YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Beshalach**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

**The Song of the Sea**

Translated by David Strauss

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In loving memory of

Yitzchak ben Chaim Zvi Schwartz z"l, who passed away on 13 Shvat 5771

and Sheva Shayndel bat David Schwartz z"l, who passed away 13 Shvat 5778

Dedicated by Avi and Sarah Schwartz

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### I. "The great Hand"

And Israel saw **the great hand which the Lord did upon the Egyptians,** and the people feared the Lord; and they believed in the Lord and in His servant Moshe. (*Shemot* 14:31)

The *Rishonim* wondered what it was exactly that the people of Israel saw and how one can see the hand of God. Some concluded from here that God has in fact a body and a hand,[[1]](#footnote-1) unlike the position of the vast majority of Jewish thinkers. This is how the Rambam – who vehemently opposed this exceptional view – describes the proponents of this view at the beginning of his *Guide for the Perplexed*:

If they did not conceive God as having a body possessed of face and limbs, similar to their own in appearance, they would have to deny even the existence of God. The sole difference which they admitted was that He excelled in greatness and splendor and that His substance was not flesh and blood. (*Guide for the Perplexed* I:1)

The Rambam decisively disagreed with this position and saw the use of the expression "the hand of God" as an instance of the Torah "speaking in the language of man":

Such actions being perfections respecting ourselves are predicated of God, because we wish to express that He is most perfect in every respect, as we remarked above in explaining the Rabbinical phrase, "The language of the Torah is like the language of man." Instances of organs of locomotion being applied to the Creator occur as follows: "My footstool"; "the place of the soles of my feet." For examples of organs of touch applied to God, compare: "the hand of the Lord"; "with the finger of God"; "the work of Your fingers"; "And You have laid Your hand upon me"; "the arm of the Lord"; "Your right hand, O Lord"… Of the inner parts of the human body only the heart is figuratively applied to God. (*Guide for the Perplexed* I:46)

But the words of *Chazal* in their expositions in the Haggada of Pesach may indicate that they understood that we are dealing here with a real hand, for they drew a comparison between the plagues in Egypt, which are described as "the finger of God," and the splitting of sea wrought by "the great hand," which has five fingers. According to the understanding of the Rambam that God has no physical form, which has been accepted as a fundamental belief in Judaism, how are we to understand *Chazal's* exposition?

It is possible that the people of Israel did, in fact, see a hand with five fingers. They saw the hand of Moshe lifting his rod toward the sea, as God had instructed him to do: "And lift up your rod, and stretch out your hand over the sea, and divide it" (*Shemot* 14:16). But the force of the plague was so great that the Israelites understood that Moshe's hand was activated by the hand of God, and not by Moshe's own strength. They could then also understand the infinite power of God and the deep meaning of the selection of Moshe to be His agent with regard to His mighty hand and outstretched arm. In this way, they believed both in God and in his servant Moshe.

### II. The Song of War

Biblical songs are reserved exclusively for victories in war. This is the case regarding both the Song of Devora about Israel's victory over the army of Sisera and the song of David about his victories over his enemies. The *Mesora* records the list of thirty-one kings whom Yehoshua defeated (*Yehoshua* 12) in the form of a song, and the *gemara* defines it as the "song of the kings of Canaan" (*Megilla* 16b) about Yehoshua's victory over them. Similarly, the list of the ten sons of Haman in the scroll of Esther is recorded as a song, and it is defined as such by Halakha (ibid.). This was a song of victory in the war that the ten sons of Haman led against us, the war of the annihilation of the people of Israel that was planned by Haman. When the tables were turned, and "the Jews had rule over those that hated them" (*Esther* 9:1), the song of "the ten sons of Haman" was sung.

