

## In this Issue

- **Growth through Torah** by Sarah Maddali
- **Shraga's Weekly** by Rabbi Shraga Simmons
- **Torah for Your Table** by Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis
- **Rabbi Avraham Twerski's Insights on the Torah** by Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski



## Grateful for Everything

Moses told the Jewish people that the food that sustained the Jews in the desert, *manna*, would not fall on Shabbat. However, to try to stir ruckus amongst the Jews and instill a sense of doubt in Moses's authority and credibility, two Jews scattered *manna* at sunrise on Shabbat. Miraculously, birds came and ate all of it so that not a single parcel of *manna* was left when the Jewish people woke up. As a result of this story, some have the custom of feeding birds before Shabbat of this week's Torah portion as a token of

gratitude for averting a potentially disastrous situation.

However, there is a question as to why. Birds love eating bread, especially savory *manna* that the Torah describes tasting like dough fried in honey. Why then would we show gratitude to the birds? They did not do anything beyond their nature to help us, and in fact benefited by getting to eat delicious *man*.

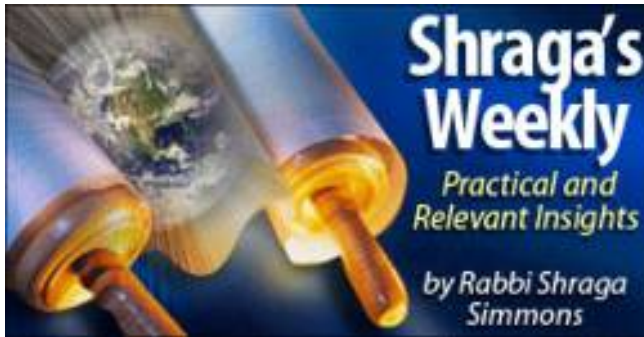
Lesson:

There is a beautiful lesson we can all glean in gratitude. Regardless of the intention of the giver, if we reaped any benefit, we are obligated to not only feel, but act indebted and appreciative.

There is an idea that even if a coin falls out of someone's pocket unbeknownst to them, and someone finds it and uses it, it is as if that person gave *tzedakah*, charity. How much more so do we need to feel grateful to those who intentionally helped us! Often times, it is easy to overlook little acts by those closest to us, especially when we feel as if we are constantly giving of ourselves. However, it is incumbent upon all of us to show gratitude for even small acts: when our two-year-old brings us tissues when we sneeze, when our wife has a warm dinner waiting for you when you get home, when our husband takes out the trash. Not only do we benefit from becoming more grateful people, but positive encouragement makes those around us want to help even more. It's a win – win situation!

Exercise: Thank someone for something you would have normally overlooked. It could be as simple as thanking the cashier while checking out

or calling someone to let them know how much they have impacted your life.



### Jump Into the Sea

Moses orchestrates a full year of plagues which completely debilitates Egyptian society. After the climactic 10th and final plague, the slaying of the First Born, Pharaoh finally agrees to let the Jews leave Egypt.

But, like any good megalomaniac, Pharaoh changes his mind and chases after them. When the Jews look in their rear-view mirrors and see the thundering Egyptian chariots fast approaching, panic spreads. The Jews feel trapped. There is no other outlet but the sea — the Red Sea.

The Jews begin to berate Moses: "Why did you have to bring us out here to die in the desert? You should have just left us alone to work for the Egyptians!" (Exodus 14:11-12)

Ludicrous! How could the Jews, after 210 years of intolerable suffering in Egypt, complain to Moses for liberating them?!

About 20 years ago, an incident occurred in Stockholm where terrorists captured and held

hostages. The hostages were abused both physically and emotionally. At the news conference following their release, the hostages all spoke in complimentary, glowing terms about their captors! Psychologists have since identified the "Stockholm Syndrome," whereby prisoners develop comfort and satisfaction in captivity.

For the Jews in Egypt, life was comfortable. In slavery, the rations may be meager and the bed made of straw, but there's an up-side as well: all one's needs are provided, and there are no challenging decisions to be made. No laundry, no shopping, no deals, no deadlines. The Hebrew word for Egypt, "*Mitzrayim*," means a "place of confinement." Sometimes it's the smallest box which makes us feel the most secure.

### One Giant Leap

Three million Jews are standing at the shores of the Red Sea. Their options are either to go forward into the un-split sea, or back to Egypt. The sea is cold, strange and foreboding. Egypt is warm, familiar and comfortable.

The Egyptians are thundering closer. The Jews are panicked. And then Nachshon, from the tribe of Yehuda, steps foot into the sea. (The original "one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.") But the sea still does not split. Nachshon continues as the water reaches his ankles, then up to his knees. Still no split. Nachshon forges deeper: Up to his waist, his chest. Still no split.

