

Song of the Sea

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

This Shabbat is also called Shabbat Shirah; the Shabbat of the Song, after the Israelites had crossed over and Egypt was finally defeated. Singing plays a vital role in the transmission of tradition and culture. It is the emotional dimension that complements the more rational prose of history and law.

The Torah is not just prose. It is called a song too. It is not just laws and stories. It is a multifaceted and complex celebration of the relationship between God and human beings. Just as a wedding ceremony combines the legal blessings with the romantic, so too the Torah combines the legal and historical with the ecstatic and celebratory. Just as it is normal to record the pain, the complaints and the failures. So too it is to record the joy of delivery and thanks.

Most of us who have studied literature know how important experts with a record of scholarship are. They have mastered the text itself, its background and the processes by which it was composed and transmitted. One would not take an analysis of Shakespeare seriously if the person making it had little academic background in literary analysis. So it is with Torah. People think they can simply look at the text of the Bible and understand it. But one needs to understand the differences between those texts that are meant to be taken literally and those which are poetic, those which require legal conclusions and those which convey moral and ethical messages—and of course two thousand years of commentary and explanation.

The Song of the Sea also emphasizes the participation of everyone. The Women too play their part when Miriam takes them out to dance as well as sing. It is a national expression of joy. Which is why it is written in the Torah in a different format to everything else. And why its style of language uses repetition to create rhythm and emphasis. This song is repeated every single day of the year in the liturgy of the morning service. The Shema gives us the obligations. The Song of the Sea gives us joy. Songs are easy ways of transmitting ideas. Sung around camp fires or as one works or even as lullabies.

The Midrash compares our song here with the Song of Songs, that beautiful poem of Solomon in the Bible that talks about the pains and joys of love between a man and a woman and implies that the song is also a mirror of our relationship with God. All relationships have their moments of pain and joy.

But of course emotion needs to be translated into action. Therefore study is important. Why every service is not just prayer and meditation. It is also a chance to study and learn, because that is the best way of engaging our minds and those of our children. That is why study is as important in Jewish tradition as prayer.