Words and Spaces: Thoughts for Parashat Beshallah

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Beshallah

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

This week's Torah reading includes the "shirat hayam," the song sung by Moses and the people of Israel after they miraculously crossed the Sea of Reeds. The Torah scroll presents the song in an unusual formation. Instead of the words following one another in order, the words of the song are interspersed with blank spaces.

This unusual pattern may simply be a stylistic feature emphasizing the poetic qualities of the song. When looking at the Torah scroll, one immediately notices that this section is very different stylistically from the adjoining texts.

However, there also may be a deeper significance. The words record what the Israelites sang; the spaces symbolize what the Israelites felt. The words were full of joy at their redemption from their Egyptian pursuers. The blank spaces reflect the emotions that were too deep for words. How can one find adequate words to thank God for the miraculous salvation? What words can fully express anxieties about the future? The "sounds of silence" are as significant as the verbalized song…maybe even more significant.

Words do not always—perhaps never—fully convey our underlying feelings. The words recited in the Kaddish capture this paradox. We offer lofty words of praise of God, but then chant that God is "le'eyla min kol birkhata, shirata, tishbehata, venehemata de'amiran be'alma," God is supremely exalted beyond all blessings, hymns, praises and consolations of this world. When we pray, we use words; but the silent spaces that underly the words are the real engines of our spirituality.

A Hassidic sage, Reb Simha Bunim, commented on a phrase in our prayer book, describing God as choosing "beshirei zimra," the melodious songs. He interpreted "shirei" as connected to the word "shirayim," not songs but what remains from the songs after the songs are done. The heart still longs to sing beyond what has been sung. "And this is what God chooses most of all."

The more general lesson is that life is characterized by external observances—the words-- but these observances are powered by underlying emotion too deep for words—the silent spaces. If we have words without the wordlessness beneath, then the words tend to be empty. If we have the wordlessness but do not actually articulate the words as best as we can, then our spiritual/emotional lives are stunted.

When we chant the "shirat hayam" we should concentrate on the words and the blank spaces between the words. This is a valuable lesson not only for this song, but for life itself.