

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From **Rav Binny Freedman**

(Portion of Beshalach)

It is hard to imagine, looking down at the dry, windswept desert floor far below, what it must have been like two thousand years ago, to be a Jewish rebel soldier atop the isolated fortress of Masada. What kept you going, as you gazed down at the might of three full Roman Legions, all bent on your destruction?

In the year 70 CE, with the Temple (the Beit HaMikdash) in flames, Jerusalem breached and destroyed, hundreds of thousands of Jews dead, and hundreds of thousands more sold into slavery, the Romans announced that the great revolt had finally been put down. They even minted a coin to communicate their victory to the entire Roman Empire. The coin, known as 'Judea Capta', shows a woman, meant to be the Jewish people, cowering at the feet of a Roman legionnaire. The Jewish people had been defeated, and the war was finally over. The only problem was, the Romans were wrong.

Two hundred Jewish rebel fighters and their families, who had slipped away from the fighting and escaped to the fortress of Masada, decided to show the world that the war wasn't over just yet.

Finally, word of a pocket of Jewish fighters still ambushing patrols in the desert reached Rome, who could not afford for the word to get out that they had been wrong and that the revolt was not really over. And so the Senate dispatched what would eventually amount to three full Roman legions to defeat the Jewish resistance at Masada. Three Legions; that's fifteen thousand men; the sheer size of such a force must have been terrifying.

One wonders what it must have felt like, to see a cloud on the horizon to the North one day, which did not seem to move, it simply grew larger and larger. What was it like to realize with a sinking feeling in your stomach that this was no ordinary cloud, it was the dust raised by the feet of thousands upon thousands of marching legionnaires, all coming to destroy you, and all that you hold dear.

What must it have been like to watch the Romans surround the bottom of the mountain and begin building one of their infamous siege walls? Set back from the base of the mountain far enough to ensure a no-man's land no-one could pass through undetected, this was a nine foot high wall set with guard towers within sight of each other around the entire mountain. What did it feel like to realize that it was no longer a question of whether; it was simply a question of when? And how did you explain to your five-year-old son who might have come to visit you on guard duty, why there were fifteen thousand men encamped below your home?

Nearly two thousand years later, long after the Roman Empire had crumbled into dust, a small group of archeologists and students came back to this place and began their search for the legend of Masada. Led by Yigal Yadin, the former Chief of Staff of the Israeli Army and one of the heroes of the War of Independence, they were determined to find out whether the incredible story of a small band of Jews who stood up to the mightiest Empire the world has ever known could be true.

And one day, along the Eastern casement wall, in what was thought to be a Jewish rebel guard post overlooking the Legions far below, they made an incredible discovery. Hidden beneath the dirt and dust of two thousand years, they discovered a small piece of parchment, and on it was written the eighty-second psalm, in its entirety, exactly as we have it today. A small piece of the book of Tehillim (psalms) read and re-read most probably by a Jewish soldier on guard duty, two thousand years ago.

“A Psalm of Asaf. G-d stands in the congregation of G-d, He judges among the judges. How long will you judge unjustly, and respect the persons of the wicked?”

Judge the cause of the poor and fatherless! Vindicate the afflicted and the needy! Deliver the poor and destitute: rescue them out of the hand of the wicked.

They know not, nor do they understand, they walk on in darkness, and all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

I had said: ‘You are angels (messengers of G-d), all of you sons of the most high; Nevertheless, you shall die like a man, and fall as one man, O’ princes.

Arise, Oh G-d, judge the earth, for you shall inherit all of the nations.”

I remember one particularly depressing Sunday morning, heading back up to Lebanon from Yad Eliahu, the stadium near the central bus station in Tel Aviv. It was a ten-minute walk from the bus station to where the buses were waiting, outside the stadium, to take the various units back up North after a weekend off. And you could easily spot any soldier that was headed back up to the hell of active duty in Lebanon; they were the ones carrying flak vests, helmets, and ammo webbing. (You had to leave Lebanon in military gear because of the danger, so guys would just take the gear home for the weekend.)

