

The Everyday Enchantment of Music* -- February 7, 2020

Deep in a cave in the mountains of Southern Germany, it rested for 40,000 years: a small pipe, three-tens of an inch wide, made from the naturally-hollow wing bone of a vulture. Five carefully-carved finger holes; a v-shaped mouthpiece. It was a prehistoric flute, the oldest musical instrument ever discovered; played around a campfire, perhaps, bringing beauty to the the darkness of some primeval night.

[\[http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20140907-does-music-pre-date-modern-man\]](http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20140907-does-music-pre-date-modern-man).

A member of our congregation, a young mother, recently wrote this: “One of my treasured rituals is my daily walks to the school bus with my children singing [Woke Up This Morning](#), a freedom song from the Civil Rights Movement. The morning chaos that often includes yelling and warnings to hurry up or risk missing the bus is immediately forgotten moments after shutting the front door. The song is powerful. It was written by 33-year-old Reverend Robert Wesby of Aurora, Illinois in June 1961 while he spent time in the Hinds County jail, arrested for participating in the [freedom rides](#) from New Orleans to Jackson, Mississippi. It’s a song of resilience, new beginnings, and steadfast faith. You can’t help but feel good while singing it. By the end of the summer of 1961, “Woke Up This Morning” had become the unofficial anthem of the local voter registration drive.

Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on freedom
said I woke up this morning with my mind stayed on freedom
Well I woke up this morning with my mind stayed on
freedom
Hallelu, hallelu, hallelujah...

“Walking down the road,” our member wrote, “holding hands with my kids, I’m trying to teach them to walk tall and proud, despite any challenges they may face. [I want to teach them] that you can immediately transform your mood through music and powerful words. And that every day is a fresh start” [<https://thriveglobal.com/stories/rituals/>].

On this Shabbat Shirah, I’m thinking about the mysterious power of music; the magic of lifting our voices up in song. It’s striking to me that the first thing the Israelites do upon their liberation -- their first collective action as a people -- is to sing together. Some scientists think music began as a way for ancient humans to telegraph emotion to each other and build social cohesion. From an evolutionary standpoint, a songbird’s mating call and Elvis singing “Love Me Tender” are pretty much the same thing.

In the Bible, music and singing are a means of communication, emotional catharsis, therapy, spiritual inspiration. The warrior judge Deborah, triumphant in war, sings out her victory song. Hannah, rescued from the anguish of infertility, expresses her delight at the birth of her son in song. The shepherd boy David soothes the dark, agitated depression of King Saul by playing music for him; later, he will earn the name “*n’im z’mirot Yisrael* -- the sweet singer of Israel” [1 Sam.2:1-10; 1 Sam. 16:23; 2 Sam.23:1].

Ancient Israelite worship was musical -- the Levites played instruments and chanted the psalms in the Temple. And so it is still; in traditional and modern synagogues the liturgy is not read but chanted or sung throughout. For Jewish prayer, then and now, is not so much about stating propositions or sending messages to God. It

is mostly about shifting our consciousness, opening our hearts, expressing emotion, coming together in community.

“What an odd thing it is to see an entire species -- billions of people -- listening to meaningless tonal patterns, occupied and preoccupied for much of their time by what they call ‘music’.” So wrote Arthur C. Clarke in his classic science fiction novel, *Childhood’s End*, describing the reaction of aliens visiting earth, mystified by something we know in our kishkes: human beings are hungry for music, stirred by music; uplifted, excited, brought to tears, moved -- in body, mind and spirit -- by music.

So often, these days, our experience of music is a passive one. We listen on our various devices, or we hear virtuosos at a concert. We’re taught, early on, that if we don’t have the right kind of voice we don’t deserve to sing where anyone can hear us; and our experiences of singing together are rare indeed: in a choir, at a ball game, at certain music festivals, in synagogue or church. But music is our birthright, the shared blessing of our humanity.

So here, on Shabbat Shirah, this Sabbath of song, is my tribute to three songs that are important to me, as a human being and a Jew.

I begin with a song by Abel Meeropol, who was not really a composer at all but an English teacher. Born in 1903 to Russian Jewish immigrant parents in the Bronx, Meeropol graduated from CCNY, earned an M.A. from Harvard and taught at DeWitt Clinton for 17 years. Like many Jewish intellectuals of the time, he was a social activist and a Communist, though he later quit the party. In 1937, Meeropol saw a photograph taken a few years before, of the lynching of two black men in Marion, Indiana. The

photograph, he says, haunted him for days; it ate him up inside. So he wrote a poem and set it to music. More than 80 years later, it still has the power to shock us:

“Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant south
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop.”

