



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

PASSOVER > Seventh Day

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

April 21, 2014
Passover/Seventh Day

**The Day Seas Fled and
Mountains Danced**



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

PASSOVER > Seventh Day >
The Day Seas Fled and Mountains Danced
April 21, 2014

ABSTRACT

Stereotypes abound around the idea of trembling before God. Much damage has been done by the juvenile images of a God that sits like an angry old man on a heavenly throne, waiting to strike us with lightning when we misbehave. How many of us see God in this way – as a God of wrath and vengeance, evoking superstitious feelings of fear and trepidation?

So then, what is the meaning of all the references in the Torah to “fear of God”? Shouldn’t God evoke in us a sense of love, compassion and ecstasy?

When we have a divine encounter should we be retreating in fear, or dancing with joy?

The answer lies in an exquisite psalm describing the parting of the sea that takes place today, the seventh day of Passover: *The sea saw and fled; the Jordan turned backward. The mountains skipped like rams, hills like lambs.* Why did the sea flee, and the mountains danced a wild jig?

This beautiful psalm reveals for us the two-fold secret to all healthy relationships, and certainly our relationship with God – awe and love.

Today’s splitting of the sea is not a *historical* event; it is a *current* event, happening every second of every day of our lives.

Right here, right now, the sea is parting and the mountains are dancing – and we play a crucial role in making that happen.

Get awestruck. It is time to dance.

THE DAY SEAS FLED AND MOUNTAINS DANCED

1. Adventuressome Hymie (Joke)

Sir Solomon Climberg, the renowned Jewish adventurer, mountain climber, and explorer of the seven seas, was planning yet another dangerous adventure – this time to the deepest untapped backcountries of the Himalayas. Because of the extreme nature of this excursion, Solomon required an assistant to accompany him on the trip, so he placed an advertisement on some Jewish websites.

The ad read:

WANTED, A COMPANION TO ACCOMPANY ME ON A DANGEROUS TRIP TO THE DEEPEST BACKCOUNTRIES AND HIGHEST PEAKS OF THE HIMALAYAS. LOOKING FOR RUGGED, STRAPPING, YOUNG MAN, WITH AN AFFINITY FOR NATURE, ABLE TO EXIST SOLELY ON PLANT ROOTS AND BERRIES. THE IDEAL COMPANION WILL ALSO BE CAPABLE OF BUILDING FIRES FROM SCRATCH AND COOKING ON THEM; HAVE KNOWLEDGE OF TROPICAL MEDICINE; BE ADEPT AT HAND-TO-HAND COMBAT; AND BE FAMILIAR WITH HAND GUNS AND RIFLES. PLEASE WRITE WITH FULL PARTICULARS TO SIR SOLOMON CLIMBERG.

In the wee hours of the morning, some days later, there was an urgent knock on Sir Solomon's door. He opened it and found standing there a short, very thin, weak-looking man who introduced himself as Hymie.

"What do you want at this time of night?" asked Sir Solomon.

"I vont to talk to you about ze ad," said Hymie, speaking with a strong Yiddish accent.

"You do?" Sir Solomon's voice registered surprise, and then he mockingly began to question Hymie.

"Do you know mountain cookery?"

"No, but I make a gut knish and kugel."

"Are you strong and strapping?"

"No, I am weaker than ze European economy."

"Can you build a fire from scratch?"

"No, I don't even know how to work ze microwave."

"Can you handle weapons?"

"No, I'm scared of guns. My wife told me they're dangerous."

Having had his fill, Sir Solomon huffed, "So why in heaven's name are you here at 2AM in the morning?!"

To which question Hymie replied: "Vell, Sir, I just vonted you to know that on me you shouldn't depend."

2. The Great Adventure

For some reason, there is this notion that Jews don't do adventure. (You know that song – *Jews Don't Camp*: "If it doesn't have a lobby, I don't want it for a hobby...") The stereotype goes that, for a Jew, adventure is discovering a new Talmudic method of oral argument ... or a new medical procedure ... or a new type of Chinese food.

Sure, when you are looking for a good accountant, the Jew says, "On me you could depend." When you are looking for a top lawyer, the Jew says, "On me you could depend." When you are looking for a leading doctor, the Jew says, "On me you could depend." But when it comes to climbing mountains or crossing seas, popular belief would dictate that the Jew says: "On me, you shouldn't depend."

But then comes today, the seventh day of Passover, and blows this popular notion to smithereens. Today is the anniversary of perhaps the most adventurous event in the history of the outdoors – an event that is so ridiculously bold, audacious and daring that many have trouble believing it ever happened. Huh? The sea did what? You expect me to believe

that the Jews did what? Impossible! There is absolutely no way this ever happened!

