

Kol Rina  
*An Independent Minyan*  
Parashat Beshalach  
February 8, 2025 \*\*\* 10 Sh'vat 5785

Beshalach in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/3262/jewish/Beshalach-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3262/jewish/Beshalach-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

The name of the Parshah, "Beshalach," means "When he sent" and it is found in Exodus 13:17.

Soon after allowing the children of Israel to depart from Egypt, Pharaoh chases after them to force their return, and the Israelites find themselves trapped between Pharaoh's armies and the sea. G-d tells Moses to raise his staff over the water; the sea splits to allow the Israelites to pass through, and then closes over the pursuing Egyptians. Moses and the children of Israel sing a song of praise and gratitude to G-d.

In the desert the people suffer thirst and hunger, and repeatedly complain to Moses and Aaron. G-d miraculously sweetens the bitter waters of Marah, and later has Moses bring forth water from a rock by striking it with his staff. He causes manna to rain down from the heavens before dawn each morning, and quails to appear in the Israelite camp each evening.

The children of Israel are instructed to gather a double portion of manna on Friday, as none will descend on Shabbat, the divinely decreed day of rest. Some disobey and go to gather manna on the seventh day, but find nothing. Aaron preserves a small quantity of manna in a jar, as a testimony for future generations.

In Rephidim, the people are attacked by the Amalekites, who are defeated by Moses' prayers and an army raised by Joshua.

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Judges 4:4 – 5:31

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/626290/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/626290/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

This week's haftarah describes the fall of the Canaanite general Sisera and his armies, who were swept away by the Kishon River, and Deborah's ensuing song of thanks. This parallels this week's Torah portion which discusses the drowning of the Egyptian forces in the Red Sea and the subsequent songs led by Moses and Miriam.

Deborah the Prophetess was the leader and judge of the Israelites at a difficult time; the Israelites were being persecuted by King Jabin of Canaan and his general Sisera. Deborah summoned Barak son of Abinoam and transmitted to him G-d's instruction: "Go and gather your men toward Mount Tabor, and take with

you ten thousand men of the children of Naphtali and Zebulun. And I shall draw to you, to the brook Kishon, Sisera, the chieftain of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his multitude; and I will give him into your hand." At Barak's request, Deborah accompanied him, and together they led the offensive.

Sisera was informed of the Israelites' mobilization and he gathered his forces and proceeded towards the Kishon River. Barak's army below and the heavens above waged battle against the Canaanites and utterly destroyed them. The river washed them all away; not one of the enemy survived.

The defeated general fled on foot and arrived at the tent of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite. She invited him in and offered to hide him. When he fell asleep, Jael took a tent-peg and knocked it through Sisera's temple.

The next chapter of the haftorah is the Song of Deborah, which describes the miraculous victory and thanks the One Above for His assistance.

## Food For Thought

[Music, Language of the Soul](#)  
by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l (5772)

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/beshallach/music-language-of-the-soul/>

For the first time since their departure from Egypt, the Israelites do something together. They sing.

“Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to the Lord.” Exodus 15:1

Rashi, explaining the view of Rabbi Nehemiah in the Talmud[1] that they spontaneously sang the song together, says that the Holy Spirit rested on them and miraculously the same words came into their minds at the same time. In recollection of that moment, tradition has named this week **Shabbat Shirah, the Sabbath of Song**.

What is the place of song in Judaism?

There is an inner connection between music and the spirit. When language aspires to the transcendent and the soul longs to break free of the gravitational pull of the earth, it modulates into song. Music, said Arnold Bennett is “a language which the soul alone understands but which the soul can never translate.” It is, in Richter’s words “the poetry of the air.” Tolstoy called it “the shorthand of emotion.” Goethe said, “Religious worship cannot do without music. It is one of the foremost means to work upon man with an effect of marvel.”

Words are the language of the mind. Music is the language of the soul. So when we seek to express or evoke emotion we turn to melody. Deborah sang after Israel's victory over the forces of Sisera (Judges 5). Hannah sang when she had a child (I Sam. 2). When Saul was depressed, David would play for him and his spirit would be restored (1 Sam. 16). David himself was known as the "sweet singer of Israel" (II Sam. 23:1). Elisha called for a harpist to play so that the prophetic spirit could rest upon him (II Kings 3:15). The Levites sang in the Temple. Every day, in Judaism, we preface our morning prayers with Pesukei de-Zimra, the 'Verses of Song' with their magnificent crescendo, Psalm 150, in which instruments and the human voice combine to sing God's praises.

