



Walking Through the Heart of God

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This week's *parashah* describes the triumphant and dramatic moment of *keriyat Yam Suf*, the splitting of the Reed Sea. While the primary beneficiary of this miracle was *Benei Yisrael*, the experience of *keriyat Yam Suf* is notable not only for how it felt for us, but also for how it felt for God. Understanding what made the process of splitting the sea difficult for God, the emotional toll it took on Him, can help us better understand the nature of adversity. It can also show us the proper way to use God's example and God's help when we encounter our own obstacles.

In the Torah, it is traditional for couples to meet by a well.¹ A well is where Rachel met Ya'akov, where Tziporah met Moshe, where Eliezer found Rivkah for Yitzhak.² Perhaps the most important couple in the Torah is not any two individual people, but the Jewish people and God. Fittingly, *Benei Yisrael* also meet God at a body of water. Yet keeping with the larger scale of this encounter, God meets the people not at a small cistern or a well, but rather at the Reed Sea itself.

Keriyat Yam Suf is our first significant moment of committing to God. It is also the moment when God took full responsibility for us. God caused the wind to blow and pushed the

¹ See Chapter 3 of Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 1981.

² Bereishit 29:9-11, Shemot 2:15-22, Bereishit 24:11-25.

water aside, drying the land in the middle of the sea and enabling us to walk through it. *Keriyat yam suf* is the moment when we said, “*Zeh eili ve-anveihu*”—“**this is my God, and I will make a home with Him,**”³ when the fates of God and *Am Yisrael* became publicly and irrevocably intertwined.

However, this image of romantic commitment is not completely straightforward, sweet, or serene. When the verse describes the splitting of the sea and the water as it stood at attention, it says, **וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הִלְכוּ בִּיבֶשֶׁת בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם וְהַמַּיִם לִפְנֵיהֶם הָיָה חֹמָה מִיְמִינֵם וּמִשְׂמָאלֵם, And *Benei Yisrael* walked on the dry land inside the sea, and the water was a wall for them on the right and on the left** (Shemot 14:29). The *midrash* collected in *Yalkut Shimoni* (238)⁴ notices that the word *homah*, wall, is written חֹמָה, without a *vav*, whereas it could have been spelled more fully with a *vav*, חוֹמָה. The absence of this letter allows the word חֹמָה to be pointed differently and pronounced with different vowels, as חֻמָה, meaning anger. The verse can therefore also be read as, “*ve-ha-mayim labem heimah*,” the water was **anger** for them. According to this *midrash*,⁵ this moment is anything but calm. The waters of the Reed Sea are boiling with rage. The forces holding back the waters of the sea are not love and affection; they are anger, tension, and fear.

This is not the only time where the midrashic literature reports that God upends some component of the physical environment, suspending the laws of nature in a simultaneous miracle and threat to His chosen and beloved Israel. The final *mishnah* in *Ta’anit* compares *Matan Torah*, the giving of the Torah, to our wedding to God:

³ There are different interpretations of the unusual word *ve-anveihu*. The *Mekhilta* offers an interpretation that it derives from *naveh*, meaning house.

⁴ The *Yalkut Shimoni* is a collection of *midrashim*, compiled in the medieval period. Often it is the only source for midrashic material which seems to be of an earlier provenance.

⁵ In a different midrashic tradition, in Shemot Rabbah 20:18, God is described as encircling the Jewish camp with fire, but here the association is positive, based on the verse in Zekhariah 2:9: “**I will be a wall of fire surrounding them,**” says God, **אֲנִי אֶהְיֶה לָהֶם נֶאֱמַר ה' חוֹמַת אֵשׁ סָבִיב.**

משנה תענית ד:ח

צאנה וראינה בנות ציון במלך שלמה בעטרה שעטרה לו אימו ביום חתונתו וביום שמחת ליבו (שיר השירים ג:יא): "ביום חתונתו", זה מתן תורה; "וביום שמחת ליבו", זה בניין בית המקדש.

