With Four Strings and a Bow: The Role of Music in Religious Expression

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“S.D.G.”—Soli Deo Gloria (To God Alone Be Glory), wrote Johann Sebastian Bach on his musical scores. Many of the greatest classical composers were deeply religious and openly expressed their gratitude to the Source of All Inspiration. As Jews, we learn in *Bereishit* about the inherent rhythm and bold artistry of Creation, crowned by that awesome moment when God breathes life into Adam. We are designed to “sing a new song,” and pivotal moments in Torah are vividly punctuated with music. But how do we connect Bach’s “music of the heart” with Bachya’s “Duties of the Heart?”

My foundational exposure to the role of music in religious expression was the tender voice of Cantor Carl Urstein, at the “Old” Sinai Temple on 4th and New Hampshire in Los Angeles. Recent transformative experiences include hearing the rich, velvety chanting of Cantor Laszlo Fekete at the Dohany Street Synagogue in Budapest and to the exquisite phrasing and nuances of Cantor Henry Drejer at Ner Tamid Synagogue in San Francisco, who has taught the cantorial arts to my daughter, Cherina. Jascha Heifetz, my beloved violin teacher, suggested that just before going on stage one can “thank God for the gift of music” and pray for “a blessing to the work of our hands.”

Regular practice and performance of works of great composers, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, invite flow into the musical vibrations of the divine. Even off stage in the kitchen, I delight in kneading challah to Rudolf Serkin's rendition of Brahms *Piano Concerto #1*. Throughout my musical life, there have been powerful moments of spiritual insight—performing the banned Bloch *Baal Shem Suite* in Soviet Moscow; recording the Vaughan Williams *Lark Ascending* with the Israel Philharmonic on Tisha b'Av at the Jerusalem Music Center, on an empty stomach after hearing a human lark, Cantor Gail Hirschenfang the previous Shabbat; and introducing the Ben-Haim *Three Songs Without Words* to students in Taiwan. Perhaps the deepest imprint that magnified my sensitivity and appreciation of the role and relationship of music in religious expression was my acquaintance with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Rabbi Heschel, as a poet/philosopher, expressed himself through the musicality of language. The power of his writing and speech were enhanced by the lilt of phrase, the lyrical structure of sentence, the grace of alliterative voice, and abundance of musical allusions. As a musician, I find that one of the supreme joys of studying Heschel is being able to connect to his ideas through his musical language. At times the idea is beyond my comprehension, but I can make out a familiar tune.

I came to know Rabbi Heschel through music. Several weeks after my father's death, I was sent to Camp Ramah in Ojai, California, to give my mother a chance to rest. There I met a kind, gentle redheaded boy, who also had chosen the elective of orchestra. Teddy "Tuvia" Kwasman, concertmaster of the group, immediately became my dearest friend. After camp ended, we communicated sporadically, seldom seeing each other except at an occasional concert or *simcha*. Years passed. Then one summer day he telephoned, inviting me to meet his new friends, Abraham and Sylvia Heschel. Teddy had been in the UCLA library, where Rabbi Heschel discovered him poring through a pile of impressive Jewish books. An instant bond occurred between them. When Teddy met Mrs. Heschel, a concert pianist, he told her about me, and soon we were lucky to be guests at the Heschel apartment.

They waited for us to arrive to have Havdalah. It was a magical moment, seeing Rabbi Heschel's eyes reflecting the dancing flames of the braided candle. After grapes and tea, Sylvia and I began to play. Here too, there was an instant bond. Lalo's *Symphonie Espagnole* was followed by Beethoven's *Spring Sonata* and then the Bloch *Nigun*. Sylvia was an outstanding musician. Both Teddy and I looked forward to the Heschels' summers in Los Angeles. Teddy and the Heschels attended my wedding, where Rabbi Heschel sang the *sheva berakhot* and danced

a handkerchief dance with me.

Despite our friendship, I had experienced Heschel but had not read much of his work until I enrolled in a credit course on Heschel at UC Berkeley Hillel in 1975, taught by Burt Jacobson. Discovering the musical references did not surprise me; they seemed perfectly natural and logical, since I had always seen him steeped in a world of music. I believe music gave Heschel an invaluable linguistic tool, because he saw music as an inherent aspect of Jewish expression. Music was a source of mystery and majesty, a wisp of the ephemeral and infinite, of spirit and body, of boundaries and freedom, and of the complementary polar opposites of sounds and silence.

I could easily imagine Sylvia's grand piano, which dominated the living room of their Riverside Drive apartment in New York City, and him sitting across the room enchanted by her music, carefully observing the process of her work. The practice of music requires a complex routine, repeatedly exercising the fingers, brain, imagination, and heart. Heschel wrote that "routine breeds attention… For this reason, the Jewish way of life is to reiterate the ritual, to meet the spirit again and again, the spirit in oneself and the spirit that hovers over all beings."[1] He describes that the spirit is dependent not only on the accomplishment of the goal, like the concert performance, but the process, the practice, which is "…a song without words."[2] "When done in humility, in simplicity of heart, it is like a child who, eager to hear a song, spreads out the score before its mother. All the child can do is open the book. But the song must be forthcoming. We cannot long continue to love on a diet that consists of anticipation and frustration."[3]

Heschel understood the complete concentration and focus, the letting go of ego, which makes a great performing musician like his wife. This same transformation allows prayer to take flight, to connect with God.

