



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## SHEMOT > Beshalach

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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January 14, 2011

Beshalach

### **Two Sermons**

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## Meaningful Sermons “Words from the Heart

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Shemot > Beshalach > Shabbat Shirah: Can You Fly  
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### ABSTRACT

When feeling bogged down or crushed by life’s relentless pressures, do you ever dream of being able to fly to another place? In a life where your work and daily routines wear you down, how can you find ways to soar above it all? How can you access your free spirit even when being dragged down by the gravitational pull of pedestrian life and mundane monotony?

The Jewish answer is through song.

This Shabbat is called *Shabbat Shirah* (the “Shabbat of Song”) because today’s Torah reading contains the song which the Israelites sang after the parting of the Re(e)d Sea – the first song ever documented in history. So today we shall talk about song, and the power that music has to provide us with wings that transport us to another time and place and transform our lives.

Music is endlessly mysterious and has a formidable hold over us. Why, for example, is our generation so utterly captivated by music? Human beings are a “musical species” coming into this world musically pre-wired. So writes the famed neurologist Dr. Oliver Sacks (best known for his books *Awakenings* and *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*) in his latest offering *Musicophilia*. But, try as he might, Dr. Sacks cannot solve the mystery why...

Today, on *Shabbat Shirah*, we shall take some “flying lessons” and discover the deeper reason behind the power of music and its ability to lift our spirits to unprecedented heights ... to allow us to fly ... to travel to far-away places.

Shemot

Beshalach

Shabbat Shirah: Can You Fly  
on the Wings of Song?

## SHABBAT SHIRAH: CAN YOU FLY ON THE WINGS OF SONG?

### 1. Jewish Flying Lessons

When feeling bogged down or crushed by life's relentless pressures, do you ever dream of being able to fly to another place? In a life where your work and daily routines wear you down, how can you find ways to soar above it all? How can you access your free spirit even when being dragged down by the gravitational pull of pedestrian life and mundane monotony?

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This Shabbat is called *Shabbat Shirah* (the "Shabbat of Song") because today's Torah reading contains the song which the Israelites sang after the parting of the Re(e)d Sea – the first song ever documented in history. So today we shall talk about song, and the power that music has to provide us with wings that transport us to another time and place and transform our lives.

Today, on *Shabbat Shirah*, we shall take some "flying lessons" and discover the deeper reason behind the power of music and its ability to lift our spirits to unprecedented heights ... to allow us to fly ... to travel to far-away places.

I know ... many of you will claim to be tone deaf. Or that you only know one song: "One-hundred bottles of beer on the wall." Am I right? No? You know two songs? Great. You are like Ulysses S. Grant, who apparently claimed to know just two tunes. He said: "One is Yankee Doodle and the other is not."

But seriously ...

## 2. The Mystery of Music

Music is endlessly mysterious. And there are so many questions that we have about it:

- What gives music its power?
- How does it have the ability to transport us to another time and place? To lift a broken spirit? To bring a tear to a happy soul?
- Why does a song have the capacity to reach the depths of our heart, bring old memories alive, awaken our deepest aspirations and naturally cause us to dance to its beat?
- What type of language is this language of song, and where did it originate? We learn the spoken language at home and at school. But who taught us how to sing?
- Why do we naturally respond to music, moving to its beat, singing to its tune? (I mean, even embryos have been witnessed reacting to music!)
- What is the soul of song?

## 3. A Neurologist's Answer

Dr. Oliver Sacks – the famed neurologist best known for his books *Awakenings* and *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* – undertakes the study of music in his most recent offering, *Musicophilia*. But try as he might, even he cannot solve the mystery ... although he does make some fascinating observations concerning the extreme effects of music on the human brain, and how lives can be utterly transformed by the simplest of harmonies.

Furthermore, Sacks demonstrates how music has been used successfully as treatment for many kinds of mental suffering. (Indeed, it can be said

that the benefits of the so-called “singing cure” are more evident than those of the “talking one.”) Music and song can cure various motor and speech disorders, and several forms of dementia. Sacks describes an astonishing sight of agitated Alzheimer’s patients becoming suddenly calm when music is played to them. He also recounts the amazing cure of a victim of an extreme form of Tourette’s syndrome – and man who was racked by nearly 40,000 compulsive tics per day and whose life was completely transformed when his family bought him a piano.

