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The Ten Songs of Israel:  
The Defining Sounds of a People's Redemption,  
as Understood by the Midrash

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## Abstract

According to the Midrash, all of Jewish time contains within it ten defining songs, or at least can be distilled into ten defining songs of redemption. The first nine are illustrated in the texts of the Tanakh, with varying degrees of description, while the tenth song has yet to be sung and will be heard in the Messianic era. In this thesis, I focus on the version of the Midrash found in Mekhilta D'Rabbi Yishmael Mesechta D'Shirata - Exodus 15:1; however, variations of this text can also be found in Tanchuma B'Shallach 10, Midrash Zuta Shir Hashirim 1:1, and Ba'al Ha Turim on Exodus 15:1.

This text invites us to think about the grand arc of Jewish time, the narrative of our people, God's redemptive powers, the redemptive experiences of the people of Israel, the musical stories we tell, and how we tell them. The ten songs listed by the Rabbis can be seen as both definitive and also as suggestions for the stories that define our people, and our redemption, over time. In this thesis, I study the relationship between each of these songs, music, Jewish time, redemption, and ultimately Jewish eschatology. I focus in on each of these songs, provide context, and offer interpretations of each of these texts. I also highlight the focus on redemption that is present in each of these texts, and on music's role in our tradition and why music in particular is the chosen modality for praising God. Chapter Three centers around two topics in particular: the gender dynamics present in the text, and the use of the word "az" (thus), as it pertains to the phrase "az yashir" (thus sang) – a phrase that is utilized in the various songs in the midrash. In this thesis, I explore the ways in which music has been used to illustrate the evolution and arc of Jewish time, and, eventually, music's role in visions of the coming of the Messiah. Many people – rabbis, cantors, students, lay-people, friends, professors, and more – have approached me sharing that they have never heard of the Midrash of the Ten Songs of Israel. In my recital on March 22, 2023 I had the opportunity to sing settings of these ten songs, and also pieces inspired by these ten songs. I believe each of these settings contributed to illustrating the arc of time and redemption that the Rabbis sought to illustrate. Through this program I was able to not only teach about this midrash, but to also demonstrate the esteemed place that music holds in grand narratives of Jewish time and in our tradition.

The Thesis will be presented as follows:

- Introduction
- Chapter 1: Translation of the Midrash
- Chapter 2: The Ten Songs of Israel
- Chapter 3: Gender and "Az"
- Conclusion

- Bibliography

I will shine a spotlight on several intriguing themes that emerge from the midrash, and seek to explain them using commentaries from a range of Jewish thinkers. It is my hope that ultimately this study serves as a jumping off point and will inspire readers to further explore this midrash, the related parallel midrashim, and other texts connected to the broader topics and themes of the midrash. What I have contributed only begins to scratch the surface of the study that is possible with these texts. I look forward to the continued unfolding of this rich material.

*This thesis is dedicated to my great-grandparents, Emma and Solomon Hirsch z”l, who committed themselves to preserving Judaism and living Jewishly, even when it was difficult in rural Germany, and for the sacrifice they wittingly and unwittingly made to protect their children, and future generations yet to be.*



אלו פינו מלא שירה כים, ולשוננו רנה כהמון גליו, ושפתותינו שובח כמרחבי רקיע

ועינינו מאירות כשמש וככרת, וידינו פרושות כנשרי שמים

ורגלינו קלות כאילות אין אנהנו מספיקים להודות לך

*"And were our mouths oceans of song, our tongues alive with exultation like waves, our lips full of praises like heaven's dome, our eyes lit up like sun and moon, our hands*

*spread out like eagle's wings, our feet as swift as a gazelle - we would never have sufficient praise for you, Abundant One." – Psukei D'Zimrah Liturgy*

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## Introduction

According to the Midrash, there are ten preeminent songs in the history of the Jewish people, each which represent decisive stages of Jewish history in which the people of Israel experience a redemption. These moments of redemption are like a glimpse into the future, as the “Ten Songs of Israel” build toward a messianic vision in which the final song sparks the ultimate moment of redemption. This final song will not be followed by persecution or injustice, nor will it have a period of “gestation [ie. the messianic era and the redemption will be the final period of human history.]” (Mekhilta D’Rabbi Yishmael Mesechta D’Shirata - Exodus 15) Rather, it will usher in ultimate freedom, harmony, and unity.

In this thesis, I will translate the midrash of the Ten Songs of Israel from Hebrew to English, and contextualize and reflect on each of the songs in their narrative context. In addition, I will shine a spotlight on several intriguing themes that emerge from the midrash, and seek to explain them using commentaries from a range of Jewish thinkers. Finally, I will close by proposing several topics that emerge from the midrash that are important avenues for progressive Jewish thinkers to consider as we continue the project of developing a progressive theology that is rooted in our textual tradition.

### *The Ten Songs Midrash*

The “Ten Songs of Israel” midrash can be found in several forms, with slight variations: Mekhilta D’Rabbi Yishmael Mesechta D’Shirata - Exodus 15.1, Tanchuma B’Shallach 10, Midrash Zuta Shir Hashirim 1:1, and Ba’al Ha Turim on Exodus 15:1. In

this thesis, I have primarily focused on Mekhilta D'Rabbi Yishmael Mesechta D'Shirata - Exodus 15.1. Through this midrash the Rabbis establish a list of the "Ten Songs of Israel," which could also be called Ten Songs of Redemption, that are mentioned in the Torah. Each of these ten songs provide examples of occasions in which our people's experience of redemption found its expression through song. They detail stories that express a wide range of emotions and experiences, from joy and triumph to sorrow and lament, amongst some of those emotions. By and large, the selection consists of songs of praise following God saving them from a dangerous situation. In a sense, through this midrash, the Rabbis suggest that song may be the most fitting modality for all forms of expression toward God—songs of praise and gratitude.

### *The Narrative Function and Power of Song*

Rabbi David Silber (n.d.) helps us to understand that the songs serve a narrative function, as they act as moments of transition throughout the Biblical narrative. Most of the songs are songs of praise offered by the Jewish people after surviving a dangerous encounter, often a military victory. These songs, therefore, act as important signposts as the Jewish people proceed through their development as a nation. He notes that among the important questions that we ought to be asking when studying Chumash is why a particular text is placed where it is. Our sages taught that nothing in the Torah is written or placed arbitrarily. Everything, even the smallest detail, has bearing on the meaning of the text and its interpretation. These details, including specificity of the narrative and the placement of certain songs, help to convey a specific message and storyline. Rabbi Silber

(n.d.) suggests that these songs are significant to the text as a whole as they denote turning points in the narrative arc of the Torah.

In this midrash, the rabbis write that Moshiach will be ushered in through the “singing of a new song.” Through the modality of music, we possess the ability to convey something far greater than we are able with mere words. Music enables us to come close to experiencing the ineffable as somewhat imaginable. The founder of Chabad, Rabbi Schneur Zalman (1745 – 1812, 18 Elul 5505 – 24 Tevet 5573), also known as the Alter Rebbe, purportedly said: “There are gates in heaven that cannot be opened except by melody and song.”<sup>1</sup> This example highlights the inextricable connection between the Jewish people and music. It is perhaps dramatic, but what would the Jewish people be without music and the sounds of the heavenly spheres? The unique gift of music is that within it is contained multitudes. The value of these vibrations and sounds far exceeds each note itself. So as to say, music is layered and functions as more than just a pretty sound. In many ways, the transcendent quality of music is something we experience but struggle to articulate. Music is not only a means of praise, prayer, and practice, but it is also a storyteller and a vessel that holds our storied past, our evolving present, and our vibrant future.

### *Messianism and Progressive Judaism*

The messianic vision of the midrash offers us an opportunity to consider what the concept of the Messiah or a messianic era, might mean to progressive Jews. My study invites us to think of the Messiah and messianic age in the present day and to think about

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<sup>1</sup> Attributed to the Alter Rebbe, in article by Shlomo Katz (Katz 2015)

what a contemporary theology of messianism in progressive Judaism could be. For progressive Jews, the idea of Moshiach has long been a challenging concept. We see one adaptation of the redemptive idea in the seminal document, the Pittsburgh Platform: “The 1885 Pittsburgh Platform [stating the principles of Reform Judaism] rejected the traditional Jewish hope for an heir of King David to arise when the world was ready to acknowledge that heir as the one anointed (the original meaning of *mashiach*, anglicized into “Messiah”). In the *Avot*, the first [blessing] of the Amidah [a central prayer in Jewish liturgy], Reformers changed the prayerbook’s hope for a *go-el*, a redeemer, to *geulah*, redemption...” (CCAR, 1999)

I do not endeavor to have the final word on this matter, but I do hope to contribute to this discourse and reflect upon the value of such an aspiration and the importance of orientation toward a brighter, more unified, time. My study of this midrash will not be conclusive, yet I hope it encourages others, especially cantors, rabbis, and other Jewish leaders, to seriously contemplate these ideas and keep them at the forefront of our thinking.

Toward this end, I find it helpful to think through a lens provided by Christian theologian Walter Brueggemann (1985), who provides a useful taxonomy of Psalms, offering the categories of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. Brueggemann’s categorization can be explained as follows: psalms (or songs in general) of **orientation** are those sung when all makes sense in life and we are filled with praise and gratitude. Psalms of **disorientation** are those that serve as cries for help when we have sunken into the pit of despair, they are pleas for God’s assistance. Finally, psalm of **reorientation**

are those that express thanks after a traumatic or transformative experience in which there is a newfound sense of awareness and gratitude in regard to God and our lives as a whole.

I find it helpful to apply this paradigm to songs in the Tanakh, which helps us to conceptualize the tenth song which has yet to be written as an ultimate song of reorientation, as it is the summation of these individual parts. Consequently, we will require a new melody to accompany us into this new era, a new melody to support and uplift our yearning, and a sound to encapsulate the wonder of creation. This melody will unleash the voice that expresses the sound of Creation's ultimate aspiration – redemption. At this moment, we have no idea as to what this song might be, or what it might sound like, but perhaps we will know it in our souls when we hear creation's yearning echoing throughout the earth.



## 1. Translation of the Midrash

*Mekhilta Mesechta D'Shirah 1- Exodus 15.1*

“Then sang Moshe,” there is a “then” (*az*) referring to the past and a “then” (*az*) referring to what is to come in the future.

“Then men began to invoke the Eternal by name.” (Gen 4: 26) “Then she said: ‘A bridegroom of blood’ (Ex. 4:26) “Then sang Moshe,” “then sang Joshua” (Joshua 10:12); “Then David said” (I Chronicles 15:2) “Then spoke Solomon” (I Kings 8:12) — these refer to the past. There are instances when “then” refers to what is to come in the future: “Then you shall be radiant.” (Isaiah 60:5); “Then shall the light break forth as in the morning.” (Isaiah 58:8); “Then shall the lame man leap as a hart” (Isaiah 35: 6) “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened” (Isaiah 35:5) “Then shall the virgin rejoice in the dance” (Jer. 31.12); “Then will our mouth be filled with laughter... then they will say among the nations; the Eternal has done great things with these” (Psalm 126.2) — These refer to what is to come in the future. The Rabbi taught: it is not written here “then Moshe sang” (*shar*), but rather, “then Moshe will sing” (*yashir*). Thus we can derive [literally: come to learn] the resurrection of the dead from the Torah.

"Moshe sang to [against] Israel, and Israel replied to Moshe, [and] at the time that they were singing the song together."

*D'var acher*, another interpretation: it was told Moshe sang a song on behalf of all of Israel [in front of them, to them]. <sup>2</sup>

“*Et hashira hazot*” “This song” but is it only one song? Are there not ten songs? The **first** was in Egypt — as it is said: “You shall have song in the night when a feast is hallowed” (Isaiah 30:29). The **second** was the Song of the Sea: “*Az yashir Moshe*” (Beshalach). As it is said: “Then sang Moshe.” The **third** [song] was said at the well [Miriam’s song], as it is said: “*Az yashir Yisrael*” (Numbers 21:17).<sup>3</sup> The **fourth** song, which Moshe recited, “as it is said: and it was Moshe who wrote the words of this final song” (Ha’azinu). And Moshe spoke the words of this song into the ears of the entire Assembly of Israel until they were finished” (Deuteronomy 31. 24-30).

