

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Beshalach

KRIYAS YAM SUF SPECIAL

What Happened at the Red Sea?

SOME PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

The opening section of our parsha is devoted to Egypt's pursuit of the Jewish people, culminating in the miraculous splitting of the Red Sea, through which the Jewish people traversed and in which the Egyptian army was drowned. The Torah describes these events at length, with many questions to be raised concerning the relevant verses. Let us consider three questions at this stage, leaving others to be mentioned as the discussion unfolds:

Question One: In *Az Yashir* (The Song of the Sea) we read:

מִרְכַּבֹּת פָּרְעֹה וַחֲיִלֹּו יָרָה בָיָם וּמִבְּחַר שְׁלֹשֵׁי מִבְּעֹו בָיָם סוּף

*Pharaoh's chariots and army He [Hashem] threw into the sea, and the choice of his officers were drowned in the Red Sea.*¹

- ▶ This verse is effectively doubled over, with Pharaoh's officers receiving separate mention in the second half. Why? Are they not also part of his army mentioned in the first half of the verse?
- ▶ The first half of the verse simply mentions "the sea," referring obviously to the Red Sea. Why then does the second half specifically mention "the Red Sea"? If the identity of the sea did not need to be specified in the first half of the verse, why would it become necessary in the second?

Question Two: Verse 22 of Chapter 14 reads:

וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם בַּיַּבֵּשׁה וְהַמַּיִם לָהֶם חוֹמָה מִיְמִינָם וּמִשְׁמָאלָם

The Bnei Yisrael entered the sea on dry land, and the water was a wall for them, on their right and on their left.

¹ Shemos 15:2.

A few verses later,² we find:

וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הִלְכוּ בַיַּבֵּשָׁה בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם וְהַמַּיִם לָהֶם חֹמָה מִיְמִינֵם וּמִשְׂמָאלָם

The Bnei Yisrael went on dry land in the middle of the sea, and the water was a wall for them, on their right and on their left.

- ▶ Why is the same idea mentioned twice in two verses so close to each other?
- ▶ There is a subtle difference between the two verses: The first verse refers to them travelling “in the middle of the sea on dry land,” while the second verse reverses the terms, describing them as going “on dry land in the middle of the sea.” What is behind this reversal, seeing as, by definition, both were true in both verses?

Question Three: The verse which describes the splitting of the sea reads as follows:

וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת יָדוֹ עַל הַיָּם וַיִּזְלַךְ ה' אֶת הַיָּם בְּרוּחַ קְדָיִם עֶזְרָה כָּל הַלַּיְלָה וַיִּשָּׂם אֶת הַיָּם לַחֲרֹבָה וַיִּבְקְעוּ הַמַּיִם

Moshe stretched out his hand over the sea, and Hashem moved the sea with a strong easterly wind all the night, and He turned the sea to dry land, and the water split.

- ▶ The verse describes the split as having been effected by Hashem blowing an easterly wind. How are we to understand this? Presumably, an easterly wind blowing on the sea would have the effect of *moving it westwards*, but not of causing it to split in half!
- ▶ The word in the verse which describes the sea’s movement is “וַיִּזְלַךְ”, which literally means “to transport.” To where was the sea transported?
- ▶ The word which describes the turning of the sea to dry land is “וַיִּשָּׂם”, yet this word literally means “to place.” How does one “place” a sea into dry land? Surely the word should have been “וַיַּחֲפֹךְ – He turned”!
- ▶ The end of the verse mentions the sea-bed becoming dry land *before* mentioning that the waters split. Isn’t this backwards? Surely, first the water first split and *then* the exposed sea-bed became dry land!

