

## **Searching for Holiness: The Song of the Sea in the Bible and in the Liturgy**

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*Great is the power of prayer. For to worship is to expand the presence of God in the world. God is transcendent, but our worship makes Him immanent.*<sup>2</sup>

Prayer is the search for holiness. That is, when we pray, we seek to bring God's divine presence into our daily experience. Many people are familiar with this idea as expressed in the rules and philosophy of prayer, but many fewer understand how it is expressed in the actual liturgical texts of prayer. This essay examines one example of this theme, in the prayer *Az Yashir*, also known as *Shirat Ha-yam*, the Song of the Sea.<sup>3</sup> It is hoped that a literary-theological analysis of the Song of the Sea in its biblical and liturgical settings will inspire a personal connection between this ancient poem and its modern daily readers, and thus enhance the experience of sanctity for those who recite this prayer.

### **The “Verses of Praise” and the Daily Prayer Service**

The Song of the Sea is part of the section of the liturgy known as *Pesukei D'zimra*, or “Verses of Praise.” The Talmud teaches that “a person should first recount the praise of God, and then pray” (B. Berakhot 32b). The rabbis instituted *Pesukei D'zimra* to prepare the individual for the recitation of the central elements of the daily prayer

service—the Shema and the Amidah—by focusing one’s thoughts on the Divine and the contemplation of God’s glory. Before we can ask God to grant our needs and requests, we must enter the proper state of mind by thinking about, and praising, God.

The broad theme of these selections is praise of God for creation of the splendid and orderly natural universe. Pesukei D’zimra begins with the introductory blessing popularly called Barukh She-amar, which includes ten praises of God, each beginning with the word *barukh* (“blessed”).<sup>4</sup> The prayer itself explains its goal, as follows: we intend to praise God through the songs of David (*u-v’shirei David avdekha, n’hallel’kha Adonai eloheinu*). Indeed, the core passages that follow are the six final chapters of the book of Psalms—Psalm 145, commonly known as the Ashrei (“praiseworthy are those...”),<sup>5</sup> and Psalms 146–150, the *halleluyah*-psalms.<sup>6</sup> The remainder of Pesukei D’zimra is mostly composed of passages from the Bible that are also traditionally attributed to David, from the book of Psalms and elsewhere. Pesukei D’zimra then concludes with the blessing of Yishtabah (“May [Your name] be praised”), which enumerates fifteen words of praise and fifteen expressions of glorification of God.

The Song of the Sea stands out from most other selections in Pesukei D’zimra because it is not attributed to David.<sup>7</sup> It is a song found in the biblical book of Exodus, a song recited by the Israelites after they crossed the Sea of Reeds and their Egyptian pursuers were defeated. Why is this song, which begins with the words “Then Moses and Israel sang,” included in the category of the songs of David? What was the motivation for including this passage, and the verses that precede and follow it, in the Pesukei D’zimra section of the service?

In order to answer these questions we must consider the significance of the Song of the Sea in its biblical context.

### The Biblical Significance of Shirat Ha-yam

The structure and themes of the book of Exodus, based on a plain-sense reading of the biblical account, is as follows:

#### Book of Exodus: Part 1

1–14	Oppression and Exodus
15:1–21	<b>Song of the Sea</b>

#### Book of Exodus: Part 2

15:22–17:16	Journey begins
18–24	Revelation at Sinai
25–31	Commandment to build the tabernacle
32–34	Sin of the golden calf
35–40	Construction of the tabernacle

On the simplest level, Shirat Ha-yam marks a turning point, the end of the period of the Exodus. The time of oppression and miraculous salvation are over (chapters 1–15:21), and the journey through the wilderness toward the land of Canaan has begun (chapters 15:22ff.). Thus, Shirat Ha-yam is the demarcation line between Part 1 and Part 2 of the book of Exodus. In this sense, it is similar to Song of Deborah (Judges 5), which marks the completion of the conquest of Canaan.

On a deeper, level, however, Shirat Ha-yam is the key to understanding the entire structure of the book of Exodus. Analysis of the passage helps clarify the very nature of the book.

