

Sanctifying the Senses II:
“The voice of the turtledove is heard in the land”
(Exodus 19:16-19; Song of Songs 2:10-14)

Fortunately for me, it is not a prerequisite for rabbis to be able to sing well. More often than not, rabbis lead services with cantors—clergy trained in the music of Jewish worship. But, historically there is one place where rabbis have been on their own—and that is in the military. Indeed, the first Reform Jewish cantor to serve as an Army chaplain graduated from the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 2011. I had the pleasure of meeting this pioneer, Cantor David Frommer, when one of my favorite former students, now Rabbi Carla Fenves brought him to campus several years ago before they got married.

David tells of a moving experience singing in the Army. He marched into Kabul, Afghanistan in April 2012, just a few hours before the start of Passover, the holiday of freedom. As he began to conduct the Passover Seder inside the Green Zone in Kabul, a non-Jewish guest approached him with an unseasonal request. After the Seder, would the cantor do him a special favor and sing *Kol Nidrei*—the haunting, timeless melody that greets Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which falls in the early days of Autumn? The guest explained that he was in need of some spiritual relief at the moment and he found *Kol Nidrei* to be the most beautiful music he’d ever heard. The two of them found a quiet place to create a private sanctuary as David’s voice filled the air. This non-Jewish man who had served for two decades in some of the harshest war zones in the world, from Rwanda to Iraq, listened with his entire being. He wept as he absorbed the music. He later wrote, “David, I can’t thank you enough... You have no idea how much your voice and the voice of a cantor penetrates my soul with beauty. Music doth hath charms to soothe the savage breast...especially mine right now as I seem to have lost my way. Too many wars I’ve seen, too much suffering in this world, too much sorrow for even a seasoned adventurer and traveler and aid worker that I am [but] I felt very alive for a moment when I heard you sing it. Thank you!”ⁱ

When the sounds we hear are a prelude to pain, whether they be gunshots or shouts, it is understandable that we want to close our ears or take up armor to protect us from pain’s penetration. But this war weary and courageous man teaches us that there is a place for solace even amidst the

sounds of combat. We need to remember to seek sounds that will soothe and sustain us even as we listen attentively to the literal and figurative bombs on the battlefield. By his example, this man models how to remain open to cries of pain, to be present to the cacophony of injustice surrounding us, and then to know when and where to seek the sounds of solace.

Can we do the same? Are we, often safe in our suburbs, more practiced in shielding ourselves from cries than in hearing them? What cries of pain may we have become inured to as our private symphonies play on our iPods?

Have we heard the cries in the silence of Carmela, who moved from one foster home to another and one caseworker to another for as long as she could remember? At nine she told a caseworker that she wanted to go home. But when she was asked, "Where is home?" Carmela could only look up in pleading silence. She didn't know.

Have we heard the rumblings of hunger of the eighth grade students whose principal reports that if they need to be sent home, because they are sick or because they have discipline problems, the kids will almost always ask, "Can I eat lunch first?"

Have we heard the stifled wails of fear of Juana's two children, sent to foster care when their mother, an undocumented food vendor was arrested and detained because a new security guard reported her to immigration authorities for selling tamales in front of a Sacramento Walmart? (That situation, by the way, is one that the simple passage of the TRUST Act, now being considered by the Senate in California will prevent in the future.)

Have we become deaf to the cries of immigrants who seek safety, security and jobs so that they can work for a better life? Have we become deaf to the cries of children who have been bequeathed a culture in which violence is a daily commonplace and growing up healthy and successful is someone else's story? Have we become deaf to the drugs and guns, which accompany so many young people in their waking hours and in their dreams? A collective refusal to hear cries does not absolve us of the individual need to heed them. We must listen more carefully in the face of so many who shut their ears.

