

Shabbat Shirah 5771

15 JANUARY 2011 • PARASHAT B'SHALACH

Almost two months ago, a funny thing happened to me on the way to the Forum...or should I say, the Bell Centre. Of course, I've been to the Bell Centre many times. As a Montreal Canadiens season ticket holder for the last five seasons, I know the best way to get to my seats in section 302.

But this game was different. For the first time, I didn't enter the Bell Centre via the main entrance on de la Gauchetière. This time, I went around to the service entrance on St. Antoine Street where I was ushered to a private dressing room. At the appropriate time, I walked to centre ice and sang the national anthems of the United States and Canada.

Since that night, I can't go anywhere without being engaged in conversation about my 2½ minutes of Bell Centre fame. And what do you think the most frequently asked question has been? Not "Why didn't they show it on TV?" Not "Did you meet the players?" Not "Did they give you free tickets to the game?" No, the number one most frequently asked question has been: "Were you nervous?"

On the surface, the question seems simple enough. After all, it's not every day that I sing in front of 21,273 people, to say nothing of the radio audience (and no, I don't know why RDS didn't show the anthems on TV). It also was definitely not the usual setting for me.

A year in my life sees me singing in many different settings. Shabbat Services, High Holy Days, Weddings, Funerals, concerts, and the list goes on...The interesting thing is that when people see me after my "typical" singing events, their queries are usually event-specific and frankly, somewhat shallow. At the end of Yom Kippur, it's "How did you do that without eating or drinking?" After a winter funeral on top of Mount Royal, it's "How do you sing in that cold?" Perhaps it is the gravitas of these occasions that keeps people from asking how it feels to officiate at them? Celebration, loss, forgiveness, hope. That's a lot for anyone to digest.

So why is it that my Bell Centre debut is what led people to ask the simple, yet profound question: if I was nervous, scared, overcome by stage fright? I'd like to try to answer this question for you using a tripartite sequence that is set out in this morning's parasha. The sentence that immediately precedes Shirat Hayam, Moses' song at the Red Sea, reads as follows:

רָא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַיָּד הַגְּדֹלָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה י' בַּמִּצְרַיִם;
וַיִּירָאוּ הָעַם אֶת־י';
וַיֹּאמְרוּ בְּיָהּ וּבַמֶּשֶׁה עֲבָדָיו.

"Israel saw the wondrous power which the Lord had wielded against the Egyptians; the people feared the Lord; they believed in the Lord and in Moses His servant." (Exodus 14:31)

The Israelites had to see the power of God; then they feared God, and that combination of substantiation and trepidation led the people to believe in God, and eventually, in themselves.

First, Vayar Yisra'el—the Israelites, and Moses in particular, had to see some evidence of God in order to believe God.

This morning's Torah portion sees Moses cast in the iconic, Cecil B. DeMille-ian prophetic role, performing the greatest of all miracles by parting the Red Sea and leading the Israelites through it on dry land. He has certainly come a long way from where we met Moses in the opening chapters of the Book of Sh'mot.

Just four weeks ago, having run away from Pharaoh's house, Moses was trying to be your average shepherd, tending his flocks in the wilderness of Chorev. Then, one day, he takes the road less traveled by, and ends up giving God almost two whole chapters worth of reasons why he should not be the one to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? What will the Israelites say when I introduce myself as their new leader? Who shall I say sent me? I'm not a good public speaker! They won't listen to me! Please, God, just send someone else!"

The rabbis attribute these protestations to Moses' great humility. I am certainly not here to debate the humility of Moshe Rabeinu, however, let me propose the following: what if he was just plain scared out of his wits? The awesome responsibility; the expectations; the prospect of defying Pharaoh and his armies, both of which he knew intimately from his days as an Egyptian. What if it was all just too much for Moses to

contemplate, and he didn't think that he was up to the task?

I find myself in a similar position each year on the first day of Rosh Hashanah. "Hineni. Here I stand, deficient in good deeds, overcome by awe, and trembling before You for I am unworthy for this sacred task. I plead with you, God—do not hold my congregants accountable for my failings. May my voice be pleasing enough, my kavanah deep enough, and my devotion sincere enough for my prayers to be heard on high."

When I stand at the back of the sanctuary, I—like Moses—have many doubts as to whether I am up to leading my flock. I am forced to confront the enormity of my sacred task, performance anxiety, stage fright, and nervousness, all at once, all on the Yamim Nora'im, the holiest days in our religious calendar (and in front of a sellout crowd!).

Am I physically up to leading a High Holy Day Musaf? Is my voice in good shape? Can I stand that long? Have the choir and I rehearsed enough? But most importantly, am I spiritually up to the task? After all, I have my own sins to atone for, my own demons to confront, my own deficiencies and insecurities. And now I'm being asked to represent all of you in the pews behind me, before the King of Kings, on the holiest days of the year, when the small matter of an inscription in the Book of Life hangs in the balance? At that moment, I can certainly understand how Moses must have felt talking to that bush in the wilderness!

