

# THE ROLE OF SONG IN MIDRASHIC LITERATURE

SARAH H. REINES

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Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion  
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Advisor: Dr. Norman J. Cohen

This thesis is dedicated to my father, Borah Reines, ז"ל,  
whose every word resounded as a song of insight and response,  
and to his granddaughter, Talia,  
who sings his Torah as a *shir hadash*.

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## Introduction



I have always had a love of music and a passion for Midrash. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that I chose to write my thesis on the role of song in midrashic literature. However, this idea did not come to me right away. In fact, I struggled to arrive at a thesis topic for some time.

I always knew that I wanted to work with Midrash, as this is the form of text which speaks most directly to me. Midrashic Literature represents what the Looking Glass was for Alice: an opportunity to step into another world while mirroring my own reality. When I study Midrash, I enter into discussion with the Rabbis and become part of their creative process. The issues with which we grapple are timeless, providing me with a window into the worldview of my ancestors, while at the same time, challenging and informing my own spiritual consciousness, religious practice, sense of “what is,” and also “what can be.”

I decided to study the role of song in Midrash while preparing for my senior sermon. My biblical portion was *B'shallah*, which includes the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15). Overwhelmed by the richness of this portion, I spent weeks following the different directions the text took me and attempted to tease out the various possibilities for in-depth examination. In the end, I explored how song functions as a tool of healing from separation. My own reactions to the text, and the wealth of rabbinic response I found during research, inspired me to continue my study of song.

I began to investigate song as a possibility for my thesis, certain that it was an area studied in previous years. To my surprise, I found that no student of HUC-JIR had ever written about song. In addition, my cursory search found no published works at all dealing with Midrash and song.

These discoveries inspired within me a greater sense of purpose for my study.

Before beginning any research, I spent some time simply thinking about the role of song in my life, and realized how dependent I am upon it. I sing daily. For me, song acts as a natural expression of prayer, celebration and communication. It also functions as a processing mechanism, enabling me to make sense of my world.

I learned from this self-reflection that while I felt intimately connected to the power of song, I lacked the ability to articulate how it functions in my life, as well as in Jewish texts. This realization became the overarching pursuit of my thesis: to explore our tradition through the framework of Midrash, and uncover the role of song in the life and soul of our people.

My thesis advisor, Dr. Norman Cohen, directed me in a very methodical, structured research process. I began with the Bible, conducting a concordance search to isolate the places where song is mentioned. My search began with the term *shir* (song) and later included *zemer* (song). I listed all occurrences of song in the Bible and set apart several of them as subjects for further research, posing questions inspired by the texts and looking at rabbinic and modern commentaries to find the tradition's questions and answers.

I moved from biblical research to modern scholarship, looking up "song" and "music" in biblical encyclopedias and music anthologies.<sup>1</sup> The first chapter of my thesis represents the integration of this material.

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1. E.g., Encyclopedia Judaica. Cecil Roth and Dr. Geoffrey Wigoder, eds. in chief, Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1982, 17 vols.; The Encyclopedia of Religion, Mircea Eliade, ed., New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987, 16 vols.; The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians. Stanley

Following the completion of my biblical analysis, I began the process of midrashic research. I compiled midrashic sources from verse indices, subject indices, midrashic anthologies and indices of midrashic works onto notecards.<sup>2</sup> Once I finished listing the citations, I organized the cards chronologically, according to compilations. I looked up the texts, copying any which I thought might be relevant to my study, and translated and analyzed them.

After compiling the texts, I began to organize them, generating a list of themes and arranging them into a rough outline of chapter headings, topics and sub-themes. I then reviewed the texts in each section and created a full, working outline, listing texts under their relevant heading in an intentional order.

Finally, I began the process of writing the paper. Moving section by section, I re-analyzed each text, carefully translating those that were to be included in the body of the paper. Though I had already plotted the progression of the thesis in the outline, the writing also followed the direction of the texts as I re-analyzed them. One section informed the direction of the following text, and helped create the transitions.

This thesis, then, is divided into six chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of song in the Bible, looking at segments of song and references to song in the text, and examining how this biblical evidence

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Sadie, ed., London: MacMillan Publishers Ltd., 1980, 20 vols.; The New Oxford History of Music. Egon Wellesz, ed., London: Oxford University Press, 1973, 10 vols.

2. E.g., Legends of the Jews. Louis Ginzberg, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 7 vols.; Osar ha-Aggadah. Moshe Gross, ed., Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1971; Torah ha-Ketuavah u'Mesorah al Torah, Nevi'im u'Ketuvim. Aaron Hyman, ed., Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1979, 3 vols.

reflects the role of song in ancient Israelite society, from the nomadic period until the post-exilic period.

Chapters Two through Six each respond to a different question regarding song: What is Song? Who Sings? When Do We Sing? How Do We Sing? and Why Do We Sing? Chapter Two defines the topic of discussion. I start with an obvious answer to the question, "What is Song?" examining song as a method of communication. I also include a more abstruse response, illustrating how song represents a merging of the human and the Divine. The chapter concludes with a study of the rabbinic interplay between Torah and song.

Chapter Three asks, "Who Sings?" The first section, *Every Part of God's Creation Sings*, sums up the findings of the chapter: everyone and everybody sings. The content, however, reflects the extraordinary scope of how the Rabbis use song in midrashic literature, as well as their ability to hear the voices present in every part of creation.

Chapter Four focuses on the variety of times we sing, including the more obvious -- *We Sing at Times of Miracle* -- and the less obvious -- *We Sing at the Moment of Death*.

It would not have occurred to me to ask, "How Do We Sing?" had I not found so much material responding to this question in the early stages of my research, particularly regarding how we sang the Song at the Sea. Chapter Five confronts issues of leadership, gender and communal unity and examines how the many roles we play in life are reflected through song.

The final chapter tackles perhaps the most crucial question of this study: "Why Do We Sing?" It examines the purpose of song, discussing how song functions as a vehicle for redemption, repentance and eternal life.

## Chapter 1

### An Overview of Song in the Bible

The Bible is filled with references to song, as well as lyrics themselves, though we cannot determine where all of them lie. We cannot definitively discern between those biblical passages which are lyrics to vocal melodies and those which are lyrical verse.<sup>3</sup> For example, some prayers may be songs (Hannah, I Samuel 2:1-10, Habakkuk 3, Isaiah 26, Jonah 2:3). The same is true of laments (II Samuel 1:19-27), as well as whole books of text (Job, Proverbs, Psalms). Regardless, explicit evidence of both secular and cultic song is plentiful. While the music of Ancient Israel cannot be neatly divided into categories of secular and sacred, there is a clear distinction between those songs which were used for formal worship and those which were not.<sup>4</sup>

The wide variety of secular songs (those songs not associated with worship) includes folk songs and institutionalized songs of the palace (II Samuel 19:36; Amos 8:3), fighting songs, such as those relating to war (Numbers 21:12,15, 21:27-30), military victory (Exodus 15:20; Judges 5; I Samuel 21:12; Isaiah 14:4), and marching (Numbers 10:35,36; II Chronicles 20:21), songs of labor workers, including diggers (Numbers 21:17), vineyard workers (Judges 9:27), builders (Job 38:7; Zechariah 4:7) and watchmen (Isa. 21:12), songs of mirth and celebration such as wedding songs (Genesis 31:27; Jeremiah 25:10; Jeremiah 33:11), drinking songs (Job 21:12; Psalms 69:13) and dance songs (I Samuel 18:6,7; Psalms 26:6), as well as songs expressing emotions of love (Psalm 45; Song of

Variety  
of  
songs

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3. Carl H. Kraeling and Lucetta Mowry, *Music in the Bible*, in Vol. 1 of The New Oxford History of Music, Egon Wellesz, ed., London: Oxford University Press, 1957, p. 283.

4. Eric Werner and Edith Gerson-Kiwi, *Jewish Music*, in Vol. 9 of The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Stanley Sadie, ed., London: MacMillan Publishers Limited, 1980, p. 617.

Songs 2:14), mourning and lamentation (II Samuel 1:18-27; Ecclesiastes 12:5).<sup>5</sup> The Bible refers to almost every kind of secular song imaginable, except that it contains no mention of lullabies and has only a few indirect references to children's songs.

The later history of biblical song focuses on the music which accompanied worship. The vocal music of the Temple was sung by professional choirs of Levites, and was often accompanied by orchestras. While the Temple orchestras were made up of many string and wind instruments, few percussive instruments were used. The lack of emphasis on the beat of the music dissuaded listeners from rhythmic bodily movements, then associated with pagan worship practiced in nations surrounding Palestine.<sup>6</sup> We can see, therefore, a clear distinction between the staid music of the Temple and the more vivacious folk music which was often accompanied by timbrel, drum and dance. However, the life of the Ancient Israelites was a blend of both secular and religious sensibilities. Their music testifies to this fact, as many of their folk songs related to God's power, and some Temple songs were likely sung to secular melodies.<sup>7</sup>

Despite such complexities, it is possible to trace the various stages of social, political and religious development of the Israelite people through the evidence of their songs.

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5. Alfred Sendry, Music In Ancient Israel, NY: Philosophical Library, 1969, pp. 84-85.

6. A.Z Idelsohn, Jewish Music in its Historical Development, NY: Henry Holt and Company Inc., 1929, pp. 16-18.

7. Marion Bauer and Ethel R. Peyser, Music Through the Ages: A Narrative for Student and Layman, NY: GP Putnam's Sons, 1946, p. 19.

### A. Nomadic Period: The Epoch of the Patriarchs and of the Exodus

Most likely, the nomads chanted and sang throughout their wanderings. However, the Bible contains no evidence of this type of song. The songs of this period which were preserved in the Bible, as well as the Biblical references to song, reflect the wanderers' quest for survival despite the harsh, unyielding nature and the dangers posed by rival tribes.<sup>8</sup> The Song of the Well (Numbers 32:17-18) celebrates the discovery of water, a desert jewel. The Song of Lamech (Genesis 4:23-24) is far less joyful, but no less passionate, threatening vengeance against a bitter enemy.

It is likely that most singing was accompanied by instrumental music.<sup>9</sup> Laban's song (Genesis 31:27) refers to a lighthearted musical send-off with "joy and songs, drum and harp." Our nomadic ancestors may have been burdened with loads on their back, but they did not travel without musical instruments to accompany their singing. Miriam's Song (Exodus 15:20-21), sung upon crossing the Red Sea after the Exodus from Egypt, was accompanied by timbrels, flutes and dancing.

The music of this period was used during desert travel, and though it did not play a significant role in worship, much of it functioned as mode of religious expression.<sup>10</sup> The lives of the Ancient Israelites was not divided into religious and secular realms, and their songs reflect the blending between the two.<sup>11</sup> For example, the Song at the Sea (Exodus 15:1) is both a triumphant song of victory and a religious hymn of thanksgiving, extolling God's majesty. The close relationship between secular songs of war and religious songs of worship is evidenced in

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8. Kraeling and Mowry, Oxford, p. 285.

9. Werner, Grove, p. 617.

10. Kraeling and Mowry, Oxford, p. 284.

11. Bauer and Peyser, Music Through the Ages, p. 18.



Joshua's belief that the sound of the Israelites singing before the golden calf was actually the sound of battle songs (Exodus 32:18).

The Ancient Israelites' belief in the power of song is illustrated in the fact that this is the vehicle God chooses to ensure that Israel remember God's majesty. God dictates the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 31:19 - 32:43) to the dying leader and commands him, "Teach it to the children of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for Me against the children of Israel" (Deuteronomy 31:19).

#### B. Settlement in Palestine

In contrast to the nomadic era, the arrival of the Ancient Israelites into Palestine marked a sedentary phase in their history. Once isolated tribal wanderers, they now confronted the realities of agricultural life, interacting with peoples of different racial backgrounds who lived according to various social and cultural norms. This change affected various aspects of their national development, including their music.<sup>12</sup> In Palestine, the Hebrew tribes found shrines of Canaanite and Egyptian deities. The extensive use of music and particularly song in such temples is documented by the hymns inscribed on the walls of Egyptian sanctuaries and in the Babylonian texts. It is very likely that the Hebrews also erected shrines and followed the custom of using religious lyrics as part of their ritual. This may well have laid the foundation of music as an intrinsic part of formalized Temple worship.

This was a time of military battle and conquest, reflected in dirges grieving for the fallen hero, as well as songs of victory. Song functioned as

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12. Kraeling and Mowry, Oxford, p. 286.

a vehicle for mourning, both by the individual and the institution. We find evidence of personal lamentation, such as David's lament for Saul and Jonathan (II Samuel 1:19-27) and his much shorter lament over Abner (II Samuel 3:33-34), as well as ritual lamentation, such as the professional singers lamenting the death of Josiah (II Chronicles 35:25).

Song expresses the pain of loss, as well as the ecstasy of triumph. The Song of Deborah, bearing the name of she who led the battle, celebrates Israel's victory over King Jabin of Canaan (Judges 5). The Israelite women welcome David and Saul from the war against the Philistines with singing, dancing, and the playing of instruments (I Samuel 18:7). But like dirges, the music of celebration was performed by personal friends and family, as well as public groups and institutions. For example, when Jephthah returned home from fighting, his daughter greeted him with timbrels and dance (Judges 11:34).

These songs not only exemplify the proliferation of military songs, but they also point to the active role of women in performance music of this time. Prior to the establishment of Saul's kingdom and the institutionalization of music, we find an abundance of spontaneous and unrehearsed songs. "Women's songs" in all Ancient Near Eastern cultures are understood to have been rooted in this expressive and rhythmic style of music.<sup>13</sup>

During the early years of the Palestinian period, agricultural living dominated the society. We find this lifestyle reflected in songs celebrating the harvest of field and vineyard, including Isaiah's oracle against Moab

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13. E. Werner, *Music*, in Vol. 3 of The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, George Arthur Buttrick, ed., NY: Abington Press, 1962, p. 457.

(Isaiah 16:10) and Isaiah's song to his beloved (Isaiah 5:1)<sup>14</sup> In the later years of this period, after instituting a monarchy, the Hebrews became an established nation of the Ancient Near East. They formed a more centralized, organized society, with large urban centers and developing industries, such as trade, crafts and fine arts. Music, in turn, became institutionalized, as it found formal usage in the court and the Temple.<sup>15</sup> Song also became a pastime of the wealthy, illustrated by Qohelet's purchase of professional vocalists: "I got for myself male singers and female singers, and the delights of humans in abundance and of all sorts" (Ecclesiastes 2:8).

Little is known about the secular music of this period, though from the prophets it seems to have been used often in moments of frivolity and indulgence. Amos rebukes the indulgent who spend their days lying upon their expensive couches, eating feasts, chanting songs and playing on instruments (Amos 6:5), and he warns them that these superficial airs will soon be transformed into dirges: "I will turn your feasts into mourning and all your songs into lamentation" (Amos 8:10). Isaiah makes a similar prophesy, advising Israel that their days of drinking songs will soon end (Isaiah 24:7-9).

