In this week’s parshah the Torah recounts the miraculous events of the Yam Suf: Hashem splits the sea and provides a path of escape for the Jews from their Egyptian pursuers. The sea-walls remain firm for the Jews, then come crashing down on the wicked Egyptians, finishing them off for good.

It would appear that this event should be a cause of great celebration. In fact, the Gemara (Sanhedrin 39b) tells us that even the angels were ecstatic, and wanted to sing a song of praise to the Almighty for this wondrous salvation. However, Hashem rejected the angels’ praise, telling them, “My handiwork is drowning in the sea, and you want to sing merrily?”

Despite the fact that Hashem saved His chosen people from their oppressors in this spectacular fashion, and despite the fact that the perpetrators were really a bunch of sinister thugs, the Egyptians were nevertheless the creations of Hashem. Consequently, their demise was not a cause for jubilation.

On the other hand, we find that Moshe Rabbeinu and the B’nai Yisrael indeed went on to sing songs of praise and joy. Immediately following the aquatic decimation of the Egyptians, the Torah records the beautiful Az Yashir, the hymn that joyously chronicles the suffering of the Egyptians as they sank into the abyss.

How can we square the singing of the Jews—which was initiated by Moshe—with Hashem’s censure of the angels’ desire to sing?

In search of an explanation, we turn to a thought from the Maharsha in Sanhedrin, who quotes a Mishnah in Rosh Hashanah (4:7) which discusses shacharis and musaf. The Mishnah states:

“On Rosh Hashanah, the shofar-blowing takes place during the recital of the ‘second’ chazzan (during musaf). At other times, it is the ‘first’ chazzan (during shacharis) who conducts the recitation of Hallel.”

The Mishnah seems to be telling us two relatively straightforward halachos:

1) Shofar-blowing takes place during musaf, and
2) Hallel takes place during shacharis.

When the Mishnah discusses the shofar, obviously we must be referring to Rosh Hashanah. Yet, when the Tanna refers to Hallel, the setting is changed to ‘other times.’

Why couldn’t the Mishnah stick to Rosh Hashanah when discussing the second halachah? Based on this distinction, the Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 32b) deduces that Hallel is omitted on Rosh Hashanah, despite its being said on all of the other Yomim Tovim (besides for Yom Kippur).

The Gemara’s explanation for Hallel’s omission may sound somewhat familiar: While the King of Kings sits in judgment on His Throne of Glory, and the books of life and death are open before Him, it is not appropriate to render joyous exaltation.

Once again, we are faced with an apparent contradiction. When people—even wicked people—are consigned to death, there is no
place for joyous singing, as we see from the omission of Hallel on the Yamim Noraim. How, then, could the Jews sing upon witnessing the downfall of the Mitzrim?

Based on the Gemara’s explanation, the Maharsha identifies two distinct types of song: hallel and shirah.

The halachah forbidding the recitation of Hallel on Rosh Hashanah indicates that Hashem discourages the hallel type of song when people—even wicked ones—are suffering punishment. Similarly, Hashem refused to allow the angels to sing hallel at the sea.

However, when the Jews sang Az Yashir, they were not engaging in hallel; rather, they were singing the shirah type of song.

What exactly is the difference between hallel and shirah?

In elucidating the words of R’ Aharon Kotler (Mishnas Rebbi Aharon vol. 3), R’ Yeruchem Olshin explains that there are actually two distinct benefits of singing praise to Hashem. The first benefit relates to Hashem: namely, singing praise brings glory to His Name. This type of praise is referred to as hallel.

The second benefit of song relates to the singers themselves. While the mere experience of witnessing a miracle makes a significant impression on the spectator, the verbal expression of awe and amazement formulated into song substantially strengthens his emunah. Through song, the lessons of Hashem’s great power and providence become permanently emblazoned on the spectator’s soul. This type of praise is referred to as shirah.

When the angels desired to sing praise to Hashem as the Egyptians perished at sea, their song could only be characterized as hallel. No significant benefit of song would be accrued to the angels themselves; as permanent residents of the Heavenly spheres, the strengthening of emunah is unnecessary for them. The only benefit of their song would have been to relate the glory of Hashem. As such, Hashem chose to forego the angels’ hallel in light of the suffering of His creations.

However, for the B’nai Yisrael the encounter at the sea was a remarkable opportunity that could not be passed up. As denizens of this world, it was extremely important that the Jews take advantage of this rare chance to witness the workings of the Master of the Universe. They themselves would benefit tremendously by engaging in shirah and building up their personal faith in Hashem. Hashem did not want to deprive the B’nai Yisrael of this enormous benefit, and so He readily accepted their adulation.