As I was leaving the bus station, a beggar woman accosted me for tzedakah, a little bit of charity. The Jewish tradition teaches: “Tzedakah Tatzil Mi’Mavet” “Charity saves one from death”, so if you’re on your way up to Lebanon and a beggar woman asks for tzedakah, you find some coins. After I gave her some tzedakah, though, she wouldn’t let me be, insisting on giving me a small miniature book of Tehillim (psalms) encased in plastic.

Now, if you’re on your way up to Lebanon, and a Beggar woman insists on giving you a book of Tehillim, you take it; so I did. And that book of Tehillim, which I have opened and used on a number of very challenging occasions since that day, still sits in the breast pocket of my army uniform, where it’s familiar feel and shape gives me comfort wherever the army sends me.

Two thousand years ago, facing the full might of the Legions of Rome, with the Temple destroyed and Jerusalem in ruins, a small group of Jewish men and women took a stand. And one of them, a lonely Jewish soldier, despite what appeared to be the end of the Jewish people close at hand, pulled out his little Tehillim and began to recite the psalms. And today, two thousand years later, in a modern State of Israel, with the first Jewish army since the fall of Masada, Israeli soldiers are still reading from that same book of Tehillim, which may well be why we are still here.

On the one hand, this idea still fills me with awe, and suggests very obviously (to me) that Hashem (G-d) is really running the show. And yet, it also raises some very challenging questions. After two thousand years of wandering and suffering, trials and tribulations, one wonders, why did it, and why does it still have to be so hard? Why is G-d playing all these games with us? After all, if in the end we were meant to be here again, while Rome was meant to disappear, then why couldn’t G-d have arranged that in the year 70, without all of the challenges and struggles we have had to endure since then?

It may be that we are not meant to understand the answer to this question in this world. But hidden in this week’s portion Be’shalach, may well be the Torah’s response to this challenging issue.

This week’s portion begins as the Jewish people are leaving Egypt, and the Torah points out that there are really two routes the Jews can take to get to Egypt. The shorter, more obvious way to go will take the Jews straight up

the coast through the Sinai desert to Israel. With a brief stop at Sinai (why *that* is necessary is next week's portion), they could be safely back in Israel within the week. Hashem, however, chooses the long way around, through the Red Sea to the East, then up through the heart of the Sinai desert and North through the lands of Edom and Moav (today Trans-Jordan) and then back west across the Jordan River into Israel.

Why does Hashem choose this much longer, and certainly much more arduous route?

"G-d led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines, though that was near, for G-d said: 'lest the people relent when they see war and return to Egypt. And so G-d turned the people through the desert of the Sea of Suf (the Red Sea).'" (Shemot 13:17-18)

In other words, Hashem knew the people would not be able to handle an immediate encounter with the Philistines, three days North of Egypt, and knew that when the Jews were confronted with a military campaign, they would panic and head back to Egypt.

So, to avoid this conflict, G-d takes them all the way around, on a much more difficult journey. Now, the idea of the entire Jewish people, having just left Egypt and two hundred years of slavery behind them, and seeing G-d's miracles in the form of the ten plagues (whose purpose was in fact to make known the mighty hand of G-d, see Shemot 10:1-2) turning tail and running back to Egypt at the first sign of trouble, is challenging enough. But what really makes this difficult is what happens next. Because the very next thing that happens is that the Jewish people find themselves in exactly the scenario G-d seemed to want to avoid!

