

INSPIRE

BESHALACH 17TH SHEVAT - 30TH JANUARY 2021

TRADITION

By Rabbi Yossi Goldman



How important is tradition in Judaism? I don't just mean for the Fiddler on the Roof — I mean for me, you, and all the rest of us. How strong is the need for tradition in the spiritual consciousness of Jews today?

Despite the effects of secularism, I would venture to suggest that there is still a need inside us to feel connected to our roots, our heritage, and our sense of belonging to the Jewish people.

But for vast numbers of our people, tradition alone has not been enough. And that applies not only to the rebellious among us who may have cast aside their traditions with impunity but also for many ordinary, thinking people who feel that to do something just because "that's the way it has always been done" is simply not good enough.

So what if my grandfather did it? My grandfather rode around in a horse and buggy! Must I give up my car for a horse just because Zayde rode a horse? And if my Bobba never got a university degree, that means that I shouldn't? So, just because my grandparents practised certain Jewish traditions, why must I? Perhaps those traditions are as obsolete as the horse and buggy?

There are many Jews who think this way, and who will not be convinced to behave Jewishly just because their grandparents did.

We need to tell them why their grandparents did it. They need to understand that their grandparents' traditions were not done just for tradition's sake, but there were very good reasons why their forebears practised those traditions. And that those very same reasons and rationales still hold good today.

Too many young people were put off tradition because some cheder or Talmud Torah teacher didn't take their questions seriously. They were silenced with a wave of the hand, a pinch of the ear, the classic When you get older, you'll understand, or the infamously classic Just do as you're told.

There are answers. There have always been answers. We may not have logical explanations for tsunamis and other tzoris, but all our traditions are founded on substance and have intelligible, credible underpinnings. If we seek answers we will find them in abundance, including layers and layers of meaning, from the simple to the symbolic to the philosophical and even mystical.

This week's Parshah features the Song of the Sea, sung by Moses and the Jewish people following the splitting of the sea and their miraculous deliverance from the Egyptian armies. In its opening lines we find the verse,¹ This is my G-d, and I will glorify Him; the G-d of my fathers, and I will exalt Him.

The sequence is significant. First comes my G-d, and only thereafter the G-d of my fathers. In the Amidah, the silent devotion which is the apex of our daily prayers, we begin addressing the Almighty as Our G-d and the G-d of our fathers... Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Again, our G-d comes first. So it is clear that while the G-d of our fathers — i.e. "tradition" — most definitely plays a very important role in Judaism, still, an indispensable prerequisite is that we must make G-d ours, personally. Every Jew must develop a personal relationship with G-d. We need to understand the reasons and the significance of our traditions, lest they be seen as an empty ritual to be discarded by the next generation.

Authentic Judaism has never shied away from questions. Questions have always been encouraged and formed a part of our academic heritage. Every page of the Talmud is filled with questions — and answers. You don't have to wait for the Passover Seder to ask a question.

When we think, ask, and find answers to our faith, then the traditions of our grandparents become alive, and we understand fully why we should make them ours. Once a tradition has become ours, then the fact that this very same practice has been observed uninterrupted by our ancestors throughout the generations becomes a powerful force that can inspire us and our children for all time.

THE DIVIDED SEA: NATURAL OR SUPERNATURAL?

By Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The splitting of the Reed Sea is engraved in Jewish memory. We recite it daily during the morning service, at the transition from the Verses of Praise to the beginning of communal prayer. We speak of it again after the Shema, just before the Amidah. It was the supreme miracle of the exodus. But in what sense?

If we listen carefully to the narratives, we can distinguish two perspectives. This is the first:

The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left...The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen—the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived. But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

The same note is struck in the Song at the Sea: By the blast of Your nostrils the waters piled up.

The surging waters stood firm like a wall; The deep waters congealed in the heart of the sea.

The emphasis here is on the supernatural dimension of what happened. Water, which normally flows, stood upright. The sea parted to expose dry land. The laws of nature were suspended. Something happened for which there can be no scientific explanation.

However, if we listen carefully, we can also hear a different note:

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land.

Here there is not a sudden change in the behaviour of water, with no apparent cause. God brings a wind that, in the course of several hours, drives the waters back. Or consider this passage:

During the last watch of the night the Lord looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. He made the wheels of their chariots come off so that they had difficulty driving. The Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The Lord is fighting for them against Egypt." The emphasis here is less on miracle than on irony. The great military assets of the Egyptians—making them almost invulnerable in their day—were their horses and chariots. These were Egypt's speciality. They still were, in the time of Solomon, five centuries later: Solomon accumulated chariots and horses; he had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses, which he kept in the chariot cities and also with him in Jerusalem...They imported a chariot from Egypt for six hundred shekels of silver, and a horse for a hundred and fifty.

