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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT BESHALACH

“And with a strong hand he will drive them out of his land”

By Rav Gad Eldad

a. “And with a strong hand he will drive them out of his land”

[Last week](#), we noted the passivity of *Bnei Yisrael* over the course of the story of the Exodus. In this *shiur*, we will address this point in greater depth.¹ From the very beginning, when God appears to Moshe at the burning bush, He attaches importance to involving *Bnei Yisrael* in the redemption process. He tells Moshe to inform them that their subjugation is coming to an end, and He tells him that they will accept and welcome this message. Accordingly, He commands Moshe to include them in the meeting with Pharaoh:

And God said moreover to Moshe, “**Thus shall you say to *Bnei Yisrael***: The Lord God of your fathers – the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzchak, and the God of Yaakov – has sent me to you... Go and **gather the elders of Israel together, and say to them**: The Lord God of your fathers – the God of Avraham, of Yitzchak, and of Yaakov – has appeared to me, saying: I have surely remembered you, and seen that which is done to you in Egypt... And they shall listen to your voice, and **you shall come – you and the elders of Israel – to the king of Egypt, and you shall say to him**: The Lord God of the Hebrews has met with us, and now let us go, we pray you, three days’ journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God. And I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go, if not by a mighty hand. And I will stretch out My hand, and smite Egypt with all My wonders which I will do in their midst, and after that he will let you go.” (*Shemot* 3:15-20)

Not everything happened exactly as foretold. The nation did indeed accept and believe Moshe’s message, but their level of cooperation was lower than God’s words might have led us to expect:

And Moshe and Aharon went and **gathered together all the elders of *Bnei Yisrael***, and Aharon spoke all the words which the Lord had spoken to Moshe, and performed the signs in the sight of the people. **And the people believed; and when they heard** that the Lord had remembered *Bnei Yisrael* and that He had looked upon their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshipped. **And afterwards Moshe and Aharon went in** and told Pharaoh, “Thus says the Lord God of Israel:

Let My people go, that they may hold a feast to Me in the wilderness.” And Pharaoh said, “Who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, nor will I let Israel go...” And the king of Egypt said to them, “Why do you, **Moshe and Aharon**, distract the people from their work? Get you to your burdens.” (4:29-5:4)

The text makes it clear that Moshe and Aharon entered alone to speak with Pharaoh, unaccompanied by the elders. Pharaoh’s answer to them is likewise formulated in the second person, as he speaks about the nation in the third person. In fact, the story of the Exodus is characterized by passivity on the part of *Bnei Yisrael* throughout. Since it would seem that the initial plan had intended otherwise, we must try to understand what changed, and why.

b. “And it shall be, if war breaks out...”

The culture maintained amongst *Bnei Yisrael*, their proliferation, and their success caused the Egyptians some concern. The existence of this group, which was growing with such rapidity, could represent an existential threat to the kingdom:

Now there arose a new king over Egypt who did not know Yosef. And he said to his people, “Behold, the nation of *Bnei Yisrael* are more and mightier than we; come, let us deal wisely with them, lest they multiply, **and it shall be, if war should chance, they also join our enemies and fight against us**, and so go up out of the land.” (1:8-10)

Pharaoh imagines a confrontation with *Bnei Yisrael* as entailing a violent struggle over their offering of aid to a foreign enemy, or as part of an initiative aimed at overthrowing the monarchy. We may assume that neither Pharaoh nor anyone else imagined the danger posed by *Bnei Yisrael* as involving Divine signs and wonders.

In truth, it may be that the scenario that the king of Egypt imagined was actually not far removed from the original plan. As God had told Avraham at the time of the Covenant between the Parts:

And He said to Avram, “Know with certainty that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years; and also that nation, whom they serve, will I judge, and afterwards they shall come out with great substance.” (*Bereishit* 15:13-14)

A plain reading of these verses allows for the possibility of a popular uprising after four hundred years of subjugation. According to this scenario, the “great substance” promised to them would consist of the spoils of their war of independence.²

¹ The discussion here is based on my article, “*Arba Leshonot shel Geula*,” *Megadim* 34, pp. 43-51.

² Seforno hints to this possibility: “And you shall despoil Egypt” (*Shemot* 3:22) – Although you will receive all of it from them as a loan,

In view of the points raised here, we might have imagined the redemption from Egypt as a process following a more natural, worldly course.