The Jewish people arrive at the Sea of Reeds (*Yam Suf*) and with the way ahead blocked by the Sea, turn around to see the entire Egyptian army bearing down on them. With nowhere to go, and nowhere to hide, they are, just as G-d predicted, terrified. In fact, their reaction is exactly as Hashem said it would be (big surprise there...):

"And they (the people) said to Moshe: 'are there no graves in Egypt that you have taken us to die in the desert? What have you done to us to take us out of Egypt? ...It would be better for us to work in Egypt than to die in the desert!'" (14:11-12)

Given that this should be no surprise, Moshe's (read G-d's) response is surprising to say the least:

*"And Moshe said to the people: 'Do not fear (**Al Tira'u**), stand and see the salvation that G-d will do for you this day, for as you have seen Egypt this day, you shall not see them again any more forever. Hashem will fight for you and you will hold your peace.'" (14:13-14)*

"Do not fear"? How can the Jewish people be expected not to fear? Especially considering the fact that Hashem has already pointed out that the people will see war and be afraid, why does Moshe (and G-d) expect them not to fear? And how indeed, if this is the expectation, does one overcome their fear?

Furthermore, if Moshe is telling the Jewish people not to be afraid, one wonders why? After all, once the Sea splits, it won't matter whether the Jewish people were afraid or not, because the Egyptians will be wiped out. So why do the Jews need to cease being afraid?

But the most obvious question here is, why does G-d take the Jewish people all the way around in order to avoid imminent warfare, only to lead them to between a rock and a hard place, where they are confronted with... imminent warfare!

And since Hashem's response to their encounter with war, and their subsequent desire to return to Egypt is to split the Sea and essentially vanquish the Egyptians Himself, why could Hashem not simply have done this with

the Philistines? G-d could have led the Jews up the coast and when they encountered the Philistines, Hashem could have split the earth, and vanquished the Philistines, just as He did the Egyptians?

All of which, again, leaves us wondering, especially when considering that it is G-d who actually leads the Jewish people to the Sea of Reeds where they will encounter warfare, what the real purpose of this long, arduous, roundabout journey is really all about.

And of course, add to all of this the fact that at the *end* of this week's portion, the Jewish people encounter war again, this time with the nation of Amalek, which leaves us wondering what is really going on here?

In addition to the afore-mentioned questions, a closer look at some of the events in this week's portion further add to the challenge of understanding the nature of the Jewish people's journey into the desert.

Immediately after the splitting of the Sea, the Jewish people arrive at *Marah*, so named because of the bitter, undrinkable water they find there, after not being able to find any water for three days. (15:22-23) So why does Hashem take them there (remember that the Jews are following heavenly clouds and pillars of fire to show them the way...) if there is no water? Didn't G-d realize an entire people in the desert would need water?

Not surprisingly, the Jews complain (15:24) and we expect we know what will happen next, right? It's like a problem-solving exercise: the Jewish people are in the desert and have no water, so what do you do? Get Moses to grab his staff and hit a rock, and presto! You get some water right?

Only G-d doesn't do it that way; he has Moshe throw a stick (which Jewish tradition teaches was actually itself bitter) into the water, and behold, the water became sweet. Impressive, right? Only it was G-d who led them to this bitter water in the first place, obviously in order to do this miracle, so what exactly was the point of it all? G-d hadn't done enough miracles by then? The people weren't sufficiently impressed with ten plagues, the Exodus, and the splitting of the Sea? Isn't this miracle a bit redundant? After all, you see one miracle; you've seen them all, right? (Especially since immediately after this miracle, (15:27) they come to *Eilim*, where they find 12 wells and seventy date trees, so Hashem obviously could have brought them to a place where this miracle was not even necessary!

And why doesn't G-d have Moshe do the famous 'hit the rock' scene here? Is it more impressive to use a bitter stick to make bitter water sweet?

And when G-d actually makes the bitter water sweet, He then launches into a rather strange little speech:

"And He said, if you will hearken to the voice of G-d, your G-d, and do that which is right in His eyes, and listen to His mitzvot, and uphold all his laws, then all of the sickness which I placed in Egypt I will not place upon you, for I am the Lord your healer." (15:26)

What is this all about? Is G-d threatening to unleash another set of plagues, this time on the Jews if they don't listen to Him? Even if that is the case, what is this strange warning doing here? And what does bitter water turning sweet have to do with adherence to Hashem's commandments?