In the end, Dr. Sacks concludes that human beings come into this world musically pre-wired. How and why he is not sure. But, he says, there is no doubt that we truly are a “musical species.”

#### 4. Kabbalah’s Answer

Kabbalah couldn’t agree more. Yes, we definitely are pre-wired for music. Yes, we definitely are a musical species. What [the rhythm and blues artist] Ray Charles said about himself – “I was born with the music inside of me” – is definitely true for all of us. And Kabbalah knows the fascinating reason why.

Music is our soul’s mode of transportation.

Bodies move about on legs or on bicycles or in cars. But a soul doesn’t have legs

and cannot be contained in an automobile or any other vehicle. So what carries our soul from place to place?

The wings of song. Without song, the soul remains stuck in one place.

Certainly King David understood this, when he composed so many beautiful songs which have come down to us as the Psalms. Certainly, King Solomon understood this, when he arranged a Levite choir and orchestra to sing and play in the Temple. And certainly the sages understood this, when they decreed that to ascend the staircase of fifteen steps to the Temple, fifteen songs – the Psalms known as the Songs of Ascent – were to be sung.

And it all began with the first song documented in the Torah – when Moses led the Jewish people in song following the parting of the sea. They broke out in song when they saw how miraculously they were saved. For only song can capture such a soaring feeling.

## 5. Modes of Travel

In our material world, people constantly convince themselves that they are mobile – that they are movers and shakers – even if their souls never budge an inch. There are those who are chalking up millions of frequent flyer miles. There are those who are moving around in high social circles. There are those who are climbing the corporate ladder. But are they truly moving? Their bodies may be traveling places, but are their souls in flight?

But then, there are people who perhaps sit in the same place, praying or meditating, but spiritually they are moving millions of miles.

In the spiritually intact Holy Temple – where spirit met matter and the physical was seamlessly aligned with its inner purpose – no one could move from one step to the next unless his or her soul was lifted through song.

Why does song have this power?

Because it is divine.

## 6. A Parable (Optional)

A story is told about how music first descended from heaven to earth. When God created the universe, He consulted the angels: “Should I bestow upon the human race the gift of music?”

The elitist angels unanimously replied with a resounding “No.” They maintained that the human race could not possibly appreciate the

sublime power of melody. “The humans will abuse and commercialize it,” the angels cried, “They won’t know how to appreciate the divine nature of song. But give *us* your gift of music,” the angels argued, “and we will sing Your praises, we will sing Your songs. We will know how to use the power of music to reach great spiritual heights.”

God considered their opinion, but then overruled them. “No. I will give the gift of music to humans. Because I want them to have something to remember Me by ... Sometimes life will be difficult, and humans may feel depressed and hopeless; sometimes they may feel drained or overwhelmed. Therefore, I want them to have music to remind them that even when they are stuck in the dire straits of material existence, even when they are lonely and desperate, they can break out in song, which will lift their spirits ... And then again, sometimes life will be comfortable, too comfortable. Let them then sing to remember that there is more to life than instant gratification ... Yes, indeed,” God concluded, “I will give to humans my unique language – the language of music and song – so that they can use it to discover transcendence.”

## 7. Divine Nature of Song

The reason song has the ability to transport the soul is because its true nature and the source of its power is divine. In short, song is a dialect from another plane.

Song makes the soul soar. It has the ability to lift our spirits to unprecedented heights ... to allow us to fly ... to travel to far-away places – places that are beyond pedestrian life and mundane monotony. That is why song is spiritual transportation, and we have all felt it.

Haven’t you been drawn by the wish to just escape to an uninhabited spot in nature and sing out freely – unfettered, unbound – to the heavens ... to get away from it all, to close your eyes, and allow the music to take you to unknown places beyond the anguish and pain of life’s tribulations ... as Shabtai Zusha Zimmerman (otherwise known as Bob Dylan) sang:

Take me disappearing through the smoke rings of my mind  
Down the foggy ruins of time, far past the frozen leaves  
The haunted, frightened trees, out to the windy beach  
Far from the twisted reach of crazy sorrow  
Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky with one hand waving free  
Silhouetted by the sea, circled by the circus sands  
With all memory and fate driven deep beneath the waves  
Let me forget about today until tomorrow.<sup>1</sup>

## 8. Power of Music

This explains the compelling power of music throughout time. Back when Bob Dylan was getting started, in the 1960s, music was the voice of rebellion, an expression of individuality, of the challenge to the status-quo. This is how the soul of discontented youth found its expression in song – this is how it tried to free itself from the materialistic bondage of the body and re-establish a dialogue with something higher, with God (whether the singer knew it or not).

