

B'shalach Davar Torah – Jan. 15, 2022 By Steven Lesser

Good Shabbos Minyan Ma'or.

In this week's parsha, God builds a wall!

Not a border wall ... this was a wall of water.

And Pharaoh paid for it!

I'm speaking today in memory of my father, Eddie Lesser, ל"ל גרשון בן יהודה whose fifth yahrzeit is on the 16th day of Shevat. I can't believe that five years have already passed. I have never stopped missing him.

I am able to deliver this d'var Torah thanks to my father, and to my mother, עמו"ש who agreed to send me to yeshiva, even if it wasn't their first choice. That decision changed my life forever.

In our fourth aliyah this morning we read about the culmination of ים סוף קריאת. The Torah says:

וַיִּשַׁע יְהוָה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם

And God saved B'nei Yisrael on that day from the Egyptian soldiers ...

וַיִּרְא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־מִצְרַיִם מֵת עַל־שֵׁפֶת הַיָּם

... and B'nei Yisrael saw the Egyptian soldiers lying dead on the shore of the sea.

There are some rather gruesome Midrashim that say that the ים סוף expelled the bodies of the Egyptians so that B'nei Yisrael could see that they had not survived but were actually dead; and B'nei Yisrael were able to recognize and identify the taskmasters who had previously enslaved them.

After this the Torah continues:

וַיִּרְא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַקֹּדֶקֶד הַגָּדֹלָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה יְהוָה בְּמִצְרַיִם

And our ancestors saw the mighty power that God brought down on the Egyptians ...

וַיִּירָאוּ הָעָם אֶת־יְהוָה וַיִּאֱמִינוּ בַיהוָה וּבְמֹשֶׁה עַבְדּוֹ

... and they revered Hashem and they believed in God and in God's servant Moshe.

And I wonder: What took them so long?

After all, we read in שמות פרשת:

וַיִּלְךָ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן וַיִּצְּקוּ אֶת־כָּל־זִקְנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

Moshe and Aaron went out and assembled all the Jewish elders ...

וַיֵּצֵאוּ אַהֲרֹן אֶת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה

And Aaron told them about everything that God said to Moses ... about how they were going to leave Egypt ...

וַיֵּאֱמְנוּ הָעָם

and the people were convinced ...

וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ כִּי־פָקַד יְהוָה אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכִי רָאָה אֶת־עַנְיָם וַיִּקְדּוּ בַּיִשְׁתַּחֲוִי

when the זקני ישראל heard that God had not forgotten them, and that God knew about their suffering, they bowed down in gratitude. But the Torah *doesn't* say

וַיִּרְאוּ הָעָם אֶת־יְהוָה וַיֵּאֱמִינוּ בִּיהוָה וּבְמֹשֶׁה עַבְדּוֹ

And what about our ancestors, who witnessed the עשר מכות coming down on מצרים, and who saw that their first-born were safe while all the first-born of Egypt were dying, as we read last week in פרשת בא:

וַתִּתֵּן אֶעֱשֶׂה גְדֹלָה בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם אֲשֶׁר כָּמֹהוּ לֹא נִהְיְתָה וְכָמֹהוּ לֹא תִסָּף

There was an enormous cry in all the land of Egypt, such as has never been nor will ever be again. Even here, the Torah still doesn't say:

וַיִּרְאוּ הָעָם אֶת־יְהוָה וַיֵּאֱמִינוּ בִּיהוָה וּבְמֹשֶׁה עַבְדּוֹ

Even when B'nei Yisrael were gathered in front of the ים סוף, watching over their shoulders as the mighty Egyptian army was getting closer and closer, and Moshe said to them:

הַתִּצְבּוּ וּרְאוּ אֶת־יְשׁוּעַת יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר־יַעֲשֶׂה לָכֶם הַיּוֹם

Just you watch what God is going to do for you today! And they watched as God divided the sea, and they saw that they could walk through the sea on dry land. But it wasn't until they got all the way to the other side, and were standing on the shore ... *then* the Torah says:

וַיִּרְאוּ הָעָם אֶת־יְהוָה וַיֵּאֱמִינוּ בִּיהוָה וּבְמֹשֶׁה עַבְדּוֹ

So what took them so long?

