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Art and Soul

The Creative Model of Miriam and David

By Hollis Suzanne Schachner

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Masters of Sacred Music Degree

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
School of Sacred Music
New York, New York

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Advisor: Dr. Carol Ochs

PREFACE

This master's thesis is an exploration of the intersection of the arts and the soul in the Tanach. We know that artistic creativity is manifest throughout the bible from accounts of songs sung, instruments played, garments worn, and the beauty of the Tabernacle and Temple, among a profusion of other references. I believe strongly that we are meant to learn from the bible's example in this regard.

The rabbis made an art of interpretation, scrutinizing every letter of scripture for underlying messages and bringing to life the drama that lies in between the lines. In their readings of Jewish biblical literature, the rabbis left no literary stone unturned, and overlooked no miniscule letter or word that could hold a potential clue, from which they could garner great meaning and insight into the ways of God and the mystery of the universe. Their interpretations were new tellings of ancient stories, and the layering of scripture and rabbinic imagination that forms the Midrash is a creative masterpiece in its own right.

We learn from the rabbis that nothing in the bible is gratuitous. If this is so, then art in the bible must be more than simply ornamental. The study of biblical and Midrashic descriptions of artists and artistic creativity is well warranted, as we can learn great lessons that will still resonate thousands of years after these texts were written. There are jewels hidden in these verses, not only for artists, but for every soul that longs to be close to God.

There are many examples in the body of Jewish literature where the arts and the soul appear to be linked. Sometimes the relationship is right on the surface and obvious in the language itself, and at other times it is subtler, and we are endowed with the

challenge of parsing it out from the hints we are given. The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate the ways that creativity has a dramatic effect on the soul. Artistic expression reveals the soul, and provides for transformation within the soul, by inspiring transcendent experiences, by moving us from one place to another in a spiritual sense, and by lifting us to higher levels of worship and communion with God. Many of the pivotal events in Jewish history--like the Exodus from Egypt and the installation of the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem--were marked with song and dance. Music-making was ritualized in the heart of Jewish worship itself, the Temple, and remains so today in the synagogue service.

The method I have used in writing my thesis is in keeping with its theme of creativity. It takes the shape of an extended modern Midrash, focusing on the stories of two unrivaled biblical artists, Miriam and David. The research was based primarily on the Tanach, the Midrash and other Aggadic literature, and secondarily on the work of contemporary scholars. My goal was to gain a deeper understanding of who Miriam and David were and how they integrated the arts into their leadership. I intend to show some of the ways they contributed to and changed the nature of Israelite worship in their time, and discover what we can learn from their holistic approach that has lasting value for us today. Although visual arts do occupy a significant place in the bible, despite the prohibition against making graven images, I have chosen to limit my study for the most part to music and dance, and to a small extent poetry in considering the Psalms. These were the artistic strengths of Miriam and David, and were their media for the gifts they brought to worship.

My work is divided into three chapters. The first gives a general background on some of the Jewish concepts of the soul, particularly those of biblical times. I have attempted here only to provide a contextual framework for the rest of my paper, recognizing that a full discussion of Judaism's tremendously diverse opinions about the soul would be an overwhelming and unrealistic undertaking for this project. In this chapter, I also present my ideas about the creative process, and draw comparisons between artistic expression and worship. The second chapter is Miriam's. Here, I examine the character of this strong biblical woman as a prophetess, as a singer and dancer, as a catalyst for spontaneous worship at the shore of the Sea of Reeds, as the creative force of the partnership with Moses and Aaron in leading the Israelites to freedom, and as the ancestor of other biblical artists, including David himself. The third chapter belongs to David, who is described in the Midrash as being "the foremost of singers."[1] The facets I have concentrated on are David as the chosen of God and the Sweet Singer of Israel, as the progenitor of the line of the Moshiach, as the dancer before the Ark of the Covenant, as the initiator of the Levitical musical rituals; and as the Psalmist.

These aspects of Miriam and David highlight their artistic natures and demonstrate that what they were able to accomplish was due, in no small part, to their creative energy. Both had a powerful influence on the people of Israel, and both were engaged in a profound relationship with God. Their creativity brought forth the passion within their souls, allowing them to transform Israel. Likewise, their teachings can bring us to new places today, if we can continue to learn from their examples.

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[1] Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah*, Esther, Vol. IX, 10.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The guidance and encouragement of a few special people made this project possible. I am immeasurably grateful to my advisor, Dr. Carol Ochs, for the journey she set me on more than two years ago, upon which this thesis is a major landmark. The thread that runs through all of these pages is *transformation*, and from the very start my relationship with Dr. Ochs has been an ongoing transformative experience. She helped me to discover new ways of praying, and taught me a new language for thinking and talking about God. In doing so, she also gave me the permission I needed to see myself as an artist, and to allow myself to outgrow old self-imposed limits. This thesis is a reflection of the lessons I've learned from her, and she continues to be a tremendous role model.

Among the wonderful faculty of the SSM are a few mentors who have been especially great sources of direction and inspiration. Dr. Mark Kligman helped me to get this project off the ground and steered me toward many valuable resources. Dr. Eliyahu Schliefer gave me some terrific ideas for my recital, and neither time nor distance has diminished my admiration for him. Joyce Rosenzweig, Hazzan Israel Goldstein, Hazzan Jack Mendelsohn, Hazzan Benjie Ellen Schiller, and Hazzan Faith Steinsnyder amaze me as artists, and I am honored by their involvement in my life and work.

As always, I am thankful to my family and friends who have blessed me with their love. I am especially grateful to my classmates, who have been a constant support network for the last four years--I treasure our friendships. It has been a privilege to learn together.

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This thesis is an exploration of the relationship between creativity and the soul. My goal was to show that artistic creativity reveals and nourishes the soul, and can be a means of individual and communal transformation, as demonstrated by the biblical model of Miriam and David. While routine spoken language is usually a functional tool for making ourselves understood, at times the content of our souls is too complex or overwhelming to be communicated with speech alone. Artistic creativity is a more liberating form of communication, and the arts dynamically expand our vocabulary of expression.

Worship can be described as self-expression before God and, in Judaism, worship is both an individual and collective endeavor. If the arts are a powerful means of interpersonal communication, then they are all the more powerful for offering the workings of our souls to God, as individuals and as a community. Miriam and David understood this, and the arts were intrinsic to their lives, their worship, and their leadership. This project gave me a deeper understanding of this holistic model provided by Miriam and David, which I hope to incorporate into my role as a cantor and leader of the Jewish community.

This thesis was written in keeping with its theme of creativity, and takes the shape of an extended modern midrash. My goals are outlined in the preface, and the body of the paper is divided into three chapters. The first is a concise background of Jewish thinking about the soul, and also discusses the nature of the creative process and its correlation to worship. The second chapter is a study of Miriam, and the third is a study of David. My research was based primarily on the Tanach and the Midrash, and secondarily on contemporary academic work.

CHAPTER I

THE SOUL AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Hallelujah.
Praise the Lord, O my soul!
I will praise the Lord all my life.
Sing hymns to my God while I exist.
Psalm 146: 1-2

Judaism is rich with concepts about the soul, and these ideas are expressed in Jewish prayer, texts, arts, folklore, mysticism, and most especially, the Tanach itself. The words for "soul" or "spirit" – *neshama, ruach* or *nefesh* among other Hebrew names - appear hundreds of times throughout the Tanach. Jewish ideas about the soul have evolved since the times of the Torah, and have historically been influenced by the beliefs of the surrounding cultures in which Jews lived. While there is no one, unified Jewish definition of the soul in all its wider connotations, it can be said that Jewish tradition recognizes the uniqueness of each soul and regards each individual soul as sacred.

Although the Torah itself is not specific about the nature of the human soul or its role concerning the afterlife, these subjects began to receive greater attention as Jewish history advanced, and tradition seems to follow two opposing streams of thought. One is that the soul and body are inextricably linked to each other, meaning that humans are fully psychosomatic, made up of interwoven spiritual and physical components. This first view is that of the time of the Torah, which reflects the early belief that the soul is the life force of the body. The other view is that the soul is metaphysical, remote from the body and the laws of time and space that govern the world as we know it. According to this premise, the soul preceded and can survive the death of the corporal body, as the

essence of the soul comes from the Divine.[2] This idea is derived from Hellenistic thought, and resonated deeply with the rabbinic sages. It is this later view that has formed much of the basis for evolution in Jewish thinking about the afterlife. In either case, Jewish tradition sees humanity as a duality of body and spirit, and imbues each with significance and function.

The Torah gives no full explication on the immortality of the soul or the nature of the afterlife. In most religions, the soul plays a crucial role in theories of survival beyond our physical demise. Judaism is no exception, yet Jewish belief about the afterlife is generally more ambiguous in its interpretations of immortality and concepts about the world to come. While Jewish literature throughout the ages has presented a wide range of beliefs about this nebulous question, Judaism's primary focus has been on *this* world, not on the afterlife. Some people have taken this to mean that Jews have no expectations of an afterlife, but this is a misconception. Rather, Judaism encourages us to enjoy the delights of this world while we are living, and not to wait for the next one to find happiness.

