

Shabbat Shirah Parshat B'Shalach 8 February 2025 10 Shevat 5785  
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Good morning, shabbat shalom. Because our reading this morning includes Shirat HaYam, the song at the sea, and the Haftorah includes the song of Deborah, this shabbat has become known as Shabbat Shirah, the Shabbat of Song. Some congregations have a special musical focus to their worship; others have special concerts and commemorations. I wanted to give a shout out to our feathered friends, the birds. When our ancestors burst out in song with Mi Kamocha, that was the first human singing recorded in the Torah. From the outset of natural creation, that is, during the first week back in Parshat Breishit, when birds came to be, they produced sound, as did insects and other animals. The traditional Orthodox Jews in Europe developed the custom of setting out kernels of wheat, then bread crumbs, then seeds to mark this special Shabbat. They wanted both to thank the birds for singing, and to encourage them, through sustenance, to continue singing. These days, it might be more fitting to contribute to an environmental organization, or specifically to the Audubon Society, if we want to focus on bird wellbeing and survival.

Turning to the actual Torah reading for today, what a joy and a responsibility it is to have so much material to work with. There are several parshiyot—portions—containing familiar, often dramatic, stories that we re-discover each year. There are few, however, that contain sentences that our sages found so compelling that they incorporated them into our daily liturgy. Some examples that you probably remember of prayers first found in the Torah include the Shema, the conclusion of Aleynu, the so-called priestly benediction, which we recite during the repetition of the Amidah and on various other occasions including the parental blessing of children on Friday evenings.

If you turn to page 143 in our Siddur Lev Shalem you will see the entire song of the sea. Then on page 144, we also have Miriam's song. In addition, we have a reprise on P 158, just before we begin the Amidah. Why do you suppose that is? We have two central themes that we repeat each Shabbat. We are commanded to remember creation, the creation of the world, including us and the birds, and we are commanded to remember the Exodus from Egypt. These are essential core elements of our belief system. We sing to both of these, for example, during Kiddush on Friday evening, and again during the morning prayers. In fact, we are supposed to repeat the song at the sea daily, during Psukei d'Zimra. It is our custom in Fabrangen to skip over this prayer. As we approach Pesach, Passover, I wanted to discuss our approach to the Song at the Sea together with another prayer that we used to skip most of the time, and

which now we often do recite. Since this is Fabrangen we do have the dealer's choice, actually service leader's choice, on a number of liturgical options. On page 132, or page 116, in Siddur Lev Shalem you will find Psalm 136, sometimes called the Great Hallel. I do want to discuss the commonalities of these two prayers, and the reason why we find them uncomfortable.

But first, since it is Shabbat Shirah, I would like to introduce a Niggun, for the fourth line of Psalm 136. In transliteration it reads, "L Oseh niflaot gdolot l'vado, Ki L'olam hasdo."

Translating—we give thanks, Hodu

To the One who alone works great wonders, for God's love endures forever.

For some reason, I find this song, both the niggun and the words, very appealing right now.

If you look at the text, though, not everything on the page is appealing, and I'll come back to that.

We read this Psalm every Shabbat and every festival as part of Psukei de Zimra, the verses of song. Back in the day, the Levites were assigned to read this Psalm on Pesach instead of the regular Psalm of the Day, for reasons that seem obvious, as it focuses on the Pesach experience of leaving Egypt, crossing the sea and traversing the desert.

We see a panorama of history in this Psalm, stories co-existing in the text. First the great wonders of creation, followed by the sadness of slaying Egypt's first born, then the drowning the Egyptians who pursued the fleeing Israelites, later the slaying and smiting of kings, and the subsequent assignment of their lands to Israel. Finally, we have a universal theme of caring, we recognize that God provides bread for everyone, not just the Israelites. And lest we be forgetful, it rounds back to asking us to praise and thank God in Heaven. Our modern sensibilities cry out and question when we read about the destruction of Kings Sihon and Og, not to mention the losses incurred by Egypt. At the same time we are grateful to have been rescued from slavery and led out of Egypt by a powerful God and then brought to our land.

Back to the Torah reading. The Israelites reach the Sea and for the first time in our recorded (Toraitic) history, we burst into song.

"Ozi v zimrat ya vayhi li lyshua,"

(Gd is my strength and my might; Gd is my deliverance.)"

Why do we not want to read this every week? If we had a daily minyan at Fabbrangen we would probably skip this prayer then as well. We do not want to sound triumphalist. We find that distasteful.

You likely recall the famous midrash which led to the custom of spilling out drops of wine at our Passover seder. We remember the plagues that befell Egypt. God wonders why the angels are singing at the loss of his creations. Our compromise is that we sing to rejoice and express gratitude, but our cup of joy is diminished to recognize the losses in Egypt, losses that our tradition decided were necessary to reach the desired outcome. Today I want to explore the back story of this midrash.

