

RAMBAM AND THE RAV BESHALACH



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In the pasha of Beshalach, the Jewish people are saved by God's miraculous splitting of the Sea of Reeds and Egypt's pursuing army is destroyed when the sea closes back on them. Moshe and the people respond with a joyous song of praise:

Then Moshe and the children of Israel sang this song to the Lord, and they spoke, saying: I will sing to the Lord for He is highly exalted; the horse and his rider He has thrown into the sea. My strength and song is the Lord, And He has become my salvation; This is my God, and I will glorify Him; My father's God and I will exalt Him. The Lord is a man of war; The Lord is His name. (Shemot: 14:1-2)

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik ("The Rav") in his essay, "Appointed Days: Purim and Hannukah" explains:

Spiritual achievements are attributed to man; military achievements are attributed to God: "The Lord is a man of war; the Lord is His name (Ex. 15:3). In the *Haggadah*, we search in vain for a reference to Moses. Is this not ingratitude on the part of the Jewish people, to omit mention of the name of Moses, the leader whose agency took the Jews out of Egypt, who sacrificed himself for the Jews? However, in Judaism any political achievement, any military victory, must not be attributed to flesh and blood; it must be attributed to God. No matter how much the human being accomplishes as far as political and material achievements are concerned, he cannot attribute them to himself. He must not claim credit, because the worst sin is to say: "My power and the might of my hand has gotten me this wealth" (Deut., 8:17). That is idolatry. ("Days of Deliverance" by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik Page 124)

In the case of the redemption of Egypt, the Rav points out, the Jewish people were not participants in the physical struggle. This was a situation where the God performed his conquest of Egypt with no assistance from the Jewish people and thereby made clear that He and He alone was the source of physical power. The Rav states in the same essay:

It may seem very strange, but at no point in Egypt did a Jew lift a finger in order to accelerate the Exodus or bring it about. This is the way the Bible has portrayed the events. On the contrary we read: "And none of you shall go out from the door of his house until morning" (Ex. 12:22). In essence, God is saying to the Jewish people, "Do not help Me; stay home. I will take care of Pharaoh and the Egyptians". We learn from this that when the fight is spiritual, God invites the Jew to participate. When spiritual survival is at stake, man must take the initiative (RB-the Rav is referring to the situation of the Hasmonians taking the fight to the Greeks at the time of Hannukah). Even though man is under the guidance of the Almighty, man takes the initiative, and therefore his role is recorded (RB-the Rav is referring to mention of the Hasmonian struggle in the Shemoneh Esrei additions on Hannukah). However when it is only a question of physical struggle, God acts differently. When there is a physical menace or the threat of physical destruction, God uses the human hand as an instrument of His will. He recruits man. He uses human energy and human resources, to implement the plan that He has

devised. But Judaism has said that in this case the man who is the messenger of God should not be credited with the salvation.

I would explain this distinction in terms of the unique quality of the human being's free will. A principal of Jewish thought is that "all is in the hands of God except for the fear of God". There is only one area in which an individual is fully independent and the determiner of his or her own destiny- in the choice to obey or disobey God. This is not within the power of God. So in a spiritual struggle man is the true operator and the one who should be recognized and lauded. But when it comes to power and strength man is an infinitesimal player and has no ability to truly determine outcome. Here it is God, who controls all physical forces without restriction that is the master of war and the master of destruction and salvation. For man to attribute any power to himself in this regard would be a great error in assessment and, as the Rav relates, would stimulate man's illusion of power and control.

The Rambam in the Guide for the Perplexed comments on a statement in Beresheit Rabbah regarding the splitting of the Sea of Reeds:

It is said in the passage (from Beresheit Rabba): *"Rabbi Jonathan said: The Holy One, blessed be He, has posed conditions to the sea: that it should divide before Israel. That is (the meaning of the words) 'And the sea returned to its strength when the morning appeared. (Exodus 14:27) Rabbi Jeremiah son of Elazar, said: The Holy One, blessed be He, has posed conditions not only to the sea, but to all that has been created in the six day of the Beginning."*

The Rambam, although he respects this position that miracles are not changes in nature, but instead, predetermined aspects of nature that appear as unique and coincide with the historic destiny of the Jewish people, he does not agree with it. Rabbi Jonathan's opinion, it seems to me would be that a miracle is something like a comet or Solar eclipse that may seem to be a departure from nature but is a rare but consistent event that occurs at a particular time. Of course the splitting of the Sea has the additional important element of timing that coincides with the precise historical need of the Jewish people at that time. The Rambam differs with this opinion holding that there are actual temporary changes in nature that are not "programmed" from the beginning and these we call miracles. The Rambam states:

....that which exists has had a beginning, and at first nothing at all existed except God. His wisdom required that He should bring creation into existence at the time when He did do it, and that what He has brought into existence should not be annihilated nor any of its natures changed except in certain particulars that He willed to change; about some of these we know, whereas about others that will be changed in the future we do not know. This is our opinion and the basis of our Law.

An interesting related point is that according to Rabbi Jonathan's and Chazal's position of a precisely programmed splitting of the sea being set from the beginning of creation, we could explain the haste with which the Jews had to leave Egypt. The splitting of the sea being timed to the minute in the beginning of creation was "due" to occur at a particular point in time as creation unfolded. The Jewish people had to be at the Sea of Reeds at the precise preprogrammed moment to have Jewish destiny perfectly mesh with the unfolding of this unique predestined splitting of the waters.

This idea puts the concept of the matza in an interesting light as the Jewish people did not have time for the dough to rise as if they were "late" for the miracle, the waters would have opened and closed too late for the Children of Israel to be saved and the Egyptian charioteers to be drowned. It seems from Chazal's point of view timing is an absolute requirement for the occurrence of miracles. The Rambam's position would not require this level of exact timing as the Rambam holds that the miracle is made "on the spot".