

Parshat Beshalach

Think First!

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In honor and memory of Rabbi Shraga Feivel Wagner zt"l

In Mesillat Yesharim, ch. 2, R. Moshe Chaim Luzatto (Ramchal) discusses מדת הזהירות, the trait of carefulness. He states:

מתבונן ומפקח על מעשיו ודרכיו הטובים הם אם לא, לבלתי עזב נפשו לסכנת האבדון, חס וחלילה, ולא ילך במהלך הרגלו כעור באפלה.

Basically, a person is meant to think first before acting and not go forth acting in habit without thinking, like a blind man in the dark. Further on, Ramchal quotes a pasuk in Yirmiya (8:6):

אין איש נחם על רעתו לאמר מה עשיתי, כלה שב במרוצתם כסוס שוטף במלחמה.

"No man relents of his evil, saying, 'What have I done.'" In other words, they are constantly propelled forward by their habits and ways, without leaving themselves time to examine their actions. As a result, they fall into wrong doing without being aware.

In this week's parsha, Parshat Beshalach, the Egyptians become the test subjects for Hashem to reveal his awesome power to the world. In real-time, the Torah describes intricately the actions of the Egyptians, to teach us the very same lesson that Ramchal was trying to teach us in the section above. In the end of ch. 13 and beginning of ch. 14 of this week's parsha, Hashem sets the trap to ensnare the Egyptians. Pharaoh and the Egyptians take the bait and with that, ויהפך לבב, the people have a change of heart regarding Bnei Yisrael. For those who are wondering – what were they thinking!?! Suddenly, all of Egypt forgot what had happened to them while the Jews were there?! Sure they were good workers – but all their crops, animals and firstborns were destroyed because of the presence of these Jews! Did they even think about what they would do once they confronted Bnei Yisrael near the sea?

If we look closely at verses 5 and 6, we notice that Egypt regrets sending out the slaves and then rush to their saddles. They don't appear to factor thinking into their plans. In fact in v. 5 they ask the rather silly question, "What is this that we have done that we have sent away Israel from serving us?" I apologize; let me answer the question for them: Because these people will be the death of you! Did not one person stop to think for a second? Maybe they had a good reason for their change of heart. Rashi gives tells us the reason: בשביל ממונם שהשאילום, because of the property that they had lent to Bnei Yisrael. These pots must have been something special to want to risk their lives for!

In answer to why they didn't stop to think, we turn to Bereishit Rabbah, which teaches us that hate disrupts protocol, as we see from Pharaoh who "made ready his chariot" rather than asking a servant to saddle it for him. It appears that the sum total of their hatred and greed disrupted their better judgment. Pharaoh, at least, must have had brain atrophy, because the trend of not thinking was a recurring theme during the ordeal of the plagues for him. Pharaoh appeared to do his best thinking only once tragedy hit Egypt. As Pharaoh with his army ran out to confront Bnei Yisrael, Hashem hardened his heart so that who could not see

clearly. Here were a couple thousand Egyptians charging at a mass of nearly two million people, armed and going out with a great show of power, as it says, **ובני ישראל יצאים ביד רמה** (Shemot 14:8)

Let's briefly take a step back. Multiple times during the previous Parshas, whenever the Torah writes a list of objects or groups of people, the pasuk is trying to teach a lesson. The normal explanation presented by Rashi would describe the list as an order or rank of those deserving punishment. Now if we return to our parsha and analyze the next pasuk, we find a very similar list. As the pasuk says, **כל סוס רכב, פרעה ופרשיו וחילו** (14:8)

Now, in this pasuk, the idea that this is a list of the order of punishment doesn't quite seem to fit, because why would the horses have been put first on the list of those deserving punishment? One could point out that is simply the order in which they came, but if that were the answer, then why did the Torah mention it at all. Interestingly, these were some rather funny horses; these horses were willing to plunge into the midst of the split sea after Bnei Yisrael. Once again I don't quite understand. To the best of my memory, horses scare easily, yet these horses didn't appear to lose a step as they hurtled themselves toward dry land surrounded by two large walls of flowing water.

There appears to be only one explanation for this. These were not ordinary horses; these were horses of battle. Rav Orlofsky describes the significance of the warhorse's training in his shiur on the section of the Mesillat Yesharim quoted above. He says that what is special about the warhorse is that the owner keeps the animal so busy it does not have a second to think and use its survival instincts to flee, thus allowing the animal to be able to charge headlong into the most dangerous of places.

Now, back to our story of Pharaoh and his army. In v. 10 it says that when Bnei Yisrael looked up and saw the Egyptians charging toward them, **והנה מצרים נוסע, אחריהם**, "Egypt was traveling after them," and Rashi comments: "with one heart, as one man." Together they went thoughtlessly to their end. If we look at the pesukim that refer to the horses it is always written in the singular. So now, let's answer the question of why the horses were mentioned first. The reason is that they symbolically represent Egypt.

How better to show the lack of thought; the Egyptians were led by the thoughtless war-horses that they thoughtlessly attached to their chariots as they charged to battle Hashem and His people! And as it says in v. 24-25, Hashem confused the Egyptians, **ויהם את המחנה מצרים**, and with their last words they declare, **אנוסה מפני ישראל, כי ה' נלחם להם במצרים**, "Let me flee before Israel, for Hashem is fighting for them against Egypt." Even at this last moment of their lives, some of the Egyptians soldiers continued to charge into the sea even as it was closing on top of them, as the pasuk says, **ומצרים נסים לקראתו**, "Egypt were fleeing towards it."

One should learn well this lesson from the Torah, so as not to come rushing blindly like a warhorse toward his or her own downfall. And what in the verses crystallizes this warning? The fact that the parsha strangely begins by stating the planned thought of Hashem for not sending **בני ישראל** by the shorter path, "Lest the people regret when they see battle, and they will return to Egypt." (13:17)