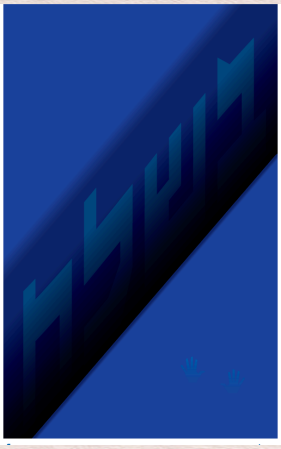
Beshalach: Shemot (Exodus)

What's it all about?



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No sooner do the Israelites leave Egypt then Pharaoh gives chase, trapping the fleeing slaves on the shores of the Red Sea. **God commands Moses to raise his staff, and the sea splits** and allows the Israelites to pass through before closing again and drowning the pursuing Egyptians. The Israelites sing a song of praise to God.

In the desert, however, the Israelites, thirsty and hungry, complain, and God performs a series of miracles to meet their needs, from having Moses strike a rock and bringing forth water to making edible "manna" rain down from heaven. On Friday, God instructs his people, they should collect a double portion of manna for none will come down on the Sabbath; when some Jews disobey this order and go looking for manna on Shabbat, they find nothing.

The parsha ends with the villainous Amalekites attacking the Israelites before being defeated by Moses's prayers.

"And all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances."

Take a deeper dive

This week's parsha contains one of the most ecstatically joyous moments in the entire Torah. It is known as *Shirat HaYam*, or the Song of the Sea, and it is pretty self-explanatory: finally released from the house of bondage, the Israelites, freed slaves, get one last scare when Pharaoh and his evil minions give chase, but they're redeemed by one final, grand miracle. Moses raises his staff. The sea parts in two. The Israelites pass in peace, and the sea resumes its natural form and drowns the wicked enslavers. Hallelujah!

But, curiously, we get not one version of this moment of pure, unadulterated joy but two: One from Moses and one from his older sister, Miriam. Here's the great teacher and prophet himself: "Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to the Lord," the parsha tells us, "and they spoke, saying, I will sing to the Lord, for very exalted is He; a horse and its rider He cast into the sea."

It's great stuff, but Miriam has an even more spectacular encore in mind. "Miriam, the prophetess, Aaron's sister," the parsha reports, "took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women came out after her with timbrels and with dances. And Miriam called out to them, Sing to the Lord, for very exalted is He; a horse and its rider He cast into the sea."

The similarities between both songs are obvious, but the differences are fascinating. Moses leads the singing himself; Miriam, on the other hand, lets her fellow women do the singing, and assumes leadership merely by responding to their exclamations. Moses sings; Miriam sings *and* dances. And finally, Miriam has a musical instrument, her little drum.

Why? Rashi explains: "The righteous women of that generation," he wrote, "were so certain that the Holy One, blessed be He, would perform miracles for them, they took timbrels out of Egypt."

Imagine, then, Miriam and her fellow faithful friends, rushing to leave Egypt and yet remembering to pack a small drum because they were absolutely certain that very soon they'll have an opportunity to use it while giving praise to God for the miracles He is bound to deliver. **That is what true faith looks like**, a lesson in hopefulness that continues to resonate millennia later.

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