



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## SHEMOT > Beshalach

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January 11, 2014

Beshalach

**Does God Ever Chill?**



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

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## **ABSTRACT**

Does God intimidate you? Is your relationship with God tense? And, if yes, is that a good thing?

When we are at attention, or at a reverent moment, or giving a formal speech, we stand up. When we are hanging out with friends, relaxing on a couch, or just chilling with family, we sit down.

Which of these two is optimal when building a relationship with God, religion, and Judaism? Should it be a stand-up or a sit-down experience? Can we just have a warm, relaxed rapport with God?

Is it blasphemy to even ask such questions?

The splitting of the sea, the leader Augustus, and the *Az Yashir* philharmonic provide the answers to these stand-up questions.

You might want to sit down for this.

## DOES GOD EVER CHILL?

### 1. A Chaired Professor (Joke)

An eccentric philosophy professor gave a one question final exam after a semester dealing with a broad array of philosophical topics. The class was already seated and ready to go when the professor picked up his chair, plopped it on top of his desk and wrote on the board:

“Using everything we have learned this semester, prove that this chair does not exist.”

Fingers flew, erasers rubbed, notebooks were filled in furious fashion. Some students wrote over 30 pages in one hour attempting to refute the existence of the chair.

One member of the class, however, was up and finished in less than half a minute.

A week later when the grades were posted, the rest of the group wondered how he could have gotten an “A” when he had barely written anything at all.

His answer consisted of two words: “What chair?”

### 2. Chair Leaders

And with this metaphysical opening I would like to talk to you about the first chair in the history of the world – if we were so inclined we could call it the lead chair, or chair leader – and by “chair,” I mean a place to sit down and get comfortable.

But before we get into the first global sit-down, let us articulate the difference between standing up and sitting down.

We stand up when we are at attention; and we sit down when we are comfortable.

For instance, take our standing and sitting in the synagogue: We all stand when the Torah is removed from the ark, but we sit down during the gefilte fish at the Kiddush. Why? Because when the Torah is brought from the ark, it is a reverent and formal occasion, one which demands respect; but the Kiddush is a time to eat, relax, and be social with the community, and this level of comfort calls for sitting down.

There is also another time when it behooves us to sit in synagogue – right now, during the sermon. Though, I daresay, this is for a very different reason. It is simply much more comfortable to sleep while sitting down than while standing up.

Though, I must say that I am confident I could put you all to sleep whether you are sitting down, standing up, or dancing the *hora* with your Bubby.

But we digress.

### 3. Stand-up vs. Sit-down

Back to the issue at hand. If you'll indulge me, I will apply this stand-up versus sit-down issue to religion in general, Judaism in particular, and of course God. And I'll pose it in the form of a question:

Is your relationship with religion, Judaism and God more of a stand-up thing or a sit-down thing?

In other words: Do you experience religion, Judaism and God as something comfortable, friendly and relaxing (like sitting down) or as something formal, and sometimes intimidating and forbidding (like standing at attention)?

And which of the two is a more genuine relationship – should religion relax you or set you on edge? Should it be like standing in front of a king or like sitting down with your best friend?

I really cannot *stand* the uncertainty...

## 4. Splitting of the Sea

Just a few moments ago, we read ...

[Or: In just a few moments we will read ...]

one of the most famous episodes in all of the Torah – the miracle of the splitting of the sea, when God turned the waters into dry land, so that the Jewish people could walk across and escape the charging Egyptians, who wished to return them to slavery.

The description in this week’s portion, *Parshat Beshalach*, culminates with a poetic song – known as *Az Yashir*, “Then they sang” – that Moses and the Jews sang to celebrate this miraculous event.<sup>1</sup>

Can you picture it? Hundreds of thousands of newly liberated Jews had just crossed the sea, while its waters split and stood still. Now, safely on the other side, they break out their tambourines and serenade the Creator of the World.

Okay, seems like a classic biblical miracle – God parting the sea in a supernatural act so that the Israelites could continue on their journey to receive the Torah at Sinai and then on to the Promised Land. So, of course, they celebrated.

But that was then and this is now.

Like most classic biblical miracles, what relevance does this parting of the sea have to do with us, some 3,300 later – here, in the beginning of 2014?

And what about this *Az Yashir* song? What does it mean for me, here today in a modern world, where I don’t have split seas, but I do have split atoms and split pea soup?

What personal practical message can I take away from this ancient, august event?

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<sup>1</sup>Exodus 15:1. See Rashi loc. and Ohr Hatorah Beshalach pp. 490 for a comprehensive explanation on the grammatical tenses used in this verse.

