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BESHALAH

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“THIS IS PRAYER”: HITBODEDUT IN RAV SHAGAR’S AND RAV ELHANAN NIR’S WRITINGS

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I. Introduction

“R. Elazar said: When one who makes their prayer fixed, their prayer is not [truly] supplication... Rabbah and Rabbi Yosef both said: this refers to all who are unable to find a new element in their prayer.” (*Berachot* 29b).

Attention has been called one of the most important literacies of the 21st century.¹ With more information available at our fingertips than perhaps ever in history, it is no surprise that techniques that foster attentiveness have become increasingly popular. The U.S. meditation market is estimated to be valued at over \$2 billion by 2022,² and advocates and researchers want to see mindfulness practices brought into schools.³ Jews have been developing practices to bring attentiveness into life for thousands of years. Jewish practices that center on increasing attention and intention in *tefillah* bear a suspicious resemblance to mindfulness and date back to as early as the time of the Mishnah.⁴ One Jewish meditation practice that has become highly famous in recent years is *hitbodedut*.⁵ While most often associated with Bratzlav *Hasidut*, it appears in the writings of the Baal Shem Tov and is mentioned as a concept in works predating *Hasidut* by several hundred years.⁶ I will

seek to explore the perspectives of two contemporary *Dati Leumi* rabbis on *hitbodedut* who have been influenced by Bratzlav *Hasidut*. First, we will look at R. Shagar and his commentary on *Likutei Moharan* I:52, one of R. Nahman’s classic *torot* on *hitbodedut*. This will also serve as a brief introduction into how R. Nahman views the practice of *hitbodedut*. Afterwards, we will turn to R. Elhanan Nir and his short exposition on *hitbodedut* in his book *Yehudi Ba-Laylah: Masa Be-Ikvot Halomotav Shel R. Nahman Mi-Bratzlav* on R. Nahman’s recorded dreams. We will conclude by discussing how these expositions not only show *hitbodedut*’s ability to enhance prayer, but even to be a form of supplication and prayer in and of themselves. In looking at these two contemporary Israeli thinkers, I hope to share a deep appreciation for the unique voice of R. Shagar’s and his students’ “*Hasidut Eretz-Yisraelit*”⁷ and to contribute in a small way towards making their relevant and novel interpretations of Jewish texts more accessible to an English-speaking audience.

II. Rav Shagar

R. Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, known by the acronym R. Shagar, served as *rosh yeshiva* at Yeshivat HaKotel and Yeshivat Shefa and founded Yeshivat Siach Yitzchak with his hevruta R. Yair Dreyfuss. His engagement with postmodernism, contemporary philosophy, and pedagogy designed to address the issues of today has led to a growing following of his teachings and methodology since his passing in 2007. Siach Yitzchak continues to publish his works, and new essays are periodically uploaded [on their website](#) in Hebrew and English. Bratzlav features prominently in R. Shagar’s teachings; this teaching about *hitbodedut* is from his two-volume set of shiurim on *Likutei Moharan*.

[Likutei Moharan I:52](#) begins as follows:

There are heretics who say that the world is a necessary reality. Based on their evil and erroneous opinion it seems to them that they have proofs and examples of this, God forbid, from the way the world functions. But in fact their

¹ [Attention, and Other 21st-Century Social Media Literacies](#) by Howard Rheingold.

² [The Mindfulness Industry](#) by Kit Caless.

³ [Mindful Schools](#) is one such organization dedicated solely to advocating for mindfulness in schools.

⁴ See for example *Mishnah Berachot 5:1*. *Hekhalot* literature has also been labeled as a form of visualization meditation; cf. Vita Daphne Arbel’s [Beholders of Divine Secrets: Mysticism and Myth in the Hekhalot and Merkavah Literature](#), pg. 31.

⁵ See Tomer Persico’s [Hitbodedut For A New Age: Adaptation of Practices Among the Followers of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav](#) on how this relates to the *Baal Teshuvah* and New Age movements.

⁶ On the Baal Shem Tov, see for example *Mekor Mayim Chaim Ekev* 32:1. The Arizal, *Sefer Haredim*, and even Abraham Ben HaRambam’s

[HaMaspik Le-Ovdei Hashem](#) explicitly discuss *hitbodedut*. Cf. [Meditation and Kabbalah](#) by Aryeh Kaplan, pgs. 15-16.

⁷ Zvi Leshem speaks insightfully about R. Shagar and his student’s place in “*Hasidut Eretz Yisraelit*” and how this relates to other branches of American and Israeli *Hasidut* in his lecture [“Hasidut of the Future: Was R. H. Zeitlin’s Vision Fulfilled in the Hasidut or Neo-Hasidut of Our Day?”](#)

mouths spew foolishness. For the truth is that the world and all it contains are a contingent⁸ reality.