While the prophets scold the Israelites for frivolous and inappropriate song, they also look to song as a beacon of salvation. Isaiah proclaims that upon redemption, "song shall be sung in the land of Judah" (26:1), and instructs Israel to herald the time of salvation by singing a new song (Isaiah 42:10). Jeremiah commands Israel to thank God with songs of praise, saying, "Sing to the Lord, sing praise to the

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14. Kraeling and Mowry, Oxford, p. 288.

15. Werner, Interpreter's Dictionary, p. 458.

Lord, for He delivered the soul of the poor from the hand of evildoers" (Jeremiah 20:13). The prophets, themselves, listen to music for religious purposes.<sup>16</sup> Elisha prepared to prophesy with the aid of music: "'Now bring me a musician.' And it happened that when the musician played, the hand of God came upon him" (II Kings 3:15). Similarly, I Samuel 10:5-6 describes a procession of prophets led by musicians. These examples reflect the prophets' use of music for atropaic purposes, enabling them to enter an ecstatic state from which they would prophesy.

As in the nomadic period and the early stage of Palestinian settlement, the ancient Israelites continue to use song in battle.<sup>17</sup> However, song now finds a new home in the royal court and Temple. "And the king (Solomon) made of the almug trees pillars for the House of the Lord and for the king's house, harps and psalteries for the singers" (I Kings 10:12). Despite the rulership's growing use of music for institutional purposes, song and music retain their spontaneous and unrehearsed characteristics during the early years of the monarchy.<sup>18</sup> Though II Chronicles 7 credits David with organizing the Temple music, the early historical accounts highlight David as a skilled musician, singer and composer. The image of David's spirited dancing "before the Lord with all his might" (II Samuel 6:5,14) contrasts sharply with the pomp and rigid formality used for the same occasion as described in I Chronicles 15, and more likely reflects the type of religious music prevalent in David's time, as well as subsequent generations.<sup>19</sup>

16. Bathja Bayer, *Music*, in Vol. 12 of the Encyclopedia Judaica, Cecil Roth and Dr. Geoffrey Wigoder, eds. in chief, Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1982, p. 560.

17. See II Chronicles 20:21.

18. Bathja Bayer, Encyclopedia Judaica, pp. 559-560.

19. Werner, Interpreter's Dictionary, p. 459.

### C. After the Return from Babylon

With the return of some of the exiles to Palestine, the institutional life of the Jewish community resumed, but on a much smaller scale. From the writings of the Chronicler, it seems as though music played an even greater part in Temple worship than it did before the exile.<sup>20</sup> Music became more and more a part of worship, given a fixed place in the order of the service accompanying sacrifice (II Chronicles 29:27-28). Vocal and instrumental music was performed by families or guilds of professional musicians associating themselves with the tribe of Levi, claiming to have been commissioned by David (I Chronicles 6:16-32; I Chronicles 15:16-24; II Chronicles 20:19), perhaps hoping to instill a sense of traditional continuity while also validating their positions and elevating their standing in the eyes of the community.<sup>21</sup>

Eventually, the steady development of Temple music transformed song into a high art form, merging choral music with poetic lyrics. Solo singing in the Temple was rare, with most vocal music sung by the Levitical chorus.<sup>22</sup> Biblical references reflect the importance of singing in unison. For example, "The trumpeters and the singers were joined in unison to sound as one voice in praising and thanking God" (II Chronicles 5:13). Not surprisingly, with the growing use of music for sacred purposes, came more frequent biblical references to music, most of

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20. Compare II Samuel 6:5,14 with I Chronicles 15.

21. Kraeling and Mowry, Oxford, p. 297.

22. Werner, Grove, p. 622.

which refer to Temple music (e.g., I Chronicles 23:5; I Chronicle 25; II Chronicles 5:11-14).<sup>23</sup>

} Temple  
music

Ancient Israelite music, like the music of other Ancient Near Eastern civilizations, functioned as part of an oral tradition, thereby lacking any musical notation.<sup>24</sup> But unlike the music of the surrounding cultures, ancient Israel's vocal music of this period was severely regimented, leaving little or no room for improvisation.<sup>25</sup> This rigid and fixed method of music performance may reflect the community's desire for structure, order and centralization in reaction to the chaotic, uncontrolled trauma of their forced dispersion.

Biblical literature emphasizes Temple music. However, secular music remained part of ancient Israelite society.<sup>26</sup> We learn that the returning exiles brought back household singers with them, both male and female (Ezra 2:65; Nehemiah 7:67). We also find evidence outside of the Bible of Jews trained in secular music, such as the stele of King Sennacherib of Assyria which listed among the tributes received from King Hezekiah, many Jewish musicians.<sup>27</sup> Of course, we cannot overlook that an entire book of secular lyrics was canonized into the Bible. The lyrics of the Song of Songs, a collection of sensual love poetry, resembles the love songs of ancient Egypt and contemporary Arabia.<sup>28</sup>

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23. Amnon Shiloah, *Music and Religion in the Middle East*, in Vol. 10 of The Encyclopedia of Religion, Mircea Eliade, ed., NY: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987, p. 183.

24. Sendry, Music In Ancient Israel, pp. 205-209.

25. Werner, Grove, p. 622.

26. Kraeling and Mowry, Oxford, p. 299.

27. Werner, Grove, p. 615.

28. Kraeling and Mowry, Oxford, p. 300.

#### D. Conclusion

The destruction of the Temple in 70 CE ended the Temple-centered music of the Jewish people. However, Jewish secular music continued to develop, influenced by the cultures of the many nations to which Jews immigrated following the dispersion from Zion.<sup>29</sup> Religious music also survived, despite the official abolition of music from worship services instituted as a way of mourning the tragedy of 70 CE. Some eastern synagogues retained the practice of incorporating instrumental music in worship services.<sup>30</sup> While the choral tradition of the Levites was never notated or preserved through writings, vocal music persisted as an element of prayer in western synagogues. Hymns of praise, liturgical melodies and chanting of Scripture brought song into every aspect of the synagogue service, and continues until today.<sup>31</sup>

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29. Werner, Grove, p. 634.

30. Sendry, Music In Ancient Israel, p. 183.

31. Kraeling and Mowry, Oxford, pp. 301-302.

## Chapter 2

### What Is Song?



## A. Song is a Vehicle of Communication

In every time, in every culture, humans have communicated through song. The Rabbis, however, were particularly sensitive to the use of song as a vehicle of communication. Their midrashic writings emphasize the need for engaging in song -- with others, with God, and with oneself -- as a means of working toward redemption.

### 1. *Song is a Vehicle for Communicating Within Community*

Of the many verbs used to describe the act of singing, ana may best reveal the communicative nature of song. *Ana* (answer) suggests that song is about response, implying an active listener as well as an active speaker. When we sound our song as a response, we participate in an interdependent relationship with our audience.

When our song responds to others, it encourages them to sing their song, which Midrash illustrates through the song of Miriam:

The well [was due] to the merit of Miriam, who sang a song by the Sea, as it is said, "And Miriam sang (*vata'an*) to them: Sing to God" (Exodus 15:21), and by the waters of the well: "Then Israel sang this song: 'Rise up, O well, sing (*enu*) to it'" (Numbers 21:17). (Numbers Rabbah 1:2)<sup>32</sup>

At the shore of the Sea, Miriam utters a song which beckons the people to sing, but in the midst of the desert, Miriam sings as part of Israel. She no longer needs to instruct them to sing. They have found their own voices and join together as one community in a song of response.

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32. All texts cited in this paper, with the exception of Philo, were translated by the author.

This midrash praises Miriam, venerating her and her ability to reach out to others in song, as a model for us to follow. However, the Rabbis understand that Miriam is exceptional. Often, we forget to sing in relationship to those around us: "They (the Israelites) sang to God and not to human beings. When [will they sing to people]? '[When] He (God) brings Himself salvation with His right hand and holy arm'" (Psalms 98:1).<sup>33</sup> We suffer from narrow vision, disregarding each other in our eagerness to sing praises to God. Only after redemption will we broaden the focus of our song, singing to one another, as well as to God.

At first reading, this midrash seems to assert that the Divine is responsible for redirecting our song, since the biblical text emphasizes that God will bring redemption. However, when we look at the entirety of the verse and study the midrash in its larger context, we discover a very different message. The passage preceding this pericope quotes the beginning of Psalms 98:1: "Sing to the Lord a new song, for He has done marvelous things." The Rabbis explain that this "new song" is a future song of Israel.<sup>34</sup> We enable God to bring salvation by singing a song we have not yet sung: *ana*, Miriam's song of response.

We find support for this teaching elsewhere in Midrash. The Rabbis teach that Jerusalem will only be rebuilt by means of our songs and sung praises, and offer us the following reminder:

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33. Midrash Tanhuma ha-Nidpas, *b'Shallah* 11. This midrash responds to the redundancy of "to the Lord" in the biblical verse: "Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to the Lord and spoke, saying: 'I will sing to the Lord.'" (Exodus 15:1).

34. Midrash Tanhuma ha-Nidpas, *b'Shallah* 10.

*New Song*

This is what you find in the building of the Second Temple, as it is said: "When the builders laid the foundation of the Temple of God . . . they sang (*va'anu*) to one another in praising and singing thanks to God" (Ezra 3:10-11). (Midrash on Psalms 147:3)

When we communicate with each other through songs of response, we help God to bring redemption, a time when all will sing to one other.

## 2. *Song is a Vehicle for Communicating With God*

We read that God banished Adam from Eden for neglecting to sing praises, leaving God to exclaim, "Behold, here I am, talking to myself!"<sup>35</sup> God's expectation that we will sing may exceed our desire to do so. Our refusal to sing may bring divine retribution, as it did with Adam, or at least result in God's withholding of reward.<sup>36</sup> In either case, when we neglect to sing, we distance ourselves from God.

Both physically and metaphorically, song functions as a gateway into God's dominion.<sup>37</sup> The Rabbis explain that just as our ancestors offered up the smoke of sacrifice to God, so do we raise our voices as a gift to the Divine.<sup>38</sup> We may think of song as a meager response to God's miracles and wondrous acts.<sup>39</sup> But while we may feel the need to offer

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35. Midrash Tanhuma Buber, *Bereshit* 1. The proof text following this statement, "Let me sing to my beloved" (Isaiah 5:1), emphasizes that God and Adam communicate through song.

36. God revoked a previous decision to appoint Hezekiah as messiah because he never sang to God (B.T. *Sanhedrin* 94a).

37. "*Sha-ar ha-shir*" (the gate of song) is the name of a Temple gate (M. *Sheqalim* 6:3; *Middot* 2:6). The Rabbis use the verbal association between *sha-ar* (gate) and *shir* (song) to build a midrash explaining that song is the gate of God which the faithful enter (Midrash Tanhuma ha-Nidpas, *b'Shallah* 10).

38. Genesis Rabbah 43:9.

39. In various midrashim we bemoan our song as inadequate thanks for all God's works, e.g., Midrash on Psalms 22:1; Exodus Rabbah 23:9; Mekhilta d'Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai on Exodus 15:1.

something grander, our tradition assures us that God wants nothing more than what lies within us. God speaks to us through the text, saying, "Although you praise me with psalteries and harps, it (your praise) is not sweet (*areiv*) to me unless it comes from your throat (*bi-gronam*)."<sup>40</sup> Within our *garon* (throat) resides our *ron* (song). We do not need to look any further than ourselves to produce the music God desires; the song of the self is God's most treasured and desired gift.

The previous midrash uses the word *areiv* to describe how God experiences our song. *Areiv* may refer to a sweet or pleasant sound, but it is also often used regarding food. The text, in suggesting that God experiences our song as something to be tasted, associates song with sacrifice. A lengthy talmudic discussion makes this implicit connection explicit, determining that song is an indispensable element of ritual sacrifice.<sup>41</sup> The destruction of the Temple prevents us from offering sacrificial smoke to God. However, we always carry with us the alters of our throats, from which we offer God the melody of our song.

#### B. Song is the Coming Together of the Human and the Divine

Philo writes that we "are mixtures with human and divine blended in us and formed into a harmony in the proportions of perfect music."<sup>42</sup> The potential to create song dwells within us at all times. However, sometimes our base desires and passions overpower the divine essence that is part of our being. We must fight an internal battle, struggling to control our human passions and quell our base urges, thus allowing our

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40. Midrash on Psalms 149:5.

41. E.g., B.T. *Arakhin* 11a-12a and Numbers Rabbah 6:10.

42. Philo, *On the Change of Names*, p. 237.

divine nature to emerge.<sup>43</sup> After successfully achieving the balance of harmony within, we sing songs of victory, thanksgiving and praise to God.<sup>44</sup>

The Rabbis agree with Philo that song grows from a merging of the human and the Divine. However, the midrashic tradition uses a different image to illustrate the process that leads us to sing. Philo uses words of war to explain that after we successfully battle our temptations and achieve inner peace, we sing to God. According to the Rabbis, we sing when God's presence (*Shekhina*) rests upon us.<sup>45</sup> We do not entice the *Shekhina* by repressing our desires, but rather, by releasing them. Through our faith -- our determination to sing -- we bring God to us.<sup>46</sup> For example, David sank toward Gehenna, lost the *Ruach haKodesh* (the Holy Spirit), and asked God to return it to him. God did as David requested, and, as a result, David sang a new song.<sup>47</sup> Philo perceives song as a victory of self-restraint and intellectual achievement; Midrash understands song as a consequence of our pure appreciation for the Divine and our wonder at God's holy works.

Just as Philo and the Rabbis take different positions regarding how we come to sing, they also differ in their understanding of what song we sing. Philo believes that the courageous and triumphant sing songs of

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43. Philo, *On Drunkenness*, p. 373.

44. Philo, *On Drunkenness*, p. 373.

45. "When Israel came up from the Sea, the Holy Spirit rested on them and they recited their song" (T. *Sotah* 6:2; Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, *Masekhta d'Shirta*, Chapter 1; Mekhilta d'Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai on Exodus 15:1; Exodus Rabbah 23:2).

46. In reward for Israel's faith, the *Shekhina* came to them and they sang the Song at the Sea (Midrash Tanhuma ha-Nidpas, *b'Shallah* 10; Exodus Rabbah 23:2; Yalqut Shimoni, Vol. I, *remez* 140).

47. Midrash on Psalms 40:2.

victory, while the cowardly and unfortunate wail in weakness and defeat.<sup>48</sup> The Rabbis, however, had a much more egalitarian view of song:

Rabbi Nechemiah said: "When our ancestors came up from the Sea, they saw the corpses of the sinful men who made them serve with rigor and hard labor . . . They asked to sing a song (*shira*), and the Holy Spirit rested (*sharat*) upon them. Even the most seemingly insignificant of all the Israelites could sing the Song just like Moses" (P.T. *Sotah* 5:4).

