



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Beshalach

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

February 3, 2012
Beshalach

Two Sermons

- 1) Beshalach, Page 1
- 2) Tu B'Shevat, Page 8



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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Shemot > Beshalach > Shabbat Shirah
> Can We Achieve the Impossible?

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ABSTRACT

“Impossible. Absolutely impossible.” How often do we hear these discouraging words, pouring cold water on our freshly hatched ideas? Don’t you think that the first creators of the airplane or any other modern feat were told by their peers that their dreams were an impossibility?

And yet...

In this week’s Torah portion we read about the parting of the sea – a rather famous story told and retold over the generations (we even recite the song, *Az Yashir*, evoked by this miracle in our daily prayers). But what is the significance of this event? What relevance does it have to our modern-day lives? And above all, why was the parting of the sea necessary in the first place considering that there is no sea that separates between Egypt and Israel? So why did God take them on a detour to lead them to the sea, so that the parting could take place?!

The answers to these questions offer us a surprising and profoundly relevant lesson to what is truly possible in our own lives today.

Shemot Beshalach

Can We Achieve the Impossible?

CAN WE ACHIEVE THE IMPOSSIBLE?

1. Parting of the Sea

Everyone may remember the miracle of the parting of the sea from Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*. Though for many, the miracle was how the filmmakers were able to re-enact the parting ...

Which reminds me of this story:

A professor was delivering a lecture on the myth of miracles, used the parting of the sea as an example, attempting to demonstrate that it was not a sea at all, but a tidal pool with water about two inches deep. As he expounded his proofs, an old lady from the back row exclaimed: "What a miracle!" This irritated him to no end. "Excuse me, Madam, I just explained that there was NO miracle. The water was two inches deep!" The old lady gasped, "I can't believe the magnitude of this miracle!" He was now really angry, "Lady! Are you deaf?!" he shouted, "No miracle! Two inches of water!" But she would not be denied: "What a miracle! The entire Egyptian army drowned in two inches of water."

2. A Bizarre Miracle

Our sages tell us that miracles do not happen in vain.¹ This raises the big question regarding the parting of the sea: Why the need for such a bizarre miracle? Indeed, there is no sea that separates between Egypt and Israel, so there was no need to part the sea for the Jews to make their way to the Promised Land. God had to actually take them on a detour to lead them to the sea, so that the parting could take place!

What was the purpose for this fantastic miracle - one that seems completely unnecessary in the scheme of things?!

¹ *Deroshos HaRan Drush* 8. See Talmud, *Shabbat* 53b.

And the answer cannot be that it was to drown the pursuing Egyptians, because God could have found other ways to do so, as is evident from the ten plagues.

Clearly there was something special about this event, especially considering that it evoked the song of praise, *Az Yashir*, which is the reason this Shabbos is called *Shabbat Shirah*, “the Shabbat of Song.” Indeed this song is so important that we recite it every single day in our morning prayers!

The brief answer is that this event teaches us that nothing is impossible. But there is much more to the lesson.

3. Jumping In

We can appreciate the significance of this event by examining a critical moment that transpired just before the sea parted.

It is well known that when the Jews came to water and saw the Egyptians pursuing them from behind, they realized that they were trapped between the sea and the enemy. They broke into a few groups arguing what to do: One group insisted that they should surrender to the Egyptians and save their lives. A second group insisted that they should jump into the sea and drown rather than resume lives of slavery. A third group wanted to go down fighting, and the fourth pleaded for all to pray.²

Moses turned to God and asked what should we do? The response? A command: “Go! Move forward!”

² Midrash Mechilta, Shemot 14:13-14.

No one acted, until only one man, Nachshon Ben Aminadav from the tribe of Judah, did something that no one else considered: He stepped right into the sea. When he began to drown, Moses raised his staff above the sea and God miraculously parted its waters, thus allowing the Children of Israel passage on the dry seabed.³

As a result, Nachshon ben Aminadav goes down in history as a pioneer – the one who took the first impossible step. One single step, but one that changed history forever.

4. Everything Is Possible

God went out of His way to lead the Jews to the sea and part it for them in order to teach them – and all generations to come – an invaluable lesson in life: Everything is possible, even the parting of a sea.

When you set your mind to it and you forge ahead with faith – as Nachshon did – you can achieve anything and everything.

5. Rabbi Akiva (Optional Story)

That is also the lesson we learn from one of the greatest sages of the Talmud – Rabbi Akiva, who did not even begin to study Torah until age forty.

