

GOD VS. THE SEA: LESSONS OF PSALMS AND THE MIDRASH

SOLOMON WIENER

The strange recounting of the Splitting of the Sea of Reeds found in Psalms is often discounted on the assumption that the Psalmist was merely using poetic license, justifying slight differences in events and details from those of the Exodus narrative as creative poetry. However, a closer investigation of the verses in Psalms reveals a significant and unusual addition to the standard Exodus narrative, a deliberate personification of the sea:

Our forefathers in Egypt did not perceive Your wonders; they did not remember Your abundant love, but rebelled at the sea, at the Sea of Reeds. Yet He saved them, as befits His name, to make known His might. He rebuked the Sea of Reeds, it became dry; He led them through the deep as through a wilderness (Ps. 106:7-9).

When Israel went forth from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange speech, Judah became his holy one, Israel his dominion. The sea saw them and fled, the Jordan ran backward (Ps. 114:1-3).

The sea is personified twice in the verses cited above. Firstly, when the Israelites are described as rebelling at the Sea of Reeds, God rebukes the sea as if it has done something wrong (Ps. 106:9), although the reason why is not clear. Secondly, when it is described as being able to see and run away (Ps. 114:3). In this article, we will consider what this additional element was understood to add to the Exodus narrative.

These texts raise many questions: (1) What could "the sea" have done that made God scold it? (2) What did "the sea" behold that compelled it to run? (3) Furthermore, is there any other mention of a personified sea character in biblical or rabbinic literature?

Psalm 89 in conjunction with an *aggadah* from Tractate *Bava Batra* begins to solve the mystery surrounding the personified sea: *You rule the swelling¹ of the sea; when its waves surge, You still them. You crushed Rahab; he was like a corpse; with Your powerful arm You scattered Your enemies* (Ps. 89:10-11). This Psalm draws upon mythological imagery familiar to the Isra-

elites of the time, the fight between the warrior god Marduk and the ocean goddess Tiamat in the Babylonian creation epic *Enuma Elish*,² and stresses the idea of God's dominance over the sea (and over His enemies). Verse 11 of Psalm 89 introduces a mysterious character, Rahab. An *aggadah* in the Talmud clarifies the rabbinic view as to who Rahab is:

R. Judah in the name of Rav further said: At the time when the Holy One, blessed be He, desired to create the world, He said to the angel of the sea:³ 'Open your mouth and swallow all the waters of the world.' He [the angel] said to Him: 'Lord of the Universe, it is enough that I remain with my own.' Thereupon, He struck him with His foot and killed him; for it is written: *By His power He stilled the sea; by His skill He struck down Rahab* (Job 26:12). R. Isaac said: From this it may be inferred that the name of the angel of the sea was Rahab (TB *Bava Batra* 74b).

While this *aggadah* specifies the identity of the personified sea character, it does not address the question regarding its actions in Psalms 106 and 114. Still unclear is what the angel of the sea could have done to provoke God enough to scold it, and what the sea witnessed that compelled it to run away. The third question, however, demands refinement. The figure known as Rahab in the Bible,⁴ whom the Sages understood to be the mighty angel of the sea, lacks characterization. We still know nothing about the nature and motives of that figure in Psalms. A study of various *midrashim* involving the stories found in Exodus and Psalms clears up the ambiguity in Psalms.

When writing the *midrashim* that relate to the Splitting of the Sea, the Sages reconciled two seemingly different versions of one story to demonstrate a harmonious fluidity in the Tanakh. In so doing, they elucidated the mythological aspect of the personified wayward sea to create a richer Splitting of the Sea narrative.

The first two *midrashim* that we will examine expound verses in Exodus:

When Moses stood at the sea and ordered it to part in the holy name of God, the sea refused; Moses showed the sea his rod, but it still refused. Only when God Himself appeared [to it], *the sea saw and fled* (Ps. 114:3). Said Moses, "I ordered you to part in the name of God and you refused; I showed you my rod and you refused. *What alarms you, O sea, that you now flee* (Ps. 114:5)?"

The sea replied: "I flee not from you, O son of Amram, rather *at the presence of the Lord, Creator of the earth* (Ps. 114:7)" (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shim'on bar Yohai* 14:21).

Moses immediately hearkened to God and went to divide the sea, but the sea refused to comply, exclaiming, "Shall I split at your behest? Am I not greater than you, since I was created on the third day and you on the sixth?" When Moses heard this, he went and informed God, "The sea refuses to part" (*Exodus Rabbah* 21:6).

Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shim'on bar Yohai reconciles the texts in Psalms and Exodus while incorporating direct quotations from Psalm 114 and a close reading of Exodus 14:16 and 14:21, thus explaining that God's original plan was for Moses to split the sea on his own and that His intervention when the time came was an impromptu measure. By personifying the rebellious sea, this *midrash* shows how both texts complement each other to form a greater narrative of the story. It also addresses the question of what the sea was fleeing from, suggesting that the sea character beheld the presence of God and ran away out of fear.

Exodus Rabbah 21:6 also endeavors to reconcile the two different texts while creating a more complete story, but its means to achieve that goal are different. Both *midrashim* explain that Moses was originally instructed to split the sea on his own. Moses consulted God after the sea refused to split, and God assisted Moses with parting the sea.⁵ *Exodus Rabbah* augments the characterization of the sea, informing us that the sea considered himself greater and more venerable than humankind, since he was created before man. Here, the sea behaves in a haughty manner, obstinately disobeying Moses' representation of God's authority when he displays his rod in conjunction with a request for the sea to part.

Together, these *midrashim* answer two of the three questions directly: *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shim'on bar Yohai* explains that the frightened sea ran away from God's presence, while *Exodus Rabbah* characterizes the sea as an arrogant individual who believed he was above mankind. In fact, it might even be argued

that the sea thought Moses and his people should worship him as some form of deity.⁶ Either way, God did not approve the actions of the sea character.

Another set of *midrashim* take verses from Psalms rather than Exodus as their starting point:

They rebelled at the sea, at the Sea of Reeds (Ps. 106:7). "At the sea," i.e., while still on the seashore; "at the Sea of Reeds" is meant literally: when they were in the sea. At that moment the Angel of the Sea⁷ became enraged and wished to overwhelm them with his flood, but [God] reprimanded him and dried him up. Thus Scripture says, *He rebukes the sea and dries it up* (Nahum 1:4); *He rebuked the Sea of Reeds; it became dry* (Ps. 106:9) (*Exodus Rabbah* 24:1).

The sea was unwilling to be parted, since the Israelites were acting rebelliously. It protested: "They act rebelliously, and I should part?" But the Holy One, blessed be He, reproved it, as Scripture says, *He rebuked the Sea of Reeds; it became dry* (Ps. 106:9) (*Midrash Tehillim* 114:3).

Like the others, these *midrashim* reconcile the two different texts of Psalms and Exodus using mythological motifs, a personified sea, to create a more complete story. They directly address what the sea did that caused God to reprove it. The sea was rebuked for proactively disobeying Moses', and indirectly God's, request for it to split, despite the sea's positive aim of defending God and mediating justice. While the first two *midrashim* we examined were primarily concerned with the sea's disobedient refusal to part, these focus on the wrongdoing of the Israelites during the Splitting of the Sea.

A notable feature of *Exodus Rabbah* 24:1 is its conclusion that the Israelites were indeed rebelling against God while He was in the midst of bringing about their miraculous salvation. Adding an alternative characterization, this *midrash* infers that the sea only tried to annihilate the Israelites out of zealotness for God – in sharp contrast to the sea character's motives in the two *midrashim* previously quoted. *Midrash Tehillim* reinforces the notion that the sea character thought of God before itself, and was well aware of its role in the world as a divine messenger.

From our reconciliation of the verses in Psalms with the Exodus narrative it emerges that the sea was scolded in Psalm 106 for disobeying the request of Moses and God to part (and in one case for trying to destroy the Israelites), while in Psalm 114 it is God's wrath that causes the sea to flee.

The two different sets of *midrashim* offer polarizing characterizations of Rahab, the Angel of the Sea, which do not mesh with each other. *Exodus Rabbah* 24:1 speaks of its sea character defending God – the essential role of any angel of the Lord – which is in marked contrast to the egocentricity and disobedience expressed by the sea character in *Exodus Rabbah* 21:6.

It should be noted that *Shemot Rabbah* 21:6. is the only *midrash* cited above which does not incorporate a verse from Psalms 106 or 114. It appears to be teaching a different lesson from that of the other quoted *midrashim*. According to this *midrash*, when the children of Israel were leaving Egypt, they needed to be taught the basics of their own faith. Unlike the idolatrous cults in Egypt, where the River Nile was worshipped, God does not condone the subservience of mankind to aspects of nature. When the sea haughtily declares that he is greater than Moses because he was created before man, God promptly intervenes to remind the sea and His people that He, the Creator of all things, uses nature at his disposal. What better way to manipulate nature at His disposal than by parting a vast body of water? What better way to demonstrate the epitome of a nation's faith than by doing so at the first few stages of its life? This is the powerful message of *Exodus Rabbah* 21:6.

