

BESHALACH

NOTEWORTHY NOTES

A familiar section of *parashas Beshalach* is *Shiras HaYam* (the Song of the Sea). These famous verses were sung by the Jewish people after they witnessed the great miracles of the sea splitting and their Egyptian pursuers drowning. Our Sages instituted these verses in our daily *tefillah* (prayer) of *Pesukei DeZimra* (verses of singing praise). We refer to *Shiras HaYam* a second time during morning *tefillah*, just before we recite the *Shemoneh Esreh* (the eighteen-blessing, silent prayer). Throughout the generations, rabbinic authorities attested to the special power of *Shiras HaYam*.

Rabbi Eliezer Meizlish lists¹ many potential blessings one may receive by singing *Shiras HaYam* aloud with joy, one of which is forgiveness of one's sins. He mentions many other merits, including *tikkun* (rectification) of one's body and soul in general,² *tikkun* of one's thought processes,³ the merit to see the *Mashiach* (Messiah) and the merit to sing *shirah* in *Olam HaBa*.⁴ Rabbi Dov

¹ *Shirah Al HaYam*, p. 7.

² *ibid.*, p. 8.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 10.

Yaffe⁵ also recommends reciting *Shiras HaYam* with proper intention to earn pardon from transgressions. He writes that, based on the *Zohar*, joyous recitation of *Shiras HaYam* aloud replicates the righteous actions of our forefathers standing on the seashore, and opens channels of repentance.

As mentioned above, we allude to *Shiras HaYam* immediately before the *Shemoneh Esreh* saying, “*Moshe unnei Yisrael lecha annu shirah besimchah rabbah* (Moshe and the Children of Israel raised their voices in song to You with great joy).” Not only should *Shiras HaYam* be said with joy, but it should be said with “*simchah rabbah* (great joy).” Joy seems to be a defining feature of it.

Let us take a journey through sea and song, trying to answer the following questions: First, what is the unique power of *Shiras HaYam* enabling it to have a potent effect on those who recite it many generations later? Second, why is it so important that it be sung “*besimchah rabbah*?” Addressing these two questions will enable us to answer a third: Why is the mention of the *Shiras HaYam* a fitting introduction to *Shemoneh Esreh*?

Leaving the Land of Make-Believe

To approach these questions, we need to – figuratively speaking – leave the “land of make-believe.” Honest introspection reveals, surprisingly enough, that we spend most of our time in this “land.” Meaning, our perceptions of the world are mostly superficial; we often do not grasp the deeper spiritual reality. So let us journey away from that place to the “land of real-believe,” and define different levels of our perception of reality.

⁵ *Le’ovdecha Be’Emes*, Elul, *Yamim Nora’im*, p. 53.

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler describes⁶ four levels of understanding cause and effect in how this world operates. The lowest level is the belief that there is a specific design built into the natural order of creation. Level-one believers view the laws of nature as just that – laws. For example, a military group that trains extensively to be the strongest army will win in battle. Crops planted in proper environmental conditions and properly tended will grow well.

Of course, there are always chances of unforeseeable circumstances. Even the strongest army could be struck by a flu outbreak and a bizarre snowstorm could destroy fields of produce. To prevent those instances, level-one believers will turn to G-d. After all, He controls nature, so they beseech Him constantly and fervently: “Please don’t let me get sick.” “Please don’t let there be a storm today.” “Please don’t make the stock market drop.” Hashem is asked to not to “interfere” with what the laws of nature would dictate.

What’s wrong with this picture? Rabbi Dessler describes⁷ a person who looks through a small hole in a wall and sees a pen writing on a piece of paper. In his mind, the pen writes on its own. Due to his limited view, he doesn’t see the person sitting at the table, holding the pen in his hand. Level-one believers think that nature operates itself, and G-d merely has the ability to intervene.

Praying “please don’t let me get sick,” implies that if Hashem didn’t involve Himself in the person’s life, he would naturally stay well. *Please don’t let there be a storm today!* Does that mean that if G-d doesn’t interfere, the laws of nature would govern the weather? *Please don’t make the stock market drop!* Do we rely on the laws of

⁶ *Michtav Mei'Eliyahu*, vol. 1, p. 180-183.