The **fifth** song was said by Joshua: as it is said “*az yedaber Yehoshua*,” “Then Joshua spoke to the Lord [on the day when the Lord delivered up the Amorites before the children of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, ‘Sun, stand still upon Gibeon, and Moon in the valley of Ajalon’]” (Joshua 10:12).

The **sixth** [song] was recited by Devorah and Barak, the son of Avinoam. As it is said: “And Devorah and Barak son of Avinoam sang on that day [when God delivered Sisera and his camp into the hands of Israel]” (Judges 5:1).

The **seventh** [song] that David recited, “and David said to God, these words of song” (Samuel II 22:1).

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<sup>2</sup> Here, Moshe is portrayed as shaliach tzibbur, prayer leader. It seems it is saying that Moshe sang on behalf of everyone. Klal Yisrael was not actually singing as well but it was as if they were because Moshe was representing them.

<sup>3</sup> Rashi on Numbers 21:18 – a gift of water to them from God, the place was named Mattanah, *gift*

The **eighth** that Shlomo said [is]: “*Mizmor shir chanukat habayit l’David*” “A Psalm, Song of The Dedication of The House [the temple] of David” (Psalm 30:1). David built it [the Temple]? Did not Shlomo build it [the Temple]? And it is taught, “So Shlomo built the Temple and finished it” (I Kings 6:14). But scripture teaches [that even though he did not build it] it is the song of the dedication of David’s temple. Rather, because David gave his soul (his entire being) for the building of it, [and so] it was called by his name. And thus it says: “Remember unto David all his affliction: how he swore unto the Eternal, and vowed unto the Mighty One of Jacob: ‘surely I will not come into the tent of my house until I find a place for the Eternal...’ And so, we heard of it as being in Efrat...” (Psalm 132: 1-6). And thus it says: “now see to your own house, David” (I Kings 12: 16).

Therefore because David gave his life [and was devoted with his whole soul] It is called by his name. And so you will find if a man devotes himself with his entire being, to anything, it is named after him. There were three matters to which Moshe devoted his entire being and they are known by his name. He devoted himself with his entire being to the Torah and it is named after him. For it is said: “Remember unto you the law of Moshe, my servant” (Malachi 3:22). But is it not the law of God, as it is said: “The law of the Lord is perfect restoring the soul” (Psalm 19:8). So, what does it mean when saying “The law of Moshe, My servant?” Because Moshe devoted his entire being, his entire soul, thus it is named after him. But where do we find that he devoted himself with his entire being to the Torah? It is said: “And he was there with the Eternal” (Exodus 34: 28). And it also says: “then I remained on the mount for forty days and forty nights”

(Deuteronomy 9:9). Therefore, since he devoted himself with his entire being to the Torah, it is named after him.

He devoted his entire soul to Israel and they were called according to this name [his]. For it says: “get yourself down, for thy people... have dealt corruptly” (Exodus 32:7). But were they not God’s people, as it is said: “Yet they are Your people and Your inheritance” (Deuteronomy 9:29)? And it also says: “In that men said of them: ‘these are the people of the Lord. and from His land they have emerged’” (Ezekiel 36:20). What then does it mean by saying: “Go, get yourself down... for thy people have dealt corruptly?” (Exodus 32:7) Simply, that since he devoted his entire being to Israel, they were called his people.” But where do we find that he devoted himself with his whole soul to Israel? It is said: “And it came to pass in those days when Moshe had grown up, that he went out unto his brothers [his people] and looked on their burdens” (Exodus 2:11), and it is written, “And he looked this way and that way...” (Exodus 2:12). Therefore, because he devoted himself with his whole soul to Israel, they were called his. He devoted himself with his whole soul to justice and thus judges were called his. For it is said “Judges and officers shall you make within all your gates” (Deut 16:18). But is Justice not God’s: as it is said: “For the judgement is God’s” (Deut 1:17). What does it mean, then, by saying “Shall you make yourself?” Merely, that since Moshe devoted himself with his entire being to justice, the Judges are called his. But where do we find that it says he devoted his entire being to justice? It is said: “and he went out the second day,” etc. And it says: “And he said: ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?’” And it is written: “And the shepherds came and drove them away” (Ex. 2:13-17). Now, he had to flee just because he was acting as a judge, and yet he turns again to acting like a judge – “He executed the

righteousness of the Eternal and His judgements with Israel” (Deut. 33:21). Thus, because he devoted himself to justice with his entire being, the judges were called his.

The **ninth** song was recited by Yehoshaphat, as it is said: “And when he had taken counsel with the people, he appointed those who should sing unto the Eternal, and praise in the beauty of holiness, as they went out before the army and say: “give thanks to the Eternal, for His mercy will endure forever” ( II Chronicles 20:21).

And what has changed here? Why is this different from all the other gratitudes in the Torah? Because in all other prayers of thanksgiving in the Torah it is said “*Hodu l’Adonai ki tov ki l’olam chasdo*,” “Blessed is the Eternal for the Eternal is good, his mercy will endure forever.” and in this one, it doesn’t say “ki tov”—why?

Rather it is as if there is no joy before Him in the heavens! It’s as if there is no rejoicing over the death of the wicked. If upon the death of the wicked, there was no joy before him in heaven, [then] all the more so over the *tzadikim*, the righteous ones. Of course, God is not happy when good people die since one *tzadik* is measured like the whole world. As it is said: “the righteous man is a foundation of the world itself [if the righteous die it’s as if the whole world dies]” (Proverbs 10:25)<sup>4</sup>

The **tenth** song will be recited in the future to come: As it is said, “Sing unto the Eternal a new song, and God’s praise from the ends of the earth” (Isaiah 42:10). And it also says: “Sing unto the Eternal a new song, and his praise in the assembly of the righteous” (Psalm 149:1). They’re called in [designated as] feminine language, because the woman gives birth, thus the redemptions that have passed each had been followed by subjugations. But the Redemption that is to come will not be followed by any

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<sup>4</sup> “Thus everything a man gives his life for is called by his name”

subjugation. This is the reason it is read in the masculine form. For it is said: “Ask you now and see whether a man will travail with child. Why then do I see every man with his hands on his loins, like a woman in labor? Why have all faces turned pale?” (Jeremiah 30:6). Just as a male does not give birth, so too the future redemption will not have a period of gestation [ie. the messianic era and the redemption will be the final period of human history]. As it is said: “Oh Israel, you are saved by the Lord with an everlasting salvation” (Isaiah 45:17).

## 2. The 10 Songs of Israel<sup>5</sup>

Each of these 10 songs provide examples of occasions in which our people's experience of redemption found its expression through song. In a sense, the midrash suggests that song is the most fitting modality for praise and gratitude.

*Song 1: The first was sung in Egypt – Isaiah 30:29*

הַשִּׁיר יִהְיֶה לָכֶם כְּלֵיל הַתְּקֵדָה שִׁתְּגַן וְשִׁמְתָה לְכָב כַּהוֹלֵךְ בְּחֹלֶיךָ לְבוֹא בְּהֶרֶה' אֶל־צוּר יִשְׂרָאֵל:

“This song shall be to you as the night of the sanctification of the festival, and the joy of heart like one who goes with a flute to come upon the mountain of the Lord, to the Rock of Israel.”<sup>6</sup>

In this first song, Isaiah tells the people Israel, speaking on behalf of God, that they shall have a song they will sing upon the ruin of the Assyrian army. This will be just like the song the Israelites sang when Pharaoh and his army were drowned in the Red Sea during the story of the Exodus. In Rashi's commentary on this verse, he explains that this song shall come to the people of Israel on the eve of Pesach and with this song will come joy. The Israelites recited songs in praise of the pascal lamb sacrifice in Egypt, which Rashi derives from Midrash Tehillim 1:20 — God wants to secure the faith and trust of the

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<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, short songs will be presented in their entirety, whereas long songs will include a citation of the first verse, and then an indication regarding where one can look in the Tanakh for the full quotation.

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah is here understood to be alluding to a song that was sung on the eve of the very first Passover; cf. b. Pesachim 95b and Ber Rabba 6:2 (Kugel 1982, 329)

Israelites and in order to do so, God reminds the Israelites of the Exodus and that it was God who redeemed them and delivered them out of Egypt. God uses these past experiences as proof of God's redemptive powers.

This first "song" underscores the idea that the God of Israel is a God of action, a God who will bring redemption for those who believe and follow the God of Israel. Yet, this text also illuminates the fierce rage that can overcome God. In this excerpt, Isaiah reassures the people that God will take care of them and provide for them. They will not experience a wrath-filled, vengeful God. Rather, their crops will grow, their fields will be verdant and lush, their animals plump, and the ground fertile. The land shall be overflowing with water and abundance. They shall merit lives of abundance and plenty. Their enemies, however, will suffer a much grimmer fate. The "hallowed feast" mentioned in Isaiah 30:29 refers to the three festivals and the temple rites and rituals that accompany said festivals. These festivals represent a pinnacle of praise, rejoicing, and glory, thus this creates a compelling visual for the people of Israel to entertain. The text also juxtaposes those who turn to "the rock of Israel on the Mountain of God" – God exalted and reigning in the heavens – versus those who choose to turn to man "Those who go down to Egypt for help and rely upon horses!" In Isaiah 31:1 the text continues "They have put their trust in abundance of chariots, In vast numbers of riders, And they have not turned to the Holy One of Israel, They have not sought the LORD" (Berlin et al. 2004).

Furthering the association of music and joy, the pasuk also refers to the music of a flute. Rashi explains, based on Mishnah Bikkurim 3:4, that the verse in Isaiah is stating



that the Jewish people will rejoice upon the downfall of Sancherev, like the joy of those who bring the "first fruits," who come upon the mountain of God.

Finally, this text contains one of the origins of God's nickname "*Tzur Yisrael*" Rock of Israel. Typically, in the Jewish tradition, the word 'rock' denotes strength, stability, and dependability- all of which are characteristics attributed to God.

We also see God as "*Tzur Yisrael*" in Deuteronomy (32:4), where God is described as follows: "a rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice."

This instance of using "*Tzur Yisrael*" appears in Isaiah; however, the concept of God as *Tzur Yisrael* is often associated with the story of Moses and the children of Israel wandering in the wilderness. In the Exodus story, God is described as a rock that provided water for the thirsty Israelites, highlighting God's protective role as the source of sustenance for God's people. Additionally, the rock is symbolic of God's eternal presence and strength. Furthermore, God is often invoked as *Tzur Yisrael* to emphasize the idea of God's unwavering support and protection for the people of Israel.

*Song 2: The Song of the Sea/“Az yashir Moshe” (Beshalach, Exodus 15)*

אֲזַיִשִּׁיר־מֹשֶׁה וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לַה' וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֵאמֹר אֲשִׁירָה לַה' כִּי־גָאֹה גָאֹה סוּס וָרֶכֶב  
רָמָה בָּיָם

“Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to ה'. They said: I will sing to ה', for He has triumphed gloriously; Horse and driver He has hurled into the sea.”

*Shirat Hayam*, the Song of the Sea, records a moment in time when the Israelites had full faith in God and trust in Moshe, their leader. *Shirat Hayam* serves as a transitional text. It marks the transformative moment when the Israelites exit slavery and

emerge from the sea, reborn, a free people. Yet this free people still continues to endure the arduous journey through the desert toward the promised land. Interestingly, “*Shirat Hayam*” and “*Shirat Ha Be’er*” (the Song of the Well, which will follow as the Third Song of Israel) each begin identically with “*az yashir*” (“Thus sang...”). In a later chapter we will later explore the importance of this word “*az*” and its function throughout this Midrash. Though these *shirots* have the same beginning, they do not continue similarly at all. *Shirat Hayam* centers around Moshe and God, whereas *Shirat Ha Be’er*, a remarkably short poem, speaks of the well that quenched the Israelites thirst during their sojourn through the torrid Sinai desert. *Shirat Hayam*, The Song of the Sea, is found in Exodus chapter 15, Parashat Beshalach. Traditionally, *Shirat Hayam* is included in the daily *shacharit* liturgy in the *p’sukei d’zimra*, verses of song, section. When chanting *Shirat Hayam* each year on *Shabbat Shira*, and also on *Pesach*, it is traditional for the *kahal* to rise and chant in special melodies which are used to bring the text to life.

