

Shabbat Shirah 5778

27 JANUARY 2018 · PARASHAT B'SHALACH

Tomorrow night, I will be sitting in Madison Square Garden, next to my supermodel wife, nervously waiting for someone to open an envelope and say the words “And the Grammy Award goes to...” No, I will not be going up on stage to receive the trophy should “You Want It Darker” be the winner. My last name isn’t Cohen, and let’s be honest, this week I’m hoping for another trophy to be hoisted. But I’ll be tempted to stand up and scream “Hineni Hineni” should Leonard’s name be called.

Little did you know when you came to shul this morning that you would be hearing a bunch of rock stars. A Cantor, Music Director and a Synagogue Choir nominated for a Grammy for best rock performance? Yeah, that makes sense. Actually, my usual repertoire does include some assorted rock songs: Tzur Yisra’eil, Ma’oz Tzur, Tzur Chayeinu to name a few. But I don’t think they are what The Recording Academy has in mind. Neither is “You Want It Darker” what our sages would have in mind for the best Torah related song. Shirat Hayam has won that honour in perpetuity.

So, this morning, in a Shaar Shabbat Shirah exclusive, I am here to announce the Torah’s nominees for best, and worst, rock performance.

The nominee for best rock performance is: Moses.

And the nominee for worst rock performance is: Moses.

This is not a “La La Land” style Oscars screw-up. No Richter or MNP accountant will lose their job over this (are you guys relieved?). You heard me right: the same person is nominated for both awards.

There are many parallels between Moses’ two rock performances, but the end result is quite different. Let’s first examine the circumstances of the two incidents in question, and then dig down a little deeper.

First, the candidate for best rock performance.

We find the story in today’s Parashah, B’shalach. Moses is in his first hundred days as the leader of the people of Israel and he’s flying high. His approval ratings should be through the roof. After “Walking Like an Egyptian” through the Red Sea waters, he and the Israelites have a wide open (albeit sandy) road ahead of them. First stop: Mount Sinai, to be followed shortly thereafter by a short trip across the River Jordan and into the Promised Land. Sounds easy, right? Not so much.

Just one chapter after witnessing the greatest miracle of all time, the people are complaining. They have already complained about the food in the desert and now they’re complaining about water, or the lack thereof.

They bark at Moses: “Give us water!” No “Please.” No “Thank You for that awesome miracle, now we’re a little bit thirsty.” Just “Give!” And they follow that up with the ultimate Jewish guilt trip:

לְמַה זֶה הָעֲלִיתָנוּ מִמִּצְרָיִם

תִּשְׁאָרְנוּ וְאֶת־בְּנֵי וְאֶת־מִקְנֵי בְצִמָּא

“Why did you bring us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children with thirst?”

Moses can’t believe it! He screams to God in frustration saying:

מֶה אֲעֲשֶׂה לָעָם הַזֶּה עוֹד מֵעַם וְסָקְלֵנִי:

What am I going to do with this people? Before long they will be stoning me!

God then gives Moses, in a very even tone, instructions for a ritual that will defuse the situation. “Pass before the people; take with you some of the elders of Israel and take along the rod with which you struck the Nile and set out. I will be standing there before you on the rock at Chorev. Strike the rock and water will issue from it, and the people will drink.” Moses performs the ritual, follows the instructions and the people get their

water. The place is named **מַסָּה וּמְרִיבָה**, because the people quarrelled with and tested God. End of scene.

Now try to keep all that in mind as I present the nominee for worst rock performance.

This time, we fast forward 36 years and 2 ½ books and we find ourselves in the middle of the book of B’midbar, Parashat Chukat. As Herman’s Hermits said, “Second verse, same as the first.” The people are complaining, again, about water, almost verbatim. “Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place? There is not even water to drink!”

All sounds familiar? Well, here’s where things begin to change.

Moses and Aaron go seek Divine advice and God says: “You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community and speak to the rock before their very eyes and the rock shall yield its water.”

The instructions are clear, just like last time: perform this ritual and you’ll get water. So far, so good, right? Moses and Aaron gather the people as they were told, but then they go off script and Moses has a bit of a tantrum:

שְׁמַעוּ-נָא הָעָרִים

Moses chastises the people saying “Listen, you rebels!”

הַמִּן-הַפֶּלֶע הַזֶּה נוֹצֵיא לָכֶם מַיִם

“Shall we get water for you out of this rock?”

