



PESACH 5775

Seventh Day, Shvi'i Shel Pesach / 21 Nissan

Do You Have an Unsung Song Inside You?

April 17, 2017

**DO YOU HAVE AN UNSUNG SONG INSIDE YOU?
SEA-PARTING MUSIC LESSONS**

ABSTRACT

Do you have a song inside of you that you have never sung? A voice that has never been heard? Is it possible that your song is drowned out by the external commotion and noise of your life? Can we indeed sometimes not hear the music in our lives due to our being distracted by our struggle to survive?

Today, the Seventh Day of Pesach, is a day of song – when we recreate the song the Jews sang after the parting of the sea 3329 years ago today. Today we celebrate the song within each one of us, and the power of sing to release our innermost strengths and abilities.

What does a musical story of the Baal Shem Tov in Eastern Europe more than 200 years ago and an undercover musical performance by a world leading violinist, Joshua Bell, in Washington, DC a decade ago have in common?

A divine, symphonic, melodious message that could change your life.

Ahh, the power of melody. To close your eyes, sing a song and be transported to another time and place. Perhaps to a time and place that is beyond time and place. How can we tap into this mysterious – yet readily available – tool to reach transcendence?

With all our presenting life pressures and anxieties, how can music help us rise and soar? What can the mystery of melody, the synergy of song, the miracle of music teach us about our lives today? About being truly free? About learning to sing even in the most tone-deaf moments of life?

How can we each access our inner note, our unique musical key to compose the greatest symphony imaginable?

Peppered with anecdotes and stories about melodies, this sermon offers us a music lesson not to forget.

WOULD YOU LIKE A MUSIC LESSON?

1. A Day of Song

Gut Yom Tov!

Today is a day of song. On this day, the Seventh Day of Pesach, we recreate the song the Jews sang after the parting of the sea 3329 years ago today, as we just read in today's Torah reading: *Az Yashir...*¹

Today we celebrate the song within each one of us, and the power of song to release our innermost strengths and abilities.

Is there anyone who is not touched by music?

Melody resonates within us. It can transport us to another time and place. It can make us forget about sorrows (for a while), and bring a smile – or a tear – to our faces. There is something about the harmony of song that reaches deep into our souls.

And today we honor this power of song.

Not to pull rank, but long before the birth of the modern day music industry, we Jews have been singing songs for over three millennia. And today we revisit one of our oldest – but also timeless songs: The song at the sea.

So let's speak about the relevance of song to our lives today. How it can empower us in facing our challenges and taking on life.

But also how we can sometimes ignore the music... Beautiful music may be playing all around us; your soul may be emitting an exquisite song. And yet we may be so distracted that we cannot hear the sound.

How then do we attune ourselves to hear the music? On this day we learn the answer.

See this as our personal music lesson.

2. Music on Deaf Ears

Here is a true story that demonstrates how we often fall deaf to the music around us.

In 2007, a Washington Post reporter named Gene Weingarten asked the following question: “What would happen if one of the greatest violinists alive, playing on a Stradivarius worth several million dollars, was

¹ Exodus 13:17-15:26.

plunked into the sterile environment of a subway station at the height of rush hour on a dreary Friday morning? Would anyone stop to listen? Would anyone recognize the genius, the soaring beauty of the playing? Would the greatest of musicians be able to touch these rushing creatures?"

To get an answer, Weingarten decided to conduct an experiment for which he engaged one of the finest classical musicians in the world, generally acclaimed as America's greatest living violinist – Joshua Bell. (A Jew by the way, the latest in a long line of Jewish violin-playing aristocracy.)

Joshua Bell plays regularly before awe-struck crowds across the globe. His instrument is a violin crafted by Antonio Stradivari in 1713, at the end of the Italian master's career. It was owned by Bronislaw Hubermann, who founded the Israel Philharmonic. Joshua Bell purchased the violin at an auction for \$3.5 million dollars. He and his violin are musical mastery at its absolute height.

In any case, the young Jewish violinist agreed to play the violin for free in the subway... This would be the test of what type of society we live in.