And this also explains why music is such a draw for our youth today. Being a language of the soul, music fills the deep spiritual void created by corrupt or irrelevant belief systems. For good or for bad, the songs of today – be they rock, pop or rap – have become the hymns of today’s souls; and theatrical concerts have become their cathedrals.

Unfortunately, like any powerful force, if untamed and unfocused, music can be hijacked and turned into another hedonistic vehicle of entertainment and indulgence rather than of transcendence and inspiration.

But, at its heart, song has a hold on us because it is ultimately divine – it expresses and conveys the essence of the soul.

As one sage put it: “The spoken and written word is the quill of the mind. Music is the quill of the heart and soul.”

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<sup>1</sup> “Mr. Tambourine Man” by Bob Dylan, 1964.



## 9. Song and the Sea (Optional)

This power of song was celebrated – for the first time collectively – when the Jewish people sang the song of the sea. And this event also explains the connection between the sea and song.

Our sages tell us that miracles do not happen in vain.<sup>2</sup> 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 Egypt from Israel, so there was no need to part the sea for the Jews to make their way to the Promised Land. God took them on a long detour so that the parting could take place! Why?

The Midrash<sup>3</sup> further complicates the puzzle by stating that not only did the Re(e)d Sea split, but all the seas and water bodies in the world did likewise at that very moment! What could the Midrash mean by this?

The mystics supply the answer. They explain that something very deep happened here, for the land and the sea represent two forms of consciousness: the “revealed world” of dry land represents our conscious experiences, while the “hidden world” of the sea represents our unconscious experiences.

In truth, these two states are one seamless whole. Thus, as the Book of Genesis tells us, in the beginning of time all earth was submerged in water ... just as each of us begins our life submerged in the embryonic fluids of our mothers’ wombs, for each us is a universe in microcosm. Then, the primal water-world underwent a dramatic change – a parting took place, a parting that divided “land” consciousness from “water” consciousness.

This happened for man’s benefit, and in fact, it is only true from our perspective. If we think about it, we realize that our world is still very much a water-world. All land on earth is actually a series of islands jutting out of water. About 75% of the globe is covered with water, leaving only 25% uncovered. The same is true of the microcosm of our body –

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<sup>2</sup> *Deroshos HaRan Drush* 8. See Talmud, *Shabbat* 53b.

<sup>3</sup> Midrash Mechilta on *Shemot* 14:21.

most of it is made up of water. Our conscious minds are just a “tip of the iceberg” jutting out of our unconscious.

However, a separation between land and water, between conscious and unconscious, defines our reality. Still, this separation is not total. At the outset of creation, when God divided the land from the sea, He did so on the condition that the sea would always remember that, one day, it would have to part again and allow man to walk through its depths as if on land.<sup>4</sup>

So this is the mystics’ explanation for this bizarre miracle – the parting of the sea (in which “water was transformed into land”) was a demonstration of the naked truth that sea and land are two dimensions of one reality.

This is also the reason that the people sang a song of praise following the parting of the sea, because song is the language of the sea and the language of the divine.

Conventional speech (“land language”) consists of staccato-like fragments of disconnected words, separated by spaces and breaths, combining together to express an idea. But melody flows like water in one seamless stream.

The parting of the sea paved the way for song, and today we have the power to sing, the power to unite what is above and what is below, in one harmonious flow.

## 10. Our Challenge

Our challenge is to recognize the true nature of song’s power and the reason this gift was given to us – to allow us to touch the divine and integrate it into our lives. Not just to listen to pleasant harmonies and dance to the beat, but to allow the soulful language of music to refine our personalities, strengthen our commitments, connect us with our higher calling, help us build healthy families and illuminate each of our respective corners of the world with our unique light.