The song of *Ha'azinu* is called a song because of its ending, the victory in the war in which God takes revenge against the enemies of Israel:

If I whet My glittering sword and My hand take hold on judgment; I will render vengeance to My adversaries and will recompense them that hate Me. I will make My arrows drunk with blood, and My sword shall devour flesh; with the blood of the slain and the captives, from the long-haired heads of the enemy. Sing aloud, O you nations, of His people; for He does avenge the blood of His servants, and does render vengeance to His adversaries, and does make expiation for the land of His people. (*Devarim* 32:41-43)

The same is true of the song of the well (*Bamidbar* 21:17-20); although this seems to be an innocent song about the supply of water to the people of Israel in the wilderness, it is defined by *Chazal*  as a song of the Israelite victory in the war at Wadi Arnon over Sichon the king of the Emorites and his army.[[2]](#footnote-2) And the same is true about the wars fought by Israel in our generation. The War of Independence, the Sinai Campaign, and the Six Day War all gave rise to many songs.

Indeed, there are allusions in the Bible to songs in honor of human saviors as well. Yiftach's daughter went out to greet her father with timbrels and dances following his victory over Amon, just as Miryam the prophetess went out with timbrels and dances with the daughters of Israel in honor of God and His victory over the Egyptians at the Yam Suf.

But the song of Yiftach's daughter had, as we know, a very bad ending. This was also true about the women's singing with timbrels and dances in honor of David’s defeat of Golyat; this too had a bad ending, for it led to Shaul's jealousy of David, which brought him to pursue David with the aim of killing him.[[3]](#footnote-3) Similarly, in the Torah, Lemekh's song to his wives in honor of his victory was one of the causes of the flood. Yet songs in honor of God's victories in His wars with His enemies, such as the Song of the Sea and the Song of Devora (our *parasha*'s *haftara*) remain beautiful and joyful.

### III. The song of Miryam and the women

The Song of Miryam is recorded in the Torah after the song of Moshe and the people of Israel. There is no great novelty in its content; it repeats the first verse in the song sung by Moshe and the people of Israel, and nothing more. Why, then, did the Torah see fit to mention it?

We propose, for the purpose of our explanation, that even though the song of the women is recorded after the song of Moshe and the men of Israel, it was in fact sung prior to it.[[4]](#footnote-4) In this way we can explain the strange conclusion of the Song of the Sea:

You bring them in and plant them in the mountain of Your inheritance, the place, O Lord, which You have made for You to dwell in, the sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands have established. The Lord shall reign forever and ever. For the horses of Pharaoh went in with his chariots and with his horsemen into the sea, and the Lord brought back the waters of the sea upon them; but the children of Israel walked on dry land in the midst of the sea. (*Shemot* 15:17-19)

The first two verses (17-18) seem to be an appropriate ending of the song. But what is the connection of the last verse?

According to our suggestion, the song ends with the verse: "The Lord shall reign forever and ever." The verse beginning with the words, "For the horses of Pharaoh went in," is connected to the song of the women and should be read as follows:

For the horses of Pharaoh went in with his chariots and with his horsemen into the sea, and the Lord brought back the waters of the sea upon them; but the children of Israel walked on dry land in the midst of the sea. And Miryam the prophetess, the sister of Aharon, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. And Miryam sang to them: “Sing you to the Lord, for He is highly exalted: the horse and his rider has He thrown into the sea.” (*Shemot* 15:19-21)[[5]](#footnote-5)

In other words, upon completion of the song ("The Lord shall reign forever and ever"), the Torah returns to the drowning of the Egyptians in the sea, and tells us that immediately after their drowning, Miryam took a timbrel in her hand and went out with the daughters of Israel with timbrels and dances. The women used the imperative: "**Sing** you to the Lord, for He is highly exalted" (*Shemot* 15:21), and "then **sang** Moshe and the people of Israel this song" (*Shemot* 15:1). That is to say, they sang in the wake of the call of the women, and with wording similar to what is recorded in the continuation of the verse: "I will **sing** to the Lord, for He is highly exalted." Once they began the song, they added more and more until they reached: "The Lord shall reign forever and ever" (v. 18).

Why were the Jewish women quicker to break out in song than their male counterparts? In almost all contexts in the Bible, the role of singing a song in the wake of a military victory is that of women. Thus with the Song of Devora, with the song of the daughter of Yiftach, with the song of the women following the victory over Golyat in the Eilah Valley, and in other places.

