

## **Parshat Beshalach and the Blessing of Being Remembered**

### **By Hannah Greenberg, Class of 2029**

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Most of us know what it feels like to be forgotten. A friend forgets to call back. A birthday goes unnoticed. You speak in a meeting and no one seems to hear. These tiny fractures accumulate and leave us wondering whether our presence truly matters. Judaism does not shy away from this experience. In fact, the Talmud argues that, at the edge of the Red Sea, an entire nation wondered whether they, too, had slipped through the cracks of history. At that moment, they realized that they had gone on a journey to be remembered. The Talmud connects this moment of remembrance to the following bracha: "Blessed are You, God, Who remembers the forgotten."

Appearing in Masechet Ta'anit (15a), as part of the special blessings recited on communal fast days, the Gemara connects the meaning of this blessing to the moment when the Israelites stood before the Red Sea, trapped between Pharaoh's army and the water. When God splits the sea and provides them safe passage out of Egypt, the Israelites finally see that God has not forgotten them. But what would it mean for the Israelites to be "forgotten?"

In Parshat Beshalach, we meet a people newly freed from slavery. After 410 years in Egypt, generations of suffering and silence, this is a group that has no memory of having a relationship with the Divine and has no framework for what freedom means. They are a group seemingly abandoned by those who hold power, both human and Divine; destined to be stuck in Egypt and left in slavery.

When they finally leave Egypt, God could have chosen to take the Israelites on a more direct route through the land of Philistines. Instead they go on a roundabout journey. Why? In the fog and chaos of war, emotions are high. With Egypt on their heels, God anticipates a change of heart and knows that fear could fuel a desire to return to the familiarity of Egypt. God therefore chooses to bring them on a longer path without a possibility of return, because it is the kinder, gentler way for a vulnerable people. The Israelites have been enslaved for centuries; they have no confidence and no experience of faith. They have been forgotten, and they have forgotten what it means to have faith and be taken care of by a higher power. This miraculous route, which leads to the splitting of the sea, becomes an act of return to having a relationship with the Divine. God teaches them how to slowly trust again and sets the stage for one final encounter with Pharaoh (Shemot 14:3).

Ibn Ezra, a 10th century Spanish commentator, notes that God's choice is striking. Instead of bringing the Israelites through a human war, which they were not yet prepared to fight, God brings them into circumstances where the Divine can be revealed. It is, in a sense, a controlled trial; a passage through fire and water, to transform fear into faith. The people must see and act to learn that they are not forgotten. When the Israelites panic at the Egyptian display of power, Moshe cries out to God and God

responds sharply, asking: “Why do you cry out to me!? Speak to the Children of Israel, and march forward! (Shemot 14:15).”

According to Sforno, an Italian commentator from the 14th century, Moshe’s cry highlights how he feared that the people would refuse to enter the sea and fail this test of faith. God rebukes him: Do not assume the worst; the people are ready. God rejects this panicked prayer without action; return and redemption begins when they step forward into the water. And so, God’s remembrance becomes visible through action, through power, and through presence. The Israelites learn that they were never truly forgotten. But something else happens too; they remember God. This mutual remembering restarts their relationship.

Remembering, in the Torah, is not a quiet or internal act. It takes the form of movement, intervention, or renewed relationship. When God “remembers—vayizkor,” God acts: God remembers Noach and causes the floodwaters to recede (Bereishit 8:1); God remembers Rachel and opens her womb (Bereishit 30:22); God remembers the covenant and begins Israel’s redemption (Shemot 2:24).

Here at the Red Sea, God remembers Israel by acting decisively: splitting the sea, protecting them, and revealing the Divine presence. It is this action that the Gemara in Ta’anit invokes when stating “God remembers those who are forgotten,” a reminder that actions inspire belief. Here, the Israelites, in turn, remember God by acting on faith, and stepping forward into the water before it parts. That first act of courage renews the relationship. Remembering becomes a proactive choice to re-engage.

Every day in davening we recall this act of faith, and each week we act on our remembering by reciting Kiddush. Throughout the year we remember by doing: when we eat matzah at Seder, when we build our Sukkah, and when we say Yizkor. Each act becomes another moment of stepping in or stepping up toward God, trusting that the Divine will support us, meet us, and bring us through the other side.

“Blessed are You, God, Who remembers the forgotten.”

This blessing is not only about Divine memory. It is about relationships restored through action. At the Red Sea, God remembered Israel, and Israel remembered God. And ever since, when we feel abandoned or unseen, we are reminded that remembering is not a passive act. It is stepping forward, even when the sea has not yet parted. Like our ancestors, we are called to move forward and to trust that even in moments of silence, we are never truly forgotten.

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