

A-17

"WHAT MAKES A JEWISH SONG JEWISH?"

In discussing the theme of this sermon, "what makes a Jewish song Jewish", I speak as a Rabbi, not as a musician or connoisseur of the arts. I believe that in addition to the artistic qualities of a song, or any work of art, there are also certain ethical or moral or religious matters which contribute to its greatness and Jewishness. This week, as Shabbos Shirah - the Sabbath on which the Song of Moses is read - and the beginning of Jewish Music month, is an opportune time to delve into those other-than-technical matters which make songs like Az Yashir great and Jewish.

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There are three prerequisites for, or tests of, a great Jewish song. The first two of these are universal; that is, they are the marks of greatness which distinguish any truly superior song or chant. The third is the particularly Jewish aspect. And it is the three of these, taken together, which make for a song such as Az Yashir, which is both great from a universal point of view, and invaluable holy from a Jewish point of view.

The first requirement is - that it have meaning for all times. It must be as appropriate for any future generation as it is for the one in which it is written. It must outgrow local character and provincial significance, and overflow into the stream of time, the stream of Eternity. For a truly great song, to be immortal, must be eternal. וְנִכְחַד יִנְכַּח, "and the Israelites said saying" is interpreted by the Jerusalem Talmud as meaning that they said for future generations to say, אֲנִי אֶפֶר, 'tis a song for all time to come. It is a song which will be as valid for the 20th century as for 4,000 years before the 20th century. Do we not repeat the Az Yashir daily? Do we not read it from the Torah twice every year? You see, this song was not restricted to particular events and was not circumscribed by definite personalities, - in essence it transcends all these. For, as the song of liberation, sung after the exodus from Egypt, it is the hymn of freedom for all time, the eternal anthem of the Jew which commemorates and reverences the beginning of his history. And even more than historical or political motifs were here detected by the Jewish mystics. They saw in it, too, a song of the liberation of the soul from the Egyptian qualities of man which drag it down. Every man must leave his own Egypt, says the Kabbalah, and must sing of this exodus proudly & sweetly. If a man be dragged down to misery because he is by nature vindictive, then vindictiveness is his Egypt in which his soul is in exile. If he can overpower that banal quality - then he has personally experienced the exodus from Egypt, and though he live in the year 5712, he must

sing an Az Yashir, the song of liberation from an Egypt all his own. So then, Az Yashir, from the historical point of view and from the personal aspect, is a song with as much meaning for our day and every day as it was then when it was composed. Its overtones have not been silenced, and it is, in this way, indicative of the first important quality of a great song - value for all time, the power to survive the vicissitudes of ages in which values and ideas change ever so severely.

The second important characteristic of a great Jewish song is that, more than being repeated by future generations, it must also be able to inspire them. It is sometimes possible to read an ancient text and find meaning in it - without necessarily being inspired by it. The great song, however, is more than a curiosity lifted out of the musical notes of an age gone by. The musical overtones of the great song must not only be heard by some future generation - it must drive it and fire it and detonate it. It must contain the power to awaken men from their spiritual slumber. "Song" in a Jewish sense is more than a melodious combination of sounds. It must be a song which can stir a person to create a response. It is that song which can, even centuries later, cause people to change themselves. It must be eternal - and effective.

Furthermore, the great song can inspire only by getting ^{him} ~~he~~ who hears it to finish it. Schubert's "Unfinished Symphony" has challenged men for many years - challenged them to finish it and complete it and perfect it. In a similar vein, every great song is an unfinished song. The listener must finish it by a soul-stirring response. After listening passively, he must digest actively, and create a noble reaction of his soul. Emotionally and intellectually, he must complete the great song by changing himself. The great song, any great work of art, is great because of its suggestiveness - and that is the secret of its powers of inspiration. The crescendo or climax is internal.

Our Rabbis saw the kernel of this idea, this second standard for the great Jewish song, in the first two words of Moses' lofty song by the Sea.