Mishnah Ta'anit 4:8

“Go forth, daughters of Zion, and gaze on King Sh'lomo with the crown with which his mother has crowned him on the day of his wedding and on the day of the joy of his heart” (Shir HaShirim 3:11). “On the day of his wedding” is the giving of the Torah. “On the day of the joy of his heart” is the building of the Temple.

But according to the Talmud, our wedding with God was not an exclusively romantic affair:

תלמוד בבלי שבת פח.

ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר (שמות יט). א"ר אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא- מלמד שכפה הקב"ה עליהם את ההר כגיגית ואמר להם אם אתם מקבלים התורה מוטב- ואם לאו שם תהא קבורתכם.

Talmud Bavli Shabbat 88a

“They stood at the bottom of the mountain” [*lit.* underneath the mountain]. R. Avdimi b. Hama bar Hasa said—This teaches that God overturned⁶ the mountain like a barrel and said to them, “If you accept the Torah, good; and if not, this will be your grave.”

In the wedding that R. Avdimi describes, the *huppah* is not beautiful and protective, woven with the beautiful tapestries described in the Song of Songs.⁷ The *huppah* was a mountain ripped from the earth, flipped over, and held like a barrel over our heads. God does not say, “I love you unconditionally.” Instead God says, “Accept My conditions, or I will kill you.” These two moments of commitment, the splitting of the Reed Sea and the giving of the

⁶ The root ה,פ,כ which means “to overturn” can also mean “to compel.”

⁷ Shir HaShirim 3:9.

Torah could have been imagined as smooth, beautiful, and loving, but they are not. They could have been characterized by joy and excitement, but instead are described as being dominated by fear, and anger, and the threat of annihilation.

These moments are presented in this way because this is the nature of romantic commitment. If I ask you to marry me, but you say “no,” we don’t usually continue on as if nothing has changed. It is because the stakes are so high that the feeling on the other side of strong, fierce love is not apathy or a neutral affection; it is anger, and it is fear. God’s suspending the mountain over our heads is not a description of an arbitrary threat that God makes, but rather an expression of the reality of this kind of proposal. If we choose to reject God at the moment that He asks us to be with Him, God will not stay with us. That is the end of the relationship. Similarly, when God pulls back the waters of the sea, inviting us to walk through the dry land and into a committed relationship with God, there is a lot of hope, but also a lot of vulnerability and fear. If we choose to walk through the walls of water, good. The water will stay suspended; we will remain safe. However, if we choose to reject God, the walls will crash around us and bury us in a watery grave. We will be consumed by God’s disappointment and fury.

Understanding the tension implicit in the splitting of the sea can help us explain another fascinating midrashic tradition about *keriyat yam suf*:⁸

בראשית רבה סח:ד

מטרונה שאלה את רבי יוסי בר הלפתא אמרה לו לכמה ימים ברא הקדוש ברוך הוא את עולמו, אמר לה לששת ימים, בדכתיב (שמות כ, יא): **כי ששית ימים עשה ה' את השמים ואת הארץ.** אמרה לו מה הוא עושה מאותה שעה ועד עכשו, אמר לה, הקדוש ברוך הוא יושב ומזוג זוגים... אמרה ליה, ודא הוא אמנותיה, אף אני יכולה לעשות כן, כמה עבדים כמה שפחות יש לי, לשעה קלה אני יכולה לזוגן. אמר לה, אם קלה היא בעיניך, קשה היא לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא בקריעת ים סוף...

⁸ This idea is also quoted in the name of R. Yohanan on Sotah 2a.

Bereishit Rabbah 68:4

A Roman noblewoman asked R. Yosi bar Halafta, saying to him, “How long did it take the Holy Blessed One to create His world?” He said to her, “Six days. As it says: **For God made the heaven and the earth for six days.**” She said to him, “What does He do from that point until now?” He said to her, “The Holy Blessed One sits and makes matches...” She said to him, “This is His occupation?! Even I could do that! I have so many male and female slaves, and I could quickly match them!” He said to her, “If it’s easy for you, it is as difficult for the Holy Blessed One as the splitting of the Reed Sea.”