Yet today – one week after the Jews left the prison of Egypt – is when we say it did happen: the sea split.

3. Does God Scare You?

Many people believe that the splitting of the sea is not a historical fact. And I, a rabbi, couldn't agree more. Why, you ask? I'll tell you why. But in good Jewish fashion, I first have to preface my answer with a question:

Should the thought of God make us tremble with fear or dance with joy?

Stereotypes abound around the idea of trembling before God. Much damage has been done by the juvenile images of a God that sits like an angry old man on a heavenly throne, waiting to strike us with lightning when we misbehave. How many of us see God in this way – as a God of wrath and vengeance, evoking superstitious feelings of fear and trepidation?

So then what is the meaning of all the references in the Torah to “fear of God”? Shouldn't God evoke in us a sense of love, compassion and ecstasy?

When we have a divine encounter should we be retreating in fear, or dancing with joy?

The answer lays in an exquisite psalm describing the parting of the sea that took place today, the seventh day of Passover.

4. Hallel

On every single one of the eight (in Israel, seven) days of Passover we recite *Hallel* (which literally means “praise”), the musical exaltation of God and His wondrous ways.

Hallel is culled from the Book of Psalms, composed by the celestial poet, noble leader and royal warrior, King David. For King David, the well-known aphorism, “the pen is mightier than the sword,” was irrelevant, for he was mighty with both pen *and* sword. Starting with Goliath, King David physically conquered Israel’s enemies, all the while composing some of the world’s most exquisite songs to God.

King David was a harpist and most of his compositions are very beautiful, melodious, and symphonic. Some of his psalms are also cryptic, their words conveying esoteric truths through imagery, wordplay, metaphor, simile, and analogy.

A good number of the psalms address the theme of the Exodus from Egypt. The second psalm in *Hallel*, Psalm 114, depicts the splitting of the sea in very thrilling language:

¹*When Israel went out of Egypt –*

The house of Jacob from a nation of an alien tongue –

²*Judah became His sanctuary,*

Israel His dominion.

³*The sea saw this and fled;*

The Jordan turned backward.

⁴*The mountains skipped like rams,*

The hills like lambs.

⁵*What frightens you, sea, that you flee?*

Jordan that you turn backward?

⁶*Mountains that you skip like rams?*

Hills like lambs?

⁷*At the presence of the Master, the earth trembled,*

At the presence of the God of Jacob,

⁸*Who turned a rock into a pool of water,*

A stone into a fountain of water.

When the Jewish people left the slavery of Egypt, the land of an alien tongue, they became a nation unto God.¹ When the sea saw the awesomeness of God, the sea fled in fright, splitting open for the people to cross. We have all heard of the splitting of the sea after the Exodus, but the psalm adds another dimension: *The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs*. What exactly does this mean?

The psalm itself asks, *What frightens you, sea, that you flee? Jordan, that you turn backward? Mountains that you skip like rams. Hills like lambs?*

Why were the seas frightened while, simultaneously, the mountains and hills were ecstatic – skipping around like happy rams and lambs – dancing a wild jig? Why did the bodies of water and the mountains have completely opposite reactions to the same event? Why did one flee in fright and the other dance with joy?

5. Of Seas and Mountains

Rabbi Yeshaya Helevi Horowitz – the 17th century scholar and mystic better known as the *Shalah HaKadosh*, the Holy Shalah² – elaborates on this psalm in his seminal work, *Shnei Luchot Habrit*.³ There he explains that the sea and mountain are two elements of our relationship with the Creator. There is the element of thunderstruck awe – called *yirah*. And then there is the element of ecstatic joy – called *ahavah*. When we relate to the Divine as servants to their master, then we experience the Divine

¹ See Midrash Rabba, Beshalach 21, Midrash Tehilim ad loc for various reasons why

² The word Shalah is an acronym for *Shnei Luchot Habrit*, “Two Tablets of The Covenant,” which is the title of his magnum opus. It is also an acronym for his name, Shaya Levi Horowitz.

³ Tractate Pesachim 21b (Warsaw, 1930).

with awe and respect from a distance. When we relate to the Divine in an intimate way, like ministers to a king, then we experience the Divine with love and joy.

The seas represent everything in life that is hidden and concealed. When you look at a sea, or any large body of water, you do not see to the bottom of the depths. All you see is the surface. And the greater the body of water, the greater the concealment.

