

# B'shallach @ DC Beit Midrash @ בשלח

Monday, 2 February 2004; 11 Shvat 5764

Welcome to the DC Beit Midrash!

The Chumash (Five Books of Moses) is divided into 54 portions, which Jews read sequentially each week in services. This Shabbat, we will be reading Parshat B'shallach, from the book of Sh'mot (Exodus). Tonight, a member of our community will lead us in a text-study of this portion. The voices of both past and contemporary interpreters will inform our discussion.

Below you will find a summary of this week's Torah portion, along with brief biographies of the commentators cited. The presentation will be followed by *chavruta* (paired) study on a subject of your choice.

בשלח, שיצאת יג:א-יז:א

## ***This week's parasha (Torah portion): B'shallach, Sh'mot (Exodus) 13:17-17:16***

*The Israelites have finally left Egypt. God does not lead the Israelites along the closest route to the Land of Israel, which is through territory occupied by the Philistines. Rather, the people are led in the direction of the Yam Suf—the Sea of Reeds. One final time, God hardens Pharaoh's heart, and Pharaoh decides to chase after the Israelites with his army. The Egyptian army catches up with the Israelites as they camp by the edge of the sea. Dramatically, the Israelites are caught between the sea on one side, and Pharaoh's chariots on the other. Moses reassures the people that they only have to trust God, and, as he raises his staff, God parts the waters, and the Israelites are able to cross in safety. The Egyptians chase after them into the parted waters of the sea, but are drowned as the waters return to their natural state. Moses and Miriam lead the people in the “Song of the Sea,” a spontaneous song of exaltation and thanksgiving.*

*Faced with the new reality of survival in the wilderness, the people begin to complain almost right away. Principal concerns include water and food. God promises that if the people follow the commandments, God will always provide and care for them. God provides fresh water at Marah, and again later at Horeb, and then provides the people with Manna, the miraculous food that will sustain them throughout their years of wandering. Also, through the detailed instructions about the Manna, the notion of Shabbat is introduced. The Parasha ends with the Amalekites' surprise attack. This is the Israelites' first experience with war.*

(Adapted from Kolel.org, [http://www.kolel.org/pages/parasha/shmot\\_summary.html#beshalach](http://www.kolel.org/pages/parasha/shmot_summary.html#beshalach))

## ***This week's sources:***

### **Talmud Bavli**

(c. 500 CE)

The Babylonian Talmud (Talmud Bavli) is a compilation of discussions on the Mishna, discussions which had been going on some three hundred years already at the time they were written down. Because the Babylonian edition is far more extensive than its Palestinian counterpart (Talmud Yerushalmi), compiled around 400, it has become the most authoritative compilation of Jewish law. When people speak of studying “the Talmud,” they almost invariably mean the Bavli.

The Talmud's discussions are recorded in a consistent format. A law from the Mishna is cited, which is followed by rabbinic deliberations on its meaning. The Mishna and the rabbinic discussions (known as *Gemara*) comprise the Talmud, although in Jewish life the terms *Gemara* and Talmud are usually used interchangeably. The rabbis quoted in the *Gemara* are known as Amoraim, explainers or interpreters. In addition to extensive legal discussions (*halacha*), the rabbis incorporated into the Talmud guidance on ethical matters, medical advice, historical information, and folklore (*aggadata*).

(Excerpted from Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy*, p 150-153)

### **Midrash Rabbah**

Midrash comes from a Hebrew root which means “to search out, to investigate.” Thus, this is a Jewish method of exegesis which sought to discover deeper meanings in the text beyond the literal one. Since the rabbis greatly venerated every letter of the Hebrew Scriptures as of Divine origin, every detail was seen to be significant. Sometimes Midrash is used with the legal portions of the Torah (*halacha*) and sometimes it is used with the non-legal portions (*aggadah*), such as stories about the main protagonists in the Bible. Different Midrashim were written down at different times, over a period of almost a thousand years, from 300 - 1200 CE. The compilers of the different collections of Midrash are generally unknown. Midrash Rabbah (The Great Midrash) is the largest collection of Midrash. **Ecclesiastes (Kohélet) Rabbah** is an aggadic midrash on the book of Ecclesiastes. It draws on both the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmud, Genesis Rabbah, Leviticus Rabbah, Lamentations Rabbah, and Esther Rabbah. It was redacted between the end of the 7th century and the beginning of middle of the 10th century CE.

(adapted from <http://learn.jtsa.edu/topics/diduknow/sources/midrashim.shtml>)

### **R' Chasdai Crescas, Or Hashem**

ר' חסדאי

(14th cent.)

Born in Barcelona, Chasdai ben Abraham Crescas was a physicist, philosopher, mathematician and Rabbi. After losing a son in the 1391 riots, Crescas is best-known to scholars for his systematic philosophical refutation of Maimonides' Aristotelean proofs in the Guide for the Perplexed. By countering RaMBaM's proofs with other metaphysical counter-arguments, Crescas succeeded in philosophically bringing his readers back to traditional Jewish practices. Although the ardent followers of Maimonides (and, therefore, Aristotle) belittled his work, parts of Crescas' work, *Or Adonai* (or *Or Hashem*), were translated into Latin. Galileo

apparently was influenced by Crescas' writing, as was Spinoza. In opposition to all his predecessors, Crescas inclined toward the rejection, or at least toward the limitation, of free will. According to him, the law of causality is so universal that human conduct can not escape its operations. Man, unconscious of the cause, may believe his choice is a free one, but in reality it is not, because there exists always that which determines his resolution. Still the Torah teaches freedom of choice and presupposes self-determination. Crescas, therefore, concludes that human will is free in certain respects, but limited in others.