Only the Holy One must necessarily exist. However, all the worlds and all they contain need not necessarily exist. God created them *creatio ex nihilo*. For God had the ability, the power and the alternative to create them or to not create them. Therefore the world and all it contains are certainly a contingent reality... Yet as soon as the Holy One resolved to issue the souls of Israel, then the entire world took on the aspect of necessary reality. For after the souls of Israel were issued, God was then obliged, so to speak, to bring the world into being. It was on account of this that their souls were created, so that all the worlds would be created for them and they would rule over everything.

R. Shagar reads R. Nahman's ontological explanation of the creation of reality as truly an existential statement about our purpose in life:

"the goal of a person's service according to R. Nahman's description in this torah is to bring our life to a state of necessity, meaning to be identified with our actions and to see them as something essential and not random."⁹

While R. Nahman is more concerned with the actual change of the status of the reality, R. Shagar is looking to understand what the idea of a necessary reality means for one's inner world. R. Shagar asks: what does it feel like for the individual to live a necessary existence? His answer is that it is a world where our actions matter. If the world is necessarily so, then it makes a difference that I am here now. It couldn't be that I would not exist or would make different choices and things would remain the same. In a necessary world, I necessarily matter.

Continuing in a psychological key, R. Shagar sees a more primary issue underlying the attempt to live in a necessary world: an inability to accept ourselves. "We are always seeking," he writes, "external validation, a fist to force us to accept our life, to be at peace with it, but this is impossible. This reception must come from within us, from an understanding that our life is a life that is adequate for us; in a sense, 'necessary.'"¹⁰ The 'philosophers' that R. Nahman discusses see the world as necessary so that they can feel important. If my actions are part of a necessary universe, then they must be meaningful. Yet we are still left with doubts, feelings of unfulfillment, a sense of regret, and more. This is because the only true self-acceptance can come from within.

After this lengthy introduction, R. Shagar explains that "precisely through leaving the village, through *hitbodedut*, a person changes themselves, their soul, to 'necessary.'"¹¹ The unique character of *hitbodedut* can be understood in R. Shagar's distinction between the attitudes of Chabad and Bratzlav regarding nullification:

"Surprisingly, the path R. Nahman delineates to arrive to the soul's state of nullification is not through achieving a

mystical consciousness, like in Chabad which seeks nullification through *hitbonenut* (contemplation) of God's infiniteness, how God fills and surrounds the world, but comes from the power of *hitbodedut*. Only if a person is doing *hitbodedut* with themselves and hears their Godly soul can they uncover intimacy with their Creator, and be nullified. Here nullification is not acquired through nullifying awareness of the 'I,' but the opposite."¹²

Chabad *hitbonenut* consists of contemplating the infinitude of God so that one is nullified and ceases to exist altogether. *Hitbodedut*, on the other hand, is a dialogic process. If my self is nullified then there is no "I" to speak with God, so paradoxically nullification in Bratzlav comes about from a reinforcing of the self's existence. Our problem of self-rejection exists within our internal monologue. The problem can only be solved through bringing my monologue into a dialogue with the other. And yet, *hitbodedut* must be done alone, since according to R. Shagar, we are unable to be ourselves around other people. Citing Sartre's idea of being-for-onself versus being-for-others, R. Shagar explains that the other's very presence and gaze objectifies us. We can only be ourselves, for ourselves, when free from socialization.

It is for exactly this reason that

"R. Nahman doesn't denigrate the self and try to be collected into the Infiniteness of the Creator, but rather to speak to God, to spill one's concerns, to tell God intimate things in a personal manner to bring God into our happenstances and needs."¹³

Seeking a path for discussing our inner monologues while maintaining authenticity, R. Shagar sees in R. Nahman's teaching a certain type of speech with the other that can occur in *hitbodedut* which allows us to be free from our doubts and to accept ourselves. R. Shagar characterizes this type of speech as *dibbur el* (speaking-to) in distinction from *dibbur al* (speaking-about). *Dibbur el*, the goal of *hitbodedut*, is characterized as "being one with the speech, creating intimacy, connecting and having faith in the other... this type of speech changes reality ontologically."¹⁴ In this type of speech, my whole self and all of my being become communicable. I am totally connected with what I am saying, not wearing any masks or trying to conform to any societal norms. When we can be most radically ourselves, we can speak authentically and through dialogue, changing our internal monologue.

This underscores why R. Nahman, in R. Shagar's eyes, sees it as fundamental that *hitbodedut* occur at night outside of the village: the nullification that must occur is not of the self, but of one's awareness of everything else. At night and alone there are no distractions and the world still sleeps, not yet awoken to a day of labor. The escape not only from socialization, but also from society itself, facilitates the nullification of doubts and worries and everything that is not me and my Creator. Separating from one's normal surroundings allows for a heightened awareness of the self. By way of conclusion, R. Shagar suggests that the reader occasionally practice *hitbodedut* and offers that it can be practiced anywhere that is conducive to authentic speech, not only in the desert or outside of city bounds.¹⁵

⁸ Necessary here means "necessarily must exist or be true," whereas "contingent" means "must not necessarily exist or be true." For these terms in their philosophical context, see [the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's entry on Leibniz](#), section 2: The Nature of Modality.