One explanation for this can be found in Leviticus 18:3, where it is written: "You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt." These "practices" have been interpreted by some contemporary scholars as being those that involve Egypt's fixation on death and the afterlife. While enslaved there, the Israelites were invariably exposed to the elaborate and lavish burial practices of the Egyptians, and indeed we are told that Jacob himself was embalmed according to Egyptian custom (Genesis 50: 2-3). The slaves of Egypt likely suffered terrible labor to create the opulence of the

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[2] Rachel Elior, "Soul," in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, ed. Arthur Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987) 887.

extravagant tombs of the Egyptian nobility. This may have made the Israelites determined not to emulate a culture that reserves the best of this world for the next one at great cost to the quality of life of those still living. Fresh from their experience of hardship, the Israelites were careful to prevent their own recreation of the oppressive Egyptian death-cult. Therefore the Torah, unlike the Egyptian Book of the Dead, does not offer extensive details of the world to come. As Jack Reimer explains, "The way of the land of Egypt was king-centered and death-centered...Perhaps this is why the Torah that was given to the people that came out of Egypt is so reticent about the afterlife...The silence of the Torah is no accident; it is an eloquent response to Egypt."[3] When the Israelites made it to the safe side of the Sea of Reeds after their narrow escape from Egypt, they sang *Shirat Hayam*, the Song of the Sea. This song of thanks celebrated their freedom and marked the moment Israel could begin to appreciate the bounty of *this* world.

In the days of the Torah, the soul was seen primarily as the animating force, the life-breath of the body, and this belief is evident in the connection between the words for soul and for breath. For example, *neshama* can imply either breath or soul, depending on the context and the interpretation: *"Kol han'shama t'haleil Yah"* can be interpreted both as "Let every soul praise God" and as "Let all that breathes praise God" (Ps. 150: 6). *Ruach Elohim* in the creation story is seen as "a wind from God," but could also be read as "the spirit of God". The soul is mentioned so often and is called upon frequently in moments of worship, joy, and distress. This makes it compelling to consider later traditions, which see the soul as being something more than the breath or animating force of the body. It seems that there must be a reason why the soul is invoked at these

[3] Jack Reimer, "Afterlife," *Moment* (October 1979) : 43.

moments, and that the answer could possibly be that while our breath is a physical manifestation of the life within us, the soul is that Divinely touched essence within us which makes us vibrantly alive.

In modern language, we can depict the soul as being a deeply embedded core within every human being, hidden from plain view. It is this core that makes one person distinct from another, beyond visible physical differences or more subtle ones such as culture or upbringing. It is from here that we are driven to be the people we are, relating to everything in the world around us with our own unique perspective. Our souls are not engaged on a conscious level all the time, yet at moments, we are poignantly aware of its being there. Cataclysmic events in our lives naturally rock us to our souls, and yet quieter moments of absolute clarity also have the power to reach that veiled part of us and leave us utterly moved or changed. There are many ways to describe this root of our being, and in the rational world of science and psychology we have an extensive vocabulary for approaching an understanding of what is obscured within us. In spiritual dialogue, the soul need not be rationalized, but is simply that part of us, that place within us, where we are most profoundly connected with God.

We are told in the first creation story that we are made *betzelem Elohim,* in the Divine image: "And God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'...And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." (Gen. 1: 26-27). While we do not have anywhere near an understanding of what exactly God's image is that we were created to resemble, we do know one thing: God is the Ultimate Creator. If we were made *betzelem Elohim* and God is the Creator of

all, then one way we resemble God is by being creative. David is quoted in the Midrash as having said:

> The soul in the body is never asleep, and as for the Holy One, blessed be He, there is no sleep with Him; let the soul which is never asleep in the body come and praise the Holy One, blessed be He, with whom there is no sleep, as it is said, *Behold, He...doth neither slumber nor sleep* (Ps. CXXI, 4).[4]

Our souls are never still within us, just as God is never still in the universe. Even when we are not awake, our souls are stirring and churning, creating ideas, dreams and visions. In the same way that God is constantly active in the universe, our souls are constantly active within us, whether or not we are aware of it. While our breath may be the animating wind or *ruach* of our bodies, we can think of our souls as the source of our creativity. It is in our souls that our deepest and most powerful thoughts and emotions originate, and it is from our souls that our prayers come forth.

While speech is an efficient form of communication for most of our daily interactions, sometimes the spoken word can be an obstacle to expressing the intricacies of our souls. There are realms of thought and emotion that defy translation into verbal language, being too complex to be contained by common speech. When we run out of words, our choices are to grow silent, or artistic. When some souls are inexpressibly full and overwhelmed, and have become frustrated by the boundaries of spoken language, they may choose silence. When even silence becomes stifling, our souls hunger for more liberating means of communication.

Music, dance, visual art, and poetry transcend the usual limits of routine functional language, expressing what lies too deep for simple words. Artists are people who are gifted with means for expressing the inexpressible, unveiling glimpses of their

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[4] Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah*, 2nd ed., vol. IV, Leviticus, IV: 8., (London: Soncino Press, 1983) 58-59.

souls and allowing others to share in their intimate insights. When we encounter art, we are transported, permitted to see at least one small sliver of the world through someone else's lens. This is a transformative moment, when the soul of the artist and the soul of the perceiver meet on a shared plane, that of the art itself. As Gerardus Van Der Leeuw describes this moment, "The beauty which the artist created must be experienced and re-recreated anew in (the viewer's) soul, thereby revealing to the humble 'lover of art' something of the mystery of creation."[5] We need not be artists ourselves, in the traditional sense, to find Holiness in beauty, or to see an imprint of the Divine in creativity. We leave such an encounter changed by the experience, as we have been taken somewhere entirely new to us, into the soul of another human being, and to a fresh perspective of our own.

Nor need we be artists to explore our own creative potential. Much of our daily life revolves depends on our creative ingenuity, regardless of whether or not we recognize it as such. Navigating a career, nurturing relationships, and raising children can require tremendous creativity. These aspects of the lifecycle can encompass some of the most transformative experiences that humans encounter. Every human has creative potential within their soul, and the act of creation can take on as many shapes as we have the imagination for. Creativity means taking the kernel of an idea and expanding it into a something that did not exist in the world before it was envisioned in the soul of its maker. This changes the person who brought it forth, in a small measure, or in astonishing ways.

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[5] Gerardus Van Der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art*, with a preface by Mircea Eliade (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 149.

Worship can also be powerfully transformative. Like art, worship is also the soul's answer to the Inexpressible. In the words of Evelyn Underhill,

> Worship, in all its grades and kinds, is the response of the creature to the Eternal:.. For worship is an acknowledgement of Transcendence; that is to say, of a Reality independent of the worshipper, which is always more or less coloured by mystery, and which is there first.[6]

On occasion, we may find ourselves brushed by "mystery" and feel in our souls a profound moment of recognition, awareness, or insight. This "acknowledgement of Transcendence" is about as far as we are capable of comprehending God, as any grasp of the magnitude of God is far out of human reach. Accordingly, there may be no human experience more difficult to recapture in speech than an encounter with the Divine.

Worship can stand outside of language, much in the same way that art can. Both may utilize language, liturgically or poetically, but these break the mold of normal speech, and communicate far more than the words themselves. Van Der Leeuw's thoughts on poetry are an eloquent testament to the marriage of art and worship:

> A word is sound, rhythm and image. It drags everything along, but also sets boundaries; it constrains and it frees...The poet calls into being things which do not exist. Therein lies his divine mission. And when he becomes aware that God stands behind him and breathes into him his creative spirit, he turns and sings his most beautiful song in God's presence, and in praise of him who put it into his mouth.[7]

Worship and art lift us above and beyond language, so it comes as no surprise that in the bible, the arts are often vehicles for prayer and praise. The wide range of human emotions is presented through biblical worship, and much of it is deliberately artistic. Our ancestors used a myriad of media--songs, instruments, dances, fabrics, gemstones, and poetry, among many others--to offer their innermost feelings to God. From *Shirat*

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[6] Evelyn Underhill, *Worship*, 2nd ed. (United States: Harper and Brothers, 1937), 3.
[7] Van Der Leeuw, 149.

Hayam to *Shir Hashirim*, *Tehillim* to the Tabernacle, art poured from the souls of many of our biblical ancestors, and carried them to new places as they gave of themselves to God.

CHAPTER II

MIRIAM, MOTHER OF ARTISTS

Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand,
and all the women went out after her in dance with timbrels. And Miriam chanted for them:
Sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously;
Horse and driver He has hurled into the sea.
Exodus 15:20-21

At the first mention of Miriam the prophetess, we meet the singer and dancer who led the women in jubilant celebration on the shore of the Sea of Reeds. The earlier story of Moses's sister keeping a protective eye on the baby in the basket does not reveal her name, only her relationship to the future liberator of Israel. If the girl on the bank of the Nile and the woman on the shore of the sea are indeed one and the same, that watchful girl has come into her own at this pivotal moment in our history. Thousands of years later, we've just learned her name, and she has received the title "prophetess."

There is so little we know about women's firsthand experience of biblical days and events. The fact that Miriam is a leader is exceptional in and of itself, for few biblical women achieved her level of authority. In as much as the bible and most of Jewish history was written through the filter of men's experience, we can only conjecture what most women thought and felt about their lives, and infer what little we can from what the text does tell us. To better understand the richness of the Torah's teachings, we can use our insight and imagination to study the few women who are given voice, and make their stories speak as meaningfully as possible to compensate for their rarity. When a woman like Miriam appears, it is imperative to draw what lessons we can from her example. Why is it then that Miriam is recognized as a leader, and what are we meant to learn from her?

