**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**MIDRASH ON THE PARASHA**

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Dedicated by Mr. and Mrs. Leon Brum for the Refua Sheleima of

Dana Petrover (Batsheva bat Gittel Aidel Leba)

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**Parashat Beshalach:**

**Faith and Song**

**Introduction**

Both faith and song stem from man's inner being. Both are springs which constantly renew themselves from a lofty, secret source. But is it the same source that inspires both? What is the dynamic that exists between them? We will trace these two things in the *derashot* on our *parasha* across the length of Rabbinic literature, from the Tannaim until the late Midrash.

**Mekhilta:**

**In reward for faith, they merited uttering a song**

Let us begin our examination of this issue with the *Mekhilta*, the halakhic Midrash on the Book of *Shemot*.

The Tanna Rabbi Nechemya expounds the juxtaposition of the verses (*Shemot* 14:31-15:1): "And Israel saw the great work which the Lord did upon the Egyptians, and the people feared the Lord; and they had faith in the Lord, and in His servant Moshe. Then sang Moshe and the children of Israel…" He sees this as an expression of the greatness of faith as a driving force in the reality and life of the nation:

"Then sang Moshe and the children of Israel" (*Shemot* 15:1).

Rabbi Nechemya says: Whoever accepts even one single commandment with true faith is deserving of having the holy spirit rest upon him.

For thus we find regarding our forefathers, that in reward for the faith which our forefathers had, they merited that the holy spirit rested upon them, and they uttered a song.

As it is stated: "And they had faith in God" and [immediately afterwards] it is stated: "Then sang Moshe and the children of Israel."

And similarly you find that Avraham our forefather inherited this world and the World to Come only by virtue of the faith that he had in God.

As it is stated: "And he had faith in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness" (*Bereishit* 15:6).

And similarly you find that Israel was redeemed from Egypt only in reward for their faith.

As it is stated: "And the people had faith" (*Shemot* 4:31)…

And it is written: "But the righteous shall live by his faith" (*Chavakuk* 2:4).

And it is written: "They are new every morning; great is Your faith" (*Eikha* 3:23).

And similarly you find that the exiles will be ingathered only in reward for their faith.

As it is stated: "Come with me from Lebanon, my bride, with me from Lebanon; look from the top of Amana [= *emuna*, faith]…" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 4:8).

And it is written: "And I will betroth you to Me forever… And I will betroth you to Me in faith" (*Hoshea* 2:21-22).

Great is true faith before the Holy One, blessed be He, for in reward for faith, the holy spirit rested upon them and they uttered song.

As it is stated: "And they had faith in the Lord, and in His servant Moshe. Then sang Moshe and the children of Israel this song to the Lord."

And similarly it is stated: "Then they had faith in His words; they sang His praise" (*Tehillim* 106:12). (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Beshalach, Vayhi*, 6)[[1]](#footnote-1)

Rabbi Nechemya's *derasha* opens with the value of absolute commitment to God's commandments on the part of a person, in the wake of which one "is deserving of having the holy spirit rest upon him." It is built on a series of proofs regarding the power of faith, which opens and closes with Israel's song at the Sea of Reeds: "That as a reward for the faith which our forefathers had, they merited that the holy faith rested upon them, and they uttered a song.[[2]](#footnote-2) As it is stated: 'And they had faith in God' and [immediately afterwards] it is stated: 'Then sang Moshe and the children of Israel.'"

The four instances mentioned — the Song of the Sea, Avraham's meriting two worlds, the Exodus from Egypt, and the ingathering of the exiles —are presented in the *Mekhilta* as a reward for faith in a reality that requires tremendous strength in a state of great difficulty or need. Thus, the verse "And he had faith" appears in connection with Avraham who questions the fulfillment of God's promise of seed: "And Avram said: Behold, to me You have given no seed, and, lo, one born in my house is to be my heir" (*Bereishit* 15:3). Similarly, the Torah speaks of Israel's faith in the depth of bondage, when Moshe and Aharon present themselves as God's agents to take the people out of Egypt. In this way we can also explain Israel's faith by virtue of which they merit to utter a song: even while in fear of Egypt's pursuit after them (and over the course of the entire period of the Exodus from Egypt), Israel has faith in God. This explanation accords also with the other verses cited in the *derasha*, which deal explicitly with faith in a state of darkness and distress, and the reward which follows in its wake. If so, the entire *derasha* has a unified message.