The word association between *shira* and *sharat* emphasizes that God's spirit rested upon every Israelite, enabling each of them to sing.

According to rabbinic tradition, God does not ask that we engage in fierce battles or search for deeply buried wisdom in order to sing. All we need to do is recognize God's greatness and God will come to us. Once we desire to sing, God will place song in our mouths.<sup>49</sup>

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48. Philo, *On Drunkenness*, p. 373. Throughout this paper, "Song" with a capitalized "S" refers to the Song at the Sea.

49. Pesiqta Rabbati 9:2. Most midrashim agree that God's presence rests upon us and then we sing. While the majority of midrashim which deal with this issue state first that the Holy Spirit rested upon Israel, and then tell us that Israel sang, one midrash cites these two events in reverse order: "Israel merited reciting the Song and then having the *Shekhina* rest upon them" (Exodus Rabbah 22:3). The difference in the word order most likely comes from a scribal error and probably does not reflect a change in the theological implication of the statement. The fact that another midrash in the same compilation describes the same incident with the more common wording supports this assertion (Exodus Rabbah 23:2). However, the Babylonian Talmud does explicitly state that song sometimes precedes the arrival of the Divine Presence. We read that while David only sang the psalms beginning, "To David, a psalm," after the *Shekhina* rested upon him, David sang those psalms introduced as, "A psalm of David," before the *Shekhina* rested upon him (B.T. *Pesahim* 117a). But this scenario is only suggested regarding David, who the midrashic tradition deems as a man of extraordinary faith and unsurpassed musical skills. Thus, this midrash may not represent a contradiction to the tradition, but rather, an exception to it.

### C. Torah is God's Song

Midrashim often see song as a metaphor for Torah. For example, David expresses his love for Torah, exclaiming, "It (Torah) is not a burden, but a song."<sup>50</sup> We also read in Eliyyahu Rabbah, "There is no true song of joy but Torah."<sup>51</sup> Throughout midrashic literature, the Rabbis use song to represent different aspects of Torah, such as the delight and strength that Torah brings us, as well as Torah's binding nature.<sup>52</sup>

In giving Israel the Torah, God chooses us as the instruments to sound this precious work; Torah is the divine song that sings through us. But even the most masterfully created instrument cannot sound a note of music if it is not played. Midrash teaches that as individual Jews, we must take responsibility for learning, singing and teaching God's song. We do this by studying Torah, living Torah, and inspiring others to engage in Torah.

#### 1. *We Sing God's Song When We Study Torah*

Resh Lakish said: Whomever occupies himself with the study of Torah by night, the Holy One, Blessed be He, draws over him a cord of lovingkindness by day, as it is said: "The Lord commands His lovingkindness by day," because "by night His song is with me" (B.T. *Chagigah* 12b).

In a sense, this midrash suggests that Torah is similar to a lullaby. God, our loving parent, cradles us at night with the protective wrappings of the Torah, divine song. But while babies passively listen to lullabies, we must

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50. Midrash on Psalms 19:41.

51. Eliyyahu Rabbah *piska* 18.

52. Torah is a song of strength (Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana 5:9); God appoints the song of Torah to testify against Israel (Sifre Deuteronomy, *piska* 306).

learn the words of Torah for ourselves. Babies lie helpless, completely dependent upon others for receiving care and protection. We are able to clothe ourselves in the shelter of divine blessing by singing God's song through the study of Torah. Unlike the song of the lullaby, which offers comfort for the moment and no longer, the song of Torah ensures sustained protection, both through the day and in the world to come.<sup>53</sup>

## 2. *We Sing God's Song When We Live Torah*

Torah, like song, is not simply meant to be learned, but practiced as well. While we must study the laws of Torah, we must also live its teachings; we must learn the lyrics and sing the music. The Rabbis view this as an interdependent process. Rabbi Joshua warns that though we may repeatedly perform *mitzvot*, if we do not study them, it is as if we sow and do not harvest. Similarly, if we study Torah but forget its teachings (by not practicing them), we are like women who conceive and then give birth to stillborn children.<sup>54</sup>

Rabbi Akiva responds to Rabbi Joshua's statement saying, "*Zemer bi t'dirah zemer* - Song abides within me, constantly song (is with me)."<sup>55</sup> Song represents permanency. We must make Torah our song, through study and practice, if we expect it to carry it with us at all times. We plant the seed of Torah when we study; we bring Torah to life through song.

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53. B.T. *Hagigah* 12b.

54. The Hebrew, which reads, "*Isha holedet v'kiveret*," may also refer to a woman who aborts her fetus and then buries it (T. *Parah* 4:7, *A hilot* 16:8).

55. *Ibid.*



### 3. *Torah is the Song Each of Us Sings With God*

Just as a performance represents the coming together of composer and musician, so does the song of Torah represent the coming together of God and Jew. As Israel we receive the song of Torah, binding us to God as a community. However, God places the song of Torah in the mouth of every Jew in every generation. Therefore, all of us are responsible for pursuing and maintaining our personal covenant with God. We all must sing God's song in our own voices. A talmudic injunction illustrates this notion, charging each of us to write our own Torah even if we have inherited one from our parents, citing as a proof text, "Now write for yourselves this song" (Deuteronomy 31:19).<sup>56</sup>

Puccini wrote one "*Mi Chiamano Mimi*," but each artist who sings it brings her own talent, temperament and interpretation to its performance, making the aria her own, impossible for anyone else to duplicate. The same is true of Torah. Each of us sings Torah as a soloist, performing a unique work which expresses our individual relationship with God. We see this expressed in Philo's description of a musical ritual following an oral discourse on the Scriptures, in which all present sing their songs to God before the entire gathering:

Then the president rises and sings a hymn composed as an address to God, either a new one of his own composition or an old one by poets of an earlier day who have left behind them hymns in many measures and melodies, hexameters and iambics, lyrics suitable for processions or in libations and at the altars or for the chorus whilst standing or dancing, with careful metrical arrangements to fit the various evolutions. After him all the others take their turn as they are arranged and in the proper order, while all the rest listen in complete silence except when

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56. B.T. *Sanhedrin* 21b.

they have to chant the closing lines or refrains, for then they all lift up their voices, men and women alike. When everyone finished his hymn, the young men bring in the tables (Philo, *The Contemplative Life*, p. 161).

This ritual includes not only the sharing of individual songs, but also the communal practice of singing Torah, as the text continues:

After the supper they hold the sacred vigil which is conducted in the following way. They rise up all together and, standing in the middle of the refectory, form themselves first into two choirs, one of men and one of women . . . Then they sing hymns to God composed of many measures and set to many melodies, sometimes chanting together, sometimes taking up the harmony antiphonally . . . Then when each choir has separately done its own part in the feast . . . they mix and both together become a single choir, a copy of the choir set up of old beside the Red Sea in honour of the wonders there wrought (Philo, *The Contemplative Life*, p. 161).

We enter into covenant with God both as individuals and as a nation. Therefore, each of us sings our own song of Torah, and we also join together to sing a communal song of Torah. As Jews, we express our unique interactions with Torah through solo song, and as Israel, we form a timeless choir of past, present and future generations, with voices of varied perspective and experience joining together in shared tradition.

#### 4. *Our Singing of Torah Inspires Others to Sing*

When we engage in Torah, our individual souls encounter God's teachings, transforming a communal text into a personal experience. We then sing, opening this unique Torah to those around us. Song, a gift offered before God, also functions as a gift for community, since it shares the beauty of music and teaching with others. We see this exemplified

through David, who studied Torah until midnight and then offered God songs of praise until morning.<sup>57</sup> The strains of his music awoke the people of Israel and motivated them to study.<sup>58</sup> We can all emulate David, singing Torah by reaching into ourselves, up toward God, and out to each other.

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57. B.T. *Berakhot* 3b.

58. *Pesiqta Rabbati* 17:3.

## Chapter 3

### Who Sings?

## A. Every part of God's Creation Sings<sup>59</sup>

The earth, the heavens, and all that is in them sing. God created the universe for the very purpose of song and music.<sup>60</sup>

### 1. *Inanimate Creation Sings*

God's decision to create the universe was inspired by a desire for song, and midrashic tradition agrees that the waters were the first to sing God's praises. However, various midrashim reveal different rabbinic perceptions regarding God's appreciation of the song of the waters. For example, one strain of tradition argues that the waters sang first simply because they were created first, and their song only served to whet God's expectations for human song.<sup>61</sup> Other texts do not clearly state when the waters sang, and this ambiguity suggests that they may have sung after other creation existed. This tradition highlights the merit of the waters for taking the initiative to sing first, emphasizing that God cherished the song of the waters in their own right, and bestowed eternal honor upon them in reward for their song.<sup>62</sup>

The waters sang the first song of creation, but the earth sang the first song of redemption. We learn that God revoked a decision to designate Hezekiah as messiah, because the king never sang songs of praise. Yet the earth sang in Hezekiah's place, hoping this would satisfy God's desire for song, and thus persuade the Eternal One to bring the messiah.<sup>63</sup> This

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59. Even the Sabbath sings. She stopped Adam from singing a hymn to her, and instead joined him in singing a hymn to God (Midrash on Psalms 92:3).

60. *Alphabet of Rabbi Akiva* in *Bet ha-Midrash* 3:12-13; Midrash on Psalms 33:1, 148:5.

61. Genesis Rabbah 5:1.

62. Midrash on Psalms 93:2.

63. B.T. *Sanhedrin* 94a and Yalqut Shimoni, Vol. I, *remez* 415.

midrash teaches that while human song possesses the capability to bring redemption, this power lies dormant until we share the earth's passion, and choose to sing.

We must consciously open our mouths to utter song, and we must also consciously open our ears to hear song. All creation sings, even the sun as it moves through the sky, but often we fail to recognize the many melodies that surround us.<sup>64</sup> For example, how many of us listen to the sound of the corn stalks rustling in the springtime wind, and hear the ears of corn bursting into song?<sup>65</sup> The Rabbis enlighten us to the fact that the songs of creation surrounds us; it is up to us to take notice of their melodies.

## 2. *Animals and Creatures Sing*

As humans, we sometimes close our ears to the songs of both inanimate and animate creation. Even those of us seemingly most appreciative of music, dismiss the songs of any other than ourselves. King David, after completing the Book of Psalms, began to boast that no other creature in the universe sang more songs of praise to God than he. The king was soon confronted by a frog who corrected the king, stating, "David, don't be so boastful. I sing more songs and hymns of praise than you."<sup>66</sup>

Throughout midrashic literature we find humbling reminders that we are not the only creatures to sing, nor to recognize God's greatness.

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64. Midrash Tanhuma ha-Nidpas, *A hare Mot* 9 and Yalqut Shimoni to Joshua, *remez* 22.

65. B.T. *Rosh Hashana* 8a.

66. Yalqut Shimoni to Psalms, *remez* 889.

Repeated throughout the tradition is a midrash which describes how cows, pulling the wagon carrying the Ark, sing a song in its honor.<sup>67</sup> Each compilation uses this midrash differently, revealing several lessons that we learn from these animals. For example, in the Babylonian Talmud's account, Israel learns the song itself from the cows, while the authors of *Genesis Rabbah* praise the cows for their ability to sing spontaneously, especially since Moses had to work so hard to teach the Levites their song.<sup>68</sup>

## B. All Human Beings Sing

### 1. *Babies and Fetuses*

Before we do anything else, we sing; we sing even before leaving the womb. Midrashic tradition contains several references to babies and fetuses singing. They, representing the promise and the early beginnings of life, sing praises to God, the Guardian of life.

When Pharaoh decreed that all newborn Israelite boys be killed, the pregnant Israelite women delivered in a field and then entrusted their newborns to God's care. These babies later sang at the Sea in praise of their surrogate parent, God, Who nurtures life.<sup>69</sup> After crossing the Sea and seeing the Egyptians lying dead, all of the Israelites, including the nursing infants and those still living in the womb, sang in praise of God, Who redeems life.<sup>70</sup> When God demanded a suitable surety before

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67. B.T. *Avodah Zarah* 24b; *Genesis Rabbah* 54:4; *Midrah Tanhuma ha-Nidpas, Vayiqahel* 7; *Eliyahu Rabbah piska* 11.

68. The cows sing the song beginning "Sing, O sing, acacia tree" and then Israel repeats this song (B.T. *Avodah Zarah* 24b); *Genesis Rabbah* 54:4.

69. *Exodus Rabbah* 23:8.

70. T. *Sotah* 6:4; B.T. *Ketuvot* 7b; *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Masekhta d'Shirta*, Chapter 1; *Midrash Tanhuma ha-Nidpas, b'Shallah* 11.

entrusting the Torah to Israel, the babies and fetuses sang out, offering themselves as guarantors to God, Who ensures life.<sup>71</sup>

Our young express greater faith in God than we do: Fetuses sing praise of God from the midst of water, while Israel sings praise once the waters close behind them; nursing infants sing while they are still dependent on another for food and sustenance, but Israel sings only after gaining independence. "Rabbi Meir says, 'Even fetuses in their mothers' wombs [sang]. . . and the infant detached the nipple from his mouth and uttered song, as it is said, 'From the mouth of babies and nursing infants You founded strength (*oz*)'" (Psalms 8:2).<sup>72</sup> God recognizes the strength (*oz*) present in the song of infants. Israel, however, discovers this strength in God, "God is my strength (*ozi*) and my song. . . (Ex. 15:2)," but overlooks its presence in our youth.

## 2. *The Dead*

Our song precedes our birth and survives our death.<sup>73</sup> The Midrash on Psalms and *Pesiqta Rabbati* both use the same biblical verse to support this midrashic claim: "Let the saints rejoice in glory; they will sing songs of joy upon their beds" (Psalms 149:5). The first compilation builds its midrash upon the reference to *mishkavotam* (their beds), treating this word literally instead of as a metaphor or euphemism. According to this interpretation, the righteous sing after death, in joy and thanks for the beds that God had prepared for them.<sup>74</sup> *Pesiqta Rabbati* agrees that the

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71. Midrash on Psalms 8:5.

72. T. *Sotah* 6:4.

73. For the concept of resurrection through song, see B.T. *Sanhedrin* 91b and *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Masekhta d'Shirta*, Chapter 1.

74. Midrash on Psalms 149:5.



righteous sing songs of praise (*mikalsim*) upon departing from this world (*silukan*).<sup>75</sup> But this midrash focuses more on the singing itself, rather than the reason for the singing. We learn that unlike the living, the dead cannot speak; all they can do is sing. And they cannot sing just any song: "They only sing songs in the language of joyous praise, as it is written: 'The voice of joyous song and salvation (*yishua*) is in the tents of the righteous'" (Psalms 118:15).