A disagreement regarding the overall theme and purpose of the book of Exodus dates back to the rabbinic period. Is Exodus a book that tells the story of a nation of slaves who are liberated, enter a covenant with God, and, in a culminating crescendo, build a sanctuary in which to serve God? Or is it the story of a nation liberated by God and blessed with divine revelation that then falters by succumbing to idol worship, so that God must command the construction of a sanctuary to fulfill their need for physical worship?

This divergence in opinion reflects two different views as to the actual chronology of events in the narrative. According to the sequence described in the book, and assumed by the thirteenth-century Spanish exegete Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (among others), God commanded Moses to construct the tabernacle (*mishkan*) immediately following the revelation at Sinai. According to this understanding, it had always been God's intention to have a tabernacle at Sinai and to dwell among the people.<sup>8</sup> The people then sinned with the golden calf, and the Torah therefore reiterates that the command to build the tabernacle was nonetheless fulfilled.

The midrash, however, as well as many of the classical commentators (such as the sixteenth-century Italian exegete Obadiah Sforno),<sup>9</sup> assumes that this is one example of the principle *ein mukdam u-me'uhar ba-torah*, that the Torah is not necessarily written in chronological order. In fact, the sages argued, the command to build the tabernacle followed the sin of the golden calf; it was only in response to the sin that the concept of the tabernacle was introduced at all.<sup>10</sup>

There is an indication in the text that the book of Exodus records events in their actual sequence—and we can appreciate this through careful study of Shirat Ha-yam. Immediately after the liberation from Egypt, after witnessing their salvation from the Egyptians at the Sea of Reeds, Moses and the people pause to reflect on the new era of history unfolding before them. At this juncture, the Israelites express their heartfelt desire to embrace God in sacred space, proclaiming: *zeh Eili v'anveihu*, usually translated as “This is my God, whom I shall glorify” (Exodus 15:2). Targum Onkelos, however, explains the word *v'anveihu* as deriving from the word *navveh*, habitation: “This is my God, for whom I shall build a sanctuary.” The twelfth-century Spanish exegete Abraham ibn Ezra elaborates: “This is my God, and I wish to make a habitation wherein God can dwell with me forever.”<sup>11</sup>

At the conclusion of the song, the nation lodges the same request: “You will bring them and plant them in the mountain of Your inheritance, the place You made to dwell in, O Eternal, the sanctuary,

my Sovereign, that Your hands established” (15:17). When the Israelites are finally planted in the land of Israel, they will build a permanent structure in God’s honor. Shirat Ha-yam begins and ends with the same theme: the Israelites desire a physical location at which they can experience God’s presence on earth. Scholars have noted that this theme is prominent in ancient Near Eastern texts as well, where songs often express a desire to build temples to the gods. For example, the Babylonian creation epic *Enuma Elish* culminates with the building of a temple for Marduk, and the Ugaritic *Baal-Yam* texts describe the construction of a palace for Baal following his victory over Yam. Thus Shirat Ha-yam, which proclaims the sovereignty of the God of Israel, asks that a temple be built to God’s name.

This desire to build a shrine for God is implicit elsewhere in the song as well. Whereas the first eleven verses of the song celebrate God’s salvation of Israel at the Sea of Reeds, verse 12 introduces the theme of God’s holiness, in addition to the theme of divine power: “Who is like You among the heavenly powers, Eternal One! Who is like You, mighty in holiness (*nedar ba-kodesh*).” Similarly, in verse 13, God is not only the victorious warrior but also the redeemer who guides Israel to the divine destination of holiness: “You have led with might to Your holy abode (*n’veih kodshekha*).” Ibn Ezra asserts that the “holy abode” referred to here is Mount Sinai: the Israelites praise God for leading them to the site of revelation. This explanation is in fact quite logical, given the location of this praise in the song: it occurs after the description of the events at the Sea and before the description of the Canaanite nations’ fear of conquest. If the nation’s desire for *v’anveihu* (verse 2) is their wish to enshrine God on earth, we might argue that the hope expressed in the song is similarly to build the *mishkan*, the tabernacle, at Mount Sinai.

Israel desired a sanctuary, a sacred place, and God responded by commanding the building of the tabernacle—not as a concession to human frailty, but as a response to the Jewish people’s desire for nearness to God, as expressed in Shirat Ha-yam. This indicates that

the final 16 chapters of Exodus, the complex and detailed enterprise of building the tabernacle, had always been part of the divine plan, to have the people create an abode for God's presence in the wilderness. Perhaps the tabernacle was a response to the desire for a physical mode of worship, but that desire is not negative. On the contrary: it is the lofty desire to continue to glorify God in a sacred space long after we have concluded singing the song glorifying God's miracles.

