

Sat 30 January 2010

Beshlach Devar

Congregation Adat Reyim

Robert Berkowitz

Sabbath of Song

This Shabbat, Shabbat Beshalach, is also called Shabbat Shirah or the Sabbath of Song because this portion contains the song that Moses and Israel sang after the Sea of Reeds returned to its natural state and drowned the pursuing Egyptian army. The Song at the Sea is also part of the Torah reading of the second day of Pesach. When it is chanted, congregations stand, a custom associated with only one other Torah reading -- that of the Ten Commandments.

This song glorifies God, rather than thanks God (although implicit in the glorification is the feeling of thankfulness the Israelites must have felt). Thus the Talmud states:

It is shameful for Moshe and the 600,000 Jews that they did not say "Blessed [is Hashem]" until Yitro came and said "Blessed is Hashem..."

Although devoid of words of thanks, from start to finish the song is rife with poetic descriptions of Hashem's might. Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut, quoting Samuel Driver, wrote, "The ode of triumph is one of the finest products of Hebrew poetry..." The Talmud prescribes that the song be written in a specific way so its spacing sets it apart from the preceding and following narrative portions of Exodus. I'm going to analyze what may be the oldest poem in the Tanakh. The poetic forms of the original Hebrew, such as alliteration and rhythm, cannot be captured in translation. Both Professor Everett Fox, director of Jewish Studies at Clark University, and Rabbi Plaut point to a 20th century composition by David Daiches as being closest in English to the Hebrew in style.

Chazel discusses at length the manner in which this song was recited. The text itself tells us only that Moses and the Israelites sang this song. In all my research I never saw it proposed that this song pre-existed the crossing of the Sea of Reeds. So Chazel wonders how is it possible that both Moses and the Children of Israel could sing a song that is composed immediately after the event it describes took place? It shouldn't be too surprising to learn that there are multiple solutions that have been proposed to this question. R. Akiva felt that Moses sang a phrase and the people repeated what they just heard. Tosefot felt that when the Israelites were saved, the holy spirit came over them. Melkita suggests that "Moses and the people mutually supplemented each other" -- that is, each sang half a verse. Moses would begin, "I will sing to the Lord for He has triumphed;" then the people answered, "the horse and rider He has thrown into the sea." Melkita also gives the theory that "Moses and the Israelites" means that Moses sang the song on behalf of all the Israelites. In contrast, Melkita also proposes that not only did the adults of Israel sing along with Moses, even sucklings dropped their mothers' breast to join in the singing! Even the embryos in the womb joined the melody and angels' voices also joined. Ibn Ezra had yet a different theory; this 11th century Biblical commentator said that Moses composed the song and taught it to the Israelites.

The rabbis also had a question concerning the grammar used in the first words of this song. Even when it is understood that this is Biblical poetry, it was noted that the first words, "Az Yashir Moshe," use the future tense, not the past tense. Rabbi Judah the Prince used this anomaly as a proof text to buttress his position in the dispute between the Pharisees and Sadducees that resurrection of the dead is expressed in the Torah. Rabbi Chaim ben Attar interpreted the future tense as indicating that Jews will always be capable of raising their spiritual level to the level felt by their ancestors after crossing the Sea of Reeds.

In the second verse, we find the word "va-anveihu." This word may be translated in a variety of ways. Translations I have seen are: "honor him;" "exalt him;" "praise him;" "laud him;" "enshrine him;" "glorify him;" "build him a

sanctuary;" "emulate him." Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch extended these concepts into "I will make myself a sanctuary." Rabbi Ishmael asks in Melkita about the use of this word. He asks: "Is it possible for flesh and blood to add glory to the Creator?" This verse means we should have beautiful sukahs, handsome tzitzit, attractive estrog and tefillin, and so forth.

