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Jewish Woman's Song

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What Are Women Doing All Day In Gan Eden?

We all received the Torah at Har Sinai, which we celebrate on the festival of *Shavuot*. Ever since standing at Har Sinai, Jewish men spend their time learning the Torah. What about women? What special significance does the Torah have for women, being that women do not have the *mitzvah* to learn Torah?

It is written, “*Do not forsake the Torah of your mother.*”¹ What does this mean? What Torah does a mother learn? She doesn't learn *Gemara* or the *Zohar*.

In order to answer this question, we need to reflect on the following. After *Shavuot*, what do the women take from it for the rest of the year?

We know that when a person dies, the soul ascends to *Gan Eden*. But what exactly does everyone do in *Gan Eden*? And specifically, what do the women do in *Gan Eden*? Exploring this will help us understand what a woman's Torah is, and what part of Torah will remain with them after *Shavuot* is over.

The Song Of Miriam

The Torah is replete with stories, many of which are very applicable to women. One reason the Torah tells us all these stories is to teach us *mussar* as well as good ethics. However, there is more to it than this.

One great story entirely focused on Jewish women is the story of Miriam when she sang *shirah*/great song with all the women after the splitting of the *Yam Suf*. We can learn from this that this *shirah* is a record of all the miracles together throughout history which are essentially connected via a continuous chain of song. The *sefarim hakedoshim* teach that this *shirah* continues to be sung in a special chamber in *Gan Eden*, and that this women's choir in *Gan Eden* is headed by Miriam.² The fact that this *shirah*, this song which was conducted by Miriam,

¹ Mishlei 1:8

² Zohar III 167b. The following is a translation of the words of the Zohar with the commentary of the “Matok M'Devash”:

“There was a story that when Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai was learning Torah, two messengers from *Gan Eden* came to him and said to him, “The head of the Heavenly yeshivah (the angel Metatron) is inquiring about your peace. Many novel Torah insights were revealed tonight.” Rabbi Shimon asked of them to reveal one of the novel Torah insights, so they told him. Afterwards, Rabbi Shimon said to one of the two messengers, “There is one thing I wanted to know. Can you tell me if women get into the Heavenly Yeshivah, since they, too, have a *neshamah*/Divine soul which ascends to *Gan Eden* above? Since they are not “daughters” of the Torah, for they do not learn Torah like men, perhaps because of this they do not ascend to the Heavenly Yeshivah....? If there is any yeshivah for women in Heaven, please let me know about this.” As he was saying this, one of the messengers flew to *Gan Eden*. After the messenger returned, the messenger said that it requested permission to tell Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai about the spiritual benefits which women receive in *Gan Eden*, and that since this request was in the name of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, the messenger was shown what it previously never knew about. The messenger began to speak.

“Six chambers were shown to me, which were full of several pleasures and delights. It was in a place in *Gan Eden* which is draped by a curtain and from this curtain and onward, no men are allowed to enter. In the third chamber, there resides Yocheved the mother of Moshe, the trustworthy prophet. Her daughter Miriam is also there and thousands and myriads of women are with them in this chamber. Every day, for three times a day, she [Miriam] and all the women give thanks and praise to the Master of the world, and every day, they sing the Song at the Sea. She [Miriam] alone begins from

is continuing, means that the great miracles that happened to the Jewish people didn't end with the splitting of the sea. Rather, the miracles continue as the song of Miriam continues to be sung.

How does this *shirah* relate to a woman's Torah? One of the names of Torah is "*shirah*". This particular name of the Torah, "*shirah*," the song, is the woman's Torah – and it is this particular aspect of Torah which women "practice" since Har Sinai. Whereas men *learn* the Torah, women "*sing*" the Torah. That is the "Torah" which our mothers learn – it is the *shirah* which was sung by Miriam with the women at the *Yam Suf* and it continues on in *Gan Eden*.

