

“Judaism: The Music That Lifts Our World”
Rabbi Judith Schindler, Yom Kippur 5772, October 7, 2011
Temple Beth El, Charlotte, North Carolina

There were once, in Europe, hundreds of special violins, possibly thousands. They had Jewish stars crafted into the wood – mother of pearl inlaid into their spruce or maple. I imagine the violin makers crafting their instruments. With love, they designed the symbol of their faith in the center, knowing that it was not just the physical Star of David, the most prominent sign of Judaism, that would identify the violins as Jewish, but the music that would be played upon them.

As they fashioned their instruments, the craftsman must have imagined them being played to celebrate B’nei Mitzvah and marriages. The artists must have envisioned their elevating celebrations across the continent. For in the late 19th and early 20th century, Europeans of all faiths enjoyed Klezmer melodies, in the same way that we today enjoy country music or blues. These violins with stars at their center were the best and most prestigious a Klezmer musician could buy.

But these rare Eastern European violins would not have an expansive future of celebration. The violins would instead play songs of sorrow and despair. They would be played by Jewish prisoners at Nazi concentration camps. The violins would be used as a façade, calming deportees as they exited boxcars. They would be tossed into fires and used as wood to warm German soldiers. The violins would be played in the deep dark of night, in the ghettos, offering hope to Jews at their darkest time of history.

Some of these rare violins would survive. Eighteen of these Violins of Hope will be here in Charlotte this spring – on display at UNC Charlotte’s new building uptown and played here in Shalom Park on Yom Hashoah – Holocaust Remembrance Day. These violins are so much more than mere wood with strings. They are a symbol of Jewish survival.

Judaism is a song that is eternal – it connects the generations. Judaism is the music that, on one hand, transports us to our ancient and recent past, and on the other, binds us to our future. Judaism is a melody that speaks to us on every level – intellectual and emotional, spiritual and mystical. Like music that is internalized, Judaism enters our souls. We improvise upon the texts of our faith as we live them. Judaism is that song that heals our sorrows, lifts our celebrations, and inspires us to transform our world for the better.

A friend of mine, Cathy Bessant from Bank of America, recently visited Germany with her son, Hayden, who is a classmate of my son, Max. In the midst of their trip, an email came my way,

“We are in Germany and stumbled across a memorial stone in the ground. It said: ‘Maxwell Wallach, Auschwitz, 1943.’ We were stopped dead in our tracks.”

In that moment of stumbling across my son’s full name, Maxwell Wallach, inscribed on the ground in a memorial stone, for my friend and her family, the Holocaust became real.

She wrote me afterwards: “As soon as we saw it, and I showed it to Hayden, I cried, my sister cried and Hayden couldn't speak. I have never cried about the Holocaust before. That moment took it from intellectual to personal for a Christian family that knew but didn't get it.”

It was not just the violins that almost died -- it was us and our faith. Just as these violins, whose music once lifted lives for Jews and non-Jews alike, have survived, so does the music of Judaism that has lifted the entire world for four thousand years continue on.

Tonight on Kol Nidre [*music begins*], let us vow to keep alive the melodies of Judaism that elevate humankind – the melodies of our sacred Torah with God at the center, the melodies of social justice and action, and the melodies of sacred community.



On this night of Kol Nidre let us commit to keeping alive **the music of our Torah with God at the center.**

Rabbi David Wolpe tells the story of his friends who when visiting Bali were asked by a Balinese couple if they had children. When they replied that they didn't, the woman then asked: “But who will live in your houses when you die?”

From this Rabbi Wolpe teaches: “The Jewish tradition asks Jews to build families for precisely this reason: so that someone will live in the house of Israel when they are gone. As a people who have often wandered, the houses we have built have not always been on a plot of land. We have learned how to build a spiritual abode. We have built houses with words, with rituals, with Torah, with love.”¹

We are the original people of the book. It our book, our Torah and Hebrew Bible, that has formed the basis of the world’s most populous religions. It is estimated that 33 percent of the world is Christian, 23 percent of the world is Muslim and that number is rising, while .2 percent of the world is Jewish.

¹ Rabbi David Wolpe, *Finding Faith* (Berman House: Springfield, New Jy), 2004, p. 11

As Jews, we do not read Torah as an isolated text, we study it while hearing the voices of generations before. When we learn Torah, we listen to the echoes of Rashi from 11th century France, the whispers of Maimonides from 12th century Spain, the teachings of Soleveichik and Rav Kook, Manechem Mendel Schneerson, and the great sages of every age. Jewish wisdom knows no borders of time and space.

