

With Walls on Both Sides

A sermon by Rabbi Michael Marmor, Ph.D., Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Provost, given at HUC-JIR's Alumni Gathering at the Jerusalem campus on July 5, 2014, during the convention of the American Conference of Cantors.

The psalmist tells us that having been exiled to sit by the waters of Babylon, our conquerors tormented us, asking us to sing a song of Zion. The rhetorical response is famous:

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

This week, we are forced to ask ourselves how we can sing a song of Zion in Zion itself, here where hatred and terror reign? Here where four of our sons and more are laid out before us – Naftali Frankel, Gilad Shaar, Ayal Yifrach and Muhammad abu Chadir? Here where riots and incitement abound, where troops are massing and missiles fly?

The Midrash on Psalms notes that the text does not say we will refrain from singing. To sing, as many in this room well know, is an uncontrollable instinct. Rather, the question asked is: how do we sing a song in the midst of such pain and such injustice?

Asking how to sing seems an appropriate question in the presence of so many gifted cantors and musicians. I will confess I know very little about many aspects of the cantor. To give an example – I know next nothing to the sight singing known as solfège. All I learnt about "do, re, mi" I learnt from Julie Andrews. So when during my tenure as Dean here I found myself in the midst of a passionate debate about the relative merits of fixed "do" and "moveable do", I misunderstood and thought it was a discussion on where to invest one's dough.

There is something to be learnt on the way music operates within scales and bars and staves. The greatest creativity, the greatest expression, moments of profound revelation, exist within frameworks and are bounded by context.

In looking for an example of revelation within boundaries, we may turn to this week's Torah portion, Balak. All over this city and beyond there are countless sermons being preached about Pinchas, who appears at the end of the portion. He is the patron saint of zealots and extremists, and for this reason he is much in demand. But I suggest we look for inspiration to an ass and an angel.

We read in Chapter 22 of Numbers:

²³ *When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, it turned off the road into a field. Balaam beat it to get it back on the road.*

²⁴ *Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path through the vineyards, with walls on both sides.* ²⁵ *When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it pressed close to the wall, crushing Balaam's foot against it. So he beat the donkey again.*

The angel reveals itself in a moment of pressure "with walls on both sides", *gader mizeh ve-gader mizeh*. We often like to employ a cliché about emerging from narrow spaces into the wide open planes, but it may be that such an image will not help us here. We are living through a time in which we are situated, like the angel, *gader mizeh ve-gader mizeh*. Here we are in sight of Jerusalem's Old City – here the ancient, there the modern; here East Jerusalem, there West Jerusalem; a wall in front of you now and a separation wall just a short distance away, beyond the Hinnom Valley; here the sublime, there the suppressed, here the need for security, there the call for justice, here our rootedness in a particular identity, there our commitment to universal solidarity. We are bounded on one side by the morality of the Jewish people surviving and thriving, and on the other by the morality of the Palestinian people's call for that which we hope for ourselves. Here the rage which goes with great and senseless loss. There the knowledge that if we give in to that rage, we will be pulled yet further into a vortex of blood. Here the knowledge that we live in a dreadful neighborhood, and have to be strong. There the awareness that all this extravagant strength may translate into weakness.

Pinchas has no boundaries, and sees no complexity. But our lot is with those who are bounded by commitments on both sides. I am trying to suggest that the angel in this week's portion, witnessed not by the great soothsayer but by his humble ass, this angel represents a situation we encounter in every walk of life. It is interesting to note that in the Middle Ages the great translator Samuel ibn Tibbon described the role of the translator in terms taken from this week's portion:

This narrow lane of translation with a boundary here and another there

He was referring to the boundary of the language from which we translate and the language into which we translate. This is true of all of us trying to mediate between cultures and generations.

Today in the presence of so many cantors, let me suggest that this work of interpretation is true in particular of you, master interpreters. As Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

I should like to conceive hazzanuth as ... the art of interpreting the words of the liturgy. Words die of routine. The cantor's task is to bring them to life. A cantor is a person who knows the secret of the resurrection of the words.

In order to do so you have to be fully aware of the tradition you represent on one side of you and the men and women you serve on the other. Awareness of these two boundaries may bring the angel into view.

Here is the hundredth psalm as translated by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, who died just a couple of days ago:

*This is how you sing to God a thank You song.
You join the symphony of the whole Earth
In your gratefulness you meet Him,
voices echo joy in God's halls.
In giving thanks we engage Her blessings.
We meet His goodness here and now,
Her encouragement from generation to generation.
You are filled with joy serving God's purpose.
You sound your own song as you do it.
Certain that God is Be-ing,
we know that we are brought forth from Her,
- both God's companions and His flock.
Enter into God's Presence,
Singing your own song
in grateful appreciation.
Thank You God, You are all Blessing.
In this world You are goodness, Yes, Grace itself.
This is the trust we bequeath the next generation.*

Listen to these words:

You are filled with joy serving God's purpose.
You sound your own song as you do it.

This is the trust we bequeath the next generation.

This may not be a literal translation, but it is true. It comes from a revelation experienced *gader mizeh ve-gader mizeh*, between two boundaries.

How can we sing the Lord's song in a hard time in our own land? How can we sing songs of praise when God's handiwork is kidnapped and murdered and oppressed? The only way we can earn the right to speak, learn, act and sing in this time is with great honesty and great sensitivity. It is my experience that when a person sings, something essential is revealed about them, beyond musicality and training. We are naked when we sing. I hope we can learn how to sing a song of moderation, decency and humanity, and to mean it. Only our authenticity and commitment will be equal to the task we face.

May we be able to see the angel beckoning for our attention, pleading with us to speak for the values of moderation and humanity even when Pinchas is flavor of the month. May we sing even when stunned silence suits us better, in the spirit of Psalm 30:

יג לְמַעַן, יִזְמְרָךְ כְּבוֹד-- וְלֹא יִדָּם: **13** *So that my glory may sing praise to You, and not be silent;*
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי, לְעוֹלָם אֲדַבֵּר. *O LORD my God, I will give thanks unto You for ever.*

How shall we sing the Lord's song in this Land? I don't know how, but I know we shall. May we learn to see the boundaries and the angels before our very eyes.

This is how you sing to God a thank you song...

May this be the trust we bequeath the next generation.