Though women are exempt from learning Torah, women relate to Torah and teach it through their *shirah*, their song. A man is not allowed to hear a woman singing, and the deep reason behind this is because a woman's unique *avodah* is the *shirah*, the "song" - which is not a man's *avodah* - thus, a man is not allowed to "hear" a woman's song.

What Is The Song Of The Jewish Woman?

What does it mean that a woman "sings" the Torah? The Hebrew word "*shirah*" is linked to the Hebrew word *sharsheres*, which means "chain" (Maybe that's why women like to wear chains!). In the context of Torah, a "chain" refers to an episode in Jewish history, made up by links in the chain which represent various events. A *shirah* is sung whenever a certain "chain" is completed. *Shirah* is the point at which the historical event has been played out, the episode is complete and the women can sing about the positive outcome, with hindsight.

For example, at the time when Yosef was sold into slavery, this event seemed like the worst thing possible. However, after reading about the subsequent events, we can see how this original, apparently negative event led to Yosef being second in command and saving his brothers and people from famine. A woman sings when she reaches a point of genuine realization, understanding and gratitude to Hashem in seeing that the details and events of history are vital links in a chain.

In other words, by contemplating their lives with *emunah*, a woman is able to come to sing *shirah*.

Reflecting About Your Life

Shirah is a song of recognition, appreciation and pure joy for the journey and for seeing the distance one has travelled in life. In order to appreciate the chain of history and be brought to *shirah*, a woman must reflect on all the events in her life and how they connect. For instance, a woman may reflect back to the time when she was a baby and she cried and all the challenges and

this verse: "And Miriam the prophetess took..." And all of the righteous in Gan Eden listen to the pleasantness of her voice, and several holy angels give thanks and praise with her, to the Holy One. In the fourth chamber resides Devorah, and she is also regarded with the other prophetesses, and all the rest of the women are found with her and they all give thanks and sing, the same song which she [Devorah] sang in this world: "And Devorah sang, along with Barak son of Avinoam..." Then one of the messengers added by saying to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, "Ho, Rebbi, Ho, Rebbi! Who shall merit and see the joy of the righteous [men] and the righteous women, which they make for the Holy One Blessed Is He?"

The messenger also said, "There are also four hidden chambers, where the holy Matriarchs Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel and Leah reside in. No one is given permission to reveal these chambers, and no one has ever seen or reached them."

growth moments she faced before reaching her wedding day. But then she gets married and sings out of joy.

The Greatness Of Women

Miriam was the one who began the *shirah*. She was also the one who was responsible for Moshe's birth and survival.³ Ever since Moshe was born, his older sister Miriam looked after him and ensured his survival. Thus, if not for Miriam, there would be no Redemption! This is the depth behind why "in the merit of the righteous women, the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt."⁴ If not for Miriam, there would be no Moshe!

Miriam's name comes from the word *merirus*/bitterness. When Miriam sang the *shirah*, she was alluding to the fact that although the Jewish people first went through bitterness in Egypt, now they were singing. In a certain way, the song of Miriam is greater than the Torah which Moshe gave! This is because it is written, "*Az yashir Moshe*" – "Then, Moshe sang." The men only sing after the miracles are complete,⁵ as the *Gemara* states that "*Az Yashir*" is a song of the future, in which Moshe will lead all the men to sing.⁶ But Miriam was singing with the women even before the people had witnessed the salvation, as the Torah says, "*And Miriam took,*"⁷ which is written in past tense, implying that the women were already singing from before.⁸

Thus, the women expressed their faith in Hashem even before they could experience the salvation. This is a perfect example of a woman's role in the Torah. Just as Miriam and the women sang *shirah* by the sea to prepare the people to receive the Torah, so too every Jewish woman can provide her family with Torah by singing the *shirah*.

Making Time To Reflect

It is written, "*A new Torah shall come forth from me*"⁹, which means that at the Redemption, Mashiach will reveal a "new Torah." What is the Torah that Mashiach will reveal? Mashiach will reveal the entire story of the Jewish people throughout history and this will show us the great chain of events that will lead us to *shirah*.

