PI-HAHIROT -- THE MOUTH OF FREEDOM

MOIS A. NAVON

The biblical narrative, describing the splitting of the sea at the time of the Exodus from Egypt, begins with God's command that the people make a specific encampment:

The Lord said to Moses: Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp before [לפני -- lifnei] *Pi-hahirot, between Migdol and between the sea, before Baal-zephon; you shall encamp facing it, by* [על -- al] *the sea* (Ex. 14:2).

Though the geographical location of the encampment is established through a number of landmarks, a mere seven verses later the description of the encampment has changed considerably.

And Egypt pursued after them, and overtook them encamping on [על -- al] *the sea, all the chariot horses of Pharaoh and his horsemen and his warriors, near* [על -- al] *Pi-hahirot before Baal-zephon* (14:9).

Whereas verse 14:2 stated that the people were *before Pi-hahirot*, in verse 14:9 they are *on Pi-hahirot*. Migdol is not mentioned at all.

The differences in the descriptions lend the text to midrashic interpretation. Indeed, Rashi interprets the name Pi-hahirot midrashically as *pi-hahayrut* [the mouth of freedom], "for it is there that they became free." By understanding the descriptions metaphorically one can not only reconcile the differences, but also reveal the powerful underlying message of the splitting of the sea -- attainment of freedom.

Given that the people had already physically left Egypt (and their slave life) a full week earlier, the "freedom" referred to here is clearly not the release from physical bondage.[1] The freedom gained at Pi-hahirot is a mental, emotional, and spiritual freedom. Indeed, it is this freedom which is of essential necessity, for a slave nation now physically liberated, to become God's chosen people, to accept His Torah and to perform His will in Creation.[2]

Mois A. Navon is a computer engineer living in Jerusalem. He has published articles in parshanut ("The Shalsheleth Cantillation," Jewish Thought 4:1*;"Yosef is Still Alive,"* Jewish Thought, 5:2*), gives talks in parshanut, and lectures for Amutat Ptil Tekhelet.*

God Himself alludes to this dual emancipation in the very first words of the Decalogue: *I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage* (Ex. 20:2). Benno Jacob[3] picks up on the twofold description *land of Egypt* and *house of bondage*, and explains that one refers to the physical redemption and the other to the psychological, spiritual liberation. The events at Pi-hahirot, as will be demonstrated, are to provide an object lesson in the attainment of this ultimate freedom.

FREEDOM AT THE SEA

Freedom is defined as "the capacity to exercise choice; free will."[4] Ramchal explains that freedom is part and parcel of the Creation, designed to give man the opportunity to fulfill his purpose in creation. Freedom is that condition wherein one is presented with a choice and given the possibility to choose. However, freedom consists not only of being placed in an environment where both good and evil exist, but also where one has the capacity to choose and effectuate the choice.[5] Pi-hahirot was precisely such an environment.

As described in verse 14:2, Pi-hahirot was characterized by three landmarks: Baal-zephon, Migdol, the sea. Baal-zephon was, according to classical interpretation, an Egyptian deity and, as Rashi points out, the only idol to escape the destruction, left in order to legitimize its ascribed power.[6] Migdol [מגדל] as a common noun means "tower," and is an epithet for God, as in "[God is a] *tower of salvation*" (II Sam. 22:51). The sea, as will be developed further on in detail, represents that entity through which the children of Israel are given the possibility to execute their free choice.

The first references in the introductory verse (14:2), *between Migdol and between the Sea, before Baal-zephon* provide a technical definition of Pi-hahirot.[7] However, this depiction of Pi-hahirot includes not only the technical loci but the requisite elements to grant the people full freedom -- two distinct, autonomous options (i.e., the power of Israel and its antithesis, the power of Egypt) and a venue to effect choice (i.e., the sea).

With the two powers from which to draw strength and guidance, Israel now had to focus its attention on choosing allegiance. The sea, the place where they will effect their choice, is mentioned a second time in verse 14:2 in the explicit

command to *encamp on the sea*. Since the verse mentions encamping twice, once *before the sea* and once *on the sea*, it is not unreasonable to interpret the first instance as referring to the people's physical encampment, and the second to a figurative encampment -- "encamp in thought" (i.e., meditate, contemplate). Though the word על can be translated in various ways[8], in the figurative interpretation "on" is an ideal modifier for the object of the contemplation. Thus, the command becomes "dwell in thought on the sea." The imperative form is used as emphasis to admonish the people that the primary focus of their encamping is *on* the actualization of their free choice.

   And Egypt pursued after them and overtook them encamping on the sea, . . . on Pi-hahirot before Baal-zephon (14:9). Note the subtle yet dramatic difference in description of the location of the people. Whereas verse 14:2 stated that they were *before Pi-hahirot* [the mouth of freedom], in verse 14:9 they are *on* the mouth of freedom. Upon arriving at the sea, their task was to meditate on the power that was to rule them as well as how to effect a decision; this point is described as "*before* the mouth of freedom." Following this stage of thought comes the actualization of the choice where freedom is actually acquired; the people's position is appropriately described as "*on* the mouth of freedom."[9]

   At this stage, the children of Israel must actualize their choice: to move forward, or stagnate and literally go backward. The dynamic of free choice not countenancing stagnation is strikingly depicted by the Egyptian pursuit to overtake the Israelites and bring them back. The following verse (14:10) does not state that "the Egyptians" were to overtake them, but rather "Egypt" itself, and all that it represents, was to take hold of them.[10]

   There is another telling change in the description of the encampment at the sea. Whereas originally (14:2) Migdol (representative of God as *tower of salvation*) is a prime landmark, at the more advanced stage of the event (14:9) Migdol is no longer visible on the landscape. For man to actualize his potential he needs freedom and this includes apparent freedom from God's supervision.[11] By this point, the people had ample time to internalize the power represented by Migdol and must of their own free will press forward with their decision.