We have given the majority of the religious world the Bible as the number one bestselling book of all time. We need to continue to study Torah and teach Torah to our children so that Judaism can serve as the tuning fork that keeps the world in key. As well we know, abusers of religion can take our religious melodies where they were never meant to go -- creating discord where harmony was meant to hold sway.

At the center of our sacred text is God. As Jews, we are the revealers or innovators of the most elevated idea for creating peace in this world -- that all human beings are created in the image of God; that all human beings descend from one source; that all human beings are equal. As the Talmud puts it, “God created humanity from a single person, so that no person can say, ‘My ancestor is greater than yours.’ God created humanity from the four corners of the earth - yellow clay, and white sand, black loam and red soil. Therefore, the earth can declare to no part of humanity that it does not belong here, that this soil is not their rightful home.”

May we keep alive the Jewish understanding of Torah and inspire those around us to wrestle with the God we know to be true. May we challenge the world to live up to our faith’s highest ideal – where all human beings are recognized and treated as holy.



On this night of Kol Nidre let us commit to keeping alive the **music of social justice and action**. From our very beginning as a faith, we have given the world a passion for pursuing righteousness.

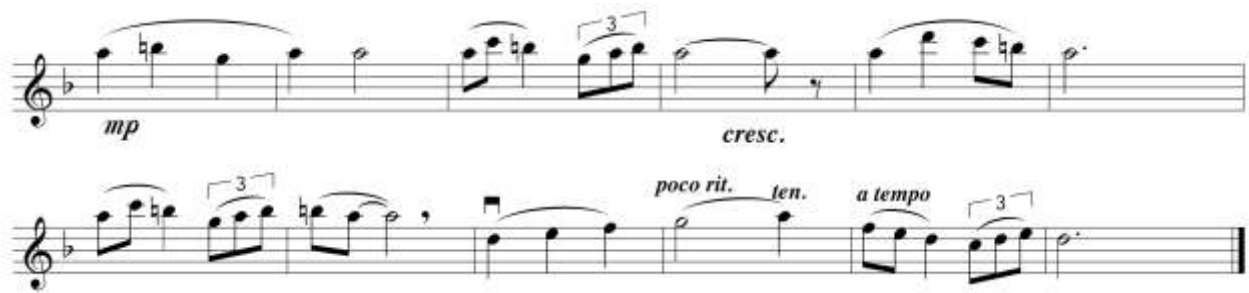
Abraham, the first monotheist, was called by God to do “what is just and right.” Moses acted to free our people from slavery. Amos decried the economic injustices he saw. Hosea condemned our infidelity. Isaiah chastised us for the arrogance of pretending to pious with our outer worship all the while failing to act humanely in our inner core through our daily actions.

The mystics of the 16th century gave the world a metaphor for repair that would reach across religions. They taught that in the very beginning of creation, God filled all space and time. Yet to make room for humanity, God needed to contract by channeling God’s light into clay vessels.

Yet because God's light was so powerful it could not be contained. The vessels shattered and the shards containing God's light crashed to the earth.

The second most prominent gift Jews have given the world is *Tikkun Olam* -- the religious mandate to pick up the shattered shards and redeem God's light through our repair of the world.

On this night, we stand broken before God and commit to changing for the better not only ourselves, but we commit to repairing our community and the society in which we live.



On this Kol Nidre eve, let us lastly speak words of promise to keep alive **the music of sacred community.**

In *Chicken Soup for the Jewish Soul*, a woman tells the true story of her friend, Talia, in Jerusalem, who gave birth to her tenth child, a son.² The whole community offered to cook for the Brit Milah, celebrating that son's eighth day of life and entering him into the covenant of the Jewish people. The mother gave her friend, Ilana, directions to go pick a dish at an apartment not too far away.

When Ilana arrived at the given address she explained to the older woman at the door that she was here to pick up the meal for the bris. The stranger invited Ilana in, offered her some tea, proceeded to pull a casserole from the refrigerator and wrap it up.

"I'd love to also send along this honey cake that I just baked for Shabbat," the woman added as an afterthought and wrapped it with foil as well.

As Ilana started to leave with the goods in hand, the woman asked: "So tell me, whose brit milah is it anyway? Which family has a simchah?"

At that moment, Ilana, humiliated, realized she'd come to the wrong address. In utter embarrassment she explained what happened and held out the food in return. But the stranger insisted that it be sent along to the celebration.

²Rebecca Heiser, "A Surprise in Jerusalem" in *Chicken Soup for the Jewish Soul* (Deerfield Beach, Florida: Helath Communications, Inc., 2001) edited by Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen, Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins, pp. 64-65.