1. PHARAOH AND EGYPT – A TALE OF TWO ARMIES

A classic understanding of the entire episode of the splitting of the Red Sea is found in the commentary of one of the early Acharonim, the Maaseh Hashem.³ The key to his approach lies in noting that throughout the parsha, the Torah refers sometimes to “Pharaoh’s army” and sometimes to “Egypt.” It is important to realize that these are not two ways of referring to the same army, rather, they are *two separate armies*. “Egypt” refers to the general Egyptian army, comprised of its citizenry, which numbered many, many thousands of soldiers. In contrast, “Pharaoh’s army” refers to his personal guard, which consisted of a few hundred soldiers. Moreover, Hashem’s plans for these two armies diverge:

- ▶ **Pharaoh’s guard** are without exception evil to the core. They are intensely loyal to Pharaoh and have been intimately involved in his persecution of the Jewish people. As such they are liable, without exception, of meeting their end at the bottom of the Red Sea.
- ▶ **The Egyptian army** are more diverse: some of them indeed also deserve to be killed, but most of them to do not. Therefore, while the wicked among them are to be drowned, the

2 Verse 29.

3 R’ Eliezer Ashkenazi (1513-1585). Various elements of the Maaseh Hashem’s approach are adopted and developed by numerous later commentators, including R’ David Tevel of Minsk (Derashos Beis David, drush 10), R’ Yehuda Aidel of Slonim (Derashos Afikei Yehuda, drush 33), as well as in the commentaries of the Malbim and the Netziv on the Torah.

goal for most of them is to witness directly the salvation of the Jewish people and the retribution meted out to Pharaoh and his guard.

This is the meaning of verse 4 of chapter 14, which states:

- ▶ “And I will be glorified through **Pharaoh and his entire army**” – through meting out Divine retribution by bringing the sea in over them.
- ▶ “and **Egypt** will know that I am Hashem” – the greater Egyptian army will be there to witness it.

In light of this, the process of drawing the Egyptians out of Egypt is twofold in nature:

1. Both armies need to be drawn out toward the Red Sea.
2. Given the differing plans for each of these two armies, they *cannot come out together*, but rather, need to be kept separate from each other.

2. DRAWING OUT PHARAOH’S GUARD

The first stage is thus bring in out Pharaoh’s guard by themselves. The way this will be accomplished is by making him feel that there is no need to mobilize the entire nation’s army. This will happen by making Pharaoh think that not only are the Jewish people *lost*, and can be easily pursued, but also that they are *scared*, and can be easily retrieved without mobilizing the general army.

- ▶ The notion that they are lost is accomplished by having them backtrack towards Egypt, as mentioned in verses 2 and 3.
- ▶ Interestingly, the second notion, that they are scared, has been cultivated over the course of the preceding six days. Verse 21 of Chapter 13 informs us that the people were “travelling day and night.” This seemingly minor detail is most striking. A nation that is confident does not travel non-stop without rest! One who observes people who cannot afford to stop moving is looking at a people that is scared.

It was this combination of factors which convinced Pharaoh that he only needed to pursue them with his guard in order to bring them back. Thus, verse 5 states that “Pharaoh was informed that the people had run away”. How is this relevant? Was not the point for him to be informed that they were lost? Rather, the fact that they had been “running away” from Egypt meant that they were scared as well as lost. All this led to Pharaoh’s decision, as recorded in verses 6-8:

“He took his people with him. He took six hundred chariots, and all the chariots of Egypt, with officers on them all... and he pursued the Children of Israel.”

The phrase “his people” refers to his personal army, for whose purposes he enlisted the country’s chariots. In Pharaoh’s estimation, the mere sight of his elite guard with chariots would cow the people into submission. The general Egyptian army were left behind, with their mobilization and presence deemed unnecessary.

And thus were a king and his country’s army parted

Pharaoh’s optimism, however, was short-lived. Upon getting close enough to observe the Jewish people firsthand, he received something of a surprise, described in the end of verse 8: “The Children of Israel were going out *with an upraised arm*.” The phrase “upraised arm” depicts a people who are confident and in high-spirits. At this stage, Pharaoh was hit with a startling realization: Somehow, he had been

misled, for the Jewish people were not actually scared at all!

