

Tactical Deception and Clueless Pawns (Beshalach)

*Those who are skilled in producing surprises
Are as infinitely varied as heaven and earth,
And as inexhaustible as the great rivers. -Sun Tzu*

While God performs awesome miracles, He apparently also balances them with as many “natural” causes as possible. This is fairly evident in the Splitting of the Sea and the subsequent drowning of the entire Egyptian Armed Forces in one of the most dramatic events in our history.

God could have simply disintegrated the entire Egyptian army with their cavalry and chariots and at the same time teleported the fleeing Israelites to their destination.

It seems God wanted everyone to sweat a bit, have time to absorb the fantastic events, and appreciate the incredible process that was happening. God guides the ensuing military maneuvers in a fashion that would have earned the admiration of Sun-Tzu.

“And when Pharaoh sent the nation, and God did not lead them by the Philistine route, for it was close; for God said, lest the nation regret when they see war and return to Egypt. And God turned the nation on the desert route, the Suf Sea, and the Children of Israel ascended armed from the Land of Egypt.” (Exodus 13:17-18)

Rabbi Ovadia Sforno (1475-1549) says something that may sound surprising upon first inspection. Sforno explains that God wanted to take the Jews to Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah and then subsequently to the land of Israel. Sforno claims that the Suf Sea didn't lead to either of these places.

The sole reason the Jews were led to the sea was for the express purpose of baiting the Egyptians and drowning them in the miraculous trap God was setting for them.

Furthermore, it seems that the fastest route to the Suf Sea was actually via the Philistine route that God diverted the Jews away from.

Sforno explains, that tactically, God wanted his Jewish pawns to be unaware of the pursuing Egyptians until it was too late. Historically, the Philistine route was a well-traveled road that was inhabited along its path. Once Pharaoh would have started his chase, the Jews would have gotten wind of it very quickly and in fear would have returned to Egypt and begged for a merciful return to their enslavement. God wanted his bait to be unaware of the impending attack in the radio-silence of the uninhabited desert. That way, when the Egyptian attack on the escaping Jews was imminent, the Jews would have no option of returning to their Egyptian masters.

The strategy, of course, works. The Jews with their backs to the sea, witness the charging Egyptian army. The Egyptians believe they have the frightened Jews trapped. The frightened Jews believe they are trapped and lament their having left Egypt.

The two protagonist nations are in place. God places some cloud and fire cover to protect the Jews from immediate attack and blows a strong wind (more “natural” causes) to split the sea. The Jews take this surprising escape route and the Egyptians, once the cloud and fire cover has been removed, follow in rapid pursuit.

The trap is sprung, and the Egyptian army is annihilated.

When Moses and the Children of Israel subsequently sing the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:1-19), it's not by chance that they praise “God, Man of War; God is His Name.” (Exodus 15:3).

May God always guide us in the tactics and strategies we need for success – even if at times we are clueless!

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To the hospitality of Kehillas Haturim of Phoenix, AZ.