We know that she is sister to Moses and Aaron, but would that have sufficed to elevate her role if she was not born to it naturally, within herself? Being their sister may have held her to certain responsibilities and come with privileges, but would they have been enough for her to be worthy of being called "prophetess"? After all, not one of her prophecies is relayed in the Torah. Yet in Micah 6:4, we are reminded that she, along with Moses and Aaron, was one of the three leaders who brought Israel out of Egypt. Why is it precisely *here* that Miriam is introduced to us with such special distinction?

The answer might be because it is at this awesome moment that her true gifts are revealed. The Israelites have just found themselves safely on the shore. They watched as the waters that had parted peacefully for them turned back violently and drowned their Egyptian pursuers. The realization hit: "And when Israel saw the wondrous power which the Lord had wielded against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord; they had faith in the Lord and in His servant Moses." (Ex. 14:31). These are the same people who just hours before were urgent in their panic, berating Moses for daring to make them defy their oppressors: "What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying, 'Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness'?" (Ex. 14: 11-12).

Miriam was wise, she knew her people. She knew that the Israelites were slaves, down to their very souls, unable to claim their right even to the dream of their own freedom. She also had profound faith that this moment would come, because she was well prepared when it did. We know that the Israelites fled Egypt in the dead of the night, so swiftly that they did not even have time to finish preparing their bread, but wore it upon their backs. The Egyptians were pushing them on, fearing for their own lives

after the plague killed their firstborn sons. They were too desperate to reclaim their borrowed valuables, and let the Israelites run with all their wealth. With bread on their backs, and Egyptian gold and silver for whatever emergencies lay ahead, the Israelites made for the water. Fleeing for their lives and grabbing what they could in the chaos of their departure, packing must have been limited to only those things that are most necessary to sustain life on their unpredictable journey. Miriam knew to bring her timbrel.

They drew their first breath, and in that instant the Israelites stood in wonder, having witnessed the miracle of their freedom and the events that won it. Although they were no longer an enslaved people, their liberation was not yet complete. It is one thing to be made free, it is another to believe it, to embrace it, to celebrate it. Egypt left an indelible impression on the generation of the Exodus. A generation would have to die before the next could begin to know the joy of being their own people in their own land. In the words of Achad Ha-am,

> Pharaoh is gone, but his work remains; the master has ceased to be master, but the slaves have not ceased to be slaves. A people trained for generations in the house of bondage cannot cast off in an instant the effects of that training and become truly free, even when the chains have been struck off.[8]

Yet this group who had endured the bitterness of slavery sorely needed a moment of triumph, even if they were unsure of their future and still bound to the fresh memory of their past. In that liminal hour between slavery and freedom, Israel desperately needed transformation. Their souls were too full of relief, fear, and hope, too overwhelmed to move from that shore without a ritual of passage. It was for this moment that Miriam brought her timbrel, and had instructed the women to follow suit.

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[8] W. Gunther Plaut, ed.,*The Torah. A Modern Commentary.* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), 494.

The Israelites were a slave people, conditioned to follow instructions and build whatever their oppressors ordered. With their former taskmasters drowned behind them, they now found themselves suddenly free on more than one level. Their bodies belonged solely to themselves, not to Egypt. Their souls were now free to dream and hope for a future that they themselves could shape. Their destiny was larger than toiling over the tombs of the Egyptian nobility. The work of their hands was no longer the property of Pharaoh, but instead they could begin to reap the fruit of their own creativity. But how were they to realize this? How could they come into awareness of their right to claim what is theirs?

Miriam's hand closed around her timbrel. Her lungs expanded as she drew sharp breaths, her head swam from the sudden rush of air and adrenaline. Her mouth opened, and a fountain of melody burst forth. She raised her arms, her hands, her face to God, and leapt into the air before the One who had rescued them. Whirling, she shook her timbrel, and the instrument was an extension of her body, making her larger, louder, and more vibrant in her dance. On this timbrel she beat out an ecstatic rhythm, urging the women to leap in with her. Stamping and shouting, they threw down their packs, and clutching their own timbrels, they ran to join her. Their hair whipped their faces, and they inhaled the salty air, singing, dancing their first full taste of life.

The Israelites had needed a catalyst. In order to recognize their physical, emotional, and spiritual freedom, they needed a ritual of transformation to mark the moment. Miriam herself was the catalyst, and her ritual was one that linked together all of these new freedoms. Her entire being was engaged. With her mouth, Miriam chanted a song with the women as they danced, and the song was an offering of her soul to God,

who had saved and protected them. Singing, dancing, and beating drums were potent acts, which physicalized the reclamation of their newly liberated bodies from Pharaoh's rule. The drums lengthened their reach and heightened their physical awareness, and their abandon was a full sensory experience before God. Singing and dancing are physically, emotionally, and spiritually creative endeavors, providing the people with a means to express themselves *freely* for the first time.

We know that Moses also sang with the Israelites on the shore of the Sea of Reeds. His singing of *Shirat Hayam* appears just before the account of Miriam's leading the women. If we read literally, it could be seen that Moses's celebration had already taken place when Miriam's began. However, the roles of men and women were so clearly delineated in biblical times, with life being shaped very differently along the lines of gender. This makes it possible to speculate that it may indeed have been Miriam who initiated the celebration. As it was men who wrote down the story, the record they left us is attentive to Moses' role, but far less so to Miriam's.[9] It is also possible that the singing and dancing occurred concurrently, as there is no mention of dancing or drums while Moses and the Israelites sang *Shirat Hayam*, perhaps because the women were already engaged in this way. It is consistent with what we know of biblical times to imagine that celebrations fell along some of the same lines that divided men and women in many other aspects of their lives. While here in this instance, Miriam is credited with leading the women, we remember that she, along with Moses and Aaron, was one of the three responsible for bringing the Israelites out of Egypt, so even as a woman, her influence had a vast reach in a patriarchal society. This strength of character is attributed to

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[9] Frankel, Ellen. *The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman's Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 110

Miriam in the Midrash as well, with stories that emphasize her capacity to have men and women alike listen respectfully to her counsel.

While Miriam's prophecies are not retold in the Torah itself, the Midrash provides us with clues that also demonstrate Miriam's gifts as a creative artist. Even as a child, Miriam was known not only for being bold and astute, but also for expressing herself by means of music and dance. The story is told of young Miriam chastising her father Amram when, in his anguish over Pharaoh's evil decree to kill all Hebrew newborn male children, he divorced his wife Jochebed, thereby setting an example for other men to do the same.[10] Miriam was outraged, and unafraid to confront her father for his behavior, she accused him of acting wrongly. Amram saw the wisdom of her reasoning, and he "took back" his wife. The use of "took back" as opposed to "returned to" or "restored" implies that this was a formal wedding ceremony or a remarriage, and the legend follows that Miriam rejoiced before the couple, dancing before them with her brother Aaron.[11] As a young girl, Miriam not only exhibited fearlessness and extraordinary insight in confronting and righting a wrong, but also led the ensuing celebration with dance. Having reunited her parents, a following story credits Miriam with declaring that her mother "is destined to give birth to a son who will save Israel from Egypt", a prophesy which was realized with Moses.

Another compelling legend about the character of Miriam identifies her as Puah, and her mother Jochebed as Shifrah, the Hebrew midwives named in Exodus 1: 15. According to the Torah, these two women were called before Pharaoh, who ordered them

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[10] Hayim Bialik and Yehoshua Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends, Sefer Ha-Aggadah [sic]: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash,* trans.William Braude (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 60:13.
[11] Ibid., 60:13.

to kill all the newborn males. Because they feared God above Pharaoh, they did not follow Pharaoh's evil decree, but let the children live, and they justified this to Pharaoh by explaining that the Hebrew mothers were strong, and gave birth before they arrived to assist them. For this brave act, they were blessed with households that, according to the Aggadah, produced exalted offspring.[12] While this comes to pass speedily with Jochebed's son Moses, it is in later generations that Miriam's descendants achieve greatness.

To this end, in addition to Puah, Miriam is also associated with the character of Azubah, Caleb's wife. This makes her the great grandmother of Bezalel, the artist named as the one imbued with the skill to beautify the Tabernacle and make it fit for worshipping God. There is even a tradition among some rabbis that Miriam is a direct ancestor of King David, the Sweet Singer of Israel, Psalmist, musician and dancer. A complicated Midrash explains:

> *And it came to pass, because the midwives feared God, that He built them houses* (Exodus 1:21). Rab and Levi discussed this. One says: It means that they established priestly and levitical families; and the other that they were founders of a royal family. Priestly and levitical families—from Moses and Aaron; a royal family from Miriam, because David descended from Miriam... 'Azubah' is Miriam...Whence do we know that David descended from Miriam? Because it says: *Now David was the son of that Ephathite of Beth-lehem in Judah* (I Sam. 17:12).[13]

Here, the Midrash is accompanied by an editor's footnote, specifying that Miriam is also associated with Ephrath. It continues with a genealogy, which concludes with:

> *'And the families of Aharhel the son of Harum'* (I Chron. 4:8). Aharhel is Miriam: and why was she thus called? Because: *And all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances* (Ex. 15: 20). What families was he

[12] Encyclopedia Judaica, (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd. 1971), s.v. "Miriam," vol. 12,. 83.
[13] Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah*, Exodus I, 17.; vol. III, 22-24.