### **The Liturgical Context of the Song of the Sea**

With this background in mind, we can understand the function of Shirat Ha-yam as part of Pesukei D'zimra, which consists predominantly of the songs of David. Shirat Ha-yam, the Torah's paradigm for the praise of God as savior, culminates with a request that God invest the divine glory on earth, creating a sacred space for humans to worship God. This is, in fact, the subtext of all of Pesukei D'zimra.

In the Ashkenazic liturgy,<sup>14</sup> Barukh She-amar (the beginning of Pesukei D'zimra) is preceded by Psalm 30 (Mizmor Shir Hanukkat Ha-bayit L'David); according to a prominent rabbinic tradition, this psalm was intended by David to be sung at the dedication of the Temple.<sup>15</sup> In fact, although it was David's son Solomon who would actually build the Temple, one of our primary associations with David is his own desire to build it. It was David who pleaded with God for the opportunity to build a house for divine worship, and when his request was denied, he prepared the plans and materials for its eventual construction.<sup>16</sup>

Pesukei D'zimra continues to praise God, particularly in connection with the divine sanctuary on earth. Hodu, the first passage that follows Barukh She-amar, is a song of thanksgiving composed by David when the portable ark was brought to Jerusalem, in preparation for the ultimate construction of a permanent sanctuary.<sup>17</sup> Psalm 100 (Mizmor L'todah) was recited when one brought a thanksgiving

offering in the Temple upon salvation from a hazardous situation.<sup>18</sup> Psalm 145 (T'hillah L'David), the most important passage in Pesukei D'zimra, is introduced with the words *ashrei yosh'vei veitekha*, "Happy are those who dwell in Your house"—words that are not actually a part of that psalm.<sup>18</sup> The final Halleluyah, the magnificent culminating song of Psalm 150, was recited by pilgrims bringing their first fruits to Jerusalem. It begins, "Praise God in God's holy place (*b'kodsho*)."

Following this psalm, we recite three successive verses from the book of Psalms that each begins with the word *barukh* ("blessed"),<sup>21</sup> which would seem to bring closure to the praise begun in Barukh She-amar, where that word is the central theme. We would expect Pesukei D'zimra to end here, but instead, we move on to the passages of *Va-y'varekh David* ("David blessed the Eternal"),<sup>22</sup> *Attah Hu Adonai L'vadekha* ("You alone are the Eternal"),<sup>23</sup> and Shirat Ha-yam. What are these sections doing here? I suggest that they continue the theme that we have begun through the excerpts from the "songs of David": they mark the historical moments when Israel asked God for sacred space on earth.

At the end of his life, David made Jerusalem the capital of his kingdom and he brought the ark there. Denied the chance to build the Temple himself, he assembled the people and charged them with the task of doing so. The *Va-y'varekh David* passage is David's prayer of thanksgiving, which he recited after concluding his preparations for the Temple that would be built by his son Solomon.

The next section, *Attah Hu Adonai L'vadekha* ("You alone are the Eternal"), is an excerpt from a prayer recited by Ezra, Nehemiah, and their community after the return to Zion. Ezra and Nehemiah summon the people to reaffirm their covenant with God and ask God to help them as they rebuild Jerusalem, with the intent of rebuilding the Temple. Indeed, this gathering culminates with the people's affirming their commitment to the Temple service: "We will not leave the house of our God" (Nehemiah 10:40).

Pesukei D'zimra then continues with Shirat Ha-yam (introduced by Exodus 14:30–31, *Va-yosha Adonai*), which describes, as we have said, the very first request for a sanctuary. The song glorifies God as Israel's savior and asks God to invest the divine presence in a sacred space on earth—a *mishkan* (tabernacle) or *mikdash* (temple).

The opening words of Shirat Ha-yam indicate that this composition was recited in immediate response to the miracles that Israel witnessed at the sea: *Az yashir*, “Then they sang.” The rabbis of the midrash claim that the verb in this verse is actually in future tense and, strictly speaking, should be translated literally as “then they *will* sing.”<sup>24</sup> According to this midrash, this is the song that Moses and the Israelites *will* sing in future, messianic times. Similarly, Rashi writes in his comment to Exodus 15:1: “This is a hint in the Torah to the resurrection.”

