

Shabbat Shirah 5780

8 FEBRUARY 2020 · PARASHAT B'SHALACH

Shabbat Shirah number 15 for me at Shaar Hashomayim, and this year finds me in a bit of a down mood. Is it a vitamin D deficiency? Is it the fact that the Patriots weren't in the Super Bowl (a relatively new experience for me)? Is it the general state of affairs of our planet: the coronavirus, the impeachment, a pre-refused peace plan followed by three terror attacks in Israel over a 12-hour span? Probably a bit of all of the above.

I know that my B'shalach blues are also due in no small part to the passing of two members of our community, to whose memory I'd like to dedicate this morning's offering: Senator Leo Kolber and Armando Rodrigues, both of blessed memory. Two great men with seemingly little in common, but a shared devotion to Shaar Hashomayim. Leo had the means to enable dreams to become plans, Armando worked to make plans become real, and many of the memorable events of my Shaar years would not have been possible without their respective contributions. I feel their absence deeply – personally and professionally – and I am fortunate to have known and loved them both.

So, with all this going through my head and heart, and with the dumping of snow we just received, it would have been easier for all of us to roll over, pull the covers over our heads and wait for the supposed early spring forecast by Punxsutawney Phil and his furry colleagues this past week. But, like Nachshon at the shore of Yam Suf, you leapt into the snowbanks, faithfully determined to make your way here to be rewarded with the serendipitous salvation offered by a Snowbound Shabbat Shirah service full of song from voices young and old, in this magnificent setting, all designed to soothe, to transport, to inspire.

If words are the language of the mind, then music is the language of the soul. When we seek to express or evoke emotion, our tradition turns to melody. Deborah sang after Israel's victory over the forces of Sisrah. Hannah sang when she had a child. When Saul was depressed, David would play for him and his spirit would be restored. David himself was known as “נשים ומירות ישראל” – the sweet singer of Israel.” Elisha called for a harpist to play so that the prophetic spirit could rest upon him, and the Levites sang in the Temple. Every day, we preface our morning prayers with P'sukei d'Zimra, literally ‘Verses of Song,’ whose climax is Psalm 150, the ultimate Psalm, in which instruments and the human voice combine to sing God's praises.

When we pray, we do not read: we sing. When we engage with sacred texts, we do not recite: we chant. Every text and every time has its own specific melody. There are different tunes for Shacharit, Minchah and Ma'ariv, the morning, afternoon and evening prayers. There are different melodies and moods for the prayers for a weekday, Shabbat, and the festivals of Pesach, Shavu'ot and Sukkot, which have much musically in common but also distinctive tunes to each festival, to say nothing of the Yamim Nora'im and the most important service of our year, known by its musical title, Kol Nidrei.

There are even different tunes for different texts. There's a learning mode intended to accompany the study of Rabbinic texts. We have one kind of cantillation for the Torah, another for the Haftarah, yet another set for the Torah reading on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and three more sets for the M'gilot. There is even a special melody only used for today's reading of שירת הים.

There is a map of holy words and it is written in melodies and songs. What an awesome tradition we have, and how fortunate I feel to be in one of the few remaining communities perpetuating it and expanding upon it.

It's easy to say all that with the benefit of history and scholarship, but how did the Israelites know what to sing or how to sing it as the waters settled over the vanquished Egyptian chariots? I doubt they held a national choir rehearsal before the Red Sea crossing, so how did the newly freed slaves learn this song that gives this Shabbat its name?

The structure of first verse of שירת הים may provide a hint:

אֶזְכֹּר יְשִׁיר־מִשְׁחָה וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לַיהוָה

“Then did Moses sing, and all the Israelites with him, this song to the Lord, and they said, saying: I will sing to God...”

The Talmud, in Masechet Sotah (30b), picks on the words “וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֵאמֹר” – and they said, saying,” which seems to be straight out of the department of redundancy department. When the Torah doubles down, commentators ask why, leading three rabbis to discuss this peculiar syntax and how it can be used to understand the way in which the Israelites actually sang שִׁירַת הַיָּם. They present differing takes based upon the premise that “וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֵאמֹר” implies that Moses sang first, followed by the people.

Rabbi Akiva suggests that “לֵאמֹר” refers only to the first words of the song; that the people continually repeated: “Ashirah Ladonai – I will sing unto the Lord.” Rabbi Eliezer, son of Rabbi Yosi HaG’lili, posits that “לֵאמֹר” is referring to every single word, meaning that the Israelites would repeat the song after Moses, phrase by phrase. And Rabbi N’chemyah holds that it indicates that everyone recited the song of the sea together; the word “לֵאמֹר” meaning that Moses began singing the song first, the people sang the “Ashirah” phrase after him and then they all continued in unison.

