

SACRED SOUNDS

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Passover 2017

Singing at the Sea

By Cantor Hinda Labovitz

The Song of the Sea is a declaration of freedom, an ode to the militant God who has just miraculously overcome the Egyptians who enslaved and sought to re-oppress the Israelites. "I will sing to God for He has triumphed gloriously / Horse and driver God has hurled into the sea," the poem begins (Exodus 15:1). Miriam the Prophetess echoes this same phrase at the poem's close (Exodus 15:21). The poetry here is so powerful that it permeates our liturgy every day; we recite the poem in full in our morning service of each day.

In context of the biblical story, we can understand and even sympathize with the Israelites' celebration: the long-lasting yoke of oppression was lifted, and they were watching with catharsis as their oppressors were overtaken in a Divine act. But does the message, that God is militant and destructive to our enemies, ring true to our modern ear?

Many Jews traditionally take a bit of wine out of our glasses as we recite in the Passover seder the ten plagues that were inflicted upon Egypt. Some explain that this custom allows us to recognize that Jewish salvation in the Exodus narrative came at the expense of Egyptian lives, while others explain it as symbolic of revenge, spilled blood, or placation of evil spirits. For centuries, it was important to our ancestors to feel like God would be ready to do the same for them if the need arose, and that is reflected in other parts of the Passover seder liturgy – particularly at "*sh'fokh chamat'kha*," in which we call upon God to enact vengeance on our oppressors while welcoming Elijah the Prophet, escort to the messiah, through our open doors.

Western Jews have experienced an unprecedented era of calm in the past several decades, not fearing for our lives from pogroms, hate crimes, and random anti-Semitic acts daily as our ancestors and grandparents did. Though that struggle is not totally abated and our fears have risen in the current political climate, we are still able to see that our enemies are also humans; that our job in repairing the world is to build bridges and facilitate understanding between groups, undermining the hate. Perhaps, then, the daily message of *Shirat Ha-Yam* is this: In dire moments, when we are unable to protect ourselves, we can rely on our Defender. In all others, we are our own defense.

And thus, the last verse of the poem becomes our charge, a universalistic echo: "You shall bring them in, and plant them on the mountain of Your inheritance — the place, Lord, You made for Your dwelling, the sanctuary, Lord, Your hands established" (Exodus 15:17).

Let us recognize today our place in God's sanctuary, and be cognizant that all those we encounter are human, and divine. Let us find ways in which we can make a sanctuary for all who are in need. May we find ways to make music, relish the dissonances, and resolve in harmony.

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Becoming a Welcoming Congregation to All Children

By Cantor Sandy Bernstein

Our congregations are filled with people of all ages and generally, the *kahal* on the morning of a Bar or Bat Mitzvah is also comprised of both Jews and non Jews. How does a child find something to teach all of those people? It is a true demonstration of coming of age when the new “Jewish adult” can teach even the adults! It is also an opportunity for said Bar/Bat Mitzvah to demonstrate what they have learned in terms of Hebrew skills, chanting *Torah*, chanting *Haftarah* and leading *t’fillah*/prayers to the whole *kahal*.

So what happens when a child has learning difficulties or has some physical or mental disability? What are we to do with that child when the time comes for his/her Bar/Bat Mitzvah? In the not too distant past, those children were pushed away from the main *Shabbat* morning service and would either do a little something on Friday evening, or would do a *Shabbat* afternoon *Minhah* service so that only their family and friends would be there and the main service with the rest of the community would not be disturbed by such a change in the regular service as might be needed for a child with challenges. The model of our regular *Shabbat* morning services comes from the classical reform service which took its cues from the church where formality and decorum were most valued. In these services, any extraneous sound or non conformity are considered bad form. In these services, when a baby cries, they are asked to leave or worse, are not invited to attend and are pushed aside to an alternative service.

It is time for us to move beyond these formalities. It is time for us to bring *hesed*/kindness into our services and embrace those with differences! To that end, we should be welcoming Bar/Bat Mitzvah students who may need to walk off the bimah unexpectedly or who might start talking about something completely unrelated to the morning’s topics in the midst of the service, or who may only be able to do a very small part in the service, or who may stutter, or who may have a clear physical disability. Each one of those children is, just as we all are, created *b’tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. When one reads the Torah, one can easily see many of our ancestors who had issues, including speech impediments, clearly visible skin conditions and more. Let’s not forget that we all have some kind of issues. Not one person on the planet can truly say that he has no flaws, that he is completely perfect. Many of us shy away from those with visible differences. Many don’t care to acknowledge that some have non-visible differences. Either way, we need to embrace all people no matter what their differences or disabilities may be. We need to show *hesed*. We need to reach out and help our neighbors and fellow congregants who may be struggling. We need to have patience. We need to congratulate all of our Bar/Bat Mitzvah students for what they CAN do and not criticize them for what they cannot do.

