



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

DEVARIM > Haazinu

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October 15, 2016
Haazinu

Jews Are Muse-ical



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Music transcends differences. People speak different languages yet sing the same tune together.

We are coming fresh off the High Holidays, the Days of Awe, when the songs in the synagogue touched a primal chord, perhaps warmly reminding us of childhood near a grandparent, or of a family around a holiday table.

In secular life as well, a jingle or pop song we hear reminds us of and transports us to a time we'd first heard that song.

Our Torah portion this week, *Haazinu*, is a song. It begins with two characters, heaven and earth, which represent the soul and the body.

What soulful connection does music have with the heart and soul of man?

The story of one of the world's leading violinist's 300-year-old Stradivarius, a violin that saved Jews from Nazi Germany and brought them to the Land of Israel, conveys to us the power of music.

As does the stories of Itzhak Perlman and Ludwig van Beethoven, both of whom had major physical shortcomings. But, instead of making excuses, they made sublime music.

We can too.

And what better time to sing our song as we move from Yom Kippur into Sukkot, the time of joy and celebration?

JEWS ARE MUSE-ICAL

1. Musically Inclined (Joke)

One evening, a C, an E-flat, and a G go into a bar. The bartender says: "Sorry, but we don't serve minors." So, the E-flat leaves, and the C and the G have an open fifth between them. After a few drinks, the fifth is diminished: the G is out flat. An F comes in and tries to augment the situation, but is not sharp enough.

A little while later, a D comes into the bar and heads straight for the bathroom saying, "Excuse me. I'll just be a second."

An A comes into the bar, but the bartender is not convinced that this relative of C is not a minor. Then the bartender notices a B-flat hiding at the end of the bar and exclaims: "Get out now! You're the seventh minor I've found in this bar tonight."

The E-flat, not easily deflated, comes back to the bar the next night in a 3-piece suit with nicely shined shoes. The bartender says: "You're looking sharp tonight, come on in! This could be a major development." This proves to be the case, as the E-flat takes off the suit, and everything else, and stands there *au natural*.

Eventually, the C sobers up and realizes in horror that he's under a rest. The C is brought to trial, is found guilty of contributing to the diminution of a minor, and is sentenced to 10 years of DS without Coda at an upscale correctional facility. On appeal, however, the C is found innocent of any wrongdoing, even accidental, and that all accusations to the contrary are base-less.

Many of those puns went way over my ears. And I'm sure more than a few of you were left scratching your instruments. But....

2. Music to My Ears

One thing we can all agree on is that music is one of the most enjoyable and sublime creations. Traditional songs in the synagogue, lullabies, national anthems – all music touches our souls in the deepest of places.

Song and melody plays a central role in Judaism in particular.

The Levites served in the Temple as musicians, singing praises of G-d as the Temple service was performed. The Book of Psalms is a book of divine songs. Every part of the Torah, when read in the synagogue, is chanted in accordance with a specific tune and cadence, called *trop*, which also serves as its stress and punctuation.

And then we have the thousands of songs and cantorial arrangements composed over the generations in virtually every Jewish community. Sephardic music, Ashkenazic music, Chassidic music. Not to mention the various *lidlelech* sung lovingly to children by their parents and grandparents.

Music runs in the veins of the Jewish people.

Is it any wonder, then, that some of the most famous secular musicians and composers in recent memory were Jewish? From Arthur Rubinstein to Leonard Bernstein; from George Gershwin to Bob Dylan, from Leonard Cohen to Carole King, and let's not forget Simon and Garfunkel.

3. Huberman Stradivarius (Optional Story)

Perhaps the most famous violinist alive today is Itzhak Perlman. Perhaps the second is Joshua Bell. I would like to share a story written by Joshua Bell about one of his violins. A little later, I would like to return to Itzhak Perlman.

Recently, Joshua Bell shared the following story, about the "Huberman Stradivarius Violin."

This year my violin celebrates its 300th birthday ... [It] came into my life one fateful day during the summer of 2001. I was in London, getting ready to play a concert at the Royal Albert Hall and decided to stop by the famous violin shop J & A Beare to pick up some strings. As I entered the shop, Charles Beare was just coming out of the back room with a stunning violin in hand. He told me that it was the famous Huberman Stradivarius, and of course I was instantly intrigued.

I soon learned all of the known details of the violin's remarkable history ... Believed to be one of only five or six instruments made in 1713 by Antonio Stradivari in Cremona, Italy, the violin has belonged to many ... but it was its connection to Bronislaw Huberman that I found particularly fascinating and somewhat personal.

Huberman was a Jewish Polish violinist who lived from 1882 to 1947. He was a child prodigy who was revered for his remarkable virtuosity and daring interpretations ... At 13, Huberman had the honor of performing the violin concerto of Johannes Brahms in the presence of the composer himself, who was stunned by his interpretation. According to biographer Max Kalbeck:

"As soon as Brahms heard the sound of the violin, he pricked up his ears, during the Andante he wiped his eyes, and after the Finale he went into the green room, embraced the young fellow, and stroked his cheeks. When Huberman complained that the public applauded after the cadenza, breaking into the lovely Cantilena, Brahms replied, 'You should not have played the cadenza so beautifully.'"

Huberman became one of the most celebrated musicians of his time, but it was in 1929 that his contribution to humanity took on an added dimension. During that year he visited [what was then the British Mandate for] Palestine and came up with the idea to establish a classical music presence there.

During Hitler's rise to power, Huberman had the foresight to realize he could save many Jewish artists while fulfilling his desire to start

a Palestinian Orchestra. Huberman auditioned musicians from all over Europe. Those selected for the orchestra would receive contracts and, most importantly, otherwise impossible-to-get exit visas from their homeland to Palestine. Huberman raised the money for the musicians and then their families, even partnering with Albert Einstein to set up an exhaustive U.S. fundraising trip in 1936. By the end of that tour, the money for the orchestra was secured and sixty top-rated players had been chosen from Germany and Central Europe. All in all, it was a fantastically successful tour, barring one particular performance at Carnegie Hall on February 28th.

That night Huberman chose to play the second half of his concert on his "other violin," a Guarneri del Gesu. During the applause following his performance of the Franck Sonata, Huberman's valet walked on stage to inform him that his Stradivarius had been stolen from his dressing room. The police were called while Huberman tried not to panic, continuing optimistically with his encores. The instrument had previously been stolen in 1919 from a hotel room in Vienna but was recovered days later when the thief tried to sell it. This time, Huberman was not so lucky.

There are several versions as to exactly how and why the violin was stolen, but what we know for sure is that the instrument ended up in the hands of a young freelance violinist by the name of Julian Altman. Some say Altman's mother convinced him to steal it; others report that Altman bought it off the actual thief for \$100.

Regardless, Altman took great pains to conceal the violin's true identity, covering its lovely varnish with shoe polish and performing on it throughout the rest of his career, which included a stint as first chair with the National Symphony Orchestra ...

Heartbroken, Huberman never saw his Stradivarius again. However, his great dream was fulfilled when the new Palestine Orchestra made its debut in December of 1936 with the great Toscanini on the podium. I like to imagine that my own relatives might have been in the audience on that opening night, as my grandfather was born there and my great grandfather was part of the first "Aliyah" of Russian Jewish immigrants to Palestine in 1882.

As for his violin, it was played by its suspected thief for over fifty years, and in 1985, while dying of cancer ... Julian Altman made a deathbed confession to his wife, Marcelle Hall, about the true identity of the instrument. She eventually returned the violin to Lloyd's of London and received a finder's fee; and the instrument underwent a nine month restoration by J & A Beare Ltd which noted it was like "taking dirt off the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel."

... And so here I was in 2001, buying some strings at the violin shop and I was introduced to the 1713 Stradivarius again. As it was handed to me, I was told it was being sold to a wealthy German industrialist for his private collection. However, after playing only a few notes on it, I vowed that this would not happen. This was an instrument meant to be played, not just admired. I fell in love with it right away, and even performed that very night on it at the Royal Albert Hall. I simply did not want it to leave my hands.

This violin is special in so many ways ... When I perform in Israel with the Israel Philharmonic, I am always touched to think how many of the orchestra and audience members are direct descendants of the musicians Huberman saved from the Holocaust – with funds raised by concerts performed on the very same instrument I play every day. Who knows what other adventures will come to my precious violin in the years to come? While it certainly will be enjoyed and admired long after I am not around anymore, for the time being I count myself incredibly lucky to be its caretaker on its 300th birthday.¹

4. Songs We Like to Sing

We Jews are a musical people and we like to sing as well.

In the Torah, we find a number of songs. For example, there is the classic song which Moses and the Israelites sang after crossing the Red Sea²

¹ https://artsandlectures.sa.ucsb.edu/media/2522/pressrelease/jbell_hubermanes-say.pdf.

² Exodus 15:1.

and the famed Song at the Well.³ This week, our Torah reading is also centered on a song called *Haazinu* meaning, literally, “Listen.” It begins:

*Listen heaven! I will speak! Earth! Hear the words of my mouth!*⁴

There are various interpretation as to the meaning of “heaven” and “earth.”⁵ One interpretation understands “heaven” as referring to the soul, and “earth” as referring to the body.⁶

According to this understanding of heaven and earth (as soul and body), perhaps there is a lesson to be learned in the power of song to connect both soul with body, body with soul.

The power of music is better appreciated when we remember the intrinsic connection between music and the soul, between song and the heart.

5. Wise Saying

There is a wise saying: “The tongue is the pen of the mind and the intellect; the voice [of song] is the pen of the heart and emotion.”⁷

Intellect may be transmitted via words. Feelings and emotions cannot be fully expressed by mere words. That’s where voice, sound and music enter the stage.

Melody is the language of the soul.

Words and letters transmit the inner workings of the mind and intellect. But the voice and song convey the innermost feelings of the heart and emotion.

³ Numbers 21:17.

⁴ Deuteronomy 32:1.

⁵ For example, Ibn Ezra and Ramban translate it literally, meaning heaven; Saadia Gaon understands it as referring to the angels, who reside in heaven.

⁶ Paneach Raza, *Haazinu*; cf. Sanhedrin 91a-b, interpreting Psalms 50:4, He shall call to the heavens above and to the earth to avenge His people.

⁷ As quoted in *Likkutei Diburim* vol. 3, p. 1020. See pp. 510-511 for all the follows.

With regard to understanding and intellect, every person is different – some understand more, some less. But with regard to feeling and intrinsic connection, we all have the same soul connection.

That’s why when one person speaks, everyone else has to remain silent in order to hear the speaker’s words. But when it comes to song, all gathered can sing together. Language separates us; people speak different languages. Music transcends differences; we all sing the same tune together – in one seamless harmony.

Every single Jew has the same exact soulful connection to Torah, to G-d, and to the people of Israel. We only differ in how much we understand, some of us understand more and some of us less. But with regard to our innate and intrinsic soul connection to Torah, all Jews are alike because we connect to its music on a soul-feeling level, instinctively and intrinsically, not merely intellectually and formerly.

And that is what the song of *Haazinu* captures: Our intrinsic connection. And we read it on the Shabbat connecting Yom Kippur and Sukkot – both of which represent the melodic unity of the Jewish people.

6. Perlman and Beethoven

The power of music to transcend differences and shortcomings is profoundly demonstrated by the example of two musical giants – Itzhak Perlman and Ludwig van Beethoven.

Itzhak Perlman, the legendary violinist, plays sitting down. This is because Itzhak had polio when he was a child and his legs have been damaged. He could have very easily used his legs as an excuse not to use his hands. Instead, he has inspired a generation with his violin playing. Anyone who has seen and heard him play – in person or on a recording – has been touched to the core.

The same is true of the music of Ludwig van Beethoven, who began losing his hearing at 30 years of age, in the prime of his career.

And one point, his hearing loss became so profound that at the end of the premiere of his Ninth Symphony in 1824, he had to be turned around to see the tumultuous applause of the audience because he could hear neither it nor the orchestra. Beethoven composed and conducted without the musician's most essential faculty, his hearing. Yet, like Itzhak Perlman, this shortcoming did not hinder his brilliance.

Perhaps this speaks to the immense soulful power of music, bottling the soul's unique ability to transcend challenges and turn what others might perceive as a handicapped life into a life of unfettered brilliance.

7. Two Practical Lessons

Haazinu teaches us about the song within each of us. *Haazinu* – Listen: we need to learn to listen to the song within ourselves and within others.

Haazinu ha'shomayim – Listen heaven, I will speak! *V'sihama ha'aretz* – Earth! Hear the words of my mouth! We call out to both our souls and our bodies (heaven and earth) to listen and hear the song.

Every single one of us is blessed with the sublime gift of music. A select few are literal musicians, but every one of us has a song in our souls. And we are blessed with the ability and responsibility to sing that song and touch other souls with the unique music of our own soul.

Even when we may have shortcomings and reasons not to sing, *Haazinu* reminds us:

- 1) Never allow your shortcomings to distract from your music,
- 2) There are parts of life that require the pen of the mind, and other parts that require the pen of the heart.

Let's look at these two lessons one by one:

1. Never allow your shortcomings to distract from your music.

Excuses are easy to come by. You can argue: “I cannot play my song because I don’t have enough skill or money or this or that.” Or, you could simply pick up your favorite instrument – whatever it may be, from a cooking utensil to a computer to a Smartphone – and use it to make music, to let your soul sing. This may be by cooking a meal for family and friends, or it may be by sending an email telling people how much you care about them. The ways to play your soul’s music are infinite; you just cannot be derailed by some *perceived* handicap or limitation. Sing your song, the song of heaven and your soul, and the song of earth and your body – together as one.

2. Parts of life that require the pen of the mind, and other parts that require the pen of the heart.

Sometimes we connect to something based on the intellectual power, but sometimes we connect on a more intrinsic level. Both these pens are necessary to compose a healthy life – connecting to Judaism intrinsically is essential, being a Jew because you are a Jew, regardless of affiliation, age, gender, knowledge, or anything else. This is like music, every Jew hears the song the same way a learned scholar and newborn baby hears the song. But this is not enough, we also must utilize the pen of the mind to understand and articulate the lyrics.

This lesson is also true in day-to-day life, be it relationships, business, or anything else. To have an intrinsic, heartfelt, soulful, heavenly (as represented by heaven) connection is essential, in work, in love, in community. But it is best when followed by a tangible and articulate understanding of that relationship or reality, each according to his or her level. This is the earthy (as represented by earth) part of *Haazinu*, where the music is not just heard but also understood.

And what better time to sing your song as we come from Yom Kippur and prepare for Sukkot tomorrow night. On Sukkot, the time of joy, we celebrate the great revelations we received on Yom Kippur. We dance and sing in jubilation for our connection with the divine – for the fusion of both pens, the pen of the soul and the pen of the body, the pen of the mind and the pen of melody.

Together, these two pens will shortly pen the greatest tune and lyric ever composed – the song of the Final Redemption.

Shabbat Shalom! And Happy Sukkot!

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