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Shabbos Shira

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Sponsored by Shimon Aron & Devorah Leah Rosenfeld & Family
In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Beshalach

Shabbos Shira

In Judaism, the holidays don't just have dates, but also have names. For example, the Fifteen of Nissan is called Pesach. The Fifteenth of Tishrei is called Sukkos. Each one has a name.

Shabbosim, on the other hand, generally do not have specific names. They occur every week, and they're just called "Shabbos" and nothing more.

But every general rule has an exception—and thus there are several Shabbosim across the years that have special names. These include:

Shabbos HaGadol. This is the Shabbos immediately before Pesach. It's called Shabbos HaGadol because on the Shabbos before the first Pesach in history, when the Jewish Nation was still in Egypt, a great miracle happened. On that Shabbos, all the Egyptian first-born heard about the impending Plague of the First Born and they staged a revolution against the Pharaoh and his military, demanding that they free the Jewish Nation before they all died. Because of this great miracle of G-d "smiting the Egyptians through their first-born," this Shabbos is called "Shabbos HaGadol," the "Great Shabbos."

Shabbos Shuva. The Shabbos between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is called Shabbos Shuva, the "Shabbos of Repentance"—firstly, because it is the only free-standing Shabbos during the Ten Days of Repentance, and also because the Haftarah that we read on that Shabbos begins with the words, "Shuva Yisrael," or "Return, O Israel." And since the Ten Days of Repentance are a time for teshuvah, repentance, the Shabbos of these ten days is also called Shabbos Shuvah.

Shabbos Zachor. The Shabbos before Purim is called Shabbos Zachor, the "Shabbos of Remembrance." You might recognize the word "Zachor"—you'll see it in virtually every Holocaust museum, - "Remember" regarding remembering what happened in the Holocaust. Where does the concept of "Zachor" come from? The Torah states, "Z'chor eis asher asa l'cha Amalek"—"Remember that which Amalek did to you." There is a mitzvah incumbent on every Jew to remember how the nation of Amalek attacked the Jewish Nation on their way out of Egypt—and it is this portion of the Torah commanding us to remember Amalek's deed that we read on the Shabbos before Purim, since the evil Haman was a descendant of Amalek. And so that Shabbos is called Shabbos Zachor.

Shabbos Chazon. The Shabbos before Tisha B'Av is called Shabbos Chazon, the "Shabbos of Vision," because on that Shabbos, we read the Haftarah which opens with the following words: "Chazon Yeshayahu," the vision of the prophet Yeshayahu (Isaiah), in which he envisions the destruction of Jerusalem and the Holy Temple. And Chasidic philosophy teaches that G-d shows every Jew a "vision" of the Holy Temple during this Shabbos, and so it is called "Shabbos Chazon."

Shabbos Nachamu. The Shabbos after Tisha B'Av is called Shabbos Nachamu, since the Haftarah read on that Shabbos opens with the words "Nachamu, nachamu, ami"—"Be consoled, be consoled, My Nation." And since we mourn the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash, the Temple, on Tisha B'Av, thus after Tisha B'Av we thirst for a bit of consolation, and so we call that Shabbos "Shabbos Nachamu."

Now, what all these Shabbosim have in common is that they have special names—that they are all connected to the holidays that come right before or after. (Even Shabbos Shekalim, Shabbos Parah and Shabbos HaChodesh—which we did not discuss—are also connected to holidays.)

But there is one Shabbos in the middle of the winter that isn't connected to any holiday and still has a special name. This is this very Shabbos, which is also known as "Shabbos Shirah," the Shabbos of Song.

This Shabbos, we read in the Torah the "Shiras HaYam," the Song of the Sea, which describes the mighty miracle of the Splitting of the Sea, after which Moshe and the Jewish Nation sang and praised G-d for the great miracle. In the physical Torah scroll itself, the Song is not written in straight lines like the rest of the portion but rather, in a unique typographical layout more appropriate for poetry, not the writing of a story.

Thus, this Shabbos is called "Shabbos Shirah."

The Rebbe asks: but there's another portion in the Torah that contains a Shirah, a song of praise! Almost at the very end of the Book of Devarim, Deuteronomy, there's the Torah portion of Haazinu, which is also known as "Shiras Haazinu," the Song of Haazinu. This is a song, a poem, in which Moshe Rabbeinu provides an overview on all of Jewish history. And there, too, the physical Torah scroll is written not in straight lines but in a certain poetry format, a similar format to which Shiras HaYam is written: two columns along the entire height of the page. And if so, asks the Rebbe, why is this Shabbos called Shabbos Shirah? Seemingly, the Shabbos on which we read Shiras Haazinu is more fitting to be called Shabbos Shirah?

What's more, in this week's parshah, the Shirah is only a small portion of the parshah—18 verses out of a total of 116, to be exact. On the other hand, Parshas Haazinu is almost entirely one long Shirah—so why is specifically this Shabbos called Shabbos Shira and not the Shabbos on which we read Parshas Haazinu?

So we must say that there is something unique about this week's Shirah that isn't found in any other Shirah—something unique in whose merit specifically this Shabbos, and not any other Shabbos, is called Shabbos Shirah.

The Rebbe says: At the end of the Shirah in our Torah portion, we read yet another Shirah that isn't found in either the Shirah of Haazinu (or the "Shiras Ha'B'eir" in the Torah portion of Chukas.) After the Shiras Hayam concluded, we read, "And Miriam the prophetess... took the tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing" (Shmos 16:20). Here, something unusual develops. The Torah tells us that the Jewish womenfolk participated actively in the Shirah, not just as spectators. And not only that, but they even brought out the tambourines which they had brought with them from Egypt, drumming and singing along in praise of the miracles.

But behind this "Song of the Women" there lurks a story of faith.

The Midrash tells us that that the menfolk of the Jewish Nation in Egypt had despaired due to the exile. They didn't believe that they'd ever leave this "House of Slaves" called Egypt, and so they didn't want to have any kids. Why bring kids into a world of slavery? But it was specifically the women who didn't give up; they wanted to get married and build families and bear children.

And so the entire Exodus from Egypt was in the merit of the womenfolk. If not for the faith and optimism of the women, there'd be no one to take out of Egypt.

And therefore, in order to emphasize the strength of the women, it is specifically this Shabbos that is called “Shabbos Shirah”—to remember and remind that the hope of the Jewish Nation, from time immemorial to this very day, depends primarily on the women.

It was in the merit of the upright women that our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt—and it is in their merit that we will be redeemed once again.

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