

Parshat Beshalach

Shirat HaYam

After decades of slavery and oppression, Am Yisrael escapes Egypt. They taste freedom for the first time as they take their steps through the harsh desert to a future of hope, identity, faith; a future of Torah and Eretz Yisrael.

"And the Children of Israel departed defiantly."
(14:8)

Unknown to them, they were being chased, the entire Egyptian cavalry pursuing them to the seashore. Suddenly they realized that they were hemmed-in, trapped. They had to face their terrifying oppressors once again. We can only imagine the dreadful sense of panic and fear, the despair, the disillusionment. The Desert suddenly appeared as the place of death, and Egypt the place of life!

"Better to serve Egypt than to die in the wilderness!" (14:12)

And then, within a single night, the tables turned yet again. Bnei Yisrael watched as their enemies disappeared before their very eyes. Their fears, their insecurity, their shame, their masters, drown in the sea. The miracle of the Splitting of the Yam Suf – so sudden, so vivid – prompts the Israelites to burst into song. Their sense of relief, their astonished exhilaration, emerges as song and dance.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE "SHIRA"

We read the "Shira" daily in Tefilla, but there are few people that might be able to give a clear summary of its content. Let us look at its structure¹.

The "Shira" is punctuated by "double statements" that, from a literary perspective, determine its structure. These are:

v.6 "YEMINCHA HASHEM ne'edaree bakoach,
YEMINCHA HASHEM tiratz Oyev"

v.11 "MI KAMOCHA be'elim Hashem, MI KAMOCHA..."

v.16 " AD YAAVOR amcha Hashem, AD YAAVOR am zu..."

In each case, this doubled expression creates a refrain that gives us a moment to pause. These are the

changeover points between the stanzas. (All the stanzas are equal in length: 48-50 words) giving equal weight to each. Hence, we emerge with the following structure for Shirat Hayam:

v.1	Introduction
v.2-6	Stanza 1
v.7-11	Stanza 2
v.12-16	Stanza 3
v.17-18	Conclusion

Now let us move to the **content** of each section. How does each stanza add to the song?

The first section celebrates God's immense power. God is a "man of war," who will take "Pharaoh's chariots and his army" and "cast them into the sea... like a stone."² God is described with powers of strength and deliverance. Hence we complete this section with a celebration of God's strength as depicted by his right arm "glorious in power."

The second section is characterized by an atmosphere of violent hostility. While depicting God's victory over the Egyptians, this action is filled with the evil intent of the enemy – sometimes described as God's enemy, and sometimes, Israel's foe. In response, we feel God's furious backlash. In this section we talk about "enemies"³ (v.9) and "opponents" or those who "stand against" God (v.7). Now God responds with greater fury (v.7) consuming the enemy. The enemy plots and plans, with evil intent, seeking profit and spoils. In this section, the rivalry is expressed in the way in which God's victory is described not simply as a defeat of Egypt but above all that, this is a subjugation of rival deities: "Who is like You amongst the gods, Hashem."

What does the third section describe? It begins with the notion of God's leadership of the nation, his guiding hand (*Nachita Bechasdecha*.) But a second theme is thrown in here. This is the impact of Kriyat Yam Suf upon the nations around. They hear and they "tremble" and quiver. The nations that are mentioned here are: Philistines, Edom, Moav, Canaan. Indeed, the backdrop to this fear that paralyzes the region's nations, is the notion of "Ad Yavor Amcha Hashem," that this nation do not intend to remain in the desert but to move on to "Your Holy Abode," (v.13) – to Eretz Yisrael. It is this national agenda, the impending conquest of Eretz Yisrael, which generates the concern of these nations, as they all surround Eretz Yisrael.⁴ And yet, beyond the territorial focus, this section depicts the interesting stark contrast of emotions between God's special love for Am Yisrael, and the fear of the surrounding nations.

² It is interesting that each of the three sections all make mention of "stones," either regarding Pharaoh's sinking in the water as compared to "a stone" (v.5,) "they sank like lead" (v.10); or that the nations were paralysed by fear to the point that they are "silent as a stone." (v.16) This "stone" theme is interesting. Maybe it might serve to act as a connecting point from a literary perspective, linking the three sections of the "shira." Maybe there is more to it!

