

The Song Amidst The Chaos

Imagine the scene: The Jewish people are finally leaving Mitzrayim after centuries of enslavement by the Egyptians. Sadly, many did not survive this brutal period. Jewish children were drowned in the Nile, and numerous Jews refused to leave. Tradition holds that only one-fifth of the Jewish people departed Egypt; the remaining eighty percent perished during the Plague of Darkness.^{1]} The survivors, who did leave Egypt, were the physically beaten slaves who had lost family members and could not fully rejoice in the miracle of their salvation.

Now on their journey to freedom, they faced a new terror: the Egyptians in pursuit, trapping them between the sea and their former oppressors. Confusion and fear engulfed the people. They questioned Moshe's leadership, complaining, "Why have you brought us here to die?"

The people expressed their despair to Moshe: "Were there not enough graves in Egypt, that you've brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done by leading us out of Egypt? We might have been better off remaining slaves there."

Moshe reassured them, urging them to trust in Hashem's protection.

Undeterred, the Jews pressed on, stepping into the sea, which miraculously split before them. Even as they walked through, the sight of the Egyptians in pursuit was daunting.

It was only after Hashem caused the waters to come back over the Egyptians, that the people finally felt a sense of relief and safety.

In response to this, Moshe and the Bnei Yisrael sang "Az Yashir," thanking Hashem for their salvation.

It's interesting to note that the words "Az Yashir," is grammatically indicative of the future tense, raising the question: Why does it refer to a future event rather than the present?

The Gemara provides an answer." Rabbi Meir asked: From where in the Torah can we deduce the resurrection of the dead? It is written, "Then Moshe and the children of Israel will sing this song to Hashem^{2]}, not 'sang' but 'will sing', hence the resurrection of the dead from the Torah."^{3]}

A fundamental belief in Judaism is the faith in the resurrection of the dead. Death is not the end of a person's story. The Neshama, which is the true self, continues to exist, and a day will come when it will return to the body.

In the Shiras HaYam, the Torah chooses to describe the song in future tense, hinting at the song that will be sung during the resurrection. The song of Moshe and the Bnei Yisrael is not just a story of the past, is also a prelude to the future.

This raises further questions: Why does the Torah choose this particular moment to hint at resurrection? What profound link exists between the Shiras HaYam and the concept of resurrection? Additionally, how could the Bnei Yisrael find the strength to sing amid the chaos and turmoil they had just experienced?

These questions prompt us to contemplate the ability to find hope and express joy even in the most tumultuous times. How do we, like the Bnei Yisrael, sing amidst our own chaos and despair?

1] As noted in Shemos 13:18 and Rashi's commentary

2] Shemos 15:1

3] Sanhedrin 91b

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One of the great Rebbes prior to the Holocaust was Rav Aharon Rokeach (1880 - 1957), the fourth Rebbe of the Belz Hasidic dynasty. Tragically, the Nazis took the lives of his wife, children, and grandchildren.

Following his arrival in Israel, the Rebbe was in Haifa for Shabbos Shira and there he noticed that many attendees at his Tish were Holocaust survivors who were burdened with unimaginable grief and loss, hardly in a state for singing. The Rebbe decided to encourage the attendees and raised the previously mentioned question - why does the Torah hint at the resurrection specifically in the Shiras HaYam?

He explained that Az Yashir, in its future tense, suggests a continuing story. Moshe reassured his people that their journey was far from over. Though many Jews in Egypt died, their souls live, destined to be resurrected. Moshe urged that they could sing in the present not because their pain was absent, but because their faith assured them that the end of their story remained unseen.

For the Jewish people, history encompasses not just the past but also the future. With the belief that the Geula will come, both the current Galus and the current Geula are seen as steps towards the ultimate Geula. This perspective offers a measure of solace amidst current suffering.

The secret to singing amid chaos lies in the pasuk preceding “Az Yashir”:

וירא ישראל את־היד הגדולה אשר עשה ה' במצרים וייראו העם ה' ויאמינו בה' ובמשה עבדו

“And when Israel saw the great hand that Hashem had used against the Egyptians, the people feared Hashem; and they believed in Hashem and in His servant Moshe.”

Emunah, or faith, enables one to perceive the broader context. With Emunah, one finds the strength to sing.

Perhaps this is why this is the first time we find that someone said Shirah in the Torah.

