

Shabbat Shirah 5777

11 FEBRUARY 2017 · PARASHAT B'SHALACH

If you didn't look up into the sky on the way home from shul last night, then you missed the chance to witness a rare cosmic trifecta: a full moon, a lunar eclipse, and a comet. All between the hours of 5:30 and 10:30pm. And all on Tu BiShvat, the Jewish version of Earth Day.

The full moon: Tu BiShvat is the 15th day of the month of Sh'vat, also known as "Rosh Hashanah La'ilanot, the New Year of the Trees."

The comet in question, Comet 45P (followed by a bunch of names that I will not even attempt to pronounce) is on an elliptical orbit around the sun.

The eclipse is part of the Saros 114 series that began on May 13, 971 and will end on June 22, 2233. It last occurred on January 31, 1999 and will next occur on February 22, 2035 (we should all live so long).

These three celestial occurrences are predictable: one as part of a monthly cycle, one occurring every 5 ¼ years, and one every 18 years. What are the odds of them all converging on the same night? And all on Shabbat Shirah? I'd say they're better than the odds of coming back from a 25-point deficit with 18 minutes left in the Super Bowl.

Shabbat Shirah is also a predictable, annual occurrence, and this year marks my 7th consecutive Shabbat Shirah sermon. Seven times appearing on the biggest stage—that sounds vaguely familiar. You know, someone else this week appeared on the biggest stage for the 7th time, but I just can't recall who. Maybe it will come to me by the end of my remarks? After all, the end is when we New Englanders shine brightest.

First, a disclaimer: there's no small degree of hubris in my sermon this morning. Yes, I'm fully aware of the words that are emblazoned above my head: "Da lifnei mi atah omed. Know before Whom you stand." But, my friends, this has been a good week. No, it has been a great week. Actually, it's been a SUPER week. A week that marked the third time in my Shaar tenure that I've celebrated a Patriots Super Bowl victory. (How many for the Bengals?)

So, indulge me a bit as I embark on a tribute to this week's championship moment and its calendar proximity to the Sabbath of Song by offering the thesis that there is another three-fold cosmic convergence happening here today: three things that connect Shabbat Shirah—the protagonists and themes of the crossing of the Sea—to the Super Bowl and its stars. Hatzdadim Hashavim Shebahem, the common denominators are: A name, a GOAT, and a motto.

First, a name.

Juliet famously asks, "What is in a name?" Jewish tradition's answer is "Kishmo kein hu." A name can give one a sense of purpose. So, I ask: what is in the names "Super Bowl" and "Shabbat Shirah"?

How did the Super Bowl come to be called the Super Bowl? A little bit of NFL trivia. The term "Bowl game" has its origins in the Rose Bowl, the massive bowl-shaped stadium in Pasadena, California, that was dedicated in October 1922, just a few weeks after the dedication of this sanctuary. The name "Super Bowl" was coined by Lamar Hunt, the late owner of the Kansas City Chiefs and the driving force behind the merger of the AFL and the NFL in 1966. When the leagues joined forces, they needed a name for their season-ending event. The proposed naming options were: *The NFL-AFL Championship Game*, *The Merger Bowl* and just *The Game*. But after watching his kids playing at home with a Super Ball, Hunt wrote to NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle and kiddingly proposed the "Super Bowl." The next year, 1967, marked the first Super Bowl, and the rest is history.

By comparison, we don't have to look too deeply to find the origins of the name Shabbat Shirah. It's obviously

because we read the song at the Red Sea today. But consider this: next week, we read the Ten Commandments, arguably the most important Halachic moment in Jewish history. Do you know what that Torah reading is called? Yitro, Jethro, the name of Moses' father in law, the High Priest of Midian. Not Shabbat Aseret Hadibrot, Shabbat HaTorah, Shabbat Sinai, Shabbat Cecil B. DeMille or any other obvious names that one might come up with for the giving of the Ten Commandments. Just Yitro. Full stop. Why does this Shabbat get a name and next week's doesn't?

The Ten Commandments are important, but they aren't the first mitzvot in the Torah. They aren't even the first code of law—the Seven Noahide laws beat them by quite a few generations. But Shirat Hayam marks the first time that song is used for prayer. It is the first liturgical music. Visually, Shirat Hayam is written differently from any other section in the Torah. Musically, it has its own special cantillation—that Yosi sang so beautifully—and it is not used anywhere else in our scriptural readings. Its lasting effect is felt every evening and morning as we are commanded to invoke it as part of our t'filot. Whenever we read its most famous excerpt – Mi Chamocha – we reinforce the transcendent power of song, of Shirah.

Second, A GOAT.

No, I'm not referring to the one that my father bought for two zuzim. I'm referring to an ALL CAPS GOAT, the Rashei Teivot, the acronym: Greatest Of All Time.

