

Parshat B'Shalach: On Singing

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The Divine miracle of splitting the Red Sea is replete with creation imagery, mimicking the story of creation in *Sefer Bereishit*.

In *Bereishit*, the world was chaotic, *tohu vavohu*. The earth was covered in darkness, and God hovered above the surface of the waters (Bereishit 1:2). Then, God gathered the waters and dry land appeared.

And God said: 'Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so (Bereishit 1:9).

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים יְקוּוּ הַמַּיִם מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם
אֶל-מְקוֹם אֶחָד וַתִּרְאֶה הַיַּבְשָׁה וַיְהִי-כֵן: (בראשית
א:ט)

The splitting of the waters culminated in God creating living beings, allowing life to flourish on Earth. On the shores of the Red Sea, the creation process culminated with the creation of the nation, of *B'nei Yisrael*. Here too, the verse describes chaos and darkness with God's presence hovering above. The waters are split, and dry land is revealed.

Thus there was the cloud with the darkness, and it cast a spell upon the night, so that the one could not come near the other all through the night. Then Moses held out his arm over the sea and the Lord drove back the sea with a strong east wind all that night, and turned the sea into dry ground. And the waters were split (Shemot 14:20-21).

וַיְהִי הָעֶנָן וְהַחֹשֶׁךְ, וַיִּאָר אֶת-הַלַּיְלָה; וְלֹא-קָרַב
זֶה אֶל-זֶה, כָּל-הַלַּיְלָה. וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת-יָדוֹ,
עַל-הַיָּם, וַיּוֹלֶךְ יְהוָה אֶת-הַיָּם בְּרוּחַ קְדָיִם עֶזְהָ
כָּל-הַלַּיְלָה, וַיִּשָּׂם אֶת-הַיָּם לַחֲרָבָה; וַיִּבְקְעוּ,
הַמַּיִם. (שמות יד:כ-כא)

The Midrash *Shemoth Rabbah* (21:6) connects the creation story of the world with the creation at the Red Sea, explaining that the splitting of the sea was a stipulation of the original creation story. The verse in Shemot 14:27 reads: וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת-יָדוֹ עַל-הַיָּם וַיִּשָּׂב הַיָּם לְפָנוֹת בְּקֶרֶ לְאַיְתָנוּ וּמִצְרַיִם וְנָסִים לְקִרְאָתוֹ

Don't read the verse, the midrash explains, as Moshe stretched out his hand to the sea, and the water returned, *l'aytano* (to its original strength), rather read the word *l'aytano*, as *tanai* stipulation. Exegetically, the verse should read: "the waters returned to its original **stipulation** (that was made at creation)." As early as creation, God stipulated that the very waters that God was creating, would split once again for the Jews, so that God's nation could be born.

God reenacts the creation in the Exodus story with the Jewish people as the central characters. From this point on, the Jews are called *Ivrim* (a unified people), a nation to which God has given birth.

There is one distinct difference between the creation in Bereshit and the re-creation at *yam suf* (Red Sea). It can be argued that there was something lacking in the creation story in Bereishit. Shortly after the world is created, God destroys almost all living creatures in the flood and begins the creative process again with Noah and his family. The creation at the sea, however, is a creation that endured, a final act of Divine creation. What was different about the creation of *B'nei Yisrael*?

The creation of the world is marked by the words “*vayomer elokim*” (God said). God said ‘let there be light.’ God said ‘let the waters separate’ etc. However, in the Exodus story, at the moment the Jewish people reached the other side, there was no prose, there was no sacrifice. There was song.

Then Moses and the children of Israel chose to sing this song to God...I shall sing to God for God is exalted...
 (Shemoth 15:1)

אֶזְיָשִׁיר־מִשְׁנֵה וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לַיהוָה
 וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֵאמֹר אֲשִׁירָה לַיהוָה כִּי־גָאֵה גָאֵה
 (שמות טו:א)

It is through the medium of song, that we are bidden to recognize and celebrate God as the ultimate creator of the world. “Az (and then) Moshe and Israel sang”. The Safet Emet explains that the word “then” comes to teach us that Israel had always longed to sing God’s praises, for Israel’s inherent nature and essence is to give testimony to God’s power. But this song could not be sung while the Jewish people were enslaved. It was only after the people were freed that they were able to recognize God as the God of creation at the sea and then, they could sing.

Az yashir Moshe..... This creation is sustainable through song. We are bidden to bring song into our daily lives. We sing the verses of *Az Yashir* every morning as part of daily *tefilah* (prayer). In this way, on each day anew, we must sing out and praise the God of creation.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha’s three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week’s 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek’s 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.