The biblical verse preceding this proof text repeats a verse sung at the Sea: "The Lord is my strength and song, and will be my salvation (*yishua*)" (Psalms 118:14). When we emerged from the birth canal of the Sea, we celebrated by singing of a time when we would again experience spiritual rebirth. "*Ozi v'zimrat Ya vayihi li yishua* -- God is my strength and my song" The voice of God sustains our song even after we lose our ability to speak. Our body is an instrument of God's song while we are living, but God's joyous song abides in our soul before we enter our bodies and after we leave them. Song is the source of our eternal salvation.<sup>76</sup>

### 3. *The Wicked and the Righteous*

Song in midrashic literature often appears as praise of God by the righteous. The following midrash explores this notion and asserts two unexpected notions: the righteous sing both songs of complaint and songs of praise to God, while the wicked only sing songs of praise to God. The text analyzes the different ways that the righteous and the wicked relate to God through song:

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75. *Pesiqta Rabbati* 2:3.

76. We find a specific example regarding the sons of Korach, who achieved immortality through singing in Gehenna (B.T. *Sanhedrin* 110a).

"Sing in the Lord, O righteous ones; the praise of the upright is beautiful" (Psalms 33:1). These words are to be considered in the light of what Scripture says elsewhere, "Your lips, my bride, drop honey" (Song of Songs 4:11). The Holy One says [to Israel], "I love to hear your voice. Be it a song of complaint or a song of praise, do not restrain your voice [from singing to me]." Why? "Because your voice is sweet (*areiv*) (and the vision of you is beautiful)" (Song of Songs 2:14). When they said to Him, "Behold, Jacob is complaining," He replied to them, "Because of whom? Is it not because of Me? Whether [Jacob sings in] complaint or praise, it is a joy to me," as it is said, "(Thus says the Lord,) 'When Jacob sings, it is joyful'" (Jeremiah 31:7).

And so Scripture, in writing "Your lips, my bride, drop honey," means [singing] with your lips. And with your tongue? It is written, "Honey and milk are under your tongue" (Song of Songs 4:11). And with the roof of your mouth? It is written, "The roof of your mouth is like the finest wine" (Song of Songs 7:10). With your throat? It is written, "Let the high praises of God be in their throat" (Psalms 149:6).

Everyone sings (*m'ron'nim*). The righteous sing (*m'ron'nim*), as it is said, "Sing in the Lord, O righteous ones" (Psalms 33:1). The wicked sing (*m'ron'nim*), as it is written, "The song of the wicked is brief (*mi-karov*)" (Job 20:5). You find it is so with Pharaoh. When Moses and Aaron first came to him, he said, "Who is the Lord (that I should listen to his voice?)" (Exodus 5:2). [But] when he received his punishment, he began to sing, "The Lord is righteous, and my people and I are wicked" (Exodus 9:27). But the wicked do not sing before Him until He brings plagues upon them. This is not so of the righteous. It is not written here, "TO the Lord," but rather, "IN the Lord." The moment they see Him, they immediately sing, as it is said, "Israel saw the great work that God did" (Exodus 14:31). Immediately, they began singing, "Then sang Moses (and the people of Israel this song to the Lord)" (Exodus 15:1). Thus [Scripture] also says, "Moses and Aaron went into the Tent of Meeting (and the glory of the Lord appeared unto all the people). And there came out fire from before the Lord. . . and when all the people saw it, they sang out" (Leviticus 9:23-23).

. . . Although all sing before Him, the songs of the righteous and the upright (*y'sharim*), and the upright (*v't'meimim*) are [the most] beautiful to Him, as it is said, "Sing in the Lord, O righteous ones, the praise of the upright is beautiful. Praise the

Lord with harp, sing to Him with a psaltery of ten strings. Sing to Him a new song (*shir hadash*).” To He who did something new, who left the heavens and caused His presence to dwell on earth, as it is said, “Let them make for me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them” (Exodus 25:8). (Midrash on Psalms 33:1)

God loves Israel as a husband loves his wife. Spouses do not always speak to each other with praise; sometimes they quarrel and complain. But more important than what they say, is that they share their feelings with each other. The same is true for Israel and God. God does not ask that we always sing praises, but encourages us to sing songs of complaint. Why? “Because your voice is sweet (*areiv*)” (Song 2:14). *Areiv* meaning “sweet; pleasant; tasty,” emphasizes the theme of pleasurable taste and sound developed in the beginning of this text. *Areiv* also means “surety; pledge,” thus suggesting that Israel’s voice acts as a surety, guaranteeing the covenant between herself and God. Any song Israel sings sounds beautiful to God. As long as God hears Israel’s song, their relationship remains dynamic.

God lovingly accepts our song, whether it be joyful or angry, but it must be a song of truth, sung with the entirety of our being. As we learn from the midrash, Israel’s song bears the heavy and tantalizing sweetness of honey when it is sung with every part of our mouth: roof, lips, tongue and throat. We are the righteous ones, because we offer ourselves to God fully, without pretence.

In contrast to the righteous, the wicked have only one song, which they sing in reaction to divine retribution. Their song drips with the sickening syrup of insincere praise. While Israel and God interact in relationship with one another, sharing true feelings and whole hearts, the wicked only relate to God as a threatening power, disregarding God

unless they feel threatened. Thus, God finds Israel's song, even if it expresses complaint, more beautiful than the song of praise sung by the wicked.

When the wicked sing, they sing to God; they are other than God. The righteous sing in God; they are a part of God. The wicked use song as a vehicle of self-protection, but the righteous experience song as the merging of the human and the Divine. The sexual imagery presented in this midrash emphasizes the powerful and intimate union of God and Israel. The two lovers become one, and song emerges as the root of Israel's passion and God's desire: "The righteous sing in the Lord." Israel sings God inward, seducing the Divine into her body through the tastes of her mouth, and breathing the Eternal One into her soul through the tantalizing sweetness of her song.

While Israel knows God with part of her very being, Pharaoh asks, "Who is the Lord?" (Exodus 5:2) as one would ask about a stranger. The proof text ends here, but this biblical verse continues, "Who is the Lord that I should listen to His voice?" The righteous understand that God's voice is as close as our own, speaking and singing within us. The wicked, however, close their ears to God's voice and therefore ignore God as a distant, even nonexistent entity. They only sing after their ears are pried open by the screams brought by plague and devastation.

"The righteous sing in the Lord," but "the song of the wicked is short-lived (*mi-karov*)" (Job 20:5). Ironically, the word *mi-karov* literally translates as "from near" or "from within." While this appears to contradict the developing theme of the midrash, it actually serves to deepen its message. In order to engage in an intimate and close relationship, one must move beyond the self; only by reaching out can we

draw another in. Israel reaches outward to God with her voice, and draws the Divine inward in song: "The song of the righteous is in the Lord." The wicked, however, never extend themselves beyond their own selfish desires. They close their ears to all voices but their own: "Who is the Lord that I should hear His voice?"

"Everyone sings (*m'ron'nim*). The righteous sing (*m'ron'nim*) . . . The wicked sing (*m'ron'nim*)." Both the wicked and the righteous sing the song "*m'ron'nim*," but while the wicked only sing it as an insincere song of praise, the righteous sing it in its entirety, both as a song of bitter complaint and heartfelt praise. The righteous sing another type of song in addition to *m'ron'nim*; they also sing the song of *shir*. The midrash hints at this through an apparent redundancy in the text: "Although all sing before Him, the songs of the righteous, the upright (*y'sharim*) and the upright (*v't'meimim*) are [the most] beautiful to Him." *Y'sharim* and *v't'meimim*, both meaning "upright," describe who sings the songs which God finds most beautiful. However, the first word, *y'sharim*, carries a double implication, describing who sings, and also implying what they sing: only the righteous, those who are *y'sharim*, carry the song of *shir* within them.

This midrash begins with explicit sexual imagery and builds to a metaphor suggesting the merging of the human and the Divine. From the middle of the text through the end, the physicality becomes increasingly less sexual, and the description of the relationship between Israel and God shifts to a more communal, less intimate closeness. Whereas we first experienced God through the songs and tastes of our mouth, we now experience God through the visions and sights of our eyes. Whereas we first encountered God as the song within our bodies, we now encounter

God as the fire within the sanctuary. Earlier we sang *m'ron'nim*, a song of deep passion and desire; now we sing *shir*, a song of awed reverence and veneration.

All people are capable of singing both songs. The wicked must simply choose to accept God's invitation to sing a new song (*shir hadash*). God, desiring to come close to us, asks us to build a sanctuary, a dwelling place for the Divine Presence on earth. We transform our bodies into sanctuaries when we open our ears and voices to God, thus merging as one through song.

#### 4. *Those Talented in Music, and Those Who are Not Talented*

God created the universe for the purpose of song, and God, the Creator, gave all of creation its voice. This explains why God desires the song of the frog, as well as the song of King David. However, the tradition teaches that God does have discriminating taste, and treasures beautiful songs and talented singers. The Rabbis explain that, although ten people wrote the Book of Psalms, David is given credit for composing the Psalms in their entirety because God finds his song to be sweeter and more beautiful than the songs of the others.<sup>77</sup>

Despite God's appreciation for exceptional music, God wants to hear everyone sing. But sometimes we forget that we sing for God, and instead we sing for our own benefit and self-acclaim. Hyrcanos ben Levi, appointed to oversee Temple song, sang better than any of his peers.<sup>78</sup> However, unlike Ben Gamla, Ben Katin and King Monobaz, who donated

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77. *Pesiqta Rabbati* 9:2 and *Midrash on Psalms* 1:6.

78. Also referred to as Hygros or Hugrum. See *M. Sheqalim* 5:1 and *Song of Songs Rabbah* 3:6.

Temple gifts of precious vessels and utensils to be used by others, Hyrcanos ben Levi refused to teach song to anyone else. The Rabbis cited Proverbs 10:7 to proclaim the outcomes of these contrasting acts: "Of the first, it is written, 'The memory of the righteous is for blessing,' and of these (including Hygros ben Levi), it is written, 'but the name of the wicked shall rot.'"<sup>79</sup>

We are not blessed for our gifts, but for our giving; we are not rewarded for our ability to sing, but for our willingness to share song with others. When we help others to sing, we give to them and to God as well, because God wants to hear the music of every person's voice. Unfortunately, many of us do not heed this lesson. But in the time to come, when all will recognize the Divine as Sovereign, God will enable all of us to sing, as we read, "When the Lord reigns, all will be fit (*mikashrim*) [to sing]."<sup>80</sup> We are all *mikashrim* (worthy of song), even in this world, because *shir* (song) dwells within us.

Often we disregard the potential for song that resides in others, distracted by the musical imperfections of their voices. We are like the king who refuses to respond to a poor, yet noble man, whose hand bears the burn of a scar.<sup>81</sup> Unlike humans, God disregards the aesthetics of heartfelt song. God accepts praise from all who offer it, saying, "'Sing praises to me and you will be fit (*tov*) before me,' as it is said, 'For it is good (*tov*) to sing praises to our God'" (Psalms 147:1).<sup>82</sup> In the context of this midrash, we may also translate the word *tov* in the Psalms proof text, "*Ki tov zamrah Eloheinu*," as a noun instead of an adjective: "For the one who

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79. M. *Yoma* 3:9; T. *Parah* 4:7.

80. Midrash on Psalms 147:1.

81. *Ibid.*

82. *Ibid.*

is fit (*tov*) sings to our God." All of us carry song (*shir*) within us, making us suitable (*mikashrim*) to sing before God. We only need to find the courage to raise the song from our soul to our lips. Once we feel confident to do so, we must share our ability with others, helping them to do the same.

### C. We Sing as Individuals, and as a Nation

#### 1. *We Each Sing Our Own Song*

All people sing unique songs, for we learn, "As the Psalms were recited by ten people, so were ten kinds of songs sung."<sup>83</sup> We all sing our own song, and God values every one, as we read, "Because they (the sons of Korach) were three, they sang three [songs] . . . and God said to them, 'Every one of them, each and every one, is beloved by me.'"<sup>84</sup> God treasures our songs as a mother loves her children, appreciating each child's individuality, but loving them all equally.

The midrashic tradition also presents the apparently contradictory notion that God finds David's song more beautiful than others.<sup>85</sup> One verse cited as a proof text is II Samuel 23:1: "These are the last words of David, the son of Jesse, the man raised up on high, the anointed one of the God of Jacob, the sweet singer of Israel." Like David, each of us wears many faces. Just as all of us sing our own song, so does every part of us sing a different song. Which song does God find the most beautiful? Not the song of our status ("the man raised up on high"), not the song of our majesty ("the anointed one of the God of Jacob"), not even the song of our

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83. Midrash on Psalms 1:6.

84. Midrash on Psalms 45:2.

85. Pesiqta Rabbati 9:2 and Midrash on Psalms 1:6.



musical prowess ("the sweet singer of Israel"). It is the pure song of our being ("David, the son of Jesse") that God loves most, for as the midrash reminds us, this is the song of David that is the Psalms, as it is written, "The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended" (Psalms 72:20).<sup>86</sup>

## 2. *Israel Sings*

God values our individual voices, but what God truly desires is to hear them raised in song as a community:

Another explanation of, "Then sang Moses" (Exodus 15:1): It is written, "She opens her mouth in wisdom and the law of kindness (*Torat hesed*) is on her tongue" (Prov. 31:26). From the day when God created the world, until Israel stood near the Sea, none could be found who had sung a song to God except Israel. God created Adam, but he did not sing a song. God saved Noah from the flood, and he did not sing a song. He delivered Abraham from the burning furnace and from the kings, and he did not utter song. He saved Isaac from the knife and he did not sing a song. He also saved Jacob from the angel, and from Esau, and from the men of Shechem, and he did not utter song. When Israel came to the Sea and the waters parted for them, immediately they sang a song before God, saying, "Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song to God." This is what is meant by, "She opens her mouth in wisdom." God said, "I have been awaiting these." The word *az* is purely joyful, as it is said, "Then (*az*) our mouth was filled with laughter" (Psalms 31:2). (Exodus Rabbah 23:4)

She who "opens her mouth in wisdom" and who bears "the law of kindness on her tongue" is described in Proverbs 31:10 as a virtuous woman (*eshet hayil*), who is difficult to find. Her midrashic counterpart, Israel, is also a rare gem. It is not Israel's virtuousness (*hayil*) which sets her apart from others, but her ingenuity in singing as a chorus (*hola*),

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86. Midrash on Psalms 1:6.

which distinguishes her from those who came before. Noah is beloved by God for his righteousness, Abraham for his faith and Jacob for his determination, and God enters into covenants with each of them. But only Israel possesses the wisdom of shared song, signifying that she seeks out the strength and purpose present in community. God enters into covenant with Israel and seals it with the gift of Torah, entrusting her to share its light with the world: "She opened her mouth in wisdom and the *Torah* of lovingkindness was placed on her tongue. She looks well to the ways of her house" (Proverbs 31:26-27).

