



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Beshalach: The Sound of Music

Shabbat this week is known around the Jewish world as *Shabbat Shira* – the Shabbat of Song. It is given this name because our *Torah* reading contains *Shirat Hayam* – the Song of the Sea – sung by the Children of Israel after the waters of the Red Sea miraculously parted.

So let's take this opportunity to talk about music and song.

- Why do we sing?
- What does music do for us?
- Can you define how music interfaces with your emotions? Music can soothe and relax, inspire and energize, give voice to our feelings, activate our emotions. How does music affect you?
- Does music play a role in your religious life?

I. A Midrash:

From the day that God created the world up until Israel stood at the sea we do not find anyone who sang a song to God.

He created Adam, and he did not sing a song.

He saved Abraham from the furnace and from the kings and he did not sing a song.

He saved Isaac from the knife [at the Akeida] and he did not sing a song.

He saved Jacob from the angel [who struggled with him in the night], from Esau and from the people of Shechem, and he did not sing a song.

When Israel came to the sea and it split before them, at once they sang a song to God. (Shemot Rabbah)

The Midrash notes that notwithstanding moments of relief and salvation in the lives of our patriarchs, none of them is recorded as having been brought to song!

- What specifically might have made Israel sing at the Red Sea? Why did the Patriarchs not sing?
- Was it the relief and elation felt by the Israelites that brought them to sing and dance, praising God for their survival, as they saw their oppressors drowned and realized they had been saved?
- Was there something about its being a mass event, a collective national moment, rather than a moment of individual salvation?
- What is the difference between singing alone (in the car or shower) or in a group (in communal prayer or at a wedding)?

II. Study:

When we chant the *Torah*, we sing it with a *trope*, with cantillation; we don't just read it in a speaking voice. In many *yeshivot*, *Talmud* is studied in a singsong.

The *Talmud* tells us:

Anyone who reads the Torah without a melody or studies the Mishna without a song, the verse states: "So too I gave them statutes that were not good, and judgments whereby they should not live." (Ezekiel 20:25)

- Why do we sing our holy books?
- In what way is a verse which is spoken rather than sung "not good"?

Rabbi Steinsaltz suggests two explanations for this law:

1. Words associated with song add joy; they have the effect of endearing the text to the student.

2. A tune with words serves as a memory aid.

- Do you remember words of songs more than words of prose? If yes, why is that?
- Do you ever chant the *Torah*? Do you find it a different experience than just reading the *Torah* without the cantillation? How so?

III. Music in prayer:

Psalms – religious poetry – were composed by King David, famous for his musical ability. "It is good to thank God and to make music for Your supreme name," says

King David (Psalm 92). Even the heavenly angels are said to sing God's praises "in a clear and tuneful language" – *b'safa berura u'b'neima* (morning daily prayers). Prayer is meant to be melodious. Here is the advice of the 12th century scholar Rabbi Yehudah 'the Pious':

Seek out melodies, and when you pray, say [the prayers] with whichever melody you find pleasant and sweet, with that melody say your prayer, then pray with great kavannah (intent), and your heart will follow that which comes from your mouth.

Plead to God in a melody that makes the heart weep. Praise God in a melody that makes the heart glad. (Sefer Hassidim 11)

- Which is your favorite tune that is sung in *tefilla* (prayer)? Why?
- Can you think of a moment (maybe on *Rosh Hashanah* or *Yom Kippur*) when a tune evoked particularly powerful emotions? Please share that experience.

IV. Shabbat Songs – *Zemirot*:

If I may add one last point, it is the tradition of singing special Shabbat songs at Shabbat meals. These songs, or *zemirot*, many of them composed by the greatest poets such as Rabbi Yehudah Halevy and Ibn Ezra, bring a certain spirituality to our Shabbat table, adding another layer to the other Shabbat rituals – special Shabbat clothing, food, and words of *Torah*.

Some tunes are slow and filled with yearning, others are fast and jolly, but the mix of music and holy words infuses a spiritual dimension to Shabbat meals.

What will you sing at your Shabbat table this week?

Shabbat Shalom!