

B'Shallach 2020
The Song and the Truth of Our Lives
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Last year, we did a text study on today's *parashah*, focusing on one verse from the Song at the Sea that is the highlight of our Torah reading, and the reason today is called "*Shabbat Shirah*," the *Shabbat* of song. This year I'd like to consider the Song as a whole.

When the Second Temple stood, the Levi'im would sing this Song as an accompaniment to the Mincha offering on Shabbat. They would alternate the verses week by week, singing the first 10 verses one week and the last 8 the next week. The Song was brought into prayer services late in the Roman period. Since that time, we recite this song, or at least we read it, every morning as part of *P'sukei D'Zimrah*. It comes as the third in a triad of biblical texts praising God, which were appended to a previously organized set of six psalms relating to Creation.

The Song finds an echo in the familiar "Mi Chamocha." There, it is part of a long blessing following the Shema, directly preceding the private Amidah.

Please open your siddur and find the Song on page 143 and take a minute to read it over.

This is a paean of praise to God, a spontaneous lyrical outpouring of emotion immediately following the crossing of what we call "the Sea," and the drowning of Pharaoh's army. The Song illustrates the prose narrative that precedes it, but in the Song, the focus shifts to glorifying God. We have one other text like this: the Haftarah we just read, from Judges, where, in Chapters 4 and 5, a triumphal ode follows an historical prose narrative.

When Moshe and then Miriam sing, it is the first time in our Bible that *anyone* sings praises to God. This is also our oldest piece of sustained poetry. Scholars believe that it was originally sung responsively, and there are different theories about how, exactly, that was done.

I am not a critical literary scholar, but I have learned some interesting points about this poem that may be of interest to you. The language of the Song employs features common to Canaanite poetry, such as the use of parallel clauses, like "This is my God, to whom I give glory; the God of my ancestors, whom I exalt." Another shared feature is

the repetition of ideas, with incremental changes. Others include the use of many imperfect verbs, and the absence of definite articles followed by nouns.

Despite those Canaanite features, our Song, and the one in Judges, are better seen as Hebrew versions of an ancient Egyptian genre. In what we now call the New Kingdom in ancient Egypt, poetry accounts often followed prose narratives, an introductory statement would identify the singers, and a brief summary would follow the song. But there is a key difference: The Egyptian poems extol the superhuman heroism of the pharaohs, whereas the Hebrew poems praise God.

Notwithstanding its placement in the Biblical narrative, we don't know when the Song actually came into being. Some modern scholars suggest that the Song was written after the First Temple was built, when our Bible had not yet been redacted as we know it.

All of that concerns the Song's construction. Now, let's think about what we are intended to take from reciting this Song, as we do, every day.

Thematically, when we compare the Song to the prose narrative, God's justice, meted out measure for measure, is the most striking and celebrated feature. Just as the Egyptians drown Israelite babies, so is their army drowned. As they oppress the Hebrews with mud, so do the Egyptians sink into the mud, and so on. And again, the contrast: The Egyptians believe that their Pharaoh is the most powerful king, and now the God of Israel is shown to be the true Sovereign.

I think that one of the reasons the Song comes to take up such an important place in our liturgy is that it moves from past to present to future, and in so doing, it draws us into the story it sings. The first 10 verses celebrate God's triumph over Egyptian foes. Verses 11-13 celebrate the incomparability of God: "Mi Chamocha," "Who is like You?" Then, we sing of the impact of the Exodus on surrounding nations. The final two verses anticipate future developments: settling the Land of Canaan and building a sanctuary for God. Our minds check off those boxes and fill in our continued evolution up to and beyond the present moment.

At any moment, each of us may be moving "*mi avdut l'cherut*," from slavery to freedom. We read the narrative and sing the song, not only to remember where we came from, but to awaken ourselves to the narrative of our *own* ongoing liberation, in hopes that we, too, may place our trust in God, pull up the anchors that keep us stuck where we no longer need to be, and move toward becoming our most authentic selves. That is what our sages are talking about when they say, "*B'chol dor va'dor chayav adam*

livot et atzmo k'ilu hu yatza miMitzrayim-- "In every generation, each person must regard themselves as if they, personally, came out of--or are coming out of, Egypt, or their own narrow straits" (Mishna Pesachim 10:5).