> privileged to raise from her?—*'The son of Harum'*: i.e. she was privileged to have among her descendants David whose kingdom God exalted...[14]

Biblical names often carry hidden significance. "Aharhel" can be read as *Acher Hol*, which the Midrash's editors translates as "after her with the dance", quite a lovely image for Miriam.[15] If we examine the name Puah, it can be translated as "to open the mouth", which fits well for a midwife who gently warbles at a newborn to make it open its mouth and breathe. Yet is not the same translation even more appropriate for this sacred singer, whose mouth was a fountain for the outpouring of her soul, in song and celebration of powerful, transformative moments? Miriam was not only found worthy of the title prophetess, but also as being a mother of artists. The rabbis went to very creative lengths to build a case for Miriam as the progenitor of both Bezalel and King David himself.

As Micah reminded us, it took the work of Moses, Aaron and Miriam to bring the Israelites to freedom. Since all three were mentioned together, there must be reasons that no one or two of them could have accomplished this monumental task without the others. God endowed each of them with abilities that enabled them as individuals to lead the people in specific ways, but to need the balance of the other two to see the Israelites through their crossing out of Egypt, and later through the wilderness. If the soul is the place within us that is most deeply and profoundly connected to God, then these leaders were people whose souls were especially touched, in that they were able to discern the needs of the people, and provide for them in the desert. It was the fusion of Moses, Aaron and Miriam's triad of leadership that sustained the Israelites during their wandering.

Moses was the bearer of the law. He was a visionary who turned aside to see the miracle in the burning bush, and was chosen by God, destined to be *Moshe Rabeinu*, the

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[14] Ibid., 24.
[15] Ibid., 24.

greatest prophet and teacher of the Jewish people. Moses was called to go up the mountain, and spend forty days receiving Torah. No one else among the Israelites had or would have the same direct relationship with God, as we are told in the last few verses of Deuteronomy, "Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses—whom the Lord singled out, face to face," (Deut. 34: 10). After meeting God, Moses came down from Sinai to lead the people and transmit to the Israelites what he had received on the mountain, the law that would ultimately shape Western society as we know it today. He was a great political leader, maintaining order among the often stiff-necked and unruly people, according to the law he had been handed. While his greatness itself could have made him seem to us as superhuman, there are facets of Moses's character that demonstrate his humanity.

Although Moses's soul was so directly chosen by and bound to God, he was not a man of words. When God called upon him to come forward as the leader of the Hebrews, Moses answered, "Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that you have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." (Ex. 4: 10). It was Moses and Miriam's brother Aaron who was to be Moses's mouthpiece. "Thus he shall serve as your spokesman, with you playing the role of God to him." (Ex. 4: 16). Aaron's duties evolved from being first Moses's spokesman, to being appointed by God as the first high priest, from whom all the other Cohanim—priests—are descended. His functions, and those of his progeny, were concerned with the exactitude of the law lived out in ritual worship. Every detail of priestly ritual had to be precisely followed, from what garments the priests wore to how

sacrifices were to be performed. Creativity was not permitted, and any deviation from the prescribed rituals was met with dire consequences:

> Now Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before the Lord alien fire, which He had not enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from the Lord and consumed them; thus they died at the instance of the Lord. (Lev. 10: 1-2)

Even Aaron's own sons were not spared from death when they tried to be innovative with the priestly rituals. Or perhaps it could be said that *especially* Aaron's sons were held to a demanding standard of perfection, because it is they who were to carry on the legacy of the priesthood after Aaron. We can draw a parallel between Aaron's responsibilities and our concept of *keva*. If *keva* is the clearly defined order and structure of ritual worship, we can say that in a sense, *keva* originated with the priestly duties of Aaron and the Cohanim. Moses brought down the law, and Aaron and his kind were to strictly oversee its ritual worship components, adhering exactly to God's plan as it was told to them.

This leaves us with Miriam. First and foremost, the Torah was brought down by Moses and given to Israel to uphold and follow with love and dedication. Aaron and the Cohanim were designated to be the keepers of its esoteric rituals. These were crucial roles, as the law and the priestly rituals occupied a central focus in ordering Israelite society. Yet there must be another component to human existence. There has to be an element of creative spontaneity in our lives and, consequently, in our worship. We cannot spiritually thrive if we are living by all-encompassing, strict legal and ritual lines alone. In order to be fully human, we must be able to give life to our *kavanna*, the unique voice within all of us, the part of our souls that wants to bring originality to the world. Though it can and should affect our practice of ritual worship, *kavanna* is not

encapsulated solely by the law or its ritual manifestations. The moment of Miriam's singing and dancing with the women was an unleashing of *kavanna*, giving over to a creative impulse that transformed the people, that brought them to a new place, literally and figuratively. If this need is an instinct we were born with, than it was surely implanted by God, just as our needs for order and ritual were. We cannot put aside or stifle our creativity, but must be given appropriate outlets for it.

Just as Moses and Aaron were chosen by God to provide and oversee a legal and ritual system, a *keva* for the Israelites, Miriam was there to teach them *kavanna*, to show them when and how to express themselves creatively. All three elements- law, priestly ritual and creativity- had to work in conjunction with each other for this biblical system of checks and balances to be maintained. No one force could overshadow the others, but all had to be accounted for in order for society to function. During the days of the Exodus and the wandering, all three leaders, Moses, Aaron and Miriam were necessary to disseminate God's teachings and transform the Israelites from a slave people to a free people. Later we find this trilateral leadership of law, ritual, and creativity united in one great figure, King David.

We can imagine that Miriam's leading the women in song and dance was not an isolated incident. Perhaps the other occasions were lost as men retold the story, focusing on the laws and rituals that were their territory, and from which women were largely excluded. We can also imagine that her leadership was infectious, that the creativity she encouraged was not limited to the women only, but that men saw the goodness in her work and found means of their own for sharing in it. After all, Miriam was credited with bringing Israel out of Egypt, implying *all* of Israel, not only the women of Israel.

Metaphorically speaking, her gifts brought them out of the slavery of the heart, the slavery that numbs the mind and sucks away hope. She gave them freedom of expression, freedom of the soul.

CHAPTER III

DAVID, SWEET SINGER OF ISRAEL

Bless the Lord, O My Soul,
all my being, His holy name.
Psalm 103

Miriam, Moses and Aaron left a legacy of creativity, law, and priestly ritual, which saw Israel through the wilderness and carried them into the Promised Land. King David was their legitimate heir, who followed in their footsteps and continued to build upon their foundation. A musician, a poet, a dancer, a warrior, a political leader, and the king who brought the Ark of the Covenant to the city of Jerusalem, David was chosen by God, and even today Jews await the Messiah born of his line. His life was turbulent, and much of it was spent in flight from those who sought his downfall or destruction, including his predecessor king Saul and his own son, Absalom. Even during periods of relative calm and prosperity, David's own personal shortcomings were, at times, a source of grief, characterizing him as a flawed human with whom we can identify. Yet it seems that despite David's failings, God was ever willing to forgive him, and stayed with him regardless of his weighty mistakes. As Jonathon Kirsch elucidates,

> Strangely, but tellingly, the Bible depicts God himself as ready and willing to overlook the bloodiest deeds and nastiest sins of King David. The punishing deity who dictated so many stern laws of moral conduct to Moses does not appear to much care, for example, that David seduced and impregnated a married woman while her husband was serving as a soldier on the front lines and then conspired to murder the husband—thereby violating at least three of the Ten Commandments in one sorry episode. "Yahweh," explains Harold Bloom in *The Book of J*, "is the God who fell in love with David."[16]

Throughout the full range of his victories and misdeeds, David was engaged in an intimate dialogue with God. He was powerfully drawn to the Ark of the Covenant,

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[16] Jonathon Kirsch, *King David: The Real Life of the Man Who Ruled Israel* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000), 9.

which housed the Tablets of the Law given to Moses at Sinai, and he upheld in principle, if not always by example, the laws and teachings handed down by Moses. David also enhanced the role of the Levites, Aaron's progeny, by instituting them as keepers of the musical rituals that would accompany worship in Jerusalem. His creative passion was inherited from his foremother Miriam, and like her, he drew deeply from the well of his experiences. The inner workings of his soul are laid bare in the Psalms, in the outpourings of his heart in distress and elation, in his relationships with friends and enemies, and in his sheer, creative abandon when worshiping God.

When we first hear of David, he is a young shepherd in his father Jesse's household. Saul is still ruling as Israel's first king, but his kingship has soured, and both God and the prophet Samuel are regretful of having anointed him. In I Sam. 16:1, God instructed Samuel, "Fill your horn with oil and go: I am sending you to Yishai (Jesse) the Betlehemite, for I have selected a king for me from among his sons."[17] God's words "king for *me*" are especially potent. What does it mean to be a king *for God*? What could possibly make one worthy?

