FUCHSBERG JERUSALEM CENTER STUDY PRAY EXPLORE

Parashah:	Beshalach
Read On:	January 31, 2026 | 13 Shvat 5786
Torah:	Exodus 13:17–17:16
Triennial:	Exodus 13:17–15:26
Haftorah:	Judges 4:4–5:31

TORAH SPARKS

PACKING A TIMBREL

Bex Stern-Rosenblatt
Dvar Parashah

The Song of the Sea concludes with timbrels. After אז ישיר, "Then Moses and the Israelites sang," after the song concludes, Miriam and the women take up their own instruments and sing one verse, answering them. We read of what Miriam, the prophet, the sister of Aaron, takes. And it is a timbrel. She has been fleeing the Egyptians, she has just made her miraculous way across the Sea pursued by an army, and she happens to have a timbrel on her to take up? I never travel without diaper cream for my toddlers. Miriam and the women never travel without timbrels to rejoice, to praise God, should they witness sudden miracles.

The midrash hears the strangeness immediately and asks: וכי מנין היו להם לישראל תופים ומחולות במדבר, "From where did Israel have timbrels and dances in the wilderness?" We fled Egypt in haste. We did not even have time to let the dough rise. But we did have time to find and pack our festival bandkits?

The midrash answers: מובְטָחוֹת הָיוּ צִדְקָנִיּוֹת שֶׁבַּדּוֹר שֶׁהַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא עוֹשֶׂה לָהֶם נְסִים, וְהוֹצִיאוּ תֻּפִּים מִמִּצְרַיִם, "So confident were the righteous women of that generation that the Holy One would perform miracles for them that they brought timbrels out of Egypt." These are those same righteous women who have been running the story since the beginning of the Book of Exodus. The ones in whose merit we were redeemed from Egypt, according to the Talmud. The ones who continued to have children even when Pharaoh had decreed death by drowning for every newborn son.

These women had already learned how to orient themselves toward a future while remaining inside a present marked by danger and instability.

Pharaoh's decree: כָּל־הַבֵּן הַיִּלּוֹד הַיְאֹרָה תַּשְׁלִיכֻהוּ, "Every son that is born, you shall throw into the Nile," targeted the children whose survival would carry memory forward. The Nile is meant to swallow them before they can speak, before they can remember, before they can grow into a people capable of resistance. And Miriam, even then, as a child herself, led the resistance, saving her baby brother.

Pharaoh's fear of that future does not disappear. It resurfaces during the plagues, when Egypt begins to fracture and Pharaoh tries to control the terms of Israel's departure. Again and again, he negotiates over who counts as the people. Moses insists that liberation must include

everyone.

He explains, "With our young and with our old we will go," Pharaoh recoils. He refuses to let the טף go with the adults, he will not free the children. He proposes a departure limited to adult men, severing worship from dependency and freedom from the future that would carry it forward.

The negotiations make explicit what the Nile decree already implied. Pharaoh understands that the טַף, the children, are decisive. A people who leave with their children intact, with the means to sustain life beyond the present moment, are a people who will not return. Liberation that includes the טַף cannot remain provisional.

This is the future Pharaoh keeps trying to bargain away.

This history shapes the meaning of the timbrel.

When the midrash describes the women as מוּבְטָחוֹת, confident, it gestures toward a form of trust shaped by action. The Exodus narrative shows that miracles require space in which to emerge. That space is created by people who refuse to surrender the future, even when doing so carries enormous risk. The women who carry timbrels out of Egypt have already spent years creating such space.

Hebrew allows this meaning to resonate through sound. תֹּף, timbrel. טַף, child. The words are not linguistically related. A timbrel comes from the root תפף, to drum. טף comes from the root טפף, to take small steps as a toddler might. One starts with a ת and the other a ט. But by playing midrashically, by noticing that these words sound nearly identical, we can open a world of meaning.

Pharaoh attempts to silence the טַף. First by drowning them, then by bargaining them away, then by permitting their presence only under conditions that ensure dependence and return. The Nile is meant to erase them. The negotiations are meant to contain them. Then, at the sea, the women hold תֻּפִּים, drums. What was meant to be swallowed now reverberates. The children Pharaoh sought to drown live on in rhythm.

That this future is carried by Miriam matters. In this verse at the edge of the Sea she is called: Miriam the prophet, sister of Aaron. She is not identified as a mother. The biblical narrative never tells us that Miriam has children of her own. Her role in the story is not biological continuity but guardianship of continuity itself. She stands watch over other people's children, just as she stood watch once over her brother. She invests in a future in which she does not personally have a stake.

