

## A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Beshalach)

*Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*  
From **Rav Binny Freedman**

*It was only 4 a.m., and the cold was starting to get to me. We were halfway through a month of reserve duty in the Gaza Strip, and as usual, we were finishing off the night patrol at the Erez Junction, backing up the skeleton crew that was guarding this all-important entryway, over the Green Line into the soft belly of the Jewish population centers of Gush Dan.*

*The Erez army roadblock is manned 24/7 by Israeli soldiers whose responsibility is to prevent any attempted illegal entry into the Gush Dan area, which includes Tel Aviv. For fifteen years this roadblock has been a natural corridor for terrorists and suicide bombers, so this duty is taken very seriously.*

*The thousands of Arabs who passed through the Erez checkpoint every morning usually began lining up as early as 3 a.m. to wait for their turn to be checked and cleared in order to arrive at their jobs in factories, restaurants, hotels and businesses across the country. Once the Intifada started in 1988 resulting in more rigorous inspections, the small shift of reserve-duty soldiers manning the check post was simply not up to the task at hand. At any one time, there might be as many as ten thousand Arabs waiting their turn for inspection, which presented a substantial security risk for the men on duty. As such, the patrols in the area would all converge on the Erez checkpoint in an attempt to help field this assignment.*

*On this particular morning, we had been checking vehicles for about an hour when we noticed a Volkswagen minibus with darkened windows. There was never enough time to check every vehicle, so we did the best we could at assessing which vehicles might present a greater threat, often waving vehicles through after merely looking at the occupants' papers. But for some reason, this Volkswagen minibus seemed a little off. Maybe it was the driver's nervousness, or maybe just the way the fellow in the passenger seat seemed so tense, just looking straight ahead; not wanting to take any chances, I motioned the car to stop. Due to the enormity of the task, we were all working in pairs, which was less than ideal, but as so often happens, the principle often gives way to the practical issues in life.*

*There is a very specific way to approach a suspicious vehicle: The soldier who provides cover is supposed to stand at an angle behind the rear tire on the driver's side covering both the driver and the rest of the car from the rear, while the soldier who checks the car approaches the driver's window from the side. In this case, I was covering one of my men while he checked the inside of the car, and, shining a flashlight through the rear windows, I saw that the entire back of the minibus was filled with Persian-style rugs. And then my heart stopped, because I suddenly realized the rugs were moving; someone was obviously hiding under the carpets.*

*With three or four men, I might have reacted a little more slowly, and been a little more relaxed. But given the stress we were under to begin with — it being so early in the morning at the end of a long overnight patrol, and being surrounded by thousands of Arabs — I immediately cocked my gun and yelled at the soldier speaking to the driver to get back, while falling to one knee. As the driver turned around, his face was caught in the beam of my flashlight, and he seemed absolutely terrified.*

*There were no less than seven adults crammed into the front two benches in the van, which presented us with a tricky dilemma: How do you keep your eye on seven Arab adults, cover each other and the van, and instruct the driver to open the rear doors, all while making sure that you are sufficiently behind the van doors in case someone inside opens fire when the doors open?.*

*You don't really have the time to get sufficient back-up, and in any event there are too many other potential dangers around that the men from the other patrols are equally challenged by, not to mention the fact that if there is actually someone dangerous inside the van, the longer you wait, the more dangerous the situation becomes. So you yell at the driver and signal him to open the van doors nice and slow, and then your heart skips a beat as you watch him do just that.*

*Nothing moved inside the van; just a pile of carpets, but you know what you saw through the windows a few minutes earlier, so you get the passengers to start pulling out the carpets, at which point you begin to see the arms and legs of... no less than a dozen children!*

*I had never seen anything like this before: children ages 9 through 14 all entering Israel illegally in an attempt to find work and bring home a little extra food for their families; they were stacked under the carpets side by side, to keep warm in the freezing cold.*

*You might imagine that the two of us, now presented with no less than nineteen people (all of whom had been crammed into one Volkswagen mini-bus designed for no more than eight passengers!), felt just a bit overwhelmed, and as I was slowly evaluating what to do (and whether to walk the few hundred feet over to the guard-post with the radio, and risk leaving one man alone in the dark with nineteen people, or just march them all over there, abandoning the mini-bus, which would probably have caused a traffic jam of epic proportions), I saw something that to this day stands out as the essence of what the Israeli army is all about.*

