

## The Splitting of the Red Sea by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein (rabbircklein@gmail.com)

In describing the Egyptian pursuit of the fleeing Jewish Nation, immediately preceding the Splitting of the Red Sea and following the Israelites' Exodus from Egypt, the Bible states, "These did not approach near those the entire night."<sup>1</sup> The Talmud<sup>2</sup> exegetically interprets this verse as referring to the ministering angels in Heaven who wanted to sing of G-d's praises on the night of *Kriyas Yam Suf* (Splitting of the Reed Sea), but G-d countered rhetorically "The works of My hand are drowning in the sea and you request to speak of songs?" Essentially, the Talmud is explaining that because the Egyptians were drowning in the sea, the ministering angels were forbidden by G-d from singing of His praise.

Based on this Talmudic passage, Rabbi Yosef Kairo (1488-1575) explains<sup>3</sup> that on the latter days of Pesach one does not recite the *Hallel* in its entirety, rather one merely recites "Half-*Hallel*" because the Splitting of the Sea occurred on the Seventh Day of Passover<sup>4</sup> and therefore the full *Hallel* should not be sung for the same that the ministering angels were forbidden from singing of G-d's praises at the *Kriyas Yam Suf*. That is, as G-d said, because "The works of My hand are drowning in the sea and you request to speak of songs?" However, the question arises, according to Rabbi Kairo, why the Jews sing *Hallel* in its entirety on the First Night of Passover, if historically on that night the ancient Egyptians were massacred by the Plague of the Firstborn, thus, just like one refrains from saying the complete *Hallel* on the Seventh Night of Passover because that Egyptians drowned in the Red Sea, one should also do so on the First Night of Passover because many Egyptians died in the Plague of the Firstborn.

Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (1820-1892) writes<sup>5</sup> that the Ten Plagues in Egypt which afflicted the Egyptians were mainly to punish the Egyptians for their unfair enslavement of the Jewish Nation. He reasons that one cannot say that the main purpose of the plagues was to facilitate the Jewish redemption from Egypt because Rashi writes that G-d commanded the Jews to offer the *Korban Pesach* (Pascal Offering) and perform the *Bris Milah* (Ritual Circumcision) so that they could merit being deemed worth of redemption. This implies that prior to their fulfillment of those two commandments, the Jews were "bare of commandments" (as Rashi says) and had no value in Heaven by which to merit being saved.

Accordingly, reasons Rabbi Soloveitchik, one must conclude that the Ten Plagues which occurred prior to the fulfillment of these commandments (or concurrently with them in the case of the final plague) were primarily brought by G-d in order to punish the Egyptians—not to save the Jews, for at that point, the Jews were not yet worthy of being saved. In contrast, Rabbi Soloveitchik writes that the *Kriyas Yam Suf* happened primarily as a means of allowing the Jews to traverse the Sea on dry-land and escape their Egyptian pursuers to continue *en route* to Israel.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 14:20

<sup>2</sup> Megillah 10b

<sup>3</sup> *Beis Yosef to Tur Orach Chaim* §490

<sup>4</sup> The question arises as to why this event which occurred on the Seventh Day of Passover affects the type of *Hallel* said on every day of Passover after the first two days. This question requires further analysis.

<sup>5</sup> *Beis HaLevi* to Parshas Beshallah

Thus, the primary purpose of the splitting of the sea was to save the Jews, while the secondary purpose was to punish the Egyptians who met their watery graves there. In summation, Rabbi Soloveitchik feels that the plagues in Egypt were primarily to punish the Egyptians, while the act of the splitting the sea was primarily to save the Jews.

However, if one understood contrary to the explanation of Rabbi Soloveitchik then the aforementioned question on the explanation of Rabbi Yosef Kairo can easily be resolved<sup>6</sup>. If the *raison d'être* of splitting the sea was to drown the Egyptians as a means of punishing them for their cruelty, one can clearly discern the difference between the First Night of Passover and the Seventh Night of Passover. The Ten Plagues represented by the First Night of Passover were primarily aimed at delegitimizing the Egyptian deities in the eyes of the Egyptians<sup>7</sup>, and only tangentially did the plagues kill Egyptians; therefore, when the Jews sing the praises of G-d on the First Night of Passover, they recite the *Hallel* in its entirety.

However, on the Seventh Night of *Pesach*, G-d split the Red Sea allowing the Jews to cross the sea as a means of luring their pursuers into the sea to kill them, the motive behind the miracle was to punish the Egyptians, not to save the Jews. Therefore, on the Seventh Night of Passover, when the Jews commemorate the splitting of the Red Sea, they do not recite the entire *Hallel* because the purpose of the miracle was to kill the Egyptians, and as mentioned above, G-d rhetorically asks, "The works of My hand are drowning in the sea and you request to speak of songs?" Therefore, only the "half", abridged, version of *Hallel* is recited.

