

PREFACE

As one sun sets another sun rises.¹ Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak of Lubavitch passed away on the 10th of Shevat and his son-in-law, the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, of blessed memory, filled his place on that same day. He filled that place, as well as the place of all whose position his father-in-law had filled—all the way back to the Baal Shem Tov.

In the following essay, the Rebbe expands upon a teaching that was passed down through each generation from the Baal Shem Tov. For the sake of clarity and understanding, we've expanded the original version, based upon the explanations provided and referenced in its footnotes.

The theme of the essay is one that is central to the Rebbe's thought: That the natural world is designed from the ground up to allow entry to the divine. Nothing can stand in the way of a person carrying out his or her divine mission. Indeed, everything that exists was made for that purpose. And further: nothing can truly be said to exist until it actually becomes an accessory to fulfillment of that mission.

¹ See Kohelet Rabbah 1:10.

CHRONOLOGY

1756 (5516), Shabbat Parashat Beshalach: The Baal Shem Tov says a *maamar* on the words “And the sea returned to its strength.”

1761 (5521), Shabbat Parashat Beshalach: In the year after his passing, the Baal Shem Tov comes to the Maggid and repeats the *maamar*, adding an explanation.

1769 (5529), Shabbat Parashat Beshalach: The Baal Shem Tov once again visits the Maggid and repeats the *maamar*. The Maggid summons his student Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, founder of Chabad (known as “the Alter Rebbe”), and repeats the *maamar*, adding an interpretation.

1805 (5565), Shabbat Parashat Beshalach: Rabbi Schneur Zalman says the *maamar* for his grandson Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch, who later became the third rebbe of Chabad.

1861 (5621), Shabbat Parashat Beshalach: Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch says the *maamar* he heard from his grandfather for his youngest son, Rabbi Shmuel, who later become the fourth rebbe of Chabad. He concludes, “Today the Baal Shem Tov, the Maggid and the Alter Rebbe came to me, each repeating the *maamar* in his own style.”

1969 (5729), Shabbat Parashat Beshalach: Two hundred years after the first rebbe of Chabad heard this *maamar* from the Maggid, the seventh rebbe, the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of blessed memory, says a *maamar* explaining the original *maamar* in depth.

1971 (5731) Two years later the Rebbe publishes an essay based on the *maamar*, providing extensive notes and emendations. The essay is printed in Likkutei Sichot, volume 6, pp. 86–94.

It is on that essay and those notes that the following essay is built.

How the Red Sea Got Real

A classic talk of the Rebbe

Adapted from *Likutei Sichot* vol. 6, pp. 86-94; *Sefer Hamaamarim* 5729, pp. 124-129

בשלח יד כז

וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת יָדוֹ עַל הַיָּם וַיִּשָׁב הַיָּם לַפְּנוֹת בִּקְרַר לְאִיתָנוּ וּמִצְרַיִם נָסִים
לְקִרְאָתוֹ וַיִּנְעַר יְהוָה אֶת מִצְרַיִם בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם:

EXODUS 14:27

So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and toward morning the sea returned to its strength as the Egyptians were fleeing toward it. And the Lord stirred the Egyptians into the sea.

The Story

Having escaped from slavery, the children of Israel find their path blocked by the Sea of Reeds. The Egyptian army is closing in behind them. It is nighttime. It seems a nightmare.

G-d tells Moses to hold out his staff over the sea. A mighty wind begins to blow, and continues blowing intensely throughout the night.

As morning approaches, the sea splits and the children of Israel march through. The Egyptian army, following close behind, is foiled, the wheels of their chariots snatched away by the mud, riders and chariots dragged torturously by their horses.

Now Moses holds out his staff once more. In the language of the Hebrew text, "The sea returned to its strength"—with a fury, drowning an entire army. The nightmare reveals itself as an ambush to the pursuer and a pathway to liberation.

