

Marking the conclusion of Sefer Shemot and the inauguration of the Mishkan on the 1st of Nissan.¹

Parashat Hachodesh ("Machar Chodesh"), Rosh Chodesh Nissan,² and the start of spring.³

The Parable of the Cave and the Sea

Pesikta Rabbati, Parasha 5, Shir Hashirim Rabbah 3:1

It is written: "Even the heavens and the highest heavens cannot contain you," and here it is written: "and the glory of God filled the tabernacle." Yehoshua of Sachnin said in the name of R. Levy: To what is this similar? To an open cave on the seashore. The sea will rage, and the cave will be filled, but the sea is not diminished. Similarly, although it is written "and the glory of God filled the tabernacle," those in the heavens and those on earth were not lacking.⁴

Shemot Rabbah 45:3

We find that it is written "And God *spoke* to Moshe," "And God *said* to Moshe," and also, "Moshe *said* to God," "Moshe *spoke* to God" – A parable for this might be a cave on the seashore. The sea rose, and filled the cave; the sea did not move away; rather, from here on in, the sea would give to the cave, and the cave to the sea.⁵

Note: a good darshan (exegetic) is more than a well-read scholar with depth of thought; a good darshan is also soulful, is in touch with the world around him, and understands human nature. He has a keen eye for nature and is touched by its magic; he takes the time to stop and internalize, to

¹ Shabbat 87b: "And it came to pass in the first month in the second year, on the first day of the month, that the tabernacle was erected - It was taught: That day was awarded ten crowns; the first day of creation [Sunday], the first day of the offerings brought by the princes, the first day of the priesthood, the first day of service in the Temple, the first time for the descent of fire onto the altar, the first time that consecrated foods were eaten, the first day of the resting of the Divine Presence upon the Jewish people, the first day that the Jewish people were blessed by the priests, the first day of the prohibition to bring offerings on improvised altars, and first of the months." See [The first of Nissan](#) on Parashat Hachodesh. Vayakhel-Pekudei, which conclude Sefer Shemot and describe the conclusion and erection of the Tabernacle, are often read on the same Shabbat as Parashat Hachodesh, with tidings of Rosh Chodesh Nissan, the day on which the Tabernacle was inaugurated.

² Mishna Rosh Hashana 1:1: "There are four days in the year that serve as the New Year: On the first of Nissan is the New Year for kings and festivals." Pinchas Kehati explains: "For kings – for counting the years of the kings of Israel [...] the mishna makes an analogy between the beginning of Shlomo's kingship and Yetziat Mitzrayim; just as the latter took place in Nissan, so too the former took place in Nissan." The years of the kings of other nations are counted from the first of Tishrei, which is the universal New Year (in fact, Tishrei is the New Year for most purposes; see [This is the day on which the world was conceived](#) for Rosh Hashana). However, the years of the kings of Israel are counted from Nissan, since their status is derived from Yetziat Mitzrayim. Nissan also determines the time of the festivals: "Pesach, which is celebrated in Nissan, is the first festival of the year [...] and one does not transgress the mitzvah of failing to bring a festival offering unless three festivals have passed in order: Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot" (Kehati, *ibid.*). Interestingly, the mishna lists Nissan before Tishrei, perhaps indicating that this is the primary New Year!

³ See also Bereishit Rabbah 13:12, and [The season of Tevet](#) in Vayigash.

⁴ This midrashic parable appears in many other sources such as Bemidbar Rabbah 12:4; Pesikta DeRav Kahana parasha 1, Midrash Tanhuma, Vayakhel, 7, and more. All these sources emphasize that the sea is never lacking, that is, that God's *shechina* is never lacking despite its descent to the Mishkan. Bemidbar Rabbah 12:4 explicates: "The sea raged and the cave was filled, and the sea lacked nothing. So too the Tent of Meeting was filled with the *shechina* and the world lacked nothing."

⁵We found only one parallel to this formulation, in Tanhuma, Parashat Ki Tissa, 14.

cherish the moment, and to be filled with awe. Anyone who travels along the shore in Israel, particularly by Habonim beach or Rosh Hanikra, is familiar with the beautiful view of a raging sea that fills the stone inlets and crevices. When the waves subside, the water returns to the sea. It's hard for anyone to ignore that magical effect; but it takes a good, soulful darshan to connect this natural phenomenon with lofty concepts such as the descent of God's divine spirit to earth, thus going back and forth between nature and the Beit Midrash. It is this feature that makes the midrash, especially midrashic literature written in Israel, so beautiful and relevant to our generation, particularly to those who live in Israel.

