

# Parashat Beshalach **בשלה**

Torah: Exodus 13:17–17:16

Haftarah: Judges 4:4–5:31

## Redefining Freedom

### General Overview

We come now to one of the most dramatic portions of Scripture — the story of the Exodus from Egypt. It is a masterpiece of excitement, suspense, and awe. Perhaps one of the most important verses in the Bible is found in 14:13: “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today.”

This is the Lord's introduction to one of the greatest and most famous events in the Bible. The rest of the Tanakh abounds with references to this supernatural crossing of the sea. Every year the children of Israel celebrate it at Pesach time. It is also alluded to several times in the Renewed Covenant. It is the event by the sea, coupled with the slaying of the Pesach lamb, which together constitute Israel's redemption. Both complement each other. Both are necessary to complete any discussion concerning redemption.

Redemption is the act of emancipating slaves through the payment of a price. Let us look at several characteristics of redemption that are revealed in this passage.

### Exposition

Our approach to this parasha will utilize this outline:

- I. The Big Debate — The Date of the Exodus
- II. The Big Event — The Account of the Exodus

In this excerpt from Parashat Beshalach, we will focus on the third major feature of redemption, the Exodus from Egypt.

### ***Redefining Freedom***

The Exodus story teaches us an important lesson about what it means to be redeemed. As we have already pointed out, redemption has to do with freedom from slavery. We have seen that Israel was free because the Lord made it absolutely clear that all ties to their former masters were severed.

Many people make a grave interpretative mistake here. Freedom does not mean “without boundaries.” In fact, it really means, “changing masters.” This is illustrated in the Renewed Covenant Scriptures by the use of certain Greek words when discussing redemption. The Greek words depict a familiar scene in the ancient Greek *agora* (market or *shuk*) where business was conducted at the slave market. One master would bring his slaves for sale. When he received the right price, upon payment of the money (the ransom), the chains of the slave were cut from him and handed over to the new owner. The slave was now the property of the new master; the old one no longer had any rights to him.

This is, in essence, what happened to the children of Israel. The ransom of the blood of the Pesach lamb was “paid.” The chains to the Egyptians were cut. Now the Lord Himself became their new Master. If only some of them would have realized it! In short, Israel was totally free from the bondage of harsh slavery, to serve with their whole being their new benevolent master, the Eternal One.

However, in all of the excitement of the events at the sea, it was not easy for them to see this. Therefore, the events thereafter were designed by the new Master to teach the redeemed community what it is like to serve Him. What are some of these lessons from this portion?

### **1. You Are Not Soldiers Yet!**

The first lesson was actually taught by the Lord even before the crossing of the sea. The most natural and quickest way to get to the Promised Land was by the northern route, along the Mediterranean coast. This is the way of the famous international trade highway, which the Romans later called the *Via Maris*. In Hebrew this route was called *derek haYam* (הים דרך), or “Way of the Sea.” In 13:17, the name of this road was *Derek Eretz Philistim* (פלישתים ארץ דרך), or “Way of the Land of the Philistines.” This important highway was one of the most frequented of the ancient trade routes, running from Egypt to points north along the Mediterranean coast and east as it branched off into the Galilee, through to Damascus. It was the most obvious way for the Israelites to travel from Egypt to the Promised Land.

However, the Lord specifically did not lead Israel in that direction. God told us His reasoning in 13:17 saying, “if they face war they might change their minds and return to Egypt.” In other words, if they had travelled along the normal route to the Promised Land, they would soon encounter hostilities from the Philistines, who lived just north of Egypt, along the coast and then from the Canaanites themselves. The problem was that Israel had been enslaved all their lives. They were not trained for war, only for building storehouses! It was the wisdom of God that realized that if they went along the most logical route, they would encounter a war with the Philistines or Canaanites before they were ready to fight.

Classic Jewish commentator, Iben Ezra, explains the Lord’s reasoning clearly when he says,

The Israelites had never had a taste of war and had been slaves of others. When Pharaoh pursued them, none of them dared to raise a hand.<sup>1</sup>

It is the same with any redeemed person. There is a war to fight. The time will come to do battle, but we dare not engage in these spiritual battles until the Lord of the armies says we are ready!