Akiva was a poor shepherd who dared to imagine the impossible when he fell in love with his employer's daughter. She was completely out of his reach – being the aristocratic daughter of a rich, and her father was adamantly opposed to any such union. But Rachel loved Akiva and she too dared to dream the impossible dream.

She told him she would disobey her father and marry him, if he devoted himself to Torah study.

³ Talmud, *Sotah* 37a. Mechilta, Shemot 14:22.

The illiterate Akiva decided he was up to the challenge when he saw a stone that had been hollowed out by dripping water. He said: "If water, which is soft, can hollow out a stone, which is hard, how much more can the words of the Torah, which are hard, cut through and make an impression on my heart, which is soft."⁴

Thus he began his studies and in a short period of time was considered one of the wisest men of Israel. Students from all over flocked to learn from him, and at one point, he was reported to head a chain of schools totaling 24,000 students.

That's dreaming the impossible dream and going forward to make it a reality.

6. The Singles Crisis

This is especially relevant to many of us today specifically in regard to finding a partner in marriage (a *shidduch*) which can seem like an impossible dream to many. Indeed, it has been described as being as difficult as the parting of the sea.

Unfortunately, we live in a time of crisis when it comes to finding and maintaining lasting and enduring relationships. Some call it a Singles Crisis. Others identify singles today as a Lonely Hearts Club.

We should know that finding one's soul-mate has always been a challenge, as is captured in this powerful Midrash:⁵

A Roman matron asked Rabbi Yosei bar Chalafta: "In how many days did God create His world?"

"In six days," he replied.

"And what has He been doing ever since?" she asked.

⁴ *Avot D'Rebbi Natan*, Chapter 6.

⁵ *Bereishis Rabba* 68:4.

“God sits and matches couples,” Rabbi Yosei told her.

“Is this God’s occupation?” she asked derisively, “I could do that too! I possess a great number of men servants and maid servants and would be able to pair all of them off in one hour!”

“You may think it is easy, but for God, it is as difficult as parting the sea,” he said.

After Rabbi Yosei left, the matron formed rows of her men servants and maid servants, a thousand in each row, and said to them, “This man shall marry this woman,” pairing them off as she walked down the line for the night.

But when they returned to work the next morning, one had an injured head, one was missing an eye and one had a broken foot.

“What is going on here?” the matron asked.

“I don’t want this one [for a partner],” they all said.

She sent for Rabbi Yosei and told him, “There is no God like your God. When you explained to me that God is busy making matches, you spoke wisely.”

The lesson of the parting sea is that, with faith in God’s help, we can achieve the impossible.

Two strangers, two people with different personalities and interests, can become one and build a beautiful family, with healthy and wholesome children that will in time build their own families, and so generation after generation!

Imagine the odds against that, and yet we see us all standing here today – children and grandchildren of great ancestors, stretching back thousands of years in an unbroken chain. Each of you, each of us, is a walking miracle – a living, breathing example that everything is possible.

7. Overcoming Every Obstacle

Same is true for all our challenges, and God knows that each of us has many of them: We can overcome any obstacle.

“Impossible. Absolutely impossible.” How often do we hear these discouraging words, pouring cold water on our freshly hatched ideas? Don’t you think that the first creators of the airplane or any other modern feat were told by their peers that their dreams were an impossibility? Yet, they persisted and finally prevailed. History is witness to countless stories of humans achieving the impossible – crossing vast seas in wooden vessels, flying into the skies on steel wings, speaking into wireless devices across continents, landing a rocket on the moon.

And how else do we explain the seemingly irrational drive that we can overcome any challenge. How, for instance, are doctors utterly convinced that they can ultimately conquer every illness?! It is because we have an instinct that all is possible. This instinct stems from the Divine power of the soul that transcends mortality and all the shortcomings of human existence.

It is critical that we believe in ourselves – in the God-given strengths with which each of us is endowed, in order to be able to achieve anything in this world. But we must also know that our psyches are under a constant assault by forces that undermine us, remind us of limitations, and feed our insecurities and fears.

To repel these forces of negativity we have the inspiration of the parting of the sea, which teaches us that we have the power to be Divine! We need only believe that it is possible. God knows that it is.

In essence, this is the ultimate battle in life – how much we believe in ourselves ... how much we believe in our possibilities ... how much we dare to seize the day.

Let us all, with the help of God, have the courage – like Nachshon Ben Aminadav [and like Rabbi Akiva] – to try and, just as He parted the sea, God will surely do the rest. Amen.

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Shemot > Beshalach > Tu B'Shevat > How Sensitive Are You?

