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בס"ד

Parashat Beshalah Part II The Song at the Sea

1. Introduction

The “Song at the Sea” (Exod. 15:1-18) is a poetic response to the monumental occurrences recounted in the previous chapter, a celebration of the final and climactic act of Hashem’s consummate triumph over His opponents with the miracles at the Sea of Reeds. It does not provide any new information about those events; rather, it highlights Israel’s recognition of them as being the activity of the omnipotent and incomparable G-d. As a religious expression of exultation at His prodigious deeds, it promotes a more transcendent perspective on them. The Song closes the section in the book of Exodus that depicts G-d’s successful intervention to liberate the Israelites from bondage. Accordingly, poetry and melody were especially appropriate.

The Song does not contain a single praise of a human hero as it concentrates exclusively on G-d’s supremacy. This is in striking contrast to compositions of this genre in the ancient Near East, but consistent with the Torah’s portrayal of G-d’s thoroughgoing interest in discouraging man’s personal aggrandizement in place of His glory. Indeed, Moses, who so prominently appeared in the previous chapter’s account stretching forth his hand to signal the coming of the wind that would split the sea (Exod. 14:21), as well as doing so again to mark the sea’s return and the drowning of the enemy (v. 27), is not mentioned in the Song.

Here, Hashem stretches forth His hand (15:12). The mighty east wind that drove back the sea (14:21) is now recognized as the direct “breath of Your nostrils” (15:8). Neither His angel, the cloud, or the darkness (as in 14:19-20) is here present. Surely these are purposeful distinctions.

Remarkably, even G-d’s rescue of the Israelites from the Egyptians – the immediate purpose of His intervention – is not explicitly remarked upon, a detail we will address in due course.

2. On Content and Structure

The Song comprises two major segments or stanzas, vv. 1-11 and 12-18. Each stanza divides into subunits, or strophes. The first stanza focuses on the miracle at the sea and contains three strophes that incrementally advance in expression and effect: vv. 1-3, 4-6 and 7-11. (Literary indications for this division will be pointed out shortly.) By recognizing the subunits we can more fully appreciate the exquisite order in the Song and realize that we are not dealing with random praises and desultory movements.

The second stanza (vv. 12-18) also contains three subunits. It moves far beyond the victory at the sea, applying the impact and inspiration generated by the great divine triumph to the major forthcoming events of national import. It provides a telescopic view of highlights of Israel’s near future: Hashem’s gracious guidance of the nation He redeemed; His leading it to His holy place, possibly alluding to Mount Sinai and the lawgiving but more likely referring to the promised land (the Temple Mount?); the panic created among the leaders of the Canaanite and neighboring nations who heard of His mighty acts and of Israel’s approach; and His bringing and implanting His nation in the land of His heritage centered on His holy sanctuary.

The second stanza begins with a two-verse “transitional” strophe (vv. 12-13), composed of three clauses, that moves from the events at the sea to the future. It is followed by a strophe describing the fearful reaction of the neighboring nations (vv. 14-16)

and a final strophe that resumes the theme of G-d's direct providence that concludes with an affirmation of His eternal kingship (vv 17-18).

As a G-d-centered composition, expressions of His praise are strategically placed throughout. The key manifestation of His victory – destruction of His enemy's military – is referred to in each strophe of the first stanza, with each succeeding description employing vocabulary and imagery that exceeds the previous in fullness and force. Each of these three strophes concludes with a distinctively framed praise of G-d in an ascending pattern, creating a remarkable dual crescendo effect of victory and veneration.

Accordingly, in the opening verse, within the context of expressing gratitude to Hashem, the Song articulates a pithy summary of His military victory by briefly stating *סוס ורכבו רמה בים* (“horse and rider He cast into the sea”). This is substantially augmented in the second strophe with mention of the drowning of Pharaoh's chariots, his army and his choice officers (vv. 4-5). The third strophe contains an extensive elaboration. Its description of the foes' destruction includes a disclosure of their inner thoughts – their plans, their hopes, their motives – and provides insight into their character (vv. 7-10).

