

# Singing in Reverse

BY DON JARASHOW

**S**habbos Shirah. We sing. But there's a deeper dimension. One that doesn't necessarily meet the eye naturally.

Krias Yam Suf, Hashem's splitting of the sea for the Jews after their liberation from Mitzrayim, was the greatest miracle of all time. The seventh day of Pesach commemorates this miracle, and it is part of our daily Pesukei D'Zimrah. Since we are meant to live with constant recognition of the *yad Hashem* that was displayed for us, His beloved nation, I would like to address a simple question. Why, in fact, did *klal Yisrael* choose to sing after this miraculous event?

When someone does me a favor, even a great one, I do not sing, and you probably do not either. Yes, we sing Hallel on Rosh Chodesh and Yom Tov; however, there are other ways to give thanks, such as a *korban* or simple prayers of gratitude like Modim. Why specifically song?

I would like to propose the following.

The *koach* of *shirah* and *neginah* reflects the concept of *l'maalah min hateva*, beyond the natural course of life. The eighth note is unreachable; nevertheless, it exists within the realm of music. Additionally, a melody does not require lyrics. Lyrics often enhance a melody, but song is an independent entity. To convey a message, the conduit is usually *koach hadibur*, the power of speech. Song, however, is a deep phenomenon that does not require words. In fact, the melodies themselves often contain more potency than words.

Singers are called into the rooms of people who are leaving this world behind. Why? Because *shirah* and *neginah* speak even without words. *Shirah* can speak directly to the *neshamah*.

Evidently, *shirah* and *neginah* are metaphysical, spiritual forces. Based on this idea, we can understand why *klal Yisrael* specifically chose to sing. The greatest manifestation of Hashem's glory had just

occurred. To adequately reciprocate their love and appreciation, physical action or spoken words were not sufficient. It would not have done justice to the moment. It was almost as if their thanks would not "fit" into words. Their praise of Hashem through *shirah* and *neginah* was an outpouring of the collective soul of *klal Yisrael*, and an acknowledgment that Hashem broke the rules of nature to save them from the hand of Mitzrayim.

Continuing with the theme of *shirah*, I would like to share a gem from the Bais Halevi.

When the Torah introduces the episode of the *shirah*, it uses the word "*az*," simply meaning, "and then they sang." After the splitting of the sea, where they saw the hand of Hashem, "אז, ישיר משה ובני ישראל," Moshe sang a song of thanks to Hashem, and *klal Yisrael* sang along. Why was the word "*az*," "and then," needed?

The Midrash tells us that this "*az*" is linked to another "*az*" in the Torah, at the end of Parshas Shemos (5:23). Moshe tells Hashem, "From the time ('*az*') I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name, he did evil to this people, and You did not rescue Your people." Moshe became angry, criticized Hashem's conduct, and spoke out of turn. For this atypical behavior, Moshe was punished and lost the opportunity to bring *klal Yisrael* into Eretz Yisroel.

The Midrash concludes that Moshe's sin was rectified through the *shirah* after the splitting of the sea. The word "*az*" before the *shirah* is therefore connected to the "*az*" of Moshe's earlier complaint. Based on this, the *shirah* was not merely a song of thanks; it also served as atonement for Moshe.

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The difficulty with this Midrash is understanding the connection between these two episodes. What does the *shirah* at Krias Yam Suf have to do with Moshe complaining to Hashem about Pharaoh's resilience? Additionally, there is another problem. The Midrash tells us (Shemos Rabbah 23) that from the time Hashem created the world until *klal Yisrael* stood at the Yam Suf, no one sang *shirah* to Hashem. Yet another Midrash states that Adam Harishon sang "*Mizmor Shir L'Yom HaShabbos*" (Tehillim 92) to Hashem. So which is it?

The Bais Halevi offers a new understanding of *shirah* that resolves both difficulties.

There are two approaches to gratitude.

A person can be thankful that the bad is over, but still see the bad itself as meaningless suffering. Or a person can reach a deeper level, where he looks back and realizes that the darkness itself was part of the good.

When Moshe Rabbeinu led *klal Yisrael* in *shirah*, it was this second type of gratitude they reached. They recognized that the *galus*, the pain, the *hester panim*, the years of bitterness and enslavement were all part of a greater plan. Without the darkness, the miracle of Krias Yam Suf would never have happened.

When they sang, they were not only thanking Hashem for being saved from Pharaoh. They were thanking Hashem retroactively for the suffering itself. That is why this *shirah* served as a rectification for Moshe's earlier complaint. At that time, Moshe saw only brokenness. Now he saw the full picture.

This is not just a concept at the Yam Suf. It plays out in real life as well.

A Yid once shared the following story with Rav Ephraim Wachsmann.

His son, a rosh kollel, had made a *siyum* with the *balabatim* of his kollel. There was a little *l'chaim*, a little *farbrengen*, and people felt comfortable and open.

At one point, one of the men spoke up and said, "I want to share where I come from."

He grew up to Holocaust-survivor parents who were completely broken and totally disconnected from Yiddishkeit. There was nothing Jewish in the house—no Shabbos, no tefillin, no bar mitzvah. Nothing. The only Jewish thing was Yiddish.

He got into business very young—shady business—and made money fast. By twenty-one, he was wealthy. One night, closing a big deal at a restaurant, he walked in a free man and walked out in handcuffs. Betrayed by others, he was suddenly facing twenty-five years in prison.

Terrified, he cried nonstop.

One day after court, starving and shaking, he went into a café and cried over a cup of coffee. An elderly chassid sat next to him and said, "You look broken. Can I help?"

The young man snapped, "What do you know about problems?"

The chassid quietly rolled up his sleeve and showed him the numbers. "*Ikh ken gantz gut fun tza-ros.*"

The boy broke down and told him everything.

The chassid said, "You don't need a lawyer. You need a Rebbe."

They went to the Skolya Rebbe, who listened and said, "Everything will be fine. Hire the best lawyer money can buy. He won't show up on time. Go anyway."

In court, the judge thundered, "Where's your lawyer? You're going straight to jail."

At the last second, a young lawyer walks in. A nobody. Wet behind the ears. He starts talking. Rambling. Saying nothing. Making no sense.

Twenty-five years vanished.

Only later did they discover the judge was the lawyer's grandfather.

The man returned to the Rebbe and asked, "How did you know?" The Rebbe replied, "That's my business." Then he added, "Go buy tefillin."

Slowly, the man became a *shomer Torah u'mitzvos*.

Rabbi Waxman would say, this is the *marshal*. We are no different. We are children and grandchildren of the Judge. Sometimes He looks angry. Sometimes the situation feels impossible. But He is always on our side.

That story is *shirah*.

Not the *shirah* of relief alone, but the *shirah* that comes from realizing that Hashem had the full puzzle the entire time. The boy thought his life was ending. In truth, it was beginning. Every frightening step was part of a plan that led him exactly where he needed to be.

That is why *klal Yisrael* sang "*az*." Only now could they look back and see that nothing was random. Nothing was wasted.

May we merit not only to say the *shirah* each day, but to live with its truth. To know that even when it is dark, even when it hurts, Hashem has the full picture. And if we cannot sing yet, to at least hold onto the knowledge that one day we will. •

**"The shirah comes from realizing that Hashem had the full puzzle the entire time."**