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<sup>4</sup> Midrash, *Bereishit Rabba* 5:5. *Shemot Rabba* 21:6.

We live in a fragmented world, and when matter and spirit are not integrated but compartmentalized, this makes it terribly difficult to hear the music of our souls.

Instead, music becomes an exotic escape to an island. In search of some relief from the common world, you plug in your headphones and block out the world around you – and you soar on music’s wings. But, then you have to turn it off, then you have to return to your mundane reality, and the music dies...

In truth, however, *even then*, an inner hum fills all of existence. Every creature, every molecule, every atom emits its own unique sound. Every soul pulsates and purrs. Even when the noisy rush-hour of our lives drowns out the “small, subtle voice”<sup>5</sup> within, the music continues to play ... yes, even then, even when you are not plugged in.

## 11. In a Seamless World

In a seamless world, all our experiences would sound like a song, all our movements would look like a dance. If our inner and outer selves would be aligned, we would be singing all the time, and we wouldn’t be able to move, unless we had a song to sing along (as was done in the Temple).

Imagine: What would it be like to hear the music of the cosmos? How would it feel to hear the song of your soul? Of other souls? How would life be different if you could generate a song at will?

We have an inkling of what it would be like. Every time we experience a moment of truth – an experience that resonates – we are hearing the inner music of existence. But these moments are fleeting, and few and far between.

How do we access the music within at all times?

By getting in touch with our life’s purpose and recognizing that every moment of our day – every activity, every interaction – is a spiritual op-

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<sup>5</sup> First Book of Kings 19:12.

portunity. We are charged with the mission to ensure that all our material gain is simply a means to end – a means to express higher spiritual truths and bring more virtue into this world.

In every life experience, you have two options to choose from: 1) to serve your own needs, or 2) to serve a higher cause. And this second choice means going deeper within. When you only touch the surface of any experience, it usually will have a narcissistic result. But when you tap into the inner meaning of the experience, its music will play.

There are people in this world who turn everything they touch into music, everything they come into contact with into a dance. They are alive, brimming with energy. They are electric, and everything that they touch becomes electrified.

And there are people who do the opposite – who deaden everything they touch.

Which do we want to be?

Imagine living in a world in which music is playing all the time. Imagine hearing a song in every breath you take, in every step you make. Imagine a life in which every move has an inner rhythm.

As we enter the “Shabbat of Song,” and we confront the turbulent sea of our times, we are imbued with the power to turn our lives into one extended symphony:

The stream sings it to the river  
The river sings it to the sea  
The sea sings it to the boat  
That carries you and me

We are the boat  
We are the sea  
I sail in you  
You sail in me.<sup>6</sup>

This is our common song. High time to start singing. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> *Samos El Barco* by Lorre Wyatt 1983.

## 12. Concluding Song (Optional)

Time permitting it might be good to end this sermon with the entire congregation singing a song. Choice of song depends on everyone's knowledge and abilities. You, as the Rabbi of your congregation, can best determine which song would work. But if you are looking for suggestions, here are three, from different ends of the spectrum:

- *Song of the Sea* (words in Exodus 15:1-18).
- *Hine Ma Tov U'ma Nayim* (words to this Song of Ascent in Psalms 133:1).
- *We Shall Overcome* (words below). This song fits the theme of a nation standing on the brink of tremendous test but trusting in God to see it through, and it is especially fitting for those congregations honoring the Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday, which falls on this Shabbat, January 15th. We cannot remember Dr. King without remembering him marching at the head of throngs of people singing *We Shall Overcome*. This song energized the marchers of the Civil Rights Movement like no other and is remembered for its astounding inspirational power.

We shall overcome, we shall overcome,  
We shall overcome some day  
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe we shall overcome some day

We shall all be free, we shall all be free,  
We shall all be free some day  
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe we shall overcome some day

We shall live in peace, we shall live in peace,  
We shall live in peace some day  
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe we shall overcome some day.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *We Shall Overcome* by Pete Seeger, Zilphia Horton, Guy Carawan, and Frank Hamilton, 1960.



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Enter the Heart”

Shemot > Beshalach > Are You Stuck?  
Crisis of Confidence

January 14, 2011

### ABSTRACT

Do you ever feel stuck in your life? Even if you don't feel that way just now, every one of us at times feels trapped in one way or another – at work, at home, or in general. We often feel lethargic with nowhere to turn, emotionally or spiritually. What can we do when we feel stuck in a situation?

