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In the past several generations, a literary approach to Tanakh study has engaged both lay and academic Jewish learners; indeed, it is a significant subject in this volume. The thesis of this article is that a literary reading of biblical material found in the daily *liturgy* can similarly infuse our prayers with new levels of meaning and connect these specific prayers to the larger themes and messages of the Siddur.

In this article, I will focus on the prayer of *Az Yashir*, also known as *Shirat ha-Yam* (*The Song of the Sea*, or simply, the *Song*), to demonstrate this methodology.[2] It is hoped that a literary-theological analysis of the *Song* in its biblical and liturgical settings will inspire a personal connection between this ancient poem and its modern daily readers.

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 de-Zimra*, or *verses of praise*. The Talmud teaches (*Berakhot* 32b) that "a person should first recount the praise of God, and then pray." The Rabbis instituted *Pesukei de-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 God and contemplation of His glory. Before we can ask God to grant our needs and requests, we enter the proper state of mind by thinking about Him and praising Him.

The broad theme of these selections is praise of God for creation of the splendid and orderly natural universe. *Pesukei de-Zimra* begins with the introductory blessing of *Barukh she-Amar*, which

includes 10 praises of God, beginning with the word "*Barukh*" —blessed is He—and explains its goal: [3] "*U-ve-shirei David avdekha, nehallelekha Hashem Elokenu*" —we intend to praise God through the songs of David. Indeed, the core passages that follow are the six final chapters of *Sefer Tehillim* (Book of Psalms) —Psalm 145, commonly known as "*Ashrei*," (Praiseworthy are those...)[4] and Psalms 146–150, the "*Hallelukah*s" —corresponding to the six days of creation that we praise.[5] The majority of the remainder of *Pesukei de-Zimra* is also composed of passages from the Bible traditionally attributed to David, from *Tehillim* and elsewhere. *Pesukei de-Zimra* then concludes with the blessing of *Yishtabah* (May Your name be praised), which enumerates 15 words of praise and 15 expressions of glorification of God.

The *Song of the Sea* stands out from most other selections in *Pesukei de-Zimra* because it is not attributed to David.[6] It is a song found in the biblical book of *Shemot*, a song recited by the Israelites after they crossed the Red Sea 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 de-Zimra*?

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

Biblical Significance of the *Song*

The chart below describes the structure and themes of the book of *Shemot* based on a plain-sense reading of the biblical account.

Book of Exodus

Part I

1–14	Oppression and Exodus
15:1–21	***Song of the Sea***

Part 2

15:22–ch. 17	Journey begins
18–24	Revelation at Mt. Sinai
25–31	Commandment to build *Mishkan* (Tabernacle)
32–34	Sin of the Golden Calf
35–40	Construction of the *Mishkan*

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 15:22–40). 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 *Sefer Shemot*. Analysis of the *Song* helps clarify the very nature of this book.

A disagreement regarding the overall theme and purpose of *Sefer Shemot* dates back to the rabbinic period. Is *Shemot* 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 Him? Or is it the story of a nation liberated by God and blessed with divine revelation that then falters in 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 inter alia by the thirteenth-century Spanish exegete Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban), God commanded Moshe regarding the construction of the *Mishkan* immediately following the revelation at Sinai. It had always been God's intention to have a Tabernacle at Sinai and to dwell among the people.[7] The people then sinned with the Golden Calf, and the Torah therefore reiterates that the command to build the *Mishkan* was nonetheless fulfilled.

The Midrash, however, as well as many of the classical commentators such as the sixteenth century Italian exegete R. Obadiah Sforno,[8] assumes that this is one example of the principle "*en mukdam u-me'uhar ba-Torah*" —the Torah is not necessarily written in chronological order. In fact, the Sages argued, the command to build the *Mishkan* followed the sin of the Golden Calf; it was only in response to the sin that the concept of the *Mishkan* was introduced at all.[9]

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 Red Sea, 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: "*zeh E-li ve-anvehu*." Targum Onkelos explains the word *ve-anvehu* as deriving from the word *naveh*, habitation: "This is my God, and I will build a Sanctuary for Him." The twelfth-century Spanish exegete Abraham Ibn Ezra elaborates: "This is my God, and I wish to make Him a habitation wherein He can dwell with me forever."[10]

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 Lord, The Sanctuary, my Sovereign, that Your hands established." When the Israelites are finally planted in the land of Israel,[11] they will build a permanent structure in His honor. *Shirat ha-Yam* thus begins and ends with the same theme: The children of Israel 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 His name.

