

Shabbat Shirah 5770

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Henry Molaison — known during his lifetime as “the man who could not remember” — left scientists a gift that will provide insights for generations to come: his brain. Henry lost the ability to form new memories after a brain operation in 1953, and over the next half century he became the most studied patient in brain science. Henry began to suffer as a boy. By the time he was 26, they were so severe he consented to an experimental brain operation to relieve them. His doctor suctioned out two slug-sized slivers of tissue, one from each side of the brain. The operation controlled the seizures, but it soon became clear that Henry could not form new memories.

Suzanne Corkin, a neuroscientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, studied and followed Mr. Molaison in the last five decades of his life: “He loved to converse, but within 15 minutes he would tell you the same story three times, each time differently, without remembering that he’d just told it. Each time he met a new acquaintance, each time he visited the corner store, each time he strolled around the block, it was as if for the first time.”

Imagine if each experience, no matter how ordinary it might now seem, each action, no matter how many times we may have done it before, evoked the same sense of excitement, discovery, thrill, and satisfaction, as the first time.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, the eminent theologian, called this Radical Amazement. For Heschel, a religious man is in a “perpetual sense of surprise.” Looking at the world, he would say: “Me’eit Adonai Hay’tah zot, hi niflat b’eineinu. This is all the Lord’s doing. Isn’t it wondrous!” In a tradition such as ours that stresses daily repetition of sacred words and actions, Heschel maintains that this sense of wonderment is an essential element of being Jewish.

Yet how often do any of us actually feel this way?

For me, there are a handful of select places in the world that no matter how many times I visit them, I still get the same thrill as though it were the very first time. They are (in no particular order): Fenway Park, the Lincoln Memorial, the Metropolitan Opera, the Kotel, and this very room. There are some afternoons that I sneak into this sanctuary before Mincha, just so that I can catch the last rays of daylight gleaming through the stained glass windows, casting an amber glow over the entire bimah. Stephen Glass and I like to call it “Shaar-light.”

While a sense of wonder at sacred spaces is certainly important, a more serious issue for a cantor is something that Rabbi Avrohom Jacks of Congregation Zichron K’doshim chose to discuss in 2002, the first time I performed at a cantorial concert at his shul.

Rabbi Jacks spoke about the differences between the roles of Rabbi and Cantor. He said: “Many people think that rabbis have the harder job. Preparing a new sermon each week, trying to synthesize Torah thoughts and make them relevant to the present day. This certainly requires great learning and creativity. But I say that it is the Chazan who faces the greatest challenge each week. The Chazan is duty bound to say the same words each week. He cannot stray from the Matbeah Hat’filah—the prescribed content and sequence that is spelled out in the siddur. He must adhere to Nusach Hat’filah, the traditional prayer modes. Somehow, despite these constraints, he must find a way to reinvigorate the same words each Shabbat and Yom Tov, to make them fresh and immediate, so that they may inspire the worshippers to new spiritual heights.”

Well, after writing this sermon, I can tell you that neither job is a walk in the park! But Rabbi Jacks makes a valid point, and I am here to tell you that this is, indeed, quite a tall order. Each week that I stand before you on this bimah, I say the exact same words as I said last week, and I will say them all over again next week. No deviation. No textual improvisation. No freestyle Hebrew rapping from the Bimah. The Mishnah in B’rachot goes so far as to say that the Shaliach Tzibur who strays from the prescribed text must be immediately removed!

How does one keep these texts from becoming clichéd?

The once per year texts are not so much the problem. After all, Kol Nidrei sounds the same each year, but the

anticipation and the drama of the day both ensure the dramatic weight of that musical moment. No, the challenge lies in the every day texts: the weekday Shacharit Amidah, the Shabbat Musaf K'dusha, Adon Olam—these are texts which could easily become stale and devoid of any freshness or immediacy.

Some think that it is sufficient to use as many accessible tunes as possible, regardless of their roots in secular music, their non-adherence to Nusach or the fact that they bear no interpretive relation at all to the texts to which they are applied. Well, Heschel had something to say about this too. “So much of what we hear in the synagogue...distorts and even contradicts the words, instead of enhancing and glorifying them. Such music has a crushing effect upon our quest for prayer. One feels frequently hurt when listening to some of the melodies in modern synagogues.” And to think that Heschel wrote this in 1957—imagine what he would have to say about some of today’s synagogue music!