3. CALLING UP THE EGYPTIAN ARMY

In light of this discovery, Pharaoh does not feel confident advancing accompanied by just his private guard to confront an exultant people who outnumber him a thousand to one. He therefore does what he would have done originally had he known the triumphant mood of the Jewish people – he calls for the Egyptian army! The arrival of this second army is described in verse 9: “Egypt pursued after *them*,” i.e. after Pharaoh’s army whose own pursuit was mentioned earlier in verse 7, “and they caught up with them encamped by the sea.”⁴

With his nation’s army behind him, Pharaoh once again feels emboldened to advance with his guard to retrieve the Jewish people. Thus, verse 10 reads:

“Pharaoh advanced, and the Children of Israel raised their eyes and behold, Egypt was travelling after them and they were very afraid and they cried out to Hashem.”

Let us ask: did no one inform the Jewish people that the goal of their backtracking was to draw out the Egyptian army? If not, why not? Moreover, why would the people consent to traveling back toward Egypt for no reason? But if they were told, then why were they so surprised to see the Egyptians coming after them? Was that not the plan? Rather, the people understood that Pharaoh would come out with just his guard numbering a few hundred soldiers, a confrontation for which they felt confident. They were not prepared to see *all of Egypt* “traveling after them,” i.e. after Pharaoh’s personal army! Moshe, however, allays their fears, and assures them that Hashem will do battle on their behalf against the army of Egypt (verses 13-14).

4. CHASING TO THE CUT

We are now ready to head toward the Red Sea, with a different goal in mind for each of the three groups:

- ▶ **The Jewish people** need to enter the sea, traverse it, and emerge on the other side.
- ▶ **Pharaoh’s army** need to enter the sea and *not* emerge on the other side, but to be drowned within.
- ▶ **The Egyptian army** *cannot be allowed to enter the sea!* For the most part, they are not meant to be drowned. Rather, they are to reach the banks of the sea, from which point to witness the demise of Pharaoh’s army, as stated in verses 17-18.

In order for all this to happen, it is imperative to keep all these groups separate from each other. How is this achieved? Verses 19 and 20 describe how the pillar of cloud which normally went before the Jewish people now went behind them, plunging the entire Egyptian camp in darkness. This allowed for two results.

Firstly, it meant that Pharaoh’s camp would continue to move forward, even entering the Red Sea after it had split, completely oblivious to the fact this had occurred. Had they known, it is highly unlikely they would have followed the Jewish people in, as they would have to know by that stage that it was not being miraculously parted for them.

Second, the two armies of Pharaoh and Egypt were not able to successfully regroup and reconnect. This

4 In other words, the “horses and chariots of Pharaoh” are the *objects* of the verse, i.e. those with whom Egypt caught up. This is why the verse describes them as being encamped “עַל פִּי הַחִירוֹת – *by Pi Hachiros*,” a short distance from the Jewish people who were instructed to encamp “לְפָנֵי פִי הַחִירוֹת – *before Pi Hachiros*” (verse 2).

is described in the final words of verse 20: “Neither one drew near the other the whole night.” Who is the verse talking about? If it is the Jewish people and the Egyptians, we have a basic problem, for these words imply a *mutual interest* on the part of these groups to draw near to each other. In our case, that interest was decidedly one-sided, for while the Egyptians would have wanted to draw near the Jewish people, the opposite is hardly true! Rather, it refers to Pharaoh’s army and the Egyptian army, who were unable to unite, in spite of their desire to do so.

In this way, the three groups continue moving forward until the first of the groups, the Jewish people, arrive at the Red Sea.

CUTTING AND PLACING – THE DAY THE SEA WAS SUMMONED

As we noted in our introductory comments, the verse which describes the splitting of the Red Sea contains a number of questions:

1. It states that the split was caused by an easterly wind, which would seemingly have the effect of moving the sea westwards, not dividing it in half.
2. It uses the word “וַיִּלְךְ” (vayilch), which means “to transport.” To where was the sea transported?
3. It uses the word “וַיִּשֶׂם” (vayissem), which means “to place.” Where was the sea placed?
4. It appears to mention the water splitting *after* the sea becoming dry land.