Paralleling this process of gradual amplification of the portrayal of victory is a series of ascending praises of Hashem. The first strophe's final verse has two clauses, “Hashem is a man of war” followed by “Hashem is His name” (v. 3). The second strophe closes with “Your right hand, Hashem, crushes the enemy” (v. 6) and the third strophe closes with the verse that makes the supreme assertion by asking the rhetorical question, “Who is like You among the gods, Hashem, who is like You” (v. 11). The statements in the three strophe endings constitute a movement of increasing glorification of Hashem. The first provides a state-of-being description of Him, asserting an attribute together with a statement about the meaning of His name. The second makes reference to His right arm in action crushing His enemies. The third strophe concludes with an exclamation that proclaims His incomparability with all beings.

It should be noted that all three strophe-ending verses of the first stanza contain a word or phrase that is

repeated in another clause within the verse, achieving a heightening of expression through repetition. In verse 3, Hashem's name appears in both clauses; in verse 6, *Yeminekha Hashem* is repeated; and in verse 11, the repetition is of *Mi khamokha*.

The first strophe of the second stanza does not conclude with word repetition but it is distinctly set apart from the succeeding strophe by other types of repetition, that of alliteration and similar consonantal make-up. That strophe is comprised of three clauses. The opening word of each clause is a three-syllable verb referring to an action of G-d: *natita*, *nahita* and *nehalta* (“You stretched forth,” “You led” and “You guided,” respectively). Each begins with a נ (n) sound and concludes with a ת (ta or tha) sound. Each points to a successive phase of Hashem's providence. In each case the second word of the clause concludes with a כ (kha) sound – *נְהַלְתָּ בְּעֶזְרְךָ, נָהַיְתָּ בְּחַסְדְּךָ, נָטִייתָ מִיַּגְדְּךָ*, an artistic play on the phenomenon of poetic repetition.

As was the case with the last verses of the first three strophes, the last verse of the second strophe in the second stanza contains a phrase that is repeated in the verse, *עַד יַעֲבֹר* (v. 16). These four repetitions are the only such repetitions within a verse in the Song. Of course, the final strophe does not require an indicator setting it off from what follows. In accordance with the Song's content, it is clear that this design, besides being a device of emphasis with aesthetic value, serves as a marker of a strophe's conclusion (assisting the reader in that matter).

The Song's last verse proclaims that Hashem will reign (as King) for eternity (v. 18), employing the word *yimlokh*, a root not otherwise attested for Him in the Torah except in Balaam's oracle (Num. 23:21) and, according to some interpretations, in Deuteronomy 33:5. This usage – a rarity that surely requires an explanation – may have been chosen here to negate the kingship of Pharaoh who had been contesting the sovereignty of Hashem.

Following the Song proper is a one-verse postscript (Exod. 15:19) that contains a concise summary of the main events at the sea. It begins with the word “because,” and perhaps is the closing to an “envelope” that is formed with the superscript (v. 1a), providing

the explanation why Moses and the Israelites sang the song. (The Masoretic Text includes the summary verse in the structural format of the Song.)

The pericope concludes with the notice that Miriam took timbrel in hand, and as modesty dictated, led the women in their own celebration, and they sang and danced to the same theme as the men.

It is most fitting that this section, and with it the first portion of the book of Exodus, concludes with Miriam leading the women in celebration. This detail recalls Miriam's role in the rescue of the baby Moses, watching the basket, speaking with Pharaoh's daughter and summoning the baby's mother. The women celebrating also calls to mind the activity of the other women involved in the remarkable series of events described at the beginning of the book that helped bring about the redemption: the midwives, Moses' mother and Pharaoh's daughter.

3. Some Poetic Features

Among the many characteristics of biblical poetry that are here deftly crafted to create various artistic and thematic effects are: a) parallelism, usually with intensification and/or increased specification within the line, b) a variety of sound plays, c) allusion through secondary applications of words, and d) a significant degree of intertextual connectedness. We will illustrate each of these techniques, as well as others, while surveying one section of the Song, the five verses (7-11) that comprise the third strophe of the first stanza.

The strophe opens with וְיָרֵב גְּאוֹנְךָ תִּהְרַס קִמְיֶךָ (“In Your exceeding exaltedness You destroy those who rise against You” [v. 7]). Use of גְּאוֹנְךָ echoes the Song's opening phrase, כִּי גָאָה גְּאָהָה. Here, the adjective וְיָרֵב expands upon G-d's exaltedness in place of the “doubled” expression of His exaltedness that serves that purpose in the first verse while the more intimate second-person construction replaces that of third-person. The term גְּאוֹן contains an additional allusion since in Biblical Hebrew it connotes the great surging of the sea. When attested in the writings of the prophets it is usually in a primordial context wherein divine intervention was required to keep the waters within bounds, such as: וַיִּפֹּא יְשִׁית בְּגְאוֹן גְּלוֹיֶךָ (“Here you

shall cease with your surging waves” [Job 38:11]; also see Ezek. 47:5; Ps. 46:4; 89:10). Thus, it is a most appropriate term to attribute to the Deity when speaking of His manipulation of the waters, pointing to His total command of the swelling sea.

The strophe proceeds to extol Him in terms of accomplishing the most exalted deeds. Verses 8-10 provide details for the more general verse 7 while verse 11 will culminate the strophe and stanza.

Verse 8, which refers to G-d's parting the waters, possesses three colons each of four words and of essentially equal syllabic length. The commonplace *mayim* (“water”) of the first colon becomes the more specific *nozelim* (“flowing water”) in the second and, finally, the weighty *tehomot* (“depths”), which alludes to the great deep of the creation narrative, which in turn points to the cosmic dimension of the event. The waters first *ne'ermu* (“heap up”), then *nisebu khemo ned* (“stand attentively as a mound”) and ultimately *kafe'u* (“solidify”), recalling the “wall” of water of the previous chapter (Exod. 14:22, 29). The intensifying movement within the verse gives the impression that the miracle was achieved step by step, consistent with the cumulative effects of the mighty easterly gale of the previous chapter that blew the whole night long (14:21). To maintain equivalent colon length, the second and third parts of this verse assume the subject of the first part – וּבְרוּחַ אֶפְיֶיךָ (“At the breath of Your nostrils”) – and only the predicate is altered. Also to preserve balance, specification of location – בְּלֵב יָם (“in the heart of the sea”) – was added only to the third colon. The result is a verse of highly exacting standards gradually moving toward a climax.

It should be noted that beginning with verse 6 and except for the very last verse of the Song all references to G-d are in the second person. The last verse is a proclamation of universal import and as such does not lend itself to second-person formulation. The change from third to second person reflects an advance to greater closeness while providing a continuous backdrop rhyme of the *kha* suffixes. In the center of verse 8, at a spot where a string of *kha* rhymes was interrupted, the diction produces alternate sound play with the letter *nun*: *ne'ermu*, *nisebu*, *ned* and *nozelim*.

In verse 9 the scene shifts to the enemy. With the waters parted (and Israel presumed to have crossed, a detail that, strikingly, is not explicitly mentioned), the stage was set for the enemy to decide to pursue (the unmentioned Israel) into the sea. The foes' foolishness and wicked intentions are vividly portrayed with a powerful series of successive verbs without conjunctions, using alliteration and assonance in word after word. The three verbal statements following the introductory *אמר אויב* ("the enemy said"), namely, *אָרְדֶּה אֲשִׁיג אֶחְלֶק שָׁלַל* ("I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoils") all begin with the future, first-person singular, *aleph*, meaning "I will." They reflect an energetic and confident foe with expectation of quick success and booty to apportion. They also focus attention on the opponents' self-centeredness and on their material desires being central to their motivation.

The attached three phrases, each ending with the "ee" sound, meaning "mine," (*timla'emo nafshi – ariq harbi – torishemo yadi*), while continuing the depiction of self-absorbed individuals, describe cruel, base human beings with blood-thirsty fixations and intent on vengeance.

The imagery of this verse responds to a point of the reader's curiosity stirred in the previous chapter (14:23): What were the Egyptian soldiers thinking, or with what were they obsessed, that they ignored the cumulative signs of divine intervention on Israel's behalf and felt impelled to rush headlong into the parted sea?

