

Introduction to Parsha #16: Beshelach¹

Torah:

Exodus 13:17 - 17:12

Haftarah:

Judges 4:4 – 5:31

B'rit Chadasha:

John 6:31-51



And the Holy One went before them ... in a pillar of cloud

[Exodus 13:21]

The Amidah Prayer Focus for the Week is

Petition #13, *Retzeh* - The Petition for Intimate Relationship

Vayehi beshalach Par'oh et-ha-am – i.e. *And it came to pass in connection with Pharaoh expelling the people* **Exodus 13:17a.**

Pharaoh? Did someone mention *Pharaoh*? Ha! That is YESTERDAY'S NEWS! Who is Pharaoh to us anymore? He is just the abusive, narcissistic, and sadistic *ex* to whom we have finally been empowered to say *good riddance*. May we never see his face, hear his voice, or even think of him - *ever again*! That chapter of our life is behind us now. We are not even on the continent of Africa anymore – much less in Egypt. So, Pharaoh is the least of our worries, right? Our concern is *where we go from here*. Moshe is not following any highway. Where he is taking us there is not even a sign of a trail – just kilometers and kilometers of undisturbed desert stretching out all around. There are no distance indicators. There are no 'caution' signs. There are no recognizable landmarks. It is hard to figure out where we are – much less know where we are going. Where will we set up camp next? How long will it take us to get there? What kind of people will we meet along the way – speaking what languages and dialects? Will the locals be friendly ... or deadly? Will they fear *Elohim* – or will they be deceiving, manipulative, divisive,

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oppressive, and cruel like the oligarchs of Egypt? Will they welcome us in *shalom* – or will they plot to kill the men, amuse themselves with the women, pillage the gold, silver, flocks, and herds, and sell our children as slaves to the highest bidder? Will they fear our numbers and respect our unity – or will they be constantly devising ways to exploit our diversity and turn us against one another? How will we manage stay alive – and sane - long enough to reach whatever destination the Holy One has chosen for us? How will we keep from ‘falling out’ with each other along the way? What happens if we *do*? What will we find to eat and drink as we travel? Where will we sleep? Are we dressed properly – considering both the cultures we will encounter and the weather we will face? What dangers lie ahead? Will the God of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya’akov be with us? Will He lead us, protect us, and mold us into a nation? And if that is His Plan ... how exactly does He plan on accomplishing these things? Through what mechanism or manifestation will He lead us? With what army and weapons – earthly or Heavenly in origin - will He protect us? What protocols and curriculum will He employ to teach, train, and mold us into the ‘great nation’ for which all Creation groans in eager expectation? What does He envision as being *His* responsibilities in this Covenant relationship – and what does He envision as being *ours*? What coping methods and strategies of survival will we have to learn – and at what cost will we learn them? What kind of culture *will we – can we – should we -* build? What kind of infrastructure are we going to need to put in place as a societal foundation? Are a bunch of shell-shocked slaves – a mixture of Hebrews, fractional Hebrews, and displaced hordes from all the other nations and ethnic groups of the world – capable of putting aside their ethnic, personal, economic, theological, ideological, and political differences, and co-labor, shoulder to shoulder long enough to even build – much less sustain - such an infrastructure? *Oy veh* – what on earth were we *thinking*? What in Heaven’s name have we *done*?

We’ve Only Just Begun

When we awoke on the day after the Exodus it hit us: this would be the first day in our entire lives there would be no taskmaster lurking in the shadows with a whip. There would be no soldier telling us where we could and could not go, or when we could and could not speak, or what we were supposed to think, say, or do.

A great adventure awaits us in the wilderness. There will be no more merely existing, no more merely surviving, and no more selling our souls to pagans, idolaters, and occultists for crusts of bread and the privilege of being cursed and beaten. But alas, we will be like children. We will not have the foggiest idea how to live as much as a day – much less survive weeks in the desert - without a Pharaoh to tell us what to do, a taskmaster to bark out commands, and a slave’s rations of fish, leeks and onions. We will have to learn about life – and about

absolutely everything of which life consists - all over again.

Last week we experienced the thrill of breaking away the physical shackles of bondage. Time will tell if getting rid of those shackles makes us free. Time will tell the extent to which we are ready to deal with having no social structure, no job, no income, no police force, no army, no *shuk* in which to buy groceries or other ‘necessities’, no hut or house in which to enjoy privacy or take shelter from the weather, and no recognizable supply chain. Time will tell if we can deal with having to rely totally upon the Holy One for everything. Time will tell if having to forsake all compasses and maps, not to mention roadways, and just follow the Holy One wherever He leads, will make us strong – or make us crazy. Time will tell if we can move beyond acknowledging the existence of a Higher Power, and learn to let the Holy One be REAL to us. Time will tell if we are content to just know Him by a Name or reputation, or whether we hunger for CONSTANT COMMUNICATION with Him. Time will tell if we are ready to invest our entire lives in *following, walking with, depending upon, and learning what life is about from* the God of Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya’akov.

