

## **Dvar Torah – Last Days of Pesach**

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“Kerias Yam Suf,” the wondrous splitting of the Sea of Reeds that allowed Bnei Yisrael to finally proceed to safety, and the subsequent ultimate demise of their Egyptian pursuers in those same waters, is no doubt one of the most glorious moments in early Jewish History. The Midrash Tanchuma identifies ten distinct miracles that were bestowed upon the Jewish people at the Sea, while in the Hagada at the Pesach Seder, we count as many as two-hundred fifty plagues that afflicted the oppressive Egyptians at that same juncture. When we wish to describe a task requiring heroic effort - including Parnasa and Shiddukhim - we liken it to Kerias Yam Suf. The Talmud states that the ordinary maid-servant experienced the Divine Revelation at the Sea in a manner unrivaled even by the prophet Yechezkel, whose own quintessential vision of the Chariot in “Maaseh Merkava” is so mystifying that its study is limited to a select group of individuals. The Gemara in Zevachim, also cited by Rashi in his commentary to Chumash, says that Kerias Yam Suf – along with the defeat of Amalek - was what motivated Yitro to rejoin his family and convert to Judaism. Indeed, another Midrash states that the report of Kerias Yam Suf – or perhaps the sound of the splitting itself – was heard from one end of the world to the other, causing all of its inhabitants to tremble in awe and panic. It is no surprise then that the Talmud should require that one who sees the places of traversal of the Sea is obligated to offer praise and thanksgiving before the Almighty.

Indeed, on the surface, the response of Bnei Yisrael to Kerias Yam Suf was entirely in line with the astonishing events that they had just witnessed. The Gemara in Pesachim states that it was at this time that Hallel, the classical prayer for salvation and celebration, was instituted for posterity, while the Gemara in Berakhos says that even the fetuses, still in their mothers’ wombs, also participated in this cry of joy. While there may perhaps be other origins of Hallel, in any case, the “Shiras Ha-Yam,” the song of Moses and the Jewish people just following this final act of redemption as is clearly recorded in Chumash, is the quintessential song in Tanakh: when we mention “The Shira”, without any qualification, it is assumed that we refer to the “Song of the Sea”, even though there are many other “Shirot” throughout Scripture. It is read not only in its home-context - Parashas Beshalach - when the Shabbos is so named for it as “Shabbos Shira”, but also was selected as the reading for the Seventh Day of Pesach, and in both cases, a special melody is used for the public readings and the introductory verses. It is included throughout the year in the daily morning service as part of the Pesukei Dezimra – even inasmuch as one is otherwise forbidden to interrupt at this point, and in many congregations on days when it is read later from the Torah, the Shira that is part of the prayers is said responsively by the Baal Tefilla and the Tzibbur. The Aliya La-Torah for the Shira is one of the most coveted honors associated with Torah-reading, usually reserved for a synagogue leader or the highest bidder to Tzedaka, and in most synagogues, the congregation rises for this part of the reading. It seems rather clear, that this Shira – “The Shira” – is one of the most feted portions in the entire Torah.

The Talmud Yerushalmi at the beginning of Shekalim, however, takes a strikingly different and openly critical view: Rabbi Yehuda ben Pazi said in the name of Rabbi: Is it possible to read these verses without trepidation? When it came to the Jews raising their voices in praise after their delivery from the Sea, the Torah states “Az yashir Moshe,” implying that it was only after Moshe sang that Bnei Yisrael were inspired to join in. In contrast, when it came to the slanderous reports about Eretz Yisrael brought back by the Spies, the Torah informs us that the *entire* assembly raised their voices and cried. The reaction was immediate and unanimous. No matter how great, when it was finally drawn out, was that Song of the Sea and the honor it would be accorded in subsequent generations, it would suffer forever from a certain stigma due to the delayed and indirect response.

It is appropriate then that Pesach, the anniversary of Kerias Yam Suf, is the holiday when, like no other we are challenged with specific regard to the same areas where, as per the Yerushalmi, Bnei Yisrael perhaps fell short. There is the concern for time whether in baking the matzot or in eating them, the need for complete participation whether in the slaughter of the Korban Pesach or at the Pesach Seder, and, more generally, the initiative and effort that is required by every household to properly prepare for and observe Pesach. In the merit of our efforts, may we be able to say in unison and without delay, the ultimate Shira – the Shira Chadasha.