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Parshat B'Shalach



The Ultimate Song

This week is Shabbat Shira - when we read about the Shira or song that the Jewish people, led by Moshe and Miriam in turn, sang after safely crossing the Yam Suf. What exactly is a Shira? It would seem that Shira is one of the highest ways to use our mouths. The Midrash says that the Jewish people were greatly praised by Hashem for singing the Shira, it was something that had not been done from creation until this point. It sounds like there is a greater significance to the concept of Shira than just a simple song.

There is a custom among some people to say Perek Shira on a daily basis. Perek Shira describes the songs that different parts of the creation sing to Hashem. We may have heard birds sing, but the sun and moon? Scorpions? Lions? In what way do they sing to Hashem?

The deeper commentaries explain that the concept of Shira is to reveal the glory and honor of Hashem within creation. Every day, in the Celestial heavens, bands of angels sing to Hashem. The Gemara says that the instruments the angels use for their song are their six wings. There is deep symbolism here - just like wings lift a bird from the ground, so the whole point of Shira is to elevate a seemingly physical mundane concept and reveal its spirituality, its G-dliness.

Every part of creation *by its very existence* sings a song to Hashem. Just like a magnificent piece of art or an ingenious invention is a testament to the brilliance of its creator, so the beauty, structure and complexity of each and every being demonstrates the greatness and glory of the Creator. As each being is slightly different, has different qualities it will therefore testify about its Creator in different ways. These are the songs that the creations sing in Perek Shira.

However the songs that the physical world and the angels sing are eclipsed by the Shira of humans. Both animals and angels lack free choice. Both are programmed to behave in a certain way, animals in their natural desire for physicality and angels in their spiritual roles. But a human is a fusion of these two worlds. On one hand his body pulls him towards his immediate physical desires while his soul desires long term spiritual accomplishment.

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Prayer Insights

Over the last few weeks we have been investigating 'Modeh Ani' where we thank Hashem for returning our souls to us every morning. When we refer to Hashem in this prayer we call Him מלך חי וקיים - Living and Eternal King.

As this prayer is normally said before we have washed our hands it is not appropriate for us to use Hashem's proper names as we would in other prayers. We therefore use other descriptions of Hashem. Let's look at the three words in greater detail.

King - One of the 6 Constant Mitzvot is to realize that Hashem is One (He is all that really exists and everything else is just an expression of His will) and thereby accept upon oneself the Kingship of Hashem (see Sefer HaChinuch 417). This is learnt from the words Hashem Echad - Hashem is One - in the first verse of the Shema. When we wake up in the morning we do not want to waste a moment before reminding ourselves that Hashem is the King and rules over and creates everything.

Living - Hashem is the source of all life which we want to specifically mention at this point as we thank Him for reviving us.

Eternal - When people make promises, even if they are careful to keep them, they can only do so while they are alive. But as Hashem is Eternal, His promises to us are Eternal too.

Prayer Insights has been written as a zechut for a refuah sheleima for Elisha Ben Ayala, a young boy who is undergoing treatment for leukemia. Please take a moment to say some tehillim on his behalf

Tip Of The Week

Have you ever been driving and someone cuts in front of you. You are slightly stressed and in a rush and this person's inconsiderate and dangerous behavior really riles you. You get angry, start to seethe inside. People like this should be banned from the road! You may even consider this to be a personal affront! You then decide that the most appropriate response would be to speed up so that you can fiercely gesticulate through the window or make a vengeful maneuver! And yet, when it happens again on another day when you are more relaxed, feeling internally calm and happy, you just smile to yourself about how foolish some people are and take it in your stride.

What happened there? It was the same exact situation! What was it that made you respond in a different way? It was purely based on the way you were feeling at the time. We believe that our perception of objects & occurrences around us are factual. But the reality is that it all depends on the emotional state we are in.

After crossing the Yam Suf the Jewish people arrive at a place called Marah. The verse says that they were not able to drink the waters of Marah for they were bitter. The straightforward explanation of the words 'they were bitter' is that it is referring to the waters. However in his book *Living Each Day*, Rabbi Avraham Twerski quotes the Baal Shem Tov who suggests that it is possible to understand that 'they' refers to the Jewish people. The verse would then be read as 'they were not able to drink the waters of Marah because they (the Jewish people) were bitter.'

If we are feeling bitter, we are stressed and worked up, then the same behavior that we would think was cute in our children or appreciate in our spouse on a positive day, will suddenly appear annoying. Even our senses e.g. taste, can be affected by a negative disposition.

When we feel ourselves getting aggravated about something we should try and stop for a moment before we say something that we will regret and consider what is going on inside ourselves that is making us respond in that way.

While animals, without thinking, testify by their very being about their Creator and angels have the Presence of Hashem clear in front of their eyes and have such clarity that they must obey, we have the ability to ignore the spiritual source of everything. We could pretend that the complexity came about by chance, that there is no higher world or higher purpose. When we, who have the opportunity to deny it, choose instead to recognize Hashem in everything, our Shira reaches heights that those who don't have choice can't reach.

In fact, the reality is that what makes Perek Shira itself great is when **people** say it. It is true that the animals are testifying, but if we the thinking beings are not listening, what is the point of such testimony? When we say Perek Shira we choose to confirm that the testimony is true and that completes the song.

But even for humans, there are different levels of Shira. There are some occurrences where it is easier to see Hashem's Hand than others. Can we see Him in the difficult times, in the suffering and the pain? In the Song for Shabbat - Mizmor Shir L'Yom HaShabbat we say in the 'morning' we relate *Your kindness and Your faithfulness at 'night'*. Morning, in the bright daylight, represents the times when it is easier to see Hashem in the world. Night represents the dark times, the times when Hashem appears to be hidden. Even then we should believe that he is faithful to his promise and is standing with us. The Song then continues to discuss how in this world it is often difficult to see Hashem's control, the wicked appear to prosper without retribution. Nevertheless, the Song assures us that Hashem has his plan, everything is carefully calculated and if we search we will be able to see Hashem's glory even when it's not immediately apparent.

In the Shira at the Yam Suf, the Jewish people say *Mi Chamocha BaEilim Hashem - which gods/powers are comparable to You?* However the Gemara suggests it can be read *Mi Chamocha Bailmim Hashem - Who is comparable to You among those who are silent?* This refers to the times when the Jewish people are in exile and both they and Hashem are being treated with disrespect and Hashem chooses to be quiet. This is an interesting line to put in a song of praise! But this is the ultimate song - a song that can look back and say, I see now that even when we were in pain, when I called out to You but you remained silent, even then You were there with me, even then, in my darkest hour, I can see your presence.

When the Midrash says that this was the first time that someone had sung a Shira it refers to this ultimate Shira, where they were able to reveal Hashem not just now, having witnessed the amazing miracle of the splitting of the sea, but also looking back and realizing that He was there and had a plan throughout the 210 years of darkness too.

Adapted from Ohr Gedalia

לעֵינֵינוּ חַמּוּחָה בַּת שְׁלֵמָה

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