(adapted from <http://www.hum.huji.ac.il/Dinur/Internetresources/historyresources/medieval.htm> and <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=363&letter=F#1066> available online at [http://www.seforimonline.org/seforim/or\\_hashem.pdf](http://www.seforimonline.org/seforim/or_hashem.pdf))

### **R' Pinchas Halevy Horowitz, *Sefer HaBrit* ספר הברית (1730-1805)**

Rabbi Pinchas Horowitz, together with his younger brother, studied under their father, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsh of Chortkov. Early in life they joined the chassidic movement, becoming dedicated followers of the Maggid of Mezritch. As a young man, Rabbi Pinchas served as rabbi in Vitkova and Lechovitz, and in 1772 he received the appointment to serve as rabbi of the prestigious community of Frankfurt-on-the-Main and as dean of its yeshiva. He served as the rabbi of Frankfurt for 33 years, until his death. His gracious and kindhearted character gained him the affection of the entire community. *Sefer Habrit* was published in 1797.

(adapted from [http://judaicaplus.com/Tzadikim/tz\\_viewer.cfm?page=pinchashalevi.htm](http://judaicaplus.com/Tzadikim/tz_viewer.cfm?page=pinchashalevi.htm))

### **Rambam, *Guide to the Perplexed* מורה נבוכים (1135-1204)**

If one did not know that Rambam (Maimonides) was the name of a man, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, one would assume it was the name of a university. The writings and achievements of this twelfth century Jewish sage seem to cover an impossibly large number of activities. Maimonides was the first person to write a systematic code of all Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*; he produced one of the great philosophic statements of Judaism, *The Guide to the Perplexed*; published a commentary on the entire *Mishna*; served as physician to the sultan of Egypt; wrote numerous books on medicine; and, in his spare time, served as leader of Cairo's Jewish community.

Maimonides' major contribution to Jewish life remains the *Mishneh Torah*, his code of Jewish law. His intention was to compose a book that would guide Jews on how to behave in all situations without having to expend large amounts of time. Despite sometimes-intense opposition, the *Mishneh Torah* became a standard guide to Jewish practice, later serving as a model for the *Shulchan Arukh*, the 16th century code of Jewish law that many Jews still regard as authoritative.

([www.us-israel.org/jsource/biography/Maimonides.html](http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/biography/Maimonides.html))

### **Dr. Norman Lamm (1927-)**

Dr. Norman Lamm, a distinguished rabbi, philosopher, teacher, and author, was elected president of Yeshiva University in August of 1976. Born in Brooklyn, NY in 1927, Dr. Lamm received his elementary and high school education at Yeshiva and Mesivta Torah Vodaath. In 1945, he entered Yeshiva College where he continued his Jewish learning and undertook a liberal arts program with a major in chemistry. Upon graduation, Dr. Lamm pursued advanced scientific studies at Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn while continuing his Judaic studies and rabbinic scholarship at Yeshiva. He was ordained as a rabbi by YU's affiliated Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary in 1951, and earned a Ph.D. in Jewish philosophy from the University's Bernard Revel Graduate School in 1966.

Dr. Lamm, author of ten books, has gained wide recognition for his writings and discourses on interpretation of Jewish philosophy and law, especially in relation to problems involving science, technology, and philosophy in the modern world. His major work, *Torah Lishmah*, published in Hebrew in 1972 and updated and translated into English in 1989, deals with the religious philosophy of Hasidism and their opponents, the Mitnaggedim, in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe. *Torah Umadda*, published in 1990, explores the University's cornerstone: the integration of Torah learning and secular knowledge. The same year, his book in Hebrew *Halakhot ve'Halikhot (Jewish Law and the Legacy of Judaism: Essays and Inquiries in Jewish Law)* was published.

(adapted from <http://www.yu.edu/lamm/bio.htm>)

#### ***This week's teacher:***

#### **Jesse Grauman**

**[jesse.grauman@aya.yale.edu](mailto:jesse.grauman@aya.yale.edu)**

Jesse Grauman has been living in Washington D.C. for almost two and a half years. He is currently a speechwriter for Senator Chris Dodd (D-CT). Tonight's topic notwithstanding, he swears that he has never watched a single episode of Star Trek.

#### ***This week's food sponsor:***

**Dena Wigder**, in honor of her birthday on January 30 and in honor of the birth of her nephew on January 29.

#### ***This week's food shlepper:***

**Ethan Merlin**

Wanna teach, think about teaching, or suggest a teacher? Email Jesse Grauman at [teachers@dcbeitmidrash.org](mailto:teachers@dcbeitmidrash.org)

Wanna sponsor food? Email Simma Asher at [food@dcbeitmidrash.org](mailto:food@dcbeitmidrash.org)

Questions, feedback, wanna join our email list? Anything else? Email [info@dcbeitmidrash.org](mailto:info@dcbeitmidrash.org)

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