

Dvar Torah – Parasha Beshalach
January 15, 2021 – Women’s League Shabbat
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Today’s Parasha, Beshalach, opens with Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt after the ten plagues have devastated the Egyptian people and their land. The final and most horrendous plague, the death of the first-born sons, has left Egyptian parents in grief and seeking revenge. The Israelites must therefore escape quickly.

Despite Moses’ reassurance to the Israelites that they would be safe and ultimately free, the thundering hooves, the clattering chariots and the war cries of the pursuing Egyptians lead the people to cry out, “Were there not enough graves in Egypt that you have brought us to this wilderness to perish?” When God parts the Sea, the people find faith to move forward between the two towering walls of water. The passageway between the walls of the sea was like a birth canal through which the Israelites were born into freedom. One by one, each of our ancestors finds the strength to put one foot forward, and then another to walk away from slavery.

When they reach dry land, they turn around and witness a terrible sight – the sea walls collapsing, submerging their pursuers, their chariots, and their horses. This was God’s justice – Egyptians drowned Israelite babies, so now the Egyptians are drowned; Israelites worked in muddy mortar, so now Egyptians sank in the mud.

Grateful that they had survived the crossing, our ancestors praised “the work of God’s hand, and were in awe of the Holy One and Moses, God’s servant.” They were inspired to sing what we call Shirat haYam, or Song of the Sea. It is for this reason that this Shabbat is called Shabbat Shira, named for the song at the heart of this portion. The song is well known, particularly to those who attend daily morning minyan, for it is included in its entirety in the morning service. Its words describe God’s power by saying that God made the wind blow, enabling the sea to cover the Egyptians who “sank like lead in the majestic waters.” The Song praises

God by saying, “Who is like You, Holy One among the celestials; Who is like You, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, working wonders!”

The rabbis have spent years discussing whether these 22 verses are one song or two, and whether Shirat haYam should be attributed to Moses or to Miriam, who along with both of her brothers, led the people out of Egypt. Does Moses begin the song, and then Miriam adds her voice? When do the people sing? Do they sing together in one voice, or separately? As you listen to the parasha today, focus on the music and spirit of the words. Maybe the song began when Miriam lifted her lilting voice above the crowds. Then the other women joined in, and finally, the men picked up the chant. The songs are an essential part of Israel’s healing and recovery, moving from the death-like culture and misery in Egypt to molding and supporting a people who celebrate life. This very well may have been the first time in history that the Israelites sang a song in praise of God.

Many modern scholars conclude that the song was created and performed by women. Beginning in the mid - twentieth century, a considerable body of literary and historical evidence has been gathered to suggest that the Song should be attributed to Miriam. The story of liberation from Egypt began with women and water when Moses began his life having been hidden by Miriam at the edge of the Nile, and now the women and water frame the story of Israel’s beginnings. In fact, when Miriam sings with her timbrel, she is given the title of prophetess.

During this time of COVID, when we have been unable to sing God’s praises together as a community of women with a singular voice, we have not lost sight of the fact that the words of Shirat haYam continually resonate with us in ways that we could never have imagined. As we slowly return to our Congregations and our Sisterhoods, these powerful words remind us to look back, and then, like the Israelites, to move forward with resolve, toward new lands, new lives, and new freedoms.

Shabbat Shalom!