From this perspective, the inclusion of the elders in the delegation to Pharaoh makes sense. Moshe gathers the elders and stands before Pharaoh at the head of a dignified group of representatives. In light of Pharaoh's refusal, according to "Plan A," disappointment would spread throughout *Bnei Yisrael*, leading to an uprising of this nation of slaves. By the end of the physical confrontation between the slaves and their oppressors, *Bnei Yisrael* would have earned their freedom.

A process of this type would sit well with the general orientation and guidance of the Torah, according to which we do not rely on miracles.³ The Exodus from Egypt could have followed a natural, earthly course of events, as happened in the conquest of Eretz Kena'an.

However, as we know, that is not how it happened. We must therefore try to understand the reason why the Exodus was ultimately an altogether miraculous process characterized by Divine signs and wonders.

c. **"But they rebelled against Me and did not agree to listen to Me"**

The prophet Yechezkel offers a different perspective on the circumstances of the Exodus. He depicts a crisis in the relations between the nation and God:

And say to them: So says the Lord God: On the day when I chose Israel and lifted up My hand to the seed of the House of Yaakov, and made Myself known to them in the land of Egypt, when I lifted up My hand to them, saying: I am the Lord your God; **on that day that I lifted up My hand to them, to bring them out of the land of Egypt** into a land that I had spied out for them, flowing with milk and honey, which is an ornament for all the lands, then I said to them: **Let every man cast away the abominations of his eyes, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt; I am the Lord your God. But they rebelled against Me, and would not listen to Me; they did not cast away the abominations of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt.** Then I said: I will pour out My fury upon them, to accomplish My anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt. **But I acted for My Name's sake, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations,** among whom they were, in whose sight I made Myself

which you will be obligated to return, afterwards you will acquire it all lawfully, when they pursue after you to fight you and to take away your spoils. For when they [the Egyptians] died in that battle – for God fought for [*Bnei Yisrael*] – it was lawful, measure for measure, that all the spoils of the pursuers went to the pursued, [since they were victorious,] as is the custom in every war" (Seforno, *Shemot* 3:22). Admittedly, from the outset, at the burning bush, God had told Moshe that the nation would find favor in the eyes of the Egyptians and they would ask for "vessels of silver and vessels of gold, and garments." However, attention should be paid to the fact that these verses (3:19-22), which were told to Moshe alone, were not conveyed to *Bnei Yisrael* at this stage.

³ See Ramban, *Bamidbar* 1:45, regarding the census of those going out to fight, and 13:2 concerning the dispatch of the spies.

known to them, **to bring them out of the land of Egypt.** And I caused them to go out of the land of Egypt, and brought them into the wilderness. (*Yechezkel* 20:5-10)

God wants to bring *Am Yisrael* out of Egypt, and to this end He commands them to remove the foreign gods from their midst. The nation refuses to cooperate, and is therefore deserving of annihilation. Ultimately, God decides to proceed with the process on His own, in order to prevent a *chillul Hashem* in the eyes of the nations.

Let us try to locate this crisis in the plot as described in *Sefer Shemot*.

d. **"Therefore say to Bnei Yisrael, I am God, and I shall bring you out..."**

Following the failure of Moshe's encounter with Pharaoh, he "challenges" God as to the efficacy of his mission, and receives a brief and firm response:

And Moshe returned to the Lord and said, "Lord, why have You dealt ill with this people? Why is it that You have sent me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name, he has done evil to this people, neither have You delivered Your people at all." Then the Lord said to Moshe, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh, for with a strong hand he shall let them go, and with a strong hand he shall drive them out of his land." (*Shemot* 5:22-6:1)

Immediately thereafter, the Torah records a new Divine message, whose content echoes the speech given at the burning bush. This similarity prompts the question of what is new in this speech and why it is given at this particular point in time.

