

ISRAEL Teaching Letter

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Our Hearts *in Unison* with His

Have you ever met anyone who really did not like to sing? It's a rare occurrence. The vast majority of people enjoy singing, whether before a group of people or in front of the bathroom mirror, with a choir or in the shower. We sing in the car, we sing while we work, we sing under our breath, we hum along with others...for most humans, making music with our voices, whether on-key or off, comes almost as naturally as breathing. The question is, "Why?"

It shouldn't surprise us that the answer to this question, like so many others, is found in the Scriptures. Because we tend to think of the Bible as a rule book, a guide book for life or the definitive text on theology, we often forget that it is rife with references to making melody with our vocal chords. When compared to other topics we might consider spiritually significant, the biblical importance of song becomes abundantly clear. Sin,

as critical as it is, appears around 390 times in the Scriptures, depending on translation while love is mentioned 348 times and the incredibly important command to “fear not,” 365 times. Singing, however, occurs over 400 times, and 50 of them are direct commands to the reader to lift up his voice and sing.

Jewish Life—Surrounded by Song

One of the many similarities we find between Christianity and Judaism is the use of song in worship and praise. Until living in Israel for a number of years, however, I didn’t realize exactly how important singing actually is in the religion and culture of the Jewish people. If you have ever attended a Friday night *Erev Shabbat* meal and celebration in a Jewish home, you are aware that the Sabbath is welcomed with song. Throughout the evening, various prayers and blessings are sung as well. At every holiday meal from *Pesach* to *Hanukkah*, families gather to rejoice in the Lord and acknowledge His goodness through song. In Orthodox Judaism, prayer is an integral part of everyday life and those prayers, many of them Scripture, are also sung. The prayer book is in essence a song book.

I am reminded of a visit Bridges for Peace once made to an elementary school that we were supporting through our Feed a Child program. We were told that we would visit a classroom of youngsters who were learning the Scriptures. Imagine our amazement and delight when that room full of 7-year-old boys burst into song! With glowing faces, they sang for us verse after verse of that week’s *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.) portion.



Singing Torah

And as you walk the streets of Jerusalem, you realize that song literally permeates the culture. Thousands of Israelis fill the streets on Jerusalem Day and Israel's Independence Day to dance and sing in praise and gratitude for the gift of the nation that God has given them. Every day, street musicians perform in the open market, hymns resonate from Christian cathedrals, children sing in parks and, of course, as in all countries, popular music blares in restaurants and coffee shops, all combining to fill the air with a constant harmony of song. How amazing to discover that the lyrics of many of those popular songs heard on the radio and in cafes are words of praise to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Reflecting Who We Are

Those lyrics reveal something about the Jewish heart and its focus on the God of Israel. Actually, all of our songs are revelatory; what we sing about reflects who we are. They reflect our values and experiences, expose what makes us laugh and cry, reveal what tugs at our heartstrings. Often, songs tell our personal stories or the stories of our country or culture. Songs can sometimes articulate things we hold dear in a way that words simply cannot. They are able to express thoughts and feelings, and they have the power to teach. Many Christians give credit to their church hymnals for much of the theology they have learned.

And songs have the power to unite. A national anthem unites us as a country. A doxology unites us as a denomination. That is certainly true of the Jewish people who today sing the same songs, blessings and Scriptures that they have sung for millennia. Those songs have bound them together as a faith community the world over despite dispersion, oppression, persecution and anti-Semitism.



Celebrating Jerusalem Day



The Power of a Song

In the past few decades, a number of scientific studies on the power of singing have been conducted with some pretty startling results. Research on stroke victims who were unable to put a three-word sentence together revealed that they could, in fact, sing, and do so with such proficiency they seemed perfectly normal. Other studies indicated that singing could prove to be of significant help to children with autism. Young people who ordinarily could not make eye contact and rarely raised their heads were transformed when singing. Standing straight and tall, they were able to look the world in the eye and sing with power and focus.

Other studies have shown that singing is beneficial for Alzheimer's patients as well. Researcher Dr. A. D. Patel says, "Music provides a way to access regions of the brain and reawaken memory when language simply won't." What scientists call musical memory has the remarkable ability to remain active in the human brain when all other memory functions fail.

Many of us can still remember songs we learned as children, and Bible verses that were taught through song.

Perhaps Moses had this principle in mind when he taught the Israelites his song recounted in Deuteronomy 31 and 32. Most often thought of as his final discourse to the people before his death, it was imperative that they absorb and remember every important detail he was revealing to them. He would not be with them as they entered the Land, and the promises, warnings and instructions he imparted to them were critical to their success. Deuteronomy 31:21 tells us he taught them his song. Perhaps he knew it was a way to ensure they would never forget.

Research has also shown that all of the earth does, in fact, have a song. Even inanimate objects, when studied at a molecular level, have a specific pattern of vibration, or song that identifies them. Rocks, trees, flowers and even the desk in your office each have a song. Only mankind, however, has the ability to create his own.

Finally, many experts today believe that song was the original language of mankind. Before spoken language, they say, man communicated by singing.



Our God is a Singer

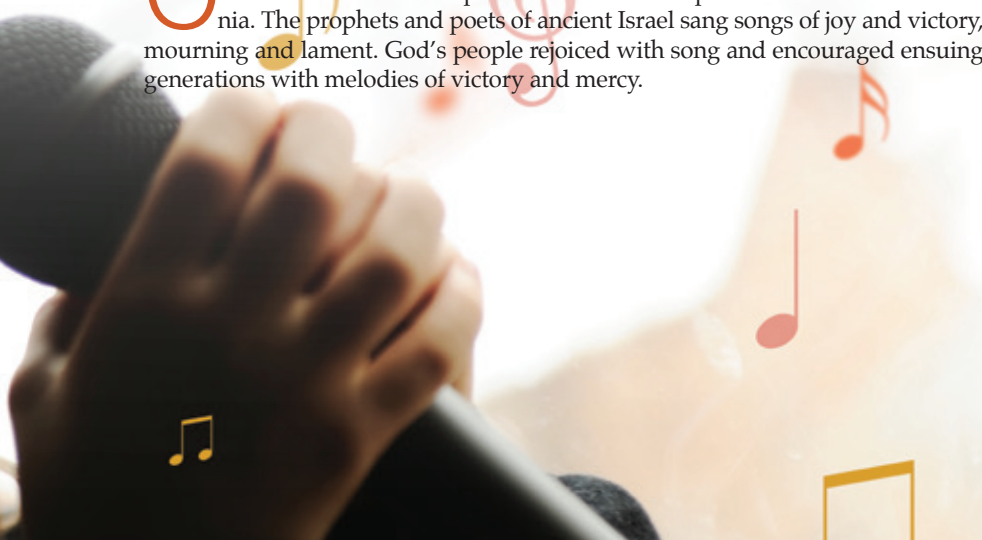
None of this should surprise us since Scripture makes it clear that the God who created all things is passionate about singing! In Psalm 96, we are enjoined to sing to the Lord a new song, sing to the Lord all the earth; sing to the Lord a new song and tell of His salvation from day to day (vv. 1–3). Psalm 47:6 instructs us to sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to the King, sing praises! Those are only four of dozens of verses in the book of Psalms that specifically instruct the people of God to sing.

In the epistles, we find similar instructions. Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 both encourage believers to sing to one another, greeting each other with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. The prophet Zephaniah tells us that God Himself is a singer, exalting over His people with singing. There are also references in the Gospels to Yeshua (Jesus) lifting His voice in song and the Writings of the Apostles tell us if we are in fact filled with the spirit of the Lord, we will make melody in our hearts to Him.

However, not all songs express joy or exult in victory. Many psalms express the deepest anguish of the human soul, crying out to God for deliverance from evil or release from pain. Some even seem to challenge Him, wondering why He has forsaken His children or how long He will allow such suffering to continue. In Psalm 6, David cries to the Lord, *“My soul is in deep anguish, how long, Lord, how long?”* (v.3 NIV). Our God desires open communication with His children, welcoming our praises, but longing for us to bring Him our hurts and disappointments as well.

Sing to the Lord!

Clearly, the tradition of singing praises to the Lord has its roots in the Word of God and has been a part of His relationship with mankind for millennia. The prophets and poets of ancient Israel sang songs of joy and victory, mourning and lament. God’s people rejoiced with song and encouraged ensuing generations with melodies of victory and mercy.



