

Song of Victory

Finally the Children of Israel can celebrate their freedom. But they do not get far before Pharaoh has once again changed his mind and, with his army of chariots, is pursuing them. Despair, fear, and a collapse of morale ensue. As we know, God intervenes. The Red Sea divides and they cross safely, but the pursuing army gets caught in the returning waves and is destroyed. The Children of Israel celebrate with a beautiful poetic song that is written in the Torah in a very different style and shape than the texts that surround it.

A similar example of poetry that celebrates a victory is in the Haftarah. This concerns the victory of the Deborah, prophetess and judge, and Barak over Sierra, the Canaanite general and oppressor. In this story, too, water plays a crucial part in sweeping away the enemy. In both cases it is possible to understand the events as Divine Intervention or as natural disasters.

There are always different ways of looking at events. So both are celebrated with poetry, which allows us to understand things on different levels. In the Song of Deborah which is the Haftarah, again there is a full expression of delight at the gory death of Sierra and the decimation of his armies. As here the palpable delight over defeat of Pharaoh's army and the drowning of the ruler.

Should one really delight in the downfall of one's enemies? Particularly if Proverbs 24 says "When your enemy falls do not rejoice"?

We should and do indeed rejoice when our enemies fall. However if it is only rejoicing at destruction that indeed is vain. But if it is a celebration of life and gratitude for survival or simply success in any area, then that is something we should all do.

If the Song of the Sea were just a crass celebration of the Egyptian catastrophe then one might raise an objection. But like the Song of Songs it is just as much a celebration of God and an expression of gratitude that we survived. The fact is that often good things come from bad. A cut to operate may lead to a cure. The Midrash also imagines a scenario in which God silenced the Angels when they wanted to join in the celebrations over the defeat of the Egyptians. God replies, "My creatures are drowning in the sea, and you want to sing too?" Rejoicing is a human response. But its unbridled joy needs to be tempered by regret at unnecessary loss too.