

Between the Lines

Weekly Midrash Learning with Rabbi Abigail Treu

מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל בשלח - מס' דויהי פרשה ב
ארבע כתות נעשו ישראל על הים, אחת אומרת ליפול אל הים ואחת אומרת
לשוב למצרים ואחת אומרת לעשות מלחמה כנגדן ואחת אומרת נצוו כנגדן.
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נשוב למצרים נאמר להם כי אשר ראיתם את מצרים, זו שאמרה נעשה מלחמה
כנגדן נאמר להם ה' ילחם לכם, זו שאמרה נצוו כנגדן נאמר להם ואתם
תחרישון.

Mekhilta, Beshallah, chapter 3

The Israelites at the Sea of Reeds were divided into four groups. One group said: Let us throw ourselves into the sea. One said: Let us return to Egypt. One said: Let us fight them; and one said: Let us cry out against them. The one that said “Let us throw ourselves into the sea,” was told: “Stand by, and witness the deliverance which the Lord will work for you today.” The one that said “Let us return to Egypt” was told “for the Egyptians you see today you will never see again.” The one that said “Let us fight them” was told: “The Lord will battle for you.” The one that said “Let us cry out against them” was told: “hold your peace!”

What a wonderful feature of being human, that we are so different that even our shared experiences produce in us such a wide range of possible emotions. Despair, regret, aggression, complaint—the midrash imagines that different people, standing at the shore of the Sea of Reeds with Pharaoh’s army closing in from behind, felt each in different measure.

Moses’s response, the midrash imagines, addresses each of the emotions felt in that moment: “Have no fear! Stand by, and witness the deliverance which the Lord will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. The Lord will battle for you; you hold your peace!” (Exod. 14:13–14). Each person there felt addressed by some piece of this mini-pep talk; each group felt as if Moses understood and was speaking directly to them. Moses was able, in two short sentences, to speak to the diverse needs of those in his newly forming community.

Too often we walk through life judgmental of the way others respond to their circumstances. “If I were in his shoes . . .,” we think, and go on to imagine how we might do things differently, better. The midrash invites us to consider that the variety of our responses is okay; in fact, it is part of our foundational story. From here, the Lord says to Moses, “Tell the Israelites to go forward!” If we grant ourselves and one another what Moses granted the Israelites—compassionate acceptance of whatever our emotions may be—then perhaps we will inspire one another to move forward with our own paths to freedom, as our ancestors did so long ago.

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Beshallah
Exodus 13:17–17:16
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Parashah Commentary

This week’s commentary was written by Rabbi Charlie Schwartz, Director of Digital Engagement and Learning, JTS.

“One good thing about music: when it hits you, you feel no pain.” So opens Bob Marley’s reggae anthem “Trenchtown Rock.” This lyric cuts to the heart of music’s awesome power to transform one’s state of being. Music can touch something deep inside of us, can make us feel. Melodies express complex, even contradictory, emotions and ideas; they can soothe pain with joy, while adding feelings of loss or nostalgia. This emotive power of music stands at the center of this week’s Torah portion, Beshallah.

As the waters of the Sea of Reeds come crashing down on Pharaoh’s pursuing army, we read, “And when Israel saw the wondrous power which the Lord had wielded against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord; and they had faith in the Lord and His servant. Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord” (Exod. 14:31–15:1). What follows is *Shirat Hayam*, the Song of the Sea, a glorious poem celebrating God’s power. Well known for its place in the daily liturgy, *Shirat Hayam* enhances the straightforward telling of the Exodus with metaphoric imagery placing the focus on God’s might. Professor Nahum Sarna highlights this shift in imagery in his Jewish Publication Society commentary, noting that in the narrative of the Exodus, the splitting of the Sea of Reeds is preceded by a naturalistic “strong east wind” that blew all night long (Exod. 15:8). In the poetic *Shirat Hayam*, this wind is replaced by a “blast of [God’s] nostrils” (Exod. 15:8). In the biblical text, Moses uses the power of song to express the awe and majesty of the moment, going beyond the limits of prose to capture the greatness of God.

Within the classic rabbinic commentaries, the Rabbis disagree as to why Moses chose this particular moment to sing. The 11th-century commentator Rashi writes, “Then, when [Moses] saw the miracle, it arose in his heart to sing a song.” In Rashi’s understanding, the amazing events at the Sea of Reeds ignited Moses’s desire to sing. Witnessing the full force of God’s power made Moses so awestruck he broke out into song. In this interpretation, Moses’s

display of pure emotion inspired the Children of Israel to join him in song and reflect that emotion.

In contrast to Rashi's understanding of *Shirat Hayam*, the 16th-century commentator the Kli Yakar implicitly asks why Moses wasn't inspired to sing during the multiple miracles and acts of God he experienced throughout the Exodus narrative. The Kli Yakar writes, "[Singing] did not occur during the Exodus from Egypt because Moses knew that the Children of Israel had limited faith. Only when [Moses] saw on the shore of the sea that they had faith in God . . . then did he sing." In the Kli Yakar's understanding, *Shirat Hayam* was inspired not only by God's greatness, but by the faith of the Israelites.