Our ancestors were enslaved in Egypt for 210 years. No one in the generation that left Egypt remembered what it meant to be free, and you can say the same thing about the previous

generation. And it's likely that few in the generation before that had a clear recollection of what it meant to live as free people.

Slavery is about a lot more than hard labor. It's not just *physical* slavery, it's also *psychological* slavery. This is why Pharaoh said, at the beginning of שמות ...

תָּבֵה נְתַחֲכֶמָה לּוֹ פְּוֵרֵי־רֵבָה

Let's deal wisely with these people, lest they grow. And here growth not only means growth in numbers – it also means growth in ideas. Pharaoh is saying: I don't want these people to have their own ideas, or to make their own decisions. They must not have their own way of life and determine their own destiny. So Pharaoh set about to crush their spirit ... to destroy any chance of hope ... to make B'nei Yisrael so completely subservient to their Egyptian masters that they could imagine nothing else.

And we can see the degree to which Pharaoh succeeded. For even after our ancestors saw with their own eyes all the מכות that God brought on מצרים, and even after Pharaoh chased them out, with their neighbor's gold and silver, when they stood at the edge of the ים סוף, and they could see, off in the distance, the Egyptian army coming after them, they cried out – not to God for help, but to Moshe to complain! They said:

הַמִּבְלִי אֵיזוֹ קָבְרִים בְּמִצְרַיִם לְקַחְתָּנוּ לְמוֹת בַּמִּדְבָּר

Could it be that there were not enough graves in מצרים so you had to bring us out here so we could die in the desert?

תַּגֵּל מִמֶּנּוּ וְנַעֲבֹדָה אֶת־מִצְרַיִם

Why couldn't you leave us alone, and let us be slaves to the Egyptians ...

כִּי טוֹב לָנוּ עֲבֹד אֶת־מִצְרַיִם מִמָּתְנוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר

Better for us to be slaves in Egypt than to be free people in the desert ...

But when B'nei Yisrael were on the other side of the ים סוף, every one of them alive and well, safe and secure, they looked back and they saw that the sea was whole and the soldiers were dead ...

That's when it finally became real. This really happened. They were not going back to מצרים. They were *never* going back to מצרים and no one was going to make them go back. They would never be slaves to Pharaoh, ever again.

גִּירָאֵי הָעָם אֶת־יְהוָה וַיִּאֱמִינוּ בְּיְהוָה וּבְמֹשֶׁה עֲבָדוּ

My friends, if you would indulge me for just a few minutes more, I would like to offer another perspective on this פסוק .

Another highlight of this week's parsha is the שירת הים. According to the Sforno, B'nei Yisrael began to sing the שירת הים not *after* they were safely on the other side of the ים סוף but while they were still in the midst of crossing it. He writes:

כִּי בָא סוּם פִּרְעֹה. וְזֶה שֶׁאֵמְרָנוּ אֵז יִשִּׁיר

When the Torah speaks of the song אז ישיר ...

היה כאשר בא סוס פרעה ברכבו ופרשיו בים

This happened while Pharaoh's army were chasing after B'nei Yisrael in the ים סוף.

והאל יתברך הטביעם בעוד שבני ישראל היו הולכים ביבשה בתוך הים

And as B'nei Yisrael were crossing the sea on dry land, right behind them the Egyptians were drowning in water.

So, according to the Sforno, the שירת הים was not a song of praise but a song of *prayer*! B'nei Yisrael were literally on the edge of despair and they were pleading with Hashem for help.

This is a feeling with which I am familiar. When I lost my Dad, almost five years ago, I too was on the edge of despair and needing help. And the רבנו של עולם lead me out of the depths of my ים סוף by introducing me to amazing people, who shared their wisdom with warmth and caring, and restored my soul.

Shabbat Shalom