Next, after the embarrassingly poor planning at Marah, G-d takes the Jewish people by way of the desert of *Sin*. (Not sin, as in transgression, but a place named Sin, in Hebrew.) And this time, the problem is, they run out of food!

Predictably, the Jewish people, again, complain:

“Would that we had died by the hand of G-d in the land of Egypt, where we sat by the flesh (read chulent!) pots and ate our fill of bread, for you have brought this entire congregation out to this desert to kill us all with hunger.” (16:3)

Many commentators ask the question, as to how the Jewish people, after seeing so many miracles from G-d, could possibly still be complaining, much less considering going back to Egypt? But upon closer examination, given the circumstances, the behavior of the Jewish people is quite understandable; it is G-d who seems to have much to answer for! First, they are taken out of Egypt only to face extinction by the Egyptian army, then they have no water, and now they have no food! So what gives?

And G-d’s response here, famous in Jewish history, is even stranger. Recall, that G-d is taking the Jewish people all the way around on this long, circuitous route to get them ready to face the inevitable combat awaiting them in Israel. So the last thing you want to do when training future soldiers is to make life easy. Yet, that is exactly what G-d does!

“Behold I will rain down bread from the heavens, and the people will go out daily to collect it, in order to test them as to whether they will follow my Torah.” (16:4)

In response to the people’s desire for bread, G-d gives them the Manna, which for the next forty years, day in and day out, every day except for Shabbat, they will go and collect right outside their tents. According to Jewish tradition this was real miracle bread, able to taste like whatever you wanted (and were thinking about) when you ate it. So why do they get this bread now? After all, if G-d had this trick up His sleeve, why not just rain the Manna down from day one? In fact, we could have skipped the whole matzah story, and gone straight to the Manna?!

And, incidentally, if G-d is already performing this miracle, why not do it once a week, and let the Jews have food in the cupboards; why make them do it every day? (And the importance of only collecting enough for each day is emphasized by the focus devoted to the individuals who do not heed this command, attempting to store additional Manna in their homes, see 16:19-21)

And, most of all, what exactly is the *test* here? G-d gives us bread for free every day, which can taste like anything we want, and the test is...?

And then, when the issue of the food is finally resolved, the people move on to *Refidim*, where again, there is no water! (17:1) This of course, is unbelievable! Is G-d just having difficulty with his GPS navigational system? And yet again, predictably, the people complain saying:

“Why have you taken us up from Egypt to kill me, and my children, and my cattle with thirst?” And, incredibly, Moshe is upset with the Jewish people! (See 17:2; 5)

And this time, G-d will unveil the ‘hit the rock’ plan, but with a twist: G-d doesn’t just tell Moshe to hit a rock; he has to gather together the elders of Israel (the *Ze’keinim*) and hit a specific rock that G-d Himself designates. (17:5) And most interesting, is that Moshe, with the Elders in tow, has to go all the way to *Chorev*, another name for Mount Sinai, to find that rock! And apparently, the water must then have flowed all the way back to Refidim. (See 19:2 and note that the Jewish people eventually journey from *Refidim* to Sinai) So why the need for this miracle? And why was it done in this way? What is the connection of all this to Mount Sinai?

Lastly, the portion of *Beshalach* then concludes with the attack of the Jewish people by the nation of *Amalek*. (17:8-16) And this time, the Jewish people have no time to complain, because this time, G-d will not be splitting any seas; the Jewish people will, at last, have to do their own fighting. Well... sort of. You see, while Joshua is

leading the troops in battle below, Moshe's plan (17:10) is to go up on the mountain with his staff, the same staff that wrought the plagues and split the Sea. This is very strange; why doesn't Moshe lead the Jewish people into battle himself?

