



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

BESHALLACH • חטלח

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7"צז

With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel.

"I have loved the Torah of R' Chaim Schimmel ever since I first encountered it. It strives to be not just about truth on the surface but also its connection to a deeper truth beneath. Together with Anna, his remarkable wife of 60 years, they built a life dedicated to love of family, community, and Torah. An extraordinary couple who have moved me beyond measure by the example of their lives." – Rabbi Sacks

The Power of Ruach

● This summary is adapted from a video by Rabbi Sacks, available at RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation/beshallah/the-power-of-ruach/

In 2010, a sensational scientific discovery was announced. Researchers at a US National Center for Atmospheric Research and the University of Colorado were now able to use computer simulation to replicate the miraculous parting of the Red Sea.

Sophisticated models demonstrated how a strong east wind, blowing overnight, could have pushed water back at a bend. The water would have been guided into the two waterways, and a land bridge would have opened at the bend, allowing people to walk across the exposed mudflats. As soon as the wind died down, the waters would have rushed back in. As the leader of the project said when the report was published, "The simulations match fairly closely with the account in Exodus."

So we now have a scientific explanation to support the biblical account. Rabbi Sacks notes that this raises questions like: **How should we view God's miraculous interventions? Are they supernatural phenomenon, that lose their impact if science can explain it?**

The miraculous splitting of the Yam Suf can be read in different ways. The first is that what happened was a suspension of the laws of nature. The waters stood, literally, like a wall – a supernatural event.

Another option is that although science can explain the strange behaviour of the water, the timing was miraculous. It happened just there, just then, when Bnei Yisrael seemed trapped, unable to go forward because of the sea, unable to turn back because of the army pursuing them. Hashem acted with perfect timing to save the people, and this was the miracle.

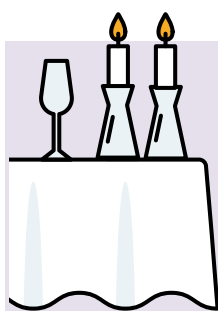
There is a significant difference between these two interpretations. The first appeals to our sense of wonder. How extraordinary that the laws of nature should be suspended to allow an escaping people to go free, through the sea! It is a story that captures

the imagination of every child. But the naturalistic explanation is wondrous at another level entirely. What's more, here the Torah is using the device of irony. What made the Mitzrim of the time of Paroh so strong was the fact that they had the latest and most powerful form of military technology: the fearsome horse-drawn chariot. It made them unbeatable in battle.

What happens at the sea is therefore poetic justice of the most exquisite kind. There is only one circumstance in which a group of people travelling by foot can escape a highly trained army of charioteers, namely when the route passes through a muddy seabed. The people can walk across, but the chariot wheels get stuck in the mud. The army can neither advance nor retreat. The wind drops – the water returns. The powerful are now powerless.

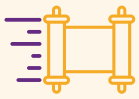
This second narrative has a moral depth that the first does not. The elegantly simple way in which the division of the Red Sea is described in the Torah so that it can be read at quite different levels – one as a supernatural miracle, the other as a moral tale about the limits of technology when it comes to the real strength of nations – this to Rabbi Sacks is what is most striking. **It is a text carefully written so that our understanding of it can deepen as we mature, once we are no longer so interested in the mechanics of miracles and more interested in how freedom is won or lost.**

It's good to know how the division of the sea happened, but there remains a depth to the biblical story that can never be exhausted by computer simulations and other historical or scientific evidence and depends instead on being sensitive to its deliberate and delicate ambiguity. **Just as ruach, a physical wind, can part waters and expose land beneath, so ruach, the human spirit, can expose, beneath the surface of a story, a deeper meaning beneath.**



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Can you think of other moments in the Torah when a supernatural event took place? What was the message of those stories?
2. Reflect on a time when your inner strength was challenged. How did you overcome this obstacle?
3. Consider the technological and medical advances we have seen in the past number of years. How do you see God's role in shaping modern innovation?



Parsha in Passing

After Paroh orders Bnei Yisrael to leave Mitzrayim, they think they're free of the Egyptians, but suddenly he changes his mind again! Pursued by Paroh and his forces, they find themselves cornered between his army and the sea. Moshe is instructed by God to lift his staff over the waters, which miraculously part, allowing safe passage for Bnei Yisrael. When the

Mitzrim follow, the waters return, engulfing them. In response to this incredible miracle, Bnei Yisrael praise God. Miriam leads the women in dancing and singing, using musical instruments called timbrels.

While journeying through the desert, Bnei Yisrael face hunger and thirst, leading to complaints

against Moshe and Aharon. In response, God provides relief by transforming the bitter waters of Marah into drinkable water and He later commands Moshe to produce water from a rock using his staff. Additionally, God sends *maan* each morning, and quail birds each evening, to nourish the people.

At Rephidim, Bnei Yisrael faces an assault from Amalek. They emerge victorious, thanks to Moshe's prayers and a military unit led by Yehoshua.