It takes many voices to produce a full sound. Our individual voices may carry to heaven with clarity and full timber, but a song sung by one rises thinly and dissipates before reaching most human ears. One person alone cannot bring redemption to the world, no matter how sweet or resounding his/her song may be. But a chorus of voices carries testimony of God's greatness to the four corners of the earth, despite individual weaknesses and shortcomings. When Israel sings as one nation at the Sea, all the nations of the world hear her voice, as the text teaches, "Then our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with joyful songs; then said they among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them'" (Psalms 126:2).

#### *D. The Nations of the World Sing*

Our tradition reminds us that God resides in the song of every human being. When the nations of the world heard that Pharaoh and his army drowned in the Sea and the Egyptian kingdom was destroyed, they

joined Israel in singing the Song.<sup>87</sup> However, the Rabbis also teach that God finds Israel's songs to be the most beautiful, as it is said, "sweet are the songs of Israel" (II Samuel 23:1).<sup>88</sup> What makes Israel's songs sweeter than any other? The biblical verse following this proof text provides us with the answer: "God's spirit speaks within me and His word is on my tongue" (II Samuel 23:1). All sing in praise of God's power, but only Israel sings Torah.

#### E. The Heavens Sing

##### 1. *Angels Sing*

God desires both human song and angelic song, though the two satisfy very different purposes. Human song, sometimes sweet and sometimes musically flawed, serves as a vehicle of communication and relationship with the Divine. The song of the angel, however, provides God with aesthetic perfection. Such music is unknown by humans, and Philo suggests it would be both thrilling and dangerous for us to hear:

If the sound of it ever reached our ears, there would be produced irrepressible yearnings, frantic longing, wild ceaseless passionate desires, compelling to abstain even from necessary food, for no longer should we take in nourishment from meat and drink through the throat after the fashion of mortals, but as beings awaiting immortality, from inspired strains of perfect melody coming to us through our ears (Philo, *On Dreams*, p. 313).<sup>89</sup>

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87. Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, *Masekhta d'Shirta*, Chapter 7.

88. Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, *Masekhta d'Shirta*, Chapter 2.

89. Philo claims that Moses is the only mortal to have heard the songs of the angels (Philo, *On Dreams*, p. 313) According to the Rabbis, while we may not be able to hear heavenly music, the heavenly creatures certainly hear ours. After listening to Israel sing at the Sea, the angels become inspired to sing, praising God for our song (T. *Sotah* 6:5).

The angels never lose their pitch or sense of rhythm. Their throats never choke with illness, their voices never strain from old age. Every day God creates a new myriad of angels who sing until the day ends. They disappear, and God raises another group of angels to sing anew.<sup>90</sup> These heavenly creatures function as master musicians and as musical authorities. Philo writes that when Moses sings his final song, the people listen as students, while the angels play the role of *gabbai*, "observing, in accordance with their own [musical] skill, whether the song had any discordant note."<sup>91</sup>

The Rabbis argue that while the angels are musically superior to us, God values human song more than heavenly song. Throughout midrashic literature, but most often in the early Gaonic texts, we read that humans bear the honor of singing prior to the angels:<sup>92</sup>

A king went to war and was victorious, and his son and his servant came with a crown in their hands to put on the head of the king. They came to the king and said to him, "Your son and your servant stand [before you] with a crown in their hands. Who may enter first?" [The king] said to them, "Are you stupid, that you would think my servant would ever enter before my son? My son will enter first'" (Midrash Tanhuma Buber, *b'Shallah* 4).

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90. Genesis Rabbah 78:1; B.T. *Hagigah* 14a; Lamentations Rabbah 3:23.3. From Genesis Rabbah we also learn that if an angel does not sing one day, he will not sing the next, which seems to contradict the notion that angels do not survive past sunrise. The Rabbis resolve this discrepancy by explaining that while the ministering angels pass away each day, the archangels do not. However, the Babylonian Talmud also contains a contradiction, noting a disagreement among the Rabbis regarding how often the angels sing. They suggest various possibilities, including: once a day, once a week, once a month, once a year, once every seven years, once every jubilee, and once in all eternity.

91. Philo, *On the Virtues*, p. 207.

92. B.T. *Hullin* 91b; Midrash Tanhuma Buber, *b'Shallah* 4; Pirquei ha-Yeridot, p. 540.

While we enjoy listening to the high quality of music performed by professionals, we forgo attending virtuoso debuts to attend student recitals performed by our children. In the same way, God relates to our song as an expression of relationship, while relating to angelic song as a work of aesthetic beauty.

God loves beautiful music, but yearns to hear more than technical perfection. Human song offers the deeper dimension that God desires. While angels sing to God, we sing in God. For example, God silences the angels from singing when the flood wipes out the generation of Noah, when the Egyptians drown in the Red Sea, and when the Temple is destroyed.<sup>93</sup> However, God does not silence Israel from singing at the Sea, nor when the Temple is destroyed.<sup>94</sup> The reason for this is that the angels sing as though nothing is wrong, while we sing despite our tragedy.<sup>95</sup> In fact, our song emerges from our tragedy, as a way of reaching up to God. "When the Temple was created, it was done to the sound of song, as it is said: 'A Psalm; a song at the dedication of the House' (Psalms 30:1), and when it was destroyed, it was done to the sound of songs, as it is said, 'A Psalm of Asaph; O God, the nations are coming into your inheritance'" (Psalms 79:1).<sup>96</sup>

The source of angels' song is their musical talent. What drives Israel's song, however, is our coming together with the Divine. Angels, who live one day and then pass away, sing learned songs by means of

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93. B.T. *Megillah* 10b; B.T. *Sanhedrin* 39b; Lamentations Rabbah, Proems 24.

94. Midrash on Psalms 92:9.

95. They are pictured as singing the daily song of prayer. See B.T. *Megilla* 10b.

96. Midrash on Psalms 92:9.

their skill. Israel, however, sings from her experience; Israel sings Torah.<sup>97</sup> We sing new songs in celebration of redemption, in the sureness of faith, in the thankfulness of victory and in the ecstasy of renewed spirit.<sup>98</sup> The new songs sung by angels, however, are new simply because the angels are new: "Rabbi Helbo said, 'Every day the Holy One, Blessed be He, creates a band of new angels who utter a new song before Him and then pass away.'"<sup>99</sup> The angels' *shir hadash* (new song) reflects their lack of experience, while our *shir hadash* represents the transition of our experience.

## 2. God Sings

Midrash clearly presents God's love of song and desire to hear song, but the Rabbis rarely mention God singing. In those instances which do mention the song of the Divine, God does not sing alone, but participates in song with us and through us. In *Pesiqta Rabbati*, the Rabbis teach that David is superior in song to all others, and then reminds us that while some humans may be extremely talented musicians, the source of all song is God:

Who [is the leader? God], Who places song of praise in the mouths of the righteous in order that they may sing praises to Him . . . Rav said, "We give thanks to You . . . for Your enabling us to give You thanks" (*Pesiqta Rabbati* 9:2).

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97. In contradiction to this, the Rabbis teach that God asks the angels to let Israel sing first since they are mortals and might die before singing, while the angels, being immortal, have all eternity to sing (*Exodus Rabbah* 23:7).

98. *Pesiqta Rabbati* 31:6; *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Masekhta d'Shirta*, Chapter 1; The Apocalypse, Judith 16; Midrash on Psalms 40:2.

99. *Lamentations Rabbah* 3:21-23. A parallel text neglects to include the word "*hadash*" (new) (*Genesis Rabbah* 78:1).

God places song in our mouth. When we sing praises to the Divine, we return God's song to the heavens, but in our own voice. In this way, God sings through us and we sing through God.

In another midrash, which presents an even clearer image of how God and Israel share song, we read: "The Holy One, Blessed be He, will be the leader of the chorus of the righteous in the time to come." And not only in the future, but now as well: "[God] will lead us in this world and will lead us in the world to come."<sup>100</sup> God enables us to sing and guides us in our song. God's song, like Israel's song, represents a coming together of the human and the Divine.

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100. Leviticus Rabbah 11:9.

## Chapter 4

### When Do We Sing?



### A. We Sing at all Stages in Our Life

[David] lived in his mother's womb and recited song . . . He came out into the air of the world and saw the stars and constellations and burst into song . . . He nursed from his mother's breast, looked at her breast and uttered song . . . He saw the downfall of the wicked and recited song . . . He saw the day of his death and sang song (B.T. *Berakhot* 10a).

Through the example of David, we see that song resides within us in every stage of our individual lives. The same is true regarding our existence as a nation. Tradition explains that Israel sings songs before her birth at the Sea, during her wandering through the desert, while living in the Promised Land, and after redemption:

The first (song) was sung in Egypt. . . The second was uttered by the Sea. . . The third was sung at the well. . . The fourth was sung by Moses [upon leaving the wilderness]. . . The fifth was sung by Joshua [upon conquering the new land]. . . The sixth was sung by Deborah and Barak. . . The seventh was recited by David [after successfully protecting his kingdom]. . . The eighth was sung by Solomon [upon the dedication of the Temple]. . . The ninth was recited by Jehoshaphat [upon entering battle to protect Judah]. . . The tenth will be sung in the future (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, *Masekhta d'Shirta*, Chapter 1).<sup>101</sup>

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101. This midrash appears in other midrashic compilations, including Midrash Tanhuma haNidpas, *b'Shallah* 10. We see a striking, though imperfect, parallelism between this midrash and B.T. *Berakhot* 10a: David sang in the womb, Israel sang in Egypt; David sang upon birth, Israel sang on the shore of the Sea; David sang when nursing from his mother, Israel sang at the well; David sang at the downfall of the wicked, Israel sang upon conquest; David sang when looking at the day of his death, Israel will sing in the future. These parallels emphasize the previously discussed concept that we sing both as individuals, and as a nation.

### 1. *We Sing at the Moment of Death*

As discussed in the previous chapter, we possess the ability to sing both before birth and after death<sup>102</sup> We also sing at the moment when we leave this life for the hereafter. For example, David sings when confronting his day of death. He sings, "Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, You are very great; You are clothed with glory and majesty" (Psalms 104:1). The midrash explains that this refers to the day of death, according to a later verse of the psalm, which states, "You hide Your face, they vanish; You withdraw their breath, they perish" (Psalms 104:29).<sup>103</sup> A few verses later in the biblical text, David recites, "I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God throughout my existence" (Psalms 104:33). Though facing the reality that his life in this world will soon end, David praises the eternity of God's greatness and proclaims that he will sing, regardless of his mortality.

Another midrash notes three death songs which, examined in their biblical context, reflect that those who are aware of God's greatness will sing in the face of death. We learn that Zabedai bar Levai, R. Yose bar Piteres and Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, each sang a verse from Psalms as they were dying.<sup>104</sup> Zabedai bar Levai recited, "I acknowledged my sin to You, and I did not hide my wrongdoing; and You forgave the guilt of my sin. For this everyone who is pious will pray to You in a time when You are found" (Psalms 32:6). This verse, like Psalms 104:29, sung by David, suggests that we cannot see God's presence at every moment. Sometimes the Divine Presence remains hidden from us, such as those times when

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102. See Chapter 3, Sections B.1 and B.2.

103. B.T. *Berakhot* 10a.

104. P.T. *Avodah Zarah* 3:1.

we sin. But as Zabedai bar Levai reminds us, we have the ability to reach out to God. When the Divine Presence reappears to us, we sing once again, as Zabedai bar Levai's song may have continued, "You (God) will surround me with songs of deliverance" (Psalms 32:7). Once we return to God through repentance, God will bring us song.

David promises to sing while he exists (*b'odi*). The death songs of Rabbi Yose bar Piteres and Rabbi Joshua ben Levi suggest that for the righteous, *b'odi* extends beyond existence in this world into life in the world to come. Rabbi Yose asserts that, unlike the faithful whose mouths house wickedness and insincerity, those who look to God for guidance are capable of eternal song, as he sings, "But let all who trust in You rejoice; they will sing in joy forever" (Psalms 5:12).<sup>105</sup> Rabbi Joshua ben Levi's song develops this idea even further, emphasizing that God will reward the efforts of those who reach out to the Divine, but will punish the wicked for their evil utterances:

O Lord, I will not be disappointed when I call You; let the wicked be disappointed, let them be silenced in Sheol. The lying lips, which speak haughtily against the righteous with arrogance and contempt, will be silenced. O how great is the goodness that You have stored away for those who fear You; which You made for those who trust in You before all humanity (Psalms 31:18-20).

These three righteous men sing songs to God at the time of their death. Midrashic tradition also indicates that three groups of angels, acting as agents of the Divine, attend to the righteous with song as they leave this world.<sup>106</sup> Whether from our lips or from the mouth of the heavens, song accompanies our journey from life into death.

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105. P.T. *Avodah Zarah* 3:1.

106. *Pesiqta Rabbati*, 2:3.

## B. We Sing at Various Moments in Our Life

### 1. *We Sing at Times of Victory*

Biblical and apocryphal writings contain several instances in which song follows military victory.<sup>107</sup> Philo continues this tradition, but for him song celebrates the victory of a battle waged within the self.<sup>108</sup> He argues that when we free ourselves from physical temptations, when our search for inner wisdom proves successful, we triumph over the troublesome parts of our souls and sing. Unlike other victory songs which rise above the noises of war, Philo's song emerges from the quietude and peace of a soul unfettered by discord and confusion. The harmony of the soul emerges as harmony of the voice.

Philo explains that the power behind this victory is God, and the Rabbis echo this concept. One midrash, which examines the biblical verse, "*Lamnatzeah upon Neginah*, [A Psalm] of David" (Psalms 61:1), plays with the double meaning of *natzeiah*, ("one who leads song" and "one who achieves victory"), and suggests that this verse may mean, "To God who owns victory," or, "To God who gives victory to His children."<sup>109</sup> God is our leader both in song and in battle, enabling us to sing by helping us win victories. Another midrash quotes the verse, "Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song to the Lord, and spoke saying 'I will sing to the Lord'" (Exodus 15:1), and interpreting "and spoke, saying" as a directive for future generations, warning them not to declare war, because "The Lord will fight for you; you hold your

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107. E.g., The Song at the Sea, Exodus 15:1ff; Miriam's Song, Exodus 15:21; Deborah's song, Judges 5; The Song of Welcome, I Samuel 18:7; The Song of Judith, Judith 16.

108. Philo, *On Drunkenness*, p. 373.

109. *Pesiqta Rabbati* 9:3.

peace (*taharishun*)" (Exodus 14:14).<sup>110</sup> We must remain silent (*heherish*) until God achieves victory, allowing us to use our voices to sing praise.

