

"A SONG OF LONGING"

The last days of Passover commemorate specifically the miracle of the crossing of the Red Sea. It was at this occasion that Moses and the Children of Israel raised their voices in the immortal shirah, song, which we repeat every day of the year.

The Talmud tells of another song that was almost sung at this occasion. The malakhei ha-sharet, the ministering angels, expressed the desire to say shirah before God at the occasion of the defeat of Pharaoh's hordes. The Almighty, however, refused to grant them permission to recite shirah. His reason was, maasei yadai tov'im ba-yam v'atem omrim shirah? -- how can you think of singing My praises at a time when the work of My hand, the Egyptians, are drowning in the sea? At a time when God's creatures are suffering and being destroyed -- no matter how well deserved that suffering and destruction is -- no one, not even the ministering angels, have the right to sing!

Now, that is certainly a good reason and appeals to our noblest and most humane instincts. It is a remarkable instance of the Jewish view on compassion even for a malicious enemy. However, there is something troubling about this entire episode in the Talmud. If this were an adequate reason why the angels should not sing shirah, why then were Moses and the Children of Israel permitted to sing their song, the famous az yashir? Why, indeed, do we repeat

this az yashir song every day? Why, furthermore, do we recite the Hallel, even if it be only half Hallel, during these days of Pass-over? This, too, is shirah, and by the inner logic of God's response -- maasei yadai tov'im ba-yam v'atem omrim shirah? -- both Moses and Israel, and we today, should keep our peace and remain silent.

I would suggest, in answer, that there are two kinds of shirah. One is the song of exultation, the cry of triumph and victory and conquest, when God has manifested His omnipotence by the destruction of His enemies. It is this kind of shirah that the angels endeavored to sing. This sort of song is quite natural and would be acceptable -- but not at a time that maasei yadai tov'im ba-yam, that God's human creatures experience the sufferings and pangs of death.

The other song is not that of triumphant exultation, but the expression of gratitude for existence itself. The renowned Rabbi Loewe, known as the Maharal of Prague, defined this kind of shirah as gaagu'im shel ha-alul la-ilah, the longing of the effect for the cause. Because the effect derives totally from the cause, then, when the effect acknowledges its existence to the cause, that acknowledgment we consider shirah. This shirah, therefore, is that of yearning rather than rejoicing, nostalgia rather than jubilation; it is the effect pining for the cause and not the elation of conquest.

For instance: you save my life. I therefore know that henceforth my life is the effect of which you were the cause. When I

acknowledge this -- in look, word, or conduct -- that acknowledgment is my shirah. Or, my teacher has taught me something which has made all my life more meaningful. When I acknowledge him as the source of the meaningfulness of my life, the effect of which he is the cause, that too is shirah. Thereafter, whenever I reflect upon this benefit that has occurred to me, this enhancement of my existence itself, I am filled with gaagu'im, with yearning and nostalgia towards the teacher, which is the longing shel ha-alul la-ilah, of the effect for the cause.

In our tradition we choose a number of verses from the Torah and combine them in what is known as pirkei shirah, literally, "the Chapters of Song." Many pious Jews, especially Hasidim, often recite them before the morning services. In it we go from object to object, from one form of life to another, throughout creation, and show how, in various verses of Scripture, these objects and living beings sing their shirah to Almighty God. Heaven, for instance, sings shirah: "The Heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19). The day itself is enraptured in expression of shirah: "Day unto day pours forth speech" (Ibid). And so we proceed to the animal kingdom: lion, lamb, deer, wolf -- all of them have their own specific shirah in which they acknowledge their existence to the Creator; even Heaven and Hell sing their song to God!

And is not birkhat ha-mazon, the saying of grace, actually a form of shirah? When we acknowledge God as the Source of all our

sustenance, we are in effect reciting shirah. That is why often we will recite the grace over a cup of wine, for according to the Halakhah, shirah should be expressed preferably over wine. Similarly, when we recite the kiddush on Friday night -- over wine -- this, too, is a form of shirah in which we express the yearning of all of nature, ourselves included, for Almighty God Who created the world in six days.

Thus, the az yashir which Moses and Israel sang at the shores of the Red Sea, despite its several military metaphors, is not the cry of conquest which the angels sought to articulate, and from which they were restrained by God. Actually, the az yashir is a song of longing, a shirah of gaagu'im. The song the angels wish to sing was one of praise of God for the stunning defeat he dealt the Egyptians. The song that Moses and Israel sang was merely occasioned by the victory over the Egyptians; essentially it was a poem of God as the Source of all existence and all blessings, rather than as a Divine General Who had won a specific battle. "I will sing unto the Lord -- for He is highly exalted," and not merely because He won a victory. It may be true that "the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea," but the result of this is that "the Lord is my strength and song and He is become my salvation; this is my ^God and I will glorify Him." It may be true, similarly, that "the Lord is a Man of war" -- but this leads me to the higher recognition that "the Lord is His name," in other words,

God reveals, in mysterious and wondrous ways, His infinite mercy and compassion, His midat ha-rahamim.