³ Notice how the theme of the "Oyev" - the enemy- already creeps into the second clause of v.6 : *Yemincha Hashem Tiratz Oyev*. Maybe this serves a transitional function.

⁴ Indeed in Sefer Yehoshua Ch.2 Rahav mentions Kriyat Yam Suf as a well known fact amongst the inhabitants of Canaan.

¹ For a different structure, see

<http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/beshalah/mar.html>

The concluding section deals with "The Future." According to the Ibn Ezra it is actually a prayer, a request for future blessing. Here we talk about the arrival of the Children of Israel in Eretz Canaan and their settling there, The building of the Beit Hamikdash, and the vision of God reigning for ever. This vision is only partially fulfilled in the near future. In Joshua's time, we settle the land, but we must wait 440 years for the Beit Hamikdash. And beyond that, the vista of God reigning supreme over the universe still eludes us today, remaining a Messianic dream.

So we have:

1. Introductory chorus.
2. God's victory and power
3. God opposition to those that challenge him
4. God's care of Am Yisrael, God instilling fear into rival nations
5. The future: Mikdash, and God's everlasting reign.

We should add that whereas the first section describes God in the third person, the second section already shifts, addressing God in the second person, denoting a movement **towards** God, The initial act of praising God (3rd person) stimulates a process of opening up to God, of drawing close, that allows for a more intimate I-Thou relationship (2nd person).

HOW DID THEY SING IT?

Let us now return to the opening line of the Shira. The first passuk raises a range of options for the manner in which the Shira was sung:

"Our rabbis taught: On that day Rabbi Akiva expounded: When the Israelites came up from the Red Sea, they wanted to sing a song. How did they sing it? Like an adult who reads the Hallel [for the congregation] and they respond after him with the leading word. Moses said, "I will sing to the Lord," and they responded, "I will sing to the Lord." Moses said, "For He has triumphed gloriously," and they responded, "I will sing to the Lord."

R. Eliezer son of R. Jose the Galilean said: It was like a child who reads the Hallel [for a congregation] and they repeat after him all that he says. Moses said, "I will sing to the Lord," and they responded, "I will sing to the Lord." Moses said, "For He has triumphed gloriously," and they responded, "For He has triumphed gloriously."

R. Nehemiah said: It was like a schoolteacher who recites the Shema in the synagogue. He begins first and they respond after him." (Sotah 30b)

The basic question here relates to how Bnei Yisrael sang the "shira". How does an entire nation spontaneously break into identical song? How did they know the words?

But in truth, the question of the manner in which the song was sung emerges from the phraseology of the opening passuk:

"Then **Moshe** sang (singular) **and Bnei Yisrael**, this song, and **THEY** said..."

Does Moshe sing or Bnei Yisrael? What is the interaction between the two groups?

Three suggestions are offered. We shall explain them in reverse order.

3. RABBI NEHEMIA – prophetic inspiration.

Moshe began the text, but the people somehow instinctively knew the words, the praises, and so, Moses began but then they all took up the text of the song and sang together. Moshe was the "chazzan" starting with the opening words, but after that everyone sang in unison.

This interpretation would seem to be the most incredulous as it relies upon a certain prophetic inspiration or Ruach Hakodesh whereby the entire nation were imbued with the words of the song. The mood might have been emotionally elated and the dancing spontaneous, but the content of the verse was divinely communicated.

2. RABBI ELIEZER SON OF RABBI YOSE: Repetition

The "shira" was chanted "like a child leading the congregation in Hallel." A child might know the words, but is not obligated in prayer, hence he must "dictate" the entire prayer service to the adults who will recite the text, word for word after him. Rabbi Eliezer suggests that the "shira" was chanted responsively, verse for verse, much like the way we chant Tehillim, with the Chazan leading the congregation, and the congregation repeating each line.

Here clearly we have an interesting solution whereby both Moshe AND the people sing. In addition no "auto-inspiration" is necessary to teach everyone the text.

1. RABBI AKIVA : Responsive Prayer.

"Like an adult who reads the Hallel [for the congregation] and they respond after him with the leading word."

