

Shabbat Shalom

A friend and colleague at a large congregation in Chicago tells me that there are weeks he works for hours on his sermon. He writes and rewrites. He edits and re-edits. And then he finally has a work that he's proud of. Sometimes this happens weeks in a row. He has a chazzan. A GREAT Chazzan and he sings the same songs, the same tunes EVERY week. After services as he stands in "The Line" he crumbles as a person after a person wishes him "Good Shabbos" and then reaches the Chazzan and says: "Oh Cantor that was the most beautiful service I have ever heard!"

Music is pretty important in our services. We all know this.

There is nothing quite like music to reflect our emotional states. Music can be an expression of great joy or contemplation. Music can also be the expression of our sadness. Depending on the music, when it is played and how it is played.

After the destruction of the Second Temple, music was forbidden amongst the Jewish people. Music, which had been so important during the time of the great Temple, in fact, we are told that the Temple was a place of constant music.

Music is such a strong vehicle because it connects and opens us to deeper places inside of ourselves and larger places beyond ourselves. They understood this in the Beit HaMikdash.

What do you think it means that David, the first king of Israel, was a musician? David, with the writers of the Psalms, understood something and that was that music was a strong opening to the "spirit" to Ruach HaKodesh, to God. Recent neuron-psychological studies have shown that the locus for music and love and the spiritual is found in the same place in our brains. And so it is no wonder that when we first went into exile that the rabbis said that we should no longer have music. They felt abandoned by God. It is no wonder, also, that when we returned to the land, the early Zionists heralded the Jewish presence with vibrant songs and dances and musical expressions of their soulfulness. This is Shabbat Shira, the Sabbath of Song and for me it is the first time speaking in a formal sense at this time of the service.

This is my first sermon after my surgery. There is so much that fills my heart and my mind. There is so much I wish to talk about, but I want to speak about music. As you know, it is called Shabbat Shira because of the reading of the text in Parsha Beshellach: *Az Yashir Moshe Uv'nai Yisrael et Hashira Hazot*, and then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song. It was their song of deliverance. It was their expression of their greatest joy. They were finally free from Egypt. They were finally able to move towards their promised land. Maybe the only response was the response of song. For me being away, spending lots of time alone during the recovery from my illness, it was such a wonderful

experience to walk into synagogue on a Friday night a few weeks ago and to listen to the music of Kabbalat Shabbat. It evoked tears.

Music is sacred when it acts as a conduit towards deep emotional states, places that may not otherwise be reached. Music can do that. I know many of you have a song that you share with your lover. Some song that brings you back to the beginning of a relationship. How powerful it is to hear and rehear that song. It brings you to another time, to an earlier time. Coming into the synagogue on Shabbat morning and hearing the beautiful, beautiful music of this congregation with a cantor and music director and a choir and a congregation that sings.

Have you heard the expression “salvatory joy”? It is joy unlike any. It is the joy of a narrow escape. It is the joy of gaining hope after hopelessness. There are no words for this, only expression in song. It leads you to sense the infinite.

The Hassidim have a notion of *d'vekus*, in Hebrew *d'vekut*. It is a connection between yourself and something beyond yourself which brings you close to the edge of experience. That is, you lose yourself in the attachment. In much younger years there was an album entitled “Blind Faith” and it was based on an assumption that music can attach you to something beyond the normal.

In our world here and in New York and in Los Angeles and in Jerusalem and in London, there are younger people returning to synagogues partially because of the music of Shlomo Carlbach. It is beautiful and lofty and spirited. And it feels as if it roots us to something. Can music give us a sense of connection to something that goes way back? As far back as Sinai? That I don't know. but it roots one in a sense of tradition and something else also. Music ties us together.

There is nothing that creates a sense of unity within in a crowd, within a community, within a congregation of singing a song together. *Hinei ma tov uma na'im shevet achim gam yachad*. The words, “Behold, how good and how wonderful it is when brothers and sisters are together,” have one meaning. But, when the words are song as a unit, as a group, then the meaning is even deeper.

There is a Chassidic Midrash when asks the question, when Moses was doing the 40 days, he was up on Mount Sinai and he was learning six hundred thousand melodies, a different melody for every person. From this they learned that music has the power to create a community of individuals.

Torah is called Torah Chaim, but music is really Music Chaim. Music identifies us with different generations of music, with swing of the 40s, early rock and roll of the 50s and the protest music of the 60s all evoked different images and connected us to different places and to different people.

