

Rabbi's Reflections:           The Importance of Song (Part 1)

January 19 is *Shabbat Shirah*, the Sabbath of Song, since we read the triumphal hymns the Song of the Sea (*Shirat Ha-Yam*, Exodus 15:1-18) and the Song of Deborah (Judges 5). The former extolls God's power, which controls the fate of nations, and God's role in history. The rabbis claim it is the highest revelation, not just for the miracle, but our ancestors seeing God and glorifying God. Accordingly, the poem is in the daily morning liturgy. It is the seventh day of *Pesah* (Passover) reading, and in modern Israel, some people chant it that day on the beach. People chanted it in the Temple on Shabbat afternoons. Some sing it at a *b'rit milah* (circumcision) and at midnight. As far back as Temple times, people chanted it in some way with the leader. Some communities today add *piyytim* (poems) to the service on *Shabbat Shirah*.

Rabbi Shephatiah (*M'gillah* 32a) quoting Rabbi Yoḥanan opined one must chant both *Torah* and *Mishnah*. Rabbi Judah (*Ta'anit* 16a) required a prayer leader (among other things) to be skilled in chanting and have a pleasant voice. Rabbi Judah He-Ḥasid (*Sefer Ḥasidim* 11) wrote that music aids concentration (*kavanah*), unites emotion (heart) and brain (words of our mouths), and enhances feeling (one melody leads to weeping to supplicating God, another to gladness to praising God). Sa'adia, Bahya, and Maimonides (based on Greek and Muslim ideas, and Bible, e.g. David played music to relieve King Saul's melancholy) penned that music affects mood, which leads to thought and deed—Sa'adiah to the Golden Mean, and Maimonides (likely a disciple) to rising from the material to the spiritual world. Many worried about music eclipsing meaning (e.g. *Sefer Ḥasadim* 418, Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Pulnoye *Toldot Ya'aqov* Yoseph, Rabbi Dov Baer of Lubavitch *Kunteres Ha-Hitpa'alut*). Ashkenazi (European Jews except from Spain, Portugal and Italy) cantors often only chant each prayer's beginning and ending. Sephardic (Jews from Spain, Portugal and the Levant) leaders often chant the whole prayer aloud.

Two new trends developed among Ashkenazim. One, due to those who believe no joy may be completed since the destruction of the Temple, includes no singing even in the synagogue (Rabbi Moses Sofer, the *Ḥatam Sofer*, a revival of Talmudic and medieval *Avelei Tziyon*, Mourners of Zion, in Eastern Europe, and some mystics). A second trend comes from mysticism, where some counted every letter and word, allowing no deviation or repetition while praying lest one change *Torah* or the very nature of God and of God's involvement in this world.

Modernists stress the aesthetics of music (it existed earlier). Reform Judaism from its beginning emphasized new melodies, and advocated bringing in external influences, though Conservative Judaism began congregational singing. In fact, the tension between the traditionalists and the modernists about bringing "secular" or "religious" music into Judaism goes back to the Bible and has existed in every age, with advocates on both sides. Reformers tend to be freer in allowing in more external music or even creating melodies with no basis in tradition. Traditionalists tend to try to exclude as much external influence as possible. Today we hear much from the extremes. Traditionally, the two were balanced. Next month, I will continue this theme.

-- Rabbi Michael Rascoe