These melodies highlight the joyous, redemptive quality of this epic moment in the story of Jewish people.<sup>7</sup> The text appears in the Torah in a unique form. As Dr.

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אָמַר רַבִּי חֲנִינָא בַּר פֶּאֶרְשֵׁי דְרַבִּי שֵׁילָא אִישׁ כָּפַר תְּמַרְתָּא כָּל הַשִּׁירֹת כּוֹלֵן נִקְתְּבוֹת אָרִיִּם עַל גָּבִי לְבִינָה וְלְבִינָה עַל גָּבִי אָרִיִּם

“**Rabbi Hanina bar Pappa said that Rabbi Sheila, a man of the village of Timarta, interpreted a verse homiletically: All of the songs in the Bible are written in the form of a half brick arranged upon a whole brick and a whole brick arranged upon a half brick**, i.e., each line of the song is divided into a stitch of text, referred to as a half brick, which is separated by a blank space, referred to as a whole brick, from the concluding stitch of that line of text.

חֲזוּז מְשִׁירָה זֶה וּמִלְכֵי כְנָעַן שְׁאָרִיִּם עַל גָּבִי אָרִיִּם וְלְבִינָה עַל גָּבִי לְבִינָה מֵאֵי טַעְמָא שְׁלֵא תְּהֵא תְּקוּמָה לְמַפְלֶתָן  
The next line of the song inverts the sequence. **This is the principle for all songs in the Bible except for this song**, referring to the list of Haman’s sons, **and the song listing the kings of Canaan** who were defeated by Joshua. These two songs are written in the form of **a half brick arranged upon a half brick and a whole brick arranged upon a whole brick**, i.e., one stitch of text over another, and one blank space over another. **What is the reason** that these two songs are written in this anomalous fashion? **So that they should never rise from their downfall.** Just as a wall that is built in this manner will not stand, so too, these individuals should have no resurgence.”

Gordon Dale writes, “Jewish scribes write five of these songs in a form that deviates from the standard written format of the sacred text, emphasizing the structure of the song’s form and setting aside these passages as special. Some suggest that there is a metatextual component to the patterns of these songs, as the formatting indicates whether those in the Biblical narrative have successfully navigated the situation that they have been Divinely tasked with overcoming” [Leibtag n.d.] (Dale 2023). This particular visual and poetic structure resembles the parting of the sea. The evocative form, like the wavy waters of the sea, serves a transportive purpose; perhaps the break from the normative form facilitates a sense of distinction and freedom for the reader. The structure says “ah yes, this is different, I should react differently to this.” There is no room for the reader to doubt that this is a song of praise and great import in the story of the Jewish people.

*Shirat Hayam* is not only a rejoicing in the sweetness of liberation, but also a promise for tomorrow and future generations to come. American poet George Oppen captures this element of intergenerational transmission in his poem “Exodus,” which draws on the Song of the Sea in its visual layout.

## **Exodus**

BY GEORGE OPPEN

Miracle of the children                      the brilliant  
Children                      the word  
Liquid as woodlands                      Children?

When she was a child I read Exodus  
To my daughter                      'The children of Israel. . .'

Pillar of fire  
Pillar of cloud

We stared at the end  
Into each other's eyes                      Where  
She said hushed

Were the adults                      We dreamed to each other  
Miracle of the children  
The brilliant children                      Miracle

Of their brilliance                      Miracle  
of

The aforementioned poem interestingly mimics this form found in the Torah, alongside referencing the Exodus explicitly. Oppen's writing is simultaneously sparse and vague, while also possessing a certain exactitude. Aside from the title and theme of the Exodus, he seemingly attempts to evoke a similar emotional quality to *Shirat Hayam* as well, and quotes imagery found in Torah that relates to this budding covenant and the journey of the Israelites. He writes "Pillar of fire/ Pillar of cloud" calling in the drama of the scene especially as placed in contrast to this visual of the children. Oppen focuses on

this phrase of the “Children of Israel” and in doing so, alludes to the fearlessness of children and their willingness to move forth into the unknown with little idea of what might wait in the great beyond. In many ways, the Israelites were indeed like children as they crossed the sea, singing *Shirat HaYam* upon their safe arrival to the other side, while their enemies were drowned. In that liminal moment, the People Israel journeyed from a space of simultaneous imprisonment and certainty to one of simultaneous freedom and uncertainty. Perhaps the visual form of *Shirat Hayam* in the Torah, and that same structure as borrowed by Oppen, also helps to convey a sense of disorientation and wandering.

Additionally, in the moment of the Exodus, the people of Israel must make a pivot from reliance on God and Moshe to reliance upon themselves; perhaps not entirely, but in some way they must become more autonomous. It is taught that: “while the first night of Passover commemorates the redemption from exile in Egypt, the final day celebrates the future Redemption, which God will bring about through *Moshiach*. The connection between the first and the last redemption is also gleaned from the verse: ‘As in the days when you left Egypt, I shall show you wonders [during the final Redemption]’ (Menachem Mendel Schneerson, 1981). Physically leaving Egypt, “Mitzrayim – the narrow place,” the people of Israel were able to attain the status of being a “free people.” However, true freedom expands far beyond this literal freedom from slavery. The real work, which we are still engaged in, is digging into one’s full self and one’s heart, and the process of deep reflection.

Not only are we commanded to see ourselves as if we were slaves in Egypt, but we must remember that in ways we are indeed still enslaved as well. According to this

logic, we will only truly be free upon the arrival of Moshiach. Through this song of praise and redemption, we experience redemption not only as an experience for our ancestors but also as an ongoing and evolving process that continues to this day. Additionally, the miraculous parting of the Red Sea in Parashat Beshalach, in the book of Exodus, is replete with creation imagery. It mimics the creation story as seen in Parashat B'reishit in the book of Genesis.

In B'reishit we read:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יִקְוּ הַמַּיִם מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם אֶל־מָקוֹם אֶחָד וַתֵּרָאָה הַיַּבָּשָׁה וַיִּהְיֶה־כֵן

God said, "Let the water below the sky be gathered into one area, that the dry land may appear." And it was so. (Genesis 1:9)

And we read the following in Beshalach:

מִחֲנֶה מִצְרַיִם וּבֵין מִחֲנֶה יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיְהִי הָעָנָן וְהַחֹשֶׁךְ וַיֵּאָר אֶת־הַלַּיְלָה וְלֹא־קָרַב יָם וּיַבָּא בֵּין

אֶל־יָם כָּל־הַלַּיְלָה: וַיֵּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הַיָּם וַיּוֹלֶךְ יָקוֹק אֶת־הַיָּם בְּרוּיִם קָדִים עֲזָה כָּל־הַלַּיְלָה וַיִּגָּשׁ

אֶת־הַיָּם לְחֶרֶב וַיִּבָּקְעוּ הַמַּיִם

And it came between the army of the Egyptians and the army of Israel. Thus there was the cloud with the darkness, and it cast a spell upon the night, so that the one could not come near the other all through the night. (21) Then Moses held out his arm over the sea and the LORD drove back the sea with a strong east wind all that night, and turned the sea into dry ground. The waters were split. (Exodus 14: 20-21)

In the first story of creation, God's voice commanding the parting of the seas, led to more creation and life. In Beshalach, where we see this creation-like imagery, we see

an example of both creation and destruction. We see the birth of a new and free people of Israel, yet we also see death through the destruction of Pharaoh's army perishing in the sea. Through this imagery we might ponder the creative and destructive powers of the Divine. Perhaps this recurring creation imagery throughout the Torah serves as a reminder that the act of creation is never fully finished; rather, it operates in a cyclical state of constant unfolding.

Similarly, Rabbi David Silverberg suggests that the Song of the Sea can be understood as a model for how to express thanks to God. Through doing so in such passionate language, one can develop a positive outlook, which will result in a better quality of life overall.

As frail and imperfect beings, we will, almost invariably, have occasions when we complain and protest. Even Moshe, the greatest prophet who ever lived, could not bear to see *Benei Yisrael*'s torment and felt compelled to cry out to God in bitter protest. *Chazal* teach us, however, that we need to try to overcome this natural, ingrained tendency through “*Az Yashir*,” by effusively complimenting, praising, thanking and appreciating all that is good in life. The more effort we invest in “*Az Yashir*,” in expressing a positive outlook, the better able we will be to resist the natural tendency of “*u-mei’az bati el Pharaoh*”<sup>8</sup>, to complain about life’s difficulties and disappointments. (Silverberg, 2016)

*Song 3: “Was said at the well Shirat Be’er” [Miriam’s song], as it is said: “Az yashir Yisrael”*

אֶז יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת עָלֵי בָּאָר עֲנוּ־לָהּ: בָּאָר חֲפְרוּיָה שְׂרִים כְּרוּיָה נְדִיבֵי הָעָם בְּמַתְקָן  
בְּמִשְׁעָנֶתָם וּמִמִּדְבָּר מִתְנַה: וּמִמִּתְנָה נִחְלִיאֵל וּמִנְחִיאֵל בְּמֹת: וּמִבְּמֹת הַגִּיא אֲשֶׁר בְּשִׁדָּה מוֹאֵב רָאֵשׁ  
הַפִּסְגָּה וְנִשְׁקָפָה עַל־פְּנֵי הַיַּשְׁמֹן

<sup>8</sup> Idea expounded upon in Chapter 2

Then Israel sang this song: “‘Ascend, O well,’ sing to it! A well dug by princes, carved out by nobles of the people, through the lawgiver with their staffs, and from the desert, a gift. From the gift, to the streams, and from the streams to the heights. From the heights to the valley in the field of Moab, at the top of the peak, that overlooks the wastelands.” (Numbers 21:17) <sup>9</sup>

Numbers 21 begins with a scene of war. The Canaanite king of Arad waged war against the Jewish people as they traveled through the desert. During this battle, a hostage (who, according to the Yalkut Shimoni, was a maidservant) was taken from among the Israelites. The Jewish people prayed to God and yearned for a victory over the Canaanites. In verse 3, we learned that their wish was granted and God did indeed destroy the Canaanites. Later in the chapter, the Israelites continue their travels through the desert and reach the Arnon river which was the border between two enemy nations, the Moabites and the Amorites. Verse 15 presents an enigmatic scene when it refers to “the spilling of the streams that turned to settle at Ar and leaned toward the border of Moab.” Rashi offers a commentary, which draws on a Midrash Tanchuma, that provides some clarity.

**The spilling of the streams:** The Aramaic translation of שָׁפַךְ, “spilling,” is שִׁטְטָא - the spilling of the streams, for [there] the blood of the Amorites who were hidden there was spilled. The mountains were high and the gorge deep and narrow, and the mountains were so close to each other, that a man standing on the mountain on

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<sup>9</sup> Translation from Chabad.org



one side [of the gorge] could speak to his fellow standing on the mountain on the other side. A road passed along [the floor of] the gorge. The Amorites said, “When the Israelites enter the land by passing through the gorge, we will come out of the caves in the mountains above them and kill them with arrows and stones shot from catapults.” There were clefts in the rock on the Moabite side [of the canyon], and directly opposite those clefts, on the mountain on the Amorite side, there were protrusions, [appearing] like horns and breasts. When the Israelites prepared to pass through, the mountain of the Land of Israel trembled, like a maidservant going out to greet her mistress, and moved toward the mountain of Moab. Then those breastlike protrusions entered the clefts, killing them [the Amorites]. This is the meaning of, “that turned to settle at Ar.” The mountain swung from its place and moved toward the side of the Moabite border, and attached itself to it. Thus, “[it] leaned on the border of Moab.” (*Midrash Tanchuma Chukkath 20, Num. Rabbah 19:25*)

In later verses of Rashi’s commentary an extra line is included, which adds that “Israel passed across the mountaintops, and were not aware of these miracles, but through the well which entered [the scene of the miracles].” Here we come to understand that the Jewish people only learned of these miracles through the well.

