

Shabbat Shirah 5773

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I have always loved reading about sports, about baseball in particular, and of course about the Boston Red Sox. One of the first “serious” pieces of baseball literature I encountered was John Updike’s famous 1960 New Yorker article entitled “Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu.” In it, Updike rhapsodizes lyrically about Ted Williams’ last game in which he dramatically hits a towering home run in the last at bat of his career. The piece left me captivated and led me to search for more Updike to read, ultimately leading me to his 1975 essay collection whimsically titled, “Picked up Pieces.”

Dan Shaughnessy, sports writer for the Boston Globe, has adopted this title, and for many years now, he periodically writes a column called “Picked up Pieces.” It is a bit of a stream of consciousness made up of pithy vignettes and random observations which, taken as a whole, present a larger picture of the Boston sports scene.

So after this week in which it has been way too cold to think in a linear fashion, I present to you, in no particular order, some Cantorial observations from a busy week.

I call it “Picked up pieces leading up to Shabbat Shirah.”

- Not two weeks ago, another gaudy awards show—this time it was the Golden Globes—was on TV. As expected, one of the big winners that night was “Les Miserables.” Michelle and I managed to get out to see “Les Mis” last month and as I watched, I felt that one of its iconic numbers deserves to be mentioned today.

“Do you hear the people sing,

singing a song of angry men?

It is the music of a people

who will not be slaves again!”

Isn’t this what Shabbat Shirah is all about? A song that galvanizes a group of slaves into a nation. It is about the transformative power of music.

Shirat Hayam, Moses’ song at the Red Sea’s shore, may very well be the first “national anthem” (trust me, I know a lot about national anthems), and there is no question that Claude Michel Schonberg attempted to make an anthem out of “Do you hear the people sing?” as it is sung by the ragged band of revolutionaries on top of the barricade. (Similarly, “Va Pensiero,” Verdi’s famed “Chorus of the Hebrew slaves” from his early opera Nabucco, has become an unofficial national anthem of Italy.)

I would like to propose that while the State of Israel certainly has “Hatikvah” as a traditional and secular national anthem, we find in this morning’s Torah reading our Jewish liturgical anthem. “Mi Chamocha ba’eilim Adonai, Mi Kamocha ne’edar bakodesh, nora t’hilot, osei feleh. Who is like You, O Lord, among the mighty? Who is like You, glorious in holiness, revered in praises, doing wonders?”

Now, when asked to name the most important prayer in our tradition, most would immediately answer “The Sh’ma,” and you wouldn’t be wrong. After all, it is a core statement of monotheism that appears in our liturgy twice daily, morning and evening. Well, Mi Chamocha is also quoted in our t’filot twice each day, at Arvit and Shacharit, and if you count the daily recitation of Shirat Hayam, that makes thrice!

Perhaps even more telling is the way these words are sung. In traditional services, Sh’ma is not sung at all while Mi Chamocha is a refrain for the entire congregation to recite aloud. Nusach Hat’filah, the traditional musical modes of prayer, goes so far as to dictate exactly how Mi Chamocha is to be sung at each service, and indeed at each season of the year. This morning, I have asked Stephen Glass and the Synagogue Choir to help me illustrate this point by singing three different examples of Mi Chamocha for three different points in the Jewish calendar cycle. See if you can name them.

- Rosh Hashanah, the lilting melody that for many of us, so strongly evokes the feeling of the New Year.
- Sukkot, sung to the melody for the na’a’nu’im, when we shake the lulav in six directions during Hallel.
- Pesach, the music derived from the melody for Adir Hu which we sing at the seder table.

The power of music to transport is immediately evident in each of these examples. A few notes bring us to a

different season and a different mood and link us to different memories and emotions.

- Speaking of anthems, there were two of note this week:

- One that was definitely sung (albeit poorly) in the Bell Centre for the first time in almost nine months, marking the end of the NHL lockout, an event for which it may be worth omitting Tachanun for the remainder of this short hockey season.

- And then the stunning rendition that may or may not have been actually sung on the steps of the US Capitol at Monday's Presidential Inauguration. Temperatures in the 30s led Beyonce to "allegedly" use a pre-recorded version. She should try doing a funeral at The Shaar Cemetery atop Mt. Royal. Clearly, she's not cut out to be a chazzan.

