

Shir Shavuot



Welcome to Shir Shavuot



It is a unique joy to approach the holiday of Shavuot, the time of the giving of the Torah, connected in spirit and conversation with you and your community.

Shavuot is the historic time to bring the first harvested fruits to the Temple. The Mishna (Bikkurim 3:3) describes people gathered to present their first fruits with the fanfare of a majestic parade through the streets of Jerusalem. A gathering of great pomp and circumstance, with oxen crowned in olive wreaths and gold plated horns carrying baskets of produce approaching the Temple. The Mishna pans out from the scene to take note of the residents of the city emerging to greet the pilgrims lining their streets with shouts “Our brothers and sisters of town X, we welcome you in peace!” Accompanied by flutes, the marchers would finally reach the Temple, where the Levites receive them in song “I will praise You God, for You have raised me up” (Psalms 30:2).

This image of communities of Jews farmers, musicians, city dwellers, and Levites all working together to orchestrate a



glorious shared celebration is the guiding image for this Shir Shavuot Project.

This interactive guide can be used in any way that you see fit. You can read it on your own or gather with others sometime over the holiday. You can work through the guide from beginning to end or choose to focus on a single section.

Song plays a powerful role in the way that we experience life, ritual and human connection. During these times in which all of us are experiencing vulnerability and loss, we hope and pray that raising this discussion on the value of song, asking questions, listening to the voices of the texts and other people will prove to be a source of comfort and joy.

This guide is being used around the globe, as a demonstration of the loving and connected spirit of a Jewish community that cares and supports one another wherever we are in the world.

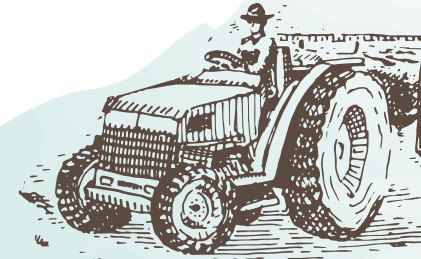
We are honored to share this conversation together and look forward to continuing after the holiday.

B'vracha
Ilana Fodiman-Silverman



Opening Activities

- 1 Each person sings all or part of a song they love to sing. Why is it a favorite?
- 2 Share a song from childhood you remember well.
- 3 Try going around the table, with each person saying the phrase "Thank you so much" and everyone expressing it in a different tone, melody, volume, stressing different words or even syllables. What did you discover?



What is song?

E. Y. Harburg, the American lyricist who composed the music for The Wizard of Oz suggested

*Words make you think a thought.
Music makes you feel a feeling.
A song makes you feel a thought.*



- Have you ever felt a thought?
- Today is your best friend's birthday. Do you sing to her? What changes when we set wishes to music? How does it feel to sing to someone we love?

The power of song

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 19th C American poet, introduces his poem "The Singers"

*God sent his Singers upon earth
With songs of sadness and of mirth,
That they might touch the hearts of men,
And bring them back to heaven again.*



- How do songs touch our heart?
- Who or What do you understand is travelling back to heaven? The singers? The songs? The listeners?



In the words of the Baal Shem tov, the 18th Century founder of the Hassidut movement (whose yahrzeit is on Shavuot)

*There are gates in heaven that cannot be opened
except by melody and song.*

- What about song allows it get into places that are otherwise locked or closed?
- Many synagogues use song. Sometimes a cantor/Chazzan leads the community to sing together; at other times, the congregation, by listening to the singular voice of the chazan, is connected and uplifted. Do you prefer one model over another? Are there certain times that you would be open to the other experience?
- Do you remember Julia Andrews playing Maria in the Sound of Music, when she arrives as the governess of the seven von Trapp children and tries to connect with them. How does teaching them to sing Do-Re-Mi help? (ACTIVITY: Sing "Doe a deer")

Torah as song

In Moshe's farewell address to the nation as they journey without him into the Land of Israel, he instructs

Parashat Vayelekh, Deuteronomy 31:19

“וְעַתָּה כְּתֹבוּ לָכֶם אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת וְלַמָּדָה אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁמְעָה בְּפִיהֶם לְמַעַן תִּהְיֶה־לִּי הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לְעֵד בְּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל”

Therefore, write down this song and teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths, in order that this song may be My witness against the people of Israel. . .

- Is it surprising for you to think of Torah as a song?
Why would you write down a song?
- How might memory of an event connect to song?



Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (aka Netziv), the legendary 19th-century head of the Volozhin Yeshiva, explores this in his introduction to his commentary on the Torah.

