

THE SOUND OF MUSIC: A PHONETIC ANALYSIS OF *SHIRAT HA-YAM*

ALEX MAGED

After the Israelites cross the Sea of Reeds and watch their former masters, the Egyptians, drown within it, they erupt in *shirat ha-yam*, i.e. “the Song of the Sea.” Both the lyrics of this song and the narrative which surrounds them offer us prime examples of the ways in which the Bible carefully cascades its language to express multiple layers of meaning simultaneously. We shall divide our analysis of this phenomenon into two overlapping units: (a) *shirat ha-yam* along with the story that precedes it – Ex. 13:17-15:19; and (b) *shirat ha-yam* along with the story that succeeds it – Ex. 14:30-15:27. Our study will focus primarily on phonetics, i.e. on words that share similar sounds, whether or not they share similar etymological roots as well.

In undertaking this study, of course, we reject the popular notion that phonetics constitute a branch of linguistics inferior to, say, philology or etymology, and that a focus on the sounds of words, as opposed to the semantics thereof, cannot provide any real insight into the meaning of the text. To that end, it is worth recalling that oral communication was, for centuries, the primary mode through which Torah was taught and studied. Moreover, *shirat ha-yam* in particular is a text that was originally produced to be recited aloud. Thus, the notion that its meaning is to be found not only in the denotative, connotative, or diachronic properties of its words, but also in the sounds produced when those words are audibly articulated, should not strike us as unreasonable. I further contend that the narratives surrounding *shirat ha-yam* expand these layers of meaning both through their own, internal phonetics and, to a far greater extent, through their phonetic connections to the song. Let us now consider some of the most salient examples of this phenomenon.

UNIT 1: EXODUS 13:17-15:19

This unit includes the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt, their confrontation with the Egyptians on the shores of the Sea of Reeds, and the song which

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they sing following the death of those Egyptians. Within this unit, we find the following linguistic resonances:

1. *Lest the people reconsider [yinahem] when they see war and return to Egypt (Ex. 13:17) / God did not lead [naham] the Israelites by way of the land of the Philistines (Ex. 13:17).*
2. *Lest the people reconsider when they see [bi-r'otam] war and return to Egypt (Ex.13:17) / And the people revered [va-yiru] the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in Moses, His servant (Ex.14:31).*
3. *And with the breath of Your nostrils the waters were heaped up; the running water stood erect like a wall; the depths congealed in the depths [belev] of the sea (Ex.15:8) / And I will harden Pharaoh's heart [lev] and he will pursue them, and I will be glorified through Pharaoh and through his entire force, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord (Ex.14:4).*
4. *Pharaoh drew near [hikriv] and the children of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold! the Egyptians were advancing after them (Ex.14:10) / God did not lead the Israelites by way of the land of the Philistines, though it was the closer [karov] route (Ex.13:17).*
5. *And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the Lord led the sea with the strong east wind all night, and He made the sea into dry land [haravah] and the waters split (Ex.14:21) / The enemy said, I will pursue, I will overtake, I will share the booty; my desire will be filled from them; I will draw my sword [harbi], my hand will impoverish them (Ex.15:9).*
6. *And He removed [va-yasar] the wheels of their chariots, and made them drive heavily, and the Egyptians said, Let me run away from the Israelites because the Lord is fighting for them against the Egyptians (Ex.14:25) / So he [Pharaoh] harnessed [va-yesor] his chariot, and took his people with him (Ex.14:6).*
7. *And He removed the wheels of their chariots, and made them drive heavily [bi-khvedut], and the Egyptians said, Let me run away from the Israelites because the Lord is fighting for them against the Egyptians (Ex.14:25) / And I will harden Pharaoh's heart and he will pursue them, and I will be glorified [ve-ikabdah] through Pharaoh and through his entire force, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord (Ex.14:4).*
8. *The Lord said to Moses, Stretch out your hand over the sea, and let the water flow back [va-yashuvu] upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and*

upon their horsemen (Ex.14:26) / *Lest the people reconsider when they see war and return* [ve-shavu] *to Egypt* (Ex.13:17).