⁷ *Michtav Mei'Eliyahu*, vol. 1, p. 181.

economics and only pray that G-d won't steer the economy off-course? These are the prayers of level-one believers; they request Hashem not to interrupt the natural, predictable course of events.

When a person sees any process as being independent of Hashem, he lives in the "land of make-believe." Even if he is certain that Hashem could intervene at any time, he still operates under misconceptions. We often create this fantasy land because predictability is reassuring and comforting; human beings need to feel in control of the world. We imagine cause and effect to be natural processes that we can manipulate to get our desired results. If we recognize that Hashem has ultimate control, but still view the process as independent, then we just have to ask Him not to interfere with the process. This false impression, says Rabbi Dessler, has a shade of *avodah zarah* (idol worship) in it, because it attributes power to something besides Hashem. Level-one believers think human efforts make things happen, independently of Hashem.

The next level, Rabbi Dessler explains, is the knowledge that all the events of nature are entirely within Hashem's control. Level-two believers have a fuller view and see the person writing with the pen. Nothing happens unless G-d wills it to happen. An army wins only because G-d gives strength to the soldiers' limbs and puts winning strategies in the officers' minds. Gardens grow because G-d makes the rain fall and causes the sunlight and water to produce the nutrients the seedlings need.

While this is a big improvement, level-two believers still have one foot in the "land of make-believe." Why? They think the world is conducted through a partnership between Hashem and nature. The very statement that "G-d is in complete and direct control of nature" demonstrates a belief that G-d and nature are separate. The very action of identifying a specific subject

controlling a direct object, means that one is distinguishing between the subject and object, and seeing them as separate entities. Level-two believers might believe that Hashem ultimately controls nature, but they still distinguish nature as its own force. The pen is identified as an instrument in the hand of the writer.

So how do we get to the “land of real-believe?” Let us explore Rabbi Dessler’s third level. Level-three believers understand that the laws of nature are neither independent of G-d nor simply in G-d’s direct control, but instead a direct manifestation of G-d Himself. This perspective is much closer to reality. We say in our daily *tefillos* that “*Hashem Echad* (G-d is One)”⁸ and “*ein od* (there is none other).”⁹ These phrases do not simply mean that Hashem is the only G-d and there are no other gods. Hashem is One – He is all that exists! Everything that we can perceive (and everything we cannot) stems from the Oneness, the Unity and the Existence of Hashem.

Nature may appear independent of G-d, but this is a mere illusion. Hashem manifests Himself in this mysterious way to give us free choice. We may choose to be deluded by the natural world or we may choose to perceive the truth. All world events – from the largest to the smallest – are a manifestation of Hashem’s Oneness. They are just disguised so that we can choose to see the reality. At this level, there is no difference between the natural and the miraculous. Everything is “miraculous,” because everything is a direct manifestation of Hashem. This is a true perception of reality.

We mentioned that there are four levels. How can we possibly progress from here?

⁸ From *Shema*.

⁹ From *Aleinu*.

Individuals that internalize that everything is a manifestation of Hashem know that all occurrences result from a spiritual cause. Therefore, the higher level conclusion should be as follows: it is illogical to do human *bishtadlus* (efforts) to get desired results. If the whole existence of physical *bishtadlus* is a disguise for reality, why should involvement in a disguise, in *bester* (concealment), result in positive outcomes? What we consider miracles, the world operating according to the laws of spirituality, should in fact be the most natural. Such was the level of Moshe *Rabbeinu*, who remained on *Har Sinai* for forty days without eating or drinking. Why should ingesting tangible food, which is only *bester*, lead to life? It should lead to death! Refraining from physicality should sustain life! It might seem abstract to us, but Moshe *Rabbeinu* was on that level. He lived in the “land of real-believe,” never once deceived by the illusions of this natural world.