This is what happened, as you know, or if you don't know, you can probably guess:

At 7:51 a.m. on Friday, January 12, 2007, at a popular Metro in Washington, DC, the first subtle musical note danced off Bell's violin and thus began an immortal performance that would last for 43 minutes, with Bell performing six classical pieces.

Although Bell put his heart and soul into his music, eliciting pristine, resonant notes from his instrument, 1,097 people walked by the master without a second glance.

As the Washington Post later reported, many of these people were very well to do professionals who worked in or around Washington. They included lawyers, CEOs, managers, investors, consultants, tradesman, bureaucrats, policy analysts, computer programmers, doctors, and so forth.

Only seven people stopped, although almost thirty threw in some coins into his violin case – at total of \$32 plus change.

Weingarten wrote up the results of his experiment in a detailed article in the April 8, 2007 edition of the Washington Post,² two days before Joshua Bell accepted the Avery Fisher Prize, the greatest honor a classical musician in America can receive.

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/pearls-before-breakfast-can-one-of-the-nations-great-musicians-cut-through-the-fog-of-a-dc-rush-hour-lets-find-out/2014/09/23/8a6d46da-4331-11e4-b47c-f5889e061e5f_story.html?tid=a_inl-amp&utm_term=.7c0dc3974f33

3. ~~Ear~~ Sea-Splitting Octaves

On Shvi'i Shel Pesach, the seventh day of Passover, we commemorate the parting of the sea. This morning, exactly 3329 years ago, the sea split one week after the Jews left Egypt on the first day of Passover. The Jewish people walked on the dry land that, moments before, was wet sea, emerging completely free from their Egyptian pursuers. The splitting of the sea symbolizes the culmination of the exodus, complete liberation from slavery.

To thank G-d for the great miracle of the parting of the sea, the Jewish people celebrated with song. *Az yashir...* Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to the Lord, and they spoke, saying: "I will sing to the Lord, for very exalted is He..."³

What is music? Why do we sing? When do we sing? And how come music sometimes goes unnoticed?

4. Why Do Chassidim Sing and Dance?

There is an ear-opening Chassidic tale whose message pulls at the heart-strings of every human being's musical instrument.

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Chassidic approach to life, focusing on joy, light, and non-judgmental positivity, was once asked: "Why is it that Chassidim burst into song and dance at the slightest provocation? Is this the behavior of a healthy, sane individual?"

The Baal Shem Tov responded with a story:

Once, a musician came to town – a musician of great but unknown talent. He stood on a street corner and began to play.

Those who stopped to listen could not tear themselves away, and soon a large crowd stood enthralled by the glorious music whose equal they had never heard. Before long they were moving to its rhythm, and the entire street was transformed into a dancing mass of humanity.

A deaf man walking by wondered: Has the world gone mad? Why are the townspeople jumping up and down, waving their arms and turning in circles in the middle of the street?

"Chassidim," concluded the Baal Shem Tov, "are moved by the melody that issues forth from every creature in G-d's creation. If this makes them appear mad to those with less sensitive ears, should they therefore cease to dance?"⁴

³ Exodus 15:1.

⁴ From *Be'er HaChassidut* by Eliezer Steinman; translated from the Hebrew by Yanki Tauber. The analogy is from *Degel Machne Efraim, Parsha Yisro*.

5. The Shepherd's Song

The Baal Shem Tov would often retreat into the forest to contemplate G-d's infinite glory as is revealed so awesomely in nature. Most often he would go alone, the seclusion providing him with true closeness to his Maker. On other occasions, such as this, and for reasons revealed only unto him, the Rebbe would bring along with him several of his disciples.

As the group walked on together through the profuse green forests, they suddenly heard a particularly beautiful melody. The Rebbe followed the music, his Chassidim close behind him. As they neared, they discovered a young shepherd playing a melody on his wooden hand-crafted flute. They were all enthralled by the lovely music.