*Some of these kids had no shoes on, and at four o'clock in the morning it was freezing, so the soldier I was with realized how uncomfortable it must be for them to be standing on the ice-cold asphalt in the freezing air without shoes.*

*As I was in the midst of deciding how best to handle the situation, he walked off to the side of the road and, spying a long piece of cardboard lying beside the road, dragged it back and motioned to the barefooted kids to stand on it.*

*There we were, exhausted, more than a little nervous, surrounded by thousands of Arabs and keeping our guns trained on nineteen of them, quite conscious of the fact that they could probably rush us and we wouldn't stand a chance. And yet in the midst of all this, an Israeli soldier was still concerned about the welfare of the very people who posed the greatest threat to us.*

We have all seen the pictures and read the stories about the Israeli soldiers who cleaned up the Arab house they took cover in before leaving, or who offered water to the captured and blindfolded terrorist, and we ask ourselves whether we really need to be so concerned about the impact of our actions on the enemy.

We are challenged by the bias and pure ignorance of facts often demonstrated in the media, and yet we wonder whether we should really care about what the nations of the world think, or whether we need only be concerned with what the Jews do, as Ben Gurion once suggested.

This week's Torah portion, *Beshalach*, contains a fascinating insight into the challenges that lie behind this seemingly endless question.

This week at long last, the Jewish people are finally free, having left Egypt at the behest of no less than Pharaoh himself, who at the end of last week's portion (Bo) couldn't even wait until morning to be rid of them, calling Moses and Aaron in the middle of the night (Shemot 12:31) to send the Jewish people on their way. It seems as if the future is bright and sunny, and the Jewish people are headed for destiny, when suddenly everything changes, and in an instant the Jewish people find themselves caught with the Sea before them and the entire Egyptian army bearing down behind them. It seems as if the dream is about to end before it ever really had a chance to get started.

What caused Pharaoh to change his mind so suddenly? The Torah tells us:

*“Va'yugad le'melech Mitzraim ki barach ha'am; Va'ye'hafech levav Paro va'avadav el ha'am, va'yomru: 'Mah zot Asinu ki shilachnu et Yisrael me'avdenu?'”*

*“And it was told to the King of Egypt that the people had escaped, and Pharaoh's heart and the hearts of his servants were turned (changed), and they said: 'What have we done that we have sent Israel away from serving us?'”* (Exodus 14:5)

What does it mean that Pharaoh is told that the people have escaped? Didn't he just send them away in the midst of the tenth plague?

Indeed, Pharaoh himself summons Moshe and Aaron in the middle of the night saying:

*“Kumu tze'u mitoch ami, gam atem, gam B'nei Yisrael, u'lechu ivdu et Hashem ke'daberchem.”*

*“Get ye up and get out from amongst my people, you and the children of Israel as well, and go and worship G-d as you have said.”* (Exodus 12:31)

Why is Pharaoh concerned with what the Jewish people will do when they leave Egypt? Isn't it enough to say 'get out of Egypt'?

Apparently, Pharaoh was sending the Jewish people out of Egypt to worship G-d, and one wonders whether he has any idea the Jews are leaving for good. Perhaps he thinks it is the ancient version of Woodstock; they need to party and serve their god, but they'll be back, right?

Could Pharaoh have been so naïve as to believe that once released from bondage, the Jews would be coming back? In truth, this was not an innocent assumption; this seems to be exactly what Moshe wanted Pharaoh to think!

When Moshe and Aaron first meet Pharaoh, their initial request is:

*“Koh' amar Hashem Elokei Yisrael: 'Shalach et ami, ve'yachogu li bamidbar.'”*

*“So said Hashem, the G-d of Israel: 'Send out my people that they may celebrate (to) me in the desert.'”* (Exodus 5:1)

Moshe and Aaron do not ask Pharaoh to let the Jewish people go free, all they seem to want is a three day furlough in the desert! This may explain Pharaoh's response:

*“Vayomer Pharaoh: ‘Mi Hashem asher eshmah bekolo le’shalach et Yisrael? Lo yadati et Hashem, ve’gam et Yisrael lo ashale’ach.”*

*“And Pharaoh said: ‘who is Hashem that I should heed His voice to send out Israel? I do not know Hashem, nor will I send out Israel!’” (Exodus 5:2)*

And its no wonder Pharaoh does not take Moshe (and Aaron?), (and for that matter G-d) seriously, when all he is asking for is a three-day weekend! Pharaoh might well be thinking that if G-d were so powerful, he would be talking about freedom, not a few days off.

