

V'Shamru: Shades of Shabbat: A Sermon in Song

Cantor Lauren Adesnik | Temple Emanu-El | Shabbat Shirah

January 7, 2014~7 Sh'vat 5774

(Sing Rothblum V'shamru)

Shabbat Shalom!

This week we mark a very special *parsha* in the book of Exodus called *Beshallah*. This *parsha* is dramatic and brings us to the height of our redemption story. Moshe and the Israelites escape from the Egyptians, they make their way through the wilderness to the sea, it miraculously parts, they cross through to the other side. Moses, Myriam and the People of Israel sing a song to God: praising God for their miraculous redemption.

We call this song "*Shirat Hayam*," The Song of the Sea, and if you look at the Torah, you will see that the text is arranged so that it resembles the waves of the sea. Our prayer of redemption, *Michamocha* comes directly from this text.

Synagogues across the world tonight recognize this special Shabbat as a celebration called *Shabbat Shira*, Shabbat in Song. At this moment Cantors across the world are giving sermons in song covering a gamut of themes- ranging from a musical history of liturgy

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or chazzanut, to highlighting the redemptive nature of this Parsha, or focusing on specific liturgy in our Shabbat service.

Tonight, we explore the literal text and meaning of Shabbat in Song, through the text and various musical settings of Vshamru- the biblical text iterating Gods commandment to keep Shabbat that is now a part of our fixed Shabbat evening liturgy.

"V'shamru V'nei Yisrael Et Hashabbat, L'dorotam B'rit Olam:

The Children of Israel shall guard/keep the Sabbath, for all generations, as an eternal covenant. Between ME and the children of Israel, it is a sign for all time, for in 6 days Adonai created the heavens and the earth, God ceased from work, and was refreshed."

--Exodus 31:16-17

This commandment to keep Shabbat also comes from the book of Exodus, chapter 31, verses 16-17. Each week we sing these words joyously as a part of our Shabbat liturgy. There are several items of note about the placement of the *V'shamru* text in the bible. These verses come directly after God describes the holy sanctuary,

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our *Mishkan*, and the various holy objects to be placed in the sanctuary. The Women's Torah Commentary suggests "*the placement of the Shabbat commandment here connects the realms of holy space (the [sanctuary]) and of holy time.*" ¹

Understanding this connection between holy space and holy time is significant, as we recite these verses together in our sanctuary- our holy space-on Shabbat- our holy time. This prayer reminds to set aside special time to be with those whom we love, to reflect on the week, to rest. This is our chance to connect to that which is Divine- God. Our relationship with God is manifest in our marking of this sanctified space and time in *Haaretz*- the earth, while God did and continues to do so in *hashamayim*-the heavens above.

For this reason, each week we anticipate the coming of Shabbat. We fulfill *Hiddur Mitzvah*, making these 25 hours extra beautiful as we wear our best clothes on Shabbat, we rise to

¹ Women's Torah Commentary, 500

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welcome in the Sabbath Bride in L'cha Dodi with particular attention to our singing.

This commandment is repeated twice in Torah. In the previous verses, exodus 31:12-15 God introduces the commandment of keeping the Sabbath as a sign of the covenant between God and Israel and warns that anyone who does not keep the Sabbath shall be put to death.

God explains that all work may occur over six days, but on the seventh, there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest. God repeats the commandment of keeping Shabbat in verses 16-17, the *V'shamru* text that we sing together, and emphasizes this commandment as a sign of our covenant or relationship, with God.

The repetition of this text highlights the importance and sacred nature of this commandment. It is through this commandment that we create sacred relationships with ourselves, with others, and ultimately with the Divine.

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The Moshe Rothblum (b.1944) *V'shamru* we sang together a few moments ago, reflects the communal and joyous nature of Shabbat. We emulate our jubilation of Shabbats arrival, of being together as a community in the congregational refrain. The key is major, our “happy sounding” key. The verses we are speech-like, focused on elevating this text.

Composers choose to highlight many themes that come out of this prayer. While Moshe Rothblum highlights the joy and communal nature of Shabbat, Debbie Friedman's (1951-2011) melody is soothing, and in a more somber, minor tone, almost like a lullaby. Debbie employs a singable and congregational tune throughout, still allowing for our community to come together in one voice, yet highlighting a completely different aspect of Shabbat, that of rest.

The text at the end of *V'shamru* reads “*Shavat Vayinafash*”
Vayinafash is a play on the words *Nofesh* נֹפֶשׁ: rest and *Nefesh* נֶפֶשׁ: soul. Rashi writes “every expression of *Nofesh*, rest is an expression of *Nefesh*, Soul, for one regains one's soul, and one's breath when one

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*rests from the toil of work.*² We understand that *Vayinafash* is an ultimate and complete rest of both spirit and body. Debbie Friedman's lulling and soothing melody reflects this idea of complete rest. Tonight, we especially think of Debbie and her beautiful gifts of music, as she passed away three years ago January 9th. She was truly a sweet singer of Israel.