***Welcome to the Great Adventure of Freedom –
and the Great Transformation from a Bondage Worldview
to a Covenant/Kingdom Lifestyle!***

The Holy One has a plan to deliver us from the fear of man, from every root of bitterness, from the slavish coveting of leeks, onions, and the other inferior pleasures of this world, and from the self-pitying mentality of newly freed slaves. But His Plan – like all good things – is going to take time. The Great Road Trip of Redemption and Restoration has only begun. What lies before us as we leave the land of the Pyramids behind is a long and arduous journey - not an easy, instantaneous translation. We may be out of Egypt – but we are a long, long way from anything remotely resembling a habitable homeland. The promised land we grew up hearing our forefathers whisper about is not only a long way away geographically - it is also not ready for us. And, of course, we are nowhere near ready to appreciate, much less steward, its beauty, its mystery, and its fruitfulness. We have a lot of growing up to do. We have some training to receive. We have a new way of thinking, feeling, talking, reacting, and living to learn.

The desert that lies before us is going to become our training ground. In it the One Who redeemed us from bondage has established a network of critical oases. But we are going to need more than oases in order to redefine our individual and national identities. We are going to need more than a little bread and a few strategic drinks of water to prepare us for the glorious mission and world-changing destiny our Courtier-King has in mind for us. Our Beloved has, therefore, also

prepared a series of increasingly challenging obstacle courses for us to navigate. He knows exactly what our fear-of-man triggers are. He knows exactly what stirs up our fleshly lusts. He knows exactly what causes us to indulge ourselves in self-pity, depression, and despair. He knows exactly what will make us get distracted by dark energy sources like anger, offense, self-righteousness, jealousy, ideology, and religious form.

It is in the desert that lies before us, you see, that our King intends to work out our most glaring and destructive faults, stains, and blemishes. He loves us far too much – and has far too great a plan for us - to leave us the way we are. He knows many – indeed the overwhelming majority - of us who are leaving the place of bondage now will not handle the obstacle course well. He knows most will reject His love and choose instead to indulge their lusts, their infatuation with murmuring, complaint and outrage, their ambition, their desire for an idol to worship, their offense, their self-righteousness, and their self-obsession. He knows most of them will choose, of their own free will, to wander and die in the desert. He knows that only two of the men among this throng of freed slaves are going to persevere, endure, stay steadfast, and enter the promised land. But His commitment is to the descendants of Avraham – and all the families of the earth whom the descendants of Avraham are called to bless. His call is cross-generational. And while He knows that all but two of the adults who are leaving Egypt with Moshe are *not* going to make it, He also knows that vast numbers of the children and children’s children of the others *will*. His Plan to redeem mankind and Creation will succeed. Each person in the great throng of refugees will have to decide for himself or herself if he/she wants to play a part of it.

It is in the desert that our loving but wise Courtier-King is going to train anyone who will listen to trust Him. It is in the desert that He will teach us to *humbly approach* and *thankfully eat from* whatever table He sets for us – even in the presence of enemies. It is in the desert that He will teach us to *drink from His overflowing Cup*. It is here that He will teach us to *tune our ears to His Voice* and *train us to draw near to Him* so He can anoint our head with oil.

If the Holy One does not lead us through this wilderness we will wander aimlessly and be terrorized by *khammins*² and *haboobs*³, disoriented by mirages, and confused by shifting sands. If the Holy One does not provide food for us in this barren terrain we will collapse from starvation. If He does not lead us to the hidden pools of still water in this wilderness we will dehydrate and die. If He does not protect us – and train us well in how to protect ourselves – as we pass through this vast

² *Khammins* are extremely dry, extremely hot winds common in the desert. These gales pick up sand and propel it with great force into the faces and lungs of unprotected travelers.

³ *Haboobs* are intense, blinding, and suffocating dust storms, common in arid lands.

expanse of badlands we will be easy prey for the predators and outlaws who even now watch our every move from their secret lairs, licking their lips at the thought of the attack they intend to launch against us around the next corner, in the valley of the shadow of death.

But He *will* lead us. He will feed us. He will provide water. And He will, in this wilderness, prove Himself to be every bit the glorious and trustworthy Courtier-Bridegroom we have begun to imagine Him to be.

Ashirah L'Adonai?

It is in this parsha that we will face the angry attack of Pharaoh's chariot corps and witness perhaps the greatest sign and wonder of all time - the great miracle of deliverance the Holy One stepped out of eternity and invisibility to perform on our behalf at the Sea of Reeds. The narrative of Torah will then regale us with the glorious *shir* [prophetic song] sung by the entire Redeemed Community as the magnitude of the Holy One's intervention in the affairs of men began to become apparent. We will hear Moshe kick off that song with the exultation '*Ashirah l'Adonai* [*i.e. I will sing to the Holy One*] then shed tears of joy as a great prophetic symphony of praise bursts forth from millions of lips simultaneously.

Why are multitudes of homeless refugees with not a single morsel of *matzah* left to sustain them going to be laughing, singing, and dancing with all their might on the desert floor a few kilometers outside of Egypt? Why are hundreds of thousands of men, women and children going to raise their voices in harmony to exalt the Name and extol the characteristics of the Creator of Heaven and Earth? Is the desert heat going to make the whole lot of them *meshuga*? No, Dear Reader. They will be singing, dancing, and exulting because they are going to have a story to tell that will be so amazing, so awe-inspiring, and so incredible that no one but a fool would believe them if they tried to explain what happened in the course of ordinary conversation. They are going to be singing "*Ashirah L'Adonai*" because ... well, because they are going to witness Heaven touch Earth. And when Heaven touches Earth there is *no language that can possibly suffice to describe or explain what happened*. A story like that *simply must be told in song*.

Theirs is, after all, the story that will literally change the world forever. And the song with which they spontaneously erupt as the story unfolds is the song that will pour forth from human voices in all generations - and will ultimately be sung by men from every tribe, tongue, and nation in the World to Come. I therefore call this very special section of Torah *the Parsha of the Shir*.