And, lest we think this was just a tactic dreamed up by Moshe, a careful look at the beginning of Moshe’s entire mission at the burning bush is revealing. G-d said to Moshe:

*“Ve’atah, lechah, ve’eslachachah el Pharaoh, ve’hotzeh et ami B’nei Yisrael mi’Mitzraim.”*

*“And now go, and I will send you to Pharaoh that you may take my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.” (Exodus 3:10)*

To which Moshe responds:

*“Mi anochi ki elech el Pharaoh, ve’chi otzi et B’nei Yisrael mi’Mitzraim?”*

*“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should take the Children of Israel out of Egypt?” (Exodus 3:11)*

To which G-d responds:

*“Ki eheyeh imach, ve’zeh lechah ha’ot ki anochi shelachticha: be’hotziachah et ha’am mi’Mitzraim ta’avdun et ha’Elokim al ha’har ha’zeh.”*

*“For I will be with you, and this shall be for you the sign that I have sent you: When you will take the nation out of Egypt, you shall serve G-d (the G-d) on this mountain.” (Exodus 3:12)*

The point of this entire exercise seems to be for the Jewish people to get out of Egypt so they can worship G-d on ‘this mountain,’ which, according to Rashi, is a reference to Mount Sinai.

Indeed, G-d, when describing to Moshe what he will say when first meeting Pharaoh, actually says:

*“U’vata atah ve’ziknei Yisrael el melech Mitzraim ve’amartem elav Hashem Elokei ha’Ivri’im nikrah aleinu ve’atah nelchah na derech shloshet yamim ba’midbar ve’nizbechah la Hashem Elokeinu.”*

*“And you shall come, you and the elders of Israel, to the king of Egypt and say to him: G-d, the Lords of the Hebrews appeared to us and now please let us go on a three-day journey into the desert that we may offer up to Hashem our G-d.” (Exodus 3:18)*

What is this request for a three-day jaunt into the desert? Why isn’t the plan to just ask Pharaoh to ‘let my people go’? Why is there a need for this deception? Clearly, the plan is for the Jewish people to leave Egypt behind them for a lot more than three days, as G-d tells Moshe to tell the elders of Israel (according to the verses, G-d tells Moshe what to tell Bnei Yisrael, not the elders):

*“I will bring you up from the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites... to the land flowing with milk and honey.”* (Exodus 3:17)

So what’s the game? Why is Moshe trying to trick Pharaoh into letting them go by telling him they are only taking a three-day vacation?

Indeed, a careful look reveals that throughout the ten plagues that G-d visits upon Egypt, Moshe consistently asks Pharaoh, in G-d’s name, to: *“send my people that they may worship me in the desert...”* (Exodus 7:16, 26, etc.)

An even more challenging question is why Moshe needs to speak with Pharaoh at all? Why indeed does Moshe have to ask Pharaoh to let the Jewish people go? If G-d wants to set them free, He can obviously do it Himself, so why the need for all this negotiation and apparent subterfuge?

Indeed, if it was not G-d who was really running the show, we might understand Moshe’s (G-d’s?) tactics; after all, what king *would* have taken Moshe seriously had he initially requested that Pharaoh let the Jewish people go?

According to the Torah, there were 600,000 *men* between the ages of twenty and sixty (military service age) leaving Egypt, which, when adding the older men, women and children, would mean the Jewish people actually numbered in the *millions*. Consider the implications then, of walking out of Egypt into the desert with millions of people: Who would feed them? Where would they find water? And of course, where were they going? Israel (nee Canaan) was occupied at the time by seven fierce and war-like tribes including the Philistines and the Amalekites; how would an unarmed (from Pharaoh’s perspective) and untrained mass of rabble hope to conquer this land from its inhabitants?

Who would take such a plan as *‘let my people go’* seriously? Indeed, even the Jewish people themselves were skeptical about the idea; when faced with destruction at the Red Sea, they remind Moshe that:

*“This is the thing we spoke of to you in Egypt saying: ‘Let us be, and we will serve Egypt,’ for it is better for us to serve Egypt (and live) than to die in the desert.”* (Exodus 14:12)

So it would be understandable to use the ruse of a three-day party in the desert in order to get the Jews out of Egypt. Indeed, as the plagues progress, Pharaoh is focused only on this question, attempting to negotiate with Moshe:

At the end of the plague of the frogs, he asks Moshe to entreat G-d to remove the frogs, in which case he promises, *“I will send the people out that they may give offerings to Hashem.”* (Exodus 8:4)