⁹ *Shiurim Al Likutei Moharan Helek Bet*, pg. 154.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pgs. 158-159.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 160.

¹² *Ibid.*, pg. 161.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pgs. 162-163.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 163.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 164.

We have seen that Shagarian *hitbodedut*:

- 1) contains a two-part crisis, beginning with an inability to see meaning and ‘necessity’ within our existence, along with the inability to accept ourselves;
- 2) is not about nullifying but emphasizing the self;
- 3) necessitates a unique type of authentic language;
- 4) serves to facilitate fundamental change; and
- 5) can be done anywhere.

III. R. Elhanan Nir

R. Elhanan Nir is a poet, author, and teacher in Israel. He has received numerous awards for his writing, including the Prime Minister’s Award for Artistic Creation. He has taught at Yeshivat Siach Yitzchak since 2004, and also teaches at Yeshivat Machanayim. R. Nir was a student of R. Shagar for many years and taught alongside him and R. Menachem Froman at Yeshivat Shefa.¹⁶ His most recent book, *Yehudi Ba-Laylah: Masa Be-Ikvot Halomotav Shel R. Nahman Mi-Bratzlav*, is a fascinating work that dissects Bratzlav *Hasidut* through the lens of the recorded dreams of R. Nahman. The book is simply amazing, and R. Nir spends a few pages discussing *hitbodedut* in R. Nahman’s thought.

R. Nir begins where R. Shagar ends, with the idea that *hitbodedut* occurs at night outside of the village. He sees multiple meanings in this movement: this is not only the move to leave the safety of the city walls and civilization to uncharted territory, but also the move from the established way of relating to God through prayer to the improvised conversation of *hitbodedut*.

He writes about how this movement affects a person:

“There is a terror in this exposed standing... this is the moment when a person requests speech itself. Speech is stuck in exile, the heart is full of a lack of trust, cynical and exhausted... and what now? One is left utterly exposed, seeking someone to believe in their life, who will see them as living freely, needing at the same time someone to defend and protect them.”¹⁷

Standing exposed and outside of our comfort zone, we find that our speech is in exile. Exiled speech is mired in doubt; we do not have the confidence to fully expose our inner selves through dialogue. Our speech is in exile when we have not yet developed an ability to trust the other enough to speak truly and freely. These words call to mind the idea of the Zohar that speech was in exile when the Jews were in Egypt.¹⁸ By going into the wilderness we mirror *Bnei Yisrael* in the Exodus. Just as *Bnei Yisrael* left the urban Egyptian environment for the wilderness, we leave our urban environments for a wilderness. R. Nir’s use of the word *hahmatzah* (missing an opportunity) when describing the doubt that hinders true communication in *hitbodedut* also points to the failure of exiled language to fully communicate our internal worlds. This extends the Exodus metaphor, as *hahmatzah* shares a root with *hametz*. *Hametz* is made by the Hasidic writers to

symbolize all types of negative attributes that prevent connection.¹⁹ Halakhically, *hametz* must go through a process of *bitul* (nullification), and below we will see how R. Nir sees *hitbodedut* as a process of *bitul* in order to arrive at real dialogue. R. Nir additionally highlights in this quote a remarkable power of *hitbodedut*: the ability to redeem nature with our words. Our practice of *hitbodedut* affects the world around us along with the one inside of us, to change everything from a *midbar* (desert) to a *medaber* (speaker). While our encounter with *hitbodedut* could be filled with doubt and failure, our goal is to elevate speech out of exile. In distinction from R. Shagar, R. Nir sees *hitbodedut* as ideally practiced in nature so it can “remove nature from its stagnation and firmness, to bring it from a state of indifferent silence, silence and necessarily violence as well, to the state of open Divinity, full of language and speech.”²⁰

R. Nir explains that “speech characterizes the Infinite as Infinite, removing it from the imperviousness that prevails in the world of nature and its surroundings and turning to It; it brings the Infinite out of the aspect of exile in which everything is hidden, and brings it to revelation via the voice itself when it makes speech.”²¹ The act of going into nature and speaking actually allows for a form of revelation in the form of a meeting. Going into nature to practice *hitbodedut* is like hide-and-seek, where once away from our busy and preprogrammed lives we can speak, and thereby start to notice the Godliness in the world around us.