Ashirah l'Adonai indeed! Before the week is over, may this be our song – and the anthem of our households and communities - as well!

What a Difference a Day Makes!

As you will recall, at the end of last week's parsha Pharaoh *ordered* our ancestors to leave his country. Still in a fit of grief and rage after the death of his firstborn son, He did not mince words:

Kumu tze'u mitoch ami gam-atem gam-b'nei Yisra'el

'Get up!' out from among my people - you and the descendants of Yisrael!

uleichu ivdu et-Adonai kedaberchem

Go! Worship the Holy One just as you demanded!

Gam-tzonchem gam-b'karchem keichu ka'asher dibartem

Take your sheep and cattle, just as you said!

v'leichu uverachtem gam-oti

Go! And bless me too!

[Exodus 12:31-32]

Early the next morning we herded our wives and children and flocks and herds together, slung sacks over our shoulders containing all the *matzah* dough we could gather up in our haste ... and walked right out of Egypt to freedom. That was truly a day that we will never forget. And what a difference a day makes. As the sun rose on us the next day we awakened to the surreal realization that for the first time in our lives we are waking up *outside Pharaoh's familiar land of pleasant distractions and bitter disappointments*. The *land of the living dead* is no longer our home.

There was not a pyramid in sight. The Nile was over a thousand sand dunes away. The barking of taskmasters – and the sting of their whips - were nothing but unpleasant memories. But ... what *exactly* was freedom from Egypt going to *mean* for us? Buckle your seat belts - we are about to find out!

A Beshelach Road Trip Travelogue

Being out of bondage is great and all ... but *where do we go?* How are we supposed to survive in the desert? What are we supposed to eat? Where are we supposed to find water to drink? Even assuming we are somehow able to survive, what kind of lifestyle change does the One Who delivered us from Pharaoh's grip with a Mighty Hand, an Outstretched Arm, and Great Wonders *expect from us* now that He has purchased our freedom? We know what lies *behind us*. But we have no idea what lies *before us*. We have, you see, never known any place but Egypt. And we have never known any lifestyle but bondage. What is this newfound freedom that has been won for us by the Hand of the Holy One going to *mean* in *real time*? How will it change our lives? We have *never passed this way before*. This is all *totally new to us*.

1. Going in Circles

The first thing we will discover in our new parsha this week is that for the first few days after we leave Egypt it will seem like we are *wandering aimlessly in circles*. The Holy One is leading us with a pillar of cloud by day and with by a pillar of fire by night, but as comforting as that is a nagging feeling is gradually setting in that despite all the walking we are doing we are *not really getting anywhere*.

For all the steps we have taken in the desert sands we do not seem to be *putting much distance between us and Egypt*. The Holy One has not - as we expected - led us up the 'coastal highway' towards the land of our forefathers. He has instead been leading us in a back-and-forth pattern just outside the border of Egypt. It is almost as if He is using our continuing presence in the area to *taunt Pharaoh* or something. And as we read a little further in the parsha we will find out that is *pretty much exactly what He is doing*. It seems that the Holy One our God is *not through with Pharaoh* just yet. And of course, since we have 'come with' the Holy One, that means we are not through with Pharaoh just yet either.

2. Pharaoh Hatches the Prototypical "Final Solution" Plan

Pharaoh is, you see, going to react to seeing us wandering around just outside his border by deciding that if he cannot have us as slaves, *no one will*. He will issue a decree of death for us. He will muster his war chariots and head off in hot pursuit. With mayhem in his mind he and his army will find us deliciously vulnerable - with ***Yam Suf*** - the 'Sea of Reeds' – blocking any escape. He will lick his chops with relish as he sees our helpless state. He will then order his charioteers to charge forth with intent to maim, to kill, and to wreak as much havoc and Hell-on-Earth as one man in charge of an army of murderers possibly can.

3. The Miracle at the Sea – Phase I – The Inter-positioning

Before Pharaoh can release his fury on our ancestors however the Holy One will prove His worth as a Covenant Partner to us one more time. He will actually *move* before our eyes, *strategically repositioning His Pillar of Fire* so as to form an impenetrable barrier *between us and the approaching Egyptian army*. This will stop the mightiest army on earth dead in its tracks. But that is just going to be the beginning of what the Holy One is going to do for us in this action-packed parsha.

4. The Miracle at the Sea – Phase II – Yeshuat Adonai

After dealing with some understandable consternation on the part of the redeemed multitude Moshe will tell us to *stand and see the deliverance of our God*. In *sh'ma* response to the Holy One's instructions he will then stretch out his hand over the sea that blocks our escape. A strong wind will immediately begin to blow, and right

in front of our eyes the Sea will *divide in two*. The divided waters will then form a wall on each side. As we stare in awestruck wonder He will the seabed to become as dry land. He will do all this to make a way for us where there seemed to be no way. It absolutely thrills Him to do things like that for us.

5. The Miracle at the Sea – Phase III – The Final ‘Distinction’ Between Nations

The redeemed community will soon find itself passing miraculously through the middle of the Sea dry shod. Then, we will all watch in stunned silence as the Holy One removes the protective barrier of His Cloud and lets the Egyptian army pursue us - horses, chariots, and all - into the corridor between the two walls of water.

