

**BESHALACH (EXODUS 13:17-17:16)**

## Sticks and Stones

2006 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

The People of Israel were thirsty. Very thirsty. They had left Egypt over a month ago, and they already seen many miracles. They saw the Ten Plagues in Egypt and they saw the splitting of the Red Sea. They saw Moses miraculously turn bitter waters sweet and Manna that came down from Heaven. But now they were out of water and they were thirsty.

*The people began to quarrel with Moses. “Give us water to drink!” they exclaimed... “Why did you bring us out of Egypt? ...Do you want to make me, my children, and my livestock die of thirst?”*

*Moses cried out to G-d. “What shall I do for this nation? Before long, they will stone me!”*

*G-d said to Moses, “March before the people along with the elders of Israel. Take in your hand the staff with which you struck the (Nile) River, and go. I will stand before you there on the rock...Hit the rock, and water will come out for the people to drink.” (Exodus, 17:2-6)*

Moses lifted his “magic wand” and struck the rock, and out flowed the water. That rock miraculously followed them through the desert, providing water for forty years.

This was obviously one very powerful stick. Moses had pulled it out of the ground in his future father-in-law’s garden, a feat that no one else was able to accomplish. As a result, Jethro understood that Moses was destined to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. (The origin, perhaps, of the legend of King Arthur and Excalibur???)

This staff had belonged to Adam, his son Seth, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. By pulling it out of Jethro’s garden, Moses became its owner. This was the staff that turned into a snake. This was the staff that turned the Nile to blood and wreaked havoc and destruction upon the Egyptians. This stick had punished the Egyptians at the Red Sea. And now, it turned on the water for the Israelites.

The Torah often refers to this rod, which was, by the way, made of sapphire, as, simply, “*your staff*.” Only here do we see the additional description of “*...the staff with which you struck the River...*” Since this was, presumably, the only staff Moses carried, what was the point of identifying it?

Apparently, the Israelites didn’t particularly care for Moses’ walking stick. It was destructive. It caused suffering in Egypt, and at the Red Sea. It was a killer stick. It seemed only good for punishment. Was it capable of doing anything POSITIVE??

Rashi explains that the Torah emphasizes that contrary to the then-popular opinion, “...*the staff with which you struck the River...*” could also be used for good.

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This is very curious. Rashi seems to imply that the Israelites were wrong in their assessment of the stick. The Torah, says Rashi, is showing them the error in their thinking. They were now being shown that the life taker could also be a life giver.

But were they wrong? Consider, for example, the end of next week’s Torah Portion:

*When you will build a stone Altar for Me, do not build it out of cut stone. Your sword will have been lifted against it, you will have profaned it. (Ibid, 20:22)*

If a piece of iron so much as touches a stone of the Altar, that stone has to be replaced. Iron, the raw material used by sword makers, is a life shortener. The Altar is a life lengthener. The two don’t mix.

For the same reason, King David was not permitted to build the Temple. Yes, he was a righteous man, the composer of most of the Psalms. But he was also a warrior. Therefore, the building of the Temple had to wait for David’s son Solomon.

So why did Moses use his “Punishing Stick” as a “Watering Stick?” What is the difference between the using his “Egypt Terminator” for water and a sword for the Altar or a warrior as a Temple builder?

I would like to suggest an answer.

It is customary to ask righteous people to pray for us. Not only is this so in the case of the living righteous. We also have the custom of praying at the graves of the righteous, hoping that the merits of these great people will lend credence to our prayers. We ask the souls of these special people to appeal to G-d on our behalf. (See See “Mama’s Tears”.)

It is told that there was a great Chassidic leader whose blessings carried a great deal of weight in Heaven. Whenever the government passed a new decree against the Jews, he would pray to G-d and the decree would be annulled. A new decree came up, and one of his students asked the Rebbe to declare a public fast. The Rebbe confided to his disciple that he had learned that he was to die in a few days. “Rather than trouble the people by making them fast, just wait a few days, and I will bring my appeal directly to the Heavenly Tribunal.”

Sure enough, a short time later, the Rebbe returned his soul to its Creator, and his Chassid waited with anticipation for the anti-Semitic decree to be canceled. That cancellation didn’t come.

He went to the Rebbe’s grave. “Great and holy Rebbe!” he called out. “We always turned to you in your lifetime in our times of trouble. Please! Why have you not brought about our salvation?”

Shortly afterward, the Rebbe appeared to him in a dream. “My dear student,” he said. “When I walked with you on earth, I shared your limited understanding of how things work. I wasn’t capable of comprehending the ultimate reason behind human suffering. It was simply unfathomable to me. When things went badly for us, I begged G-d to change His Mind. But now that I am here in the World of Truth, I can see the whole picture. I now understand G-d’s mysterious ways. I now understand why bad things sometimes happen to good people. And therefore, I am no longer in a position to intercede on your behalf. You’re going to have to find someone else to pray for you.”

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When very good things happen to us, we are supposed to recite a blessing, “...that He has given us life, and sustained us, and brought us to this day.” (An alternate blessing is, “...He is good and does good.” There are distinct rules as to the circumstances that determine which of these two “good times” blessings is recited.) Someone who wins a million dollars in a lottery would say this blessing.

When, G-d forbid, tragic events take place, the blessing is, “...He is the true Judge.” Someone who loses a loved one, G-d forbid, would recite this blessing. This blessing is supposed to be said with as much love of G-d and appreciation of His ways as the person is able to muster.

Someone who loses a parent and inherits a million dollars says BOTH blessings!!!

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We regular people have a hard time telling things apart. War is bad. Killing is bad. Peace is good.

Not always. War against evil is good. Killing terrorists is good. Peace with Hamas is suicide.

Guns and swords kill. That’s bad. (Sometimes.) You can’t use a sword to build an Altar, because in our perception, a sword kills, and in our perception, we tend to see destruction of human life as generally negative.

So why was Moses permitted to use his “Punisher” as a waterer? Perhaps the difference between Moses and his nation was similar to the difference between the Rebbe in Heaven and his still-terrestrial student. Moses understood G-d’s ways.

We regular people see swords and guns and bombs as sources of evil and suffering. However, even bad things somehow fit into G-d’s Master Plan. We just don’t see it. Therefore, we have to keep swords away from our Altar.

But Moses was not a regular person. He understood what we have to try to understand, but are not always capable of comprehending.

He understood that it’s all good.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

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