

Parashah Fifty-Six

Exodus 13:21–15:18; Jeremiah 49:1–22; Romans 8:1–14

notes by Tim Hegg

God's Mysterious Leading

In our *parashah* this week we encounter the well-known story of the crossing of the Red Sea. Its familiarity offers both an advantage and a disadvantage: an advantage because we already know the general flow of this wonderful narrative, and a disadvantage, because in its familiarity we may fail to receive the impact it is intended to have. Here, in our text, the miraculous salvation of Israel is displayed in all of its grandeur—a salvation that would forever mark the sovereign hand of God in the affairs of His people.

The opening verse of our portion immediately highlights the core issue: God dwells with His people. This is the primary theme of *Shemot* (Exodus), and is the over arching lesson we must not miss. The God of Israel has determined to dwell among His people, not in some far-off, remote place where they cannot know or commune with Him. Thus our text begins with וַיֵּהָרֶה ה' לְפָנֵיהֶם עַמֹּוד, “And Adonai was walking before them....” His visible presence was seen in a pillar (עַמֹּוד, *‘amud*) of cloud by day, and of fire by night. Verse 22 emphasizes the constant presence of God with Israel: “He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people.” The Sages note that this indicates an overlapping of the appearance of the cloud and the fire: the pillar of fire appeared while the cloud yet remained, and the cloud reappeared in the morning while the fire was still visible (*Mekilta* “Beshallach” ii [2.187 in Lauterbach]). Thus God was with His people at all times, and He manifested His presence continually.

The same is true for us, though admittedly we lack the visible manifestation of God’s presence in the form of a pillar of cloud and fire. Yet His dwelling among us is nonetheless just as real, and just as constant. When our Master promised “Look, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20), He asks us both to believe He is present, and to live in the knowledge of that reality. Moreover, the indwelling Spirit as comforter and companion, continues to manifest the very presence of God among His people.



The route of the exodus is much disputed, primarily because the sites listed in our text have yet to be positively identified. Exodus 14:1 notes that Moses was to command the Israelites to “turn back” (שׁוּב, *shuv*) and camp “before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea; you shall camp in front of Baal-zephon, opposite it, by the sea.” Pi-hahiroth (פִּי הַחִירֹת) has not been found. In Hebrew this means “the mouth of the canals,” but it may also be an Egyptian name meaning “House or temple of Hat-Hor” or “temple of Hrt.”

Migdol (“fortress”) may be a square tower on a height known as Jebel Abu Hasan overlooking the southern part of the small Bitter Lakes. It seems apparent that at one time, the water of the Red Sea (Suez) extended further north to include what was later the Bitter Lakes. Thus, the biblical account that has Israel crossing the Red Sea (יַם סוּף, *yam suf*) has historical foundations as well. Some claim that the Red Sea never had reeds (Egyptian *twf*), but elsewhere in the Tanach, *yam suf* refers

to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aqabah (Ex 10:19; Num 33:10–11; 14:25; Deut 1:40; 1Ki 9:26).

Even though the exact route is allusive, the obvious point in the text is that Israel was heading away from Egypt, and God instructed them through Moses to “turn back” and to camp in a place that made them vulnerable. God’s ways are not our ways, and He does not always reveal to us the purpose for His leading. In this case, He intended to bring a final destruction upon Pharaoh and his army by luring them into pursuing after Israel. The military observers for Pharaoh doubtlessly reported to him that Israel was wandering about, and had apparently lost her way. Camped with the water before them, they had no place to go, and from a military standpoint were “sitting ducks.”

Thus God hardened Pharaoh’s heart again (14:4, 8) and so he mustered his best fighting forces in chariots and went to defeat Israel in order to enslave her once again. Having a few days of respite from the months of plagues, the Egyptian people also had a change of heart. After all, their economy, resting as it was upon the shoulders of slave labor, had just hit an all-time low. The best solution in their minds was once again to enslave Israel who now presented herself as a weak and lost people, wandering in the wilderness.