Even stranger is what happens next, because when Moshe holds his hands high to the heavens, the Jewish people in battle below prevail, but whenever Moshe's hands grow weary it is the Amalekites who prevail and seem about to carry the day. What is that all about? Who is really fighting this war? G-d, or the Jewish people? And again, if this entire journey is to avoid a war, how is it that the Jewish people find themselves fighting the war that G-d was trying to avoid?

Obviously, there is something much deeper going on here behind the scenes, and if Hashem is introducing challenge after challenge to the Jewish people, especially condensed into such a short period of time, then we have to at least try and understand what Hashem is trying to do, and what we are meant to learn from it all.

What really, is the purpose of getting us out of Egypt to begin with? What is the goal of this entire four thousand year story we call the Jewish people?

Ultimately, we are meant to become a "*Mamlechet Kohanim Ve'Goy Kadosh*", a "*Kingdom of Priests (teachers) and a Holy Nation*". Every nation has its mission; essentially the gift it offers the world. And ours is to be an *Or La'Goyim, a Light unto the Nations*.

In order to do that, however, the goal is to become *Am Yisrael, Be'Eretz Yisrael, Al pi Torat Yisrael. (The Nation of Israel, according to the Torah of Israel, in the land of Israel.)*

In other words, in order to achieve our purpose as a Nation, three things have to happen:

1. We have to get to Israel, because a nation is not a Nation without a land. Only in a land can we be seen as a separate entity and have an ethical impact on the world as a Nation. Every Nation has its place, and only in that place can it truly become all it is meant to be, and achieve all it is meant to achieve as a people. And just like the world would not have gained all the gifts the Greeks had to offer had they been anywhere else but Greece, our place to become who we are meant to be as a Nation, is the land of Israel.
2. Before we can become a nation in our land, we must first receive the Torah, because in order to become an ethical people who can be a role model of what ethics are meant to be, we have to have an objective source for those ethics, and there is only one truly objective source in this world. So we have to stop at Sinai to 'pick up' the Torah.
3. But before we can do any of this, we first have to become a Nation. And **that** is the theme of this entire portion.

In this week's portion, having just left two hundred years of Egyptian slavery, the Jews are not really a Nation; they are just a collection of ex-slaves, with a very pronounced slave mentality. And, with that slave mentality, the first challenge that comes their way will obviously send them packing back to Egypt. Which is why G-d cannot take them straight to Israel; they need a National therapy session!

In fact, when Moshe at the Red Sea tells the Jewish people: "*Do not fear*" ("*Al Tira'u*"), it is not a command, or even a challenge; it is, rather, the entire point.

You cannot be a slave in Egypt for so long without being affected by the Egyptian way of thinking. In Egypt, it was very simple: might makes right. This is, in general, the nature of paganism, which worships nature, because in nature the strong survive, and the weak perish. And Egypt was the theological center of this philosophy.

Hence, when Moshe first asks Pharaoh to “*Let my people go*” (5:1) Pharaoh’s response is: “*Who is Hashem that I should listen to His voice to send Israel forth? I do not know Hashem and thus I will not send Israel*” (5:2)

Pharaoh is basically saying: if G-d wants to have His way, let’s see how tough He is. There is no objective ethic, and no absolute ‘right’. If you want something to be right, you have to make it right, and if you can’t then it’s wrong. And this ideal of ‘might makes right’, which is the natural outgrowth of a pagan, nature-worshipping society, is exactly what the Jewish people came into the world to undo. And it is why they have to leave Egypt to receive the Torah.

However, part of the problem with the Exodus from Egypt itself was that while G-d gets the Jewish people out of Egypt, He ends up teaching them that Egypt was really right all along. Because they only get out of Egypt by virtue of ten plagues, which, if looked at the wrong way might demonstrate to the Jewish people that in the end, Pharaoh was right. G-d proved that he was stronger, so he won. Now, the dangerous consequence of this impaired view is that the Torah itself will then only be valid as long as, indeed G-d remains the strongest, (something with the hindsight of two thousand years of exile might be thought, however mistakenly, to be untrue later in Jewish history.)

