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Comments on Parashat B'Shallach (Exodus)

This week's parashat is crowned with the Shirat Ha'Yam, the Song of the Sea, the triumphant song of Moses and the Israelites after crossing the Yam Suf, the Sea of Reeds. Here is a ragtag group of wanderers being pursued by the frightening, ferocious force of the Egyptian army, facing annihilation or captivity and return to Egypt as slaves, or walking to their death in the Sea. Yet within a few hours, the people of Israel experience something that no one has ever experienced before and 400 years of slavery comes to an abrupt end. In Ch. 15, verse 1, we read:

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord. They said:

I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously;

Horse and driver He has hurled into the sea.

The Lord is my strength and might;

He is become my deliverance.

This is my God and I will enshrine Him;

The God of my father, and I will exalt Him.

.....and then, in v. 11,

Who is like You, O Lord, among the celestials;

Who is like You, majestic in holiness,

Awesome in splendor, working wonders !

Based on certain linguistic features, scholars believe that the Shirat ha'Yam represents one of the most ancient elements of the bible. It has remained part of our daily service and a centerpiece of our consciousness about who we are.

It also dawned on me, however, that the Shirat represents something else: this is the first time that the Israelites as a people express praise to God or even acknowledge His existence. We know the patriarchs, Joseph, and Moses offered prayers to God, but we don't have any indication that any other descendents of Israel did, or that they were even aware of the God of their fathers.

So why, you might ask, would they even think of praying to God while in Egypt? Well, for one thing, early in their sojourn in Egypt, their lives were pretty good. They had been saved from famine because of Joseph and lived for some period of time as free people,

tending their flocks and enjoying the bounty of lower Egypt. In fact, Joseph told his brothers that their wicked deeds were part of a divine plan to get Joseph elevated to the position of Grand Vizier so that he could save his people. We have no evidence that the sons of Israel offered prayers of thanksgiving for these amazing events. Even when they were enslaved, the Israelites continued to live with their families and eat at the fleshpots of Egypt. This was not as brutal as the kind of slavery experienced by blacks in the American south, who still found it in themselves to praise God.

When things get worse and worse, we are told in ch. 2 of Exodus, v. 23-25, "The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God. God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites and took notice of them". Note that the bible does not say that the Israelites called out to God, however, but rather that it was God who remembered them.

One clue as to why the Israelites did not cry out to God comes from something we're all familiar with, in the episode of the burning bush. God said to Moses, "I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and have heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters..... etc.". But Moses is concerned that his people will not even know what he is talking about, because in Exodus 3:13, we read: Moses said to God, "when I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'the God of your fathers has sent me to you' and they ask me, 'what is His name', what shall I say to them?" 14 And God said to Moses, "Ehyeh-asher-Ehyeh"..... :thus shall you say to the Israelites: The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you".

A second reason that the Israelites didn't offer prayers until the miracle of the Sea of Reeds, however, is that they were probably like many of us, unaware of the miracles that daily surround them. Heschel writes, "most of us find it difficult to recognize the greatness and wonder of things familiar to us."....."The perception of the glory is a rare occurrence in our lives. We fail to wonder, we fail to respond to the presence. This is the tragedy of every man, "to dim all wonder by indifference". The Baal shem Tov said "Replete is the world with a spiritual radiance, replete with sublime and marvelous secrets. But a small hand held against the eye hides it all". The wonders are daily with

us, and yet “the miracle is not recognized by him who experiences it”....The greatest hindrance to such awareness is our adjustment to conventional notions, to mental clichés. Grandeur or mystery is something with which we are confronted everywhere and at all times....what formula could explain and solve the enigma of the very fact of thinking? The most incomprehensible fact is the fact that we comprehend at all.

Even to the modern rationalists among us, we can ask whether the world is any less of a miracle if it resulted from an unfathomable singular event, the Big Bang, 12 billion years ago, from which elementary particles, and then atoms, and then heavier elements, and then massive bodies formed? Or is the human mind any less of a miracle if we know the identity of the proteins that determine how its hundred billion nerve cells that become wired up?

Heschel, in the last chapter of “Between God and Man” tells us that two sources of religious thinking that are given to us, and that are here in the Shirat ha’Yam: It says, “This is my God, and I will glorify Him, in other words, our own personal insight, that emerges from our personal awareness of the wonder of the world; and The God of my father and I will exalt God”, that is, our traditions that we inherit from our forefathers.

This is one of the goals of the Jewish way of living: to experience commonplace deeds as spiritual adventures, to feel the hidden love and wisdom in all things. This idea is clearly stated in our daily prayers: “we thank thee... for thy miracles which are daily upon us, for thy continual marvels”.... Every day miracles such as those that occurred at the Exodus come upon man; every day he experiences redemption, like those who went forth from Egypt.

Shabbat Shalom.