Another difference between the song of the men and the song of the women is that the song of Moshe and the men was with words, and it would appear with words only. In contrast, the song of the women was with timbrels and dances. Years later, Mikhal the daughter of Shaul scoffed at David when he brought up the ark of God to the City of David with timbrels and dances, something which she saw as beneath his dignity:

And David and all the house of Israel played before the Lord with all manner of instruments made of cypress-wood, and with harps, and with psalteries, and with timbrels, and with sistra, and with cymbals… And David danced before the Lord with all his might; and David was girded with a linen ephod… And it was so, as the ark of the Lord came into the City of David, that Mikhal the daughter of Shaul looked out at the window **and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart…** And Mikhal the daughter of Shaul came out to meet David, and said: “How did the king of Israel get him honor today, who uncovered himself today in the eyes of the handmaids of his servants, as one of the vain fellows shamelessly uncovers himself!” (II *Shemuel* 6:5-25)

We can understand Mikhal’s thinking. God is exalted above all blessings and glory, and even though we dare to sing His praises before Him, there is room to do so in a dignified manner, quietly, with fear and dread, as is appropriate for the distance between us and Him. The intimacy that is broadcast by the rejoicing, the dancing, and the playing of the timbrels seems to contradict these things, and is somewhat reminiscent of the sin of the golden calf:

And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt-offerings, and brought peace-offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink and rose up to make merry. (*Shemot* 32:6)

But Miryam at the Yam Suf and David in Jerusalem chose to emphasize the closeness and spontaneous joy with timbrels and dances. Perhaps there is an allusion to this in the Song of the Sea, which ends with going up to Jerusalem: "You bring them in and plant them in the mountain of Your inheritance" (*Shemot* 15:17). From that time on, this approach found a place in the hearts of Israel as an important – if not the exclusive – approach to the service of God.

### IV. The Song of Moshe and the People of Israel

The statement, "Then sang Moshe and the people of Israel," seems to refer to the recitation of the *shaliach tzibbur* and the communal response (which is indeed the practice in many Sefardic congregations to this day). This seems to be the meaning of the many parallel formulations in the song. The *shaliach tzibbur* – Moshe – would recite the first part of the verse, and the congregation – the people of Israel – would respond to him with the parallel second part. Sometimes the congregation itself divides into two parts, and thus – together with Moshe – there is a tripartite verse. At the end, they all declared with a single voice: "The Lord shall reign forever and ever."

Let us consider the song with this structure, and perhaps we can try this in our own synagogues:

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| This is my God, and I will glorify Him;  | my father's God, and I will exalt Him.  |  |
| The Lord is a man of war,  | the Lord is His name.  |  |
| Pharaoh's chariots and his host hath He cast into the sea,  | and his chosen captains are sunk in the Sea of Suf.  |  |
| The deeps cover them, | they went down into the depths like a stone. |  |
| Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power, | Your right hand, O Lord, dashes in pieces the enemy.  |  |
| And in the greatness of Your excellency You overthrow them that rise up against You;  | You send forth Your wrath, it consumes them as stubble.  |  |
| And with the blast of Your nostrils the waters were piled up,  | the floods stood upright as a heap; | the deeps were congealed in the heart of the sea.  |
| The enemy said: I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil;  | my lust shall be satisfied upon them; I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them. |  |
| You did blow with Your wind, the sea covered them;  | they sank as lead in the mighty waters.  |  |
| Who is like You, O Lord, among the mighty?  | Who is like You, glorious in holiness, | fearful in praises, doing wonders?  |
| You stretched out Your right hand, the earth swallowed them.  |  |  |
| You in Your love have led the people that You have redeemed;  | You have guided them in Your strength to Your holy habitation.  |  |
| The peoples have heard, they tremble;  | pangs have taken hold on the inhabitants of Peleshet. |  |
| Then were the chiefs of Edom affrighted;  | the mighty men of Moav, trembling takes hold upon them; | all the inhabitants of Canaan are melted away.  |
| Terror and dread fall upon them;  | by the greatness of Your arm they are as still as a stone; |  |
| till Your people pass over, O Lord,  | till the people pass over that You have gotten.  |  |
| You bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of Your inheritance,  | the place, O Lord, which You have made for You to dwell in, | the sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands have established. |
| The Lord shall reign forever and ever |

### V. "In the morning watch"

The miracle at the Yam Suf took place "in the morning watch." When the morning arrived, Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the sea shore, they believed in God and in His servant Moshe, and they sang their song.

