

SHEVII SHEL PESACH

A Time to Sing

In their most desperate moments, with the turgid sea blocking their way and the fearsome Egyptian chariots bearing down on them from behind, the Jewish people saw the hand of the Almighty reach down from the heavens and pull them to safety. Suddenly, the sea tore itself asunder. Its waters rose up to form two towering walls and a dry passageway in between, and thus they remained until the very least Jewish child had passed through. Then they tumbled down upon the pursuing Egyptians and sent them to a watery death.

In this moment of transcendent inspiration, the Jewish people sang the exquisitely beautiful Shirah, a song of praise to Hashem for his kindness and His magnificent miracles. "Then Moses and the Jewish people sang," the Torah declares. Only then, when they witnessed the awesome revelation of the divine power did they lift their voices in paeans of glory to Heaven.

But the question immediately arises. Only one week earlier, the Jewish people had also witnessed manifestations of divine power such as mankind had never seen. For months, they had watched the Egyptians beset by the most supernatural plagues. They had seen rivers turn to blood, frogs, locusts, hailstorms, the death of all the firstborn of Egypt. These too were absolutely stunning miracles, which ultimately forced Pharaoh and the Egyptians to capitulate and release the Jewish people from bondage. Why then did they not sing Shirah as they marched out of Egypt, free at last?

The commentators explain that in order for the Jewish people to reach the exultant level that would inspire the singing of the Shirah the feeling of liberation and deliverance had to be absolute, without the slightest reservation. In Egypt, the Jewish people had witnessed the subjugation of the Egyptians by the divine power of Hashem. Nonetheless, they still viewed the Egyptians as a force to be reckoned with, a powerful nation that had been overcome by an even more powerful deity. In this sense, the liberation was not truly complete. The Egyptians had been defeated, but they still exerted an aura of domination and mastery in the perception of the Jewish people.

But after they walked through the sea to safety and saw the battered corpses of the drowned Egyptians washed up on the shores of the sea, they came to the realization that the domination of the Egyptians had been no more than an illusion. They were powerless

pawns in the divine plan, and there was no point of being concerned about them at all. Finally, they understood that Hashem alone controls the world, and this stunning revelation inspired them to sing the Shirah.

A man was fleeing through the silent streets of the city in the dead of night. A short distance behind, three thugs pounded after him. They brandished weapons in their hands and shouted dire threats as they ran. The man was more frightened than he had ever been in his life, but he knew that if he would reach his father he would be safe. His father would protect him.

The pursuers slowly gained on the man, but in the distance, he could see his father beckoning to him. Faster, faster! A surge of hope gave him renewed strength, but suddenly, he stumbled and fell. Horrified, he looked behind him at the fast approaching thugs. Ahead, his father was running towards him. But the distance was too great. The man realized his life was about to come to an end was hopeless, and he screamed at the top of his lungs.

A hand grabbed him by the shoulder and began to shake him.

“My son, my son, wake up,” said his father. “You have nothing to fear. It was all a nightmare. There is no one here but me.”

In our own lives, we often find ourselves buffeted and overwhelmed by the vicissitudes of living in this world. The hard knocks all of us experience, in one way or another, can be very discouraging and disheartening, and we may sometimes even begin to lose hope. At times like these, it is worthwhile to remember the fugitive slaves standing on the shores of the sea and singing Shirah to the Creator. Even in our darkest hours, deliverance can come quickly and with such totality that we wonder what had come over us to be discouraged in the first place.