

Parshat B'shalach
The Time for Encounter
Hannah Ruimy - Class of 2025

We often tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt as if it was a triumphant journey. But if we look at it carefully, it was actually a rather painful deliverance.

Let's imagine how the Hebrew people must be feeling, as they have not yet really become one people. They suddenly must leave their homes, hastily pack their bags, and wake up the babies. A race against time starts to cross the border before it's too late.

I have personally always been confused by how the *haggadot* of Passover are illustrated. The Exodus looks like it was a very well-organized experience, with very tidy and upright columns of clouds, surrounded by camels, sheep walking in line, and little kids all happy and perfectly prepared for the trip. However, in reality, the people are crying, and suffering from this rapid, messy departure.

Since the beginning of the *parsha*, the tone has been set. Hashem spares heartbroken people by organizing an itinerary that will be adapted to their trauma, sparing them further encounters with enemies .

Yet, the whole *parsha* is strewn with their pain and complaints.

A psychoanalyst would certainly have a lot to say about how difficult it is for them to express their needs and feelings with serenity. They seem unable to put into words their ill-being, because in their minds, liberation has not yet happened. It is their unconscious that makes them cry and complain so much.

There are two key moments that really struck me in *parshat B'shalach*, and I'd like to explore what links them. The first one is during the crossing of the Red Sea, and particularly its ending with the "*shirah*," the song of the Hebrew people which continues to accompany us daily in prayer. The second one is the Manna, the divine food which will fall from the sky during their entire journey in the desert (40 years !).

Firstly, we can notice that these events are essential in a new life of free men, and they both occur in hostile environments, the sea and the desert, respectively. How unsettling it must have been, as a slave, to be taken away from a torturer, in order to be brought into these terrifying and uncertain environments! Hashem certainly has a sharp sense of humor.

Let's go back to the two moments I was mentioning earlier :

1. The Shirah

We must remind ourselves that this crossing of the Red Sea on dry ground represents a real challenge. It is about transforming the deepest inner fears of the people into a reasoned and structured fear of the Lord—from terror inspired by Pharaoh to fear of Heaven. And to that end, the people must see, because at this moment, they need to see it to believe it.

I invite you all to observe together how subtle is the chiasmic structure of the following paragraph which is written right before the opening of the Red Sea. Here, Hashem is not

only about to manifest His glory to the skeptical people, but also to make their torturer disappear forever.

They must see (ה.א.ר) in order to stop being afraid (א.י.ר). They won't be seeing their torturers anymore (ה.א.ר) so that they may finally fear God positively (א.י.ר)

Let's take a close look at the text :

But Moses said to the people, “ Have no fear! ”	(ג) ויאמר משה אל העם: אל תיראו	1
Stand by, and witness the deliverance which Hashem will work for you today. for the Egyptians whom you see today	הַתְּנַצְּבוּ וְרֵאוּ אֶת יְשׁוּעַת ה' אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה לָכֶם הַיּוֹם כִּי אֲשֶׁר רֵאִיתֶם אֶת מִצְרַיִם הַיּוֹם	2 3
<u>you will never see again.</u>	4 <u>לא תספו לראותם עוד עד עולם.</u>	4
Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea.	(ל) וַיֵּרֶא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת מִצְרַיִם מֵת עַל שְׂפַת הַיָּם	5
And when Israel saw the wondrous power which Hashem had wielded against the Egyptians,	(לא) וַיֵּרֶא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת הַיָּד הַגְּדֹלָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' בְּמִצְרַיִם	6
the people feared Hashem ; they had faith in Hashem and in God's servant Moses.	7 וַיִּירָאוּ הָעָם אֶת ה' וַיֶּאֱמִינוּ בֹהוּ וּבְמֹשֶׁה עַבְדּוֹ.	7

The reply of the people is spontaneous. Indeed it is a rare moment of grace inside the desert. They sing a song, with Moshe as a choirmaster:

אָז יִשִּׁיר-מֹשֶׁה וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת, לַיהוָה, וַיֹּאמְרוּ, לֵאמֹר: אֲשִׁירָה לַיהוָה כִּי-גָאֵה גָאֵה

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to Hashem. They said:
I will sing to Hashem for He has triumphed gloriously (Exodus 15: 1)

They sing all together, in perfect harmony.

