

Evocation and Expression— Music and Song in Judaism

by Rabbi Reuven Taragin February 7, 2022

In memory of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who deeply felt and beautifully sang the song of Torah, Jewish life, and Hashem's world.

Torah as Song

One would have expected the Torah to conclude with a seminal law or philosophical idea. Instead, it ends with *Shirat Ha'azinu* — with song. *Chazal* understood this usage of the term “*shirah*” as referring not just to *Ha'azinu*, but to the whole Torah. Like song, the Torah has many layers of meaning¹ and harmonizes variant voices.²

Understandably, we express our appreciation of this aspect of Torah by singing Torah.³ And not just to one tune, but to many different ones. In the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks:

There are different tunes for different texts. There is one kind of cantillation for Torah, another for the Haftorah from the prophetic books, and yet another for Ketuvim, the Writings, especially the five Megillot. There is a particular chant for studying the texts of the written Torah: Mishnah and Gemarah... Jewish texts and times are not color-coded but music-coded. The map of holy words is written in melodies and songs.

We, the Singers

G-d and His word are the subjects of the song; His world is the singer. Tehillim⁴ describes how Hashem's handiwork sings His praises.⁵

Man, the greatest of Hashem's creations, creates music to accompany song. When describing the development of civilization, the Torah includes those who fashioned the first musical instruments.⁶ Music and song are central parts of man's existence.

Though we sing many songs, our most important ones are about Hashem, His world, His miracles, and His assistance. Our world and our lives are full of Hashem's presence. We show our appreciation to Him through song. Dovid Hamelech — the author of the “sweetest Jewish songs”⁷ — exclaimed: “I will praise Hashem with my life, I will sing to Him as long as I exist.”⁸

¹ See Ha'emek Davar (Introduction).

² See Aruch Hashulchan (Introduction to Choshen Mishpat).

³ The Gemara in Sanhedrin (99b) teaches “*zamer b'chol yom* — sing (Torah) every day.” Furthermore, the gemara in Megillah (32a) tells us that not singing Torah implies that the *chukim* we have are no good.

⁴ 19:2 and many other places. See [Otzar Hamidrashim](#) (Rebbe Akiva 4) which explains that the declaration is through music and that Hashem would not have created the world without it.

⁵ In birkot Kriyat Shema section of our tefillot we describe the angels singing to Hashem. Perek Shira describes how every part of creation sings to Hashem. Rav Nachman MiBreslov (LKM”H Batra 63) says that every blade of grass has its own song.

⁶ Bereishit 4:21.

⁷ Shmuel Bet 23:1.

⁸ Tehillim 146:1–2. See the Gemara in Sanhedrin (94b), where Shmuel asserts that the world was created for the songs of Dovid HaMelech. See also Tehillim 71:23. See also [Otzar Hamidrashim](#) (Rebbe Akiva 6 and Otiyot Rebbe Akiva 1).

We see how important this appreciation through song is from the fact that Chizkiyahu Hamelech missed realizing his destiny to become the Mashiach by failing to sing *shirah* to Hashem for saving him and the people of Yerushalayim from Sancheriv's army.⁹ Chazal tell us that Chizkiyahu saw his Torah learning as enough; clearly, it was not.¹⁰ Singing Hashem's praises is a critical part of our relationship with Him.

Why is this so?

Song and music are important both in how they impact us, and in what they express.

How We Are Impacted

Music deeply impacts the soul. It soothes, heals, and inspires. King Shaul brought the young David before him to play music in order to dispel the terrifying "bad spirit" that had engulfed him.¹¹ The Rambam adds that music reduces stress and eases depression.¹²

Music also inspires. Elisha used music to prepare him for prophecy.¹³ Similarly, many Chassidic masters describe how music facilitates spiritual growth.¹⁴ Niggunim are a ladder we can use to climb spiritually. This happens when the soul, inspired by our singing, sings in response.¹⁵ Jewish liturgy also employs song to evoke emotion. Rabbi Sacks describes it this way:

