

Shabbat Shirah 5772

4 FEBRUARY 2012 · PARASHAT B'SHALACH

I would like to dedicate this morning's Shabbat Shirah presentation to the memory of Ayelet Galena - *Ayelet Yakira bat Sheit Luria, zichronah livrachah*, of blessed memory. Daughter of Seth Galena and Hindy Poupko, granddaughter of Rabbi Reuben Poupko. Her all too short life was an inspiration to so many—may her memory be a blessing to us all.

"A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." I think this pithy gem from Ralph Waldo Emerson was one of my favorites from my 10th grade American Literature class. But I do believe that the architects of Jewish liturgy would have taken great exception to the notion that repetition breeds complacency. After all, *Halachah* is all about repetition, consistency, cycle, and I certainly don't think that our great rabbis were small-minded. And when it comes to prayer, Jewish Law prescribes the *Matbe'ah shel t'filah*, the formula of prayers that we say each morning, noon and night. We are to learn the drill and not deviate.

So in an effort to quell any notion of small-mindedness on this bimah, this year's Shabbat Shirah sermon will be a little different from those of previous years. Why? Well, perhaps doing a repetitive task a little differently serves to highlight the very issue that Stephen and I would like to explore this morning.

For years now, when people ask me what I do as a cantor, and I happen to be feeling a little cheeky, I say "I'm in the business of religious aesthetics." Well it's true! Take the role of Shaliach Tzibur, the prayer emissary of a community, cross that with the concept of *Hidur Mitzvah*, beautifying the performance of an Jewish religious imperative, and you get me—a religious aesthetician. Each Shabbat and Festival, Stephen Glass, the Shaar Choir and I try our best to make our t'filot as beautiful as possible.

In preparing today's presentation, I've decided to modify my slightly wise-guy answer to the question. From now on, my new answer will be: "I am in the business of religious aesthetics and ergonomics."

Now you're all scratching your heads and wondering, "What does Ergonomics have to do with shul?" (Or perhaps sitting on these ultra comfy Shaar pews, you wished that the builders of our nearly 90 year old sanctuary knew a little bit more about ergonomics, but I digress.)

For starters, ergonomics is a HUGE industry today, certainly much bigger than Jewish music. We have specially designed chairs, desks, mice, keyboards, all with optimized viewing angles, viewing distances and seat heights, the theories of which are drawn from fields so diverse as biomechanics, mechanical engineering, industrial engineering and design, kinesiology, physiology and psychology, all of which form much of the basis for careers in occupational therapy, physiotherapy, osteopathy, chiropractors and orthopedics....I could go on and on. This is BIG business.

Well, what's the point of ergonomics? It's this: the more frequently and carelessly you do something, the more unhealthy it becomes, and the result is a repetitive strain injury, and if that unhealthy repetitive action is not addressed, you risk more serious injury and even permanent disability. Ergonomics is the movement created to promote healthy repetition, repetition that is in tune with the needs of our bodies, our minds, and our spirit.

Put that into the context of davening three times daily, each services consisting largely of the same texts, and you get this: By being here each week, you could be putting yourselves at risk of a repetitive spiritual injury (maybe that's why so many only come three days per year...I couldn't resist).

But fear not! We here in the Music Department of Congregation Shaar Hashomayim care very deeply about your spiritual vitality, so we do our best to provide a safe, aesthetically pleasing and ergonomically conscious prayer environment by constantly working to prevent prayer at the Shaar from becoming a routine, careless, meaningless, and therefore unhealthy experience.

First and foremost is the institution that I, as your cantor, respect more than anything else: *nusach hat'filah*, the traditional musical modes of prayer. Each synagogue service has a musical scale associated with it. 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, which sounds different

from a weekday morning, afternoon, evening, and so on.

When services are led by Rabbi Woolfson or myself together with the choir, you can be sure that these modes are adhered to. The very existence of *nusach* is evidence that prayer must not be a mindless stream of words sung to a nondescript tune—care **MUST** be taken to ensure that our *t’filot* are said appropriately.

But Stephen and I are not the only ones who care about this. As our past-president, Alvin Fagen, wrote, “Shaar Hashomayim preserves a musical tradition that stretches back to a different time and the great synagogues of the major capitals of the Old World. We preserve this tradition not in a library or merely by holding concerts but by a living and continuous manifestation through the central worship service of the Congregation.” 125 years ago, in 1887, the leaders of this congregation committed themselves to this ideal by forming a choir, and one of the reasons that Stephen and I are so fortunate to be associated with this congregation is that very musical tradition of which we are custodians.

In Stephen’s own words, “A successful service has variety and pace, and we are proud of having many different settings of the same text.” So it is in the spirit of aesthetics, ergonomics, tradition and variety that Stephen and I would like to take you through a few of the many settings of the text that we just sang to return the Torah to the Ark.

Before we get to the music, a few words about the text, which can be found on page 460 of your siddurim. It is very common to find in the siddur selections of verses on a common theme that span the breadth of our sacred texts, and the *Uvnucho Yomar* paragraph is one of these.

The first sentence, drawn from the book Numbers, is the second half of the formula that make up the bookends of the Torah services. Chapter 10, verse 35 of B’midbar is the verse “*Vayhi Binso’a ha’aron*—when the Ark was carried forth, Moses would proclaim the following words.” The next verse, verse 36, reads “*Uvnucho Yomar*, And when the Ark was set down, Moses prayed the following.”

In other words, this is a description of Biblical Tabernacle procedures, and this is the construct that we expounded upon to create the Torah service as we know it.

The rest of the verses are on the themes of Torah, its centrality to our tradition, and its power to draw us closer to God, closing with the penultimate sentence of the book of Eichah, “*Hashiveinu Adonai eilecha v’nashuvah*, Turn us to You, O Lord, and we shall return; *Chadeish yameinu k’kedem*, renew us as in days of old.” Though we read from a very old book, the cycle of which is repeated each year, the idea that we are left with when we return the Torah to its special place is renewal.

So now, enough from me. I’ll take my place to do some singing and turn the rest over to Stephen.