

Parshat Chukas 5776

Time to sing: The Shirat Habe'er – the song of the well – is four pesukim at the end of parashat shishi. Its message is not obvious and it is easy to overlook its significance.

Tradition holds we have ten elevated songs in Jewish history. Three are in Torah (the other two are Shirat HaYam and Ha'azinu). Six are in Nach and the final song will usher the days of Moshiach. The Baal HaTurim points to the "Yud" (gematria 10) in Az Yashir" to emphasise their significance. What distinguishes these from other songs? They mark key historical moments for Klal Yisrael. They express a harmony in Creation. According to the Zohar, they evidence a moment of union between the higher and lower spheres. In our more limited understanding, they evoke what other cultures call a "eureka moment" when Bnei Yisrael grasp that deeper understanding of how Hashem runs the World. According to Rav Munk, the songs resound in all ages with the desire to reach the ultimate goal of the true harmony of Hashem and Israel.

Shirat HaYam comes almost at the beginning of our Sinai experience. Shirat Habe'er is timed as it draws to a close. Miriam had died. The well which accompanied Bnei Yisrael for forty years had ceased to flow. Moshe Rabbenu had struck the rock and the waters again began to flow. According to Rashi, the Amorites waited in the mountains to ambush Bnei Yisrael. Hashem moved the mountains to crush them. Their remains were seen in the stream that flowed from the well and the people signalled this miraculous victory with a song as they were about to enter the Promised Land.

What did they sing? Examination of selected sections of the song reveals successive levels of meaning. By phrases, the song reads:

1	Az Yashir Yisrael et Hashira hazot	Then Israel sang this song
2	Aliy Be'er enu lah	Rise up o well, sing to it
3	Be'er haforuha soriym	You are the well dug by princes
4	Caruha nedyvei ha'am bimchoikeik bemishanotam	That the nobles of the people excavated by a lawgiver with their staff
5	Umimidbar matana	And from the wilderness a gift
6	Umimatana nachaliyeil	And from a gift to a stream of Hashem
7	Uminachaliyel bamot	And from a stream of Hashem to high places
8	Umibamot hagai asher bisdei Moav	And from high places to the valley in the plains of Moav

9	Rosh hapisga venishkafah al pnei hayshimon	To the peaks that overlook the wasteland
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At a basic level, the well flowed (miraculously) through a desert as a present from Hashem to Bnei Yisrael. Contrary to nature, it flowed up to high places, before flowing down to the plains of Moav. Then it again rose to the peaks. (How wondrous are Hashem's works!) But when we look into the Gemara a new understanding emerges. In Baba Kama (82a) we find "Water is none else than Torah". In Eruvin (54a) we have a detailed interpretation. Rav Masne says (of line 5 above) this is the method to retain one's learning. "Make yourself into a wilderness – where anyone can tread – and achieve humility. The "gift" is the greatest of all gifts – the Torah". Rava amplifies (line 6) translating "nachaliel" as inheritance (rather than nachal – stream). The gift, by virtue of inheritance, becomes a permanent possession. The acquisition (line 7) leads to high places. But (line 8) high places can bring one to arrogance and downfall. Then (line 9) – with teshuva – one can regain one's learning and reach even higher by regaining that lost humility. The song is not just a guide to learning Torah; but a guide to life.

Why didn't Moshe sing? In Shirat Hayam, Moshe Rabbenu sang. Here it was only Bnei Yisrael singing. How come Moshe Rabbenu was silent? The miraculous well produced streams of water to provide for over two million people in a series of desert locations for forty years. It was granted in the merit of Miriam and ceased on her death. Moshe Rabbenu brought it back; but (contrary to Hashem's instructions) struck the rock instead of speaking to it. For this he was refused entry to the Promised Land. So when the outpouring of praise for the well produced the song (according to Rashi) Moshe Rabbenu did not join in. Rabbi Frand suggests an alternative view. It took forty years for Bnei Yisrael to appreciate the miraculous gift of the well. Only finally when it was denied and re-granted, did they express hakoras hatov in song. Too often, we fail to appreciate everyday gifts and take them for granted until they are gone. So finally, after forty years, Bnei Yisrael sang. But Moshe Rabbenu did not as all along he recognised Hashem's gift and saw the merits of his sister. The "eureka moment" for Bnei Yisrael only came forty years later. But from the words of the song (as fully understood) they now gained an insight into the need to appreciate what you have. We are blessed with signposts and commentaries of Chazal. We are told "Here is a Shira – it must be important". Do we delve and learn wherein lies the importance? Or do we wait (hopefully not as much as forty years) before appreciating what we have?

The messages are constantly before us. May we be blessed to give pause, to take notice, and to absorb the depth of the meanings that have so much to teach us.