

THE ESSENCE OF SONG

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Although we usually refer to a given week by means of its Torah reading, such as 'parshas Beshalach,' this week's Shabbos has a special name - Shabbos Shirah; Shabbos of Song. This, of course, is in reference to the special Shirah found in the this week's sidrah, sung by the B'nei Yisrael at the shore of the Red Sea. The Song begins:

'Az Yashir...' - Then Moshe and the Children of Israel sang the following Shirah, and they said, saying, *'I will sing to Hashem, for He is exceedingly great; the horse with its rider He tossed into the sea...'*
[15:1-18]

There is some discussion as to where the precise beginning of the Shirah is: Does it begin with the words, "Then Moshe and the Children of Israel sang..." or with, "I will sing to Hashem..."? It would be reasonable to suppose that the first sentence is an introduction to the Shirah, while the Shirah proper begins with the second sentence. (Indeed, this seems to be the simple understanding of the Talmud, Sotah 30b, which quotes Rabbi Akiva's description of the Shirah:

"How was the Shirah recited? Moshe would say, 'I will sing to Hashem...' and [the nation] would repeat after him.") However, from the laws regarding the writing of a sefer Torah, it appears that the Shirah proper begins with "Then Moshe and the Children of Israel sang." Normally a sefer Torah is written in parallel columns. The Shirah, in contrast, is written, "Like bricklayers lay bricks," i.e. with half of the preceding line supported by the script of the following line, and half of it on top of blank space (Talmud, Megillah 16b). From where does this unusual stylistic change begin? Masseches Sofrim (Ch. 12) rules that we begin with the words 'Az Yashir,' which implies that the Shirah begins with these words.

What is special about the words 'As Yashir' that makes them an integral component of the Shirah? And why, as Rashi points out, is the word Yashir in the future tense ("will sing")? Furthermore, it should say, "Yashiru - **They** [Moshe and the Bnei Yisrael] will sing" and not "Yashir - **he** will sing!"

In a more general sense: What is the concept of Shirah, song, in Judaism? Chapter 149 of Tehillim, which is part of the daily liturgy, begins, "Sing to Hashem - a new song!" We faithfully recite these words, day after day, yet how many of us have actually ever, "Sang a new song to Hashem?" Even those who are musically or poetically inclined, how often do they compose something new and original? It would indeed be admirable if we all had the skill, time, and inclination to consistently compose new songs, yet there must be a more practical way of "singing a new song."

It is written (Tehillim/Psalms 135:5), "For I know that Hashem is great." King David said, "I know" - I alone. It is impossible to describe G-d's greatness to another. One cannot even describe it to oneself from one day to the next. One day, a person may be inspired with a certain thought; yet on the next day, he may not even be able himself to describe nor understand the thought that yesterday so inspired him. It is this which King David describes, "I know" - I, as I am now. It is the beauty of a moment - never before experienced, never again to be had. [See The Light Beyond 1:1]

Shirah goes far beyond the recitation of words; it is an experience. Shirah in its true sense is the expression of the soul, the melody of the neshamah, as we experience it in a certain fleeting moment. Perhaps it takes its form from the words we say, yet it reaches far beyond verbs, nouns, and prepositions. The words are merely a vehicle from which we are to awaken our deepest thoughts and feelings, and allow our souls to sing out to Hashem. We sing communally, yet each soul finds its own inner expression of the moment. Indeed, each day, a new song is sung.

One whose mind is occupied with the details and fine-print of day-to-day life can not hope to understand the depths of Shirah. One must, if only for a brief moment, restrain one's thoughts from their endless journey through life's small matters - from the arguments, from the things-to-do, even from the people and things that presently surround him - and focus completely on one thing and one thing only: experiencing the Shirah.

It is said that the angels sing shirah with the flutter of their wings. Perhaps, metaphorically, this is a lesson to us: To appreciate shirah, we must use our spiritual wings to elevate ourselves momentarily above the drone of the material world, and ascend to a plane upon which the song of the soul can be heard. Perhaps this too is the meaning of the verse (Yeshaya 24:16), "From the wings (i.e. ends [Metzudos Tzion]) of the earth, we heard song."

Sefarim write that the physical world is represented by the number seven, symbolized by the seven days of the week. The number eight, therefore, represents a plane above and removed from physical existence. The word Az, with which the Shirah begins, has the numerical value of eight. It is as if to say that in order to appreciate Shirah, we must be prepared to put aside the details of physical existence, and ascend, for a moment, to a level upon which true Shirah can be sung, heard, and experienced. [Rav Zilberstein shlita]

Although the Shirah was and is sung communally, it is in essence a personal experience. Perhaps that is why Yashir ("will sing") is written in the singular: it is impossible for anyone else to grasp the intimacy of the song of another. Nor was this a one time experience; the Torah is teaching us the true meaning of Shirah - it was experienced then by Moshe and the B'nei Yisrael, and continues to be experienced by those who refine themselves through sincere prayer; therefore it is written in the future tense. And perhaps this is why the introductory verse is included in the Shirah proper, for it teaches us the essence of Shirah, without which we'd just be singing another song.

This week's publication has been dedicated anonymously in memory of R' Zelig Wolkenstein z"l.

Those who had the privilege of knowing him would agree: he was one of the few individuals who understood the essence of Shirah.

Have a good Shabbos.

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