There are two perplexing aspects of R. Yosi bar Halafta’s statement that making matches is as difficult for God as *keriyat Yam Suf*. The first question is theological. Why say that it is difficult for God to split the Reed Sea? We have no indication from the text that splitting the sea was difficult for God in any way, and therefore, there does not seem to be a compelling reason to think that *keriyat Yam Suf* would be more challenging for God than any other miracle that God has done. The second aspect of this comparison that is troubling is the imagery. When trying to come up with a metaphor for the difficulty in bringing two people together, wouldn’t it make more sense to reach for an image of two disparate things being joined? Why compare it to *keriyat Yam Suf*, when a single entity, the sea, was pulled apart?

However, if we remember what *keriyat Yam Suf* felt like for God, how much pain, fear, and anger was involved in it, we can understand R. Yosi’s statement differently. It is not that *keriyat Yam Suf* is somehow technically challenging for God; rather it is *emotionally* difficult. R. Hanina teaches that everything is in the hands of heaven except for fear of heaven.⁹ What this means is that the only thing that God can’t control is our choice of whether we are going to commit to Him. God splits the sea, but He has no guarantee that we are going to walk through it. God proposes, as it were, without any assurance that we are going to say

⁹ Talmud Bavli Berakhot 33b.

yes. *Keriyat Yam Suf* is God's ripping open His heart and inviting us to walk through it without knowing that we will. What is hard for God is not the physical process of moving the water but the waiting with an open heart. Therefore, what it really means to say that God is making matches, is not that He is arranging the universe in a way so that person A meets person B; rather God models the open-hearted willingness we need to commit to one another.¹⁰ God's role is in supporting us and expanding our capacity to love.

We often misunderstand the nature of our own challenges, such that we misattribute what is difficult about them to the technical and logistical when, in truth, their difficulty lies in the emotional, spiritual, and psychological. The size of our problems is relative to our own ability to address them. We think that our obstacles lie in nature, in the structure of the universe or the structure of our lives, but what we should be focusing on is our own attitude, our own willingness to face what we need to with openness, confidence, and determination.

Not recognizing this can also lead us to ask God for help in the wrong way and to pray to God for the wrong things. You could ask God to change the structure of the universe for you, but that is a *tefillat shav*, a futile prayer. Often, we ask God to manipulate the world for us, when what we should be asking God to do is support us in growing ourselves, in opening our hearts, in making us stronger, and wiser, and more able to confront what confronts us. If you are looking for a job, you could ask God to create more openings in your field, but that probably won't happen. Instead, ask God to help you become more flexible, more confident, more willing to ask for help, more patient as you face the uncertainty of watching your future unfold. If you are romantically overwhelmed, you could ask God to make your problems disappear or to find you a more perfect person. Or, you could ask God to help you become more communicative, more loving, more courageous, and more willing. Perhaps Mar the son of Ravina struggled with his learning, but rather than asking God to

¹⁰ Indeed, in the continuation of the *midrash*, R. Yosi bar Halافتa's interlocutor tries to imitate God in matching up her slaves by force and does not succeed.

make the Torah easier, he instead concluded his *Amidah* prayer by asking God to open his heart to Torah, פתח לבי בתורתך.¹¹

God's open heart at *keriyat Yam Suf* is a challenge, and it is a promise. It is a challenge to us to take more responsibility for what we can control and to recognize our own capacity to improve our lives, to focus on what we can change instead of raging at what we can't. And it is also a promise. It is a promise that we can become stronger and more loving than we are now, that we can commit to the people and things that we love so much, that a labor of years can feel like just a few days.¹² If we ask God to open our hearts, we can set down the rocks that feel like they are crushing us and scale them like mountains to even greater heights.

Wishing you a Shabbat of courage and open-heartedness.

¹¹ Talmud Bavli Berakhot 17a.

¹² Cf. Bereishit 29:20.