Viewed from this perspective, the events that took place could be described as follows: The Israelites had arrived at the Reed Sea at a point at which it was shallow. Possibly there was a ridge in the sea bed, normally covered by water, but occasionally—when, for example, a fierce east wind blows—exposed. This is how the Cambridge University physicist Colin Humphreys puts it in his *The Miracles of Exodus*:

Wind tides are well known to oceanographers. For example, a strong wind blowing along Lake Erie, one of the Great Lakes, has produced water elevation differences of as much as sixteen feet between Toledo, Ohio, on the west, and Buffalo, New York, on the east...There are reports that Napoleon was almost killed by a "sudden high tide" while he was crossing shallow water near the head of the Gulf of Suez. In the case of the wind that exposed the ridge in the bed of the sea, the consequences were dramatic. Suddenly the Israelites, traveling on foot, had an immense advantage over the Egyptian chariots that were pursuing them. Their wheels became stuck in the mud. The charioteers made ferocious efforts to free them, only to find that they quickly became mired again. The Egyptian army could neither advance nor retreat. So intent were they on the trapped wheels, and so reluctant were they to abandon their prized war machines, the chariots, that they failed to notice that the wind had dropped and the water was returning. By the time they realized what was happening, they were trapped. The ridge was now covered with seawater in either direction, and the island of dry land in the middle was shrinking by the minute. The mightiest army of the ancient world was defeated, and its warriors drowned, not by a superior army, not by human opposition at all, but by their own folly in being so focused on capturing the Israelites that they ignored the fact that they were driving into mud where their chariots could not go.

We have here two ways of seeing the same events: one natural, the other supernatural. The supernatural explanation—that the waters stood upright—is immensely powerful, and so it entered Jewish memory. But the natural explanation is no less compelling. The Egyptian strength proved to be their weakness. The weakness of the Israelites became their strength. On this reading, what was significant was less the supernatural, than the moral dimension of what happened. God visits the sins on the sinners. He mocks those who mock Him. He showed the Egyptian army, which reveled in its might, that the weak were stronger than they—just as He later did with the pagan prophet Bilaam, who prided himself in his prophetic powers and was then shown that his donkey (who could see the angel Bilaam could not see) was a better prophet than he was.

To put it another way: a miracle is not necessarily something that suspends natural law. It is, rather, an event for which there may be a natural explanation, but which—happening when, where and how it did—evokes wonder, such that even the most hardened sceptic senses that God has intervened in history. The weak are saved; those in danger, delivered. More significant still is the moral message such an event conveys: that hubris is punished by nemesis; that the proud are humbled and the humble given pride; that there is justice in history, often hidden but sometimes gloriously revealed.

This idea can be taken further. Emil Fackenheim has spoken of "epoch-making events" that transform the course of history. More obscurely, but along similar lines, the French philosopher Alain Badiou has proposed the concept of an "event" as a "rupture in ontology" through which individuals are brought face to face with a truth that changes them and their world. It is as if all normal perception fades away and we know that we are in the presence of something momentous, to which we sense we must remain faithful for the rest of our lives. "The appropriation of Presence is mediated by an event." It is through transformative events that we feel addressed, summoned, by something beyond history, breaking through into history. In this sense, the division of the Reed Sea was something other and deeper than a suspension of the laws of nature. It was the transformative moment at which the people "believed in the Lord and in Moses His servant" and called themselves "the people You acquired."

Not all Jewish thinkers focused on the supernatural dimension of God's involvement in human history. Maimonides insisted that "Israel did not believe in Moses our teacher because of the signs he performed."

What made Moses the greatest of the prophets, for Maimonides, is not that he performed supernatural deeds but that, at Mount Sinai, he brought the people the word of God. In general, the sages tended to downplay the dimension of the miraculous, even in the case of the greatest miracle of all, the division of the sea. That is the meaning of the following midrash, commenting on the verse, "Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its full flow [le-eitano]":

Rabbi Jonathan said: The Holy One, blessed be He, made a condition with the sea [at the beginning of creation], that it should split asunder for the Israelites. That is the meaning of "the sea went back to its full flow" – [read not le-eitano but] letenao, "the condition" that God had earlier stipulated. The implication is that the division of the sea was, as it were, programmed into creation from the outset. It was less a suspension of nature than an event written into nature from the beginning, to be triggered at the appropriate moment in the unfolding of history.

We even find an extraordinary debate among the sages as to whether miracles are a sign of merit or the opposite. The Talmud tells the story of a man whose wife died, leaving a nursing child. The father was too poor to be able to afford a wet-nurse, so a miracle occurred and he himself gave milk until the child was weaned. On this, the Talmud records the following difference of opinion:

Rav Joseph said: Come and see how great was this man that such a miracle was wrought for him. Abbaye said to him: On the contrary, how inferior was this man, that the natural order was changed for him.