Mystics go further and speak of the song of the universe, what Pythagoras called 'the music of the spheres.' This is what Psalm means, when it says:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands . . . There is no speech, there are no words, where their voice is not heard. Their music[2] carries throughout the earth, their words to the end of the world. Psalm 19

Beneath the silence, audible only to the inner ear, creation sings to its Creator.

So, when we pray, we do not read: **we sing**. When we engage with sacred texts, we do not recite: **we chant**. Every text and every time has, in Judaism, its own specific melody. There are different tunes for Shacharit, Mincha, and Maariv, the morning, afternoon, and evening prayers. There are different melodies and moods for the prayers for a weekday, Shabbat, the three pilgrimage festivals, Pesach, Shavuot, and Succot (which have much musically in common but also tunes distinctive to each), and for the Yamim Noraim, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

There are different tunes for different texts. There is one kind of cantillation for Torah, another for the Haftara from the prophetic books, and yet another for Ketuvim, the Writings, especially the five Megillot. There is a particular chant for studying the texts of the written Torah, for studying Mishnah and Gemara. So by music alone we can tell what kind of day it is, and what kind of text is being used. There is a map of holy words, and it is written in melodies and songs.

Music has extraordinary power to evoke emotion. The Kol Nidrei prayer with which Yom Kippur begins is not really a prayer at all. It is a dry legal formula for the annulment of vows. There can be little doubt that it is its ancient, haunting melody that has given it its hold over the Jewish imagination. It is hard to hear those notes and not feel that you are in the presence of God on the Day of Judgment, standing in the company of Jews of all places and times as they pleaded with heaven for forgiveness. It is the holy of holies of the Jewish soul. (Lehavedil, Beethoven came close to it in the opening notes of the sixth movement of the C Sharp Minor Quartet op. 131, his most sublime and spiritual work).

Nor can you sit on Tisha b'Av reading Eichah, the Book of Lamentations, with its own unique cantillation, and not feel the tears of Jews through the ages as they suffered for their faith and wept as they remembered what they had lost, the pain as fresh as it was the day the Temple was destroyed. Words without music are like a body without a soul.

For many years I was privileged to be part of a mission of song (together with the Shabbaton Choir and singers Rabbi Lionel Rosenfeld and chazzanim Shimon Craimer and Jonny Turgel) We journeyed to Israel to sing to victims of terror, as well as to people in hospitals, community centres, and food kitchens. We sang for - and with - the injured, the bereaved, the sick and the broken hearted. We danced with people in wheelchairs. One boy who had been blinded and lost half of his family in a suicide bombing, sang a duet with the youngest member of the choir, reducing the nurses and his fellow patients to tears. Such moments are epiphanies, redeeming a fragment of humanity and hope from the random cruelties of fate.

Beethoven wrote over the manuscript of the third movement of his A Minor Quartet the words *Neue Kraft fühlend*, "Feeling new strength." That is what you can sense in those hospital wards. You understand what King David meant when he sang to God the words: "You turned my grief into dance; You removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to You and not be silent." United in song, you feel the strength of the human spirit no terror can destroy.

In his book, *Musicophilia*, the neurologist and writer Oliver Sacks (no relative, alas) tells the poignant story of Clive Wearing, an eminent musicologist who was struck by a devastating brain infection. The result was acute amnesia. He was unable to remember anything for more than a few seconds. As his wife Deborah put it, 'It was as if every waking moment was the first waking moment.'

Unable to thread experiences together, he was caught in an endless present that had no connection with anything that had gone before. One day his wife found him holding a chocolate in one hand and repeatedly covering and uncovering it with the other hand, saying each time, 'Look, it's new.' 'It's the same chocolate', she said. 'No', he replied, 'Look. It's changed.' He had no ability to hold onto his memories at all. He lost his past. In a moment of self-awareness he said about himself, 'I haven't heard anything, seen anything, touched anything, smelled anything. It's like being dead.'

Two things broke through his isolation. One was his love for his wife. The other was music. He could still sing, play the organ, and conduct a choir with all his old skill and verve. What was it about music, Oliver Sacks asked, that enabled him, while playing or conducting, to overcome his amnesia? He suggests that when we

'remember' a melody, we recall one note at a time, yet each note relates to the whole. He quotes the philosopher of music, Victor Zuckerkandl, who wrote, 'Hearing a melody is hearing, having heard, and being about to hear, all at once. Every melody declares to us that the past can be there without being remembered, the future without being foreknown.' Music is a form of sensed continuity that can sometimes break through the most overpowering disconnections in our experience of time.

