

Shabbat Shira Sermon-in-Song  
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**Ashira L'Adonai: Sing Unto God**  
**The Power of Our Voice as an Instrument of Prayer and a Tool for Change**

אז ישיר משה ובני ישראל את השירה הזאת לה..."

“Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to Adonai...” (Exodus 15:1)

מִי־כְמֹכָה בָּאֱלֹהִים יְהוָה מִי כְּמֹכָה נֹאדָר בְּקֹדֶשׁ נִרְאָה תְהִלַּת עֲשֵׂה פִלְא

“Who is like You, Adonai, among the gods; Who is like You, majestic in holiness, Awesome in splendor, working wonders!” (Exodus 15:11)

Today, I would like to share with you a few reasons why I and other Jewish scholars believe that music, highlighted in this week’s Torah portion, is such a critical form of Jewish prayer. Other than Shabbat Shira, this week is also Tu Bishvat, a holiday of trees and the natural world. I want to explore the connections between our Torah, the Song of the Sea, and how we can use our voices to make a positive change in our environment.

Why is music so important?

I love my weekends at Hevreh because of our community’s love of music. Everyone sings and participates in the prayer experience. A musical prayer space is one of the best gateways into Jewish life. It is also a personally important form of prayer. To me, music is prayer. When I sing, I feel uplifted, engaged- complete and yearning at the same time. That is why I have devoted much of my life to the study of music and singing. It is what brought me to the cantorate in the first place. Music serves to take us out of reality for a minute and create a sacred space wherever we find ourselves. It brings the Jewish text alive, and singing is a path into this vivacious experience.

You may not know this about me, but I’m not much of a public talker. I tend to be quiet in big groups, and the number one most common comment on my grade reports growing up was “She is too quiet in class.” However, I found my voice through music. I finally found a way to express myself publicly. It was life-changing.

Standing at the Red Sea, finally free from Egyptian slavery, the Israelites too were able to find their voices. They turned to music and song immediately after crossing the Red Sea. Because, in times of intense emotion, whether joyful celebration or great suffering, music elevates the mo-

ment and allows us to express a truth we feel in our souls. Music brings people together in inexplicable ways, sound vibrations pulsing on an internal level that we cannot fully understand.

Rabbi Sampson Raphael Hirsch defines song as "an inspired or rapturous expression of what some external event has revealed to the inner self, that which the physical eye cannot see, but which has become clear to the mind's eye". Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains that "words without music are like a body without a soul." He also claims that "there is an inner connection between music and the spirit." The Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, Philo, describes heaven as constantly filled with music in "perfect harmony," an angelic orchestra that continually fills the heavens with celestial music. When humans would encounter music, they would "no longer take nourishment from food and drink in the manner of mortals, but as beings destined for immortality." For these reasons, it is clear why Moses and Miriam led the Israelites in song.

”אז ישיר משה ובני ישראל את השירה הזאת לה”

“Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to Adonai”

*Az yashir Moshe*, “then” Moses sang- why do we have this seemingly unnecessary word before the Song of the Sea? The late Israeli Rabbi Elimelech Bar-Shaul explains that this extra word, *az*, is hinting at the fact that no humans in the Tanach up until this point had sung- there is no mention of singing up until now. A midrash teaches that “from the day the world was created until that day, no man sang a song to God.” From Adam and Eve, to the miraculous stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, up until this point, there has been no mention of people singing. The Song of the Sea emerges then as the tipping point, beginning the phenomenon of human song in the Hebrew Bible.

This “song” phenomenon that started with the Song of the Sea was successful. Our Friday night liturgy, especially the psalms of Kabbalat Shabbat, are filled with images of singing and musical calls to worship. We have:

(Sing each)

Psalm 95: *L'chu n'ranenah L'Adonai*, “Come, let us sing joyously to Adonai”

Psalm 96: *Shiru L'Adonai*, “Sing to Adonai a new song”

Psalm 98: *Shiru l'Adonai shir chadash*, “Sing to Adonai a new song”

- Late in the psalm, *zamru l'adonai b'chinor v'kol zimra*, “Sing praise to Adonai with the lyre and melodious song”

Psalm 92: *Mizmor shir l'yom hashabat*, “A psalm, a song for Shabbat”

These are just a few of the many prayers that describe this sacred act of elevating our prayer through music. The prayer does not have to be about music to be elevated through music. There are so many moving musical settings of prayers, each tailored to express the emotion of that prayer in that service.

One example of that sort of prayer is our Friday night “Hashkiveinu.” Though perhaps not on the epic proportions of the Song of the Sea, the words of “Hashkiveinu” ask for God’s protection, looking forward to redemption, a time of eternal peace and happiness. Going to bed at night can be fraught with danger, whether external or from inner demons. How many of us have trouble falling asleep as our mind dances around, trying to settle down? We do not know what will happen to us overnight, or what the future will bring. Max Helfman’s setting of “Hashkiveinu” conveys this yearning for protection and peace. *Ufros alien sukat sh'lomecha*, “and spread over us the shelter of your peace.” Notice, as you listen to the beginning of this prayer, how Helfman interprets this portrayal of God as our protector, our source of comfort and peace.

—“Hashkiveinu” by Max Helfman—

### **Part 2: Wangari Maathai**

A modern-day Miriam, Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai worked tirelessly to decrease poverty in her native Kenya and all over Africa by starting Green Belt, a GMO that provides training and job opportunities to rural women in reforestation and working the land in a sustainable way. She found her voice through creating innovative, sustainable ways to support the underserved members of her community, in turn helping to make the world a better place.

Maathai believes that protecting the environment is part and parcel of ending poverty and supporting the African economy. In her words, “It’s the air we breath, it’s the water we drink, it’s the food we eat. And we can’t live without these things.”

Maathai’s inspirational story is proof that our voice matters. It expresses our deepest emotions, evoking a spirituality not found in every day life. Our voice can impact the world around us for real, positive change. If song can elevate our prayers and brings us closer to God, then we can also use our voice to elevate and enrich the world around us.

Our exodus from Egyptian slavery may, at first, seem unrelated to the holiday of Tu Bishvat, but a deep connection exists. In the words of Maathai, “The entry point is the tree. A tree has a personality, and as it grows, and it changes the landscape, it seems to change the minds of the people. It brings with it a certain rapport that sort of encourages people to do more, so that you start with a few farmers, and before you know, so many other farmers also want to participate.” Our Exodus story is one from slavery and disempowerment to freedom and identity as a people, from an utter lack of self-sufficiency to an opportunity to fulfill our destiny as God’s chosen people in the Promised Land.

My hope is that we use our voice for good. Whether creating a spiritual prayer experience through music, or enacting positive social change in the world around us, our voices are powerful, and their effects can truly be miraculous.

—“Mi Chamocha” by Dan Singer—