

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From **Rav Binny Freedman**

(Portion of Beshalach)

May 1948; tough times for the Jewish people, and particularly for the Jews struggling to claw out a place for themselves in a land they hoped to claim as their own.

A few months after the United Nations voted to partition the remaining territory in the British Mandate for Palestine and allow finally, the creation of a modern Jewish state, six Arab armies were poised to attack.

They were waiting for the British to leave, so as not to find themselves in the position of attacking British sovereign territory. The Arabs who were already in country however, had no such dilemma, which was why the Jordanian legion was on the offensive. Even as the Jews were still celebrating the partition plan vote, the Jordanians were already on the march.

The Jordanian Legion, commanded by Abdullah Tell, was without a doubt the best fighting force in the Middle East. Thirty-two hundred strong at three full brigades, they were British-trained and French-armed, and they had no equal at the time.

Though strategically insignificant, they had set their sights on the heart of the Jewish people: the old City of Jerusalem. For six bitter months the Jordanian legionnaires surrounded and laid siege to the Jewish Quarter. There were fourteen hundred Jewish civilians trapped inside Jerusalem's old city walls, and despite how hopeless it was, the Jewish command felt they had to do something.

And so it was, in the middle of the night of May 3-4th 1948, that Twenty-two fighters of the Palmach (Jewish fighting brigade) found themselves slowly climbing up the hill below the old city walls under the noses of the Jordanian soldiers.

Taking cover behind a wall remaining from the ruins of a Crusader fortress the irony was not lost on the fighters: These same crusaders who had massacred the Jewish communities of Europe in their path a thousand years earlier, had built a wall which was protecting these Jewish fighters in their quest to redeem this same ancient city for the modern State of Israel.

*As they neared the final stretch of path that would bring them to their objective of the Zion gate, they were literally right under the guards positions on the walls, they had to advance the last hundred yards one at a time so as to minimize the noise and avoid detection. And as they all waited, each fighter advanced a hundred yards, one at a time, **all alone** it must have been terrifying. It was nearly 3am and they had to maintain total silence; if even one Jordanian soldier just happened to look down, they would have had nowhere to run and nowhere to hide.*

There is a comfort to being part of a unit; moving with men with whom you have become one; having each other's backs. But be all alone?

This week we read the portion of *Beshalach*, most famous for the dramatic splitting of the sea and destruction of the Egyptian Army. And amidst the powerful spectacle we often miss the details.

The Torah tells us (*Shemot* (Exodus) 14:22) that:

“... *the water was a wall for them on their right and on their left.*”

And the Talmud (Tractate *Yoma* 4b) explains that the water did not simply recede leaving dry land; rather the water literally split, leaving a narrow path for them to go through. One wonders why this happened in this way and more, why the Torah takes the time to share this detail with us?

Rav Baruch Halevy Epstein, in his *Torah Temimah*, suggests that in this way the miracle was even greater, and no-one would say the miracle was simply a coincidence that the sea dried up....

But that does not really seem to answer the question. Besides, the fact that the sea suddenly dried up just when the Jewish people needed it most, and then came crashing down again just as the Egyptians were closing in on the Jews was not a big enough miracle? Really?

Perhaps there is a deeper idea here. Interestingly, the Talmud compares the Jews' entering a path into the sea with walls on both sides to when Moshe enters the cloud at Mt. Sinai, suggesting that the identical language implies that Moshe forged a path through the cloud; he wasn't just walking through the cloud; he was walking on a path through the cloud. Because to receive the Torah; to discover meaning; to be imbued with a sense of purpose; is to be on a journey; to see the path one has to take.

Indeed, the redemption really begins when Moshe, all alone in the desert (*Shemot* chap. 3) sees a burning bush and **turns off the path** to see... he recognizes that he needs to change direction.

Perhaps a path signifies a direction, and a journey. In fact, one opinion in the Midrash suggests each Tribe had its own path so that there were thirteen paths (Joseph had two sons who both became tribes; hence thirteen tribes even though Yaakov only had twelve sons...) through the sea, and another Midrash suggests each Jew walked single file and possibly each Jew had his or her own path!

Redemption it seems, comes when a person is ready to take his or her own journey; when a person sees the path they are meant to take.

Just before the sea splits Moshe holds out his staff over the sea pointing forward. Think about it: The Torah tells us there are six hundred thousand men, and they are terrified by the sight of six hundred chariots! A thousand men are afraid of a chariot? They are stuck; and when the sea splits they finally realize they need to take their own steps in order to leave Egypt behind.

Over three thousand years later a small band of Jewish fighters, carrying the Jewish people on their shoulders, each alone with his or her thoughts, steps out on a path, all alone, determined to bring us home.

Many of those fighters did not survive that battle; indeed, the Jewish quarter fell to the Jordanian legion some four weeks later (on May 28 1948). But walk through the Zion gate (***Shaar Zion***) today

and you will see a monument to the memory of those fighters and the courage with which they carried themselves on that day.

The words are inspiring: “... ***with no armor nor artillery, with their own bodies, they sacrificed themselves on the walls of the ancient city of Jerusalem. Let he who walks through this gate remember them...***”

Each of us has our own ‘Egypt’ that constricts us, and the question is whether we are ready to forge the path that will leave that Egypt behind forever...

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman