



Shir HaMa'alot

(Psalm 126)

We say *Shir HaMa'alot* every Shabbat and holiday before *Birkat HaMazon* and for decades we have sung it to the tune of *Hatikvah* at the conclusion of the *Yom HaAtzmaut* prayers. Why is this psalm connected to Yom HaAtzmaut, and what is its message?

This psalm is divided into two distinct parts:

The first part (1–3) speaks in the past tense, in which the redeemed Jews feel their redemption is like a dream. It is so monumental that even the non-Jews are amazed at the greatness of the miracle; they see the hand of G-d and say, הַגְדִּיל ה', "The L-rd has done great things for them."

After the non-Jews speak about the magnitude of the miracle, *Am Yisrael* finally understand it themselves, הַגְדִּיל ה' "The L-rd has done great things for us." At first, הָיִינוּ כְּחֹלְמִים, it was like a dream, but now, after others talk about it with such awe, "we were like dreamers" becomes a clear reality: הָיִינוּ שְׂמֵחִים, "we were happy."

Part Two (4–6) speaks in the future tense. It is a request for redemption, for G-d to return us כְּאַפְרִיקִים בְּנֶגֶב, "like springs in the Negev." Tears of struggle accompany the sowing stage, and we request and pray that the harvest and the gathering will be with joy.

The order of the psalm is surprising – if we have already proclaimed the vision of redemption; why do we now request redemption אֶת שְׁבִיתֵנוּ, "the L-rd shall return us"?

To answer this, we must understand the unusual expression, "as streams in the Negev." What are these *afikim*, these

streams? Yosef Breslavi explains that there are no streams which flow regularly in the Negev Desert, but there are flash floods. The Negev is usually dry. There is almost no rain. However, the rain that does fall on the mountains flows towards the dry streams. Because the ground is hard, the water does not seep into the soil but appears suddenly, almost instantaneously, on the surface and flows very quickly. This phenomenon characterizes the Negev. When it rains, hundreds of small tributaries fill up with water, flowing into dozens of larger ones, flowing down to one big site, which then looks like a river.

This phenomenon can be compared to the flow of *olei haRegalim* to Israel, the pilgrims who come to Yerushalayim at once, in large quantities, from many places across the Land.

Moreover, the suddenness and surprise of the flash floods in the Negev is a beautiful metaphor for the process of redemption. Just as a dry and desolate desert is instantly filled with life-giving water, so the lonely Land is suddenly filled with its returning children, and the barren begins to blossom.

The psalm also likens redemption to a plant, seeds and harvests. Indeed, in the words of the prophets, a plant is often a parable for Mashiach and Redemption. For example, Yirmiyahu (23:5) calls Mashiach צֶמַח צְדִיק, a true branch.

Zechariah (6:12) also describes how Mashiach, whose name is Tzemach, will build the *Beit HaMikdash*: הִנֵּה אִישׁ צֶמַח שָׁמוֹ וּמִתְחַתָּיו יֵצֵמַח וּבְנֶה אֶת הַיְכָל ה', "Behold, a man called the Tzemach shall branch out from the place where he is, and he shall build the Temple of the L-rd."

In the *Amidah*, as well, we say אֶת צֶמַח דָּוִד עֲבָדְךָ מְהֵרָה תִצְמַיֵחַ... בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', מִצְמִיחַ קֶרֶן יְשׁוּעָה, “Speedily cause the sprout of David, Your servant, to flourish... Blessed are You... Who causes the power of salvation to sprout.”

Why is Mashiach's Name a Plant?

At the beginning of the growth process, we see nothing but dry ground. Only once the plant sprouts do we realize the process had already begun earlier. The new growth begins only after the decay of the previous seed.

Redemption comes after destruction, after tears. The decay of the seed may seem like the end of the process, but it is specifically there where growth begins. *Am Yisrael* will grow to salvation and greatness only through despair, destruction and difficulty.

Chazal said (Yerushalmi Berachot) that Israel's redemption is like אֵילַת הַשָּׁחַר, dawn. Just as the light of dawn comes slowly and almost unnoticed, so too Israel's salvation – a great light will suddenly burst out of the bleakest darkness.

Who is This Psalm About?

The common opinion is that this psalm was about those returning to Israel during *Shivat Tzion*. After Cyrus' declaration, the immigrants felt the great redemption and were like dreamers. Slowly, however, they encountered insurmountable difficulties. Indeed, almost the entire Second *Beit HaMikdash* period was characterized by challenges and hardships. Hence the returnees asked for the continuation

of redemption (the second part of the psalm), that the tears be turned to joy.

Some of the visions of this psalm did come to fruition, at least some of the time. However, there was certainly no impressive breakthrough of redemption like *afikim* in the Negev. Nevertheless, Jews all over the world continued to say this psalm in *Birkat HaMazon* every Shabbat and holiday, believing and expecting its vision would be fulfilled in its entirety.

We are almost there.

With immense gratitude to the Almighty, we have been privileged to return to our Land – a much more impressive return than that of the Second *Beit HaMikdash*. Then, the return was after 70 years. There was hardly any new settlement in the country. We have rebuilt after 2,000 years! We returned after many years of foreign rule and yet we have succeeded in establishing a State, with economic, scientific and technological prosperity, and even spiritually, the quantities of Limmud Torah and observant Jews are much higher than at many times during our history.

Indeed, the world, the non-Jewish world, sees the greatness of the miracle, the magnificent blossoming of the State of Israel through G-d's grace. We see but do not believe: “we were like dreamers.” The world is in awe: “The L-rd has done great things for them.” We are seeing the great Redemption, the mighty streams in the Negev, in our own days.

The psalm ends with the sentence: בֹּא יְבוֹא בְרִנָּה נִשְׂא אֱלֻמָּתָיו, “he shall come back with songs of joy, carrying his sheaves.”

Alumot, sheaves, appear elsewhere in Tanach solely in the context of Yosef's dreams. As a boy, Yosef had dreams of greatness. But those dreams were destroyed by the hatred and animosity between the brothers. Eventually though, after many trials and much suffering, Yosef's dreams came true, but in exile.

Now, with the Return to *Tzion*, we pray to witness the fulfillment of the great dream of the upright *alumot* of *Knesset Yisrael* that will in turn lead to the realization of the Divine mission in the world. These sheaves will stand upright through a process of unity, closeness and connection.

We have been blessed with such great abundance in our generation, and we continue to pray that “the L-rd shall return us.” We continue to pray for the success of the State of Israel, that all the people of Israel will know the Name of G-d called upon us, and may Hashem bless us in our beloved country to continue to make a *Kiddush Hashem*, further the Redemption, and bring Mashiach speedily in our days.

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