This interpretation, however, does not accord with the plain sense of *Tanakh* regarding Israel's faith and the song that they utter at the Sea of Reeds:

But the children of Israel walked upon dry land in the midst of the sea; and the waters were a wall to them on their right hand, and on their left. Thus the Lord saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore. And Israel saw the great work which the Lord did upon the Egyptians, and the people feared the Lord, and they had faith in the Lord and in His servant Moshe. (*Shemot* 14:29-31).

The verses describe Israel's response to the Splitting of the Sea and the devastation of Egypt before their very eyes , which brings them to absolute trust in God's infinite capacity to care for them at all times.[[3]](#footnote-3) They do not relate to Israel's faith in God's salvation **before** the Splitting of the Sea, in their time of tribulation. In light of this, the question may be raised: should we explain the *Mekhilta's* intention regarding the relationship between faith and song at the Splitting of the Sea in a different manner?

On the face of it, it can be argued that the *derasha* is not committed to the plain sense of the text. On the other hand, we have seen throughout our previous studies that *Chazal* often propose surprising readings of the biblical verses that accord in a most profound manner with their wording and with the messages arising from them. Is it possible that in this instance Rabbi Nechemya ignores the plain sense of *Tanakh*?

The question becomes stronger when we examine the verse with which the *derasha* concludes. Let us see it in context:

Our fathers in Egypt gave no heed to Your wonders; they remembered not the multitude of Your mercies; but were rebellious at the sea, even at the Sea of Reeds.
Nevertheless He saved them for His name's sake, that He might make His mighty power to be known.
And He rebuked the Sea of Reeds, and it was dried up; and He led them through the depths, as through a wilderness.
And He saved them from the hand of him that hated them, and redeemed them from the hand of the enemy.
And the waters covered their adversaries; there was not one of them left.
Then they had faith in His words; they sang His praise. (*Tehillim* 106:7-12)

The psalm emphasizes the wonders of God in contrast to Israel's responses from Egypt to the Sea of Reeds, until the actual time of salvation. "But they were rebellious at the sea, at the Sea of Reeds." Faith arrives only when they see the defeat of the Egyptians, and in the wake of that comes the song. In no way may this verse be interpreted as referring to faith out of difficulty, the reward of which is song. It is inconceivable that verses are expounded twice in the *derasha* in a manner contrary to the way they appear in *Tanakh*.

We must, therefore seek a different explanation of the sentence that frames Rabbi Nechemya's *derasha*: "For in reward for faith, the holy spirit rested upon them and they uttered song."

The wording of the *derasha*, "in reward for faith, the holy spirit rested upon them," supports the first understanding suggested here, as it is impossible to talk about reward without some previous action. If Israel's experience of faith at the Sea of Reeds is their sense of trust in the wake of God's miraculous war against Egypt, there is no action on the part of man. Thus, we are forced to explain the matter of the reward in a different manner.

It seems that the matter can be explained in the wake of a *derasha* of Rabbi Abbahu, an Amora from Eretz Israel who was a disciple of Rabbi Yochanan, in *Shemot Rabba*:

Another explanation: "Then sang Moshe."

This is what is stated: "Then they had faith in His words; they sang His praise" (*Tehillim* 106:12).

Rabbi Abbahu said: It is already written that they had faith while they were still in Egypt,

As it is stated: "And the people had faith" (*Shemot* 4:31),

But they lost their faith,

As it is stated: "Our fathers in Egypt gave no heed to Your wonders" (*Tehillim* 106:7).

When they came to the sea and saw the might of the Holy One, blessed be He, how He executes justice against the wicked, as it is stated, "And My hand take hold on judgment" (*Devarim* 32:41), and sank Egypt in the sea, immediately, "they had faith in the Lord."