Pharaoh’s decision to attack what he sees as a helpless multitude with all the force of his chariot corps will however prove to be a fatal miscalculation. The Holy One will cause the walls of water to collapse on the Egyptian army. All Pharaoh’s horses, chariots, and soldiers will be quickly buried in a watery grave. The Egyptians who had seemed so totally in control of our destinies just a few moments previously will vanish from the earth in an instant - as we look on in total shock and awe.

6. The Song of Glorious Deliverance

When we see the bodies of the Egyptians wash up on the shore, the realization will finally dawn upon us that we are, at last, free of Pharaohs and taskmasters forever. A sense of awe will overwhelm us, and a spontaneous song of ecstatic praise [in Hebrew, a *shir*] will erupt from somewhere deep in our newly redeemed spirits. Out of the *Ruach HaQodesh* words and melody will just come, like gushing water from a rock or torrents of manna from the morning sky:

Ashirah l'Adonai ki-ga'oh ga'ah

"I will sing unto the Holy One, for he has triumphed gloriously:

sus v'rocheivo ramah v'yam

The horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.

Ozi v'zimrat Yah

The Holy One is my strength and song

vayehi-li lishu'ah

He has become my yeshu`ah:

zeh Eli v'anveihu

He is my God, and I will enshrine him;

Elohei avi v'aromemeihu

My father's God, and I will exalt him.

Recorded in Torah for posterity, and known simply as the ‘*Song of the Sea*’, it provides merely a foretaste of the ultimate ‘*Song of the Sea*’ which will be sung by

those who have victory over the Beast in Revelation 15:2-4.

7. Back to the Problems of the Real World

The ecstasy will not last long. A few days of walking in the desert heat will cause our muscles to ache, our feet to hurt, our mouths to be parched with thirst, and our stomachs to grumble. What will come out of our mouths will cease to be ecstatic praise. The fruit of our lips will degenerate quickly into pitiful moaning, murmuring, grumbling, whining, complaining, and casting of blame.

Our bodies are *detox-ing*. The toxins of a lifetime of eating and drinking the toxic waste of the super-culture lifestyle and listening to the arrogant moralizing of the superpower mindset are running amuck in our bloodstream and our nervous system. So please give us a little grace, posterity. Do not presume to judge our *kvetch-ing* until you yourself are hot, tired, thirsty and hungry after having walked away from a well-fed bondage to a world superpower on foot across a hot, dry desert.

8. The Introduction of Manna from Heaven – and Sabbath Rest

The Holy One will accommodate our cry for food by pouring forth Manna from Heaven – with a whole lot more quail than we were counting on thrown in to boot. And then - long before giving us what Christian theologians so disgustedly call ‘the law’ - the Holy One will renew our minds from Egyptian bondage by re-introducing to us the freeing, restorative, practice of joining Him in sweet rest on His *Shabbat* (Sabbath). How will He accomplish this? Six days a week He will provide only enough Manna to feed us and our families that day. On Friday however He will *double our portion*, providing just enough for us and our families to eat not only that day but also on the *Shabbat*.

We are supposed to learn some very important lessons of covenant during this wilderness excursion. We are supposed to learn to trust our Covenant Partner enough to *lodge where He lodges without a whisper of complaint*. We are supposed to learn to *be content to eat of the Bread from His Table*. We are supposed to learn to be satisfied to *drink the water from His cup*. We are supposed to learn the importance – and indeed the delight - of *moving when He moves, working when He works, and resting when He rests*.

A deep, abiding, mutually beneficial relationship is being forged. Welcome to *phase two of our Heavenly Bridegroom’s Divine Courtship process!*

9. The Release of Living Water

Twice this week our bodies will approach a toxic state of dehydration. The first such instance will occur a mere three days after the celebration at the Sea. The

pillar and cloud of the Holy One will pick up from *Yam Suf* and lead us right to the banks of a promising water source – at the spring called ‘*Marah*’. Once we are there, however, we will discover that the water is too bitter to drink. Or perhaps we will be too bitter of spirit to receive it. Either way, like spoiled children, in frustration we will resort again to grumbling and complaining.

Neither Moshe nor the Holy One will respond to our grumbling and complaining the way Pharaoh would have. Moshe will not bring out the whip as the taskmasters always had when anyone murmured or complained. He will ... *pray for us*? You do realize, don’t you Dear Reader, that before this very important day no human being has ever prayed for us?

The Holy One will respond to Moshe’s prayer of intercession with Fatherly kindness, understanding, and love. After all, the Holy One led us to this place of bitter waters *on purpose* – to teach us important principles about the new covenant lifestyle to which we had been called away from Egypt. The Holy One will then let Heaven touch Earth once again. He will show Moshe a supernatural tree - and Moshe will throw a branch of that tree into the spring. As soon as the branch touches the surface of the spring, its water will become as sweet as the rivers of Eden. And in the aftermath of yet another miracle we will all laugh and dance and drink our fill.

The second time we think we are dying from thirst it will be several chapters later, when we arrive at a place called *Refidim*. This time the Holy One’s instructions to Moshe will be different. He will tell Moshe to take his staff and strike a certain rock in order to cause the rock to release water for us to drink. Moshe will strike the rock, and just as the Holy One said majestic billowing fountains of water will pour forth. And there will suddenly be more than enough water to slake the thirst of every man, woman, child, and animal that followed the pillar of fire and cloud out of Egypt.

10. Our First War

Towards the end of the parsha we will face another kind of challenge - *our first war*. A group of desert raiders - the nomadic people of Amalek – will lie in wait for us on the road to Sinai. They will test our defenses with harassing tactics. They will attempt to weaken our will with rear-guard guerrilla tactics. And finally they will attack us *en masse* in full frontal assault.