When you are blind to the depths of a particular something, when you do not see the essence of a particular creation, and then suddenly that something splits wide open and reveals its infinite secrets, what happens? It overwhelms and frightens you. You are awestruck!

This is what happened to the waters at the Exodus from Egypt. In Egypt, when the Jews were cruelly enslaved, God was concealed, hidden beneath the fathoms of existence – when you looked at the waters of life all you saw was the surface, the Creator was nowhere to be seen...

And then, suddenly, the impossible happened. The mightiest empire on earth was brought to its knees and down-trodden slaves marched out into freedom, laden with great wealth. It was clear that it was God who was bringing them out with His mighty hand.

The sea was so shocked, awestruck and stupefied that it began to flee, splitting in half, frightened into going against its normal flow – actually moving backward.

Mountains are the opposite of seas. Mountains are completely revealed for all to see. You put a flag, or light a pyre, atop a mountain and everyone can see it from near and far. Mountains stand tall and proud, and reach upward to heaven.

Therefore, when the Creator revealed Himself at the Exodus from Egypt and at the splitting of the sea, this revelation of God's awesomeness inspired the mountains to begin dancing with joy. This was a validation of everything they *literally stand* for.

6. Back to the Question

Now, let us go back to our question: Should the thought of God make us tremble with fear or dance with joy?

A sign of real truth, of profound depth, of soulful spirituality is when the thought of God makes us *both* tremble with awe and dance with joy.⁴

This is the two-pronged approach that a Jew takes to serving God. The Jew is *both* in awe of heaven, of the mystery, of the unknowable; and the Jew simultaneously dances with utter joy at the revealed miracle of life.

At times the world shocks us with its unexpected awe-inspiring surprise-attacks. Here we are, in our innocence, looking around us and seeing a superficially calm surface. And then suddenly – BAM! – we are shocked when the world splits open and reveals a whole inner divine universe. Seemingly, out of nowhere, a miracle appears – profound depth appears in a place where we first thought saw only shallowness.

When that happens, our first reaction is awe, and then we want to retreat from this new reality. This is very healthy reaction. If we don't want to run away from God, how profound can God really be?

But at other times we are like mountains, we stand tall and proud and fully aware of divine revelation – we are cognizant of the profound depth that exists in the world. After all, from the peaks of the mountaintops we can see much deeper and farther than from the mere flatlands. And, then, when the divine depth we always stood for is revealed for all to see, our mountains begin to dance, to shake, rattle, and roll.

For our relationship with God to be complete, we need both the fleeing sea and the dancing mountains. If our relationship with God is only awe and humility, then it lacks closeness and intimacy; we are missing the joy of the dance, the ecstatic realization that our inner candles are sparks of the divine bonfire. And if our relationship with God is *only* joyous and ecstatic, then the mystery and mystique, the romance and the unknowable is missing.

⁴ See Likkutei Torah Tzav 16bff.

The relationship requires both the terrifying romance of mystery *and* the exhilarating joy of spontaneous soul dance.

To drive this point home – and home is your heart – I’d like to share with you two stories of the Baal Shem Tov, the first illustrating the state of awe, the second the poetry of dance.

7. Story 1 – In Awe Of Heaven

The first story, as related by the Baal Shem Tov:⁵

I was orphaned when I was five years old. And the last words that my holy father said to me before his passing were: “Yisrolik, fear nothing but God alone.”

I took these words to heart and I feared nothing as I walked deep in the forest or the fields around our village. Often I would spend the night out in nature.

My guardians, who looked after me and several other orphan boys and girls, did not tolerate this penchant of mine to wander in the fields and the forest, and dealt severely with me.

So passed two years. One morning, I heard in the forest the sound of a human voice. I followed the direction of the voice and came upon the figure of a Jew enveloped in *tallit* and *tefillin*, praying with a fervor such as I had never before witnessed.

I hid myself behind the trees and derived great pleasure in listening to the man’s praying. I was enthralled by the extraordinary sight and thought to myself that this holy man must be one of the thirty-six hidden *tzaddikim* (righteous and saintly people) of this world. The *tzaddik* concluded his prayers, removed his *tallit* and *tefillin*, and began to read from the Book of Psalms in a melodious voice.

⁵ Note: This is a freely translated excerpt of Chassidism's founder Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov's account of his childhood and formative years, as related by the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn. Courtesy of Chabad.org

Following this recitation, the man spent some time in ecstatic Torah study. He then gathered his books and his tallit and tefillin and placed them in a sack, lifted the sack onto his shoulders, and set off on his way. At this point I stepped out from my hiding place and walked towards him.