לאיתנו/לתנאו

“The sea returned to its strength.” The word for “to its strength” here is *le’aitano* (לאיתנו). The rabbis of the Talmud see some difficulty in this text. They find it necessary to make a play on words, changing the order of the letters. *Le’aitano*, they say, is also meant to be read as *li-tena’o* (לתנאו) —meaning “to its stipulation.”

Which stipulation? A stipulation G-d made with the sea when He created it on the third day of creation. “When the children of Israel get to this point,” G-d warned that sea, “you are to split so they can get through. Got it? Okay, so now you exist.”²

First Questions

When we tell the story of the Exodus, the rabbis say, we must tell it in a way that awakens the child to ask questions. Only an inquisitive mind can hear a story to its depth.

Revealing new details and new depth to a story by playing with the words in this way is a form of *derush* which belongs to the body of literature called Midrash. Upon hearing this particular *midrash*, any bright child will certainly have many questions. And if we open our minds as a child's mind is open, we too will find an endless string of questions to ask. Which is precisely what the rabbis wanted when they told the story this way.

Some of us will ask, “Why can't the rabbis leave the story alone? What's wrong with the words as they are? Why do they need to turn one word into another?”

Others will ask, “Why does G-d find it necessary to make a stipulation with the sea? He made the sea—let Him do with it as He pleases, whenever He pleases!”

And yet others will ask, “Since when does the Sea of Reeds become a sentient being, to choose whether to follow its Creator's command or not?”

And there will be more questions. But, for now, let us put those big questions aside and first tackle the internal consistency of this *midrash*.

² Bereishit Rabbah 5:5. (page 21 in this booklet)

Here's one seeming lack of consistency: When we read that “the sea returned to its strength”—obviously, this event occurred after the sea had split. But when we read the words as “the sea returned to its stipulation”—the fulfillment of the stipulation did not occur now, but hours earlier, when the sea first split. Why on earth would the story allude to the sea's fulfillment of its stipulation now, when it starts to flow again, and not when it actually occurred—when it split?

Another Story

Jews have been asking questions like this for a long time (as well as all the earlier questions we just put aside for the moment). They also have further resources at hand to provide further insight to the intent of our rabbis. Such as the story of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair, as told in Talmud, tractate Chullin:

TALMUD, CHULLIN 7A

Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair was on his way to perform the mitzvah of redeeming captives. At a certain point, the Ginai River blocked his path.

He commanded, “Ginai, split your waters so I can pass through!”

The river replied, “You are going to perform the will of your Master, and I am going to perform the will of my Master. You may not succeed in your task, while I will surely succeed.”

He responded, “If you don't split, I decree that water should not flow in you forever!”

The river split.

Yes, more questions. For one, it seems entirely unfair. The river put forth a good Talmudic argument. Why doesn't Rabbi Pinchas, a first-class Talmudist, provide a response? But let's put that aside along with the others for now, and extract the insight we need.

What would be the consequence of the Ginai River refusing to obey Rabbi Pinchas? As he states, water would not flow in it forever. So when the rabbis speak about the stipulation with the Sea of Reeds,

they likely intend the same: If the sea would not split, there would no longer be any sea.

If so, when do we know that the sea fulfilled its stipulation? Not when it split. That may simply have meant the end of the sea. Maybe it didn't keep its promise after all, and so has met its demise. But once we see that the water has healthily returned, then we know that it really did keep its part of the deal.³

Better Questions

That's a nice answer, because it opens up doors that allow us to investigate further. Because we're not there yet. Here are two questions we need to ask to get to the bottom of this:

1. Let's say the sea had not kept its promise. Not only would it no longer have its original strength—it would be gone altogether. So the verse should say “The sea returned to flow once again” or something similar. It doesn't say that. It says, “The sea returned to its *strength*.” What does the *strength* of the sea have to do with the fulfillment of its promise?

2. According to this explanation, the return of the sea indicates that it kept its stipulation earlier, when it split. But that's not what the words “returned to its stipulation” mean. The words should say “The sea returned *because* of its stipulation.” Unless we say that “returned to its stipulation/strength” means that it had somehow returned to its stipulation and gained strength from there. But why would that be so?

Obviously, something deeper is going on over here. And to get deeper, we need more information.

