

Beshalach: Az Yashir

- Rabbi David Gutterman, of the Federation of Philadelphia, gives an excellent analysis of the word "az" a word denoting hope and faith.

The Wizard of AZ

The British diplomat and author, Harold Nicholson once said, "I so loathe anti-Semitism, but I so dislike the Jews." Last week, the Egyptian Pharaoh resigned himself to the Jews' leaving his country. This week, in a classic inversion, he exhibits what Forbes Magazine once termed "seller's remorse," and bemoans that fact. And he sets out in hot pursuit.

The Jews are faced with the challenge of the Sea in front of them and the Egyptian third army, so to speak, behind them. These Egyptians are well equipped. They are pursuing the Jews with heavy chariots - the T80 Russian tanks of the day.

Ultimately, redemption is apace and the Jewish people cross to safety. And their response? They begin to sing. This fact and this song - famously called the Shira, the "song" par excellence, is the reason that this Shabbat is called, Shabbat Shira - the Sabbath of Song.

Moses leads the people in this 18-line song destined for number one status on the charts. The lyrics are introduced with: "Az yashir Moshe." Note well that this phrase literally translates in the future tense: "then Moses will sing..." And, by the way, this "song" is recited every day in the morning service in every synagogue, temple, beit k'neset and shul in the world. It has even more staying power than Dick Clark himself.

But it is the introductory phrase which fascinates me. This may seem a tad esoteric. Stay with me and I assure you that it is one of the most pragmatic and pertinent of Jewish messages that needs to be said or sung. Allow me to give an illustration from modern Hebrew usage.

Anyone who has been to Israel, who has Israeli relatives, or for that matter speaks the language, will recognize one of the most over-used and hackneyed expressions - and it too begins with az. The expression is az mah. Roughly translated as, so what.

Follow these scenarios. Your 12-year-old kid wants to go to a party without parental supervision - you object and he responds, 'az mah - who cares - I'm going anyway.' You ask your husband to do some shopping and he objects, and you respond, 'az mah - who cares - so there won't be any food to eat this week.' The Israeli government is now facing a hostile Palestinian regime, they might respond, 'az mah - who cares - the previous one wasn't much better.' You get the point. Though az literally means, then, it introduces an attitude, and one that is often writ large. But what type of attitude? The modern and often sarcastic one, or something more refined - yes, with an edge, but hopeful nonetheless?

Teaches the Sage, Rabbi Yehuda ben Pazzi: "The word az is really sign language for faith." The future redemption of our people depends upon, and indeed, will be introduced by this short word.

Why is this a word that speaks to our future, of our strength and about our redemption?

It is precisely because it bespeaks an attitude. It is an attitude that declares our indomitable faith...a sort of, in-the-face-of. Even when there is the sea in front of us and the tanks behind us - az yashir – we will yet sing. Even when our Jewish values are not always the norm, az yashir, we may struggle but ultimately we will yet sing. It's an attitude that denotes our stubborn commitment - no matter how seemingly inscrutable the circumstances are at home here or at home in Israel - to our sense of peoplehood and mission. Az yashir - we will yet sing.

In a remarkable essay, Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks writes: "I am proud to be part of a people who, though scarred and traumatized, never lost their humor or their faith; their ability to laugh at present troubles and still believe in ultimate redemption; who saw human history as a journey and never stopped traveling and searching."

All this from one small word. It gives us the ability to sing and to be stubborn; to struggle and to prevail; to survive and to thrive. Simply put, this is our Wizard -of- Az.

Shabbat Shalom

David

(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)