Rashi’s comment on verse 16, drawing upon the midrash, once again clarifies his understanding of these verses:

**From there to the well:** From there the flow [of blood] came to the well. How? The Holy One, blessed is He, said, “Who will inform My children of these miracles?” The proverb goes, “If you give a child bread, inform his mother” (*Shab. 10b*). After they passed through, the mountains returned to their places, and the well descended into the stream, and brought up the blood of the slain, their arms, and their limbs, and carried them around the camp. The Israelites saw them and sang a song. — (*Midrash Tanchuma Chukkath 20, Num. Rabbah 19:25*)

According to Rashi’s understanding, the song that is sung in verses 17-20 is a song of praise to God for defeating their powerful enemies, while the Jewish people simply walked along, unaware of any of this happening. It was only when they later saw the blood and limbs of their enemies that they understood that God had enabled their passing

through enemy territory. This moment of deliverance, in which God protects a people without their knowledge is a powerful message related to God's protection of the Jewish people, even when they are oblivious to what is taking place.

Jewish studies scholar Jermon A. Chanes (2019) offers another understanding of how this song functions in the broader text. He notes that it is important to recognize that the song is followed by Israel's encounter with Sichon, the king of the Amorites, which marks the beginning of the Jewish people conquering the land of Israel. As he writes, "We are now at the beginning of the capture of the Land of Israel. 'The Song of the Well' is a transitional moment. Right before the song the narrative is about wandering, minor skirmishes (which the Israelites lose), water shortages. Immediately following the song is the defeat of Sichon — the beginning of the conquest of the Land" (Chanes, 2019).

Chanes goes on to analyze the text of the song. While The Song of the Sea begins "Az Yashir Moshe," the Song of the Well begins, "Az Yashir Yisrael." "The Song of the Well" is about themselves, the Israelites, not about Moses or God. It's a second-generation story: Miriam dies, Aaron dies. Moses will soon die. The leaders are gone. The second generation are no longer the slaves that left Egypt, the generation that constantly complains to return to Egypt. The second generation can and will capture the Land. As Rabbi Silber suggests, the danger in Bamidbar is one of under-dependency ("It's all about us"), not dependence on God or Moses.... "The Song of Deborah" is where it all comes together: the role of God in the conquest, and the role of the people ("ha-mitnadvim ba'am"), those who stepped up to the plate, and hit the ball out of the park." (Jerome A. Chanes 2019, summarizing David Silber) Chanes' explanation is intriguing, as it invites us to think about the songs in relation to one another, and in

relation to Israel's maturation from slavery to an independent nation living in their own land. The points in that development, he suggests, are marked with songs.

*Song 4: Ha'azinu: Deuteronomy 31*

וַיְהִי | בְּכִלְוֹת מֹשֶׁה לִכְתֹּב אֶת־דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה־הַזֹּאת עַל־סֵפֶר עַד תִּמָּלֵךְ: וַיִּצֹו מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הַלְוִיִּם נֹשְׂאֵי אֲרוֹן  
בְּרִית־ה' לֵאמֹר: לָקַח אֵת סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה הַזֶּה וְשָׂמֶתֶם אֹתוֹ מֵצֵד אֲרוֹן בְּרִית־ה' אֶל־קִיכֶם וְהָיָה־שָׁם בֵּין  
לָעֵד: כִּי אֲנֹכִי יִלְעֶתִי אֶת־מִרְיָךְ וְאֶת־עֶרְפְּךָ הַקָּשָׁה הוּא בְּעוֹדְנִי חַי עִמָּכֶם הַיּוֹם מִמָּרִים הַיּוֹם עִם־ה' וְאַף־  
כִּי־אַחֲרֵי מוֹתִי: הִקְהִילוּ אֵלַי אֶת־כָּל־זִקְנֵי שְׁבִטֵיכֶם וְשִׁטְרֵיכֶם וְאַדְבָּרָה בְּאָזְנֵיהֶם אֵת הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה  
וְאֶעֱיִדָה בָּם אֶת־הַשְּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ: כִּי יִלְעֶתִי אַחֲרַי מוֹתִי כִּי־הִשְׁתַּחֲוִּיתוּ וְסָרְתֶם מִן־הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר  
צִוִּיתִי אֲתֶכֶם וְקִרְאתֶם אֲתֶכֶם הִרְעָה בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים כִּי־תַעֲשׂוּ אֶת־הָרַע בְּעֵינַי ה' לְהַכְעִיסוֹ בְּמַעֲשָׂה  
יְדֵיכֶם: וַיַּדְבֵּר מֹשֶׁה בְּאָזְנֵי כָל־קֹהֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־דְּבָרֵי הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת עַד תִּמָּלֵךְ:

And it was, when Moses finished writing the words of this Torah in a scroll, until their very completion that Moses commanded the Levites, who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, saying: Take this Torah scroll and place it alongside the ark of covenant of the Lord, your God, and it will be there as a witness. For I know your rebellious spirit and your stubbornness. Even while I am alive with you today you are rebelling against the Lord, and surely after my death! Assemble to me all the elders of your tribes and your officers, and I will speak these words into their ears, and I will call upon the heaven and the earth as witnesses against them. For I know that after my death, you will surely become corrupted, and deviate from the way which I had commanded you. Consequently, the evil will befall you at the end of days, because you did evil in the eyes of the Lord, to provoke Him to anger through the work of your hands. Then, Moses spoke into

the ears of the entire assembly of Israel the words of the following song, until their completion. (Deut. 31:24-30) (*Judaica Press Books of the Prophets and Holy Writings (24 Volume Set)* 1992)

Ha'azinu describes Moshe's "farewell address" to the people, Israel. It takes place right before his death and prior to the Jewish people's entrance into the land of Israel. This moment serves as a dramatic climax to the life of Moshe. This is the final speech Moshe gives to the people he has led during their forty year journey. It is a crucial moment not only in the life of Moshe, but also in the narrative of the Israelites as a whole.

In so many ways, a people's leadership defines them and their identity. In this moment, the entire identity of the Jewish people is changing form, as Moshe steps down from leadership, parting with the community entirely and from this life. In modern terms, one might say Moshe became a "cult of personality" of sorts, and as we've experienced in the modern day, it's hard to dissociate a leader from their people and vice versa after such a deep seated foundation had been laid. However, these moments of transition also present the opportunity for transformative changes in leadership and shifts of identity formation. In this case, the people were not only changing leaders, but they were also shifting from being a mobile, wandering people to a people with a land—the promised land—and a more permanent, centralized, gathering place.

The speech, or song, is significant in many ways. Firstly, it provides a summary of the history of the Israelites up until this point in time. It recounts their trials and tribulations in Egypt, their journey through the wilderness, the experience of revelation from God at Mount Sinai, and more. In Moshe's parting address, he reiterates the

covenant between God and the people Israel and urges the Israelites to remain faithful to God and their eternal covenant.

Ha'azinu contains a series of exhortations and warnings. Moshe implores the people to follow God's commandments and warns them of the consequences that may follow if their devotion lapses and they go astray. Moshe doesn't only scare the people, but he also reminds them of the blessings that they shall be graced with if they remain faithful to God. Moshe encourages the people Israel to preserve their people and their faith so that it may continue *l'dor vador*, from generation to generation.

This final speech in the Torah poignantly reminds the people Israel of their history – and of their past, present, and future. Moshe takes this final opportunity to speak to the people to remind them to be faithful and obedient to God, through the song. However, Rabbi Aryeh Citron writes: “Some suggest that the word *shirah* in this context doesn't mean a song at all. Rather, it means a vision (see Numbers 24:7) as this portion is a prophecy about the future of the world (ibid). Rabbi Yechiel Michel Feinstein ob”m (1906 – 2001, Rosh Yeshivat Bait Yehudah in B'nei B'rak) explains (Be'er Miriam by Rabbi Tzvi Weiss on Parshat Ha'azinu) [and addresses this quandary as follows: He explains] that just as when an orchestra plays a song, one can only appreciate all of the sounds when they are heard together, so, too, one can only really appreciate the goodness and kindness of G-d in this world if one sees the entire story of mankind. Since this story, as well as the story of the life of every individual, is expressed in this section of Ha'azinu it is appropriately called a song.” (Citron 2019)

According to this explanation, the classification of song seems appropriate. Additionally, this underscores the importance of song as an entity in Jewish storytelling.

How fitting that Moshe's final address to the people of Israel should be described as a song.

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l adds another layer to our understanding of the role of "song" in Jewish history. He writes: "there is something profoundly spiritual about music. When language aspires to the transcendent, and the soul longs to break free of the gravitational pull of the earth, it modulates into song. Jewish history is not so much read as sung." (Sacks 2016) According to this reading, perhaps Rabbi Sacks z"l helps us to understand why Ha'azinu is understood to be a song. If what Moshe was saying required something that transcends "language" it's only logical that he sang his parting address.

#### *Song 5 - Shirat HaGivon (Joshua 10:12-14)*

אֲזַי יְדַבֵּר יְהוֹשֻׁעַ לַיהוָה בַּיּוֹם תָּתַּהְיֶה אֶת־הָאֲמֹרִי לִפְנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר ׀ לְעֵינֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שָׁמַשׁ בָּגָבְעוֹן  
לְיוֹם וַיָּרֶם בָּעֶמֶק אֵילֹן׃ וַיִּדָּם הַשָּׁמֶשׁ וַיָּרֶם עֹמֶד עַד־יָקָם גּוֹי אֲיִכּוֹ הֲלֹא־הִיא כְּתוּבָה עַל־סֵפֶר הַיָּשָׁר  
וַיַּעֲמֵד הַשָּׁמֶשׁ בַּחֲצֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלֹא־אָץ לָבוֹא כְּיוֹם תָּמִים׃ וְלֹא הָיָה כִּיּוֹם הַהוּא לִפְנֵי וְאַחֲרָיו לְשִׁמְעַי יְהוָה  
בְּקוֹל אִישׁ כִּי יְהוָה נִלְחָם לְיִשְׂרָאֵל׃

On that occasion, when the LORD routed the Amorites before the Israelites,

Joshua addressed the LORD; he said in the presence of the Israelites:

"Stand still, O sun, at Givon,

O moon, in the Valley of Ayalon!"

And the sun stood still

And the moon halted,

While a nation wreaked judgment on its foes

—as is written in the Book of Yashar. Thus the sun halted in midheaven, and did not press on to set, for a whole day; for the LORD fought for Israel. Neither before nor since has there ever been such a day, when the LORD acted on words spoken by a man. (Josh. 10:12-14)<sup>10</sup>

At first glance, it is challenging to understand why this portion of the book of Joshua is referred to as a song by the midrash. Rashi's commentary to 10:12 is helpful. He suggests that upon going into battle against the Amorites, Joshua commanded the sun to stop moving in its orbit, which in turn meant that the sun stopped singing praise to God. In the absence of the sun's song to God, Joshua himself filled the sonic void by singing his own song of praise while the battle took place. Therefore, we see here as well that the song is a song of praise to God in connection to a military victory over the enemy.

We know that sound is an important feature of Joshua's leadership. According to God's strange instruction during the Battle of Jericho, Joshua and the army circled around the city. On the seventh day they marched around seven times, then shouted, and the walls fell down completely. In the battle the enemies ran away from B'nei Yisrael. Joshua was willing to listen to God's peculiar advice and in turn led the people to victory. Additionally, through following God's instruction Joshua demonstrated trustworthy and faithful behavior toward God. Eventually, this resulted in the Israelites conquering the land of Canaan. Over the course of events that comprised this great military conquest, not only did Joshua listen to God but God listened to Joshua.

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<sup>10</sup> Judaica Press Books of the Prophets and Holy Writings (24 Volume Set) (1992)

As the text states, there was no precedent nor antecedent for such miraculous and dramatic events. Never before had the eternal listened to, and acted upon, the words and instructions of a man, and neither was there any subsequent happening akin to this occurrence. Perhaps God listened to Joshua because the people of Israel had finally entered the Promised Land, or perhaps Joshua had earned the trust of the Eternal. In many ways, the entity of the sun represents the pinnacle of creation. This underscores the supernatural and atypical dynamic between God and Joshua, and in turn Joshua and creation. It is clear that God had immense faith in Joshua.