## 5. August In January

Which brings me to the word august.

If you look up the word august in the dictionary, you will find a definition along these lines: “Inspiring reverence or admiration ... of supreme dignity or grandeur ... majestic ... venerable ... eminent.

The origin of the word august – which ironically we are discussing in January – is in the Latin word *augustus*, meaning “sacred/grand”<sup>2</sup> (hence Caesar *Augustus*) and is related to the word *augēre* meaning “to increase/grow.”

Regarding the august parting sea, specifically the praiseworthy and poetic *Az Yashir* song sung after, there is a Midrash which, at first glance, seems rather peculiar, but which, in fact, reveals the essence of the splitting of the sea miracle, explaining it in a very contemporary way and answering our question of whether to be stand-up or sit-down Jews.

This Midrash<sup>3</sup> begins with a quote from the Book of Psalms: *Established is Your throne from yore (m'az)*,<sup>4</sup> and then goes on to explain that God's throne – i.e. the place where God sits – was established from *az*, meaning “from yore” or “from then.”

The Midrash then expands the definition of *az*. It says that though God created the world in the beginning, His throne was not established until *az* – that is, until the time when the Jews sang *Az Yashir* at the splitting of the sea. And this is the first time in the history of the world that God (with His throne established) sat down, so to speak.

[DISCLAIMER: When the Midrash uses language like God's *throne*, or anthropomorphic expressions – like God *stood* or God *sat down*, it is obviously not being literal. God transcends all such anthropomorphic limitations and descriptions, and they are only used to explain the different dimensions with which God relates to the world.]

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustus\\_\(honorific\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augustus_(honorific))

<sup>3</sup> Shemot Rabbah 23:1.

<sup>4</sup> Psalms 93:2.

The Midrash goes on. It says that God's throne and God's act of sitting down is analogous to a King who went to war and was victorious and was afterwards called Augustus.<sup>5</sup>

They said to him: prior to ever going to war, you were called King, but now you are called Augustus. What special honor does the title Augustus convey that the title King does not?

The King is depicted as standing but [Caesar] Augustus is depicted as sitting. So says Israel to God: True that from before creation and also after creation You God were always here; but Your presence was more like standing at attention, a formal King ready to judge the world or even go to war; as it says (in the Book of Habakkuk): *He stood and meted out to the earth.*<sup>6</sup> But now, after the singing of *Az Yashir* at the splitting of the sea, You God have become like Augustus in post-war victory, sitting and settled on Your throne. Now You are at peace; You are at ease and comfortable in a seated position.

## 6. What Does This Mean?

What does this mean?

Prior to the splitting of the sea, God's relationship with the world was an authoritative (standing) relationship – one of distance and formality. God was the Creator, and the world His creation.

The world was very top-down and structured. The nature of the seas was to be wet and flow and cover the land beneath it, and the nature of land was to be still and dry. Everything had its place and everything had its order – as in the above-quoted words of Habakkuk – everything was *meted out* and everything had its meter and measurement.

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<sup>5</sup> See Matnat Kehunah and Etz Yosef on Midrash at loc.

<sup>6</sup> Habakkuk 3:6.

But the whole point of existence is to transform the meter and measurement, so that which seems hidden should be revealed and the inner workings of reality should come to light. The purpose of life is to create a *comfortable* home for God in this material universe, a place where God can rest, sit a spell, and settle in, and not remain standing.

This happened at the parting of the sea. Literally. The sea is a mysterious deep, dark world of concealment – when you look at its surface, all you see is water and you are totally unaware of the depths and worlds which hide beneath. But when the sea parted, then all of its inner workings were revealed for man to see.<sup>7</sup>

This, indeed, was truly miraculous. And this is why the Jews sang *Az Yashir* – they had just experienced the deepest revelation, the revelation of the inner poetry and music of the world, and this brought out poetry and song in them.

At the splitting of the sea, our relationship with God became integrated – with God “settling in” and “sitting down,” so to speak. Sure God still controlled the world’s meter and structure, only now we were exposed to the warmth and comfort within that meter and structure.

## 7. Standing vs. Sitting

It is even better understood by looking at a standing person and a sitting one.

What’s the difference? Here, right now, you behold a perfect example: I am standing as I speak, and you are sitting as you listen. What visible difference is there between us? It’s very obvious and simple:

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<sup>7</sup> In the Kabbalistic/Chassidic terminology, the sea refers to the hidden worlds of *Alma d’Iskasya*, like the hidden letters in man’s thought, and dry land refers to the revealed world of *Alma d’Isglaya*, like the revealed letters in speech. See Ohr Hatorah *ibid*; Torah Ohr Beshalach, 62b; et al.