## 2. *We Sing at Times of Miracles*

Just as we find several instances in biblical and apocryphal literature where song follows triumph, we also find that song often follows miracles.<sup>111</sup> Midrash develops this tradition even further than that of victorious song, perhaps reflecting the Rabbis' political reality and spiritual insight. Though military conquest was rare, the Rabbis saw that God's presence flourished in daily miracles. God could work a miracle at any moment, and would always find us prepared, as we remind God through the text, "When You perform miracles for us during the day, we sing songs in the day, and when You do miracles for us at night, we sing songs before You at night."<sup>112</sup>

When we behold a miracle, singing seems our natural reaction. Experiencing God changes us, inspiring within us an expression of wonder. Some examples: when the children of Israel saw God at the Sea they became pious and sang, at Sinai they became upright and sang, and at the Tent of Meeting they became righteous and sang.<sup>113</sup> But we do not always encounter God in the form of parting waters, thick clouds or roaring fires. The Divine Presence resides in all of creation, and often, especially when life seems bleak and unpromising, we lose sight of the miracles that surround us:

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110. Midrash on Psalms 4:13.

111. The Song at the Sea, Exodus 15:1; Miriam's song, Exodus 15:21; The Song at the Well, Numbers 21:17-18; Apocrypha, The Song of the Three Children.

112. Genesis Rabbah 6:2.

113. Midrash on Psalms 149:1.

Why didn't we sing a song over the manna as we did over the well? Because they spoke frivolously about the manna, as it is said, "But now our souls are dried up, there is nothing at all, except this manna, before our eyes" (Numbers 11:6). God said, "I do not want your complaints or your praises." Therefore, He did not give them permission to recite song except for over the well, because they loved it, as it is said, "Rise up, well, sing unto it" (Numbers 21:17). (Exodus Rabbah 25:7)

Song emerges when we interact with the Divine, uncovering the sacred hidden in the mundane. When the manna fell in the desert, all that Israel sees is the manna itself, dry and tasteless. We overlook the miracle of its presence: a source of nourishment, a symbol of God's abiding care. We perceive the presence of manna before our eyes, but not the presence of God.

Though at times we neglect to see the wonders that fill our world, we also have moments of such deep faith that we prepare for miracles yet to be. "And Miriam, the prophet, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed after her with timbrels and chorus" (Exodus 15:20). Why did these women, who had just fled from bondage, think to bring instruments with them? Why would they have prepared themselves as a chorus? Our tradition explains that the righteous have faith that God will work miracles and wondrous deeds for them. Therefore, before leaving Israel, the Israelites prepare themselves with timbrels and chorus.<sup>114</sup>

While our tradition encourages us to prepare songs for future miracles, it also teaches us that we must be patient in our exuberance to sing them. As we learn from the text, David only sings a song of

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114. Pirquei d'Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 42.

deliverance after surviving great dangers and winning tremendous victories. And, we are warned, the same will be true of Israel.<sup>115</sup> Song is part of us; it grows from our own experience of God and the universe. The song of ultimate redemption is a song of the future, and while we must be prepared to sing it at any moment, we must also expect to wait.

David understands that he will be a model for future generations. As he tells us through the text, "I am a sign (*mofeit*) unto many" (Psalms 71:7).<sup>116</sup> Indeed, the miracles (*mofetim*) experienced by our ancestors often inform us of the miracles we experience ourselves:

The community of Israel said before the Holy One, Blessed be He, "Master of the World, not only for the miracles that you did for me will I utter song and praise before you, but for the miracles that you did for my fathers and my mothers, and that you do for me in every generation," as it is said, "My father's God, and I will exalt Him" (Exodus 15:2). (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, *Masekhta d'Shirta*, Chapter 3)

Song represents an appreciation for God's timeless and boundless gifts. And while sometimes we close our eyes to the Divine Presence in our life, our communal memory of those wonders experienced by our ancestors help us to open our mouths in acknowledgement of the miracles God works every day. Both song and divine works surpass the boundaries of time, and, as we learn from our tradition, Israel sings in celebration of miracles past, present and future.

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115. Midrash on Psalms 18:5.

116. *Ibid.*

### 3. *We sing at Times of Joy and Difficulty*

Usually, we find it easy to sing after winning victories and experiencing miracles. Joyous moments seem to naturally lead to song. But when we suffer a misfortune or face a time of difficulty, our ability and desire to sing may allude us. However, our tradition instructs us that we must not limit our use of song to an expression of delight, but must sing in grief, as well. We are mistaken in believing that the only songs appropriate for God's ears are hymns of glory. God desires to hear us sing, whether in joyous praise (*m'ronen*) or bitter grievance (*m'ronen*).<sup>117</sup>

The Rabbis understand the difficulty of singing in response to disappointment or sorrow. Therefore, they provide us with an example from which to learn:

Rabbi Huna said in the name of Rabbi Acha that David said to God, "If You show me mercy, I will sing. If You give me judgement, I will sing. Either way, 'To You, Lord, I will sing'" (Psalms 101:1). (Midrash on Psalms 101:1)<sup>118</sup>

When we sing to God at times of disappointment or anger, we acknowledge that God exists in the moment; our song recognizes God's abiding presence, even in the midst of sorrow. Song represents our ability to exalt God in moments of celebration, as well as in moments of loss:

When the Temple was created, [its building was accompanied by] songs and Psalms, as it is said, "A Psalm: a song at the dedication of the House" (Psalms 30:1). And when it was destroyed, [its destruction was accompanied by] songs and Psalms, as it is said, "A Psalm of *Asaph*: O God, the nations are

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117. Midrash on Psalms 33:1. See Chapter 3, Section B.3 for an analysis of this text.

118. For a parallel source, see Leviticus Rabbah 24:2.



coming into Your inheritance, (they have defiled the holy Temple" (Psalms 79:1). Thus [it is said], "But You, O Lord, are most high for evermore" (Psalms 92:9). (Midrash on Psalms 92:9)

Even the destruction of the Temple, God's dwelling place on earth, cannot sever our relationship with God. When we lift our voices in the face of tragedy, our soul rises in song, meeting God in the heavens, beyond the grasp of human evil.

## Chapter 5

### How Do We Sing?

## A. We Sing as Leaders and as a Congregation

We find our own stories in the descriptions of both Moses and Israel. We are leaders and congregants, as our tradition teaches, "Moses is Israel and (the people of) Israel are Moses."<sup>119</sup>

### 1. *We Sing in Response to Our Leaders*

While our ability to sing is as innate as our ability to breathe, our tradition teaches that leaders play a significant and necessary role in enabling us to sing as a nation. The Rabbis tell us that Moses, Aaron and all the leaders of Israel came to hear the sons of Korach sing their songs so that they, too, could learn how to sing before God.<sup>120</sup> This midrash uses the following verse as a proof text: "When all your children are students of the Lord, great shall be the peace of your children" (Isaiah 54:13). Our leadership must learn song and then bring this song to each of us, thus helping our nation achieve the peace of redemption.

Clearly, our leaders shoulder tremendous responsibility and wield great power. They determine the direction we take, as the Rabbis teach, "The chief of a generation is the whole generation."<sup>121</sup> Our leaders may guide us away from God, in the way of sin, or toward God, through song:

Rabbi Reuben said, "The whole body follows the head, and when the shepherd goes astray, the sheep go astray after him, as it is said, 'For the sins of Jeroboam which he sinned, and which he made Israel sin' (I Kings 15:30). When the shepherd is good, all follow after him. Moses began to sing (*l'shoreir*) and to sing praises (*l'zameir*) before the Holy One, blessed be He, and all Israel followed after him, as it is said, 'Then sang Moses and the

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119. Numbers Rabbah 19:28.

120. Midrash on Psalms 45:2.

121. Numbers Rabbah 19:28.

children of Israel' (Exodus 15:1). Miriam began to sing (*m'shoreret*) and to sing praises (*m'zameret*) before the Holy One, blessed be He, and all the women followed after her, as it is said, '... and all the women went out after her'" (Exodus 15:20). (Pirquei d'Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 42)

In this midrash, the redundancy of "*l'shoreir... l'zameir...*" suggests that these words represent something other than their obvious meaning.

"*L'shoreir*," meaning "to sing," may be associated with "*l'shoreir*," meaning "to knot." Similarly, "*l'zameir*" means both "to sing praises" and "to cut." Song functions as a powerful tool of leadership, and while it is often used to praise God, it may be used both to bind us to God, or to sever us from God.

But can our leaders truly determine how we sing? The Bible tells us, "*Az yashir Moshe u-v'nei Yisrael et ha-shira ha-zot* -- Then Moses and Israel sang this song" (Exodus 15:1). Midrashic sources speak in Israel's voice when describing this event: "*amarti l'fanav shira al y'dei Moshe* -- I sang a song before You, through Moses."<sup>122</sup> The ambiguity of "*al y'dei*," meaning "through, by way of," offers several possible interpretations of how we came to sing at the Sea. Perhaps Moses sang for us, as our agent. Maybe we sang, but only with Moses' encouragement. Or possibly, Moses led us in song as a conductor leading a choir. In every scenario, we depend upon Moses to sing, and we follow his lead without question.

While our leaders, such as Jeroboam, may be held responsible for leading us away from God, they may also be credited with bringing us back to the Divine. A Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana text teaches that throughout our history, God responds to us in song (*ana*) only through the bidding of

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122. Song of Songs Rabbah 2:1; Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana 5:9.

various leaders, including Moses and Aaron, Joshua and Eliezer, Daniel, Ezra and Elijah.<sup>123</sup> The midrash reminds us that when we live as slaves in Egypt, worship the golden calf, live under the kingdom of Babylon, and behave as an immoral society, we cut ourselves off from God, withholding our song from the heavens. In all these situations, our leaders help us to rediscover our song. Through its interpretation of the verse, "The time of our singing (*ha-zamir*) has arrived," (Song of Songs 2:12), the midrash explains that God responds to the plea offered by our leadership, bringing us to a time of singing and renewed covenant.

Not only does God respond to us through our leaders, but also as our leader. Miriam leads the women through Song with a song of response: "And Miriam sang (*va'ta-an*) to them" (Exodus 15:20).<sup>124</sup> God does the same, as the text reads, "My Beloved sang (*ana*) to me" (Song of Songs 2:10). The use of the same root (*a.n.a*) suggests that God and Miriam sang the same song. Like Miriam at the Sea, God finds us wherever we are and reaches out to us with a song that speaks to our needs, thus enabling us to access our own song. God leads us to renew our covenant, ushering in a time of *zamir*, a time of both "singing" and "cutting." We circumcise our flesh to mark a physical seal of recommitment, and we offer song as a spiritual pledge. As we read, "The time of our *zamir* - singing/ cutting (of the foreskin) has arrived" (Song of Songs 2:12).<sup>125</sup>

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123. Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana 5:9.

124. See Chapter 1, Section A.1 for a more extensive analysis of this text.

125. Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana 5:9; Pesiqta Rabbati 15:11.

## 2. *Our Song Reflects Our Styles of Leadership*

Our tradition records an ongoing debate among the Rabbis regarding how we sang the Song at the Sea. This discussion appears in numerous midrashic compilations spanning thirteen centuries. It first appears as a disagreement between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Nechemiah: "Rabbi Akiva explained. . . 'Israel responds after Moses, phrase by phrase, just like they recite the Hallel.' Rabbi Nechemiah says, 'Just like they recite the Shema, and not as they recite the Hallel.'"<sup>126</sup> According to Rabbi Akiva, Moses acts as a soloist and Israel functions as a chorus, accompanying the leader by singing repeated refrains. Rabbi Nechemiah suggests that Moses acts as a conductor, giving the cue to begin and then inviting Israel to sing; whether on her own, or with Moses as part of the congregation is unclear. These positions represent different models of leadership. Rabbi Akiva's understanding offers the congregation a sense of security and ease; they simply echo their leader, leaving little to chance or interpretation. Rabbi Nechemiah's interpretation gives the congregation more independence and control over the process, rather than the leader.

We find this discussion further developed in the Tosefta, where the text resonates with more voices, as well as extended versions of the arguments posited by Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Nechemiah:

Rabbi Akiva expounded, "The Israelites . . . sing [the] Song like a child who reads the Hallel in school, echoing every phrase after him (Moses). Moses sings, 'I will sing to the Lord,' and Israel repeats, 'I will sing to the Lord.' Moses sings, 'God is my strength and my song,' and Israel repeats, 'God is my strength and my song.'" Rabbi Eliezar, the son of Rabbi Yose, the

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126. M. *Sotah* 5:4.

Galilean, says, "[Israel sings] like an adult who recites the Hallel in the synagogue, responding after him with the first phrase: Moses sings, 'I will sing to the Lord,' and Israel sings, 'I will sing to the Lord.' Moses sings, 'The Lord is my strength and my song,' and Israel sings, 'I will sing to the Lord.'" Rabbi Nechemiah says, "(Israel sings) like adults who recite the Shema in the synagogue. . . . Moses opens first and Israel answers after him and finishes. Moses sings, 'Then sang Moses' and Israel sings, 'I will sing to God.' Moses sings, 'God is my strength and my song' and Israel sings, 'This is my God and I will glorify him.' Moses sings, 'The Lord is a man of war,' and Israel sings, 'The Lord is his name'" (T. *Sotah* 6:2-3).

The opinions of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Nechemiah, so simply stated in the Mishna, are now followed by examples. Their arguments are also altered a bit. This text not only tells us that Rabbi Akiva believes that we sing the Song like we recite Hallel, but like a child recites Hallel in school. Rabbi Nechemiah, who is originally quoted as saying that we sing the Song in the way we sing Shema, is now said to argue that we sing it like adults reciting Shema in the synagogue. And, in addition to these two positions, the text introduces a third: Rabbi Eliezer agrees with Rabbi Akiva that we sing in the style of the Hallel, but in the way that adults sing Hallel in the synagogue. This discussion continues to develop and change throughout layers and layers of midrashim.<sup>127</sup> In fact, one source attributes Akiva's argument to Eliezer and Eliezer's argument to Akiva.<sup>128</sup>

The changes made by the Rabbis in the Tosefta represent an extension of the leadership styles illustrated by the text. Consider, for example, the differences between children leading Hallel at school and adults leading Hallel in the synagogue. The act of leading Hallel in school

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127. E.g., Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, *Masekhta d'Shirta*, Chapter 1; Exodus Rabbah 23:9.

128. B.T. *Sotah* 30b.

tests the children, helping them to master the prayer and learn leadership skills. Perhaps God has Moses sing the Song in this way as a means of providing this young, unexperienced leader with the training he needs to lead the people throughout their wanderings. This method, in addition to teaching the student leader, also teaches the student congregation, spoon-feeding them the song one line at a time. This method certainly suits Israel, who lives for generations in a nation which worships idols. Suddenly, she crosses the Sea, and emerges from the waters reborn. Israel, in her infancy, needs to learn about God repetitiously, little by little. Like the students in the classroom, both Moses and Israel are novices. At the beginning of their journey toward peoplehood, they both must learn about God and define their roles in building a nation.