Cantor Sandy Bernstein serves Congregation Beth El Ner Tamid in Broomall, PA

“It is time for us to bring *hesed*/kindness into our services and embrace those with differences!”

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Forming a Jewish Identity

By Cantor Elizabeth Berke



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As we are about to celebrate Pesach, when we are creating our national identity and are ushered through the waters of the Sea, I want to draw attention to those in the community who are striving to form their Jewish identity. Little did I know, in 1994, when I was writing my thesis for the Graduate School at JTS on infusing Jewish music into conversion curricula, that 17 years later I would find an incredibly fulfilling job coordinating a robust conversion program at Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago, IL. While much of the curriculum is filled with history, theology, the how-to's and why-for's, that material is dry unless moistened with the liturgical, holiday and cultural songs of our people.

The choice to become Jewish is not an easy one. Some people are drawn to Judaism through a potential partner, others are on a spiritual quest on their own. No matter the original driving force, the individual slowly builds a Jewish identity. Attaining Jewish knowledge is one way to gain confidence in this evolving identity. An additional layer is finding ways to participate, and that is often through song and experience at home and synagogue life.

Does your community welcome Jews by choice in a conscious way? How can you be involved in the process as a congregant? Even if your rabbi is working with only a few individuals, congregational involvement supports the clergy and creates a welcoming community for those on a spiritual path. At Anshe Emet we have congregants serve as mentors for the students in the Jews by choice program. Some of the congregants are Jews by choice themselves, but most often the congregants are Jews by birth who make themselves available to sit with a conversion candidate at services to help decode the experience and answer questions. This relationship can also take place out of the synagogue by invitations to Shabbat and holiday meals. As you know, even if it is off-key (meaning - don't feel like you aren't up to the task) the music of our tradition is also found around the Shabbat table- even just learning *ki vanu vacharta v'otanu kidashtah* of Kiddush is a big step toward feeling a part of the Jewish story.

In my time working with conversion candidates I find it has helped me on my spiritual path too. The students are inquisitive and taking their spirituality to a new place. This is also an important idea for Jews by birth. You may find that helping others on their growth edge helps you find yours. After all, we all stood at Sinai together - Chag Kasher V'sameiach. Wishing you a happy and joyous Pesach.

Cantor Elizabeth Berke serves as Director of Continuing Education at Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago, IL



Judaism & Shakespeare

By Cantor Matthew Austerklein



"Words, words, words." (Hamlet Act II, Scene 2).

We Jews are classically known as the "People of the Book"— a people intimately attached to the written word. Indeed, we study Torah, Talmud, and Midrash in a way to deepen our understanding of HaShem's "Word." Our ability to interpret language is at the heart of our ability to experience God.

Shakespeare, like the Bible, is at the heart of the Western literary canon. It has inspired generations of readers, writers, actors, and audiences. And like the Bible, Shakespeare requires study and attention to language to truly experience its deep truths and timeless questions.

I have always loved both Torah and Shakespeare for their depth, values, and great stories. As a Shakespeare camper in my high school days, I learned first-hand the importance of understanding each word to get the most out of Shakespeare. And I loved every minute of it.

Fifteen years later, it became my privilege to share both of these loves with my synagogue's teenagers by organizing a special trip that would highlight the pleasures of both Torah & Shakespeare. And so, on October 11, 2015, a group of teens from my congregation and our local day schools traveled 2 ½ hours south to Staunton, VA – home of the American Shakespeare Center (ASC) and the world's only re-creation of Shakespeare's winter theater – the Blackfriars. We were accompanied by a 5th grade teacher from the day school who ran its Shakespeare club, some parent chaperones, and our synagogue's cantorial intern.

Over our trip, we learned how to read the Bible as a drama, and studied parallel archetypes in Shakespeare & Jewish literature. We toured the beautiful Blackfriars theater, studied Shakespearean language with ASC scholars, and saw one of the most unbelievable productions of *Midsummer Night's Dream* ever – the teens were jumping up and down in their seats with laughter!

Rabbi Bradley Artson once spoke of his vision of Judaism as "where your truest self and G-d's deepest desires meet." It was a pleasure to share the values and interest that make up part of my true self and my faith on this trip, and I could see that it was valuable for our teens as well. I wish for each of us that we can always find the meeting place between our personal passions and our spiritual calling as Jews.

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Beyond offering our members opportunities for mentorship, professional development and personal growth, we also provide essential services such as placement, insurance and retirement planning.

Affiliated with the Conservative/Masorti movement, we serve congregations from across the denominational spectrum. We seek to ensure that our members are fully prepared to lead synagogues and the whole Jewish community through an ever-evolving musical and spiritual landscape.