

The Shirah Melody in the Ashkenazic and Sephardic Traditions

The oldest song in Jewish history in existence today is the one of national triumph sung by Moshe and B'nei Yisrael after their miraculous deliverance at the Sea of Reeds (Yam Suf), generally called the Red Sea. The song is identified in Jewish literature as the *Shirah*.

Having occurred on the seventh day after the Exodus from Egypt, the *Shirah* has become an affirmation of Jewish belief in God and an acceptance of His sovereignty over all the earth. Moreover, the *Sefat Emet*¹ comments that it is a source from which the Jews' final and total salvation will spring. The *Shirah*,



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beginning with the initial words *Az Yashir*, contains eighteen verses. These parallel the eighteen vertebrae in the spine. The song, say the Sages, will be in the backbone of the resurrected dead and when they awaken, they too will sing to God.² During the yearly cycle of Torah reading, the Shabbat on which the *Shirah* is read has become known in Jewish tradition as *Shabbat Shirah*, the *Sabbath of Song*.

Much has been written concerning *Shirat Hayam*, which is notable for its forceful text, poetic fire, and vivid imagery. However, little has been said of the melody that accompanies the text. In the following study, an attempt will be made to outline the history and influences of this remarkable tune both in the Ashkenazic and Sephardic traditions.



Introduction by Cantor Eric S. Freeman

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Cantor Macy Nulman began his affiliation with Yeshiva

University's music department in 1951 as an instructor in Hazzanut and Nusah Hatefilah. He served as Assistant Director of the Cantorial Training Institute (later renamed the Belz School of Jewish Music), from 1954-1966 and as Director from 1966-1984. Cantor Nulman was among the first to successfully elevate the study of synagogue music to a level of an academic discipline and the first to research synagogue music chant from a halakhic perspective as reflected by Rabbinic tradition.

The author of numerous articles and journals on Jewish liturgy and

Jewish music education, Cantor Nulman authored several significant volumes including "The Concise Encyclopedia of Jewish Music," "Concepts of Jewish Music and Prayer," "Essays of Jewish Music and Prayer," "The Encyclopedia of the Sayings of the Jewish People" and his award winning "Encyclopedia of Jewish Prayer." He also served as editor of the *Journal of Jewish Music and Liturgy* for over 30 years.

This issue of *Torah To Go* is dedicated in memory of Cantor Jerome L. Simons. Cantor Simons was a student of Cantor Nulman while he studied at CTI. In my youth, I had the privilege to spend many Shabbos meals at the Simons'

table and listen as Cantor Simons reminisced about the insights into nusah hatefilah he picked up from Cantor Nulman. Cantor Simons was a devoted practitioner of nusah hatefilah and to this day, I incorporate aspects of the nusah I learned from him in my own davening. While Cantor Nulman was already retired when I began my training as a cantor, I trained under Cantor Bernard Beer, one of Cantor Nulman's main students and thus I consider myself to be a "second generation" student of Cantor Nulman. I adapted this article, originally printed in *The Journal of Jewish Liturgy* (1984), as a tribute to Cantor Nulman and Cantor Simons.

Song as a Mode of Expression

In every epoch of Jewish history, song and chant became a significant mode of expression. When the Jewish people were victorious over their enemies and when God saved them from disaster, their thankfulness and joy were expressed through the medium of song. David's Song (II Sam. 22) is an obvious parallel to the *Shirah*, and its imagery seems to have been evoked by the miracle of the waters of the Red Sea.³ Deborah's song of victory (Judges 4:4-5:31) also holds a high place among the triumphal odes, and is included as the special haftarah on *Shabbat Shirah* (*Parshat Beshalach*). Even in a later period, the author of the alphabetical acrostic *Esh tukad bekirbi* ("a fire [of joy] is kindled within me"),⁴ contrasts the glory of Israel's departure from Egypt with her degradation when exiled. One of the lines reads, "Then Moshe sang a song unforgettable." The poem ends with a wish for the return to Jerusalem with rejoicing and gladness.