Years ago, when my children were little, there were a few different tapes that we would listen to in the car all the time. One of the tapes was by a children's folk singer named

Rafi. Rafi had a song “All I really need is a song in my heart, food in my belly and love in my family.” Such a simple message, but hearing the kids singing together on trips, “All I really need is a song in my heart” made us all feel full.

I came home from the hospital Erev Shabbat. A couple hours before sunset and as it was getting dark my three, now adult children, were standing around my bed and one indicated to the other two that it is almost Shabbat and began to sing *Y'did Nefesh* and the other two joined in and the music of that moment, that connection of spirit and Shabbat through its music ran through me and created such a wonderful feeling of family, love and care. It was so, so very beautiful. Yes, healing.

Az Yashir Moshe uv'nai Yisrael et Shira Hazot, Moses and the people of Israel sang this song. It is a song of glory to God. It is a song of faith. It is a song of gratitude. It is a song of hopefulness. It was a song that was sung then and a song that is to remain in our hearts as part of our liturgy every single day.

According to the Mishnah, the regular temple orchestra of 2000 years ago consisted of twelve instruments and a choir of twelve singers. It lifted people's souls. When I go to a house of Shiva and feel the power of the presence of friends and community members attempting to bring comfort to those who have suffered loss and have the community join in prayer, the singing of *Aleinu*, a song that is known well by all who are there and voices together it transforms the room and it transforms the moment. I know it brings such great comfort to the mourner.

I am not an expert on Jewish music. I know about the development of music through *piyyut*, which were medieval poetry and we have our *zmirot*, the songs we sing after meals on Shabbat and holy days. There are *nigunim*, those are the melodies without words that come from the Chasidic community and are an expression of the heart and the soul. *Pizmonim* are songs of praise to God and *Bachashot* make requests. It was all kept alive through the art of the Chazzan.

I'm carrying a message for you with me that is about something more than music. It is expressed through music as the vehicle. The message I have stated recently and will restate again and again. The message is the following: There are different generations amongst our people reflected here this very morning. The generation of people who feel connected to Jewish life based on their knowledge of their parents lives, based on their knowledge of their tradition and their sense of obligation to keep it alive. You are the people who will come to synagogue, whether the music is beautiful or the music is awful, although everyone prefers beautiful music. There are a generation of Jews out there who identify themselves fully as being Jewish, but who live lives in this nation of great freedom with so many activities to choose from for themselves or for their children. Synagogue life is one of many options. Hebrew School competes with tennis lessons and dance lessons and all sorts of other wonderful opportunities for learning and for growth. Technology and the media have created options for our time that are engaging for which we can learn a great deal. So, what sustains the synagogue? I believe there are a number of things. I believe there are those things that are essential and I believe those things that

are essential, that are contained within a message and its learning that is contained within the power of necessity of community. But I believe it must be presented and delivered in a way, as I said at the concert last week, in a way that is refreshing and compelling and exciting and beautiful. My generation and those younger than me don't accept a product which is mediocre. They want something which is special, something which responds to the world, something of great esthetic beauty.

Congregations attracting hundreds, if not thousands of young people do so primarily because of engaging music. But, the engaging music just doesn't happen by somebody singing. It is something that develops through artistic talent and forethought. Something that needs a connection to that which is authentic. As part of my vision for this synagogue, shared with many of you, has been the notion of a music program. That is and it is obvious, to create music which is beautiful, that is compelling, music that calls you back and the development of newer forms of music with contemporary harmonies and syncopations that, on some subtle level, will attract people to what it is that we are creating and to the community that we are and can be. It is not easy to create this within the framework of the structure of this synagogue because it takes time and it takes effort and because it takes funding. But I ask you to join in with me and to help us to allow this continue to develop and to grow. We are so blessed with Udi and Michael right now and the members of the choir and a synagogue that sings, but if we want it to continue on, then we have to allow it to flourish.

Just as couples have our songs, their songs, your songs, so do our people have our songs. They are so important in creating that connection that is everlasting. There is a reason that teenagers have always fostered bonds around the music of their generation. We have music. We have music for old generations and for new generations. We must allow it to flourish and be great.

Az yasheir Moshe uv'nai Yisrael et Hashira Hazot Leimor, Then Moses and the people Israel sang this song. It has been pointed out that the language combines the past tense and the. The notion is that we are a people that have loved to sing. We sang at the Red Sea and we sang as we entered the land and we sang as we were in the land and we've sung at Shabbat tables and we sing at our children's weddings and B'nai Mitzvot and it is in the song that we most express our soulfulness, the depth of our feeling and the love we have for each other and for our God.

May this Shabbat Shira inspire us to learn more and sing more and create more for the future we all share.

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