



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

בשלח תשע"ט
Beshalach 5779

**The Divided
Sea:
Natural or
Supernatural**

WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 FAMILY EDITION

Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting initiative from The Office of Rabbi Sacks for 5779. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the *Family Edition* is aimed at connecting older children and teenagers with his ideas and thoughts on the *parsha*. To receive this via email please make sure you are subscribed to Rabbi Sacks' main mailing list at www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe.



PARSHAT BESHALACH IN A NUTSHELL

The Israelites leave Egypt. God deliberately leads them on a circuitous route. They come up against the Reed Sea. Pharaoh, having changed his mind about letting them go, pursues them with horses and chariots. The people come close to despair. Then, in one of the supreme miracles of history, the sea divides. The Israelites pass through and

sing a momentous song of faith and deliverance. But their troubles are not over. They lack drinkable water, and food. God sends both: oasis springs and then water from a rock, and *manna* from heaven. The *parsha* ends as it began, with the prospect of war, this time against the Amalekites.



THE CORE IDEA

The splitting of the Reed Sea is engraved in Jewish memory. We say it twice every day during the morning service. It was the ultimate miracle of the Exodus. But in what sense? If we listen carefully to the way the Torah describes it, we can distinguish two ways of looking at it.

This first is the supernatural dimension of what happened. "The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left... The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen – the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived. But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left." (Exodus 14:22, 28-29) Water, which normally flows, stood upright. The sea parted to expose dry land. The laws of nature were suspended. Something happened for which there can be no scientific explanation.

However, if we listen carefully, we can also hear a different note: "Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. (Exodus 14:21) Here there is not a sudden change in the behaviour of

water, with no apparent cause. God brings a wind that, in the course of several hours, drives the waters back.

Viewed from this perspective, the events that took place could be described as follows: The Israelites had arrived at the Reed Sea at a point at which it was shallow. Possibly there was a ridge in the sea bed, normally covered by water, but occasionally – when, for example, a fierce east wind blows – exposed.

We have here two ways of seeing the same events: one natural, the other supernatural. The supernatural explanation – that the waters stood upright – is immensely powerful, and so it entered Jewish memory. But the natural explanation is no less compelling. To put it another way: 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.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Which do you find more plausible: the natural explanation for the splitting of the Reed Sea or the supernatural explanation?

2. If the splitting of the Reed Sea was caused by a fierce east wind, does this make it any less miraculous?

3. In our age, where there are no perceptible supernatural miracles, do you still believe God intervenes in history and acts through nature? Can you give any examples?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

During Israel's War of Independence in 1948 a famous miracle occurred in the Arizal's synagogue in the holy city of Tzefat. The synagogue was full of people while the battle for the city was going on around them outside. During the *tefillah*, a bomb exploded just outside the synagogue, spraying debris everywhere, including into the synagogue. Miraculously, just as the worshipers by the *bimah* bowed their heads for the blessing of *Modim*, a piece of metal flew directly above their heads, and lodged itself in the *bimah*. Bowing their heads saved their lives. The

hole it made can still be seen today, reminding visitors of this miracle, and the need to thank God.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. The story describes this event as a miracle. Do you agree that it was miraculous? What aspect of it was a miracle?

2. Can you think of any other stories from Israel's history that you would consider a miracle?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

There is an extra dimension to the second perspective to the splitting of the Reed Sea. "During the last watch of the night the Lord looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. He made the wheels of their chariots come off so that they had difficulty driving. The Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The Lord is fighting for them against Egypt." (Exodus 14:24-25). The emphasis here is less on miracle than on irony. The great military assets of the Egyptians – making them almost invulnerable in their day – were their horses and chariots. These were Egypt's specialty.

