

Erev Beshallah 5779

Shirat Ha'yam: The Happiest Song in Jewish History

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At this exact moment seventeen years ago, I was nervously pacing around my room making final preparations for my Bat Mitzvah service. I had memorized my Torah portion, written my sermon, and marked up my prayer book. The only thing left to do was pray. Sensing my nervousness, my father asked me if there was anything he could help out with during the service — anything he could take off my hands and sing for me. And without missing a beat I said to him, “Yes of course Dad, you can do the silent *Amidah!*”

My Dad and I have made a running joke out of how often I make fun of his singing voice — but not because it’s bad. In fact, it’s really quite good, and he sometimes even sings in harmony with me. Singing has been a part of our family life for as long as I can remember, whether sitting around the Shabbat dinner table or belting along to musical soundtracks in the car. But our family’s singing was never focused on *sounding* good. Rather, we were focused on *feeling* good. Singing was a gateway to good memories, to connection, and to joy.

This Shabbat is called *Shabbat Shira*, the Sabbath of Song. In this week’s *parashah*, *Beshallah*, we witness the miracle of the parting of the Sea of Reeds and we reach our ultimate “*Mi Chamocha* moment”: singing and dancing as we emerge onto dry land, a people finally freed from slavery.

On page 95 of our Liberal Jewish prayer book, *Siddur Lev Chadash*, we read the following words before *Mi Chamocha*:

“When we witnessed Your power, we praised Your name and gave thanks; willingly we accepted your rule; then, full of **joy**, we sang together...”

And on page 156 of the American Reform prayer book, *Mishkan Tefilah*, we arrive at the same place in the liturgy and read: “When Your children witnessed Your dominance, they praised Your name in gratitude, and they accepted Your sovereignty — Moses, Miriam and all Israel together, lifting their voices **joyously**...”

The Hebrew word for joy is *simcha*, but here we read “*b’simcha raba...*” — with **great joy**. This wasn’t just any celebration — and this wasn’t just any song, either. This was the most **joyful** song in our history.

Our Torah portion this week begins with the words “*Az yashir Moshe u’vnei Yisrael...*” — translated as “Then Moses and the Israelites sang”. But Rashi took a closer look at this verse and discovered something curious: the verb “*lashir*”, to sing, was conjugated in the future tense: “*yashir*”, meaning “he would sing”. Rashi explains that the use of the future tense

signifies that Moses' heart told him that he should sing, so he did. And the song of his heart was the greatest joy he had ever felt.

The Medieval Spanish commentator Kitzur Ba'al Haturim sees another world of meaning in the word "*yashir*". According to the system of *gematria*, each letter of the Hebrew alphabet has a numeric value, and the value of the letter *yud* is 10. Kitzur Ba'al Haturim translates "*yashir*" to mean that the Israelites sang *yud* — ten — songs. What were those ten songs? He answers: The ten songs are the sea, the well, Moses, Joshua, Deborah, Hanna, David, Solomon, Hezekiah, and the song of the future."

I won't go through all ten songs — that's a whole other sermon. But the first and the last songs that bookend this commentary are worth noting.

The Song of the Sea, *Shirat HaYam*, is the special *parashah* we will chant tomorrow morning. The words on the Torah scroll are uniquely spaced out on the parchment so that they resemble waves rolling on a choppy ocean, and the melody of the Torah chanting is unique only to this portion. You can really see and hear the Song of the Sea unfolding in front of you. And it is in this Torah portion that we encounter the text of our *Mi Chamocha* prayer in its original context, sung jubilantly by the Israelites as they get their first true taste of freedom.

If *Shirat Ha'yam* is the song of our ancient past, then what is the song of our future? Kitzur Ba'al Haturim doesn't have an answer to this question, but maybe we can answer it ourselves.

One of my professors once taught me that when we sing, we pray twice. And in a way, to sing is to pray. But the songs we pray don't need to be in Hebrew. They don't need to mention God. They may not even have words. Singing, no matter the song, is a way to express what words fail to. And song, like prayer, is carried on the breath: the source of voice, and the source of life.

On this *Shabbat Shira*, no matter how you pray or what you sing, I hope that the many songs we find in our lives bring us comfort, strength, and joy. And may we continue to experience little *Mi Chamocha* moments where our hearts move us to sing.