When we use our voice to speak to God, something remarkable happens:

“the words that one expresses through the mouth from the depths of the heart suddenly are revealed to exceed the boundaries of subjectivity and are revealed to be objective Godly words...it does not remain within the boundaries of human speech turning to God, but is human speech which is revealed to be Godly speech.”²²

Again in distinction from R. Shagar, R. Nir suggests that the boundary between us and God becomes blurred through *hitbodedut*. In explaining this concept, he cites an earlier piece in *Likutei Moharan*, where R. Nahman writes that “when one is nullified to the Infinite, they are in the aspect of ‘not knowing a person,’ that they do not even know themselves.”²³ This idea of *hitbodedut* as self-nullification is exactly what R. Shagar characterized as Chabad *hitbonenut* and not Bratzlav *hitbodedut* above! For R. Nir, we momentarily cease to be as the words we are saying turn out to be God’s words, and we find in *hitbodedut* the answers to the questions we were initially asking and the concerns we initially had. He even suggests that we observe our words go from subjective to objective, whereas R. Shagar invokes Sartre to show that we are objectified by the other and should seek to remain subjects if we want to speak to God! R. Nir sees in *hitbodedut* a sudden realization that there is no subjectivity since our words are from an objective God that transcends all individual perspective. R. Shagar suggests the opposite, that our *hitbodedut* is hindered by anything that diminishes our subjectivity and that we

¹⁶ Beis Moshiach’s interview with R. Elhanan Nir, [Every Word Counts](#).

¹⁷ *Yehudi Ba-Laylah: Masa Be-Ikvot Halomotav Shel R. Nahman Mi-Bratzlav*, pgs. 263-264.

¹⁸ *Zohar 2:25b. Cf. Sefat Emet Miktetz 5659, Maor Va-Shemesh Rimzei Pesach Ve-Peirush Al Ha-Hagaddah.*

¹⁹ See, for example, the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s *Likutei Sihot* vol. 16 pg. 124. Notably, *hametz* must also go through a process of *bitul*, nullification, as R. Nir will prescribe for the one who seeks to practice *hitbodedut*.

²⁰ *Yehudi Ba-Laylah: Masa Be-Ikvot Halomotav Shel R. Nahman Mi-Bratzlav*, pg. 264.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.* pg. 265.

²³ *Likutei Moharan 4:9*, cited in *Ibid.* 266.

must maintain and even strengthen our perspective to be able to speak through it to God.

This union between us and God in *hitbodedut* becomes full nullification, as “it is actually God that is revealed through human identity; no longer are there two with one turning to speak to the other, no self-awareness divides them, rather the two are revealed as one.”²⁴ Understanding that we all contain Godliness actually becomes the work of *hitbodedut*, as we ascend from finding God in nature to finding God in speech to finding God in ourselves. R. Nir uses the exact same terminology as R. Shagar to describe this newfound language in which we become aware of God speaking through us, describing it as the move from *dibbur al* (speaking-about) to *dibbur el* (speaking-to).

This ascension, from action (going to nature) to speech (trying to speaking to God) to thought (finding the Godliness in myself), is a painful process. R. Nir calls this pain “the pain of transitioning from the world of *tohu* (chaos) to the world of *tikkun* (repair).”²⁵ This transition comes from finding a new language, the language of *dibbur el*, which is wholly connective. This language allows us to fully communicate our selves, the parts of us that are beyond all externalities and even thoughts and beliefs, and therefore to bridge directly with the listener, which in *hitbodedut*, is God. Through this process we are unified with the listener and transcend language altogether. The world of *tohu* is created by the inability of the finite world to fully hold God’s contracted self, and we are in a subsequent world of *tikkun* to reconfigure the sparks of Godliness in this world back to their intended structure. This process is one of partial redemption, where God serves as an aid in the individual’s healing through *hitbodedut*.

In R. Shagar’s thought, this healing is rooted in God’s distance, wherein the individual can find the space, through dialogue with God, to be themselves authentically and therefore to grow. Change begins and is cemented on the plane of speech. In R. Nir’s thought, the healing comes from moving beyond speech altogether. This is further exemplified by R. Nir’s final suggestion of how to commune with God and ultimately be healed: using *niggun* and music. *Niggun* is a path to circumvent “our obsession to translate every occurrence into words, and forces us to be completely and necessarily—at one.”²⁶ When we can get lost in music and leave behind all of our thoughts and worries and just be, then we are able to arise to the deepest level within us, which is God.

In summation, R. Nir’s *hitbodedut*:

- 1) contains a two-part crisis, beginning with an inability to first find the words to say and then the pain of transitioning to the world of *tikkun*;
- 2) is not about emphasizing but nullifying the self;
- 3) necessitates a unique type of authentic language;
- 4) serves to facilitate fundamental change; and
- 5) must be done in nature.

