

Shabbat Shirah 5783

4 FEBRUARY 2023 · PARASHAT B'SHALACH

Shabbat Shalom,

Exodus deniers often attribute the plagues and the splitting of the Red Sea, arguably the top 11 of God's greatest miracles, to natural phenomena. Red algae made the Nile change colours; frogs left a Greek lake en-masse as recently as 2010; algae and dead frogs lead to insect infestations, or lice... You get the picture? We are confident that we can explain these things away. Well, sometimes man proposes and God...well, God makes ice. We learned that lesson in Montreal 25 winters ago. This week, they are learning it in Dallas. Which unfortunately means that my good friend Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky is not with us this Shabbat.

Years ago, when he served as assistant Rabbi at The Jewish Center in Manhattan, Rabbi Rackovsky oversaw the search process that led to hiring Cantor Chaim David Berson (and led me to have to look for a new Parallel Service cantor here at The Shaar). It was through that process that Ariel and I became fast friends. As a frustrated Chazzan, he will often fire off a text to me asking who wrote a certain liturgical composition, or I will send him a text questioning why a particular *t'fillah* contains a certain phrase or theme. This morning's remarks were to have been cooperative, the outgrowth of years of text message chains and subsequent discussions. Sadly, you all are left with only me this morning. I hope that I can do our intentions justice.

Rabbi Rackovsky tells the following story: It was Erev Pesach of 2019, and the majority of the Orthodox Rabbinate of Dallas was gathered in the office of one of my colleagues, prepared to execute the final transaction whereby all the Chametz of Dallas is sold to a non-Jew for the holiday. Piled high on a table were hundreds of documents, the kind many of you sign annually, empowering us to be their agents for the sale of their whiskey, Cheerios and sourdough starters. Sitting across from us was a well-dressed gentleman whom we will call Frank. We called the event to order, only to be interrupted by Frank. "Excuse me, Rabbi. Before we begin, may I have a moment to pray?"

All of us froze. Despite years of interfaith cooperation and bridge building, and despite Dallas being an ethnically diverse and multicultural city, it is still the Buckle of the Bible Belt and none of us were sure to whom, exactly, Frank wished to pray, and whose name he was about to invoke. On the other hand, it would be a PR disaster if a group of Rabbis would deny a sincere request for prayer, especially from someone who is there to help *us*, so we gladly acquiesced and hoped for the best. Frank closed his eyes, stretched his hands, lifted his palms in prayerful supplication and began:

Lord, we thank you for bringing us together in fellowship on this eve of the joyous Passover holiday, which celebrates freedom and the ability to serve You. I thank you for the privilege of being able to serve the Jewish community by purchasing their leavened products, and pray that You will guide me and help me be a faithful steward of this responsibility. We pray for your continued blessing and for our good health and happiness, in Your name. Amen.

At least, that's how Ariel remembered it. He also remembered what came next - the sound of a room full of Rabbis scraping their collective jaws off the floor. A few minutes later, as they were all leaving, the rabbis remarked amongst themselves that if they and their congregants were able to muster the kind of sincerity and devotion in *their* daily prayers as he did in that one, they would be quite devout indeed.

Thinking about it further, Rabbi Rackovsky and I were struck by another realization. While we could maybe compose a spontaneous prayer in English, we don't know if either of us—or indeed many of our colleagues, certainly those in the diaspora—could do the same in Hebrew, or that we even *should*. To be sure, new Jewish prayers have been composed countless times over the millennia of our history. There are *piyyutim* - liturgical poems composed for Jewish holidays and special Shabbatot that are still recited in various communities; *t'chines* or *t'chinot*, supplicatory prayers composed and said by Jewish women for just about every occasion;

Z'mirot that enhance our Shabbat table; *bakashot* that are the liturgical heritage of the Syrian and Moroccan communities; and others. For the most part, though, our prayers have been heavily codified, with an internal structure and logic to them.

But the ability to compose prayers in *lashon HaKodesh*, in Hebrew—especially biblical or Rabbinic Hebrew—is one that fewer and fewer people possess. Is there room for creativity, for personal expression, in our prayers? Should we be composing our own, and if not, how can that exist even within the confines of a set text?

