

## Opus Number Eight

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“A person should not say that music is not Torah, or it is Torah” (Midrash Shochar Tov). Music, as seen from the previous quote, is at the core of Jewish values and Jewish spirituality. Growing up, we sing Jewish songs about the stories in the Torah, some of these times as a way to remember stories such as the ten plagues. In the times of the Beit Hamikdash, the Leviim led their service with music and, even today, songs guide our holiest of prayers. Music is present at shul during the davening, at our bar and bat mitzvahs, as we thank G-d for our food, and so on, essentially in every aspect of our lives. Dovid Hamelech, one of the most revered kings of our nation, intertwined music into all areas of his life, most notably in his connection to Hashem. We find references to music throughout the Torah, ranging from Miriam leading the Jewish nation in Az Yashir after escaping the Egyptians, to the kinor, a musical instrument in the Temple, to the songs in Tehillim. Music is the string that connects them all [1]. The presence of song is what reaches out and connects the Jewish woman of the 21st century to the Jewish woman suffering through the slavery of Egypt. By these testimonies, one would think that music is to be exalted and always present in Judaism, but sages and explanations of the text have placed limits on its use. Seemingly, music and song have brought nothing but positive outcomes to the Jewish people. If this is truly the case, why are the prohibitions against it so severe?

The Gemara (Gittin 7a) states that after the churban bayit, it was forbidden to sing, play or listen to music. Furthermore, as noted in Mishna (Sota 48a), after the dissolution of the Sanhedrin, singing at parties was forbidden as well. Chazal debated as to what the Gemara and Mishna really meant in these contexts. Rashi and Tosfot agreed that in both cases, the music being referred to was only the music at feasts or parties. Many rishonim, including the Smag, agreed. However, the Rambam, or Maimonides, a prolific Torah scholar in the early 12th century, understood the prohibition to mean that music from musical instruments was always prohibited, whereas singing was only prohibited in instances in which wine was present [2]. Seeing the abundance and ever-present nature of music throughout Jewish history, these prohibitions seem incongruous.

The Yerushalmi's commentary in Sotah explained that these rabbinical prohibitions came as a direct result of the dissolution of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin instilled a sense of awe in the people of Israel, ensuring that the Jewish people would act according to the laws set down by the Torah. Once the Sanhedrin was no longer in power, it was feared that song would become impure and would lead to frivolous acts, eventually bringing the Jews to sin. This is where Chazal reanalyzed the issur of singing and music, concluding that the issur only applied in situations with wine, such as a feast or a party, for example. According to this explanation, singing and music in other circumstances should be permitted [3]. Yet, the Rambam suggested that the ban on music was a sign of mourning for the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash and thus applied in all

circumstances, whether or not wine was present. Rav, also known as Abba Arika, and Rava, also known as Abba ben Yosef bar Hama, were both among the first amoraim and held stricter opinions, justifying this issur by stating that a person was given ears to listen to words of wisdom, and listening to music was an unproductive way to spend time [2]. Most Jewish communities in our day and age do not hold by this school of thought, although some Hasidic sects, such as the Satmar sect, abide by it.

The language describing music develops somewhat harshly in the Gemara. Rav states that “an ear that listens to music should be torn loose” (Sotah). Although the previous statement expresses a rigid approach, when the happiness of a kallah and chatan are a focal point at weddings, the commentaries agree on leniency. Weddings allow for both singing and instrumental music, despite the fact that wine is often served. Certain explanations even encourage music at weddings. The Rema, better known as Rav Moshe Isserles, a prominent rabbi, posek, and Talmudist of the 16th century, adds that if a seudah of a chatana is on a Friday night, one is permitted to ask a non-Jew to play music or even to fix an instrument on Shabbat, which is normally considered an issur deoraita [2]. It seems that, as strict as the poskim are about music on a regular basis, when it came to weddings, all the issurim were set aside. Chazal recognized that a wedding feast with wine and singing, along with men and women intermingling, had the potential to evolve into a frivolous, vulgar scene, threatening the sanctity of marriage. Still, the issur of listening to music and singing was suspended for the wedding [3]. Enhancing the simcha of the bride and groom was put above all else. Why was the happiness of a chatan and kallah put above the issur of playing and singing music?

It is clear that, although the laws of music are strict, there is a certain importance that surrounds weddings, which invites the magic of music to enhance the joyous event. In this exception, the reasons for such strict prohibitions begin to unravel. Chazal understood the power of music, and perhaps to that end, they chose to restrict it. Music is the intangible power that transcends the physical and glimpses into the spiritual. It is the medium through which we can look into the past, but also leave a legacy for the future. Music and song can arouse happiness, joy, sadness, grief, or any range of emotion within the religious community as well as the secular world. In an attempt to capture the emotional capabilities of music, Beethoven said that “music should strike fire in the heart of man and bring tears to the eyes of women.” Aside from the emotional aspect, the Gemara (Arachin 13b) alluded to music as having a connection to the world-to-come: “The kinor of the Temple had seven strings...and the one in the times of Moshiach will have eight...” The musical scale has seven notes and if one looks deeper into kabbalah, seven is representative of the outer parameter of holiness in this world [4]. Eight signifies the era of Moshiach, a time when the Jewish people will be redeemed, with this parallel being shown through music with the eight notes on

an octave scale. The eighth day, or era of the Moshiach, will bring about new perceptions and expanded consciousness; something entirely novel will be brought about with this eighth string, this eighth note.

How do mothers use candy in a positive way? They rationalize by using candy as a reward for good behavior on special occasions, thereby giving candy more value and making it special in the eyes of their child. Just as limiting candy makes it infinitely more special for the child, so too with music. Although the Sages restricted people from listening to music as a sign of mourning and out of fear of lewd behavior, there was a notion of keeping music and its hidden power as “candy” for the Jewish people. Music was to be used in celebration, and in circumstances worthy of its mysticism.

All restrictions of music are put aside for weddings, to rejoice in the partnership of two souls, the holiest of unions and a rite of passage in life. Music is the means by which we praise Hashem, reach out to Hashem in prayer, and repent through song. Music is the strand that connects us through generations and unites us as a nation. When Jews of all backgrounds, nationalities, and ages, at all levels of religiousness, join together to sing the Hatikvah on Yom Haatzmaut, the feeling of unity is unmatched by anything else. Chazal understood this. In efforts to hold on to this unique influence, ensure its continued spirituality, and not revert it into the mundane, our Sages took upon themselves to make a fence. They made a fence to keep our seven notes sacred until we should merit the redemption, ultimately revealing our eighth note.

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