Let's Read That Story Again

Rabbi Dov Ber, known as the Maggid of Mezeritch, was a great Talmudist and Kabbalist. He is best known as the master teacher of the generation of *tzaddikim* who spread the Baal Shem Tov's teachings throughout Eastern and Central Europe.

³ See Yedei Moshe on Bereishit Rabbah, *ibid*; Ohr Hachaim on Exodus, *ibid*.

The Maggid reads the story of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair with a slight twist from our reading.⁴ When Rabbi Pinchas declared that “if you don’t split, I will decree that water should not flow in you forever!” he did not mean simply that the water should cease to flow from this point on. To say that, he could drop the word “forever.” Rather, Rabbi Pinchas was quite literally threatening to revoke the river’s license to have ever existed. There would never have been a Ginai River.

And that is how he pulls the carpet out from under the river’s otherwise very reasonable argument: If it would never have existed, it would never have been fulfilling its Creator’s will. Indeed, the river really does not have the capacity to stand in the way of its Creator’s will—because, if it does, it never was. Which is another way of saying that its entire reality, from its genesis to its end, is inextricably tied to assisting Rabbi Pinchas in his mission.

The Maggid extends that thought further to include the entirety of existence. After all, the Midrash continues, “Not only with the sea did G-d make a stipulation, but with all that He created in the six days of creation.” Meaning, as the Maggid explains, all that exists was created only as background and props for the fulfillment of Torah and mitzvot—either as an assist or as a challenge to bring out greater strength. Anything that stands in the way retroactively never existed.

So when Rabbi Pinchas saw this river was an absolute obstacle to the fulfillment of his mitzvah, he informed it that it was putting its very existence on the line—retroactively as well.

That certainly is the meaning of a stipulation in a case like this. Let’s say we make an agreement that I will share ownership of my house with you from this day on, as long as you never stand in the way of my sale of the house. We share the use of the house as two equal owners for a year or so. Then one day I decide to sell, and you say, “No way! It’s my house too!” I could simply turn around and say, “No, it never was.”

And if you say, “Since when?” I would answer, “Until now, it was your house just as it was mine. But now that you don’t agree to my sale, it was never your house.

⁴ Ohr Torah, Beshalach, 89. (page 24 in this booklet)

Watch out, because I may charge you retroactive rent for all those months, as well.”⁵

Retroactive Non-existence

So a stipulation can change the status of the past. But here we are talking about an observed phenomenon—namely the existence of a river or a sea. How can something we have all observed vanish to never have been?

That would be an issue if the world was made of static objects that have some sort of independent existence. If the Creator had made the world out of some pre-existing substance, then if He would choose to destroy it, it would only revert to that primal gunk. But let’s say He would have conjured some elemental substance into being and endowed it in some inexplicable way with its own existence. Then, once He would destroy it, it would still have a history. There would have been a thing that is now no longer here.

But neither of those is the case. There is nothing that “just is” all of its own—not even the fundamental matter of which the physical world is composed, not even the laws and constants of physics that seem so consistent throughout the universe. The very existence of each entity—down to its very substance and its very nature—is a recurring event, sustained by a current of creative energy invested within it. The Torah calls that energy “words” or “divine speech.” As Rabbi Schneur Zalman writes in the second part of *Tanya* in the name of the Baal Shem Tov:

SHAAR HAYICHUD VEHAEMUNAH (TANYA, BOOK II), CHAPTER 1

It is written, “Forever, G-d, Your word stands firm in the heavens.” The Baal Shem Tov, of blessed memory, explained this verse as follows: Your word that You said, “Let there be a sky in the midst of the waters”—those very words and letters stand firmly within the sky of the heavens and are forever invested within all the heavens to vivify them. As it says: “The word of our G-d shall stand firm forever.” So, also: “His words live and stand firm forever.”

5 For a similar case, see Mishneh Torah, Laws of Divorce 5:22, and Magid Mishneh ad loc.

For if the letters were to depart for just an instant, G-d forbid, and return to their source, all the heavens would be annulled to become absolute void. It would be as though they had never existed at all, exactly like before the utterance of “Let there be a sky.”