But if we can train our ears to heed the cries of those in need, let us also listen to what they can teach us. Amidst situations of sorrow, let us also make room for the sublime. Graduate student Joel Kerner was leaving the library one night when a drunk and deranged former soldier shot him. He survived

the shooting, but he was paralyzed below the neck. After nearly a year in the hospital, several of his friends plotted his first outing. Joel loved music, so they got tickets to a classical concert. His friends wanted the evening to be flawless. They practiced putting the wheelchair in the trunk of a Chevy and scouted out the handicapped spaces in the parking lot. But then the night of the concert arrived, and all of their thoughtful plans fell apart. When they got through heavy traffic, the handicapped spots were taken. They finally parked, but a strap from the wheelchair had jammed the lock—the trunk wouldn't open. They removed the backseat of the car, they slithered into the trunk and pried the lock open. The chair finally was free. But by this time, even intermission was over. The ushers wouldn't let them in. The friends were furious and ready to mobilize. One threatened to write an expose for the school newspaper. Another started to muscle her way in. But Joel Kerner, himself immobile, ignored them all. Seated on his chair on the broad porch of the building he looked up at the Doric columns and beyond at the spring sky. "Just leave me here. I haven't seen the sky for eight months." "I don't need a concert," he said. "This is a concert."ⁱⁱ

This is a concert. What Joel Kerner was telling his friends and by extension, reminding us, is to embrace joy even in the face of unfairness, even as we confront injustice. Listen to pain and heartbreak and listen to the prelude to heaven. We need to train ourselves to be able to hear both cries and crescendos.

That this gunshot victim, hospital dweller, music-lover, graduate student could hear a concert in the nighttime sky, that the sublime place that music transports us to can be reached by watching the stars, reminds me of the ways that our senses can be confused and can surprise us. In addressing the experience of the revelation at Mount Sinai, even the bible struggles to describe the ineffable. "V'kol haam roem et ha kolot," "And all the people SAW the thunder." Hearing intensified their seeing. Their senses were stunned.

But this was not the only sensory surprise at Sinai.

Amidst the smoke on the mountain overwhelming the senses of sight and smell, standing on a trembling mountain commandeering their sense of touch, "the blare of the horn waxed louder and louder". Think about how counterintuitive this is this. Usually, when a person blows a horn, the sound that is produced gets weaker and fainter as the trumpeter's breath gets used up. But instead at Sinai, sound broke the bounds of the expected. The horn grew

stronger, louder, longer, more prominent, more present, more enduring, more eternal.

The rabbis speculate that what occurred was not that the sound itself was changing, but that the human capacity to absorb and receive it became more acute. As soon as their ears could hear more sound, more sound flooded the airwaves. And this was just the prelude. This was the preparation. The text continues, “As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder.”

If the shofar was loud and long—the ultimate in surround-sound—what might God speaking in thunder have sounded like? The roar of rushing water? The rumbling companion to lightening during a storm? Was it a voice? The certainty of an all-encompassing presence? We are limited by mere words in trying to absorb, let alone communicate, the ineffable.

But perhaps what the bible is trying to teach us is less how to pinpoint with precision the experience of revelation, but rather how to train ourselves to listen in a new way. To listen with an open heart, filled with awe, filled with attention, filled with responsibility, filled with connection. To listen at each moment remembering that awe-filled time when our senses came together and confused one another because all we comprehended for certain was that we were in the presence of the Divine.

In his book, *Man is Not Alone*, theologian and activist Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, “Only in moments when we are able to share in the spirit of awe that fills the world are we able to understand what happened {to Israel} at Sinai. Revelation means that the thick silence which fills the endless distance between God and the human mind was pierced, and man was told that God is concerned with the affairs of man; that not only does man need God, God is also in need of man. (Man is Not Alone p. 195)

All of our senses are invoked to try to describe standing in the place where the human and the Divine hear one another. But any description is, at best, an approximation. Is it possible for even our best poets to portray love? How can we narrate ecstasy? Some things are real, but incomprehensible, real but incommunicable. Heschel asks, “Can we describe exactly how the tense power of a spirit glides on the strings of a violin, creating a world of delicacy out of nothing?” (God in Search of Man)

The most famous love poem of all, the Song of Songs is often read as the yearning, breathtaking love between a man and a woman. But it can also be

read, as Jewish tradition does, as the yearning, breathtaking love between God in search of humanity and humanity in search of God.