- "B'yad chazakah uvizro'a n'tuyah" is one of the frequent anthropomorphisms that recurs in connection with the Exodus. God brought us out from Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. Didn't Lance choose the right week to confess that Armstrong strong-armed an entire sport and indeed the whole world into believing in his false messianic image?

As Rabbi David Wolpe pointed out in this week's Washington Post, "The biblical counterexample [to Lance Armstrong, about whom we read in the parshiot of the last two weeks] is worth remembering. When God chose Moses to lead the Jewish people, it was not because Moses leapt in the air, in the manner of Shrek's donkey, yelling "Pick me! Pick me!" Rather Moses repeatedly protested his unworthiness. His humility qualified him for leadership. Self-effacement no longer gains traction in our age of wild narcissism."

- This week, we began the process of recording the third in our CD series, "The Music of Congregation Shaar Hashomayim" (Volumes I and II available in the office during normal business hours). With this volume we begin covering the repertoire of the High Holy Days. This is probably the first time in the history of synagogue music that someone is rehearsing for Rosh Hashanah in January!

- On Thursday, US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced an end to the nearly twenty-year-old policy of the United States Armed Forces prohibiting women from serving in combat. Perhaps this decision was motivated by the numerous lawsuits over the years challenging this policy, but I'd like to think that it was inspired by this morning's Haftarah.

Deborah remains one of the most remarkable and inspirational women in the Tanach. She is a Judge, a poet, and a singer, but she is even more. Her name, D'vorah, is derived from the shresh "Dabeir," to speak. God spoke to the People of Israel through D'vorah—she was a full-fledged Prophet as well.

When she comes to Barak, her military commander, asking almost incredulously "Hasn't God commanded you to attack the Canaanites?" Barak responds, "If you go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go." Barak realizes that without D'vorah's approval and support, he does not have God's support. It only took the US Department of Defense 3000 or so years to grasp what Barak immediately understood.

- This past Sunday, I was among the 68,756 fans who braved the cold and wind at Gillette Stadium in Foxborough, Massachusetts only to watch my beloved New England Patriots play their worst game of the year and blow a chance to make it to consecutive Super Bowls.

Why did I go? Did I not already mention that I like sports? Well, I also like history and feel that I have a keen appreciation for historical events. As a lifelong Patriots fan, I feel privileged to continue to enjoy the Tom Brady/Bill Belichick era. Perhaps Canadiens fans, who came to expect to win a Stanley Cup every season and have now endured 20 years since the last championship, can now appreciate that as a fan, you cannot take these "golden ages" for granted.

Why do I bring this up? The piece that I just sang to put the Torah back into the ark was Stephen Glass' first composition. He wrote it in his teens! While practicing it over the last few weeks, he's used various self-deprecating words to describe the piece: young, naïve, and unsophisticated. I say it's sublime, uncomplicated, and simply amazing that a mind so young could create something so deep, evocative and beautiful.

The fact is, I came to The Shaar to work with Stephen. My love of synagogue choral music, my aforementioned appreciation for history, and the Jewish musical value system that was inculcated in me by my mentors in Jerusalem, all came together and led me to realize that a partnership with Stephen had all the earmarks for the beginnings of a special time for Cantorial Music at Shaar Hashomayim, and for the greater

Jewish community. All of us who are touched by his music have come to understand that we are in a championship era. Appreciate and cherish it. It doesn't come around every day.

- I love Presidential Inaugurations. I went to two myself when I was living in Washington, DC. I love the ceremony, the ritual, the pomp and circumstance, and I am also a patriot (yeah, I know). But this year, perhaps even more than four years ago, I was struck by the magnitude of just how far the United States has come. In the 150th year since the end of slavery and fifty years after Martin Luther King's March on Washington, an African American stood on the steps of the Capitol to be sworn in for his second term as president. Who could have believed it?

So, in this week that saw a new government take office in the United States and in Israel, Abraham Lincoln's timeless words from his second inaugural address in 1865 seem a fitting way to close this address, his message applicable to the newly freed Hebrew slaves, the leaders of Israel, the United States and Canada. "Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that the mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman's two-hundred-and-fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to *see* the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations."

"There is [indeed] a life about to start when tomorrow comes." May that peaceful tomorrow come soon for all of us, and for those we love.

Amen, and Shabbat Shirah Shalom.