

SINGING IN THE DARKNESS

The Audacity of Faith

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The Israelites didn't just sing *after* their salvation at the Sea of Reeds. They actually sang *before* they were saved. With a pursuing army closing in behind them and a wall of water before them, they nonetheless sang.

In the Book of Exodus, after we read about the miraculous parting of the Sea and the Israelites' witnessing of God's awesome power, the Torah tell us:

שמות טו:א

אָז יִשְׂרָאֵל מָנָה וּבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אָת־
הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לַה' וַיֹּאמְרוּ לְאֹמֶר
אֲשִׁירָה לַה' כִּי־גָאָה גָּאָה סוֹס
וּרְכָבוֹ רָמָה בַּיָּם:

Exodus 15:1

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to God. They said: I will sing to God, for God has triumphed gloriously; horse and driver He has hurled into the sea.

There are two uses of the future tense that are out of place in this verse. First, the Torah brings together past tense and future tense when referring to Moshe's song, writing "*az* - then," which would naturally indicate past tense, followed by "*yashir* - he *will* sing," in the future. Second, the Israelites declare together in the future tense, "*ashirah* - I will sing." Generally, we gloss over these unexplained uses of the future tense and assume that, in poetic form, it really means to indicate present tense: in the moment after they crossed the Sea and witnessed God's saving power, the Israelites burst forth into song.

The 18th century commentator Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev offers another explanation. He suggests that, in fact, the Israelites sang "*az* -

CAN WE REALLY BE EXPECTED TO BE LIKE THE ISRAELITES, SINGING IN DARKNESS, FINDING SONG IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING?

then," that is, at some other time in the past. "Then"—while they were still trapped between a warring army and water, with the Egyptians coming up behind them. "Then"—in the midst of their suffering, they cried out, "*ashirah* - I will sing." They were so certain of their coming salvation, of their ability to sing God's praises in the future, that they were able to sing "*az* - then," even in the darkness.¹ Just as Nahshon ben Aminadav boldly jumped into the waters before they split, confident that God would provide a way forward,² so, too, says Rabbi Levi Yitzhak, the Israelites "believed with certainty that the Holy One would perform for them a salvation, and it rose up in their hearts immediately to sing even before the salvation."³

While usually we think of Shirat Ha-Yam (the Song of the Sea) as a song expressing great relief and gratitude after being saved by God, it becomes a testament to the immensity of the Israelites' faith through the lens of the Kedushat Levi. Even before they had been saved, even with certain death behind them and no path before them—still, they sang.

On the one hand, I'm awed by the faith of the Israelites. So audacious were they to burst out in song in a moment of danger and doubt. On the other hand, they set an impossible bar for the rest of us. Can we really be expected to be like the Israelites, singing in darkness, finding song in the midst of suffering?

On this theme, Rabbi Kalonymos Kalman Shapira, writing from the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942, connects singing to prophecy. He teaches that, in order to sing about a future state of salvation, one must be able to achieve a level of prophecy, an ability to see through the darkness and brokenness, and visualize salvation. Yet we can only prophesy from a place of joy.⁴ When we are deep in sadness, it is impossible to imagine a better future. And therein lies the problem. How can we sing about our future salvation? How can we tap into a state of prophecy when we are in the midst of suffering and brokenness? Rabbi Shapira addresses this question.

אש קודש פרשת בשלח תש"ב

כי לזמר צריכים שמתוך נפשו
ולבו יזמר מעצמו ואפילו הנביא
שאחד מתנאיו הי' שיהי' בשמחה
גם בשעת יסורים...

1 Kedushat Levi, Parashat BeShallah.

2 See the story in Talmud Bavli Sotah 37a.

3 Kedushat Levi, Parashat BeShallah.

4 Rabbi Shapira derives this idea from Rabbi Hayyim Vital in Sha'ar Ha-Kedushah.

Eish Kodesh, Parashat Be-Shallah, 1942

In order [for a person] to sing, his⁵ essential self—his soul and his heart—must burst into song. One of the conditions of prophecy was the necessity for the prophet to be in a state of simhah⁶ at all times, even while in a time of suffering...

