

Dvar Torah Beshelach  
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Of all the countries in Europe, Estonia is not the largest, and clearly not the most well known. A small country across the sea from Finland and Sweden, and bordering Russia on its East, Estonia is definitely not on most people's list of places to go on a vacation. They have an immensely complicated language, and are known for the growing technology center, and as the creators of Skype. But what really makes Estonia incredible is its music, or more specifically its songs. In this tiny country with a population of a little over a million, they have one of the world's strongest cultures of groups singing and folk song, rivaled only in numbers of songs by Ireland. Nearly everyone sings in some formal way, in choirs, in school, in churches, or in the popular song festivals that are held throughout the year. Once every few years, there is a massive festival --sometimes as large as 100,000 people, a tenth of the population--they can see choirs of up to 30 thousands of singers, of people of all generations, and backgrounds singing together with pride the songs of their people.

But what makes the Estonian songs so powerful were not the numbers, but how they managed to use their music to fight back against the endless powers which had tried to stop their independence. In the 20th century, there were the Germans and then the Soviets in 1940. The Soviets began to Russify the country and try to prohibit Estonian language and culture. But the Russians didn't expect the power of music to be the weapon that would eventually help win Estonian independence.

After many years of only mildly successful resistance in September 1988, the Popular Front of Estonia organized a rally at the song festival grounds in Tallin. While the movement expected a large crowd, at most tens of thousands of people, amazingly over 300,000 people came. This was about 1 in 3 Estonians. In this amazing event, as people looked around the crowd with Estonian flags flying rapidly, they sang. They didn't sing the Soviet songs that they had been forced to for decades, but they sang with pride the folks songs of their people, including the unofficial anthem of their people "Estonian I am, and Estonian I will be, as I was meant to be." According to many of the participants, this event and the power of singing with one voice left an emotional power that held strong for the next few years, and Estonians fought for their independence. For over 50 years the Soviets had taken away their land, their culture and their freedom of speech. But they could not take away the songs that had been passed down throughout the generations. As one participant in the revolution said: "We had no weapons but singing, being together, singing together, this was our power."

Here we are on Shabbat Shira, once again recalling as a community the story of our people's journey from Egypt and across the sea of reeds. As we learned last week, this was a journey with an unknown destination and with an even more unsure people.

The people had said “And we do not know with what we must worship God until we arrive there.” Yet while the Israelites still have many years of wandering before they reach their destination, we see that they have learned how to give thanks for their blessings.

Standing at the edge of the sea of reeds, looking ahead to an unknown future and looking with an odd sense of familiarity and comfort at their slavery past, the sea splits the Israelites sing.

“And Israel saw the great hand, which God had used upon the Egyptians, and the people feared God, and they believed in the God and in Moses.

אֲזַ יִשְׂרָאֵל מִשְׁחֵה וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לַיהוָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לַאֲמֵן רַ אֲשִׁירָה לַיהוָה כִּי־גָאֹה גָאֹה

Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to the Lord, and they spoke, saying, I will sing to the Lord, for very exalted is God; “

As I mentioned last year at this time, according to the commentaries, this song was the most free flowing and clear song that could have possibly been sung. The Talmudic rabbi Nehemia, said the Israelites did not need anyone to teach them the song, they did not need anyone to guide them. They simply saw the miracle, they saw the joy in each other’s eyes, and they sang- the entire song, every word and every note, together, and we might assume in perfect key. The experience was so strong that the song flowed straight from their hearts to the heavens.

And looking more closely, it wasn’t simply the fact that they sang so beautifully and with such a communal ease that was incredible, but we also are told that this was the first true shira, the first true song that was ever sung. The Midrash says that from the moment of creation, through all of the many other joys and challenges that they Israelites had experienced, there may have some short jingles, some brief verses, but never a song. Something about this experience gave the people a level of inspiration to do something entirely different, to look up to the heavens and to each other and sing--sing song so powerful that everyone, even babies in their mother’s wombs felt impelled to join in.

Yet we are also told that that when the Israelites sang, this was also a sign of acceptance and of being able to finally put everything--their slavery, their past, the mystery of their future in perspective. The Shemen ha Tov points out that the root of Shira is Yashar, straight--that this song was a way of straightening out the highs and lows of life, and bringing it all together and finding a sense of equilibrium from it all. It is pointed out that this is why the entire parsha is called Shabbat shira, even though the song is only a part of the story. The sea splits and they are happy, but then there is no water, and they are low again. The water is sweetened, they are happy and then there is no food and they complain. This is of course like life, there are high points, the mountains, and there are low points, but we hope and know that things often do work

themselves out and it is then that we can sing. Even when we look back at an imperfect life, even when we look around and see a truly imperfect world, we can still look around at our fellow life travellers and sing.

We all know that song and music has the power to inspire and bring us together as a community. We sing our prayers when we gather together for Shabbat services, and we also sing together with excitement at a concert where we all know the words. We sing happy birthday to celebrate another year of life, and we sing song of mourning when that life is taken away. Over the past few weeks, I have been inspired to see people once again singing in protest singing songs of peace and connection as people fought againsts the refugee ban in the US or against oppression around the world. While tweets and protests signs can make their mark, hearing those holy words, “We Shall Overcome” has an undeniable power to cut through it all. Song connects us with each other and gives us strength to move ahead in our journeys.

But here’s where I must ask a challenging question. Do we truly have a song, an idea, a vision, that brings us, as a community and as individuals in this way? Is it even possible to create this kind of profound sense of connection with each other, and to create something so powerful that every single person, every single voice will open up with joy and ruach to sing in harmony? What is our Shirat Ha Yam, our song of the sea? Estonians can gather hundreds of thousands of people to sing with pride in their people, Moses can gather hundreds of thousands of Israelites to give thanks for their lives, and I wonder can we do the same. Put another way, what is the uniting vision, the point of inspiration that can bring us together beyond our differences as Jews and as members of a diverse society to sing with pride, strength and clarity in a very broken world? This is a big question, but what is our song?

As Rabbi Ruth Sohn concludes her poem, "The Song of Miriam":

And the song—  
the song rises again.  
Out of my mouth  
come words lifting the wind.  
And I hear  
for the first time  
the song  
that has been in my heart