The contrast with the immediately following verse 10 description of Hashem's sudden and total victory over His charging foes is spectacular. *נִשְׁפָּת בְּרוּחַךְ כָּסְמוּ יָם* ("You blew with Your breath, the sea covered them"), followed by, "they sank like lead in the mighty waters!" The opening phrase of verse 10, *נִשְׁפָּת בְּרוּחַךְ*, recalls the opening phrase of verse 8, *וּבְרוּחַ אֶפְיֶךָ*. As His breath parted the waters so did His breath turn them back over the pursuers.

The triumphant pride in Hashem's incomparability expressed in the foregoing generates the emotional outburst of verse 11's rhetorical question – "Who is like You among the *elim*, Hashem...?" – and the section is concluded. Although *elim* may mean "gods," it is also widely used in Scripture to connote

celestial bodies as well as members of G-d's heavenly court and angels who are at His service (see Ps. 89:7 with preceding and following verses). Such a statement is not indicative in any way of a belief in the existence of other gods. Moses employed a similar term in conversation with Hashem upon expressing awe at all he had seen of His incomparability: "For which god in heaven or on earth can do as Your acts and Your mighty deeds" (*אֲשֶׁר מִי אֵל בְּשָׁמַיִם וּבְאָרְצוֹ אֲשֶׁר* [Deut. 3:24]). Psalm 96 states about Hashem, "He is awesome above all the gods, for all the gods of the nations are idols" (Ps. 96:4b-5a). In any event, such expressions were then the standard way of the language to say, essentially, "There is none like You, Hashem!"

The Song's diction is especially rich. For example, portrayal of the terror that fell upon the leaders of the Canaanite and neighboring nations when they heard about G-d's feats on behalf of Israel includes eight different successive verbs or verbal clauses: *יִרְגְּזוּן-הָיִל אָחֻז-נִבְהָלוּ-רָעַד-נִמְגְּו-אֵימָתָה-נִפְחָד-יָדְמוּ כְּאֶבֶן* (vv. 14-16).

The Song contains a significant number of literary idiosyncrasies. Eight suffixal pronouns take the archaic form of *mo* or *moo* (e.g., *יאֲכַלְמוּ* in v. 7). Several words possess what in prose would be considered an extra letter, such as the *tav* at the end of *zimrat* and the *nun* in *va'aromemenhu* (both in v. 2) and the *yod* at the end of *ne'edari* (v. 6). The *zimrat* of verse 2 lacks a *yod* at its end. Modern scholars consider most of these features of biblical poetry to have been instituted for euphonic purposes, to increase the harmony and pleasantness of sound. However, we cannot be certain of that.

Not a single noun in the Song appears with the definite article. In place of the relational pronoun *asher*, Israel is twice referred to as '*am-zoo*' (vv. 13, 16) and in some cases the relational pronoun is altogether lacking (v. 17), compacting the locution.

Some of these stylistic features have been compellingly shown to be linked to the poetry of the time, particularly to that of neighboring Ugarit. The monotheistic revolution in thought and practice is in the content; the cultural form popular in the existing society was acceptable to be the vehicle through which the Torah would articulate its meaning. The

same principal explains usage of a contemporary suzerain-vassal covenant format for the G-d-Israel covenant* as well as for the framework and wording of many clauses in the legal sections of the Torah. The forms of rituals attached to idolatrous service, however, are prohibited even when intended to be used in the service of the one G-d (Deut. 12:31). In those cases, the direct association and fear of the “slippery slope” come into play.

4. Regarding the Omission

The omission of any mention in the Song of Israel’s rescue requires explanation. It appears inadequate to say that Israel was excluded because the focus is on G-d’s doings and the honor that is due Him. Particularly after verse 8, which constitutes a profuse description of G-d’s preparing the sea for human crossing, we are informed of the enemy’s energetic pursuit, without so much as a hint at Israel’s crossing. Who is the enemy pursuing? Although the Song is not an epic narrative that can be understood from within itself but requires the attached prose account, the absence of a statement referring to Israel’s crossing is eminently conspicuous; even, at first sight, astonishing.