IV. Conclusion

While perhaps an interesting intellectual exercise, it is important to ask: what does any of this mean for the American Jew living in an

urban environment? As a resident of New York City, it is exceedingly difficult for me to find any kind of real nature, let alone to be completely alone whatsoever! However, R. Shagar and R. Nir do share one belief that has ramifications for all of us: that the principles they outline here have applications to standard *tefillah*. R. Shagar writes that only through the stance that *hitbodedut* grants, of speaking to God in a straightforward and informal manner, can one pray.²⁷ In a similar vein, R. Nir explains that when we can “transition from *dibbur al* to *dibbur el*...then I am no longer speaking about something but to Someone. This is *tefillah*.”²⁸ Even if we cannot practice standard *hitbodedut*, or even if it does not seem to resonate with us (perhaps we should try!), we can still be changed through our *kavannah* to speak closely and freely to God in *tefillah*, and perhaps through this, bring the world to *tikkun*.

REEDING BETWEEN THE LINES: PARALLELS ACROSS THE YAM SUF AND BABY MOSHE NARRATIVES

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The Splitting of the Sea (in *Parshat Beshalah*) and Moshe’s infant rescue from the river are written as parallel stories, meant to be read side by side. This essay highlights the many layers embedded in this seemingly simple parallel, and uses the intensity of that connection to explain a number of otherwise awkward and difficult words that appear in the Torah text.

Both narratives tell of an Israelite safe passage through dangerous waters. Indeed, baby Moshe is placed into the *suf*, the reeds ([2:3,5](#)), while the Israelites traverse the *yam suf*, the Sea of Reeds ([13:18, 15:4,22](#)). Of course, both stories also feature an Egyptian royal: at the river, it is Pharaoh’s daughter; at the Sea, it is Pharaoh himself. In each text, the royal is accompanied by a retinue. For the daughter, it’s her attendants and servants; for Pharaoh, his soldiers and drivers. Nor are we, the reading audience, unaccompanied. There is another onlooker, standing there and reacting with us. Not coincidentally, it’s the same person in both scenes: Miriam. She is there to see what will happen to her younger, infant brother; she is there to celebrate with her heroic adult (though still younger) brother. Not only is Miriam witness both times to Moshe’s safe passage, but as soon as his piece of the story concludes, the text trains its focus upon her activity. At the river, she organizes two women -- Pharaoh’s daughter and her own mother -- racing between them in the height of this tense and dramatic moment, and thus taking the child’s fate in her hands. At the sea, she leads all the Jewish women, taking the instruments of celebration in her hand and giving voice to the song of salvation. Interestingly, the rescue of young Moshe and the rescue of young Israel are immediately followed by the same question: what shall they drink? “Shall I go and call you a nurse woman?” ([Exodus 2:7](#)) to provide milk for this child, Miriam immediately asks. And then, in the desert, the people ask: “*mah nishteh* -- what shall we drink?” ([15:24](#)). Here, Miriam is less obviously involved in the crisis, but her name still hovers all around it: shall the people find sweet, potable water in a place which is called *Marah* because its waters are bitter, *marim* ([15:23](#))?

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 266.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 264.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 266.

²⁷ *Shiurim Al Likutei Moharan Helek Bet*, pg. 162.

²⁸ *Yehudi Ba-Laylah: Masa Be-Ikvot Halomotav Shel R. Nahman Mi-Bratzlav*, pg. 266.

There is one final parallel upon which this connection rides: vehicles. Both scenes feature a mobile prop. At the river, it is the ark, in which the child rests. At the sea, it is the Pharaonic chariots, which stand as perhaps a mere detail in the popular memory of the scene, but are mentioned a full six times in the course of the story and another four times in the Song at the Sea. Here, the parallel use of vehicles serves to highlight not a similarity, but a contrast: ark vs. chariot. If there is one thing we know about Moshe's ark, it is that as humble and barebones as it is, this little ship can float. Patched together from pitch (*heimar*) and reed -- a nod to the ingredients of slave oppression, mortar (*homeir*) and straw (1:14, 5:7-18) -- the ark is empty of might, yet full of hope. The Torah includes and emphasizes the chariots for they constitute a perfect symbolic contrast: full of strength and pride, the chariots can do anything except swim.

The heaviness of the chariots is highlighted not just in its narrative contrast to the light, floating ark, but also in the Torah's intentional repetition of the root *k.b.d.* Thrice we are told that God will "be glorified" (*kavod*, honor) through Pharaoh and his chariots (14:4,17,18). This pledge ultimately manifests in God making the chariots drive heavily (*be-khveidut*, 14:25) across the seabed. The root *k.b.d.* hovers over the entire story, emphasizing the heaviness that came to define, and ultimately destroy, the Egyptian army.