The Shirah in the Bible and the Talmud

The Torah records that Moshe led the men and his sister Miriam led the women in song. Miriam, alongside her brothers, is considered as one of the three emancipators from Egypt.⁵ According to R. Akiba the duplicated verb in the opening verse, "*Az yashir Moshe ... vayom'ru*; Then sang Moshe ... and spoke, saying," teaches that to every phrase which Moshe uttered, *B'nei Yisrael* also responded in song.⁶ Miriam, too, "sang unto them"; thus, both the men and women answered to their respective leader in responsorial form. Miriam and the women's

singing, however, was accompanied by instruments and dance.

Moshe struck up the holy tune to glorify the Lord and all His people joined the leader's voice. But in what form or manner was this magnificent hymn of praise chanted? The Gemara offers three methods of rendering it. R. Akiba states that Moshe declaimed it, while the congregation responded with the response "I will sing unto the Lord" after every verse. R. Eliezer, son of R. Jose the Galilean, declared that the congregation repeated the whole song after Moshe. R. Nehemiah said that Moshe and the congregation recited the verses alternately.⁷ The special fashion and methods described are still reflected in different usages in both Ashkenazic and Sephardic congregations and persist, in one form or another, in contemporary congregational singing.

Occasions for Singing the Shirah

In the days of the Beit Hamikdash, the Leviim sang the *Shirah* at the mincha sacrifice of Shabbat.⁸ As time went on, the *Shirah* became fixed as a daily recital at the conclusion of *Pesuke Dezimrah* in the morning service. The *Sefer Hamanhig* writes, "This song is recited throughout all the localities inhabited by the people of Israel. It would be wrong to omit this prayer, to fail to render praise for the first redemption, for it is said 'That you may remember the day when you came forth from out of the land of Egypt, all the days of your life ...'"⁹ Other occasions when the *Shirah* is read is on the seventh day of Pesach as part of the Torah reading; in some congregations it is read responsively by the *Sheliach Tzibbur* and congregation when a Brit Milah takes

place in shul; among some Hassidic sects it is sung at a special ceremony at midnight of the seventh day of Pesach; and in Israel it is ceremonially sung at the beach in Tel Aviv and Eilat on the seventh day of Pesach.

In the Torah scroll, the *Shirah* is marked by a special way in which it is written. The verses are set in a form metrically arranged in thirty lines like a "brick in a wall." The Talmud refers to this form as *ariah al gabe leveynah* (a half brick over a whole brick).¹⁰ This configuration appears in many siddurim and as such is differentiated from the other prayers.

In Kabbalistic literature great importance is attributed to the joyful and musical recitation of the *Shirah*. It is recited in a standing position, as if one were actually standing by the sea, witnessing the miracle. Some render it with the cantillation notes (*niggun hate'amim*) as it is read in the Torah. The joyful nature of the recitation of the *Shirah* explains why, on Tisha b'Av, Sephardic ritual substitutes *Shirat Ha'azinu* for *Shirat Hayam*.

One who recites the *Shirah* with the proper intent, says the *Zohar*, will merit singing the praises of future miracles.¹¹ Mystic tradition states too that, "he who recites *Az Yashir* audibly and joyously is pardoned in heaven."¹²

The Shirah—Ashkenazic and Sephardic Chant

Both Ashkenazic and Sephardic traditions apply a festive tune or cadence, although divergent in detail, for the *Shirah* text. A.Z. Idelsohn, in his *Thesaurus of Hebrew Oriental Melodies*, notated the *Az Yashir* as chanted and cantillated according to the Yemenite (vol. 1, no. 9), Persian (vol. 3, no. 20), Syrian (vol. 4, nos.

28, 29) and Moroccan (vol. 5, 25-26) traditions. Isaac Levy in his *Antologia De Liturgia Judeo-Espanol* (vol. 4) notated three versions of the Sephardic chant according to Jerusalem (no. 25), Corfu (no. 26), and Tunis (no. 27; also prevalent in North Africa and Eastern Sephardi) traditions. Francis Lyon Cohen, the music editor of the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, also notated several versions of the *Shirah* melody. He quotes one version as transcribed in Federico Consolo's *Libro dei canti d'Israel* (1891) and writes that this version is chanted on Sabbath and festivals and the variant preserved among Turkish Jews is very similar.¹³ This tune is the one sung in the Moroccan, Italian, Portuguese, and Southern France (Carpentras and Avignon) communities. Of special significance is the fact that the Ashkenazic chant is very similar to the tunes used in these communities.



