



“Do Not Rely On a Miracle”¹

R. Yitz Greenberg – ygreenberg@hadar.org

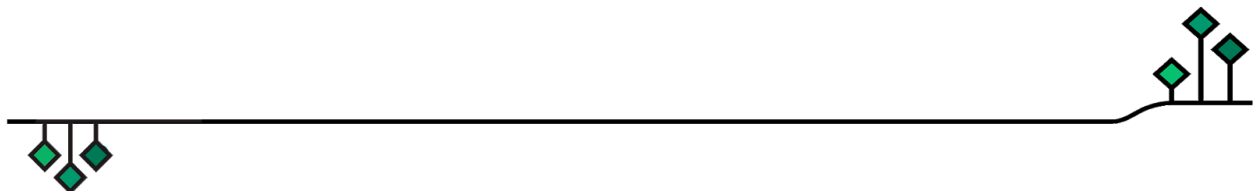
Parashat BeShallah 5781

To all outward appearances, Parashat BeShallah is the archetype of the revelation of God to humanity through awe-inspiring miracles. The natural processes are so completely overturned that there is no room for doubt as to who is the Master of the Universe. At the same time, the *parashah's* counter-narrative teaches us that divine miracle-making does not overcome the flawed character of human nature.

BeShallah starts with perhaps the most important miracle in the Bible—certainly the most celebrated—the splitting of the Reed Sea. This wondrous event enabled the Israelites to successfully complete their escape from Egypt. The stunning miracle obliterated Pharaoh's army and the residual Egyptian capacity to re-enslave the Hebrews. If the Exodus or liberation is the core experience of Jewish history and religion, then the splitting of the sea is its climactic moment, so overwhelming that the Israelites' anxieties and hesitations fall away. Now they know that “God is in His Heaven, all's right with the world.”²

¹ Talmud Pesachim 64b. The Talmud is referring to crowd control in the Holy Temple. I am generalizing the statement in this Dvar Torah to highlight the Divine policy shift from displaying miracles that dazzle the people into obedience, to education and psychological retraining to enlist people to freely follow.

² Robert Browning, *Pippa's Song*, Act I.



The thrill and the exultant song celebrating the event are so inspiring that the Rabbis inserted it into the daily liturgy. Shirat haYam, the song of the sea, is recited just before the Berekhu call to prayer. The reference to the sea split is reprised just before the central Amidah (standing, silent) prayers. On weekdays, this is the liturgical point when the worshippers address God directly, asking for their fundamental needs to be met and for the national redemption be realized. This event “confirms” that prayers for redemption are not said in vain. “That day the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians... **Israel saw the great power the Lord had displayed against the Egyptians.** The people feared the Lord. **They believed in God and in His servant, Moses**” (Exodus 14:31).

The counter-narrative begins immediately. From the Reed Sea, Moses marches the Israelites into the wilderness of Shur. For three days, they find no water sources until they arrive at Marah where the water is bitter and undrinkable. Thereupon the people turn on Moses. At God’s instruction, Moses makes a quick miracle. He takes a branch from a tree which he throws into the spring and the water turns potable (Exodus 15:24-26).

Less than three weeks later, the people arrive in the wilderness of Zin. They become hungry. Again they turn on Moses and Aaron. “If only we had died at the hand of the Lord in Egypt, where we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread.” Instead you two “have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger...” (Exodus 16:2-3). The Lord intervenes with a double barreled miracle. In the evening, flocks of quail cover the campground providing meat for the taking. In the morning, manna—bread from Heaven—floods the desert. People gather all the bread that they can eat. Henceforth, throughout the desert journey, this miracle food will descend daily except on Shabbat.³

³ No problem, a two day size portion descends every Friday.



At the next campsite, Rephidim, there is no water. The people assail Moses. “Why did you take us out of Egypt? To kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” At God’s instruction, Moses strikes a rock. Miraculously, water gushes forth for the whole assembly to drink. This fix works. The people drink their fill and are pacified.