Verse 3 directly describes Hashem as a warrior. The midrash explains that God does not battle with a sword or gun; rather He battles with His holy name. To the people on the shore of the sea it was clear that God is Israel's protector and, when push comes to shove, will fight for Israel. Again and again history has shown that Israel has overcome enemies that were both more populous and stronger. Not only Egyptians but Romans, Persians, Syrian Greeks, Germans, and Russians have all tried to destroy us. Today, some followers of Islam, with the help of a few of Israel's neighbors, are trying to physically eradicate Israel and the Jewish people. They haven't succeeded and with the Lord of Hosts being a protector of Israel I believe their efforts will fail.

The next two verses describe God's exact justice. Verse 4 speaks of the Egyptians being mired in the Sea of Reeds. As the Egyptians drowned, the infant boys of Israel, so said Ben Azzai, the Egyptian charioteers drowned. Since the Egyptians forced the Israelites to make brick from clay, so now the Egyptians sank into muddy clay. In Verse 5, the song describes the Egyptians as going to the depths as stone. Two verses later the Egyptians are described as straw or chaff. Then Verse 10 has the Egyptians falling like lead. How could each of these statements be true? Rashi and the medieval work written in Yiddish, Tz'enah Ur'enah, explains that each Egyptian rider was treated individually, based on his personality. Those that were most wicked were treated as straw – tossed about. These Egyptians floated, enduring fear and misery and did not drown immediately. Those not as evil sank more quickly, as stone or lead, and hardly suffered. The stone imagery also occurs near the end of song when Canaan's residents are described as being so frightened they are as still as a stone.

In Verse 6 God's right hand anthropomorphically shatters the foe. This is just one example where the Torah prefers the right side to the left side. A second example occurs in parshah Tzav, when Moses takes blood and places it on Aaron's right ear, right thumb, and the big toe of Aaron's right foot. This preference for the right side in the Torah has influenced how a traditional Jew will dress in the morning. In the Shulchan Aruchan HaRav, it states that when dressing one should give precedence to the right side over the left. Accordingly, one should put on the right shoe before the left shoe, the right arm should be placed in the shirt sleeve before the left arm, and so forth.

In Verse 8 we have another poetic anthropomorphic image of the wind being a blast from God's nostrils. This wind causes the waters to "pile up," in Hebrew "neh-eh-r-moo." The midrash makes a play on words and says that the water became cunning (in Hebrew ar-moo-mi-ot), for the waters understood that they were to be solid walls for Israel but become liquid for Egypt.

Verse 11 is well known in the Jewish community. It is part of the Shacharit and Maariv service: the mi chomocha. The verse containing the mi chomocha is followed immediately by yet another reference to God's right, this time to God's right hand that stretched out and caused the earth to swallow the drowned Egyptians. Tz'enah Ur'enah points out that the Egyptians merited burial because Egyptians accompanied Joseph when he buried his father Jacob and God repays measure for measure. The midrash explains why God stretched out His right hand for this to happen. It seems that the earth at first refused to accept the dead Egyptians. The earth was cursed for accepting the blood of a single man (Abel) so it demurred, saying: "Master of the universe! When just one man was killed on my surface I was cursed. How much more so will I be cursed if I accept this entire horde! Swear by your right hand, that you will not hold it against me." God lifted his right hand and swore that the earth would not be blamed. Additionally, God promised that the next time armies arrayed against Israel died in battle on the earth, the soldiers would be cast into the sea. Thus it says in Shofetim: "Kishon Brook swept them away; the ancient brook, Kishon Brook."

A new theme is introduced in Verse 13. With this verse, the Song at the Sea shifts from praising God for what God had just done to declaring what God will surely do for Israel in the future. For example, the reference to God's holy abode to which the people are guided in this verse, while ambiguous, is obviously looking forward. Some see it as a reference to the future Temple, others see a reference to the City of Jerusalem, to Eretz Yisrael or to Mount Sinai.

