

the Torah of Music



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cated silence from time to time as a way of handling trauma,² weathering tough times,³ or as a political strategy.⁴ Silence was also an essential spiritual expression⁵—according to some opinions silence was even the highest form of prayer.⁶

But Jews could not remain silent all the time—they had to sing. In that vein, David begged to keep on singing:

Let my heart sing of you and not keep silent, YHVH my God, I will always praise you!⁷

In the ongoing debate between the merits of various types of expression, an aphorism developed among Hasidim:

Silence is better than words, but singing is better than silence.⁸

Ultimately, however, singing supports silence, and vice versa, even if they initially may seem to be in competition. Songs, with their melodies and harmonies and pulsating rhythms, at once overwhelm us with their beauty, and also teach us to appreciate the character of quiet. One sonic extremity opens up the other.

This is one interpretation of why we say “*Selah*” at the end of certain psalms. *Selah* is the Psalmist’s instruction to the singer to pause,⁹ to stop for a moment to take in the depth of the words and melodies one has just sung. *Selah* invites us to meditate for a moment and prayerfully reflect. The letters of *Selah*, S-L-H (ס-ל-ה), form an acronym for “*Siman LaM’natzeah Has*, סימן למנצח חס,” “a Sign to the Leader/conductor to Hold on/pause.”¹⁰

Song works in partnership with silence to cultivate the spirit. Sometimes song grows out of silence, sometimes silence grows out of song. As we feel the

² Leviticus 10:3; See also Talmud Bavli Zevahim 115b. Simkha Weintraub sees Aaron’s response as potentially an unhealthy repression of his feelings, conversation in Brooklyn, 2012.

³ Amos 5:13.

⁴ Isaiah 30:15.

⁵ Talmud Bavli Berakhot 24b: “He who makes his voice heard during prayer is of the small of faith. Rav Huna said, “This teaching applies only to one who is able to direct his heart when whispering (the words of prayer); but if he is unable to do so, he is permitted (to pray aloud).”

⁶ Talmud Yerushalmi Berakhot 9:1; the opinion cited above is attributed to Rabbi Yehudah of Kfar Neburya.

⁷ Psalms 30:13. “לִמְעַן יִזְמְרֶךָ כְּבוֹד וְלֹא יִדָּם ה' אֱלֹהֵי לְעוֹלָם אֲוֶדְךָ.” Translation of “כְּבוֹד” as “heart” following Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (New York: Norton, 2007).

⁸ Hasidic Teaching, quoted in Hanoch Avenary, “The Hasidic Nigun: Ethos and Melos of a Folk Liturgy,” *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 16 (1964), p. 60; also in Jonathan L. Friedman, *Quotations on Jewish Sacred Music*, p 46.

⁹ Brown, Driver, Briggs *Biblical Lexicon* on “*Selah*.”

¹⁰ Naphtali Herz Imber, “Music and the Psalms,” p. 578.

great expanse between sound and silence and stretch our aesthetic sensibilities, we learn to stretch our spiritual sensibilities as well.

What's left over after song may be even more important than the song itself! According to Rabbi Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir, the daily ritual of singing in itself is insufficient to praise God. Rather, the full awesomeness of the Divine is realized in the silence after the songs of *P'sukei D'Zimrah* (verses of song), when one is "left with the residue of song."¹¹

So, it would seem that song prepares us for a rich, full silence, the type of silence in which music isn't heard but yet can be felt pulsing through our veins. But it turns out that that very silence also allows us to hear song. Often the seeds of a melody, like the seeds of wisdom itself, are contained within a silent moment. As soon as we get quiet, the silence itself turns around and inspires more music!

Two of our most famous leaders were initially known for being quiet but later became known for their songs. Hannah, whose silent prayer became the Talmud's model for the silent *Amidah*,¹² later opened her mouth "wide" with song,¹³ and sang one of the Top Ten songs ever sung in the Tanakh.¹⁴

Moses, too, who was nearly mute as a result of eating a burning coal,¹⁵ and who hesitated to lead because he could barely talk, became one of the greatest song leaders of our tradition, leading all of the people at once in the famous Song of the Sea.¹⁶ By the end of his life, in a stunning reversal of musical initiative, even the heavens and the angels quieted their singing to listen to the songs of Moses and his people.¹⁷ The truths that Hannah and Moses discovered in quietness allowed them to sing the songs of their souls, and of their people.

To Rebbe Nahman, Moses represented the balance between extreme quiet, which was emblematic of his humility and faith, and extreme song. His songs, rooted in silence, became the ancestor of all spiritual songs in our tradition.

All songs, whether of this world or the one of the future to come, are only by means of Moses, who is the aspect of silence, who merited to sing since

¹¹ Or *HaMe'ir*, Parashat Tetzaveh (#153). He illustrates this idea with wordplay on the seemingly unnecessarily doubled word *shirei*, songs, in the closing prayer of the daily verses of song, which reads, "*HaBoher BeShirei Zimrah*, הבוחר בשירי זמרה."

¹² 1 Samuel 1, Talmud Bavli Berakhot 31a (#42).

¹³ 1 Samuel 2:1.

¹⁴ *Ba'al HaTurim* on Exodus 15:1 (#107).

¹⁵ Exodus Rabbah 1:26.

¹⁶ Song of the Sea, Exodus 15:1–2 (#2).

¹⁷ Deuteronomy 32:1; Yalkut Shimoni, Ha'azinu 942; Talmud Bavli Hagigah 12b (#55).

all songs are related to that elevated faith, which includes all songs, all are drawn from it...¹⁸

A full cup cannot receive, and so we must make room inside for music and its wisdom to enter. Song and silence delicately balance each other. In hours of trying to quiet my baby, I learned to quiet myself first. From that quiet came song, and those songs in turn became lullabies to quiet my baby and my own soul. In a neverending cycle, the very act of singing allows us to hear silence and moves us to silence, and yet silence itself cannot help but lead us back to song.

Calm at the Center of Sound

ובשוֹפֵר גָּדוֹל יִתְקַע,
וְקוֹל דְּמַמָּה דְּקָה יִשְׁמַע.

And the Great Shofar is sounded,
and the still small voice is heard.

—*Unetaneh Tokef prayer*

Music cuts away extraneous noise to reveal the divine song hidden in quiet moments. Music carves silence from sound; it organizes the chaotic sounds, and allows us to find the spaces in between. In these spaces, we can hear the sacred nuances of the world.

The greatest musicians, having mastered the notes, work their whole lives to master the silence. My teacher, Cantor Noach Schall, would survey hundreds of pages of music he had penned, which contained a whirlwind of thousands of musical notes, and proclaim, “Here’s the best part of all of it!” pointing to the musical rest, where no notes were written.

This concept is nowhere better expressed than in our High Holiday prayers, where we exclaim,

And the Great Shofar is sounded, and the still small voice is heard.¹⁹

First, we hear the great, loud sounds of the shofar, of our communal singing. But after the loud sounds, we hope that our ears have been opened, so that we can hear the quietest sounds of the universe.

¹⁸ *Likkutei Moharan* I 64:5 (#149). For an in depth study of Rebbe Nahman’s musical writings, see Chani Haran Smith, *Tuning the Soul: Music as a Spiritual Process in the Teachings of Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

¹⁹ *Unetaneh Tokef prayer*. “קוֹל,” translated as “voice” above, can also mean “thunder.”