The Source of Everything

Now equipped with new distinctions between illusory and real worldviews, let us return to *Shiras HaYam*. Rabbi Simcha Broide recounts¹⁰ the *Midrash* detailing the fantastic miracles experienced by the Jewish people at *Krias HaYam* (the splitting of the sea). Not only did the sea split, but it split into twelve paths, one for each of the tribes. In addition, fruit-bearing trees blossomed and fresh water fountains flowed, so that the Jews would enjoy nourishing sustenance while they crossed. Surprisingly, these supernatural occurrences are not mentioned at all in the *Shirah*. Instead, *Bnei Yisrael* sang about the more natural events, such as “*sus verochvo ramah vayam* (a horse and its rider He

¹⁰ *Sam Derech, Shemos*, p. 336.

cast into the sea),”¹¹ “*markevos Paroh vecheilo yarab vayam* (the chariots of Pharaoh and his army He threw into the sea),”¹² and “*tehomos yechasyumu yardu vintzolos kemo aven* (deep waters covered them, they went down in the depths like a stone).”¹³ Through these unsophisticated events, they perceived Hashem’s “exaltedness,”¹⁴ “His right arm,”¹⁵ and exclaimed “Who is like You?”¹⁶ Realistically speaking, these details don’t appear to be the most notable. On the contrary, phenomena that defy the laws of nature usually make the most impressive show. The sea crashing down would obviously drown the Egyptians, who were in its path. Why were *Bnei Yisrael* so moved by this natural event?

Rabbi Broide explains that *Shiras HaYam* demonstrated the level that *Am Yisrael* reached at that time. They saw with clarity how nature itself is a manifestation of Hashem, just like miracles. The flashy, supernatural phenomena (as detailed in the *Midrash*) did not impress them any more than the natural events did. They beheld the natural events with wonder and awe. To them, it was all a miracle. *Bnei Yisrael* understood the “natural” drowning of their enemies as a direct manifestation of G-d’s Will. They saw Hashem’s Hand and burst into song.

The Maharal expounds¹⁷ the Torah’s use of *az* (then) as the first word of the *Shirah*. “*Az yashir Moshe uVnei Yisrael* (then Moshe and the Children of Israel sang).”¹⁸ *Az* is composed of two

¹¹ *Shemos* 15:1.

¹² *ibid.*, 15:4.

¹³ *ibid.*, 15:5.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 15:1.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 15:6.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 15:11.

¹⁷ *Gevuros Hashem*, 47.

¹⁸ *Shemos* 15:1.

letters: *aleph* – which has the numerical value of one, and *zayin* – which has the numerical value of seven. The Maharal quotes a *Midrash* that interprets *az* as a code word for “*echad rochev al shivah* (the one that rides on seven).” What does that mean? In Judaism, digits represent much more than their simple numerical value. As clarified¹⁹ by Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, the number six signifies a complete object, which has six sides: top, bottom, right, left, front and back. The number seven, therefore, symbolizes moving beyond a unified whole into many disparate objects.

Seven, then, signifies individual parts. The number one is the Only One. It represents the Highest Unity, the all-encompassing Unity of Hashem. The *az* of *Shiras HaYam* means that the Divine One “rides on” and dominates the separateness of seven, the seemingly independent natural events. When Hashem turned the sea into dry land, the Jews perceived with clarity that Hashem is the Source of everything and all apparently separate objects are contained within His Unity.

On(c)e upon a Time

The general use of the word *az* in Hebrew also hints to this unity. The Maharal notes that *az* can refer to a past or a future event. One could say, “Then I went to the park” as well as “then I will go home.” The word *az* in its essence refers to a time beyond time, in which there is no distinction between past, present and future. *Az* is an appropriate word to praise Hashem, whose Unity is beyond time.

¹⁹ *Sifsei Chaim*, vol. 2, p. 416.

Rabbi Chaim Friedlander expands²⁰ on the Maharal's idea to explain how specifically at *Kri'as Yam Suf* (the splitting of the Sea) the Jewish people attained clarity of Hashem's Unity in time. He utilizes a *mashal* (parable) from Rabbi Dessler to explain the concept of time.

Imagine a map with many different cities. In your mind, take a piece of posterboard and cut out a small square from the center. Now place the remaining posterboard over the map. Only one city is visible through the square. If you move the posterboard, you can't see that city anymore, but you know that it's still there. So too, the system of time is one of *bester*. Just like we only see one city, we only experience one point of time at any given moment. Other times exist only in our memory or in our imagination. The past and future are not as vivid as the present, just like the remaining cities are concealed under the posterboard.

