

"ETERNITY FOR A SONG"

Judaism places great importance on the idea of shirah, song, the theme of this special Sabbath which is suggested in our Torah reading of the shirat ha-yam, the song of triumph sung by Moses and the Children of Israel at the shores of the Red Sea.

One of the indications of the significance the Jewish Tradition attaches to shirah is the statement by the Rabbis deriving the doctrine of resurrection and eternal life from an analysis of the second word of the song. Az yashir Mosheh u-vnei Yisrael, "then Moses and the Children of Israel sang" - ~~the~~ Hebrew, however, uses the future: yashir, will sing, not shar, sang. Mi-kan li-tehiat ha-metim min ha-torah, thus we learn from the Bible, say the Rabbis, the principle of the resurrection of the dead -- for it means that in the days of resurrection Moses and the Children of Israel will again sing this song.

But the Sages meant more than to prove a religious doctrine by taking a poetic form literally. They meant, in a large sense, that shirah contains in it the seeds of tehiat ha-metim. They meant that you can find something of Eternity in this song. If you know the secret, the inner meaning of shirah, then you can get ~~something~~ ^{eternity} for a song.

And what is that secret? Why, indeed, is shirah accorded such a place of honor in the Jewish Tradition? How can you win eternity for a song?

The answer cannot be merely the esthetic quality of shirah, for other peoples speaking in other tongues produced poetry and music equal to and perhaps superior to that of Israel. The significance of shirah lies not in the senses but in the spirit, not in the art but in the heart, not in the sound but in the vision.

Shirah is the expression of insight. It reveals an added dimension of personality: an awareness of hidden truths, a sensitivity to mysteries usually veiled and obscure in the normal course of mundane, prosaic life. It is the ability to perceive what is beyond the apparent, the capacity to see the world right-side-up even if it is, as it usually is, upside-down.

Rabbi Jacob Zvi Meklenburg (in his Ha-ketav ve'ha-Kabbalah on Va-yelekh) locates the root of the word shirah, or song, in the word shur -- to look. Shirah is that which inspires the soul to shur, to penetrate the haze of everydayishness and behold the mysterious, the wonderful, the marvelous that abound all about us. Thus, in the Bible (II Chronicles), Heman and Yeduthun are called both meshorerim and hozim! The singer, in the biblical sense, is a visionary. Shirah is -- a prophetic insight.

Shirah is necessary especially because the world we live in is an olam ha-shekker, ~~is~~ one beset by falsehood, sham, illusion. It is a world which too often rewards vice and punishes virtue. The Gaon of Vilna, in a moving passage in a famous letter, avers that fate, in our false world, is like a scale or balance: that which is heavy sinks low, and that which is light rises high. So -- not always but much too frequently -- the weighty and worthy are often neglected by the world, allowed to sink into oblivion, while the light and flighty, the unworthy and the frivolous, are those who are raised to positions of eminence and influence, and cherished as successful and wise. The function of shirah in such a world is to enable us to perceive what is truly worthy and weighty and what is only superficial and meaningless, to see through the sham, past the artificial, beyond ^{the} illusion, behind the facade, and to discover the authentic and the real and the genuine.

The shirah we read this morning, the Song at the Red Sea, abounds in such insights. Here is Pharaoh who, like a successor-tyrant some 3,000 years later, believed his reign would last a thousand years. His bragging was legend. In the shirah he is quoted: amar oyev, erdof asig apalek shalal... the enemy said, I will pursue Israel, I will catch him, I will divide his spoils.

Notice the succession of Alephs in this verse -- Pharaoh lived in the first person singular: I,I,I. Everything Pharaoh says begins with "I." He is a meglomaniac who is concerned only with himself, and is certain of his own powers. And so: nashafta be'ruhakha kisamo yam: You, O God, blew a wind -- and the waters covered him. All his bragging, his arrogance, his egotism, his power remains stilled and silenced, covered forever by the dark waters of the Red Sea. When the facade is ripped off, when man's cruel acting is revealed as nothing more than a play, as deceitful sham, then we attain the insight: mi kamokha ba-elim, ha-Shem, who is like unto Thee amongst the gods, O Lord. It is God, the Lord of history who will declare and determine the destiny of men and nations; Pharaoh and his fellow potentates are but a passing phantom. In our every-day world, it is the Pharaoh's, who are loud and who exact the tribute of the masses, who dominate the scene, while God and the Godly are silent, seeming to sit on the side-lines of life's great spectacles. Yet Jeremiah exclaims Pharo melek mitzrayim sha'on, Pharaoh king of Egypt is but a great noise, and the Rabbis play on the word elim and derive ilmim, the silent, thus: mi kamokha ba-ilmim ha-Shem, who is like unto Thee amongst the silent, O Lord! In the noisy arena of man's mundane affairs it may seem that the loud and false, the Pharaoh's, prevail. Ultimately, however, we become aware of the silent but unyielding truth: God prevails. And it is shirah which lets us peer behind the curtain and hear above the din, and learn God's honest truth.

