



5778 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein Parashat Beshalach / פרשת בשלח

Ending the Story in Yerushalayim

When the pursuing Egyptians nearly reach the defenseless Jews, Moshe naturally begins to pray to Hashem. Hashem's response, however, is startling: "The Lord said to Moses, Why do you cry out to Me? Speak to the children of Israel and let them travel."¹ God seems to be silencing Moshe's attempt to pray. Why? Isn't beseeching Hashem the proper response to a national crisis?

The midrash offers various suggestions to parse this perplexity. One perspective is that of Rabbi Yishmael:²

"Speak to the children of Israel and let them travel": In the merit of Yerushalayim I will split the sea for them as the verse states: "Awaken, awaken, put on your strength, O Zion; put on the garments of your beauty, Jerusalem the Holy City,"³ and the verse states: "Awaken, awaken, dress yourself with strength, O arm of the Lord, awaken, awaken like days of old... Are you not the one who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep? Who made the depths of the sea a road for the redeemed ones to pass?"⁴

The midrash juxtaposes two verses in Yeshyahu that use the phrase "awaken, awaken" (*uri uri*). As the first speaks of Yerushalayim and the second about the splitting of the sea, the midrash derives that it was in the merit of Yerushalayim that the sea split in the "days of old."

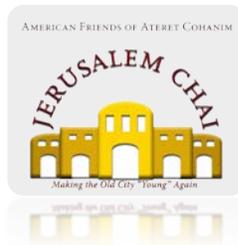
This midrash elicits two questions. First, over and above the literary connection between Yerushalayim and the splitting of the sea, what is the conceptual bond? In what way does Yerushalayim factor into God's decision to split the sea? Second, in its original context, the midrash is grappling with God's perplexing rebuke of Moshe's prayers. How does Yerushalayim answer the question?

¹ Shemot 14:15

² Mechilta DeRebbi Yishmael, maschet VaYehi, parsha 3.

³ Yeshayahu 52:1

⁴ Yeshayahu 51:9



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Perhaps this midrash is underscoring the deterministic nature of God's ultimate plan. While we still have a significant role to play in history, ultimately God wants the world to reach a certain place at a certain historical moment and any obstacles will necessarily be removed. Part of God's plan is the reawakening of Yerushalayim in the end of times and the establishment of the city as the capital of the Jewish people and of the world as a whole.

The episode of the splitting of the sea is the first major national crisis that occurs after the Jewish people emerge from Egypt with a distinct national identity. Thus, the Egyptian threat to re-enslave the Jewish people represents the first potential hazard in God's plans. In response, God wanted to emphasize that no matter the odds and no matter what obstacles stood in their way, the Jews would ultimately reach Yerushalayim in the end of times. Therefore, all other efforts were unnecessary and superfluous; all the Jews needed to do was advance. God would ensure that they would end their journey in Yerushalayim.