Rabbi Friedlander explains that Hashem established the system of time to be one of *bester* to enable us to function as physical beings. If all of the most beautiful, exciting, and joyous moments of our lives were experienced simultaneously, we would be overwhelmed. Likewise, if we were to constantly relive all of our painful and challenging moments all at once, the burden would be too great. Hashem, with great kindness, gave us the gift of chronological order: past, present, and future. We only need to manage the present and the rest is muted by the *bester* of time.

While this *bester* is necessary for human function, it puts us at a disadvantage by giving us a limited perspective. We perceive events as disconnected from one another. We don't understand why things happen. Many doubts surface, and we may ask questions about Hashem's Providence. If we just saw the whole

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 417.

map – the entire past, present, and future – everything would be clear and our uncertainty would dissipate. But the full picture is hidden from us. We therefore experience seemingly separate and unrelated events throughout our lives and judge them emotionally as either bad or good for us. On the other hand, as faithful Jews, we try to intellectually convince ourselves that “it’s all for the best.” The phrase coined for this concept is “*gam zu letova* (this is also for the good).” The idea is that while we cannot fully understand why bad things happen, we believe that there is a hidden fuller picture. We have faith that Hashem conducts the world for our ultimate good. “*Gam zu letova*” is illustrated well in the following children’s story.²¹ Sometimes stories for children are even more meaningful for the adults, as we will soon see.

There was once a man named Feivel. One day he ran into his rabbi’s study and cried, “Rabbi, it’s terrible! My ox died and I can’t plow my field. Isn’t this the worst thing that could possibly happen to me?” “Maybe it is and maybe it isn’t,” the rabbi answered cryptically. Feivel was baffled by the response. *That is so silly! Of course this is the worst thing that could happen to me!* The next day, Feivel’s luck changed. He ran into the rabbi’s study, joyously exclaiming, “Rabbi, it’s wonderful! Yesterday on my way home, I found a horse! With this horse, I plowed my field twice as fast as I used to with my ox. Isn’t this the best thing that could have happened to me?” “Maybe it is and maybe it isn’t,” answered the rabbi thoughtfully. The reply confused Feivel yet again. *That is so silly! Of course this is the best thing that could happen to me!* The next day brought new circumstances for Feivel. “Rabbi, it’s terrible! My son fell off my new horse and broke both his legs! The poor boy is in terrible pain! Isn’t this the worst thing that could happen?” “Maybe it is and maybe it isn’t,” echoed the familiar reply. Feivel

²¹ Shmuel Blitz, *My First Book of Jewish Stories*, p. 31.

again thought, *That is so silly! Of course this is the worst thing that could happen to me!* The next day the king's soldiers arrived in Feivel's village. They forcibly drafted all the boys into the king's army. Only Feivel's son was left behind. His two broken legs disqualified him from service. Now Feivel understood the rabbi's wise responses.

Our perspective is limited. Everything Hashem does is part of a larger plan, but we may not understand it at that moment. In this whimsical story, Hashem's plan is revealed in three days. In our lives, the larger truth might take months, years, or even a lifetime to unfold.

At *Kri'as Yam Suf*, the Jewish people understood the whole Divine plan.²² The posterboard – the *bester* – was removed. They viewed a complete timeline and saw clearly how enduring all the years of slavery and suffering was a preparation for the *ge'ulah* (redemption). *Bnei Yisrael* now fully appreciated the intricate Divine orchestration of events. Circumstances which had caused them pain were now understood as custom-designed pieces of Hashem's puzzle. Pharaoh, for example, had repeatedly refused to release *Bnei Yisrael*, causing them much heartache and doubt. Later this same stubbornness prompted Pharaoh to doggedly pursue the liberated Jews with his army, leading the Egyptians to meet their demise in the sea.

This is why *Shiras HaYam* begins with the word *az*. *Am Yisrael's* new vision was timeless, recognizing the past, present and future as a whole. The Jewish people understood how “*echad rochev al shivah*”: all the disparate elements of the physical world and time are really controlled by Hashem. It is all a manifestation of Hashem's Unity, waiting to be revealed. The Jewish people

²² *Sifsei Chaim*, vol. 2, p. 417.

appreciated Hashem's masterful orchestration of the world and expressed it. *Shiras HaYam* is when they burst into song to articulate "*ein od milvado*" – nothing exists but Hashem.

