

# Az Yashir, the Song of the Sea

## Parashat Beshalach

Exodus 15:1-3

(1) Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to YHVH. They said: I will sing to God, for God has triumphed gloriously; Horse and driver God has hurled into the sea. (2) God is my strength and might; God is become my deliverance. This is my God and I will enshrine God; The God of my father, and I will exalt God. (3) God, the Warrior—YHVH is God's name!

שמות ט"ו:א-ג'

(א) אָנוּ יַשִּׁיר־מִשְׁחָהּ וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־  
הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לַיהוָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לְאֹמֶר  
אֲשִׁירָה לַיהוָה כִּי־גָאֵה גָאֵה סוֹס  
וּרְכָבוֹ רָמָה בַּיָּם. (ב) עָזִי וְזִמְרַתִּי לַיהוָה  
וַיְהִי־לִי לִישׁוּעָה זֶה אֱלֹהֵי וְאֲנוּהוּ  
אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי וְאַרְמְמֶנְהוּ. (ג) יְהוָה אִישׁ  
מִלְחָמָה יְהוָה שְׁמוֹ.

Exodus 15:20-22

(20) Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her in dance with timbrels. (21) And Miriam chanted for them: Sing to YHVH, for God has triumphed gloriously; Horse and driver God has hurled into the sea. (22) Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds. They went on into the wilderness of Shur; they traveled

שמות ט"ו:כ-כ"ב

(כ) וַתִּקַּח מִרְיָם הַנְּבִיאָה אֶחָדָה  
אֶהָרָן אֶת־הַתֵּף בְּיָדָהּ וַתִּצָּאֵן כָּל־  
הַנָּשִׁים אַחֲרֶיהָ בְּתַפִּים וּבַמִּחֹלָת.  
(כא) וַתַּעַן לָהֶם מִרְיָם שִׁירוּ לַיהוָה  
כִּי־גָאֵה גָאֵה סוֹס וּרְכָבוֹ רָמָה בַּיָּם.  
(כב) וַיַּסַּע מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל  
מִיַּם־סוּף וַיֵּצְאוּ אֶל־מִדְבַּר־שׁוּר  
וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁלֹשַׁת־יָמִים בַּמִּדְבָּר וְלֹא־  
מָצְאוּ מַיִם.

three days in the wilderness and  
found no water.

**Rashi (Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040-1105) on Exodus 15:20**

AND MIRIAM THE PROPHETESS TOOK — But where had she prophesied? When she was THE SISTER OF AARON alone — before Moses was born she said, “My mother will at some time bear a son who will deliver Israel etc.”, as is stated in tractate Sotah 12b.

**Ramban (Moses ben Nachman, 1194-1270) on Exodus 15:20**

**Sister of Aharon.** Since both Moshe and Miriam are mentioned in connection with this song the Torah wished to include Aharon as well. Referring to Miriam as his sister is a way of honoring him because it implies he is the elder brother—as well as a prophet and holy man in his own right—through whom she is to be identified. Alternatively, it is usual for the Torah to identify siblings by reference to their eldest brother as in *I Divrei Ha Yamim* 2:42.

**Rashi on Exodus 15:20**

WITH TIMBRELS AND WITH DANCES — The righteous women in that generation were confident that God would perform miracles for them and they accordingly had brought timbrels with them from Egypt (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 15:20:2).

**Aviva Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus (225-226)***

At the end of the Song, Miriam (the prophetess, as the Torah emphasizes) leads the women responsively in another Song. She is, indeed named for the first time, as she sings and dances; though she figured prominently in chapter 2 (bringing the infant Moses to his mother to nurse), she has remained anonymous, simply "Moses's sister," until now. Essentially, she plays the role of Moses among the men; she sings and the women answer...

The clearest contrast to the men is that the women play musical instruments --

"drums" -- and dance during their Song; also that the opening words of their Song -- "Sing to God..." are not identical with those of the men's Song -- "Let me sing to God..."

All the difference of what the women bring to their Song is crystallized in these drums, expressive of faith in what is not yet.... *They prepare for miracles*: almost a contradiction in terms. They are set for wonder, carrying the instruments of song with them through the corridors of fear...

