

Shabbat Shalom: Chol Hamoed Pesach
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Efrat, Israel - Everyone who saw Cecil B. DeMille's "Ten Commandments" or Steven Spielberg's "Prince of Egypt" was thrilled to view the scenic depiction of the splitting of the Reed Sea, undoubtedly the most amazing supernatural occurrence in the pages of the Bible. Indeed the inspired and ecstatic song-prayer of praise which emerged from the souls and lips of Moses and the Children of Israel exults, "This is my G-d and I will glorify Him, the G-d of my father and I will exalt Him" (Exodus 15:2); our Sages teach us that a Gentile hand-maiden at the sea saw G-d's glory in a way that even the prophet Ezekiel, the son of Buzi, had not. But what was the religious idea behind the miracle? What profound truth was the Almighty attempting to convey to His people by this phenomenal miraculous event?

In order to understand the Biblical intent, it is necessary to review the Scriptural account of the creation of the world. The Book of Genesis opens with an earth, formless and empty ('tohu and bohu' - inchoate and uncreated) darkness on the face of the deep with the spirit ('ruah') of G-d hovering over the face of the waters. Into this dark cosmos of water, the Almighty injected His Divine light, And G-d said, Let there be light, and there was light. G-d then divided between the light and darkness established the firmament-heaven-sky in the midst of the upper waters, and then commanded:

"Let the waters under the heaven be gathered into one place so that dry land ('yabasha') may be seen... And G-d called the dry land Earth and the gathering of waters He called seas. And G-d saw that it was good." (Genesis 1:2-10)

Fascinatingly enough, each of the key verbs and nouns we have seen in the creation story finds its parallel in the Splitting-of-the-Reed-Sea story.

"And the Egyptians pursued them [the Israelites], and they overtook their encamping near the sea" (Exodus 14:9). The dominant substance filling the world before the miracle of the splitting is water, the Reed Sea before which the Israelites are encamped. "And there were clouds and darkness, and [the Almighty] lit up the night with light." (Exodus 14:20). Here again, we find the darkness of the night paralleling the darkness of the deep, a night into which G-d injects His divine light providing a surrealistic, atmospheric change similar to the primordial moment of creation, when light entered the world of darkness.

"And the Lord moved the sea forward with a powerful easterly wind." ('ruah' - reminiscent of the ruah of G-d which hovered over the face of the waters in creation). "And He set the sea into dry earth, and the waters were split."

"And the children of Israel came into the midst of the sea upon dry land," ('yabasha' Exodus 2), parallel to that 'yabasha' (dry land) which may be seen at the time of the land's emergence from the waters on the third day of creation.

Darkness, waters, light, a division, break or split within the waters, and the emergence of dry land- the very same elements characterizing in a remarkable fashion both the creation of the world as well as the splitting of the Reed Sea. (And we cannot escape the fact that these are the very elements involved in the birth-creation of every new life: the fetus enveloped by water in the comforting darkness of the mother's womb; the baby is then split apart from its mother, thrust forth into a world of light and dry atmosphere and dry land.)

Clearly, the striking parallelism forcefully conveys the message of the miracle: the splitting of the Reed Sea must be seen as nothing less than a second creation of the world. There is, however, one crucial distinction: in the drama of creation, the Almighty G-d effectuated a virtuoso solo

performance (as it were), whereas the splitting of the Reed Sea required the participation, and even the initiative of the Israelites.

Indeed, it would seem that even Moses himself had to be taught the lesson of Israel's involvement. Initially, when the Israelites became aware of the Egyptians' chase and - finding themselves hemmed in between Pharaoh's hordes behind them and the Reed Sea in front of them - frighteningly rail against Moses for taking them into the desert to die, the great leader-liberator comforts them with the promise "Be not afraid; stand still and watch for the salvation of the Lord which He will do for you today. What you will see perpetrated against Egypt today you will never see again. The Lord will do battle for you but you must remain silent," (Exodus 14:13,14).

G-d, however, had very different plans. Moses apparently then prayed to G-d. The Almighty chides the great prophet: "Why are you crying out to me? Speak to the Children of Israel, and let them move," (Exodus 14:15,16). In the words of Rashi (ad loc), "It is not proper to spend time in lengthy prayer during periods of danger." It is necessary to begin the movement towards redemption, to jump into the raging waters of the sea to escape the Egyptians, to do whatever it takes to reach out for freedom and attempt to assume a partnership role in completing an incomplete world, in repairing and perfecting the world to accept the Divine Kingship of peace and morality. And our Sages guarantee, "those who act to purify will be aided from on High."

G-d created the world alone, but G-d re-created the world together with the Israelites by forging them into a nation predicated upon freedom and morality, the exodus from Egyptian enslavement and the Revelation at Sinai. From a Jewish theological perspective, there was a primordial creation at the beginning, a historical re-creation at the Reed Sea, anointing the Nation of Israel by connecting the Exodus with the Revelation, and there will be the ultimate re-creation when the entire world will accept G-d's demand that swords be turned into ploughshares and war not learned anymore. This is the precedent as well as the promise of the miracle of the Reed Sea. But we must understand and fulfill our mission to work together with G-d to change the world order and bring about redemption -- then and now.

Shabbat Shalom.