*Song 6: Shirat Devorah: Judges 5:3-7*

וַתֵּשֶׁר דְּבוֹרָה וּבָרַק בֶּן-אֲבִינוֹם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר:  
 עִם בָּרְכוּ ה': שִׁמְעוּ מְלָכִים הָאֲזִינוּ רְזָגִים אֲנֹכִי לַה' אֲנִי אֲשִׁירָה אֲזַמֵּר לַה' אֱלֹהֵי  
 יִשְׂרָאֵל: ה' בָּצָאתָ מִשְׁעִיר בָּצַעְדָּהּ מִשְׁדֶּה אֱלֹהִים אֶרֶץ רַעֲשָׁה גַם-שָׁמַיִם  
 גִּטְפוּ גַם-עֲבָדִים גִּטְפוּ מָיִם: הָרִים נָזְלוּ מִפְּנֵי ה' וְהָ סִינַי מִפְּנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵי  
 יִשְׂרָאֵל: בִּימֵי שִׁמְגָר בְּנוֹ-עֲנַת בִּימֵי יָעֵל חֲדָלוּ אֲרָחוֹת וְהִלְכִי נְתִיבוֹת יִלְכוּ אֲרָחוֹת  
 עַד שְׁקַמְתִּי דְּבוֹרָה שְׁקַמְתִּי אִם בִּישְׁרָאֵל חֲדָלוּ פְּרִזּוֹן בִּישְׁרָאֵל חֲדָלוּ:

On that day Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang:

When locks go untrimmed in Israel,

When people dedicate themselves—

Bless the LORD!

Hear, O kings! Give ear, O potentates!

I will sing, will sing to the LORD,

Will hymn the LORD, the God of Israel.

O LORD, when You came forth from Seir,



Advanced from the country of Edom,  
The earth trembled;  
The heavens dripped,  
Yea, the clouds dripped water,  
The mountains quaked—  
Before the LORD, Him of Sinai,  
Before the LORD, God of Israel.  
In the days of Shamgar son of Anath,  
In the days of Yael, caravans ceased,  
And wayfarers went  
By roundabout paths. The open cities ceased,  
in Israel they ceased,  
until I Deborah arose;  
I arose as a mother in Israel.”

Chapter 5 of Judges presents a song praising God which follows the dramatic scene contained in the previous chapter. In Judges Chapter 4, the Israelites were being persecuted by the Canaanites. At this time, Deborah was chosen to deliver the people of Israel in a moment when they were experiencing a moral and spiritual ebb. After Ehud's death the Jews abandoned the ways of the Torah and adopted the idol worship of many of the surrounding peoples. Consequently, as punishment, God delivered them into the hands of the King of Canaan, Jabin, who resided in the city of Hazor. Jabin's cruel general,

Sisera, oppressed the Jews for twenty years. Sisera possessed a well-trained army of cavalry. He also had iron chariots that were considered the tanks of those days. The Jews suffered terribly under the cruel rule of Sisera. According to the text, Sisera, the powerful chieftain of the Canaanite army, was approaching with nine hundred chariots. Sisera's army demonstrated physical power and strength. The Israelites called out to God in terror and great despair. Then Deborah the prophetess received a message from God to summon Barak, a military commander, to lead an army of Israelites against Sisera's forces. Barak initially hesitated to lead the army unless Deborah went with him, and Deborah agreed to join him, but she prophesied that the honor of the victory would not belong to Barak, rather to a woman. In the ensuing battle, Sisera's army was defeated. The Jewish people fought back successfully against the opposing military but in the midst of the battle, Sisera managed to escape. It is there he encountered the woman who would cause his ultimate demise. Sisera fled to the tent of Yael, where he intended to hide. Yael took him in, fed him, and covered him with a garment. While he slept, Yael drove a tent pin through Sisera's head, killing him. When this news reached Deborah and Barak, they rejoiced, singing this song of praise that also recounts their people's history.

Deborah's leadership and prophetic gifts played a crucial role in the deliverance of Israel from the Canaanites. She served as a judge in Israel during a time of great distress and led with an immense fervor that was especially needed by the disheartened Israelites. Deborah was bold, some commentaries say that Deborah did not concern herself with making change in order to pave a path for other women leaders in the future. Rather, Deborah found herself to be the most suitable leader and so she made it happen. Deborah was deeply respected by all. In the midst of the aforementioned sin and idolatry, Deborah

remained true to God and God's Torah. Deborah was wise and God-fearing, and the people would flock to her asking for advice and assistance. Deborah held court outside, beneath a palm-tree. She held court in a public area so that everyone could hear her. In these conversations she warned the Jewish people about the evils and temptations surrounding them. Deborah urged them to leave their evil ways and to return to their God.

*Song 7: David recited, "and David said to God, these words of song:" II Samuel 22*

שמואל ב כ"ב:א:

(א: וַיִּדְבֹּר דָּוִד לַיהוָה אֶת־דִּבְרֵי הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת בַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה ה' אֱתָו מִכָּר כָּל־אֹיְבָיו וּמִכַּף שָׁאוּל)

*II Samuel 22:1*

(1) *"David addressed the words of this song to the LORD, after the LORD had saved him from the hands of all his enemies and from the hands of Saul"*

A song of praise is offered by David when the Eternal delivered him from throngs of his enemies and from the hands of Saul. This song in II Samuel 22 is very similar to Psalm 18, which is also attributed to David. The Song of David is a powerful expression of praise and thanksgiving to God for His faithfulness and protection. David begins by declaring that God is his rock, his fortress, his deliverer, and his shield. He describes how he called upon the Lord in times of distress and how God heard his cries and came to his rescue. David goes on to describe the awesome power of God, using vivid images of thunder, lightning, earthquakes, and fire. He marvels at God's goodness and mercy, and declares his unwavering trust in God. Throughout the Song of David, we see a deep and

abiding faith in God's goodness and power, even in the midst of great difficulty and danger.

Rashi explains that this song was composed at the end of David's life, "when his troubles had passed over him and he had been saved from them all." This text offers a dramatic narrative and raw words of praise and gratitude for God's gift of redemption. In this song we once again see the portrayal of an angry and powerful God. In verse 2, we see God described as "rock" and "fortress," and in verse 3 God is described as "shield, support, refuge, savior." It is good to have a God who possesses qualities such as this, especially when God is also rageful. "*Shirat David*" revolves around the concept that God possesses the power to save a person who might otherwise surely succumb to the hands of their enemy.

Interestingly, *Shirat David* and *Mizmor Shir Hanukat Habayit L'David*, the song to follow, are incredibly similar in their thematic elements. In both of these texts, the speaker calls out in gratitude to the Eternal for their deliverance from the path of danger. Both texts express the essential presence of God in their salvation and redemption. These are not only songs of immense gratitude, but they are also songs of relief.

*Song 8: Shlomo said: "Mizmor Shir Hanukat HaBayit L'David:" Psalm 30*

#### Psalm 30

וְהַיְלִים ל'

(א) מִזְמוֹר שִׁיר־חֲנֻכַּת הַבַּיִת לְדָוִד: (ב) אֲרוּמָהּ ה' כִּי דָלִיתִנִּי וְלֹא־שָׁמַחַת אִיבִי לִי: (ג) ה' אֱלֹהֵי (שְׁנַעַתִּי אֱלֹהֵי וְתַרְפָּאֵנִי: (ד) ה' הִעֲלִית מִן־שָׁאוֹל נַפְשִׁי אֲחֵי־תִנִּי (מִיִּוְרָדִי) [מִיִּוְרָדִי־כּוֹר: (ה) וַיִּמְרֹו לֵה' בְּאִפְסֹׁ חַיִּים בְּרָצוֹנִי בְּעֶרְבַּי יָלִינוּ בְּכִי וְלִפְקֹר רָנָה: (ז) וַאֲנִי וְחֲסִידָיו יְהוֹדוּ לְזִכָּר קִדְשׁוֹ: (ח) כִּי רָגַע

אִמְרָתִי בְּשִׁלְגִי בַּל־אֲמוּט לְעוֹלָם: (ח) ה' בְּרִצּוֹנָהּ הִעֲמִידָהּ לְהִרְרִי-עוֹ הַסִּתְרָתָהּ פָּנֶיהָ הִיטִי נִבְהָל: (ט)  
 אֶלֶיָּהּ ה' אֶקְרָא וְאֶל־אֲדוּשָׁם אֶתְחַנֵּן: (י) מִה־בָּצַע בְּדַמִּי בְּרִדְתִּי אֶל־שֹׁחַת הַיּוֹדֶה עָפָר הַנִּגִּיד אֲמַתָּהּ: (יא)  
 וְשִׁמְעָהּ וְחַנּוּנִי ה' הִיָּה־עֲגוּר לִי: (יב) הִפְכָּתָהּ מִסִּפְדִּי לְמַחֲוֹל לִי פִתְחָתָהּ שִׁקִּי וְתִאֲוָרָנִי שִׁמְחָהּ: (יג) לְמַעַן  
 {יִזְמְרָהּ כְּבוֹד וְלֹא יִדָּם ה' אֱלֹהֵי לְעוֹלָם אֲוִדָּהּ: } פ

# Psalms 30

- (1) A psalm of David. A song for the dedication of the House.
  - (2) I extol You, O LORD, for You have lifted me up, and not let my enemies rejoice over me.
  - (3) O LORD, my God, I cried out to You, and You healed me.
  - (4) O LORD, You brought me up from Sheol, preserved me from going down into the Pit.
  - (5) O you faithful of the LORD, sing to Him, and praise His holy name.
  - (6) For He is angry but a moment, and when He is pleased there is life. One may lie down weeping at nightfall; but at dawn there are shouts of joy.
  - (7) When I was untroubled, I thought, "I shall never be shaken,"
  - (8) for You, O LORD, when You were pleased, made [me] firm as a mighty mountain.
- When You hid Your face, I was terrified.
- (9) I called to You, O LORD; to my Lord I made appeal,
  - (10) "What is to be gained from my death, from my descent into the Pit? Can dust praise You? Can it declare Your faithfulness?
  - (11) Hear, O LORD, and have mercy on me; O LORD, be my help!"
  - (12) You turned my lament into dancing, you undid my sackcloth and girded me with joy, (13) that [my] whole being might sing hymns to You endlessly; O LORD my God, I will praise You forever.

King David, of course, was no longer alive when his son Solomon built and inaugurated the Beit HaMikdash. The Ten Songs Midrash asks, why would this song describe the dedication of the Temple of David and not Solomon? The rabbis offer varied

answers to this question, the first from the Yalkut Shimoni and the second from the “10 Songs Midrash” in *Mekhilta D’Rabbi Yishmael, Midrash Tanchuma* (Beshalah 10). The “*Yalkut Shimoni*, a late *aggadic* compilation on the books of the Tanakh, suggests that King David wrote this Psalm prophetically for the dedication of both the first Temple built by King Solomon around 957 BCE and the second temple dedicated by Ezra HaSofer around 480 BCE (Psalm 7:13). *The Midrash Tanchuma* (Beshalah 10) offers an alternative suggestion, namely that the Psalm is attributed to King David because he desired the building of the Temple and gave his soul for its realization. In other words, his strong yearning to build a house for God earned him the legacy of having built it and dedicating it himself.” (Levy 2021)

A cursory assessment of this psalm suggests that it is a song of praise following military victory. Yet this begs the question, why sing this particular psalm for the dedication of The Holy Temple. Should not this moment be described by a spiritual, transcendent psalm rather than words describing an earthly military victory.

Rabbi Meir Weiser (1809-1879), author of the commentary *Malbim*, was bothered by this dissonance. “He suggested that the Psalm is indeed a victory song and the words “*Hanukat HaBayit LeDavid*” – Dedication of the house of David – are actually a reference to King David’s body. He celebrates the fact that he is alive and able to glorify God. His body is the *bayit*, the home he dedicates.” (Levy 2021)

Moreover, this commentary speaks to a more universal and modern interpretation of this psalm.