And by virtue of their faith, the holy spirit rested upon them, and they uttered song…

This is: "Then they had faith in His words; they sang His praise." (*Shemot Rabba* 23, 2)

Rabbi Abbahu explicitly describes Israel's faith at the time of the Splitting of the Sea as stemming from their seeing the Egyptians drowning in the sea. In the wake of *Tehillim* 106, he characterizes it as both climactic and transient. Nevertheless, he uses wording which echoes the *Mekhilta*: "And by virtue of their faith, the holy spirit rested upon them, and they uttered a song." The faith which a person arrives at in a moment, in the wake of exposure to the mighty hand of God, raises one to spiritual heights, even if the impression it leaves is not long-lasting. Faith is a state that brings about the resting of the holy spirit, and from there to song — not because of the person's efforts, but despite the fact that one does not exert oneself sufficiently. The experience of faith has value in and of itself.[[4]](#footnote-4)

If we go back to Rabbi Nechemya's *derasha* in the *Mekhilta*, then according to this explanation, regarding faith and song at the Splitting of the Sea, it can be argued that his *derasha* describes different kinds of faith. There is the faith of adhering to an ideal over time, even when it is difficult and seemingly impossible to realize ("and faith in you at night," *Tehillim* 92:2); and there is the formative experience of faith that elevates a person all at once to a loftier reality.

The reward for each of these two types corresponds to its essence. The first type brings the people of Israel to actualize their destiny as God's people in this world, while rising to a new and higher stage of life: breaking the chains of bondage to Egypt and going out to freedom, meriting life in this world and in the World to Come, leaving the exile and joining together as a new organic entity. The second type allows temporary contact with higher worlds: "The holy spirit rested upon them, and they uttered a song." The holy spirit is a higher and more sublime consciousness of reality, characterized by an all-embracing and unified vision.[[5]](#footnote-5) The *Mekhilta* describes song not as an inner process coming from man, but as a reward, as something that is the product of the abundance that reaches man from above, flashing like lightning and then disappearing.

In the wake of our examination of Rabbi Nechemya's *derasha*, let us go back and explain the opening statement: "Whoever accepts even one single commandment with true faith is deserving of having the holy spirit rest upon him." A person who accepts upon himself to fulfill a certain *mitzva* to perfection and with all his heart is a person who at a certain moment identifies himself with it in absolute fashion. That moment parallels Israel's experience of faith after the Splitting of the Sea, and therefore one "is deserving of having the holy spirit rest upon him." Rabbi Nechemya essentially shifts the religious-historical experience that belongs in the past to the people as a whole in the face of God's clear and mighty intervention in the world, to the experience of the individual member of Israel in the present in relation to the Torah's commandments. In this way, a one-time phenomenon repeats itself in reality.

**Shir Ha-shirim Rabba:**

**An act that carries a reward**

In *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* we find a development and continuation of Rabbi Nechemya's *derasha* in the *Mekhilta*, with a change of direction regarding Israel's faith in the wake of the Splitting of the Sea and the song:

I.

"Look from the top of Amana" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 4:8).

Rabbi Chunya said in the name of Rabbi Yusta:

In the future, the exiles will reach the Amanus mountains and utter a song.

And in the future the nations of the world will bring presents for the messianic king.

What is the reason? “*Tashuri* from the top of Amana."

The term *tashuri* means nothing but an offering.

This is what is stated: "And there is not a present (*teshura*) to bring the man of God" (I *Shemuel* 9:7).

By virtue of what?

By virtue of their having uttered a song at the sea.

Rav Nachman said: By virtue of the faith that Avraham had, as it is stated: "And he had faith in the Lord" (*Bereishit* 15:6).

Rabbi Chelbo said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: It is written: "And Israel saw the great work" (*Shemot* 14:31).

He had just been leading them [through the Sea of Reeds], and they should not have faith? Is there a person who saw, but did not have faith?

By virtue of the faith that Israel had while in Egypt, as it is stated: "And the people had faith" (*Shemot* 4:31).

II.

Rabbi Berekhya said in the name of Rabbi Elazar:
Israel was worthy of uttering a song on the downfall of Sichon and Og.

