



## FEAR AND FAITH: LESSONS FROM THE SEA

The concluding verse of Sefer Shemot, Perek 14, identifies two major emotions that Bnei Yisrael felt following kriat Yam Suf: fear of G-d and belief in G-d.

וַיֵּרָא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת הַיָּד הַגְּדֹלָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' בְּמִצְרַיִם וַיִּירָאוּ הָעָם אֶת ה' וַיֹּאמְינוּ בּוֹ וּבַמֶּשֶׁה עַבְדּוֹ.

*Israel saw the great work that Hashem did to the Egyptians, and the people feared Hashem; and they believed in Hashem, and in his servant Moshe.*

Many commentators wonder as to the significance of the development of these two feelings at the splitting of the sea. What is their inclusion here meant to teach us about Bnei Yisrael's experience at Yam Suf and their development as a nation?

When examining the text, the midrash, *Yalkut Shimoni* on Shemot (240) explains that prior to kriyat Yam Suf, Bnei Yisrael did not possess the feeling of fear toward Hashem:

וַיִּירָאוּ הָעָם אֶת ה' לְשֹׁעֲבֵר לֹא הָיוּ יֹרְאִים אֶת ה' אֲבָל כָּאֵן וַיִּירָאוּ הָעָם אֶת ה'.

*The people feared Hashem — Prior to this, they did not fear Hashem, but now*

*“the people feared Hashem.”*

It was only after experiencing the tremendous miracles at the Sea that they fully developed this quality. Recognizing that this is the first place that the emotion of fear is used in the context of the exodus from Egypt, the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh, Rav Chaim ibn Attar (Shemot 14:31), points out that the experience of fear here is not the level of simplistic fear, but rather the combination of fear and awe. He explains that we must assume that Bnei Yisrael possessed a certain amount of fear of G-d in Egypt, as the level of fear of punishment would have been what motivated them to keep the mitzvot of korban Pesach in Mitzrayim. Based on this, the significance of kriyat Yam Suf is that it promoted a key emotional quality within Bnei Yisrael that had not been accessed before.

But what exactly prompted this development of fear and awe? The Netziv, R' Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, commenting on this verse, notes that during kriyat Yam Suf, Bnei Yisrael witnessed the *yad hagedolah*, the

great hand, which signifies Hashem's involvement in each individual's personal life. Based on the phrase that we recite in Birchot Keriat Sh'ma at Ma'ariv, “*et rodfeihem v'et soneihem b'tehomot tiba*” — *their pursuers and enemies were drowned in the depths of the Sea*,” the Netziv explains that there were different types of individuals who chased after Bnei Yisrael at the Sea: those who were *rodfeihem* — namely part of the Egyptian military — and those who were *soneihem* — the haters of Bnei Yisrael. The Netziv explains that each individual who died as G-d split the Sea and closed the Sea received a specific punishment based on his own actions. When Bnei Yisrael witnessed the different punishments given to the different types of Mitzrim, they understood that Hashem's providence is individualized, even to non-Jews. This realization inspired significant awe and fear within them, as they recognized the uniqueness of G-d who has the capacity to provide and impact each and every person uniquely.

Rav Soloveitchik (*Chumash Mesoret HaRav* p.120) notes the change in language in the way that Hashem's "hand" is described. He notes that in Egypt, Bnei Yisrael witnessed Hashem's mighty hand (Shemot 6:1), whereas here, Bnei Yisrael witnessed Hashem's great hand. He notes that in Egypt, Bnei Yisrael "experienced physical liberation, but the spiritual significance of the event was lost on them." At kriyat Yam Suf, Bnei Yisrael experienced Hashem's great hand, namely that they received prophecy at this moment and were able to connect and recognize Hashem's greatness in a way that they had not before.

The second emotional quality that Bnei Yisrael developed at kriyat Yam Suf was that of *emunah*, belief in G-d. According to Ibn Ezra, Bnei Yisrael's experience at the Sea concretized for them that Hashem was the true and only God. The Midrash points out that the level of *emunah* that was derived from the experience was so great that it gave each individual within Bnei Yisrael enough merit to receive *ruach HaKodesh*.

The Malbim, R' Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Weissner, explains that the type of *emunah* developed by Bnei Yisrael at the kriyat Yam Suf was the type that lasts forever. Based on the fact that the text utilizes the letter *bet* to describe their emotional reaction — *vaya'aminu ba-Shem* — as opposed to the letter *lamed*, indicates that they developed the type of *emunah* where there is an inherent belief in the subject that the letter *bet* addresses. In the case of Bnei Yisrael at the Yam Suf, the miracles and wonders that were easily attributable to G-d led them to a belief experience that was to be eternal.

*Netivot Shalom*, The Slonimer Rebbe,

notes that there are three types of *emunah*: that of the head, that of the heart, and that which encapsulates our entire being — our limbs. He explains that the type of belief developed at Yam Suf was that of our limbs. The experience at the Sea, so complete and overwhelming, set the stage for the belief established at Yam Suf to be the type that would make a lasting impact on Bnei Yisrael forever.

Rav Hirsch points to the importance of these two emotions as basic key qualities "that are always to pulsate in the heart of the Jew who stands before God" (Rav Hirsch, Shemot 14:31). According to Rav Hirsch, the qualities that the Jews developed at the Sea were not meant to be limited to the Jews of that time, but were rather to serve as a model for all those in later generations. When thinking about why Az Yashir may have been included in our daily tefillah, at the pinnacle of the *Pesukei DiZimrah* experience, perhaps one answer is that it allows us to connect back to the qualities developed at that moment and attempt to draw on the inspiration of that moment, in what it stood for and in the metaphysical inspiration that it created for Bnei Yisrael forever.

The two emotions that Bnei Yisrael experienced at the Sea are fundamental feelings that we must continue to develop in 5782. According to the Rambam in *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* 2:1, fear of G-d is a fundamental mitzvah that we are commanded to keep as Jews, based on *Devarim* 6:13 "et Hashem Elokecha tira" — you shall fear G-d.

This quality, in the Rambam's view, typically develops as a progression from a different emotion, that of love. In his opinion, when we spend time contemplating nature and all of

God's creations, we will develop the emotion of love toward God. After this, our contemplation will lead us to recognize how insignificant we are compared to Him, the creator of the world, and we will thus develop the emotion of fear. When thinking about the wonders and miracles that Bnei Yisrael experienced at Yam Suf, it makes sense that they developed *yirah* as they experienced the progression that the Rambam describes in this halacha. We too, however, have the ability to work on this quality on a lesser scale in our daily lives. Taking time each day to identify the miracles of G-d's actions and creations in our own lives will give us the chance to work on this trait, and to build upon what was set out for us by our ancestors.

The second emotional quality developed by the nation at kriyat Yam Suf was that of *emunah*, belief. Whether belief is considered its own mitzvah today is debated extensively among the commentaries. According to the Ramban and *Baal Halachot Gedolot*, belief in G-d is not a mitzvah in its own right, but is instead the basis on which the rest of the mitzvot are established. According to this opinion, the remaining mitzvot would not be significant to keep without the establishment of *emunah*, belief, first. The Rambam, on the other hand disagrees and includes belief in G-d in his *Sefer Hamitzvot*, thus codifying it as one of the 613 mitzvot. This mitzvah, according to the Rambam, is the first of the Aseret HaDibrot. and is developed by a lifetime of trying "lada'at et Hashem" — to know G-d.

On this holiday of Pesach, let us take time to identify opportunities in our own lives to work on these qualities, in the spirit of those who came before us.