

**Rabbi Ken Chasen**  
**“Where Is Our Miracle?”**  
**Leo Baeck Temple**  
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**Shabbat Beshalach 5784**

*Shabbat Shira*, which we welcome tonight, is for celebrating how the miraculous summons song from our souls. When Moses’s sister Miriam and those ancient Israelite women took up their timbrels and led our biblical ancestors in song at the shore of the Sea of Reeds, they were doing so in a moment of inspiration. They had just witnessed what would become the most memorable miracle in a Torah filled with miraculous moments. The sea had parted. They had escaped to the other side. And the waters had once again closed, with Pharaoh’s chariots underneath them and Egypt safely on the other side. In a gust of impossibility, the Israelites were free.

Because the image of *Shirat Hayam* – the Song of the Sea – is the most enduring one from this episode of our people’s story, it’s tempting to view those ancient Israelites as deep spiritualists... the kind of people who must have routinely had song in their souls. After all, most of us don’t know too many people who spontaneously break out in song even under the most extreme of circumstances. But the Torah sets us straight on that misconception right before the miracle at the Sea takes place. You might recall that it was looking pretty bleak for those freed Israelite slaves right before the parting of the Sea. Pharaoh had experienced a change of heart, and he had commanded his courtiers to pursue the slaves once they were pinned against the sea with no retreat. As regards that moment in the story, let’s just say there were no timbrels and no music. There was only outrage, dripping with sarcasm.

“*Ha-mib’li ein k’varim b’Mitzrayim lakachtanu lamut bamidbar?*” – “What... was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us out here to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt?” Those words are also in this week’s Torah portion. They are the words the Israelites spoke to Moses, right before they found cause to break out the timbrels.

So no, the biblical Israelites aren’t from the great spiritualists. They’re pretty much like you and me. Show me a parted sea, and I promise you I’ll find plenty to sing about. Show me inevitable violence and death with no refuge, no way out? Well, I suppose I’ll feel a lot like I do right now... like you do right now.

The relentless thrum of three and a half months of brutality and death in Israel and Gaza has done nothing to normalize what we are witnessing and weathering. As the number of the innocent dead, between both peoples, climbs further into the tens of

thousands... as millions languish in desperate humanitarian crisis... as efforts to broker a ceasefire and a return of all hostages keep coming up empty... as Hamas continues to assert its plan to murder Jews for as long as it takes to rid the world of us... as our capacity to rid the world of Hamas is revealed daily in increasing measure to be painfully nonexistent – we have settled in for a war that has no evident end. But even that has failed to normalize what we are experiencing. We know how futile this all is in our minds. We feel how futile it is in our spirits. We are suffering from how futile it is in our bodies and in our mental health. I hear this from practically every one of you... practically every person I speak with anywhere.

On this Shabbat Shira – this Shabbat of spontaneous song, elicited by the miraculous, we are left to ask, “Where is our miracle, our parted sea?”

The thing that might be most attractive to us about the Bible’s miracles is that they portray a conclusiveness for which we hunger... but which the world inevitably lacks. Manna falling from the heavens, as it will for these same Israelites as they journey on from this week’s Torah portion, is a pretty conclusive experience. It leaves little doubt about who’s right and who’s wrong, and it renders a clear winner: the people eating the manna. We so want the world to work that way. And absolutely nothing about our lives suggests that it actually does.

We spend our days in an endless reckoning over the disparity between what ought to be and what is. Fairness would produce a world in which small children are never stricken with disease – and yet they are, which is why we yearn for miracles to wash away their illnesses. We yearn for that conclusive verdict, for “clear right” to defeat “clear wrong.” A conclusive verdict to protect us from cancer when we’ve lived healthily... to save our business when it fails due to factors beyond our control... to rescue our broken family after our spouse cheats or uses or abuses. We want to live in a world where the murderer reliably gets convicted, and nobody is wrongly imprisoned – where people pay for their lies instead of advancing because of them. This is what we ache for. And it’s what the Torah gives us every now and then... when a sea parts, and the timbrels come out.

Our unsated hunger for a crisp, clear conclusion – one that renders the just a winner – probably goes farther than anything else in explaining why this awful war between Israel and Hamas has become so polarizing. The surest way to infuriate another person is to declare this war to be “complicated.” Many supporters of Israel will brand you a Hamas sympathizer, an antisemite. Supporters of the Palestinians will call you an apologist for genocide. Perhaps you have felt your own spirit being incited by a family member or friend who sees this conflict differently than you do. Where is that miracle that not only ends the savagery but proves to your interlocutor that you were the one who was right all along?

