

## The Spiritual Power of Music: *Beshallah/Shabbat Shirah Derash 5783*

By Rabbi Leora Frankel, Larchmont Temple & Westchester Board of Rabbis

Ever since I was a child, Jewish music has been the soundtrack of my life. The changing liturgical tropes and holiday tunes oriented me to each season. Shabbat melodies filled our home every weekend, as my father, Jules, strummed guitar. We used to joke that he was a CPA by day, but rockstar by night and on the weekends, given his many volunteer gigs in New Jersey synagogues and Solomon Schechter. When he wasn't teaching "Puff the Kosher Dragon" to a room full of Hebrew school kids or leading Kabbalat Shabbat for his singing Chavurah, my dad was writing his own liturgical settings or noodling a new niggun he was working on.

In my family, Jewish music was not only how we marked time, but also how we measured it day to day, even amid the secular workweek. I remember one morning on our usual drive to elementary school asking my dad, "How far away IS school anyway?" and without missing a beat, he responded: "About one song." Often it was a Debbie Friedman song we'd play, his dear friend for many years. Sometimes though, it was Safam or classic Israeli folk tunes, mixed in with a measure of Simon & Garfunkel, James Taylor, and the Beatles to round out the soundtrack of our lives.

Shabbat Shira is the musical peak of our year, celebrating this week's Torah portion, *Beshallah*, and that moment of our ancestors crossing the Sea of Reeds. We read that just as the Israelites reached freedom at the far side, Moses and all the people sang *Shirat HaYam* or the famous "Song of the Sea," from which our daily prayer *Mi Chamocha* originates. The song's coda then describes Moses' sister, Miriam, taking up her timbrel and leading all the women in song and dance, echoing the Song of the Sea's opening lines. (Incidentally, one of my biblical history professors back at JTS made a point to teach us that the dating of this feminist post-script was actually proven WAY earlier than the Moses reference, despite him getting all the credit, but that is a derash for another time.)

Regardless of whether it was Moses or Miriam or a much later scribe who first chanted these words, the Song of the Sea became our people's paradigm for joyous thanksgiving, for raising our voices together in prayer and praise. But each year as we reach this parsha, I get to wondering again: Why did our ancestors choose to SING these words? And why do we sing today?

In a certain sense, singing was our people's first act of freedom. After hundreds of years of slavery, this song marked the moment of their redemption. The Children of Israel reached the far shores of the sea, finally safe, and for the first time in any of their memories, could do whatever they wanted. What welled up and burst forth in that initial independent impulse was a song whose words praise God's might, but which also empowered them. Chanting the Song of the Sea was also the first time the Israelites had done anything together, in unison. Not after practicing the words and melodies a few times with the Cantor, mind you! Rather, the Rabbis teach that after the parting of the sea, the very next miracle was this spontaneous song itself, when all at once the very same words and melody erupted from the Israelites' lips. (*Talmud Bavli Sotah 30b*). And, in that moment of first raising their voices together, they transformed from being a rag-tag bunch of slave families to a newborn nation.

We sing because it uplifts and strengthens us. And through the act of communal singing, especially in prayer, we become connected and even transformed by the experience. Spoken words, even those poignant lyrics of *Shirat HaYam*, might be easily forgotten or adapted over subsequent recitations. But once you set words to music, the melodies get stuck in our heads, wrap themselves around our hearts, and stay with us for years. We hear a particular tune on the radio or in synagogue, and we are transported to another time and place. We sing because music binds us to our past, present, and future.

And sometimes, as with Moses at the very end of his life and farewell speech to the Israelites, we sing because it's all that we have left to do. I experienced this most profoundly at the very end of my dad's life. On hospice, when he was hardly able to communicate anymore, music somehow still penetrated. We kept an iPad right next to him, playing his beloved Jewish music, and through his final days on earth, one finger would still be conducting and keeping the beat long after most of his other faculties failed. We sing because music is embedded deep in our souls and can truly be transcendent.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks likened music to faith itself, writing: "Music is a form of sensed continuity that can sometimes break through the most overpowering disconnections in our experience of time. [...] Faith is more like music than like science. Science analyzes, music integrates. And as music connects note to note, so faith connects episode to episode, life to life, age to age in a timeless melody that breaks into time. God is the composer and librettist. We are each called on to be voices in the choir, singers of God's song. Faith teaches us to hear the music beneath the noise."<sup>1</sup>

This week, heavyhearted though we are from tragic violence in both Israel and America, let us keep listening ever closely for the joyous music beneath the world's chaotic commotion. After months of physical separation in early COVID when services were all on zoom and most of us muted, may this year's Shabbat Shira be filled with joyful, reverberating harmony across our Westchester community. For just as singing sustained our ancestors on their way out of Egypt and into the wilderness, raising our voices together in song will surely nourish us too.

Shabbat Shalom.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/haazinu/the-spirituality-of-song/>