At the Sea of Reeds we discovered that the Covenant means that the Holy One now automatically considers our enemies as His enemies as well. At Refidim we will learn that the Covenant also means that the enemies of the Holy One are now automatically to be considered by us as *our enemies* as well as His. Loving our

enemies is all well and good. The Holy One does the same to His. But letting either our enemies or the enemies of the Holy One our Covenant Partner annihilate us is just not in the cards. Even those whom one loves must be stopped before they damage things beyond repair. Hence we will take up arms and repel the genocidal assault of the Amaleki, even as the Holy One bared His Right Hand and repelled the genocidal assault of Pharaoh's chariot corps.

11. A New Kind of Deliverer is Introduced

In the context of war with the Amaleki we will be introduced to a new kind of deliverer. A young man named Hoshea of the tribe of Efrayim – later to be renamed *Y'hoshua* [Joshua] – will arise from obscurity to lead us to victory against the *Amaleki* [Amalekites]. With that victory, and a warning from the Holy One of future wars we will have to fight with Amalek, our action-packed parsha will finally conclude.

So now that we know *the parsha's details* let us pause to consider *it's spiritual essence*.

Toro!

As aforesaid, in this week's parsha Pharaoh and his army of 600-plus chariots will attack our ancestors' refugee camp by the Sea of Reeds. They will come with weapons in hand and with murderous intention. They will make a cold-blooded charge toward 2-3 million unarmed and helpless people⁴ who find themselves trapped with their backs to the Sea.

Unbeknownst to Pharaoh however he is ordering his murderous horde into *a trap*. This will be this army's *last charge* ... ever ... against anyone. Picture yourself at a *bullfight*. The bull is alone in the ring of the arena, snorting, prancing, pawing the earth - being a bull - like he was created to be. The bull is an amazingly powerful creature, basking in the sun as he has every day of his life. He does not know that this day will be different. He does not have *the slightest clue* what is about to happen to him. But the crowd that has gathered to watch the spectacle of the bullfight knows. And they cannot wait until the Matador arrives.

Picadores and Banderillos

Soon *picadores* with lances ride into the arena on swift and nimble horses, and begin to encircle the bull, and mock him, and strike him for what appears to be no reason. Wounded by the lance blows, he becomes bewildered and angry. What is happening? He rushes around the ring after the picadores and they leave the arena.

⁴ *I.e.* the recently freed Hebrew slave population as well as a mixed multitude of foreigners who in the aftermath of the plagues which devastated Egypt's economy elected to cast their lot with the Hebrews.

But there is *no rest* for the bull. Just as soon as the picadores leave the *banderillos* enter, on foot.

The bull eyes the *banderillos* cautiously as they circle him. They taunt him, then pierce his shoulders with darts. Strength begins to ebb from his body. Intense pain begins to dull his wits. He is now afraid. He reacts with rage. He will not be calmed.

Oh, how magnificent he is in his anger; oh how fearful he is in his display of remaining strength. He rips around the arena, tossing his head to and fro. He roars like a lion at anything that dares to move.

The crowd becomes nervous. Can *anyone* face this fearsome creature now?

Enter El Matador!

Enter *el matador*. The day does not belong to the bull. It belongs to him. And he will have the glory. He will wave his red *muleta* in the face of the bull, and he will draw the bull's charge again and again.

If the bull were to lie down peacefully and submit to his sword, the matador would receive no honor. There would be no shouts of *Ole!* But the bull is crazed with pain, and he rushes on. Each time the *muleta* is waved he charges forward. With shoulders squared to the target, head low, and mighty horns in position to rip flesh from bone his goal is to spill as much matador blood as physically possible. At the most dramatic moment possible however the matador pulls away the *muleta* ... and in its place the bull sees only the glint of a glimmering sword. Alas, it is too late for the bull to withdraw now. The sword will flash, and the blood that will be spilled will not be matador blood. And the bull will never again bask in the sun.

The Bullfight of Life

This week's parsha has all the earmarks of a *bullfight*. So does life. Sometimes we are *the bull* - like Pharaoh in this week's parsha. Sometimes we are *the crowd* - who merely observes and *ooh's* and *ahh's*. Sometimes we are the *picadores* or *banderillos* who are given the task of setting the stage for the event. Sometimes we are the *muleta* that He waves in front of a manic or a despot like Hitler, or Mussolini, or Saddam Hussein ... or Hezbollah's Nasrallah or Turkey's Erdogan. But the Holy One is always *El Matador*. To him be all glory, forever and ever.

Haftarah Beshelach

Judges 4:4 – 5:31

The traditional haftarah reading for the week of *Beshelach* is the so-called "*Song of Devorah*" and its associated narrative. This song [Hebrew, *shir*] is a lyric poem

commemorating a great miracle wrought by the Holy One when He caused the mighty war chariots of the Kena'ani general Sisera to bog down in a supernatural flood at the Brook Kishon, and thereby enabled a much smaller force of Hebrews to defeat them and end a long season of Kena'ani oppression.

The setting for this miracle of the Holy One is the dark period of Hebrew history known as the period of 'Judges'. In this era, which followed the deaths of Y'hoshua and Kalev, Israel had neither a prophet like unto Moshe, a general like unto Y'hoshua, a fiery warrior like Kalev, or a king. Every man did what was right - or at least what for the moment seemed expedient – in his own eyes.

