



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Beshalach

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Beshalach

Lessons from Horses



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

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ABSTRACT

Horses are magnificent creatures. Is there anything quite as majestic as a horse carrying a warrior into battle? Is there anything quite as fearsome as cavalry galloping over green plains? Is there anything as thoroughly athletic as thoroughbreds tearing through a derby? Is there anything freer than the bucking bronco, an untamed wild horse fighting for its independence? Is there anything as romantic as a Cinderella carriage drawn by pure white horses?

A rider has mastered the art of horsemanship when he or she becomes one with the horse, so they move in complete synchronicity. The horse intuits what the rider wants; the rider intuits what the horse needs. Together they leap fences, win races and are victorious in war.

A horse is a horse, of course, of course, but it is also so much more. Within the mystique of the relationship between a horse and a rider lie the answers to some of life's most pressing questions and difficult challenges.

In the dance of rider and horse, horse and rider, we may discover how to fulfill our deepest potential.

And in that dance lies the secret of the Splitting of the Sea, when both the Egyptian horse and rider were submerged in the sea's truthful depths.

A hard-to-believe story of a Belmont Stakes winner brings this sermon across the finish line.

LESSONS FROM HORSES

1. Horse Control (Joke 1)

A city dweller came to a farm and saw a beautiful horse. He decided he had to have the animal. He bargained with the farmer who finally sold him the horse. The city man jumped on the horse and said, "Giddyup!" The horse didn't budge. The farmer explained, "This is a special kind of horse. He is very religious, ultra-Orthodox. He'll only move if you say, "Baruch Hashem," (Hebrew for "Praise the Lord.")

"Great," said the city dweller.

There's one more thing, said the farmer. To stop the horse, you have to say, 'Shabbat Shalom.'"

Keeping this in mind, the new owner yelled, "Baruch Hashem!" whereupon the horse took off with great speed. Soon horse and rider were headed for a cliff. Just in time the rider remembered to say "Shabbat Shalom!" The horse came to a screeching halt right at the edge of the cliff.

Relieved, the rider raised his thankful eyes to heaven in great salutation and humbly exclaimed, "Baruch Hashem."

2. Horsing Around (Joke 2)

JUNIOR: Daddy, there's a man at the circus who jumps on a horse's back, slips underneath his belly, catches hold of its tail and finishes on the horse's neck!

FATHER: That's nothing. I did all that the first time I rode a horse!

3. Of Horses

Horses are magnificent creatures. Is there anything quite as majestic as a horse carrying a warrior into battle? Is there anything quite as fearsome as cavalry galloping over green plains? Is there anything as thoroughly athletic as thoroughbreds tearing through a derby? Is there anything freer than the bucking bronco, an untamed wild horse fighting for its independence? Is there anything as romantic as a Cinderella carriage drawn by pure white horses?

As the two opening humorous anecdotes convey, it takes considerable expertise to ride a horse. Horsemen, equestrians, jockeys ... all have to be highly skilled.

A rider has mastered the art of horsemanship when he or she becomes one with the horse, so they move in complete synchronicity. The horse intuits what the rider wants; the rider intuits what the horse needs. Together they leap fences, win races and are victorious in war.

This symbiotic relationship is honed over time. The rider must get to know his horse intimately; the horse must become comfortable and familiar with its rider. This is not unlike most relationships.

A horse is a horse, of course, of course, but it is also so much more. Within the mystique of the relationship between a horse and a rider lie the answers to some of life's most pressing questions and difficult challenges.

In the dance of rider and horse, horse and rider, we may discover how to fulfill our deepest potential. So let us look what happened to horse and rider at the Splitting of the Sea.

4. Negotiation Pattern

One of the most famous biblical events – the subject of various Hollywood films – is the Parting of the Re(e)d Sea.

With the Egyptians chasing them from the rear and the sea blocking them from front, the newly freed Nation of Israel was stuck between a rock and a hard place – or an Egyptian and a wet place, if you will.

What could they do?

One man, Nachshon ben Aminadav, walked into the sea and – lo and behold, miracle of miracles – the sea magically split.¹ The Jewish people then walked through the dry path left by the parting waters, and traveled forward towards Mt. Sinai and the Promised Land.

Meanwhile, the pursuing Egyptians, hot on their trail and intent on recapturing the Jews in order to return them to slavery, followed them into the dry sea bed.

What now? Our Torah reading, *Parshat Beshalach* relates:

Thereupon, the Lord said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea. The water will come back over the Egyptians, covering their chariots and horsemen.” So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and toward morning the sea returned to its strength. The Egyptians were fleeing, but the Lord stopped the Egyptians in the sea. And the waters came back and covered the chariots and the horsemen, the entire force of Pharaoh that came after [the Israelites] into the sea...²

Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to the Lord. It went: “I will sing to the Lord, for very exalted is He; a horse and its rider He threw into the sea.”³

As we well know, everything the Torah says is exact. Not one letter is superfluous. Why then this repetition about the chariots and the horsemen?

