

When You're Dealing with a Miracle, You've Got to Get the Location Right: Was it the Red Sea or the Sea of Reeds?

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Abstract: About 2,500 years ago, in the third century BCE, the majority of the Jewish world in the ancient Near East spoke Greek or Aramaic, not Hebrew. Most Jews did not understand Hebrew. As Jewish leaders prepared a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible for a Greek-speaking Jewish world, some well-intentioned translator living in Alexandria, Egypt, mistranslated yam suf as the "Red Sea." This rendering has been accepted as authentic Jewish tradition ever since. But there are problems with this translation. First of all, yam suf does not mean "red sea." it literally translates as "sea of reeds," a type of marshland where papyrus reeds grow. And while there are a few instances in the Bible where yam suf refers to the Red Sea, in the context of the Exodus from Egypt, it really does not make sense...it seems likely that the Israelites did not cross the Red Sea, but some other body of water.

I have been asked to explain why, in the context of our prayers that describe the Exodus from Egypt, I say the Sea of Reeds where the liturgy reads the Red Sea. Since the Torah portion for this Shabbat describes the beginning of the Israelites' march to the land of Israel, this might be a good time to explain.

In the Torah, specifically Exodus 13:18, the miracle of the parting of the sea is said to have taken place at *Yam Suf*.

In the 3rd century BCE, the Greek translation of the Bible known as the Septuagint, translated *yam suf* as "the Red Sea." This rendering has been accepted as authentic Jewish tradition ever since.

But there are problems with this translation. First of all, *yam suf* does not mean "the Red Sea." It literally translates as "sea of reeds," a type of marshland where papyrus reeds grow. Secondly, while there are a few instances in the Bible where *yam suf* refers to the Red Sea, in the context of the Exodus from Egypt it really does not make sense.

For example, if you will look at your map, you will see that the Red Sea is 120 miles below the region of Goshen where the Hebrews left Egypt. Why would the Hebrews take such an incredibly roundabout way to get to Sinai? In addition, it would have taken the Hebrews weeks, not just three days as recounted in the Bible, to get that far south. Thus, it seems likely that the Israelites did not cross the Red Sea, but some other body of water. The problem is that the term *yam suf* doesn't specify a particular place. It refers to "a" sea of reeds, not "the" sea of reeds.

While the ancient biblical reader would have most probably understood which *yam suf* was being referred to, we do not. Currently, biblical historians propose three theories of how the Israelites made it to Sinai: a northern route, a central route, and a southern route. As you can see from your map, each route hypothesizes a different location for the sea of reeds.

According to the northern route, the sea of reeds refers to the lagoons near the shores of the Mediterranean Sea in the northeastern corner of Egypt. According to the central route, the sea of reeds is located near the bitter lakes at the southern end of today's Suez Canal. According to the southern route, the sea of reeds is located near the northern part of the Gulf of Suez. Pending the discovery of new archaeological evidence, no one really knows which sea of reeds our ancestors walked through.

About 2,500 years ago, the majority of the Jewish world in the ancient Near East spoke Greek or Aramaic, not Hebrew. Most Jews did not understand Hebrew. As Jewish leaders prepared a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible for a Greek-speaking Jewish world, some well-intentioned translator living in Alexandria, Egypt, mistranslated *yam suf* as the Red Sea.

So why do I prefer to say Sea of Reeds rather than the Red Sea? I suppose you could say it's for the sake of historical accuracy, but it's really something more than that. The Torah wanted to memorialize for all time the site of a great miracle. But the Red Sea is most probably not what the Torah wanted all future Jewish generations to know and remember as the location where that miracle took place.

You know, when you're dealing with a miracle, you've got to get it right!