The answers begin much earlier in the biblical drama, when we learn that the prophet and leader Samuel had grown older, and his sons were not fit to take his place. Concerned about the future, the elders of Israel gathered and pleaded with Samuel to "make us a king to lead-us-as-judge, like all the (other) nations!" (I Sam. 8:5).[18] Samuel was quite distressed about Israel's desire to emulate other peoples and appoint a human to rule, when truly Israel should serve only God as King. Yet God indulged Israel, and

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[17] Everett Fox, *Give Us A King! Samuel, Saul, and David: A New Translation of Samuel I and II* trans. Everett Fox (New York: Schocken Books, 1999), 79. For all subsequent quotes from Samuel I and II this biblical translation will be used, unless otherwise noted.
[18] Ibid., 37.

instructed Samuel to warn the people of dire consequences, but to do as they asked; thus Saul was chosen. The kingship experiment was not exactly a success; although Saul was a great military leader and, at times, was even moved by God's spirit—able to "rant like a prophet" (I Sam. 10:6)—he was ultimately overcome by paranoia, and his rule came to a tragic end.[19] Yet, rather than abandon the idea of having a king altogether, God saw fit to choose another, *specifically* David, to replace Saul as King of Israel. This time, however, it is God who initiates the kingship—God chooses to have a king given to Israel, rather than Israel petitioning for one. Whereas with Saul, Israel came of their own volition before Samuel, asking him to "make *us* a king," here with David we remember that God had "selected a king for *me*." David is to be Israel's king *for God*, because God wants Israel to have *David*. It is a biblical *shidduch*, literally a match made in heaven.

We get a glimpse of David's glorious future in a midrash depicting a subtle difference in the anointing of David and Saul. To illustrate this, the rabbis draw our attention to the vessels that held the oil used to anoint the two kings. When Saul was made king, Samuel "took a flask of oil and poured it on his head and kissed him" (I Sam. 10:1), and the rabbis take careful note that here, the prophet anointed the king with oil from a flask, or cruse. Yet when David was chosen, God directed Samuel to "Fill your horn with oil and go," whereupon Samuel "took the horn of oil and anointed him amid his brothers" (I Sam. 16:1 and 16: 13). In David's case, it is a horn that holds the oil, and herein lies the clue. The rabbis tell us that "Saul and Jehu (a later king) were anointed [with oil] out of a cruse, because their kingships were [to be] transient kingships; David and Solomon were anointed out of a horn, because their kingship was [to be] an

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[19] Ibid., 34.

everlasting kingship."[20] The rabbis found justification for David's distinction as God's chosen king even in the container used at his anointing! The horn indicated that David's kingship would outlive him and his vaulted son Solomon. The kingship of the House of David would be a kingship for all time to come.

Why was David chosen? What set him apart to make him worthy of God's special election as Israel's leader? The rabbis have given us some of their answers in the Aggada, and according to them, God wanted to be certain of the correct choice, so David was tested before the kingship was bestowed upon him. We know that David was a shepherd of his father's flock, and the rabbis have interpreted this occupation itself to have been his test:

> "The Lord testeth the righteous" (Ps. 11:5). How does He test him? By having him pasture sheep. He tested David by means of a flock, and found him a good shepherd, as is said, "God took him because of [his] separations of the sheep" (Ps. 78:70). What is meant by the phrase "his separations"? It means that David kept some sheep separate from others. He would lead out the lambs and let them feed on the upper part of the herbage. He would then lead out the old ewes and let them feed on the middle part of the herbage; and finally he would lead out the rams and let them feed on the stubble of the herbage. Accordingly, the Holy One said: Seeing that David knows how to feed the sheep, each according to its capacity, let him come and feed My sheep, the people of Israel, as is said, "From following the ewes that give suck, He brought him to be shepherd over Jacob His people" (Ps. 78:71).[21]

God wanted a king who would be fair and just, who would provide for the people as warranted their needs. This meant someone who could relate to people at all stages of life and who come from all kinds of backgrounds. Just as the young David knew how to care for the needs of the sheep, so did God foresee that David the king would have empathy for his people, and would be able to care for them with compassion and wisdom. It was not enough for the rabbis to recognize David for his creativity, piety, or

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[20] Freedman and Maurice Simon, *Midrash Rabbah*, Leviticus, Vol. IV., 132.
[21] Bialik and Ravnitzky, *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, 726:41.

military acumen—he had to be capable of *shepherding*, of making people trust him and feel safe under his guidance.

Additionally, the rabbis felt there was a compelling message in David's being no stranger to persecution. We are told in Ecclesiastes that "God seeketh that which is pursued" (3: 15). Out of this grew a midrash in which the rabbis recount a list of biblical heroes and their pursuers, followed by quotes to demonstrate the heroes' status as chosen by God. It ends with:

> ...Saul was pursued by the Philistines, and the Holy One chose Saul, as it is said, "See him who the Lord hath chosen?" (I Sam. 10:24). David was pursued by Saul, and the Holy One chose David, as the verse indicates: "He chose David also, His servant" (Ps. 78:70). Israel are pursued by the nations, and the Lord has chosen Israel as Scripture says, "And the Lord hath chosen thee to be His own treasure" (Deut. 14:2).[22]

Both kings, Saul and David, were pursued, and both were chosen by God. Israel, too, are God's specially chosen people to whom God gave the Torah. Israel's leaders must be people who are able to understand the plight of persecution in an immediate and personal way, so that they can empathize with the persecuted among Israel, and with the persecution *of* Israel on a larger scale. Since the Diaspora, the Jews have lived with hostility on many fronts and many levels. This midrash may have served to comfort the Jews in the *Galut*, teaching them that they are a part of a strong chain of survival that spans the entire history of their people, touching even their first kings in the early days of their homeland.

Not only is David himself held in such high regard, but his descendents are also celebrated. Tradition holds that the Messiah—or *Moshiach*, "Anointed One"—will be a direct descendant of David's. Rabbi Ishmael recalls a mystical journey up to heaven,

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[22] Ibid., 335:19.

where he was granted the privilege of seeing David on his throne:

> And behold, David, king of Israel, coming out first, and all the kings of the house of David following him, each one with his crown on his head. But David's crown was brighter and more beautiful than all the others, so that its radiance reached to the end of the world. Then David went up to the heavenly Temple, where a fiery throne was prepared for him. He sat on it with all the kings of the house of David seated facing him and all the kings of Israel standing behind him. Then David rose up and uttered songs and praise no ear had ever heard...[23]

The description of the kings of the house of David shows them to be wearing ornately adorned crowns, and they are given the honor of being seated facing him, while the rest of the kings of Israel are not depicted as wearing crowns, and they stand behind David. This is David in all his heavenly glory, having earned a seat among the angels, and secured a place of honor for his progeny there, as well.

It is one thing to be granted kingship—to be tested, found worthy, and be given the responsibility of leading a people in one's lifetime. It is quite another to have a "fiery throne" in heaven and one's offspring designated as the line of the *Moshiach*. Although he was tested as a shepherd and knew persecution well, others had met these requirements before him.[24] There must be yet another dimension to David, another facet that made him so beloved of God, and such a unique figure in Jewish history.

One attribute that David possessed in abundance was a tremendous depth of self-expression. He had a keen insight that captured the essence of the connection between the human soul and the Holy One:

> With regard to whom did David say five times, "Bless the Lord, O my soul"? He said these words with regard to the Holy One and with regard to the soul. As the Holy One fills the entire world, so the soul fills the entire body. As the Holy One sees but is not seen, so the soul sees but is not seen. As the Holy One sustains the entire world, all of it, so the soul sustains the entire body. As the Holy One is

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[23] Ibid., 386:1.

[24] Ibid., Moses in the shepherd Aggada (726:41), and Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses before Saul and David in the persecution Aggada (335:19).

> pure, so the soul is pure. As the Holy One dwells in chambers that are innermost, so the soul dwells in chambers that are innermost. Therefore let him [i.e. man] who has these five characteristics come and praise Him who has these five characteristics.[25]

According to David, the soul is where we share these extraordinary characteristics with God, and is a way that we are made *betzelem Elohim*, in God's image. If the soul is the part of us that "sees but is not seen," and "dwells in chambers that are innermost," than the soul is the realm of our deepest selves, where our most intimate perceptions of the world come from. In turn, human creativity reveals the soul, and gives life to what is otherwise concealed from the world in our innermost chambers. David was richly endowed with an ability to give rise to what he saw through the eye of his soul, and bring it forth in song, dance, and poetry. Even David's ancestry lends itself to this end: "R. Yohanan said: Why was she called Ruth [the one who fills to overflowing]? Because such was her merit that from her was to issue David, who filled to overflowing (*rvh*) the Holy One with songs and hymns."[26] More than any other character, David is lauded as the biblical artist par excellence, and his creative attentions were lavished on God.

In addition to being a musician, the rabbis depicted David as an intense student of Torah, and found a way to link these two passions together. According to the Aggada, his harp itself would rouse him from sleep at midnight, in order that he study Torah:

> "At midnight I will rise to give thanks unto Thee" (Ps. 119: 62). A harp was hung above David's couch, across his window. When midnight arrived, the north wind blew upon the harp and made it swing to and fro, so that it played of itself. David would immediately rise and occupy himself with Torah until the break of dawn....And the proof that David was awakened in such a way and at such an hour? The verse, so said R. Isaac Bar Adda, "Wake up my royal glory, let the psaltery and the harp wake it, and I then wake the dawn" (Ps. 57:9).[27]

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[25] Ibid., 585:92.
[26] Ibid., 113:51.
[27] Ibid., 118:85.