Here we have three propositions for the most effective way to get a group of people to sing together with competence, confidence and kavanah. To begin with a simple refrain and build upon it until all of us can sing it together. I think that this morning, with the help of the Choir and Roï Azoulay, I’d like to turn the sanctuary into a rehearsal room and see if we can’t get you all to learn something to sing together that we will then use during the Musaf Amidah.

But you can’t really sing something together without being together. So for those of you way back in the bleachers, I’d like you to come closer. Don’t be shy, move forward and see the lovely ceiling of the sanctuary that is obscured by the balcony above your heads. But most of all, I’d like you to feel more connected, to the service, to your fellow congregants, to me and the Synagogue Choir. After all, you’ll be serving as the choir yourselves, and the root of the Hebrew word for choir, מִקְהֵלָה, is קָהָל, meaning community. And I know that moving from your usual seat is a great sacrifice, a קָרְבָּן, but the root of קָרְבָּן is קָרַב, to be closer...you get the picture? Just move up.

Next, I invite you to take this morning’s musical programme in hand and turn it over to the verso, where you will find the musical phrase I’d like you to learn. This is something the Israelites definitely did not have, but you do so there’s no excuse for sitting quietly. As an aside, the choir and I have tried to do this a number of times over the years by offering a few choir rehearsals that are open to the public where you can come, learn a few of our congregational refrains, and have a backstage look into how we make music happen. I invite you all to join us for the next one leading up to Passover.

Now, a little background on the piece. Shabbat Shirah is traditionally a time at which we introduce new music, but we actually premiered this piece a few months ago. It is another composition from the wonderful catalogue of Cantor Meir Finkelstein. This new arrangement was commissioned in June by the Schneiderman family in honour of the pre-wedding Auf Ruf of Shonnie and Zachary.

Next, you need to know the text. It is Birkat Kohanim, the Priestly Benediction taken from the Book of Numbers, that appears near the end of the repetition of the Amidah. The “hook” is the melodic refrain that accompanies the congregational response of “בֵּן יְהוֹי רְצוֹן” or as one of our well-known congregants translated it, “If it be Your will.”

The melody between each of the verses of Birkat Kohanim hearkens to the custom of a melody sung by the congregation when the Kohanim bless the us on R’galim, the pilgrimage festivals, and on the High Holy Days, with one important variation. The Mishnah B’rurah (127:10) points out that while on festivals, the congregation responds “Amen” as one would to a typical b’rachah, on Shabbat the chazan does not actually bless the congregation. Rather, I ask that God bestow those blessings on all of us, making “בֵּן יְהוֹי רְצוֹן” the appropriate response.

So, you know the words, “בֵּן יְהוֹי רְצוֹן.” Now, with the help of Roï and the Synagogue Choir, we’ll go over the music

bar by bar until we can sing it all together and when the appropriate moment arrives in the repetition of the Musaf Amidah, we'll expect to hear your emphatic participation! Take it away Roï...

The power of communal song that you just experienced became part of the Jewish's People's DNA from its nascent national moments at the Red Sea shore. So it makes sense that שירת הים has effectively become our Jewish liturgical anthem. It contains "מי כמוך - Who is like You, O Lord, among the mighty? Who is like You, glorious in holiness, revered in praises, doing wonders?" מי כמוך is quoted in our t'filot twice each day, at Arvit and Shacharit, and if you count the daily recitation of שירת הים, that makes thrice!

Perhaps even more telling is the way these words are sung. מי כמוך is a refrain for the entire congregation to recite aloud and Nusach Hat'filah, the traditional musical modes of prayer, dictates exactly how מי כמוך is to be sung at each service, and indeed at each season of the year. Moses' song still resonates every day and in a way that is relevant and appropriate to every season.

For me, the power of a communal singing experience such as שירת הים can be summed up in the following vignette as told by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. He says:

I once watched a teacher explaining to young children the difference between a physical possession and a spiritual one. He had them build a paper model of Jerusalem. Then he put on a recording with a song about Jerusalem that he taught to the class.

At the end of the session he did something very dramatic. He tore up the model and erased the recording. He asked the children, "Do we still have the model?" They replied, No. "Do we still have the song?" They replied, Yes.

We lose physical possessions, but not spiritual ones.

We will always have the song.