

## Divrei Rav Josh- Parshat Beshalach

*A song takes you from where you are to where you want to be.*

-Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady

Parshat Beshalach is one of the few parishyot in the Torah that is commonly referred to by another name, in this case “Shabbat Shirah,” or the “Shabbat of Song.” This name was chosen because the central miracle in this week’s parasha, namely God’s splitting of the Red Sea and the drowning of Pharaoh’s soldiers, is followed by the Israelites spontaneously singing together. The parasha tells us the following:

“Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians.... Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord: ‘I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously....this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him’ (Exodus 14:30-15:2).

Immediately following the above passage, which becomes a part of our daily *tefillot*, we see a second song recited by Miriam and other Israelite women. Our parasha states:

“Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: ‘Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea’” (Exodus 15:20-21).

In each case, upon seeing Pharaoh’s troops drown in the sea, and realizing, perhaps for the first time, that they were now free, the Israelites’ first reaction was to sing.

This past week, in preparation for the special Kabbalat Shabbat in honor of Shabbat Shirah and the dedication of the Annette Ostrow Music Lab, I visited the music classes with the fourth and fifth grades in our elementary school, and asked them why they thought the Israelites chose to make song their first act as free people in this week’s parasha. While this may seem like a trivial question, we could imagine a scenario where the Israelites celebrated their freedom in any number of other ways, such as having a feast with food and wine, or building an altar to the God who brought them out of Egypt.

However, our commentators who interpret this section of Parshat Beshalach see the act of singing as the ideal way to form community.

I would like to suggest three different answers to this question given by different Torah commentators throughout the generations. In each case, the commentators saw something singularly unique about the decision to sing to God at this particular moment in the Israelites’ journey. First, the midrash points out that the song at the sea was unique because it marked the first time that any people chose to sing a song in praise of the one God. The midrash states:

“From the day the Holy One, blessed be He, created the world until the day the Israelites stood on the shore of the Red Sea, no human being had sung a song to the Holy One, blessed be He, save for the Israelites... When the Israelites arrived at the sea and it was split for them, they immediately sang a song before the Holy One, blessed be He, as it says, ‘Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song’” (Exodus Rabbah 23:4).

According to the Midrash, the song at the sea was unique because it was the first communal acknowledgment of God’s sovereignty, the moment the Israelites went from being merely a people to being God’s people.

Second, some commentators that take a Hasidic approach to understanding the Torah text see the song as the Israelites first testament of faith to God prior to the giving of the Torah in Parshat Yitro.# Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk, the Kotzker Rebbe, writes that the song begins with the words “this is my God” because “A Jew must first acknowledge: 'This is my God.' Only then will he choose to follow in the path of his ancestors, to exalt the God of his forbears.” In other words, when the Israelites feel that they can finally attest to their beliefs about how they make meaning in this world, the only way they can properly testify to their faith is through this song. In our modern day, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel offers a similar interpretation to the Kotzker Rebbe, only Heschel argues that each of us is obligated to find our own connection to God through our rational understanding of the world in which we live. Heschel writes:

“Out of his own insight...a person must first arrive at the understanding: This is my God, and I will glorify Him, and subsequently he will attain the realization that He is the God of my father and I will exalt God” (Abraham Joshua Heschel, page 242).

In each case, the Israelites’ viewing this awesome miracle at the sea formed the foundation of their relationship to God, and the foundational statement of that relationship is the statement “This is my God.” By extension, any relationship that we can form with God in our own lives begins when we acknowledge God’s role as being in primary relationship to us.

Finally, in a masterful commentary from his essay entitled “The Fourfold Song,” Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook writes that the act of singing itself is a spiritual act that achieves a type of unity between the human and the divine. Kook writes:

“There is a person who sings the song of his soul. He finds everything, his complete spiritual satisfaction, within his soul...[Eventually,] The song of the soul, the song of the nation, the song of humanity, the song of the world-they all mix together with this person at every moment and at all times. And this simplicity in its fullness rises to become a song of holiness, the song of God...” (Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook, *Orot Ha-Kodesh II*, page 444).

While not specifically referring to the song of the sea, one can see how Rav Kook’s understanding of the fourfold song parallels what took place in this week’s parasha. In

that moment when the Israelites burst into song, they became bound together as a people who went from slavery to freedom, and to whom God sent miracles on their behalf, and thus this moment at the sea was their opportunity to attest to the guiding values and principles that would define what made the Jewish people, in some way, chosen.

Although each of three approaches outlined above examine the significance of song, and the significance of the song of the sea, in different ways, each is united through an understanding that Jewish song is powerful precisely because it makes a statement about community. In certain cases, the communal statement is a national one, as in the case of the midrash where the Israelites took this opportunity to sing, for the first time, in honor of their God. In other cases, the communal statement is actually a personal one, where the Kotzer Rebbe and Abraham Joshua Heschel note how the song of the sea represents a type of credo for what defines Jewish belief. And in other cases, the communal statement is a universal one, as in the case of Rav Kook's, where song can somehow unite everything in the world, when it happens at the right place, and at the right time. In every case, no matter the purpose, song becomes a mode of expression that brings people together for a higher purpose, one where melody is a vessel for spiritual power and force.

As the text of Rebbe Shneur Zalman reminds us at the beginning, all of us have the opportunity to use song as a means of bringing the many different subgroups within our community together, whether that is through *tefillah* in our many minyanim at Schechter, through listening to the beautiful compositions created by students in our music classes, or simply through those peak moments where song is used to raise up the significance of an event, whether through *havdalah* on a Saturday night, or singing *Hatikvah* at a communal celebration. At every opportunity, we can use song to bring our community together for communal, individual and universal purposes, taking us from a place we are to where we want to be.

*Shabbat Shalom!*