It doesn't help when we think about today's wavering and uncertain national and international state of affairs – the economic upheaval, national health reform, the endless bickering between the Republicans and Democrats in Washington, an unstable Middle East, and now a wild killer unleashing his wrath in a murder spree in Tucson. It all seems to indicate that we are facing a collective crisis of confidence, which mirrors a crisis of confidence on a personal level. What will be? Where to turn? What to do? We are stuck.

This week's Torah reading – in which we read about the first documented case of being trapped “between a rock and a hard place,” a crisis of *biblical* proportions – offers us a very powerful solution for getting out of such a quandary.

The newly-freed Jewish slaves are cornered at the sea. In front of them the roiling waters. In back of them the pursuing Egyptians. What will they do? They don't know. They are not sure. They are stuck.

Since, as we well know, Jews can't agree on anything, neither could the Israelites. They had four solutions to the problem in front of them ... but not one was the right one. They could not decide what to do until God supplied the answer.

We, too, have four common strategies that we generally adopt when confronting adversity. This sermon will reveal the fifth – and most effective – option.

Shemot

Beshalach

Are You Stuck? Crisis of Confidence

## ARE YOU STUCK? CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE

### 1. State of the Times

Do you ever feel stuck in your life? Even if you don't feel that way just now, every one of us at times feels trapped in one way or another – at work, at home, or in general. We often feel lethargic with nowhere to turn, emotionally or spiritually. What can we do when we feel stuck in a situation?

It doesn't help when we think about today's wavering and uncertain national and international state of affairs, and now a wild killer unleashing his wrath in a murder spree in Tucson.

Reading the newspaper or watching the news these days is distressing and depressing. The latest from Washington DC is that the new Republican majority is undoing the legislation recently passed by their Democratic opponents, and it all seems to indicate that, as a nation, we don't know which way to turn. Is national health care voted into law last year good or should it be annulled? Will tax breaks kick-start the economy and create new jobs, or will they only deepen our national debt and lead to more economic upheaval?

We don't know. We are not sure. We are scrambling. Our national confidence has been shaken by our recent financial upsets and constant terror threats, and we fear for the future rather than looking confidently ahead.

This national crisis in confidence mirrors a crisis in confidence on a personal level. What will be? Where to turn? What to do? We are stuck.

### 2. Confronting the Sea

This week's Torah reading – in which we read about the first documented case of being trapped “between a rock and a hard place,” a crisis of *biblical* proportions – offers us a very powerful solution for getting out of such a quandary.

The newly-freed Jewish slaves are cornered at the sea. In front of them the roiling waters. In back of them the pursuing Egyptians. What will they do? They don't know. They are not sure. They are stuck.

Now, these slaves have had their confidence beaten out of them a long time ago, but they have also just witnessed astonishing miracles, as God turned nature on its head with the ten plagues. So they should have had some of their confidence restored. But to which side will the scales tip? Will their slave mentality prevail? Or will their new-found trust in God?

Their initial reaction is panic and complaint as the Book of Exodus relates:

As the Pharaoh drew near, the Children of Israel looked up. They saw the Egyptians coming after them, and they became very frightened. Then the Children of Israel cried out to God, and they said to Moses: "Were there not enough graves in Egypt that you took us out to die in the desert? What have you done to us..."<sup>1</sup>

The Midrash fills in some additional details about this crisis of confidence and ensuing bedlam. It says that (in tried and true Jewish fashion) the Israelites argued among themselves:

One group said, "Let us throw ourselves into the sea." A second group said, "Let us return to Egypt." A third group said, "Let us wage war against them." And the one fourth group said, "Let us cry out to God."<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Four Reactions to Adversity

The reactions of these four groups represent the four common strategies that people generally adopt when confronting adversity:

- Escape – the first group of Israelites was advocating the ultimate escape through suicide for, to them, death was better than returning to slavery

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 14:10-11.

<sup>2</sup> Midrash Mechilta, *Shemot* 14:13-14.



