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JEWISH
CONTINUITY

Beshalach - A Song for the Ages

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In memory of Dafna Meir HY'D

SHIRA is not simply a song. *SHIRA* is one of the most pure and beautiful expressions of love, devotion, commitment and accomplishment. Henry Giles, an English preacher in the mid-1800's, wrote: "*A song will outlive all sermons in the memory.*" When there is a need to express something more profound than the simple meaning of spoken words, *SHIRA* begins where words end.

In this week's Parsha we read of a *SHIRA*, a song of songs sung by the fledgling Jewish nation as they saw the mighty Red Sea come crashing down on their Egyptian oppressors. *AZ YASHIR MOSHE U'VNAI YISROEL, It was then that Moshe and the children of Israel sang (Exodus 15:1)*, they were so overcome with joy and elation that there were no words - only *SHIRA*.

Why did the Jewish people wait until crossing the Red Sea to sing *SHIRA*? Why didn't the people burst forth with spontaneous song upon their departure from Egypt, upon tasting freedom for the first time?

Perhaps, the answer can be found in a very strange exchange between Moshe and God. As the Jewish people stood by the banks of the Red Sea, roaring waves in front of them, hostile and vengeful Egyptian army behind them - Moshe lifted his eyes heavenward and began to supplicate for Divine assistance. God responded in a most unusual fashion; "*The Lord said to Moshe, Why do you cry out to me? Speak to the children of Israel and let them travel (Exodus 14:15).*" What does this mean? Who else should Moshe be calling out to? Isn't prayer the most instinctive spiritual response to difficulty and challenge?

Rabbi Meir Simcha HaCohen of Dvinsk (1843-1926) in his work titled *Meshech Chochma* explains that until now the Jewish people had followed Moshe like sheep following a shepherd. Although they often seemed to doubt Moshe's ability and leadership - at the end of the day, he was their shepherd. They believed in him and were prepared to follow him into the sea. It is here that God turned to Moshe and said, "*The people have clearly demonstrated their willingness to follow (they followed you out of Egypt), they must now demonstrate their ability and willingness to take the lead.*"

MAH TITZAK ELAI – "*Why are you praying Moshe? It is not a lack of prayer or supplication that is holding up this process.*"

DABER EL B'NAI YISROEL V'YISAU – "*Tell the people they must go in first and you will follow them.*"

God explains to Moshe, "*I need the nation of Israel to exhibit initiative; I need them to demonstrate that they possess the inner strength to do what is right and take the reins of life even if their leader is not leading the charge. I need them to see that they are not only followers; they can be leaders as well.*" Only a mere seven days out of Egypt and the children of Israel are being asked to exhibit initiative and walk in to the raging sea before Moshe Rabbeinu!

Perhaps, now we can understand why the *SHIRA* could have only occurred after crossing the sea. Rabbi Aharon Soloveitchik zt'l explains: "*SHIRA is appropriate only when one attains a victory—and to be a victor one must actively participate in the struggle*" (*The Warmth and the Light*, Feldheim, p. 129). There was no *SHIRA* upon leaving Egypt because the children of Israel were simply "following." *SHIRA* can only be sung when one has accomplished something of epic proportions. *SHIRA* is the melodic culmination of man's work, toil and struggle. After the Jewish people crossed the Sea of Reeds, they sang *SHIRA*, elated that they had been able to summon and harness the inner strength to walk into the roaring waves, imbued as they were with the hope and belief that God would save them. It was at the sea that they were forced to exhibit initiative. They had to actively participate in the struggle, they had to overcome the natural impulse to run back to the "safety" of Egypt. They had to literally jump into the unknown. This was an accomplishment and life victory of epic proportions. The crossing was an event of such great magnitude that the feelings of the people could not be captured in mere words – they needed the extra emotion and power that only *SHIRA* could provide.

Throughout the journey of life we each encounter our own personal obstacles, challenges and problems. Too often we wait for someone to lead us across the turbulent sea of our troubles into our personal Promised Land. We must learn from our ancestors. If we desire a life of *SHIRA* - a life of accomplishment and fulfillment - we must be willing to take the initiative, actively participate in the struggle and initiate our personal redemption.