

Parashat Beshalach, 5780, 2020:

The Greatness of Kriyat Yam Suf

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

This Shabbat is called “Shabbat Shirah,” as our *parasha* contains the 21-verse song of exaltation sung by our forebears in response to the miracle of *Kriyat Yam Suf* (Splitting of the Sea of Reeds):

And the waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen, the entire force of Pharaoh coming after them into the sea; not even one of them survived. But the children of Israel went on dry land in the midst of the sea, and the water was to them like a wall from their right and from their left. *Az Yashir* — Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to the L-rd, and they spoke, saying, “I will sing to the L-rd, for very exalted is He; a horse and its rider He cast into the sea.” (*Sefer Shemot* 14:28-29, 15:1, these and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Fascinatingly, our ancestors did not sing a single verse of praise following *Yetziat Mitzrayim* (The Exodus from Egypt). This notable difference led my *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, to ask the following question:

...strangely at the time that the Jews left Egypt, neither Moses nor the people sang hymns of praise for the amazing miracle they had experienced. Only seven days later, after the splitting of the Red Sea, did Moses and the people sing *Az Yashir*. Why did Israel wait a week to give thanks? (*Derashot HaRav: Selected Lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, summarized and annotated by Arnold Lustiger, p.171, brackets and underlining my own)

According to the Rav, the answer to this question is to be found in the very different nature of these two *nissim* (miracles). *Yetziat Mitzrayim* was performed solely by Hashem and banned our people’s participation: “...and you shall not go out, any man

from the entrance of his house until morning. The L-rd will pass to smite the Egyptians...” (12:22-23) This idea is famously elaborated upon in *Midrash Sifrei, Ki Tavo* and emphasized in the *Haggadah*: “I [Hashem] and not an angel, I and not a seraph, it is only Me and no other.” The Rav labels such a miracle, wherein Hashem acts exclusively on His own, a “*yeshuah* — an act of deliverance,” and observes; “The paradigmatic historical event signifying *yeshuah* was the Exodus from Egypt. No one — not an angel, not man — abetted G-d on the wondrous ‘night of watching.’” Our role on this amazing evening was severely circumscribed; we remained in our homes, ate the *Korban Pesach* (Paschal Lamb) and passively watched the unfolding of this miracle and the fulfillment of the Holy One’s promise.

The miracle of *Kriyat Yam Suf* stands in stark contradistinction to *Yetziat Mitzrayim*. Now, the entire Jewish people actively worked to save themselves from Pharaoh’s chariots and horsemen, and the Almighty joined them in achieving this great goal. The Rav conceptualizes this type of *nase* (miracle) as “*ezrah* — help from the Master of the Universe.” As such, *Kriyat Yam Suf* was a time when:

...the Creator offered the Israelites a role in their own redemption. He required a leap of faith: a jump into the water prior to the parting of the sea (*Sotah* 36-37a). The shock of cold water, the fear of drowning thus became Israel’s minute “contribution” to the miracle. At that moment they became partners with G-d, and as a result Moses and the people full-throatedly sang the majestic *Az Yashir* in gratitude. (Page 171, underlining my own)

Rav Soloveitchik notes that, on the surface, “one would assume that Hashem should be thanked more for *yeshuah* [herein, *Yetziat Mitzrayim*] than for *ezrah* [herein, *Kriyat Yam Sum*],” since in the former He, and He alone, brought about the *nase*. Scaffolding on this line of thinking, we should have had our “*Az Yashir* moment” when we left Egypt, rather than at the *Yam Suf*! Nothing, however, could be further from the truth:

We nonetheless arrive at the opposite conclusion: the more man participates in the effort needed [to achieve the Torah-sanctioned goal], the more he must thank

the Creator. Our gratitude is increased in the case of *ezrah* [*Kriyat Yam Suf*], because we must bless G-d for the privilege of allowing us to be His partner. (Page 170, brackets and underlining my own)

In sum, when we are privileged to join the Master of the Universe as His partners in bringing forth a *nase*, we have the greatest obligation to praise and extol Him. This, then, is why we sang *Az Yashir* at *Kriyat Yam Suf*, rather than something similar-in-kind following *Yetziat Mitzrayim*. May it be Hashem's will and our fervent desire to ever be His partners, as we continue on the grand march of Jewish history toward the time of the *Mashiach* and our ultimate redemption. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*'s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.