Nachshon's mind races: Maybe we should return to Egypt. Then he reminds himself: Life is about growing ... leaving the place of confinement behind... moving forward into the unknown ... But



## Beshalach (Exodus 13:17-17:16)

*basic compendium*

the alternative — to stay in our small space of warmth and comfort, is to choose stagnation and, ultimately, death. Egypt, Nachshon knew, was no option at all.

By now the water has reached his neck. Nachshon is being challenged to his limit. Yet he continues into the sea. As the water reaches his nostrils, at this last possible moment... the Red Sea splits. The Jewish People all rush in after him. Finally, freedom.

### Self Esteem

Although every Jew passed through on dry land, the experience of Nachshon was qualitatively different. When Nachshon walked through the sea, he was alive and invigorated. The future had issued its challenge, and Nachshon confronted it head-on. Slavery was baggage he'd left behind. He was liberated, both body and soul.

Contrast this to the experience of the rest of the Jewish People. The others, having entered only after the sea split, were in one sense disappointed in themselves for not having the bravery of Nachshon. Nachshon "*entered the water first*" (Exodus 14:22); the others "*entered first on dry land*" (14:29).

The Gaon of Vilna (18th century Europe) offers a beautiful insight: In describing the experience of Nachshon, the Torah says "*and the water formed a wall*" (Exodus 14:22). But for the rest of the people, the Hebrew word for wall, "*choma*," is spelled peculiarly — without a Vav. This can be read "*Chaima*," meaning anger. The Torah is reflecting each Jew's disappointment (and God's "anger") for not having had the courage to fulfill

their own potential. The growth opportunity had been lost forever.

### Breaking Out

The Red Sea appears in our own lives as well. Ultimately, the story of our lives comes down to a few key moments of decision. These spell the difference between a life of achievement versus one of regret. Often we procrastinate until the best option no longer remains. The door is closed and we comfort ourselves by saying, "Oh well, what could I do, things just didn't work out."

This Shabbos, as we read the portion of Beshalach, take a few minutes and ask yourself:

- What negative situation am I perpetuating simply because I am not willing to make the effort to change?
- Why am I afraid to change?
- What is the worst thing that can possibly happen?
- What is holding me back from achieving my full potential?
- In 10 years from now, what decision will I regret not having made?

Sometimes the answer is just "do it." To jump into the sea.

The question was once asked of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, the great 18<sup>th</sup> century Chassidic leader: "What if someone feels distant from God and Torah? How can he enter the 'loop' of spirituality which on one hand is so appealing, yet on the other hand is intimidating?" Rebbe Nachman answered: "Go to a Shabbos table and sing a *niggun* (melody). Sing it with zest and

verve, with feeling from deep in your soul. That's the way to jump in."

### Life's Crescendo

Unfortunately, our lives are not equipped with background music reaching its crescendo, to alert us that the "big moment" has arrived. Our only hope of escaping the confines of Egypt is to honestly confront our fears and embrace the opportunities that God gives us to grow.

Of course, we cannot always know what's waiting on the other side of the sea. But that's part of the beauty. It's our chance to become invigorated with the fullness of life.

The Torah tells us: Nachshon chose life. We must do the same. The feeling is liberating. Our self-esteem depends on it. And it is our only true option.



## The Song of Faith

The Shabbos that *Parashas Beshalach* is read is known as "*Shabbos Shirah* – the "Sabbath of Song" – because it is in this *parashah* that Moses leads the Jewish men, and Miriam the prophetess, leads the Jewish women in singing *the Song of*

*Praise and Exultation to the Almighty God* following the crossing of the Sea of Reeds. The special song that Moses composed is "*Az Yashir* – Then Moses *will* sing." The use of the future tense teaches us that Moses not only sang at the Sea of Reeds, but he will lead us in song once again when we behold our final redemption: the coming of Messiah. In the interim, we, the Jewish people, recite the song of Moses every morning in our prayers as we express gratitude to God.

How does one sing unto God? Is it possible for mere humans to praise Him?

Moses opened his song with the awesome words, "*Ashirah la'Hashem ... I shall sing to Hashem for He is exalted above the arrogant ....*"<sup>1</sup>

But how high is God? Can we compare Him to anything that we human beings have experienced? Moses, the greatest man ever to walk on planet Earth, was keenly aware of this human inadequacy, so he contented himself with the phrase, "*ga'oh ga'ah*," which is literally translated "high, high" (exalted above), followed by a blank space in the text. In fact, every stanza of Moses' song is followed by a blank space, so that we might realize that no mortal can even hope to comprehend the infinite, the Divine.

