



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

.....Family Edition.....

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



"With thanks to *The Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation* for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation. Maurice was a visionary philanthropist. Vivienne was a woman of the deepest humility. Together, they were a unique partnership of dedication and grace, for whom living was giving."

ב"ס"ד

בשלח תש"ף  
Beshallach 5780

**Crossing  
the Sea**

## \*\* KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK \*\*

**If we realise we must move forward, we can make great changes to our lives**



### PARSHAT BESHALLACH IN A NUTSHELL

The Israelites walked out of Egypt and into the desert, finally a free people. God led them by a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night. They were headed to Mount Sinai but they went the long way round, to avoid possible battles on their way.

Then Pharaoh felt regret for setting them free, and chased after them with his powerful army of many men, horses and chariots. The Israelites reached the Red Sea with nowhere safe to turn. They panicked and cried out to God in despair. Moses calmed them and promised that God would save them. Then God caused the sea to miraculously divide, forming two walls of water with a path in the middle.

The Israelites walked along the dry path. As they reached the other side of the sea, the Egyptian army chased them along the same path, but the sea walls crashed down and drowned the army. The Israelites, led by Moses and Miriam,

sang songs of praise and thanksgiving for the miracle they had just witnessed.

But their troubles were not over. The people needed water and food and complained to Moses. God sent both: water sprang from a rock, and manna came down from heaven. Then a new enemy, the Amalekites, attacked. The Israelite army defeated the Amalekites with the help of God, who then told Moses to write it all down as a remembrance.

#### QUESTION TO PONDER:

What do you find to be the most impressive miracle in this week's parsha: the pillars of fire and cloud, the splitting of the sea, the water from the rock, the manna from heaven, or the victory in battle over Amalek?



### THE CORE IDEA

Our parsha begins with an apparently simple statement:

*"When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the land of the Philistines, though that was shorter. For God said, 'If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.' So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of Egypt prepared for battle." (Exodus 13:17-18)*

God did not lead the people through the coastal route, which would have been more direct, because He did not want the people to be attacked on the highway by groups like the Hittite army. He knew if they felt too much fear, they would ask to go back to their old lives in Egypt.

There are some confusing points here. The route they took instead led to straight the Red Sea - a terrifying dead end. Pharaoh was soon to send his army to pursue the Israelites, which God knew would happen. And at the end of the parsha, the Israelites faced an attack along their route anyway – against their new archenemy the Amalekites. So how can we understand the text that explains God's plan?

In the beginning of the parsha, what we see is God taking care of the people. He performed powerful miracles for them to show His protection. He knew they were not ready to face attack. But after the unforgettable splitting of the sea, saving them and destroying the Egyptian army, their spirits were stronger, and God took a step back. He did not fight

the battle against the Amalekites on behalf of the Israelites; He had given the Israelites the strength to do so themselves.

Furthermore, once they had crossed the sea, the people knew that there was no way back. So they took responsibility and partnered God in achieving their own destiny. They went from passive to active participants in their own history, because from now on, they could only journey forwards.



## IT ONCE HAPPENED...

*As I opened the card and felt the embossed words with my fingers "Good Luck!" I felt tears welling. The message written below in familiar handwriting read: "Darling Mia, Good luck on your big day tomorrow. We are so proud of you. You are going to be great. Onwards! All our love, Mum and Dad". I read it for a second and third time, a rush of warm and loving memories flooding back to me. It felt like I had been here before. Many times.*

*The first time was earlier than my memories stretch back. I was born 2 weeks after my due date. My dad always jokes that I didn't want to leave the comfort and safety of my mum's womb. But I was dragged literally kicking and screaming into the world by the doctor and midwife, and of course my mum.*

*I have clear memories of the next time I was pushed forwards, against my will, into a new world. It was my first day of school, and I wasn't ready for my life to change. 'Why are they making me do this?' I remember thinking... but after a few days, school almost felt like a second home.*

*The next time I remember feeling forced to do something I wasn't sure about, it wasn't my parents doing the pushing, but my closest friend. Camp just didn't appeal to me, but Sophie*

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How were the Israelites affected by taking the longer route out of Egypt?
2. What was God trying to teach them here, and how do we know they understood this message?