Music has extraordinary power to evoke emotion. The Kol Nidrei prayer with which Yom Kippur begins is not really a prayer at all. It is a dry legal formula for the annulment of vows. There can be little doubt that it is its ancient, haunting melody that has given it its hold over the Jewish imagination. It is hard to hear those notes and not feel that you are in the presence of G-d on the Day of Judgment, standing in the company of Jews of all places and times as they plead with heaven for forgiveness. It is the holy of holies of the Jewish soul.¹⁶

How We Express Ourselves

Song and music *evoke* emotion, but so do other phenomena, such as Torah learning and powerful messages and experiences. Music and song are unique in that they are also the way we *express* emotion. They are how we show that we care, how we engage, and how we express our feelings.

⁹ Sanhedrin 94b.

¹⁰ Medrash Shir Hashirim. See Sanhedrin 94b for a description of the intensive Torah learning during Chizkiya's reign.

¹¹ Shmuel I 16:14-23; see *Mei'am Lo'eiz*, who explains that Shaul wanted the music to bring him peace.

¹² Shemoneh Perakim 5:2. See also Kuzari (2:64-65) who describes how music can move someone from one emotional pole to the other.

The Gr"a (Pe'at Hashulchan, Hakdamah) famously taught (based on the Zohar [Chelek B 18b]) that music is needed to understand many of the Torah's secrets.

¹³ Melachim II 3:14-15. See also Divrei Hayamim I 25:1 which describes people who prophesized through music and Shmuel I 10:15 which describes Nevi'im accompanied by musicians.

¹⁴ Tzav V'ziruz, Ot 36.

¹⁵ Bnei Machshavah Tovah, Ot 18.

¹⁶ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks — *Spirituality of Song*.

The Gemara¹⁷ links “*avodat Hashem* with happiness and goodness of heart” to song. Rashi elaborates that people sing when they are happy and in a good mood. Later commentaries¹⁸ explain that though Torah impacts the heart, song and music are how we express happiness and celebration.

Rashi makes this point regarding the first time *shirah* is mentioned in the Torah — the song of Az *Yashir* after *kriyat Yam Suf*. Rashi¹⁹ explains that when the Jews saw the miraculous splitting of the sea and their subsequent salvation from the Egyptians, song spontaneously rose from their hearts.²⁰ Rashi adds that this is how they sang then and how others have continued singing ever since.²¹

Song is how we express our yearning for more than just knowledge and intellect. It is how we express our yearning for spirituality and a highly level of existence. In the words of Rabbi Sacks:

*Judaism is a religion of words, and yet whenever the language of Judaism aspires to the spiritual it breaks into song, as if the words themselves sought escape from the gravitational pull of finite meanings. There is something about melody that intimates a reality beyond our grasp, what William Wordsworth called the “sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused / Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns / And the round ocean and the living air.” Words are the language of the mind. Music is the language of the soul.*²²

For this reason song and music are also how we express our *simchah* at the *Simchat Beit Hasho'eiva*²³ and what accompanies *bikkurim* on their way to Yerushalayim²⁴ and the sacrifice of *korbanot* in the Beit Hamikdash. In fact, music and song are so critical that *korbanot* unaccompanied by them are disqualified.²⁵

We sing our prayers to express similar emotions.²⁶ Our heartfelt song shows that we care about what we are saying. We also use different melodies to distinguish between the emotions of different prayers and specific seasons. As Rabbi Sacks depicted all this the following way:

When we pray, we do not read: we sing. When we engage with sacred texts, we do not recite: we chant. Every text and every time has, in Judaism, its own specific melody. There are different tunes for Shacharit, Mincha and Maariv (the Morning, Afternoon and Evening

¹⁷ Arachin 11a.

¹⁸ Tzon Kodshim, Arachin 11a.

¹⁹ Shemot 15:1.

²⁰ The *Medrash* (Otzar Hamidrashim, Kedushah 7) explains that this is why Hashem prefers the songs of man over those of angels. Angels sing on schedule each day, while man sings spontaneously. See also Or Chayim there who describes that *shira* with *ruach hakodesh* flows from a heart filled with awe and complete faith.

