

פרשת בשלח

OVERVIEW

The people find themselves rather abruptly at the shores of the sea. Behind them they faced the threat of Egypt's military might. Moshe movingly conveys the people's anxiety to G-d.

The ranks of Pharaoh's army are thrown into confusion. Under the protective cover of a thick cloud, Israel crosses the red sea that miraculously splits apart. In their blind rush the Egyptian chariots, riders and horses follow the sons of Israel in the dry seabed only to be drowned in the churning mass of the returning waters.

From the opposite shore rises the triumphal song of the liberated nation. Leading the women, Miriam intones a hymn of joy.

Then the people begin to complain of the lack of water. By divine command the bitter water is transformed into sweet springs. The people complain of the lack of meat and great numbers of quail descend on the desert camp. The people complain of the lack of bread and the heavenly Manna cover the ground surrounding the camp. This continues morning after morning except for the Sabbath.

Amalek suddenly attacks Israel from the rear and is defeated after a brief battle. Moshe vows "a war for G-d against Amalek from generation to generation".

COMMENTARY

The Pursuit

Following the night of terror, Egypt is confronted with the new situation created by Israel's exodus. The extended Jewish presence in the land had changed its social structure in that there was now a much more pronounced emphasis on basic human rights and dignity. Despite the blow to their pride and the economy caused by the exodus - the loss of the Jewish slaves is heavily felt - the authorities make no attempt to lighten the burden imposed on the general population. Pharaoh, however, is out of touch with the mood of his people. This explains that even the plagues, while they achieved their goal in regard to Israel, failed to shake his determination to maintain his tyrannical rule. Thus, the only way to end the terror is the destruction of his murderous instrument, the Egyptian army.

Facing the Sea

"G-d will fight for you and you remain silent". The people believed to be in a hopeless situation. Their faith in the liberating power of G-d had weakened through the long years of suffering. They had to regain the belief in G-d's omnipotence, a belief that no obstacle

or calamity, however traumatic, could shake; a belief and trust which were the magnificent achievement of the forefathers.

Divine intervention will not forgo man's active role. The sea will not split open until the first Jew enters the waters, a first step into the unknown. It is this finely tuned relation between the divine and the human that will become an integral aspect of Israel's historical experience.

Crossing the Sea

The east wind lashes the waves. The waters, towering up on both sides of the passage, expose a path leading from west to east through the sea inlet separating the Egyptian mainland from the Sinai peninsula. The Egyptians trailing behind the Jews are engulfed by the mighty floods that are joined together above them.

There is no more effective demonstration of divine rulership over nature. The very element that was to become Israel's grave turns against those who bear the responsibility for the organized mass onslaught against a peaceful people. Measure for measure, Egypt must pay the price for its blatant violation of human justice and dignity. At the same time Israel realizes the challenge of its special mission to defend and uphold the principles of justice that will determine its own fate and future as the nation of G-d. Zion's rebuilding, its messianic deliverance, will only be effected through and for Justice.

The Song of Praise by the Sea

"Then Moshe and the sons of Israel intoned this song to G-d; they said: "I will sing to G-d how exalted He is and sublime, horse and riders has He cast into the sea". In a hymn of lofty content Israel expresses its elation and undying gratitude. It gives voice to the realization of its own lowliness in the awareness of the miracle both of its birth and deliverance. "He is my G-d, I glorify Him, G-d of my father, I extol Him". The commitment of the forefathers becomes again the descendant's credo. It is not skin-deep piety in deference to the ancestors. It is not a G-d Who reveals Himself from the remnants of an obscure past and Whose laws one upholds out of an instinctive fear.

The nation recognizes clearly and objectively the reality of the divine guidance that will be the sole guarantee for its survival as a nation. "Who is like You among the mighty, o G-d". There are forces at work in nature and history that appear to be independent powers. Yet these are merely emanations of the All-High, nothing but tools employed by His Mighty Hand toward the fulfillment of His Will.