The same applies to all created things in all the upper and lower worlds—even the plain, dumb matter of this physical earth: If the letters of the ten utterances by which the earth was created during the six days of creation were to depart from it for just an instant, G-d forbid, its very existence would be annulled— exactly like before the six days of creation.

This what the Ari, of blessed memory, meant when he said that even within those creations that are plain, dumb matter—such as rocks, soil and water —there is a soul and spiritual vitality. He was referring to the way the letters of speech from the ten utterances by which the world was created are invested within each of these. These letters vivify and “isify” the silent to be a something out of the null state that preceded the six days of creation.

You might compare this to a rock thrown in the air—eventually, as the impetus that propels the rock is neutralized by inertia, the rock returns to its default state of sitting quietly upon the earth. Or, to use the analogy that Rabbi Schneur Zalman provides,⁶ if the mighty wind that was holding back the Sea of Reeds would stop for a moment, the water would return to its default state and flow once again.⁷

So too, the default state of each thing is to not exist. With the removal of the “isifying” force, they return to that state of never having been.

You’ll realize that this is somewhat different from the flying rock scenario, or the wall of water crashing down. The rock settles back down, and there is still a rock. The impetus someone put into it is gone, but the rock is still there.

⁶ Ibid., chapter 2.

⁷ A modern analogy may be the state of the pixels on your computer screen: as soon as the current of energy stops flowing, they all revert to their default state of zero luminance.—Ed.

That's because the rock is not dependent upon that impetus for its existence. The rock can't *fly* without that impetus, but it certainly can sit there. Heaven and earth can't even exist for a moment without the force that isifies them.

But let's go further—let's discuss the *event* of flying: Once that impetus is dissipated, the event may be over, but it happened. The rock settles down with a history. What we are saying about the isifying force is that once it's removed, history disappears along with it.

Why? Because, it never really happened. At least, not the way we perceive it to be—as a world that just is, all of its own. That was never real.

The event of a rock flying is a real event. There was a rock, it accelerated and left a person's hand, then lost impetus to the force of gravity and landed elsewhere. There was a force, and that force had an effect outside of itself.

But with the creation of heaven and earth, nothing ever emerges as its own entity. There really is no *is*, just *isifying*. Say those words out loud a few times and try to visualize what you are saying: There is no *is*, just *isifying*.

Yes, we see an independent *isness*—something that appears to be just because it is. But that is only because we are incapable of seeing the *isifying* submerged beneath it. As soon as that isifying stops, a higher truth becomes evident—that there really was nothing here but a display of the Creator's capacity to isify. There was no isness outside of Him.

If that is hard to conceive, consider as well that time is also a created entity. Removing the creative force from any entity would mean an annulment of its time continuum as well.

But that is not the crux of the explanation. The point is that even within its own timeframe of being, a creation exists only on one plane. Removing its isifying force annihilates that plane of reality, taking us up to a higher plane where none of this ever was.

Here's a simple example: It's much like that person who owns my house along with me and also does not. His ownership is in two superimposed states at once—and one of those will be annulled when I decide to sell my house. Which one depends on what he says. If he

protests when I try to sell the house, he's reaching back into the past and ripping out his claim of ownership from its very beginning. Now all that's left is his non-ownership.

So too here: On one plane of reality, the sea exists. On another, it does not. We've yet to see which plane of reality will survive and which will be annihilated.

How does any of this help us? Quite simply: Until the sea fulfilled its stipulation, its existence was "weak." If you could have asked its Creator, "Does the sea exist or does it not?" the answer would have been "Yes. The sea exists and it does not." That's certainly a very weak and flimsy existence.

But once the sea fulfilled its stipulation, the possibility of "does not" was effectively removed, with only "does" remaining. Not only does the sea return to its past state, that past becomes retroactively a less compromised, "stronger" form of existence.

And that is why we have to say that the sea returned not only to its previous state, but "to its strength": It was no longer in a dual, collapsible state. It was now in a strong, resolved state.