### **2. You Are Still Too Young**

Not only was Israel not trained to fight at that point, they were just too young to function in the kind of life a redeemed nation was called to live. The Lord could easily have prohibited the Philistines and Canaanites from attacking. That would have solved the first problem and would have enabled them to travel on the direct route. However, God was doing something else among the children of Israel. Consequently, instead of leading them along the international coastal

trade route, in 13:18 we read, “God led the people about, by The Desert Road toward [of?] the Reed Sea,” or *Derekh haMidbar Yam Suf* (סוף ים המדבר דרך).

Again, remember that in the Hebrew text, when we read the words “by the way of,” the writer is naming another highway. Roads were not usually named “Main St.” or “1st Avenue” back then. They were usually called “the way of” (whatever direction that road travelled, be it to the Philistines, or to the Moabites, etc.). There is one exception to this that we know about. One of the most famous routes along which the children of Israel would eventually travel was called “The King’s Highway.” This road ran north to south through Edom, Moab, and Ammon, east of the Jordan River and into the mountains.

Thus, God led the Israelites on the road that led to the wilderness, *Derekh haMidbar Yam Suf*. This was not just a haphazard trek through the wilderness. They travelled along a known and used highway that even had a name to it.

Notice, however that God purposely took them through the wilderness. Why did He do so? It seems that this would have been a much more difficult way to travel. Let us permit Rabbi Hertz to provide a possible explanation. To him, Israel was not only unable to fight in a battle; they were just plainly, not ready for anything! They were like children who needed to be taught the lessons of life before they could live as a free and independent nation. Thus, Hertz states it like this:

They required training and teaching and disciplining. It is like that king who wished to give his son his inheritance. He thought to himself, “My son is young; he hardly knows how to read and write. If I give him all my possessions now, will he be able to keep them? I will wait until he has grown in strength and wisdom.” In the same way God thought, the children of Israel are verily still children; “First let Me teach them to understand and practise My precepts and commandments, then I will give them the Promised Land.”<sup>2</sup>

A redeemed person has it within him to function in obedience to his new Master, but he also has a flesh which needs to be controlled and a body which needs training and discipline. For the children of Israel, the training period was to be in the wilderness. For us, it is life as a whole with all of its trials and difficulties. When we encounter difficulties in our lives, instead of thinking, “What have I done wrong that all these problems have come upon me?” The redeemed person asks, “In what area of my flesh is the Lord working now? How is He training me for obedience in this trial?” The Scripture says that even Yeshua, because He lived in a physical body, “learned obedience from what He suffered” (Hebrews 5:8). Israel needed that training, and so do we.

### **3. Learning to Really Listen**

There is a third, vital lesson a redeemed person needs to learn. He needs to recognize and follow the voice of his new Master.

The Hebrew slaves were not taught to think for themselves. They heard only the harsh tones of the same familiar taskmasters day by day. Now they were free but they did not know how to think as free people. Did they really know the heart and mind of their new master?

This, undoubtedly, was one of the lessons that God wanted to teach them when He changed their travel route to go through the wilderness. All reason said to go north. It was against reason to take some 3,000,000 people, including weak elderly ones and children, for a dangerous journey through the desert. They needed to learn right from the start that their new Master did not think like them, nor did He think like their former Egyptian owners.

Again, Professor Leibowitz understands this lesson clearly for she says:

The longer way around in spite of all its apparent disadvantages was to be preferred. The lesson is clear. Many things which appear harmful on the surface prove, in the long run, advantageous. His ways are not ours. Not all that seems right to man is right in the sight of the all-seeing, all-knowing God.<sup>3</sup>

Like Israel, the redeemed person lives by different instructions, follows a different voice, and has different goals than the one who is in bondage to slavery. God is always in the process of training the redeemed person and the redeemed community to learn what His voice sounds like and to follow it, no matter how illogical it may, at first, seem.

---

<sup>1</sup> Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot*, 235.

<sup>2</sup> J. H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 265.

<sup>3</sup> Leibowitz, *op. cit.*, 237.