With the birth of Christianity, that Hebraic tradition became a part of our heritage and has informed Christian worship ever since. From the early church to Augustine, Martin Luther to John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards to today's modern worship leaders, singing praises to the Lord has been central to the Christian experience. John Wesley said, "Sing lustily to the Lord and with good courage. Beware of singing as if you are half dead or half asleep—lift up your voice with strength!"

The Ten *Shirot*

The importance of song in Judaism is beautifully illustrated through a tradition called the Ten *Shirot*, or the Ten Songs. These songs, the rabbis tell us, are not mere melodies but the only songs ever written that recount the history of the Jewish people in perfect harmony with all of creation and were composed to honor the Lord of the Universe.

The first, entitled "A Song for the Sabbath," is Psalm 92. Jewish tradition tells us this song was first sung by Adam on the day Creation was completed.


The second is called "*Shirat Ha-Yam*" or the "Song of the Sea." It is found in Exodus 14:30 to 15:19 and was originally sung by the Hebrews following their deliverance from Egypt and the destruction of Pharaoh and his armies. It was a spontaneous outburst of joy at the realization that their God had kept His promise and brought them to freedom.

The third song is the "Song of the Well." In Numbers 21:16–18, we are told that God instructs Moses to gather all of the people together. "*I will give them water,*" says the Lord. "*Then Israel sang this song: Spring up, O well...*"

Song number four is actually the 32nd chapter of the book of Deuteronomy. Written by Moses, it was his final declaration to the Israelites before his death. Since he could not accompany the people into their promised Land, it was imperative that he impart to this generation, the first generation in over 400 years to be born in freedom, the promises, warnings and instructions of the Lord that were critical for their survival. Recounting history and encouraging hope, Moses taught his song to the people so that they would remember and pass it on to succeeding generations.

Song five recounts the incredible story of Joshua's conquest of Canaan found in Joshua 10. God heard Joshua's prayer and answered by causing the sun to stand still. This miracle enabled Joshua's armies to defeat the Canaanite forces and enter the Land, distributing it among the tribes of Israel and establishing a sanctuary at Shiloh.

The sixth song is that of Deborah and was first sung by the prophetess herself. Found in Judges 4:4 through 5:31, the song recounts the defeat of Canaanite armies yet again, this time under the leadership of Sisera. Deborah sings of Yael, a Hebrew woman who turned the tide of battle and secured the victory by single-handedly killing Sisera, leaving the Canaanite armies without a leader (Judg. 5:24–27).



The “Song of Hannah” is next, found in 1 Samuel 2:1–10. In the throes of despondency because of her barrenness, Hannah prays to the Lord for a son, confiding her pain and humiliation and begging for the Lord’s merciful intervention in her circumstances. God hears and blesses her with a son, Samuel, one of the greatest figures in Jewish history.

The eighth song is called “*Shirat David*,” or the “Song of David.” It is found in 2 Samuel 22 and repeated in Psalm 18. It is an incredible song of praise and declaration of faith in the power and faithfulness of God as David looks back over his life. Recounting the desperate situations he found himself in during his long and varied career, David dedicates the song to the God to whom he owes his very life.

Called “*Shir HaShirim*” in Hebrew, most of us know the ninth song as “The Song of Songs” or the “Song of Solomon.” It is one of the most beautiful examples of Hebrew poetry ever written and is beloved in Judaism and Christianity alike. One of five *megillot* (scrolls), this song is sung every Passover. It is considered an allegory, using the example of the relationship between a man and a woman to describe the love relationship between God and Israel.

The tenth is called the new song, or the song that is yet to be sung. It is the “Song of the Messiah” and will be on the lips of all of God’s people when the Messiah appears on earth. It is found in Isaiah 9:2–7 and 26:1 and is the song by which all the earth will step from this realm into the eternal.

For many of us as Christians, this song may be reminiscent of the book of Revelation where we see the events surrounding the coming of Messiah revealed. There are 27 songs in the book of Revelation, two of the most important of which are referenced in chapter 15. Here we find those who have had victory over God’s enemies standing around the sea. Scripture tells us they are singing the “Song of Moses” and

the “Song of the Lamb.” Traditionally, Christianity has viewed this verse (Rev. 15:3) to indicate that these are two separate songs, some even using the passage to reinforce a supercessionist view of the Bible.