*would not take no for an answer. "I'll look after you" she said. "And we will have the BEST time!" And she was right of course.*

*Thinking about it now, this has been a theme running throughout my life. My Bat Mitzvah speech in front of hundreds of people... starting high school... my gap year away from home... university. The list goes on and on. Each one more scary than the one before. Each time those who loved me most, helped me, not just with encouragement but by forcing me out of my comfort zone. And each time I grew a little more into the person I am today.*

*Tomorrow I start my first real job. Tomorrow I start life as an adult. I've never liked change, and I am petrified! But my parents are right. I have got this. No more looking back - onwards!*

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What things have your parents or teachers forced you to do that you can see now was for your own good? Why do you think they did this?
2. How is this story connected to this week's parsha?



## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Let us really try to understand God's decision to take a circuitous route out of Egypt: "If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt". It seems to raise a number of significant questions.

First: we see that the alternative route they took was potentially even more traumatic. God led them around by the desert road towards the Red Sea. When the Israelites saw the Egyptian chariots pursuing them in the distance, they had nowhere to go. They were terrified. So they were not spared the fear of war. Hence the first question: why the Red Sea? On the face of it, it was the worst of all possible routes.

Secondly, if God did not want the Israelites to face war, and if He believed it would lead the people to want to return to Egypt, why did the Israelites leave *chamushim*, "armed" or "ready for battle"?

Third: if God did not want the Israelites to face war, why did He provoke Pharaoh into pursuing them? The text says so explicitly.

"And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them." (Exodus 14:4).

Fourth: God did not want the Israelites to have reason to say, "Let us return to Egypt." However, at the Red Sea, they *did* tell Moses something very close to this: "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!" (Exodus 14:11-12)

Fifth: God clearly wanted the Israelites to develop the self-confidence that would give them the strength to fight the battles they would have to fight in order to conquer the Holy Land. Why then did He bring about a situation at the Sea where they had to do exactly the opposite, leaving everything to God?

The miracle that followed has so engraved itself on Jewish minds that we recite the Song at the Sea in our daily Morning Service. The division of the Sea was, in its way, the greatest of all

the miracles. But it did not contribute to Jewish self-confidence and self-reliance. *"The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still."* (Exodus 14:14) The Egyptians were defeated not by the Israelites but by God, and not by conventional warfare but by a miracle. How then did the encounter teach the Israelites courage?

Sixth: Our parsha ends with another battle, against the Amalekites. But this time, *there is no complaint on the part of the people*, no fear, no trauma, no despair. Joshua leads the people in battle. Moses, supported by Aaron and Hur, stands on a hilltop, his arms upraised, and as the people look up to Heaven, they are inspired, strengthened, and they prevail.

*Where then was the fear spoken of in the opening verse of the parsha?* Faced by the Amalekites, in some ways more fearsome than the Egyptians, the Israelites did not say they wanted to return to Egypt. The sheer silence on the part of the people stands in the strongest possible contrast to their previous complaints about water and food. The Israelites turn out to be good warriors.

*So why the sudden change between the opening of our parsha and its close?* In the opening, God is protective and miracle-working. At the close, God is more concealed. He does not fight the battle against the Amalekites; He gives the Israelites the strength to do so themselves. In the opening, the Israelites, seeing the pursuing Egyptians, panic and say that they should never have left Egypt. By the close, attacked by the Amalekites, they fight and win.

What has changed?

The answer, it seems to me, is that we have perhaps the first recorded instance of what later became a key military strategy. In 1519, a man named Cortes (the Spanish commander engaged in the conquest of Mexico) burned the ships that had carried his men. His soldiers now had no possibility of escape. They had to win or die. Hence the phrase, "burning your boats."

Sometimes you have to arrange that there is no way back, no line of retreat, no possibility of fear-induced escape. It is a radical strategy, undertaken when the stakes are high and when exceptional reserves of courage are necessary. That is the logic of the events in this week's parsha that are otherwise hard to understand.

Before they crossed the Red Sea, the Israelites were fearful. But once they had crossed the Sea, there was no way back. Their ability to fight and defeat the Amalekites showed how profoundly they had changed. Their boats and bridges were burned. They looked only forwards, for there was no return.

