

Shabbat Shirah: The Song of God and People --- *Rabbi Rena H. Kieval*

What causes a people to break into song? This Shabbat is called Shabbat Shirah, the Shabbat of song, because on it we chant the beautiful Song of the Sea in BeShallah, this week's Torah portion.

You know the story. After miraculously walking through the sea on dry land – the people of Israel break out in an exuberant song of praise for God, who has redeemed them from slavery in Egypt amidst a display of spectacular miracles. So they sing! But.. it's not quite that simple. Before that song, our parsha describes an extraordinary moment that can teach us.

Picture it. Moshe has led the people in a great escape. Now they stand at the shore of the sea. Imagine. A huge expanse of water lies before them. Suddenly, they hear a roar behind them – the Egyptians, with their armor and horses and chariots, coming to re-capture their slaves. It is a moment of terror for these people; they are stuck, paralyzed. They cannot go forward or turn back. We remember that these are very newly freed slaves, who have been degraded, robbed of their dignity, their independence, for generations. They cannot be expected to have a sense of their own power or possibilities. So their response is not surprising. They turn on Moses with a vengeance and demand: Why did you bring us here? Better we should die as slaves in Egypt rather than be slaughtered here in the wilderness!!!

Moses responds to them just as forcefully: Do not be afraid, he urges them, stand firm, *'hityatzvu'* - God will fight for you and deliver you, be still. *'ta-cha-ree-shoon'*. Moshe's approach as a leader is also not surprising. As God's emissary, throughout the Exodus events, he has seen God's show of strength and commitment to redeeming these people. So with full faith, he seeks to reassure them, Just be still, and watch as God's might will be displayed.

The people and Moshe react in predictable ways. Then comes the startling moment, as God says to Moshe: Why are you crying out to Me? *Ma titz'ak ei'lai?* Tell the Israelites to go forward! Suddenly, shockingly, God seems almost irritated with Moses, and unwilling to exercise the awesome power we have seen at every turn of this story.

Suddenly, in this brief moment, there is a paradigm shift in the roles of these three actors in the story: the Israelite people, their leader Moses, and God. Until now, in the long series of challenges to Pharaoh leading up to the escape from Mitzrayim, God has explicitly been focused on demonstrating God's might and power, a power that will not be defeated, pointless to challenge. Moshe's job as a leader has been to showcase God's power to Pharaoh, and to inspire the people with faith in God. The people had only to watch, listen and go where they were told, as God rescued them.

We know that at the sea God *will* rescue the people. But now that they are free, we see that God begins to expect something different from them, and from Moshe. God is taking a small step back, saying "Why do you cry out to Me?" Responsibility is shifting. It is up to the Israelites now, to "go forward" as God says – *'yee-sa-oo'* – and Moshe's task is to inspire them to do so.

This is a beginning of a post-slavery mentality for the Israelites as they are born as a nation. And embedded in this story is a picture of Judaism's approach to personal responsibility, and *partnership* with God, rather than passive dependence on God. "Do not rely on miracles," our sages taught in the Talmud.

Those same sages imagined the fearfulness of the Israelites as they stood before the sea, and they imagined one man, Nachshon ben Aminadav, as having the courage to step into the water. In their midrashic account, Nachshon walks forward and God waits until the water is about to cover his face before finally splitting the sea and opening the way for all the people to cross. It is then that the people break into song: when they, their leader and God *together* have made something happen.

The message resonates into the future: faith in God does not mean passivity. On the contrary, faith inspires us to act, to behave in ways we have been shown by God's teachings and by the guidance of great leaders like Moses. Human initiative and courage partner with God's power to bring redemption.

As we make our way through our own time of crisis, let us take responsibility to behave in ways that will move us towards redemption. We pray that as a result, God's presence will be felt and the time will come when we can all sing of good fortune, healing and a better world.

Shabbat Shalom