Music and Worship

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One of my favorite Hasidic stories is the one about the poor uneducated peddler who "ruins" the high holiday services of his town by showing up in synagogue and reciting the Alef Bet. This was a congregation that took the high holidays very seriously. The cantor had been practicing every note, singing through the entire mahzor once each day and drinking only honey and water for two months. The choir had been rehearsing for four hours a day every day for the past five weeks. The honors committee had interviewed all the candidates for aliyot and ark openings at least twice, and had conducted a full rehearsal with all the honorees for the entire service. The Torah readers learned three times the amount of Torah reading in the special trope just so that the required reading would be perfectly smooth. And the rabbi read his sermon over and over each night at the dinner table. And if you feel bad for the rabbi's family, I won't even tell you what the family of the shofar blower had to go through all summer long. The floors were cleaned, the chairs and books laid out. Even the PA system worked. Well, they didn't have PA systems in eighteenth century Poland but I'm adapting the story! But as the story goes, the congregation is focusing on their devotions, seeking that higher spiritual plane that we all look for, standing for that one extra half-hour to justify the long festive meal to come, and then the spell is broken by that poor schmendrik who bellows out lout: "Alef, Bet, Gimmel, Dalet!"

The people in his pew give him "the look." A woman furls her eyebrows furiously together. Several "shhhhs" are heard, and a little girl smiles at the man and puts her finger to her lips. He pauses for a moment, and then takes a deep breath, and bellows out, "Hey, Vav, Zayin Het!" The ushers start walking towards him and he says: "Tet, Yud!" At that point the ushers pull him aside and escort him out of the sanctuary.

Of course, the service continued in all its splendor. Then all wished one another a shanah tovah, over a quick piece of sponge cake on their way home for the big lunch. "What a beautiful service," everyone said. "The *other* communities in our neighboring towns couldn't possibly have had a service as beautiful as ours!" Sounds so familiar, except that I can't pronounce the names of any of these Polish towns.

After lunch, the rabbi sat down with a learned commentary so that he could round out the day with hours of piety. But because the service was so long, and because lunch was so good and plentiful, and because his chair was so comfortable, he didn't complete the first sentence of the book he took in his hands before he was fast asleep. And in his dream he came upon Elijah the Prophet. How he knew this was Elijah he could not recall, but Elijah it was.

And what did the rabbi say to Elijah in his dream? The same as any Jew would say to another today: "Shanah Tovah! A happy and a healthy new year!"

"Yes," Elijah replied, "but barely. That was a close one."

"What do you mean?" asked the rabbi in sudden concern.

"The Heavenly Host was about to pass by your little town," Elijah explained. "But then, reaching above *the noise*, came a pleading voice, reciting the Alef, Bet. That pure prayer, coming from a pure soul that offered itself in the purest fashion, was accepted on behalf of the whole community, and the gates of mercy were opened."

The rabbi searched back in his memory to hours earlier and remembered now the schmendrik who insisted on interrupting the service at the worst possible moment and bellowed out the Alef Bet until the ushers took him out. The rabbi was suddenly humbled, understanding how that simple but sincere act of worship had redeemed the insufficient devotions of everyone else, including himself. Or most of all, himself, for he had been so focused on the professional execution of the service that he had forgotten what it was all about, about opening one's heart to God.

"Master," the rabbi said to Elijah, "may God forgive us for we have surely sinned. May God bless that beautiful soul who said his Alef Bet and saved us all!"

"Indeed," replied Elijah. "And imagine if you had just let him finish his alphabet! Then the messiah might have come."

I share this story because I have been thinking a lot about the meaning of worship. We all have as a community. We spent four Shabbat evenings last year sharing our feelings and reactions to hearing the introduction of musical instruments to the Friday night liturgy. We've talked about what prayer is supposed to be. About how it is supposed to sound. Of course there is no one right answer to these questions. The point of the story is that even the letters of the alphabet are a perfect prayer if recited with sincerity. Recognizing that we all approach these questions differently, we have introduced different styles on different Friday nights. Our plan is to have one Friday night a month as our family service with guitar. One Friday night with the organ, which is on loan to us by Dr. Ralph Selig who has generously volunteered to join us once a month with his accompaniment. One Friday night with a fuller instrumental sound, whether it be our own musicians, guests like the wonderful Amichai Margolis, or something else. And one Friday night without instruments. The idea, then, is a rotating schedule, and I invite each of us to check that schedule and join us, so that together we can find the right sound. The last few Friday nights here had record attendance, and I know that those of us who were here went home those evenings from a different place. We came here at the end of the busy week, and when we left it was Shabbat, holy and good.