This is especially relevant considering this morning's Torah reading, that of *Shirat HaYam*, the Song of the Sea, which gives this Shabbat its special name. A simple reading of the text depicts a spontaneous outburst of song on the part of Moses and the Israelites, soaring to the heights of eloquence on the wings of divine miracles. It is perplexing, therefore, that the verse describes this event in the future tense. Rather than saying *אז שר משה*, then Moses *sang*, it says *אז ישר* then Moses *will* sing. Why would the Torah describe an event that happened in the past, as happening in the future?

Rav Chaim ibn Attar, the great 18th century Moroccan Torah commentator, in his work *Ohr HaChaim*, explained that the future tense formulation alludes to the eternal nature of this prayer. Had it been set in the past tense, it would have been a one-time affair, relegated to books of history and legend. But *Shirat HaYam* is one of the most often recited prayers we have today. Each morning, we read it in its entirety. We quote from it several more times throughout the day. *Emet Ve'emunah* in the evening and *Ezrat Avoteinu* in the morning are grand liturgical paraphrases of the events leading to the Exodus, each concluding in *Mi Chamocha*. The joy, elation and transcendence of the prayer is not just for fleeting moments—it is meant to bracket and punctuate our daily existence. But what is so special about *this* song that it merits inclusion in our prayers, and not any of the other songs in the Torah?

Rabbeinu Yosef B'chor Shor, the 12th century French exegete, explained that the word *yashir* is not a future tense verb, but a causative one. Moses, in his enthusiasm, *caused* the Israelites to sing along with him. A *t'filah* experience is eternal when it is standardized. If it were vouchsafed to us to be the sole authors of our own prayers, our eloquence would wax and wane as our moods would shift, and people would be disadvantaged if they possessed limited vocabulary. Those with minimal Hebrew skills would not be able to pray in the language of their forefathers, because they would not be able to compose prayers. At the same time, though, it must be energizing, creating an experience that motivates others to participate. The future tense of this song means that the prayers we say are always relevant, because the words are expansive enough and deep enough to contain our loftiest intentions and our deepest desires. But if the words don't change, how can we add creativity to our prayers?

The answer is found in the name of this Shabbat. It is no accident that this poem, in whose first two words the eternal nature of prayer is found, is called a *Shirah*, a song. It is especially through music that we can bring fresh creativity to fixed prayer, using the notes of the scale to add layers of interpretation and inspiration.

One of the phrases that is often used to describe Shaar Hashomayim is that we are “one of the last vestiges of the European Choral Synagogue tradition.” (At least that's what our website says, so it must be true!) But what does that mean? What is a Choral Synagogue, and how does that come to bear in the rituals that we have enacted here in this room every week since the Fall of 1922, or going back even further, to 1887 when the Synagogue Choir was established?

To answer this question, we must delve into the prevailing theme of 19th century European Jewish history: the emergence of the European Jew from cultural restrictions into social acceptance as part of the European Enlightenment, or the *Haskalah* as it was known in the Jewish world. New synagogues, ones that differed from the traditional forms seen across Europe and the Pale of Settlement, appeared as a direct consequence of the *Haskalah*. Its adherents, *maskilim*, harshly criticized contemporary eastern European Jewish society, and much of their critique focused on disapproval of traditional synagogues and the behavior of the worshippers there. One of the central figures in the early *Haskalah* in Russia, Isaac Ber Levinzon, wrote this about the traditional synagogue of the 1830s: “There is no order in the worship, one disturbs another; one builds and another destroys; one cries and another dances; one proclaims his loss and another spits his tobacco on the floor; one eats and another drinks; one starts his prayer and another ends his prayer.” (Sounds

like the first day of Rosh Hashanah in some years).

Perhaps most deeply connected to our *raison d'être* here at The Shaar is the idea that “Improvement” of worship was an integral part of the maskilic program. Maskilim desired forms of worship that fit the norms—real or imagined—of non-Jewish “civilized” society. The Choral Synagogue was intended to be a new Jewish space where rituals were conducted in such a way that would discipline worshippers and help them transform into a new type of “modern” Jew.