Elsewhere, we related to the active role that Israel played in the miracle at the Yam Suf. The activity of Israel is what made it possible for them to sing the song. The song does not stand on its own. It is part of the person's feeling that he is a true partner in the miracle that God performed; only then can he sing the song.

Unlike the miracle at the Yam Suf, the central miracle of the exodus from Egypt took place at midnight. It was then that God smote the firstborns of Egypt, and Pharaoh arose and cried out to the people of Israel to leave Egypt. During the plague of the firstborn, Israel did nothing; the people were holed up in their houses. This is the meaning of the hour of midnight, an hour when people are usually asleep. God is alone in His world at that hour. Israel did not participate in the miracle, and they therefore did not sing a song.

These two events may be likened to what happened to the kings of the house of David when God delivered them:

Zavdi ben Levi opened: "The kings of the earth believed not" (*Eikha* 4:12) – There were four kings; what the one requested, the other did not request. And they were as follows: David, Asa, Yehoshafat, and Chizkiyahu. David said: "Let me pursue my enemies and overtake them" (*Tehillim* 18:38). The Holy One, blessed is He, said to him: I will do that. This is what is stated: "And David smote them from the twilight unto the evening of the next day" (I *Shemuel* 30:17).

Asa arose and said: I do not have the strength to kill them; rather I will pursue them and You do it. He said to him: I will do it, as it is stated: "And Asa… pursued… before the Lord, and before His host" (II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 14:12). It is not written here: "and before Asa," but rather "before the Lord, and before His host."

Yehoshafat arose and said: I do not have the strength to kill or to pursue them. Rather, I will sing a song and you do it. The Holy One, blessed is He, said to him: I will do it, as it is stated: "And when they began to sing and praise" (II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 20:22).

Chizkiyahu arose and said: I do not have the strength to kill, to pursue, or to sing a song. Rather, I will sleep on my bed, and You do it. The Holy One, blessed is He, said: I will do it, as it is stated: "And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the Lord went forth and smote in the camp of Ashur" (II *Melakhim* 19:35). (*Eikha Rabba*, *petichta* 30)

The *midrash* wishes to describe the decline in the status of the kings before God, from David to Chizkiya and until the destruction. The two events that we are discussing, the plague of the firstborns and the splitting of the Yam Suf, correspond to the last two events that the *midrash* brings. Yehoshafat sang a song over the salvation that he merited, and Chizkiyahu slept in his bed on the night of Pesach, while God was smiting the camp of Ashur, and did not even sing a song of praise. This is what the people of Israel did during the plague of the firstborn. As we noted, a song does not stand on its own. It is part of a person's feeling that he is a true partner in the miracle performed by God; only then is he capable of singing.

It may further be noted that after the splitting of the Yam Suf and the Song of the Sea, Israel fought Amalek at Refidim, in the same way that many years later David would fight Golyat on his own, with God giving him the strength to do so. This is the way that Yehoshua fought against Amalek at Refidim. This is the highest level. Both David and Yehoshua fought in the full light of day, not at midnight and not in the morning watch. We are not dealing here with a tactical consideration, which sometimes dictates fighting at night, but rather, as stated, with the spiritual significance of war during the day, which means Israel's full participation in the miracle.

### VI. "All the inhabitants of Canaan melted away"

The Song of the Sea extends the influence of the splitting of the Yam Suf and the drowning of the Egyptian army to the peoples of the region in general and to the Canaanites in particular. The Tel el-Amarna letters, which date to the period under consideration, indicate that the Egyptian Empire extended its protection (in exchange for taxes) to the peoples of Canaan and their environs. The loss of the Egyptian army at the sea caused panic among these peoples. The significance of this fear in Canaan found expression forty years later in the words of Rachav to the spies sent by Yehoshua:

And she said to the men: “I know that the Lord has given you the land and that your terror is fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. **For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Yam Suf before you, when you came out of Egypt;** and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites beyond the Jordan, to Sichon and to Og, whom you utterly destroyed. And as soon as we had heard it, our hearts did melt, neither did there remain any more spirit in any man, because of you; for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath. (*Yehoshua* 2:9-11)

It may be assumed that had Israel merited to enter the Land of Israel a year later, and not forty years later because of the sin of the spies, the splitting of the Yam Suf would have had an even greater impact on the peoples of Canaan. They might have run away, surrendered, or accepted to fulfill the *mitzvot* when the people of Israel entered the land. Indeed, even though forty years had passed, the fear of Israel dictated to a large extent the manner in which the war of conquest was conducted.