According to Abbaye, greater are those to whom good things happen without the need for miracles. The genius of the biblical narrative of the crossing of the Reed Sea is that it does not resolve the issue one way or another. It gives us both perspectives. To some the miracle was the suspension of the laws of nature. To others, the fact that there was a naturalistic explanation did not make the event any less miraculous. That the Israelites should arrive at the sea precisely where the waters were unexpectedly shallow, that a strong east wind should blow when and how it did, and that the Egyptians' greatest military asset should have proved their undoing—all these things were wonders, and we have never forgotten them.

PARSHA SUMMARY

Soon after allowing the children of Israel to depart from Egypt, Pharaoh chases after them to force their return, and the Israelites find themselves trapped between Pharaoh's armies and the sea. G-d tells Moses to raise his staff over the water; the sea splits to allow the Israelites to pass through, and then closes over the pursuing Egyptians. Moses and the children of Israel sing a song of praise and gratitude to G-d. In the desert the people suffer thirst and hunger, and repeatedly complain to Moses and Aaron. G-d miraculously sweetens the bitter waters of Marah, and later has Moses bring forth water from a rock by striking it with his staff. He causes manna to rain down from the heavens before dawn each morning, and quails to appear in the Israelite camp each evening. The children of Israel are instructed to gather a double portion of manna on Friday, as none will descend on Shabbat, the divinely decreed day of rest. Some disobey and go to gather manna on the seventh day, but find nothing. Aaron preserves a small quantity of manna in a jar, as a testimony for future generations. In Rephidim, the people are attacked by the Amalekites, who are defeated by Moses' prayers and an army raised by Joshua.

HAFTORAH SUMMARY

This week's haftorah describes the fall of the Canaanite general Sisera and his armies, who were swept away by the Kishon River, and Deborah's ensuing song of thanks. This parallels this week's Torah portion which discusses the drowning of the Egyptian forces in the Red Sea and the subsequent songs led by Moses and Miriam. Deborah the Prophetess was the leader and judge of the Israelites at a difficult time; the Israelites were being persecuted by King Jabin of Canaan and his general Sisera. Deborah summoned Barak son of Abinoam and transmitted to him G-d's instruction: "Go and gather your men toward Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men of the children of Naphtali and Zebulun. And I shall draw to you, to the brook Kishon, Sisera, the chieftain of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his multitude; and I will give him into your hand." At Barak's request, Deborah accompanied him, and together they led the offensive. Sisera was informed of the Israelites' mobilization and he gathered his forces and proceeded towards the Kishon River. Barak's army below and the heavens above waged battle against the Canaanites and utterly destroyed them. The river washed them all away; not one of the enemy survived. The defeated general fled on foot and arrived at the tent of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite. She invited him in and offered to hide him. When he fell asleep, Jael took a tent-peg and knocked it through Sisera's temple. The next chapter of the haftorah is the Song of Deborah, which describes the miraculous victory and thanks the One Above for His assistance.

WISHING ALL THOSE WITH YARTZEIT THIS WEEK CHAIM ARUCHIM

Lesley Adams, father Diamond, Raymond Reuven ben Avraham HaLevi Sunday 31/01/2021 Shevat 18, 5781
Nigel Tobias mother, Rose Sunday 31/01/2021 Shevat 18, 5781
Alison Levy, father Fenton, Shlomo Shlomo Laab ben Betzallel Monday 01/02/2021 Shevat 19, 5781
Gill White, mother Wednesday 03/02/2021 Shevat 21, 5781
Irene Rose, mother Koss, Sarah Sarah bas Yitzchok Wednesday 03/02/2021 Shevat 21, 5781
Sally-Ann, Teller father Thursday 04/02/2021 Shevat 22, 5781
Debby Blow, father Morris Moshe ben Yaakov Thursday 04/02/2021 Shevat 22, 5781
Howard Diamond, daughter Claire Clara bas Hershel Thursday 04/02/2021 Shevat 22, 5781

JEWISH HUMOUR

Moishe and Miriam Epstein, in their late 80s called a handyman to do some work around their condo. "Honey why don't you sit down by the table and we'll start supper," said Miriam to Moishe, husband of 50 years. "Sure thing," Moishe replied, settling himself down. "Now darling, would you like the soup first or the salad?" asked Miriam. "Umm I guess I'll take the soup," Moishe responded. After a whole meal of one endearing term after another, the handyman who was watching in disbelief couldn't contain his curiosity any longer. He snuck into the kitchen and asked, "Excuse me Mrs. Epstein. Do you always talk to your husband like that?" "Son, I'll be honest with you," Miriam replied. "It's been five years now, and I just can't remember his name but I am just too embarrassed to ask!"

RIDDLE OF THE WEEK

Glittering points that downward thrust, Sparkling spears that never rust. What is it?