We may pause to consider this mysterious aspect of God’s leading. Would the people themselves have chosen to take this route? One hardly thinks so! The best route out of Egypt was the shortest and straightest. To have turned back and camped against the wall of the sea could never have been thought a wise thing to do. We should never forget that as God leads us in paths of righteousness (note that Ps 23:3 uses the same word, נָחָה, *nachah* “to lead” as is found in Ex 13:21) the path may traverse “the valley of deepest darkness (shadow of death).” But He brings us there to demonstrate His power and greatness, as a matter of His grace. It is in the hour of our greatest need that His “outstretched” arm is most obvious. Indeed, the Sages note that Pi-Hahiroth is related to חֵירוֹת, *cheyrut*, “freedom.” The very place where it appeared Israel was entrapped was the place of their ultimate freedom.

The text (14:9) indicates that the Egyptians “overtook” (נָסַג, *nasag*) the Israelites as they camped by the sea. This should most likely be understood to mean “they arrived on the horizon.” One can only imagine the terror that struck the hearts of the people as they immediately realized their indefensible position. Their first response was to cry out to the Lord in fear, and next to blame Moses for his ineptitude. He had led them in a way that appeared ill-conceived and that would lead to their ultimate demise. The irony in their words is evident, as they ask, “were there not sufficient graves in Egypt?” (14:11). Indeed, Egypt was known for her graves! And they conclude that slavery in Egypt, as terrible as that was, was still better than dying in the wilderness. If we put ourselves in their place, we can sympathize with their sentiments.

Yet it was this very issue that was crucial: is slavery in Egypt actually better than dying in the wilderness? Or to put it another way: is it worth one’s life to seek to worship God as He should be worshipped? This was the point of their leaving Egypt, that they might “serve God.” It is easy to state the principle when one is not faced with the ultimate choice, but the principle still remains true: better to die in the wilderness where true worship can be expressed, than to be enslaved in paganism.

The faith of Moses shines forth in his reply to the people (14:13–14):

But Moses said to the people, “Do not fear! Stand by and see the salvation of Adonai which He will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you have seen today, you will never see them again forever. Adonai will fight for you while you keep silent.”

This was a battle that God Himself would fight for the Israelites while they “kept silent” (חָרַשׁ, *charash*). The picture here is one of complete trust. The most difficult thing for us to do is to rely entirely upon the Lord when we find ourselves in situations well beyond our control and abilities. Yet it is in these times when we find the Lord working His will and accomplishing His purposes.

Moses gives a prophetic word: “you will never see these Egyptians again forever.” Their fight against the Almighty secures their final demise. We must never lose sight of the fact that God’s enemies will never succeed. Finally, in the end, all who rise up against the Lord will be crushed. It is therefore a firm and resolute faith in God that is able to accept the comforting command, “do not fear,” in such a situation.

The text (14:15) indicates that Moses likewise was crying out to the Lord. Yet He responds with a rebuke: “Why are you crying out to Me?” The Sages offer two suggestions for this rebuke: “Now, when Israel is in distress, is no time for a lengthy prayer!” Alternatively, some suggest a different punctuation: “Why do you cry out (as though the situation is your responsibility)? *It is* “to Me,” that is, “It is for Me to save the nation, therefore instruct them to move ahead and I will attend to their safety” (Rashi). Regardless of how we may understand this rebuke, the Lord’s point to Moses is that now was the time to move forward, not to seek alternative solutions. God’s way of saving Israel was unfolding just as He had planned. He would be honored (כָּבֵד, *kabad*) through the destruction of Pharaoh and his army. While all along Pharaoh “honored” his own heart, in the end, the honor would be the Lord’s.

As the Israelites set out toward the sea, the pillar of cloud moved from before them to act as their rear guard. Here, the pillar is identified as the “angel of God” (מַלְאֲכַי הָאֱלֹהִים, *mal’ach haElohim*), which corresponds to the “angel of His presence” in Isaiah 63:9 — “In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them; in His love and in His mercy He redeemed them, and He lifted them and carried them all the days of old.” The pillar of cloud apparently gave light on the Israelite side, but maintained darkness for the Egyptians. Thus Israel marched through the sea all night long without the Egyptians knowing (14:20).

Once again, the staff of Moses is used (14:16). He stretches his hand and staff over the sea, and the waters parted via a strong east wind that not only held the waters back as walls on both sides, but also dried the sea bottom for easy passage across. At the morning watch (Rashi considers this to be just before dawn) the Egyptians were able to see that Israel had escaped through the sea, and they took up pursuit. God confused them by making their chariot wheels swerve. The text doesn’t explain exactly how this happened, but one could imagine that God confused the drivers of the chariots so that they broke rank and caused collisions with each other. Regardless, they found themselves engulfed with water-walls on both sides, and in the turmoil of battle confusion. They realized immediately that God was still fighting for Israel, and attempted to retreat, but it was too late. The trap was sprung and the waters returned to their place. The Sages, in fanciful midrash, suggest that the waters were created initially with the command that they should split for Israel in the future, and only when they had accomplished this task could they return to the normal, creative order.