Speech at the burning bush (<i>Shemot</i> 3:7-10, 16-18)	Speech after Moshe's complaint (<i>Shemot</i> 6:2-8)
<p>And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of Egypt, and to bring them up out of that land to a good land and expansive land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Kena'ani and the Chitti and the Emori and the Perizi and the Chivi and the Yevusi. Now therefore, behold, the cry of <i>Bnei Yisrael</i> has come</p>	<p>And God spoke to Moshe and said to him: I am the Lord. And I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and Yaakov... And I have also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Kena'an, the land of their sojournings, in which they sojourned. And I have also heard the groaning of Bnei Yisrael, kept in bondage by Egypt, and I have remembered My covenant. Therefore say to <i>Bnei Yisrael</i>: I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of Egypt, and I will deliver you out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm, and with great judgments, and I will</p>

to Me, and I have also seen the oppression with which Egypt oppresses them. Come now therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh, that you may bring My people, *Bnei Yisrael*, out of Egypt... Go and gather the elders of Israel together, and say to them: **The Lord God of your fathers - the God of Avraham, of Yitzchak, and of Yaakov - has appeared to me**, saying: I have surely remembered you, and seen that which is done to you in Egypt, and I have said, **I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Kena'ani** and the Chitti and the Emori and the Perizi and the Chivi and the Yevusi, to a land flowing with milk and honey.

take you to Me for a people, and I will be for you a God; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, Who brings you out from under the burdens of Egypt.

And I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov, and I will give it to you for a heritage; I am the Lord.

fathers of the Leviim according to their families. These are the same Moshe and Aharon who whom the Lord said, "Bring out *Bnei Yisrael* from the land of Egypt according to their hosts." These are they who spoke to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to bring out *Bnei Yisrael* from Egypt; these are the same Moshe and Aharon. And it came to pass on the day when the Lord spoke to Moshe in the land of Egypt... (6:13-18)

It seems clear that the purpose of this genealogy is to focus attention on Moshe and Aharon. The question is why it appears here, in the middle of the narrative. Apparently, this technique also serves to underscore the change indicated above. While Moshe will continue to be the live catalyst advancing the process of the Exodus, he will no longer function in this capacity as the representative of the people, since this mission has failed. Instead, he will be the agent and emissary of the Holy One, blessed be He, Who henceforth acts alone. Moshe is still the messenger, but in a new initiative.

For this reason, the Torah presents the spokesman of this new initiative, as though from the beginning, while noting that he is in fact the same Moshe who had appeared before.

f. **"And *Bnei Yisrael* went out with a high hand"**

Our *parasha* describes *Bnei Yisrael* leaving Egypt calmly, victoriously, with no one disturbing them. The image of their going out "with a high hand" appears again in *Sefer Bamidbar*, in the summary of their journeys:

And they journeyed from Ra'amses in the first month, on the fifteenth of the month, **on the day after the Pesach, *Bnei Yisrael* went out with a high hand in the sight of all of Egypt.** (*Bamidbar* 33:3)

However, reading the narrative in its context in *Sefer Shemot*, we find a completely different atmosphere prevailing on the previous night. Rather than "the Exodus from Egypt," a more fitting description might be "the expulsion from Egypt":

And Pharaoh rose up in the night – he and all his servants, and all of Egypt – and there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where there was not one dead. And he called for Moshe and Aharon by night, and said, "Rise up and get you out from among my people, both you and *Bnei Yisrael*..." And Egypt pressed upon the people **that they might send them out of the land in haste**, for they said, "We are all dead men!" And the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading troughs being bound up in their clothes upon their shoulders... And *Bnei Yisrael* journeyed from Ra'amses to Sukkot, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children... And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough which they brought out of Egypt, for it was not leavened, **because they were driven out of Egypt** and could not delay, neither had they prepared for themselves any provision. (*Shemot* 12:30-39)

We propose that the speech given in response to Moshe's complaint is meant to replace the speech given at the burning bush. At the burning bush, Moshe had been called upon to act to deliver the nation, including *Bnei Yisrael* in the process. The alternative speech focuses on the acts of deliverance that will be performed by God alone, by virtue of His commitment to the forefathers. These acts of deliverance are emphasized over and over in the first person, showing that they are meant to replace the instruction to include the nation in the process – a possibility which the nation had proved itself unwilling or unable to realize.