This vacuum of leadership either led to or resulted from a lagging in passion to complete the conquest of the Land as the Holy One had directed. Just as the Holy One had warned them, compromise with the Kena'ani led to gradual acceptance of Kena'ani cultic religious practices and hedonistic lifestyles. This in turn led to a general distractedness and weakening of the men of Israel that dulled their passion for the Holy One and for His ways. They gradually lost their ability - not to mention their will – to remember who they were called to be and how they were called to live.

With this loss of their sense of identity, destiny, and purpose came the loss of the will to resist the fleshly temptations and occult seductions offered by the nations they had been called to judge. Unfaithfulness to the Holy One and to His Torah became the rule rather than the exception. The spiritual essence of those years is described in Judges 2:12-14 as follows:

*... they forsook the Holy One, the God of their fathers,
who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; and they followed other gods
from among the gods of the people who were all around them, '
and they bowed down to them; and they provoked the Holy One to anger.
They forsook the Holy One and served Baal and the Ashtoreths.
And the anger of the Holy One was hot against Israel.
So He delivered them into the hands of plunderers who despoiled them*

While the wayward Bride-nation that the Holy One had betrothed to Himself on Mount Sinai was being allowed to suffer some serious consequences of her infidelity to her vows of betrothal, however, she was by no means forsaken or put away by her Divine Bridegroom. As the author of the Book of Judges points out, despite her many sins against Him: *Nevertheless, the Holy One raised up judges who delivered them out of the hand of those who plundered them. Judges 2:16.*

The more Israel was unfaithful the more the Holy One raised up oppressors to come against her to *threaten her, chastise her, and bring her to t'shuvah*. And yet, when she would finally cry out to the Holy One He would send her a deliverer,

someone the writer calls a ‘judge’. But the writer tells us also that alas:

*... when the judge was dead they reverted, and behaved more corruptly than their fathers,
by following other gods, to serve them and bow down to them.
They did not cease from their own doings nor from their stubborn way.*

[Judges 2:19]

As our *haftarah ha-shavua* [the haftarah of the week] begins, a period of foreign occupation, domination, and oppression is in full force. The oppressor of the hour is *Sisera*, captain of the allied Kena’ani forces. Sisera has 900 iron war chariots at his disposal. In case you have forgotten, that is 300 more chariots than Pharaoh brought against us at the Sea of Reeds.

Sisera’s army is a fierce and formidable force indeed. When the people cry out to the Holy One concerning the oppression of Sisera, however, the Holy One *hears their cries*. Who does he raise up to deliver them? The answer may surprise you. He raises up two women, *Devorah* and *Yael*, to play the key roles in the deliverance. Neither is a warrior. *Devorah* is a prophetess; and *Yael* is a simple housewife – and a *foreigner* to boot. The warrior amongst the Holy One’s people who seemed the most likely candidate to lead them to freedom - a man named *Barak* – was unwilling to do anything unless *Devorah* went to war with him, directing his steps with prophetic insight.

Who Are These People to Us?

We really know very little of the woman called *Devorah*. We know that in Hebrew her name means bee, and that she is not the first person in the Bible with that name. Rivkah’s nursemaid, who went with her when she left Charan and served as wet nurse for Esav and Ya’akov, was also named *Devorah*. Perhaps the Divine Writer is hinting that the second *Devorah*, the heroine of our haftarah, was in essence a kind of spiritual wet nurse for Israel, just as her namesake had been a physical wet nurse for Ya’akov.

We are not told any details of this latter *Devorah*’s lineage, nor indeed even from which of the tribes of Israel - *if any* - she hailed. Though she is called a *prophetess* [Hebrew *nabiah*], and it is clear from the story that she heard from the Holy One and spoke true words of prophecy, we are given no insight whatever into how she received her prophetic calling or how the Holy One went about lifting her through the ancient ‘glass ceiling’ of male-dominated society to a role of leadership. We are not told of even one of the ‘God-encounters’ she experienced, or of what kind of training she had in the Torah. We are not told of any connection between her and the *Mish’kan* [Tabernacle], which was designed by the Holy One to serve as the center of all Hebraic life. We are told simply that this *Devorah* was the wife of a man named *Lapidot* [a plural Hebrew noun meaning *torches* or *lamps*], that she took up

her seat of judgment neither in the gates of any city nor at the *Mish'kan* as might be expected but *under a palm tree* in the territorial allocation of Efrayim between the villages of *Beit-El* and *Ramah*, and that there at that remote location the people brought their controversies to her for judgment. **Judges 4:4-5**. Interestingly, this location would have been in close proximity to the place where the first Devorah was buried, which Torah tells us was near *Beit-El*, under an *oak tree* that was then known as the 'oak of weeping'. **Genesis 35:8**. As you may recall, Devorah's death took place right after Ya'akov led his family in the first recorded act of *t'shuvah* [turning, repentance]. **Genesis 35:1-7**.

As the haftarah begins Devorah is prophetically sending for and calling forth *Barak* [whose name means *lightning*] to lead the forces of Israel in a revolt against Sisera's army.

*Go and deploy troops at Mount Tabor
take with you ten thousand men of the sons of Naftali and of the sons of Zebulun;
and against you I will deploy Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army,
with his chariots and his multitude at the Brook Kishon*

What do we know of *Barak*? Not much more than we know about Devorah, really. From where he is living at the time of Devorah's call [*i.e.* at *Kadesh-Naftali*] we assume he is of the tribe of Naftali.

