

Rosh Hashanah 2019/5780

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*"The Song of All Life"*

*There is one who sings the song of one's self – shirat hanefesh, and in that "self" one finds everything: spiritual fulfillment at the fullest.*

*And there is one who sings the song of the nation – shirat ha'umah, who goes beyond the circle of one's own private soul, for it is not wide enough. It does not ease one's ideals. One longs for valiant heights and cleaves with gentle love to the Community of Israel as a whole, and sings her song with her, grieves for her sorrows and delights in her hopes.*

*And there is one whose soul expands further beyond the bound of Israel, to sing the song of humanity, shirat ha-adam, one's spirit majestically expanding to humanity in general and its glorious image.*

*And there is one whose spirit expands and ascends even higher, to the point of unity with all creation, with all creatures and all worlds, and sings with them all. Shirat ha'olam. It is of one such as this that tradition says that whoever sings a portion of song each day is assured of having a share in the world to come.*

*And there is one who ascends above all of these songs in a single union, and all sound their voices: the song of the self, of the nation, of humanity, of the world.*

*All come together within that one person at every time, in every hour.*

*And this perfection in all its fullness ascends and becomes a sacred song, Divinity's song, Israel's song, in its very strength and splendor, in its very truth and greatness. Yisrael, Shir-El, the Holy One's song, a simple song, doubled, tripled, fourfold, the Song of Songs which is Solomon's, the sovereign to whom peace belongs.*

What song do *you* sing?

More specifically, what *Jewish* song do you sing?

You just heard the song – the plea – of Rav Kook, who served as the first Chief Rabbi of Palestine during the British Mandate, and who died in 1935. In 1917 he composed his book called “Lights of Holiness” (*Orot Hakodesh*), which is an extended mystical meditation on the meaning of existence and the sacredness inherent in all life. Somewhere in the middle of the book he inserted a short poem reminiscent of Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” That’s the poem I began

with. He called it “The Fourfold Song.” *Shir M’ruba*. Not many people read Lights of Holiness, but the Fourfold Song has gotten a lot of play.

Rav Kook proposes that among human beings there are four distinct songs: the song of the self or soul; the song of one’s nation or people; the song of all humanity; and the song of universal creation. To wit, different people sing different “songs” from the fourfold schema, reflecting four different personality types. Rarely does a person master all of the songs. But that would be the ideal.

Some sing the first song, the song of the “*nefesh*,” the self. *Shirat Hanefesh*. Self-singers at their best are in tune with their inner souls. They achieve spiritual balance. They seek harmony between their physical selves and their emotional selves. They work to achieve and maintain their mental health. They eat conscientiously. They strive toward moral excellence. They follow the famous dictum in Psalm 34: *mi ha’ish hechafetz chaim, ohev yamim lir’ot tov*; “Who is the person who desires life, who wants days of seeking good? *N’tzor l’shon’cha meyra us’fatecha midaber mirmah*; never let your tongue speak evil, nor your lips pronounce deceit.

Nefesh singers learn to accept themselves; to love themselves; to respect themselves; to own their flaws and their sins; to work to improve themselves in every possible way, and to use the ever-widening repertoire of tools for self-work to make of themselves what they imagine God might have intended them to be.

Some sing the second song, the song of the *'umah*, the “people” or “nation.”

*Shirat Ha'umah*. Whatever their nation or tribe of origin, these singers connect beyond themselves to that amorphous grouping of selves who give them their roots and their definition; who nourish them culturally or religiously, linguistically or geographically. They not only identify with the aspirations of their *'umah*; they contribute to the evolving creation of that *'umah*. This is what Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan meant by “civilization,” speaking specifically of the Jewish civilization, but anchoring his definition in the larger concept of what it means for human beings to be part of a people, to have “peoplehood.” *Amcha*.

Nation singers devote their lives to the welfare of their *'umah*. They work vigilantly toward its defense and its security. They argue lovingly with their fellow tribespeople over the direction of the nation, the morality of the nation, the future of the nation. They build institutions and organizations to strengthen national education, culture, historical memory, and the wellbeing of the next

generation. They devote themselves to assuring that the next generation will somehow embrace their identity and perpetuate the tribe and its particular dreams.