9. *And with the breath of Your nostrils the waters were heaped up; the running water stood erect* [nitzvu] *like a wall; the depths congealed in the depths of the sea* (Ex.15:8) / *Moses said to the people, Don't be afraid! Stand firm* [hityzatzvu] *and see the Lord's salvation that He will wreak for you today, for whereas you see the Egyptians today, you shall no longer continue to see them for eternity* (Ex.14:13).

10. *People heard, they trembled; a shudder* [hil] *seized the inhabitants of Philistia* (Ex.15:14) / *And I will harden Pharaoh's heart and he will pursue them, and I will be glorified through Pharaoh and through his entire force* [heilo], *and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord* (Ex.14:4).

These linguistic resonances serve several literary purposes. At one level, they produce dramatic irony by underscoring the sharp contrast between the expectations held by our scene's various stakeholders and the reality that actually unfolds. Thus, for instance, the Israelites avoid the *close* [karov] route for fear of war, only to find Pharaoh *advancing* [hikriv] with his army in hot pursuit; they appear ready to contemplate a *return* [ve-shavu] to Egypt, but wind up watching the waters of the Sea of Reeds *flowing back* [va-yashuvu] upon, and drowning, the very Egyptians to whom they would have surrendered. The other examples can be interpreted along similar lines.

Simultaneously, the linguistic resonances highlight our scene's poetic justice, i.e. the *middah k'neged middah* (measure for measure) parallelism that lends it its tight moral symmetry. Pharaoh *harnesses* [va-yasar] his chariot only for God to *remove* [va-yesor] its wheels; he chases the Israelites with a hardened *heart* [lev], but is ultimately cast into the *depths* [be-lev] of the sea; etc.

UNIT 2: EXODUS 14:30-15:27

This unit includes *shirat ha-yam* and the crisis that follows immediately upon its heels, as the Israelites struggle to find drinkable water in the desert. Within this unit, we find the following linguistic resonances:

1. Miriam the prophetess¹ Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women came out after her with timbrels and with dances (Ex.15:20 – see also 15:21) / They came to Marah, but they could not drink water from Marah because it was bitter [marim]; therefore, it was named Marah (Ex. 15:23).

2. Miriam, the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women came out [va-tetzana] after her with timbrels and with dances (Ex.15:20) / Moses led Israel away from the Red Sea, and they went out [va-yetzu] into the desert of Shur; they walked for three days in the desert but did not find water (Ex. 15:22).

3. And the Lord led [va-yolekh] the sea with the strong east wind all night, and He made the sea into dry land and the waters [ha-mayim] split (Ex.15:21) / Moses led Israel away from the Red Sea, and they went out into the desert of Shur; they walked [va-yelkhu] for three days in the desert but did not find water [mayim] (Ex. 15:22).

4. And Miriam called out to them, Sing [shiru] to the Lord, for very exalted is He; a horse and its rider He cast into the sea (Ex.15:21) / Moses led Israel away from the Red Sea, and they went out into the desert of Shur; they walked for three days in the desert but did not find water (Ex.15:22).

5. Moses led Israel away from the Red Sea, and they went out into the desert of Shur; they walked for three [shloshet] days in the desert but did not find water (Ex.15:22) / Pharaoh's chariots and his army He cast into the sea, and the elite of his officers [shalishav] sank in the Red Sea (Ex.15:4).

6. They came [va-yavo'u] to Marah, but they could not drink water from Marah because it was bitter; therefore, it was named Marah (Ex.15:23) / For Pharaoh's horses came [ba] with his chariots and his horsemen into the sea, and the Lord brought the waters of the sea back upon them, and the children of Israel walked on dry land in the midst of the sea (Ex.15:19).

7. So he [Moses] cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed [va-yorehu] him a piece of wood, which he cast into the water, and the water became sweet. There He gave them a statute and an ordinance, and there He tested them (Ex.15:25) / Pharaoh's chariots and his army He cast [yarah] into the sea (Ex.15:4).

8. So he [Moses] cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood [etz], which he cast into the water, and the water became sweet.