But it wasn't just the worshippers who evolved in the Choral Synagogue, it was also the officiants, the clergy, in particular the cantor and choir. The distinction of the “modern” cantor (the *khoreazan*) from the “traditional” one was his professional musical education and the type of music he performed. He also began to dress differently: a long black robe (sometimes called an *Ornat*—a vestment in German), a round cap, and a small silk prayer shawl around the neck. Look at the pictures of the two cantors on the verso of your programme that the Music Department so thoughtfully prepared for you this morning, then look at me. The uniform is consistent. Additionally, the distinction of the choir in a choral synagogue from the traditional choir was the musical knowledge of the singers and their uniformity of dress, both of which are modeled excellently by our harmonious and handsome Shaar Choir.

We now understand what the term “Choral Synagogue” means from a sociological perspective. We know about the form, how about the substance? So, I would like to wrap up this morning's presentation in the spirit of the NFL playoffs, with an instant replay of the piece the choir and I just sang for the first time in the history of Shaar Hashomayim. One of our most familiar texts is עֵץ חַיִּים הוּא, the words with which we place the Torah in the ark after the reading. We have many different versions in our repertoire. I recorded no fewer than 12 of them on the second CD in our series. This morning's newly introduced version was composed by the Dutch Cantor, Victor Schlesinger, who served for many years in Amsterdam before moving to Manchester in the UK. (In 1913, he even was a candidate for the position of Cantor at Shaar Hashomayim!) Schlesinger wrote this beautiful melody which I will sing to you first as a solo line, without the accompaniment of the choir.

I think you can agree that this is a lovely melody on its own. It is intuitive, simple, plaintive, and absolutely fits the text. Perhaps in a community without a choir, it would be enough to sing this melody on its own. But in a Choral Synagogue a simple melody can become so much more. Now, listen carefully to the same melody in Conor's new choral arrangement, and pay particular attention to the words “*Tom'cheha m'ushar* - those who support it are happy. *D'racheha darchei no'am* - its ways are pleasant, *n'tivoteha shalom* - its paths are peace.”

The melody on its own was charming. But once the values of the Choral Synagogue movement enter the equation—a trained cantor working with a skilled arranger and a professional choir; a community that values dignity and majesty in worship; a congregation that is attentive to the subtleties of what Conor and I just presented—you have something entirely different. The melody on its own was a charcoal drawing. What you have now is richer, deeper, more fully explored, a watercolour with many shades that brings the worshipper into the prayers in a way never before possible.

Remember the goal of the maskilim in forming the Choral Synagogue? To present modern Jews and modern Jewish worship to a European society in the hope that they would receive the Jews favorably. Here is a quote for you:

“Only once have we had the awesome experience of seeing and hearing what can happen in Jewish art when, in new art forms created by their...genius, the Israelites pour out the full splendor of their fantasies and dreams, the full intensity of their feelings and stifled passions, and reveal the glow of that burning fire which they most often cautiously cover with ashes that it may seem cold to us.”

These are the words of none other than Franz Liszt after hearing Cantor Solomon Sulzer lead High Holy Day services in the Stadttempel on the Seitenstettengasse in Vienna. The Haskalah and one of its primary innovations, the Choral Synagogue, deeply impacted the same Liszt who in 1860 wrote *The Gipsy in Music*, which contains a scathing treatment of Jews perhaps worse than Wagner's. But Liszt's experience in Sulzer's synagogue was nothing less than transcendent.

Places like Shaar Hashomayim are sadly all too rare in the Jewish world of today, but for the last 100 years, the music heard in this sanctuary has helped to fulfill the words of Isaiah that are inscribed on our sanctuary walls:

בֵּי בֵיתִי בֵית-תְּפִלָּה יִקְרָא לְכָל-הָעַמִּים:

For My House shall be called a House of prayer for all peoples (Isaiah 56:7).