An adult, however, sings the Hallel in the synagogue in a style very different from the child in the classroom. The leader and the congregation know the text and melody of the Hallel. They recite it in prayer, not in study. In this case, the leader acts as a soloist, and the congregation functions as a chorus, providing accompaniment. Both parties know their part and their role, and together they create the musical harmony of worship. This scenario implies that Moses and the Israelites know the Song before crossing the Sea, and have already practiced this "call and response" system of singing. Later midrashim support this notion, suggesting that Moses and Israel have the faith to anticipate their redemption, and thus, prepare themselves as a chorus while still in Egypt.<sup>129</sup>

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129. E.g., Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 42.



The Tosefta expands upon Rabbi Nechemiah's Mishnaic statement, specifying that Israel sings like adults reciting the Shema in the synagogue, and explicitly describing how Moses begins a phrase and then Israel completes it. This opinion also represents a "call and response" method of singing, involving two distinct parts, but nullifies the hierarchy between leader and congregation. Those who lead this type of song do not sing a phrase for the congregation to echo, but they do have some control regarding how the congregation sings. Since the leaders sing first and sing alone, they can influence the mood and interpretation of the response with the style of their call. Like the leader, the congregation has its own part and sings it without hearing it first. However, while the leader sings alone, the members of the congregation may rely upon each other for support. Unlike the leader, their part does not demand that they expose their vulnerabilities.

This "call and response" structure aptly reflects Moses and Israel. Moses joins Israel as an outsider. He grows up on his own, apart from his people; he has no experience in living as part of a community. While he may lack certain communal skills, such as the ability to work with others, his isolation enables him to take initiative and make decisions on his own. Moses initiates the process of redemption by defying the power of the taskmasters. In contrast to Moses' independence, the children of Israel only know interdependence, which makes them both stronger and weaker than Moses. While Moses is able to rebel against Pharaoh on his own, Israel can only flee from Egypt as a group. But as a community, they ensure our survival. The children of Israel, not Moses, form the foundation of our nation.

Another midrashic source offers yet another possible model of leadership:

Rabbi Eliezer, the son of Taddai, says, "Moses opened with the first words [of a verse] and Israel answered after him and finished [the verse] with him. Moses began, singing, 'I will sing to God for He is highly exalted,' and Israel answered after him and finished with him, 'I will sing to God for He is highly exalted; the horse and the rider he has thrown into the Sea'" (Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, *Masekhta d'Shirta*, Chapter 1).

Both Eliezers agree that Moses and Israel sing the Song like we sing the Hallel. However, in the previously discussed midrash, Rabbi Eliezer, son of Rabbi Yose the Galilean, interprets this to mean that Moses begins a phrase and then Israel finishes it. This foreshadows how Moses and Israel develop as a community throughout their wanderings. Moses fulfills his role of leader, enabling the people to sing without him once they reach the Promised Land. In this Mekhilta text, Rabbi Eliezer, the son of Taddai, argues, that first Moses sings the beginning of a phrase, then Israel repeats what they hear, and finally, together with Moses, they complete the phrase. In this method of singing, after the leader sings for the congregation, the congregation shadows the leader and then becomes empowered to sing without example. The leader adds his voice to the congregation, and the community completes the song as one. This model sets the paradigm for Moses and Israel's journey toward ultimate redemption. Moses teaches the people to develop a sense of independence, then joins with them in singing as a united congregation.

The Rabbis repeat and develop this discussion of how we sing at the Sea for a purpose. Their repetition reflects the importance they place upon how leaders interact with their communities and how communities

respond to their leaders. The changes and additions, incorporated throughout the generations, illustrate the validity of various styles of leadership. Even today, different personalities and situations demand innovative and individualized practices. Ultimately, the division of a community into leadership and congregation does not represent an imbalance of power, but rather creates a structure which enables all to actively participate in communicating with God as a nation, as the Rabbis remind us, "When they were uttering song, Moses was equal to Israel and Israel was equal to Moses."<sup>130</sup>

#### B. We Sing as a Community of Men and Women

In contrast to the tremendous attention given to the roles of leadership and congregation in song, Midrash focuses very little on the issue of how men and women relate through song. Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael contains the terse description, "Scripture tells us that just as Moses recited the song for the men, so did Miriam recite the song for the women: 'Sing to God, for He is highly exalted'" (Exodus 15:1,21)<sup>131</sup> We can draw a few inferences from this statement: the Israelites were divided into two groups according to gender, each had a leader of its own gender, and each recited the same song.

Philo also tells us that Moses led the men in song while Miriam led the women.<sup>132</sup> However, he continues with an analysis of how the two genders interact in their singing: "Two choirs, one from the quarters of the men, one from those of the women, with answering note and voice shall

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130. Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, *Masekhta d'Shirta*, Chapter 1.

131. Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, *Masekhta d'Shirta*, Chapter 10.

132. Philo, *On Husbandry*, p. 147.

raise harmonious chant."<sup>133</sup> According to Philo, though Israel is divided into two parts on the basis of gender, the two share in a song of response, together producing a full sound, complete with harmonies and chords.<sup>134</sup> But this music moves beyond the aesthetic:

The choir of the men shall have Moses for its leader, that is Mind in its perfection, that of the women shall be led by Miriam, that is sense-perception made pure and clean. For it is right with both mind and sense to render hymns and sing blessing to the Godhead without delay, and tunefully to strike each of our instruments, that of mind and that of sense-perception, in thanksgiving and honour paid to the only Savior (Philo, *On Husbandry*, p. 147).

Philo explains that the two genders represent different parts of our human consciousness: that which we feel -- how we experience the world -- and that which we know -- how we process our experiences. By sounding these instruments that lie within us, and harmonizing with the music sounded by others, we offer God due praise. We must sing the notes of the masculine and feminine that lie within each of us, and also seek out the song of the opposite gender, to fully express our love for God. Our success in this endeavor results in the creation of pure and perfect song:

It is on this model above all that the choir. . . of either sex, note in response to note and voice to voice, the treble of the women blending with the bass of the men, create an harmonious concert, music in the truest sense (Philo, *The Contemplative Life*, p. 161).

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133. *Ibid.*

134. In every description of how the choir of men and women sing at the Sea, Philo mentions that they sing in response to one another (Philo, *On Husbandry*; p. 147; *The Life of Moses*, p. 577; *The Contemplative Life* p. 161). Midrashic tradition also emphasizes the role of responsive song, though not specifically in relation to gender. See Chapter 1, Section A.1.

### C. We Sing as One Voice

Though our tradition emphasizes the necessity of leadership, and acknowledges that Israel is a heterogeneous group, it stresses the importance of our joining together as one, united community, represented by the concept of singing in one voice. Our texts reflect the magnitude of this concept, warning us that our prayer only reaches God's ears when we offer it as a united whole. For example, if we fail to sing the *Shema* with one voice, mouth and chant, God cannot hear us because the voices of the heathens threaten to overpower the voices of the righteous.<sup>135</sup> Thus, we must sing in a single, strong voice to ensure that our song of praise rises above the din of curses and blasphemy.<sup>136</sup>

Rabbinic literature illustrates the Rabbis' desire for solidarity, not only midrashically, but halakhically as well. The Babylonian Talmud, in discussing Levitical qualifications, states the importance of the Levites' ability to sing in unison:

At Shiloh or at the Permanent House, they (the Levites) were only disqualified [from Temple service] because of their voice . . . as it is said, "And it came to pass, the trumpeters and singers were as one, sounding one voice in order to praise and thank God; (they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and the cymbals and the instruments of song, and praised the Lord, for He is good, for His mercy endures forever; Then the House was filled with a cloud (*anan*), the House of the Lord)" (II Chronicles 5:13). (B.T. *Hullin* 24a)

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135. Song of Songs Rabbah 8:13-14.

136. *Ibid.*

The Levitical singers are not selected due to their musical skill. In fact, a magnificent singer could be disqualified from participating in the choir if he is unable to blend in with the other voices to create a unified sound.

Another talmudic tractate explains what qualities prevent singers from functioning as a choir members: "Rabbi Chiyya said to Rabbi Shimon, the son of Rabbi, 'If you were a Levite, you would be disqualified from [standing on] the platform [and participating in the choir] because your voice is heavy (*av*).'"<sup>137</sup>

The proof text used in the *Hullin* passage teaches that when the musicians and singers praise God in one voice, God comes to the Temple in the form of a cloud (*anan*).<sup>138</sup> The second text describes the disqualified Levite as having a voice which is heavy (*av*). Besides meaning "heavy," *av* refers to a thick, dark cloud. Therefore, when we sing in competition with those around us, in the hope that our own song will be heard above all others, the heavy quality of our voice functions as a thick cloud, hiding the light of the heavens from our sight. However, when we listen to the voices of those in our community and try to sing in concert with them, we draw the Divine Presence toward us; our communal song of response (*ana*) brings the cloud of God's sheltering presence (*anan*).<sup>139</sup>

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137. B.T. *Megillah* 24b.

138. *Anan* frequently connotes a sense of shelter, or the protective covering of the Divine Presence, e.g., Song of Songs Rabbah 2:6.

139. For a midrashic parallel to B.T. *Hullin* 24a, see Numbers Rabbah 6:8. For a midrashic parallel to B.T. *Megillah* 24b, see Song of Songs Rabbah 2:14.6.

## Chapter 6

### Why Do We Sing?

## A. Song Functions as a Vehicle of Redemption

### 1. *The Song of Redemption is Accessible to All*

Our future redemption resembles that of our past, marked by running waters and celebrated with song offered by the entire Israelite community.<sup>140</sup> When God redeems Israel from Egypt, all Israel joins together in singing God's praise, as the Rabbis remind us, "All the people sang (*ya-anu*) together" (Exodus 19:8). When God redeems us in the future, we will all sing together again, as it is said, "The tongue of the mute shall sing, (for in the wilderness waters will burst forth and streams will [run] in the desert)" (Isaiah 35:6).<sup>141</sup> This midrash reminds us that the song of our past redemption from Egypt is a song of response (*anu*).<sup>142</sup> When we listen for the song present on every person's tongue and respond to it, we enable every person's song to be sounded; we transform an assembly of individuals into a people, helping to bring redemption. So, too, in the future, will we help reach redemption, by forming, once again, a community of full acceptance, encouraging all to sing out, including those who offer songs of silence.

We read in the Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael that when God redeems us from Egypt, the nations of the world join us in our song of praise before the Divine.<sup>143</sup> They will sing once more when God redeems us again. However, according to Sifre Deuteronomy, this song will differ from the first: "In the future the nations of the world will sing praise before Israel, as it is said, 'Sing aloud, you nations, [of] His people (*harninu goyim amo*)'"

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140. Sifre Deuteronomy, *piska* 333.

141. Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana 5:16.

142. For a fuller analysis, see Chapter 1, A, 1.

143. Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, *Masekhta d'Shirta*, Chapter 7.



(Deuteronomy 32:43).<sup>144</sup> The absence of any preposition in this phrase gives it ambiguity. The Rabbis who authored this midrash would likely read the verse: "Sing, nations, with his people." The Rabbis of the Sifre, however, understand it to mean: "Sing, nations, of his people." While both midrashic compilations agree that all peoples of the world will sing upon redemption, one believes that they will sing with Israel before God, and the other argues that they will sing a song of their own before Israel. The interpretations stated in these two midrashic compilations represent opposing humanistic and particularistic perspectives within Judaism. But regardless of how we sing, whether together or separately, redemption will mark a time when everyone's voice will sound.

## 2. *The Song of Redemption is a New Song*

God wanted to hear our songs of the past, God desires to hear our songs today, and God also expects that we will sing upon redemption in the future. But we will sing a unique song in the world to come: a new song (*shir hadash*):<sup>145</sup>

"Do not remember the earlier things, (do not consider the things of old). Behold, I will do a new thing; (now it will spring forth . . . I will even make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert . . . to give drink to my people, my chosen); the people I formed for Myself, that they will tell of My praise" (Isaiah 43:19-21). The Holy One, Blessed be He, meant, "Since I made these new things, sing me a new song" (Midrash on Psalms 149:3).

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144. Sifre Deuteronomy, *piska* 333.

145. Midrash Tanhuma Buber, *Bereshit* 1; Exodus Rabbah 23:5.

In many ways, our future redemption will be similar to the redemption of our past. In both situations, God creates a pathway through the desert to guide us, provides water for us to drink, and in response, we sing God's praise. However, as we learn from this Midrash, God asks that we not compare the two experiences. God and Israel are like lovers who fall in love every time they come together; each meeting, deliciously overwhelming, feels like the very first time when everything is new. Thus, with each redemptive experience we sing a new song.

*Shir hadash* represents the timeless and dynamic qualities of our relationship with God: eternal, and at the same time, new. The Rabbis further explore this tension:

As Rabbi Judah bar Simon said in the name of Rabbi Meir, "Like the spring from which fresh water pours out every moment, so will the children of Israel [in the time-to-come] sing a new song (*shir hadash*) at every moment, as it is written, 'And the singers, like the players on instruments, [will sing in the world-to-come]; all my springs (*ayanai*) are in you'" (Psalms 87:7). The Rabbis also interpreted this verse to mean that even as the men sing songs, so will the women sing songs (Midrash on Psalms 87:7).

Though the Rabbis never explicitly discuss the role of women in the Song of the Sea, they expressly state that women will participate with men in singing the new song (*shir hadash*) of future redemption, as evidenced by this midrash. Like the texts dealing with Miriam and the well, this midrash illustrates how the tradition associates women with water and song.<sup>146</sup> Women's voices, represented in the biblical verse by *ayanai* (fountains; springs), signify the newness brought to Israel's song of redemption. This *shir hadash*, a song changed by women's voices, will

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146. See Numbers Rabbah 1:2.

flow forth as a never-ending spring of continually fresh water in the world to come.