This past week, Israel's fiercest defenders and its severest critics turned to the International Court of Justice to provide the miracle. A ruling would determine who's right and who's wrong. Only it did nothing of the sort. The decisions were produced by a body of fifteen judges – some from countries that have supported Israel's right to defend itself, such as Germany and France and Australia, and some from countries that have championed the Palestinians, like Lebanon and Somalia. The U.S. had a judge in the group. So did China and Russia, who are frequently America's adversaries. Israel itself had an ad hoc judge on the case who agreed with many of the nearly unanimous rulings produced by the court. And if you look at the body of them, you are left with only one clear descriptor: it is complicated.

Can Israel's actions thus far in this war be declared a genocide? The court said no. Must Israel punish any incitement to genocide in Gaza? The court said yes. Should Israel be ordered to cease its military operations in Gaza? The court said no. Must Israel preserve evidence of its own potential violations of the Genocide Convention, to be investigated in the months and years ahead? The court said yes. Is Israel doing enough to ease the humanitarian crisis in Gaza? The court said no. Should Hamas be ordered immediately and unconditionally to free all the hostages it took from Israel on October 7<sup>th</sup>? The court said yes.

It's the kind of justice we are used to in this world. Unsatisfying, inconclusive justice. So of course, both parties and their defenders instantly rushed to declare themselves the victors, handpicking the parts of the ruling that provided vindication and ignoring the parts that acknowledged that their adversaries indeed have a moral case. No miracle. No parting of the sea. No one people standing on the shore while the other drowned. Just a deep, penetrating sea of nuance, which of course is what this situation demands and what not much of anybody wants.

If you yourself were aggravated today when the international court handed down its ruling – aggravated because it did not defend Israel enough or because it defended it too much – perhaps you are missing the real message of these past three and a half months: the manna for which you are hoping is not going to fall from the sky. Neither of these two peoples is going to achieve an unfettered victory.

Israel is not going away. It is not consenting to its own disappearance or some shared state with Palestinians that leaves the Jewish people once again a homeless minority in the world. That will not be happening. Israel is not surrendering itself as a refuge for Jews, and it is not going to tolerate genocidal ambitions against it on its borders or anywhere in the world.

And the Palestinians, with their right to self-determination, are not going away... and that includes their extremists no less than it includes Israel's own, the ones still in Israel's embattled government, who dream of either expelling or eviscerating the Palestinian people. As it turns out, Hamas and its tunnels are not so easily just "removed" with bombs and tanks, and the cost of sustaining the dream of doing so – in Israeli hostages' lives, in Israeli soldiers' lives, in Israeli treasure and well-being, in Palestinian lives by the thousands, and in political consequences all over the world, including here in the United States – the cost of that mirage is beyond imagination, much less payment. Anybody who ever believed that there won't be any more Palestinian extremists whenever this war finally ends is dreaming that the sea is going to part again... dreaming of the kind of divine intervention, absolutism, that brings on spontaneous song in the Torah.

Revisiting our ancestors' song tonight certainly reminds us why the story of the Song of the Sea was written in the first place. It's there because we want that song so desperately – and not just when terrorists attack Israel, but whenever we suffer injustices, collective or personal, that we want rendered as such and stopped. It is painful to walk alongside those injustices in our lives, but we learn how to do it. All the time, we learn how to do it. We are learning how to do it once again, as a Jewish people.

Our song will not emerge in a miraculous moment. It will come note by note, one agonizing measure at a time, one stanza of tenuous and frightening compromise after another. Israel, with the aligned hearts of Jews all over the world, will continue to wage its war for now because it must, just as the court ruled today. But the costs, both now and for generations to come, will not be willed away... this, too, the court said today. The pristine, uncompromised ending is never coming – which means we must join with those who wish to be a part of an actual ending, an attainable one, one that might enable the families of all these departed innocents in Israel and in Gaza to know that their loved ones did not die in vain, for nothing.

The actual ending will leave us with only part of what we dream for. That's how it works in the real world. And it will depend upon the world's help and partnership – not just in reaching agreement but in sustaining whatever new reality will grow upon the ashes of this inferno. They don't make miracles like they used to.

But Israel's very birth 75 years ago was the kind of miracle made in our time – made painfully and incompletely, without the simple clarity that a parted sea delivers. So, too, will Israel be born again when the day comes, may it be soon, that the killing stops, and the claiming of a better, albeit imperfect future for Israel and its neighbors begins.