Therefore, the angels were silent because no song of victory and exaltation may be chanted when maasei yadai tov'im ba-yam, when other humans suffer. But man may indeed sing his shirah of gaagu'im, his song of longing, because the military victory is only the trigger for the occasion, but is essentially irrelevant to it.

One of the most intimate and personal cause-effect relationships in the life of a man is that of a parent to a child. As children, we often fail to appreciate parents while they are alive, and if we do appreciate them we usually fail to acknowledge it to them in a manner which will make them feel worthy and valid. But then, after parents have gone the way of all flesh, there arises in the heart and in the soul the gaagu'im, the yearnings and the nostalgia shel ha-alul la-ilah, of the effect for the cause, of the child for the parent who bore him and who imprinted his influence and teachings upon him. This shirah we call -- yizkor! For the yizkor is that acknowledgment of nostalgia, that recognition of indebtedness for existence and the quality of our existence, and it therefore constitutes a true shirah of the nature of gaagu'im shel ha-alul la-ilah, a song of longing.

But there is even a higher Force for our lives, one which transcends that of parents, and that is: God Himself. How do we express our longings, our song, to Him? The answer is: Torah -- by

studying it, living it, supporting it. That Torah itself is a shirah we read -- in the Torah. Thus, when the Bible wishes to teach us that it is incumbent upon every individual to write for himself a Sefer Torah, which we today may fulfill also by purchasing religious books such as the Talmud, it expresses that commandment in the following form: v'ata kitvu la-khem et ha-shirah ha-zot, "and now, write for yourselves this song" (according to the interpretation of RaLBaG). Torah, then, is our shirah, the song of our longing, for the Divine Father.

Can American Jewry today say shirah? Is there anything to sing about?

That depends on which shirah we mean. Can we sing the angel's shirah? Apparently, yes: we have all kinds of triumphs to our credit. We are the wealthiest Jewish community that ever existed in the Diaspora. We have more status in the arts and the sciences -- sometimes I rue the fact that we have too much status in literature -- than could ever have been anticipated. We have greater freedom than ever before: for the first time in history Jews in the Western world can opt for vanishing as Jews completely. Politically, economically, organizationally, we have won tremendous battles.

Nevertheless, -- we dare sing no shirah! We have nothing to crow or boast about. For if we do, God Himself can turn to us with the same question which He addressed so sharply to the angels at the shores of the Red Sea: maasei yadai tov'im ba-yam v'atem omrim shirah?, how can you sing and trumpet about victory when the work

of My hand, the people that I chose for Torah, wallows in swamps of cynicism and drowns in seas of ignorance! No, we have no right to boast about American Jewry. In fact, the situation is most disgraceful. It is shameful and ignominious that a Jewish community as wealthy as ours and as charitable and philanthropic as ours, should be so delinquent in its support of Torah -- the real, true, and only appropriate shirah that is permitted to us. It is a mark of opprobrium that most of our great philanthropists are attracted only by glamor charities and completely neglect the blue chips of Jewish life: Torah and the Torah institutions.

(HERE: APPEAL FOR YESHIVA UNIVERSITY)

It is the work of the Yeshiva University and other such Torah institutions that, in toto, constitute the true shirah, that of gaagu'im shel ha-alul la-ilah, the song of longing of the effect for the cause, the Jew for his God, Israel for its Torah. Shirah is expressive of the return to our sublime origins.

Indeed, sometimes I think that the study of Torah too is a form of Yizkor -- a prayer of contrition for all the lost Jews, for all those precious souls who are forever lost to Israel and Judaism because of the neglect of generations, including our own! Let us never be smug and complacent if we have succeeded in keeping our own children in the fold; we are guilty, dreadfully guilty, for every Jewish child, for every ounce of irreplaceable Jewish talent, that has been squandered and lost to Israel and to Torah. Our song

of shirah, our song of longing which is Torah, also includes the sad note of Yizkor for lost souls of Judaism. Our Torah song must be played in a minor key.

The only shirah to which we are entitled, therefore, is a spiritual one and an intellectual one: the study of Torah. We ask your support for the appeal which we conduct today, as we always do on the 8th day of Passover. A song in which many people cooperate is like a symphony; each person contributes whatever he can, to the best of his ability. However, in the past our contributions have been inadequate, and the symphony too soft. All of us must increase the tempo and the power of the notes that we contribute. Let each of us do the best he can. Even as the Torah tells us that when the Jew came to Jerusalem on the festival he had to bring with him a gift, and each person had to give the best he was able to; so let it be with our shirah today. Ish k'matnat yado ke'virkhat ha-Shem Eloekha asher natan lakh, let every one here pledge to do whatever he can, "according to the blessing which the Lord thy God has given thee."

And then, having pledged and having given to the best of your ability according to God's blessings, we will read that same verse slightly differently: when you give whatever you can in the best possible way, then God will bless you according to how you have given. Amen.