

## Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch

### Last Days of Pesach 2020 “Lose-Lose”

Gut Yom Tov. Chag sameach. First, I'd like to acknowledge that this Pesach sermon is sponsored by Sharon and Ellen Geller, in commemoration of the yahrtzeits of their father, Jack Geller z'l, and uncle, William Potler z'l, which fall during chol hamoed Pesach. May their memories be a blessing.

When we think about the holiday of Pesach, it's intriguing how it compares to another major holiday, Sukkot. The first days are the same – in the diaspora, both fall on the 15<sup>th</sup> & 16<sup>th</sup> of the month. On the other hand, the last days are fundamentally different. The last day of Sukkot is Hoshana Rabbah which is Chol Hamoed, and then we begin a new holiday -- Shemini Atzeret. In contrast, the last days of Pesach are a second Yom tov, just like the first days. Why the difference? These last days are distinctive, because we're commemorating a major event that occurred then – the splitting of the Red Sea, *kriat yam suf*. And I think we treat these days as a Yom Tov because there are several important lessons we must learn from the episode of *kriat yam suf* that we did not learn from the rest of the story of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*.

Consider how the Jews ended up at the Red Sea, seemingly trapped with the Egyptians right behind them. When God liberated them from slavery, He decided it was necessary to take them on a roundabout path to the sea. It took them a whole week to depart (which brings to mind the Jewish tendency we often joke about, that Jews love to say long goodbyes!) God led them by the longer route because the shorter way would have been a more treacherous one, where we would have encountered the nation of the Pelishtim. But it took so long, Pharaoh thought the Jews were simply lost, and that emboldened the Egyptians to chase them.

It's notable that the story of *Kriat Yam Suf* seems to be the first time the Jews were actively involved with the Exodus. During most of the narrative, we were primarily on the sidelines, and the salient interactions occurred solely between Moshe and Pharaoh. Even with the korban Pesach, we were not active agents of our liberation. We can see our activity in the Torah's description regarding our

actions at the Red Sea, where there are two very different descriptive verses. The first pasuk in Shmot 14:22 says the Jewish people went *b'toch hayam bayabasha*, directly into the sea, which then transformed into dry land.

The second states in Shmot 14:29 that they walked *bayabasha b'toch hayam*, onto dry land, in the midst of the sea. The Vilna Gaon understands these verses to allude to the Midrash which says that, there were two groups among the Jewish people. The first group, which included Nachshon ben Aminadav and the tribe of Yehuda, (and some say the tribe of Binyamin), went into the water and trusted that God would work a miracle. The second group entered only afterwards - the sea had already split, and there was dry land for them to walk on, so they didn't get wet.

I've heard many times the assertion that the Jewish people weren't supposed to pray but **to act**. After all, God said to Moshe, '*Ma titzak eilai? Daber el bnai yisrael vayisao!*' *Why are you pleading to me? Do something! Go ahead!* But keep in mind that a few verses earlier, we read that *Vayitzaku B'nai Yisroel el Hashem*, the Jews cried to God in such a way that, as Rashi brings from the Midrash Tanchuma, they evoked the memory of our forefathers, Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov, and that prayer was a factor that brought God's help. It's true that typically, as the Ramban famously teaches in Parshat Shelach, *ain somchin al hanes*, you cannot rely exclusively on God to come to your rescue, you must engage in hishtadlut, you must make an effort.

But even if this sequence of events at the Red Sea meant that the Jewish people had to take action by walking into the water, their prayer was still an extremely significant factor in what transpired. I think this narrative is teaching us that yes, we must do all we can, but we can never finish the job without God. We were placed in a situation where there was no other option but to turn to God. Think about it -- was walking into the sea actually a sensible act? Of course not; it was more like suicide. It was an act of hopelessness based on the conviction that only a miracle from God could save them now.

I think the message of *kriyat yam suf* is a fitting one for the situation we are all facing now with the Coronavirus pandemic. Our situation is untenable on so many different levels. If we relax social distancing, we risk a resurgence of the virus. If we don't, we will all suffer the effects of a crippled economy. It's like we're stuck in the mud. It's a lose-lose situation. In my view, the only thing left to

do is pray. This brings to mind what I've always thought about the current situation in Israel – despite all our efforts, there is no clear path to a solution. Sometimes, we must heed the words of the Gemarah in Mesechet Shabbat 97a and Mesechet Sotah 49a paraphrased and made popular by Mordechai ben David in his classic song: *Anachnu ma'aminim bnei ma'amidim, v'ein lanu al mi lahishaein ela al avinu shebashamayim.*

*We are believers who are the children of believers, and we have no one to rely on except for God.* *Kriat yam suf* was the first time in the Torah when the Jews were called believers, *va'yaaminu bashem*, and I think this the reason why – they realized they had no other choice. We too must realize that we are stuck; we have no one to turn to for help except for God.

I think we can apply this message to our outlook on the hardship of social distancing, and specifically, our inability to gather at shul. Obviously, the Torah places incredible value on the tzibur, the group, but our situation of being isolated and pretty much helpless might be our cue to *talk to God*. Not necessarily in liturgical prayer, but in our own words; in other words, *hitboddidut*, in the spirit of Reb Nachman Mibreslov. Perhaps God will not miraculously solve our problem as in Egypt, but if we talk to Him from the heart and with humility, He will certainly listen to us, help us in all aspects of our life and safely get us through these extremely difficult days. Chag sameach.