This desire to build a shrine for God is implicit elsewhere in the *Song* as well. Whereas the first 11 verses of the *Song* celebrate God's salvation of Israel at the Red Sea, verse 12 introduces the theme of God's holiness in addition to that of His power. "Who is like You among the heavenly powers, Lord! Who is like You, mighty in *holiness!*…" Similarly, in verse 13 God is not only the victorious warrior, but also the redeemer who guides Israel to His destination of holiness: "You have led with might to Your *holy abode*." 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—after the description of the events at the Sea and before the description of the Canaanite nations' fear of conquest.[12] If the nation's desire of *ve-anvehu* is their wish to enshrine God on earth, we might argue that the hope expressed in the *Song* is similarly to build the *Mishkan* at Mount Sinai.

Israel desired a Sanctuary, a sacred place, and God responded by commanding the building of the *Mishkan*—not as a concession to human frailty, but as a response to the Jewish people's desire for nearness to Him as expressed in *Shirat ha-Yam*. This indicates that the final 16 chapters of *Sefer Shemot*, the complex and detailed enterprise of building the *Mishkan*, were always part of the plan to create an abode for God's Presence in the wilderness. Perhaps the *Mishkan* 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 conclude singing the song glorifying His 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 de-Zimra*, which are predominantly the songs of David. *Shirat ha-Yam*, the Torah paradigm for the praise of God as Savior, culminates with a request that He invest His glory on earth, that He create a sacred space in which we can worship Him. This is, in fact, the subtext of all of the *Pesukei de-Zimra*.

In the Ashkenazi liturgy,[13] we precede *Barukh she-Amar*, the beginning of *Pesukei de-Zimra*, with *Mizmor Shir Hanukkat ha-Bayit le-David* (Psalm 30); according to a prominent rabbinic tradition this Psalm was intended by David to be sung at the inauguration of the Temple.[14] In fact, although it was David's son Solomon who would actually build the Temple, one of our primary associations with David is his desire to build it. He pleaded with God for the opportunity to build a house for Him, and when he was turned down, he prepared blueprints and materials for the eventual construction.[15]

The *Pesukei de-Zimra* continue to praise God particularly in connection with His sanctuary on earth. *Hodu*, the first passage that follows *Barukh she-Amar*, is a song of thanksgiving composed by David when the ark was brought to Jerusalem, in preparation for the ultimate construction of a *Mikdash*.[16] *Mizmor le-Todah* (Psalm 100) was recited when one brought a thanksgiving offering in the Temple[17] upon salvation from a hazardous situation. Psalm 145 or *Tehillah le-David*, the most important passage in *Pesukei de-Zimra*, is introduced with the words, "*Ashrei yoshevei vetekha*" —"Happy are those who dwell in Your *House,"*[18] although these words are not part of the biblical psalm. The final "*Hallelukah*," the magnificent culminating song of *Tehillim*, Psalm 150, was recited by pilgrims bringing their first fruits to Jerusalem[19]. It begins, "Praise God in His *holy place*."

Following this psalm, we recite three verses from *Tehillim* that begin with the word "*barukh*" —"blessed,"[20] 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 de-Zimra* to end here, but instead, we move on to the passages of "*va-Yevarekh David*"—"David blessed the Lord," "*Attah hu Hashem levadekha*," [21] —"You alone are the Lord," 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 *shirei 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 and brought the ark there. Denied the chance to build the Temple himself, he assembled the people and charged them with the task. In "*va-Yevarekh David*,"[22] he recites a prayer of thanksgiving after concluding his preparations for the Temple that would be built by his son Solomon.