In our culture of hedonism and instant gratification, it is vital to absorb this message, for ours is a generation that may lose faith at the slightest disappointment. "How could God have allowed this to happen to me?" we protest indignantly. So, when events do not turn out as anticipated, let us remember the message of Moses: leave a blank space and remain silent, anchored to our faith.

### Converting Despair Into Hope

Miriam the prophetess not only led the women in song, but she did so with tambourines and drums. From where did she obtain those instruments?

The desert was hardly a place to purchase them. A profound lesson is to be found in those instruments. While enveloped in brutal bondage in the “Auschwitz” of Egypt, Miriam the prophetess prepared drums and tambourines, in the faith that one day redemption would come and give the nation cause to sing and celebrate. It is this pure faith that Jewish women instilled in our people, it is this faith that enabled us to survive the centuries, and it is this faith that we must summon whenever we find ourselves in predicaments that appear to be hopeless.

When counseling people embroiled in trying and untenable situations, our esteemed mother, Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis, often advises them to take their cue from Miriam: The name *Miriam* means “bitter” (as in *maror* of the Seder table); but through her faith, Miriam converted bitterness into hope and renewed life. So, instead of giving in to despair, get a tambourine and trust God. Our mother, a survivor of the infamous Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, is living testimony to that trust.

### A Song That Springs from the Heart

*Shirah* is more than a song: It is an expression of jubilation and exultation that springs from the inner recesses of the soul.

At the Splitting of the Reed Sea, the Jewish people, in its entirety, witnessed events of a magnitude that even the illustrious prophets did not behold. The heavens opened as the Children

of Israel beheld angels, the Patriarchs, and the Matriarchs; they saw the very Hand of God. A simple handmaiden was able to point and cry out in joy, “This is my God ....”

But there is yet another dimension to this song of Moses that makes it so special, and this uniqueness is to be found in the Hebrew word, “*az*” with which Moses commenced the song. It was with this very same word, “*az*,” that Moses previously questioned God and complained, “*Mei’az* ... – From the time I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name, he [Pharaoh] did evil to this people, but You did not rescue Your people.”<sup>2</sup> And now, with this very same word, “*Az*,” Moses proclaims God’s praise.

Sometimes we sing songs of praise to thank God for having saved us from danger and suffering, and we also sing to acknowledge the miracles He performed on our behalf. But that gratitude takes on a totally different dimension when we become aware that even the danger and suffering that we experienced were for our own benefit, and realize that through that affliction, we came to realize our potential and achieved greatness. Our bondage in Egypt enabled us to come to Sinai and accept God’s Covenant, for only a nation that endured suffering could appreciate the true meaning of Hashem’s *chesed*. Only such a nation could be worthy of accepting God’s covenant and all the responsibilities entailed therein – to become a “light unto the nations,” witnesses to God’s Presence.

Now we can better understand why, when the Torah speaks about Moses singing the song at the Splitting of the Sea, the word used is *Yashir* – will



*sing*, for when the Messiah comes, Moses will once again lead us in song with the word “Az” and we will understand the meaning of our long exile and our pain.

In the interim, we must always keep that vision in mind. We must always be aware that even when problems overwhelm us, even when we find ourselves enveloped in darkness, God’s Presence is always there and our suffering is not random or for naught. As Isaiah states, “I thank You, Hashem, for You were angry with me and now ... You have comforted me.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Recreating Yourself**

It is written that when our Forefathers departed from Egypt, God took them via a circuitous route rather than on the way that would lead them directly to the Land of Israel. At first glance, this is difficult to understand. Why would God have us traverse an inhospitable desert where there was no provision for food or water when we could have passed through the land of the Philistines and be assured of sustenance? There is an important teaching to be learned here. The Almighty was concerned that we would not be able to withstand the temptations and the pressures of Philistine society; contact with them might prompt us to return to Egypt, not only in a physical sense, but in our outlook as well. It is not only from the land of Egypt that we had to depart. More significantly, we had to remove the immorality and corruption of Egypt from *ourselves*. We had to experience the desert so that we might be re-created, re-shaped, and thus become the Priestly Kingdom, the holy nation that God willed us to be.

We must derive a lesson for life from this. That which appears to be short and comfortable sometimes turns out to be arduous and hazardous. Physical risks can be overcome, but once we lose our values and our morals, we lose the very essence of our lives. Accordingly, we must be vigilant and guard our souls; we must carefully choose the neighborhood in which we live; the environment in which we work, and the place where we vacation. We are never to underestimate the deleterious effects of living in a corrupt environment. Sometimes, it is more prudent to take a longer, circuitous path and, if necessary, change direction, in order to avoid a situation that would prove destructive to our spiritual well-being.

1. Ibid. 15:1.
2. Ibid. 5:23.
3. *Isaiah* 12:1.

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