If you follow Daf Yomi, the systematic Talmud study that tackles a daf, a sort of page, a day over the course of seven years, you would be in Tractate Sanhedrin in the 50s. About two weeks ago, in Tractate Sanhedrin, 39b, the subject was Capital Punishment. The ancient sages accepted and yet frowned upon capital punishment. They intimidated witnesses to assure that their testimony was precise. They literally wanted to put the fear of God in those who testified, to avoid any miscarriage of justice. Rabbi Lexie Botzum observed (in My Jewish Learning) that, “The mishnah has just explained the necessity of emphasizing to potential witnesses the preciousness of human life. The witnesses might then think that this overrides the need to testify, even against someone who has undoubtedly done a wicked deed. Therefore, the court is counseled to inform the witnesses that the downfall of a wicked person is cause for celebration.”

So, the Talmud reports: And perhaps you (the witnesses) will say: Why would we want to be responsible for the blood of this person? But is it not already stated: “*When the wicked perish, there is song*” (Proverbs 11:10)?

The Gemara cites for example the death of King Ahab, who was a really wicked, evil guy. You can find more about him in the first Book of Kings, but for

our purposes, just note that at his death, people celebrated, indeed they burst into song! Just as it says in Proverbs.

So, are we supposed to rejoice at the destruction of evil people?

I was delighted to find this theological question in the Talmud. (I tend to think it dwells more on practicalities, albeit religious ones.)

Corollary question: Is God happy about the downfall of the wicked?

The Book of Chronicles speaks about military bands—in the time of Jehoshaphat--almost like today: *“He appointed them that should sing unto the Lord, and praise in the beauty of holiness, as they went out before the army, and say: Give thanks to the Lord, for His mercy endures forever”* (II Chronicles 20:21). And Rabbi Yonatan says: For what reason is it not stated in this praise: *“Give thanks to the Lord for He is good, for His mercy endures forever.”* Because the Holy Blessed One is **NOT** gladdened by the downfall of the wicked.

To refresh, in Psalm 136, the first line includes *Ki Tov*, for he is good, whereas the similar line in Chronicles omits that phrase. Why? According to Rabbi Yonatan, Because God is diminished by sadness at the loss of God's creatures, even the evil ones.

Indeed, though God may orchestrate the downfall of the wicked, God doesn't rejoice in their destruction.

Here comes the famous midrash:

As Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman says that Rabbi Yonatan says: What does it mean: **“And the one came not near the other all the night”** (Exodus 14:20)? At that time the ministering angels desired to recite a song before the Holy Blessed One. The Holy Blessed One said to them: My handiwork (i.e., the Egyptians) are drowning

in the sea, and you are reciting a song before Me?

In this oft-recited midrash, the [angels](#) desire to sing while the Egyptians, in hot pursuit of the fleeing Israelites, are drowned in the Red Sea. But God refuses their jubilation, insisting that even the death of the Egyptians is worth mourning. If God finds no joy in even the wicked's downfall, then how can we say it should be celebrated with song?

The Talmudic resolution:

Rabbi Yosei bar Hanina said: God does not rejoice, but God causes others to rejoice, as it is written: "**So the Lord will rejoice [ken yasis]**" (Deuteronomy 28:63). And it is not written: Will have joy [**yasus**].

God does not rejoice at the wicked perishing; however, this isn't meant to be a paradigm for human behavior. Crucially, in the midrash cited above, God stops the angels from singing, but does nothing to prevent the Israelites breaking out in joyous song as they reach the far shore and watch the Egyptians drown. God acknowledges that it is a normal human response to rejoice at the downfall of an oppressor; the Israelites, as the Egyptians' victims, are allowed to celebrate both the destruction of the Egyptians and their own salvation. But the angels, like God, are not victims of any wicked humans, so they are not permitted to delight in the death of anyone, even of the wicked.

So to conclude, it turns out that God is indeed sad for God's losses. At the same time, however, God wants us to acknowledge God's power and to rejoice at our salvation! Thus we have this complex liturgical compendium bookmarking our first major salvation, the Exodus, first the Song at the Sea, and then Psalm 136, the great Hallel, each of them including both the joy of redemption and

the sadness of the losses incurred in that process. The conclusion is universal stewardship, where God is responsible for all humanity.

Questions: how does this sit with you as you view these epic poems, Psalm 136 and the Song at the Sea?

Where do our feelings about the one-time conquest that led to our land and the losses of Egypt fit with the commandments to celebrate creation and remember our salvation?

This is the song I introduced during the drash--to a line in Psalm 136\

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HW278AKqZbc&feature=youtu.be>