Even Stronger

We've answered the first question—why the sea returned to its "strength (=stipulation)," and not just "flowed again." But what about the second question? Why "to its stipulation" and not "because of its stipulation"?

So now is time to pull out one of those questions we earlier put aside: What is bothering the rabbis, that they feel a need to reinterpret a simple word? What is wrong with that word and its simple meaning to begin with?

Well, quite simply, it's superfluous. If the water fell back down, why would I think it would be any weaker than it was before it stood as a wall? What is this phrase about returning to its strength telling me that I wouldn't know otherwise?

So here's the clue: I might imagine that being forced to break its pattern in order to fulfill a supernatural stipulation compromised the strength of nature. What previously appeared to be a fundamental law

turns out to be a pushover. The verse, then, is telling me: no, quite the opposite—the nature of the water now rises to an immeasurably greater status, a status it could achieve only due to that stipulation. Natural law gains eternal reality only because it is capable of stepping aside for a miracle.

Make sense? Not yet. Because there are a few more details to fill in.

Who Needs Conditions?

Now is time to pull out the big question we put aside earlier: Why does the Creator of heaven and earth have any need for stipulations with His creation? Whenever He so desires, He can do whatever He wants with it.

Maimonides raises this question—and he provides an answer. He writes that it would be silly to think that G-d changes His mind. From the outset of creation, He knew what miracles would be needed and when. So He programmed them into the creation to occur just when needed.⁸

Rabbi Menachem Meiri points out the flaw in Maimonides' explanation, as does Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman in his classic commentary on the Mishnah:⁹ A miracle doesn't imply that G-d had a change of mind. He can decide that when such-and-such a situation arises, He will perform such-and-such a miracle. No need to plant the miracle into the creation itself.

But aside from that, Maimonides' explanation explains only a need for preprogramming miracles. By preprogramming them, miracles become part of the natural order. That's not what the Midrash is saying here. It is saying there was a *stipulation* made with the sea (and with all the rest of creation). That implies:

1. That the sea is to do something *outside* of its nature;
2. That its very existence depends on fulfillment of that stipulation;
3. And that that fulfillment must in some way be left up to it—not (directly) imposed from beyond.

⁸ Guide for the Perplexed 2:29. See also Commentary on the Mishnah, Avot 5:6.

⁹ Avot 5:6.

In other words, it must be in the nature of things to allow entry of the supernatural.

But why?

Purpose

The only way to answer all these little questions is by going straight to the Big Question: What did the Creator have in mind when He created this world and all it contains?

Some will answer that it was all created as a stage upon which the Jewish people can learn Torah and do mitzvahs. Then, once we're done, we can receive a reward and the whole world can be tossed out.

In that case, there would be no need for stipulations with any part of the creation. Everything would be just designed from the get-go as the perfect backdrop for those mitzvahs.

So others go further. They explain that we learn Torah and do mitzvahs in order to bring into the world that which transcends the world. On Shabbat, for example, we are a step above the world. So too whenever we are engaged in the divine word of Torah or occupied in a mitzvah: We are bringing content from beyond this world—from beyond all worlds, and all creation, for that matter—onto the stage of this world. Torah and mitzvahs, after all, are the Creator's innermost will. The natural order of things is just a backdrop, a stage.

That would explain the necessity for miracles—whether they are open miracles such as occurred when we left Egypt, or miracles that unfold vested within the mechanics of the natural order. Both open our eyes to behold that our reality is not a closed system. Things do not have to be the way they are. They are this way only because there is purpose, there is meaning, there is a vast plan that lies beyond the laws of physics.

But that still does not explain the need for the Creator to enter into negotiations, agreements and stipulations with the natural order. We will work on opening the window shades, and He will shine in the light, and let Him perform a miracle whenever He so pleases.

So it seems the rabbis are telling us that the natural world is not just a stage. Rather, it is the material itself from which a miraculous world is

crafted. An utterly miraculous world—because its very nature depends on it allowing entry to that which transcends its nature.