וְאִזְּכֹר אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי מִצְרָיִם
 וְאִזְּכֹר אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי מִצְרָיִם

Idiomatic or poetic Hebrew, in its Biblical construction, writes ^{וְאִזְּכֹר אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי מִצְרָיִם} ~~וְאִזְּכֹר אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי מִצְרָיִם~~, then Moses & Israel will sing, not, as it should be, ^{וְאִזְּכֹר אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי מִצְרָיִם} ~~וְאִזְּכֹר אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי מִצְרָיִם~~, they did sing. From this unusual grammatical construction, R. Meir deduces a principle of faith - the Resurrection of the Dead. Since Moses will sing, he will first be resurrected. ^{וְאִזְּכֹר אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי מִצְרָיִם} ~~וְאִזְּכֹר אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי מִצְרָיִם~~. Resurrection is a Biblical theme - and from ^{וְאִזְּכֹר אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי מִצְרָיִם} ~~וְאִזְּכֹר אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי מִצְרָיִם~~. You see, what R. Meir meant was more than proof of resurrection

from the Song of Moses. He meant, too, proof of the quality of the song from the fact of res-
 surrection. Wherefrom does *אֵלֹהֵינוּ* derive its sublime and ethereal powers? - from *אֵלֹהֵינוּ*,
 from the resurrection of the dead, because it has the power to breathe the breath of life into
 dead souls. The great song must be able to penetrate the heart of **Man**, get within the dead
 tinderwood and driftwood piled up about his heart and set them afire. The dead souls and
 slumbering **spirits** must be resurrected, revived. Only that song is worthy of Moses
~~an~~ Israel which can, millenia later, kindle the flame of faith in men to the point where
 they rise unanimously and proclaim daily for a lifetime, *אֵלֹהֵינוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ*
 Only that song is deserving of the epithet "great" which can galvanize an apathetic people
 to resurrect its homeland and proclaim *אֵלֹהֵינוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ*, that the time has
 come when Jews, slumbering in resignation, will arise to rebuild a promised land. The
 song of the exodus of Egypt has been resung, finished, in our own day, by those who
 participated in the exodus of Europe. Certainly, the great song must be able to effect
אֵלֹהֵינוּ, the resurrection of indolent, slothful, languid souls. Our rabbis even say
 that the dead which were resurrected in Exekiel's **Vision of the Dry Bones** also *אֵלֹהֵינוּ*
 sang a song in that same vision. For their resurrection was proof of the quality of the
 "Song of Hope" of all Jews for all time.

Take, for instance, a modern song which has gained prominence among Jews in
 recent years. It is a song of the ghetto, the Song of Hope of those doomed to crematoria
 and gas chambers - *אֵלֹהֵינוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ*, I believe, in perfect faith, in the coming of the
 Messiah, in the imminent redemption of Israel. Do you remember how that song gained its
 fame? It was reported in the press during the war - - emaciated Jews, the report read,
 while being led to a crematorium in a cattle truck, were singing a haunting melody, whose
 words, strangely, expressed an irrational hope in Messiah, in a ~~low~~ ^{better} life and a ~~new~~ ^{fresh} hope.
 Was that a new song? Indeed not. The melody, perhaps, was new. The words are ancient.
 They were written eight centuries ago by Moses Maimonides, who himself had to travel over
 the entire **Near and Middle East** as an exile from his home. So, on this count, then,
 Ani Maamin is a great song. For, more than lasting into the future, it quickened the **spirits**
 of men. And even more than becoming an instrument which infused life into desperate, dying
 souls, it gavethem the courage to defy Death to its teeth.

But there is yet a third requirement for a Jewish song, and this is the critically Jewish element, it is this which makes a Jewish song Jewish. And that is, that this song which has meaning for the future, and which can inspire men in the future, must be able to inspire them to specific goals. Precisely, it must be able to shock them into an awareness of G-d, it must be able to electrify them into the sort of introspection which leads to great religious achievement. In a word, it must lead to **תשובה**, repentance. If a song moved men has ~~movement~~ to repent and to a new understanding and new practice of Jewishness, then it has proved its basic Jewishness.