Faith is more like music than like science. Science analyses, music integrates. And as music connects note to note, so faith connects episode to episode, life to life, age to age in a timeless melody that breaks into time. God is the composer and librettist. We are each called on to be voices in the choir, singers of God's song. Faith teaches us to hear the music beneath the noise.

So music is a signal of transcendence. The philosopher and musician Roger Scruton writes that it is "an encounter with the pure subject, released from the world of objects, and moving in obedience to the laws of freedom alone." He quotes Rilke:

Words still go softly out towards the unsayable  
And music, always new, from palpitating stones  
Builds in useless space its godly home.

The history of the Jewish spirit is written in its songs. The words do not change, but each generation needs its own melodies.

Our generation needs new songs so that we too can sing joyously to God as our ancestors did at that moment of transfiguration when they crossed the Red Sea and emerged, the other side, free at last. When the soul sings, the spirit soars.

[Aggressor and Aggrieved by Dr. Phil Keisman](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/aggressor-and-aggrieved/)  
<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/aggressor-and-aggrieved/>

The Israelites find themselves in a new position in Parashat Beshallah. After generations of suffering as slaves to the pharaohs, and after decades of uncertainty about how and when their suffering might end, the Israelites are now staring backwards as their oppressors die violently.

Moshe held his arm out over the sea, and at the break of day the sea returned to its normal flow, and the Egyptians fled from it, but God propelled the Egyptians into the sea. The waters turned back and covered the chariots and the riders of all the troops of Pharaoh who had come with them to the sea. Not a single one of them remained. But the Israelites had gone through the sea on dry land, for them the waters were like walls to

their right and to their left. (Exod. 14: 27-28)[1]

What follows in the text of the Torah itself is unbridled jubilation. We read “Az Yashir,” a triumphant song of military might in which we are told “God is a lord of War.” That song, found in chapter 15 of Shemot, is part of the daily liturgy established by the rabbinic authorities.

Lest we miss the point, Midrash Tanhuma takes the death of the Egyptians by water as a chance to make a larger point: Israel’s enemies die in ways fitting to their wickedness. “Egypt was lashed in water because they glorified themselves through water [by killing Jewish babies in the Nile].”[2] The Midrash then spends 12 pericopes detailing the deaths of the wicked men of the Bible from the generation of the flood to Nebuchadnezzar, Babylonian conqueror of Jerusalem. In classic midrashic fashion, this text utilizes other biblical verses to flesh out the imagery of the stories. The result is a series of violent vignettes, with the midrash dwelling on the “rightness” of the punishments of wicked people.

Tanhuma’s delight in the violent deaths of the wicked speaks to a satisfaction that can be derived from violence. Freud, in one of his earliest works, argued that violence, even abstracted violence through language, was a mechanism for working through trauma. “The reaction of an injured person to a trauma has really only then a perfect ‘cathartic’ effect if it is expressed in an adequate reaction like revenge.”[3] Freud lends his imprimatur here to the joy that humans can take in watching their foes suffer. In the absence of real violence, he believes humans can have similar catharsis from verbal or artistic depictions of suffering. The delight in this rabbinic text may be understandable, but it can trouble those of us committed to the universality of God’s creations.

Luckily for us, the rabbinic tradition never speaks with only one voice. This moment of violent catharsis comes with ambivalence for the Rabbis. In one of the most famous midrashim, we get insight into God-the-universalist’s reaction to the death of Israel’s foes:

Rabbi Shmuel son of Nachman says in the name of Rabbi Yohanan, “Why does the Torah say [in Exodus 14:20] [the Israelites and Egyptians] did not come near one to the other all night?’ In that moment, the ministering angels requested to sing a song before the Holy one, blessed be he. The Holy one, blessed be he said to them, ‘The works of my hands are drowning in the sea, and you would sing a song before me?!’” (Sanhedrin 39b)

By having God himself refer to the Egyptians as “the works of my hands,” the midrash reminds us of the overriding commonality in the human condition. From the perspective of God, there is no joy in violent death and suffering.

This midrash is today beloved for its humanistic bent. It is often employed as a demonstration of the pathos of rabbinic Judaism. It is not, however, more or less authoritative than the pornographic violence of Tanhuma. Rabbinic Jews—like the Israelites in the Torah—had both the capacity to see the divine spark in all of God’s creatures, and also had the drive towards aggression as a way to face their own trauma.

