

Because He Has a Song Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer

ב"ה

Parshat B'shallah

This Shabbat, the Shabbat on which we read the Torah Portion of *B'shallah*, is called *Shabbat Shirah*, the Shabbat of Song, for the Song at the Sea (which we sang at the shore of the Border-Sea to celebrate our deliverance from slavery in Mitzrayim) is part of this Torah Portion. On this Shabbat of Song, then, let us speak of songs.

When do we sing? More to the point, when do we not sing? We do not sing when we are tired, when we are afraid, when we are complacent, when we despair, when we have just finished a heavy meal. We sing the blues when we despair, you say? No; the blues are songs of deep sadness, but they are songs of lament, not of despair. In real despair, there is nothing left to say, and one in real despair does not sing, not even the blues.

When, then, do we sing? We sing a lament when we are lonesome, especially when we pine for an absent loved one. We sing the blues when we are sad. We sing when we strive to reach a goal. We sing for joy, we sing in celebration, and we sing in prayer.

There is a midrash that tells of ten great songs in the religious history of the Jewish people. Nine of them are found in Scripture: the song we sang on the night of the Exodus (of which we read in Isaiah 30:29), the Song at the Sea (Exodus 15:1-21), the Song at the Well (Numbers 21:17-20), Moses' song upon his completion of writing the Torah (Deuteronomy 31-32) the song with which Joshua stopped the sun (Joshua 10:12-13), Deborah's song (Judges 5), King David's song (II Samuel 22), the song of dedication of the Holy Temple (Psalms 30), and the Song of Songs, which is of Solomon. Songs of prayer, songs of exaltation and exultation, songs of praise, songs of joy, songs of war, songs of celebration, songs of love. The tenth song, says the midrash, will be the *shir hadash*, the new song that we and all the world will sing at the ultimate redemption, the redemption that is global and absolute and total, the redemption that will end all suffering, ignorance, jealousy, and hatred throughout the universe, the redemption that will be of such great proportions that the yearning it evokes and the joy it brings will require a new song, a completely new musical vocabulary, to capture the voice of Creation's ultimate striving.

All these are great songs; all these are holy songs; all these are songs of immense spiritual power. But the greatest song of all – the song of which the midrash does not speak – is a far smaller song. It is the song of the songbird. Why does the bird sing? His (and it is typically only the male bird who sings; please do not shoot the messenger) song is a part of his mating ritual, and his song tells other birds of his species that this territory is occupied. But those are only the effects of the song, not its cause and not its reason. Why does the bird sing? He sings not because he has something to say; he sings because he has a song!

Shabbat Shalom.