

Shabbat Shirah 5785

8 FEBRUARY 2025 · PARASHAT B'SHALACH

Shabbat Shirah Shalom,

Raise your hand if you know what exegesis is...

It's not the name of a new car model, nor is it the former girlfriend of a certain son of a carpenter. It is the process of critical explanation or interpretation of a text, particularly a biblical text. It is the foundation of most of the Divrei Torah that you hear from this or any other pulpit. We even do it at our dining room table every Passover when we read the אֶרְמִי אוֹכֵר אֶבֶר section of the Haggadah, taking apart a paragraph of text from Deuteronomy sentence by sentence, phrase by phrase, even word by word.

A core principle of Biblical exegesis is that there are no superfluous words in the Torah. Every word has meaning and purpose, nothing is extraneous or spam. When scholars read the Bible, they are constantly scanning the text for linguistic oddities, and one of the most common quirks is when words are repeated.

So, because you were paying close attention to this morning's parasha, and you had your bible-scholar hat on (looks something like my hat), you all obviously noticed not just a repeated word, but an entire phrase. In the Chapter 14, verses 22 and 29, which are found in the 3rd and 4th aliyot respectively, we find not just one but FIVE repeated words!

וַהֲפִיז לָהֶם חוֹמָה מִיְמִינָם וּמִשְׁמָאלָם:

“The waters formed a wall for the Children of Israel on their right and on their left.”

It is surely a dramatic image, probably one of the most iconic ever described. It has captured the imagination for millennia. John P. Fulton turned it into motion-picture magic in 1956 and won the Best Special Effects Oscar for his work on The Ten Commandments. It is epic, but it also begs the question: Why the repeated words? Even the trop, the cantillation is identical! Why are the walls to the right and the left so emphasized?

When I discovered, to my good fortune and yours, that it would be possible to have Gil Troy with us this morning, I immediately thought of this phrase. Gil is no stranger to our community, and he and I have been friends for more than 20 years. It is a connection that began at many Shabbat morning kiddushes downstairs, was cemented while I was teaching Lea, his and Linda's eldest, for her Bat Mitzvah. And since he and family moved to Jerusalem, our conversations have moved mostly online. But we still prefer meetings in the German colony where the Troys now live, mere steps from the apartment where I lived as a cantorial student from 1999 until I moved to Montreal in 2001.

Especially over the last 15 months, we have shared a continuous and mutually therapeutic conversation as we both struggle with the turbulence that we have all felt since October 7, 2023. As a presidential historian, Gil is uniquely qualified to speak on matters of the right and the left, in Canada, the United States, and in Israel. Perhaps more than ever, we are caught in a seemingly endless riptide between the strong currents from both sides. Who better to help us navigate as we seek a path forward through waves that are ready to crash upon us, from the right and the left?

DISCUSSION OUTLINE:

Ed Koch line: If you agree with my on 7/12 vote for me etc

- Hostage agreement, ceasefire phases
- Do you think Israel won?
- This deal 6 months ago vs today
- Trump's press conference and the Gaza rebuild

- Canadian election and Jewish/Israel related issues
- How do we balance having liberal ideas and our frustration with the party, domestic agenda with our Israeli agenda?
- Being a father of soldiers and marrying off children during a war
- Hostage prayer read by two secular women
- Yoni's commander
- Photos of Wedding and Bat Mitzvah
- Tent minyan & Prayers that have carried us through the war
- Gesher tzar m'od
- Ani Ma'amin
- Hatikvah
- Acheinu
- V'hi she'amda story

Rabbeinu Bachya offers a novel explanation of the **וּמִשְׁמַלְמֶלֶךְ** phrase, asserting that the traversing of the sea was not as straightforward as it sounds. **וּמִשְׁמַלְמֶלֶךְ** might lead us to think that there was a clear path to follow with water as walls on each side, but Bachya says that it was actually a solid wall on ALL sides, and with each successive forward step, a little bit cleared up. No one could see the entire route through the frothing waters.

I think that the language **וּמִשְׁמַלְמֶלֶךְ** indicates confusion on all sides. No matter how rough the seas, we must try, both carefully and hopefully, to make our way through, to clear up the confusion a little bit at a time, sorting out the nonsense from the right and the left. Rarely is there a clear path amidst the raging waters that often surround us. Together, with the guidance of our faith, we will find a path forward.

Shabbat Shirah Shalom!