Taken together, the parallel structure and symbols of these two scenes could not be clearer. We find the Jewish character, in dangerous waters, ultimately saved; one from amidst the reeds, the other from the Sea of Reeds; beside them, the Pharaoh figure and his or her accompanying posse; Miriam standing there, watching along with us to see what will happen and then springing in to complete the rescue; the immediate turn to questions of how the rescued shall find drink; in one a solution is offered by Miriam, in the other, its a problem caused by waters that are *marim*; a barebones ark representing a patchwork people, that floats on despite all odds, and militant chariots representing an oppressive regime, whose own weight and might are their downfall.

Beyond a parallel structure, the Torah also employs a number of unexpected and atypical words to bind the two stories even closer together. The most obvious is the aforementioned *suf*, reeds. While reeds play a utilitarian role in Moshe's salvation (presumably, it is safer to place the child there than into the center of a rushing stream), the term's appearance in the latter story (i.e. that the body of water happens to be named *Yam Suf*) serves no practical role and merely reinforces the connection back to Exodus 2. Another noteworthy linguistic connection occurs at 14:13. With the Egyptian threat on the horizon, Moshe tells the people not to fear, but instead "*hityatzevu (y.tz.b) u-reu -- stand still and watch,*" what God shall do. This is a clear echo of Miriam's role back at the river, where we read "*vateitatzav (y.tz.b) ... le-deah ma yaaseh lo -- and she stood still ... to know what would happen to him (2:4)*".

This pattern of parallel language can help explain three otherwise odd word choices. In 2:6, Pharaoh's daughter opens the discovered ark. We are told "she saw the child (*yeled*) and behold the lad (*na'ar*) was crying." The use of "*na'ar*" has long troubled commentators, as it typically refers to an adolescent or teenager, not a three month infant. Later, at 14:20, we learn that the Pillar of Cloud served as a nighttime barrier between the Egyptian and Israelite camps. We are told: "and there was the cloud and the darkness, and it lit up (*vaya'er*) the night." *Vaya'er* represents another surprise. If there was darkness, what was lighting up the night? Finally, there is the noteworthy use of *sim* as the verb through which God transforms the

sea into dry land: "*vayasem -- and God set the sea into dry land*" (14:21). Typically *sim* means "to set" or "to place," while here it communicates something like "make into," "turn into," or "transform." While this is within the word's flexible set of meanings (see Gen 48:20 for an example of that flexibility), it remains a striking choice.

In all three cases, the awkward or notable word choice serves to rhetorically bond the narratives of the Splitting of the Sea and Moshe's ark. "*Na'ar*" appears twice at the Splitting of the Sea. At 14:27, God is *vayinaer (n.'a.r)* the Egyptians in the Sea -- that is, God churns or shakes them. At 15:8, the breath of God's nostrils is described as *ne'ermu (n.'a.r)* the waters, that is, churning or shaking it up. Indeed, this form of the root might be what the Torah means when it describes baby Moshe as a *na'ar* crying: perhaps Moshe was trembling, or shaking, as he sobbed (a connotation suggested by *Sforno*). Whatever *na'ar* means in Exodus 2, its clear mirroring of the language of Exodus 14 further connects these two stories. Likewise, the unexpected *vaya'er* in Exodus 14 parallels a central term which appears thrice with baby Moshe: *yeor*, river (2:3,5). Though the Reed Sea and the reedy riverbed are obviously different bodies of water, Exodus 14 still manages to find a way to sneak a *yeor* into its narrative. Finally, the *sim* of God turning water into dry land echoes two places where the word *sim* appears in the baby Moshe story: Moshe's mother placing him into the basket, then placing the basket into the reeds (*vatasem*, 2:3 twice). To clarify, *na'ar* still probably means lad, *vaya'er* likely means to cast light, and in context, *sim* doesn't mean to set but to make into. But in intentionally choosing to employ these unexpected terms -- whatever their meaning -- the Torah again has each respective story of rescue at the water evoke the other.

In structure, symbol, and even word choice, the Splitting of the Sea and Moshe in the Ark are parallel stories, written so as to be read side by side. But why would the Torah choose to write them this way?

Perhaps there is a simple, literary beauty in creating a kind of narrative envelope, where Israelite enslavement begins and then ends with matching stories. Perhaps the Torah wishes to emphasize that personal redemption comes first, itself empowering and enabling a national redemption. Perhaps the Torah seeks to justify the mass drowning of the Egyptians, and points us back to the policy of Israelite newborns cast into the river, which is the legal impetus behind the Moshe in the ark story.

Or perhaps the Torah wishes to bring us into the minds of the Israelites, as they faced down the prospect of stepping into the *Yam Suf*. These were people who remembered the original Pharaonic decree -- who knew what it is like to watch Egyptians force Jews into the water. The trauma no doubt lingered. Here, as a last step before freedom, they were asked to do what Moshe's mother had done before. Place yourself into the water. You too will walk out free.