When we were in Israel last month, we spent *Shabbat* morning at the home of Yiscah Smith, a religious teacher in Jerusalem. For the first 40 years of her life, she was Yaacov Smith, an ultra-Orthodox man living in Israel with a wife and six kids. And now she is an elegant woman and teacher who goes around the world inspiring people with her Torah.

Yiscah has a great deal to say, eloquently, about how her journey has allowed her to fulfill her Divine purpose, and I can only imagine what she is staying today. She specializes in Chassidut, but she also quotes a palliative nurse, who recorded the most common regrets of people who are dying. This is people's #1 regret: "I wish I had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me."

We, too, have our Chassidic story of Zusya that bears retelling: Once, the Hassidic rabbi Zusya came to his followers with tears in his eyes.

They asked him: "Zusya, what's the matter?"

And he told them he'd had a vision in which he learned a terrible truth.

"What truth did you learn?" asked his followers.

"I learned the question that the angels will one day ask me about my life."

The followers were puzzled. "Zusya, you are pious. You are scholarly and humble. You have helped so many of us. What question about your life could be so terrifying that you would be frightened to answer it?"

Zusya replied; "I have learned that the angels will not ask me, 'Why weren't you a Moses, leading your people out of slavery?' and that the angels will not ask me, 'Why weren't you a Joshua, leading your people into the promised land?'"

Zusya sighed; "They will say to me, 'Zusya, why weren't you Zusya?'"

Rav Avraham Kook taught that we realize the Exodus when we are free in two ways. First, we must be free of governmental policies that subjugate us and demean our human dignity (in *Olot HaRa'ayah* (commentary on the siddur). That freedom corresponds to the Exodus from Egypt and the Splitting of the Sea, our collective moment of rebirth, that begins and ends with a voice bubbling up from deep within the soul of the oppressed, and then liberated, nation.

But we must also be free spiritually. Rav Kook writes, "The soul is not free if it is subjected to external demands that prevent it from following the path of its inner truth"

(Ibid.). We cannot sing in full voice when we are still stuck inside. We can rehearse our freedom by singing the song, not only today but every day. But when we really hear, and follow, our inner truth, our souls move us to sing out the manifestation of the Divinity within us. It is important for us to do that.

I once attended a conference of Jewish songleaders. Morning davening was about an hour and a half long, filled with chanting, singing, and meditative interludes. By the time we got to *Mi Chamocha*, I was feeling quite opened up and vulnerable. And then the leader said: Turn to the person next to you and share: What is getting in the way of your liberation? What needs to open in order for you to live your truth? I was stunned. I did not want to pour out what was in my heart at that moment to a total stranger, with no structure, no safety. And I didn't. But it was brilliant to raise the question. For, although the Song comes to celebrate and strengthen our faith in God as Redeemer, the question of "What sea needs to part in my life so that I can live my truth" is the question we should be asking ourselves when we sing this song and when we repeat its echo in *Mi Chamocha*. *Mi Chamocha* has never been the same for me since.

We are supposed to move straight into the Amidah after the blessing in which *Mi Chamocha* is located, without interruption, without even saying Amen to the bracha just completed--so that we enter the Amidah with faith in God's saving power.

I think that's a lot to ask. At least for me, it is difficult. Because in my experience, God does not always save while we wait humbly. I'd rather share some of the responsibility--and I believe that when we step into the process of redemption consciously, intentionally, and actively, God does save. Redeeming, or liberating ourselves so that we can serve exactly as we are called is, I believe, our most complicated and most profound Divine task. And that, I believe, is what reciting the Song at the Sea is meant to inspire us to do.

R. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira (The Piazechna Rebbe, *B'nei Machshavah Tova*, sec. 18) teaches that we must individuate, which necessarily means that we must look beyond accepted norms and customs to discover who we are meant to be. Each person's uniqueness calls us to our human purpose. We are truly free when we are able to be faithful to the truth of our own Divine image. He relates this to song, without specifying which one, and with this I will close. The Piazechna Rebbe writes:

"...Take for yourself some musical phrase, turn your face to the wall or just close your eyes and contemplate again that you are standing before the Throne of Glory.

In your broken-heartedness, you have come to pour out your soul to God in song and melody which come forth from within your heart. Then one will feel oneself that their soul goes out in joyful song. If at first you were making music before your soul to arouse her from her sleep, little by little you feel that the soul is beginning to make music for herself.”

May we find the notes that sound the truths of our lives, and may our notes rise and find chorus in a harmony of joyfully lived and life-giving purpose.