The Midrash teaches us that:

“From the time Hashem created the world until Bnei Yisrael stood at the sea, we found no one who sang Shirah to Hashem except Bnei Yisrael.

Adam was created and did not sing praises, Avraham was saved from the fiery furnace and from kings but did not sing praises, Yitzchak was saved from the Akeidah and did not sing praises, and Yaacov was saved from the angel, from Esav, and from the men of Shechem but did not sing praises. But when Bnei Yisrael came to the sea and it parted for them, they immediately sang praises to God, as it is said, ‘Then Moshe and the children of Israel will sing’. Hashem said: “This is what I was waiting for!”^{4]}

I would like to suggest that only when we were at the Yam Suf, did we transition from a place of utter chaos, confusion and despair to a place of deep emunah in Hashem. Once we saw that Hashem wiped out the Egyptians, that there is a bigger picture and more to the story, we were able to say Shirah. Shirah has the ability to transform chaos into harmony, turning disarray into melodious sounds.

4] Shemos Rabbah, 23:4

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God has been waiting since the creation of the world for someone to see the bigger picture and to sing Shirah.

Life is full of ups and downs, good times and hard times. It is through the twists and turns of life where you want to be happy, yet you have plenty to be sad about. Then there are those times that you want to be sad, yet you have so much to be happy about and that is where song bursts forth. True song comes from a place of deep Emunah, a belief that in retrospect, everything in life happens for a reason and contributes to a larger purpose.

Shlomo HaMelech famously wrote in Koheles^{5]} that every experience has its set time:

- A time to be born and a time to die,
- A time to plant and a time to uproot,
- A time to kill and a time to heal,
- A time to tear down and a time to build,
- A time to weep and a time to laugh,
- A time to mourn and a time to dance,
- A time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
- A time to embrace and a time to refrain,
- A time to search and a time to give up,
- A time to keep and a time to throw away,
- A time to tear and a time to mend,
- A time to be silent and a time to speak,
- A time to love and a time to hate,
- A time for war and a time for peace.

Amidst these contrasting experiences lies the time for Shirah (song). When we perceive the bigger picture, we bring order to chaos and harmony to life's varied experiences.

When one reads the Shirah in the Torah, its unique format stands out – sentences separated by ample white space. This layout suggests that Shirah transcends the words themselves; it's the unspoken, the space between the lines, that conveys the profoundest meaning. In everyday conversation, while words are important, it's often the unsaid that holds greater significance and impact.

Seeing the bigger picture, even that which lies hidden beneath the surface, between the words and events of life, one is moved to sing Shirah. It's in recognizing the interconnectedness and deeper meanings of our experiences that we find harmony and are inspired to express it through song.

Rav Reuven Sasson eloquently elaborates on the concept of Shirah. He compares the two instances of Shirah in the Chumash: the future-oriented Shirah in our Parashah and the historical summary of the Jewish people in Haazinu. Shirah, he explains, is an expression that spans from beginning to end. A song is composed of phrases, words, and letters. The vowels, or "Nekudot," connect the letters into words, while the musical notes, or "Te'amim," link the words into phrases.

When someone is in the midst of struggle, they are akin to a Hebrew letter isolated without vowels or musical notes. They feel stuck, unable to connect the past and the future. However, once they begin to discern these temporal connections, the 'Te'amim' carry them forward, transforming their isolated struggles into a cohesive narrative – a sentence, a poem, and ultimately, a song. The tune elevates them from the present moment into a larger symphony.

5] Chapter 3

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Rav Sasson explains that every experience, even the most challenging, ultimately serves a greater good. This is mirrored in the 'Te'amim' or reasons behind each event. When one understands these reasons, life's experiences harmonize into a song.

Seeing the broader context can be easier said than done, especially during challenges. It's crucial then to remember to sing the 'niggun' to progress. By keeping the bigger picture in mind and embracing Shirah, one looks towards the future and perceives the past in its light, leading to a spontaneous outpouring of song.

Rav Moshe Dovid Vali adds that music, particularly Shirah, captures the essence of a person, evoking deep emotions by resonating with the heart's depths. Music unites people, establishes harmony in life, uplifts during difficult times, and fosters growth. When words are insufficient, Shirah remains a source of comfort and expression.^{6]}

This is the story of our people. Our sun has set. But our sun will rise.

6] Likutim Vol 1