SONG OF THE SEA: MAKING A SPACE FOR JOY AND SORROW

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Five months into the pregnancy, our twins were diagnosed with a rare disease.²⁹ Despite our best attempts to intervene and remedy the situation, the condition caused a host of complications. It eventually led to their premature delivery and deaths just a short time later. The weeks and months that followed were extraordinarily difficult. In the aftermath of tragic loss, one quickly discovers that despite attempts to move on, a reservoir of pain remains just underneath the surface. It doesn't take much to breach the fragile barrier that holds grief at bay. Perhaps it is the sight of a newborn child or a family with young twins playing together. When the pain breaks through, it threatens to overwhelm and drag one beneath its depths. As I approached the first *yizkor* after their passing, my fear was that this too might become one of these moments. I did not want that to be the case. The last day of Pesah is a day of rejoicing and a day in which we dream of redemption. I was fearful it would become another moment when the world drains of its color and the weight of my loss nearly suffocates me.

Rabbinic commentators have long noted the incongruity of reciting *yizkor* on the festivals. If the *mitzvah* of *simhat yom tov* nullifies all public expressions of mourning, how is it possible that we can dedicate time on the festival to remembering our pain and loss? Various answers have been suggested³⁰, but I would like to propose the following: We recite *yizkor* on festivals in order to recognize that true joy must always live side by side with our loss. No matter how joyful we may be on the festivals, our pain cannot be erased, and attempting such emotional erasure would be nothing more than self-deception. Rather, experiencing authentic joy requires us to acknowledge our pain. The festivals inevitably force us to confront this reality, for what other time is there on the Jewish calendar that we yearn more to be with our loved ones?

This notion is beautifully expressed in a profound reading of the Song of the Sea offered by Avivah Zornberg³¹. Her essay, "Songline Through the Wilderness" helped shed light on my own experience and allowed for me to look at the Biblical narrative in a radically different fashion. The standard approach to the Song understands it

²⁹ This essay was originally delivered as a *yizkor* sermon on the last day of Pesah. It took place just a few months after the loss of our twin boys, who had been born extremely premature and failed to survive.

³⁰ For example, according to the Levush (*Orah Hayyim* 490) *yizkor* is recited on the last day of *yom tov* because the torah reading for that day is "*kol ha-bechor*." This sections includes a call for those making *aliyah l-regel* to bring an offering or gift of some kind, which was later interpreted as an injunction to give *tzedakah*. From this developed the practice to make a pledge for *tzedakah* on the last day of the festival which would often be done in the memory of a loved one.

³¹ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, "Songline Through the Wilderness," in [The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus](#) (New York: Schocken Books, 2001).

to be an expression of unambiguous joy. When all hope appeared lost, when the Jewish people faced the dark waters in front of them and Pharaoh's army at their backs, God miraculously split the sea and created a path for the Jewish people to walk forward. The Egyptians pursued them, only to perish as the ocean waves came crashing down upon them. After hundreds of years of slavery, the Jewish people finally witness the vanquishing of their oppressors. At this climactic moment (Exodus 14:31), "the Jewish people see the great hand that God inflicted upon the Egyptians, they are in awe of God, and they have faith in God and Moshe, His servant." God has utterly proven Himself. Their tormentors had been punished. All of their pain and suffering had been washed away by the waters of the Red Sea. As slaves, all they could utter were unarticulated cries of misery, but now they are able to find the words to sing with pure faith and joy. That this interpretation is both beautiful and appealing is beyond question; We all yearn for the moments when we can finally let go of our pain and embrace only the good. This desire is at the heart of all our prayers for redemption and it is particularly appropriate for the end of Pesah.

But there is another way to read this story. It is challenging, but better suited to the difficult reality of living in an unredeemed world. In her essay on the narrative, Zornberg cites the striking opinion of Rabbi Barukh ha-Levi Epstein, the nephew of the Netziv, who argues, that in fact, the Jewish people did not sing after having emerged victorious from the Red Sea. Instead, they sang while still marching through its waters pursued by Pharaoh's army. If this is indeed the case, Avivah Zornberg points out, then the Song of the Sea cannot be understood as a song of pure joy and triumph, but rather as a song fraught with tension. The Jewish people must sing in full view of their oppressors. They must sing while their future is still uncertain, wondering whether they will indeed make it to the other side. The song does not deny their pain. Instead, they must find the strength to sing while still bearing the psychological wounds of slavery. Under these circumstances, the Song of the Sea must embody the complex reality of joy and pain living side by side. Until the final and complete redemption takes place, joy and pain have no choice but to co-exist. If this was true for Jewish people at the Red Sea, how much more so for us. Even on the festivals, days of rejoicing, we carry our losses with us. To deny our pains would be inhuman, and in doing so, we would fail to experience the true joy that we are called to feel on these days.

