



The Song of Moshiach

What is so special about song?

The Tenth Man

Good Yom Tov!

Rabbi Noson Gurary, a famous Chabad shliach, formerly to the University of Buffalo in upstate New York, relates that one year before Yom Kippur, years ago, he was looking for a minyan for the Neilah prayer and was short one man.

Now, Rabbi Gurary knew that he'd be the one who'd have to do the actual searching for the tenth man; no one else would do it for him. But still, he took the risk that one of the other nine who he'd already managed to round up would bolt—not having a choice, he decided to step out to look for a tenth man for the minyan.

But where would he find a tenth Jewish male the evening of Neilah? Rabbi Gurary decided that he'd go to the college cafeteria in the hope that he'd find a volunteer there.

Well, he walked in wearing his white kittel and tallis, head pounding from the fasting and face white due to fatigue, seeking a Jewish face. Indeed, he identified one Jew—he didn't even need to ask him if he were Jewish! The young man clearly had the facial features of a Jew. However, he was standing on line, platter in hand, waiting to be served his dinner.

Rabbi Gurary approached the young man, wished him a “Gut Yom Tov!” and informed him that today is the holiest day of the year to the Jewish People, and that the Neilah prayer is the most important prayer. Rabbi Gurary also explained that in order to pray with a minyan, ten men all aged 13 and above were required—and that, at the moment, there were nine Jews at the campus Chabad House waiting to pray and missing their tenth man for the minyan. Rabbi Gurary now asked him to come and complete the minyan.

Now, as Rabbi Gurary had currently surmised, this young man was in fact Jewish, but had never been in a synagogue in his life. He had never even had a Bar Mitzvah, had never heard of Yom Kippur, and simply didn’t know anything. But he was a good kid and was ready to help— however, he was standing in line for dinner at the moment. If the good rabbi wouldn’t mind waiting until he finished eating, he’d be happy to come over and complete the minyan, he said.

Rabbi Gurary tried to speak to his heart: Listen, if you’ll come to us, you’ll get a meal far better than the one you’re getting here! It’s a holiday dinner by us! But the student explained that the dish they were serving today at the cafeteria was something he hadn’t eaten in a long while and it was something he really liked, and so he wasn’t ready to give it up. And as much as Rabbi Gurary tried to convince him, it didn’t help.

Having no choice, Rabbi Gurary sat down at a table nearby and waited 20 minutes until our hero finished his meal. In the meantime, the good rabbi kept looking at the window, watching the sun setting and how in just a bit, it would be too late. In his head, he was calculating what might be happening at the moment with the nine others—did any of them run off in the meantime? Well, ultimately, the student finished his meal and came over to complete the minyan, and they were able to pray Neilah.

And from that one Neilah prayer participation, this young man began his journey into Judaism and eventually built a Jewish home that anyone would be proud of.

Now, what exactly inspired this student? He certainly understood not a single word of the Hebrew prayers—and so what could have been the point that stirred him?

And with that, we come to this week's Torah portion.

The Final Song

In this week's Parshah, we read the Song of Haazinu. After over a month of speeches, Moshe Rabbeinu wanted to summarize everything for the Jewish Nation—so he chose to do so in the form of a song, because people will always remember a song. And so, the last gift that he gave the Jewish Nation was a song—the Song of Haazinu.

However, it was not the first song in Judaism.

The Sages tell us (Mechilta D'Rabbi Yishmael, Shmos 15, et al) that there are ten songs in the chronicles of the Jewish Nation. The first song was recited by Adam HaRishon, on the first Shabbos in all of history, while he was yet in Gan Eden: "Mizmor Shir L'Yom HaShabbos." This is a prayer that we recite in synagogue on every Shabbos, both on Friday night and on Shabbos day. The second song is more known and famous: the "Shiras HaYam," the Song of the Sea, which records the Jewish Nation's experience at the mighty miracle of the Splitting of the Reed Sea, when they sang, "Az Yashir Moshe U'vnei Yisrael Es HaShirah HaZos." Then you have the "Shiras HaB'eir," the Song of the Well, and "Shiras Haazinu."

But it wasn't only Moshe Rabbeinu who recited Shira—his successor Yehoshua, at the famous miracle of "Shemesh B'Givon Dom," also sang a song of thanks unto G-d, according to the Sages.

Then there is the song of Devorah, and the song of Chana who sang unto G-d after her son Shmuel was born after many years of prayers and requests. Then you have the songs of Dovid and Shlomo his son, “Shir HaShirim,” the Song of Songs.

The Special Tune

Now, one of the most common questions asked at the holiday season is: What is so special about Kol Nidrei? Why does everyone run to synagogue to hear Kol Nidrei? What is it about this prayer that has magnetically pulled Jews into shul, in every generation and every country? After all, if you read and understand what the text of Kol Nidrei is saying, you discover that it’s really not a prayer at all but a legal text—a request to annul vows!

Now, there are many answers to this question—but we can say that the best answer as to what makes Kol Nidrei unique is the ancient melody to which it’s sung, a melody that penetrates to the very bones. It is this melody that gives this prayer its special place in Jewish lore; it’s hard to hear these notes and not feel the holiness of the day.

There is a widespread legend that the melody of Kol Nidrei was composed by the Anusim of Spain. According to this legend, the royal treasurer of Queen Isabella, a secret Jew by the name of De Silva, was brought up to the stake after being caught praying the Yom Kippur prayers with his family. A famous singer and cantor named De Castila witnessed De Silva’s burning at the stake, and preserved the occurrence with a song that he connected to Kol Nidrei.

Regardless, what is clear is that the love and affection that Jews have lavished upon this melody is out of the box. A good few years ago, in some “progressive” Jewish congregation, they tried to change the melody—but lo and behold! The same progressive congregation protested stridently, leaving the cantor with no choice but to revert to the traditional tune.

Franz Rosenzweig, a German Jewish philosopher, relates in his writings that during a certain period in his life, he was ready to relinquish his faith—but before doing so, he attended Yom Kippur services in shul. The heartrending notes of Kol Nidrei made him change his mind and give up the heresy of “conversion.”

Pen of the Soul

You see, as it turns out, there is a tune for everything in Judaism. When we read the Torah, there are notes for that. When we pray in the synagogue, there is the “nusach” (musical format) for that—and the Shabbos nusach is different than that of the weekday, and that of the holidays is different than that of Shabbos. What’s more, the Haftarah notes are different than those of the Torah. And there is even a special tune for studying the Oral Torah. We can identify what a person is busy with by the tune he’s using—the melody tells us everything.

People who go to shul may not always recognize the prayers. But they do recognize the melodies. We gather together to sing in shul together, and our melodies touch us in a place where words cannot reach. As the Alter Rebbe said, “The tongue is the pen of the heart, but the song is the pen of the soul.”

The Sages listed nine songs that were sung by the greats of Jewish history: Adam, Yaakov, Moshe, Yehoshua, Devorah, Chana, Dovid and Shlomo. But the “Last Song” has yet to be sung— and this tenth song will be sung by Moshiach, with the complete and true redemption, speedily in our days, amen!

Good Yom Tov!