As Ilana headed back to her friend's home, she realized that it didn't matter. There was no such thing as "a wrong apartment" in Jerusalem.

Just like in this Orthodox community, our members of Temple Beth El take seriously their commitment to create sacred community. We fulfill with the depth of passion and compassion, the daily obligations identified in the Mishnah.

We welcome the stranger at Room in the Inn.

We feed the hungry through Friendship Trips.

We accompany the deceased for burial, as our chevra kaddishah, is always ready to prepare someone for the journey to their final resting place.

We visit the sick through our outstanding Caring Committee.

Last month a young mom tragically died from cancer. At her funeral, her sister-in-law thanked our congregation. She said in her eulogy: "During this ordeal, the outpouring from this community has known no bounds. For seven months, tons of food has poured in... everything from pizza and casseroles to brisket, turkey and full Shabbat dinners from neighbors, from friends, from people Lisa did not know that were associated with the warm Jewish community here in Charlotte. There were rides for the children to and from Hebrew School and rides for Lisa to her doctor appointments."

Genesis taught that "it is not good for man to be alone." In Judaism, one never need be alone. When a societal tragedy hits our world or a personal tragedy hits our congregants, leading one to ask, "Where is God?" At Beth El, our actions of sacred community are the answer. May we ensure they never cease.



Judaism has composed for the world the song of sacred survival.

One month ago, our world commemorated the tragedies of 9.11. It seems like just yesterday I was here before you on Rosh Hashanah of 2001, personally mourning my dad's death and collectively mourning with you our community's exile from the Eden of security we once knew.

On that dreadful day of September 11, 2001, here in Charlotte Mecklenburg hospitals, thirty six new babies were born. In Judaism, as most of you know, the number thirty six represents double chai, double life.

The poet Carl Sandburg wrote: "A baby is God's opinion that the world should go on." As Jews, we have faced more than our fair share of devastation. We have taught the world how to rebuild, even from life's hardest and harshest experiences. We have shown the world how to continue to sing even as we move forward from sorrow.

As a Rabbi, I labor, like the makers of the violins, to craft stars of David not on violins but on hearts and souls. My hope is that the songs that I sing as a Rabbi, even if out of key, and the songs that all of us sing as a Jewish community, will be carried on by the next generation. Our songs of Judaism are essential to lifting the world.

There was a Russian peasant once walking through a forest when he heard a band of gypsies singing a song that captured his heart. [*Cantor Bernard sings 4-8 measures of "Sim Shalom" softly under story*] So he paid them a generous fee, a week's pay, to teach him their tune. Yet soon after he left the forest, he forgot the melody. [*Music stops*]

So he returned to the forest a second time and again the peasant paid a handsome fee for the gypsies to teach him their song. [*Cantor Bernard sings "Sim Shalom" refrain softly under story and continues on*] This time, in order not to forget it, he continuously sang this song that filled his soul.

The villagers assumed this singing peasant had lost his sanity so they hired a carriage to take him to a retreat for rehabilitation. Yet when they gathered to send the peasant away, a child began to sing his tune. [*Cantor Thomas joins in.*] The peasant stopped. [*Cantor Thomas continues; Cantor Bernard stops.*]

"Why now?" the village rabbi inquired, "Have you chosen to stop singing your song?" And the peasant replied, "Because a child has learned it and now I know it will never die."

As Jews, we hold the gift of Judaism in our hands and in our hearts – music that lifts our world. May we proudly sing the songs of Judaism continuously in our homes and in our lives -- the songs of Torah with the ideal of God at the center, the melodies of social justice and action, and the music of sacred community - so that the next generation can learn them, love them, and help them live on. Amen.

[Cantor Bernard, Cantor Thomas, and violin; then choir members one-by-one and powerpoint and invite the entire congregation to join.]

The musical score consists of three staves in 3/4 time, with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The lyrics are in Hebrew. The first staff begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and includes three triplet markings. The second staff includes mezzo-piano (*mp*) and crescendo (*cresc.*) markings. The third staff includes *poco rit.*, *ten.*, and *a tempo* markings, along with another triplet marking. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

p Sim— sha - lom, sim— sha - lom, sim— sha - lom to - vah u-v'-ra -

chah, *mp* chein— va - che - sed v'ra - cha-mim *cresc.* a-lei -

nu v'-al— kol Yis-ra-eil a - me-cha. *poco rit. ten. a tempo* Sim— sha - lom, sim— sha - lom.