

The Song of the Sea

"And all the people saw the sounds, etc." This should be understood in accordance with a parable that I heard from my grandfather. There was once a person who played a musical instrument very beautifully, with great sweetness and pleasantness. Those who heard him [play] were unable to control themselves because of the great sweetness and delight, to the point that they would dance almost to the ceiling because of the great delight, pleasantness, and sweetness. Whoever was closer and could draw himself nearer to hear the instrument would have even greater delight and would dance even more. In the meantime, a deaf person came, who was totally unable to hear the pleasant sounds of the pleasant musical instrument. He only saw the people dancing, and they appeared in his eyes as if they were crazed. He asked himself what is the joy here. In truth, were he wise and had he understood that it is because of the great delight and pleasantness of the sound of the musical instrument, he too would have danced. The moral is obvious. This explains, "And all the people saw the sounds." That is, God, blessed be He, appeared to all of them at once with His Divine light, which they all perceived when they saw the great joy, the angels of hosts dancing (*Shabbat* 88b). They understood that it was because of the sweetness and pleasantness of the light of the holy Torah, and they pressed themselves to hear the sound of the Torah. Even though they had previously been a little deaf, for they had not heard the sounds, they all began to hear. And they had sharp eyes, for they saw the great joy and happiness and they understood that it was certainly the sounds, that is the pleasant sound of the Torah. Even though they did not apprehend the pleasantness of the Torah, they understood by way of the joy that surely it was because of the great pleasantness of the Torah. And therefore they pushed themselves to hear the sound itself, for perhaps they would apprehend and understand the pleasantness of the light of the Torah. And the wise one will understand.

(Degel Machane Ephraim, Yitro)

“From the day that God created the world until this moment, no one had sung praises to God – not Adam after having been created, not Abraham after being delivered from the fiery furnace, not Isaac when he was spared the knife, or Jacob when he escaped from wrestling with an angel and from Esau. But when Israel came to the sea and it parted for them, then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord. And God said, for this I have been waiting.”

(Exodus Rabbah 23:4)

There are two traditions about exactly when Moses, Miriam and the children of Israel sang at the Sea of Reeds. One tradition teaches they sang when they arrived safe and sound at the other shore. The other tradition teaches they sang as they were crossing. They sang in the midst of crossing, even though they did not have the certainty that they would reach the other side. It is our fervent belief that the power of song resides in its capacity to give us strength and hope during our deepest distress and to express our utmost gratitude. It is at Pesah that we experience both of these extremes. During Pesah we focus most intensely on the constricted places in our being, in our communities, in our world to seek a more open expansive vision of ourselves and of our world. It is also at Pesah that we are humbled by the privilege of our freedom.

Halaila Hazeh (This night) is a night of song and praise when all the gates of goodness and light are opened. —

Sefer Toda'ah, Rabbi Avraham Eliyahu Ki Tov (1912-1976)

The commentators ask “what did the song of the sea sound like?”

We have the lyrics,
but the tune?
The melody?
The song?
Why was it not transmitted?

Why the slavish service to the logos? The word?
And the music?
What happened to the music?

Why forget the song?
So long waited for?
What is the word without the song?
A relic.

Then we are told
There will be a new song
One day
Messianic
Visions.

But for now
In the long exile
We are condemned
To live without
No song

No music
No timbre

Just black ink
On white parchment
Page after page
Running into each other
In a sea of ink
What about the spaces in between
Have they no meaning
No music?
No song?

We must be content
For now
In an unredeemed world
With the silence of these spaces
Between the words and the letters
A screaming silence.

In the tremendum there was no song
Only Beethoven sounded at the gates to hell
Music belonged to the victors
In an effort to assuage conscience
Marching military bands
Royal tattoos
Under red Nazi banners
In torch lit stadiums
And Munich Platz
Music to march to
In formation
Military music
To march to.

I listen to the Bach C# minor fugue
And cannot comprehend
The disconnect between aesthetics and the ethical
Our failed modernity
Our placing concepts before life
Our allowing the end to justify the means
The texts that terrorize us
The beliefs that torment us
The fundamentals we hold so dear
In the fugue I hear him
Warning us
That mathematical perfection

Comes with a price
And only in the absence
The failure
Do we remain humble.

We have lost the song
The sound of music
And are bereft with the text alone
In its fundamentals
The accompanying maiden
Is missing
We yearn for that "new Song"