

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Beshalach

Symphony in Sea Major The Content and Vision of Az Yashir

FIRST MOVEMENT (VERSES 1-12): CELEBRATING REDEMPTION AND DIVINE JUSTICE

The climactic event in our Exodus from Egypt, the splitting of the Red Sea was followed by the exultant song of *Az Yashir*, well known to us from our prayers. Indeed, as the Yerushalmi¹ points out, the Exodus itself seven days earlier was not accompanied by a song, for *shira* – song – over redemption is only appropriate when that redemption has been concluded. Having said that, we note that the song does not go back to mention the earlier stages of the Exodus, but focusses solely on the splitting of the sea – both for the salvation it brought for the Jewish people as well as the final justice meted out against their Egyptian oppressors.

SECOND MOVEMENT (VERSES 13-16): TOWARD THE LAND OF ISRAEL

Having noted that the song does not go back earlier than the events at the Red Sea, we do see that, at a certain point, it extends a good deal into events that were to follow. For while the first twelve verses discuss the splitting of the sea and the drowning of the Egyptian pursuers, verse thirteen until the end – roughly a third of the song – focuses forward on the land of Israel. This is actually rather puzzling. For all the importance of the Land of Israel, what is it doing in the Song of the Sea?

In truth, entering the Land of Israel ultimately represents Exodus from Egypt in its fullest sense, for if the Exodus is about us becoming Hashem's people, it reaches full realization when we are in His land, the land He has chosen for us. Indeed, this formulation of the Exodus was expressed by Hashem to Moshe at their very first encounter at the burning bush:

וְאֵרַד לְהַצִּילוֹ מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם וּלְהַעֲלֵתוֹ מִן הָאָרֶץ הַהִוא אֶל אֶרֶץ טוֹבָה וְרַחְבָּהּ אֶל אֶרֶץ זָבֵת חֶלֶב
וְדָבָשׁ

I shall descend to rescue them from the hand of Egypt and to bring them up from that land to a good a spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey.²

Likewise, in the beginning of Parshas Vaeira, Moshe is sent to the people with five expressions of

1 Pesachim 10:6.

2 Shemos 3:8.

redemption, four of which would take place around the time of the Exodus itself, with the fifth being:

וְהִבֵּאתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁאַתִּי אֶת יָדִי לָתֵת אֹתָהּ לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וְלִיעֲקֹב וְנָתַתִּי
אֹתָהּ לְכֶם מִוְרְשָׁה אֲנִי ה'

And I shall bring you to the land about which I raised My hand [in oath] to give it to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, and I shall give it to you as a heritage, I am Hashem.³

Beyond that point, however, we do not hear of the Land of Israel as the end goal of the Exodus. The background to this is the people's reaction to Moshe's words, as recorded in the next verse:

וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה מִקְצֵר רוּחַ וּמִעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה

They did not listen to Moshe, on account of shortness of spirit and hard work.

This reaction seems difficult to understand. Surely, if they are suffering on account of the hard work, they should welcome the idea of it ending! The Meshech Chochmah explains that the people did indeed welcome the message of being released from slavery. However, their repressed spirit, along with the grinding labor, meant that they could not hear of any tidings that went beyond the cessation of their present troubles. In this constricted state, their vision could not encompass what would happen beyond that point. It was of little help to point to the Land of Israel on the horizon at a time when they did not have any horizons. Hence, the ensuing verse states that Moshe's mission was limited at that stage to the immediate task of freeing them from oppression. Any talk of the land if Israel was temporarily put on hold.

However, having crossed through the Red Sea, and with their salvation from Egypt now complete, the people were able to expand their consciousness to embrace the future. In other words, part of the emotional liberation that took place at the Red Sea was that it enabled the land of Israel to be put back on the map of their national spiritual aspirations! Hence, the anticipation of journeying toward that land constitutes a significant part of their song of liberation.

WAVES AND REVERBERATIONS

Indeed, not only did the events at the sea allow the Jewish people to again begin to *think* about entering the land of Israel, but they also actually played an active role in *enabling it to happen*. Verses 14-16 inform us that when the nations inhabiting the land of Israel heard about what happened at the sea, they were seized with fear and trembling. This situation pertained even forty years later, as Rachav described to the two spies sent by Yehoshua to assess the strength and capabilities of the inhabiting nations:

יָדַעְתִּי כִּי נָתַן ה' לְכֶם אֶת הָאָרֶץ וְכִי נִפְלְאָה אֵימַתְכֶם עָלֵינוּ... כִּי שָׁמַעְנוּ אֶת אֲשֶׁר הוֹבִישׁ ה'
אֶת מִי יַם סוּף מִפְּנֵיכֶם בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם... וְנִשְׁמַע וַיִּמַּס לִבֵּנוּ

I know that Hashem has given you the land, and that fear of you has fallen upon us... For we have heard how Hashem dried up the waters of the Yam Suf went you went forth from Egypt... We heard and our hearts melted.⁴

In this regard, it is fair to say that crossing through the Red Sea constituted the first step in

3 Ibid. 6:8.

4 Yehoshua 2:9-11.

conquering the land of Israel. Indeed, this will explain to us an unusual feature of the way we went through the sea. The midrash⁵ informs us that the sea split up not into one pathway, but into twelve, with each tribe crossing via a separate path. Why did the people cross the sea as tribes? The division into tribes is generally for purposes that relate to entering and apportioning the land of Israel! How is that relevant here? However, once we appreciate that crossing the sea was itself an act that made the conquest of the land easier when the time came, it is entirely appropriate for the people to cross accordingly – as twelve tribes.⁶ Moreover, we can further appreciate the experiential resonance within the fact that our actual entry into the land also took the form of passing through waters that had parted for us – just like the initial steps through the sea forty years prior.⁷

THIRD MOVEMENT (VERSES 17-18): BEIS HAMIKDASH AND HASHEM'S KINGSHIP

Having directed our focus forward to the land of Israel, the song culminates by referring to the location at the epicenter of that land from which its ultimate message and meaning shine forth – the Beis Hamikdash. Thus, verse 17 states:

תְּבִיאֵמוּ וְתִטְעֵמוּ בְּהַר נַחֲלֹתֶיךָ מְכוּן לְשִׁבְתֶּיךָ פְּעֻלַּתְּהָ מִקְדָּשׁ אֲדֹנָי-י כּוֹנֵנּוּ יְדֶיךָ

You will bring them and implant them on the mount of Your heritage, the foundation of Your dwelling-place that You, Hashem have made, the sanctuary, Hashem, that Your hands established.

The song then concludes with our declaration that “ה' מֶלֶךְ לְעֵלָם וָעַד” – Hashem shall reign for all eternity.” This represents the sum of our national aspirations, that Hashem should come to be recognized as King over Israel – and the entire world. In this regard, the Song of the Sea is ultimately not just about the event that took place there, but the vision that was established there. As such, the song is of relevance to us on a daily basis and hence, forms the culmination of the *pesukei d'zimra* section of our morning prayers, as well as its final verse proclaiming Hashem's kingship ushering us into the Shemoneh Esrei prayer in the morning and the evening.

Indeed, commenting on the fact the word “יָשִׁיר” is in the future tense, our sages⁸ state that this song will again be sung by Moshe and the people of Israel in the future when the vision of the song is ultimately realized. May we merit to participate in that rendition of *Az Yashir* speedily in our days!

5 Tanchuma, Parshas Beshalach sec 10.

6 Harav Shlomo Fisher shlit”a, Beis Yishai, drush 23.

7 R' Leib Mintzberg, Ben Melech, Haggadah Shel Pesach.

8 Sanhedrin 91b.