In Harmony

Why was song the most appropriate expression for this level of understanding? Rabbi Akiva Tatz comments²³ that the beauty of music is how each individual note contributes to the harmony of the entire piece. Let us apply the analogy of music to what we have learned about *hester*. The musicians in an orchestra play the notes of their personal sheet music; simply put, they only play their part of the song. They don't hear how their notes contribute to the piece's harmony – until the orchestra plays it all together.

At *Kri'as Yam Suf*, the Jewish people caught a glimpse of the conductor's score, on which every instrumental part is written. They heard everyone playing together and understood how each musician – each individual event – contributed directly to the whole piece, the Master Plan for the world. They heard the harmony of history's song and, therefore, expressed their heightened awareness of Hashem through song.

According to our Sages,²⁴ from the time that Hashem created the world until the Jews crossed *Yam Suf*, no one ever sang *shirah* to Hashem. This statement seems shocking. Can it be that generations of our ancestors passed, including great individuals like our *Avos* and *Immahos* (patriarchs and matriarchs), and not one of them sang praises to Hashem? Rabbi Gedalyah Schorr clarifies that the Sages' statement above does not imply that no one ever

²³ *Living Inspired*, p. 158-159.

²⁴ *Shemos Rabbah* 23:4.

sang Hashem's praises, but rather it shows that the songs preceding *Kri'as Yam Suf* did not express the essence of true *shirah*.

Rabbi Schorr explains²⁵ that true *shirah* demonstrates the Glory of Hashem in the world. Many people had sung *shirah* to praise Hashem, but they only focused on the positive: the open display of *chesed*, the miracles, or the salvation from hardship. No one sang about the hardship itself – until *Kri'as Yam Suf*. The spiritual achievement of *Kri'as Yam Suf* included appreciating how the suffering was an integral part of Hashem's goodness. The affliction was also a revelation of His Glory. *Shiras HaYam* was the essence of *shirah* – expressing how all the individual notes, even the ones that sound sour when played alone, create beautiful harmony when played together.

Our Sages comment on the personification of the sea in the *pasuk* (verse), “*Hayam ra'ah vayanos* (the sea saw and fled).”²⁶ What did the sea see? “*Ra'ah arono shel Yosef yoreid layam* (it saw the coffin of Yosef coming down to the sea).”²⁷ The Slonimer Rebbe explains²⁸ the deep connection between Yosef and *Kri'as Yam Suf*. Yosef's paradoxical life was characterized by both luxury and hardship. He began as the family prince, his father's favorite. This preferential treatment provoked his brothers' jealousy, and they cast him into a pit. Later they sold him as a slave. Then he was framed by Potiphar's wife and thrown into prison. A bizarre turn of events landed him in the comforts of the Egyptian palace. This was quite an emotional roller-coaster ride for Yosef!

²⁵ *Ohr Gedalyahu, Shemos*, p. 76.

²⁶ *Tehillim* 114:3.

²⁷ *Midrash Shocher Tov* 114.

²⁸ *Nesivos Shalom, Shemos*, p. 116.

Every turn along the path of Yosef's life had been part of Hashem's design to elevate him through the ranks of Egyptian royalty. Hashem carefully executed His plan to turn Yosef into Pharaoh's right-hand man, so he could save the entire Jewish people from the famine. The dramatic trials and tribulations of Yosef's life were a supreme revelation of Hashem's master plan. This same revelation was present at *Kri'as Yam Suf*, when the Jewish people in retrospect saw the Hand of Hashem in all the hardships of the Egyptian slavery.

Reaching the Level of *Shirah*

Let us now address our initial questions. Why does saying *Shiras HaYam* specifically “*besimchah rabbah*” have so many potential *segulos* (mystical benefits), and why do we introduce our *Shemoneh Esreh* by mentioning *Shiras HaYam*?

We've seen how *Shiras HaYam* expresses the perspective of absolute clarity that *Am Yisrael* had during *Kri'as Yam Suf*. They saw how “one rides on seven” – how all the disparate parts and events in the world are a manifestation of Hashem's Will.