If G-d would simply say, “Okay, miracle coming! Sea, water, all other elements of nature—just get out of the way!”—then He remains at best a guest in His own world. Instead, the very existence of each thing must be tied to the miraculous, to the transcendent—and yet allowed to remain natural.

Because that is the purpose—a very paradoxical purpose: That a finite world, tightly bound by patterns of nature, should host its own boundless, infinite Creator. G-d, so to speak, wants to be at home within His own creation.

Becoming Real

Now the smaller questions fall away: Why would we have thought that the sea might be weaker after fulfilling its stipulation? Because we imagined that by giving way to a miracle, the natural order has been compromised. Physics is not such a big deal—whenever necessary, it gets thrown to the side.

But no, quite the opposite: Nature *gains* reality only once it becomes a window for the supernatural.

What is real? Only that which lasts forever.

By all accounts, the world as we know it has a limited lifespan. Furthermore, all that we observe in our world is in a constant state of flux. How things are one moment is not how they are the very next moment. There is nothing we observe about which we can say, “This is what it is and this is what it always will be.”

But once any part of this world finds its place in a purpose and meaning beyond space and time, at that point it becomes real.

That is what happened with the Sea of Reeds: Before the children of Israel arrived there, it was nothing more than a deep marsh. It had appeared at some point in the earth’s geological history, and was destined to vanish by some later date.¹⁰

¹⁰ This has an application in *halachah* (Torah law). For certain ritual purposes (see Mishnah Parah 8:9), we need to use “living waters.” Water from a river that dries up once in seven years is not considered “living water.” Rather, it’s called “false waters.” Similarly, the rabbis say that this world has a timespan of six

But now that the sea actually assisted the children of Israel in their journey to receive the Torah, it became an eternal story—eternal because it is tied up with the inner desire of the Creator of all things, for whom time is just another creation that could be or not be. The Creator does not change, and so His desire does not change—and that desire is in Torah, in which the Sea of Reeds is now an integral player.

It comes out that this stipulation within the creation is stronger than the creation itself. Creation alone is a weak state of reality. It's the fulfillment of the stipulation that carries a creation into a strong state of reality.

That's the sense behind the words “The sea returned to its strength/stipulation.” The Sea of Reeds returned to that original stipulation between it and its Creator, and from there it received a whole new state of strength. The Sea of Reeds became real.

Challenges

You don't have to be a marsh to become real. Anything of this world that is used for a divine purpose can get there. And a divine purpose is not necessarily a mitzvah. The rabbis tell us that “all your deeds should be for the sake of heaven.” When you sleep, eat, go to work, live a healthy family life—you can do all of those with divine purpose. All of them can become a kind of commentary on the Torah, ways by which you know the Creator of this marvelous world. As King Solomon, the wisest of all men, wrote, “In all your ways, know Him.”

So with every deed, every breath, we take every puzzle piece of our world and breathe into it an eternal reality. At some subliminal level, the world knows that. Every fragment of it awaits us, yearning for that breath. Because nothing has been placed within our world without purpose. All awaits us for its rescue.

And if some river stands in the way and stubbornly refuses to allow us passage—it stands not only in the way of *our* destiny, but in the way of its own, as well. It only awaits us to declare our conviction, to reach deep inside and say, “World, for this you were created!”

millennia (Talmud, Sanhedrin 97a).

When nothing stands in the way from within, nothing can stand in the way from without. At that point, the river transforms. It even assists us in our journey. Indeed, it was there all along only to thwart the enemy and provide a path to liberation.

Because for this all things were created.

Adapted by Rabbi Tzvi Freeman.

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QUESTIONS ON PAGE 25

Source Materials

MIDRASH RABBAH (BEREISHIT RABBAH 5:5):

Rabbi Yochanan said:

The Holy One, blessed be He, made a stipulation with the sea that it should divide before Israel, as it is written, “And the sea returned to its strength (לֵאֵיטָנוּ le-eitano)” — meaning, in accordance with its stipulation (לִי-תֵנָּא li-tena’o).