So what does all this have to do with B'Shalach, today's Torah narrative, and Shabbat Shirah?

Though we find ourselves in the throes of the winter doldrums, it is impossible to deny the connection between the story of B'Shalach and the holiday of Pesach. So, on this frigid morning, try to imagine with me: the leaves budding on the trees, the grass returning to a shade of green, yourselves sitting at the seder table, surrounded by loved ones, about to observe the age old ritual of drinking the four cups of wine.

Traditionally, we derive these four cups from the four-step Slavery Bailout plan that God proposes to save the Jewish people: *v'hotzeiti etchem*—I will bring you out of the land of Egypt, *v'hitzalti etchem*—I will deliver you from bondage, *v'ga'alti etchem*—I will redeem you with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, *v'lakachti etchem*—I will bring you unto the promised land.

Well today, in honor of Shabbat Shirah, I'd like to propose the following: that each of these four verbs of redemption has a counterpart in the lexicon of T'filah, and specifically in the forms of Cantorial expression which enable me and the choir to interpret the texts of the siddur in an appropriate and lively manner.

- *v'Hotzeiti* = *tza'akah*. The people cried out to God and God brought them out of bondage. This is *bechi*, the pleading and crying of traditional chazanut that bears the weight of the many sufferings of the Jewish people throughout our history.

- *v'Hitzalti* = *n'siah*. This is the narrative of the journey that the people took: The repetitive trips to Pharaoh where Moses pleads “Let my people go!” the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, and each of the Ten Plagues, only to repeat the steps again. The journey of our sacred texts is guided in the Torah by the *t'amim*, the trop, and in the siddur, it is Nusach Hat'filah, the modes by which we chant, that plots the path through the story of the siddur.

- *v'Ga'alti* = *Shirah*. This is the miraculous act of the Red Sea crossing about which we read this morning, and *Shirat Hayam*, the resulting song of praise sung by Moses, Miriam, and the People. This is the lyrical element, melody, meant to uplift and encourage.

- *v'Lakachti* = *S'h'miah*. This is the awesome notion that God heard the prayers of our ancestors, and set in motion the process of returning to the Promised Land. This is *awe*. The still, small voice of passive participation. The ability to be transfixed in a sublime moment.

Allow me to briefly delve into these four forms of musical expression that a cantor uses to relate these sacred texts each week in the endeavor to enter the synagogue, open the siddur, forget about all that I did last week, and try to being all over again in a different way, fresh, new, reinvigorated.

First: *Tza'akah*, the cry. It's the first thing that Max did when he came out of the womb (It's also the first thing I did when he came out!). We cry in joy and sadness, we cry out for help and when we've been saved, we cry to signal injustice, we cry in anger.

At their first meeting at the burning bush, God tells Moses that he has heard the cries of the Israelites in bondage. In our own historical era, the Jewish people have done a lot of crying. This week, we observed International Holocaust Remembrance Day, marking the date 65 years ago this week when Soviet troops entered Auschwitz and liberated almost 7000 prisoners. At each Yizkor service, when we remember those millions who were not liberated, and the horrific ways in which so many of our brothers and sisters were annihilated, the memorial prayer that we offer evokes their suffering cries.

Music example: Holocaust section of Yizkor Eil Malei

How do we make the transition from crying out to action?

God gives Moses the answer to this question in the form of a mild rebuke at the beginning of today's parasha. As he faces the first of many encounters with the constant complaining of B'nai Yisrael, Moses cries

out to God, and God quickly retorts, “Ma titz’ak eilai? What are you crying out to me for? Dabeir el B’nai Yisrael v’yisa’u. Just speak to them, give them a clear idea of where you and they will go, and they will do just that.” God tells Moses that salvation is a process, and the Children of Israel become galvanized into Am Yisrael, the people of Israel, through the journey they go on together. God is just reminding Moses that these people need to be given directions, and then they will follow along the path.

When I began leading services on a regular basis, before I went to Cantorial school, a cantor that I know and love was trying to explain to me about how to pace a service. To put it into terms that this opera lover could understand, he said, “A service is like a Mozart opera. Everyone remembers the arias, those showpiece moments which expound on a particular text. But what enables the story to progress are the recitatives.” These are transitional moments of speech—parlando, or amirah. In the opera house, Mozart painstakingly set these recitatives to music so that the nuances of the conversation come out through the music. The meter and rhythm and dynamic is all written out, with musical accompaniment. Through the tone of these recitatives, the next step in the plot becomes evident.