Sins are the result of disconnecting from reality. After all, if we really understood that everything is from Hashem, would we ever go against His Word? Singing *Shiras HaYam* reconnects us to the reality of Hashem's world, and our sins can be forgiven, as the *Zohar* writes. This connection also re-establishes a wholeness of body and soul. All physical events are really a manifestation of the spiritual – the world of the soul.

Shiras HaYam, then, can heal us on all levels: physical, mental, and spiritual. Once our minds are in harmony with Hashem's reality, then all of our foreign thoughts are blocked. We can see the world with the same clarity that will be present in the times of

Mashiach and *Olam HaBa*. It is logical that proper recitation of *Shiras HaYam* gives us the merit to see that final revelation. In *Olam Hazeḥ* we recite the *berachah* of *HaTov VeHaMetiv* (He is Good and does good) when hearing joyous news and the *berachah* of *Dayan HaEmes* (He is the True Judge) when hearing sad news. Our Sages teach us that in the future, in *Olam HaBa*, we will “bless the good in the same way we bless the bad.”²⁹ We will see that it is all good and recite the *berachah* of *HaTov VeHaMetiv* for every occasion.

When we sing *Shiras HaYam* “*besimchah rabbah*,” we tap into the joyful perspective of our forefathers and we transport ourselves to the “land of real-believe.” But why is *simchah* (joy) such a critical element?

Simchah is not just happiness or satisfaction. The Slonimer Rebbe explains³⁰ the Jewish idea of *simchah* in his essay discussing “*mishenichnas Adar, marbim besimchah* (when the month of Adar enters, one increases joy).” He identifies Jewish joy as the defining quality of a truly rich person, as described in *Pirkei Avo*s³¹ – “*same’ach bechelko* (happy with his portion).” According to the Slonimer Rebbe, being *besimchah* means appreciating how Hashem has directed one’s life, with all its ups and downs.

It might appear ironic that *simchah* of this kind is best illustrated by the Purim story – the quintessential story of *hester*.³² How could this story, throughout which Hashem’s presence is hidden, demonstrate the concept of *simchah*? After all, the events of the narrative progress painfully from bad to worse:

²⁹ *Mishnah Berachos* 9:1.

³⁰ *Nesivos Shalom on Purim*, p. 5.

³¹ *Pirkei Avo*s 4:1: “Who is rich? One who is happy with his portion.”

³² *Gemara Chullin* 139b quoting the Biblical source for *Megillas Esther*: “*Ve’Anochi baster astir panai* (I will surely have concealed My Face)” – *Devarim* 31:18.

Achashverosh's rule, coercion of Esther to become his new queen, Haman's rise to power, the subsequent death sentence for the Jewish people ... it seemed utterly hopeless! But all along, Hashem designed every detail for the purpose of our salvation. This appreciation of Hashem's constant Divine Providence, even when He appears hidden, is being *same'ach bechelko* – feeling true *simchah*.

But practically speaking, we are not always in a state of *same'ach bechelko*. How then can we genuinely recite *Shiras HaYam besimchah rabbah*? A paradoxical quality of *Shiras HaYam* is that, on one hand, the *simchah* is a prerequisite but on the other hand, higher levels of *simchah* can be the outcome.

A second analogy to *Megillas Esther* will help us explain this abstract concept. Our Sages ruled that the recitation of *Hallel* (verses of praise chanted on joyous holidays) is omitted on Purim, because *Megillas Esther* is read in lieu of reciting *Hallel*.³³ How could reading *Megillas Esther* possibly be tantamount to reciting *Hallel*? Recounting the whole story, and appreciating Hashem's Hand in it, arouses true *simchah*. The story itself retroactively becomes our *Hallel*, our joyous praise to Hashem.

So, too with *Shiras HaYam*; the verses themselves have the power to inspire true *simchah* retroactively. In challenging times, reciting *Shiras HaYam* can be a powerful tool for refocusing our perspective and inspiring us to reach higher levels of *simchah* in the service of Hashem.

A question remains: why do we mention *Shiras HaYam* before the *Shemoneh Esreh*? As we prepare to stand directly before Hashem, we need clarity. Beyond recognizing that Hashem runs the world, we need to remember that He *is* the world. Everything

³³ *Gemara Megillah* 14a.

is a direct manifestation of Him. If we have an accurate perspective, we can achieve a deeper communication with Hashem. We can pray with the proper mindset.

