Torah as Song

by

Rabbi Eliyahu Safran

“So now, write this *shira* [song] for yourselves, and teach it to the Children of Israel” (Devarim 31: 19). Rashi would have us understand this *shira* as referencing the coming parasha, *Haazinu*, which Moshe was to teach to the nation prior to his death.  Ramban adds that it is a song because it is written in verse as well as chanted. Why though would God have Moshe’s final “message” be a song?

In *Haazinu*,the people see that all the elements of the universe come together in fulfilling God’s will, that all of Creation responds to the sins and good deeds of Am Yisrael.  That is, they are in harmony. This universal harmony exists beyond time, often mixing past, present and future. Everything is melded, Rav Gedaliah Schorr explains, as if it is happening at once.  This is the song Moshe speaks of; this is the music the prophet hears. Eternal, perfect. “Remember the days of yore, understand the years of generation after generation!” In this exhortation we understand all time to be present and that everything is connected.

Chazal however, (Sanhedrin 21b) do not understand Moshe’s words to refer only to *Haazinu*. This *posuk* is the source for the final mitzvah in Torah – the 613th mitzvah – obligating one to write a *Sefer* Torah himself.  It follows then that it is the *entire* Torah and not just *Haazinu* that is our “song”.

If “*shirah*” were *Haazinu*, we would be obligated only to write *parashat Haazinu*, not the entire Torah. But we *are* commanded to write a *sefer* Torah, even if we had received a Torah from our father, or father’s father and we are to make sure that *not even one letter* is missing!

It is this Torah, this complete Torah, that is the *shirah* we must write.

Now the Torah is a song? Torah certainly doesn’t *feel* like a song. We think of songs as relaxing, easy, accessible. Torah can certainly be that, but Torah is also so much more. It is demanding, intense, serious. It is, as Chazal often say, Torah requires *yegiah* or *amalah* ­– hard work.

Song. Music. Harmony. We don’t think of these things as requiring *work*.

Rabbi Yissocher Frand in a 2002 post, “Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony” references an insight from Rav Yitzchok Isaac Halevi Herzog (grandfather of the newly-installed president of Israel) in which he notes that a person uninitiated in a given discipline generally derives little pleasure from any presentation or insight in that discipline, no matter how brilliantly delivered. It makes no difference if the field is physics, chemistry, or even *haute couture*. But when it comes to music, we are all intuitive “experts.” Music is a universal language that transcends borders and cultures. It is something that everyone can enjoy on his or her own level. “Everyone can relate to music.”

Rav Herzog argues that *that* is why Torah is *shirah*.  Every Jew, whether laborer or scholar, can relate to Torah – the five-year old with his brand-new *Chumash* and the Gaon of Vilna pouring over an ancient, scrolled parchment. *Shirah* means every Jew can learn and appreciate Torah. This is why the command, “to write this song” concludes by specifying, “…for yourselves”; it implies that each and every Jew will hear the music of Torah.

Just as the whole of a song can be found in each note, so too the entirety of Torah can be found within each letter. So too, within each child, the entirety of creation. And, within the entirety of creation, each child. Each, precious and holy.

There are six hundred thousand letters in the Torah – matching the number of Jewish souls counted in the first census in the desert, alluding to the name of our People and nation. Six hundred thousand – the numerical representative of all *klal Yisrael*.

The Pnei Yehoshua explains that every Jew has within his soul *one particular mitzva that is attached to one particular letter in the Torah*. All the souls of *klal Yisrael* are inherent in the letters of Torah, letters each and every Jew claim rights to!

The Ari *z’l* taught that the soul of each and every Jew is rooted in a letter in the Torah, that each letter has spiritual power because each originates at the Heavenly throne, the same place where all souls originate; and thus each is linked to a letter.

*We* are the notes of this *shirah*! We are the letters of Torah! This is why a *hachnasat sefer* Torah is so deep and personal, for it is *mine*. It is *me*. Each of us belongs at this table; each of us has a mystical role; each of us contributes to the harmony of creation.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests as much when he implores us to understand that the 613th mitzvah is a duty to make Torah, “…new in each generation.” To accomplish this, it is not enough to simply “learn” Torah. We must “feel” Torah. We must *be* Torah.

It is true, Rabbi Sacks says, that “…Judaism is a religion of words, and yet whenever the language of Judaism aspires to the spiritual it breaks into song, as if the words themselves sought escape from the gravitational pull of finite meanings.” Music, he tells us, is the language of the soul.

The 613th mitzvah obligates us to make Torah new in every generation. “Though it was given once, it must be received many times, as each of us, through our study and practice, strives to recapture the pristine voice heard at Mount Sinai. That requires emotion, not just intellect. It means treating Torah not just as words read, but also as a melody sung.”

In his *Divrei Agadah*,  Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv ZT’L sees the connection of Torah to *shirah* in a way similar to Rav Herzog but with an additional interesting insight, one that demands our particular attention because, in our time many in our community are not “singing” in harmony with the chorus.

Rav Elyashiv teaches we must engage our students with Torah *at their level* and in a way that allows them to appreciate it. He notes that the Torah doesn’t command that we simply, “write this song”. It instructs us to, “…teach it to the Children of Israel, *simah b’fihem,* [place it in their mouth].”

Torah is to be communicated in a way that it is accepted, appreciated and enjoyed by all students – by *shirah*.  *That* is why Torah is referred to as *shirah* and not some other term that might evoke *yegiah* ­– labor, struggle, or fear. If our students are “turned off” then we must “sing” to them, not punish them! Torah is more than words. Conveying it requires melody, movement, rhythm...  *lebedikeit ...* emotion and excitement!

Many of our students drop out. They close their ears to this incredible harmony. The reasons they do so are many and often complex. Our response though should be simple and clear – *shirah*. We need to convey the music of Torah; the singularity of Torah; the foreverness of Torah.

We need *shirah* so they know that they are among the “600,000”, that *they* are a letter of Torah and a letter of Torah is them. They need to know that our symphony is not complete without their voices too; that we cannot create the perfect harmony without them.

Those claiming to teach Torah only to *metzuyanim* – only to the best, to the chosen ones, miss the truth of Torah. Without *all* the voices, without *all* the letters of Torah, it is not complete, there is no *shirah*, there is no harmony. And where there is no harmony, there is only noise.

Rav Elyashiv teaches us that, just like music, we must make sure that all appreciate Torah at his or her level. It is then, when they are simultaneously touched by a rebbe’s  love, sensitivity, attention, and concern that they eventually can become true *metzuyanim*; then and only then that they join the chorus of *Klal* Yisrael; then and only then our *shirah* is true, our harmony complete and our music sacred.