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Miriam's confidence expresses itself through vigilance, strategy, and readiness. It takes the form of waiting by the water, of intervening at the right moment, of carrying an instrument meant for celebration through years that offer no guarantee it will ever be used. She believes in the future because she has helped make it possible.

The verse continues: וַתֵּצֶאן כָּל־הַנָּשִׁים אַחֲרֶיהָ, "And all the women went out after her." They went out. From where did they go out? Were they the last to exit the Sea, even after the Egyptians were drowned, as the kids continued to play in the shallows? The commentary Kli Yakar hears in this movement a different kind of transition: כי הנבואה התחילה במרים וכל הנשים יצאו בעקבותיה במעמד זה כי כולם זכו לנבואה, "Prophecy began with Miriam, and all the women went out after her at that moment, for all of them merited prophecy." Here, וַתֵּצֶאן describes emergence into revelation. Israel's departure from Egypt marks one kind of exodus, one kind of יציאת מצרים. This moment marks another, not a physical transition but a spiritual one. The women step forward as their prophecies have been fulfilled, as their beliefs have been confirmed: that life is worth living, that children are worth having, and that one should always pack a timbrel in the diaper bag.

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WANDERING AIMLESSLY

Jonathan Lipnick
Language of the Parashah

This week's *parashah* begins in a straightforward enough manner. Following the ordeal of the plagues, the Israelites finally depart from Egypt, heading south into the desert to avoid the hazards of the heavily-guarded coastal road that could lead them directly to Canaan. However, after only eight verses, something strange happens. Like a modern GPS device abruptly announcing "recalculating" mid-drive, God suddenly instructs the Israelites to change their route. They are told to "turn back and set up camp" by the seashore, effectively luring the Egyptians into the Bible's most famous trap: the Sea of Reeds (often mistranslated as the Red Sea). But even before the Israelites have a chance to ask the obvious question, "how can we be so sure that the Egyptians will give chase?" God reassures them:

> Pharaoh will say of the Israelites, 'They are **astray** in the land; the wilderness has closed in on them.' I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them, so that I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord." (Exod. 14:3-4)

That is to say, when Pharaoh sees the Israelites turning back, he will assume that they have lost their way, and he will feel emboldened to attack. The Hebrew word translated here as "astray" is נְבֻכִים *nevukhim* (singular: נָבוֹךְ *navokh*). This comes from the rare root ב.ו.ך, meaning "confused, perplexed" that only appears three times in the Tanakh and only in the passive *niphal* form. Perhaps you recall one of these instances, in the Book of Esther, where following the promulgation of Haman's genocidal decree, we read:

> הָרָצִים יָצְאוּ דְחוּפִים בִּדְבַר הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַדָּת נִתְּנָה בְּשׁוּשַׁן הַבִּירָה וְהַמֶּלֶךְ וְהָמָן יָשְׁבוּ לִשְׁתּוֹת וְהָעִיר שׁוּשָׁן **נָבֻכָה**׃
>
> The couriers went quickly by order of the king, and the decree was issued in the citadel of Shushan. The king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city of Shushan was **thrown into confusion**. (Esther 3:15)

The phrase "but the city of Shushan was thrown into confusion" is a truly tragic moment in the Purim story. As such, it is one of several phrases in the Book of Esther that is traditionally chanted using *Eikha trop*, the musical mode used for the Book of Lamentations. The NJPS translation of the word נָבוֹכָה *navokha* is even stronger than the NRSV seen above: "the city of

Shushan was dumbfounded." As Adele Berlin writes in her JPS commentary on Esther, "this phrase marks the low point in the plot: the destruction of the Jews seems inescapable." The joyful antithesis comes five chapters later in Esther 8:15, when following Mordechai's triumph over Haman, we read: וְהָעִיר שׁוּשָׁן צָהֳלָה וְשָׂמֵחָה ("the city of Shushan rang with joyous cries").

The other instance of the word נָבוֹךְ *navokh* in the Tanakh is far more obscure. The prophet Joel, describing the impending upheaval that will take place on the apocalyptic "Day of the Lord" proclaims:

מַה־נֶּאֶנְחָה בְהֵמָה **נָבֻכוּ** עֲדָרֵי בָקָר כִּי אֵין מִרְעֶה לָהֶם גַּם־עֲדָרֵי הַצֹּאן נֶאְשָׁמוּ׃
How the animals groan! The herds of cattle are **bewildered** because they have no pasture, and the flocks of sheep are dazed. (Joel 1:18)