In our second reading of these events, the wind that exposed the ridge in the bed of the sea led to dramatic events. Suddenly the Israelites, travelling on foot, had an immense advantage over the Egyptian chariots that were pursuing them. Their wheels became stuck in the mud. The charioteers made ferocious efforts to free them, only to find that they quickly became mired again. The Egyptian army could neither advance nor retreat. So intent were they on the trapped wheels, and so reluctant were they to abandon their prized war machines, the chariots, that they failed to notice that the wind had dropped and the water was returning. By the time they realised what was happening, they were trapped. The ridge was now covered with sea water in either direction, and the island of dry land in the middle was shrinking by the minute. The mightiest army of the ancient world was defeated, and its warriors drowned, not by a superior army, not by human opposition at all, but by their

own folly in being so focused on capturing the Israelites that they ignored the fact that they were driving into mud where their chariots could not go.

The Egyptians' strength proved to be their weakness. The weakness of the Israelites became their strength. On this reading, what was significant was less the supernatural, than the moral dimension of what happened. God visits the sins on the sinners. He mocks those who mock Him. He showed the Egyptian army, which revelled in its might, that the weak were stronger than they. More significant than the miraculous or natural nature of these events, 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.

This idea can be taken further. Emil Fackenheim has spoken of "epoch-making events" that transform the course of history. It is as if all normal perception fades away and we know that we are in the presence of something momentous, to which we sense we must remain faithful for the rest of our lives. It is through transformative events that we feel ourselves addressed, summoned, by something beyond history, breaking through into history. In this sense, the division of the Reed Sea was something other and deeper than a suspension of the laws of nature. It was the transformative moment at which the people "believed in the Lord and in Moses His servant" (14:31) and called themselves "the people You acquired" (15:16).

The genius of the biblical narrative of the crossing of the Reed Sea is that it does not resolve the issue one way or another. It gives us both perspectives. To some, the miracle was the suspension of the laws of nature. To others, the fact that there was a naturalistic explanation did not make the event any less miraculous. That the Israelites should arrive at the sea

precisely where the waters were unexpectedly shallow, that a strong east wind should blow when and how it did, and that the Egyptians' greatest military asset should have proved their undoing – all these things were wonders, and we have never forgotten them.



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

The creation of the State of Israel was fraught with difficulty. Yes it has achieved wondrous things.

Through it, Hebrew, the language of the Bible, was reborn as a living tongue. Jewish communities under threat have been rescued, including those like the Jews of Ethiopia who had little contact with other Jews for centuries. Jews have come to Israel from over a hundred countries, representing the entire lexicon of cultural diversity. A desolate landscape has bloomed again. Jerusalem has been rebuilt. The world of Torah scholarship, devastated by the Holocaust, has been revived and the sound of learning echoes throughout the land. Economically, politically, socially and culturally, Israel's achievements are unmatched by any country of its age and size. The sages said that, at the crossing of the Reed Sea, the simplest Jew saw miracles that the greatest of later prophets were not destined to see. That, surely, was the privilege of those

who witnessed Israel's rebirth and youth. The messiah has not come. Israel is not yet at peace. The *Beit Hamikdash* has not been rebuilt. Our time is not yet redemption. Yet many, if not all, of the prayers of two thousand years have been answered...

*The Jonathan Sacks Haggadah, from the essay,
"Building a Society of Freedom"*

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Do you think the history of the State of Israel is miraculous?
2. Do you find modern Jewish history strengthens or challenges your faith in God?



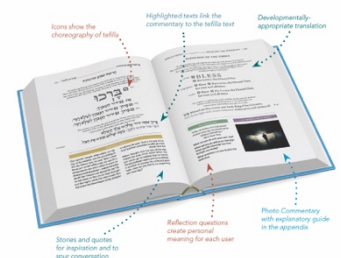
AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. How would you define the term "miracle"?
2. Do you think miracles that occur supernaturally are more inspiring and impressive than those that occur through nature?
3. Why do you think the Torah leaves room for understanding this miracle both supernaturally and naturally?
4. Have you ever experienced a miracle in your life? What was it?
5. Why do you think Rabbi Sacks describes the splitting of the Reed Sea as a "transformative moment" in history? What lessons could be learned from this event?



QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur**? This siddur has been designed to help young people explore their relationship to their God, and the values, history and religion of their people. Email CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org with your name, age, city and your best question or observation about the *parsha* from the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger**. Each month we will select two of the best entries, and the individuals will each be sent a siddur inscribed by Rabbi Sacks! Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.





THE CORE IDEA

1. Sometimes natural explanations for phenomenon can be just as fantastical as supernatural. The miraculous aspect to the natural explanation for this event is the timing and the impact that it had on history (namely on the Egyptians and the ramifications for the Israelites). Each in its way is inspiring and can lead to a strengthening of faith in God and His role in history.
2. Because of the impact the event had on the course of history, including the remarkable timing of the natural phenomenon to bring that effect, we can comfortably describe this event as miraculous. Describing an event as a miracle is testifying to its divine orchestration, whether through supernatural or natural means.
3. While this question asks for the reader to share their personal faith, it is appropriate to share the following quote from Rabbi Sacks' book *Radical Then, Radical Now*: "If we search for revelation in history, we will find it, more compellingly than anywhere else, in the history of that unusual people, our ancestors." See also *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks* for suggestions from modern Jewish history.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Those with strong faith will see the hand of God in all events. In this case, the timing of the event is key – that the explosion happened at the exact time the congregation were saying the *modim* prayer and therefore bowing, so the shrapnel missed them and injury or death was avoided.
2. So much of Israel's history can be described as miraculous – whether that be because we believe it was the hand of God orchestrating events, or because much of Israel's history seems not to be concerned with the laws of rational logic. In the words of David Ben-Gurion: "In Israel, in order to be a realist you must believe in miracles."

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. Rabbi Sacks describes the history of the state of Israel as miraculous, as he does so in this text. When we say Hallel on Yom Ha'atzmaut to commemorate and celebrate Israel's independence, we are testifying to our belief that the creation of the State of Israel is due to the hand of God. So much of modern Israeli history defies the laws of logic and rational explanation, but even if this were not true, one who believes that God acts in history will see God's hand in history, and be comfortable explaining events from history as miraculous (even if not as supernatural). For another thinker who directly sees the hand of God in modern Jewish history, see Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik's seminal essay *Kol Dodi Dofek*.
2. As we said above for *The Core Idea 1*, While this question asks for the reader to share their personal approach to history and faith, it is appropriate to share the following quote from Rabbi Sacks' book *Radical Then, Radical Now*: "If we search for revelation in history, we will find it, more compellingly than anywhere else, in the history of that unusual people, our ancestors." While there is clearly much in Jewish history that can challenge the faith that God is orchestrating Jewish history (because there have been so many dark periods in Jewish history, including the Holocaust which is still in our recent national collective memory), Rabbi Sacks still finds Jewish history as a whole an inspiration for his faith in God and His role in history.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. There are three main dictionary definitions of the word miracle:
 - a. An effect or extraordinary event in the physical world that surpasses all known human or natural powers and is ascribed to a supernatural cause.
 - b. Such an effect or event manifesting or considered as a work of God.
 - c. A wonder; marvel.Only the first of these definitions involves a supernatural act. The second and third definitions allow us to use the word miracle to explain any event in history we believe is an act of God, even if through nature (and in fact the third definition even allows the use of the word miracle without any reference to God whatsoever).
2. See *The Core Idea* question 1.
3. Different people find inspiration from different places and in different ways. Perhaps this quintessential miracle is described in the Torah with both approaches possible to ensure it has maximum impact for its readers.
4. Encourage your children/students to consider this question in its broadest sense using all three definitions of the word miracle found above, (there may be an inclination to only relate to supernatural miracles) and for them to consider events in personal history as well as national and world history to answer this question.
5. It was a "transformative event" in history where the world finally understood God's role and presence in history. That God will protect the weak in history, defeat those who have more faith in their own physical and military might than in a just God, and those who build their power on the back of the oppressed and weak. These are the messages of the Exodus story as a whole.