Rabbi Shapira connects this to the prophet, Elisha, whose ability to prophesy left him when he was angry with the King of Israel.⁷ In order to rouse his spirits and enter a state of joy, he said to those near him, "Bring me a minstrel." Sure enough, after the minstrel played, the "hand of God came upon him" (II Kings 3:16). Rabbi Shapira writes,

לכן צריכים איזה דבר טוב וישועה
לשמח את לבו ואז ע"י שבא
לשמחה מדבר הזה יכול לומר גם
על היסורים לד'

We see clearly that something good has to occur, there must be salvation, for the heart to rejoice. Then, when a level of simhah has been reached, a person can sing to God about suffering as well.

Elisha needed to be in a state of joy in order to prophesy. But he couldn't get there alone. He needed the help of the minstrel. He had to ask someone else for help. Only then was he able to achieve a bit of the happiness that would allow his soul to sing, not only of future joy, but of his pain as well.

The story of the Israelites' crossing at the Sea asks of us to sing even in suffering. And yet, warns the Eish Kodesh, when we are on our own, this is an impossible ask. We cannot sing in sorrow. We cannot always claim with certain faith that a path to salvation is clear when we can barely get out of bed in the morning. In these moments, if we're to find a little bit of joy in order to enable us to get to that place of song, we're going

to need each other. We can be each other's minstrels.

In his commentary on Parashat Vayikra, Rabbi Shapira brings in a verse from Isaiah (6:3), familiar from the Kedushah, in which "one angel calls another, saying, 'Holy, holy, holy is God.'" He notes that the Targum Yonatan, the Aramaic translation of the Prophets from Eretz Yisrael, translates the word "call" as "receive." With this alternative translation, we see a beautiful blurring of what it means to call to another or to ask for help. Calling and receiving are two actions in one. When we call to one another, we receive something in return, and when we receive something, we call out. Calling and receiving are reciprocal sides of the same coin: two beings reaching out across the divide, offering support and care to one another.

Based on the Zohar, Rabbi Shapira teaches that it's none other than the Jewish people, as they perform acts of kindness for one another, that inspire the angels of Isaiah to call-receive from one another.

אש קודש פרשת ויקרא ת"ש

ולא רק בשנותנין זל"ז צדקה
וגמ"ח מקבלין דין מן דין רק גם
כששומע איש מצרות ישראל
ועושה כל מה שיכול לעשות
לטובתם... והיא מפני שה'וקרא זה
אל זה' שהיא מקבלין דין מן דין
שמקבלין מישראל, גם מתוך צער
ישראל בא שזה תומך לזה, ולבו
של זה נשבר מצרות של זה.

Eish Kodesh, Parashat Vayikra, 1940

Angels receive from one another not only when Jewish people give charity and perform acts of kindness for one another: even when one Jew simply listens to the troubles of his fellow Jews, angels are empowered... The angels' calling to one another, which is empowered by the Jewish people receiving from one another, has in it much of the pain of

the Jewish people. This is the pain of one Jew broken by the woes afflicting his fellow and another buttressing his fellow through his pain.

When we are alone, we cannot pull ourselves out of our own sorrow. We may not be able to find the little bit of joy in our hearts necessary to bring ourselves to a place of song. But there is something we can do: we can call, and we can receive. We can witness each other's suffering and allow our hearts to break open with compassion. We do not learn from the angels what it means to love and support. Rather, the angels learn from human beings how to be with another in sadness.

I do not have the certainty of faith of Nahshon, who jumped into a sea that was closed before him, or the Israelites, who sang in suffering before the moment of their salvation. And I know that, for many of us, when we're in the midst of great pain, it can be impossible to imagine a way forward, and to sing out in future gratitude. And yet, I do believe with certainty in the changing tides of sadness and gladness. Just as sure as I know that joy gives way to grief, I know that sorrow eventually gives way to joy.⁸

In the moments when we feel trapped between water and war, with no path forward and no way back, may we be so lucky to have the clarity of faith of the Israelites' to say, "I will sing now, and I will sing then." I will sing now—in the darkness, in the suffering, with salvation still yet to come—and I will sing then, when there is reason to sing, in the joy, with salvation in my hand. And, when we can't manage that much alone, may we be each other's minstrels. May we make each other smile or laugh, just a little, so we can find the strength to pick up our weary heads and find those first notes of song. ♦

5 Following the gender as used by Rabbi Shapira.

6 In Hassidic thought, this refers to a kind of blissful joy.

7 See Talmud Bavli Shabbat 30b.

8 As it says in Psalm 30:12, quoted in our daily prayers: "You turned my lament into dancing, You undid my sackcloth and girded me with joy."