We say in Yigdal "Lo kam b'yisrael k'Moshe od." There's none greater than Moses. But he was also "anav m'od, mikol ha'adam—the humblest prophet around."

Well, winning his fourth Super Bowl MVP, there's no one like Tom Brady, and there probably won't be again. (Ah, yes, he's the one who appeared on the biggest stage seven times). But when asked about his individual accomplishments, his standard response is to deflect that attention onto his teammates. After the game, he said: "James White deserved the MVP award more than I did."

Bill Belichick has now won more Super Bowls than any coach but his first answer to postgame questioning is: "Coaches don't win games, players do, and I've got the best players in the world."

How many times in your life can you say that you were in the same place at the same time as someone who is the best in the world at what she or he does? I don't mean watching them on television, listening to their recording, seeing them on the silver screen or reading about them in a book. I mean live, in person, in the same room.

I had this experience three times since last Shabbat Shirah:

at Fenway Park, last summer when I went with the family to see David Ortiz in person for the last time;
in Los Angeles at the launch event for You Want It Darker when I met Leonard Cohen three weeks before his passing;

and in this sanctuary with all of you at a most unforgettable Kol Nidrei;

and we anticipate it once more when Kent Nagano and the Montreal Symphony Orchestra join us to celebrate 170 years of Shaar Hashomayim with Mendelssohn's Elijah (May 21 at 7:30pm, tickets available by calling the office).

Well, I'm going to let you all in on a secret: You are all in the presence of greatness today. We have in our midst someone who is the best at what he does, who has forever changed the world through his life's work, and we have all felt the impact of his gifts. I'm speaking about the world of synagogue music, and the GOAT in question is today's special guest: Raymond Goldstein.

Raymond is here because we are premiering a new K'dusha in musaf today, the first in a series of new arrangements that he has written for our congregation in celebration of the 130th anniversary of the Synagogue Choir. Remarkably, the Choir was established by the board of Shaar Hashomayim in 1887. Today at Kiddush, Raymond will tell you about the place of Shaar Hashomayim within the continuum of synagogue music, but he's too humble to tell you about himself, so allow me to.

Raymond, a Capetonian by birth, made Aliyah exactly 40 years ago. His association with Cantor Naftali

Herstik and their musical partnership at the Jerusalem Great Synagogue changed the landscape of synagogue choral music. Using his prodigious classical music background, together with his exposure to some of the greats of South African synagogue choirs and cantors, Raymond brought shul repertoire out of the shtetls of Eastern Europe and into the modern era. His thousands of arrangements for cantors, choirs, chamber ensembles and full orchestras are heard all over the world, including some of the mainstays of our own Shaar repertoire.

More than anything else, while I was a student in Jerusalem I was Ben Bayit in his home. Raymond's family was my family and his kids are my adoptive younger siblings. My years in Jerusalem would have been incomplete without him. He's the greatest, and we all are in his debt.

And finally, a motto.

My current crop of Bar Mitzvah students, all born in 2004, think that I'm a Patriots fan because they always win. Well, they do. But what my students don't know is that for the first 25 years of my life, the Pats were loveable losers. They played in a pathetic, run down stadium and finished in last place almost every year. Then along came Kraft, Belichick, Brady and the motto: "Do your job." And in the ensuing 15 years, the record speaks for itself. Do your job did its job.

For a people that God is trying to bring out of 400 years of slavery, the Israelites were a pretty ungrateful bunch, suffering from Goshen Syndrome, loving their taskmasters and saying that life would have been better in Egypt. At water's edge, the Israelites say to Moses "Wouldn't it be better to serve the Egyptians than die in the Wilderness?" And Moses immediately chastises them: "Hityatzvu! Ur'u et y'shuat Adonai asher ya'aseh lachem hayom. Stand still and watch what God's going to do for you today."

The authors of our t'filot made a motto out of our deliverance from bondage. "Zeicher litziat mitzrayim—always remember the Exodus." The story of the Israelites in Egypt is the greatest comeback story of them all. Beaten nearly into submission, the odds stacked against them, and facing a seemingly unstoppable force, "Zecher litziat mitzrayim" is a mantra that reminds us: "We've been here before. We've overcome the worst and we can do it again." The results: "Vaya'aminu Badonai uvMoshe avdo—they come to believe in God, and in Moses."

We are living in challenging times. Many things—some predictable and some not—are converging all at once and we may feel demoralized, disenfranchised, even slightly deflated. Despair can be easier than hope, complacency than action, resignation than making a comeback and overcoming the odds.

But at times like these, we can turn to three things for inspiration:

Our name: The Gate of Heaven.

Our GOAT: Shomeir Yisrael, the Guardian of Israel.

And our motto: Zeicher litziyat mitzrayim. Remember that we made it to the other shore, unscathed.

God willing, the stars will continue to align in our favour so that we can celebrate an even longer list of successes, together, in next year's sermon.