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Shirat Hayam: A Momentous Turning Point

Yetzi'at Mitzrayim marks a momentous turning point in the history of our people. At that time, Bnei Yisrael became a nation. Beforehand, living in Goshen, they had not witnessed the plagues – but now, having seen firsthand the demise of the Egyptians in the Red Sea, and their deliverance on dry land, Bnei Ysrael “had faith in Hashem and in Moshe, His servant.” And then they burst into Song.

Shirat Hayam – the Song of the Sea – is remarkable in several ways. But first, with the rise of a new American president, our thoughts might turn to that country’s “song,” if not also to the anthem of the

State of Israel, that both talk of freedom. Indeed, our people were freed from servile oppression both in ancient Egypt and in the not-too-distant past. But *Shirat Hayam* does not mention that term, “Freedom,” even once!

One of the main themes of *Shirat Hayam* is praise of God, the mighty Savior, before whom no-one can stand. In the introductory lines, we find the following: “This is my God and I will build Him a sanctuary; the God of my fathers and I will exalt Him.”

Again, no talk of freedom as we might understand the term as used in western society today: The freedom to do as I wish, to be who I want to be without boundaries, without any binding obligations to tradition, to a system of ethics, or to a heavenly, divine imperative. By way of contrast, the “Israelites,” in one short, wondrous breath of revelation, accepted Hashem unconditionally – and not as a temporary, passing fantasy – with these words on their lips: ה' ימלוך לעולם ועד – “Hashem shall reign for all eternity.”

Shirat Hayam is the first recorded song in the Torah. Many before had had reason to

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thank Hashem and sing to Him – but they did not: not Adam, Avraham, Yitzchak, or Yaakov. So how did Bnei Yisrael reach the stage that song emerged from their mouths, whereby “the Song” is a “profound and unusual spiritual phenomenon” of which only ten were ever recorded from Creation to the end of the scriptural period (Artscroll)?

The Netivot Shalom explains that the people underwent a process of what we might call today “mindfulness.” They realized that they were no longer slaves. But also now they comprehended that they were, indeed, true children of Hashem who, following the Medrash, were acutely aware of the care and love bestowed upon them from on high during the parting of the Red Sea. For example, each tribe had a designated path to follow along the dry land; moreover, the waters surrounding them were sweet.

The Song represents the climax of an intuitive experience of heightened cognition and intense emotion. Like the components of an orchestra, the parts came together to form a melodious and harmonious symphony. The people now saw the “dry land” amidst the outpouring of the treacherous waters. They now perceived the parts of the puzzle; they understood that all their suffering was part of a bigger picture, a long-term divine plan, a reflection of the Covenant made with Avraham their forefather.

These sudden insights led the people to trust and believe in Hashem and Moshe. This instant, enhanced state of *Emunah*

rapidly elevated the people to untold spiritual heights. Our rabbis taught that the lowest echelons of the people now saw prophetically what Yechezkiel the prophet never saw. The freedom that the people had now was the freedom to follow Hashem and His ways unabashedly. They now had the prophetic insight to foresee that one day, “You will bring them and implant them on the mountain of Your heritage...”

So, *Shirat Hayam* is not just a victory song or a national Anthem; it is far more than that. It is a statement of belief, a declaration of God’s majesty in the world, and a commitment to follow in His path for all time.

Please God, give us the freedom today to choose You as You have chosen us. As our Father, have mercy on us and bestow upon us Your loving kindness. Heal us (from Corona) with the same care and concern You showed us when we shifted our servitude under Pharaoh to submission to Your will, when You took us through the raging waters of the Red Sea. ■

Shabbat Shalom!

Menachem Persoff

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