Common to all three of these passages is the theme of imminent danger, followed by shock and panic. Fearing an impending catastrophe, all three subjects - the Israelites in the wilderness, the Jews of Shushan and Joel's cattle - are baffled by their misfortune; they are at the brink of despair. Others translations have "wandered aimlessly" or "were disoriented." This sense of disorientation was the core idea that Maimonides hoped to capture when he used this word in the title of his most famous work of philosophy, the *Guide for the Perplexed*. Although originally published in Judeo-Arabic under the title *Dalālat al-ḥā'irīn* ("instruction for the confused"), within ten years it had been translated into Hebrew by Samuel ibn Tibbon with the title מורה הנבוכים *moreh ha-nevukhim*. Maimonides writes in his introduction that this work is intended:

> to explain certain obscure figures which occur in the Prophets, and are not distinctly characterized as being figures. Ignorant and superficial readers take them in a literal, not in a figurative sense. Even well-informed persons are bewildered if they understand these passages in their literal signification, but they are entirely relieved of their perplexity when we explain the figure, or merely suggest that the terms are figurative. For this reason I have called this book *Guide for the Perplexed*.

Also derived from the the root ב.ו.ך, is the equally rare biblical noun *mevukhah* meaning "confusion." Isaiah, for example, groups this together with two other anxiety-producing nouns, *mehumah* and *mevusah*:

כִּי יוֹם֩ מְהוּמָ֨ה וּמְבוּסָ֜ה **וּמְבוּכָ֗ה** לַאדֹנָ֤י יֱהוִה֙ צְבָא֔וֹת בְּגֵ֖י חִזָּיָֽוֹן

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For the Lord God of hosts has a day of tumult and trampling and **confusion** in the valley of vision... (Isaiah 22:5a)

Interestingly, in Modern Hebrew the root ב.ו.ך has shifted its meaning from "confused" to "embarrassed." Accordingly, the noun *mevukhah* now means "embarrassment, awkwardness" rather than mere "confusion" and the causative *hiphil* verb הֵבִיךְ *hevikh* means "to cause embarrassment." What does embarrassment have to do with confusion? The connection is less tenuous than you might think. When one is lost or confused, one feels hindered, leading to feelings of self-doubt and shame. This is actually the original meaning of the English word "embarrass," which comes from Italian *imbarrare* ("to block, obstruct") via the French *embarasser*. This original sense of the word is preserved in the French phrase *embarras de richesse* ("a superfluity of wealth"), the title of a 1726 comedy by Abbé d'Allainval. This phrase is used to describe a situation in which one is paralyzed by an abundance of good options. This deep connection between feeling "blocked" and "confused" is at the heart of the Modern Hebrew noun מָבוֹךְ *mavokh* meaning "maze, labyrinth."

Let us conclude with two well-known words that sound like they might be related to *navokh* although, technically, they are not. First, some people think that the Yiddish word נעבעך *nebekh* is etymologically connected to the Hebrew *navokh*. This fascinatingly elastic word, which can be both a noun meaning "poor pitiable person" as well as an interjection meaning "unfortunately," actually comes from a Slavic root, though it is not entirely clear what that is. Second, the name of the Babylonian king נְבוּכַדְנֶאצַּר Nebuchadnezzar II responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE seems to contain the word *navokh*. In fact, this is the Hebrew form of an Akkadian name, *Nabu-kudurri-uṣur*, meaning "Nabu, protect my heir." Nevertheless, a brilliant contemporary midrash by Ya'ara Inbar attributes Mordechai's early ability to grasp the existential perplexity (*mevukhah*) that Haman would unleash to the fact that in the Megillah he is first introduced as a Judean exile from the days of Nebuchadnezzar (Esther 2:5). Why was it necessary to mention the name of this Babylonian king? Because this name can be homiletically read as נבוכה דנצר *nevukhah denatzar*, meaning "the perplexity that was stored up." Mordechai had a sensitivity to the potential dangers of antisemitism due to his understanding of history:

בוא וראה, שמתוך שהוגלה מרדכי על ידי נבוכדנצר, הבין את אותה מבוכה של העיר שושן. שנצר נבוכדנצר את המבוכה שהועיד לישראל, ושמרה עד התבשלה היטב. עד יבוא היום בו תוכל לשמחו כשמח יין ישן לבב אנוש, שככל שמתיישן משתבח, והבקיא ימתין.

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Come and see that from that which Mordechai was exiled by Nebuchadnezzar, he understood that confusion of the fortress of Shushan - that Nebuchadnezzar stored away the confusion that he earmarked for the Jewish people and guarded it until it would be fully ripe. Until the day would come when it would bring gladness, as old wine gladdens the heart of man. Since the more it ages, the better it becomes, such that the expert will wait.
(*Dirshuni: Contemporary Women's Midrash* II)

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