

## דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

### A Scroll of The Song of Songs

The Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary

This decorated scroll of Shir Hashirim (which is read on the Shabbat of Pesah) is a product of the circle of the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, dated to circa 1930, though the scribe and artist are unidentified. The artistic movement associated with this school was informed by the Zionist ideals of the society in which it was immersed. Many of the pioneers sought a return to an intimate physical connection between Jews and their Land, and a reimagining of the image of the Jewish body. Influenced by this ideology, the Song of Songs became beloved of the writers and artists of this group for its emphasis on the physical features of the Land of Israel—and of the bodies of the two lovers who narrate the book.

The decorations are based on those found in copies of Megillat Esther from 18<sup>th</sup> century Italy, albeit with coloring typical of 1930s Palestine, and transferred to this cherished book of the Bezalel School. It was created as an art object for tourists who sought to bring home a piece of the Jewish art of the Holy Land. Fittingly, the tourist would have acquired a copy of the book of the Bible that describes the Land of Israel itself most vividly.



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# TORAH FROM JTS



Last Days of Passover 5779

יום טוב אחרון של פסח תשע"ט



## Fear and Faith at the Exodus

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As they cross the Sea of Reeds and see the advancing Egyptian army behind them, the Israelites feel terror and cry out to God for help in Exodus 14:10. But in the next two verses they reject God's wondrous efforts to bring them out of Egypt:

And Pharaoh approached, and the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, Egypt marches after them and they were greatly frightened, and the people of Israel cried out to Adonai. And they said to Moses, "Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done, taking us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying 'Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness?'" (Exod. 14:10–12)

The people ask for help and then reject it. Do they want God's help or not? Ramban (Nahmanides, 1194–1270, Spain), commenting on this account of the people's deep ambivalence about their own liberation, proposes that two factions of Israelites stood at the edge of the sea; the good group was reverent toward God, and the other group rejected what God has already done for them. Ramban tries to solve the people's attitudinal problem by essentially saying it was not true of all of them.

There are at least two other ways to resolve the question about the people's apparent ambivalence. One is that the people called out for help, but subsequently didn't like the help they received. It can be productive to think about why that might be. Was their enslavement so spirit-crushing that they could not imagine a positive future? That is not surprising if one day is like the

next, for generations, and all days are without hope. A pernicious effect of oppression is that liberation becomes hard to imagine.

Another way to read the Israelites' apparent ambivalence at the moment of liberation is that it expresses a realistic, universal, and unavoidable human tension between fear and faith, rebellion and obedience. There is a stage in life—adolescence—when tensions are our defining reality. To say that adolescence is entirely a time of rebellion would be to give a shallow account of those formative years, when most of us struggle with conflicting needs to conform or to rebel; to obey or to disobey authority; to heed our own emerging voice, or to distrust it. These struggles test our willingness to commit to the values and life choices that will define us as adults. By honestly portraying an uneasy pairing between fear and faith at the shore of the Sea of Reeds, the Bible acknowledges this essential emotional process, which never completely resolves in adulthood.

By honestly showing the Israelites' fear at a transcendent moment, the Bible also prepares us for the fact that transcendent milestones in our lives can contain a frisson of fear. A lot is at stake when we marry, or when a child is born, or at other change-filled joyous moments. We become briefly conscious of our human fragility as well as our blessings. That awareness forms the backdrop of our gratitude.

So fear is normal, up to a point. But fear can go too far and be overwhelming, even paralyzing, as nearly occurred to all the Israelites at the shore of the sea. When that happens, what might help people? Moses offers a model:

Moses said to the nation, *Al tira'u!* Fear not, stand upright and see God's salvation, which God will do for you today, for what you saw of Egypt today, you will not continue to see, forever. God will do battle on your behalf, and you shall be at peace. (Exod. 14:13–14)

Moses speaks about fear without . . . fear. This is perhaps the most important thing he does: he names the overwhelming feeling and confronts it directly and succinctly. He is supportive, confident, and empathic. He speaks not only about what God will do, but about how the Israelites will experience it. Moses promises that they will see God's redemption, and he predicts a defining shift in how they will see Egypt from now on.

A short while later, the biblical narrator, summarizing the redemption, expands on the Israelites' vision:

*Vayosha Adonai bayom hahu et Yisrael miyad Mitzrayim vayar Yisrael et Mitzrayim met al sefat hayam*

*Vayar Yisrael et hayad hagedolah asher asah Adonai beMitzrayim vayyiru ha'am et Adonai vaya'aminu bAdonai u-veMoshe avdo*

And Adonai redeemed the Israelites on that day from the hand of Egypt, and Israel saw Egypt die on the shore of the sea.

And Israel saw the great hand which God performed on Egypt, and the people feared/revered Adonai, and they had faith in Adonai, and in Moses, God's servant. (14:30–31)

The narrator notices the Israelites' roving glance twice (*vayar Yisrael*). Their eyes see the dead Egyptian soldiers on the shore, and then they see the hand of God; they notice God's invisible influence on events. In this moment of transformative vision, the people do not only shift their *reiyah* (vision); they also shift their *yirah* (fear and awe), in object and in kind. *Yirah* itself is now elevated from raw fear of the approaching army to reverence for God, which is consistent with faith in God and in Moses. Fear itself is transformed. For the collective people of Israel, it acquires the coloration of awe and faith for the first time.

Moses's "fear not" of verse 13 was crucial to the success of the redemption. The compassion he expressed with two small words, *al tira'u*, was itself an act of courage under the circumstances. It proceeded from emotional generosity, which is very hard to summon in a moment of terror.

And it worked. It shifted his people's perception, their vision. The people needed Moses's "fear not" at that moment so they could absorb their new reality of liberation. We too would need someone to say "fear not" if we stood at the brink of redemption, with the enemy advancing toward us, and we unaware of the great miracle that we are living through.

In our day, when we are sorely challenged, when we seek faith but feel fear, we can look around and notice who is saying "fear not" with real compassion. That person will be a leader worth following.