Rabbi Akiva says that the people chanted a simple chorus. The words "*Ashira Lashem*" were repeated after each phrase of the "shira" forming a very rhythmic chanting:

"*Azi Vezimrat Ya*" – *Ashira LaShem!*
"*Vayehi li Liyeshua*" – *Ashira Lashem!*
"*Zeh Keli VeAnvehu*" – *Ashira Lashem!*
"*Elokei Avi Vaarommenhu*" – *Ashira Lashem!*

In this manner, the people simply recited the phrase “*Ashira Lashem*” as a refrain – much as we see in some of our Tehillim⁵ (Psalms) and piyutim⁶ (liturgical poems.)

Moses then is the poet, the singer, and the people simply chant along, listening to, but not partaking of the intricate poetry.

HALLEL

The passage here in the Gemara is fascinating in that it relates Bnei Yisrael’s recital of the “shira” to our prayer of Hallel. Interestingly enough, the Rambam talks about Hallel in precisely this fashion:

“In the ancient times, the reading of Hallel was performed in the following fashion. After the blessing, the leader said “Hallelujah!” and the congregation answered, “*Halellujah!*” He continued “*Hallulu Avdei Hashem*” and they answered *Halellujah!*” ; “*Hallulu b’shem Hashem*” and they answered *Halellujah!*” ... until they recited “*Halellujah!*” One Hundred and Thirty Two times during Hallel.” Laws of Channuka 3:12

In other words, the Shirat Hayam is the prototype for our Hallel. It was the archetypal song of praise.

RESPONSIVE PRAYER

Have you ever noticed how much of our prayer is composed as a responsive chant? Think about it - Kaddish, Kedusha, Borchu, Hallel, all have a responsive style, a rhythm created by the call of the chazan and the response by the community. Even in Zimun, there is a to and fro: a leader's introduction, a prompt, and then the "audience" reply to that statement, a "communal echo", and then it continues, back to the leader, and again the response. Many of our central teffilot are structured in this style. We now know from where this interactive prayer form originates. But why do we use this mode of communal expression?

Maybe we could suggest that it helps people who in ancient times, lacked prayer books. And that is true. But I do think that there is an answer that lies at the root of the prayer experience.

The Biblical source for this "responsive prayer" can be found in Parshat Ha'azinu (see Sifrei and Gemara Berachot 45a):

"When I call out the Lord's name, give glory to our God!" (Devarim 22:3)

The passuk is interesting as it changes mid-sentence, from the grammatical first-person ("I") to the second-person form ("YOU give glory"). This grammatical switch is the key to its function in prayer. The passuk can be read as saying that the community must respond to the prayer of the individual; "When I call God's name, YOU praise him too!" We join the individual who praises God and echo his statement. But maybe it is saying even more. It would appear that this passuk informs us that responsive prayer is the classic mode of Jewish prayer.

Why? Maybe we can say that there is a special energy created by the two-way prayer, the reverberation of praise, shouted and sung in excitement and overwhelming joy. The classic definition of Hallel – praise - comes from shirat hayam; It is the chant of verse and chorus, the interactive song where praise generates greater praise, where the song of one person spurs the next person to burst into song leading to a crescendo of voices of praise, of prayer, of song. That is Hallel. It is created by the blended harmony of voices in dialogue, it is a two-way conversation that transforms itself into the ultimate song to God.

So, interactive prayer is not merely repetition. It is a formula of creative power, of excitement, appreciation and thanks towards God. (And maybe this explains why Jews engage in noisy, sometimes chaotic prayer – like at the Kotel – rather than a silent, serene, introspective atmosphere.) This prayer-echo - responsive prayer - reverberates and expands its power exponentially creating what we call “shira.”

May we pray that all our prayers become a song of praise to the Almighty.

Shabbat Shalom

⁵ The best example that comes to mind is Hallel Hagadol – “*ki le’olam chasdo*” – Psalm 136.

⁶ Eg. “*HaAderet veHaEmuna*”; “*Dayeinu*” on Seder Night, “*Allelaj Li*” on Tisha Be’av, “*Salacht*” on Kol Nidrei night, “*Mi pi El*” on Simchat Torah. It seems like many of the ancient selichot were all recited this way – such as “*Anneinu*.”