²¹ See Shemot Rabba 23:4 which sees the Jews at Yam Suf as the first people to say *Shira*. See *Medrash Tanchuma* (Beshalach 10) and *Midrash Zuta* (Shir Hashirim 1:1) which identify 10 *shirot* in Tanach (the tenth being the song at the time of Moshiach).

²² Rabbi Jonathan Sacks — *Spirituality of Song*.

²³ Mishneh Sukkah 5:4.

²⁴ Mishneh Bikkurim 3:3.

²⁵ Arachin 11a.

²⁶ The Gemara (Berachot 10a) teaches that prayer should be connected to song. Interestingly, the words *tefilla* and *shira* have the same gematria.

*prayers.) There are different melodies and moods for the prayers for a weekday, for Shabbat, for the three pilgrimage festivals, for Pesach, for Shavuot and for Sukkot (which have many musically in common tunes but also tunes distinctive to each), and for the Yamim Noraim, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.*²⁷

Just as we use distinct tunes to show our appreciation for the uniqueness of each area of Torah, so too we employ distinct songs to express different emotions in our various prayers.

Singing is also how we express our appreciation of Hashem and celebrate our relationship with Him. The opening *pesukim* of many of the *Pesukei D'zimra* and *Kabbalat Shabbat mizmorim* describe singing to Hashem.²⁸ The final *mizmor* of *Pesukei D'zimra* (and *Sefer Tehillim*)²⁹ climaxes by calling upon the whole world to join the celebration.

And, of course, we are familiar with how central our *zemirot* are to our Shabbatot.³⁰ Shabbat is meant to be more than just a day of rest. It is meant to be a day of enjoyment and appreciation. Rabbi Sacks tells a story that shows how important *zemirot* are to the character of Shabbat:

*A previous Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Avraham Shapiro, once told me a story about two great rabbinic sages of the nineteenth century, equally distinguished scholars, one of whom lost his children to the secular spirit of the age, the other of whom was blessed by children who followed in his path. The difference between them was this, he said: "When it came to se'udah shlishit, the third Sabbath meal, the former spoke words of Torah while the latter sang songs."*³¹

A Shabbat without song lacks the atmosphere so critical to holistic Jewish life and education. We have to express our appreciation for the truly meaningful things in life. We do so through song.

Our Song

Rabbi Sacks beautifully encapsulates these different perspectives on music and song and their centrality to a meaningful Torah life and tradition:

*Torah must be effective, not just cognitive. It must speak to our emotions. As Antonio Damasio showed empirically in *Descartes' Error*, though the reasoning part of the brain is central to what makes us human, it is the limbic system, the seat of the emotions, that leads us to choose this way, not that. If our Torah lacks passion, we will not succeed in passing it on to the future. Music is the effective dimension of communication, the medium through which we express, evoke and share emotion. Precisely because we are creatures of emotion, music is an essential part of the vocabulary of mankind.*³²

²⁷ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks — *Spirituality of Song*.

²⁸ *Pesukei D'zimra*- *Tehillim* 146:1-2, 147:1, 149:1-2. *Kabbalat Shabbat*- 98:4-9, 100:1-2.

²⁹ 150.

³⁰ See *Bereishit Rabba* 10 which quotes Hashem calling for us to sing *zemirot* in honor of Shabbat. See also *Megilla* 12b and *Esther Rabba* 3:13 which see the singing of *zemirot* when eating, drinking, and celebrating as distinctly Jewish. See also *Sochar Tov Tehillim* 92, *Sefer Chassidim* 271, and *Rokeach* 54.

³¹ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks — *Torah as Song*.

³² Rabbi Jonathan Sacks - *Torah as Song*

Each person has his/her own song.³³ We sing about what we are most passionate about, which itself reinforces them as our passions. Let's ensure that we sing about the things that are *truly* important to us.

³³ Rav Kook taught (Orot Hakodesh 2:page 444) that ideally man should sing the song of self, the song of the people, the song of all mankind, and the song of the world at all times.