Any great undertaking comes with fear. Often we fear failure. Sometimes we even fear success. Are we worthy of it? Can we sustain it? We long for the security of the familiar, the life we have known. We are afraid of the unknown, the uncharted territory. And the journey itself exposes our vulnerability. We have left home; we have not yet reached our destination. Courage is not fearlessness. It is, in the words of a well-known book title, feeling the fear but doing it anyway.

Sometimes the only way to do this is to know that there is no way back. That is what crossing the Red Sea was for the Israelites, and why it was essential that they experienced it at an early stage in their journey. It marked the point of no return; the line of no retreat; the critical point at which they could only move forward.

**I believe that some of the greatest positive changes in our lives come when, having undertaken a challenge, we cross our own Red Sea and know that there is no way back. There is only a way forward.**

**Then God gives us the strength to fight our battles and win.**

#### QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why do some people need to be in a situation with no other options, in order to take on scary challenges?



#### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

*"Failure is the supreme learning experience, and the best people, the true heroes, are those most willing to fail... God lifts us when we fall, gives us hope when we despair, and believes in us more than we believe in ourselves... Even more than the strength to win, we need the courage to try, the willingness to fail, the readiness to learn and the faith to persist."*

**Credo, The Times, 24th February, 2007**



#### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What do you think God's plan was for the next stage in Jewish history, following the Exodus?
2. Why do you think the Israelites were prone to fear when they left Egypt?
3. How did the Israelites gain the courage to bravely battle Amalek?



## QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur**? Email [CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org](mailto:CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org) with your name, age, city and your best question based on the ideas from the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger**. Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



## EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

### IN A NUTSHELL

1. All these miracles are impressive, and while the splitting of the Red Sea is perhaps the most remarkable, the others are no less miraculous. However, the odd one out here is the defeat of Amalek. The others are all supernatural miracles directly from God. The battle with Amalek is a natural miracle, and for the first time, a partnership between the people and God. Perhaps this is the most notable of them all.

### THE CORE IDEA

1. There simply was no choice here but to be brave and move forward and trust in God. There were no other options. The Egyptian army was behind them and was rapidly approaching, and the Red Sea, impossible to traverse, stood in front of them. This was the educational journey God took them on to increase their faith in God and to build bravery in the face of adversity.
2. The message God was imparting here was that all growth incurs fear. There is no growth in the comfort zone and no comfort in the growth zone. It is only natural to want to remain in a safe and secure place and never take risks. But then there will be no growth and no progress. God was teaching that sometimes you need to be forced into an endeavour to overcome the fear that would otherwise prevent you from trying. The message was understood by the end of the parsha, and this can be seen in the way the Israelite army fought Amalek without a word of complaint or an expression of fear.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. It is a parent and teacher's responsibility to encourage growth. This sometimes means forcing a child to leave their comfort zone and tackle their fears. This could be at school, in a social context, or with other endeavours in their life. As difficult as this is for the child, it is for their own good and growth (and it is difficult for the parent also!)
2. In the parsha, God acts as a parent and mentor, forcing the Israelites into an uncomfortable situation with no easy way out. But by the end of the parsha their growth is easy to identify.

### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. It is only natural to want to remain in the comfort and safety of the familiar. It is normal to want to be protected and cared for. But without ever being tested, and without being forced into a situation of discomfort, a person will miss out on opportunities for growth by always taking the easy and familiar path.

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. The simple answer is that God planned to get the people to Mount Sinai, give them the Torah, and then bring them to the Promised Land. But God's agenda was more complex than just this. He wished to take the Israelites on a journey and through an educational process, building them as a people and teaching them the core values of Judaism. This meant inserting these values and national character traits into the national DNA of the people. The message contained in parshat Beshallah is an example of that. The narrative is about the process as much as the destination and outcome.
2. The Israelites still had a slave mentality. They had been subservient to a hostile authority for hundreds of years, and then when they finally gained their freedom and independence, it was by way of a miraculous event in history brought about by a benevolent, all-powerful God. The people were passive during this whole process. They did not yet have the skills or independent thinking to tackle challenging issues for themselves. They were totally reliant on God, and on Moses their leader.
3. Through an educational process, revolving around the experiences they had in the wilderness, including the one described here, they slowly gained the confidence and courage to be independent and create a partnership with God. The battle against Amalek is an example of this. Rather than complain to God from a position of fear and weakness, they stepped up and entered the battle, with confidence and faith in God. This partnership is a model for all subsequent generations.