

What a tense, exciting scene we have in today's Torah reading. The Israelites have finally been told that they can, or rather should, leave Egypt after the tenth plague. Now they stand at the shore of the *Yam Suf*, which should be correctly translated as "Reed Sea", and they become aware that Pharaoh's army is chasing them.

They ask Moses, "Were there not enough graves in Egypt, that you had to bring us out here into this wilderness to die? We were better off serving as slaves in Egypt!" Moses answers, "Do not fear, God will fight for you!" He lifts his staff over the waters, and they part in a pathway for the Israelites.

When the Israelites have crossed, the Egyptian chariots and horsemen enter the path. As the heavy chariots become bogged down, Moses lifts his staff again over the waters, and they close in over the Egyptian army. The Israelites chanted a song of jubilation over their narrow escape from death at the hands of Pharaoh.

In this "*Shirat HaYam*", the "Song of the Sea", God is given credit for this miracle. Scholars tell us that this is one of the oldest pieces of poetry in the Hebrew Bible, and it appears in the *Torah* scroll like overlapping bricks, the way we see it in our *Chumash* on pages 270 through 273. There is also a special melody that is used to chant certain verses, [chant] and the *Sefardim* chant the entire poem in a beautiful melody. [chant]

There are many sections of Biblical text that are taken verbatim into the *Siddur*, such as the *V'havta* and *V'sham'ru*. This *Shirat HaYam* appears near the end of the Preliminary Service each morning, and some congregations chant part or all of it.

This text is also the source of some more common pieces of our liturgy, and of one verse that is less common but powerful in content. In the middle of the Song of the Sea we find the well-known verse "*Mi Chamocha*". This sentence, Exodus 15:11, has been quoted from today's *Torah* Portion into every evening and morning service, and it was chanted just before the *Amidah* a few minutes ago.

Another congregational response that goes along with *Mi Chamocha* is "*HaShem Yimloch*", "God will reign forever". This is the last line of *Shirat HaYam*, Exodus 15:18, and it appears not only in our Jewish liturgy but also in many Christian liturgies.

The other verse quoted from the Song of the Sea is Exodus 15:2a, "*Ozi v'Zimrat Yah*", meaning "God is my strength and my song". This half-verse from the *Torah* also appears in Psalm 118:14, but the *Torah* version is the older source of the Psalm verse. We chant this verse in the Psalms of *Hallel* on Festivals, *Rosh Chodesh* and *Hanukkah*, using a very beautiful melody [chant], and it also has a powerful Yemenite melody. [sing]

These verses, and the "Song of the Sea" in general, are a good example of how the power of music can reinforce the emotions connected with an event. The Israelites' fear of recapture followed by the exultation of their successful escape from Pharaoh echoes in these songs over 3,000 years later, and that is why these verses entered our liturgy.

Last year the prolific Jewish composer Debbie Friedman passed away after years of fighting a chronic disease. She was a pioneering feminist, using her gift of music to look at many aspects of our Biblical and liturgical texts in new ways. Picking up on two verses after the Song of the Sea where Miriam also leads the Israelite women in a song of praise, Debbie presented the emotions of joy and gratitude to God in this song: [*Miriam's Song*]

Debbie Friedman

When Miriam stood upon the shore and gazed across the sea,

The wonder of this miracle she soon came to believe.

"Whoever thought the sea would part with an outstretched hand

And we would pass to freedom and march to the Promised Land."

Chorus: And the women dancing with their timbrels

Followed Miriam as she sang her song;

"Sing a song to the One whom we've exalted"

Miriam and the women sang and danced the whole night long.

And Miriam, the Prophet, took her timbrel in her hand,

And all the women followed her, just as she had planned.

And Miriam raised her voice in song, she sang with praise and might,

"We've just lived through a miracle, we're going to dance tonight."