

The Song at the Sea
Seventh Day of Pesach 2011
Congregation Beth Shalom, Cambridge
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Shirat ha-Yam, the Song at the Sea, is unusual in many ways. As we saw when the Torah Scroll was lifted, it *looks* different from the usual Torah text, the words arranged in what appears to be a lattice work of bricks, with open spaces. In many Sephardi congregations it is chanted to a distinctive melody. It is one of the relatively few Torah passages that is repeated a second time during the year. It gives its name to a Shabbat: when *parashat Be-Shallah* is read, we call it *Shabbat Shirah*, while we do not call the following Sabbath *Shabbat Aseret ha-Dibrot*, nor do we have a *Shabbat Shema Yisra'el* when that passage is read from Deuteronomy. And Hebrew readers will be aware of very unusual grammatical forms that make it seem archaic, like the language of the King James translation of the Bible for us today.

But more important than these relatively superficial characteristics, the words evoke one of the most powerful moments in our collective memory as a people: following the exaltation of the exodus from Egyptian slavery, and then the Israelites' terror and panic in realizing that they were being pursued by Egyptian chariots, their escape blocked by a sea, and finally the experience that—through no power of their own—the Egyptian pursuit became a disastrous failure, they were no longer in danger, they were free to pursue their own destiny. The words of the poem convey that magnificent moment of relief, gratitude, exaltation.

Yet there are some difficult issues relating to the poem. First, theological difficulties. In order to understand it properly, we have to recall that the Tetragrammaton, the four-letter name of God usually translated “the Lord”, or “the Eternal”, and pronounced in our Torah readings and prayers as “Adonai”, was still in this poem a *proper name*: the name of the God worshipped by the Israelites. We don't know for certain how it was actually pronounced, but the four Hebrew letters יהוה and their English equivalents, YHWH, it seems to be associated with an exhalation of breath, possible as “Yahweh”.

It is fairly clear that this poem is *not* an expression of pure monotheism, which denies the very existence of any gods other than the One we worship. Here (as in the second Commandment, Exod. 20:3) we find explicit reference to other gods in competition with our own: *Mi kamokha ba-eilim, YHWH*: “Who is like you among the gods, O YHWH?” (15:11). You have shown us that none of the other gods can hold a candle to you; you are the greatest!

And how does the greatness of Israel's God manifest itself? *YHWH ish milhamah*, literally, “YHWH is a man of war” (15:3), or perhaps to paraphrase, “God wears a Green Beret.” This divine power as a warrior is expressed in blatantly anthropomorphic language: “Your right hand shatters the foe” (15:6), “At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up” (15: 8). It is language that will strike many as expressing a rather primitive conception of God, a conception that inspires a certain unease. It is rather difficult to reconcile with the words we sing about the Torah: *derakheha darkhei no'am ve-khol netivoteha shalom*, “its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace” (Prov. 3:17).

Theologically, we perceive a tremendous advance when we read a very different kind of statement about God in the Talmud: While the Egyptians were drowning, it became time for the ministering angels to sing their statutory praises. They begin, but God rebukes them, saying, “My creatures, the work of My hands, are drowning in the sea, and you would sing songs!?” (b. Meg. 10b, Sanh 39b). This dramatic expression of divine compassion is totally absent from the Song at the Sea.

In addition to the theological problems, there are some serious historical issues. The historicity of the enslavement and the Exodus has become a matter of serious contention among scholars (including Israeli scholars). There is no record in Egyptian sources about a disastrous defeat; if it occurred, it certainly was not as important in Egyptian consciousness as it was to the Israelites. Any pursuit of the Israelites would certainly not have been made by Pharaoh with the main Egyptian army, but probably by the garrison of a border patrol post. The number given in the biblical account, 600,000 men not including women and children, is inconceivable.

And there are apparent historical anachronisms in the second part of the poem. “Agony grips the inhabitants of Philistia” (15:14): but the consensus of historians is that the Philistines, who gave their name to the coastal area including Gaza, had not yet settled in that region at the time of the Exodus, and would not do so until some two generations later (about 1175 BCE). And the reference to “the sanctuary, which Your hands established” in “Your own mountain, the place You made to dwell in” (15: 17) seems to refer to the Temple, built by Solomon some three hundred years after the Exodus.

One interesting theory, proposed by the American scholar Judah Goldin, is that the Song of the Sea was actually composed in the time of Solomon by someone who was very upset with Solomon’s pro-Egyptian policies. Solomon had married a daughter of the Pharaoh (1 Kings 3:1), accepted an Egyptian embassy in Jerusalem and allowed foreign worship there, built the Temple on the model of the glorious Egyptian Temples such the Temple of Karnak at Luxor, which had its own “Holy of Holies” that could be entered only one day a year by the High Priest and the Pharaoh.

In addition, Solomon imposed forced labour battalions of 30,000 Israelite men to cut down and transport the cedars of Lebanon needed for the Temple (and—according to the biblical narrative—150,000 other men to quarry and transport the local stones: 1 Kings 5:27-30), all of which must have created considerable dismay, evoking memories of the forced labour imposed by the Egyptians in the past. In Goldin’s theory, the poem was a conservative reaction, written in intentionally archaic language to appear old, intended to whip up anti-Egyptian feelings, as if to say, “Down with Pharaoh, and everything associated with Pharaoh.”¹

Today, of course, our associations with Egypt and the anti-Pharaoh sentiments expressed in the poem are rather different. We might well think of the Egyptian masses themselves proclaiming *Allahu akbar*, “God is the Greatest” in their courageous defiance of now former President Mubarak and his powerful Army; or the Libyan people risking their lives to challenge the dictatorship of their own Pharaoh, Muammar Gaddafi.

With all its theological and historical problems, the enduring message of *Shirat ha-Yam* read at the end of the Pesach week is that wherever people are struggling for freedom, God is present, helping inspire them to do what seems to many to be beyond the power of the enslaved to accomplish.

The enduring message of the poem is that in many cases liberation from tyranny cannot be achieved without some measure of violence and bloodshed.

And the enduring message of our tradition, as expressed in that Talmudic passage about God's rebuke of the ministering angels, is that when human beings perish in the struggle for freedom — even human beings on the side of tyranny and oppression — God mourns the violent death of His own creatures, and the cup of joy for liberation should likewise be diminished.

¹ For this proposal, see Judah Goldin, *The Song at the Sea* (New Haven and London, 1971), pp. 34-58.