All of this brings us to a completely new understanding of how the miracle occurred. In order for the Jewish people to make their way through the sea, a path had to be cleared for them, with the water occupying that path displaced. Where did that water go? The answer is that Hashem caused an easterly wind to blow, which transported (וַיִּלְךְ) *that water westwards* out of the sea! To where? Onto the sea-shore, as the verse then states: “וַיִּשֶׂם אֶת הַיָּם לְחֹרֶבָה” – He placed the sea onto dry land! However, given that the Jewish people were directly in the path of this water coming out to meet them, how did they not get deluged by it? The answer is in the final phrase of the verse: Upon that portion of the sea being moved out onto the shore, the waters split!

Indeed, says the Maaseh Hashem, it is to this aspect of the miracle at the Red Sea that the prophet refers when he says “He [Hashem] is the One... Who summons the waters of the sea and pours them on the face of the earth.”⁵

ON DRY LAND IN THE SEA – AND IN THE SEA ON DRY LAND

It turns out that the Jewish people were surrounded by water on both sides even before they had entered the sea. This is the meaning of verse 22, which states that “*The Bnei Yisrael entered the sea on dry land, and the water was a wall for them, on their right and on their left.*” In other words, the verse is emphasizing that they were entering the sea *while still on dry land*. This is in contrast to verse 29, which, as we noted, sounds almost identical, except it reverses those two terms, saying: “*The Bnei Yisrael went on dry land in the middle of the sea etc.*” That verse refers to the later stage when the people had already entered the sea, at which point the miracle was reversed: For while initially they were “in the sea while on dry land,” they were subsequently “on dry land while in the middle of the sea!”⁶

5 Amos 5:8. This understanding of the miracle may give us a new insight in to the verse in Tehillim (136:13): “לְגֹזֵרִים יָם סוּף לְגֹזְרִים – Who tears the Red Sea into strips.” If the miracle consisted purely of creating a divide within the sea, the two halves of the sea would not be called strips. [Indeed, the Midrash learns from these words that each tribe had its own individual path within the sea.] According to the Maaseh Hashem’s understanding, however, a strip of water was indeed cut out of the sea and then itself divided in two strips.

6 Afikei Yehuda.

Thus, with a path having been cleared for them, the Jewish people enter the sea – pursued by the Egyptian army as well as Pharaoh’s own army, both of whom are still engulfed in darkness. This continues until Pharaoh’s army is entirely within the Red Sea (verse 23) while the Egyptian army is still at its banks. At this stage, Hashem illuminates the area, allowing the Egyptians to see that although they have not actually entered the sea, they too are surrounded by water on both sides. The Egyptians try to head back, but Hashem disables their chariots and immobilizes them (verses 24-25).

With everyone where they need to be, it is time for the waters to return.

6. SHAKING OUT EGYPT AND COVERING UP PHARAOH

The returning of the water is mentioned twice in two consecutive verses:

Verse 27 states that the sea returned to its original form.

Verse 28 states that the waters returned and covered over Pharaoh’s chariots.

In light of our discussion, we appreciate that these two verses refer to two separate stages of the water’s return.

As we have seen, the water that was displaced to create a path through the sea was moved out of the sea onto dry land. Why was this so? Why did it not simply pile up on either side in the sea itself? The answer lies in fact that although most of the Egyptians were meant only to witness the drowning of Pharaoh’s army in the sea – for which reason they were brought only to its banks and no further – a number of them were deserving of that fate as well. How were they to end up there? The answer is in verse 27. The water which was on either side of the Egyptians while on dry land closed on them from behind as it was returned to the sea,⁷ taking with it all of those who deserved to be drowned. This process is described with the words “וַיִּנְעַר ה' אֶת מִצְרַיִם בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם – Hashem shook Egypt into the sea,” i.e. He shook out the Egyptian camp of those deserving to be drowned, washing them into the sea.

