




COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Thoughts on the Weekly Parsha from Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks



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Beshalach · בשלח

Music, Language of the Soul

For the first time since their departure from Egypt the Israelites do something together. They sing. "Then sang Moses and the children of Israel." Rashi, explaining the view of R. Nehemiah in the Talmud (Sotah 30b) that they spontaneously sang the song together, says that the holy spirit rested on them and miraculously the same words came into their minds at the same time. In recollection of that moment, tradition has named this week *Shabbat Shirah*, the Sabbath of Song. What is the place of song in Judaism?

There is an inner connection between music and the spirit. When language aspires to the transcendent and the soul longs to break free of the gravitational pull of the earth, it modulates into song. Music, said Arnold Bennett is "a language which the soul alone understands but which the soul can never translate." It is, in Richter's words "the poetry of the air." Tolstoy called it "the shorthand of emotion." Goethe said, "Religious worship cannot do without music. It is one of the foremost means to work upon man with an effect of marvel." Words are the language of the mind. Music is the language of the soul.

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So when we seek to express or evoke emotion we turn to melody. Deborah sang after Israel's victory over the forces of Sisera (Judges 5). Hannah sang when she had a child (1 Sam. 2). When Saul was depressed, David would play for him and his spirit would be restored (1 Sam. 16). David himself was known as the "sweet singer of Israel" (2 Sam. 23: 1). Elisha called for a harpist to play so that the prophetic spirit could rest upon him (2 Kings 3: 15). The Levites sang in the Temple. Every day, in Judaism, we preface our morning prayers with *Pesukei de-Zimra*, the 'Verses of Song' with their magnificent crescendo, Psalm 150, in which instruments and the human voice combine to sing God's praises.

Mystics go further and speak of the song of the universe, what Pythagoras called 'the music of the spheres'. This is what Psalm 19 means when it says, 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands . . . There is no speech, there are no words, where their voice is not heard. Their music¹ carries throughout the earth, their words to the end of the world.' Beneath the silence, audible only to the inner ear, creation sings to its Creator.

So, 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, in Judaism, its own specific melody. There are different tunes for *shacharit*, *mincha* and *maariv*, the morning, afternoon and evening prayers. There are different melodies and moods for the prayers for a weekday, Shabbat, the three pilgrimage festivals, Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot (which have much musically in common but also tunes distinctive to each), and for the *Yamim Noraim*, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

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There are different tunes for different texts. There is one kind of cantillation for Torah, another for the *haftorah* from the prophetic books, and yet another for *Ketuvim*, the Writings, especially the five Megillot. There is a particular chant for studying the texts of the written Torah, for studying Mishnah and Gemarah. So by music alone we can tell what kind of day it is and what kind of text is being used. There is a map of holy words and it is written in melodies and songs.

Music has extraordinary power to evoke emotion. The Kol Nidrei prayer with which Yom Kippur begins is not really a prayer at all. It is a dry legal formula for the annulment of vows. There can be little doubt that it is its ancient, haunting melody that has given it its hold over the Jewish imagination. It is hard to hear those notes and not feel that you are in the presence of God on the Day of Judgment, standing in the company of Jews of all places and times as they pleaded with heaven for forgiveness. It is the holy of holies of the Jewish soul. (*Lehavdil*, Beethoven came close to it in the opening notes of the sixth movement of the C Sharp Minor Quartet op. 131, his most sublime and spiritual work).

Nor can you sit on Tisha B'av reading *Eichah*, the book of Lamentations, with its own unique cantillation, and not feel the tears of Jews through the ages as they suffered for their faith and wept as they remembered what they had lost, the pain as fresh as it was the day the Temple was destroyed. Words without music are like a body without a soul.

Each year for the past ten years I have been privileged to be part of a mission of song (together with the Shabbaton Choir and singers Rabbi Lionel Rosenfeld and Chazanim Shimon

¹ *Kavam*, literally “their line,” possibly meaning the reverberating string of a musical instrument.

Craimer and Jonny Turgel) to Israel to sing to victims of terror, as well as to people in hospitals, community centres and food kitchens. We sing for and with the injured, the bereaved, the sick and the broken hearted. We dance with people in wheelchairs. One boy who had lost half of his family, as well as being blinded, in a suicide bombing, sang a duet with the youngest member of the choir, reducing the nurses and his fellow patients to tears. Such moments are epiphanies, redeeming a fragment of humanity and hope from the random cruelties of fate.

Beethoven wrote over the manuscript of the third movement of his A Minor Quartet the words *Neue Kraft fühlend*, “Feeling new strength.” That is what you sense in those hospital wards. You understand what King David meant when he sang to God the words: “You turned my grief into dance; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to You and not be silent.” You feel the strength of the human spirit no terror can destroy.

In his book, *Musicophilia*, the neurologist and writer Oliver Sacks (no relative, alas) tells the poignant story of Clive Wearing, an eminent musicologist who was struck by a devastating brain infection. The result was acute amnesia. He was unable to remember anything for more than a few seconds. As his wife Deborah put it, 'It was as if every waking moment was the first waking moment.'

Unable to thread experiences together, he was caught in an endless present that had no connection with anything that had gone before. One day his wife found him holding a chocolate in one hand and repeatedly covering and uncovering it with the other hand, saying each time, 'Look, it's new.' 'It's the same chocolate', she said. 'No', he replied, 'look. It's changed.' He had no past at all. In a moment of awareness he said about himself, 'I haven't heard anything, seen anything, touched anything, smelled anything. It's like being dead.'

Two things broke through his isolation. One was his love for his wife. The other was music. He could still sing, play the organ and conduct a choir with all his old skill and verve. What was it about music, Sacks asked, that enabled him, while playing or conducting, to overcome his amnesia? He suggests that when we 'remember' a melody, we recall one note at a time, yet each note relates to the whole. He quotes the philosopher of music, Victor Zuckerkandl, who wrote, 'Hearing a melody is hearing, having heard, and being about to hear, all at once. Every melody declares to us that the past can be there without being remembered, the future without being foreknown.' Music is a form of sensed continuity that can sometimes break through the most overpowering disconnections in our experience of time.

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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.

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So music is a signal of transcendence. The philosopher and musician Roger Scruton writes that it is “an encounter with the pure subject, released from the world of objects, and moving in obedience to the laws of freedom alone.” He quotes Rilke: “Words still go softly out towards the unsayable / And music, always new, from palpitating stones / builds in useless space its godly home.” The history of the Jewish spirit is written in its songs. The words do not change, but each generation needs its own melodies.

Our generation needs new songs so that we too can sing joyously to God as our ancestors did at that moment of transfiguration when they crossed the Red Sea and emerged, the other side, free at last. When the soul sings, the spirit soars.

Shabbat Shalom



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