Irene Bressler and Marc Cantor offered beautiful accompaniment to our services last night as well as for Selihot on Saturday night. Their gift to us, together with the commitment of Tamara Freeman, our entire choir and Cantor Bromberg, have added an extra degree of holiness to this sacred season.

This was a big change for our community. Back when I was interviewing for rabbinic positions and I was asked how I felt about musical instruments on Shabbat I did not know what to say. This is a question that I have struggled with since I was thirteen when I attended a bar mitzvah of a classmate from Solomon Schechter, unexpectedly encountered musical instruments in the synagogue on Shabbat, and was so upset that I could not remain. I was so young and unprepared. But life is about ongoing preparation, is it not? The good thing about marching through the years is that we become better and better prepared for what is come. The bad thing is that there is less to come. But hopefully enough yet in store!

I have gradually become more flexible with my approach to music and worship, as I have come to appreciate the extra help in starting Shabbat. We are of course a Conservative synagogue and so we approach change conservatively. We are not introducing instruments to our main Shabbat morning service. And there are important halakhic issues regarding the use of musical instruments in the synagogue service. The practice of acapella worship on Shabbat and festivals goes back two millennia. Besides the weight of tradition, opponents cite the *gezeira* (decree) of the ancient sages to forbid music in the synagogue to differentiate it from the destroyed Temple where there were acoustical instruments, as well as the concern that a musician will want to carry his or her instrument to the synagogue and will automatically seek to repair it, acts that are clearly forbidden on Shabbat. Advocates stress the association of musical instruments in Jewish culture with joy. Mourners avoid music whereas musicians are required for a wedding. The decree against music on Shabbat represents a state of national mourning following the destruction of the Temple, advocates claim, which may have been appropriate in its time, but is no longer so today, especially given the re-establishment of Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel. The concern that a musician may carry or tune or repair the instrument on Shabbat can

be alleviated by individual logistical arrangements and instructions from the rabbi. I was moved in my own thinking by a recent unpublished yet masterful responsum by Rabbis Elliot N. Dorff and Elie Kaplan Spitz that examines the halakhic issues and approaches to music on Shabbat in detail, carefully mapping a comprehensive halakhic approach to the use of musical instruments in Shabbat worship.

The halakhic arguments against and justifications for musical instruments on Shabbat span over two hundred years. The determining factor must be what is best for the individual community. Will the addition of musical instruments add to the level of devotion, or will it distract worshippers? Will it make the liturgy more accessible, or will it destroy the more familiar rhythms and make it more distant? There is no simple answer to these questions, reminding us that worship is at the same time a very communal but a deeply personal affair.

So I want to take this opportunity to speak personally. For me, the purpose of worship, especially on Shabbat and festivals, is to help us slow down. To remind us to breathe. A beautiful story was told at the Seminary about when Abraham Joshua Heschel would participate in rabbinical school interviews. The interview for rabbinical school is the final stage of the application process when the candidate appears before the dean and six other professors and rabbis for about 45 minutes of discussion, and the decision on admission is made by the committee on a rolling basis immediately after speaking with the candidate. Imagine the anxiety that the candidate feels, having to answer questions about one's background, theology and personal commitment before such revered figures. So the story is that when it came to Heschel's turn to ask a question one day he asked, "What did you see on your way into the Seminary today?" The Seminary is, by the way, in Morningside Heights in

Manhattan, at 122nd street on Broadway, a few blocks north of Columbia University. But the rabbinical school candidate that day didn't see a thing on his way to the Seminary, as his mind was frantically going over every question that might be asked at the interview. But you can't say nothing, so the candidate gave it a shot, "Well, Professor Heschel, on my way up Broadway, as I passed Columbia, I reflected on the great value of learning and free inquiry, and when I passed Teachers' College I thought about the mitzvah of education, and when I looked across the street at Union Theological Seminary I thought about the importance of restoring the relationships with our Christian neighbors."

Heschel stared at the young interviewee and the silence in the room was deafening. Finally, Heschel said, "And what else did you see?"

The candidate thought frantically about what Heschel was looking for, then swallowed and tried again: "Well, Professor Heschel, on my way up Broadway, passing those great buildings I saw a homeless man asking for a meal." The candidate wondered if he should say whether he gave the homeless man money or food, or nothing, but that would just dig him in a deeper whole as he really saw nothing on his way to the interview that was to determine the rest of his life.

Another interminably long pause. Even the other professors looked uncomfortable. Then Heschel smiled and said, "Very good, but what else did you see?"

At this point the candidate was at a total loss and answered honestly, "I am sorry, Professor, but in truth I saw nothing as I was so nervous about being able to answer whatever questions you were to ask me here."

"Ah," said Heschel. "So you didn't notice that in the middle of Broadway, between all the lanes of traffic, there is an island with grass and trees, a place for birds to rest, for squirrels to run, and for God's creation to peak forth from the pavement?"

