

The Seventh Day of Pesach 5778, 2018:

*“This is My G-d and I Will Extol Him”*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheil, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, HaRav Raphael ben HaRav Ephraim, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Yekutiel Yehudah ben Pessel Lifsha and Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The first 21 verses of the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of *Sefer Shemot* are known as “the *Shira*,” the song of joy and exultation that was sung by our forebears after they crossed the Sea of Reeds. It is one of the most often recited passages in the Torah based upon its prominent placement at the end of the *Pesukei d’Zimrah* (Verses of Song) section of the morning prayers, and its choice as the dramatic Torah reading for the Seventh Day of Pesach. One would think that our familiarity with this celebrated passage would lead to a clear understanding of its content. Yet, due to its poetic language and metaphoric images, its meaning remains elusive and difficult to comprehend.

One such example of the *Shira*’s complexity is the phrase, “*nora tehilot*.” Popular English translations render it in the following manner: “too awesome for praise” (*ArtScroll Tanach*), “too awesome for praises” (*The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*), and “awesome in praise” (Rav Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*, *The Living Torah*). The first two translations seem to follow Rashi’s (1040-1105) explication of our term, “[You are] too awesome for [one] to recite Your praises, lest they fall short, as it is written (*Sefer Tehillim* 65:2): ‘Silence is praise to You.’” (Rashi and *Tanach* translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Rashi's approach to our expression is quite reminiscent of a passage found in *Talmud Bavli*,

*Brachot* 33b:

A certain [individual] went down [to lead the prayers] in the presence of R. Chanina and said, O' G-d, the great, mighty, awesome, majestic, powerful, awful, strong, fearless, sure and honored. He [R. Chanina] waited until he had finished, and when he had finished he said to him, "Have you concluded all the praise of your Master? Why would I [or anyone else] want all this? Even with these three that we do say [the great, mighty and awesome G-d,] had not Moses our Master mentioned them in the Torah [*Sefer Devarim* 10:17] and had not the Men of the Great Assembly come and inserted them in the *Tefilah* [i.e. *Shemoneh Esrai*], we would not have been able to mention them, and you say all these and still go on! (Translation, *The Soncino Talmud* with my brackets and extensive emendations)

The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-12-4) summarizes the essential intent of Rabbi Chanina's words in the following halachic decision:

Also, a person should not be profuse in his mention of adjectives describing G-d, and say: "The great, mighty, awesome, powerful, courageous, and strong G-d," for it is impossible for man to express the totality of His praises. Instead, one should mention [only] the praises that were mentioned by Moses, of blessed memory. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tefilah* 9:7, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

In sum, the approaches of Rashi, the Talmud, the Rambam, and the first two translators mentioned earlier focus upon our fundamental inability to effectively praise our Creator. Moreover, the expression, "great, mighty and awesome G-d," is permissible in our *Tefilot* solely because Moses utilized these terms in *Sefer Devarim*, and they were included by the Men of the Great Assembly in their formulation of the *Shemoneh Esrai*.

Rav Aryeh Kaplan's translation of *nora tehilot*, "awesome in praise," takes an entirely different tact than that of the previous sources. Instead of emphasizing our incapacity to properly proclaim the glory of Hashem, Rav Kaplan recognizes that man, too, has a role to play in extolling Him. I believe that this approach is in consonance with the following midrashic passage from the 42<sup>nd</sup> chapter of *Pirkei d' Rabbi Eliezer*:

*Nora tehilah* (singular form) is not written here. Instead, the Torah writes, "*nora tehilot*" (plural form). [It is written in the plural form to teach us that] the Ministering Angels praise You in the Heavenly Heights, whereas, the Jewish people offer praises in the terrestrial

sphere. [Regarding the Jewish people's role in exalting Hashem,] the text, therefore, writes (*Sefer Tehillim* 22:4): "But You are holy; You await the praises of Israel." (Translation and brackets my own)

I believe that the Midrash, and Rav Kaplan's translation of *nora tehilot*, are very spiritually edifying. They focus on the positive nature of the relationship that obtains between Hashem and the Jewish people. It is a unique relationship, for as King David emphasizes in this verse from *Sefer Tehillim*, Hashem in all His uncountable glory waits for us to praise Him – something that He does in regard to no other nation. True, as the other sources stress, we can never truly begin to recognize Hashem's greatness and awesome status. Nonetheless, He longs for our songs of praise just as much, if not more, than the praises of the Ministering Angels.

May this Seventh Day of Passover be one wherein we, as individuals and as a nation, sing heartfelt praises to our Creator, and once again proclaim as a united people: "...this is my G-d, and I will extol Him, the G-d of my father, and I will exalt Him." (*Sefer Shemot* 15:2)

*V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and *Chag Sameach*

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at:

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\*\*\* I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.