Some sing the third song, the song of humanity, *Shirat Ha'adam*. These singers strive for human betterment the world over. Humanity singers may certainly value the physical or cultural borders of their own nation – or they may not - but their primary focus is the borderless sprawl of human striving and suffering. They dream of political freedom around the globe; of an end to exploitation of one people by another; of a great sharing of collective wisdom, science, and knowledge across all lines of language and belief. They sing this song without end, believing that if every human being would sing it, we would see an end to war and poverty, an end to racism and injustice. We would see the *tzelem Elohim*, the image of the divine come into sharp focus in the faces of every person on earth.

Some sing the fourth song, the song of the world or universe, *Shirat Ha'olam*.

This is the person who asks for peace *al kol yoshvey tevel*, “for all who dwell on earth,” and means not “all humanity,” but *all life*. All that dwells on Earth. All life forms. All *non-life* that forms the vessels in which life can thrive. Our entire

biosphere, our geosphere, our atmosphere. And not only that, but all space and time beyond this tiny, lovely globe of Earth.

Rav Kook was directing his poem to Jews, but he wrote it in such a way that every person could relate to it and grow from it. In the first place, everyone could recognize him- or herself in the mix. Everyone could say, yes, that's me. And yes, that's my spouse, or my mother, or my best friend. And yes, that's my enemy, my foe, my nemesis, my fellow human whose priorities are all messed up.

Herein lies the problem. The simultaneous songs should blend together splendidly. They should create a symphony! Instead, they create a cacophony, which is a metaphor for the cacophony of agendas in our communities and our world. If people could learn to sing all four songs in tune, or at least listen to others and tune one's own song with theirs, we could move toward universal "harmony" and unity of purpose. But alas!

Alas, people are people. People favor themselves and their own choices. People believe their own priorities are superior to those of others. People are people.

And as is often said, the Jews are people like everyone else, only more so! We Jews have our own version of the fourfold song. At its best, it is this marvelous

admixture of songs from across the Jewish spectrum that gives us our vitality and our glory. But, as Rav Kook knew over a hundred years ago, the petty perspectives of each of our well-meaning Jews creates the earsplitting cacophony that keeps us from becoming the great Jewish people we could be and should be. Without resort to the tools of historical analysis, Rav Kook had already figured out the modern Jewish “problem,” much as Rabbi Kaplan had done in his own social-scientific way by that time.

As Rav Kook was writing in 1917, nationalism had backfired and set the world on itself in a horrific world war. Jews had begun in earnest to return to Eretz Yisrael and rediscover – or reinvent – the identity of the Jewish people. This was cause for great celebration as well as unprecedented anxiety in the far corners of the Jewish world. Zionism motivated European Jews who were caught in the tightening vise of anti-Semitism. In contrast, Zionism created *shvitzing* among Jews who wanted universalist Judaism to eclipse tribal-national Jewishness as the baseline of our identity. Zionism struck fear in the hearts of Palestinian Arabs who saw Jews not as returnees but as colonialist poachers.

Rav Kook, Charedi par excellence, was telling Jews to come home to Israel and trust the divine hand, but to do so not only as nationalist-religious particularists but also as universalists. To sing all four songs in harmony.

In some ways, that argument from 1917 hasn't moved very far in all these years. We are still squabbling over whether our spiritualists are just narcissistic fools who contemplate their Jewish navels; whether our particularists are just insular elitists who are *only* concerned their own kind; whether our universalists are just self-hating Jews who care about everyone *but* their own kind. And whether our globalists are just loony mystics whose warped sense of Jewish values has led them off the cliff of logic and practicality.

The argument will only advance when it ceases to be an argument. When it turns into a *machloket*, which is a kind of argument, but an argument in which every side counts and every side contributes to the final outcome.

Look at us. Look at how we Jews sing all four songs, just not together. Jews borrow creatively from all world religions and faith traditions to create inspiring approaches to spirituality and self-betterment. Jews are exemplary among particular nations in their dedication to *Jewish* causes. Jews are visible

everywhere tackling *social and political* causes. Jews pioneer the science that could save the planet. In fact, if humanity solves the global climate crisis, it will only do so with the State of Israel as a major scientific and technological team player.

Let's think generously about ourselves and our fellow Jews for a moment.