Answer for last week by

STORY TIME

Many years ago in the Land of Israel, there lived a man named Reb Nisim. He and his family lived in a small stone house, very much like all the other houses in his village, with one exception. Next to his house there grew the most beautiful tree, which produced a crop of luscious pomegranates. People traveled from far and wide to purchase these special "Nisim" fruit. In fact, they were so much in demand that the family was able to live all year on the profits they made from selling these pomegranates. Every summer the tree was heavy with the beautiful, red fruits. But one summer not even one pomegranate could be seen. Reb Nisim called his eldest son and told him, "Climb up to the top of the tree; perhaps there are some fruits there that we don't see." The boy climbed to the top, and indeed, hidden from view were three precious fruits - the most beautiful they had ever seen. When Shabbat came, Reb Nisim put two of the pomegranates on the table for a special Shabbat treat. The third, he put away to eat on the holiday of Tu B'Shevat, the New Year of the Trees. That was a difficult year for the family, as they had always depended on the tree for their livelihood. Finally, Reb Nisim's wife suggested that he travel outside the Holy Land to earn or raise some money. He was very reluctant to leave. He had lived his entire life surrounded by the holiness of the Land of Israel, and he didn't want to "shame" the land by admitting that he could not make a livelihood there. He tried in various ways to earn some money, but every effort met with failure, and it seemed that he had no choice but to do as his wife had suggested. "All right," he said. "I will go, but I will never reveal to any soul that I come from the Holy Land." For many months he travelled from city to city, but each place had its own poor to support, and he had no luck. Since it is a great mitzvah (commandment) to support the poor of the Land of Israel, he would have received alms had he identified himself, but this he refused to do. It was Tu B'Shevat when Reb Nisim arrived in the city of Koshta, Turkey. When he came to the local synagogue, a shocking sight met his eyes. All the Jews of the city were gathered there, weeping, mourning and reciting Psalms. "What has happened?" asked Reb Nisim, in alarm. The sexton of the synagogue explained, "The son of the Sultan is very ill. He knows that Jews are accomplished doctors, and he has decreed that every Jew will be expelled from his realm unless we produce a doctor or a cure for his son. So far, we have failed." As Reb Nisim was absorbing this terrible news, the rabbi's assistant asked Reb Nisim to accompany him to the rabbi, saying, "Our rabbi says he is very happy to have a guest from the Holy Land." Reb Nisim went as requested, but he was puzzled. How did the rabbi know? He had been so careful to tell no one where he was from. He decided to ask the rabbi directly. "There is a special fragrance about you. I feel it is the holiness of the land which adheres to you," the rabbi replied. "What you are smelling must be the fragrance of the pomegranate I have brought with me," Reb Nisim explained. "I carried it with me especially for Tu B'Shevat, and since that is today, I beg you to partake of it with me." The rabbi was overjoyed. "Please, tell me your name," he asked. "My name is Reb Nisim." When the rabbi heard that he smiled broadly. "This surely is a sign of Divine Providence. In honor of Tu B'Shevat, I have been studying about the different types of fruits that are described in the holy books." The rabbi described what he had learned. Then he said, "The acronym of the word 'rimonim' (pomegranates) is 'refua melech u'bno nisim yaviya meheira' - the recovery for the king and his son, Nisim will bring quickly. Let us bring some of your pomegranate juice to the king's son at once. Perhaps, in the merit of the fruits of the Holy Land, G-d will bring us success." The two men were admitted to the room of the sick prince, who was lying close to death. They approached the bed and administered a few drops of juice into the unconscious boy's mouth. Suddenly colour rose into his pallid complexion. They gave him a few more drops, and there was a weak but unmistakable flicker of the prince's eyelids. The Sultan grasped the hand of his beloved child, and tears of joy welled in his eyes. He turned to the two Jews and said, "I will never forget what you have done for my son." The next day Reb Nisim and the rabbi were summoned to the palace. The prince was sitting up in bed, a happy smile on his tired face. The Sultan's servants brought in large velvet bags bulging with gold coins and jewels. "Reb Nisim, this is just a small token of my gratitude to you for having saved my son. As for the Jews in my realm, they may stay and live in peace." Reb Nisim returned home laden with riches. The next summer, the wondrous pomegranate tree produced as many beautiful fruits as ever. Its fame spread as the story of the prince was retold throughout the Holy Land.

FOOD 4 THE SOUL

At every moment, in each thing, a miracle occurs far transcendent of even the splitting of the Red Sea: Existence is renewed out of the void, and the natural order is sustained where there should be chaos. Indeed, it is not the miracle that is wondrous, but the natural order. Does anyone have a good reason why gravity should behave today the way it behaved yesterday? Does anyone have a good reason why there should be anything at all?