“Sustain me with raisin cakes/ refresh me with apples/ For I am faint with love.

O my dove, in the cranny of the rocks,/hidden by the cliff,/Let me see your face,/let me hear your voice; /For your voice is sweet;/And your face is beautiful.”

The desire to touch the divine can sanctify our senses. But if God is in search of humanity, and humanity is in search of the Divine, the place we meet is not only one of spirituality; it is also one of responsibility. Indeed, those who stood at Sinai did not just have a peak experience—there was content to the moment--they received guidance for how to live. And they responded, *naaseh v'nishmah*—they said, “We will do and we will listen. We will act and we will understand. We will respond and we will hearken.” We encounter the divine not only in sublime music and soft whispers, on Sinai and in sanctuaries, but also when we hear and when we too respond to the cries of those in need, when we listen to stories of injustice and act to change their endings on our streets and in our public square.

Religious scholar and poet Hillel Zeitlin was no stranger to injustice—he was killed in the Warsaw Ghetto. But he understood that revelation braids weeping and true joy, pain and promise. His is a description of how to sanctify our senses, how to listen with an open heart, how to be truly present for both cries and for consolation. To know with our very bodies the invisible lines of connections between us—rich and poor, powerful and powerless, young and old, wise and innocent. As we listen to Hillel Zeitlin’s words, may we train ourselves to attend with our heart to sounds and to silence.

Weeping and true joy struggle with each other at Tikkun Hazot, the midnight vigil. Softly, I tell you, there is one kind of midnight vigil in which there’s no need to squat on the floor or place ashes on your head.

The place for it is on a mountain, at the edge of a forest; the time, when the moon is covered by clouds and the stars are concealed and invisible.

Shadows of darkness cover everything. There are no separate trees or flowers, not a separate creature.

A veil of blackness is drawn over all.

A deep silence is before you, the silence of pure thought, the silence of creation, the silence of eternity.

There is no movement, no murmur, no agitation, no noise and emotion, no developing and growing, for all is being, and only being.

There is no changing of form, maturation and decay, transformation and alteration; there is only the whole universe.

You want to grasp in your thought the essence of existence, of reality, of eternity.

You sink into this thought, and labor to give it some image you can hold on to.

But from far away you hear the echo of various sounds that recall the perpetual flow of life.

Far away from where you are sitting, the brook rushes, the spring murmurs, the bird chirps, the insects rustle, the leaves talk, and the winds meet.

And you understand the secret of rest and of motion, the secret of reality and of the modes of reality, the secret of existence and of the manifestation of existence, the secret of creation and form.

And you sense all the sadness and all the joy of eternity.

And the night's talk tells you about the pure blood that has been spilt throughout all the ages; about the travail and distress of those who have always been miserable and exploited, abused and humiliated; about the terrible suffering, the troubles and afflictions that have been going on endlessly; and about the victims who are still falling to your left and to your right, every minute.

The time is not for wonder and amazement and excitement, but for weeping, the weeping of silence, weeping of bitterness, weeping of the world, weeping of eternity.

But you also hear in the night's talk about the eternity of all that is holy and pure, beautiful and sublime, exalted and supernal; about the noble and holy

emotions, and holy visions, and holy intentions and all the great holy deeds and projects.

And the night's talk reveals to you that everything comes together, is connected, unites, that there is no holy aspiration that will not at some stage be redeemed.

You realize that everything is imprinted in eternity.

And when the Holy One Blessed be God goes into the Garden of Eden to delight with God's Righteous Ones, and those beings on high and below are aroused, you also hear the murmuring of the spring of tears.

And you feel all the sorrows and grief, and also consolation of the holy and the supernal beauty.

ⁱ "The Chronicle" Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Fall 2012, p. 16

ⁱⁱ Max Apple, *Roommates: My Grandfather's Story*, p. 67ff