When the water returned to the sea, it then covered over Pharaoh’s army, as described in verse 28, concerning whom the verse concludes “לֹא נִשְׁאַר בָּהֶם עַד אֶחָד – Not even one remained from them.”

FROM THE CHUMASH TO THE SIDDIR

Understanding that retribution at the sea was meted out to two separate groups will illuminate the way in which we refer to that event in our prayers. In the blessing which follows the evening Shema, it states: “אֵת רוֹדְפֵיהֶם וְאֵת שׂוֹנְאֵיהֶם בְּתוֹמוֹת טָבַע – Those who pursued them and those who hated them He [Hashem] drowned in the depths.” Let us ask: What is the meaning of this double reference? Are “their pursuers” and “their enemies” not one and the same? In light of our discussion, we now understand that they are in fact two distinct entities:

“Those who pursued them” refers Pharaoh’s army, who were directly in pursuit of the Jewish people.

“Those who hated them” refers to those among the broader Egyptian army who displayed particular hatred and cruelty towards them and thus also deserved to be drowned.⁸

7 This is the meaning of the words “וּמִצְרַיִם נָסִים לְקִרְאָתוֹ” – Egypt was fleeing towards [the water].” If the Egyptians were trying to head backwards, how would that make them fleeing towards the water on either side? Rather, since the water had closed in behind them, in trying to head back they were effectively fleeing towards it (Beis David).

8 Haamek Davar.

Likewise, in the blessing after the morning Shema, we say: "זָדִים טָבַעַת... וַיִּכְסּוּ מִיַּם צָרִיהֶם אֶחָד מֵהֶם" – **לא נותר** – You drowned the wanton sinners... and the waters covered their oppressors, not one of them remained." Here, too, the double reference can be explained as per the above:

"You drowned the wanton sinners" refers to those among the Egyptians who were especially evil in their enslavement of the Jewish people, and who thus deserved to be drowned in the sea.

"And the waters covered their oppressors" refers to Pharaoh's army who, as a group oppressed them, and who were thus entirely covered over with the water, as it proceeds to state: "not one of them remained."

BETWEEN "THE SEA" AND "THE REED SEA"

The dual nature of the splitting of the sea is expressed in the two phrases of the verse from *Az Yashir* which we quoted in the opening to our discussion:

- ▶ *Pharaoh's chariots and army He [Hashem] threw into the sea* – This refers to the drowning of Pharaoh's army
- ▶ *and the choice of his officers were drowned in the Red Sea* – This refers to those among the Egyptian army who likewise deserved to be drowned. The word "מַבְחָר" comes from the word "לַבְחֹר – to select", and literally means "those who were selected from among his officers."⁹

Additionally, this will allow us to understand why the Yam Suf is mentioned in the second half of the verse, but not the first. As is well known, the term Yam Suf, commonly translated as "The Red Sea," is more accurately translated as "The Reed Sea," on account of the reeds (סוּף) which grow near its banks. When Pharaoh's army were drowned, they had by that time entered deep inside the sea. In contrast, the Egyptians who had been shaken out into the sea from dry land, were much closer to its banks. Therefore:

- ▶ The first phrase which describes Pharaoh's army simply refers to "the sea," as the middle portion of the sea in which they were drowned was largely similar to any other sea.
- ▶ In contrast, the second phrase which refers to the Egyptian army refers more specifically to "the Reed Sea," as the portion of the sea where they were drowned was near its banks where the reeds are found, after which the sea received its distinct name!¹⁰

And so, through a careful analysis of the verses, and guided and inspired by the masterful commentary of the Maaseh Hashem, a fascinating vision of the monumental events leading up to the splitting of the Reed Sea unfolds before us.

9 Beis David.

10 Malbim.