Thus, to the rabbis, the significance of the Song of the Sea is not limited exclusively to the episode of the splitting of the sea. Similarly, to the compilers of Pesukei D'zimra, the recitation of Shirat Ha-yam does not simply recall a song of praise that had been sung once upon a time, or a request for God's presence that had been lodged ages ago. Rather, Shirat Ha-yam anticipates messianic times and the future Third Temple; it thus constitutes our own praise of God and our own request for *mikdash Adonai kon'nu yadekha*, “the sanctuary, O Lord, that Your hands established” (Exodus 15:17).

Because of these messianic implications, we conclude our recitation of Shirat Ha-yam with other verses that refer to the ultimate redemption and God's universal sovereignty: “For sovereignty is the Eternal's, and God rules over the nations” (Psalm 22:29); “Saviors shall go up to Mount Zion to judge Mount Esau, and sovereignty shall be the Eternal's” (Obadiah 1:21); “Then the Eternal shall be sovereign over the whole earth; on that day, the Eternal shall be one and God's name shall be one” (Zechariah 14:9).



According to our understanding of the thrust of Shirat Ha-yam, it serves as an appropriate capstone to Pesukei D'zimra: it declares the glory of God, crowns God as our sovereign, and asks God to create sacred space for us on earth.

### **Searching for Holiness: The Song of the Sea in the Bible and in Prayer**

In our prayer service, then, the Song of the Sea plays two key roles. First, it provides the final “verses of praise” for Pesukei D'zimra, concluding our introduction to the formal prayer service (which begins immediately thereafter with the Shema and the Amidah). Second, it provides a model for praising God (on which this entire introductory section of the morning prayer service is based). To understand the Song of the Sea, then, is to understand how the compilers of Pesukei D'zimra conceived of the very act of prayer.<sup>25</sup>

Our reading has shown that Shirat Ha-yam (and thus the very enterprise of prayer itself) is about how to create holiness: how to create an encounter with God on this earth and in our daily lives. This biblical song concludes Pesukei D'zimra because it is not only about creating holiness in an abstract sense, but is about doing so in the most concrete way possible: by building a physical space set aside for encountering God.

The Song of the Sea connects us to a historical moment in which the nation of Israel beseeched God, seeking to create sacred space on earth. Since being granted that privilege, our people has been forced by history to transition from one conception of sacred space to another, and then yet another: from tabernacle to Temple to synagogue. But, through all its various expressions, our quest for holiness endures. We continue through our prayers to encounter God wherever and whenever we are.

## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (1954; rpt. New York: Scribner's, 1983), p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> The history of the liturgical recitation of Shirat Ha-yam is itself a fascinating topic but one that is outside the scope of this essay. Shirat Ha-yam was part of the liturgy in the Temple; it was sung by the Levites on Shabbat afternoons in conjunction with the daily offering, the *korban tamid*. After the destruction of the Second Temple, two different customs developed with respect to the inclusion of Shirat Ha-yam in the prayer service. In Babylonia it was not included in the daily service, and even in geonic times it was sung only on Shabbat and holidays; only much later did it become a fixed part of the daily prayer service. In the land of Israel, however, many customs of the Temple were incorporated into the daily service after its destruction, and Shirat Ha-yam was thus included in Pesukei D'zimra from earliest times. See, e.g., Eliezer Levi, *Torat Ha-t'fillah* (Tel Aviv: Abraham Zioni Publishing House, 1967), pp. 123–125.

<sup>4</sup> In the first line of the prayer Barukh She-amar, the words *barukh hu* are a response to the previous phrase and are therefore not counted as a separate line of praise.

<sup>5</sup> In the prayer service, Psalm 145 is introduced with two verses, Psalms 84:5 and 144:15, both of which begin with the word *ashrei*. Therefore, this prayer is commonly referred to as “the Ashrei.”

<sup>6</sup> These six psalms correspond to the six days of creation. See, e.g., the comment of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in *The Koren Siddur with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary by Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2009), pp. 62, 65. The concept of God as Creator is fused with that of God as Sustainer; God created humanity and continues to care for it. Thus, these passages describe not only the wonders of nature, but also the graciousness of God's nurture. Psalm 147, for example, describes God as the One who not only “counts the stars” and rules the cosmos, but also as the One who “heals the broken-hearted and binds their wounds.”