R. Yirmiyah b. Elazar said:

Not with the sea alone did G-d make a stipulation, but with everything which was created in the six days of creation, as it is written, “My hands stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host.”¹¹

I commanded the sea to divide, and the heavens to be silent before Moses, as it says, “Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak!”¹²

¹¹ Isaiah 45:12.

¹² Deuteronomy 32:1.

I commanded the sun and the moon to stand still before Joshua;
I commanded the ravens to feed Elijah;
I commanded the fire not to harm Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah;
I commanded the lions not to harm Daniel;
the heavens to open before Ezekiel;
the fish to vomit forth Jonah.

HAYOM YOM, 17 SHEVAT

On Shabbat Beshalach 5621 (1861), the Tzemach Tzedek said the *maamar* “Re’u Ki Hashem” printed in Likkutei Torah. Shortly afterward he said to his son, my grandfather: On Shabbat Beshalach 5565 (1805) my grandfather [Rabbi Schneur Zalman, “the Alter Rebbe”] said this *maamar*. Afterwards he sent for me and told me that in 5529 (1769), when he was in Mezeritch, the Maggid had summoned him to his room and had said:

On Shabbat Beshalach 5516 (1756) the Baal Shem Tov said a *maamar* on the verse *Vayashav hayam...le’aitano*, quoting the rabbinic play on the word, *le’aitano* - *li-tena’o*, meaning “to its stipulation.” In 5521 (1761), a year after the Baal Shem Tov’s passing, my rebbe (the Baal Shem Tov) came to me, said the *maamar*, and added an explanation of the subject “doing His will” in contrast to “doing His word.” And today my rebbe again came to me to repeat the *maamar*.

Then the Maggid repeated the *maamar* to the Alter Rebbe, adding an interpretation of “River Ginai, part for me,” which is similar to the splitting of the Red Sea.

The Tzemach Tzedek concluded: Today the Baal Shem Tov, the Maggid and the Alter Rebbe came to me, each repeating the *maamar* in his own style.

Several hours later the Tzemach Tzedek called my grandfather again and told him an interpretation of the *maamar*.

OHR TORAH (MAGGID OF MEZRITCH), BESHALACH, 89

*From the Baal Shem Tov, four years before his passing:*¹³

“Towards morning, the water returned to its strength.” The rabbis interpret this as “to its stipulation.” For G-d had made a stipulation with the sea that it would split for the Israel.

This seems difficult to understand. With whom did G-d make this stipulation? The explanation is that when G-d said the statement that brought the sea into existence, he made a stipulation that the sea would split, and if not, the seas would not exist—meaning that they would never have been created. Because they would be annulled from the reality of the creation. For the entire Torah is positive and negative.

From the Baal Shem Tov, the year after his passing, to the Maggid:

Now we can understand what the rabbis said that “*tzaddikim* do the will of the Omnipresent”—not His word or his statement, but His will. Yet the will of G-d is not comprehensible.

But there is a parable to explain this. A father tells his son his understanding of some matter of Jewish law or some novel idea he has conceived in Torah. The son, with his acute mind and skillful rhetoric, refutes his father’s words and comes to a different conclusion. Now, although the son has opposed his father and refuted his words, nevertheless the father has pleasure, great delight and great joy from this, just as the verse in Proverbs goes, “Be wise, my son, and cause my heart to rejoice.”¹⁴

Indeed, the father desires this more than if the son would stay silent and agree with his words.

So it is that “A *tzaddik* rules over the fear of G-d,”¹⁵ so to speak.

And this is why it says that *tzaddikim* do His will—even though they are not doing His word or His statement.

From the Maggid, having heard the maamar from the Baal Shem Tov a third time, as he told it to the Alter Rebbe with an added explanation:

¹³ See the *maamar* “HaYoshevet BaGanim” 5729, where the Rebbe divides the *maamar* into these three parts.

¹⁴ Proverbs 27:11.

¹⁵ II Samuel 23:3. See Talmud, Moed Katan 16b. See also Keter Shem Tov, 251a. The meaning there appears to be that the *tzaddik* rules over the decrees of nature.

