Beshalach: The Shirah, *kol isha*, and women's equality

By Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

In the sidrah *Beshalach* we find Miriam leading the women in a victory celebration of song and dance for the nation's deliverance at the Red Sea (Ex. 15:20). The introductory words of the Shirah she leads are almost identical to those composed by Moses for the menfolk to sing:

> *Ashirah laShem ki ga'o ga'ah, sus v'rochvo ramah vayam* – 'I shall sing to the Lord for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has hurled into the sea' (15:1).

Miriam, on the other hand, changes those opening words into an exhortation to the women to sing that thanksgiving song:

> ***Shiru laShem*** *ki ga'oh ga'ah, sus v'rochvo ramah va-yam* – **'*Sing*** to the Lord for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has hurled into the sea' (v. 21).

We may well wonder what happened to the rest of Miriam's song! Surely, while the women were dancing, singing, and playing their timbrels, they would have got bored with reciting repeatedly just the single opening verse quoted in relation to her! Furthermore, if, as stated, Moses invited the men to join him in either repeating the song verse-by-verse after him or singing its alternate verses, the odds are that Miriam and the Israelite women would have done the same. We may assume, then, that, in respect of the women, the Torah did not bother to repeat the words of that lengthy

song, although such lengthy repetitions are not unknown, as with the account of Eliezer repeating almost verbatim his experiences on his way to Laban's home (Gen. 24:1-26 and 34-48), the repetition of the identical sacrificial ritual performed by each of the twelve princes at the dedication of the desert sanctuary (Nu. 7:1-99), and the book of Devarim, with its lengthy retrospect of the experiences of the nation over the previous forty years.

The use of the introductory phrase - ***Vata'an*** *lahem Miriam* – 'And Miriam *responded* to them,' seems to indicate that, following the men's choral response to each verse sung by Moses, Miriam and the women followed suit and sang aloud the identical response. This is reinforced by the use of the masculine form – 'Miriam responded to them (*lahem*).' Do I hear some indignant shouts of *kol isha* – surely not a woman's voice?!! *Oi!!* Well, that was certainly the way R. Eleazar (quoted in Midrash *Mishle,* sec.14), followed by R. Samson Raphael Hirsch (Commentary to Ex. 15:21), understood the text!

As expected, some other commentators could not accept that such intermingling of male and female voices occurred, notwithstanding that, before long (See Nu. ch.25), the Israelites were 'committing harlotries with the daughters of Moab!' That purist consideration led them to emphasize the different verbs use to describe the respective choral participation of the men and the women. Whereas, in the case of the men, the regular verb *yashir* ('sang') is used, in the case of the women we find *vata'an* which R. Zalman Sorotzkin (Ukraine, 1881-1966), in his *Oznaim La-Torah*, interprets in the

nuanced sense of merely ‘offering a response,’ by way of nodding their approval to what the men were singing.

I would suggest, however, that there are two objections to such a distinction: First, that, in direct speech, Miriam clearly instructs the women to ‘sing’ - *Shiru laShem*! Rashi (basing himself on the *Mechilta*) attempts to overcome the problem of women singing at the same time as men by suggesting that Moses led the men separately from Miriam and the women. However, this does not overcome the problem of the use of the masculine form, *lahem*, that she followed on from the men. Secondly, the verb *a-n-h* – the root of the word *vata’an* – is found countless times throughout the *TaNACh* as a straightforward synonym for the verb *lashir*, ‘to sing’, or ‘to sing responsively’! Hence, ***vata’an****enah ha-nashim,* ‘And the women sang’ (I Sam. 18:7, 21:12, 29:5; Nu.21:17; Jer. 51:14; Ps. 147:7, *et al*.).

We may wonder why it was only the women who played timbrels to the accompaniment of their singing. After all, from the early biblical period, a variety of musical instruments were regularly played by men as an accompaniment to worship, such as the priests who blew the trumpets ceremonially on several occasions, in addition to their use to summon the congregation (see Nu.10:2-3, 4, 7, 8; 31:6; Ezr. 3:10, *et al*.). Thus, the final (150th) psalm calls upon everyone to

Praise God in His sanctuary
In the firmament of His power,
Praise Him for His unique deeds
For being our rock and tower;
Praise Him with trumpet sound
With harp and lyre,
Praise Him with timbrel

With dance and choir;
Praise Him with string and flute
With cymbals clashing loud,
With all means of percussion
Amid the assembled crowd.
(Transl. from my *The Book of Psalms:Poetry in Poetry*, Wipf @ Stock, p.239)

So, given that, on the evidence of the psalmist, the timbrel was one of the instruments that the men would have been expected to play, it is curious that they didn't do so at that celebration of the safe passage through the Red Sea! Possibly, unlike the women, the men did not regard musical instruments as a priority for what they were able to carry on their backs as they left Egypt in haste.

R. Kalonymos Kalman Epstein (18th cent. Polish commentator and Kabbalist), author of *Ma'or Va-Shemesh*, views the dance of the women as reflecting their loftier level of spiritual perception.

He points out that Moses did not prescribe dancing, merely a responsive, poetically structured, lyrical composition. That contrived structuring is reflected in the way the Shirah is set out in the Sefer Torah in the shape of the bricks of a wall, with one brick bridging the join of the two bricks on the line below. The men were, symbolically, 'wall-like,' rigid, stiff, and self-conscious.

When Miriam led the women in celebration, on the other hand, they all instinctively joined hands and created a circle for dancing. It was not merely the voice that offered praise; it was the entire body in a symbolic demonstration of total unity with God and in an uninhibited outpouring of ecstatic spiritual joy and rhythmic movement. This is

evocative of the psalm-verse, '*All my bones* shall declare – *Hashem mi chamocha* - "Lord who is like unto you"' (Ps. 35:10), the latter phrase of which occurs twice in the Shirah.

Rav Kalonymos views the women's circle as a mystical expression of equality. In a circle, all points on the circumference are equidistant from the centre point. The centre point is God, at the epicentre of His universe. In the world we inhabit there are hierarchies, tensions, and competitiveness between the sexes and between the various echelons of wealth and rank. And even in matters of spirituality, men tend to dominate and to impose a passive role on women.

But, Rav Kalonymos asserts that that is not God's ultimate plan, and that there would come a time when all would receive His light in equal measure, and spiritual inequalities would vanish, as symbolised by the circle that Miriam initiated for the women.

That same idea is reflected in the Haftarah, where the judge and prophetess Devorah makes herself indispensable to both the physical and the spiritual security of the nation. The Israelite general, Barak ben Avinoam, approaches her and craves her presence at the battle against the Canaanites, to guarantee the Israelites victory. She agrees but tells him that this would result in the glory being ultimately credited to her spiritual influence.

Significantly, her famous victory song is introduced by the phrase, ‘Then Devorah *and* Barak ben Avinoam sang on that day’ (Ju. 5:1), with no reference to them – or the people - singing independently!

At the present time, with many women immersing themselves in Torah study at seminaries and occupying academic posts in Jewish Studies, that ideal of spiritual equality is well on the way to being realised. Perhaps it is no accident that most words for wisdom, learning and religious practice are feminine: *Torah, chochmah, binah, da’at, tevunah, eitzah, toshi’ah, mitzvah, halachah, mishnah* and *Gemara.*
With women serving as equals of men in the Israeli Defence Forces, in the Kneset, and in almost every other walk of life, as well as in representative communal bodies, such as synagogues and security organisations of Jewish communities around the world, their indispensable contribution to Jewish life cannot be denied, and, indeed, should be welcomed and acclaimed.

Shabbat shalom,

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