II. THE UNIQUE LAYOUT OF THE SONG IN A TORAH SCROLL- GAPS

The “Exodus Scroll” includes the portion from the book of Exodus called “Shirat HaYam” or “The Song of the Sea.” In the Torah, the Song is not written like other sections. If it is, the Torah is invalid. Rather it is written in a unique manner, so that the page has the following pattern:

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XXXX  xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx  XXXX
xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx  xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
XXXX  xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx  XXXX
xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx  xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
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The first line of the Song (15:1) is written as a complex line. The rest of the lines, however are written in a special pattern. It is customary to write the Song in 30 lines. The text is unique in the Tanakh along with “The Song of Deborah” because it is laid out with gaps or spaces. Rabbinic tradition refers to the format of “Shirat HaYam” as having the appearance of “full brick over half brick” (Megillah 16b). Song and poetry in Israel’s ancient history was parsed in this way. Firstly, the significance of this unique layout arises from the representation of the liberation from slavery, a universal theme, in a structure that recalls the fact that the Jews were forced to make bricks and use them to build store houses in Pithom and Ramses. Rabbinic tradition tells that when the Israelites in Egypt did not complete their quotas of bricks, the Egyptians would substitute Israelite children for bricks (Shemoth Rabbah, in Yeффeh Toar, p.127; BaMidbar Rabbah, Nasso, in Yeффeh Toar, p.196). Pharaoh himself bathed in the blood of Israelite children to try to cure himself of skin disease. It is told that the Egyptians out of cruelty withdrew the amount of the supply of straw required for making the bricks but increased the number of the quota of bricks that must be required by the Hebrew slaves. In our text of “Shirat HaYam” instead of bricks of straw, we encounter song layed out in the form of “bricks of redemption” that expresses the most sublime artistic expression. Secondly, the form of the brick suggests that what occurred at the parting of the “Reed Sea”1 cannot be expressed in language. The ineffability of language is also the subject of linguists like Ferdinand Saussure who refers to “the prison house of language.” The Song is written with blank spaces left in the middle of each line to indicate that there are blank spaces in our praise of G-d- there are great gaps in our knowledge of Him and in our ability to praise Him. If one thinks that he knows how to praise God more fully let him fill in the blanks (Toldoth Yitzak). The miracle at the parting of the Reed Sea was so great that we

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1 The Hebrew term “Yam Suf” has generally been translated “Red Sea” in the English versions. This tradition goes back to the Latin Vulgate’s “Mare Rubrum” and “Mare Erythraeum,” which in turn derive from “Erythra Thalassa” of the Greek Septuagint version produced by the Jews of Alexandria. How the “Red Sea” got its name is a misnomer for the Hebrew term means “See of Reeds.” Theories that rationalize this name change are not persuasive. One theory has it that the supposedly red corals that lie along the shores and bed. Another theory has it that it derives from the color of the mountains of Edom and Arabia that flank its eastern shores. More convincing is the theory that rests on the presence of a certain kind of alga that thickly populates that strip of water. The genus Trichodesmitum, which floats on the surface, gives rise to a reddish-brown discoloration of the water as the algae die off. The Hebrew suf is generally taken to be a borrowing from the Egyptian tef, “papyrus,” reed thicket, so that the designation yam suf would seem to rule out the possibility with what is traditionally known as the Red Sea.
must “read between the lines” and “between the gaps” in the text itself. This is exactly what the Rabbinic tradition does in imaginately extrapolating, expanding, and interpreting what is not said in the plain text. This mode of hermeneutical exegesis is called Aggadata. Let us look at a few of the Aggadic legends surrounding our text of “Shirat HaYam” that highlight this passage’s ultimate significance.

III. A FEW AGGADIC PASSAGES ON THE SONG HIGHLIGHTING ITS IMPORTANCE

In Avot de Rabbi Natan, a kind of Midrash on Pirke Avot, we see how the Rabbis draw The Song of the Sea into dialogue with other passages in the Hebrew Bible thereby creating an intertextual dimension. The passage climaxes with the imaginative assertion that twelve rows of water were established by God through which each of the twelve tribes walked based on the verse, “For splitting the sea into paths, boundless is His love Psalms 136:13). Alluding to this the Israelites sang, “This (zeh) is my God, and I will glorify Him” (15:2) and the numerical value of “zeh” is twelve. When the fleeing Hebrews touched the salty brackish water of the Reed Sea they found it to taste sweet. The passage illustrates that only a small fraction of the miracles that occurred are mentioned in the Exodus text. In Avot de Rabbi Natan we read:

When our ancestors stood at the Red Sea, Moses said to them: “Rise, go across!” We shall not go across they declared, “until tunnels are made in the sea.” Moses took his rod and smote the sea, and tunnels were made in it, as it is said, Thou hast stricken through with rods the head of his rulers (Hab. 3:14). Said Moses to them: “Rise, go across!” We shall not go across they declared, “until the sea is turned into a valley before us.” Moses took the rod and smote the sea, and it became a valley before them, as it is said, He made a valley of the sea, and caused them to pass through (Ps.78:13), and it is said, As the cattle that go down into the valley, so didst Thou lead Thy people (Isa. 63:14). Said Moses to them: “Rise, go across!” “We shall not go across,” they declared until it is cut asunder before us.” Moses took the rod and smote the sea, and it was cut asunder before them, as it is said, To Him who divided the Red Sea in sunder (Ps. 136:13). Said Moses to them: “Rise, go across!” “We shall not go across,” they declared “until it is turned into clay for our benefit.” Moses took the rod and smote the sea, and it became clay, as it is said, Thou has trodden the sea with Thy horses, through the clay of mighty waters (Hab. 3:15). Said Moses to them: “Rise, go across!” “We shall not go across,” they declared, “until it is made into a wilderness before us.” Moses took the rod and smote the sea, and it became a wilderness, as it is said, And He
led them through the depths as through a wilderness (Ps.106:9). Said Moses to them: “Rise, go across!” “We shall not go across,” they declared, “until it is broken into many pieces before us.” Moses took the rod and smote the sea, and it was broken into many pieces, as it is said, Thou didst break the sea in pieces by Thy strength (Ps. 74:13). Said Moses to them: “Rise, go across!” “We shall not go across,” they declared, “unless it is turned into rocks before us.” Moses took the rod and smote the sea, and it turned into rocks, as it is said, Thou didst shatter the heads of the sea monsters on the waters (ibid.). Now on what are the heads of sea monsters dashed? Say surely, the heads of sea monsters would not be dashed save on rocks. Said Moses to them: “Rise, go across!” “We shall not go across,” they declared, “until it is turned into dry land for us.” Moses took the rod and smote the sea, and it turned into dry land, as it is said, He turned the sea into dry land (Ps.66:6); it also says, But the children of Israel walked upon dry land in the midst of the sea (Exod. 14:29). Said Moses to them: “Rise, go across!” “We shall not go across,” they declared, “unless it is turned into walls before us.” Moses took the rod and smote the sea, and it turned into walls, as it is said, And the waters were a wall unto them, on their right hand, and on their left (ibid.). Said Moses to them: Rise, go across!” “We shall not go across,” they declared, “unless it is turned flask shaped before us.” Moses took the rod and smote the sea, and it turned flask shaped, as it is said, (The waters) stood upright like flasks containing liquids (Exod. 15:8)- As for the waters between the sundered paths, a fire came down and lapped them up, as it is said, When fire caused that which melts to disappear, and the fire lapped up the waters; to make Thy name known to Thine adversaries (Isa. 64:1)- And the flasks released oil and honey into the mouths of the babes and of this they took suck, as it is said, And He made him to suck honey out of the crag (Deut. 32:13). Some say: Fresh water came forth for them from the sea, and this they drank in the midst of the sundered paths- for the waters of the sea are salty- for it is said, flowing streams, and “flowing streams” are none other than sweet waters, as it is said, A well of living waters, and flowing streams from Lebanon (Cant.4:15). With the clouds of glory over them lest the sun overpower them, Israel crossed, so as not to be discomfited. Rabbi Eliezer says: The deep arched over them and under it Israel went across, so as not to be discomfited. Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Simeon say: the upper and lower waters tossed the Egyptians up and down, as it is said, And the Lord tossed the Egyptians up and down in the midst of the sea (Exod. 14:27).

The Rabbis in fact recount fifty miracles that occurred in the crossing of the Reed Sea one of which was that the breeze blew the fragrances of the Garden of Eden into the sea, which was flowing like perfume (Mekilta). It is told that even vegetation grew out of the sea bed for the Israelites’ animals to eat. These miracle stories are given to increase the awesomeness of the event. Even for skeptics who doubt such phenomena they are left pondering the miracle that the parting of the Reed Sea occurred just at the right time when the Hebrews needed it because the Egyptians almost caught up with them. Thus it
is the timing that is so miraculous as well. When the Egyptian pursuers entered the parted sea it transformed initially into “boiling mire” (Tanchuma) so that just as the Egyptians had made the Israelites tread in mud all day under the hot sun, now they were up to their knees in mud just before the waters crashed in upon them to drown them. God removed wheels from the Egyptian chariots and the heavy vehicles swung back and forth, breaking bodies as they went and many Egyptians fell from their chariots and were not able to get up again. The Exodus text says “They sank to the bottom like a stone” (15:5), “They sank like lead” (15:10), and “it devoured them like straw” (15:7). The sound of the splitting of the Reed Sea could be heard all over the world. It is thus written, “Nations heard and shuddered, terror gripped the inhabitants of Philistia” (15:14). The Zohar, a Kabbalistic work, recounts that God sent a wind that did two opposite things. First it froze the sea, making it solid. Then it melted the sea so that it could drown the Egyptians. The same wind was both freezing cold and boiling hot. Not a single Egyptian survived, while at the same time not a single Israelite was harmed. The rabbis say that the angel Gabriel wanted to drown the Egyptians at night, as soon as they came near the sea, but God told him to wait until morning then the Israelites would be delivered in the merit of Abraham regarding whom it is written, “Abraham woke up early in the morning” (Genesis 22:33). Gabriel said, “In Your great majesty, overthrow those who rise against You” (15:7). God then said to Michael, “Judge them.” With that, Michael grasped them by their sacred dread locks and tossed them into the depths of the sea. Regarding this it is written, “You broke the head of the vipers on the water (Psalms 74:13) (Yalkut Shimoni).

At the crossing of the Reed Sea all Israelites attained the level of prophecy and were thus able to sing the Song of the Reed Sea along with Moses, word by word, letter by letter. The Israelites saw a vision of angels and the entire Divine Assembly (Zohar). The Israelites were also able to see Jerusalem and the Temple on high (Derashoth Yeshenim). All sang together in harmony. They knew the words through prophetic inspiration. Moses began the song, “I will sing to God for He is high, high” (15:1). All the people responded, completing the entire song. According to another Rabbinic view, however Moses first sang the entire song for the Israelites. Then they repeated the song all together. After hearing the song only once, all the people were able to recite it precisely. Rabbi Yose taught that nursing infants pushed aside the breast and sang. Even
children still in the womb joined in. The Talmud asks how unborn children could sing. It replies that “the womb became like a chamber, airy and well illuminated” (Sotah, chapter 5). Rabbi Levy said that there was even a greater miracle here. “After the Israelites had finished singing, the unborn children returned to normal in their mothers’ wombs. Suckling babes finished singing and took back the breast” (Yalkut Shimoni on Psalms, Siman 740). King David also alluded to the song of the unborn children in their mother’s womb, when he said, “In assemblies bless God, the Lord from the source (womb) of Israel” (Psalms 68:27) (Sotah 31a).

Tradition has it that there is significance to the fact that the song has eighteen sentences. Eighteen is the numberical equivalent of the word Chai meaning life in Hebrew. These parallel the eighteen vertebrae in the spine according to tradition. This song therefore will be the backbone of the resurrected dead. When they awaken, they too will sing a song to God (Bachya: Toledoth Yitzchak. Cf. Tzedah LaDerekh).

Rabbinic tradition has it that on the eve of the Seventh of Passover one should chant all the ten songs in the Bible (Targum on Song of Songs 1:1; Tanchuma; Yalkut Shimoni; Mekhitta). The ten songs are:

1. The song for the Sabbath Day (Psalm 92). This was sung by Adam after God forgave him for the sin of eating from the Tree of knowledge of good and evil.
2. The Song of the Reed Sea. It is recited from the beginning until after the account of the bitter waters (14:30-15:26)
3. The song for the well in the desert (Numbers 21:17-20)
4. The song chanted by Moses before he died, admonishing Israel to keep God’s word. This is the entire portion of HaAzinu (Deut. 32).
5. The song chanted by Joshua after the great miracle when the sun stood still for 36 hours until the battle could be won (Joshua 10:12-14)
6. The song chanted by Barak and Deborah after the defeat of Sisra (Jdgs 5)
7. The song chanted by Hannah when God heard her prayer and granted her a son, even though she was sterile (1 Sam 2:1-10).
8. The song chanted by David for the miracles God had done (2 Sam. 22)
9. The entire Song of Songs composed by King Solomon with prophetic inspiration.
10. The song that Israel is destined to chant upon redemption from the present exile. It is thus written, “You shall have a song as on the night when the festival was sanctified; there shall be heartfelt joy as when one goes with flute, coming to God’s mountain, to the rock of Israel”
(Isaiah 30:29). That is, there will be a song as on Passover, when the first festival was sanctified to God, and as on the Three Festivals when all Israel makes a pilgrimage to the Temple Mount. This song consists of Psalms 30 and 98.

The reason the Israelites deserved to be redeemed according to rabbinic tradition is that they avoided sexual immorality. This was true of both the unmarried and the married. The Egyptians had the lowest sexual standards engaging in adultery, bestiality, and other immoral acts. The rabbis interpret the verse “A sealed garden is My bridal sister (Song of Songs 4:12) to mean that the Israelites in Egypt sealed themselves against all sexual liaisons with the Egyptians (Shir HaShirim Rabbah). This goes back to Sarah who refused to have relations with Pharaoh (Genesis 12:15) and Joseph who rejected the seduction of Potiphar’s wife (Genesis 39:8).

IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF MIRIAM THE PROPHETESS IN THE SONG

Miriam the prophetess, sister of Aaron, took the tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her with drums and dancing. Miriam led the response for them: “Sing to God, for He is high; horse and rider He cast in the sea.” Miriam according to tradition is also known as Ahrahel because she took all the women out “after” (aher) her. Miriam sings regarding her freedom. Never will the Hebrews be brought back to Egypt as slaves. According to Rabbinic tradition Miriam was one of the midwives whom Pharaoh had instructed to kill the Hebrew male infants. When Pharaoh asked her why she had not done so, she replied that the Hebrew women were able to deliver themselves without resorting to midwives (1:19). Miriam also asked Pharaoh’s daughter Bithya, “Shall I go and get a Hebrew wet nurse to nurse the child?” (2:7), and received permission. Miriam got Moses’ own mother to be his wet nurse thus outsmarting the Egyptians. Miriam is referred to as a prophetess. Miriam was three years older than Aaron and six years older than Aaron and she prophesized that “a child would be born who would deliver Israel.” Miriam is named Miriam because she was born when the harshest period of subjugation began. Miriam is from the root “marar” meaning bitter. We say in the Pesah Haggadah that the Egyptians “embittered our lives.” She can sing at the crossing of the Reed sea
because from the bitterness, the redemption emerged (Siftey Cohen). The bitterness of those days is captured in the Midrash Rabbah where we read, “I had no peace (Job 3:26): from the first decree that Pharaoh laid upon me- “and they embittered (va-yimareru) their lives” (Exod. 1:13)... But then God raised up a redeemer for me- that is, Miriam, named for bitterness (Shemoth Rabbah 26:1).

Aviva Zornberg notes that while Moses says, “I will sing” Miriam says “Sing to God...” Zornberg writes, “But Miriam, with her circle dance, drew down (mashcha) the transcendant light, achieved the highest possible awareness, and therefore could sing, in the present tense, Sing to God (p.230). Her song climaxes in the statement, “God shall reign forever and ever” (15:18). In recognition of Miriam’s Song a well springs up in the desert. This well, the gift of Miriam, miraculously accompanies the people on their travels through the wilderness. When Miriam dies, it disappears (Num.20:1-2). Miriam’s song brings the gift of spontaneous water gushing freely from the depths of the desert. It is said at the crossing of the Reed Sea even the “maid-servant saw what even the prophets did not see” (Rashi to 15:2 from Shir HaShirim Rabba 3:15 and Mechilta Shirah, chapter 3). This is Miriam’s legacy to women, Jews, and the world.

According to Megillah 14 Miriam is one of the seven prophetesses who also include Sarah, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Hulda, and Esther, but Miriam is the leader of the prophetesses according to Targum Micah. According to Sotah 12 Miriam married Calev ben Hezron and her three sons were Yashar, Shovav, and Ardon.

V.INTERTEXTUALITY

We saw in the passage from Avot de Rabbi Natan how the Rabbis weave other Biblical passages into their thoughts when interpreting the parting of the Reed Sea. Let us consider on our own some other places in the Tanakh (Bible) where the parting of the Reed Sea is alluded to.

The psalmist calls upon all the earth to hymn the praise of the Lord, and he invokes all people to come and see the works of God when referring to the parting of the Reed Sea. We read:

Who is held in awe by men for His acts.
He turned the sea into dry land;
We therefore rejoice in Him (Psalm 66: 5-6)
In Psalm 77:15-21 the psalmist celebrates the event in these words:

   You are the God who works wonders;
   You have manifested Your strength among the peoples.
   By Your arm You redeemed Your people,
   The children of Jacob and Joseph.
   The waters saw You, O God,
   The waters saw You and were convulsed;
   The very deep quaked as well.
   Clouds streamed water;
   The heavens rumbled;
   Your arrows flew about;
   Your thunder rumbled like wheels;
   Lightning lit up the world;
   The earth quaked and trembled.
   Your way was through the sea;
   Your path, through the mighty waters;
   Your tracks could not be seen;
   You led your people like a flock in the care of Moses and Aaron.

In these passages God triumphs over nature and over history in the rescue of the Jewish people, but why is not a word said about the drowning of the Egyptians which is the subject of much Rabbinic commentary? In the Pesah Haggadah we read that the angels were singing in jubilation over the drowning of the Egyptians and they were silenced by being rebuked for rejoicing when “God’s creatures were drowning in the sea.” One is not supposed to rejoice at the downfall of an enemy- even when that enemy is wicked. This teaches that all humans are “in the image of God” even when they may be evil and not live up to the that divine potential. It is not proper to celebrate when any of God’s creations are being punished. Thoughts of relishing revenge upon the national enemy or any notion of rejoicing at Egypt’s downfall are quelled. The emphasis should be shifted to God’s care for His people, His absolute sovereignty over nature, and His control of divine history.

Let us turn to another passage that highlights the intertextual dimension of the Tanakh. In the book of Joshua we encounter a structural symmetry. Just as the Sea of Reeds parted when the Egyptians parted from Egypt so to the Jordan river must part when the Jews enter into the land of Canaan. These two parting of bodies of water are like two book ends that give the Tanakh a symmetry of complementary events.
Following the crossing of the Jordan into the Promised land, Joshua charged the people to set up a memorial to the event so that future generations may be moved to reflect on the history of the nation. He tells them in Joshua 4:22-28:

For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan before you until you crossed, just as the Lord your God did to the Sea of Reeds, which He dried up before us until we crossed. Thus all the peoples of the earth shall know how mighty is the hand of the Lord, and you shall fear the Lord your God always.

Joshua derives from the lesson at the parting of the sea that God is omnipotent and that awe is appropriate in reverence for His might. The prophet Isaiah too echoes themes found in the Joshua passage when we read:

Awake, awake, clothe yourself with splendor
O arm of the Lord! Awake as in days of old,
As in former ages!
It was you that dried up the Sea,
The waters of the great deep;
That made the abysses of the Sea
A road the redeemed might walk (Isaiah 51:9-10)

The parting of the Reed sea is that seminal event that is a constant source of reference for prophets, leaders, and kings in all of the Bible. It is at the parting of the Reed sea that God’s awesome power was redemptive for the people of Israel. Isaiah again returns to this theme:

Where is He who brought them up from the Sea
Along with the shepherd of His flock?
Where is He who put
In their midst His holy spirit,
Who made his glorious arm
March at the right hand of Moses,
Who divided the waters before them
To make Himself a name for all time,
Who led them through the deeps
So that they did not stumble… (Isaiah 63:11:13)

In these passages cited to illustrate the intertextual dimension of the Bible the celebration of God’s mighty deeds and the redemption of Israel is apparent.

VI. CONCLUSION
The Song of the Sea is perhaps the most sublime passage in all of the Bible. Regarding the verse “This is My God and I will make him a habitation, the God of my Father and I will exalt him” we read in the Zohar, “All the Israelites beheld at the sea what even the prophet Ezekiel was not priviledged to see, and even the embryos in their mothers’ wombs beheld the wonderful works of the Holy One, and sang praises to Him, saying: “This is my God and I extol Him; the God of my father and I exalt Him”, namely the God of father Abraham. Said R. Jose: “Does the God of Abraham need our exaltation? Is he not already exalted high above our comprehension? R. Jesse replied: Yet man can and must exalt Him in the sense of uniting in his mind all the attributes in the Holy Name, for this is the supreme expression of worship” (Zohar Beshalah 55b). This becomes the focus of much of medieval Jewish philosophy which sought to free its practitioners from the mental Egypts of noetic unredemption. “Shirat HaYam” is perhaps the highest and most sublime form of man’s articulation of divine redemption ever expressed