

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Beshalach, Exodus, Chapters 13-17

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

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Operation Nahshon and the Journey of Freedom

The book *O Jerusalem!* memorably describes how, in April 1948, one month before the declaration of Jewish statehood, the Jews of Jerusalem were besieged by the enemy. Any convoy seeking to bring food to the Jerusalemites was forced to journey through a narrow gorge, leaving it terribly vulnerable to artillery from above. It was therefore decided that the Haganah, in a visionary operation, would temporarily shield both sides of Bab al-Wad from above, so that at least one large supply of food could reach the holy city prior to Passover. The operation's planners drew inspiration from the ancient episode of the splitting of the sea, as Israel faced another enemy many millennia before:

The water was a wall for them on the right and left. (Exodus 14:22 and 29)

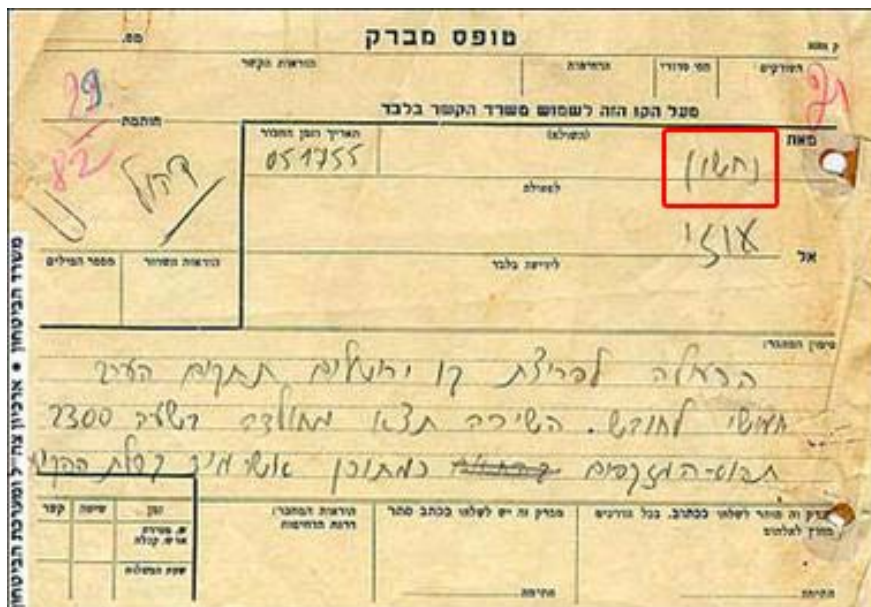
Here, the soldiers themselves would be that wall.

It is this that brings us to what is perhaps the most interesting part of the story. The book reports how, during the late-night planning at Ben-Gurion's home, someone suggested a striking name for the operation based on a midrash. Before the splitting of the sea, the rabbis teach, with Egypt bearing down on Israel, Moses instructed the people to step into the waters, with every Israelite reluctant. But one brave individual, *Nahshon ben Aminadav* of the tribe of Judah, strode into the sea. And only when he had waded into the waters up to his nostrils did the sea actually split. It was in memory of this midrash that "Operation Nahshon" was named.

The story embodies a message that for religious Zionist Jews lies at the center of Zionism: that Jews are part of a chosen people, that their history is filled with miracles, but at the same time God asks His people to take action as well, to have the courage to forge ahead, so that then more miracles can be manifest. It is therefore inspiring to encounter an image of a coded telegram about the operation from April 1948, informing its recipient that all was prepared to save Jerusalem's Jews. The telegram was sent by someone who had chosen an incredibly apt alias:

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It was sent by “Nahshon,” a man who lived millennia ago, whose legend and legacy inspired an operation in 1948, and whose name lives on today in an Israeli antiterrorism unit, the “Nahshon Brigade,” whose motto is: “Be first, Nahshon.”