The other *midrashim* also have rich messages embedded in their stories, the conflict between a heavenly advisor of God and God Himself, arguing about His rebellious Israelite nation. This theme is found in another well-known *aggadah*:

Rabbi Joshua b. Levi said, "When Moses ascended on high [to receive the Torah], the ministering angels spoke before the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Sovereign of the Universe! What business has one born of woman among us?' 'He has come to receive the Torah,' God answered. They said to Him, 'That secret treasure, which You have concealed for nine hundred and seventy-four generations before the world was created. You desire to give it to flesh and blood! *What is man, that You are mindful of him, mortal man, that You take note of him?*' (Ps. 8:5). *O Lord our God, How majestic is Your Name throughout the earth, You who have set Your glory [the Torah] over the heavens!*' (Ps. 8:2).

The Holy One said to Moses, 'Return them an answer.' 'Sovereign of the Universe,' Moses replied, 'I fear, lest they consume me

with the [fiery] breath of their mouths.' 'Hold on to the Throne of Glory,' said God to Moses, 'and return them an answer.'

Moses [then] spoke before God: 'Sovereign of the Universe! The Torah which You give me, what is written in it? – *I am the Lord Your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.*' Said Moses to the angels, 'Did you go down to Egypt? Were you enslaved to Pharaoh? Why then should the Torah be yours? Again, what is written in it? – *You shall have no other gods.* Do you dwell among peoples that engage in idol worship? Again, what is written in it? – *Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.* Do you then perform work that you need to rest? Again, what is written in it? – *You shall not take [the name of the Lord in vain].* Are there any business dealings among you? Again, what is written in it? – *Honor your father and your mother.* Have you fathers and mothers? Again, what is written in it? – *You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal.* Is there jealousy between you; is the Adversary Satan at work among you?'

The angels promptly yielded to the Holy One, for it is said [Ps. 8:10, after meditating on the significance of humanity]: *O Lord our God, how majestic is Your Name throughout the earth,* [but] *You who have set Your glory over the heavens* is not repeated. Immediately, each angel saw Moses as beloved (TB *Shabbat* 88b).

In this *aggadah*, as in the second set of *midrashim* cited above, the closest advisors to God are skeptical about the loyalty of the Israelites to their Master. These advisors are so doubtful about the children of Israel that they wish to prevent their receiving the Torah,⁸ even to the extent of seeking their annihilation.⁹ Were it not for God, sometimes the nation's only advocate on high, Israel would be of no significance. Even when the heavenly advisors – who must be wiser than any mere mortals – question God's loyalty to His people, since that loyalty is not always returned, God pays no heed to their advice. The lesson to be drawn from these *midrashim* is that God loves His people unconditionally and does not allow any being whatsoever to interfere with His plan for the Israelite nation.

An insight into the methodology of the Sages and the wonders of mythology can greatly contribute to one's understanding of Tanakh. The Psalms contain a personification of the sea and thus add aspects to the Splitting of the Sea story that are not found in the Exodus narrative. The Sages, in their *midrashim*, continue to utilize mythological motifs from Psalms and use them to harmonize the two different accounts (in Psalms and Exodus), thus presenting us with a more complete story. At the same time, they unlock the deepest messages, from basic principles of the Jewish faith to God's unconditional and eternal protection of His people.

NOTES

1. The Hebrew root used for "swelling" here, *ga'ah*, is the same one employed in *Shirat ha-Yam*, the Song at the Sea (Ex. 15:1).
2. For a recent discussion of the Babylonian mythological motifs reflected in God's battle with the sea, see Avigdor Shinan and Yair Zakovitch, *From Gods to God* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2012) pp. 10-14 (and pp. 35-40 for mythological themes in the splitting of the Reed Sea in Exodus).
3. Also translated as "Prince of the Sea."
4. See Job 26:12 and Psalms 89:11.
5. See *Exodus Rabbah* 21:6 in its entirety.
6. In Babylonian mythology, the sea is indeed a deity figure, Tiamat.
7. Here, the sea character is referred to as "the Angel (or Prince) of the Sea," the exact character found in TB *Bava Batra* 74b.
8. TB *Shabbat* 88b.
9. *Exodus Rabbah* 24:1.



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