What Devorah asked of Barak must have, on the surface of things, seemed like a foolhardy and most likely suicidal mission. The place at which Devorah told Barak to muster troops was the steep summit of Mount Tabor – traditionally believed to be the Mount of Yeshua's transfiguration. This mountain is located about 5 miles West of the Galilean village of *Natzret* [Nazareth]. To the South this mountain overlooks the great prophetic battleground sometimes called the *Plain of Esdraelon* and other times called the Valley of *Megiddo*.

Mount Tabor is on the border of the tribal allotments of Yissakhar and Zevulun. Its summit was approximately 45 miles to the North of the palm tree at which Devorah sat and judged controversies, and a good bit south of Barak's home at *Kadesh-Naftali*. The Brook Kishon, where Devorah said the Holy One had directed that the decisive confrontation with Sisera's mighty army was to take place, carries the run-off of waters Westward/Northwestward toward the Mediterranean Sea at the lowest elevations of the Valley of *Megiddo*.

Kishon means *winding, twisting, tortuous*, and this brook, which eventually broadens to a river as it flows Westward, is definitely that. The name *Kishon* is derived from a Hebrew verb that means to *bait a hook* or *lay a snare*. The Holy One wanted Barak's act of mustering of an army on Mount Tabor to lure/draw/entice Sisera and his army to deploy themselves in full battle array in the

plain located at the base of – and only exit from - the mountain.

When Barak hears the prophetess' direction, he is understandably cautious. Drawing the full, far superior force of one's enemy into one's home territory is not something one does lightly. He tells Devorah: "*If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go!*" Judges 4:8. Perhaps Barak thought this would make Devorah rethink the whole idea and leave him alone. Or perhaps he recognized the critical importance of embarking on every stage of such a dangerous enterprise only pursuant to the kind of Divine revelation and counsel he knew Devorah could provide.

Whatever his motivation in responding as he did, the Holy One was no more put off by Barak's reluctance to step up and fulfill his destiny than He had been by Moshe's. The Holy One had determined that deliverance for Israel was coming one way or the other. The question was, at this point, simply who *did* and who *did not want* to participate.

Probably to Barak's great surprise, Devorah agreed to be embedded with him on the battle lines. She was so sure of the prophetic word that she had received that she was fully willing to face down Sisera's armaments and multitudes right alongside her countryman. She therefore left her judgment seat near Beit-El and traveled to Barak's home village of Kedesh-Naftali, where she and Barak called together a force of 10,000 men from only two tribes - the tribes of Naftali and Zevulun. These tribes were, of course, the tribes whose homes and villages were located nearest to the location where the Holy One had ordained that the battle take place, and who therefore had the most 'at stake' in the battle.

Sisera's forces had chariots and horses and multitudes. The Hebrews had nothing but hand weapons. Sisera's forces far outnumbered Barak's 10,000-man force. The odds looked totally stacked in Sisera's favor. Thinking he had Barak's rag-tag army trapped and isolated on Mount Tabor Sisera responded as Devorah had predicted. He appeared right on schedule and deployed his army and chariot corps in the valley of Megiddo. He appeared to be perfectly positioned to crush the Hebrew resistance forever. Unbeknownst to Sisera however the trap that had been set was the trap of the Holy One of Israel, not the trap he had in mind; and the prey that had fallen in the trap was not Barak's army, but his. The Holy One caused the Brook *Kishon* to overflow its banks and flood the entire valley. This immobilized Sisera's mighty chariots of war and threw his army into confusion. Mired in the muck, the fearsome chariots of iron began to sink like stones. They became *liabilities* in the battle *instead of assets*. The smaller force of Hebrews rushed on the befuddled, confused Kena'ani multitudes with bows, sledges, and swords and

utterly destroyed them. Sisera was the only one to get away alive.

Ah, but we have not yet spoken of *Ya'el*, the housewife descended from a clan of Midyanim called Kenites. Let us consider her story, as well. She was the wife of a Kenite called *Heber*, who up to this point had been an ally of Sisera's king Yabin. She and her husband had heretofore been no friends of Israel. But as the battle unfolded before her tent, either the Holy One somehow turned her heart or she just realized the battle was lost and that her best bet for the protection of her household was to assist the clear winners of the battle - i.e. the Hebrews - not to remain associated in their minds with the defeated Kena'ani.

So here is Ya'el's story. When Sisera saw the battle was going to end badly for his army he 'alighted from his chariot' and fled for his life. Ya'el saw this, approached him, and offered him a place to hide in her tent. He accepted, knowing he husband was an ally of his king. After Ya'el had taken Sisera into her tent, fed him milk, hidden him from view by covering him with a blanket, and promised to keep his presence there a secret from the Hebrews, he drifted off to sleep. Once he fell asleep, Ya'el turned on him, grabbed a mallet in one hand and a tent peg in the other, drove the tent peg through his temple, then called Barak and showed him where to find Sisera's body. Devorah then sang a song of victory. The song begins wonderfully:

Shim'u melachim ha-azinu roznim

Hear, O you kings; give ear, O you princes.

anochi l'Anochi

I am for the Holy One

anochi ashirah azamer l'Adonai Elohei Yisra'el

I will sing praise to Holy One, the God of Israel.

