



Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

BESHALLACH • בשלח

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF **RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS** ר"צ זצ

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

In September 2010, BBC, Reuters, and other news agencies reported on a sensational scientific discovery. Researchers at the US National Center for Atmospheric Research and the University of Colorado were able to show – through computer simulation – how the division of the Red Sea may have taken place.

Using sophisticated modelling, they demonstrated how a strong east wind, blowing overnight, could have pushed water back at a bend where an ancient river is believed to have merged with a coastal lagoon. 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."

This is how the Cambridge University physicist Colin Humphreys puts it in his *The Miracles of Exodus*:

Wind tides are well known to oceanographers. For example, a strong wind blowing along Lake Erie, one of the Great Lakes, has produced water elevation differences of as much as sixteen feet between Toledo, Ohio, on the west, and Buffalo, New York, on the east... There are reports that Napoleon was almost killed by a "sudden high tide" while he was crossing shallow water near the head of the Gulf of Suez.

Colin Humphreys, The Miracles of Exodus

To me, though, the real issue is what the biblical account actually is. Because it is right here that we have one of the most fascinating features of the way the Torah tells its stories. Here is the key passage:

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind all night, turning it into dry land and dividing the water. So the Israelites walked through the sea on dry land. To their right and left, the water was like a wall.

Ex. 14:21–22

The passage can be read two ways. The first is that what happened was a suspension of the laws of nature. It was a supernatural event. The waters stood, literally, like two walls.

The second is that what happened was miraculous, but not because the laws of nature were suspended. To the contrary, as the computer simulation shows, the exposure of dry land at a particular point in the Red Sea was a natural outcome of the strong east wind. What made it miraculous is that it happened just there, just then, when the Israelites seemed trapped, unable to go forward because of the sea, unable to turn back because of the Egyptian army pursuing them.

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. It is a story to appeal to the imagination of a child.

But the naturalistic explanation is wondrous at another level entirely. Here the Torah is using the device of irony. What made the Egyptians of the time of Rameses so formidable was the fact that they possessed the latest and most powerful form of military technology, the horse-drawn chariot. It made them unbeatable in battle, and fearsome.

What happens at the sea is 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 Egyptian army can neither advance nor retreat. The wind drops. The water returns. The powerful are now powerless, while the powerless have made their way to freedom.

This second narrative has a moral depth that the first does not; and it resonates with the message of the book of Psalms:

His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse,
Nor His delight in the legs of the warrior;
The Lord delights in those who fear Him, Who
put their hope in His unfailing love.

Psalm 147:10-11

In Bereishit Rabbah, it is indicated that the division of the sea was, as it were, programmed into Creation from the outset. It was less a suspension of nature than an event written into nature from the beginning, to be triggered at the appropriate moment in the unfolding of history.

Rabbi Jonathan said: The Holy One, blessed be He, made a condition with the sea [at the beginning of creation], that it should split asunder for the Israelites. That is the meaning of “the sea went back to its full flow” – [read not *le-eitano* but *letenao*], “the condition” that God had earlier stipulated.

Bereishit Rabbah 5:5

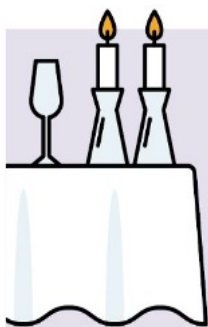
A miracle is not necessarily something that suspends natural law. It is, rather, an event for which there may

be a natural explanation, but which – happening when, where, and how it did – evokes wonder, such that even the most hardened sceptic senses that God has intervened in history. The weak are saved; those in danger, delivered. More significant still is the moral message such an event conveys: that hubris is punished by nemesis; that the proud are humbled and the humble given pride; that there is justice in history, often hidden but sometimes gloriously revealed.

The elegantly simple way in which the division of the Red Sea is described in the Torah so that it can be read at two 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: that to me is what is most striking. It is a text quite deliberately written so that our understanding of it can deepen as we mature, and we are no longer so interested in the mechanics of miracles, and more interested in how freedom is won or lost.

To be clear, 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 too *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?

● These questions come from this week's **Family Edition** to Rabbi Sacks' Covenant & Conversation. For an interactive, multi-generational study, check out the full edition at www.RabbiSacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/beshallach/the-power-of-ruach/