Although this idea that the principle reason for splitting the sea was to punish the Egyptians stands contrary to the words of Rabbi Soloveitchik, it is actually implicit in the writings of Maimonides. Maimonides writes<sup>8</sup> that Moses did not perform miracles to form a basis for the Jewish belief system in G-d, because a faith which is based solely upon miracles is flawed because one can always attribute the performance of a miracle to magic or sleight of hand. Rather, explains Maimonides, Moses performed each miracle because certain circumstances necessitated the performance of each miracle.

For example, the Jews had nothing which to eat, therefore Moses performed the miracle of raining Manna from the Heavens. The Jews had nothing which to drink, therefore Moses performed the miracle of "bursting open" a rock in order to bring forth water, *et cetera*. Included in his list of examples, Maimonides writes that G-d needed to drown the Egyptians, so He split open the Sea and sunk the Egyptians. From these words, one can infer that Maimonides understood that the purpose of splitting the sea was to drown the Egyptians, and the fact that

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed the Vilna Gaon, Rabbi Eliyahu Kramer (1720-1797), writes (*Biur HaGra* to Proverbs 11:10) that it is the way of HaShem to first save His nation from harm and then to punish those who afflicted them. As an example of this concept, he notes that first HaShem redeemed the Jews from Egypt, and only afterwards did He punish the Egyptians by drowning them in the sea. This clearly implies that the Ten Plagues were only meant as a means for helping facilitate the Jewish Redemption, while the Splitting of the Sea was meant to punish the Egyptians.

<sup>7</sup> The Bible repeatedly records that G-d said that the plagues were "so that they [the Egyptians] should know that I am HaShem", (e.g., see Exodus 7:17; 8:6, 8:18, 9:14, 9:29, 10:2, et al.)

<sup>8</sup> *Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah* 8:1

the Jews crossed the geographical location of the sea on dry-land was only a secondary facet of the miracle, but not its key objective.

Furthermore, Rabbi Eli Baruch Finkel of Yeshivas Mir in Jerusalem (d. 2008) points out<sup>9</sup> that the entire content of *Oz Yoshir*—spontaneously sung by the Jews upon the splitting of the sea to celebrate the miraculous event—records only the Egyptians drowning in the sea and the world reaction to the event, but does not even mention the Jews’ crossing the sea on dry land. This important omission seems to imply that the reason behind splitting the sea was to insure the deaths of the Egyptians, not to save the Jews.

Immediately juxtaposed to the song *Oz Yoshir* is a verse in the Torah which states<sup>10</sup>, “When the horses of Pharaoh, his chariots, and horsemen came into the sea, G-d turned the waters of the sea upon them, the Children of Israel walked on dry land amid the sea.” Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra (1089-1167)<sup>11</sup> asks why the Torah first mentioned the Egyptians drowning in the sea and only afterwards mentioned the Jews’ crossing of the sea, if chronologically, first the Jews crossed the sea, which lured the Egyptians to follow in pursuit, and only afterwards did the Egyptians drown in the sea. Ibn Ezra answers that one is forced to explain that some stragglers from amongst the Jews delayed in crossing the sea until they ended up crossing the sea at the same time as the Egyptians were drowning in their attempt to mimic the feat performed by the Jews in crossing the sea. Therefore, the Bible mentions the Egyptians drowning in the sea before the Jews crossing the sea even though the Jews began crossing the sea before the Egyptians began to drown in order to allude to the magnitude of the miracle performed that that some Jews were still crossing the sea concurrently with the Egyptians drowning in the self-same sea.

Rabbi Simcha Maimon of the Brisker Kollel<sup>12</sup> writes that one is not necessarily forced into accepting this novel interpretation of the Ibn Ezra; rather, he reasons that according to the above-cited idea implied by Maimonides that the Splitting of the Sea was chiefly to punish the Egyptians and only tangentially were the Jews saved, the Bible legitimately mentioned the Egyptians drowning before the Jews crossing because the Bible was not recording the chronology of the event, rather it was explicating the reasons behind the event. Therefore, the Bible first mentioned the main reason, that is, to punish the Egyptians by drowning them in the sea, then afterwards, the Torah mentioned the secondary reason of allowing the Jews to cross the sea on dry land<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> *Birkas HaPesach*, pg. 145

<sup>10</sup> Exodus 15:19

<sup>11</sup> In his commentary ad loc.

<sup>12</sup> *Simchas Yehoshua* to Parshas Beshalach

<sup>13</sup> Alternate routes through the Sinai Desert could have brought the Jews to Israel without necessitating the splitting of any waters. The Suez Canal was obviously not built at that point in history. Furthermore, Rabbi Simcha Maimon points out (*Shiurei Chumash* to Exodus 15:22) that the *Chizkuni* writes (Exodus 15:22) that the Jews exited from the sea to the same side from which they entered the sea, they merely traveled a semi-circle within the boundaries of the sea, but did not actually transverse the sea. This proves that splitting the sea was not necessary for the Jews’ to escape from Egypt.