Shiras HaYam is not some magic formula we recite to get close to Hashem. We can't merely imitate the song and simulate the *simchah* of our forefathers, imagining that we have clarity, while keeping a foot in the "land of make-believe." *Shiras HaYam* needs to be a genuine expression of our truthful perspective of the world.

Finding clarity is challenging. Even when we know intellectually what we should believe, it is difficult to internalize it in our hearts and to change our perspective at its roots. The illusions of the natural world are powerful and supported by many cultural influences around us. We live in a very superficial world – in which "seeing is believing." So how can we get past that? How can we overcome these influences and find clarity to see the harmony of Hashem's world, even in difficult circumstances?

Seeing Hashem in Everything

A key *pasuk* describing *Kri'as Yam Suf* reads as follows: "*UVnei Yisrael halchu vayabashah besoch hayam* (and the Children of Israel walked on the dry land in the middle of the sea)." Why does the verse include both details of "on dry land" and "in the middle of sea?" Doesn't one phrase suffice? Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk explains³⁴ that these phrases represent different ideas. "On the dry land" symbolizes this physical world and the natural course of events. "In the middle of the sea" symbolizes a fantastic, openly miraculous event like *Kri'as Yam Suf*. A deeper understanding of

³⁴ Noam Elimelech, *Likutei Shoshanah*, p. 223.

this this *pasuk* is that *Bnei Yisrael* grasped parallel levels of Hashem's greatness in the natural (on dry land) and the supernatural (in the sea); the mundane and the miraculous were equally awesome in their eyes. The Slonimer Rebbe explains³⁵ that many people are aware of Hashem's direct intervention in their lives only when they experience open miracles. But at the time of *Kri'as Yam Suf*, *Bnei Yisrael* saw the Hand of Hashem in everything. Our goal is to reach that level now. Rabbi Elimelech's encouraging words assure us that this awareness was not exclusive to *Bnei Yisrael* at that time, but is attainable by people in every generation.

G-d-consciousness is a mindset we can develop. With a little concentration, we can become aware of Hashem's wonders in the details of everyday life. If we just lift our heads out of the daily routine, we can walk down the street and feel "*roka ha'aretz al hamayim* (He stretches out the earth over the water)."³⁶ The fact that the ground doesn't start shaking beneath our feet is a revelation of Hashem. (Residents of regions prone to earthquakes can relate to this personally!) Each natural event in our lives that we take for granted – waking up, talking, breathing – is a manifestation of Hashem's greatness.

Our Sages tell us that a person's livelihood is as "difficult" as *Kri'as Yam Suf*. Rabbi Shimshon Dovid Pincus draws our attention³⁷ to our daily sustenance. When we open the refrigerator and it is full of food, it is the direct manifestation of Hashem! Our Sages make the same comparison when it comes to the functions of our bodies³⁸ and finding a spouse.³⁹ These seemingly natural

³⁵ *Nesivos Shalom, Shemos*, p. 114.

³⁶ *Birkos HaShachar* (Morning Blessings).

³⁷ *Tiferes Shimshon, Shemos*, p. 143.

³⁸ *Pesachim* 118a.

³⁹ *Bereishis Rabbah* 68:4.

events involve the direct Hand of Hashem, no less than *Kri'as Yam Suf*.

We can live on “dry land,” in the physical world, but still experience life as if Hashem is taking us through the sea. It takes practice to open our eyes and see wonder after wonder, revelation after revelation. The more we consciously try to see the real world, the closer we come to living in the “land of real-believe,” the land of “*az yashir*.” We need to acclimate ourselves to this approach with the small, positive things in life – like having daily sustenance, clothing, and a functioning body.

This practice will prepare us to see Hashem’s Hand even when we experience painful events, internalizing that Hashem is always *HaTov VeHaMetiv*. Rabbi Simon Jacobson explains⁴⁰ in the name of the Lubavitcher Rebbe that we can only relate to the meaning and purpose in bitter hardship before or after we experience it. A person in the moment of suffering is often deaf to the voices of reason.