For Rashi, *Shirat Hayam*, the inspiration to sing, expresses a reaction to an external experience. Song evokes and reflects the emotion of a specific moment. For the Kli Yakar, *Shirat Hayam* is not the reaction to an external event, but rather an expression of an internal spiritual state. Put in different terms, according to Rashi, we sing to evoke emotion that might be lying dormant or that we never knew existed, while through the lens of the Kli Yakar's interpretation, song is meant to give voice to the emotions we already feel. For Rashi music serves as the root cause of the emotion, while for the Kli Yakar, music is the expression of emotion. Do we sing in order to feel joy or do we sing because we are joyous?

Placed in the modern context, these two approaches to song are simultaneously embodied in the sacred music of Jewish prayer. The melodies of Jewish communal prayer aspire to both amplify and express feeling, while allowing brief access to a broader emotional palate replete with feelings of connection, closeness, awe, and the Divine. To use Bob Marley's words, this is what being "hit" by the music of Jewish prayer means.

The challenge is to reach a place where the music of prayer might amplify one's emotions and perhaps spark new feelings. To achieve this, the music of one's community—the melodies sung during prayer, around the table, and at home—must be vibrant and evocative. The rhythm of the traditional *nusach*, or chanting, of prayer should be taught like jazz, where improvisation within a certain key or mode adds emphasis and emotion. (It's no coincidence that Al Jolson's Jackie Rabinowitz [*The Jazz Singer*] struggled in deciding between life as a cantor and life as a jazz singer.) New melodies from across the Jewish spectrum should be integrated with familiar communal melodies rich with depth and connection to the past. Our prayer leaders should be given the latitude to innovate and experiment.

To hold both Rashi and the Kli Yakar's understandings of *Shirat Hayam* in mind when standing in prayer is undoubtedly a challenge, but it starts with one melody, one prayer leader, one powerful experience. It begins with communities coming together to sing, to learn new melodies, and to attempt to elevate the song of prayer to the emotional heights, both internal and external, of *Shirat Hayam*.

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A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

The Israelite march to freedom is marked with anxiety, trepidation, and hopefulness. Journeying away from their house of enslavement (which bound them for 430 years), the Israelites are pursued by the Egyptians as Pharaoh has a predictable change of heart. Panicked as they reach the intimidating shores of the Reed Sea, the Israelites allege that Moses has led them out of Egypt to die in the wilderness: "Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the desert? What have you done to us taking us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying 'Let us be and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than die in the wilderness!'" (Exod. 14:11–12). Moses learns quickly that you can take the Israelites out of Egypt, but not necessarily the Egypt out of the Israelites. Tension rises as Moses calls out and raises his arms to part the Reed Sea, and the Israelites miraculously pass on to dry land as the sea closes in on the pursuing Egyptians. Upon successfully crossing, the Israelites burst out into song, and declare, *zeh eli v'anvehu* (This is my God and I will glorify [or enshrine] Him; Exod. 15:2). How may we understand the complex meaning of *v'anvehu*—is it *glorify* or *enshrine*, or something deeper?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains,

Henceforth this One will be my God. As here in this moment I see and understand that my fate and my inner life has been directed by this God alone and so I will place the whole of my internal and external life at God's disposal and allow my whole life to be directed by the Divine. This God will be mine, *eli*, literally "The Director of my movements." *V'anvehu*, And so I will offer myself to be a Divine home. My whole existence and life will be a Temple of God's glorification, the home of Divine revelation; this is the natural consequence of declaring *zeh eli*, this is my God. *Neveh* designates a place which offers a refuge. Hence, *neveh* is a place that herds or flocks are supplied all that they require—where they can remain permanently without having to seek pasture elsewhere. Thus, *v'anvehu* literally means, "I will be a place for God" or "by my whole life I will prepare a place for God of which God will proudly declare, 'I now dwell amongst you.'" (Hirsch, *Commentary on the Torah: Exodus*, 189)

While our particular verse has often been understood as the basis for the concept of *hiddur mitzvah* (lit. *beautifying a mitzvah*, often through the use of aesthetically striking Judaica), Hirsch offers a very different reading. Far from "buying in" to the notion of *anvehu* meaning "I will glorify Him," Hirsch latches on to the root of the word—connecting it to *nun-vav-hey*, meaning a resting place, oasis, or home. For Hirsch, the Israelites declare that they are dedicating their whole selves to becoming refuges of the Divine. At the moment that God provides tangible salvation for these recently freed slaves, each Israelite declares in his or her own personal voice that every individual will become a shrine to God. How different would our lives be if we could live in the spirit of Hirsch's exegesis of this verse! If we could aim to devote and build our lives according to the Divine blueprint—to create, as a response to the greatness of God's presence in the world, both a refuge for humanity and a true home for God.

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