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ABSTRACT

With all the talk about environmental protection, it's worth asking: Who was the first to actually celebrate nature with a special holiday?

This coming week we celebrate Tu B'Shevat, the New Year for Trees. Why do we honor the New Year for Trees in the first place? We are, after all, humans, not trees, and we mark our own New Year, when the human race was created on Rosh Hashana, so why is it relevant for us to celebrate the New Year for... Trees?

Tu B'Shevat and the Jewish view on environmentalism contains a fascinating and relevant message for all of us – the critical importance of sensitivity.

Appreciating the environment is not merely a crusade and another cause; it reflects awareness of the Divine in all. It makes us more cognizant of every detail in life – how one virtuous deed affects the delicate balance on which the fate of the world hangs.

HOW SENSITIVE ARE YOU?

1. Environmentalism

Over the past few years much has been said about the dangers to our environment. As we approach Tu B'Shevat, New Year for Trees, I would like to speak about the Jewish view on environmentalism, which contains a surprising and relevant message for all of us.

But first, this anecdote:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Quickly, God was faced with a class action suit for failure to file an environmental impact statement. God was granted a temporary permit for the project, but was stymied with the cease and desist order for the earthly part.

Then God said, "Let there be light!"

Immediately, the officials demanded to know how the light would be made. Would there be strip mining? What about thermal pollution? God explained that the light would come from a large ball of fire. God was granted provisional permission to make light, assuming that no smoke would result from the ball of fire, and that He would obtain a building permit and, to conserve energy, He would have the light out half the time. God agreed and offered to call the light "Day" and the darkness "Night." The officials replied that they were not interested in semantics.

God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation, plant yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit."

The EPA agreed, so long as only native seed was used.

Then God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth."

The officials pointed out that this would require approval from the Department of Game coordinated with the Wildlife Federation and the Audubon Society.

Everything was okay until God said the project would be completed in six days. The officials said it would take at least two hundred days to review the applications and the impact statement. After that there would be a public hearing. Then there would be ten to twelve months before...

At this point, God created Hell.

2. Tu B'Shevat

Why do we honor the New Year for Trees in the first place? We are, after all, humans, not trees, and we mark our own New Year, when the human was created on Rosh Hashana, so why is it relevant for us to celebrate the New Year for... Trees?

In the good ol' classic Jewish style, let us answer this question with another question:

With all the talk about environmental protection, it's worth asking: Who was the first to actually celebrate nature with a special holiday?

Long before Earth Day, Arbor Day, and even before Al Gore, the Jewish calendar honored *Tu B'Shevat*, the 15th day of the Hebrew month of Shevat - celebrated this year on February 8 - as the day that marks the beginning of a "New Year for Trees." For this is the time when the trees of the Land of Israel emerge from their winter sleep and begin a new fruit-bearing cycle.

We observe *Tu B'Shevat* by eating fruit, particularly from the kinds that are singled out by the Torah in its praise of the bounty of the Holy Land:

grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates. On this day we remember that the Torah calls man “a tree of the field”⁶ and we reflect on the lessons we can derive from our botanical analogue.

Everything around us is busy appreciating the Divine, especially the habitat that provides us with sustenance and allows us to live, and therefore we are not allowed to harm even single aspect of it – even a leaf.

3. Harm Nothing

Rabbi Joseph Isaac writes in his memoirs:

One day in the summer of 1896, my father took me for a walk in the fields. The crops were ripening. A light breeze moved through the sheaves, ears of corn nodded and whispered to each other. My father said to me: “See my son - Divinity! Each movement of every ear of corn and of every tuft of grass was anticipated in God’s master plan.

We had gone into the forest, and I, absorbed in our conversation, stirred by the sound of my father’s voice and the purity of his words, had distractedly ripped off a leaf from a tree and was holding it in my hands, tearing it to bits and dropping the pieces to the ground.

My father said: “The holy Ari used to say, apart from the fact that every leaf of a tree is a creature that has in it divine life, and was created by God for some predesigned purpose, there is also contained in every leaf a spark of some soul that has descended to this world in order to be redeemed. And now, regard how careful a man must be in this world, whether awake or asleep. See, even now, as we were speaking about Divine Providence, you absentmindedly plucked a leaf, tore it into little pieces, and scattered the pieces to the ground. Should one regard the God’s creations so lightly? The

⁶ Deuteronomy 20:19.

