

**Parshat B'Shalach**  
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*Class of 2017*

It is Parshat Beshalach - Am Yisrael has made it out of Egypt. They reach the Yam Suf - the Sea of Reeds. They look back: they see the Egyptians behind them. They look forward - they see an impenetrable sea of water. Nachshon takes a step into the water and - miraculously - the waters part and the Israelites walk through the waters to the other side.

And in doing so - they leave one reality and enter another.

They leave behind being עבדים (slaves) of Pharaoh on one side of the sea.

They come out the other side as עבדים (servants) of Gd.

What happened during this once-in-a-lifetime crossing?

Anthropologist Victor Turner calls this crossing a “liminal space”.

The Oxford dictionary explains “liminal space” this way:

- The word “**liminal**” comes from the Latin word *limens*, meaning literally, “threshold”
- Liminal space is “occupying a position at, or on both sides, of a boundary or threshold” or “relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process.”

Anthropologists use the word “liminal space” to describe *“the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of **rituals**, when participants have not yet begun the transition to the status they will hold when the **ritual** is complete”*.

What ritual was happening at the Yam Suf?

R. Jonathan Sacks has a beautiful explanation as to what the splitting of the sea and the crossing of the Sea really symbolized.

Splitting something into two parts and crossing in the middle reminds us of the ancient ceremony of covenant-making: “to cut a covenant” or “to cut a treaty” or today: “to cut a deal”. In Hebrew לְכַרֵּת בְּרִית.

Looking back into Sefer Breishit: in the בְּרִית בֵּין הַבְּתָרִים (the Covenant of the Pieces) Gd tells Avram to take 3 animals: עֵז וְאֵיל וְעֵגְלָה (heifer, goat and ram) and cut them in half. Avram falls into a deep slumber and has a vision of Gd speaking to him and telling that his descendants will go down to a strange country, they will be enslaved and mistreated. But [after 400 years] Gd will take them out with many possessions. And a great smoke and fire (representing Gd) passed between these pieces and “cut” this covenant - this בְּרִית - with Avram...and thereby with his descendants.

So now imagine the Sea, it is cut in half and Bnei Yisrael **walk** through, reenacting the covenant and sealing the deal. As it says in Shirat HaYam (Shmot 15:16)

Until Your people pass by, O Lord, until the people You have acquired      עד יעבור עמך ה', עד יעבר עם זו קנית  
pass by.

R. Steven Exler's father points out this visual representation in the Torah:

And the Israelites marched on dry ground in the midst of the sea      ובני ישראל הלכו ביבשה בתוך הים

Psychologists say: *"The concept of liminal space and thresholds isn't simply scary. It's terrifying. So, why is liminal space so important? Because it allows us to arrive at the place of transformation and you cannot experience transformation unless you let go. To let go you need faith."*

Have you ever felt yourself in this liminal space - where you are leaving something behind but not sure where you are headed?

This Shabbat, as we read the story of Am Yisrael crossing the Sea, I invite you to imagine what it was like for our forefathers and foremothers to be in this liminal space - where they leave the world that they know behind, as they go forward to the unknown and trust their faith to Gd.



Rabbanit Bracha Jaffe served, for many years, as Community Educator and Director of Mercaz Center for Adult Education in Beth Tfiloh synagogue in Baltimore, MD. Her love of tefilla and ritual led her to be an experienced gaba'it and organizer of women's tefilla groups. She has taught many women and girls to leyn and is the voice of the JOFA Megillat Esther App. Rabbanit Bracha interned at United Orthodox Synagogue in Houston, Texas and at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale in New York. She participated in chaplaincy programs at New York Presbyterian Hospital and at a maximum security women's prison. Rabbanit Bracha is a 2017 graduate of Yeshivat Maharat, following a long career in hi-tech in Israel. She feels blessed to be following this path which nourishes and fills her soul.