It's not that the Torah is written in the style of song. Rather, it contains the nature and properties of song. A song isn't plainly understood, as prose is. We need to clarify its ideas by ourselves as we go along. . . This isn't called commentary, it's the very nature of song itself.



- When the Netziv says that this is just how the text works, what could that mean for us in understanding the Torah's messages?
- The traditional way of publicly reading the Torah includes trope – melody and accents. How would the words be different if one read the eighth of the ten commandments “You shall not steal” with a different intonation?



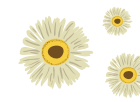


Joyous song at the sea

The Talmud (BT, Megillah 14a) describes the unique self-doubt of the biblical Miriam. Prophesying that her family would bear a son who would become the redeemer of the Israelites, she convinced her parents to ignore Pharaoh's decree to kill all Jewish baby boys, and have a child. The midrash suggests that for decades Miriam bore a heavy burden in wondering whether she did the right thing and the prophecy was correct. Moshe's life had many twists and turns. He was sent on a solo baby cruise down the Nile in a basket within months of being born

Only after the ten plagues and the final journey out of Egypt, when the sea split and the nation was fully redeemed was Miriam finally able to let go of the anxiety, seeing her prophecy gloriously fulfilled. Uniquely for a biblical woman, she leads the women singing and dancing to God with tambourines and all. Not only a national celebration, for Miriam, this Song at the Sea is her moment of personal vindication and exhalation.

- What songs do you sing to help feel or to let go of an emotion?
- What reasons motivate you to join in with others in song?
- Do you ever sing to change the mood that you are in?



We learn something else from the Song at the Sea. It was only when the people "*believed in G-d, and in Moses His prophet,*" (Exodus 14:31) that "*Then Moses sang this song*" (Exodus 15:1). Believing in people can help them to sing their song. Rabbi Nahman of Breslov (Likutei Maharan 292) speaks of finding the good points in another person and thus elevating them:

*You must continue finding more and more good points.
This is how songs are made.*

- How do you think that this works?





A bridge to other people & places

Ovadia Tuvia was born in 1921 in Aden, Yemen. He emigrated to Israel at the age of three, but returned in 1945 to Yemen to help organize the community for aliyah. There he became a popular pied piper, playing violin for the youth. Traveling between these two worlds, he witnessed the struggle of the new Yishuv emerging in Israel to value the ethnic culture brought by Jews coming from Sefardi and Mizrahi lands.

Later on, as composer and musical director of Tel Aviv's Inbal Theater, Tuvia wrote a musical setting the biblical narrative of the Book of Ruth to Mizrahi music. By relating the figure of Ruth – a Moabite outsider who joins the Jewish people, who rises to the matriarchal pinnacle of being David's great-grandmother and ultimately of the Messiah – to the experience of marginalized non-Ashkenazi Jews, he drew the ideas together that made every audience member think about Sefardi and Mizrahi traditions in a new light.



- How familiar are you with songs from other ethnic backgrounds?
- Have you ever had the experience where a familiar prayer or song is sung to a different, unfamiliar tune? What was your reaction and why?

In the words of Italian singer and songwriter, Andrea Bocelli

If I sing when I am alone, I feel wonderful. It's freedom.

While ancient Greek philosopher, Plato explains song from a social framework:

*Every heart sings a song, incomplete,
until another heart whispers back,*

- What do you think Plato means by the idea of a heart whispering?
- Do you identify more strongly with Bocelli or with Plato?
- What songs do you sing when you are by yourself? (e.g. in the shower, while working, cleaning, or driving?) What kinds of feelings do these songs create?
- How does having an audience affect your experience? (think karaoke)

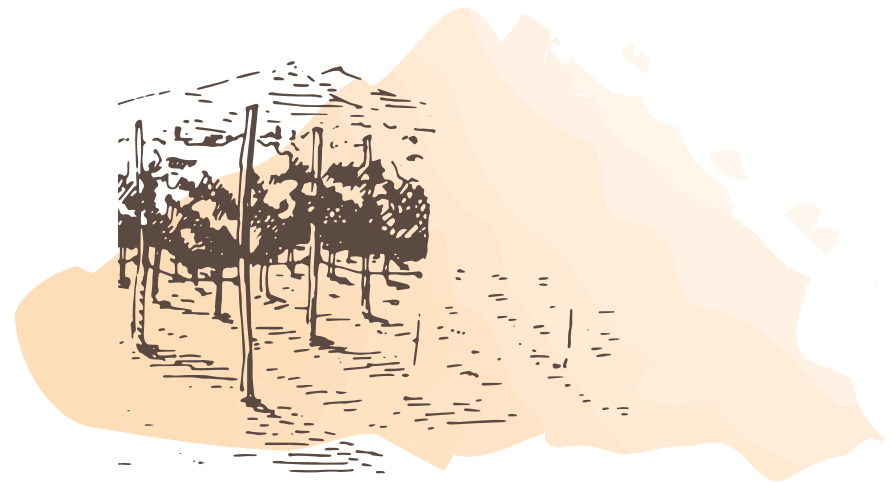




Have you seen Les Miserables, the musical based on Victor Hugo's book? It positions people standing shoulder to shoulder, singing in one voice at the defiant climax amidst the French Revolution:

*Do you hear the people sing,
singing the song of angry men.
It is the music of a people
who will not be slaves again
When the beating of your hearts
echoes the beating of the drums.
There is a life about to start
when tomorrow comes*

- Is there really power in singing together with others?
- Are there songs that connect you to a group, institution (camp, school, social group) or experience? How does singing it bring you back to a particular place or connect you to someone else that also sings it?





Sometimes when singing together with others it is actually the harmonic contrast that makes the communal song truly rich. Rabbi Yechiel Michael Halevi Epstein, aka the Aruch haShulchan (brother-in-law of the Netziv quoted above), a revered Lithuanian authority in Jewish law, developed this idea in the introduction to his code on torts:

וְכָל מַחֲלָקֶת הַתִּנְאִים וְהָאֲמֹרָאִים וְהַפּוֹסְקִים בְּאַמֶּת לַעֲבִין
דָּבָר לְאִשּׁוּרוֹ - דְּבָרֵי אֱלֹקִים חַיִּים הֵמָּה, וְלִכְלֵם יֵשׁ פְּגָמִים בְּהִלְכָּה.
וְאֶדְרְבָּה: זֹאת הִיא תַּפְאֶרֶת תּוֹרַתֵנוּ הַקְדוּשָׁה וְהַטְהוֹרָה. וְכָל הַתּוֹרָה
כְּלֵה נִקְרָאת 'שִׁירָה', וְתַפְאֶרֶת הַשִּׁיר הִיא כְּשֶׁהַקּוֹלוֹת מִשְׁנִים זֶה מִזֶּה,
וְזֶהוּ עֵקֶר הַנְּעִימוֹת. וְמִי שֶׁמִּשּׁוּטֵט בָּיָם הַתֵּלְמוּד יִרְאֶה נְעִימוֹת בְּכָל
הַקּוֹלוֹת הַמִּשְׁנִים זֶה מִזֶּה

All of the debates (in each of the generation of scholars) aims for one understanding and affirmation, that these are the words of the Living God, and all of these voices reflect an aspect of the Law. Lest you think otherwise, this is the glory of our holy and pure Torah. And the entire Torah is called a song as the glory of a song is experienced as contrasting voices expressed together. This is the fundamental beauty of it. One who swims in the sea of the Talmud will appreciate the beauty of all of the different contrasting voices. .



- Can you share an experience of a musical performance (acapella, band, choir, or orchestra) comprising many voices or instruments? What is it like?
- How do you think that the conversation would sound between him and his brother-in-law the Netziv we saw earlier?
- Wadsworth Longfellow's The Singers, poem that was referenced earlier depicts 3 different voices of singers, each with his own way of expressing song, the concluding stanza imagines this embellished expression of song:

*These are the three great chords of might,
And he whose ear is tuned aright
Will hear no discord in the three,
But the most perfect harmony.*





Y.L. Peretz, the 19th C Yiddish writer living in Poland wrote, *Gilgul Fuen a Niggun/ The Transmigration of a Melody*. In it, Peretz tells the tale of a song that travels from town to town carried through the singers who transport it from a Hasidic Rebbe's wedding to a yizkor prayer, via a Kiew theater and a Moscow circus, and finally returning to the original Hassidic Rebbe. He then shares it with a follower who carries it with him to America.

This clever personification imagines song as a companion that engages us, irrespective of geography, and enables us to live and contribute meaning even in a variety of human experiences.

- Are there songs in your family that have been carried to different places? Do you still sing these?
- Is there a song that you personally have carried to different places?

On behalf of the thousands of participants across the continents this Shavuot, thank you for joining us in conversation, looking forward to joining our voices together.

Chag Shavuot Sameach!



Moed is a non-profit organization in Zichron Yaakov, Israel

committed to innovating vibrant social justice and educational opportunities amidst the diverse population of the Carmel region to make a transformative impact on the shared development of Jewish values.



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