

Shabbat Shirah 5774

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The final month of the 2011 baseball season was the most painful in Red Sox history. That September, they went 7-20 and gave up a 9 game lead over the Tampa Bay Rays on the last day of the season to miss out on a playoff berth. Injuries, clubhouse chemistry, pitching woes, cold hitters. Whatever the issues were, it was an epic collapse. Two days later, at the press conference convened to discuss Terry Francona's dismissal after 9 seasons as manager, he summed up his feelings by saying "I think it's time for a new voice here."

After another lost year in 2012 when they finished last in the American League, the 2013 Red Sox found their collective voice. Whether by marathon bombing or by manly bearding, this year's team learned to sing together harmoniously and in doing so, took a page out of the Psalmist's playbook with an epic turnaround: "Even ma'asu habonim hay'tah l'rosh pinah - the rock that was discarded by the builders has been transformed into the cornerstone."

The motif of agony to ecstasy, darkness to light, discarded to chosen is a constant throughout the Exodus story, the culmination of which we read about today with the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea. Just as the triumph over the armies of Egypt moved the Israelites to raise their collective voices and sing in praise of their journey from slavery to freedom, so did the 2013 Red Sox sing "We are the champions" in winning the World Series and going from worst to first.

Ok, the gratuitous Red Sox fan preening is over—now Rabbi Scheier can unplug his ears.

In all seriousness, what does it mean when we talk about an individual or a group finding its voice?

Is it a technical thing relating to voice production? If Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's famous assertion that "Music is the universal language of mankind" is true, then the voice is the instrument that we all know how to play from the moment we exit the womb.

Is it a euphemism for confidence, self-assurance, pride? At the burning bush, Moses had to know that God was on his side, but he still protests his appointment as leader of the Children of Israel because he is "k'vad peh uchvad lashon" – literally heavy of mouth and tongue. Moses feels that his difficulties with speech and language make him unsuitable to lead.

Our sacred texts contain many references to the voice. Moments ago, during the Torah procession, we sang the single chapter in our tradition that contains the most references to the voice. Seven times in the eleven sentences of Psalm 29 we find the word KOL: "Kol Hashem al hamayim, Kol Hashem bakoach, Kol Hashem behadar, Kol Hashem shover arazim, chotzeiv lahavot eish, y'choleil ayalot, yachil midbar" and on and on. This long list is poetically summed up in this lovely British translation:

The God of glory thunders out
Upon the waters wide;
The voice of God resounds aloud
Across the flowing tide.

Cedars of Lebanon God's voice breaks;
God's power they, too, know,
The voice of God and desert shakes
And lays the forest low.

That's a whole lot of Kol! But fear not—I do not intend to delve into each of these aspects of the voice, either God's or our own. Instead, I'd like to share a few brief impressions about the voice that have struck me in the last few weeks leading up to this year's Shabbat Shirah sermon.

For years now, the world has been captivated by amateur vocal competitions: American Idol, The Voice, X Factor and various other spinoffs in almost every country around the world. Last month, a fascinating article appeared in the New York Times describing a most unique vocal competition in Japan. This contest, which has carried on for more than 50 years, draws more than 10,000 contestants annually and is held in a massive convention hall. Under the bright lights at center stage sits...a single telephone. It rings, and the annual All-Japan Phone-Answering Competition begins.

After undergoing intense practice and preparation using self-help books such as “How to Talk Like a Workplace Beauty,” each contestant must carry on a three-minute conversation during which they are judged on their phone etiquette: “good tone, volume, speed, pronunciation, articulation and use of words.” A strong contestant takes appropriate pauses between phrases, stays friendly but not overly friendly, and uses proper exclamations to signal attention and empathy.

The competition is so intense, the audience so engaged, that when contestants stumble on phrasing or lose their cool and grind to a dreaded silence, the audience gasps. Strange? Perhaps. But is it any more so than the rowdy fan who boos when David Ortiz strikes out with the bases loaded, when Carey Price lets one get through the “5 hole,” or when Tiger Woods three-putts? Different societies value different specialized skills, lauding their outstanding practitioners while booing those less accomplished.