In this sense we may apply the name shirah to a number of significant mitzvot -- as indeed Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik informs us the Halakhah classifies them. Thus, the kiddush is shirah. It is not that it is sung or chanted, for even if one recites it in a most uncharming monotone it remains shirah. It is, rather, the insight of its contents that qualifies it for this title. The kiddush, by declaring that God created the world in six days, denies what to most men is a truism, a working theory of everyday life, namely, that the world is theirs to manipulate, to exploit, to conquer; that progress is solely of their own making; and, consequently, that they are responsible only to themselves and to no one else for

the disposition of their material means and technical skills. It is a modern version of Pharoah's ancient boast attributing his success to Kohi v'otzem yadi-- his own power and cunning. The kiddush leads us to the real truth which, during the work week, usually escapes our attention: it is God, not man, who is the Creator of the world; our possessions and our skills, even our wisdom, are a gift to us from the Almighty -- hence life, talent, and power are a trust for which we must some day answer to the Creator. This is a shirah-insight; a thought of spiritual poetry without which man can degenerate into a power-drunk, self-centered, and self-deluding creature.

Similarly, the grace or birkhat ha-mazon is regarded as shirah. After a full meal, when his appetite is satisfied and his hunger appeased, man sometimes likes to fall into the euphoria of self-satisfaction and complacency, to imagine that it is his own wisdom, ability, and talent that have made it possible for him to enjoy a good meal and all the other pleasures of life. He may say, or at least think, I ought not after all begrudge myself the compliment that I'm a good provider, a success in life with a number of significant conquests in business or profession to my credit. I've entered the jungle of modern economic life-- and emerged to ~~imporant~~ triumphant. I've lowered myself into the murky waters of business competition where the big fish eat the little fish -- and I've managed to stay afloat. To avoid this quite natural feeling, Judaism demands the shirah called birkhat ha-mazon or "bentchen," the insight into the truth: it is God's world, His food, His produce; it is crumbs from His table that we eat. Therefore, before you sit down to a meal, wash your hands, recite a blessing, salt your bread as you would a sacrifice, let a dvar Torah be head at your table, ^{so} include with "bentchen" -- in other words, transform your own table into His table, to a mizbeah, an altar. Remember: were it not for His favor, all our wisdom, shrewdness, and experience would not avail to save us from abject poverty and starvation. Shirah!

Thus, shirah makes us take life more seriously -- and ourselves less seriously. It inspires us to see beyond the fleeting to the final, beyond the passing to the

permanent, beyond the tentative to the ultimate. It encourages man to peer behind the curtain of illusion that so often is lowered onto the stage of human activity and enterprise and that separates man from the genuine truth needed to sustain him. It is a poetic insight without which human beings cannot be truly human, without which Jews cannot be truly Jewish.

(It is interesting that according to R. Meir, shir me'akev korbon, a sacrifice ~~is~~ is invalid unless accompanied by the proper, prescribed shirah. Not only animal sacrifice, but self-sacrifice too, even when inspired by the noblest sentiments, is meaningless unless it is directed to the proper goals by the spiritual insights of Torah. One shudders in recalling how many of our finest youth devoted themselves to the cause of Communism in the 1920's --- with the most genuine and sincere motives. It was inevitable that there follow the great ^hdisillusionment, for their korbon was unattended by shirah, it lacked the insight and direction and grace of Torah. Do we not still suffer from such mis-directed sincerity in the Jewish community today? What human tragedy is spelled by that halakhic wisdom that korbon without shirah is pasul, that sacrifice without spiritual vision of Torah is ineffective! What a difference shirah makes!)

It is no wonder, therefore, that when the Torah prepares the Children of Israel for the final shirah of haazinu, they are commanded through Moses, kitvu lakhem et ha-shirah ha-zot, write out for yourselves this song. The Halakhah interprets this as meaning that it is a mitzvah for every Jew to write a sefer Torah (or, today, to buy or sponsor the purchase of Jewish books and/^aJewish library) \emptyset -- for the words ha-shirah ha-zot, this song, according to Ralbag, refers not only to the song of Haazinu, but to the whole of Torah. All of the Torah is a shirah! Even at its most prosaic, from the point of view of literature, the Torah is incomparably poetic -- from the point of view of spiritual vision, the perception of truths which, though they are the ultimate reality, are concealed from man in the busy hum-drum of his life.

This is the kind of song which can win eternity for us. The talent for seeing the world in the harmony its Creator intended for it, rather than as the human cacaphonyⁿ of conflicting claims and the dissonance of the deceitful schemes spewn by human pettiness; this is the shirah that we acquire from a study of life and Torah, and which is an indispensable virtue for the Jew. Without it he must remain spiritually blind and religiously impotent. With it -- mi-kan li'tehiat ha-metim min ha-Torah, he can learn from Torah and the Torah tradition and the secret of eternity, the resurrection of sick souls and tired spirits, of sensitivities deadened because of disillusionment and disappointment. Shirah is the insight that can lead to the revival of Jewish life and a personal sense of significance.

In the words of the Passover Haggadah, ve'nomar lefanov^a shirah hadasha halleluyah -- may God grant that we live to see the day when we shall be able to offer up a new shirah, a new song of redemption, in which we shall all of us join in the lofty insight that all our achievements, our redemption itself, is not ours -- but G-d's: Halleluyah, praise the Lord, for He is the Source of all. With that knowledge, and with that acknowledgement, may He grant us a life of p^eace and blessing -- and singing, for all eternity.