First God says tells Moses what is going to happen: *The water will come back over the Egyptians, covering their chariots and horsemen.* Then it happens: *The Egyptians were fleeing, but the Lord stopped the Egyptians in the sea; and the waters came back and covered the chariots and the horsemen...*

¹ Mechilta, Beshalach 5. Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer 42. Exodus Rabbah 13. Sotah 37a.

² Exodus 14:26-28.

³ Exodus 15:1.

And then the Jews sing about what happened: *A horse and its rider He threw into the sea.*

Why this repetition? What is the significance of a horse and its rider? And what lesson does it teach us for our modern lives today?

5. Horse Analogies

The Hebrew Bible is full of horse parables, horse analogies, and horse stories. Like for example:

He does not desire the might of the horse, nor does He take pleasure in the legs of man.⁴

Is His wrath against the rivers, or His fury against the sea? Only that you rode on your steeds with your chariots of salvation.⁵

But what do horses represent? What analogy is drawn from the relationship between a horse and its rider?

The sages teach that horses are letters – yes, I said “letters” – and we are their riders.⁶ They take us to places we would never reach on our own.

Letters – like horses (or cars in modern day and age) – are the transporters of people. They carry their riders to faraway places. On their own, horses are directionless, wild, without destination or vision. But, with trained and skilled riders, horses become race winners, war victors, masters of romantic voyages.

Similarly, letters on their own are empty and meaningless. But when someone “rides” them (so to speak) and turns them into meaningful words, they convey messages of profound meaning and heartbreaking poetry.

⁴ Psalms 147:10.

⁵ Habakuk 3:8.

⁶ Torah Ohr, Beshalach 62b, 64b, 65b.

Without a horse, a rider is left to walk, his potential diminished. A horseless man on two feet cannot compete in the Kentucky Derby. As well, a rider-less thoroughbred would never reach its fullest potential and could run anywhere (probably to the grassy field outside the track).

Letters or words allow you to reach places you could not reach on your own. You, the rider, could never reach the speeds and glory without your horse.

The secret to success is for rider and horse to be completely in sync.

6. Duplicitous Words

However in our material world our words are very often disconnected from our true intent. We can be duplicitous, and speak with a forked-tongue – *echad b'peh v'echad b'lev*, with one sentiment on the lips but a different one in the heart. It's called being dishonest and insincere – saying one thing and meaning another.

Pharaoh of Egypt epitomized this duplicity. As hinted to in his name Pharaoh: In Hebrew Pharaoh consist of four letter *peh, reish, ayin, heh*, which reordered reads: *peh rah* – an evil mouth. Pharaoh enslaved the Jews by shrewdly deceiving them (“let us deal shrewdly with them”⁷) into thinking that they were simply working for the Egyptians, when in fact they were then placed in oppressive bondage. The “great serpent’s” forked tongue commanded the persecution of the Jews and was the source of so much pain and misery.

Pharaoh and the Egyptians, in other words, personified the dichotomy between rider and horse – between intent and words.

What then is the solution to such a schism?

⁷ Exodus 1:10.

A horse and its rider He threw into the sea: Covering and submerging the horsemen and their horses with the waters of the sea reconnected the words (horses) and the ones uttering them (the riders).

And this followed the parting of the sea, which reveals the hidden forces concealed beneath the waters. As shall be explained.

7. The Splitting of the Sea

The sea is a mysterious place, a hidden world, concealing all that lays within it, beneath its surface. The Splitting of the Sea suggests the opening of outer layers and revealing the concealed.

Often times, the truths we know in our hearts and souls are concealed by layers of material opaqueness – by money, stress, worry, doubt. These cover over the truths of hope, faith, potential and infinity.

The Splitting of the Sea, revealing the hidden, shows us how to peel back the layers and uncover the truths that are embedded within nature itself.

In a moment of truth, there is no schism between rider and horse, between message and messenger, between body and soul. Any corruption – symbolized by the Egyptians – is drowned out. So the Jews walked through the split sea to a happier reality, while the Egyptians were subsumed.

Truthful people walked out on the other side, body and soul as one, fulfilling their sublime purpose as one.

8. The Sea Today

This also happens today – metaphorically speaking.

But sometimes the rider and the horse are not in sync. The message and the messenger don't jive. Your soul says one thing, but your actions say something else. Your words are not reflective of your intent.

The miracle is submersing both horse and rider in the sea of revealed brilliance, splitting open the hidden, revealing the concealed.

We each have our horse. We each have our letter in the Torah. Every one of us is a letter. But we must find it, write it, speak it, own it – we each must find our horse and ride it.

9. Win of a Lifetime (Story)

New York's famed Belmont Park has been called one of the world's finest horse racing tracks. As every sports fan knows, the Belmont Stakes constitutes the third leg of the Triple Crown. Naturally, this track has seen its share of memorable finishes. One such finish took place on June 4, 1923. What made this race noteworthy, however, was the fact that it was won by a dead man.