Every woman should take some time every day to reflect: "What has happened to me since the time I was born? What were the major events and stages I went through in my life?" Then she can reflect on how Hashem was there with her at every stage and provided salvation.

This process of reflection and contemplation would reveal the "chain" of events in our life. Recognizing this chain reveals Hashem's guidance and *hashgachah peratis*/Divine Providence, which in turn leads us to *shirah*.

³ Editor's Note: Miriam also convinced her parents to reunite and this led to Moshe being born.

⁴ Talmud Bavli Sotah 11b

⁵ Shelah HaKadosh, cited in the sefer "Mussarei HaShelah al HaTorah"

⁶ Talmud Bavli Tractate Sanhedrin, Chapter Eleven

⁷ Shemos 15:20

⁸ Shelah HaKadosh, cited in the sefer "Mussarei HaShelah al haTorah"

⁹ Yeshayahu 51:4

This process is similar to what the Chofetz Chaim did one day when he sat down and went through his entire life in his head, thanking Hashem for all that he had in his life. He spoke to Hashem, saying, "Hashem, thank you for letting me learn Torah my entire life. Thank you for me meriting that I write *sefer Mishnah Berurah*. Thank you for my wife and for the children You gave me."

When a person takes time to contemplate the chain of events in one's life, one will become more aware of how Hashem has always been there. This process should not just be a lip service but a deep and true reflection on Hashem's kindness and protection. In turn, this can bring one to such a state of gratitude that your heart will burst out with song to Hashem.

This is the "*Torah of your mother*". This is the Torah which a mother must give to her children – she teaches them how to sing *shirah* about everything in life, to see how all the seemingly disparate events in their lives link together and form one chain. This is the true song, the true 'bedtime lullaby' that a mother should sing to her children!

A Woman's Torah Comes From Within

A man's Torah learning is usually derived from an external source, such as by learning from a *sefer*, or by going to the *Beis Midrash*. But a woman does not need to rely on an external source to obtain her Torah. She doesn't need a *sefer*, or a *Beis Midrash*, to discover her Torah. A woman's Torah comes from within herself. Just as Chazal teach that "Avraham learned Torah from himself."¹⁰ Avraham *Avinu* knew what Hashem wanted and knew Torah without actually receiving it from an external source. So too, women have the ability to obtain the Torah from their hearts and souls. It is written, "*Write the words of Torah on your heart*".¹¹ This can refer to the women's Torah which is derived from their hearts.

Every Woman Has A Unique Song To Sing – The Events Of Her Own Life

When a person wants to buy a necklace/chain, she might go to a jewelry store. She asks the shopkeeper to show her a special chain that is completely unique. Similarly, the "chain" which is the basis of the *shirah* of a woman's life is also the chain which is unlike any other in the world! Every person's life is different and thus each person has her own personal *shirah*.

When a woman has sung *shirah* during her life and then goes to *Gan Eden*, she enters that special chamber in Heaven where Miriam sings with all women. However, she does not sing the particular song that others are singing. Rather, she adds her own, unique song to the chorus, the song of her own life. This idea is supported by the phrase "*shirah chadashah*"¹², a "new song" which we can reveal. The more *emunah* a woman attains by reflecting on her life with joy, the

¹⁰ *Beraishis Rabbah* 95:3

¹¹ *Mishlei* 7:3

¹² recited in *Shacharis*, before *Shemoneh Esrei*

greater her contribution to the chorus. Each woman can potentially turn her whole life into a chain of events that brings her to contribute a wonderful *shirah*.

Imagine that a woman wants to write a biography about her life. Potentially, she could write about her whole life and all the struggles and pain she endured. However, such a reflective exercise will not bring her to sing *shirah* about her life. Instead, it will just bring her more pain. However, if she reflects on her life with *emunah* and focuses on how all the events in her life are parts of one positive chain, she would break out in song. That would be a useful and *shirah*-filled biography.