The next section, "*Attah hu Hashem levadekha*,"[23] — "You alone are the Lord" —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 (Nehemiah 10:40) —"We will not leave the house of our God."

We then continue with "*va-Yosha*" and *Shirat ha-Yam*, which describe, as we have said, the very first request for a Sanctuary. The *Song* glorifies God as Israel's Savior and asks Him to invest his Presence in a sacred space on earth—a *Mishkan* or *Mikdash*.

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 note that these words are actually written in future tense and, taken out of context, would be translated literally as, "*Then* they *will* sing."[24] According to this Midrash, this is the song that Moses and the Israelites will sing in messianic times. Similarly, Rashi writes, "This is a hint in the Torah to the Resurrection" (Rashi, Exodus 15:1).

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 de-Zimra* the recitation of *Shirat ha-Yam* did not simply recall a song of praise that was sung once upon a time or a request for God's presence that was lodged ages ago. *Shirat ha-Yam* anticipated messianic times and the Third Temple; it constitutes our own praise of God and our own request for *Mikkedash A-donai konenu yadekha*, The sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands established.

Because of these messianic implications, we conclude our recitation of the *Shirat ha--Yam* with other verses that refer to the ultimate redemption and God's universal sovereignty: For kingship is the Lord's and He rules over the nations" (*Tehillim* 22:29); "Saviors shall go up to Mount Zion to judge Mount Esau, and the kingship shall be the Lord's" (*Obadiah* 1:21); "Then the Lord shall be King over the whole earth; on that day, the Lord shall be one and His name will be one" (*Zechariah* 14:9).

According to our understanding of the thrust of *Shirat ha-Yam*, it serves as an appropriate capstone to *Pesukei de-Zimra*, for it declares the glory of God, crowns Him as our King, and asks Him to create sacred space for us on earth.

Praise and Presence: *The Song of the Sea* in Bible and Prayer

This article has sought to demonstrate that an appreciation of the significance of *Shirat ha-Yam* in its Torah context sheds light on its role in *Pesukei de-Zimra* as well. Indeed, we may go a step further; the narratives of *Sefer Shemot* complete the story of creation in S*efer Bereshit*. The ultimate goal of all of creation is the creation of a space on earth in which God can dwell and we can worship Him. In the Song of the Sea, the nation of Israel—for the first time in its history—sings a song of praise and thanksgiving to God and asks Him for a *naveh, a mishkan, a mikdash*.

Thus, *The Song of the Sea* is the biblical paradigm for the praise of God and provides a literary model for the organization of *Pesukei de-Zimra*. Like *Shirat ha-Yam*, *Pesukei de-Zimra* begins with an appreciation of God's greatness and concludes with the contemplation of His holiness. While *Barukh she-Amar* praises God as the creator and sustainer of the universe and all of humanity, *Yishtabah* praises not only God's greatness, but also His "holiness in heaven and earth."

It has been suggested that the 10 words of praise in *Barukh she-Amar* are meant by its composers to evoke the 10 times that God "spoke" ("*va-yomer*") in the course of Creation (*Avot* 5:1). [25] It has also been suggested that the 15 words of praise in *Yishtabah* correspond to the 15 steps leading to the entrance of the Temple, the steps on which the Levites stood as they sang their hymns—*Shirei ha-Ma'a lot* (Psalms 120–134).[26] *Pesukei de-Zimra* can thus be understood as beginning with the praise of God of Creation and concluding with the praise of God who answers our request for Him to dwell on earth.

In sum, *Shirat ha-Yam* and the passages that precede and follow it invoke our desire for a House of God—the *Mishkan* of the wilderness, the First and Second Temples, the Temple in messianic times—and are therefore a most fitting conclusion for the *Pesukei de-Zimra*. As we move from *Pesukei de-Zimra* to the *Shema* and *Amidah*, we move from individual to communal prayer. At this point, it is appropriate to invoke these historical moments—past and future—in which the nation of Israel prays as a community, seeking to create sacred space on earth. The nature of the sacred space may change, as in the transition from Temple to synagogue, but its significance for Jewish life endures as the culmination of our people's search for holiness.

