

Dear Chavraya,

From the very first time I heard the song, I cry almost every time I hear it. That first hearing was on Yom Kippur morning a number of years ago as Rabbi Adina Allen led *P'sukei D'zimra*, fittingly, *Verses of Song*, the earliest part of the morning davenning. As we came to *Shirat Ha'yam / the Song of the Sea*, she paused and began to sing these words of praise and hope, *Ozi v'zimrat kah va'y'hi li li'shu'ah...* (Ex. 15:2). I was sitting just behind her and began to cry almost immediately, words and tune as carried in her voice going directly to my heart, touching me in a way so deep. I am still not sure what it is that so touches me, how much the words, how much the tune by Rabbi Shefa Gold; or how much it was Adina's voice then and the way of Yom Kippur to so open our souls. It was and is a combination to be sure, words and melody joined in the way of body and soul, and so it continues to be.

These six words are complex, as days of the week with all of their challenges as we make our way home to Shabbos. So we make our way through the *Shirat Ha'yam*, these words at the very beginning. We are standing on the far shore of the sea that had parted, a band of freed and fleeing slaves just having passed through, walls of water closing then upon the pursuing Egyptian soldiers in all their armored might. Stunned, even told from above to keep silent that we not cheer or gloat, we saw the loss of life. How to sing, the *musar* teachers ask, *how is it possible to sing and to rejoice with complete joy when seeing a great camp of human beings strewn upon the seashore, writhing in terrible agonies, the dead and the dying* (Sefer Chochmat Ha'matzpun, B'shallach)?

Soon the people find their voice, beginning to sing as one, all the pain and fear of all the years and of the last moments when freedom was held in the balance, all welling up in song. The verses that emerge challenge each other, seeming in conflict with each other, just as all the emotions held by the people barely seem possible to hold at once, the people themselves perhaps in conflict with each other in their different ways of response to all that has been. Some must have just wanted to cry and hold their children close; some to pray and continue to hold the silence from before there was a song; some to scream out with all the rage that had to be held when the lash tore their flesh, crying out now with triumphant vengeance. It is all held in the Song as it was sung on the seashore, as we continue to sing it. We honor all that must have been felt then, but in the way of distance now, knowing that vengeance and hate have no place if we shall ever make our way to the promised land of peace and safety, of justice for all. So we sing in time honored way, the verses that tell of Israel's redemption in joyful tune, and the verses that tell of Egypt's destruction in a quiet undertone, the undertow of the sea drawing them down, raising up our own sensibilities.

The tensions in the Song are all held in those six words that brings me to tears. Perhaps on some level, my tears come in response to what was felt then, all the tensions and all the conflicts, all the emotions finding release, and yet the struggle remaining. I did not translate the verse above because the very way we understand the verse reflects how we were touched then and how we are touched now by the tensions that surrounded the moment of our liberation, and so too by how we are touched today by all the tensions that block the way home

to Shabbos, to a world of peace and wholeness, to the day that is all Shabbos. Some translators channel those of our people who cried out on the seashore for vengeance, *ozī v'zimrat kah va'y'hi li li'shu'ah.../God's might and vengeance are my salvation....* Other translations are softer, but still focused on might, *God is my strength and might and has become my salvation....*

Of those who might have cried and simply held their children, song emerging as release, we can't miss that the word song is held in the words, *zimrat kah* most simply meaning *song of God*. The Yiddish translation known as *Yeho'ash* translates the Hebrew so beautifully, *mayn shtarkeit un gezang iz koh/my strength and song is God*. *Zemer* is song and so it emerges here, the song of God given form and voice in the hungering of our souls for freedom. The root of song, *zemer*, is also the root of *pruning*, as in to cut back a tree to allow it to grow more freely and fully. It is likely that those who sing for God's vengeance have twisted the nurturing way of pruning to become a way of destruction, cutting back as in destroying, rather than as in allowing for growth and renewal. A most familiar source of *zemer* as pruning is found in the words of the prophet Isaiah (2:4) in the turning of swords to plowshares and of spears to *pruning hooks/l'maz'merot*, a vision of that time when *nation shall not lift up sword against nation/lo yisa goy el goy cherev, neither shall they learn war any more/v'lo yil'm'du od milchamah*.

Of all the gentle possibility in this verse that touches me more with each year's reading, the most soothing teaching upon these words of song is in the understanding of the Karliner Rebbe, known from the title of his book as the *Beis Aharon: eyn oz elah Torah/there is no oz/strength but for Torah*. He goes on to say that *all is held in Shirat Ha'yam, all that ever was and all that shall ever be*. And then he returns to the words of song that call forth my tears and in his own tender understanding offers intimation of the source within from which my tears come, *ki al y'dei ozi she'hi ha'torah/for through my strength which is Torah/zimrat kah va'y'hi li li'shu'a/the song of God shall be my salvation*.

Amidst all the churning of the sea and time, standing there upon the seashore, the long desert journey just begun, it is the yearning to arrive that wells up for me in hearing the singing of those six words. Perhaps it was the wholeness felt on that Yom Kippur as we stood together on the shore of possibility, the words carried then on Adina's voice, but each time ever since the words and melody bring tears. With joy and yearning, Torah our song, swords turned to plowshares and spears to pruning hooks, so we make our way to the day that is all Shabbos.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor