

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



IF A WATERFALL'S IN THE FOREST, DOES IT MAKE A SOUND?

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Isaac Asimov imagined the final human being asking the ultimate computer whether entropy can be reversed. The computer survives the end of the physical universe, and reaches a conclusion, but how to display the answer? So Ultravac said: "Let there be light" – and there was light.

But Ultravac, unlike G-d, has no reflective motive for Creation, and so it is likely that the Ultravac bible is only three verses long.

Many years ago, I began trying to compose liturgical music that matches the meaning of the lyrics. One of my first projects was the very end of *Kabbalat Shabbat, Tehillim* 93. I had verse 4 translated as something like the following:

מקלות מים
 רבים אדירים משברי ים
 אדיר במרום ה':
*Greater than the voices of waters –
 many, powerful, ocean breakers –
 Mighty in the Above Is Hashem!*

It seemed to me that the proper musical analogue would convey the sense of the waters gathering, increasing power and volume step by step, until they reached their peak, and the chazan's voice's apparent peak; but then G-d's name would be sung at even higher pitch and volume.

This was ambitious enough, but in retrospect, it misses an important complementary element. I grew up climbing the Roaring Brook ski trail on Belleayre Mountain in the Catskills with my family; climbing, because it was summer, and so I never really heard the brook roar until we began coming for Pesach and the spring melt. Flooding streams ironically raise their voices *as they descend*, and crescendo as they expire. So here is verse 3:

נשאו נהרות ה'

נשאו נהרות קולם

ישאו נהרות דכים:

Floodstreams raise, O Hashem;

Floodstreams raise their voices;

Let floodstreams raise as they descend;

Here is an attempt at visualizing music for 3 and 4 together (read right to left).

ה'					
במרום		משברי ים			נשאו נהרות ה'
אדיר		אדירים			נשאו נהרות קולם
		רבים			ישאו נהרות דכים
		מים		מקלות	

But I confess to having no idea of how to convey rushing downhill power musically. My translation largely matched many of the *pashtanim*, although they generally add a layer of allegory; the floodstreams represent nations gathering against Israel, but G-d is more powerful than they.

I eventually realized that at least some members of *Chazal* read this very differently. In their reading, the last three words of verse 4 are a verbalization of the waters; in all their power, they declare the power of G-d.

"Out of the voices of waters, many, powerful, ocean breakers:

"Powerful in the Above is Hashem!"

Most often this is taken to refer to the waters of the Reed Sea returning to drown the Egyptian army, as the Song of the Sea refers to those waters as אדירים, powerful (*Shemot* 15:10).

Aviva Zornberg cites a somewhat macabre and deeply disturbing *midrash* (*Beresbit Rabbah* 28:2) that adopts the same translation but a different application. The literary spur is the

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perceived etymological ambivalence of יקוו המים in *Beresbit* 1:9: does the verb come from קו =line, and imply that G-d bounded the waters, or from קוה =anticipate, and imply that G-d gave the waters hope that they would one day breach those bounds? Here is the outcome.

A parable:

*A ruler built a palace, and he placed in it dwellers who were dumb
(speechless).*

*They would arise every morning and ask after the ruler's wellbeing via
gestures and fidgettalk and מנורלים.*

The ruler said (to himself):

*If these who are speechless arise every morning and ask after my wellbeing
via gestures and fidgettalk, were they speakers, how much more so!?*

So the ruler placed speaking dwellers within the palace.

They arose and seized the palace, saying:

"This palace does not belong to the ruler; it is ours."

So the ruler said:

Let the palace return to how it was.

So too,

*the exaltation of The Holy Blessed One arose only out of the water,
thus "From the voices of great waters . . . "
what do they say?*

" . . .Mighty in the Above is Hashem."

Said The Holy Blessed One:

*If these that have no egalitarian (אמירה) or hierarchical (דבור) speech
are exalting me,*

when the human being will be created, how much more so!

The generation of Enosh arose and mutinied against Him;

the generation of the Flood arose and mutinied against Him;

the generation of the Division arose and mutinied against Him.

Said The Holy Blessed One:

Let the waters turn to me and come upon them.

As with many parables that represent G-d as a human ruler, this narrative raises my moral hackles rather than making G-d more explicable.

What justifies the ruler in banishing his loyal but speechless constituents in the first place?

What has the ruler done to deserve their loyalty, and why would they remain loyal after he mistreats them?

Do the speaking dwellers have the option of leaving, or is quiescent submission their only alternative to rebellion?

(We should mention as well the perhaps unjustified privileging of verbal speech over signing.)

Furthermore:

In the *mashal*, the speechless palace dwellers have no direct relationships to the speaking dwellers. But in the *nimsbal*, the waters from (just after) the very beginning eagerly anticipate the time when they will return to the palace, and the Flood is the direct cause of humanity's removal (which regardless turns out to be very temporary)! The *midrash* intensifies the *nimsbal* by describing the Flood as literally מוהה =dissolving human beings, who are really just dirt in a liquid suspension anyway, or dough kneaded by the Divine baker. Why does G-d abet the waters' revenge?

But there is a theological difficulty perhaps even more severe than the moral challenges. It seems here that the advent of human beings (potentially) improves the quality of the praise offered to G-d, but does not change its fundamental nature.

Isaac Asimov's brilliant short story "The Last Question" imagines the final human being asking the ultimate computer whether entropy can be reversed. The computer survives the end of the physical universe, and finally reaches a conclusion – but how to display the answer?

So Ultravac said: "Let there be light" – and there was light.

Ultravac has no reflective motive for Creation, and so it is likely that the Ultravac bible is only three verses long. But in the absence of human beings, to whom do the heavens proclaim G-d's glory? Before which court does the firmament testify to the works of His hands? There is a reason that – even in our *midrash!* G-d brings in backup speakers twice before relenting to the waters, and of course the Flood is almost immediately undone.

I am more than happy to receive disagreements and alternative interpretations, and relevant musical compositions. However, I expect to maintain that when a waterfall's in the forest, and only G-d is there to hear it, it does not make a sound of praise.

..Shabbat Shalom!

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