It should not surprise you, then, to learn that Jewish tradition devotes an entire chapter of the Shulchan Aruch [the 16th century code of Jewish law] to the qualifications that one must fulfill in order to lead a community in prayer as Chazan?

The Cantor should be:

- A male at least 13 years of age (check);
- married (check);
- have a full beard (no check). This was actually later interpreted to mean that he should be of an age when the beard is fully grown, that is, he should be a mature person (chronologically I pass on that one, but mature?);
- he should be without sin (comparatively speaking, of course);
- free of rumors that he had a bad reputation in his youth (I’m just quoting the law here);
- he should be modest (not going there);
- morally acceptable to the people for whom he serves (fishing for compliments here);
- and last on the list? That the Cantor should have a pleasant voice. The voice is important, but what’s behind the voice is paramount

As the Synagogue Choir and I prepare to enter the studio once again this winter to complete our recordings of the High Holy Day liturgy for our CD series The Music of Congregation Shaar Hashomayim, I find myself reflecting on these qualities. One of the selections that we will be recording is Sh’ma Koleinu, literally “hear our voice.” Cantors of yesteryear have taken this prayer as an opportunity for virtuosic Cantorial pleading and crying, but for me the British tradition gets it right: Simple, understated, humble and elegant. All that we can ask of God as a community, and all that I can ask as your shaliach—your emissary—is this: Hear our voice, and accept, with compassion and favour, our prayers. Sh’ma Koleinu.

Going by the weekly Torah reading cycle that begins on Shabbat afternoon at Mincha, Shabbat Shirah really began for me last weekend in Los Angeles where Michelle and I attended Jeffrey Diamond’s Bar Mitzvah. What made this Bar Mitzvah different from all others is that Jeffrey is autistic.

He is highly functioning, but has substantial speech impairment. In short, he is an intelligent, thoughtful and sensitive young man who cannot vocally articulate his thoughts. They are locked inside a body that he cannot control. After years of therapy and far past the point of exasperation and heartache, Jeffrey and his family discovered that he was able to express himself by typing on an iPad. The results are nothing short of awesome.

At his Bar Mitzvah, Jeffrey sang the blessings from the Torah, chanted his aliyah, and expressed his thoughts and feelings on B'shalach and on the challenges he faced in order to reach this milestone. His brother Jason read out these words, typed entirely by Jeffrey:

"Opting to remain in slavery is common but foolish. It's common because accepting help is scary. To need help is to be vulnerable. We tend to believe that being self-sufficient is what makes you strong. I think accepting help and guidance makes me stronger. Fear of change makes me weaker. Moses says "fear not" because it is the aid and guidance of others that completes us. You just need faith in others. Sometimes, we need guidance from someone other than ourselves to be strong and free.

My world changed about 4 years ago when Elana began typing with me. [She] validated to my parents what they had believed: that I am a bright guy trapped inside my body. I found my voice that day. Being closed to suggestions and outside ideas is self-imposed slavery. If my Mom wasn't open to new ideas, I could not express myself through assisted typing. Instead she found others who express themselves like me and now I feel liberated from slavery."

At Jeffrey's Bar Mitzvah, Rabbi David Wolpe observed that after the Israelites cross the Sea, Moses immediately leads them all in a Hebrew song, begging the question: after 400 years of slavery, how did they still know how to sing in Hebrew? Rabbi Wolpe's answer is that "while everybody else was sunk in depression and slavery, someone must have remembered how to sing and transmitted that and never forgot and had a song in their soul and didn't let that song disappear. To hold on to a song in the face of everything that seems like it will destroy it—that is a great gift, one that can inspire others."

So I leave us this morning with a song of inspiration and freedom, first performed at a segregated school in Jacksonville, Florida on February 12, 1900 at a celebration of Abraham Lincoln's birthday. I first learned it in my sophomore year of High School Chorus and its words and melody have always stuck with me.

Lift every voice and sing, till earth and Heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise, high as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.

May the sounds of our liturgy, our freedom from slavery, and the inner voice of a child set free to soar, inspire us to find our own voice and to help others find theirs. Together, may they all be heard on high for life, for blessing, and for peace.

Shabbat Shirah Shalom!