The Or HaChaim highlights the future tense used here : “אָז יִשִּׁיר” would more likely mean “they will sing” than “they sang,” in reference to the future inclusion of the Shirah in the liturgy.

He also notices the use of the first person to emphasize this exceptional moment of perfect unity, echoing the Mekhilta d’Rabbi Yishmael 15:2:

שראתה שפחה על הים מה שלא ראו ישעיה ויחזקאל

A maid-servant beheld at the Red Sea what was not beheld by Ezekiel and Ezekiel.

Our *Shirah* is the only text in the Torah whose origins completely come from the human mind, with its inspiration and power from God. The men and the women are the ones taking over in order to write their part of the history in the Torah.

2. Food makes us free!

It seems that breaking free also means being liberated of our primary fears. (Hunger is one of the primary needs of the human being in the pyramid of Maslow). The episode of the Manna suddenly becomes a pretext to feed the Hebrew people with ... trust!

Let's not forget that they all had their herds and animals that could be an emergency source of food. But hunger is not the real reason for their complaint and fear. The real reason is the lack of food, the anxiety of not having enough for tomorrow. They were still tied to their lives in Egypt and all the instability that that entailed.

Indeed, we don't exactly know what their concern is:

The hunger? It is never mentioned in the text.

The quality of the food in the desert ?

Their fear of starving ? (Which is actually a psychic hunger)

Or is it their inability to ask for bread without whining?

וַיִּלֹּנוּ כָּל-עַדְת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל-מֹשֶׁה וְעַל-אַהֲרֹן בַּמִּדְבָּר: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִי־יִתֵּן מִיַּד-יְהוָה בָּרֶזֶץ
מִצִּירִים בְּשִׁבְתֵּנוּ עַל-סִיר הַבָּשָׂר בְּאֲכֹלנוּ לֶחֶם לְשִׁבְעֵי כִי-הוֹצֵאתֶם אֹתֵנוּ אֶל-הַמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה לְהַמִּית אֶת-כָּל-הַקְּהָל
הַזֶּה בָּרָעַב:

(2) In the wilderness, the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron.

**(3) The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of Hashem in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death."
(Exodus 16: 2-3)**

Which reality is described here in their complaint?

1. They are "in the desert" - the place mentioned is not precise at all, it is the situation that terrorizes them, and not the place itself.
2. They are sitting next to the meat pots, but do they get to actually eat the meat ?
3. All the commentators address this expression "sitting next to the meat pots", which excludes the action of eating the food.
3. They confirm that the particularity of Egypt was that you died from the hand of Hashem Himself, you could really feel His presence at your side, whereas in the desert, you feel like you could starve.

This idea is exactly what we can use as a starting point to think about what was really troubling the people at this point. In fact, in Egypt, the Hebrew people were perfectly able to identify Hashem's presence. Yes, you would die in Egypt, but you would die with Hashem by your side! Now they fear that they are to be left all alone in the desert, vulnerable without Hashem's palpable presence.

How does Hashem reassure them and give them the assurance they long for ?