When someone is standing, 50% of the experience is legs and 50% is head and torso. When one sits and takes the weight off, then the legs check-out and the experience becomes one where almost all of it is head and torso.

Before the sea split, creation went through a formal process – head and mind informed the heart (which is situated in the torso), which in turn influenced the legs (causing them to move into action). In other words, it was a stand-up experience.

When the sea split, water gave way to dry land and the hidden elements of existence were revealed for every Jewish man, woman and child.

And then the experience changed. We came to rely mostly on the head and heart. We were allowed to sit-down, to settle in and become integrated with existence.

And this is the message for us:

Sure we need formal religion and formal moments when we stand before God, as subjects before a King. But *Az Yashir* teaches us that, at the end of the day, we desire our relationship with God to also be an informal one. We want to relate to Him like a child to a parent. We want to be comfortable with our Judaism the same way we are comfortable with our closest friends and intimate family members.

Often times we need to stand before God. But just as importantly, often times we just want to hang out with God.

This is the miracle of the splitting of the sea for us today. We have the ability to put our legs up and just chill with Heaven.

## 8. Getting Practical

A rabbi friend of mine out in the Midwest was once trying to describe to me, in a diplomatic and somewhat humorous fashion, the struggle he sometimes has communicating with his community. He said:

During the High Holiday season, when our community has way more synagogue-goers than we have on a usual Shabbat throughout the year, we rent out the conference room in a local hotel, set up a bunch of folding chairs and have enough seats to serve the High Holiday demand.

I guess, if we were into puns, we could call it “high” demand.

One year, on Yom Kippur, as I was waiting to begin my annual *Kol Nidrei* address, I announced to the entire room:

“Ladies and gentlemen, please take your seats.”

When no one responded, I asked: “Did everyone not hear me? Why aren’t you taking your seats?”

To which one of the congregants replied: “Rabbi, we heard you loud and clear. You told us to please *take* our seats, but you never told us *where* we should take them!”

And this might be the greatest criticisms of rabbis everywhere. We quote ideas and share insights, but we don’t always have a practical suggestion.

We say: take a seat, but we don’t always say where we should take that seat.

We may speak about the formal part of Judaism, but how about the informal part? We may know how to stand before God, but can we relate to a God that sits among us? How do we become comfortable with God and how do we make God comfortable with us?

Right now, I am going to dispel this stereotype.

There are 613 mitzvahs in the Torah. Fulfilling a mitzvah is the actionable – formal – part of Judaism and, practically speaking, it is the most important part. It means giving charity, eating kosher, obeying the laws of family purity, observing Shabbat. This is the way we serve and respect God.

But if we were to break our day down into units of time, we would find that the majority of it is not spent on actionable mitzvahs – we don’t give charity or pray or eat kosher *all* day long.

So how to connect with God and Judaism in those many in-between moments, like when we are in a business meeting, say, or just walking down the street? How do we integrate God in the informal moments, when we are not standing and serving Him through specific mitzvahs?

Or, more importantly: Even when we are actually engaged in an actionable mitzvah – like right now as we pray in synagogue on the sacred day of Shabbat – how can we ensure that the action isn't merely a formal routine or an obligatory ritual that must be performed? How can we infuse it with warmth, satisfaction, mindfulness, soulfulness and serenity? How can we take the leg part of a mitzvah and imbue it with mind and heart?

In other words: How can we take the formal stand-up ideal and infuse it with sit-down warmth and comfort?

## 9. Full Circle

For this we come full circle:

The answer lies in that eccentric philosophy professor who asked his class to prove the chair wasn't there and in the brilliant answer of the student – “What chair?”

Prior to the splitting of the sea, the relationship between God and the people and between the people and God, was a relationship without a chair. When asked to get comfortable with God and the idea of God, the people asked: “What chair? How can we get comfortable without a chair?”

But with the parting sea, a new dimension was introduced into the relationship between God and man – now, once nature itself was changed and split, there was no way to deny that the chair exists.

Now, our relationship with God is informed by the head and heart. And while the structures, formalities and “legs” of religious observance are paramount – now we can sit down with God, sip a bottle of fine wine (and by fine wine I mean the wine of Torah) and enjoy an intimate relationship.

In other words: God and we can chill out!

Now is such a miracle not worthy of poetry and song?

Shabbat Shalom!

(This sermon is based on and inspired by Ohr Hatorah of the Tzemach Tzedek, Beshalach pp. 490).