Think about Jews who sing the Song of the Jewish Nation. They devotedly tend to Shoah survivors in their nineties in remote areas of Ukraine. They build "chesed" centers and summer camps in the Former Soviet Union to provide identity education for children whose parents have only recently revealed to them that they are in fact Jewish. They give support to Western European and British Jews facing social and governmental anti-Semitism in ways reminiscent of the 1930's. They create foundations that promote Jewish education in the US and world-wide, both for children and for scholars and for future rabbis and cantors. They fund and administer organizations that fight for human and civil rights in Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

They support Jewish periodicals and journals. They promote Jewish arts. They model Jewish moral values in Israel and throughout the Diaspora. They build

exemplary congregations and community centers wherever Jews live and work and raise their children. They stand up to right-wing nationalists who attack Jewish bodies, and to left-wing extremists who attack Jewish souls – who, all of them, left and right, try to de-legitimize Israel in specific and the Jewish people in general. They call out the shocking increase in anti-Semitism in American communities. They call for governments here and abroad to be bold in disparaging hatefulness toward Jews and others rather than to disgrace themselves by encouraging that hatefulness. And they personally make us safe by guarding our shuls and schools and public gatherings.

Think about Jews who sing the Song of Humanity. They translate Jewish values from our Torah and Rabbinic tradition to the great human challenges of our time. They risk castigation in order to fight for sanity in our gun policies. They protest practices of mass incarceration and racially biased sentencing. They advocate for full access to health care. They call on the world's wealthiest to take responsibility for the world's poorest. They provide disaster relief in hurricane-stricken areas. They push back against religious fundamentalism, and against secular fundamentalism. They combat global terrorism.

They work for fair housing laws and for adequate shelter for all. They call out racial and religious hatred. They raise awareness of refugee crises in Syria, Rohingya, Honduras, across the globe. They shepherd refugee families through their resettlement in America. They go on Midnight Runs and they shlep leftover kiddush food to the shelter. They argue for a moral immigration, refugee, and asylum policy at every border of every nation on earth. And it is often *as Jews* that they do and say these things. As Jews – with no direct benefit for them – for *us* – as Jews.

Now think about Jews who sing the *Shirat Ha'olam*, the song of the world. Think about the work they do both as advocates and as scientists to combat climate change; to save the oceans from choking on plastic; to save the ice caps and glaciers from turning White Plains into beachfront property; to break us of our addiction to oil and to carbon and to methane-gushing livestock. To get us to love the Earth so much that we stop abusing our water and air and soil. To get us to stop our disregard for the *kedushah*, the sacredness of our fellow life forms, our fellow travelers on this divine biosphere.

Today the world is pregnant with possibility. *Hayom harat olam*. This day the world is conceived. This day our Jewish people reconstitutes itself in all its pregnant potential.

This day we could all try to sing all of the songs inside ourselves. We could sing the song of the *nefesh*, of bringing our soul into alignment with itself. We could sing the song of the *umah*, of connecting ourselves proudly and unabashedly with our beautiful Jewish people. We could sing the song of *adam*, of humanity, of extending ourselves outward toward all of humanity, who at this late stage of desperation needs our participation and contribution more than at any time in history.

We could sing the song of the *olam*, the song of science and policy and activism and advocacy, the song of basic love for the gift that Divinity has bestowed upon us.

We could stretch ourselves to hear these different versions of the Jewish song in our fellow Jews, and we could accept that the song we ourselves sing at the top of our lungs might be different from the one our Jewish brother or sister sings, but that all of the songs are vital to the *machloket l'shem shamayim*, the argument for the sake of heaven that is the Jewish people, the Jewish experience, today. That

the Jewish “problem,” if there is one, is that we need to learn to love all four voices in the chorus, and to get them to sing together in a great symphonic harmony. Then we will understand and realize *ahavat yisrael* – the love of Israel that only comes from admiring and embracing the different voices in our chorus, the voices of all who are working to bring that *tzelem Elohim* to bear on our cacophonous reality.

That’s our work for the year ahead. Singing our song in harmony with others, and maybe even learning all of the songs. The song of our Jewish and human selves. The song of our Jewish people and other peoples. The song of humanity and our Jewish role in that humanity. The song of the planet, and the cosmos, and the ever-recreating universe.

The song called *Echad*. Oneness. *Shalom*. *Sh’leymut*. Wholeness. Completeness. Peace. Life. *Chayim*.