Thus the Egyptian army was destroyed by the direct intervention of God on Israel’s behalf. Forever would this miracle be celebrated as the historical salvation of Israel, bringing her from slavery to freedom. It thus would also stand as a paradigm for revealing the ultimate salvation in Messiah’s death, for Israel was seen as “baptized into Moses” (1Cor 10:2), a metaphor that would

inform that ritual of the *mikvah* as symbolically moving from death to life. Even as Israel “went through the midst of the sea” (14:22), so *mikvah* would become a symbol of just such a “crossing” from death to life.

The Israelites watched as the “great hand of God” (14:31, הַיָּד הַגְּדֹלָה) accomplished His victory over the enemies of His people. A similar expression, usually translated “outstretched arm” (בְּזְרוֹעַ) (נְטוּיָה) is used throughout the Tanach to describe this kind of sovereign work of salvation by God on behalf of His people (cf. Ex. 6:6; Deut. 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 9:29; 11:2; 26:8; 1Kings 8:42; 2Kings 17:36; 2Chr. 6:32; Psa. 136:12; Jer. 27:5; 32:17,21; Ezek. 20:33-34). Another similar expression is “with a mighty hand” (בְּיָד הַזֹּקָה, cf. Ex. 13:9; 32:11; Num. 20:20; Deut. 4:34; 5:15; 6:21; 7:8; 9:26; 26:8; Jer. 32:21; Ezek. 20:33-34; Psa. 136:12; Dan. 9:15), most often used in connection to the exodus. Peter refers to God’s “mighty hand” in 1Pet 5:6, “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time.” Similarly, “Your right hand” (יְמִינֶךָ) is used of God to denote His power (cf. Ex. 15:6,12; Psa. 16:11; 17:7; 18:35; 21:8; 44:3; 45:4,9; 48:10; 60:5; 63:8; 74:11; 80:15,17; 89:13; 91:7; 108:6; 110:5; 121:5; 138:7; 139:10; Is. 41:13), especially in providing refuge and salvation for His people. The “right hand” in Hebrew usage denotes a place of honor and power. All of these expressions speak of God’s sovereign power—His ability to order the affairs of our lives and of this world. Used often in connection with the exodus story, these expressions speak of God’s infinite power to accomplish all of His holy will on behalf of His chosen people.

Our *parashah* ends with the “Song at the Sea,” (שִׁירַת הַיָּם), the poetic, hymnic expression of praise and joy for God’s deliverance. We should note initially the obvious fact that music and songs of praise are the natural expression of praise to God in the Scriptures. Music and poetry allow the human soul to express the deep emotions and thoughts that words alone often cannot convey, and this is true in every human culture. Anthropologists often consider music and dance as one aspect of cultural identification, because music (and the expressions it evokes) signal a bed-rock reality of human expression. In God’s infinite wisdom, He gave to human kind the ability to create and use music, and it is therefore most fitting that we utilize music as a mode of praise and worship to express our heartfelt emotions of adoration to our Creator and Savior.

It is not certain how the Song of the Sea was composed. It is clearly one of the oldest pieces of epic poetry contained in the Hebrew Bible, and therefore offers an example of Hebrew in its early stages. Poetry often “freezes” the language in which it is written, since it cannot be updated and retain its poetic structure. Our text notes that “Moses and all the children of Israel sang this song.” How did they learn it so quickly! Did Moses compose the song and then teach it to the rest? Or is this an example of a “spiritual song” in which, in some miraculous manner, the Spirit of God gave spontaneous music to the nation as a whole? We are not certain. It may well be that the song was composed after the exodus event as a means of praise, but also as a way to embed within the national conscience of Israel this historical moment of eternal significance. Regardless, this hymn became a national monument forever retained in the history of God’s chosen people, having become the eternal word of God written in the Torah.

