

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



WHEN DID MIRYAM SING, AND WITH WHOM?

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Grammatical tenses are the cause of great tension for Biblical interpreters. It's almost never perfectly clear how two events are temporally related.

I'm not referring to the controversial principle that "There is no earlier or later in the Torah", which means that there is no presumption that undated material in the Torah is arranged chronologically. That principle relates primarily to dates rather than times, and to the temporal relationship among literary units rather than to the chronology within a literary unit. Here I am discussing time within a unit, specifically: When do the women sing their Song of the Sea?

Chapter 14 of Sefer Shemot records the splitting of the sea and the drowning of the Egyptians. It concludes:

וַיִּזְשַׁע יִקְרָא בַיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם
 וַיִּרְא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-מִצְרַיִם מֵת עַל-שַׁפְּת הַיָּם:
 וַיִּרְא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-הַיָּד הַגְּדוֹלָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה יְקֹנֵק בְּמִצְרַיִם
 וַיִּירָאוּ הָעָם אֶת-יְקֹנֵק
 וַיִּאֱמִינוּ בַּיְקֹנֵק וּבַמֹּשֶׁה עַבְדּוֹ:

Hashem delivered on that very day Israel from the hand of Mitzrayim;

Israel saw Mitzrayim dead on the lip of the sea;

Israel saw the great hand that Hashem had done in Egypt; the nation feared Hashem;

They had faith in Hashem and in Mosheh his servant.

Each action-verb in these verses is preceded by a "reversing vav", so that they are *atid*, "future". This could lead a translator to add "and then" before each verb. This would imply that they took place sequentially; first Hashem delivered, then Israel saw, then Israel saw more, then the nation feared, and finally they had faith. But grammatically, it is equally correct to present all five verbs as happening simultaneously; or for the two "saw" lines to be elaborations of the first line, and so forth.

Furthermore, at least the first two lines of this paragraph are likely a summary recapitulation of preceding events rather than a record of subsequent events. It's not that "the Jews passed through in the midst of the sea on dry land" and then G-d delivered them, rather than His enabling them to traverse the sea on dry land constituted deliverance. The next three

lines may similarly be an overall restatement of the entire experience of the plagues, rather than a direct reaction to the drownings.

All this confusion about time comes to a head in the following verse (15:1):

at that time will sing Mosheh and Bnei Yisrael this song to Hashem

They said:

I will sing to Hashem

because he has acted most exaltedly horse and its rider He threw into the sea

אָז יִשִּׁיר-מֹשֶׁה וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לַיְקֹנֵק

וַיֹּאמְרוּ לְאֹמֶר

אֲשִׁירָה לַיְקֹנֵק כִּי-גָאָה גָאָה

סוֹס וְרֹכְבוֹ רָמָה בָּיָם:

"Will sing"? Talmud Sanhedrin 91b cites Rav Meir as using this future tense to prove that the Torah promises a Resurrection. But leaving that aside: Does the Song reflect and express newfound faith in Hashem and Mosheh? Or did they arrive at faith via contemplation during the Song? (This question has powerful resonance for the role of e.g. *Zemirot* on Shabbat.)

The Song concludes by reviewing the fact that Bnei Yisrael walked on dry land in the midst of the sea. The next two verses tell us that:

Miryam the Prophetess, sister of Aharon, took the *tof* in her hand.

All the women went out after her, with *tofs* and *mechols*.

Miryam prompted them (plural, **masculine**):

You (plural) sing to Hashem

because He has acted most exaltedly horse and its rider He threw into the sea.

וַתִּקְחֵן מִרְיָם הַנְּבִיאָה אֶת-הַתּוֹף אֲתֶרְנֹן אֲתֶרְנֹף בְּיָדָהּ

וַתֵּצֵאנָן כָּל-הַנְּשִׂימִם אַחֲרֶיהָ בְּתַפִּים וּבַמְחוֹלֹת:

וַתַּעַז לָהֶם מִרְיָם

שִׁירוּ לַיהוָה

כִּי-גָאָה גָאָה

סוֹס וְרֹכְבוֹ רָמָה בָּיָם:

Casual readers likely assume that Miryam takes *tof* in hand after Mosheh and Bnei Yisrael conclude their song. But readers of this essay surely understand by now that this is an

unjustified assumption. Miryam could certainly have taken the *tof* as Mosheh began singing, or even before. Note that Miryam herself does not “go out”, although the other women go out “after her”. This timing would prevent us from seeing the song of the women as imitative of the men’s. (It is also interesting that the women bring instruments while the men apparently sing a capella.) This would fit well with the very plausible reading that the women sang the same song as the men, but the Torah abbreviates it to the first line rather than repeating the lyrics.

However, at least one sequential reading deserves mention. The 13-14th century commentary *Minchat Yehudah* and the 15-16th century commentary *Meshivat Nefesh* each note that Miriam apparently prompts a grammatically masculine father than feminine group. They accordingly connect this anomaly to the famous midrash that G-d prevented the angels from singing during the splitting of the sea. Afterward, G-d also insisted that the male Jews sing before the angels, arguing that humans are at risk of dying before they get to sing. But the angels protest that at least they should be allowed to sing before the women! Miriam accedes, and thus she prompts them: “Sing to Hashem etc.”. Angels apparently use masculine pronouns, and prefer singing with accompaniment rather than a capella.

Much as I enjoy this reading overall, I think it is enhanced rather than diminished if we make things simultaneous. What if G-d told the angels they couldn’t sing first, and they assumed that this required them to wait, because humans and angels cannot harmonize? But then Miriam suggested that angels and women can harmonize, so they joined the women’s shirah group; or else she suggested that the women would be willing to provide instrumental backup rather than singing, so that G-d could be praised by everybeing at the same time.

The second suggestion offers a better explanation of why Miriam is described as prompting, while Mosheh sings with the men.

However, nothing above explains why Miriam is described here as “the prophetess, sister of Aharon”. That difficulty is accentuated by the amazing comment of Abravanel:

ויראה שנאמ' כאן אחות אהרן
לפי שבשירה הזאת נזכר משה ומרים
והיה גנאי לאהרן שלא נזכר בה

לכן הזכירו בערך מרים שהיתה אחותו:

It seems to me that it says here *sister of Aharon*
Because this song mentions both Mosheh and Miryam
and it would have been a disgrace for Aharon not to be
mentioned in it

Therefore it mentions him in the context of Miryam, who was
his sister.

For *drush* purposes, we learn from here that Hashem puts an extra word in the Torah just to prevent Aharon from being diminished! But for exegetical purposes, this just sharpens the question. Why is Aharon not mentioned in the context of Mosheh’s song? Why not describe Mosheh as Aharon’s brother? (For that matter: Why not describe Miryam as brother of both Mosheh and Aharon?)

I don’t have a satisfying answer. In the spirit of refusing to make Torah a handmaiden of the politics of the moment, I won’t try to force a connection. But I would very much welcome your suggestions.

Shabbat shalom!

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