And what is all of תשובה if not a tribute to the omnipotence of Almighty G-d, and hence an imperative to do immediate penance?

The Chasidim used to picture the spiritual world as a great diving palace someplace in heaven and in this symbolic structure ~~above~~ all concepts were represented as different rooms or gates. By placing one room or gate next to another, the Chasidim were able to present their view of the relation of different ideas, And these Chasidim, who, as you ^{no} ~~know~~ doubt know were great believers in singing and happiness and sanguine~~ness~~, assigned the **שיר**, the Gate of Song, right next to one of the most important in the entire palace, the **תשובה שיר**, the Gate of Penitence. Now, what ^{did} they mean by that? They meant, simply, that the function of Song is that it must open for you the Gates of Penitence. No song is a diving song unless its vibrations can cause a little explosion in the inner chambers of **תשובה**. From the Gate of True Song you must be able to walk right in through the Gates of Penitence.

The Shofar is the oldest and most venerated of Jewish musical instruments. It is as ancient as is the Jewish people. Yet it has survived the test of time, and is sounded faithfully every year. It thus fulfills the first requirement. It inspires men - let each of you testify to that yourself. That meets the second test. And it fulfills the third requirement by urging him on to **תשובה**. Listen to Maimonides as he describes the meaning of the Song of the Shofar: **קומו ישימי בלתי תרדו**. "Wake up, ye who sleep, from your sleep; and arise, ye who slumber, from your slumber. Search your ways, return in penitence, and remember your Creator. Ye who forget the Truth in the Vanities of Time, and waste their years in nonsense which is of no avail, look deep into your souls and do good henceforth." So, then, the Shofar is a great Jewish song.

And according to these three standards my friends, if we will but forget the technical element of music and permit ourselves the privilege of abstraction, then even a word can qualify as a great Jewish song. Even a hand placed encouragingly on the shoulder of a faltering friend can be a great Jewish song. An exemplary life can be a great Jewish song. Anything beautiful in short, that can fulfill these three requirements, is a great Jewish song.

A rebuke, for instance, can qualify. The Torah records as a special commandment, **פניו אל אחיו**, Thou shalt rebuke thy fellow. That is, if your friend errs and veers from the right path, you must reproach him. Now, reproach can be administered in many ways - some very crude and vulgar. But that great ethical thinker, R. Yonah, gives us the prescription for the correct type of rebuke. Don't tell the wrong-doer, says R. Yonah, "Now look, you are a horrible sinner and will pay for your sins", but rather, say, "now, I think that you are a wonderful fellow; you are a pious man ^{but} ~~and~~ you don't know it. Of course you have weaknesses, but a man of your stature will certainly overcome them." Here is a rebuke which is a Jewish song! It will live with that wrong-doer for many a year. It will inspire him - he will himself finish that rebuke ~~and~~, while mulling over your words, tell himself what you dared not. And those words will most certainly be as effective as can be in - directing him to **תשובה** penitence, a new and fresh outlook upon life.

The great Jewish songs of all ages, those which conform to the standards and criteria we outlined, shall never be silenced. And the first Jewish song, the song of Moses and the Israelites by the shores of the Red sea, the song concluding with **ו' יתן אלהים** the eternal reign of G-d, shall itself be eternally resung by all Jews. The echos of the song of Moses resound in the chambers of the Jewish soul and pluck his heartstrings forever. Every Jew, himself finishing that song, must rise to new heights, and gain entry into the coveted and lofty Gates of Penitence.

BENEDICTION: **לפניו אל אחיו**
 O, G-d, teach us new words to Thy old song; let us, together with all of Israel, sing of our penitence and Thy redemption, even as Moses and our ancestors offered their praise to Thee for Thy strength and consolation. Amen.

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- 2) " " accepted by express statement of 5 people - Five, 1917

3) inspirational - visions

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