Apparently, this was the point of crisis in the Exodus as alluded to by Yechezkel.⁴ As a response to the nation's unwillingness to cooperate, God declares that from this point onwards, He will lead the process unilaterally.

e. **"These are [the same] Aharon and Moshe to whom the Lord said..."**

This helps us understand why the Torah suddenly interrupts the flow of the story in order to record the genealogy of *Bnei Yisrael* up until Moshe and Aharon:

And the Lord spoke to Moshe and to Aharon, and gave them a charge to *Bnei Yisrael* and to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to bring *Bnei Yisrael* out of the land of Egypt. These are the heads of their fathers' houses: the sons of Reuven, the firstborn of Yisrael... And the sons of Shimon... And these are the names of the sons of Levi by generations: Gershon, and Kehat, and Merari... And Amram took Yokheved, his father's sister, as a wife, and she bore him Aharon and Moshe... And Aharon took Elisheva, daughter of Aminadav, sister of Nachshon, as a wife, and she bore him Nadav and Avihu, Elazar and Itamar... These are the heads of the

⁴ Following the Exodus, the people themselves recall the voices that had spoken up earlier against the idea of leaving Egypt: "Is this not what we told you in Egypt, saying: Leave us alone, that we may serve Egypt? For it would have been better for us to serve Egypt than that we should die in the wilderness" (*Shemot* 14:12).

Seemingly, these are two different accounts of the departure from Ra'amses, which was the first station after the Exodus. However, the two units are in fact describing two different times: in the night, *Bnei Yisrael* were "driven out," whereas the following day, after the Pesach, they went out "with a high hand."

Based on our discussion above, let us try to explain why the Exodus developed in a manner that manifested two such different moods. The Exodus was not originally meant to happen in the way that it did. The unfolding of the events familiar to us was the result of the people's failure to meet the challenge that confronted them. Accordingly, the Exodus itself reflects that failure.

In the middle of the night, *Bnei Yisrael* did not "leave" Egypt, but rather were "expelled." Just as they had displayed passivity in the face of God's initiative to take them out of Egypt, so were they thrown out, as passive victims, rather than as actors participating in their own redemption. The next morning, however, God gave expression to the might that He had demonstrated to the nations – and then the nation "went out with a high hand."⁵

If our analysis is correct and we have correctly identified both the crisis and its location in the plot, we can now understand the full significance of God's response to Moshe's complaint following the failure of his first mission:

And Moshe returned to the Lord and said, "Lord, why have You dealt ill with this people? Why is it that You have sent me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name, he has done evil to this people, neither have You delivered Your people at all." Then the Lord said to Moshe, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh, for with a strong hand **he shall let them go**, and with a strong hand **he shall drive them out of his land.**" (5:22-6:1)

Even at this early stage, God hints at what is to come. The redemption is not proceeding in accordance with the opportunity afforded the people to participate actively. God's response to Moshe conveys the message that the Exodus will indeed happen, but it will include two dimensions: Pharaoh will let them go, and at the same time he will expel them.

g. "The Lord is a Man of war, the Lord is His Name"

We have proposed here that the original plan for the Exodus envisioned a war-like struggle. It is interesting to note that ultimately, this scenario was not scrapped altogether, but rather postponed. After *Bnei Yisrael* leave Egypt, God stages the final, decisive battle on the banks of the Reed Sea. As this showdown approaches, Moshe uses a term that is new to the narrative:

And Moshe said to the people, "Do not fear; stand still and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will show you today, for as you have seen Egypt this day, you shall not see them again any more forever. **The Lord shall fight** for you, and you shall hold your peace." (14:13-14)

The text even places the same phrase in the mouth of the Egyptians, who are on the other side of the same event:

... and the Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the face of Israel, for **the Lord fights for them** against Egypt." (14:25)

In view of the inability on the part of the people to rise to the occasion and choose courageously the option that God offers them, God does not rely on their contribution for His guidance of history. They cry for Divine aid, but then observe the events unfolding before them as onlookers, failing to grasp their role and responsibility. God then takes action Himself – following the same strategy that He had sought from the outset, i.e., a struggle of war.

Then Moshe and *Bnei Yisrael* sang this song... "The Lord is a Man of war; the Lord is His Name." (*Shemot* 15:3)

"And the Lord alone shall be exalted on that day." (*Yeshayahu* 2:11)

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⁵ A similar duality may be detected in the reason for the commandment to eat *matza*. On the one hand, the reason cited in the narrative itself is the haste with which *Bnei Yisrael* were driven out, but in fact the command had been given earlier, before they were driven out, and hence independent of that reason: "And they shall eat the meat on that night – roasted with fire, and unleavened bread, and with bitter herbs shall they eat it" (*Shemot* 12:8). Here too, then, we find both dimensions of the Exodus – the expulsion and the going free.