We are the same. There are moments in our lives as Jews when we face the trauma of the world around us—in America and in Israel, with our families and in public—and feel an inclination towards cathartic violence, whether rhetorical or real. That is human, and it is Jewish. But equally human and equally Jewish is to meet the drive with what Lincoln called “the better angels of our nature,” to look at our erstwhile targets and see the humanity within. We are the Israelites, but we are also the Egyptians.

This redemptive power of knowing that we are both aggressor and aggrieved underpins the yirah (awe/fear) at the core of our relationship with God. In chapter 28 of Devarim, when God warns the Israelites of what will happen to them if they fail to keep the covenant, medieval commentator Rashi notes “when the Israelites saw the various afflictions that befell Egypt, they feared (יראים) them, so that they would not befall them as well.” The Israelites leaving Egypt saw their foes suffering, and they did rejoice, but Rashi tells us that they also were able to see that this suffering was not something they would necessarily be spared. Even the chosen people are vulnerable to suffering, and though we may have base passions, we also have the capacity to rise above them when we see the humanity in the other.

Even at moments when we see our foes wracked with pain, perhaps pain that we feel they deserve, we have the opportunity, and the obligation, to see ourselves in them. Only this can stop the cycle of violent trauma that persisted in our parsha, where the victims glorified retributive violence and the sea became littered with the corpses of the work of God’s hands. *(Dr. Phil Keisman is Director of Teen Education at JTS)* [1] Translations by Dr. Phil Keisman [2] Note that in his translation on Sefaria.org, Samuel Berman explains “glorified themselves by water” as referencing Pharaoh’s claiming that he created the Nile in Ezekiel 29:3. This requires ignoring the use of the verb “שנתגאו” in its plural form in order to make Pharaoh the subject of the sentence. [3] Joseph Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies in Hysteria*. Translation A. A. Brill. (Nervous and Mental Health Disease Publishing, 1936).

[Beshalach: Between a Rock and a Hard Place \(Between the Sea and an Army\)](https://truah.org/resources/shoshanah-tornberg-beshalach-moraltorah_2025/)  
[by Rabbi Shoshana Tornberg](https://truah.org/resources/shoshanah-tornberg-beshalach-moraltorah_2025/)

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We stand like our ancestors on the precipice of what is next: They stood gazing out at the Sea of Reeds, not knowing what could happen, save their inevitable

destruction. With the sea in front of them and the enemy army behind them, they were between the proverbial rock and hard place. (Exodus 14:9) They must have been terrified. They could not look behind them for salvation; they could not look ahead. There was no place to look but up. Only a miracle could save them.

Knowing the narrative of the Torah as we do, it is easy to lose sight of the ignorance of the people in the story about how they would move forward. In other words, it would have been out of the realm of reason for them to assume that the sea would split. That's not how things work, right?

The Talmud teaches that the leaders of the Israelites were arguing amongst themselves about what to do when Nachshon ben Aminadav began walking into the water (Babylonian Talmud Sotah 37a). He continued walking as the water deepened, and only when he could no longer breathe did the sea part. Could Nachshon have known that this was the way forward?

He knew he needed to do something. And while the people may have wanted to look up (or just throw their hands up), he chose to also look ahead, despite the obvious, watery obstacle. He took a step, not knowing how the story would proceed. It took courage and presence of mind. It took creativity and hope. While many Israelites panicked, Nachshon stepped forth. Could Nachshon have known that this was the step he was supposed to take to catalyze salvation?

He did not know. And, it probably didn't feel like the "correct" thing to do. But it was the thing he did.

Imagine if Nachshon had not done so! Would someone else have come along to lead in this way? Maybe. Perhaps Nachshon became the leader in this midrash because this stepping forth was what God was waiting for.

Nachshon showed up for leadership when and where it was needed. He made a choice to not stand by. He made a choice to move forward impossibly into the future. He catalyzed salvation not because he knew what he must do, but because he did it anyway. Nachshon's actions saved us because he stepped into the breach of our need.

We are the heirs of this story; it is deeply a part of what it means to be a Jew. Each of us is commanded to see ourselves as if we personally left Egypt, freedom-bound. We must demand a world of justice and freedom because we know the plight of the stranger. We know what it feels like to be the victim of injustice. If we try to ignore this call, our story asks, "How dare you?! After all you have been through, how can you let this happen to someone? You should know better."