Notes

[1] The author is grateful to Meira Mintz and Dr. David Shatz for their contributions to earlier drafts of this article.

[2] 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 offering of 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 the destruction, and *Shirat ha-Yam* was thus included in the *Pesukei de-Zimra* from earliest times. See, e.g. Levi, Eliezer, *Torat ha-Tefillah* (Tel Aviv: Abraham Zioni Pub. House, 1967), pp. 123–125.

[3] In the first sentence of the prayer, "*Barukh she-Amar, barukh hu*," the words "*barukh hu*" are a response to the previous phrase and are therefore not counted as a separate line of praise.

[4] In the prayer service, Psalm 145 is introduced with two verses – *Tehillim* 84:5 and 144:15 – both of which begin with the word "*Ashrei*." Therefore, this prayer is commonly referred to as "*Ashrei*."

[5] See e.g. comment of Rabbi Jonathan Saks 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 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 the One who "heals the broken hearted and binds their wounds."

[6] The passages from Nehemiah 9:6–11 which immediately precede *Shirat ha-Yam* in *Pesukei de-Zimra* and the passages from Obadiah 1:21 and Zechariah 14:9 that immediately follow it are also not attributed to David. We will deal with these passages later in this article.

[7] See especially Ramban's introduction to *Sefer Shemot.*

[8] See especially Sforno's introduction to the Torah where he discusses the content and purpose of *Sefer Shemot*.

[9] The *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 Terumah* 8. This is also the approach adopted by the eleventh-century French commentator Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (Rashi), who suggests that the bull brought by Aaron as a sin offering in the dedication of the *Mishkan* was intended to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf. See Rashi on Exodus 29:1.

[10] See similarly the interpretation of Sforno on Exodus 15:2—"I will make a habitation so the He may dwell within us" or *Tanakh, The Traditional Hebrew Text and The New JPS Translation*, Second Edition (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999), which translates: "I will enshrine Him." An alternative translation is "I will glorify." Rashi, after citing Onkelos' translation, brings this alternate explanation: "From the word *noi*—beauty. I will tell of His beauty and praise to all people." See also *The Koren Siddur*, p. 80, which translates "I will beautify."

[11] This verse uses plant imagery—"*titta'emo*"—evoking the concept of rootedness in the land.

[12] Nahum Sarna agrees that this is the most likely interpretation. See The *JPS Torah Commentary, Exodus*, by Nahum M. Sarna (Philadelphia, New York, Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p. 80. This explanation is substantiated by the description of the journey from Egypt in Psalms 78:53–54: "And He brought them to the border of His holiness; this *mountain* that His right hand acquired." It is also implicit in the language of God's promise at the burning bush (Exodus 3:12), "When you take the nation out of Egypt, you will worship God on this *mountain*."

[13] The discussion in this section assumes the sequence of *Pesukei de-Zimra* in Nusah Ashkenaz.

[14] See e.g. Rashi on *Tehillim* 30:1. See also the comment of the thirteenth-century exegete Rabbi David Kimhi (Radak) on this verse.

[15] See II Samuel 7 and I Chronicles 17, 22:5–19.

[16] I Chronicles 16: 8–34.

[17] See e.g. Rashi on *Tehillim* 100:1.

[18] See *Tehillim* 84:5.

[19] See e.g. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Bikkurim* 4:17.

[20] These three verses are the concluding verses of three of the books of *Tehillim*.

[21] Nehemiah 9:6–11.

[22] I Chronicles 29:10–13.

[23] Nehemiah 9:6–11.

[24]See e.g. *Mekhilta* on Exodus 15:1. According to the simple meaning of the biblical text, the future tense is used here as a reference to the past. Rashi (on Exodus 15:1) offers a third possibility when he explains, "Then—after witnessing the miracles—it occurred to Moshe that he should sing."

[25] See comment of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in *The Koren Siddur*, p. 65.

[26] See *Sefer Abudraham ha-Shalem* (Jerusalem: Even Israel Publishing, 1995), p. 74. See also discussion in Jacobson, B.S., *The Weekday Siddur* (Tel Aviv: Sinai Publishing, 1978), p. 119.