Then Pharaoh agrees to let them give offerings in Egypt:

*“Lechu zivchu l’Elokeichem ba’aretz.” “Go and offer offerings to your G-d in the land (of Egypt).”* (Exodus 8:21)

But Moshe does not agree, claiming that since it is abhorrent to the Egyptians for the Israelites to offer up their deities (lambs and cows), the Egyptians would riot and kill all the Israelites. (8:21) Thus, Moshe says to Pharaoh:

*“Three days journey into the desert we must go, and offer up to our G-d as He tells us.”* (Exodus 8:22)

Later, Pharaoh, at the urging of his advisors (Exodus 10:7), relents and agrees to send the Jewish people to worship their G-d, but wants to know who is going, agreeing only to allow the men to go (Exodus 10:8- 11). And again, of course, Moshe refuses these terms, insisting that everyone must go: men, women, children; even the cattle.

And all of this would make a lot of sense in a Hollywood movie, but what place has this entire masquerade in the Torah? Why is Moshe negotiating, or even speaking with Pharaoh in the first place? Just take the people and go home!

It seems that G-d's initial mission statement to Moshe actually contains two separate missions.

He has to bring the Jewish people out of Egypt, but secondly, he also has to go to Pharaoh.

There was never any question as to whether G-d could take the Jewish people out of Egypt; the question was when the Jewish people would be ready to leave. And so the first mission was to get the Jewish people out of Egypt to Mount Sinai because only when the people stand before G-d, away from the pagan and evil world that is Egypt, would they be capable of letting go of the hold Egypt had on their minds and hearts. Physically, G-d could certainly have moved the Jewish people out of Egypt, but if the Jews didn't really want to go, then what was the point?

Indeed, this is our greatest challenge today: We all want peace, and while we may sometimes differ on the best way to get there, certainly we all dream of a time when Arabs no longer learn hatred, and our peoples live together in peace and harmony. What an incredible place the Middle East could be if racism and hatred ceased to exist.

But imagine if by some miracle peace actually did break out in Israel, and all the Arabs and Jews not only got along, but also learned to love each other? The same statistics of intermarriage and assimilation that plague America and the rest of the world would be the new danger in Israel.

Twenty-five years ago, the numbers being bandied about claimed that there were six million Jews in America. Today, polls range between four and a half and five million Jews, with 1.7 million of those intermarried, and nine out of ten children of mixed marriages do not define themselves as Jews and have no interest in being Jewish. Over a million Jews gone in a quarter century, without a single shot being fired. While statistics widely vary, clearly, at this rate, the American Jewish community is gradually disappearing, and this is the case in almost every country in the world outside of Israel.

So as much as we yearn for peace, our greatest challenge is what that peace is supposed to mean. Is Judaism meaningful? Is the next generation proud of being Jewish and willing to explore the meaning of such a magnificent, four-thousand-year heritage?

For two thousand years of exile we survived as a people primarily because the world would never let us forget who we are. Marked as different, hated and often reviled, we had nowhere we could assimilate to, even if we wanted to. But in the last three hundred years, that recipe has changed, leaving us with the time to consider not so much why we have suffered, but also, why as a people we need to *be*. Why indeed, be Jewish? Why is there a need for a Jewish people in the world, and why does that Jewish world need *me* to be Jewish? Is Judaism an accident of birth, or is it a heritage and a birthright, even a gift and a privilege?

More than any other challenge we face today as a people, it is this educational challenge that is the root cause of all the problems (read symptoms) we, the Jewish people and the State of Israel, focus on today.

An entire generation of Jews, both in Israel and around the world, needs to be educated as to the value and the beauty of being Jewish if the Jewish people is to survive past the current century. And to do that, we must decide and understand why a Jewish people is worth having in the first place.

And this was precisely the issue at the core of Moshe's mission three thousand years ago. After two hundred plus years in Egypt, having suffered the pain and agony of persecution at the hands of a bestial society which at the time set the standard for evil and cruelty in the world, the Jewish people are finally free, but in order for the freedom of a nation to have value, the real question is why that needs to exist at all. Indeed, at various points during the Israelites' journey to Canaan, the question is raised as to whether it wouldn't be better for them to simply go back to Egypt. Indeed, now the Jews could become the masters (why? Because of their G-d?), or at least, now that their G-d has proven Himself, they would be considered as equals; so why the need to struggle through the desert and fight to conquer their own land?