> The artist may give a concert for the sake of the promised remuneration, but in the moment when he is passionately seeking with his fingertips the vast swarm of swift and secret sounds, the consideration of subsequent reward is far from his mind. His whole being is immersed in the music. The slightest shift of attention, the emergence of any ulterior motive, would break his intense concentration, and his single-minded devotion would collapse, his control of the instrument would fail…. Prayer, too, is primarily *kavanah*, the yielding of the entire being to one goal, the gathering of the soul into focus.[4]

Heschel describes music as a gift enabling one to navigate the challenge of prayer.

> In no other act does man experience so often the disparity between the desire for expression and the means of expression as in prayer. The inadequacy of the means at our disposal appears so tangible, so tragic, that one feels it is a grace to be able to give oneself up to music, to a tone, to a song, to a chant. The wave of a song carries the soul to heights which utterable meanings can never reach.[5]

According to Heschel, speech and silence are not enough. "…[T]here is a level that goes beyond both: the level of song." He quotes the Kotzker rebbe, "There are three ways in which a man expresses his deep sorrow: the man on the lowest level cries; the man on the second level is silent; the man on the highest level knows how to turn his sorrow into a song"[6] Heschel says, "True prayer is a song"[7]

Heschel incorporates musical language in both describing the protective intimacy of prayer and the inherent discordance in connecting with God. "How good it is to wrap oneself in prayer, spinning a deep softness of gratitude to God around all thoughts, enveloping oneself in the silver veil of song! But how can man draw song out of his heart if his consciousness is a woeful turmoil of fear and ambition?"[8] "God's grace resounds in our lives like a staccato. Only by retaining the seemingly disconnected notes comes the ability to grasp the theme."[9]

In Heschel's discussion of symbols in relation to the reality of God's presence, he writes: "Of a violinist who is moving his bow over the strings of his violin, we do not say he is performing a symbolic act. Why? Because the meaning of his act is what he is doing, regardless of what the act may represent."[10] The will of God, to Heschel, is a known quantity, an obvious fact, "neither a metaphor nor a euphemism, but more powerful and more real than our own experience." [11]

Heschel understands music as a means for expressing the inexpressible.

> To become aware of the ineffable, is to part company with words. The essence, the tangent to the curve of human experience, lies beyond the limits of language. The world of things we perceive is but a veil. Its flutter is music, its ornament science, but what it conceals is inscrutable. Its silence remains unbroken; no words can carry it away.[12]

And yet, Heschel also suggests the limitations of this concept. “The attempt to convey what we see and cannot say is the everlasting theme of mankind’s unfinished symphony, a venture in which adequacy is never achieved. There is an eternal disparity between the ultimate and man’s power of expression.”[13]

Heschel differentiates between faith and creed, the former being the act of believing, while the latter is that which is believed. “Our creed is, like music, a translation of the unutterable into a form of expression. The original is known to God alone.”[14]

For Heschel, the heavens and earth are pregnant with song. He asks, “How shall we remain deaf to the throb of the cosmic that is subtly echoed in our souls?[15] God is everywhere, hidden in the essence of all of life. “The song that nature sings is not her own.”[16]

Heschel’s use of musical imagery enriches the poetic flow of his writing. At the end of *Man Is Not Alone*, however, he turns to the musical imagery of the prophet Amos. Heschel asks, “What does God desire? Is it music?”[17] Amos answers his question: “Take away from me all the noise of your songs, and to the melody of your lyres I will not listen” (5:23). The prophet castigates those who “chant to the sound of the viol and invent to themselves instruments of music like David” (6: 5), rather than feel the pain of others.

For Heschel, “man’s responsibility to God cannot be discharged by an excursion into spirituality, by making life an episode of spiritual rhapsody….”[18] The black dots on my musical scores remain meaningless until they are recognized, internalized, practiced repeatedly, recreated, pushed to their outer limits, exposed, and shared. For Heschel, the song is a prelude to the ultimate task of bringing the melody of a living, breathing, healing Torah to the people. If God, in search of man, breathed life into him, the exhalation breath of music is the human proof that man is not alone.

Postscript

In 1978, Sylvia Heschel accompanied me on a concert tour of Israel, which included major recitals at the Rubin Academy in Jerusalem, the Tel Aviv Museum, and Weizmann Institute. She attended every performance I gave in New York.

Theodore Kwasman, scholar, author, and consultant to the British Museum, founded and directed the Jewish Studies program at the University of Heidelberg before becoming Professor at the Martin Buber Institute for Judaism at the University of Cologne.

This essay is written in memory of Rabbi Doctor Byron Sherwin, Heschel protégé, whose March 2014 class on his beloved mentor I attended at Spertus Institute in Chicago.

[1] Heschel A. J. *Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism*. New York: Scribner, 1954, p. 107.

[2] *Ibid*.

[3] *Ibid*.

[4] *Ibid*., pp. 14–15.

[5] *Ibid*., p. 39.

[6] *Ibid*., p. 44.

[7] *Ibid*.

[8] *Ibid*., p. 6.

[9] *Ibid*., p. 105.

[10] *Ibid*., p. 131.

[11] *Ibid*.

[12] Heschel A. J. *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*. New York: Harper & Row, 1951, p. 16.

[13] Heschel A. J. *Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism*. New York: Scribner, 1954, p. 139.

[14] Heschel A. J. *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*. New York: Harper & Row, 1951, p. 167.

[15] *Ibid*., p. 16

[16] *Ibid*., p. 149.

[17] *Ibid*., p. 246.

[18] *Ibid*., p. 289.