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This midrash from Shir Hashirim Rabbah addresses the problem of the *shechina*'s descent to earth, which is referred to in Kabbalah as *tzimtzum* ('contraction'): how is it possible for infinity to fit itself into a finite world? How can divinity be brought down to earth? **"There were three things Moshe heard that made him recoil; the first was when he was told: Let them make a Temple so I can dwell in their midst"** (Pesikta DeRav Kahana 2). Making a Temple may seem possible, but how can God dwell in our midst? Man may identify with the need to create a Temple in which he can reflect on the infinite; but how can the infinite descend to earth and dwell within a finite construct?⁶

The *darshan* is not a philosopher; he presents the question with all its depth and answers it through a parable. He says: look around you, go to the seashore, the meeting point between heaven and earth. Pay attention to the meeting point of the sea and the sharp stone inlets in Habonim beach, or the caves of Rosh Hanikra. Look at the sea and the cave. See how deceiving nature can be: the cave almost appears as an independent source of water, but it is not; the water comes from the sea, and the sea lacks nothing. Infinity minus one (or even one million) remains infinite. There is more to *tzimtzum* than this parable, but the parable provides some direction. Herein lies the beauty and power of the midrash.⁷

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⁶ See Sukkah 5a: "R. Yossi says: The *shechina* could never have descended to earth, and Moshe and Eliyahu could never ascended to the heavens, as it is written, *The heavens are heavens for God, and the land he has given to people*" (Ps. 115:16).

⁷ In the parallel text in footnote 4, the *darshan* raises another interesting point by indicating that not only are the heavens unharmed by the descent of the *shechina* to the Mishkan; the earth-dwellers are not harmed either: "So too the Tent of Meeting was filled with the *shechina* and *the world* lacked nothing" – in other words, it is *our* world that is lacking nothing!

The second midrash brought here, from Shemot Rabbah, takes a significant leap by pointing to the mutuality between the sea and the cave: "from here on in, the sea would give to the cave, and the cave to the sea." In order to understand this midrash we need to consider the second dialogue between Moshe and God after the sin of the Golden Calf, in Ex. 33. In the first exchange, God tells Moshe "Go down for your people have acted perversely," and Moshe pleads: "Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people." Moshe successfully persuades God to hold back from destroying the nation, at least temporarily. The second dialogue is about long term ramifications: what happens in the wake of the great disaster of the Golden Calf? How do we move forward from here? God suggests one way; Moshe argues for another. The argument between them is real and harsh; they argue about the role of the angel-messenger, about the ability to see God, about the uniqueness of Am Yisrael, and more. The *darshan's* sharp eye pays attention not only to the content of the dialogue, but also to its form and framing: "And God *spoke* to Moshe," "And God *said* to Moshe," and also, "Moshe *said* to God," "Moshe *spoke* to God." The *darshan* wants us to notice that this is a dialogue that is presented as though taking place between two equals. This is not similar to the divine revelation of "I am Hashem your God" at Sinai, which culminates in fire and smoke, thunder and lightning; this is a *conversation* between Moshe and God.

The *darshan* envisions the sea and the cave, and ponders that perhaps the movement of the water between the cave and the sea is not one-directional as it may have appeared at first glance, and that perhaps the cave too has something to say. According to the parable, the initial inspiration comes from above: "the sea rose and the cave was filled" hints to the one-directionality of the revelation at Sinai: "God spoke ... saying." At Sinai, the nation has no ability to respond. But after the great revelation, there is a window enabling dialogue. While the infinity of the divine is unharmed by the descent of the *shechina*, from here on in the human voice is part of the conversation: "Moshe said to God," "Moshe spoke to God." Once the water has reached the cave, the relationship is reciprocal, and the sea now relies on the cave – it is its 'poison and passion.'⁸ "From here on in the sea would give to the cave, and the cave to the sea" – this is a description of reciprocity. The water now belongs to the cave as much as it belongs to the sea. This reciprocity connects with the idea that the Torah is "not in the heavens," (Deut. 30:12) which is later expressed by the Rabbis in such statements as God stating "my children have won me over" (Bava Metziah 59b) or various sources that either equate the judgment in the heavens to that on earth, or even go so far as to give precedence to human judgment over divine judgment, and prefer human logic over the absoluteness of the divine Torah.⁹

A good *darshan* can connect the height of intellectualism with the simplicity of nature's beauty. But the messages of a good midrash can be lost unless one is a good reader, who can see beyond the overt messages of the midrash and seek the hidden messages embedded therein. This hidden layer is the midrashic creation itself, which has the power to create and invent. The midrash itself is the cave that received the water and returns it to the sea of Jewish thought and philosophy. But there is another layer beyond that: the reader is another "cave" which returns what he has received

⁸ See midrashic texts on the verse from Shir Hashirim, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" (Song. 1:2), and on the verse "I am to my beloved, and his passion is for me" (7:11).

⁹ See [A parable of a king who had one daughter](#) on Parashat Teruma. There, the sea, which is compared to the king, could not leave his daughter, who is the cave.

from the *darshan* and the sea of Jewish texts. Without the reader, the creation, the midrash, and the text have no real existence.

חזק חזק ונתחזק

Shabbat Shalom, Chodesh Tov, and wishing you a happy, pleasant spring!

Mehalkei Hamayim