We entered this world as a baby crying. How will we leave this world? Will we also leave the world crying? If we do, then we were born with crying and we will leave this world crying. But if we use our time in this world to contemplate our life and see the numerous kindnesses Hashem has bestowed on us, we can come to sing *shirah*, and we will end our life with song instead!

Practical Recommendations

In order for a woman to receive her unique Torah – the “*shirah*” - a woman must first learn about *emunah*. The *sefer Chovos HaLevovos* first discusses *emunah* before discussing gratitude to Hashem, which implies that *emunah* is the prerequisite to gratitude to Hashem. It is recommended to learn *Chovos HaLevovos: Sha'ar HaBechinah* (Gate of Reflection), especially with the commentary of the “*Lev Tov*”. This can awaken us to consider how to think about Hashem's goodness in our life.

Then, a woman should set aside regular time to reflect about all that has happened to her until now. Then she will be able to see the significant role each event played in the overall chain of her life.

Finally, one can take a piece of paper and write down all the major events one has experienced in one's life and think about how one was saved by Hashem and brought to the next step.

This practice can help her see the chain of events in her life and encourage her to sing a unique *shirah* which is unlike any other in the world. A mother can gradually begin to include her children in her *shirah* as she expresses it. Eventually over time, her children will open up and teach themselves how to have *shirah* in their own lives.

The Challenge

However, at first, this process may not be so easy. For instance, one might find it hard to see how certain events in one's life are useful or connect to other events. Compare this process to doing a puzzle. While working the puzzle, one may be required to initially set aside certain pieces that do not seem to fit. Slowly, as the puzzle evolves, one will find where to add the missing pieces. So too, we can treat the inexplicable parts of our life like unsolvable puzzle pieces and put them aside temporarily. Eventually, we will see that these hard-to-understand-events also have their place in the overall puzzle. When completing this exercise, it is important to remember that everything you experience in life is from Hashem and plays a vital role in your life.

This understanding will hopefully grant you the patience and persistence required to come back to the events you initially did not grasp, and you will be able to incorporate them into the full picture.

Tehillim – The Ultimate Song

The entire book of *Tehillim*/Psalms is actually one big *shirah*. It is the song of Dovid *HaMelech*'s life, a chain of events that occurred in his life and that he connected together. Thus, if a woman says *Tehillim* with heartfelt intention, she can connect to the *shirah* within it and express her Torah.

Tehillim is the ultimate *shirah*, because it is the all-inclusive song of the Jewish people. After we have discovered our own personal song in our life, we can strive to connect ourselves to the great *shirah* of *sefer Tehillim*.

Preparing For Shavuot

In order for a woman to adequately prepare for Shavuot, she should be able to clearly identify what is a woman's Torah. She should understand that a woman's Torah (which women continue to sing in *Gan Eden*) is the *shirah*.

If a woman never reveals a *shirah* about her life, contemplating the events and how they were all necessary in order to lead her in her life's mission and to her current place, then she will not be able to sing the *shirah* of the women in *Gan Eden*! Imagine a person who comes to a wedding and does not understand the language spoken there. She will surely not enjoy the wedding to the same extent. To be able to enjoy the full, spiritual pleasure of *Gan Eden*, we need to understand and be familiar with the "language" of *shirah* already in this world.

In Conclusion

In summary, the unique aspect of Torah which women received at *Har Sinai*, and which she can pass onto her children, is the *shirah*, the song. A woman can reach her personal *shirah* and sing it, praising and thanking Hashem for her life, by tracing and linking all the seemingly disparate events in her life, as many parts of one puzzle that has led her to where she is today. Seeking out one's own personal *shirah* is necessary for any woman who desires to live an inner life.

These are not simply theoretical ideas! Rather, they are instructions which teach us what a woman's Torah is all about and we need to put them into practice.

May we each merit to reveal our own personal, deep *shirah*. And may all of our songs come together in harmony, and reveal the complete *shirah*, the song of the entire Creation.