Psalm 30, Mizmor Shir Hanukat Habayit begins “A psalm, song of the dedication of the House of David.” Yet, after this opening line, the song does not continue to speak of the temple or the House of David. Rather it continues as a striking poem about deliverance, and God’s redemptive

powers. This psalm not only praises the Eternal, but also serves as a plea to God. The author essentially says, I know I may struggle but if I am to perish and cease to exist then who will be able to praise you, God? Have mercy on me so I may praise and exalt you! The text is not only a song of dedication for the temple, but also an affirmation of the author's dedication to God and a reaffirmation of their steadfast faith.

The "Radak explains that the eventual inauguration of the Temple by Shlomo represented David's vindication against the taunts and charges of his enemies. If David were really a doomed sinner, as they claimed, his offspring could not have gained the privilege of realizing David's dream of building the Temple." (OU Staff 1970)

Even in moments of the greatest despair, perhaps the greatest despair that can be known, grief and mourning, the author will still praise and thank God forever. This juxtaposition offers an image of the most devout of faith.

Here we read classic words of yearning, and the ping-pong between joy and grief and everything in between. The narrator in this psalm speaks to this quintessential human experience. He not only wallows in the struggle and terror, but also provides a *nechemta*, a comfort, that in the morning there is rejoicing and gladness. The words read in Psalm 30 are vulnerable and allude to the idea. He recognizes that nothing is ever stagnant. No matter our circumstances, the wheel keeps spinning, and uncertainty and danger lurk in the shadows. However, the grace of the Eternal remains with us throughout life's journey.

*Song 9a: Yehoshaphat: II Chronicles 20*

דברי הימים ב כ

א) וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי־כֵן בָּאוּ בְנֵי־מוֹאָב וּבְנֵי עַמּוֹן וְעַמְקָם וּמִהַעֲמוֹנִים עַל־יְהוֹשָׁפָט לְמִלְחָמָה

*II Chronicles 20*

*(1) After that, Moabites, Ammonites, together with some Ammonim, came against Jehoshaphat to wage war.*

This midrash states that the 9th song was recited by Yehoshaphat. It is said that *Meshorerim* (heavenly singers) helped Yehoshaphat and stood beside him, to praise God in the hadrat kodesh.

Yehoshaphat was the fourth king of the southern kingdom of Judah and ruled from approximately 873 to 849 BC. One of Yehoshaphat's significant accomplishments was his efforts to reform the religious practices in Judah. He removed the idols from the hadrat kodesh, high places, which became places of worship for false gods, and urged the people to solely worship the Eternal. He also appointed judges in the land to ensure justice was served and the law of the Eternal was upheld.

Yehoshaphat was also known for his military campaigns, particularly his alliance with Ahab, the king of Israel. In II Chronicles, Chapter 20, a combined army of Ammonites and Moabites launches a multi-front attack on the Jewish people. Yehoshaphat is fearful and declares a fast; with this we see that he turns first to God before planning a military response. The Judeans gather in a large assembly, and Yachaziel rises to address the crowd, saying: "It is not for you to fight in this [war]; set yourselves, stand and see the salvation of the Lord with you, O Judah and Jerusalem; fear not and be not dismayed. Tomorrow, go forth before them, and the Lord will be with you." Prior to the battle, the Levites and Yehoshaphat arose early to sing praise to God, "with an exceedingly loud voice," singing, "Give thanks to the Lord, for His kindness is eternal." The next verse (20:22) tells us that at the time that Israel sang this song, "the Lord placed liers-in-wait against the children of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, who



were coming to Judah, and they were struck down.” This song of praise prompted God to fight the battle for Yehoshaphat’s army, resulting in their victory. True to form, the Jewish people soon return to Jerusalem “with psalteries, with harps, and with trumpets to the House of the Lord” (20:28).

Yehoshaphat was known for his faith in the Eternal and his commitment to leading Judah according to God's laws. We see in the Tanakah that his reign was regarded as a time of prosperity for the people of Judah. The story of Yehoshaphat once again serves as an example of God’s redemptive powers, and the subsequent outburst of song reinforces the gratitude and joy of the people. We also see the recurring idea that God saves the people from their enemies, here, prompted by song.

*Song 9b: Shir Hashirim, the Song of Songs*

(א) שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים אֲשֶׁר לְשִׁלְמֹה:

לְשִׁלְמֹה מִנְּשִׁיקוֹת פִּיהוּ כִּי־טוֹבִים דְּרִידָה מִיָּין (ב)

“The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.

“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is better than wine.”

In this section, I focus on an alternative ninth song, suggested in one of the parallel midrashim (Tanchuma B'Shallach 10), which is Shir Hashirim, the Song of Songs. Interestingly, Shir HaShirim is not listed as one of the ten songs in the Mekhilta version of the midrash.

Shir HaShirim is one of the five Megillot in the Tanakh and an evocative poem of love and desire. Many Ashkenazi Jews chant and study Shir Hashirim during Pesach.

This is because the poem is seen as a metaphor for the redemption of the Jewish people, who are compared to a bride and groom being reunited after a long separation.

“Moreover, after a long winter, as the spring flowers blossom and the buds burst into bloom, one’s thoughts often turn to love and longing. What better way to freely express human love than in the guise of the relationship with the divine” (Olitzky, n.d.). Some Sephardic, Mizrachi, and Chasidic communities also chant Shir Hashirim weekly prior to Kabbalat Shabbat. In this case, the people Israel are welcoming their lover, the Sabbath bride. This text is a poetic love song that depicts the story and dialogue of two lovers attempting to express their love and longing for one another. However, the identity of these two lovers is never specified or revealed. Some of our sages also taught, perhaps to cover up the risqué nature of the text, that Shir Hashirim is an allegory for the relationship of love, devotion, and yearning that exists between God and the people of Israel. Shir Hashirim includes incredibly rich, sensual, and immersive imagery. The author attempts to illustrate the physical features of the beloved, and the intricate pleasures and sensations of visceral and emotional intimacy. The text also depicts the vignette of the lover pining for a lover who they mistakenly think is not there, and vice versa. The confusion and pain is palpably described in Chapter 5 in particular.

Shir Hashirim exemplifies a merging of human and divine love. This song, sung by King Solomon, is the penultimate of the series and precedes the final song, which is to be sung, and will only come to be known, when Moshiach comes and the Jewish exiles return to the land of Israel during the Messianic era.

Perhaps the Rabbis of the Midrash were not thinking of it in the following terms; however, in retrospect as a modern reader, it feels fitting that Shir Hashirim should be

included in these ten defining songs of praise. Rabbi Kerry Olitzky writes the following on the matter:

Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, a leading liberal Jewish theologian of the late 20th century, taught that all loving relationships should mirror the relationship of the individual striving for the divine — what he called a covenantal relationship, similar to what the theologian Martin Buber called an I-Thou relationship. One love leads us to the other. Love indeed leads us to the Other. Jewish rituals — the mitzvot, or commandments — at their best help to mitigate the distance that separates us from one another and from God. But while the rabbis derive mitzvot from various Torah passages, Song of Songs stands alone in its pure expression of love. Most Jewish liturgy is highly intellectualized and often eclipses such pure expressions of love. Song of Songs reminds us that love is the fount of all relationships — including and especially with God.

In this sense, it makes sense that Shir Hashirim ought to be the penultimate text before the song yet to be sung, as it describes the pinnacle of union in the earthly plane—the love between humans and also the love between God and humanity.

#### *Song 10: Recited in the Future to Come*

The Midrash tells us that the tenth song "will be recited in the future to come," a reference to the Messianic era. It specifies two texts in particular which allude to the dawning of the Messianic era; however, these are not the songs that will be sung. These are the two texts that are mentioned:

ישעיהו מ"ב:

(י) שִׁירוּ לַה' שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ תְּהַלְלוּ מִקְצֵה הָאָרֶץ יוֹרְגֵי הַיָּם וּמֵלֵאוֹ אֲיִים וְיִשְׁבִּיָּהֶם

Isaiah 42:10

(10) Sing to the LORD a new song,

His praise from the ends of the earth—

You who sail the sea and you creatures in it,

You coastlands and their inhabitants!

יְהִלִּים קַמִּיט:א

א: (אֶלְלוּיָהּ | שִׁירוּ לַיהוָה שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ אֲתִהְלֹתוּ בְּקִנְיָתוֹ בְּחִסְדֵּי

Psalms 149:1

(1) “Hallelujah.

Sing unto the Eternal a new song,

And his praises in the assembly of the righteous”

Taking inspiration from these two citations, the Rabbis reach this concept of a new song that will be written and sung upon the arrival of Moshiach. Interestingly, the *Targum* helps to draw a connection between the song of Moshiach and the beginning of the Midrash

The Targum of *Shir Hashirim* (the Aramaic translation and interpretation of Shir Hashirim) begins by denoting each of the Ten Songs of Israel. Interestingly, it references that first song, Isaiah 26:19 [the first song] in relation to the tenth song. “It then writes that the tenth song will be sung by the Jews when they leave the exile. The Targum quotes this verse: “This song shall be to you as the night of the sanctification of the festival, and the joy of heart like one who goes with a flute to come upon the mountain of the Lord, to the Rock of Israel.” The Targum interprets this verse to mean that when the Jews leave exile, they will sing a song accompanied by musical instruments. (Chabad of Central New Jersey, n.d.)

This return to the beginning suggests a cyclical energetic between creation and redemption. The Targum literally demonstrates this sort of movement of return by directing the reader back to the beginning of the midrash in order to truly understand the final song – the song that will come with Moshiach. Just as creation’s ultimate aspiration is redemption, so too is redemption’s greatest aspiration creation. Both of these powerful entities are wrought of the same creative force within God, and in turn within each of us.

This text in Isaiah describes a moment of festival celebration, rejoicing in the redemptive powers of the Eternal. This text also refers to God as “*Tzur Yisrael*” Rock of Israel, a God who possesses resolute strength and operates as a powerful, steady redeemer.

As mentioned above, I conceive of Moshiach as a sort of regenerative force – not only to usher in the the new but also to uplift the days of old, as they were in their finest state. As Rav Kook famously wrote in 1908: “May the old become new and maybe the new become holy” (see Mirsky 2014, 77). Returning the reader to this first text from Isaiah, when the people are engaged in rejoicing, mirrors this idea and highlights the cyclical nature of God’s redemptive powers. It reinforces the idea that the people of Israel can trust in God, and that God will follow through by bringing a time of redemption. This choice of the rabbis also encourages a sort of aspirational, prophetic mirroring. It serves as a source of inspiration for the people of Israel to continue to hope and act in ways which will encourage the coming of Moshiach.

In the mystical writings of the Shaloh, he quotes the words of our sages, that “in the future the Jewish People will sing praises... in merit of Abraham who believed in G-d.” The Shaloh asks: What is the connection between the song of the future and the faith of Abraham? The Shaloh explains that our sages were referring not only to the song of the Redemption, but to the songs that we will sing even before Moshiach comes, out of firm faith and joy in the prophecy of redemption.”

This interpretation takes the passivity out of waiting for Moshiach. The Jewish community is taking the promise of redemption into their own hands through praising God and God’s wondrous powers in the present day, and in the prophetic Era of Moshiach to come. Not only is it admirable to express gratitude, but according to the Shaloh: “It is the nature of the righteous, that as soon as they are promised something good, they praise G-d immediately, even before it is fulfilled. This is because of their great faith... In the future, when the Jewish People will be foretold of the Redemption, they will rejoice and sing immediately, out of full faith that the prophecy will be fulfilled.” (Chabad of Central New Jersey, n.d.)

May we each act in the generative, gracious nature of the righteous and praise God's redemptive powers, and God's outstretched arms that will bring liberation, even well before the time of Moshiach has come. This reminds us, yet again, that God once redeemed the people of Israel, and God will one day, *bim'heyrah v'yameinu*, swiftly in our days, do so again.

### 3. “Az” and Gender in the Midrash

In this chapter I focus on several aspects of the “Ten Songs Midrash” that are particularly intriguing. The first is the repeated use of the Hebrew word “az” (meaning “then” or “thus”) and the second is the concept of gender as it appears in the midrash. A further examination of these themes reveals new layers of meaning within the midrash.