Creator wrought this creation too for some purpose; there is divine life in it. Within its own body is contained its own life. In what way is the 'I' in the leaf less than your 'I?' Yes, there is a great difference. The leaf is in the category of the vegetative world, and you in the category of the 'human.' But everything created has its own end, and its divine obligation to accomplish something in the world."

4. Sensitivity

Sensitivity is not arbitrary. Some of us are sensitive only to certain people and at certain times. It is not uncommon to find executive sharks that are merciless in their business dealings, while behaving like gentle lambs with their own children and families.

Not to be outdone, there is also the parent that for some reason demonstrates more love to strangers than to his or her own children.

Then, there is "seasonal" sensitivity, displayed only at whim or when it is convenient or when the bestower happens to be in a benevolent frame of mind.

Of course, in our harsh world, any sensitivity is always welcome. But true sensitivity is one that is not compartmentalized. Because sensitivity driven by personal interest can, and inevitably will, always be arbitrary.

If you are sensitive on your own terms, then who is to say when those terms will dictate turning against a loved one? If you are insensitive to some people or in some situations and times, you ultimately will – if and when it suits you – be insensitive to other people, situations and times.

During World War II unspeakable evil was perpetrated against humans while its architect, Adolf Hitler, showed unusual empathy toward his dogs.

Sensitivity is a state of being, not an act. A noun, not a verb. A sensitive person is sensitive all the time (even asleep), to all people and in all situations.

5. New Year of Trees

The New Year of Trees makes us aware of our intimate dependence and integral connection with the “field” (or world/universe) in which we live. And thus, the profound sensitivity to all that grows and all that breathes around us.

The only reason, the Torah teaches, we may consume or use elements of nature for our personal needs, is not because we have a right to them, but because we have the responsibility and privilege to refine, elevate and perfect the environment. We have this right only when we use nature for positive and constructive ends, to civilize and enhance the world, morally and ethically, for good and holy purposes. If we don't, we do not have the right to even touch any part of the environment.

The New Year of Trees teaches us that life consists of two elements: Man and the field (or world/universe).

6. Man is the Subject

Man is the subject. The universe is the object.

A human being takes an object of the universe, say an apple off a tree, and eats it. He can use the energy from this food for destructive purposes. He can use it neutrally, for optional acts. Or, he can use it towards constructive ends, for this is its purpose.

We have the power and dominance over nature; we have the ability to destroy it, maintain its neutral state, or elevate it.

Our sages state two reasons why the human being, the crown jewel of creation, was created last, after all other creatures.

One reason is because you first set the table and then invite your special guest to dine.

7. The Second Reason

The second reason, which seems to contradict the first, is that if the human being misbehaves and transgresses, he is told that even the lowly insect preceded his creation. How do we reconcile the two? Depending on our own behavior, we determine which one we are: the special guest or inferior to the insect.

The human race was given free choice. As the universe's crown jewel, we can either elevate the universe by lifting our environment to a greater place ... or, if we are destructive and act out of sync with the Divine Engineer's plans, then, as the Chassidic saying goes, the "cobblestones cry out: what right do you have to walk on me?" For then we have become inferior even to an insect, which has not digressed from its purpose.

We are all responsible for the environment around us. We have no right to hurt or damage any object in this universe, from the largest animal to the smallest insect, from the mammoth to the microscopic components of nature.

8. A Purpose for All

Everything was created for a purpose, and we are responsible to care for and protect every part of existence, whether it is human, animal, vegetable or mineral. Moreover, we are responsible to help it reach its fullest potential in realizing the purpose of its creation.

Responsibility for our universe is great gift. It is the gift of being active participants in the dynamic unfolding of the world's destiny.

So we have one day in the year when we are asked to think not about ourselves but about the trees and vegetation around us. This requires humility and discipline. With all our preoccupations, it may seem trivial to "stop and smell the roses," but in return we develop a deeper sensitivity to everything, everyone and every moment – even to ourselves.

9. Awareness of the Divine

Appreciating the environment is not merely a crusade and another cause; it reflects awareness of the Divine in all. It makes us more cognizant of every detail in life – how one virtuous deed affects the delicate balance on which the fate of the world hangs.

We can have a positive impact on every person we meet and on every space we travel through. We can act to save a life, for a life is an entire universe.

In our complicated and troubling world – a spiraling economy, leaderless leaders, global anxiety, a nervous sense of inevitability – it's good to step back and remember our symbiotic relationship with nature ... that our roots embedded in the fields of earth.

We must take responsibility for each other. We are all that we have. And we have God.

It can be very healing to lift our eyes to heaven, look at the trees around us, peer inside the tree that is man, and bid the world a Happy New Year.