"In Your loving kindness You have led to this goal the people whom You have redeemed; with Your

might You have guided them to Your holy habitation". The goal is the temple and the realization of the ideals it represents. "G-d will reign in all eternity". The world will continue on its course, men will continue to rebel against G-d and His law, but the revolts will end disastrously. The repeated crises that wind like a red thread through the history of men will ultimately lead to a united mankind under the rulership of G-d.

Miriam's Song of Praise

The sister of the two leaders, surrounded by the women, responds to the men's hymn with a song of praise echoing some of its joyous exclamations. In this way she demonstrates the happy participation of the Jewish women in the historic event. Men and woman are united in their enthusiastic acclaim of the divine intervention. Men and women will be united in their common concern and responsibility for the wholesome future of their people.

The bitter waters of Marah

It is difficult to understand how a people that has just witnessed and participated in the stupendous event of the exodus could be so affected by a passing calamity that they would lose all hope and even threaten to rebel against their leaders. Human experience shows that it is easier to give credit to G-d for extraordinary solutions to extraordinary emergencies than to build one's daily existence on unreserved trust in G-d. Admittedly, G-d is the Master over the raging sea, the architect of the liberation - but would G-d be concerned with our daily cares and worries"? Is He present when men are confronted by the pressing problems of survival? It was this nagging doubt that caused the crisis at Marah. The answer was the miracle of the water turning sweet. "For, if you will only hearken to the voice of G-d, your G-d, and will do that which is upright in His eyes, then I will not inflict upon you any of the plagues which I have inflicted upon Egypt, for I, G-d, am your healer".

Manna and the Shabbat

The people receive a new lesson to serve as a guideline for the future. In desolate surroundings without the minimal conditions required for the survival of two million souls, G-d creates an element beyond the laws of nature to ensure the well-being of His people. It will convince Israel that the problems of physical survival require more than merely material solutions. It is divine intervention that is decisive. The Manna which will provide for Israel's daily nourishment will fall to earth in quantities sufficient for the needs of the people in the desert. Hoarders will soon notice that their surplus will be inedible on the very next day. They will also realize that the sixth day will bring a double ration in preparation for the Sabbath. These are the conditions of human labor and its fruit: just and adequate distribution, without hoarding, respect for the sanctity of the Sabbath and the satisfaction

of having provided for the needs of the family. The Sabbath leads man back to the origin of his being and guides the Jew towards the sanctification of body and soul.

Amalek

The experiences of Israel since its arrival in the desert defined its position within the natural law and its special role as the nation of G-d that subordinates its efforts and aspirations to the dictates of the divine will. What of its position in relation with the nations of the worlds? How will its future be shaped by the powerful influences of the nations surrounding it? The answer comes is an event which occurred in Refidim.

Amalek, descendant of Esav, pounces upon Israel in the same manner in which the protective angel of its ancestor assaulted Yaakov. Israel is determined to gain the spiritual freedom that is inherent in G-d's rule on earth. Amalek embodies brute force that does not tolerate the challenge to its established way of life. There is no room on earth for the two ideologies so diametrically opposed to each other as those of Israel and Amalek.

The attack on Israel will not be the last one. Driven by animalistic instincts, Amalek and its like will attempt again and again to destroy the nation which dares to bring to a suffering world the law of the living G-d.

Accompanied by Aharon and Chur, Moshe ascends the mountain's summits. Raising his hands toward heaven, he points at Him on Whose behalf Israel wages this battle and Who will enable Israel to prevail. Upon the enemy's defeat, Moshe issues a solemn proclamation: "The sovereignty of G-d's Throne means war for G-d against Amalek from generation to generation". The Throne of G-d symbolizes the absolute, timeless divine power and the reality of the task given to the Jewish nation: battle for G-d, war against the law of brute force, of materialism, of egoism. An unceasing struggle, from generation to generation, until Israel, in fulfillment of its assignment, brings healing to the suffering of man through the spirit of G-d. "For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of G-d, as the waters fill the sea" (Isaiah 11:9).

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