The “Ten Songs” midrash begins by stating that there is a “then” (az) referring to the past, and a “then” (az) referring to what is to come in the future.” The midrash goes on to list six examples of texts in Tanach that begin with the word “az” that refer to the past, and six examples of texts that begin with the word “az” and look forward. The midrash proceeds to seemingly offer a counterpoint to one of its listings: while it had previously explained “Then sang Moshe” (Ex. 15:1) as a past-facing instance of the word “az,” it notes that the next word, “yashir” (will sing), is in the future tense. The midrash suggests that this unusual phrasing is a scriptural reference to the resurrection of the dead, which will be a component of the Messianic era.

The repeated and bifurcated use of the word “az” in this midrash (and the texts that it presents) has drawn the attention of commentators. While a comprehensive survey of the commentaries on the word “az” is beyond the scope of this study, I present here three contemporary commentaries that can enrich our understanding of the midrash.

*Utilization of “Az” in the Midrash*

Rabbi David Silverberg of Yeshivat Har Etzion offers a commentary on two connected uses of the word Az within the relationship between God and Moshe. He teaches that “Az yashir Moshe” (“Thus sang Moses”) relays information about God, God’s exploits, how God vanquished the pagan gods of Egypt, and how God caused the rulers of the world to quake with fear. Parashat Shemot ends with Pharaoh telling the people of Israel that they must produce their own straw to build bricks. An exasperated Moshe protests to God “Why have You done evil to this nation?! For what reason did You send me? Since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name, he has done more evil to this nation, and You did not save Your nation!” (Shemot 5:23) Moshe, perhaps rightfully so, could not understand God’s action or lack thereof. He was outraged and frustrated. However, it of course takes gumption to speak so freely and passionately in critique of God. Perhaps Moshe wondered, if You (God) can’t help them, how might I? Who am I to save them? Commenting on the following verse, Rashi writes that God was angered by Moshe’s harsh words of protest as well as Moshe’s questioning of Divine justice. The Midrash, elsewhere, (Shemot Rabbah 23) relates that Moshe later corrected his mistake. After the splitting of the sea, Moshe leads *Bnei Yisrael* in the singing of “Az Yashir” in a song of praise to God, and the Midrash draws an association between the word “az” in the introduction of that song and Moshe’s complaint to God here in Parashat Shemot: “*U-mei’az bati el Pharaoh...*” The Midrash comments that Moshe said to God, “I sinned with ‘az,’ and now I give praise to You with ‘az’.” Moshe used the same word when he began praising God that he used when he had complained to God, indicating that he was now correcting the mistake he had made when he challenged God’s justice.” ( Silverberg 2018, on Shemot Rabba 23)



Through the lens of this midrash, we see that Moshe subverts the very word he used to sin and curse God, to later uplift and praise God. Similar to a mathematical negation of a negative with a positive, Moshe redeems his negative speech that used the word “az” with a positive use of the word “az.”

Another intriguing reading of this text is presented by Rabba Sara Hurwitz in a 2021 teaching for Yeshivat Maharat. Here she investigates the Song of the Sea through a contrasting of speech and song. As seen in the following quote, Rabba Hurwitz draws on the Sefat Emet to understand why song emerges at this particular moment in the Biblical narrative:

The creation of the world was marked by the words *vayomer Elokim*, ‘and God said.’ God said ‘let there be light.’ God said ‘let the waters separate.’ And so on. However, in the Exodus story, at the moment the Jewish people reached the other side, there was no prose, there was song.

Exodus 15:1 tells us: “Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to God ... I shall sing to God for God is exalted.”

It is through the medium of song that we are bidden to recognize and celebrate God as the ultimate creator of the world. The Hasidic master known as the Sefat Emet explains that the word “then” (*Az*) comes to teach us that Israel had always longed to sing God’s praises, for Israel’s essence is to give testimony to God’s power. But this song could not be sung while the Jewish people were enslaved. It was only after the people were freed that they were able to recognize God as the God of creation at the sea. Then, they could sing. ( Hurwitz 2021)

Hurwitz's teaching helps us to appreciate the way in which the Song of the Sea was an important moment of transition in the story of the Israelites. Not only had they escaped the enslavement of their bodies, but their spiritual status also changed as they were able to perceive God in a new way.

Yet another interpretation is offered by the American-Israeli Kabbalist Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh. The website dedicated to disseminating his teachings, Inner.org, includes an entry titled “Shabbat: The Eighth Note.” Here Ginsburg is explaining the

significance of the holiday of Shemini Atzeret, which he identifies as “the climax and summit of all the holidays.” He suggests that this is alluded to in the word “az,” which according to gematria (an exegetical system that ascribes a numerical value to each letter of the Hebrew alphabet) has a numerical value of eight. He writes, “The secret of the number eight is alluded to in the word אַז /az’ as in ‘Az yashir’ – an alef on a zayin the one on the seven. The number seven is wholeness connected to this world, as in the seven days of the week. The eight is above nature. On Sukkot we bring a total of seventy (10 times 7) bulls, in order to atone for the Seventy Nations. On Shemini Atzeret, however, we only offer up one bull, representing the Nation of Israel. On this day, Israel and G-d are together – with no other nations present.”

Ginsburg goes on to list other instances of the number eight, all of which allude to an encounter with that which is “above nature.” The entry’s title, “The Eighth Note,” is a clear allusion to a Talmudic passage that also deals with this theme. The Babylonian Talmud, Arachin 13b, tells us Rabbi Yehuda says: The harp used in the Temple was an instrument of seven strings, as it is stated: “In your presence is fullness [sova] of joy, in your right hand sweetness for evermore” (Psalms 16:11). Do not read the word as “fullness [sova]” but as seven [sheva]. This indicates that the “sweet harp” (see Psalms 81:3) played in the presence of God, i.e., in the Temple, has seven strings. Rabbi Yehuda continues: And the harp that will be played in the days of the Messiah will have eight strings, as it is stated: “For the Leader, on the eighth: A Psalm of David” (Psalms 12:1). This indicates that the psalms that will be recited in the time of the Messiah, son of David, will be played on the eighth string that will be added to the harp.

Rabbi Israel Taub, the first Modzitzer Rebbe, expounds upon this Talmudic passage at length. A summary of Rabbi Taub's essay is found in Shmuel Barzilai's text *Hasidic Ecstasy in Music* (2009: 98-101). Barzilai explains that Taub seeks to understand what is remarkable about this eighth string, considering that instruments with even more than eight strings are readily available today, in the pre-Messianic era. He answers, "Rather, the strings relate to levels of which, currently, we are able to access seven vocal tones; but in the Messianic period, another eighth tone, which cannot yet be grasped, will be added to this world. This is what King David referred to with 'To the Conductor of the Eighth,'" that is, the eight tone that will enter our sphere of comprehension in the future."

Contemporary musician Rabbi Ari Goldwag (2013) draws on the teachings of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov to contribute an additional dimension. He suggests that in addition to an added note, there will be a new song in the Messianic era:

Rebbe Nachman speaks at length (*Likutei Moharan* Tinyana 8) about a special song that will be awakened in the future. This song will be used by Moshiach to guide people out of the depths of their sins. This is the song that the Torah speaks about when it says 'az yashir Moshe' – then Moshe and the children of Israel will sing. It is a song that comes after a break in tension. It is the cosmic tension of the end of days, similar to when the Jewish people seemed at the edge of destruction as they stood at the Yam Suf, with the sea on one side, and the Egyptians coming to destroy them on the other. This tension broke with the miracle of the splitting of the sea, and climaxed with their salvation and the song at the sea, which we will sing again in the future. Again, we will face near extinction, and Hashem will again perform the ultimate miracles to save us. Only this time, it will be once and for all.

Therefore, according to Kabbalistic thought, the term "az" is an allusion to the supernatural as expressed through the number eight. The eighth note that will emerge, and the new song that will emerge are representative of the complete paradigm shift that

will take place with the coming of the Messiah. All of this is encapsulated within the word “az.”

### *Gender as it Appears in the Midrash*

The topic of gender appears in a profound way in this midrash. Given contemporary considerations of gender and Judaism, this text presents an interesting study through its unusual and atypical presentation of gender in traditional Jewish texts – particularly as it pertains to the messianic era. Here, the Rabbis add a unique perspective to the discourse regarding gender, Judaism, and redemption.

For the sake of simplicity in this chapter, I will be operating with a more binary concept of male and female gender, as the Rabbis did (however, as we will see, the Shnei Luchot HaBrit offers a fascinating breakdown of this binary). However, in this text, it seems the Rabbis also conflate sex and gender. They clearly associate biological features and functions with each particular sex and synonymously use binary concepts and language. It is important to recognize the distinction between sex and gender which we now so keenly understand, and it is also important to acknowledge the context in which the Rabbis were writing and the binary nature of Hebrew language and grammar.

As biblical scholar James Kugel wrote: “all the songs that have already taken place are called by the feminine form [Asira] as the female gives birth, so the victory of the past have eventually been followed by submission. But the victory to come has no submission following it, therefore it is designated by the masculine form [Šír]. So it is written “Ask now and see if a male gives birth” (Jer. 30:6). Just as the male does not give birth, so the victory to come will not be followed by submission, as it is said [in Isaiah

45:17] , "Israel is saved by the Lord with an eternal victory"(James Kugel translation of midrash)

Kugel continues: "There is only one problem with the mechilta version. The last remark, commenting on the difference between the feminine form *širá* versus the masculine *Šir* , does not fit the list it has just presented. Our text says, "all the songs that have already taken place are called by the feminine form", yet of the nine songs listed, only four are actually referred to in the text by the word *šira*. Of the remaining five, three are in fact called by the masculine word *šir* (specifically reserved for the one future, eschatological song by our passage), while the other two are called neither *šir* or *šira*. On the face of it, then, there is contradiction within the text itself!"

Interestingly, the *Shenei Luchot HaBrit*, a Kabbalistic text by Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz (c. 1555-1630), examines gender in the "Ten Songs Midrash" and offers an explanation that suggests an eventual breakdown of binary conceptions of gender in relation to Divinity. He begins by comparing the redemption from Egypt to the eventual redemption at the time of the Messiah. He explains that the redemption from Egypt was carried out with only the first two letters of the four-letter name of God, known as the Tetragrammaton, but the final redemption will include all four letters and their corresponding attributes.

The fact that during the episode of the Exodus only the first two letters of G-d's Ineffable Name manifest themselves is alluded to in the verse: "*For the Hand is upon the Throne of G-d [Y-ah, spelled yud hei], G-d will be at war with Amalek*" (Exodus 17:16) which alerts us to the fact that only the first two letters in G-d's Ineffable name carry on the war against Amalek.

Our Sages have confirmed this when they point to the "*shira chadasha*" or "new song", written in the feminine gender, that the Jewish people sang in appreciation of G-d's salvation at that time. This song will be replaced by a "*shir chadash*",

also "new song" but in the masculine gender, which will be composed and sung by the Jewish people in the future when the final redemption will occur.

The redemption from Egypt was rooted in the "*Olam HaNekavot*," the "Female World". We read, however, in Jeremiah, where the prophet speaks about the ultimate redemption: "*For G-d has created something new on earth; a woman courts a man!*" (31:21-22) [emphasizing that the male aspect is the main object of attention]. This is an allusion to the type of redemption that still awaits us. The time of the redemption is when all the letters in the Ineffable Name combine and form the dual-faced, male-female name, i.e. the concept that prevailed at the time the prototype of Adam - who was created male and female combined - was created. The prevalent name then was masculine, as is clear from the word "Adam" [in the masculine] as opposed to "*Adama*" [in the feminine].<sup>11</sup>

This change in how God's name is deployed will involve a merging of God's male and female components, as in the time of the creation story. While this segment of the Shenei Luchot HaBrit concludes that the dominant name will be a masculine, rather than feminine one, we must recognize this nuanced and fascinating way in which gender is understood by the master Kabbalist.

### *Conclusion*

Through this close reading of the midrash's use of the word "Az" and the midrash's presentation of gender, we appreciate new dimensions within the text that give color and nuance to our understanding of the rabbis' understanding of the Messianic Era. The picture that emerges is one in which an entirely new reality sets in. A "new song" will be sung that emerges from the pain of transition, but results in a time of settling comfortably into an entirely new and peaceful reality. God too will combine the male and female forces that have been separated during the time of exile, and return to the more

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<sup>11</sup> Translation by Eliyahu Munk available at:  
[https://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article\\_cdo/aid/620802/jewish/Completing-the-Name.htm](https://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/620802/jewish/Completing-the-Name.htm)

whole state that last existed during the days of creation. While we have long been able to achieve only a meeting of our world and that of a higher world (a reality characterized by the number seven), our existence will now be characterized by knowledge and experience of the higher world (the number eight).