M. D. Cassuto suggests that explicit mention of Israel’s rescue was omitted so that the depiction of Hashem’s victory could serve a dual purpose. Besides its function on the plane of human history on behalf of the Israelites vis-à-vis the Egyptians, it could also be applied on the prehistoric cosmic plane of Near Eastern mythology, in which the sea god and other presumed divine beings were in a battle against other gods. As the Israelites were subject to such mythological influences in ancient times, the Torah here, as the prophets do in various places, establishes Hashem’s absolute dominion over the sea, the depths, and all creatures. In this respect, the Song’s duality would be similar to that in Isaiah’s call to Hashem, when he refers to His mighty ancient victories over the primeval monsters and the sea, followed by invoking His transformation of the sea into a path for the redeemed. The prophet cries out: “Awake, awake...O arm of the Lord! Awake as in days of old...It was you that hacked Rahab in pieces, that pierced the Dragon (Tannin)...that dried up the Sea, the waters of the great deep; That made the abysses of

the Sea a road the redeemed might walk” (Isa. 51:9-10, NJPS).

However, this does not appear to adequately answer the question of why Israel’s crossing was totally omitted. Hashem’s absolute triumph over the sea and primeval beings could have been incorporated in the poem while Israel’s crossing could have been referred to, similar to the Isaiah passage above (and elsewhere in Tanakh) that incorporates both the human element and the cosmic one.

Perhaps the explanation is that when celebrating G-d’s miraculous rescue and reflecting upon His awesome intervention, Moses and Israel were imbued with such an overwhelming degree of humility that they could only utter His acclaim. They could not place themselves in the role of the rescued. It is as if to say: Who are we to be the recipients of such colossal divine doings? In the poetic dimension they chose to allow their role to be assumed, passed over in respectful silence. Their gratitude may be understood as taking the form of pure praise. Together with the Song’s omission of specific mention of any human being, this appears to be in keeping with G-d’s goal of fostering a disposition of humility in His nation, a key element in its fulfilling its mission to bring His blessing to the world.

5. Linkage to Exodus 6

The Song is closely linked to the section that began with Hashem’s momentous revelation of His Tetragrammaton in Exodus 6. There, just before He began His wondrous intervention, He proclaimed that in the near future He would manifest Himself by that name, something He had not done in the case of the patriarchs. Despite the extraordinarily optimistic message, at that point “they did not heed Moses due to a crushed spirit and rigorous labor” (Exod. 6:9). Here, finally, Israel proclaimed its recognition of that name and its implications. Thus, the response to “Tell Israel I am Y-H-V-H” of Exodus 6 is “Y-H-V-H is His name” (15:3). Between these two poles is a steady progression toward the goal. At the end of the prose account in the previous chapter it does state that Israel then “believed in Hashem and in Moses His servant” (14:31). This is the poetic counterpart to that statement.

As the Tetragrammaton was extremely prominent in the Exodus 6 passage (as pointed out in our study on *Parashat Va'era Part I*), it is also so here. It is the most frequently attested word in our passage, appearing nine times, excluding the superscription and summary verse. In the pure form, that is, without prefix (a category demonstrated to be significant, examples of which are given in our *Parashat Va'era* study), it appears eight times, a signifier of the covenant as we have often demonstrated.**

The Exodus 6 passage of Hashem's message (excluding superscription) contains 102 words and the first stanza of the Song (also excluding superscription) contains 102 words. The Exodus 6 passage divides into two parts of fifty and fifty-two words (an especially meaningful structure as explained in our *Va'era* study) and the Song's first stanza also divides into sections of fifty and fifty-two words, combining the first two strophes, which can be viewed as

subdivisions of one unit. In addition, the Song's first strophe, which concludes with "Hashem is His name," appropriately comprises twenty-six words, the numerical value of the Tetragrammaton's *gematria*, consistent with the remarkable *gematriot* of that Exodus 6 passage centered around twenty-six. The Song's final two strophes combined (vv. 14-18), concluding with ה' יְמַלְךָ לְעֹלָם וָעֶד, also contain fifty-two words.

Endnotes

* See our study *The G-d-Israel Covenant: On Meaning and Format*

** See our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*

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