I would like us to consider that perhaps, conceptually, they are not two separate songs, but one. Most translations of the Bible separate the two with a comma, but, of course, that punctuation did not exist in the original manuscripts. Perhaps God is sending a very important message here that we have missed. Perhaps He is telling us that the “Song of Moses” and the “Song of the Lamb” are His song, one song in which His people have repeatedly cried out, “The enemy is vanquished and we are redeemed! And our redemption has come only by the incredible power and mercy of our Great God.”

And We Sing Because...

There are many reasons that can be given for singing. We sing when we are happy and when we are sad, when we are victorious and when we have been defeated. We sing when we are overwhelmed with temptation and when we are overflowing with joy. We sing out of obedience to God’s passionate instructions to lift our voices to Him in praise. We sing to raise our own spirits, and to encourage those around us. We sing as a weapon of spiritual warfare and to be spiritually strengthened for trial. We sing as a pathway to joy and certainly as a means to glorify God. And as the old hymn says, “We sing for we cannot be silent...”



But I think there is another reason, perhaps the most profound of all. And those scientists that were mentioned earlier have done additional research that may give us a glimpse into that reason. First of all, they have discovered that singing has many beneficial effects on the body, perhaps because it encourages the production of endorphins, the feel-good hormones that reduce anxiety and stress and cause us to feel content and even happy. It also causes an increase in the production of oxytocin, another hormone that reduces feelings of loneliness and depression and enhances feelings of trust and bonding. They have also discovered that singing tends to regulate heart rhythm.

Finally, studies have revealed that all of these benefits are magnified when we engage in group singing. Studies were conducted in which choir members were fitted with heart monitors. Before the singing began, heart rates varied greatly depending on the health of the various members and other factors. However, once the singing started the heart rates all began to regulate and as the voices came into sync, so did the heart rates of the singers. Their hearts beat in unison in relation to the speed of their breathing. Heart rates were directly affected by the melody of the music, and the pulses of those tested rose and fell at exactly the same time as they sang together.

Some doctors are actually recommending choir or choral singing as therapy for patients, and experts have decided that the healthiest thing a person can do for themselves is join the local choir or glee club.

Now let us consider that the vast majority of the 400 plus Scriptures that refer to singing are speaking of corporate singing. Most of these verses are not encouraging us to enter our prayer closets and lift our lone voices to the Lord, although that is certainly not a bad thing. Brevard Childs, American professor of Old Testament Studies at Yale University, says this:

... these Psalms were composed for use in the sanctuary in public worship.

King Hezekiah confirmed this viewpoint when he revived the true worship of God and required the singing of “praises to the LORD with the words of David and of Asaph the seer” (2 Chron. 29:30). He did so “according to the commandment of David and of Gad the king’s seer and of Nathan the prophet, for the commandment was from the LORD through his prophets” (2 Chron. 29:25).

Therefore, the Psalms were written and passed down, not principally for private devotion, but for public worship. As historian Philip Schaff indicates, “The Psalter is the first hymn-book of the church, and will outlive all other hymn-books.”

And not just the psalms. Moses, King Hezekiah, Jehoshaphat, Ezra, Nehemiah, Paul, Peter, James and many other biblical leaders understood the importance of corporate worship. Consider one of Yeshua’s last acts before retiring to the Garden of Gethsemane to prepare for the incredibly difficult events that were on the horizon for Him and for His followers: “*And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives*” (Matt. 26:30).

God desires oneness with us. He desires that our hearts beat in unison with His and without unity among ourselves that isn’t likely to happen. So He has

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commanded us to sing together, and programmed our bodies to respond with feelings of trust, bonding, unity and oneness even on the deepest physical level. Each time we lift our voices together in praise of Him, we create a beautiful triangle of oneness, our hearts together beating in oneness with His, much like that chord of three strands that is not easily broken. The Creator of the Universe has fashioned us to sing. And so we do...in the shower, in the car, in the supermarket. But most important of all, we sing together.



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Scripture is taken from the New King James, unless otherwise noted.



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