If you are like me, you sometimes find it hard to know what the next, right steps are. How do I move forward toward justice and a society bound by moral courage? As we launch into a new presidential term, many of us feel flummoxed and stymied

by the many moral crises that lay before us. There is so much that demands our attention as we prepare for sweeping societal and policy changes. There are so many stories that say to us, “How dare we?! After all we have been through, how can we let this happen? We should know better.”

Just as Moses did, Nachshon models for us the strength, courage, and hope to take steps into the unknown; to meet the future, not with self-satisfied assurance, but with action nonetheless.

Like our ancestors, we stand at the precipice of the unknown, but they model for us what it can look like to step into the breach and tell the next chapter with hope.

Come! Let us walk together into the sea! *(Rabbi Shoshanah Tornberg, RJE was ordained at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) in New York in 2006 where she also received her Masters in Hebrew Letters. She earned a Masters in Jewish Education from the Rhea Hirsch School of Education at the Los Angeles campus of HUC-JIR.)*

*And finally from the Accidental Talmudist (Sal Litvak), two short commentaries:*

### *Beshalach: A Bunch of Whiners*

Torah portion Beshalach contains many stirring moments: the Israelites flee from Pharaoh, they cross the Red Sea, they sing joyfully to God, they receive manna from heaven and the commandment to sanctify Shabbat. But alongside the grand triumphs, there are troubling undercurrents. The Children of Israel are the beneficiaries of miracles upon miracles but keep finding reasons to complain to Moses. “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us to die in the desert?” these petulant ingrates sarcastically whine (Ex. 14:11).

It’s no coincidence that after their incessant complaining the people are attacked by a vicious enemy, Amalek. This time, God doesn’t perform overt miracles to help them win. Instead the people choose warriors and go out to fight. During the war with Amalek, Moses raises his hands skywards and Israel prevails. We call Moses “our teacher” because everything he said and did contains a vital lesson. Here, by lifting his hands to the heavens, Moses shows the recalcitrant Israelites that even when God doesn’t provide flashy miracles and we have to fight our own fights, the Holy One is still running the show.

Most of us don’t see revealed miracles every day, but when we train ourselves to perceive His kindness in everything, our lives will be filled with joy. As Rebbe Nachman of Breslov famously said, “It is a great mitzvah to always be happy.”

<https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/torah/2025/02/03/beshalach-a-bunch-of-whiners-2/>

### *Beshalach: Song of the Sea – Miriam Brought Tambourines*

On Shabbat Shirah, “Shabbat of Song,” we chant the Song of the Sea, a jubilant

ballad the Israelites sang after God parted the Red Sea for them. There are actually two songs of the sea, one sung by the men and another by the women. Only one line is common to both, and therefore this line is presumed to convey the distilled essence of the song: "I will sing to God for He is exalted above all exaltedness, a horse and its rider He heaved into the sea." (Ex. 15:1, 15:21)

Why does the Torah cite a "horse and rider heaved into the sea" as evidence of God's exaltedness? Why not summon a more dramatic image, like the sea's miraculous parting or the destruction of the world's mightiest army? The Sefas Emes (Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, 1847-1905) explains that the horse and rider are mentioned to emphasize that God runs the world. Just as a rider thinks he controls his horse, so do humans often think we are solely responsible for our successes in life (and our failures.) In reality, God controls everything, and all that happens is part of God's plan. Both humans and animals are clay in the hands of our Molder.

The Egyptians denied the existence of the One God, instead worshipping the human Pharaoh, who was unable to protect them from the overpowering force of the God of Israel. We are taught to emulate not the idolatrous Egyptians but the righteous Hebrew women who celebrated by the sea. Why the women specifically? Because while both the men and the women sang and danced, only the women – led by the prophetess Miriam – had musical instruments. They believed with such perfect faith that God would continue to perform miracles for them that before leaving Egypt, they grabbed their tambourines.

<https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/featured/2024/01/23/beshalach-song-of-the-sea-2/>

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### YAHRTZEITS

Fran Nelson remembers her husband Fred Nelson on Sun., Feb. 9

Elaine Berkenwald remembers her husband Stanley Klughaupt on Mon., Feb.10

Larry Ozarow remembers his father Boris Ozarow on Tues., Feb.11

Bob Woog remembers his mother Nina F, Woog on Wed. Feb., 12th