Idelsohn remarks that “spiritual life in the Jewish settlement in Southwestern Germany starts about the ninth or tenth century, and that some of its prominent authorities were natives of Southern France or Provence or of Italy.”¹⁴ For example, R. Gershom b. Yehudah (Me’or ha-Golah) was a native of Norbonne and settled in Mayence toward the end of the tenth century; the Kalonymos family emigrated via Italy to Germany. Thus, the Eastern and Western Ashkenazic melodies resemble one another and in

turn both correspond to the Sephardic version. Francis Cohen notes that the Sephardic version was, “handed down by the Portuguese tradition, and transmitted to the daughter congregations by Amsterdam especially. The French rendering is a variant which establishes the original identity of the Italian and of the Dutch, the latter being the source of the English and the Amsterdam forms.”

As to the melody itself, it is considered to be of ancient origin. Legend has it that it was thought by some to go back to Biblical days. That the *Shirah* is very old is upheld by Rev. D. A. DeSolo who writes, “Some have affirmed that what we now sing to the *Song of Moshe* is the same (melody) Miriam and her companions sang. ... It is highly probable that this melody belongs to a period anterior to the regular settlement of the Jews in Spain.”¹⁵ Another suggestion as to its ancient origin may be its pentatonic character, one of the oldest established scales.

It has been suggested, too, that the manner and style of chanting the *Shirah* tune is an “echo of the martial notes of a trumpet-call.”¹⁶ This imitation might conceivably hint to the future usage of trumpets as a means of invoking Divine aid against the foe and thus Israel “be remembered” of God and saved (Numb. 10:9-10; II Chron. 13:12-16). How did this trumpet-like chant become a metrical pattern among Sephardim? In the Sephardic rite, the prevailing custom of reciting prayers is in unison; the entire congregation sings. Therefore, *Az Yashir* became a metrical tune rather than a free recitative. However, in the Ashkenazic rite the reader only recites the tune and the free improvisatory chant

has endured. Some readers among Ashkenazim even ornamented the declamatory chant. This can be noticed in the anthologies of Abraham Baer (*Ba'al T'fillah*, p. 40, no. 118). Solomon Sulzer (*Schir Zion*, p. 183, nos. 216-219), and M. Wodak (*Hammazeach*, p. 92, nos. 272-275).

The Shirah in Torah Reading and in the Service

In the Ashkenazic tradition, the reader is not strictly bound to the system of cantillation usually employed in reading the Pentateuch. Different customs prevail as to which verses are chanted with the special tune and those that employ the regular *te'amim*. The *ba'al koreh* generally begins to utilize the second half of the festive tune before the *Shirah* at the latter part of verses Ex. 14:22, 14:29, and 14:31. This is to acknowledge our gratitude to and belief in the Almighty. The Talmud writes that if one sees the place of the crossing of the Red Sea, he should give thanks and praise to the Almighty because it is written, “And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground” (Ex. 14:22).¹⁷ The tune is again sung at the completion of the *Shirah* (Ex. 15:21), because this is the same passage that Moshe and the men sang and which Miriam and the women subsequently sang. In the *Shirah* proper, some readers adapt the tune only for the following verses: 15:1, 15:2, 15:3, 15:6, 15:11, 15:16, and 15:18. The stylistic device of parallelism in these sentences is emphasized by using the festive melody. Furthermore, the special melody is intentionally adapted to these verses in order to publicize the miracle of the splitting of the sea.¹⁸ In other locales (e.g. Poland, Galicia),

each verse of the *Shirah* is rendered with the special melody.¹⁹ It is also customary in some communities to utilize the festive tune for *Az Yashir* in *Pesuke Dezimrah* on *Shabbat Shirah*.²⁰ Among Sephardim, the melody is sung on *Shabbat* and the *Shalosh Regalim* during the service proper. On *Shabbat Shirah* and on the seventh day of *Pesah* the tune is adapted to the *Kaddish* before *Barekhu* both in the *Arbit* and *Shaharit* services. Some adapt it to *Adon Olam* and *Yigdal* and use it as a representative theme for various texts in the service. The Sephardic *Shirah* tune differs from the cantillation used when reading the Torah.