These themes are also evoked by the contemporary poet Christian Wiman in his startlingly powerful spiritual memoir, *My Bright Abyss*. The book chronicles his cancer diagnosis along with the slow and painful process of treatment. It captures his struggle to bring together the strands of faith that provided a lifeline for Wiman, and in doing so, it offers a meditation on what it means to live life when death stares one in the face. The author is keenly aware that even after recovery, the agony of such an experience leaves an indelible mark on us. He writes, (*My Bright Abyss* p. 19):

Sorrow is so woven through us, so much a part of our souls, or at least any understanding of our souls that we are able to attain, that every experience is dyed with its color. That is why even in moments of joy, part of that joy is the seams of ore that are our sorrow. They burn darkly and beautifully in the midst of joy, and they make joy the complete experience that it is. But they still burn.

When we recite *yizkor*, there is a part of our souls that burn. However, that doesn't prevent us from singing. In fact, if we recognize that the Jewish people sang while still marching through

the Red Sea, we come to understand another important truth: There are times when we sing not as a result of our joy but rather to serve as a lifeline that prevents us from drowning. In the same essay on the Song of the Sea, Zornberg quotes a teaching by Rebbe Nahman of Breslav³², a religious thinker deeply familiar with the spiritually devastating impact of pain and loss. His writings are full of references to the presence of sadness and depression within the spiritual life. He understood, Zornberg writes, that

When one enters this wasteland a sense of worthlessness vitiates all capacity to live and to approach God. The objective facts may well be depressing; introspection may lead to a realistic sense of inadequacy and guilt. But this then generates a pathological paralysis, in which desire becomes impossible.

According to Rebbe Nahman, the only way to remove oneself from such a situation

is a kind of spiritual generosity- to oneself as well as to others. One should search in oneself for the one healthy spot, among the guilt and self-recrimination. This one spot, which remains recognizable, must exist. If one reclaims it, one then has a point of leverage for transforming one's whole life.

This teaching is based on a verse from Psalms (37:10) "A little longer (*V-od*) and there will be no wicked man; you will look at where he was and he will be gone." Instead of "a little longer" as in a moment of time, Rebbe Nachman reads this *V-od* as the one place where goodness and joy can still be found within us.

It is the role of song to help us find that one place, and then another. Once we are able to find one note, the power of song connects us to more and more. Zornberg further explains that through

[d]rawing those fragmentary, disjointed moments into connection with one another, one creates a song: a way of drawing a line through the wasteland and recovering more and more places of holiness.

In perhaps the most powerful words of the entire essay she notes that

[m]usic arises from joy, but the power of true singing comes from sadness. In every *niggun* there is the tension of the struggle between life and death, between falling and rising... the thin line of melody selects for goodness and beauty but it is given gravity by melancholy...

She concludes by observing that for Rebbe Nahman, "song opens the heart to prayer." He cites another verse from Psalms, "I will sing to my God while I exist (*be-odi*)- "with my *od*, with that surviving pure consciousness of being alive."

Rebbe Nahman's teaching is an important lesson for Pesah, a holiday of song. During Pesah we sing *Hallel*. We sing at our *seders*. We read the Song of Songs and the Song of the Sea. All these different songs reflect the tremendous joy that is a fundamental part of the holiday.

³² *Likkutei Moharan* 282.

But, we should not forget that they are also songs of complexity through which we can also hear the harmony of pain and loss.

We lost our twins just days before *Shabbat Shirah*, the Sabbath of Song, when the Song of the Sea is read. At the time, I found comfort in a *midrash* that during the Song of the Sea, even the babies still inside their pregnant mothers raised their voices in song with the Jewish people.³³ It enabled me to realize that even in the short time that our twins were present in our lives, they too were part of the Jewish people. They contributed their voices if only briefly to the Divine symphony that we strive to sing. Rebbe Nahman teaches that even their absence is part of the song. Absence when consciously remembered creates its own unique form of presence, and if we listen closely, we can hear how even the absence of our loved ones adds to the harmony of the Jewish people.

Why is it that we recite *yizkor* on *yom tov*? On the one hand, we do it in order to acknowledge that our pain must have a seat at the table with our joy. But we are also permitted to allow ourselves to dream of a day when we will celebrate our holidays without *yizkor*. We dream of a day when our pain will be washed away and our scars will finally heal. We dream of redemption, a dream deeply appropriate for the last day of Pesah. We dream of the day when we will gather with all our loved ones, those both present and absent, in order to recite the words from the *seder*. As it says in the *Haggadah*, we will sing in order "to thank, praise, pay tribute, glorify, exalt, honor, bless, extol, and acclaim God who has performed all these miracles for our fathers and for us. He has brought us forth from slavery to freedom, from grief to joy, from mourning to joy, from darkness to great light, and from subjugation to redemption." On that day we will finally set aside our pain and loss to recite a new song before God, Halleluyah.

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³³ *Sotah* 30b.