

SERMON on Beshalach 5782

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I invite you to close your eyes and imagine the following situation. An extremely important meeting takes place today: a job interview. Since you are well prepared, you have slept well enough. You woke up before the alarm and having a wonderful morning, you are able to perform your morning ritual with no rush, and you have even found a nicer shirt. Your bus arrives earlier, but you are already there. You relax in your seat near the window.

The bus stops at a traffic light. You see an advertising banner, which says “Special Deal!”, and under it there’s a huge picture of an iron. “Did I turn off the iron? Of course, I did! Did I? Really? Or I did not..?!” You are trying to remember. You are blaming yourself for not having the phone number of your neighbour. You are deciding whether to go back home or not, you are missing the stop. You get off the bus. You have forgotten your briefcase in the bus... Well, I guess you have the message.

This is quite similar to slavery. Within a moment, an overwhelming fear enchains our will and restrict our rational, so that we appear in a prison cell. Everything narrows down to a small cage, and we are lucky if a small window is there. All we can hear now are conversations of the guards and moans of other prisoners... In a state of a fear it is almost impossible to think what is next, it leads to nothing but to a greater fear. Ultimately, we become almost unable to make any further decisions. We appear to be hostages of the fear, ready to do anything it dictates – only to keep it from getting worse.

What always makes me wonder in our weekly chapter *Beshalach* is: why there were those who didn’t follow Moses and stayed in Egypt? Were they more enslaved than the others?

At that time, Hebrews had stayed already in Egypt for quite some time, meaning that there was not a single person who has ever experienced life differently than as endless hard labor with a reward and joy no greater than the daily ration of bread and water. None of them had known any rule and law rather than of a “Pharaoh, who did not know Joseph”. Young and old were accustomed to violence and humiliation.

In some ways, they were even more brave than us: not afraid of being beaten with sticks if power to build pyramids runs out before the end of the day. Obviously, they were physically strong: apparently stronger than us today, enduring such treatment day by day, generation after generation... It is fair to say that not all of us were engaged in building pyramids. Our Sages, Maimonides and Bahya ibn Pakuda claim: “As slaves the Hebrews did menial unthinking labor to an extent that the slave leads simple and unchallenging life, since all decisions are made by others”. And also: “...Living in fear of physical death in an oppressive idolatrous culture... minimizes human initiative and ambition”. So, we definitely have no right to judge those who didn’t dare to change their way of living for the desert, which up until nowadays is the obvious symbol of death.

But we also should not extol those who followed Moses. Was their decision more reasonable and conscious? After all, remember: what did they complain about immediately after the Exodus – what did worry them? Water and food... Indeed, the most basic physical needs was all they could think about at that moment. Exodus 16:3:

*“...If only we had died by the hand of the Eternal One in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread! For **you** have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death”.*

They tell this to Moses and Aaron, and not to the G-d. It looks as if some of them had just fallen for stunts and tricks – of Moses. Apparently, the rest just followed the masses. What unites the whole

generation of the Exile – Jewish tradition says this explicitly: our spiritual level was low, very low, it could not be worse...

In a state of a fear, our minds are simply unable to notice and perceive signs and wonders, even those as obvious as the Pillars of Fire and Smoke, that had guide our ancestors. We were not able to *believe* and could not *imagine* being out of the rule of Paro. We remained enslaved by the fear of the dictator.

In order to over-come this, we needed something even more unique and powerful than anything we ever experienced. We needed what the Greeks would later call a “Catharsis” – a liberating, purifying combination of extreme emotions...

This moment we recall daily in our Morning prayers:

וְהַיִּם בְּקַעַת לִפְנֵיהֶם וַיַּעֲבְרוּ בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם בַּיַּבֵּשָׁה

וְאֶת־רִדְפֵיהֶם הִשְׁלַכְתָּ בַּמַּצּוֹלֹת כְּמוֹ־אֶבֶן בַּמַּיִם עֲזִיִּים

“And the sea You split before them, and they went through the midst of the sea on the dry land; and their pursuers You hurled into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters”. [Psukei deZimra, Siddur Ashkenaz]

The Parting of the Red Sea had become a miracle of both: of **our** Salvation **and** of death of our biggest fear ever. On that day, God re-established the rule over our Fear:

“... On that day, Hashem delivered Israel from the hand of Egypt, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. And Israel saw the great hand which God wielded against Egypt, and the people feared Hashem, and they believed in Hashem, and that Moses was His servant...” [ib.]

It is inscribed in the Book of Psalms 111:10:

“The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the LORD.”

Indeed, we know today that this was only the beginning. We would still be complaining and doubting for a long time: poor Moses and Aaron. But we had the right to. That’s what psychologists call “the Posttraumatic stress disorder” that occurs to those who have experienced or even only witnessed a trauma. Yes, recognizing trauma is only the first step of the spiritual ascent. At this stage, we all need a spiritual leader, a teacher, someone caring about our needs and us, we need guidance. Only this way it was possible to rediscover our unchained will and our mind free and lively.

Only after the fear is gone we can truly start all over again. Learn how to be independent and free, to become entitled to greater knowledge and insight... One day we would become brave enough and ready to reconquer our heritage. But this always takes time and we never know how long – sometimes its forty years.

Many fears accompany us throughout our life, they are part of a package. We have to take our fears seriously, and we should never underestimate fears that our neighbour may have. We all have right to be afraid!

Suddenly, we can find ourselves living in a very frightening time or situation. Hence, inspired by the story of our ancestors at their crucial stage in our weekly chapter we can find ourselves able to recognize our fears, and strong enough to take off its shackles and overcome any fear we have. Having no explicit signs from above has to be a good sign for us nowadays. It may show that we are still able to find the way-out to a better future that we are entitled, using own reason and our will... As it says in Psalm 23: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me”.