With this, we can understand the story of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair, how he told the Ginnai river, “Part for me, for I am going to perform a mitzvah!”

The river responded, “I am also going to do the will of my Maker!”

He replied, “If you do not part your waters, I decree upon you that waters will not pass through you forever.”

It seems difficult to understand—didn’t the river provide a reasonable response?

But this is well understood according to what was stated earlier, that G-d made a stipulation with the acts of creation that all of them should do the will of the *tzaddikim*, even if it is not within their nature. And that from the positive we can determine the negative.

And that is just what Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair told the river: “If you do not part your waters, it turns out that you are not fulfilling the stipulation made with you at the time that you were created by G-d’s word. If so, you are as though you never were, as though water was never created here. So, of course, water never will pass through you forever.”

This is also how Joshua told the sun to stand still.

All this applies to someone who is called a child of G-d. He is capable of remaking the will of His Maker. And who is called a child of G-d? One who keeps His covenant, who is called “*Tzaddik*, pillar of the world.”

Understand this well.

אור תורה בשלח פט

וישב הים לפנות בוקר לאיתנו, ודרשו רז"ל לתנאו, שהתנה הקדוש ברוך הוא שיקרע הים לישראל. ולכאורה אינו מובן עם מי התנה הקדוש ברוך הוא. אך הענין הוא, בשעה שאמר המאמר התנה שיקרע הים, ואם לאו לא היו נמצאים הימים [נ"א: המים] ולא נבראו במקום הזה, כי יתבטלו ממציאיות הבריאה. כי כל התורה כולה היא עשה ולא תעשה. ובזה יובן מ"ש רז"ל צדיקים עושים רצונו של מקום, ולא אמרו עושים דברו או מאמרו, כי הלאו רצון השם יתברך אינו מושג. אך המשל בזה, אב שאומר בפני בנו איזה דבר הלכה או איזה חידוש בתורה, ובן מגודל חריפותו ופולפולו סותר את

דבריו [ואומר באופן אחר]. והנה אף שהבן מתנגד לאביו וסותר את דבריו, עם כל [זה] יש לאב נחת ותענוג גדול ושמחה גדולה מזה, על דרך חכם בני וגו'. וזהו רצון הטוב מן האב יותר משהיה שותק ומסכים לדבריו. כך הוא הצדיק מושל ביראת אלקים כביכול, וזהו עושים רצונו, אף על פי שאינם עושים דברו ומאמרו.

ובזה יובן מ"ש [גבי] רבי פנחס בן יאיר [שאמר] לגינאי נהרא [פלוג] [חלוק לי] מימיך שאני הולך לדבר מצוה, אמר לו גם אני הולך לעשות רצון קוני, א"ל אם אין אתה חולק [לי] מימיך גוזרני עליך שלא יעברו בך מים לעולם. ולכאורה קשה, הלא השיב לו תשובה נכונה. ויובן עם מ"ש לעיל, שהתנה הקב"ה עם מעשה בראשית שיעשו רצון הצדיקים אף שאינם בטבעם, ומכלל הן אתה שומע לאו. וכך אמר לו ר' פנחס בן יאיר, אם אין אתה חולק מימיך נמצא שאין אתה מקיים תנאך הנאמר בשעת המאמר, והרי אתה כלא היה מעולם וכמו שלא נבראו כאן מים, ונמצא שלא יעברו בך מים לעולם. וזהו גם כן מ"ש יהושע לשמש דום. וכל זה מי שהוא נקרא בן להקדוש ברוך הוא יכול לעשות רצון קונו, ואיזהו זה, השומר בריתו הנקרא צדיק יסוד עולם [נ"א: השומר הברית הנקרא צדיק], והבן זה היטיב.

QUESTIONS

Visit jnet.org/tenshevat and answer these questions and your name will be entered in a Duch and prize drawing.

1. Why did G-d need to make a stipulation with the sea?
2. Why does the return of the sea to its original state make it stronger?
3. What lesson did you take from this talk?