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Rayzel bas Tz'vi Hirsch a"h
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

A New Song

PARSHAS BESHALACH 5776

The “Az Yashir” hymn, familiar to many from the daily prayers, is a prominent feature in the *parshah*. We revel in its celebratory tone and tune as it is read this week from the Torah.

But with its familiarity – perhaps due to habituation – we sometimes overlook some of the notable aspects of this song. Right at its beginning, in fact, we are faced with a stark anomaly. The Torah describes the scene in which Yisrael stands by the edge of the sea viewing the corpses of their (former) tormentors and begins to chant their hymn of thanks. But notice the opening phrase (*Shemos 15:1*): 'אָז יָשִׁיר מֹשֶׁה וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לַד'. The conventional rendering of this statement is: “Then Moshe and Yisrael sang this song to Hashem...” To be precise, however, the future tense is used; thus, the verse is more properly translated as: “Then Moshe and Yisrael **shall sing** this song to Hashem...” This is a curious point. Why, indeed, does the Torah refer to the song uttered at the Yam Suf in the future tense?

From the Mishnah emerges another noteworthy aspect of this song. In discussing the obligation to sing praises to Hashem for the Pesach miracle, the Mishnah states (*Pesachim 10:5*):

לְפִיכָּךְ אֶנְחָנוּ תִּבְיִין לְהוֹדוֹת... לְמִי שֶׁעָשָׂה לְאַבְרָהָם וְלְנֹחַ אֶת כָּל הַנִּסִּים הָאֵלֶּיךָ, הוֹצִיאָנוּ מֵעַבְדוּת לְחֵירוֹת... וּמִשֶּׁעָבַד לְגֹאֲלֶהּ. וְנֹאמַר לְפָנָיו, הַלְלוּקָהּ.

“Therefore, we are obligated to thank... the One who performed all of these miracles for us and our forefathers: He took us out from slavery to freedom... and from subservience to redemption. And we shall say before Him – ‘Hallelukah.’”

This passage may be familiar to many, as it has been incorporated into the Pesach Haggadah. There is much discussion amongst the *poskim* (*halachic* decisors) regarding the proper version of the closing phrase. According to Tosafos (*Pesachim 116b*), it appears more correct to state: וְנֹאמַר לְפָנָיו שִׁירָה חֲדָשָׁה – “And a ‘new song’ was said before Him.” The commentators (e.g., the Shelah Hakaddosh) understand this as a reference to the song recited by Yisrael at the sea. Thus, we must also understand why this particular hymn is characterized as a “New Song.”

A Novelty?

In fact, there is an intimation to this effect from the *medrash*, the content of which, in and of itself, might appear somewhat surprising. It implies that Yisrael – in their rendition of Az Yashir – were the first to sing praises to Hashem. As the *medrash* states (*Shemos Rabbah 23:4*):

“From the day that Hashem created the world until Yisrael stood by the sea, *we do not find a single person saying shirah (song) to Hashem aside from Yisrael* (at this time). Hashem created Adam Harishon (the first man) – and he did not say *shirah*. He saved Avraham from the fiery furnace (into which he was cast by King Nimrod) and from the kings (with whom he battled to save his nephew, Lot) – and he did not say *shirah*. And so Yitzchak (was saved) from the knife

(during the episode of *Akeidas Yitzchak* [the binding of Yizchak on the altar]) – and he did not say *shirah*. And so Ya’akov (was saved) from the angel (with whom he wrestled), from Esav, and from the people of Shechem – and he did not say *shirah*. But once Yisrael came to the sea and it split before them – immediately, they said *shirah* before Hashem... (To which) Hashem responded: ‘It is for these that I have been waiting!’”

We see, then, that “Az Yashir” was indeed a “new song” – in fact, it is touted as *the very first song to Hashem*. But this assertion itself seems somewhat baffling, as we *do* find that the individuals mentioned above said *shirah* to Hashem. Psalm 92, which begins מְזִמֹּר שִׁיר לַיהוָה – “A psalm, a song, for the day of Shabbos: It is good to thank Hashem and sing to Your Name,” was actually uttered by Adam Harishon (*Bereishis Rabbah* 22:13). Psalm 89 begins: מְשִׁכִּיל לְאֵיֶתֶן הָאֲזֹרָחִי חֶסְדֵי ד' עוֹלָם אֲשִׁירָה – “A Maskil (type of composition) of Eisan Ha’ezrachi: I will forever sing of Hashem’s kindnesses.” The author of this psalm – “Eisan Ha’ezrachi” – is identified by Chazal as Avraham Avinu (cf. *Targum, Tehillim* 89:1). And Ya’akov Avinu is credited with reciting the entire Sefer Tehillim (*Bereishis Rabbah* 74:11)! How can the *medrash* claim that “no one said *shirah*” before Yisrael’s song?!

Ten in One

An item mentioned by the Ba’al Haturim may be key to resolving this issue; it also sheds light on the future construct of the *passuk* noted at the outset. In his commentary printed together with the *Chumashim*, the Ba’al Haturim often employs the method of exegesis involving “*remez*” (allusions), comprising such devices as *gematria* (numerical value), *roshei teivos* (acronyms), and so forth. In any event, he remarks on the curious form of the word נִשְׁיֵר at the beginning of the *passuk*, which (seemingly) should have been written in past tense, but was instead rendered in future tense. He perceives herein an allusion and thus breaks up the word (by separating the first letter) to yield the following: י' נִשְׁיֵר – “Ten songs.” This is a reference, he explains, to the ten sacred songs that were uttered over the generations, including such hymns as Ha’azinu, the songs of Devorah and Chanah, and the song that will be recited in the future, in conjunction with the Final Redemption. What this means, explains R’ Dovid Kviat (*Sukkas David, parshas Beshalach, § 73*), is that all these future songs, in some sense, are included within and emanate from Az Yashir.

This, then, would seem to account for the future tense employed by the *passuk*. Firstly, this form was necessary to allude to the inclusion of the ten hymns, as demonstrated above. Moreover, the very nature of this hymn is “futuristic,” as it is a song that was recited – through Ru’ach Hakodesh (Divine Inspiration) – on events *years before they were to occur*.

We can also now better understand the somewhat perplexing claim of the *medrash*, which asserted that no one else had said *shirah* before Yisrael sang Az Yashir. We have seen definitively that the Adam Harishon and the Avos did in fact sing to Hashem. The *medrash* may very well be referring to the manner of song that Yisrael recited, for in this respect, theirs was certainly a groundbreaking accomplishment. While others had offered praise, it was always *after the fact*; quite an understandable proposition, but the fact remains that they offered their *shirah* following their deliverance. Yisrael demonstrated a level of confidence in Hashem’s promise, to the extent that they offered a “song of the future,” praising Him for events even before they took place (cf. *Sukkas David, ibid § 82*).