The structure of the Song is as follows:

- vv. 1–10 celebration of God’s great victory over the Egyptian foe
- vv. 11–13 describe how God is incomparable to other deities
- vv. 14–16 describe how the exodus impacted surrounding nations

vv. 17–18 are prophetic and anticipate God’s continuing reign

We may note a number of things in the Song by way of explanation:

1. In v. 2 the name of the Lord is יהִי, *Yah*, an abbreviated form of יהוה used only in poetry and as the theophoric element in names (e.g., *Yirmi-yahu*, “Jeremiah”) and has survived in the oft used imperative, *Hallelu-Yah*, “Praise Yah.” Also, v. 2 is found in its entirety in Is 12:2 and Ps 118:14, showing its on-going use as a liturgical element. Accordingly, it has been used in the synagogue siddur from ancient times.
2. In v. 2, the Hebrew uses the word זְמִרָה, “song,” in the phrase “Yah is my strength and my song.” But *zimrah* can also mean “strength,” and thus the word is most likely used in a double sense: “Yah is my strength (עֹזִי) and [the theme of] my song.”
3. In v. 3 Adonai is called a “man of war” (אִישׁ מְלָחָמָה), and this is followed by “Adonai (יהוה) is His name.” Thus, the meaning of יהוה, as the God Who keeps His covenant promises, is connected here with His willingness to fight for His people in order to save them. The Hebrew Bible conveys this concept as God’s own sovereign work, not as the work of His people. We may compare David’s words (1Sam 17:47), “all this assembly may know that the Lord does not deliver by sword or by spear; for the battle is the Lord’s and He will give you into our hands.” Zechariah proclaims (4:6), “‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the Lord of hosts.” Thus, God as warrior has no connection with “holy war” as conceived by the Crusaders or by Islamic *jihad*, in which people take into their own hands what the Hebrew Bible ascribes entirely to God’s sovereign and miraculous work.
4. In v. 8, “the blast of Your nostrils” is used also in 2Sam 22:16. This is Ancient Near Eastern metaphor for the wind as utilized by God for His purposes.
5. In v. 8, the term “piled up” (נִעְרָמוּ) is taken midrashically by the Sages as deriving not from עֲרָמָה, “a heap, pile,” but from עֲרָמָה, “cunning, shrewdness.” This is taken as an allusion to retributive justice. Even as the Israelite male children were drowned in the Nile because the Egyptians “dealt shrewdly” with the Israelites, now the waters deal with equal shrewdness in drowning Pharaoh’s army.
6. V. 13 uses the language of a shepherd: “In Your lovingkindness You have led the people whom You have redeemed.” “Lovingkindness” (חֶסֶד) is often in connection to covenant faithfulness. In faithfulness to His word of promise, He leads His chosen ones as a shepherd leads and guards His sheep. Note the parallel in Ps 78:52, “But He led forth His own people like sheep and guided them in the wilderness like a flock.”
7. In vv. 14–16, the terror upon the surrounding nations is highlighted. In v. 14, “inhabitants” (יֹשְׁבֵי) may be understood as “those who sit,” that is, “those who sit on thrones,” meaning “rulers.” Thus, the peoples fear, and so do their rulers. In v. 15, the Edomites, the descendents of Esau, would become the constant foe of Israel, yet the story of the exodus would forever cause them to tremble in light of how God fights for His people. V. 16 speaks of the people God has “ransomed” (עֲבָדוֹ קָנִיתָ). The word קָנָה means “to purchase.” Here, as throughout the Scriptures, redemption is cast in economic terms. Israel as a slave in Egypt is given her freedom through the payment of a price. This economic metaphor under girds the whole concept of divine redemption or ransom.
8. V. 17 uses the unique expression “the mountain of Your inheritance” (בְּהַר יְנַחֲלְתָךְ). It refers to the city of Jerusalem, and Mt. Zion, upon which the Temple would be built, and the place where God promised to put His Name, heart, and ears forever (cf. 1Ki 9:3; 2Ki 21:7). This “sanctuary,”

which speaks in one way of the earthly Tabernacle and Temple, is viewed as a replica of the heavenly Sanctuary “not made with hands” (cf. Heb 9:11). Thus, “The sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands have established.”

9. V. 18 closes the Song with the same exultation with which it began: “The Lord shall reign forever and ever” (יהוה יִמְלֹךְ לְעֹלָם וָעֶד). The Kingship of God over all the universe is therefore the primary theme of the Song.