(Sing a part of Friedman *V'shamru*)

These next settings of *Vshamru* are examples of Jewish art music at its finest. Each piece emulates a different aspect of the *V'shamru* text.

Frederick Picket (1903-1974) highlights the coming together of God and Israel. The piece is steady, even, and intense. Think of a caravan moving slowly through the desert.

² Rashi commentary on the Bible

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The natural rhythm of the Hebrew words is reflected in the rhythm of the music. This particularly allows one to truly pay attention to the text.

Throughout the piece the piano and the vocal line come together in various rhythmic or melodic moments, illustrating that God and the Children of Israel come together as one through the commandment of observing Shabbat.

Picket uses a technique called word painting throughout this piece: note that the vocal line rises to the highest point over the words “*ki sheshet yamim asa Adonai*” **כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים עָשָׂה יי** “in six days God created. Picket writes in a sequence that spirals continually downward over the words “*et hashamayim v'et haaretz*” **אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ**” emulating the journey from the highest high of the heavens, to the earth below. This emphasizes the idea that Shabbat encompasses all of creation and describes the connection of the children of Israel on earth to God in the heavens above.

(Sing Picket)

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William Sharlin's (1920-2012) composition is a metaphor for the building cycle of creation. Sharlin employs many similar techniques of Picket, such as word painting, and a parlando or speech like nature of the text. What is interesting here is the dual nature of the piece.

The piano plays a similar repeating rhythmic pattern throughout the piece- this is known as an ostinato. I like to think of the piano as the cyclical passing of days and returning each week of Shabbat. The piano part also cycles through various harmonic scales, rising higher and higher throughout the piece. This is God, blossoming the creation of the world.

The return to a lower register in the piano at the end echoes the idea of creation coming to completion in *Shabbos* rest. The piano is the gentle, cyclical nature of God's creation, the passing of time and return of Shabbat week after week.

The vocal line is separate from the piano and offers lots of movement and turns throughout the melody. This is a musical

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metaphor of the frenetic movement of nature and living things all around us, and our frenetic nature throughout the week.

The voice finally expands into longer, more even, melodic phrases at the end of the piece, reminding us to pause at the end of our chaotic week, to reflect, to allow our bodies and our souls to come to a stop, to rest.

(Sing Sharlin)

Maurice Goldman (1910-1984) writes a setting of *V'shamru* that is a conversation between the vocal line and the piano accompaniment. The conversation between the vocal line and the piano stresses the repetition of God's commandment to keep Shabbat found in the entirety of verses 12-17 of the *Parsha*.

At the beginning of this section, God introduces and explains the importance of Shabbat, tells us when Shabbat arrives (on the 7th day), and teaches us that through our observance of Shabbat we are in relationship with God. God also gives us the consequences of not observing Shabbat. In the last two verses, God repeats the

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commandment, the timing, and reminds us once more that we are in relationship with God through our observance of Shabbat.

This emphasis is purposeful, God wants to make sure we know Shabbat is not only a sacred and holy commandment, but that through Shabbat we build our connection and relationship with God. Over Shabbat our bodies gain physical rest, and our souls gain spiritual rest and renewal. Here we see that emphasis through the dialogue between voice and piano.

As in William Sharlin's piece, there is a lot of movement in the vocal line until the very end of the piece- this gives space for the text to be the focus of the piece, bringing out the images of creation, of heaven, earth, of all living things and of Shabbat. Over the words "*Beini Uvein B'nei Yisrael* בֵּינִי וּבֵין בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל *this is a sign between me and the children of Israel,*" the melody and rhythm become more drawn out, more declamatory, again, emphasizing our relationship with God that forms through our observance of Shabbat.

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The words “*ki sheshet yamim Asa Adonai*, כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים עָשָׂה יי

that describe God's creation in six days, employ the highest tessitura, or register in the composition, and are the most explosive. Think of volcanos erupting, the chaos of the beginning of creation. Listen for the word painting over “*hashamayim* הַשָּׁמַיִם and *Haaretz* הָאָרֶץ - heaven and earth.” Goldman extends *hashamayim* in a floating higher register and brings that register down over *haaretz*- earth.

The final long descending phrases of the piece are ethereal, reflecting the expansiveness of creation, the expansive and holy nature of sacred time and space. These final phrases illuminate the intensity and wholeness of complete Shabbat rest.

(Sing Goldman)

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Our final *V'shamru* by Meir Finkelstein (b.1951) is a blend of solo *chazzanut* and Congregational refrain. The solo nature of the cantorial sections combined with the congregational refrain emulates a dialogue between God and the children of Israel, the melodic, flourishing verses iterate God's commandment to keep Shabbat, while the congregation joins together in joyful agreement in the refrain.

The *chazzonus* grounds us in traditional synagogue melody while the dialogue creates a fun conversation between cantor and congregation. The refrain focuses on inviting the congregation to join with the cantor in song and prayer. The high energy of the piece reflects the true joy that comes with welcoming Shabbat: that we might “just be” and enjoy each other in this sacred time and space.

Please sing with me!

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