

Song: the Language of Faith

B'shallach/Shabbat Shira 5768

By Rabbi Mark B Greenspan

You might be surprised to know that one of the most important lessons I have ever learned about prayer, I learned at a rock concert – in fact the only rock concert I ever attended!!

It seems like ages ago that I took Dani to his first concert. He must have been about 14 or 15 at the time. He was a big fan of a group called Phish. For all you 'squares,' that's P-H-I-S-H, not F-I-S-H. Phish performed in Harrisburg but the concert was on a Friday night so Dani couldn't attend. When his camp counselor contacted him to tell him that Phish was performing in Binghamton, New York, a week later, Dani asked us if he could take the bus up to the college to attend the concert.

Of course, we were a little reluctant to send our son off to a college campus, not to mention to a concert in another city several hours from home but we didn't want to deny him this opportunity. After thinking about it, I made an offer: I would drive Dani to Binghamton, we would stay at a hotel, and he could go to the concert with his friend. Dani was thrilled – we would spend some time together (albeit in the car) and he would see his beloved Phish concert! As we began making the plans, something came over me – to this day I don't know what it was – I asked Dani, how he would feel if I came to the concert with him. Much to my surprise and his credit, Dani said he was cool. Tickets were still available and so, that is how I came to attend my one and only rock concert.

So what does all of this have to do with prayer and synagogue life? And what does it have to do with our Torah portion this Shabbat? Leave it to a rabbi to learn a Jewish lesson at a rock concert! Attending that Phish concert was an eye opening and mind blowing experience for me – it wasn't so much the music that impressed me as it was the response of the audience. I had never seen such excitement and joy in my life! The enthusiasm, the passion, and the dancing that I witnessed at the concert made me a little jealous. There was something about the concert that felt sort of religious! I began to wonder why we couldn't inspire that kind of passion in synagogue at least occasionally. I imagined people jumping up and down, screaming and dancing in the isles of my synagogue!

I thought about this again a few years ago when I watched the movie, "Sister Act." Whoopee Goldberg plays a lounge singer from Las Vegas who hides out in a convent so she can testify against her former mobster boy friend. While there, Whoopee uses her skills as a lounge singer to take the moribund church choir and bring it to life. She combines the message of the church with contemporary music to deliver a powerful message. When she changes the words of the popular song, "My Guy" into, "My God" she has people tapping their feet in the pews and singing along. Once again, I found myself wondering – why can't we do that?

The message here is simple but profound. Music is a powerful force; and sometimes we miss the opportunity to use it in effective and meaningful ways. Torn between our commitment to tradition and a desire to renew our services we're not always sure how to put an old and beloved message into a new container. We are caught between remaining authentic and finding something that is engaging for our generation.

As you all know, this Shabbat is called *Shabbat Shira*, the Sabbath of Song. It is one of the few Sabbaths in the year that has a special name and a character all its own. This Shabbat we celebrate the recitation of

the Shira, the song which Moses and Israel sang at the Red Sea: *az yashir Moshe*. More than that, we celebrate the importance of song in our spiritual life as Jews.

Shirat Hayam, the song at the sea, has a unique place in our tradition. We chant it every morning as part of *p'sukei d'zimra*, the preliminary service. Our liturgy is built around this song and the experience of the Israelites at the Sea. In the passage which follows the Sh'ma we recall Israel's flight from Egypt: "You rescued us from Egypt; You redeemed us from the house of bondage... You split the waters of the sea...the waters engulfed Israel's enemies; not one of the arrogant remained alive..." and then we go on to say, "Moses and the people Israel sang with great joy this song to the Lord..." One of those pieces of liturgy which almost everyone seems to know, *mi kamokha ba-elim Adonai* "who is like you among the mighty" is taken from the Shira.

It's interesting that we do not recite the Ten Commandments as part of our liturgy but we do chant the Song at the Red Sea. This was not always the case. In the period of the Second Temple, the Ten Commandments were part of the daily liturgy. The rabbis chose to remove this passage from the service because of the tendency to over-emphasize these ten laws to the exclusion of the other 603 commandments in the Torah. But the *Shira* never lost its stature as part of our daily liturgy.