When the lad finished playing the tune, the Holy Baal Shem Tov offered him a kopeck if he would play the melody once again. The shepherd was pleased, and played the song once more. The Chassidim watched as their holy rebbe closed his eyes, and swayed with the music. They too were surely carried away by the beauty of this seemingly unfamiliar tune.

As the lad finished, the holy man gently requested he play the tune once again, and handed him another coin. The boy was thrilled with his good fortune, and played the melody once again. The exquisiteness of the song was beyond description. The Chassidim felt their souls being lifted to a place of sublime holiness as the music filled the air.

When the lad finished playing, he was amazed that the Rebbe asked him to play the melody again, slipping a third kopeck into his hand. And so the shepherd boy played the melody on his flute once more. The Chassidim found themselves dancing, their spirits so uplifted by the splendor of the music. And they saw their Master swaying, reaching out to heaven with uplifted hands, tears falling from his closed eyes.

When the holy man asked the boy to play the melody once again, the latter was taken aback to discover that the melody had been erased from his memory. Though he tried and tried, he could not recall a single note. Then the Baal Shem Tov smiled sweetly and led his Chassidim out of the forest.

Later the disciples asked their teacher to explain what had transpired there in the forest. The Baal Shem Tov explained that when the Holy Temple was destroyed, the niggunim, the songs of the Levites too were exiled along with the Jewish people. The melody the shepherd boy played on his flute was one such melody. The Master thanked G-d that he had been able today to pay the ransom and free the Levites' song from its captivity, so it could at last ascend to heaven until the time when the Holy Temple will stand once again.⁵

⁵ Retold by Gita Levi. From nigun.com.

6. Wings of Song

The Baal Shem Tov's insights about the power of song are explained in the teachings of Chassidus of his successors, and especially in the teachings of Chabad Chassidus of the Alter Rebbe (a student of the Maggid, who succeeded the Baal Shem Tov) and his successive generations of Chabad Rebbes.⁶

The Alter Rebbe explains,⁷ that a soul travels through song. The body moves from one place to another using its legs or a vehicle. But for a soul to travel it needs a melody. Music lifts the soul and carries it to higher levels.

7. Soul Transportation

Song is one of the most underutilized gifts at our disposal. Music has surely captured the imagination and the hearts and souls of our generation. Yet, turning music into a tool that can help us heal, grow and thrive – is a frontier that has hardly been touched.

Music therapy and other uses of the medium have made their appearance. But there is so much more that can be done.

Our great mystics, with their directives of how song is a path of service, challenges us to make song and music a very real part of our growth and development.

Not only to allow music to entertain us and lift our spirits, but to turn it into a force of growth; wings that carry our souls to unprecedented heights.

Imagine having a song for every occasion. Imagine what our children would look like if they were put to bed each night by their parents with a beautiful melody. Imagine what type of people we would be if we were singing all the time (not necessarily out loud...).

Yes, indeed, a song is transportation for your soul. Like wings of a bird, music allows the bird that is your soul to soar on high, above the din and confusion of material earth. To fly upward – searching, yearning, discovering new horizons.

8. Conclusion: Sing-Along

G-d, the omnipotent violinist, if you will, composes and performs His cosmic symphony every moment of every day. But, for many of us, it is always 7:51 a.m. We are busy commuting to or from our jobs, consumed in life, buried in bills, and too distracted, or unsophisticated, or tired to recognize the violinist as He plays.

⁶ See Igros Kodesh Admur MehuRayatz vol. 3 p. 444. Sefer HaSichos 5702 p. 122. 5703 p. 169.

⁷ Torah Ohr 73a. 113a.

At the splitting of the sea, a deaf world's ears were opened. Suddenly, existence split and all the commuting creations stopped and saw – and heard – the Creator, the consummate violinist.

So what did the people do? They began to sing!

Today, we sing. On the seventh day of Passover, as the waters part and open, our blockages part as well and our ears also open. We may be commuting, we may be in a Metro, we may be in a synagogue, we may be in a hotel at a Passover program (programmed indeed), we may be at home with our families.

Wherever we are, today we hear the cosmic symphony, hear the divine sound, and we sing a song, we dance to the music.

Happy Passover!

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