The fact that "Miriam, the prophetess," leads the women reminds us of her prophetic function in the dark days of Egypt. But, more poignantly, her very name is connected with the bitterness (*Marah*) of those days. The midrash [commentary] links her, unlike the other redeemers, Moses and Aaron, back to the beginnings of Egyptian persecution:

"I had no peace" (Job 3:26): from the first decree that Pharaoh laid upon me - "And they *embittered* (*va-yimareru*) their lives" (Exodus 1:13)...But then God raised up a redeemer for me -- that is, Miriam, *named for bitterness*. (Exodus Rabbah 1:12 and 12:3)

The very origin of the story of the Exodus is signified by "bitterness." Still nameless, and with this bitterness of her people's suffering in her veins, Miriam rises as a prophetess. She redeems it, but not in a magical sense. She does not make it disappear: rather, she re-deems it, she re-thinks it, she sings it into a different place. Forever, her name will speak of it. Her Song will arise from it, anticipating the future without denying present and past.

Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (38-39)

...important religious roles were sometimes available to individual women. On

the other side, however, whatever they tell us of women's religious power, the stories of exceptional women also allow us to glimpse a process of textual editing through which the roles of women are downplayed and obscured. Miriam, for instance, is called a prophetess. As the one who leads the women in a victory dance on the far shores of the Red Sea, she is clearly an important religious figure in the preconquest Israelite community...

The same passages that hint at Miriam's importance, however, at the same time undercut it. The dance at the Sea links Miriam with a foundational event of Israelite history, but she appears in the narrative with no introduction and no account of her rise to religious leadership. This surprising silence suggests that there were other Miriam traditions that were excluded from the Torah....

The Torah leaves us, then, with tantalizing hints concerning Miriam's importance and influence and the nature of her religious role, but she is by no means accorded the narrative attention the few texts concerning her suggest she deserves.

#### Rashi on Exodus 15:1:1

**Then...sang:** Heb. אָז יִשָּׁר. [The future tense presents a problem. Therefore, Rashi explains:] Then, when he [Moses] saw the miracle, it occurred to him to recite a song, and similarly, “Then Joshua spoke (אָז יְהוֹשֻׁעַ יְדַבֵּר יְהוֹשֻׁעַ)” (Josh. 10:12); and similarly, “and the house [which] he would make (יַעֲשֶׂה) for Pharaoh’s

רש"י על שמות ט"ו:א:א'

(א) אז ישיר משה. אז כשראה הנס  
עלה בלבו שישיר שירה, וכן  
(יהושע י יב) אז ידבר יהושע, וכן  
(מלכים א' ז ח) ובית יעשה לבת  
פרעה, חשב בלבו שיעשה לה, אף  
כאן ישיר, אמר לו לבו שישיר, וכן  
עשה, ויאמרו לאמר אשירה לה' וכן  
ביהושע, כשראה הנס אמר לו לבו

daughter” (I Kings 7: 8), [which means] he decided to make it for her. Here too, יָשִׁיר [in the future tense means that] his heart dictated to him that he should sing, and so he did, “and they spoke, saying, I will sing to the Lord.” Likewise, with [the above reference to] Joshua, when he saw the miracle [of the defeat of the Amorite kings (Josh. 10:11)], his heart dictated to him that he speak [praises to God], and so he did, “and he said in the sight of Israel” (Josh. 10:12). Likewise, the song of the well, with which [Scripture] commences: “Then Israel sang (אָז יִשְׁיֵר) (Num. 21:17), it explains after it, “Ascend, O well!, sing to it.” [I.e., in these three instances, the “yud” of the future tense denotes the thought, and after each one, Scripture continues that the thought was brought to fruition.] “Then did Solomon build (אָז יִבְנֶה) a high place” (I Kings 11:7); the Sages of Israel explain that he sought to build [it] but did not build [it] (Sanh. 91b). We [thus] learn that the “yud” may serve to indicate a thought. This is to explain its simple meaning, but the midrashic interpretation is [as follows]: Our Rabbis of blessed

שידבר וכן עשה (יהושע י יב) ויאמר לעיני ישראל, וכן שירת הבאר שפתח בה (במדבר כא יז) אז ישיר ישראל, פרש אחריו עלי באר ענו לה. (מלכים יא ז) אז יבנה שלמה במה, פרשו בו חכמי ישראל שבקש לבנות ולא בנה. למדנו שהיו"ד על שם המחשבה נאמרה, זהו לישב פשוטו. אבל מדרשו אמרו רבותינו זכרונם לברכה, מכאן רמז לתחית המתים מן התורה, וכן בכלן חוץ משל שלמה, שפרשוהו, בקש לבנות ולא בנה. ואין לומר ולישב הלשון הזה כשאר דברים הנכתבים בלשון עתיד והן מיד, כגון (איוב א ה) ככה יעשה איוב, (במדבר ט כג) על פי ה' יחנו, (שם כ) ויש אשר יהיה הענן, לפי שהן דבר ההווה תמיד, ונופל בו בין לשון עתיד בין לשון עבר, אבל זה שלא היה אלא לשעה אינו יכול לישבו בלשון הזה:

memory stated: From here is an allusion from the Torah to the resurrection of the dead (Sanh. 91b, Mechilta), and so it is [i.e., the future tense is used] with them all, except that of Solomon, which they explained as [implying] “he sought to build but did not build.” One cannot say and explain this form like other words written in the future, but which mean [that they occurred] immediately, such as “So would Job do (וְעָשָׂה)” (Job 1:5); “by the command of the Lord would they encamp (וַיִּחַנו)” (Num. 9:23); “And sometimes the cloud would be (וַיִּהְיֶה)” (Num. 9:21), because that is [an example of] something that occurs continually, and either the future or the past is appropriate for it, but that which occurred only once [i.e., the song that was sung], cannot be explained in this manner. —

Or HaChaim on Exodus 15:1:1-2

Az Yashir. The psauk didn't have to say "az" rather "vayashar" (And Moshe sang..) And the idea is understood because they really sang.

אור החיים על שמות ט"ו:א':א'-ב'

(א) אז ישיר. לא היה צריך לומר  
אז אלא וישר משה וגו' והדבר מובן  
כי אז שוררו. אכן יכוין הכתוב  
להודיענו הכנת המושג. כי

However, the pasuk is intended to make us aware of another meaning. That when the great fear and complete belief in God entered into their hearts, then they merited to sing this with divine inspiration "ruach ha kodesh". And the pasuk says Yashir, which is future tense, that a person might be mistaken and say that the kind of song they sang was totally unique and rare and could only be sung then. The Az is there to teach us that we will merit to sing it also in the future, and that all who come to sing the song before Hashem, will be able to. OR to hint to us the mitzvah 0 that there is a mitzvah to say this (section) always, and it is established in shacharit prayer every day.

כשנכנסה בלבם יראת הרוממות  
והאמונה השלימה אז זכו לומר  
שירה ברוח הקודש. ואמרו ישיר  
לשון עתיד לצד שאמר אז חש  
הכתוב שיטעה אדם ויאמר כי אז  
מיעט שאין שירה זו יכולה ליאמר  
זולת אז תלמוד לומר ישיר שישנה  
לשירה זו גם לעתיד וכל הבא לשיר  
שירה זו לפני ה' יש לאל ידו. או  
ירמוז למצוה שמצוה לאומרה  
תמיד וקבעוה בתפלת שחרית בכל  
יום:

### **Me'am Lo'az Ex. 15:1 (Aryeh Kaplan Trans. Exodus II, Pg. 232)**

The Angels wanted to sing before the Israelites. Usually the Israelites sing before the Angels, as we have discussed earlier. But this night, since the Egyptians had drowned, God did not let the angels sing during the night. They therefore wanted to sing first. Still, God made them wait, saying, "I want to hear the song of My Children first."

### **R. Hirsch (Ex. 15:1 Pg. 187)**

The Peculiarity that the AZ is frequently construed with the future tense, when it introduces an event which from the standpoint of the narrator is in the past, may be understood by the meaning of this adverb. 'זל,זל (From the root AZA related to seeing in your mind something invisible, far off) transposes the thoughts away from the present to make you see an event which occurred at some other period, past or future, actually in the process of happening. The tense is accordingly chosen, not which would be in accordance with the time of relating. At the moment at which our story has reached, the singing is regarded as just happening, hence the future tense. Az Yashir, would mean, then, at that time they sang (that had sung). Az Yashir "then they began to sing" (they broke into song) ...

### **Bamidbar Rabbah 13:5**

(act. #4)...E-lohim is known in Yehudah [in Israel His Name is great] (Ps. 76:2), Rabbi Yehudah bar Ilai said: When Israel was at the sea, the tribes were arguing with each other. One tribe said: 'I will go down first [into the sea]', and the other tribe said 'I will go down first.' Nachshon jumped first into the waves of the sea and went down, and on him David said, "Deliver me, O God, for the waters have reached my neck." Said the Holy One of Blessing to Moshe: My beloved is sinking in the sea and you are praying?! 'Tell the Israelites to get going!' (Ex. 14:15) "This is 'E-lohim is known in Yehudah', and therefore the Holy One of Blessing increased the name of Nachshon among Israel, that he merited to be the first to bring offerings [for the Mishkan], as it says: 'And the bringer on the first day, etc' - this is 'and in Israel his name became great.'