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Our Personal "Song of the Day"

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Beshalach

Our Personal "Song of the Day"

Not too long from now, Americans of all stripes, shades, races and religions will rally around the one thing that unites us all, regardless of personal belief or politics: the Super Bowl.

And, of course, everyone not at that stadium will be watching live at that All-American pastime: Super Bowl parties.

But this Shabbos, however, we read in the Torah about the greatest Super Bowl in history thus far.

Over 3,000 years ago, there were two teams—on one side, the world superpower Egypt, and on the other side, Moshe and his Jews, representing the ultimate superpower, G-d Himself.

At the beginning of the clash, we read in the beginning of the Book of Shmos (Exodus) how Moshe comes before the Pharaoh and shows him a wonder: He turns a stick into a snake. But the Pharaoh's magicians do the same thing. So Moshe comes to the Pharaoh again and shows him how he can turn water into blood—but the Pharaoh shows him that he can do the same, too. The third time, Moshe produces frogs—but so do the Pharaoh's magicians.

It was only in the next round that they started to see who was really going to win. At the Plague of Lice, the magicians said to the Pharaoh, "It's G-d's Finger"—and so it went from level to level along the rest of the Ten Plagues. Finally the Jews decisively won, as we read extensively in previous weeks.

But this week, we read how the Jews have already left Egypt, or at least are on the way out—and then, G-d suddenly orders Moshe to turn the entire Jewish Nation back in the direction of Egypt, so that the Pharaoh will think, "they are lost in the land... and I shall harden the heart of the Pharaoh and he will pursue them" (Shmos 14:4).

We see from here that G-d was not through with Egypt. He wanted a rematch, one more final round between the two teams. And indeed, as expected, the Pharaoh and his entire army ran after the Jews. And then, on the seventh night of Pesach, the mighty miracle of the Splitting of the Red Sea occurred—and the Jews were saved and the Egyptians were drowned in the sea.

Now we can ask the obvious question here: Why did G-d need all that spectacle? If He wanted to kill the Egyptians, He could have done so as He had done with the Plague of the First-Born, when they all died in their beds. Why all the chaos?

The first explanation comes straight from the verse itself: "And Egypt shall know that I am the L-rd." On top of that, Rashi says on the verse, "For with the thing that they planned was punishment brought upon them": "With water did they intend to destroy them, and they were destroyed with water" (Shmos 18:11), which was middah kneged middah, or poetic justice. Just as they had drowned Jewish babies in the water of Nile River, so too did G-d drown them in the water of the Red Sea.

In a talk on this week's Torah portion, the Rebbe says that "for redemption alone, [leaving Egypt] was not enough. When it is called real redemption? Specifically when the Redemption is in a happy mode."

And so the Rebbe explains at length that this Shabbos is called "Shabbos Shira," the Shabbos of Song, and not "Shabbos Geula," the Shabbos of Redemption from Egypt—because as long as there was no singing and happiness, the redemption was not complete. And therefore, we might add that the reason that G-d did such a huge miracle was because He wanted what would result from such a miracle.

As we know, the reaction of the Jewish Nation to this mighty miracle was the "Shiras HaYam," the Song of the Sea—the first place in the Torah, and the first recorded time regarding the Jewish Nation, that we read about singing. Not only that, but the womenfolk even danced with tambourines.

And so, thus, one of the primary purposes of the Splitting of the Sea was the mighty joy that burst out among the Jewish Nation when they saw "Egypt dead on the shore of the sea."

It's kind of like a major sporting event: When your team gets to the championship and then wins, you see huge outbursts of joy. People dance, drink and run wild for weeks on end out of joy that they won (well, maybe not for weeks on end, in the United States, but you've ever been in Brazil when their national team wins the World Cup... forget it! The entire country turns into one giant conga line for who knows how long).

And that's what happened at the Splitting of the Red Sea: the "victory" inspired in them a joy that the Exodus from Egypt alone didn't succeed in inspiring.

It remains unknown if they had a bit to drink at this event; it's likely that the men didn't have so much trust in G-d that they brought a little bit of liquor along at the Exodus so that they'd have what to say "L'chaim!" on.

But the womenfolk did indeed have that trust in G-d, and so they brought tambourines along at the Exodus. As Rashi says, "The righteous women of the generation were sure that G-d would do miracles for them and so they brought out tambourines from Egypt" (Shmos 15:20). But even if they didn't have any "L'chaim," they certainly experienced an outburst of mighty joy that they never had experienced before.

It often happens that people who pray every day complain that prayer gets boring. It's the same prayers every day! No color, no changes—just the same thing all the time.

But there is one thing about prayer that changes every day: the Shir Shel Yom, the Song of the Day. This is the song that the Levi'im, the Levites, would sing each day in the Beis Hamikdash, the Holy Temple. In the Temple, there was a huge choir of 120 Levi'im, like an orchestra, and when they would bring the Korban Tamid, the daily regular sacrifice, the Levi'im would accompany it with singing and music. The Levi'im would sing a different song every day.

What's interesting is that in the Beis Hamikdash, as is known, there were many things done that we don't do today. For example, they brought animal sacrifices, which we, of course, do not do today—not only that, we are forbidden to bring animal sacrifices today. Also, they would offer up incense, which today is also forbidden in Judaism. And they would light a menorah of seven branches in the Beis Hamikdash every day, while today we only do that on Chanukah and then, with a menorah of eight branches.

Even Temple customs that we keep to this day, like Birkas Kohanim, or the Priestly Blessing, are only kept by people who are Kohanim themselves. In contrast, the Song of the Levi'im has no tradition that is kept only by Levi'im today. Rather, every Jew today recites every day “the song that the Levi'im would chant in the Beis Hamikdash.”

But why was it this custom of all chosen to be a sort of “zeicher l'Mikdash” remembrance of the Temple? Perhaps we can say that it stands to serve as a lesson that every Jew must have his or her own personal “Song of the Day.”

Why is this so? Because leaving one's personal “Egypt,” one's personal boundaries and limitations, can only be done with happiness. Being happy is the most effective way to escape one's personal exile, to leave the worries and problems of daily life. And that's why Chasidim have always had the custom of singing during prayer, and sometimes become so inspired in prayer that they burst into a storm of dancing.

So what's the lesson, my friends? The lesson is that every Jew must sing every day. Praying every day and doing mitzvos every day is not enough. A Jew simply needs to sing the “Song of the Day.”