Let's analyze the words offered:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הֲנִי מִמְטִיר לָכֶם לֶחֶם לֶחֶם מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֵּצֵא הָעָם וַלְקִטּוֹ דָּבַר־יוֹם בְּיוֹמוֹ לְמַעַן אֲנֹסְנֵהוּ הַיּוֹם
בְּתוֹרָתִי אִם־לֹא: וְהָיָה בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁשִׁי וְהִכִּינוּ אֶת אֲשֶׁר־יִבְיֹאוּ וְהָיָה מִשְׁנֵה עַל אֲשֶׁר־יִלְקְטוּ יוֹם אֶחָד: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה
וְאַהֲרֹן אֶל־כָּל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲרַב וַיְדַעְתֶּם כִּי יְהוָה הוֹצִיא אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: וּבִקֶּר וּרְאִיתֶם אֶת־כְּבוֹד יְהוָה
בְּשָׂמְעוֹ אֶת־תְּלִנְתֵיכֶם עַל־יְהוָה וַנְּחַנוּ מָה כִּי תִלְיִנוּ עָלֵינוּ:

And Hashem said to Moses, "I will rain down bread for you from the sky, and the people shall go out and gather each day that day's portion—that I may thus test them, to see whether they will follow My instructions or not.

So, Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "By evening you shall know it was Hashem who brought you out from the land of Egypt.

and in the morning, you shall behold the Presence of Hashem, because [God] has heard your grumbings against Hashem . For who are we that you should grumble against us?

(Exodus 16: 4-7)

Note that this heavenly food doesn't have a name. Also, what is it made of ? It is only called "לחם מן השמים" - bread from Heaven. Perhaps the most important word is "Heaven."

Also note that we might have expected some reassurance from God that the people will in fact be fed. There is no such guarantee, however, that they will have enough to eat always. Instead:

- *In the evening, (by eating this meat) you will know that it is to Me that you owe your status as free men.*
(verse 6)

- *In the morning (by eating this bread) you will be able to see Me, to see My presence in this food.*
(verse 7)

And at which moment will they be fed ? The text doesn't say anything about that.

The main point is, yes, to feed them, but more importantly, to fill them with affection, to make them know and see "the *presence of Hashem inside this food*" says the text. It is then not a surprise to read a mention of a cloud column.

וַיְהִי כַּדְבַר אַהֲרֹן אֶל־כָּל־עַדְת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּפְּנוּ אֶל־הַמִּדְבָּר וְהִנֵּה כְבוֹד יְהוָה נֹרָאָה בָּעַנָּן:

And as Aaron spoke to the whole Israelite community, they turned toward the wilderness, and there, in a cloud, appeared the Presence of Hashem. (Exodus 16:10)

The Manna will be their food inside the desert because the soil is not fertile. This task is typically human, requiring planting, harvesting and preparing flour. But now this whole process is being taken over by Hashem Himself. It's a real turn of events, where Hashem becomes a new kind of farmer from Heaven.

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To conclude, we have on the one hand a perfect song, created by human minds, which becomes worthy of being included in the Torah (a creation of God), and on the other hand, we have bread from Heaven, sent by God, which is usually made by men.

Each partner is moving from its place to reach the other. God and human beings both make a move towards the other. They encroach on each other's ground, in a positive and productive way. In reality, *B'shalach* is the story of a reciprocal encounter between Hashem and His people, *b'nei yisrael*.

It is complicated, but it is sweet. As Jeremiah reminds us :

זָכַרְתִּי לְךָ יְהוָה אֱהָבָתְךָ כְּלוּלֹתֶיךָ לְכִתְּךָ אַחֲרַי בַּמִּדְבָּר בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא זְרוּעָה:

Thus said the LORD : I accounted to your favor, the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride— How you followed Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown. (Jeremiah 2:2)



Hannah Ruimy was born in Paris into a Hasidic family. After a Bachelor's degree in Clinical Psychology at René Descartes University, she studied in Israel and obtained a teaching degree from the Israeli Ministry of Education. She is passionate about Jewish education. Hannah taught high school classes in Yavné Paris. For three years, she directed ENIO-Gustave Leven, a middle class school in Paris. In 2017, she headed the Jewish Studies of the School Group. She has coordinated several educational curricula, in particular, for high schools, in France. Hannah is the educational manager of the Talmud Torah of the "Ohel Avraham" Community in Paris. In 2019, she won the Biblical Contest for adults in France.