The Midrash describes one very brave man; but rightly understood, it also highlights the fact that during the Exodus most of the Israelites were *not* Nahshon, and remained profoundly passive at a critical moment. This

rabbinic reading is rooted in the text. As the Exodus occurs, Scripture stresses that Israel is leaving not because it fully embraces freedom, but because Pharaoh has forced Israel to leave. For this reason, we are informed, God orders Israel to take a route to the Holy Land that was longer, but where military engagement would be less likely:

And it was, **when Pharaoh sent out [beshalach]** the people, that God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, Lest the people repent when they see war, and return to Egypt. But God led the people round by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. (Exodus 13:17–18)

Israel is unready for war. A free people must defend itself; and Israel is unprepared, psychologically, for the full responsibilities of freedom. As Yuval Levin comments, the verse is telling us that, “Untutored and unformed, confronted too quickly with the costs and burdens of liberty, they might choose slavery.”

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Indeed, as Egypt's chariots take up the pursuit, the former slaves do indeed ask the Almighty for slavery over liberty:

And the people of Israel cried out to the Lord; and they said to Moses, Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, in bringing us out of Egypt? (Exodus 14:10–11)

The Almighty appears unimpressed with Israel's passivity, and asks something very simple of the liberated slaves: keep going.

The Lord said to Moses, Why do you cry out to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward. (Exodus 14:15)

God's apparent frustration is understandable; despite all the miracles that have occurred, Israel itself lacks the fortitude to forge ahead.

Israel enters the depths of the sea, as the waters split and form a wall "from the right and from the left." The very same water subsumes the Egyptian army, as Moses exultantly sings:

The Lord is a man of war;
the Lord is his name. (Exodus 15:3)

It is **the Lord** who has fought the war against Egypt, at a time when Israel was utterly unready to do so, at a time when it would not enthusiastically embrace freedom itself. No effort has been expended by Israel, no bravery exhibited—save, according to the Midrash, by Nahshon alone. Freedom has come, but Israel is not ready for freedom, and this means that it cannot take its next step in its formation as a nation. It is striking that even as Benjamin Franklin memorably proposed the salvation at the sea as the symbol of the nascent United States, John Adams reported to his wife Abigail another suggestion, taken from another scene in our reading:

Mr. Jefferson proposed: the Children of Israel in the Wilderness, led by a Cloud by day, and a Pillar of Fire by night.

The point is that salvation from the enemy is not enough; a people must exhibit courage in the continuing journey of freedom. It is this courage that is missing at this miraculous moment in Israel's history.

The lack of enthusiasm for freedom continues with the journey in the wilderness as the people cry out for water. They seem utterly lacking in initiative, and need others to save them. The thirst in the desert, and the desperation in encountering a spring with bitter liquid, is addressed only when Moses himself somehow sweetens it into life-giving water. Then Israel's dissatisfaction with its leaders and liberators seems to reach new absurdities, as it utters complaints that can best be captured in the question later posed by the actress Clara Pell in the 1980s commercial: "Where's the beef?"



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And the whole congregation of the people of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and said to them, Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger. (Exodus 16:2–3)

Israel demands food, and especially meat, which, apparently, the pots of Egypt contained in abundance. On the face of it, the request for food, and for meat in particular, appears preposterous. After all, we know from Scripture that the Israelites took their flocks with them—the very flocks that only some days before had provided the paschal offerings. But rightly understood, the complaints reveal a profound psychological weakness in Israel. The former slaves have lost their physical fetters, but they have yet to remove the manacles on their minds. To see to their own sustenance would require an independence, and fortitude, that they do not yet have. As Rabbi Ezra Bick puts it, the Israelites are expressing not that they are hungry but that they are scared. The point, as he explains, is not that the Israelites' life in Egypt was luxurious—it most assuredly was not—but rather that for the first time, in the desert, they must look to their own welfare. Their despair indicates that though they have been taken out of slavery, the mindset of slavery has yet to be taken from them, or as Rabbi Bick describes it:

The complaint of the Jews when they reach the desert is a direct expression of their slave mentality . . .

