

This is an extraordinary week of celebration. If *tu bi-shevat*, the New Year of the Trees (Wednesday), weren't enough, this Shabbat is Shabbat Shirah, the Shabbat of Singing. In our Torah reading, Shabbat Shirah celebrates the successful crossing of the Sea of Reeds and our final delivery from Egyptian tyranny; in the Haftarah, it celebrates Barak's defeat of the Canaanite general Sisera on the plain of Megiddo. Both readings celebrate victories over oppression, both feature water (Sea of Reeds in the Torah and the Kishon River in the Haftarah) that impedes the movement of the enemy chariots, and both contain an epic poem that is sung: The "Song of the Sea" (15:1-18) in our Torah reading is sung by all the Israelites, while "Dvorah's Song" in the Haftarah (Judges 5:1-31) is a duet between her and her chieftain Barak. In our scrolls both appear in a special layout, called "brick on brick," with the interlocking "bricks" of phrases symbolizing enduring strength, in contrast to the two weak parallel columns of Moses's final song of rebuke and warning (Deuteronomy 32:1-43) and the lists of Haman's sons (Megillat Esther 9:7-10) and the defeated Canaanite kings (Joshua 12:9-24). The Song of the Sea figures prominently in our liturgy. It is recited in its entirety, and often sung to a special melody, at the end of the *psukei d'zimra*, the verses of praise in first part of our morning prayers. And excerpted from it are verses 11 and 18: *mi chamocho ba-eilim Adonai, mi kamocho ne'edar ba-kodesh, nora t'hilot ose fele. ... Adonai yimloch l'olam va'ed.* (Who is like You among the powerful O Lord? Who is like you in the holy place? Too awesome for praises, performing wonders! ... The Lord will reign eternally.) Both songs are victory odes, but while the Song of the Sea attributes victory solely to HaShem, Dvorah's song recognizes the valiant human "boots on the ground" who acted with HaShem's help, and it also soundly rebukes those tribes who did not participate. The Song of the Sea, which is about a third shorter than Dvorah's Song, is repetitious and prophetic, alluding to the future demise of all of Israel's foes, the building of a permanent place of worship, and the eternal reign of HaShem. In Dvorah's Song women are front and center. Dvorah, whose position as Judge is itself unique, is the guiding force behind Barak, whom she must continually encourage and even accompany into battle. And Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, descendent of Moses's father-in-law Jitro (here known as Chovav) uses her feminine wiles and the political connections of her husband to lure Sisera to her tent in order to kill him. However, almost as an afterthought in the Song of the Sea, "Miriam (the first time she is mentioned by name!), the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women came out after her with timbrels and with dances. And Miriam called to them, 'Sing (שִׁירָה) to the Lord, for very exalted is He; a horse and its rider He cast into the sea,'" (15:20-21), With one important exception, these are the very words Moses and the Israelites sing in verse 1. Some of our sages teach that Miriam repeats the entire song with the women, while others find enough meaning in this small exception to forego repetition of the entire song. "... and they spoke, saying, I will sing (אֶשְׁרָא) to the Lord, ...". Miriam's imperative following Moses' and the Israelites' assertion that they will sing (as we still do today), is an urgent cry through the ages to immediately and continually sing praises to HaShem, i.e. to keep this song foremost in our hearts and minds so we never forget to Whom we owe our continued existence. But where did Miriam and the women get all those drums? Rashi cites Midrash Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael: "The righteous trusted in God, they knew that He would perform miracles and mighty acts when they would go forth from Egypt, and they prepared for themselves timbrels and dancing." And last week we read that, "The Lord gave the people favor in the eyes of the Egyptians, and they lent them, and they emptied out Egypt." (12:36) There must have been a few drums among all those riches. Because we humans have always let music and dance convey what our vocabularies lack, this single verse, repeated over and over, actually could serve to encapsulate the entire message of the song. Music is an integral part of worship rituals, and not only in the Book of Psalms. At least six times we are told to "sing a new song," and there are several other examples in our TaKaKh of singing, dancing, and playing instruments both in praise and in supplication. It is noteworthy that Amalek appears in both our Torah and our Haftarah portions. Amalek, the epitome of the evil that arises in every generation to beset us, was the son of Esau's son Eliphaz and his concubine Timna and the ancestor of the Amalekites, the first people to attack the Israelites (17:8-14). Joshua, who in our parashah helps Moses prevail against them, is a descendent of Ephraim, as Devorah notes in Judges 5:14: "Out of Ephraim, whose root was against Amalek ..." There is no indication in the Torah of what provokes Amalek's first attack, but Deuteronomy 25:17-19 admonishes us to "Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you were leaving Egypt, how he came upon you on the way and cut off all the stragglers at your rear when you were faint and weary, and he did not fear God. Therefore it will be, when the Lord your God grants you respite from all your enemies ... that you shall obliterate the remembrance of Amalek from beneath the heavens. You shall not forget!" Shabbat Zachor, which falls on the Shabbat before Purim (March 22 this year) reminds us of the countless manifestations of Amalek that have affected us throughout history and inspires us to join forces with like-minded people in working to end oppression all over the world. The Song of the Sea and Dvorah's Song model the twin attributes of perseverance and trust in HaShem, which are precisely the resources we need to set forth this vital work. As Rabbi Tarfon in Pirkei Avot 2:16 teaches, "It is not your duty to complete the work, but neither are you free to neglect it."

Shabbat shalom!