So why did the tradition place so much emphasis on the Song at the Sea? I believe the answer can be found in the verses which appear just before the song in the Torah – actually we recite them immediately before we chant *Az yashir moshe* each morning: "Thus the Lord saved the people of Israel from the Egyptians on that day...when the Israelites witnessed the great power which the Lord wielded against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord; they believed in Him and in Moses, his servant...then Moses and the people Israel sang..."

The Song at the Red Sea, then, is an expression of faith. It is a direct product of fear and faith. Faith and fear of God are not expressed in abstract terms or in platitudes but through song and joyous celebration. For our ancestors, song is the language of faith. Jews do not say *Ani Ma'amin*, "I believe..." as Maimonides suggested. Rather they burst forth in song. As important as the Ten Commandments may be, these commandments appeal to the mind and not the heart. The *Shira* represents a moment in time when Israel was transformed from a band of slaves into a community of faith. Of course there would be highs and lows in how Israel lived that faith – no sooner did they leave the Red Sea, they began to grumble and complain to Moses – but the memory of that moment at the sea would remain with them forever.

If the splitting of the Red Sea could inspire the people to sing of their faith in God, our ancestors concluded, singing should bring us to God. Experience doesn't inspire the song; song inspires the experience. We come to synagogue not because our faith is absolute and unshakable but because we are searching for our faith; in the opportunity to raise our voices in song and prayer we can find a path that will lead us to transcendence and spirituality. When we hear the voices of others joined together, when we listen to the chanting of the Torah and the recitation of a Haftarah, when we sing the Alaynu or chant the Keddusha together something happens to us.

Who hasn't felt a chill up their spine as the congregation raises its voice on the High Holidays as we sing *Aveinu Malkaynu* together or as the cantor chants *Kol Nidre*? It's not about great voices, however but a whole heart. Faith, I would suggest, is not necessarily about what we think or believe or how we formulate our ideas but about the moments of joy and sorrow translated into music that we experience together in worship and song.

But if that is the case, then we need to think more seriously about what we're doing here and how we participate in services. People often complain to me that they don't like to come to services because they

don't understand the Hebrew. And while nothing can replace a proficient knowledge of Hebrew, it seems to me that we don't come here searching for theological proofs – we come looking for a certain type of experience not so different from the one that those rockers were looking for at the Phish concert. If you don't believe me try reciting the service in English some time – the service becomes meaningless and incomprehensible – it's not the words or comprehension that gives prayer meaning but what we do together.

So why do we come to synagogue? We come to recite the Kaddish, to answer amen, to be moved by the sound of prayer and, most of all, to sing together. We come to feel a sense of closeness to our neighbors and a sense of wholeness that we can only gain by being part of a community. And we come to the synagogue because we recognize that the whole is greater the sum of the parts. When we are a part of a minyan we become less 'me' and more 'we.'

Now, this may surprise you. I know that this approach to prayer sounds decidedly anti-intellectual. It seems to me, however, that there are times to emphasize the mind and other times when we need to celebrate the heart. Similarly, at rock concerts words aren't important; music and 'the experience' are.

I don't want to draw any conclusion this morning. I would simply like to suggest that we need to think more seriously about what we wish to get out of services. Many of us spend a lot of time here. And others in our congregation hardly ever come – and when they do they do so begrudgingly. It's not enough any more for services to be business as usual – on *Shabbat Shira* we need to think about how to inspire people so that the words of Torah apply to us: "The people feared the Lord; they believed in God and in Moses His servant."

Is it possible for prayer to inspire faith or do we simply come for the Kiddush? Can services be like a rock concert? What role does song play in our lives? You don't have to have a great voice to sing. (Believe me, Bob Dylan proves that!) But you have to be willing to loose yourself in the song and rejoice with a whole heart.

In my very first student pulpit, my congregation in the Bronx functioned on a shoe string budget. A retired lady came in and typed up the monthly bulletin on an old typewriter. Not all the letters on the type writer worked (including the letter G). My first year there, she sent out a bulletin before the high holidays with the following message. "We are forming a choir: If you can sin and are interested please call the temple office!"

Worship is not for people who have all the answers, but for people who are willing to join hand and hearts together in celebration. This morning as we celebrate the place of song in Jewish life maybe we can learn to rock and roll!!

Shabbat Shalom