Whatever hesitations Moses may have had, he certainly got his wits about him in time to verbally joust with Pharaoh, coordinate the ten plagues, part the Red Sea, trounce the Egyptians, and lead our ancestors through the transition from tribe to nation. Vayar Yisra'el—Moses and the Israelites had to see the power of God before they really believed that their liberation could happen.

Next up, Vayiru Ha'am—the people were afraid.

In my off-the-bimah professional life, I find myself discussing issues of fear on a regular basis, namely performance anxiety and stage fright, with my Bar Mitzvah students. I sit at my desk opposite so many of them who come to my office excited for their first Bar Mitzvah lesson, their cherubic faces beaming with enthusiasm, only to see them turn pale at the first mention of standing on this bimah. "What happens if I make a mistake?" they ask. "What if I don't know where to stand? What if my voice cracks? What if I lose my voice altogether? Do I really have to do this?" While those of us who have survived our B'nai Mitzvah hear this and grin, these are quite reasonable questions for a 12 year-old to be asking.

Think about it: our rite of passage requires a young man to stand on a stage in a cavernous hall, before a large group of people (mostly strangers), and to sing (a scary thought for most anyone, let alone a 12 year old boy in the throes of puberty, whose voice is cracking, whose sense of self is in flux, and for whom singing in front of one's friends just isn't cool), and to top it all off, in a foreign language! Well, that would be enough to make me run like the wind, no matter how cool the cantor is!

While the traditional model of a Bar Mitzvah may be just fine for many young adults, it is these concerns that have led your clergy to begin discussing the notion of what a Bar Mitzvah might look like for future generations of young men and women at Shaar Hashomayim.

We realize that each young person has a particular set of gifts, skills, likes and dislikes, all of which should be considered in order maximize their Bar or Bat Mitzvah experience. For example, we have had musically inclined and vocally gifted boys join Stephen Glass, the Synagogue Choir, and me in leading portions of the Shabbat service, and I am currently teaching a young lady to lead Kabbalat Shabbat Services on Friday night for only the second time in the history of this great congregation.

It's one thing for a Moses to have to suffer some growing pains as he evolved into the statesman who would guide our ancestors out of slavery, but must we try to force our children into a Bar Mitzvah mold that may well be out of date, and is almost certainly out of touch with this generation? Are hundreds of lines of Torah Reading really the measure of a man?

Vayiru Ha'am? Is fear absolutely essential to becoming an adult member of our community?

And finally, Vaya'aminu, the people came to believe in God.

If I am filled with a healthy dose of self-doubt saying Hineni on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, it is Kol Nidrei night that reminds me just why I'm here and what my role is as your cantor.

Let me set the scene for you: *Choir intro to Kol Nidrei*

It is my first Kol Nidrei as the Cantor of Congregation Shaar Hashomayim in 2004. For the first time, I see this grand sanctuary packed to the rafters with gentlemen in tuxedos and ladies wearing white. The ark is opened, the Torahs removed, the choir is around my shulchan, and I begin to walk out onto the bimah to say

the two most important words of my liturgical year. But two other words from the Parnas, that I am not at all expecting to hear, stop me in my tracks: “NOT YET.”

“Not yet?” I say. “Can’t you see it’s time!”

And then, Dr. Langleben took me by the arm, led me to my place on the bimah, and initiated me in my favorite Shaar Hashomayim ritual, one that took my breath away then, and one that, God willing, will continue to do so for many years to come. He opened his Machzor, removed a tattered index card that had been marking the page of Kol Nidrei, and in a voice that only I could hear, began to read:

“On behalf of the Executive, the Board of Trustees, and the membership of Congregation Shaar Hashomayim, it is my honor to ask you to daven on our behalf on this, our 158th Yom Kippur. We wish you strength in your davening, and may your prayers be heard on high so that we may all be inscribed in the Book of Life for the year to come.”

At that moment, I am overcome by a wash of emotions. Vayar—I see this magnificent room full not only of people, but of prayer. Vayiru—I am scared, not only that the fast might cause me to falter, but that some of my flock inevitably will not make it “Miyom Kipurim zeh ad Yom Kipurim Habah,” will not be around to see this moment next Yom Kippur.

But when I hear those first chords of the most evocative Jewish music ever written, which set the tone for the holiest of our days, Vaya’aminu—I’m a believer! I know why I’m standing here. I know why I became a cantor. I know why I love The Shaar.

In that moment, I believe that I can overcome any obstacle that might stand in my way during that Yoma Arichta, that one very long day. And I believe in N’ilah’s plea: “Shaarei Shamayim p’tach, v’otzarcha hatov lanu tiftach,” that the Gate of Heaven will be open for our prayers, as will God’s treasure trove of all that is good.

So, to answer the question about that night at centre ice:

Was I nervous?

The truth?

You bet I was!

Shabbat Shirah Shalom!