

## PASSOVER 2020 When Can We Sing? (from a sermon delivered on Pesach, 2016)

In the Torah and the narrative parts of the Bible, song comes to express gratitude, or joy. Song, and its Biblical counterpart – poetry – both “shir” or “shirah” in Hebrew, appear after an event: the Israelites sing at the sea after escaping the Egyptians, Deborah the judge and King David both exclaim their feelings in poetry after military victories, Channah expresses thanksgiving after giving birth, and King Solomon does so upon building the Holy Temple. In Torah, the outpouring of feeling to God, be it a song, or a poem, or building an altar to God as the patriarchs did, comes in response to a gift from God *after* receiving it. In the Torah, we are told to say a bracha after eating – v’achalta,.... U’veirachta – you will eat, you will be satisfied, and you will bless God. That is the origin of our grace after meals, birkat ha-mazon.

But our rabbinic sages and later Jewish tradition, including the Hasidic tradition, introduced and emphasized the idea of ‘gratitude ahead of time,’ which is a whole different way of relating to God’s gifts. This gratitude is about more than being thankful for particular events or blessings – it is a way of living, of seeing the world through eyes of faith, with an ongoing sense of awe, living with what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel called “radical amazement.”

In our prayers, the ‘Song’ of the Sea is called ‘a new song’, *shira chadashah*, and the book of Psalms many times describes singing ‘new songs’ to God: shir chadash. Rashi says that ‘chadash’ – new - refers to the future. A ‘new song’ propels us forward – to the future, it is not only about an event that has happened.

So even as we imagine Moshe, Miriam and the Israelites singing and dancing at the sea celebrating what has just taken place – the language also makes us view the song as one of hope for the future. In Az Yashir, the Song of the Sea, a quirk of Biblical Hebrew creates ambiguity between past tense and future tense – so ‘Az Yashir’ could be “then he sang” or then he will sing --- – assheerah l’adonai – can be read I sang, **or** I will sing. Many commentators have read that song as looking to the future, towards the full and true singing of a redemptive or messianic time, when the world is whole. That is when Moshe and Miriam and the Israelites and all of us will truly sing: a song of complete joy, an outpouring of faith.

The Hasidic teacher Tzemach HaShem L’Tzvi takes off from this idea and draws from it a spiritual lesson for us all. He too lifts the image of song out of fixed time, and he imagines it as a spiritual practice for all time. He notes that faith means beginning to sing even before something good happens. Singing before something happens is living with faith. That may be about finding the joy in what is before us, even when something good has not yet happened. It can also mean seeing the joy in blessings and event that are not so grand, that do not knock us off our feet and cause us to burst forth with gratitude, even though of course we hope to be blessed with those experiences as well.

*This* song he speaks of could refer to the miracles that, as the amidah says, are with us every day, always, morning, noon and night. The ones we sometimes forget to notice, let alone sing about. So many of our prayers, especially the brachot, are geared to remind us of those everyday miracles, from waking up in the morning, to breathing, to eating, and so on.

So the language of Az Yasheer directs us to see the Song of the Sea not as a description of a one-time response to a one-time event in the story of our people, but as an ongoing challenge. The spiritual challenge for each of us is to notice the miracles, sometimes even before they happen, to see through the eyes of faith. How much harder it may be to do that right now, in this time of pandemic. We are living in fear and uncertainty, dealing with the total disruption of our normal routines, forced to be physically separated from loved ones and from the larger community. It is *hard* to celebrate the miracles, to see them, but they are with us.

Let us think of the Israelites, frightened, overwhelmed, facing an unknown future; let us recall the stories of our people, who continued to sing on so many occasions through catastrophic and unimaginable times, and let the Song of the Sea remind us to sing a song of faith and of gratitude that can help strengthen and sustain us.

May you and yours stay well and safe and whole and have a Chag Sameach.

[FOR VIDEO: I will CHANT now selections from Shirat Hayam, which is normally chanted from the Torah in the synagogue on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of Passover.]