When the man saw me, he asked: “What is a small child doing all alone in the forest? Are you not afraid to be in the forest all by yourself?”

I answered him: “I like the field and the forest, because there are no people – the great majority of whom are arrogant and dishonest. I am not afraid of anything. I am an orphan without father or mother. My father, peace be unto him, said to me before his passing: ‘Yisrolik, fear nothing but God alone.’ So I’m not afraid of anything.”

We all fear mysteries, unknowns, what we cannot see. But the Baal Shem Tov is teaching us that we need fear nothing but the One True Mystery, God Himself.

8. Story 2 – Why We Dance

The second story will make us want to breakout in an uninhibited dance. Please restrain yourself until the sermon’s conclusion.

The Baal Shem Tov was once asked: “Why is it that Chassidim burst into song and dance at the slightest provocation? Is this the behavior of healthy, sane people?”

He responded with this story:

Once, a musician came to town – a musician of great but unknown talent. He stood on a street corner and began to play.

Those who stopped to listen could not tear themselves away, and soon a large crowd stood enthralled by the glorious music whose equal they had never heard. Before long, they were moving to its rhythm, and the entire street was transformed into a dancing mass of humanity.

A deaf man walking by wondered: Has the world gone mad? Why are the townspeople jumping up and down, waving their arms and turning in circles in middle of the street?

“Chassidim,” concluded the Baal Shem Tov, “are moved by the melody that issues forth from every creature in God’s creation. If this makes them appear mad to those with less sensitive ears, should they therefore cease to dance?”⁶

9. In Our Personal Lives

We each, in our personal lives, must stand in awe, but also we must dare to dance. We must stand in awe of the miracle that is life and creation, and we must dance for the miracle that is life and creation.

This is how we must relate to God and to our divine soul, and this is how we must relate to the human beings around us – from our closest family to the most distant strangers.

Next time you look at someone you love, or even at a stranger, be aware that he or she is like a deep sea, hiding within awesome resources. If you gaze deeply enough into his or her soul you may even see it.

In relating to our spouses, there must be *both* that element of respect and distance – awe, mystery, romance, tension. And this must be coupled with an element of closeness – joy and excitement that makes us want to dance.

At times your children shock you with their depth, their hidden brilliance; and at other times they make you jump up and down in a joyful jig.

The same could be applied to education, business, recreation – all the healthy experiences and interactions which consist both of a

⁶From *Be'er HaChassidut* by Eliezer Steinman; translated from the Hebrew by Yanki Tauber.

tense, hidden, astonishing element, conjoined with that which makes you leap for joy.

Life is both a sea that conceals its depth and a mountain that magnifies the peaks of existence. Embrace both elements and you will truly be free of Egypt, crossing the final frontier with the splitting of the sea and the dancing of the mountain.

10. In Conclusion: Natural History Is A Present

Now let me tell why I, a rabbi, couldn't agree more with the people that believe that the splitting of the sea is not a historical fact.

The reason I, a God-fearing, hora-dancing rabbi, agree with those that believe the splitting of the sea is not a historical event is because the splitting of the sea is not merely a *historical* event – the splitting of the sea is a *current* event, a perpetual experience, happening right now, every second of every day of every single one of our lives.

Sure, the sea actually parted 3326 years ago, just like every event documented in the Torah occurred in reality and in real time; but we also believe that the inner significance of this event did not merely occur *once upon a time*, but *occurs all the time*.

We, Jews, have always written history by living in the present; and we have known how to live in the present by studying how our ancestors lived in their present!

You know, they say history repeats itself – and historians repeat each other.

Jews are not historians. Jews are currents. Jews do not repeat themselves. Jews do not repeat themselves. Jews do not repeat themselves...

In all seriousness, we are not here to repeat, but to innovate. We innovate by not living in the past and reading the Torah like a history book of ancient events, but by recognizing that these events – in our case, the parting of the sea – are perpetual and need to be applied to

our lives today. The spiritual parting of the sea is happening right now – on this seventh day of Passover – and it is teaching us how to free ourselves from slavery.

Taking that teaching to heart, we innovate. We innovate by discovering how to be shocked and filled with awe by the world and its Creator; we innovate by remembering how to dance.

May it ring from the dancing mountaintops, across the awestruck seas: WE JEWS ARE HERE TO CHANGE THE WORLD!

Time to make history – that is, time to make the present.

Okay, enough talk. It's time to split.

Chag Kosher v'Sameach and Happy Passover!