In other words, in order for the Torah, which the Jews are about to receive, to be accepted as an objective and eternal truth, not only Egypt but the philosophy of Egypt as well must be destroyed in the eyes and hearts of the Jewish people. Only then will they be the Jewish people they are meant to be.

Thus, when Moshe tells the Jewish people “*Al Tira’u*”, rather than ‘do not fear’, it may mean, do not be in awe, and do not continue to **see** Egypt in the way that you have; *Tira’u* being from the root *ra’ah*, which means to see. And that, perhaps, is why Moshe continues there (14:13) by saying that the Jewish people will no longer see the Egyptians in the way they have until now.

At the Sea of Reeds, the Jewish people learn that war isn’t about who has the stronger army; war is in the hands of heaven, and Hashem, not the chariots of Pharaoh, decides the outcome.

And after the splitting of the sea, the Jewish people come to *Marah*, where the water is bitter. But Hashem doesn’t tell Moshe to hit a rock to get water, precisely because that might send the wrong message to the Jewish people, who need to learn that might does not make right, so the bitter wood sweetens the bitter water, because that is an unnatural thing to do. Hashem performs this miracle to teach the Jewish people that G-d is above nature, and not the other way around.

At *Marah*, the Jewish people learn that all of nature, and indeed, all of life, is in the hands of G-d.

Then the Jewish people journey to the desert of Sin, where they have no food, and Hashem gives them the manna, which is more than just a lesson that all of our sustenance comes from G-d. This lesson is not only about the goal, it is, even more, about how to get there.

Assuming one has accepted the need for an objective ethic, and the value of becoming an ethical person, the question still remains as to how one actually achieves this. This is the lesson of the Manna, the heavenly bread.

What indeed, is the test of receiving bread from heaven? **Maimonides**, in his *Guide to the Perplexed*, points out that sometimes we are challenged by what we lack, and the difficulties of the journey, but sometimes we are

challenged by what we have, and the ease with which it is available. Manna represents the ‘test of the good times’; when everything is so easy, and so readily available, do we remember where it all comes from?

The Jews will spend forty years collecting Manna every day; will they remember who gives it to them? Will they retain the sense of gratitude for this extraordinary gift?

This is one of our greatest challenges today, in the western world. We take for granted all of the extraordinary things we have, including the given that we will have food on our tables, a bed to sleep in, and a roof over our heads. Do we really appreciate what a gift this is, and where it really comes from?

But there is more; because the manner in which the manna gives us this message is also a valuable lesson that we should take care not to miss.

There are essentially two ways in which we experience change in our lives: the natural and the supernatural, the extraordinary, and the routine. (The **Maharal** speaks about this at length in his *Gevurat Hashem*.)

Sometimes, we get so stuck where we are, and have such difficulty getting out of the rut, or the desert of where we are, that we need a splitting of the Sea, as it were, to get ourselves moving. Such events, or moments, are rare and far between, and are really opportunities, however challenging they may be. Hashem doesn’t split the Sea every day, and when such a window of opportunity comes along, you have to grab it, and be willing to walk on through.

But make no mistake about it; sea splitting moments are never the solution, they are only opportunities to get a head start, or begin the journey of really becoming who we are meant to be, and getting to where we need to go. The real recipe for transformation, growth, and success, is in the manna we are given every day. When the sea splits, if you don’t succeed in turning it into the manna of every day, then it will never last.

Which is why, after the splitting of the Sea, the Jewish people are still whining about Egypt. And take note of the fact that even though the manna is a gift directly from heaven, the Jewish people still have to go out and gather it, because manna, even while being a gift from G-d, is also something you have to give yourself. The Jewish people are given the manna every day, which is why it is so easy to forget where it really comes from. And that is also why they have to at least go out and bring it in.

