



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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“Song of the Sea”

Teaching young children has always been a joy for me. One of teaching's special advantages is the clarity that emerges from conversation with people under the age of ten.

A cute and oft-told story describes the reaction of one fourth grader to the lesson in which he first learned the difference between poetry and prose.

He remarked, "Wow! I have been writing prose all of my life and didn't even know it!"

I guess it was in the fourth grade when I first learned the distinction between prose and poetry, and when I became aware not only that I was writing prose, but that much of what I was studying in Jewish day school was prose, not poetry.

We were taught that prose is ordinary writing, language which portrays everyday events. Poetry, on the other hand, is the

language of the extraordinary. Poems are for special events and rare emotions.

Poetry is a song, and we only sing when special feelings well up within us.

In this week's *parsha*, *Beshalach*, we finally encounter poetry. From the beginning of the book of *Genesis* until this week's portion, we have been reading prose.

Surely, much of what we have been reading has not been ordinary, and we have even read about some miracles. But the language, with the possible exception of Jacob's blessings to his children, has been prose.

It is only in this week's narrative of the crossing of the Red Sea that the poetic bursts forth.

One of the lesser differences between poetry and prose is that the words of the former are surrounded on the page by much blank space. Prose, on the other hand, consists of written or printed words with a minimum of space between them.

You will notice that in the Torah scroll too the prose of all of *Genesis* and of *Exodus* until this week's portion consists of words written by the scribe with only minimal space between them. Look at the Torah scroll for this week's portion, and you will see long columns of white space parallel to the holy written words.

These white spaces are found wherever the language of the Torah or of the Prophets makes use of poetry and song. It has been said that these blank spaces are symbolic of feelings so deep and inexpressible that they

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cannot be reduced to words of black ink and are, instead, wordlessly conveyed in the white empty spaces.

It is with the crossing of the Red Sea that the powerful feelings of the redemption experience emerge from the hearts of the former slaves. Words of poetry come to the surface. Song and music demand expression. These feelings have no precedent in all that has come before in the biblical narrative.

Today, many of us live lives of prose. Day fades into the night, and even years seem to march along uneventfully with only rare episodes of drama. Few of us sing, and even fewer would feel capable of poetry.

That is what is so amazing about the Song of the Sea in this week's Torah portion. Everyone sang. All of Israel joined in the expression of poetic exultation. Our sages tell us that even the "lowly maid servant on the sea saw more than the prophet Ezekiel" and sang!

Moses led all the men in the song, and Miriam, all the women.

Perhaps it was the contrast between centuries of oppressive slavery and the sudden experience of utter freedom that evoked song in everyone. Perhaps it was the release from the deadly fear of the approaching Egyptian army that gave vent to unanimous poetry. Or it might have been the sight of the hated and dreaded enemy drowning under the waves that inspired all present to sing out triumphantly. Most likely, it was all of the above.

As readers of the weekly Torah portion, each of us struggles to relate what we study to our daily lives. It is, therefore, important that we use this week's narrative to nurture our own poetic urge.

The Talmud compares the miracle of the Red Sea to quite ordinary processes, such as

finding a spouse and earning a livelihood. The Talmud does this to inspire us to see the miraculous even in everyday events. Our sages realize the importance of poetry and song and wish to motivate us to respond with poetry and song even to mundane events. They want us to see the extraordinary in the ordinary.

Of all the many Torah portions that we have read this year, beginning with *Genesis* and continuing until *Beshalach*, no biblical text is fully incorporated into our daily liturgy. Finally, from this week's portion, the Song of the Sea was made part of the daily Jewish liturgy, recited every single day of the year, weekday or Sabbath, ordinary day or holiday.

The message is clear: Poetry and song are vital for you. They are evoked by the experience of something very special. Every living moment is very special. ■

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