Influences of the Shirah Tune

Taking a closer look at the two-part melodic organization of the *Shirah* tune, one perceives direct adaptations for sections of Biblical cantillation as well as various prayers.

The second part of the tune is discernible when chanting *Hazak Hazak Venithazek* at the conclusion of each of the *Hamisha Humshei Torah* (Five Books of Moses).



When reading *Parashat Bereishit* on *Simhat Torah* morning the second part of the tune is used for *vayehi erev vayehi voker ...* for each of the six days of creation.



The entire *Shirah* melody is adapted for the Biblical section called “*Masa’ot*” (“Journeys”). The verses chanted in pairs are Numb. 10:15-16, 19-20, 23-24, and 26-27. These verses describe the journeys of the hosts of

Israel. The following verses describe the stages of the journey: Numb. 33:10-11, 12-13, 15-16, 17-18, 19-20, 21-22, 23-24, 25-26, 27-28, 29-30, 31-32, 33-34, 35-36, 41-42, 43-44, 45-46.

On fast days when reading *Vayehal* (Ex. 32:11-14; Ex. 34:1-10) the *ba’al koreh* and *tzibbur* recite several verses responsively. Although this is an adaptation of the High Holy Day tropal system, the cadence is very similar to the second part of the *Shirah* tune.

The entire *Shirah* melody can also be identified with *Ashamnu*, the prayer recited on *Yom Kippur*.

On Friday evening at *Kabbalat Shabbat* the *ba’al tefilah* may chant the opening psalm *Lekhu Neranenuh* to a modified version of the *Shirah* melody.



At first glance it would appear to be a strange variety of texts for the *Shirah* melody to serve as thematic material. For example, what does the *Ashamnu* prayer have in common with *Az Yashir*? Why would the *Shirah* tune be associated with *Hazak Hazak Venithazek*, *Kabbalat Shabbat*, or the *Masa’ot*? In each of the above illustrations a stage or period is completed and a new point is reached. The worshiper is stimulated to a mood of victory and a sense of hopeful living in the face of an unknown and unpredictable future. Although it cannot be decisively proven, the easily recognizable melody recalls this sentiment of victory.

The unanimous response of *Hazak Hazak Venithazek* by the reader and congregation at the completion of each of the *Hamisha Humshei Torah*

marks a moment of triumph and jubilation. Just as at the completion of a tractate the *Hadran* (a brief prayer against forgetfulness and a kind of farewell to the tractate) is made, so too the entire congregation chants aloud to be strong, because one of the Five Books of Moses has been completed and to take courage and start a new book.²¹

Adapting the *Shirah* tune on *Simhat Torah* for each of the six days of creation designates a moment of exaltation. God created the heavens and the earth and all their hosts in six days—or in six stages of development. Each stage indicates a moment of achievement and thus the victory tune is fitting.

Drawing upon the *Shirah* tune for the *Masa’ot* is proper. All the events and vicissitudes that confronted the Israelites in their wanderings after the Exodus, until thirty-eight years later when they were about to enter the Holy Land, are recounted. Each halting place is marked by some attainment in their lives to fulfill the task that God assigned to them among the nations.

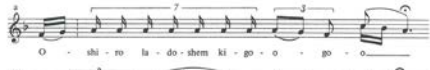
The special verses changed when reading *Vayehal* on fast days are no doubt the *trope* of the High Holy Days. It is possible that the *Shirah* cadence was blended with the High Holy Day tropal system so that the worshiper might attain a feeling of pardon in order that he may once again walk in the right path that the Almighty desires.

Adapting the tune for *Ashamnu* has a similar connotation.

Cantor Bernard Beer, Director Emeritus of the Belz School of Jewish Music, eloquently describes the correlation between *Ashamnu* and the

Shirah melody:²²

The *Ashamnu* prayer from the *Viduy* section of each *Yom Kippur* and *Selihot* service is rendered in a most jubilant and majestic manner. Chanted in a major scale, the melody (figure 5b) in its entirety is almost identical to the cantillation (figure 5a) of *Shirat Hayam* (Song of the Sea).

