Parshas B'shalach

The Torah relates that when Bnei Yisrael realized that they were trapped between Paro's approaching army and Yam Suf they cried out to Hashem (Shmos 14:10). Rashi (quoting the Midrash) explains that Bnei Yisrael  תפשו אומנות אבותם - They adopted the craft of their ancestors and prayed. This description is somewhat strange. It would seem only natural to pray to Hashem at this juncture. After all, as the saying goes, "there are no atheists in a foxhole". Why is this referred to as their forefathers' craft?

We know that Avraham davened on many occasions. Which Tefilla were Bnei Yisrael now imitating? The Midrashim and Rashi mention different sources. Rav Schwab  זצ"ל raises another possibility. The Mishna in Taanis (15a) describes the Tefillos recited on a fast day. At one point we ask Hashem to answer us as he answered Avraham on Har HaMoriah. What Tefilla did Avraham pray at the time of the Akaida? Rav Schwab suggests that Avraham was being challenged in his Emunah. On the one hand, he had been promised by Hashem that  his legacy would continue through Yitzchak. And now he was commanded to sacrifice him! Avraham davened to Hashem that despite these circumstances, his Emunah should not waiver and he should remain strong in his beliefs. That was the craft that Bnei Yisrael adopted at Yam Suf. On the one hand, they were assured by Hashem that they were now a free people heading towards the Promised Land. On the other hand, the present situation looked extremely bleak without any apparent way for that promise to be fulfilled. It was then that they followed in Avraham's footsteps and davened that their belief and trust in Hashem should be steadfast and that they too should withstand the challenge.

R. Yisrael of Ruzhin once asked why Bnei Yisrael recited Shira only after the miracles of Yam Suf. After all, the Dor HaMidbar witnessed many miraculous events! He answered that the Shira was not just a reaction to the salvation brought about by Krias Yam Suf. The Torah tells us just prior to the Shira:  ויאמינו בה' ובמשה עבדו. Bnei Yisrael reaffirmed and strengthened their belief in Hashem. It was the recognition of this enhanced Emunah that caused Moshe and Bnei Yisrael to burst forth in praise, and say:

אשירה לה'