According to the simple understanding, this is the meaning of the end of the song: "You bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of Your inheritance." The splitting of the sea was a significant stage on the way to the conquest of the Promised Land.

### VII. "The sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands have established."

*Chazal* draw a verbal analogy between "**then** sang Moshe" (*Shemot* 15:1) and "Your throne is established from **then"** (*Tehillim* 93:2):

But when You stood in the sea and we sang a song before You with "then," Your kingdom became settled and Your throne became established. This is "Your throne is established from then" with "then sang Moshe." (*Shemot Rabba, Beshalach* 23)

Let us look at *Tehillim* 93, which *Chazal* connect to the Song of the Sea:

The Lord reigns; He is clothed in majesty; the Lord is clothed, He has girded Himself with strength; yea, the world is established, that it cannot be moved. Your throne is established from then; You are from everlasting. The floods have lifted up, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their roaring. Above the voices of many waters, the mighty breakers of the sea, the Lord on high is mighty. Your testimonies are very sure, holiness becomes Your house, O Lord, for evermore. (*Tehillim* 93)

The psalm speaks of God's kingdom and the establishment of His throne, as is stated also in the Song of the Sea: "The Lord shall reign forever and ever" (*Shemot* 15:18). The psalm hangs the kingdom of God on the voices of the many waters and on the mighty breakers of the sea, as what happened when the Egyptians drowned in the sea. The psalm then refers to the tablets of the testimony ("Your testimonies") that are found in the Holy of the house of God, just as the Song of the Sea concludes with the sanctuary that God will one day establish. But what is the connection between the breakers of the sea and its waves and God's kingdom in His sanctuary?

According to the plain meaning of the verses, "Your throne is established from then" means not only from the time of the Song of the Sea, but from the beginning of time. The mighty breakers of the sea are from the time before the six days of creation, from the time about which it is stated: "Now the earth was unformed and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; **and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters"** (*Bereishit* 1:2). The Torah does not tell us when the waters were created, but it would seem that they were created even before the light of the first day. A strong wind ("the spirit of God") blew upon it, and their mighty breakers crashed with a great noise. God reigned then in His world and established His throne on His own:

He closes in the face of His throne and spreads His cloud upon it. He has described a boundary upon the face of the waters, unto the confines of light and darkness. The pillars of heaven tremble and are astonished at His rebuke. He stirs up the sea with His power. (*Iyov* 26:9-12)

According to their plain sense, these verses describe the throne of God's kingdom when He was alone, at the time of Creation, when God "rebuked" the sea and commanded it to retreat and make room for dry land.

God's kingdom found expression when the water inundated Pharaoh's army, and it would later find perfect expression in the city of Jerusalem, which He chose forever and in His Temple. As in His victory over the army of Pharaoh, so too in His Temple, His kingdom will come to rest after His victory over His enemies:

Lift up your heads, O you gates, and be you lifted up, you everlasting doors; that the King of glory may come in. **Who is the King of glory?** The Lord strong and mighty, **the Lord mighty in battle.** (*Tehillim* 24:7-8)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. R. Shelomo Min Hahar (Montpelier), one of the great sages of the Middle Ages, and his company. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Berakhot* 54a and 58a, and in greater detail, *Bamidbar Rabba, Chukat* 19:25. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *Shofetim* 11:34-40 and I *Shemuel* 18:6-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I once saw a *midrash* that made this claim, but I am unable to find it at this time. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The *Mesora* understands this verse as the conclusion of the song of Moshe and the people of Israel, but perhaps the verse can be expounded also in connection with what follows. This also follows from the words “*ki va sus Pharaoh*,” "For the horses of Pharaoh went in," which denotes the past-perfect and sends us back to the beginning of the passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)