5a 

5b 

(Figures 5a-5b) From the *Concise Encyclopedia of Jewish Music*, (pg 227) M. Nulman

The mood of victory and triumph depicted in the *Shirah* would seem to appear inappropriate to *Ashamnu*, a prayer of confession. Its text alone denotes a dirge like chant. Why then was the *Shirah* melody employed to the chanting of *Ashamnu*?

In the concluding mishnah of *Ta'anit*, the Tiferes Yisroel (Rabbi Israel Lipschutz, 1782-1860) explains that it is proper to sing the *Ashamnu* prayer, and that with true and sincere repentance through its jubilant singing, one's transgressions may be reversed and transformed to virtues (*z'khuyot*).²³

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, in a *Teshuva* lecture in 1973, discussed the conceptual distinction between communal and individual confession.

According to Rabbi Soloveitchik, when the individual confesses he does so from a state of depression, insecurity, and despair in the wake of a sin for which he has no assurance of being acquitted. In contrast, Knesset Israel (The Jewish community)

confesses out of a sense of confidence and even rejoicing with the singing of the *Viduy* in a heartwarming melody.²⁴

On Friday evening, the Jew at *Kabbalat Shabbat* is stimulated because he was able to carry through the week and at the outset of the new week is recharged with courage for the week to come.

Singing the Hassidic tune *Agil Ve'esmach* after each of the six days of creation exemplifies rejoicing for the Divine accomplishments of each stage of the formation of the universe; the gradual ascent from amorphous chaos to order, from inorganic to organic, and from lifeless matter to vegetable, animal and man.

The Exodus experience established God's claim on Israel. According to Scripture, the future generation is to be trained to gratitude and reverence toward God by means of the story of the deliverance from Egypt. The *Shema*, *Kiddush*, *Hallel*, as well as many other prayers, make references to the Exodus. Commenting on the verse, "My dove in the clefts of the rock ... let me hear your voice," (Song of Songs, 2:14) the midrash states that God is speaking to Israel saying, "Let Me hear the same voice with which you cried out to me in Egypt."²⁵

Prayer and song stem from the same root—*Shirat Hayam*—the magnificent hymn of praise. Both were nourished in the same soil and both together form a harmonious whole, giving clarity to prayer. "This is my God I will glorify Him," chants the Jew of today as in the past. God will rule forever and ever as He reigned at *Keriat Yam Suf*.

Endnotes

- 1 Posthumously published novella on Talmud and Hassidic discourses on Torah by R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (1847-1903).
- 2 *Me'am Lo'ez*, Moznaim Publishing Corp., Vol. 5 New York/Jerusalem, p. 244.
- 3 See verse 16.
- 4 One of the *Kinot* for Tisha B'Av.
- 5 Micah 6:4.
- 6 *Sot.* 30b.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *R.H.* 31a.
- 9 *Devarim* 16:3.
- 10 *Meg.* 16b; *Shab.* 103b; *Sof.* Chapters 12, 13.
- 11 Beshallah, p. 54; cf. also the SHeLaH.
- 12 *Sefer Haredim*. See also *Mishnah Berurah* 51:18.
- 13 Vol. 2, p. 189.
- 14 *Jewish Music*, pp. 43, 47.
- 15 *The Ancient Melodies of the Liturgy of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews*, London, p. 16, no. 12.
- 16 *Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, p. 188.
- 17 *Ber.* 54a.
- 18 *Sefer Matamim Hehadash* 45:30.
- 19 J.L. Ne'eman, *Tzeliley Hammiqra*, Tel Aviv, 1955, vol. 1 p. 130.
- 20 *Minhagei Frankfurt*, Rabbi Z. Y. Leitner, Jerusalem, 5742, 108:3.
- 21 Cf. *Ozar Dinim Uminhagim*, J.D. Eisenstein, p. 129.
- 22 "Enhancing The Yamim Noraim Prayers Through Synagogue Chant As Reflected By Rabbinic Tradition: The Significant Role Of The Sheliah Tzibbur," *Journal of Jewish Music and Liturgy*, volume 31.
- 23 *Tiferes Yisroel—Ta'anit* (4th chapter, mishnah, 8).
- 24 Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Before Hashem You Will be Purified*, summarized and annotated by Arnold Lustiger, pg 119-120.
- 25 *Shemot Rabbah* 21:5.