## Conclusion

The “Ten Songs Midrash” offers a unique opportunity to understand the Hebrew Bible, and therefore Jewish communal memory, through the medium of music. In this thesis I have attempted to delve deeply into the midrash by translating the text, identifying and contextualizing each of the ten songs within the Biblical narrative, and analyzing two important components of the midrash (specifically, the term “*az*” and the midrash’s presentation of gender). In this conclusion, I wish to suggest that the midrash includes several avenues that contemporary progressive Jews may wish to consider when encountering this fascinating text. Specifically, I suggest that the midrash offers us an opportunity to engage with concepts related to the Jewish people’s relationship with God, Redemption, and the role of music in Tanach.

The songs enumerated in the Midrash are predominantly songs of praise following perseverance through a dangerous encounter, often a military victory. The Israelites interpreted their survival as moments of redemption, as God expressed God’s protective love of the Jewish people. This presentation of God is one that may be challenging to contemporary progressive ideology. In the midrash, God is seen as omnipotent and powerful, and shows favoritism toward the Israelites through God’s manipulation of battles, and God’s thwarting of those who wished to attack the Jewish people. God intervenes directly in the lives, struggles, and triumphs of God’s people.

Contemporary progressive Jewish leaders tend to present the relationship between God and the Jewish people in a somewhat different light. Suggestions that God favors the



Jewish people over all other nations, and that God actively manipulates world events to protect the Jewish people are issues with which progressive Jewish thinkers have grappled in creative ways, yet they are generally kept at arm's length in contemporary discourse. The midrash forces us to confront anew the question of God's relationship with the Jewish people, as we encounter this list of instances in which God manipulated war to crush Israel's enemies.

Similarly, the midrash necessitates a reconsideration of the role of music in Tanach. The clear connection between persevering over the enemy and songs of praise is striking. While contemporary Jews are well-acquainted with the centrality of music in prayer services, spontaneous song offered in gratitude to God is a concept that runs against normative progressive Jewish practice. The midrash offers us an important model for what spontaneous musical expression might look like, and it is up to Jewish leaders, particularly cantors, to determine whether there might be a place for such forms of expression in contemporary Jewish life.

Additionally, the midrash requires an engagement with the topic of redemption, particularly in the midrash's Messianic vision. Reading these accounts of redemption, in which the Jewish people are repeatedly saved from near destruction offers us the opportunity to reevaluate what we mean when we discuss redemption in our contemporary discourse. Redemption is indeed at the core of Jewish thought, particularly as we encounter it in the Exodus narrative. As historian Paul Johnson writes in his work *The History of the Jews*, "the Rabbis reinforce the idea that the Exodus gradually replaced the Creation story itself as the central, determining event in Jewish history" (Johnson 1981, 26).

As Neil Gold (2018) has shown through his study of Reform prayer books, understandings of redemption continue to evolve. Speaking about Mishkan T'filah, the siddur currently used in Reform synagogues, he writes (Gold 2018, 73):

Mishkan T'filah in the twenty-first century demonstrates a willingness to reengage old ideas. Like its predecessors, MT is a measure of the condition of its constituency's beliefs (or, to be more precise, where its editors perceive and desire that constituency's beliefs to be). As we have seen, the personal messiah is a tentative presence in MT. Long gone is the classical Reformers' certainty of an imminent messianic age, but their objection to a personal messiah largely remains. In contrast, the restoration of Israel to its land has significantly emerged in many parts of MT, surely an outgrowth of its Zionist proclivities. And the cautious return in places of the resurrection of the dead indicates a willingness to reengage with previously discarded concepts and language.

Given the present "willingness to reengage with previously discarded concepts and language," how ought contemporary Jews understand redemption when presented with the "Ten Songs Midrash"? How are we to think of the final tenth song, which the midrash tells us will be sung in the time of the Messiah? How might we engage with the midrash's messianic vision in contemporary progressive Judaism?

In sum, the midrash invites us to consider more closely the ways that we believe God is involved in our lives, and how we ought to respond as a result. Is there a place for the theology of the midrash in our lives? If not, how are we to think of our relationship with God? Encountering this midrash offers us an opportunity to consider such questions, which is essential for establishing a theology that engages deeply with Jewish texts.

*A Personal Postscript:*

In studying this Midrash and planning my related recital, I searched for musical settings of each of the 10 songs. When searching for a musical setting for the 7th song, *Shirat David*, nothing called out to me and little existed by way of composition. I'd never before ventured into the world of song writing, only one unfinished piece and a couple of settings written in a group. However, I tried to push past this uncertainty and feeling of imposter syndrome in order to truly hear and understand the words of this text. It seemed like this would be a good a time as any to try composing and was encouraged by my classmates to jump right in, like *Nachshon*.

One of these classmates, Becky Mann, writes in her thesis on Debbie Friedman's impact on liberal Jewish composers: "Music as midrash is the idea that every melody for every essential piece of text that exists is in essence a midrash on the text by the composer of that melody. Friedman taught that text should always guide the music, and that a composer should never write a song simply for the sake of writing a new melody, but because they have something that must be said about the text. Just as rabbis have interpreted and reinterpreted texts for thousands of years, so can composers offer new interpretations of ancient words through music" (Mann 2023, 45-46).

The aforementioned sentiment, and witnessing the countless musical midrashim and compositions created by my classmates is exactly why the melody for the following text came to be. I decided to write a setting for a portion from *Shirat David* from Samuel II: 22. In particular, I focused on verse 17 which reads: "He sent from above, [and] He took me out of the many waters."

This phrase *mayim rabim*, "many waters," appears repeatedly in our textual and liturgical canon. It is especially present in the creation narrative and the Kabbalat Shabbat

liturgy through its appearance in Psalm 93. It is interesting to note both the destructive and creative forces at play in the element of water.

I was also inspired by chasidic nigunim and the chasidic concept of *dveykut* (literally “cleaving” to God, striving to experience union with the Divine). I was also drawn to the sense of upward motion and relief that seems to be expressed by David. The melody is for the most part in minor (a favorite of the Jewish people), quite repetitive, and then rises up into a *niggun* of yearning. I imagine it as though the clouds, or the seas, finally parted and made way for David to experience the light of God’s presence and outstretched arm.

“*Yishlach MiMarom*” is not the most complicated piece ever written, nor the most profound, but it serves as some form of attempting to articulate the Ineffable. Afterall, that is one of the many gifts that music provides us. In writing, I know there needed to be a simultaneous expression of fear, hope, uncertainty, promise, gratitude, and redemption. At the same time, I knew the melody ought to be simple, accessible, and to include the aforementioned sense of yearning, or *dveykut*. It also needed to draw upon the sense of upward motion and relief that seems to be expressed by David. I imagine it as though the clouds, or the seas, finally parted and made way for David to experience the light of God’s presence and outstretched arm. I’ve included the notation for this setting below. I hope that you or your community might consider using this setting, and studying this often overlooked text, to hopefully add meaning to your spiritual practice. Through the study of this text and singing of this melody, and others, may we all experience the safety and comfort of deliverance and continue to offer our praises to the Eternal.

"You reached down from on high,  
You took me,  
Drew me out of the many waters"

Samuel II - 22:17

# YISHLACH MI MAROM

EMMA MAIER

**A**

Cm Fm Cm Dm7(b9)/G Cm

YISH - LACH MI MA ROM\_ YI-KA-CHEI-NI YAM SHEI - NI\_ MI MAY-IM RAB-IM\_ YISH-

5 Cm Fm Cm Fm Gm7(b9) 3 Ab

LACH MI MA ROM\_ YI KA -CHEI-NI YAM SHEI - NI\_ MI MAY-IM RA-BI - - IM

**B**

10 Fm Eb Dm7(b9) G7 Cm

AY YI - YI AY - YI - YI AY - YI - YI YA\_ YI YI

14 Fm Eb Dm7(b9) G7 Cm

AY - YI - YI AY - YI - YI AY - YI - YI YA\_ YI YI

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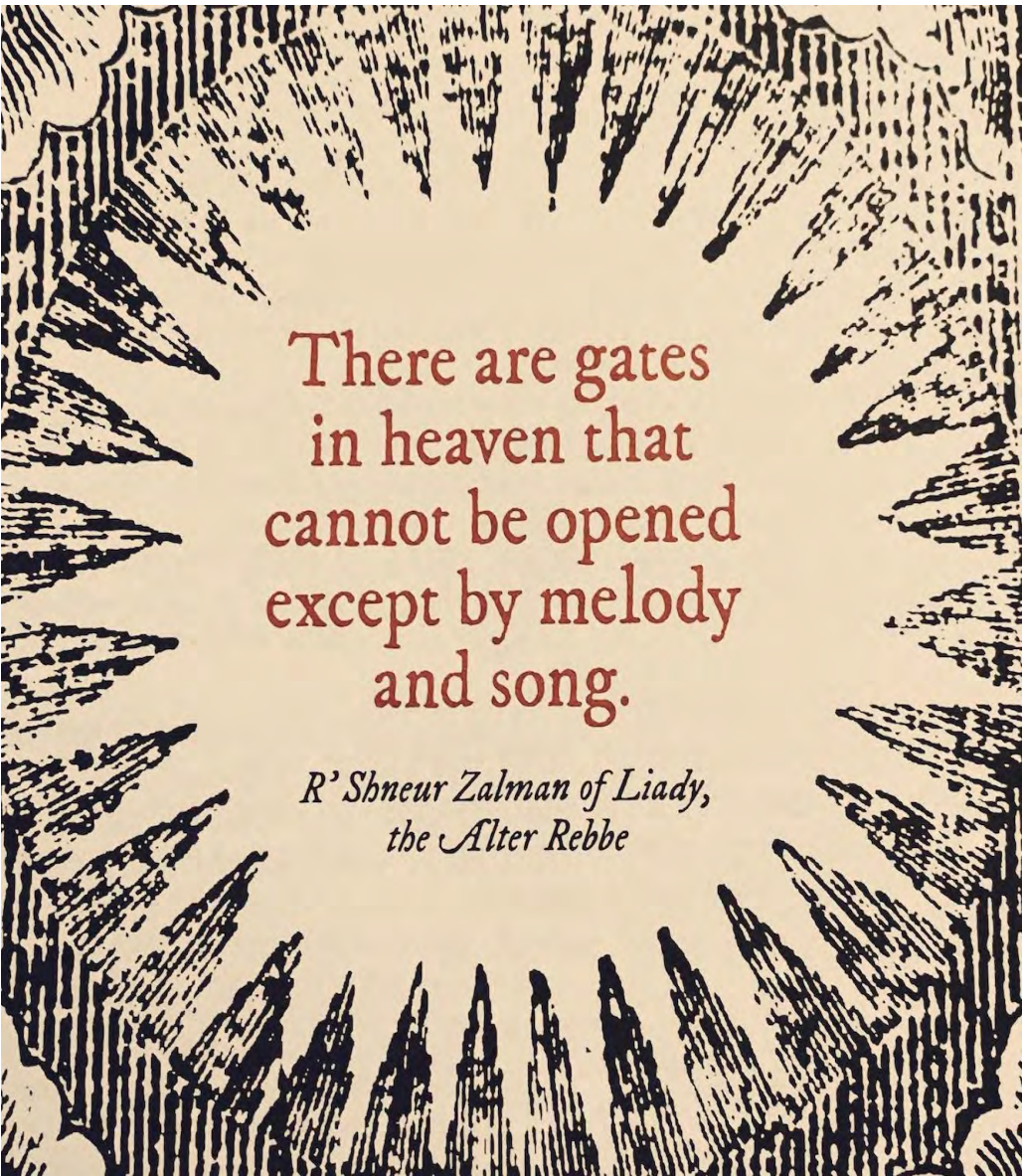
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There are gates  
in heaven that  
cannot be opened  
except by melody  
and song.

*R' Shneur Zalman of Liady,  
the Alter Rebbe*