Also, Chizkiyahu was worthy of uttering a song on the downfall of Sancheiriv, as it is written: "But Chizkiyahu rendered not according to the benefit done to him; for his heart was lifted up" (II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 32:25).

You see Chizkiyahu the king and righteous man, and yet you say: "for his heart was lifted up"?

Rather, his heart was lifted up above uttering song.

Yeshayahu came to Chizkiyahu and his counsellors.

He said to them: "Sing to the Lord" (*Yeshayahu* 12:5).

They said to him: Why?

"For He has done gloriously" (ibid.).

They said to him: Already "this is made known in all the earth" (ibid.).

Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: Chizkiyahu said: The Torah in which I occupy myself atones for the song.

Rabbi Levi said: Chizkiyahu said: Why do we have to relate the miracles and mighty acts of the Holy One, blessed be He? This is already known from one end of the world to the other. Did not the sphere of the sun stand in the middle of the firmament, and the people saw the miracles and mighty acts of the Holy One, blessed be He, until the end of the world?...

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Had Chizkiyahu uttered a song on the downfall of Sancheiriv, he would have become the messianic king and Sancheiriv would have become Gog and Magog. But he did not do this, but rather he said: "Now I know that the Lord saves His anointed… Some trust in chariots" (*Tehillim* 20:7-8). What is written afterwards? "Save, Lord; let the King answer us on the day that we call" (*Tehillim* 20:10). (*Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* 4, 2-3)

The *derasha* in the *Mekhilta* relates to the ingathering of the exiles at the time of the redemption. "And similarly you find that the exiles will be ingathered only in reward for their faith. As it is stated: 'Come with me from Lebanon, my bride, with me from Lebanon; look from the top of Amana.'" *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* expands upon this *derasha*, changing the meaning of the word "Amana" from "faith" to the name of a place,[[6]](#footnote-6) and expounding the word *tashuri* in the sense of "song" (*shira*) and "gift" (*teshura*). This double meaning relates to two different factors: the song — to Israel whose exiles were ingathered, and the gift — to the nations of the world who present a gift to the messianic king. As opposed to the presentation of the *Mekhilta,* in which the *derasha* revolves around the issue of faith, this *derasha* revolves around the issue of the song, which appears twice in the *derasha*. First is in the question and answer, "By virtue of what? By virtue of their having uttered a song at the sea," which appear nowhere else in Rabbinic literature. Second is in the second part of the *derasha*, in connection with Chizkiyahu, king of Yehuda, who does not utter a song on the downfall of Sancheiriv.

The conversation between the prophet Yeshayahu and King Chizkiyahu in the *derasha* contains three explanations: the miracle of Sancheiriv's downfall is already known throughout the world, and therefore there is no need to publicize it; Torah study is equal to the uttering of a song; and the miracles written in the Torah are also known. All of them together point to Chizkiyahu's failure to utter a song as an expression of his attitude toward his role as king, lacking a feeling of wonder in the face of God's power and a yearning to sanctify His name throughout the world, in the presence of all. Thus, the *derasha* indicates the importance of song as a mission appropriate for the messianic king. Song appears in the *Mekhilta* as reward for Israel's faith, whereas in *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba,* it appears as an act for which there is reward.

Regarding faith as well, there is a gap between the *Mekhilta* and the *derasha* under discussion. In the first part of the *derasha*, the entire issue of merit relates exclusively to the future redemption, and Rabbi Yochanan is not prepared to see Israel's faith in the wake of the defeat of the Egyptians as a reason to merit the vision of the end of days. Like song, faith too is perceived by this *derasha* as something given over into the hands of man, so that one may acquire it by way of toil and effort.

**The development of the *derashot* in the late *midrash***

Let us now consider the development of these *derashot* in the late Midrash. The first *derasha* that we will examine is from *Midrash Tanchuma*:

"Look from the top of Amana" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 4:8).

Rabbi Yosei ben Shunam said: This is a mountain called Amana.

Once the exiles reach this mountain, they will utter a song,

As it is stated: "Look from the top of Amana" — by virtue of Avraham.

"From the top of Senir" (ibid.) — by virtue of Yitzchak.