- Surrender/resignation – the second group preferred life in servitude to certain death
- War – the third group was of the mind that it's better to die fighting than to go like sheep to the slaughter
- Religion/prayer – the fourth group saw nothing that they could do, save throw themselves on God's mercy

#### 4. Modern Counterparts

In our modern world, we are often tempted to choose the option of group one – escape. We don't brood about suicide, of course, but we are very tempted to get away from it all. Our routes of escape take many forms – immersion in work or study, vacations to exotic places, meditation retreats on mountain tops. And at times, we all would love to run away from the challenges of life by playing it safe and limiting our chances of failure.

At other times, we gravitate to the solution of group two – surrender. We resign ourselves to the so-called “reality” of life. We go through our days, carrying the burden of our responsibilities with a heavy heart and a dejected air. We go with the flow of the world rather than working to change it. In short, we surrender to a life of “quiet desperation.”

At other times, we take the approach of group three – we rise to the occasion and fight for what we believe is right. But, by the end, we wonder if this is the way to improve things. The fighters seem to end up with more enemies than friends, and for all their good intentions, the final result might be worse instead of better.

And, then there are the times when – like group four – we turn to God and beg Him to make things better. We feel stuck and lost, and so we sit on our hands and pray.

Thus we see that every one of these approaches has a downside. So which is the right one?

## 5. Moses' Answer

Listen to what Moses said to the panicked people:

“Do not fear! Stand firm and watch the salvation of God that He will perform for you today. For you see [the last of] Egypt today; you shall no longer see them ever again! God will do battle for you, and you must remain silent.”<sup>3</sup>

The Midrash explains that in these few lines, Moses answered each of the four groups and told them that they were all wrong:

To the group that said, “Let us throw ourselves into the sea,” he replied: “Do not fear! Stand firm and watch the salvation of God.” To the group that said, “Let us return to Egypt,” he replied: “You see [the last of] Egypt today.” To the group that said, “Let us wage war against them,” he replied: “God will do battle for you.” To the group that said, “Let us cry out to God,” he replied: “You must remain silent.”<sup>4</sup>

In short, he told them that all of their solutions were no good. Not only escapism and fatalism, but also war and prayer.

We can readily see the problem with suicide, surrender and resignation. But what's wrong with fighting for the right cause? What's wrong with prayer? These are proactive approaches and reveal a people who want to stand up to the challenge by either using physical means (war) or spiritual ones (prayer). Isn't that good?

The problem is that neither is a complete option. Was life given to us so that we spend most of our time at war with others? And is prayer alone ever enough when confronting adversity or challenge?

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<sup>3</sup> Exodus 14:13-14.

<sup>4</sup> Midrash Mechilta, *Shemot* 14:13-14.

## 6. Move Forward!

And now we come to the correct answer which is delivered by God Himself:

“Move forward!”<sup>5</sup>

We are blessed with resources to deal with every challenge. So, coupled with prayer, we must do our utmost to rise to the occasion. And this approach, though not argued by any group, was demonstrated by a single individual as the Midrash relates:

While the Israelites were arguing [and Moses was beseeching God], Nachson ben Aminadav, stood up and walked right into the sea ... And the sea saw and fled.<sup>6</sup>

Nachson understood what God had told the Israelites. There is a time to pray and a time to act. Torah is not about submission; it is about action. Yes, we must acknowledge God, but we must also make the necessary effort. We are God’s partners in making this world a better place, and as such, we have already been given all the tools necessary to fulfill our life’s mission.

When faced with challenge, with adversity, with the difficulties each of us encounter in life, instead of spending time ruminating about our options, instead of being paralyzed by doubt, forge ahead! Movement is the key to success. Moving forward will bring a breakthrough. How this breakthrough will happen, we cannot always know in advance. But we have to move, and when we do, we can be sure that things will open up.

There is no obstacle too large that can keep us from our goal. Not even a roiling sea.

Since God created the sea, He can split it wide open. Our task is to forge ahead. When we take the first step, the sea is bound to part. That is the power of human initiative with which we have been endowed.

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<sup>5</sup> Exodus 14:15.

<sup>6</sup> Talmud, *Sotah* 37a. .

By the way, God did tell Moses in advance that He would part the sea. So why wasn't Moses confident that it was about to happen? ... He had neglected to file the Environmental Impact Statement.

