

Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



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Parashat Beshalach
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פרשת בשלח
י"א בשבט תשע"ח

Torah Reading: *Shemot* (Exodus) 13:17-17:16

After the Bnei Yisrael cross the Reed Sea in safety while Paro's army drowns, they sing praises to Hashem; in response to their complaints about a lack of food and water, Hashem gives them manna and water; they are then attacked by Amalek.

The Song of the Sea, which the people sang after they crossed safely, begins, "אָז יְשִׁיר-מֹשֶׁה וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת, לַה', וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֵאמֹר אֲשִׁירָה לַה' – Then Moshe and the Bnei Yisrael sang this song to Hashem, and spoke, saying, I will sing to Hashem..."

This is an almost universal English translation of the verse, and yet, it is incorrect. The verse reads literally, "Then Moshe and the Bnei Yisrael **will sing** this song to Hashem, and spoke, saying..." Why is it written in the future tense?

The simplest explanation is that despite the fact that the vast majority of Modern Hebrew derives from biblical Hebrew, there are fundamental differences between the two languages. For example, there is *vav hahipuch*: the letter *vav*, when placed before a past-tense verb, often switches the tense to the future and vice versa. An example appears above with the word *וַיֹּאמְרוּ* – *vayomru*. "Yomru" means, "They will say," while "*Va-yomru*" means, "They said." So perhaps this is a case of the Torah transposing the tense of a word without the use of the *vav*.

Various commentators grapple with the grammar in this verse. Rashi [11th Century Franco-Germany] claims that the implication is that when Moshe saw the miracle of the Reed Sea, he had the thought that he would sing about it, hence the future tense. Then they actually sang, which is why the verse continues, "[they] spoke, saying, I will sing to Hashem..."

Or HaChaim [Chaim ibn Attar, 18th Century Morocco/Judea] believes that it is phrased in the future tense to let us know that we should all sing praises to Hashem when we experience a Divine miracle, and that indeed, subsequent to the initial occurrence, the song was put in the daily morning service so that all future generations do sing the Song of the Sea on a regular basis.

The Rabbis of the Midrash offer an entirely different perspective. They believe that this is an allusion to the resurrection of the dead: that at some time after the Messiah arrives, the dead will once again walk the earth, and at that time, Moshe and the Bnei Yisrael will once again sing songs of praise to Hashem.

Whichever explanation you believe to be correct, this is an example of the difficulties of studying the Torah in a language other than the original Hebrew. A great deal is literally “lost in translation.”

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Can you think of other explanations for why the verse is written in future tense?
- Had you witnessed the miracles of the Exodus and had crossed the Sea safely while watching your enemies drown, would you have sung spontaneous praises to Hashem? How else might have you reacted?
- The Song of the Sea is an example of the Jewish people expressing gratitude to One who helped them. Take a few moments to think about someone to whom you should express gratitude and how the best way to do that might be.