

You may have heard about the Jews of Shanghai, during the second world war.

Shanghai was notable as the only location in the world to unconditionally accept Jewish refugees from the Nazis. I know of at least one member of temple beth-el whose family survived the war this way. Let me share another survivor's journey. Rabbi Israel David Rosenberg was the only member of his family to survive the Holocaust . He escaped on a remarkable journey, fleeing Poland with a travel visa provided by a righteous Japanese diplomat. Ultimately, he arrived in Shanghai where he spent the rest of the war. A gifted composer, he wrote a "Shir Hageulah—a Song of Redemption" , a piece that became an inspiring hymn to the survivors of Shanghai and remains an anthem of hope for all of us, even today. Yet the words are mournful as is the melody that accompanies it. It reads: "*The righteous ones have gone down into the ground, and we have been left as a remnant*"¹

Judy Sings the slow melody

And then, a remarkable thing happens. When the song repeats the melody changes. It rises in a celebratory tempo, transforming the meaning of the very same words from a poignant lament to a jaunty inspiration.

Judy sings the faster melody

Changing the melody recasts the meaning. The words are the same. They still describe suffering and loss, but this tune inspires hope. Rabbi Rosenberg lived through unthinkable trials. His family was murdered, a world war raged even as he navigated life

¹<https://newsletters.theatlantic.com/deep-shtetl/6307bc7368f61f0021d9fe1a/lecha-dodi-jewish-song-prayer/>

as refugee in a foreign land. His future was less than assured. Yet, in the midst of his sorrow and uncertainty he grasped an eternal truth—that Circumstances may be out of our control but we still get to write the melody. And, if we listen carefully, we can hear hopeful notes.

The song of doom is hard to resist. I certainly have found myself singing that tune. It is all around us, a drumbeat of all the worst things that can go wrong –with our health, the environment, our democracy, our lives. It takes courage and resolve not to give up. The persistence to continue to find the hopeful song within us is our perpetual challenge.

The song of the Shofar captures this narrative. The over 100 shofar tones you heard today tell a story. We begin with tekiah representing stability and comfort. One long steady note. Shevarim's staccato notes signify brokenness. The Teruah – up and down – is a clarion call to embrace redemption and hope. This cycle repeats—just as our stories do with highs and lows. Finally, the last, potent Tekiah gedolah is an aspirational note reaching for the best in us and in the world.

We also know that the story of the Jewish people has highs and lows. Even at our lowest moments we have looked forward with hope in the future. Perhaps the worst calamity of early Judaism was the destruction of the first Temple in Jerusalem. The Jewish people lost our spiritual center and our homeland all at once. Demoralized in exile, the Israelites plead in Psalm 137 “How can we even sing at this moment?” The prophet Jeremiah responds by reminding his people that they can still find a tune that

inspires wholeness even in a broken world. Calmly he charges them to “Build houses, plant gardens and enjoy the fruit”. He comforts them, saying “Find partners, raise families and engage in civic life.”² Then, he teaches clearly—we can sing once again. It is no mistake that Psalm 138, immediately following, is in fact a hymn of gratitude. It doesn’t deny the challenges or the suffering but reflects in its own song the words to which read: “You inspired me with courage.”³ Even when the words and the reality may be grim, our tradition teaches us that the song can still lift our hearts.

We can still sing, even when the melody is hard to find. The song can sustain us and inspire us to live each day with the message of a hopeful future. We know that to be true. Consider in the pandemic how we found ourselves in front of a zoom screen, singing alone. The songs sung in our homes (even—perhaps especially—the ones that were off key) were the sacred connection that nourished our spirits. Recently, many of you have reflected to me how excited you are to hear the soulful melodies of this season in community as we at long last raise our voices *together*. We are reminded of how the Jewish spirit is sustained in song that to sing is to pray twice.

The Midrash⁴ points out how the Jewish people have composed songs to ground us in times of crisis. One such melody was sung by the Israelites when they escaped Pharaoh’s Army and passed safely to the far shores of the Red sea. We still sing these words at each and every service—the Mi Chamocha.

² (Jeremiah 29:5-8)

³ Psalm 138:5

⁴ Midrash Tanchuma Beshalach 10

The ancient rabbis detail ten songs including those of Moses, Hannah, Deborah and King David. The Midrash teaches us that there is always one more song, yet to be written. This will be a new composition, A Shir Chadash. This song is a comforting reminder of all that is possible.

This song is ours alone to write. As we enter 5783 we can choose the melody. We are challenged not to succumb to predictions of the worst, nor to deny that times can be difficult. But for all of its complexities, this song of hope empowers and inspires us to be our best. Sometimes the notes are comfortably familiar. Sometimes they are a brand new tune and rhythm that encourages discovery and challenges us to grow.

Joni Mitchell's performance this summer inspired many of us with her songs of redemption. Joni Mitchell's surprise appearance at the Newport Folk festival brought tears to my eyes. It was a moment of "shared delight." The cause for celebration was in the reality that no one expected to see her jubilant return.

When Joni took that mic at age 78 and sang "both sides now" – a song she released when she was 23 – it struck a note in our hearts. After 55 years, what we heard was a song that felt new and yet so familiar that everyone on the stage and in the crowd had to sing along with her.

Joni Mitchell overcame what her doctors emphasize was incredible odds. Her brain aneurysm returned her to near infancy—she couldn't speak or walk. And while her

speech came back relatively quickly, she had to re-learn how to play guitar, watching videos of herself to see where to put her fingers. Joni Mitchell clawed her way back with will and grit. She survived the unthinkable and triumphed. She survived the storm and came out singing strong. As the New York Times wrote, Mitchell seemed to sing that day in Newport with a grinning shrug as if to say— ‘I really don’t know life at all. You never know — anything can happen. Even this.’⁵

One wise listener later wrote the next day, “We’ve all been counted out or chalked up as lost before. Maybe it was our health. Maybe we lost a job, or flunked out of school. Maybe we were dumped, divorced, given up on, scratched from the roster.”⁶

Seeing Mitchell’s triumph was a reminder that each of us can come back as well. How we have all stood on the ledge of that abyss and declared that we have given up—on ourselves, on a loved one, even on the state of our world. How many times have we thrown our hands in the air and declared that we give up and give in.

We can find our way back, too. It doesn’t negate our suffering, or our losses. But it is a reminder as we enter this new year, that we can return with grit and determination. We need not give in to the declarations of doom around us. Embracing both sides is, after all, at the heart of our Jewish tradition. Brokenness and wholeness exist in tandem. We have seen pain and sorrow. We can each find our voice to sing a hopeful song. Our

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/26/arts/music/joni-mitchell-performance.html>

⁶ <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/07/28/metro/why-joni-mitchells-return-newport-folk-festival-mattered-so-many-us/>

prayers on this Rosh Hashanah remind us that there is “Something lost and something gained in living every day”.

The Days of Awe are here to remind us that we don’t really understand life after all—and that makes room for the surprising joy and sweetness that our song can bring—