You liked [didn't like] that one? Here is another:

-A little boy once returned home from Hebrew school and his father asked, "What did you learn today?"

-He answered, "The rabbi told us how the Children of Israel crossed the Red Sea?"

-“How?”

-“The Israeli Corps of Engineers build a huge pontoon bridge. Once they got on the other side, they blew up the bridge while the Egyptians were trying to cross.”

-The father was shocked. "Is that what the rabbi taught you?"

-The boy replied, "No. But you'd never believe the story he *did* tell us!"

And that brings us to the deeper meaning of the splitting of the sea. Why was the sea the first test of the nascent confidence of the newly-freed slaves? What message was God trying to get across to the Israelites - and to us - through this spectacular event?

## 7. The Deeper Meaning of the Splitting of the Sea

Our sages tell us that miracles do not happen in vain.<sup>7</sup> So why the need for this one?

Consider that no sea separates Egypt from Israel, so there was no need to part the sea for the Jews to make their way to the Promised Land. God took them on a long detour so that the parting could take place! Why?

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<sup>7</sup> *Deroshos HaRan Drush* 8. See Talmud, *Shabbat* 53b.

The Midrash<sup>8</sup> further complicates the puzzle by stating that not only did the Re(e)d Sea split, but all the seas and water bodies in the world did likewise at that very moment! What could the Midrash mean by this?

The mystics supply the answer. They explain that something very deep happened here, for the land and the sea represent two forms of consciousness: the “revealed world” of dry land represents our conscious experiences, while the “hidden world” of the sea represents our unconscious experiences.

In truth, these two states are one seamless whole. Thus, as the Book of Genesis tells us, in the beginning of time all earth was submerged in water ... just as each of us begins our life submerged in the embryonic fluids of our mothers’ wombs, for each us is a universe in microcosm. Then, the primal water-world underwent a dramatic change – a parting took place, a parting that divided “land” consciousness from “water” consciousness.

This happened for man’s benefit, and in fact, it is only true from our perspective. If we think about it, we realize that our world is still very much a water-world. All land on earth is actually a series of islands jutting out of water. About 75% of the globe is covered with water, leaving only 25% uncovered. The same is true of the microcosm of our body – most of it is made up of water. Our conscious minds are just a “tip of the iceberg” jutting out of our unconscious.

However, a separation between land and water, between conscious and unconscious, defines our reality. Still, this separation is not total. At the outset of creation, when God divided the land from the sea, He did so on the condition that the sea would always remember that, one day, it would have to part again and allow man to walk through its depths as if on land.

So this is the mystics’ explanation for this bizarre miracle – the parting of the sea (in which “water was transformed into land”) was a demonstration of the naked truth that sea and land are two dimensions of one reality.

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<sup>7</sup> Midrash Mechilta, *Shemot* 14:21.

## 8. The Goal of Life

The goal in life is to take that which is hidden – the sea – and reveal it, turn it into land! The world of the sea is the world of concealment; the vast waters conceal everything within. The world of land is the world of revelation; minerals, plants and creatures are revealed and seen on dry land.

When we have the courage to wade in – to move forward – we split the sea and we reveal the true divine potential lying hidden there.

And this is why the splitting of the sea was the culmination of the Egyptian Exodus. Before the splitting of the sea, our freedom was not complete.

Freedom comes in two stages: 1) running away from our past, and 2) running towards our future. Leaving Egypt was running away from our past. We left Egypt trusting in God, trusting that there was something better out there. But until we actually discovered something better, our freedom was incomplete – at any moment, we could have lapsed, becoming discouraged, frightened of our new, free reality.

It was at this crucial impasse that the Israelites at the edge of the sea found themselves, and they had to decide: Should we move forward into the unknown, or should we look for another means of escape?

The argument among the four groups shows that they were looking for another means of egress, not the ultimate means of progress!

The ultimate means of progress is forging ahead and splitting the sea – not only escaping the past, but also running toward the future!

For us to truly be free, we cannot only have something to run away from, but we also must have something to run towards!

The lesson to us is very clear. To truly move forward in life, especially when we have a specific goal, we must journey on – we must press fast forward without pause. We must split the sea ... and reveal our hidden potential with all its fascinating and infinite power. Amen.

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