<sup>7</sup> The passages from Nehemiah 9:6–11, which immediately precede Shirat Ha-yam in Pesukei D'zimra, and the passages from Obadiah 1:21 and Zechariah 14:9, which immediately follow it, are also not attributed to David. We will discuss these passages later in this essay.

<sup>8</sup> See especially Nahmanides' introduction to the book of Exodus.

<sup>9</sup> See especially Sforno's introduction to the Torah, where he discusses the content and purpose of the book of Exodus.

<sup>10</sup> *Midrash Tanhuma*, for example, explains that the golden vessels of the mishkan

serve as an atonement (*kapparah*) for the gold used to construct the golden calf. See *Tanhuma T'rumah* §8. This is also the approach adopted by Rashi, who suggests that the bull brought by Aaron as a sin offering at the dedication of the *misbkan* was intended to atone for the sin of the golden calf. See Rashi on Exodus 29:1, s.v. *par ehad*.

<sup>11</sup> See similarly the comment of Sforno on Exodus 15:2: "I will make a habitation so that God may dwell within us." Compare also the NJPS translation of the verse, "I will enshrine Him." Rashi cites Onkelos' translation and also offers an alternative translation: "From the word *noi*, 'beauty.' I will tell of God's beauty and praise to all people." See also *The Koren Siddur*, p. 80, which translates the phrase as "I will beautify."

<sup>12</sup> Note that this verse uses plant imagery—*titta'eimo* (from the verbal root meaning "to plant")—evoking the concept of rootedness in the land.

<sup>13</sup> Nahum Sarna agrees that this is the most likely interpretation. See *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p. 80. This explanation is substantiated by the description of the journey from Egypt found in Psalm 78:54: "[God] brought them to the border of holiness; this mountain that God's right hand acquired." It is also implicit in the language of God's promise at the burning bush: "When you take the nation out of Egypt, you will worship God on this *mountain*" (Exodus 3:12).

<sup>14</sup> The discussion in this section assumes the sequence of Pesukei D'zimra in Nusah Ashkenaz.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Rashi on Psalm 30:1. See also the comment of the thirteenth-century exegete Rabbi David Kimḥi (Radak) on this verse.

<sup>16</sup> See 2 Samuel 7 and 1 Chronicles 17, 22:5–19.

<sup>17</sup> 1 Chronicles 16:8–34.

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. Rashi on Psalm 100:1.

<sup>19</sup> The words are from Psalm 84:5; cf. note 5 above.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Bikkurim* 4:17.

<sup>21</sup> These three verses are the concluding verses of three of the books of Psalms.

<sup>22</sup> 1 Chronicles 29:10–13.

<sup>23</sup> Nehemiah 9:6–11.

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., Mekhilta D'Rabbi Yishmael, *Shirata* 1 on Exodus 15:1. According to the simple meaning of the biblical text, the word *yasbir* is used here as a reference to the past. In biblical Hebrew, the imperfect *yasbir* can refer to the past or the future, depending on context. Rashi (on Exodus 15:1) offers a third possibility when he explains, "Then—after witnessing the miracles—it occurred to Moses that he should sing."

<sup>25</sup> It has been suggested that the ten words of praise in Barukh She-amar are meant by its composers to evoke the ten times that God "spoke" (*va-yomer*) in the course of creation (Pirkei Avot 5:1); in this regard, see the comment of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in *The Koren Siddur*, p. 65. It has also been suggested

that the fifteen words of praise in *Yishtabah* correspond to the fifteen steps leading to the entrance of the Temple, on which the Levites stood as they sang their hymns (the “songs of ascent,” Psalms 120–134). See *Sefer Abudraham Ha-shalem* (Jerusalem: Even Israel Publishing, 1995), p. 74. See also the discussion in Bernhard Salomon Jacobson, *The Weekday Siddur* (Tel Aviv: Sinai Publishing, 1978), p. 119. *Pesukei D’zimra* can thus be understood as beginning with the praise of God as Creator, and concluding with the praise of God as the One who answers our request for God to dwell on earth.