

12 Shevat 5765
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Beshalach

'Til the Prophet Lady Sings

Larry Summers should have known better. Last week, at an academic conference whose stated purpose was to discuss ways to more successfully integrate minorities into the workforce, Dr. Summers, the president of Harvard University, offered the tentative suggestion that the underrepresentation of women in the fields of science and engineering is representative of “innate differences in aptitude” between men and women. Needless to say, he incurred the wrath of many of the academicians present – notably the women – and he has come under fire for his comments in the press, as well. There is a very pervasive concern in our society that being underrepresented might be construed as a sign of inferiority, and Dr. Summers’ comments certainly played right into that sensitivity.

But in the Torah’s perspective, a lesser representation is not necessarily indicative of a lacking, and, in fact, can sometimes be a sign of quite the opposite.

This Shabbos is known as Shabbos Shira because of the great song that Moshe and the Bnei Yisroel sang when they were successfully delivered from the pursuing Egyptian enemy, with the splitting of the Sea and the subsequent drowning of Pharaoh’s legions. But the nineteen-pasuk song of the Jewish people is followed by a laconic two-pasuk addendum:

And Miriam the Prophetess, sister of Aharon, took her drum in her hand and all the women went forth after her with drums and dances; Miriam called out to them, “Sing to Hashem for He is exalted above the proud, He hurled horse with its rider into the Sea.”

Why did the women sing their own independent song? Why is Miriam identified specifically as the sister of Aharon (she was Moshe’s sister as well, and either identification would seem superfluous as the Torah has already told us her family relations)? And what is the significance of the drums that the women used?

Both the Malbim and the Ksav Sofer (two of the classic Commentators on the Chumash) suggest that the women’s separate song was a result of the separate role that they played in the Redemption. The Talmud (Sota 11b) tells us that the Redemption resulted from the merits of the righteous Jewish women in Egypt, who encouraged and compelled their weary and despondent husbands to continue having children despite their grim circumstances. The women were confident that the promise to their forefathers would come true and there would be a future for the Jewish Nation. It was this faith-based initiative, the Gemora says, that merited the Redemption.

And who was the paradigm of faith in the face of Egyptian bondage? Miriam. It was she who as a young girl stood alongside her mother actively defying Pharaoh’s orders in delivering and sustaining the Jewish babies. And, perhaps even more significantly, it was she who convinced her father to continue having children despite the terrible Egyptian decrees, and it was the resulting reunion of Amram and Yocheved that brought about the birth of Moshe Rabbeinu. It is for this reason, the Commentators say, that Miriam is identified as Aharon’s sister -- to underscore the fact that she pre-dated Moshe and that were it not for her he might never have been born.

And in this vein we can begin to see the symbolism of the drums, as well, if we just think about their origins. The Midrash asks, “From where did Yisroel have drums in the desert?” and answers, “the righteous had faith and knew that G-d would do miracles for them in the Exodus, so they prepared drums for themselves.” The drums were the symbol of faith and it was therefore the women specifically who utilized the drums in their song.

As the Ksav Sofer puts it: the men experienced two undeserved courtesies from Hashem – the salvation itself, as well as the witnessing of the demise of their oppressors. The women, on the other hand, were deserving of the salvation and would not therefore have had to sing Shira for it. It was only the added favor that Hashem showed them by destroying the Egyptians for which they sang. Hence, the reference in Miriam’s song only to the drowning of the cavalry.

While I can neither confirm nor deny the theories of Harvard’s president, I can tell you that the relatively shorter representation of the women in the *Song of the Sea* is not indicative of inferiority at all. Rather it is a reflection of greater faith, greater initiative, and a more central role in a most significant event in the history of our nation.