Meeropol published his haunting piece, under the pseudonym Lewis Allan, in a teachers' union magazine, and he sang it around New York, including once at Carnegie Hall, with his wife and black vocalist Laura Duncan. Barney Josephson, the Jewish owner of Cafe Society in Greenwich Village, New York's first integrated nightclub, heard the song and introduced it to Billie Holiday, who sang it at Cafe Society for the first time in 1939. She said that she was at first afraid to sing it, but it became part of her act and eventually the climax of her performance. Josephson would insist that all food service stop when the song began; the room was darkened, and Holiday would stand during the musical introduction with her eyes closed, as if in prayer. “I wrote Strange Fruit,” Meeropol said later, “because I hate lynching, and I hate injustice, and I hate the people who perpetuate it.”

Paul Simon would later tell us that “the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls” -- but Abel Meeropol's song reminds me that music

can be a vehicle for prophetic rage, and prophetic love; a searing call to open our eyes and see what we'd rather ignore.

For my second song, I wanted to choose something from my high school and college years -- the time in our life, neuroscientists say, when music has disproportionate power over our brains, because of the intensity of our emotions at that age. The music we hear in those years becomes, for most of us, the music we forever love best. [<https://slate.com/technology/2014/08/musical-nostalgia-the-psychology-and-neuroscience-for-song-preference-and-the-reminiscence-bump.html>]

There were so many possibilities -- each one evoking its own distinct mood and associations:

“Hello darkness, my old friend; I’ve come to talk with you again...”

“There’s something happening here -- what it is ain’t exactly clear...”

“I seen the needle and the damage done;
a little part of it in everyone;
but every junkie’s like a settin’ sun...”

“For the times, they are a-changing...”

I finally chose a song by the *other* great Jewish folk singer of the 60s and early 70s, whose music continues to matter, more than 40 years after his tragic death, by suicide, in 1976, age the age of 35.

Philip David Ochs grew up in a middle-class Jewish family that moved around a lot when he was young. His father, shell-shocked from World War II, suffered from depression and bipolar disorder. In a PBS American Masters documentary, Phil’s brother, Michael, says, “We went to the local school and I believe we were the only two Jews in the school, so we learned what it meant to be Jewish. *Oh you’re Jewish? Pow!* So we learned how to fight.”

Phil showed early musical talent; he excelled at playing classical clarinet. He also loved John Wayne movies; he liked seeing the good guys win. Then he got into other music -- Buddy Holly and Elvis, Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie and the Weavers. He came onto the folk scene in 1962, singing in small clubs in Greenwich Village. He always saw himself, first and foremost, as a journalist, recording the big stories of his time through his chosen medium of music -- that's why he called his first album "All the News that's Fit to Sing."

Ochs could be sarcastic with the best of them -- witness the "Draft Dodger Rag," "Love Me, I'm a Liberal," or "Outside of a Small Circle of Friends," written after the Kitty Genovese murder, when bystanders listened to her scream and did nothing. He could be bitterly angry -- witness "Here's To the State of Mississippi," written in the wake of the murder of Goodman, Schwerner and Cheney. In 1965 he sang his most famous anti-Vietnam anthem -- "I Ain't a-Marchin' Anymore" -- this from a boy who spent two years in a Virginia military academy. He wrote "Bracero" about the plight of migrant workers, "We're the Cops of the World," about the depredations of American foreign policy, "Canons of Christianity," about religious hypocrisy. But here's the one I chose for tonight, made famous by the crystalline voice of Joan Baez:

“Show me a prison, show me a jail
Show me a prisoner whose face has gone pale
And I'll show you a young man with so many reasons why
And there but for fortune, may go you or I

Show me the alley, show me the train
Show me a hobo who sleeps out in the rain
And I'll show you a young man with so many reasons why
There but for fortune, may go you or I

Show me the whiskey stains on the floor
Show me the drunken man as he stumbles out the door
And I'll show you a young man with so many reasons why
There but for fortune, may go you or I, you or I...."

He never grew his hair long. He never became a hippie. From beginning to end, even in his most bitter, angry phases, Phil Ochs remained a patriot, a lover of America. And in that song he summoned the best of America -- empathy for those at the bottom, compassion for those on the margins, a recognition of human kinship and solidarity.