"And Chermon" (ibid.) — by virtue of Yaakov.

Another explanation: "Look from the top of Amana."

By virtue of what did Israel merit uttering a song at the sea?

By virtue of the faith that they had.

What is written before the matter?

"And Israel saw the great hand… And they had faith in the Lord, and in His servant Moshe" (*Shemot* 14:31).

Rabbi Nechemya said: By virtue of what did they utter a song?

By virtue of the faith that they had at the beginning, as it is stated: "And the people had faith."

"Look from the top of Amana" — by virtue of their faith, they merited uttering a song.

As it is stated: "Then sang Moshe." (*Midrash Tanchuma, Buber, Beshalach* 11)

This *derasha* is comprised of two *derashot* relating to the verse "Look from the top of Amana." The first *derasha* begins in the same manner as does *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba*, but it does not relate to the nations of the world who bring gifts, nor to King Chizkiyahu. What appears here in the name of Rabbi Yosei ben Shunam appears in the parallel *midrash* in *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* in the name of Rabbi Yusta.

The second *derasha* is built out of two answers to the question: "By virtue of what did Israel merit uttering a song at the sea?" The first answer is the *derasha* of Rabbi Nechemya in the *Mekhilta* regarding the juxtaposition of "And they had faith in the Lord" to "Then sang Moshe." The second answer, which appears here in the name of Rabbi Nechemya, is the answer that appears in the words of Rabbi Nechemya regarding the source of the merit of the Exodus from Egypt. The appearance of the two answers one alongside the other, after one of them has been rejected in *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba*, is noteworthy. What is unique in this *derasha* is the fact that the verse in *Shir Ha-shirim* is expounded regarding the relationship between faith and song.

The second source to be examined from the late Midrash is *Shemot Rabba*:

Why is it necessary to mention the Splitting of the Sea in the *Emet Ve-yatziv* blessing [after the reading of *Shema*]?

Because once He split the sea for them, they had faith in Him.

As it is stated: "And they had faith in the Lord and in His servant Moshe."

And by virtue of the faith that they had, they merited uttering a song and the *Shekhina* rested upon them.

As it is written afterwards: "Then sang Moshe."

Therefore one must juxtapose redemption to prayer.

Just as they juxtaposed song after faith and the Splitting [of the Sea],

And just as they purified their hearts and uttered a song,

As it is written: "And the people feared the Lord, and they had faith," and afterwards: "Then sang."

So must one purify the heart before prayer. (*Shemot Rabba* 22, 3)

This source is built entirely on the foundation of Rabbi Nechemya's *derasha* in the *Mekhilta*, which sees Israel's faith, in the wake of their seeing the Egyptians drown in the Sea of Reeds, as a reason for song. However, the events of the resting of the *Shekhina* and song appear in the reverse order. Instead of the formulation appearing in *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* and in the *Mekhilta*: "In reward for their faith, the holy spirit rested upon them and they uttered a song," the formulation here is: "And by virtue of the faith that they had, they merited uttering a song and the *Shekhina* rested upon them." The reason for this lies in the parallel that is made to the Jew who comes to recite the *Amida* prayer. The parallel provides the laws with an experiential framework, and presents the moment before prayer as loaded and wonderful, during which time the person is in the throes of an intense religious experience.

Throughout the *shiur*, we have characterized Israel's faith after the Splitting of the Sea as a climactic moment which they merit, with no exertion or challenge on their part. The *Tanchuma* here injects into this moment human effort as well.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. See similarly the parallel passage in *Mekhilta de-Rashbi* 14, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We will come back and explain this opening below. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. So too in the commentary of Rashbam (ad loc.): "That even in the wilderness they will not die of hunger." See also the commentaries of *Ha-Ketav Ve-hakabbala* and Malbim (ad loc.). Other commentaries see the meaning of the experience described in the verse in relation to the leadership of Moshe as God's agent. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See also *Shemot Rabba* 22, 3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See *Orot Ha-techiya* 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See *Yerushalmi, Challa*, Chap. 1; *Yerushalmi, Shevi'it* 6:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)