The only reason ostensibly to have a country is because a nation is not a nation unless it has a place; the French are French because they live in France and are recognized as a separate and distinct people. And the Jews become the Jewish nation, as opposed to a collection of individuals who share the same beliefs, or religion, when they are a separate and distinct identity in their own land.

These changes are why the mission of leaving Egypt is *all* about arriving at Sinai: because only at Sinai, in the desert, away from the paganism and wickedness of Egypt, can the Jews discover who they are meant to be. And that is also why it is so important for them to accept the Torah, as illustrated by the words they speak as one at the foot of Sinai, "*Na'aseh Ve'Nishma*"; "*We will do, and will hear,*" which means that they chose to accept their mission as a people.

However, this is only half of Moshe's purpose in freeing the Jewish people from Egypt. Because the Jewish people's mission has never been only about the Jewish people, our dream of being home and rediscovering Jewish pride and a deep relationship with each other and our heritage has always been about the entire world.

And if the mission of the Jewish people is to become an ethical (and not necessarily exclusive) role model and even a light unto the nations, it is precisely because the dream has always been that the *entire world* will one day choose to embrace a monotheistic ethic.

And while we work to become the nation we are meant to be, it is crucial that we not forget that the dream is not to survive despite the world; our dream is to survive *for* the world.

This perhaps, is why Moshe is commanded to speak to Pharaoh and why he spends such an inordinate amount of time in dialogue with him.

Our story begins with Pharaoh declaring:

*"Mi Hashem asher eshmah bekolo?...lo' yadati et Hashem..."*

*"Who is Hashem that I should heed his voice?... do not know Hashem..."* (Exodus 5:2)

Pharaoh and Egypt have no idea that Hashem exists, much less have any respect for the source of all creation.

And in the midst of the plagues, Pharaoh begins asking Moshe to pray to Hashem (Exodus 8:4), which is very different from Pharaoh's attitude that Hashem is the god of the Israelites; now He is just Hashem, everyone's G-d.

Yet, knowing G-d exists does not mean that one has a relationship with Him, much less that one accepts the consequences and implications of a relationship with Him. That only begins to come later, as in the last plague, when Pharaoh actually asks Moshe to be blessed .

Indeed, in the world of Pharaoh, there is no need for G- d because a pagan system of belief, with many gods, suggests that might makes right, and as such, this is all about war and conquest, and if the Jewish people 'win,' it is because they are 'stronger,' with the stronger 'god' .

Indeed, a careful look at Moshe's initial request to Pharaoh suggests that Pharaoh was not just afraid of the wrath of G-d toward the Egyptians; he assumed the Jews were equally afraid of this 'Hashem'!

Moshe originally says to Pharaoh:

*"Elokei ha'Ivrim nikra Aleinu; nelchah Na derech shloshet yamim bamidbar ve'nizbechah la'Hashem Elokeinu, **pen yifge'einu be'dever oh becharev.**"*

*"The G-d of the Hebrews has appeared to us; let us go three days journey into the desert and give offerings to our G-d, **lest he smite us with pestilence or the sword.**"* (Exodus 5:3)

Moshe, speaking to Pharaoh in a language he can understand, suggests that they will all be destroyed, either by *dever*, which is an affliction that affects cattle, or *cherev*, which is when human beings are killed.

Perhaps, in the midst of the plague of the First Born, which affected both humans and cattle (see Exodus 12:29), Pharaoh finally realizes the true power of Hashem and agrees that the Jews have to go out to offer Him their offerings.

Only when they turn from this task moving further away does Pharaoh realize that there was never a plan to serve Hashem in the desert and come back to Egypt; the Jews are actually leaving Egypt for good!

Which finally allows Moshe to accomplish his second mission: to teach the world that the source of creation is not the Nile River, but Hashem, and Pharaoh, a man who would be a god, will learn, beneath the waves of the Red Sea, that in the end, he too, is a part of the plan, but not empowered to make the plan himself.

Today, amidst all our challenges, and while attempting to rediscover who we are meant to be, let us not forget the goal of sharing that discovery, one day, with the rest of the world as well.

Indeed, the willingness to cover an Arab child's feet in the cold is no less part of our mission here on earth than the need to be willing to do battle with the child's uncle who might be strapping on a suicide bomb at the very same moment.

May we soon be blessed to arrive at the fields where all these dreams are sown, that we might plough together and reap the world we so need.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rav Binny Freedman