[Judges 5:3]

From this beautiful and inspiring beginning, however, the song degenerates quickly. Instead of being a song of praise of the Holy One it turns out to be a song applauding the men who fought the battle, chastising those who did not participate in the battle and even taunting the fallen Syrians. It becomes the perfect contrast to the 'Song of the Sea', from Exodus 15. The Song of the Sea represents praise *perfected* – a spontaneous, God-glorifying song birthed of the Ruach of the Holy One. The Song of Devorah, on the other hand, represents praise *corrupted* – a human-crafted ode purporting to praise the Holy One but in reality praising man and attributing to men the honor and glory due only to God. It ends, fittingly enough, with a rather sickening bit of gloating over the grief of Sisera's bereaved mother.

Learn well the difference between the Song of the Sea and the Song of Devorah.

Learn to distinguish between the holy and the profane. One song is the essence of praise. The other song is the antithesis of praise.

***The Reading from the Apostolic Scriptures
Corresponding to Parsha Beshelach***

John 6:31-51 [*The Master's 'Song of Signs and Wonders'*]

In this week's reading from the Apostolic narratives, Yeshua will be teaching in the village of *K'far-Nahum* [Capernaum] by the Sea of Galilee. In the verses selected for this week He will give an in-depth teaching on the subject of the Holy One's '*otot*' – miraculous signs.

The verses leading up to this teaching have set the stage for it. *Otot* are coming fast and furious for Yeshua and are drawing a crowd. A few verses earlier in chapter 6 of Yochanan's account of Yeshua's life Yeshua had blessed the Creator as "*The Holy One, King of the Universe, Who Brings forth Bread from the Earth*" over 5 barley loaves and 2 fishes. In response to this blessing, the Holy One performed a stunning *ot* [sign, wonder] among the people, *multiplying the loaves and fishes* so as to be more than enough to feed all 5,000 men plus the women and children that accompanied them. In the next sequence of verses Yeshua was seen *walking on the water*. **John 6:17-20**. Following that, the boat into which Yeshua entered was *miraculously transported across the Sea of Galilee*. **John 6:21**.

The result of all of this is that the *otot* [signs] have become somewhat of a 'side-show'. Many of the people who are flocking to see Yeshua now are no longer seekers of righteousness hungry to be restored in spirit to the Holy One's true Torah and to surrender their hearts, minds, souls, and indeed very lives to His will – but are instead primarily *spiritual thrill seekers*. See for instance John 6:28, where the question on the collective lips of the crowd is said to be: *What shall we do that we might work the miraculous works [otot] of the Holy One?*

Be wary of people whose primary focus is upon miracles. From such the Holy One always *hides Himself*. The Holy One is not a carnival magician. He does not pull rabbits out of hats – or heal people – to *draw a crowd* or to *coax an offering*. He calls us *to be like Him* - not to imitate Pharaoh's 'court magicians'. So Yeshua teaches what the Holy One's *otot* are and are not all about. First of all, they are not about the person(s) by whose hand the Holy One causes the *otot* to be made manifest – they are *about the Holy One and Him alone*. **John 6:32**. *No one* is to share His glory. Or as Yeshua put it, when the manna from heaven was attributed to Moshe:

***Truly, truly, I tell you, Moshe did not give you that bread from heaven;
It is my Father Who really gives bread from heaven.***

Did you know that never in his life did Moshe ever perform a single miracle? All Moshe did was to *sh'ma* the Voice of the Holy One. In the course of *sh'ma*-ing the Holy One's Voice, he was given the opportunity to *participate in* several miracles that the Holy One had determined to perform in his presence. Moshe was no 'miracle worker' – he was just a man who knew – and was changed from the inside out by - the Voice of the Holy One.

Moshe was a *sh'ma* person. And that is what all the Holy One's people are called to be. That is our first and foremost calling. **Mark 12:28-29**. And please note one other piece of information about Moshe. Did you know that the very first time Moshe claimed credit for an *ot* –when he struck the Rock the second time, and implied it was he that brought forth water for the people - the Holy One *denied him further participation rights*? Oh Beloved – please do not ever claim any credit – for yourself or any ministry – for any miracle or wondrous sign the Holy One does.

Secondly, the reason the Holy One performs *otot* is in order that people may see *the Yeshua of the Holy One*. In this week's Torah, Moshe will declare at the banks of the Sea of Reeds as Pharaoh's war-chariots bear down on us: “***Stand and see the Yeshua of the Holy One!***” **Exodus 14:13**. Yeshua's teaching is in the same vein – that the manna from Heaven, and the bread miraculously provided – is Himself – the Yeshua of the Holy One.

This week may Yeshua's teaching on the purpose and significance of miracles – otot – radically change your life.

The Rabbi's son

Amidah Prayer Focus for the Week

Petition No. 13. Retzeh - The Prayer for Intimate Relationship - Traditionally called Avodah

Retzeh Adonai Eloheinu

Take delight, Oh Holy One our God,

B'amecha Yisrael v' b't'filatam

In Your people Israel, and in their prayers,

v'hashev et-ha-avodah l' d'vir bayiteicha

and restore true worship to Your House.

v'aishi Yisrael v t'filatam

And the fire of Israel, and their prayers,

b'ahava t'k'vel b'ratzon

Take pleasure in, and receive unto Yourself with love.

v' t'hi l'ratzon tamid avodah Yisrael ameicha

And may You always take pleasure in the worship of Your people Israel

v't'chezinah ay'ninu b'shuveicha l'Tzion b'rachamim

And may our eyes behold Your Compassionate Mercies returning to Zion.

Baruch Atah Adonai ha-mach'zir sh'kinato l'Tzion

Blessed are You, Oh Holy One, Who is restoring His Sh'kinah to Zion.