

Shabbat Shirah: A Celebration of Jewish Song

One of the most exciting elements of our annual cycle of Torah reading is the joyous Song of the Sea, or *Shirat Ha Yam*. Found within the weekly portion of B'Shallah, which recounts the movements of the newly-freed Israelites as they begin to make their way to the Promised Land, the *Shirat Ha Yam* occurs immediately following the dramatic crossing of the Red Sea. The Song includes an account of how Miriam, Moses' sister, leads the people in dance celebrating the successful crossing and the vanquishing of Pharaoh's pursuing army. Overflowing with ecstasy and gratitude, the children of Israel instinctively turn to song to express their deep emotions. Interestingly, the Song of the Sea is the first recorded prayer that simply praises God out of pure joy, rather than asking for a particular Blessing or favor.

Shirat Ha Yam is documented in the Torah in a unique poetic language and style. The power of this hymn struck the framers of our liturgy so much that this ancient prayer is repeated each day in our morning service and portions of it, such as Mi Chamocha: "Who is like unto thee O Lord?," are found in both the evening and morning prayers. In fact, it serves as the paradigmatic example of God's saving power.

The Shabbat on which the weekly portion of B'Shallah is read is known as Shabbat Shirah – the Sabbath of Song. This year, Shabbat Shirah will occur this Shabbat, February 8, 2020. *Shirat Ha Yam* is chanted on Shabbat Shirah by interspersing the beautifully majestic cantillation of the Song of Songs with the regular Torah cantillation melody. But this year will be different. In welcoming our musical scholar-in-residence this weekend, a brilliant ethnomusicologist, and an expert in Italian Jewish music, I've asked Hazzan Dr. Ramon Tasat to chant the Shirah with the ancient ornate Italian trope. Those who know trope will recognize the patterns, but the melody, well, *magnifico!*

Shirat Ha Yam is not the only special song recited on Shabbat Shirah. The Haftarah contains the song of Deborah which describes how the heroine Yael saves the Hebrews from the mighty despot, Sisera. (Spoiler Alert!) Yael invites the mighty warrior into her

home for a meal and ends up slaying him with a tent pin! You will have to come to services to get the whole story.

Shabbat Shirah is a time to reflect on the important role that music and song plays in our lives as Jews. It is also vital that Jewish music be used to enhance the atmosphere of our homes. Not only is music the best mechanism for expressing our deepest emotions, but it is the vehicle which transports prayers from our hearts to the gates of heaven. In fact, in some instances such as Kol Nidre, the significance of the music exceeds that of the text. From Yiddish lullabies to Ladino love songs, to the modern sounds of Israeli rock and roll, Jewish music is an integral part of the Jewish soul. Thus, it is fitting that Shabbat Shirah, the Shabbat on which we read one of the earliest and most striking incidents of musical expression, be dedicated to Jewish music.

Please come and pray with us on Saturday morning of Shabbat Shirah, where our service will be enhanced by our fabulous Shaarey Zedek choir, as well as the treat of not only hearing Hazzan Dr. Tasat chant the *Shirat Ha Yam*, but hearing his sermon-in-song accompanied by our choir. His visit with us is sponsored in part by the Laker Concert Fund, the Cantors Assembly Foundation, and other generous CSZ donors. Hazzan Dr. Tasat will also be the guest lecturer for tonight's Berman Night of Learning, participate in our monthly T.G.I.S. (Thank God It's Shabbat) service tomorrow night, and give a concert of Ladino Jewish music to our Religious School children this Sunday morning.

A weekend to remember!

Karen joins me in wishing you a Shabbat filled with joy, music and peace.

Hazzan David Propis

February 6, 2020