And the manner in which they receive this gift is by way of the daily routine. There is something very powerful about something we do every day, day in, and day out. If a person wants to break a habit, they can start by splitting the Sea, by going cold turkey, or something similarly traumatic. But ultimately, that is just a head start; what they are trying to do will last, when they succeed in creating a daily routine.

Thus, the Talmud tells us that one of the questions Hashem will ask of us when we get ‘upstairs’ is: “*Kava’ta Itim La’Torah?*” “*Did you set aside times, (every day) for Torah study?*”

Now, in truth, what Hashem could have asked was: ‘How much Torah did you study?’ After all, what’s the difference, really, between studying a page of Talmud a day which allows one to finish the entire Talmud in seven years, as opposed to studying seven pages of Talmud a day in the seventh year allowing one to complete a review of the same entire Talmud on the same exact day?

The difference is six years. Because the five or ten minutes a day has an impact on a person, and contributes to changing who I am.

Imagine, for example, that you want to lose weight and be healthier. Most people go on a drastic diet and lose a lot of weight in a short amount of time; they essentially ‘split the sea’. But then, eventually, they usually gain all the weight back with interest. Because the goal is not to diet, it is to learn to eat healthier. And the only way to really accomplish that is to change the way you live, and establish a daily routine, which over a long period of time loses the same amount of weight. Only this time, people are usually successful in keeping it off, because they are no longer on a diet, they have succeeded, one day at a time, through a daily routine, in becoming different people. They have become who they are meant to be.

And this is the secret of the manna, gathered one day at a time.

In the desert of *Sin*, through the manna, the Jewish people learn that Egypt was wrong; might does not make right; ‘right’ is something you build, by way of the manna you have from Hashem every day, one small step at a time. And the Jewish people begin the journey of learning how to become the free men and women they are meant to be, unraveling the slave mentality they carry in their hearts, one day at a time, for the next forty years.

Which is why they are now ready to arrive at *Refidim*, where again, there is no water. Only this time, the Jewish people are not asking to go back to Egypt, they are ready to understand why they have been brought out. And so, G-d has Moshe take the Elders and go to Sinai (*Chorev*), which is where they are about to receive the Torah.

At *Refidim*, the Jewish people learn that it is not the Nile or even the rock that gives water; it is G-d, which is why Hashem designates the rock, on Sinai, and why the Elders need to be there, because this is part of the process of transformation the Jewish people need to undergo. They need to be ready to receive the Torah from Hashem, but through Moshe and the Elders.

It is not just that might does not make right; the source of all might is Hashem, and Hashem’s Torah.

Which brings us finally, to the war of Amalek, where once again, Hashem demonstrates, as at the Sea of Reeds, that war isn’t about who has the stronger army; war is in the hands of heaven, and Hashem, not the chariots of Pharaoh, decides the outcome. However, this time, with a noted difference.

This time, the Jewish people have to be willing to fight. And in the midst of war, which is such an intensely physical experience, wherein the danger of the theology of Egypt is only too obvious, they are reminded that even so, it is Hashem who determines the outcome of all war. Yet, they have also finally achieved the goal of this portion and all of these stops along the way: they are no longer merely passive slaves, to whom life occurs; they have become a Nation, the Nation of Israel, ready to be active partners in making life happen.

And thus, they are finally ready to receive the Torah and journey on to Israel, where they begin their mission of becoming all that they are meant to be, to make the world all that it is meant to be.

Today, more than ever, as we journey along the road of becoming, after two thousand years of exile, the Jewish people we once were, let us remember that in order to be able to give all that we have to give to the world, we have first to succeed in transforming ourselves into the Nation we are meant to be: the Nation of Israel, living by the code of Israel, ultimately, in the land of Israel. And perhaps, as at the end of this week’s portion, rather than waiting for peace, maybe peace is waiting for us.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rav Binny Freedman