The Israelites are given meat through the descent of a flock of quail, and then are introduced to the source of sustenance that will sustain them in the decades ahead: the manna. This “bread from heaven” does not arrive at their doorstep; they must go out to gather it every day, they cannot hoard, and before the Sabbath they will gather a double portion that they will share with their families and remind themselves of God's creation on this sacred day. In other words, they are educated in the art of emerging from slavery to become free members of God's people. Leon Kass describes this process in a beautiful passage:

Against the ex-slaves' despairing belief that food is preferable to freedom and that serving Pharaoh offered the surest guarantee of life, the children of Israel are taught not only that they live in a world that can provide for each and every person's needs but also that the Lord helps those who will help themselves. They must work to gather, but what they gather is a gift. In a world beyond scarcity and grasping, the choice is not freedom versus food and drink, but grateful trust versus foolish pride or ignorant despair.

The journey in the desert thus provides lessons in liberty. But even as the manna is ingested, the lesson that it bears has yet to be fully absorbed. Israel, encamped at Rephidim, demands water again:

. . . and the people murmured against Moses, and said, Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst? So Moses cried to the Lord, saying, What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me. And the Lord said to Moses, Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel; and take in your hand the rod with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, that the people may drink. (Exodus 17:3–6)



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In most paintings of this scene throughout the history of Western art, Moses is shown surrounded by the people, striking a stone as water sustains his nation. But all these paintings are incorrect: rightly understood, as Israel complains in Rephidim, Moses is sent ahead of them to Horeb, to Sinai, and it is from there—from the Mountain of God—that the water flows all the way back to Rephidim, linking Israel to Sinai. The story is one of a people that still lacks the courage to journey forward; for if it had only kept going to its sacred destination, water would have been immediately provided.

In all these passages, a disturbing significance can be found in the traditional name given to our *parashah*: “*Beshalach*,” “when he sent”—which in the first sentence of the reading refers to the fact that Pharaoh “sent away” the people of Israel. The Israelites are in the desert, it seems, not because they sought liberty, not because they embraced independence, but because they were forced into freedom by Pharaoh; and this means that in a sense they are not truly free. There is, in other words, nary a Nahshon among them, save Nahshon himself.

But suddenly, as Israel in Rephidim drinks thirstily of the water that streams from Sinai, everything changes:

Then came Amalek and fought with Israel at Rephidim. And Moses said to Joshua, Choose for us men, and go out, fight with Amalek; tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand. So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek; and Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. (Exodus 17:8–10)

We must note the sudden transformation that has come over Israel; whereas only recently the liberated slaves helplessly cried out to Moses, here, Joshua and his men spring into action. Yet the verse also emphasizes that their own success in battle is linked to Moses:

Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses’ hands grew weary; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat upon it, and Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; so his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. (Exodus 17:11–12)

What role does Moses play? Why is it so significant that he sits on a rock above Israel, holding up his hands, with Aaron and Hur at his side? One might be tempted to see in this a miraculous intervention similar to that in Egypt. But the medieval commentator Rashbam takes a slightly different approach, and a striking one. Moses’ hands, he argues, held aloft in prayer, functioned as a flag, or banner, serving to inspire Israel in battle, to renew its courage. With the proper inspiration, the Israelites found the bravery within to forge forward; but when Moses’ hands fell, then, without their “flag,” their own bravery flagged. In Rashbam’s words:

For this is the way of those that engage in war; as long as they see the banner held aloft . . . they grow stronger, and when it is cast down they tend to flee and be defeated.

Rashbam is not, of course, dismissing the role of God in Israel’s victory. Rather, he is expressing what the Midrash about Nahshon, and the story of the manna, has already taught: that ideally, the providence of God goes hand in hand with the courage of a free people.



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Rashbam's approach is captured, intentionally or otherwise, in one of the more recognizable Jewish works of art of the 20th century. Arthur Szyk gives us a version of modern Israel's Declaration of Independence surrounded by several drawings.