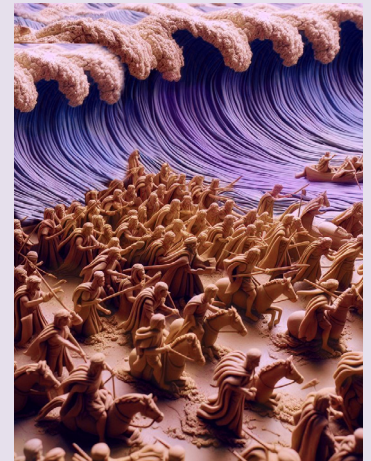
Parsha People

The Red Sea: By science or might, I split through the night. The people all cross, which proves God is the boss.

Paroh's Army: They're running away! Get them, make them stay! Across the water they go, we follow - but oh no! Our wheels are stuck, our horses are down, the water is closing around, help we're going to....

Moshe: With my staff held high, I look to the sky, but in the distance, Paroh's battle cry. The sea called "Red" parts overnight, and finally, freedom is in sight.

Miriam: My people are freed! A song of thanks I will lead!



Parsha Practical

Shabbat is something we have heard about before. It was all the way back in Parshat Bereishit where we learned that God rested on the seventh day of Creation?

But in Beshallah, Shabbat becomes official in a different way. Living in the desert, Bnei Yisrael eat miraculous *maan* that falls from the sky. In this week's parsha they are commanded to collect a

double portion of the *maan* on the sixth day and rest on the seventh. The miracle food will not fall on Shabbat.

In many ways, the pause of the daily *maan* on Shabbat is similar to the parting of the Red Sea. How so? It intertwines miracles with the mundane, teaching the importance of recognising the Divine in both extraordinary events and regular

rhythms of life.

Today, we celebrate Shabbat by having two loaves of challah on our table, as symbols of the double portion of *maan*. This weekly emblem of dependence on God echoes the faith that was required during Yetziat Mitzrayim. It bridges the grand miracles of that time with the ongoing Divine Presence in daily life, showing that God's influence extends beyond monumental occurrences to the routines of our everyday existence.



Parsha Playoff

Let's play '**Crossing the Sea**'!

Create an imaginary version of the Red Sea using household objects. For example, designate certain floor tiles as 'water' and others as 'safe ground'. Players must then creatively cross the room by only stepping on the 'safe' spots, avoiding the 'water'.

Alternatives could include walking only on rugs or floor mats, or using cushions as stepping-stones. Not only will this help you imagine you're really crossing the sea, but it will also help improve balance and strength! Sea? A fun activity for all!



Parsha Puzzle

Q. Where in the crowd was Moshe, as the people journeyed through the Red Sea? Was he at the front, at the back, or in the middle of Bnei Yisrael?

▲ Moshe was at the back. The Ralbag says that this showed ultimate faith, as he was the most vulnerable to the approaching armies (Ralbag Shemot 14:19).

Adapted from *Torah IQ* by David Woolf, a collection of 1,500 Torah riddles, available from Amazon.



Parsha Philosophy

The Mechanics of Miracles, as Rabbi Sacks shares, are, at the end of the day, impossible to fully understand. Despite extensive scientific study, some things, like the miracles from God, are so nuanced that only God could fully understand how they work.

The mysteries surrounding Divine miracles often transcend human comprehension. However, the way the Torah describes these

acts itself holds meaning. On the one hand, they are clearly awe-inspiring and, in many ways, boggle the imagination.

On the other hand, they have a mechanistic and scientific explanation, and the miracle then is that they happened at the exact right time they were needed. As Rabbi Sacks explains, these latter explanations have deeper layers that resonate with our most

important beliefs and cultural narratives.

Ultimately, such miracles remind us of the profound connections between the divine, nature, and humanity and foster a sense of awe and wonder in the face of the unknown.

But now, just for fun, can you think of a creative way you would explain the parting of the Red Sea?



Parsha Parable

Space Torah

Well, this might just be the coolest story that combines science and miracles. Get ready to blast off in five, four, three, two....

Space travel has been one of the most incredible and unique discoveries by humankind in modern times. And because of our ability to space travel, scientists and physicists have learned so much about the world (and the universe) beyond all we could once even imagine! Something to remember, though, is that space travel was invented by humans, but it was God who formed people, and gave us the ability to be creative and intelligent enough



to launch into space, and return safely home.

Now, there was one astronaut who never forgot this, even when venturing into outer space. His name is Jeffrey Alan Hoffman.

Jeffrey was one of the first Jewish astronauts ever to venture into space. And in his space suitcase,

along with his clothing, some books to read, and photos of his family, Jews around the world were thrilled to learn that he had packed some symbols of his Jewish identity, to take into the rocket: a dreidel, a tallit, and even a Sefer Torah. That's right, the Torah, just like the one we read every Shabbat, was read somewhere outside of our atmosphere.

A question for you: given that there was no gravity, do you think Jeff lifted the Torah during Hagbah, or did he just let it float free?

This story is a profound reminder that our heritage and beliefs can accompany us, no matter how far we journey - whether it's across the sea like Bnei Yisrael, or beyond the skies like Jeffrey Hoffman, or somewhere in between.



Parsha Ponderings

Imagine this:

You are one of the people running for your life. Paroh's army is behind you and the sea is up ahead Suddenly, it splits. Would you cross right away? Or would you pause and wait? Where in Bnei Yisrael would you stand?

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