The candidate was smart enough to realize that that last question was rhetorical and did not require a response. And he was accepted to rabbinical school.

I often think about this story as I prepare for Shabbat on Friday afternoons. I am always rushing and there is always so much on my mind. Having spent my twenties in New York City, I learned to appreciate the importance of the silence and rest that Shabbat offers, and the role that music can play in slowing and quieting things down for us. I even grew then to appreciate the softness that the organ can bring to the welcoming of Shabbat. On Manhattan Island of all places, one lives the frenetic energy of the work week in the extreme. The Friday evening radio broadcast I used to catch of the chords from Temple Emanuel reminded the city that it was okay now to slow down the pace. While some find energy and spirit missing in the organ and look to different types of instrumentation to establish the kavannah (or proper spiritual intent) of Friday night, I find that deceleration that the organ invites to be exactly what Friday night is about. I have found, at times, that it is what I need to help rest and truly celebrate, and I am thrilled that we are able to share this experience here on a monthly basis.

I know, my friends, that the organ was of the more controversial elements of our Friday night music discussions. And I am grateful for that, for giving me something controversial to address this morning so that we have something to criticize at our lunches this afternoon. But my point here is not to argue for or against the organ. That's one Friday a month. There are three other Fridays—sometimes more!—and Shabbat morning services and many other things

that happen here at Temple Israel for those who don't like the organ. My purpose is to reach behind that, and to try to explain how that sound reaches me and helps me feel the presence of Shabbat.

I read a book this summer on the history of silence in Christianity. I read it because it was written by Diarmaid MacCulloch, the Oxford church historian whose thousand-page tome on the history of Christianity was one of our main texts in my Sunday morning class last year, and I guess I just didn't get enough. And I read it because I was interested in his discussion of silence and noise and music in Christian worship and as themes in Christian history. Don't worry, I am not thinking of switching teams! Sometimes we can understand ourselves much better when we look at the Other. Christianity has struggled with noise and silence in ways that we have not. There are thousands of years of tension between the ideal of monastic silence, on the one hand, and the grand sound of cathedral music, on the other. In Judaism we stay away from those extremes. No vows of silence and no Bach fugues. There is, of course, a long tradition of synagogue music, but the tradition of excluding musical accompaniment does limit the extent of development. What interested me most, though, in MacCulloch's book was the role of silence and sound in worship. Prayer needs to be heard by God, but how should it sound to us? Reading this book, I realized that at every Temple Israel service I always say at some point: "We continue now in silent prayer." That is the silent Amidah. I started to think about why it is important that it is silent, what the silence does, how it helps us sing in our souls.

"Silence is allied to wordlessness," MacCulloch writes, "and wordlessness is allied to music. Music plays the role of mediator between silence and words, because it stretches

between and melts into either polarity." Good words! Music is the bridge between silence and prayer. Anyone who has read music knows that the rest notes are just as critical and as much a part of each measure as the other notes. As the famous pianist Artur Schnabel once said, "The notes I handle no better than any pianist. But the pause between the notes…ach…that is where the art resides." On any sheet of liturgical music one finds the elements of sound, silence and prayer in symphony. For me, the music of prayer is not about adding sound, but about helping me with the silence. It's not about movements but about rests. I look to the music of prayer to slow me down, to take me out of the traffic on Broadway towards the greenery in between.

When I was a teenager I used to stutter. As if being a teenager isn't hard enough. I couldn't manage to read through passages when called on in class. I had too few dates because I couldn't ask for someone on the other end of the phone. I was terrified of all matter of public speaking. Sometimes it still comes through now and then. That is, the stutter. I think I got over the terror. But back then, in those turbulent years of youth, the words that I was able to get out with perfect fluency were the words that I sung. It is quite common that stutterers are fluent singers. The reason why singing comes easier is because the discipline of music requires the nervous system to relax, causing the synapses to follow their commands and for things to flow smoothly. Speech therapists teach stutterers to speak like they sing, applying more conscious control to the process.

I sang in my high school and college choir, but I also learned to sing in synagogue. I guess for me, the restfulness, the slowing down, of song and prayer was what I needed to become whole, to fix myself.

That is what we all have to do each week when Shabbat comes in. It is what we all have to do each year at Rosh Hashanah. We have to slow down. We have to raise ourselves above our busy lives and gain thereby some needed perspective and help us fix our lives. We have to be able to hear the silence through the noise. That is what prayer is.

It's about letting go of the tension.

It's about slowing ourselves down so that we can close our eyes and see what we need to see.

That's what we do today, how we surrender ourselves before the majesty of God.

How we find a way to open our heats.

And sometimes all it takes is an alef and a bet.

Shanah tovah.