The two verses that follow Verse 13 specifically mention the fear and trembling that will be induced when the dwellers in Phillista, the Chiefs of Edom, the powers of Moab, and the people of Canaan hear of the acts of Hashem for Israel. The midrash explains why these four people are the ones afraid. The Philistines were terrified, thinking that the Jews would avenge the murder of the children of Efraim who left Egypt thirty years before the proper time

of redemption. The nobles of Edom were frightened, because they thought the Jews would take revenge for Esav's ill treatment of Yaakov. The nobles of Moab were afraid, thinking that the Jews would take revenge because Lot's shepherds had quarreled with Avraham's. The inhabitants of Canaan were panic-stricken, knowing that the Jews would come and take their land. Neither Moab nor Edom had reason to fear, as we read in Devarim, since God told Moses not to bother the children of Esau and not to bother the Moabites. Most likely neither Moab nor Edom were aware of Moses' instruction from God not to bother them. Even if they were aware, fear is not necessarily based on rational assessment of the situation. A note in the Stone Chumash, paraphrasing Rashi, states even though both nations had no cause to be afraid, their hatred of Israel was so great that they could not tolerate the thought of Israel being independent in their own land. Unfortunately, those ancient hatreds are still strong in their descendants today.

As the song comes to its conclusion, it foreshadows the fact that neither Moses nor most of the people that crossed the Sea of Reeds will enter the Promised Land. The song states that God will bring them and implant them on the mount of God's heritage. The midrash interprets these words as follows. The mountain of Your heritage refers to the Beis Hamikdash. Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to Moshe, "Moshe, You did not say, bring us and plant us." Rather you said, "bring them and plant them. It will be as you said. In this world you will bring them only to the edge of Israel, but in time to come you will plant them permanently and they will never be uprooted from their land again." As the prophet Amos says, "I will plant them upon their land and they will never again be uprooted from their land that I have given them, said Hashem, your God." Proof text that this promise from Amos will happen comes in Verse 18, the last verse, of the song: "Hashem will reign for all eternity."

I just stated that the song ends at Verse 18. That is the opinion of the majority of commentators; however, some think the song ends with Verse 19. These nineteen verses supposedly correspond to the nineteen benedictions of the Amidah. Should you believe that there are only eighteen verses to the song, then tradition says the eighteen verses allude to the eighteen parts of a person's back, all of which will come to life and praise the Creator when Mashiach comes. According to Chazal, the Song at the Sea is the second of ten songs that Israel will sing to God. Opinions differ as to which songs are to be counted; but all agree there are ten songs and this song is the second. One enumeration is the following:

1. The song sung on the night of the Exodus, described in Isaiah 30:29.
2. The Song at the Sea found in today's reading.
3. The Song at the Well of Numbers 21:17-20.
4. Moses' song upon completion of writing the Torah in parshah Haurinu (Deut 32).
5. The song with which Joshua stopped the sun (Joshua 10:12-13).
6. Deborah's and Barak's song when they defeated General Sisera (Judges 5).
7. King David's song in II Samuel 22 (also repeated as Psalm 18).
8. King David's song at the dedication of the First Temple (Psalm 30).
9. King Solomon's Song of Songs.

The tenth song, says the midrash, will be when Israel raises its voice when the Mashiach arrives.

Secular Biblical scholars generally follow the 19th century theory called the Documentary Hypothesis to reveal the authors of the Five Books of Moses. This theory states that there are multiple sources or documents, the four major ones being named J, E, P, and D. These sources, so the theory states, were combined into a single book in the 5th century BCE and is now our Torah. Followers of the Documentary Hypothesis say the author of the Song of the Sea is mostly J, the oldest of the sources, but they do see here and there evidence of a late pre-exilic or even postexilic editor.

Christian theologians see this passage as the song referred to in Chapter 15 of the last book of Christian scriptures, The Book of Revelation.

Throughout the world Jews still sing the Song at the Sea thousands of years after Moses' death. Which songs that people are downloading onto their IPODs today will be sung thousands of years from now?

Good Shabbos!