Rabbi Jacobson alludes to Yosef’s dream, in which he prophesied that during the first seven bountiful years, Egypt needed to prepare for the subsequent seven years of famine. This symbolizes how we must see Hashem’s Hand in the good times (years of plenty) so that we are better trained to see Him when we are suffering (years of famine). This is reaching the level of true *shirah*, the level of *Bnei Yisrael* as expressed by *Shiras HaYam*.

⁴⁰ *Toward A Meaningful Life*, Rabbi Simon Jacobson, p. 128.

Using Inspiration

How else can we strive to reach this level? We glean an important lesson from the second appearance of the word *az* in *Shiras HaYam*. “*Az nivhalu alufei Edom, eili Moav yochaẓeimo ra’ad, namogu kol yoshvei Chena’an* (then the chieftains of Edom became stunned; the powerful ones of Moav were seized with trembling; all the inhabitants of Cana’an melted).”⁴¹ This is the *az* of the other nations. They also experienced a revelation of Hashem during *Kri’as Yam Suf*, but what did they do with it? Rabbi Yisroel Belsky elaborates⁴² on their reaction; they became frozen, numb, and paralyzed. The nations of the world witnessed “*bigdol zero’acha* (the greatness of Your Arm),”⁴³ but instead of singing *shirah*, “*yidmu ka’aven* (they will become silent like a stone).”⁴⁴ The Jewish people had an intense emotional experience and harnessed it to enhance their *avodas Hashem*. The other nations, by contrast, did not channel their intense emotional experience towards G-d.

Of course, it might have been natural for the other nations to react with intense shock, instead of unbounded joy. On the other hand, our Sages teach us that people are capable of channeling any emotional experience, positive or negative, to service of G-d. For example, “one who sees the *sotah* (woman suspected of adultery) in her disgrace should distance himself from wine.”⁴⁵ Seeing the fate of a *sotah* was certainly not a joyful experience. Still the intensity of that shocking experience was supposed to inspire greater *avodas Hashem*.

⁴¹ *Shemos* 15:15.

⁴² *Einei Yisrael, Shemos*, p. 129.

⁴³ *Shemos* 15:16.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Sotah* 2a.

Rabbi Jacobson explains⁴⁶ how grief is an opportunity for introspection and self-evaluation. The Rambam encourages⁴⁷ a mourner, in his time of pain, to reflect on his life's direction. The trauma to the other nations during *Kri'as Yam Suf* should have inspired them – but they fell silent. This silence – this other *אָז* – speaks loudly to us.

We have emotionally intense experiences throughout our lives. Do we let the experience pass and return to life as usual, or do we channel these emotions to bring us closer to Hashem? Powerful moments, both traumatic and uplifting, are often brief glimpses at the bigger picture. Hashem gives us these gifts to guide us. He is our Loving Parent, occasionally giving us a hearty push on the swing in the playground of life. To keep on going, we, as His children, need to pump our legs on our own with determination.

Rabbi Akiva Tatz offers⁴⁸ the *mashal* of a man who is lost in complete darkness. Suddenly, a flash of lightning lights up the sky. He sees the path for only an instant, and then the darkness returns. But the light of that moment re-orientates him. Now he must follow the path on his own. Inspirational experiences give us direction and a vision of how far we can go. Our job is to work hard to get there.

How can we sing *shirab*? How can we live with an awareness of Hashem's constant revelation in every experience? We need to be inspired by the intense moments of life. We need to ask ourselves in those times, not "*How will I get through this experience?*"

⁴⁶ *Toward A Meaningful Life*, p. 121.

⁴⁷ *Rambam, Mishnah Torah, hilchos aveilus* 13:12.

⁴⁸ *Living Inspired*, p. 27-28.

but rather, *“How will this experience go through me? How can it bring me closer to Hashem?”*

Even after the intensity fades, we need to persevere. We can practice seeing Hashem’s Hand in the mundane things we normally take for granted. We are aware through our experiences - both positive and seemingly negative – that all of these life events are manifestations of Hashem’s Will. Through this awareness, we move ever closer to Him. We sing *shirah*.

May we merit seeing the revelation of Hashem in everything. May we burst forth in song with the arrival of the *ge’ulah*.