In the synagogue, this is the role of the t’amim, the modes of cantillation of the Bible, and the Nusach, the traditional modes of prayer which are the foundation of davening. There are six different systems of t’amei hamikrah, cantillation, or trop: Torah, Haftarah, Torah on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, The Book of Esther, The Book of Lamentations, and the Books of Shir Hashirim (Song of Songs), Eichah (Lamentations), and Ruth. They are the punctuation which guides the reading of these texts. They aid the telling of the story, as a memory device in the days before printing, and as a dramatic device for the listener.

Similarly, each synagogue service has a musical scale associated with it. Just as we pass signs on the highway indicating that we have entered a new province or city, Kaddish is the marker that signals passage between sections of the siddur and links the sections one to another. Its tune lets you know what is coming next. Kaddish on Friday night sounds different from that of shabbat musaf, which sounds different from musaf on the High Holy Days, which sounds different from musaf on the First Day of Passover and Sh’mini Atzeret. Here are examples of these melodies for Kaddish. I will sing the opening words first, and then identify the nusach afterward, so you can see how many you get right!

Nusach example: Friday night, Shabbat Musaf, High Holy Day Maariv, High Holy Day Musaf, Tal/Geshem, Chasidic

The parasha of B’shalach commemorates the G’ulah, the actual miracle of redemption, so it is no stretch to say that this is directly related to Shirah, joyous and melodic song. The special trop with which I chanted Shirat Hayam earlier only serves to confirm this connection. But again, the aspect of melody in prayer should still serve the text and still fit the appropriate musical mode of the service of the day. The choir will now give an example of this, singing Yism’chu, the text from the Shabbat Musaf Amidah, which reads: Those who keep the Shabbat and call it a delight shall rejoice in Your Kingship. The mode is Ahavah Rabah, and the composition is by the great Chasidic composer of Tel Aviv, Reb Yaakov (Yankele) Talmud.

Choir sings Yism’chu Refrain

Artur Schnabel, the great pianist, was once asked what makes his interpretations so special. His answer: “The notes I handle no better than many pianists. But the pauses between the notes - ah, that is where the art resides!” On Rosh Hashanah we say, “Uv’shofar gadol yitaka, v’kol d’mamah dakah yishamah. Even through the sounding of the great shofar, the still small voice is heard.” Sometimes, we just need to be quiet, to contemplate, to meditate, to be in awe.

I once heard Thomas Friedman, the well known New York Times columnist, speak at a synagogue. After his usual talk about technology, the Middle East, and the like, he shifted gears and said: “I’m Jewish, but not religiously so. My family and I have begun to observe Shabbat. Not in a traditional way, but in our own way. I’ve come to appreciate Shabbat and its stark contrast to the world in which we live. We are constantly on-call and on-line. Shabbat is a chance to be offline, and reconnect to the things which are most important: family, relationships, and something that is beyond ourselves. It is a chance for us to be in awe of the most sacred elements of our lives, and draw them close.”

We certainly understand this concept in our own lives. When we go to Place des Arts to hear Kent Nagano conduct Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, we don’t flail our arms together with him, and we certainly don’t hum “BA BA BA BUM” with the strings! When we watch A Few Good Men on DVD at home, we don’t yell “YOU CAN’T HANDLE THE TRUTH!” along with Jack Nicholson. And when we go to the Bell Centre to watch the Canadiens, we don’t bring our own skates and jump out on the ice with the Habs, much as any of us might be

an improvement for them these days!

There is awe in the synagogue as well. I have always believed that a good synagogue service provides the congregants with moments to sing outwardly and moments to sing inwardly, moments of active participation and of passive participation. And I believe that in those sublime moments of sheer beauty, we are able to be completely engaged in prayer, and the still, small voice sings just as loudly as the one which participates.

Musical example: Hashiveinu, Lewandowski together. We cry together, we sing

When I think about how I, together with Stephen Glass and the Synagogue Choir, set out to create an atmosphere conducive to prayer, I think about my friend and mentor, Rabbi Mark Loeb of blessed memory. He would always phone me before every major holiday or concert to offer the same words of encouragement. He would say, “Give ‘em Heaven!” I’ll keep trying. I hope you’ll all keep coming! Shabbat Shirah Shalom!