In contrast to this text, which suggests that the redemptive song of Israel includes women's voices, we find within our tradition several references to the song of future redemption as masculine:<sup>147</sup>

The song Israel sang is in the feminine form, *shira*, as it is said, "Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song (*shira*) to the Lord" (Exodus 15:1). But in the days to come . . . they will sing a song in the masculine form, as it says, "O sing to the Lord a new song" (Psalms 96:1) . . . Why is Israel compared to a female? Just as a female carries and unloads, carries and unloads, and then unloads again and never carries again, so is Israel enslaved and delivered, enslaved and delivered, and then is delivered and is never enslaved again. In this world, because their pains are like the pains of a woman in childbirth, they sing a song before God in a feminine form (*shira*), but in the world to come, since their pains will not be those of a woman in childbirth, they will sing a song in the masculine form (*shir*), as it is said, "On that day this song (*shir*) shall be sung" (Isaiah 26:1). (Song of Songs Rabbah 1:5, 3)

The Rabbis likely draw this analogy from a verse that follows after the proof text: "Like the pregnant woman who is close to delivery is in pain and cries out in her pain, so have we been before You, Lord" (Isaiah 26:17). Their interpretation offers a solution to the difficulties raised by the biblical references to song as both *shir* and *shira*. However, they make an imperfect analogy. A woman cries out in pain when giving birth to a new life; Israel sings a song upon her birth from the Sea. God delivers us from Egypt, and therefore God represents the true parallel to the woman in childbirth. Another midrash, however, offers a solution to this

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147. Song of Songs Rabbah 1:5.3; Exodus Rabbah 23:11-12.

inconsistency: "Rabbi Eliezer taught in the name of Rabbi Yose ben Zimra, 'In the future [on the day of Israel's deliverance], the Divine Voice (*Bat Qol*) will echo on the mountaintops,' saying 'Sing to the Lord a new song'" (Psalms 98:1).<sup>148</sup> When Israel is redeemed, the feminine voice of God (*Bat Qol*, lit., "daughter of voice"), will beckon us to sing a new song.

## B. Song Functions as a Vehicle of Repentance

The Rabbis recognize that not everyone feels comfortable singing. However, they regard song as possessing the power of absolution, and therefore, encourage all to sing:

"Moses and Israel" (Exodus 15:1): Rabbi Simon said, "Not all who want to sing a song [bring themselves to] sing a song. But all who experience a miracle and utter song, it is well known that they are forgiven of all their sins and they are made into new creatures" (Yalqut Shimoni, Vol. I, *remez* 254).

We may find it difficult to sing alone, but we all share the experience of singing as a community after beholding the miracle at the Sea. The Rabbis remind us of this, and entice us to continue singing by stating that song functions as a means of forgiveness, not only restoring us to a state of purity, but actually enabling our rebirth.

### 1. *Water and Song*

Midrashim often draw associations between song and water, especially regarding their abilities to transform. However, the tradition presents no clear picture of how they function, as the various texts employ them in several different ways. For example, one midrash interprets the

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148. Pesiqta d'Rav Kahana, 17:9.

verse, "Your teeth are like a flock of sheep that came up from the washing" (Song of Songs 4:2), to suggest that as water cleanses us physically, song cleanses us spiritually.<sup>149</sup> This text uses song as a metaphor for water, possessing the ability to function as an agent of purification. But other midrashim imply the very opposite:

"And Moses led Israel away from the Red Sea" (Exodus 15:22). Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said, "He led them away from the sins of the Red Sea, for when they sang the Song, they were forgiven for their sin at the Sea (lit., the song forgave them for their sinning at the Sea)" (Exodus Rabbah 24:3).

This midrash does not underscore water's cleansing abilities, but rather, links water with sin. Song, however, maintains its power to purify, representing an antidote to the tainted waters.

According to this midrash, Moses, Israel's leader in song, leads us away from sin. Another text describes how Moses, through his song, finds forgiveness for his own sin:

Because [Moses] killed him (the Egyptian taskmaster), he fled to a city of shelter, as it is said, "Moses fled from Pharaoh" (Exodus 2:15), and he sat by the well. Why? He sat by the well [for the purpose of] singing a song. As it is said, "Then Moses sang" (Exodus 15:1). Why did he sing a song? He knew the grief of a murderer, like an average person (*hedyot*) who eats the food from a plate knows (*yodeah*) the taste of the dish. When [Moses] sang to God, God healed him, and he began to sing a song, as it is said, "Then Moses sang" (Deuteronomy Rabbah, Lieberman, *V'ethanen*).

In the previous midrash, water is the site of sin. Here, water provides a haven for the sinner. The text implicitly suggests that Moses sits by the

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149. Song of Songs Rabbah 4:3.

well in order to sing. The text creates the image of a man desperately searching for water, his guilt choking the melody struggling to escape from his parched lips. When he finally comes to the well, the water acts as a mirror, reflecting before his eyes the darkest part of himself. His mouth opens, releasing the devastation from his soul, and offering it up to God as a song of deep pain. This midrash does not use song as a metaphor for water, nor does it assign song and water contrasting symbolism. Rather, it links them interdependently. The water represents a place of self-discovery, and song represents a mechanism of reaching out for healing; one is meaningless without the other.

The text teaches that Moses represents the average person (*hedyot*). Living his life as an Egyptian prince, he only comes to know (*yodeah*) his true self after committing a heinous crime and looking at his reflection in the well's water. This is where he finds the strength to lead the people in their song, away from their sin. As we learn from another text which describes Moses' flight from Egypt and his singing by the well, Moses' experience becomes the foundation for the Torah portion commanding that cities of refuge be established as havens for murderers.<sup>150</sup> This is not due to Moses' position or status, for he is a *hedyot* (an average person). Rather, it is his song which brings forgiveness and redemption to himself, to others in his generation, and to those who will follow.

According to the midrash, Moses sang, God healed him, and then "Moses began to sing." Moses did not simply continue to sing, but sang anew. Perhaps this is the song he enabled Israel to sing at the Sea. When we follow the model of Moses, finding the courage to look deep into

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150. Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:29.

ourselves and sing our sins, we bring healing to ourselves and inspire others to do the same.

### C. Song Promises Eternal Life

Song is the breath of our soul; it gives us life even when our lungs lie still and air no longer crosses our lips. This concept motivates David to sing, "Let me dwell in Your tent forever" (Psalms 61:5). Midrash explains that these words represent David's prayer that his descendents keep him alive through the singing of his songs and psalms.<sup>151</sup> We live beyond our death when others sing our song, and we bring life to those who have died when we sing their song.

#### 1. *Song Keeps Us Alive and We Keep Song Alive*

We are mortals, and our bodies all experience physical death. But our souls possess the power to live eternally through song. For example, the sons of Korach defy death by singing praises to God from Gehenna.<sup>152</sup> The Rabbis firmly believe in resurrection, and cite as a biblical proof, "*Az yashir Moshe*" (Exodus 15:1).<sup>153</sup> In this verse, the verb *y.sh.r* appears in the imperfect tense (*yashir*) which often signifies the future. Therefore, while the meaning of the verse in its biblical context reads, "Then sang Moses," midrashic tradition interprets it as, "Then will Moses sing." This interpretation first appears in the Babylonian Talmud, where a passage following this statement reads, "All who sing song in this world will

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151. Midrash on Psalms 30:3 and 63:3; *Pesiqta Rabbati* 2:4.

152. B.T. *Sanhedrin* 110a.

153. B.T. *Sanhedrin* 91b. See also the *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Masekhta d'Shirta*, Chapter 1.

merit singing in the world to come."<sup>154</sup> God blesses us with song – the power of eternal life – but we must access this gift. We must give birth to our song now, in order that it may bring us rebirth in the future.

Another midrashic text illustrates the talmudic teaching that those who sing in this world merit singing in the world to come:

"The thing that was is that which will be . . . (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:9)." The Rabbis said that in the world to come the generations came before God and said, "Master of the Universe, who will be the first to sing song before you?" And He said to them, "In the past, none sang a song before Me except for the generation of Moses, and now none shall sing before Me except for [that generation]" . . . As it is written, "Sing to the Lord a new song, His praise from the end of the earth, you who go down to the Sea and all that fill it" (Isaiah 42:10).

By asking God who will sing first, the generations reveal their assumption that they will sing. However, God responds that the generation of the Sea will be the only one to sing. Those who never sang in the past cannot sing in the future, as God tells us through the proof text, "Sing to the Lord a new song," i.e., a song different from the one which came before. If we fail to open our eyes to God's presence in this world, and therefore remain silent before God's majesty, we lose the privilege of singing once we sit before God in the world to come. We can imagine God speaking to those, who expect to sing only in the world to come, the words of the verse preceding the proof text: "Behold, the former things have come and now I will tell you a new thing" (Isaiah 42:9). In other words, those who sang in the past sing now, and God will reward them by placing a new song onto their lips. Our tradition insists that we, not God, prepare ourselves

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154. B.T. *Sanhedrin* 91b.



for resurrection in the way we live on earth. We do this by seeking out the holiness that abides in our lives, and testifying to the presence of these divine blessings through song.

## 2. *Song Acts as a Link, Binding the Generations*

Our tradition makes it as easy as possible for us to merit singing a new song in the future. We must sing now, but we are not required to compose a song of our own. The song we must sing is familiar to us; we learn it from those who came before us. As children and as students, we must sing the song of our parents and teachers.<sup>155</sup> For example, Solomon gave voice to David's song, though David was no longer living on earth.<sup>156</sup> If we keep the song of our parents alive, their song, in turn, keeps us alive for all eternity.

Some of us do not receive the song of our tradition from the mouths of our parents, but this does not preclude us from singing. Moses, raised in a culture apart from his family and his people, sings a song in the language of his ancestors.<sup>157</sup> Through his example, Moses teaches us that no matter how alienated we may feel from our people or our tradition, it is never too late to reclaim our inheritance and sing it aloud.

We bear responsibility, not only as children and students, but also as parents and teachers. Midrash charges us with the responsibility of teaching the coming generations how to sing: "We will sing to our children, and our children will sing to their children, that they will sing before You a song similar (*k'shira*) to this one"<sup>158</sup> And while we must

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155. Pesiqta Rabbati 2:4-5.

156. Pesiqta Rabbati 2:5.

157. Genesis Rabbah 43:9.

158. Exodus Rabbah 23:12. See also P.T., *Sotah* 5:4 and Midrash on Psalms 4:13.

teach our children the song we sing, we must also realize that the future generations will not sing a song identical to ours, but similar (*k'shira*) to ours. The innovation and new expression that our progeny brings to the song of our tradition keeps it alive and flourishing.

### 3. *Song is Timeless*

Sometimes we fail to reflect upon that which came before us, and also neglect to consider that which will be. For example, God needs to cast a sleep upon Adam to get him to look ahead to the future and see what lays ahead for his progeny.<sup>159</sup> Yet at some moments we find ourselves fully aware of where we stand in the chain of our tradition. David, without any divine intervention, acknowledges in wonder, "Master of the Universe, You wrote me in the book of the first Adam."<sup>160</sup> But regardless of how we come to understand our place in history, when we realize that we are connected from the earliest of times to the most distant, we respond with song. When Adam sees the chain of his descendancy leading to the kingdom of David in the time to come, he offers God song of praise.<sup>161</sup> David also feels compelled to sing to God when he discovers that the roots of his destiny lie in Eden.<sup>162</sup>

The power of song lies in its ability to exist beyond the boundaries of time, enabling us to live beyond our death. But we are the instruments which keep song alive. When we sing the song of our past and teach the song to our future, our song becomes one of redemption, empowered with

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159. Midrash Tanhuma Buber, *Bereshit* 1.

160. *Ibid.*

161. Midrash on Psalms 92:10.

162. Midrash Tanhuma Buber, *Bereshit* 1.

the unique ability to exist beyond any constraints of time: "How great is this song, for the present abides within it, the past abides within it, the time to come abides within it, this world abides within it, and the world-to-come abides within it."<sup>163</sup>

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163. Sifre Deuteronomy, *piska* 333.

## Conclusion

Song, both religious and secular, is part of the Rabbis' daily lives. They sing in prayer and study, and they also sing in revelry and laughter.<sup>164</sup> They hold song in such high regard, viewing it as a sacred mode of communicating with God and each other, that they feel the need to make distinctions between the appropriate and inappropriate uses of song.<sup>165</sup> They author some midrashim restricting Jews from engaging in song at home, at work and at secular celebrations, perhaps providing a warning for themselves against succumbing to such temptations, more than the general society.<sup>166</sup> But instead of accentuating the negative, the Rabbis emphasize the holiness and sacred power of song. This thesis, offering only a portion of the midrashic texts that discuss song, reflects the enormous amount of rich material present in our tradition.

We learn that song plays a vital role in the Rabbis' theology, representing the merging of the human with the Divine. The Rabbis urge us to sing, reminding us that God always wants to hear us, regardless of our musical abilities. God blesses each of us, young and old, small and great, musician and layperson, with the ability to sing. This gift offers us solace, especially in times of persecution, because God is always with us, present in our song. Our voice bears the promise of great achievement;

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164. For examples of midrashim referring to secular song, see Ecclesiastes Rabbah 19:1 and Lamentations Rabbah Proems 12. For an example of song used in prayer, see B.T. *Berakhot* 6a.

165. Those who utter the Song of Songs like a drinking song lose their place in the world to come (T. *Sanhedrin* 12:10).

166. Song must not be sung at home or at work, with the exception of ship haulers and plowmen (B.T. *Sotah* 48a); Song must not be sung at secular celebrations (B.T. *Sotah* 48a); We read of Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish singing and dancing in exchange for wine (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 19:1). An earlier text describes how Rabbi Yochanan scolds Resh Lakish for his light-hearted song, convincing him that song and laughter together must be reserved for the world to come (B.T. *Berakhot* 31a).

song enables us to come together in forming a community, find comfort by drawing close to God, and achieve purity by freeing ourselves from sin. Most important, when we sing, we bring the time of redemption closer to our broken world.

Today, we of the Reform movement still confront the problem of how we define the role of song in our lives. Unlike our rabbinic ancestors, we do not feel threatened by secular song. Rather, we face the struggle in our religious practice, often focusing on details of how we use song in worship. For example, we argue about the benefits and drawbacks of participatory and performance styles of song, the need to incorporate art music, camp music and Chasidic music into our services, and whether we should use organ or guitar as accompaniment.

These discussions are important, but sometimes we get so caught up in our positions, we stop hearing what others are saying. We must not forget that we have a tradition to advise us in our struggle. For example, the texts teach us the importance of raising our voices together as one community, as well as participating in song as an active audience, listening to a soloist. The Rabbis remind us that God loves to hear the exquisite song performed by accomplished musicians, but also desires to hear all of our voices. Perhaps the most compelling lesson to be learned from these midrashim is that we build communities and move towards redemption through songs of response. Such songs demand that we listen to each other's voices, as well as singing ourselves.

While this paper offers insight into the lives of the Rabbis and brings perspective to our lives today, certainly there is much room for further study. With more time, I would have conducted a parallel examination of the role of song in early Christian tradition, and

investigated how the many different Hebrew words for song and singing are used both in Biblical sources and midrashic sources. Some day I hope to continue this study through later midrashic, mystical and Chasidic works, perhaps even exploring modern midrashim to examine how song, itself, functions as a medium for interpreting texts.

Despite my inability to cover all the areas of study I would have liked, I learned more from researching and writing this thesis than I ever expected. Exploring song through the lens of classical midrash not only helped me to hone my research and analytical skills, but offered me great insights into my rabbinate. Through the texts, the Rabbis' encouraged me to approach song as a versatile, creative and sacred form of expression. Song, like Torah, is a sacred language offering tremendous power, awesome strength, and tender beauty.

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