

The Music of Prayer

Shabbat Shirah, Parashat B'shalach, 5782

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I began my sermon tonight by chanting just a smidgen of this week's Torah portion. Even with my suboptimal singing voice, part of the tune was hopefully familiar to those who have heard the Torah chanted previously. However, the melody changed significantly when I chanted portions of the Song of the Sea—praise lifted up by Moses, Miriam, and the Children of Israel at the shores of the Red Sea.

Scholars believe that the verses of this song of celebration may be the oldest in the entire Torah.ⁱ As Cantor Seth Warner explains in *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, the song “is uniquely laid out in the Torah scroll, with the words written out in a bricklike pattern with large spaces in the center of the column on alternating lines.”ⁱⁱ This unusual format indicates that these verses were always sung in rhythmic verse. Think about that: When we sing *Mi Chamocha* in every service, we are repeating Judaism's most ancient ritual, offering those words in song, just as our ancestors did nearly three thousand years ago in the Jerusalem Temple.

No, they didn't have Rick Recht's or Debbie Friedman's melody, but you get the idea. These are ancient words, and singing them is a direct link to our oldest spiritual ancestors. Cantor Warner notes that our sages teach that the tradition of singing these words is even more ancient than the Temple: “Moses is said to have sung the *Shirah* in a special voice to glorify God's saving power.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This Shabbat is known as *Shabbat Shirah*, the Sabbath of Song—or, we may say, the Shabbat of **the** Song—in Hebrew, *Shirah*, the Song at the Sea. Cantor Warner emphasizes the significance of this part of our Torah and worship: “The *Shirah* describes a pivotal point in our people's existence—the transition from captivity to freedom. The text and cantillation paint a picture of hope and change. The cantillation uses a different melody for the *Shirah*, different from any other in the *Tanach*, as a way to draw attention to this pivotal point in the relationship between God and the Israelites...[The] change in melody further emphasizes that God is saving and claiming the Israelite people—the two now have an unbreakable bond”^{iv}

Cantor Warner's point is that the words, because they are set to music—and special music, at that—enter the soul deeply. God has liberated the people, who now respond with joyful and unique song, which bonds the two. And let's not miss

the Cantor's even deeper point: "God is **saving and claiming** the Israelite people." Singing their gratitude for liberation, Moses, Miriam, and the Children of Israel acknowledge that God is the source of their freedom. In the process, God has "bought" the Israelites, if you will, obligating them—and us, their spiritual heirs—to serve God as partners in bringing the world from redemption at Sinai to ultimate, messianic, salvation.

Consider, if you will, the way that the music of prayer impacts our worship experience at Congregation B'nai Israel. A dedicated group of volunteers, with a variety of talents, leads us in song on Shabbat and Holy Days. Some classical pieces are not singalongs, but elevate the spirit as we hear stirring melodies, magnificently intoned. Other songs invite us all to sing along in prayer, uniting us in exuberant worship. Some of our prayer music is comfortably familiar, repeated frequently, which enhances our feeling of being at home when we gather in prayer. Other pieces are new, challenging us to be inspired by something new, even if we must be drawn out of our comfort zone in the process.

I have often mentioned how deeply I value our Zoom worship community. We have maintained warm connections and a congregational spirit throughout the pandemic. Being able to see who is with us in prayer offers a sense of solidarity and friendship, even if we aren't able to visit over an Oneg Shabbat table.

The downside of worshiping on Zoom, though, is that we cannot sing together. To be more precise, we cannot hear more than one person singing at a time. You may notice, though, that my lips are moving when our musician is singing, and I'm muted. Early in the pandemic, I realized that I was not reaping the benefits of the full worship experience because I was not singing along. Now, I sing at the top of my lungs—louder, in fact, than I would if I were anywhere near a microphone in the Sanctuary. At other times, when I can't mute, I sing in a different way, not merely mouthing the words, but not really vocalizing either, breathing the words out in a way that is inaudible to anybody but me.

I do not assume that my way of singing during a service on Zoom—or in the Sanctuary, for that matter—is the "right" way, if there were such a thing, and certainly not that it is the only way. Still, I invite each of us to find a way to connect to the music of prayer, enabling the music to connect us to God, to the story of our liberation, and to our responsibility to bring redemption to all the world.

This weekend, we celebrate the legacy of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As we recall the Civil Rights Movement, we may be mindful of the extent to which activism and music were intertwined. Music expressed the drive for

liberation, united the beloved community working to bring change, mourned devastating losses, and celebrated the greatest achievements. The Civil Rights Movement has left a legacy of liberation music that continues to inspire.

So, too, does our Jewish people continue to sing the songs of freedom—offering gratitude for past liberation, uniting our community, and articulating a call to action, seeking redemption to come. Let us ever lift up our voices in musical prayer—mournful or joyful, inspiring and soulful, individual and communal. Then, may we, like our ancestors on the shores of freedom’s sea, serve our God as we pledge ourselves to the mission that Moses and Miriam sang, leading the people: We are called to be God’s partners in liberation.

Amen.

ⁱ [7th century C.E. Exodus fragment of the Song of the Sea | University of the Holy Land \(uhl.ac\)](#).

ⁱⁱ Cantor Seth Warner, “Our Obligations to DREAMers and Ourselves, *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2021, p. 93.

ⁱⁱⁱ Warner, p. 94.

^{iv} Warner, p. 94.