David's wake-up call was the sound of his own harp gently responding to a midnight breeze. The rabbis interpret "At midnight I will rise to give thanks unto Thee" as rising to study Torah, drawing a parallel between prayer and study. For the rabbis, Torah study was the ultimate means for drawing close to God, so it stands to reason that they would equate David's rising at midnight to give thanks with waking to learn Torah. Yet for David, the Sweet Singer of Israel, giving thanks often took the shape of a transcendent musical experience. The Psalmist, like so many inspired musicians after him, may have found it difficult to sleep through the night without waking to sing a new song unto God as it came to him.

Music was also David's inroad to the central circle of power in Israel. Shortly after Samuel secretly anointed him, he was summoned to the royal household to play soothing upon his harp, to assuage King Saul's malaise. At the moment that David was anointed, "...the spirit of [God] surged upon David from that day onward" (I Sam. 16:13). Previously, Saul had also been imbued with the spirit of God, but after David's anointing, "Now the spirit of [God] departed from Saul and tormenting him was an evil spirit from [God]" (I Sam. 16:14). It seems a form of transference occurred, and Saul was left empty of God's spirit, and afflicted by the change: "That is, what was previously a gift now becomes a torment. The phrase does not imply a separate creature like a demon."[28]

When the spirit of God left Saul, the absence was agonizing. He sank into a kind of madness, or perhaps a depression, a soul-sickness. His servants, concerned about their king's malady, suggested that a musician be brought forth:

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[28] Fox, 81, footnote 14.

> Sha'ul's (Saul's) servants said to him: Now here, an evil spirit of God is tormenting you; pray let our lord speak—your servants (stand) before you: let a man be sought, one-who-knows how to play the lyre, that it may be, whenever there is upon you an evil spirit of God, that he may play (it) with his hand, so that it is well with you (I Sam. 16:15-16).

It is no coincidence that David, the new secret king, was an accomplished player of the lyre. One of Saul's servants knew of him and recommended that he be brought to Saul, "And (so) it was: whenever there was a spirit of God upon Sha'ul, David would take up the lyre and play (it) with his hand, and Sha'ul would have relief, and it would be-well with him; the evil spirit would depart from him" (I Sam. 16:23).

The bible understood the healing power of music. It was a given that music was a balm for a hurting soul, so much a given that no questions were asked when Saul's servant proposed bringing a musician to heal him. The treatment worked well, Saul's malaise lifted when David would play for him. As a result, a bond of love grew between these two kings, with Saul making David his weapons-bearer. This idyllic time was short-lived, as Saul would continue to descend into depression and paranoia, and David would bear the brunt of Saul's anxiety and ill will. Here the bible is also realistic—music is an effective therapeutic treatment, but not necessarily a permanent cure in and of itself. David's playing could not halt Saul's degeneration completely, but what it did do was alleviate his pain, give him comfort, and sooth the evil spirit within him.

Music and dance were also at times essential for biblical celebrations and worship. As well as being an instrumentalist and singer, we know David took to the streets and danced before God as the Ark of the Covenant was carried into Jerusalem. It took two tries to bring the Ark successfully; the first did not succeed. because it was not appropriately reverent. Although there was music and dancing--"Now David and the

whole house of Israel were dancing in the presence of (God), with all the fir-wood-instruments, with lyres and lutes and timbrels, with rattles and with cymbals" (II Sam. 6:5)--the Ark was carried on an ox-drawn wagon and it slipped a little, whereupon Uzza, one of the wagon drivers, reached out his hand to steady it. For this, "God struck-him-down there because of his carelessness, so that he died there, beside the Coffer of God" (II Sam. 6:7).

The second attempt is detailed in the Book of Chronicles (15:1-28), and this time the atmosphere was different. The priests and the Levites were given key roles in the ceremony, and the Ark was carried upon the shoulders of the Levites, who had been ordered by Moses in the wilderness to carry the Ark the same way. David realized how crucial it was to have them participate in the ritual: "Because you were not there the first time, the Lord our God burst out against us, for we did not show due regard for Him" (Chron. 15: 13). The procession was again accompanied by music and dancing, but this time the priests and Levites were present and properly prepared for the occasion:

> The priests and Levites sanctified themselves in order to bring up the Ark of the Lord God of Israel. The Levites carried the Ark of God by means of poles on their shoulders, as Moses had commanded in accordance with the word of the Lord. David ordered the officers of the Levites to install their kinsmen, the singers, with musical instruments, harps, lyres, and cymbals, joyfully making their voices heard (Chron. 15:14-16).

The sight of "David...whirling with all (his) might in the presence of (God)" (II Sam. 6:14) had to have been quite dramatic, as it captured the attention of both his wife, Michal, and the rabbis. Michal, Saul's daughter, peering through a window down at the celebration, found David's dancing to be completely repugnant, and "she despised him in her heart" (II Sam. 6:16). When he arrived home, she accosted him, "How he has gotten-honor today, the king of Israel, who has exposed himself today before the eyes of his

servants' (own) maids—like one of (those) empty-men exposes-himself!" (II Sam. 6:20). David answers her by asserting that "I will dance in the presence of (God), and will hold-myself-lightly (even) more than this" (II Sam. 6:21-22). For her impudence, Michal is punished with childlessness, the quintessential biblical torment for women.

The rabbis elaborate upon this story, filling it in with vibrant and colorful details. In their telling, David was wearing ornate, glittering garments, and he was dancing fervently. As he leaped and jumped and clapped his hands, he was crying God's praises in ecstatic worship. In his frenzy he pulled up the hem of his garment, exposing his legs, oblivious to the women who were watching from windows and rooftops. Michal was so enraged by his behavior that she refused to allow him to come into the house when he returned, but chastised him vehemently for acting basely. In her ranting, she compared him to her father Saul and his house, claiming higher honor for her family, who were all modest and godly.[29] Here, as in the bible, David's response silenced her:

> David replied, Am I acting up before a king of flesh and blood? Am I not acting up for the King who is King of Kings? They of your father's house sought honor for themselves and put aside the honor of Heaven. I do not do so—I seek the honor of Heaven and put aside my own honor...even as an infant is not ashamed to be uncovered before his mother, so I disposed my person before You; I felt no shame in abasing myself for the sake of Your glory.[30]

Michal could not see David's behavior for what it really was. The king was not gallivanting for the entertainment of the masses, demeaning himself and shaming her name and family. His dance was a celebration, a total giving over of himself to God, a private communion that happened to be performed in public. David's reply to her defended the honor of his actions, claiming there was no value in the modesty she spoke of here. Had he been performing at the command of just any human king, his dance may

[29] Bialik and Ravnitzky, *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, 119:92.
[30] Ibid. 120:92.

have been too abandoned, too free, but who can place judgement on a dance before God? Unlike her family, his ulterior motive was not to raise his stature in the eyes of the people, but to humble himself, to lose himself in the joy of exalting God.

Michal chose the right word when she berated him for *exposing* himself--this he did do, but not in the same vein as one of the "empty-men" she compared him to. In his own words, David *uncovered* himself completely, "even as an infant is not ashamed to be uncovered before his mother". As we saw earlier, David recognized that like the Holy One, the soul dwells in chambers that are innermost. To bring the soul forth from those hidden chambers thrusts it naked into the light. David's dance brought his soul forward to where he could hide nothing from God, he could keep no part of himself covered before God. His singing and dancing uncovered his soul as nakedly as possible while still inhabiting and animating his body. Bringing the Ark to its new home in Jerusalem brought David to this new place of total self-exposure before God. In this moment of amazing transcendence, David knew that his dance, his song, were precious to God, and she realized that the music itself was the means of his connection.

David loved God exceedingly, and his devotion to God is what motivated his bringing the Ark to Jerusalem, the new seat of the kingdom. The Ark was not only a precious, tangible emblem of Israel's history, it was Israel's most sacred possession, for it was God's abode on earth. Wherever it stood was the holiest of places, because God's presence dwelled in it. David's overwhelming desire to be close to the presence God drove him to carry the Ark to Jerusalem, and with its arrival there, David initiated a new practice of worship.[31] He knew from his own ineffable experience that music was his

[31]Shubert Spero, "King David, the Temple, and the Halleluyah Chorus", *Judaism* 47 (Fall 1998) : 412.

highest communication with God, and that the songs he sang to God were gifts from his soul to his Creator. Intuiting that music would have a similar impact on others, he established the Levitical choir, who would ritually sing and play new songs of praise at the site of the Ark, and also before the sacrificial altar.[32] This musical tradition continued when David's son Solomon built the Temple, and survived through the Second Temple period, ultimately creating the framework for singing God's praises in synagogue services today.

The idea of a choir specifically trained to sing praises to God was a revolutionary concept at the time David originated it. Music had certainly been used in worship for ages, but the novelty of the Levitical choir was that it ritualized the singing of *praises.* Singing *praises* is a distinctive act, quite separate from *petitionary prayer.*[33]

Prayer at its highest level is "an acknowledgement of our total dependence upon God", as we are asking God to provide us with whatever we need for survival or self-fulfillment.[34] In this sense, petitionary prayer demonstrates that we would be unable to sustain our lives or live a gratifying existence without God. However, for many ancient polytheistic cultures, prayer was a "transaction" between the people and their gods, and would be performed with musical accompaniment.[35] In many ancient cult practices, different forms of chanting and instrumental music were used in religious rituals, and the belief was that these sounds could influence the gods, and were what the gods required from the people. The music served to appease the gods, and compelled them to act

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[32] For a detailed discussion of David's connection with the tribe of the Levites, see Spero, pages 415-417.
[33] Ibid., 411-412.
[34] Ibid., 411-412.
[35] Ibid., 412.

benevolently. Flattering songs were played for the gods in the hopes that the sick would be healed, the hungry fed, the poor relieved, the crops bountiful, and so forth. These prayer offerings to the gods in exchange for favorable treatment are not to be confused with *praise*, which is a selfless offering, given without any desire for returns. Understood in this sense, praise is a more genuine *worship*, as it is not ultimately motivated by need, but by adoration.[36]

David knew that songs were not to be used as a tool for cajoling God. Although God's spirit rested upon him from the time of his anointing, David knew that God was so much greater than any human could ever possibly comprehend. His unique relationship and dialogue with God only intensified this conviction that God was far above and beyond the limits of human manipulation. Yet, his mighty love for God prompted him to offer the greatest gifts he could give, not in exchange for anything, but simply as an expression of his devotion. As a musician, the purest and most intimate offerings David could give to God were fresh songs of praise. They were his vocabulary for the inexpressible, his means of saying to God what could never be fully said any other way.

David also saw in the singing of praises a potential for others to develop more intimate relationships with God. Music has the ability to communicate what we cannot say with words alone, but can also bring us as listeners to a state of receptivity, a place of readiness to allow God to draw near to us. In the words of Shubert Spero, "The ultimate purpose of praise of the Lord is to have an effect on humanity itself."[37] The inspirational effect of music can ready us for worship by bringing us to the right frame of mind for proper reverence before God. David learned from the failed attempt at moving the Ark to

[36] Ibid., 412.
[37] Ibid., 412.

Jerusalem how crucial it is to be appropriately deferential in God's presence. Now that the Ark--God's abode on earth–would find its permanent home in Jerusalem, there could be no place on earth more sacred, and no place where it could be more critical to recognize before Whom one is standing. In order to be fit to enter God's abode a transformation from *hol*—the mundane everydayness of life--to *kodesh*—awe in the face of holiness and sanctity--must occur in the soul of the worshipper coming before God. David knew music to be the ultimate catalyst from *hol* to *kodesh*.

The worship service in Jerusalem was largely a product of David's creative vision. There was no precedent for worship in Jerusalem, as the city had been a Jebusite settlement with no Israelite *bama*—"high place" or altar for sacrifices. Daily sacrifices took place at the altar in Gibeon, a village not far from Jerusalem, and were performed there by the High Priest Zadok "morning and evening, in accordance with what was prescribed in the Teaching of the Lord with which He charged Israel..."[38] There at Gibeon, David left the Levites Heman and Jeduthun to make music with trumpets and cymbals, "and instruments for the songs of God" (I Chron. 16:42) at the place where the altar of sacrificial worship stood. When the Ark arrived in Jerusalem, David placed it in a tent near his palace, and set celebrated musicians among the Levites before it:

> He appointed Levites to minister before the Ark of the Lord, to invoke, to praise, and to extol the Lord God of Israel. Asaph the chief, Zechariah second in rank...with harps and lyres, and Asaph sounding the cymbals, and Benaiah and Jahaziel the priests, with trumpets, regularly before the Ark of the Covenant of God. Then, on that day, David first commissioned Asaph and his kinsmen to give praise to the Lord: "Praise the Lord; call on His name; proclaim His deeds among the peoples. Sing praises unto Him; Speak of all His wondrous acts..." (I Chron. 16:4-9).

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[38] I Chron. 16:40.

In both of these sacred places, David laid the groundwork for a musical service that would eventually be carried over to the Temple built by his son Solomon. In Gibeon, Levitical music-making shared the sacred space before the sacrificial altar. In Jerusalem, the Ark was ensconced by a host of Levites who were instructed on the very day of its arrival to begin praising God with song. Both were consequential, for different reasons.

In Gibeon, where the animal sacrifices were taking place, Israelite pilgrims would bring their live offerings to God. As the animals had to be healthy and unblemished to be acceptable for sacrifice, they would carefully choose and safeguard the most perfect animals from their flocks and herds, which were then brought to the priests, who would slaughter and burn them upon the altar. Although sacrifice was demonstrative of the commitment to God and to the laws of the Covenant that bound the Israelites, there is an emotional impact that cannot be overlooked, and indeed this emotional impact may be a large part of the purpose of sacrificial worship. To see a life ended—even that of a dove or a lamb—makes one cognizant of the preciousness of life, and poignantly reminds us of our own mortality. Despite its centrality in ancient Israelite worship as a means of relating to God, and its capacity to encourage reflection about the inestimable value of life, there is an inherently destructive element to animal sacrifice. God breathed life into the animals, and yet the Israelites were required to destroy them. While the Israelites knew this what God expected from them, one can imagine that the event of bringing sacrifices could be at worst potentially traumatic, or at least a draining, fearful, or numbing experience.

While it may have been necessary and even, to some extent, a liberating release for people to regularly undergo this emotional journey, David saw a way for a balance to be made, mitigating the sense of destruction with creativity. Praising God with song and instruments was as inherently creative as sacrifice was destructive. New songs would be offered as well as the sacrificial animals, having both a grounding and an inspirational effect on the Israelites and on the Cohanim performing the ritual slaughtering. The music would prevent them from being overwhelmed by morbidity, and would give them a focus, reminding them of the holiness of the task. We also know from the laws of *kashrut* that ultimate regard is given to the comfort of animals, and ritual slaughtering forbids us to cause them any more than an absolute minimum of pain. To this end, the music playing in the place of sacrifice may have had a calming influence on the sacrificial animals. Animals can sense tension, and the more peaceful the atmosphere, the less fear they would experience. The Levitical music helped to keep the priests and the pilgrims centered and aware of God's presence, which may have also served to prevent their desensitization by overexposure to death.[39] David provided for this juxtaposition of the destructive aspect of sacrifice with the creative power of music, creating an integration of these two ends of the emotional spectrum that lasted through both Temple periods.

In Jerusalem, the question of how to worship at the site of the Ark was particularly curious, because the situation was entirely new. The Ark had just arrived in its new permanent home, and was installed in a tent close to David's residence. As there

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[39] Temple Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures: and Other Reports From My Life With Autism.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995). For more information about animal thought and emotion, and a reflection on the spiritual aspects of livestock-handling, see chapters 8-11.

was no history of animal sacrifice at an Israelite *bama* in Jerusalem, there was no obligation to immediately institute this cult practice there. Since the Ark was the holiest possession of the Israelites, and was the inner sanctum of the Tabernacle, it would not do to make an open shrine out of it, where anyone could have access to it without proper preparation. Gibeon was still the site of the altar for sacrifice, but the very presence of the Ark in Jerusalem mandated that secluded though it might be, a new form of ritual adulation needed to take place there. David had the vision to create one, and it was a major innovative leap:

> What David does for the first time is to bring together, on a regular basis, the most sacred and revered physical symbol of the Divine Presence with what he considers the "purest" form of Divine worship. David instructs the Levites to compose, sing, and play with musical instruments songs of praise to God, morning and evening, unaccompanied by any other ritual or cultic acts.[40]

In both of these focal centers of Israelite worship, David deemed Levitical music to be not just pleasantly incidental, but *indispensable*, and his vision was enduring and effective. The rabbis acknowledge the impact and significance of the Levitical contribution to the Temple service in the Midrash:

> And the Levites used to stand on the dias and sing in the presence of Him at whose word the world was created. See what love the Holy One, blessed be He, lavished upon the Levites! The Holy One, blessed be He, spake thus to Moses: 'Greatly are the Levites beloved by me. Take them in My name for high office!'[41]

Even in the days of wandering in the wilderness, the Levites were designated for greatness. In bringing the Ark to Jerusalem, David was confronted with an unprecedented chance to create new rituals for praising God. Ever the sweet singer,

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[40] Spero, 414.
[41] Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah*, Numbers: XV: 11, vol. VI.

David recognized the extraordinary talent of his fellow musicians, and brought the Levitical choir into the forefront of the worship experience.

While we will unfortunately never know the full breadth of the Levitical repertoire, we do have an ample record of the praises they sang, which were handed down to us in the Book of Psalms. One can only imagine that the original voices, melodies and instrumentation used to bring these incredible texts to life were breathtaking. Contemporary composers of sacred music are still inspired and challenged by the task of setting the Psalms to music, and generations of musicians have kept the tradition of singing Psalms alive ever since their conception in the days of David.

Although David is given the title of Psalmist, there is a Midrash in which the rabbis tell us that he penned the majority, but compiled the rest from other authors, acting as editor of the whole book. Ten men composed the Psalms, and there is a consensus among the rabbis on the identities of five of them, namely Adam, Abraham, Moses, David and Solomon. The other five are subject to some debate, but Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun, the sons of Korah, and Ezra are the key contenders. The rabbis answer the question of why David is given the credit for the Book of Psalms, as opposed to any of its other authors:

> R. Huna said in the name of R. Aha: Although ten persons composed the Book of Psalms, the only one of them to whom it is ascribed is David king of Israel. To illustrate this a comparison was made to a company of men who sought to sing an ode before the king. Said the king to them: 'You are all good singers, you are all loyal, you are all famous, and qualified to sing an ode before me. Still, let So-and-so say it on behalf of you all, because his voice is particularly sweet.' So when the ten righteous men sought to utter the book of Psalms, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to them, 'You are all of you poetical enough and pious enough and famous enough to sing an ode before Me; still, let David say it on

> behalf of you all. Why? Because his voice is sweet' as it says, *The sweet one of the Songs of Israel* (II. Sam. XXIII, I).[42]

The Midrash tells us that David's voice was the most beautiful of all these men, and for this he was given the title of Psalmist. Yet the rabbis further elucidate that the sweetness of David's voice brought something new to the psalms written by the others: "R. Huna explains it to mean that David infused extra sweetness into the songs of Israel (the other nine to whom the composition of the psalms is ascribed)."[43] David brought the compositions written by the other men to an even higher level, and for this he deserved the title Psalmist.

Artists may not always perform original work of their own. Truly great works of art often survive the artist who created them, and take on new life in the generations that follow. The same holds true for prayer. As worshippers, we regularly repeat words of prayer and praise written by others, sometimes hundreds or even thousands of years before our own time. David knew that his lifetime was finite, but hoped that his songs of praise would be immortal. The rabbis interpret David's words "Let me dwell in Thy tent forever" from Psalm 61:15 metaphorically, agreeing that David could not have actually meant physically living forever. Instead, they portray David as having asked of God, "May it be the will of Your Presence that my songs and paeans of praise be uttered in synagogues and houses of study forever."[44] However unique was his relationship with God, David knew not to expect to live forever in this world. Yet, he longed for his songs to survive him, so his words would continue to praise God through the mouths of those

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[42] Ibid., The Song of Songs, Vol. IX, IV. 4, 1., 181.
[43] Ibid., 181.
[44] Bialik and Ravnitzky, *Sefer HaAggadah*, 119:87.

who would follow him. David teaches us that by being moved by the beauty of someone else's creation, we can bring something from our own souls to it, and raise it ever closer to God. Be they psalms or dances, prayers or paintings, these gifts are transformed by new interpretations, and in turn transform their interpreters.

David lived a thoroughly integrated artistic and spiritual existence. He never tired of pursuing fresh means of expression, and responded with music and dance to the highs and lows of his life. He laid his ecstasy and anguish, his success and failures before God as the offerings of his soul. David's loving relationship and ongoing dialogue with God drove him to create songs that relayed his transcendent experiences, and we are still inspired to worship God with his words three thousand years after him. Throughout every stage of David's life, he blessed the Holy One with song:

> King David dwelled in five worlds and composed a song for each one of them. When he abode in his mother's womb, he uttered the song "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all within which I am, bless His holy Name" (Ps. 103:1). When he came out into the air of the world and beheld the stars and planets, he uttered a song, "Bless the Lord, ye His angels...Bless the Lord, all ye His hosts" (Ps. 103:20-21). When, as he sucked milk from his mother's breasts and beheld her nipples, he uttered a song, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all those weaned [from their mother's milk]" (Ps. 103:2). When he saw the downfall of the wicked, he uttered a song, "The sinners are consumed out of the earth, and the wicked are no more. Bless the Lord, O my soul. Hallelujah" (Ps. 104:35). When he reflected on the day of death, he uttered a song, "Bless the Lord, O my soul; O Lord my God, Thou are very great; Thou art clothed with glory and majesty....Thou hidest Thy face, they vanish; Thou withdrawest their breath, they perish" (Ps. 104:1 and 104:29).[45]

[45] Ibid., 483: 133.

CONCLUSION

From Miriam and David, I have learned much about the relationship of creativity and the soul in the Bible. They have shown that through our creativity, we expose the unique gifts of our souls, and allow for growth and transformation as individuals and as a community. The need for self-expression is a human instinct that originates in our souls, and language is usually functional as a tool for making ourselves understood. Yet, at times the content of our souls is too overwhelming to be communicated by routine speech. Artistic creativity liberates our souls from the confines of language, and the arts dynamically expand our vocabulary of expression.

Worship can be described as a revealing of our souls before God and, in Judaism, worship is both an individual and a collective endeavor. Just as the arts are a powerful means of interpersonal communication, artistic creativity frees our souls to reach out for God unencumbered by the structured, formalized, and controlled rules of our everyday language. Miriam and David understood this, and the arts were intrinsic to their lives and their worship. Music and dance were the ways in which they marked the profound moments in their lives, and in the collective life of Israel. Their music and dance were rites of passage from one place to the next, from persecution to freedom, love to loss, mourning to healing, fear to courage, anger to peace, transcendence back to their immediate surroundings, *hol* to *kodesh* and back and forth again. Through their creativity, they safely navigated their souls through the inevitable swing of life's pendulum.

As leaders, Miriam and David brought themselves fully to their people. Artistic creativity was an integral part of their personae, and as such it was an essential component of their leadership. They used their God-given gifts of music and dance to

galvanize their community. At the shore of the Sea of Reeds, Miriam brought artistic *kavanna* to Israelite worship, and emboldened her people to venture into uncharted physical and spiritual territory. She saw Israel safely across the Sea of Reeds, as well as through the wildernesses of the Midbar and their own fears. With her timbrel, her song and her prophetic wisdom, Miriam upheld her people through the crisis of facing their freedom. Moses brought the law, and Aaron oversaw the *keva* of the priestly rituals, but they alone could not bring Israel out of Egypt. It took Miriam's gift of spontaneous worship, of spiritual, emotional and physical *kavanna*, to move Israel from the shore. Only then were they ready to face the next stage of their journey on their way to the Promised Land, where the tripartite leadership of Miriam, Moses and Aaron would be united in Miriam's descendant, David.

Generations later in that land, King David unified the northern and southern provinces of Israel and Judah, and achieved newfound strength for Israel. Rather than resting on the laurels of his military prowess, David was compelled to devote his energies to his truest passion, worshipping God. He centralized Israel's worship in the new capital Jerusalem, where he could be close to the Ark of the Covenant and sing praises before the presence of God. With the Ark installed in Jerusalem, David had the opportunity to ritualize artistic worship in the city that would become the spiritual and geographical heart of Israel. The Sweet Singer of Israel understood from his own experience that song raises the soul to higher communion with God. Therefore he structured a new rite around the Levites, which placed them—and their music-- at the heart of Israelite worship. He laid the groundwork for his son Solomon to build the Temple, the nexus of law, priestly ritual, and artistic *kavanna*, in that it housed the Tablets of the Law, the sacrificial Altar,

and the Levitical musicians.

Through our ancestors Miriam and David, we see how creativity can have an impact on individual souls, but in a larger sense, their characters also embody the soul of Israel—a soul that is still today manifest by law, religious rituals and liturgy (*keva*), and *kavanna.* Just as in their days, during the last three thousand years of our turbulent history, Jewish survival has depended on our creative adaptability. Throughout cycles of persecution and displacement, resettlement and restoration, our body of literature, liturgy, and ritual expression grew exponentially. Rather than being crushed by the Diaspora, the soul of the Jewish people strove to reaffirm its commitment to God in new lands and generations. Our worship and our art are reflections of our continual transformation.

Miriam and David have taught me that to be a Jewish leader, I must integrate the tripartite aspects of the Jewish soul in myself before I can provide a strong model for my community. Becoming a Hazzan means enriching my knowledge of Jewish law, developing my facility with Jewish liturgy and rituals, and nurturing my relationship with God through *kavanna* and creative expression. Miriam and David were themselves literary incarnations of this Jewish soul. From the verses of the Tanach, they call out to my generation, investing us with the challenge of continuing their sacred mission of guiding Israel through changing times.

While in their day, only the Cohanim, the priests, were permitted to perform animal sacrifice, there was no injunction against non-Levites leading musical offerings.[46] Now that the sacrificial cult of the Temple has given way to the synagogue service, it is incumbent upon all of us to share in praising God. Just as David was given the title Psalmist for possessing the sweetest voice, so is the Hazzan honored with the privilege of

[46] Spero, 419.

leading the community in song. And just as Miriam was a catalyst for spontaneous song and dance before God, she didn't sing a solo, she led her people. While there are indeed times when the Hazzan's voice soars up to God alone, even in these moments, the Hazzan is still the *Shaliach Tzibbor*, the emissary of the public. The Hazzan is not meant to praise God alone. It is only as a community that we can come together to sing the *Barchu*, the call to worship. As individuals, by pushing the limits of our creative vision, we reveal new depths of our souls and discover uncharted territory of our own. Yet when we emulate Miriam and David by inspiring and nourishing creativity within our wider community, we take our turn as leaders bringing Israel to new places. In doing so, we are rededicating ourselves to the holy task of singing God's praises, as *Hazzanim* and heirs to our ancient traditions.

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