Moses raises his staff, hits the rock twice, out comes a copious amount of water, and all drink. Crisis averted? End of scene? Not quite.

God now addresses Moses and Aaron and says:

יֵעַן לֹא-הֶאֱמַנְתֶּם בִּי לְהַקְדִּישֵׁנִי לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
לָכֵן לֹא תָבִיאוּ אֶת-הַקֹּהֶל הַזֶּה אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-נָתַתִּי לָהֶם:

“Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm my sanctity in the sight of the people, you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them.”

The place is again named **מֵי מְרִיבָה**, literally the “waters of dissent” because the Israelites fought with God. Now, end of scene.

Two nearly identical stories: same participants, same issue, same result for the people of Israel—they get the water they’re demanding. The location is even given the same name! Intellectual property lawyers would have a field day with these similarities.

But a very different outcome for their leader. Why?

For me, the key words in this whole rock story are:

יֵעַן לֹא-הֶאֱמַנְתֶּם בִּי לְהַקְדִּישֵׁנִי לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

“You didn’t believe enough in me, and that doubt led you to denigrate my holiness in the eyes of the People.”

God gave them a ritual to follow. In each instance, the ritual is meant to reinforce the notion that sustenance comes from God, but Moses and Aaron really screw up. Not only do they defy God’s instructions, but in saying “Shall we get water for you out of this rock?” they remove God from the act entirely. This is a tragic failure from which Moses and Aaron do not recover, either as leaders or as people. They are told that they will no longer bring the people into the Promised Land and before the end of that same chapter, Aaron dies.

I believe that this entire rock story can be distilled into a single concept—the power of ritual. The N’tziv, Rav Naftali Tzvi Y’hudah Berlin, apparently agreed, and offers an explanation for why this was such a failure of ritual leadership and why the punishment was so harsh. He writes:

אלו היו עומדים משה ואהרן בתפלה

If Moses and Aaron had stood before the Israelites in prayer, they would have sanctified God in the midst of the Children of Israel in what could have been an amazing example of **אמירה דבר שבקדושה ברבים** the power of communal prayer.

And in turn Israel would have embraced the transcendent power of prayer. But...

לא האמנתם את ישראל בזה

You failed to reinforce the power of prayer and, effectively, you blew it.

The power of communal prayer is not to be trifled with. It is something that your rock star Music Department takes very seriously. In fulfilling our duties to you, the members of this Congregation, we, your clergy are all duty bound to respect and maintain the rituals of our Congregation. Musically, that means that the repertoire that we choose to sing is guided by certain core principles:

- does it appropriately convey the meaning of the text?
- does it fit within the nusach, the musical mode of prayer, that is appropriate to the day it is being sung?
- does it help create an atmosphere that is conducive to inspiration, to connecting to something greater than ourselves?

Each year, Shabbat Shirah provides the impetus for communities across the Jewish world to recommit to the power of prayer. For generations, Shaar cantors, Music Directors and Choirs have used this day as an opportunity to revisit, reinterpret, and reinvigorate our already rich repertoire.

For years now, Meir Finkelstein’s compositions are beloved favourites in The Shaar’s musical library. He is the most prolific composer-cantor in the world today. He is also a close friend, and is the first cousin of the father of one Joseph Finkelstein, aka Yosi Even-Hen. His musical language is rich and cinematic and his compositions, while distinctly modern, contain an authentic Jewish musical language that comes from being a cantor since age 14!

This Shabbat Shirah, we present an all-Finkelstein Musaf. It includes Shaar staples L’dor Vador and V’al Kulam, as well as the premiere performances of three new Fink additions to our repertoire: a richly textured and musically varied K’dushah, a playful Yism’chu, and a rhapsodic Sim Shalom. They are at once traditional and modern, they interpret the text, and they will elevate your spirits as you hear them for the first time today.

I don’t know whether “You Want It Darker” is really a rock song. It most certainly is a prayer of a dying man and a reminder that we can bring a sacred dimension into all things, even rock and roll. It is also a parting gift to his community, our community. A gift of pride born out of a desire (and these are his words): “to show the flag and to indicate that there is nourishment to be had from this culture.”

Ours is a sacred community where the synergy of words and music in prayer matters deeply. Together, may we continue building upon our musical tradition that is 131 years young.

Now that rocks!