This pattern persists to the very end of the desert trek. At Sinai, the people are overwhelmed with awe and fear of God. Yet when Moses delays coming down from the mountain, the people create a Golden Calf and dance around the idol chanting, “These are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (Exodus 32:4).⁴

On the way after Sinai, the people get bored with the manna. They revolt and complain that they miss all the delicious “cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic they enjoyed—at no charge!—in Egypt” (Numbers 11:5). God responds by giving them unlimited amounts of quail until they are sick of it (11:20).

The dead end of this roller coaster trek comes when the spies return from surveilling Canaan.⁵ The people panic and they propose to return to Egypt at once. This mutiny is put down by another divine appearance and punishment. The pattern of miracles followed by relapses does not change until God acknowledges that the ex-slaves will never be able to function as free people. They must die in the desert.⁶ Only the new generation, raised in freedom and taught Torah by Moses and Aaron, is up to the challenge of winning a homeland and creating a free society.

⁴ See generally Exodus chapters 31-33.

⁵ See Numbers 13.

⁶ See chapter 14.



As our *parashah* shows, even visible miracles have only a fleeting, surface effect. Why is this so? Because miracles are external experiences that do not change the underlying psychology of the people who witness them. When the miracle is unbelievably powerful—such as at the Reed Sea—people are thunderstruck. They really do believe in God and Moses—momentarily. But three days later, the dazzle has faded. Then the slaves, unaccustomed to the hard work and responsibility taking of the life of freedom, grow tired. They are frightened that the dependable—if meager—slaves' provisions are not there.

Yielding to a miracle is like giving in to intimidation. Since the person did not really want to do it, the preferred alternative behavior reasserts itself as soon as one can get away with it. When the fear (or the thrill) instilled by a miracle fades, the ingrained tendencies or the habitual behavior patterns take over. The individuals go on **their** way, not the "coerced" divine way.

The deepest message in our *parashah* is in its opening declaration that Moses did not take the short route to Israel (i.e. the King's highway via the Land of the Philistines) because the Israelite slaves were not up to the challenges of fighting a war to win their freedom (Exodus 13:17). At that point, there were two choices before God. One, to remove human free will and turn the Israelites and ultimately all human beings into robots, perfectly fulfilling God's directions and not deterred by real-life considerations. Maimonides wrote that out of respect for human beings, God chooses the second option, to accept people as they are. Rather than changing human nature miraculously, the Torah accepts the realities of human nature and human limitations.⁷ God enters with them into a covenantal relationship in which the

⁷ Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Part 3, 32.



Israelites are asked to raise the level of their moral performance above the society and culture around them, while moving toward an ultimately higher divine standard.⁸

The Bible's ultimate process is a movement away from visible miracles and public (heavenly) revelation toward a process of education and persuasion to get people to act properly.

Increasingly, the historical outcomes are dependent on human behavior and the equilibrium of forces rather than on divine intervention.⁹ By the time we reach the Talmud, the Rabbis tell us that the age of prophecy (direct messages from Heaven) and of visible miracles is over. Such miracles are too "coercive." God wants humans to use their reason and emotions and choose to do the right thing out of free will and choice.¹⁰

This shift in tactics explains the fate of idolatry among Jews. Idolatry persisted in the biblical age despite the Torah's full scale war on it. Even remarkable miracles, such as Elijah's triumph over the prophets of Baal, won only temporary victories.¹¹ In the Rabbinic period when there were no such dramatic divine interventions, the Rabbis overcame idolatry completely by universally educating the people with *talmud Torah*. They raised the people's level of cultural and philosophical sophistication and won the battle by transforming people's consciousness. If you will forgive the pun: Splitting the Reed Sea made a great splash, but immersion in the sea of talmudic learning transformed people for the better.

⁸ Entering the covenant and applying its standards to daily life and historical challenges is the substance of the next two *parashiyot*, Yitro and Mishpatim, and will be analyzed in the next two *divrei Torah*.

⁹ See the description of this development in Richard E. Friedman, *The Disappearance of God: A Divine Mystery*, (Little: Brown, 1995).

¹⁰ See Talmud Shabbat 88a, "*Kafah aleihem har k'gigit*" and Tosafot, s.v. *moda'ah rabba l'oraita*."

¹¹ Compare Elijah's miraculous defeat of the Baal idolators (I Kings 18) with the later behavior of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel (chapters 20-21).