On the home stretch, a horse named Sweet Kiss took the lead, spurred on by a jockey named Frank Hayes. Hayes had never won a race before, and the spectators in attendance who noticed the slumped jockey on the thoroughbred's back thought the young rider was merely "showboating," riding the horse one-handed, relaxed as a dog sleeping in front of a fireplace.

But when the horse crossed the finish line, it became quite evident that Frank Hayes was more than just "relaxed" – the jockey dropped out of the saddle, lifeless.

It was later determined that Hayes had died of heart failure shortly after Sweet Kiss took the lead.

Hayes, dressed in his colorful racing silks, was buried three days later. In light of the incident, Belmont's Jockey Club waived all of the rules and thus made Hayes' win official. This ruling makes Frank Hayes the only jockey to win a race while deceased.

In fact, it just may be the only time in sports history when a competition was won by a dead man – or a horse without a live rider.⁸

10. Personal Lesson

Albeit this story relates the saddest of victories, it contains a profound lesson:

When we become one with our horses, they can carry us to victory even if we no longer have the power to ride them. So it is with our letters. They, too, can carry us across the finish line to victory. When we are one with our letters, they can carry us to places we ourselves might never otherwise reach.

Letters are nothing without us; but we can never cross the finish line without them.

Often times in our lives, we are not in sync with our horses/letters. They do not convey the message that we wish they did.

Then, we both have to immerse in the sea of knowledge, cleansing them in the waters of clarity and purity (*mei ha'daas ha'tohor*).

What does this realistically mean? Here are two practical examples of how you may implement this idea in your life:

11. Practical Example #1

Let's say, you had a disagreement with your spouse. You love your spouse. But you said something hurtful and your spouse responded in kind. Or maybe your spouse said something insensitive, and you reciprocated. It doesn't matter; the fact is you are both hurting now, and angry at one another.

⁸ <http://www.journalofthebizarre.com/2012/09/strange-history-day-dead-jockey-won-at.html>. See here too for another fascinating symbiotic relationship between horse and man.

This is called a schism, for the two of you are out of sync. You know you have to ride in one direction to fulfill the love you feel for your spouse, yet for whatever reason – let's call it exile – your horse is out of control.

How to reconcile and rectify all this? How to overcome the pain and disagreement?

Says the Torah: *A horse and its rider He threw into the sea.* What does this mean for you practically speaking?

You must submerge and immerse both yourself (the rider) and your letters, your medium of communication (your horse), into the sea. The sea represents the pure waters of Torah knowledge, which like a mikveh, purify that which is submerged in its waters. Schedule time with your spouse to study some Torah together; submerge both your words (horses) in these pure waters, and you will discover a deeper way of communicating and transcending your differences.

When you both throw your words (horses) and yourselves (the riders) into the sea, you unite them in a place that knows no difference between what is revealed (dry land) and what is hidden (the sea).

You must never allow your horse to get away from you, and you must always ride it to the destination determined by your soul.

Once you have immersed in these purifying waters, your differences may be resolved. But even if not, you can now revisit the issues with a new mind and heart set. You can communicate in a new way with your words reflecting what your heart and soul really feel and not what the fissures of the heat of the moment have caused you to say.

You apologize for the hurt. More importantly, you resolve to never again allow your letters/ words to run away from you and cause you to say anything that is contrary to your soul's feeling.

12. Practical Example #2

Another practical example: You are stressed out. Financial pressures, menial job, depressing employer, obnoxious co-workers, barely enough money to cover your basic needs, never mind a little something extra to buy something lovely for the ones you love.

When you come home from work, you can act in one of two ways:

- 1) your depression, darkness and stress from work could make you depressed, angry, and impatient at home, or ...
- 2) the second you walk through the door and see your family, your face lights up, all the stress fading away, all the angst evaporating as you savor the peace of your home

What are the causes of these two disparate reactions to the same stressful situation?

The people whose work stresses them out even around their family, even during the serenity and peace of Shabbat, are out of sync with who they are. Their rider wants to go one way but their horse is wildly running away. This happens when the rider doesn't realize, or forgets, that the horse, the letters, the work, are merely conveyers and vehicles for the rider – why then should the mere vehicle ever stress out the rider?!

The people who light up when they come home are in touch with the right perspective: their horse is a horse, their work is work. They understand that “I am its rider, I ride it, it doesn't ride me. My family is not my horse, why then should I ever allow my work, my vehicle, my horse to depress me or stress me out around my family?”

Splitting of the Sea, revealing the hidden truths, allows us to access this life-changing, peace-bringing message.

13. Conclusion

A horse could take you to faraway places at lightning speed, or a horse could buck you off and drop you into the mud.

It is up to you and me – to all of us – to ride our horses (our letters, our words, our lives) for all that they are worth. The Parting Sea teaches us that life’s horses, our vehicles, mediums and tools, must be one with us, the riders, and our essence.

Shabbat helps us remember that we ride the horse of life; the horse of life does not ride us.

Shabbat Shalom!

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