In our own time, when the poor and the struggling are ignored, or despised and blamed for their own misfortunes, "There But for Fortune" is a poignant, humble hymn to our shared vulnerability. In the convicted criminal, the homeless guy on the street, the down-and-out alcoholic, Phil Ochs still sees the image of God. More important, he helps all of us see ourselves.

Finally, I want to say Halleluyah tonight for the late, great Leonard Cohen. Born in 1934 to a Jewish family in Montreal, Cohen was the grandson of two rabbis. He was raised in an observant Jewish home, went regularly to an Orthodox shul, and attended a Jewish high school.

The prayers and biblical stories he absorbed surfaced often in his poetry and songs. "The Story of Isaac," from 1969, gave us a 9 year old son almost sacrificed by his father -- a poignant reversal of Cohen's own story, for his father died when he was 9 years old -- transformed into an antiwar parable. "Who By Fire?" from 1974, is his painful, personal reworking of the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer from the High Holy Days. "Anthem," from 1992, the year of the LA riots and the fall of the Berlin Wall, drew on religious imagery to find hope in a tumultuous world:

The birds they sang
At the break of day
Start again
I heard them say
Don't dwell on what
Has passed away
Or what is yet to be
Yeah the wars they will
Be fought again
The holy dove
She will be caught again
Bought and sold
And bought again
The dove is never free
Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

And the haunting “You Want it Darker,” released in 2016, weeks before his death, with background harmonies sung by the male choir of the synagogue where Cohen grew up, offers the refrain: “*Hineini, hineini* -- I’m ready, my Lord.”

Cohen was a spiritual seeker, who studied Sufism, Hinduism and Buddhism, and had a special love for Jesus. He lived in a Zen monastery for several years, crediting meditation with helping to ease his depression. Yet he never ceased to identify as a Jew. He said, in one interview, “I’ve inherited an extremely good religion. I have no need to change it.” When the *Hollywood Reporter* once referred to him as a Buddhist, Cohen took the trouble to write to them, saying “My mother and father, of blessed memory, would be very disturbed to hear me described as a Buddhist. I am a Jew.” [see *Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen: Interviews and Encounters*, by Jeff Burger, p.375].

In his mature years, Cohen kept Shabbat and regularly prayed in a synagogue. When his son, Adam, was hospitalized for several months in the 80’s, Cohen reportedly stayed by his bedside, reading aloud from the Bible. When his son finally regained

consciousness, he is said to have asked, "Dad, can you please read something else?"

[<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/leonard-cohen%E2%80%99s-biblical-vision>]

Yet Leonard Cohen could never be put in a box, religious or otherwise. "You Want it Darker," drawing on the words of the Kaddish, expresses, at one and the same time, reverence and revulsion towards God:

"Magnified, sanctified, be thy holy name
Vilified, crucified, in the human frame
A million candles burning for the help that never came
You want it darker..."

It's his very unorthodoxy that I prize him for. He can pour new wine into old bottles; he can hold on to traditional images but infuse them with his own unconventional spirituality. He can sing "a cold and a broken Hallelujah" -- reminding all of us who are cold and broken that we, too, can still offer praise. Cohen said: "The song explains that many kinds of hallelujah do exist. I say all the perfect and broken hallelujahs have equal value. It's a desire to affirm my faith in life, not in some formal religious way, but with enthusiasm, with emotion."

[<https://mobile.nation.co.ke/lifestyle/Celebrating-Leonard-Cohen-with-another-hallelujah-moment/1950774-3468808-item-1-y8u974/index.html>]

So Leonard Cohen gives us permission to sing, as well, here in our congregation; to sing the prayers of our people even in the absence of perfect faith, to sing out of despair or anger if we cannot access joy; to sing our own spectrum of emotion, the dark as well as the light.

By the campfire, lighting up the primeval night; by the bedside, as parents sing their children to sleep; on the shores of the sea or in the city streets, holding hands, as

patriots march for freedom; in joy, in protest, in affirmation and love -- music is our birthright and our blessing, bringing us together, giving us hope.

So let us be grateful for the gift of *shirah*, and let us lift our voices up so everyone can hear.

*Note: "The Everyday Enchantment of Music" is the title of a prose poem by Mark Strand [<https://poets.org/poem/everyday-enchantment-music>]