There He gave them a statute and an ordinance, and there He tested them (Ex.15:25) / Your right hand, O Lord, is most powerful; Your right hand, O Lord, crushes [tiratz] the foe (Ex.15:6).

9. *So he [Moses] cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood, which he cast into the water, and the water became sweet. There He gave them a statute and an ordinance [mishpat], and there He tested them (Ex.15:25) / On that day the Lord saved Israel from the hand[s] of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dying on the shore [sephat] of the sea (Ex.14:30).*²

10. *And He said, If you hearken [shamo'a tishma] to the voice of the Lord, your God, and you do what is proper in His eyes, and you listen closely to His commandments and observe all His statutes, all the sicknesses that I have visited upon Egypt I will not visit upon you, for I, the Lord, heal you (Ex.15:26) / People heard [shamu], they trembled; a shudder seized the inhabitants of Philistia (Ex.15:14).*

11. *And He said, If you hearken to the voice of the Lord, your God, and you do what is proper in His eyes, and you listen closely to His commandments and observe all His statutes, all the sicknesses [mahalah] that I have visited upon Egypt I will not visit upon you, for I, the Lord, heal you (Ex.15:26) / Miriam, the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women came out after her with timbrels and with dances [meholot] (Ex.15:20).*

As in the previous unit, the verbal links that connect *shirat ha-yam* with our second scene, the Israelites' water crisis in the desert, undoubtedly reflect a form of poetic justice. In this unit, however, the distribution of deserts has been reversed: now it is not the Egyptians, but rather the Israelites themselves whose actions God counterbalances through the mechanism of *middah k'neged middah*. Most poignant in this regard is the juxtaposition of the Egyptians, who were entirely submerged in water, and the Israelites, who now cannot find water at all.

This narrative apposition is enmeshed within a linguistic matrix that subtly reinforces the passage's central theme. The Israelites sang [*yashir, shiru*] in celebration as they watched the Egyptians drown to their death, but almost met their own deaths in the wilderness of "Shur;" the women performed jubilant dances [*meholot*], but they and the rest of the nation came close to con-

tracting *sicknesses* [*mahalah*] shortly after; etc. To be sure, some of these connections are more compelling than others; but the frequency and density with which they crop up within an episode comprised of no more than five verses in total would appear to indicate that they are indeed directed towards thematic ends.

Perhaps their thrust is to temper the Israelites' triumphalism with a modicum of timidity, to level the euphoria that rightly overcomes the nation in the wake of its salvation with appropriate empathy for the suffering of the vanquished. God inculcates this empathy within the Israelites by subjecting them to the near-inverse fate of the one which met their enemies.³ Of course, He averts its outcome at the eleventh hour; the purpose of this plight had, after all, been pedagogic, not punitive. But the lesson has been delivered. *Rejoice not when your enemy falls* (Prov. 24:17):⁴ taking joy in the loss of human life is distasteful to the Creator of that life. Even when those lives belong to our enemies, then, their end, like the waters of Marah, ought to strike us as bitter-sweet.

NOTES

1. It is interesting that the text here takes pains to designate Miriam as a *prophetess*, i.e., one capable of predicting the future (see Rashi, ad. loc.). In some sense, it is the ability to foresee later events that drives the dynamics of our scene; thus Rashi, citing the Midrash, explains as follows how the women of the Israelites came to possess the "timbrels" with which they followed Miriam in song: "The righteous women of that generation were so certain that the Holy One, blessed be He, would perform miracles for them, they took timbrels out of Egypt."
2. Although *tav* (last letter of *sephat*) and *tet* (last letter of *mishpat*) likely designated distinct phonemes in ancient Israel, they would have been sufficiently similar to evoke each other.
3. Perhaps this is in fact part of what is being intimated at the episode's conclusion, when God states: that *all the sickness that I have visited upon Egypt I will not visit upon you* (Ex. 15:26).
4. See TB *Megillah* 10b: God does not rejoice at the downfall of the wicked. And R. Yohanan said: "...the ministering angels wanted to sing [along with the Israelites], but God said: My creations are drowning in the sea and you wish to sing?"