At the sides, we see images of Israelis, including of a soldier hoisting aloft the flag of the state:



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But below, there is the image from the end of our reading: Moses and his family, his hands held aloft.



The journey in the wilderness is the journey of freedom itself; Israel is taught to be truly free only through embracing the laws of the Sabbath, and by showing itself ready to shoulder the responsibilities of caring for, and defending, one other.

Thus for Szyk, the flag that inspires the IDF is joined with the hands of Moses that, many millennia ago, prayed for providence and inspired the Israelites who, for the first time, acted as members of a free people. It was at the end of last week's reading that Israel was made politically free; but only at the end of this week's that they became psychologically liberated.

It is no coincidence therefore that this story is followed, next week, by the revelation of Sinai. At least for the moment Israel is a nation of a number of Nahshons,

a free people ready to shoulder the burdens, and responsibilities, of liberty, above all of defending themselves. It is just such an illustration of covenantal responsibility that merits Israel's free receiving of the Torah.

Thus does the *parashah* after the Exodus teach us so many political lessons about liberty. The journey in the wilderness is the journey of freedom itself; Israel is taught to be truly free only through embracing the laws of the Sabbath, and by showing itself ready to shoulder the responsibilities of caring for, and defending, one other. As Yuval Levin put it:

For us, too, bearing the duties and responsibilities of freedom without being prepared for them poses great dangers, especially the danger of abandoning our liberty in return for security or the passing pleasures and distractions of our abundant age. This danger is avoidable only if we take the long way to liberty, the way that prepares us through the practice of responsibility and through the formation and refinement of our souls.

Ancient Israel's lack of confidence, and its readiness to return to Egypt, further reminds people of all polities that even when we avoid the tyranny of Pharaoh, there remains the dangerous possibility that we can develop



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a dependence that impinges on our own freedom. Our weekly reading is not the last time that the Israelites plaintively cry out “Where’s the beef?”, and their psychological helplessness warns us of another way in which freedom can be endangered. Alexis de Tocqueville presciently warned that one danger facing democracies is what is called “soft despotism”: not the slavery of Egypt, but the creation of a country in which its citizens allow, like the Israelites in the desert, a fear of freedom and the unknown to get the better of them. Imagine, he writes, a government whose citizens look to it to address all of their desires:

It chooses to be the sole agent and the only arbiter of that happiness: it provides for their security, foresees and supplies their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry, regulates the descent of property, and subdivides their inheritances—**what remains, but to spare them all the care of thinking and all the trouble of living? Thus it every day renders the exercise of the free agency of man less useful and less frequent; it circumscribes the will within a narrower range, and gradually robs a man of all the uses of himself.**

But *Beshalach* is particularly relevant this year, as we look to Israel and see so many Nahshons, so many free Jews, fighting the enemy while also looking to God. The image of Moses, with his hands held aloft, is emblazoned on my mind because Szyk’s version of Israel’s Declaration hung in my grandparents’ home, so that I studied it constantly as a child. It is only now that I understand the deeper significance in its art. Israel’s Declaration famously contains no explicit reference to the Almighty, making mention only of the “Rock of Israel.” This was meant as a compromise: for believers in the Bible, the phrase referred to the divine defender of the Jewish people; for others, the words could be seen as a reference to the flintlike resolution of the Israeli army.

Only now do I realize that in Szyk’s drawings, faith in God is joined with Jewish courage, the image of the flintlike Israeli soldiers is depicted together with Moses, who was sitting on a rock, praying to the Rock of Israel, further inspiring the flintlike soldiers of his own time. We cannot help but be inspired by Moses of old to pray for Israel’s victory today, knowing that the courage of so many modern Nahshons is made manifest in their battle against the enemy.

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May the merit of our study together bring a swift victory to the Jewish people.



Additional Resources

Yuval Levin on Liberty, “Taking the Long Way,” *First Things*, October 2014. [Click here to read.](#)