   Finally, what remains is for the people to decide to go into the sea, thereby actualizing their thoughts and effecting their free choice. In addition to the

effectuation of their free choice, the event at the sea was their ultimate test of faith in God.[12] After the plagues, the Egyptians had literally thrown the Israelites out of the land. Thus, they did not willingly choose to go forth into the wilderness and thereby demonstrate faith in God. But at the sea, they must place all their faith in God and move forward.[13] They must throw themselves into the sea, secure in the knowledge that God is with them.[14]

MIDRASHIC ARGUMENTS ON SPLITTING THE SEA

Then the Lord said to Moses: Why do you cry out to Me? Tell the Israelites to travel on (Ex. 14:15). Given that the Egyptians were behind them and the sea in front of them, the text begs the obvious question: exactly where were they to travel?[15] Rashi, based on the Mechilta, explains God's response to Moses as bidding them to march into the sea to effect its splitting.

The Midrash provides a number of versions as to how exactly the sea was split.

R. Meir stated: At the time that Israel was standing at the edge of the sea, the tribes strove with one another. One said, "I will enter the sea first." And the other said, "I will enter the sea first." The tribe of Benjamin thejumped and descended into the sea first [and the waters divided] . . . .

R. Judah said to him: Not so did the event occur, but rather: one said, "I will not enter the sea first" and the other said, "I will not enter the sea first." Then Nachshon ben-Aminadav jumped and descended into the sea [and the waters divided] (Sotah 36b).

Though there is a disagreement in the Midrash as to who went in to the sea first, there is a clear consensus that the sea split in the merit of man's initiative.[16]

Another Midrash posits that the sea split into 12 channels, one for each tribe, thus allowing everyone to participate in the free act of faith. Since the splitting of the sea was initiated by man's demonstrating his ultimate faith in God, thereby actuating his ultimate true freedom, then every individual would not only want, but actually *need* to have this transformation performed by himself. Having a split per tribe allows each one to demonstrate that it uniquely fulfilled the act of loyalty to God to effect freedom.

Though a split per tribe emphasizes more specific representation, even if only one tribe jumped in, freedom was nevertheless effected for the entire people in that the they were all represented by the one leader.[17]

CONCLUSION

Ultimate freedom is acquired by man's initiative. At Pi-hahirot, freedom was acquired by the people as a whole by the "leap of faith" into the sea, whether expressed by one leader or 12. And thus we conclude that the power of the splitting of the sea lies not in its miraculous nature but rather in its ability to confer true and ultimate freedom upon those who share in its dynamic.

NOTES

1. In fact the slavery is said to have ended a full year prior to the Exodus itself.

2. American psychologist Abraham Maslow proposed a theory of personality wherein man has a set of needs rooted in his biology. These needs are arranged in a hierarchical order and each must be satisfied before moving to the next. Moreover, in order to be free to actualize one's higher, spiritual self, one must have sufficiently satisfied the lower, basic needs. Only when these are satisfied is one free to express and develop one's unique psychological and spiritual qualities.

3. Benno Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1992) v. 20:2.

4. *The American Heritage Dictionary*.

5. Ramchal, *Derech Hashem*, 1:2:2; 2:2:2-3.

6. Also *Exodus Rabba* (25:15) echoes this sentiment, "All the idols of the world perished except Baal-zephon." It was on the strength of this idol's "survival" that the Egyptians pursued the children of Israel with righteous indignation; as the Midrash continues, "Concerning Baal-zephon in whom they trusted . . . " See also Oznaim L'Torah on Exodus 14:2. See JPS on Ex. 14:2 for other associations to Baal-zephon.

7. Ibn Ezra HaKatzar (Torat Hayim, Mossad HaRav Kook) on Exodus 14:2: "'before Pi-hahirot, between Migdol, before Baal-zephon': names of places."

8. e.g., on, by, with, about.

9. Again, various translations of *al* notwithstanding, interpreting it as "on" fits neatly in keeping with the over-all metaphoric reading of the text.

10. Rashi (on Ex. 14:10) quoting the Tanhuma (also Exodus Rabba 21:5) explains "Egypt" in the singular form used here as referring to the guardian angel of Egypt. Nehama Leibowitz (*Studies on Exodus*, p. 244) explains: Our sages personified the national genius of each people, its cultural and spiritual character by talking of the guardian angel that represented every people on High.

11. D. Birnbaum, *God and Evil* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 1989) pp.105, 118.

12. Ohr HaHayim (Ex. 14:15) explains that demonstrating their wholehearted faith by traveling into the sea before it split would cause God's mercy to prevail.

13. Rashi (Ex. 14:15).

14. Ohr HaHayim (Ex. 14:15).

15. Ohr HaHayim (Ex. 14:15).

16. Meshech Hochmah (Ex. 14:15).

17. This point is made clear by the Midrash, which explains that whoever jumped first attained a leadership role. If it was a Benjaminite, then it is emphasized that the land of Benjamin was to house the *Beit HaMikdash* - from whence went forth the spiritual leadership. If it was a Judahite, then it is pointed out that the governmental leadership was to emanate from this tribe. Perhaps this is the core of the disagreement: On which type of leadership was their freedom based?