

# The Scriptural Stradivarius

Parashat Ha'azinu, Deuteronomy, Chapter 32 | October 6, 2022

Let us speak of the saga of the Stradivarius at the subway. Some years ago, Gene Weingarten, a writer for the *Washington Post*, decided to conduct an experiment. He would ask a violin virtuoso to play an extraordinary piece of music at a Washington, D.C., subway stop during rush hour. What would happen? Weingarten describes how one morning, Joshua Bell, one of the most gifted violinists of our age, dressed in a nondescript manner, set himself up at the L'Enfant Plaza Metro stop in D.C., took out his Stradivarius violin, and began to play. Weingarten writes:

The violin is an instrument that is said to be much like the human voice, and in this musician's masterly hands, it sobbed and laughed and sang—ecstatic, sorrowful, importuning, adoring, flirtatious, castigating, playful, romancing, merry, triumphal, sumptuous.

What actually occurred? The video is available online. A crowd never gathers. Almost everyone rushes by, utterly oblivious to the fact that they have a free front row seat to an experience that at this proximity would usually cost many hundreds of dollars. Weingarten reports that after he published his story, letters poured in, written by people deeply affected by his piece. Some even cried after they read it. Why? I think we know what truly bothered them. In Weingarten's words:

If we can't take the time out of our lives to stay a moment and listen to one of the best musicians on Earth play some of the best music ever written; if the surge of modern life so overpowers us that we are deaf and blind to something like that—then what else are we missing?

Weingarten's question is one that confronts all of us, and, in a certain sense, it is one that the final command-

ment in the Torah inspires us to ask. As his life comes to a close, Moses sings to the people of Israel, describing the justice and mercy of God and the ultimate punishment of the persecutors of his people. Moses' song begins with the joyous words of chapter 32:

*Give ear, ye heavens, and I will speak; and let the earth hear the words of my mouth.*

*My lesson shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distill as the dew, as the small rain upon the tender herb, and as the showers upon the grass:*

*For I will proclaim the name of the Lord: ascribe ye greatness unto our God.*  
(Deuteronomy 32:1-3)

The lyrics go on. But what is most interesting is that Moses precedes his exalted song with the following instruction:

*Now therefore write ye this song for you, and teach it to the children of Israel: put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for me for the children of Israel.* (Deuteronomy 31:19).

Simply understood, Moses is obligating the Israelites to transcribe what he will sing. But the rabbis, fascinatingly, understood this sentence as the source of the obligation to write the entire scroll of the Torah, the Torah that draws to a close with this Song of Moses. The final commandment of the 613 *mitzvot* contained in the Torah is to write the “song,”—meaning to write the Torah of Moses. What this tells us is that the song at the end of Deuteronomy is understood by Jewish tradition to be an embodiment of the entire Torah. The Torah, rightly understood, ought to be seen not as turgid text, but as sheet music. What does this mean? In what way can the Torah be considered a song?

My own understanding of this concept was deepened by a documentary film that I saw titled *Orchestra of Exiles*, about a man named Bronislaw Huberman. In 1929, Huberman visited British Mandate Palestine and, inspired by the Zionist endeavor, was stirred by a vision of bringing a classical orchestra to the Holy Land. During the 1930s, concurrent with the rise of Hitler, Huberman traveled all over Europe encouraging Jewish musicians to emigrate to the Middle East, and this ended up saving many lives. We are told in the documentary that throughout much of this decade, Huberman was desperately traveling all over America, performing to raise funds to transport the most gifted Jewish musicians from Europe to the Middle East. In 1936, when Huberman was performing at Carnegie Hall, the Stradivarius that had been gifted to him as a young man, and that he had been playing for decades, was stolen from his dressing room.

Huberman, the documentary reveals, was under terrible pressure to get visas for the musicians and to raise money for the orchestra in the Holy Land, and the loss of the violin that he had played since his youth was devastating. Joshua Bell is interviewed in this film saying:

The connection between violinist and violin—it becomes almost like your soulmate. Some people compare it to getting married. Huberman performed so much of his career on this violin, so it must have been devastating to come back to his dressing room and to know that your soul, your voice, is missing.

Huberman, alas, never found the Stradivarius. I found this connection between the Stradivarius and the soul quite striking, because my grandfather, Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik, noted that in the Torah, songs and poetry are written differently than prose. Instead of regular paragraphs and regular lines, there are large spaces in between the phrases. Thus, for example, if one opened a Torah scroll to our section, chapter 32, verse four, one would find the song of Moses written as follows:

*He is the rock, his work is perfect...*

And then right after those words, instead of concluding the verse, there would be a blank portion of parchment. And only then the continuation:

*For all his ways are justice.*

Why the large spaces? Why are biblical lyrics written by the *sofer*, the scribe, differently than prose? The message, my grandfather taught, is that songs are so much more than words. They have elements—musical, emotional, and spiritual—that words alone cannot capture. In seeing a song written in the Torah, we are meant to “read between the lines” and understand the emotion that is within them—emotion that cannot be put into words. In a similar sense, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks cites the English novelist Arnold Bennett, who once said that music is a “language which the soul alone understands, but which the soul can never translate.”

To this Rabbi Sacks added that:

There is an inner connection between music and the spirit. When language aspires to the transcendent, and the soul longs to break free of the gravitational pull of the earth, it modulates into song...Words are the language of the mind—music is the language of the soul.

When I pondered this, I realized that the phrase utilized to describe the birth of the Israeli Philharmonic, “orchestra of exiles,” is a fitting name for the history of the Jewish people. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein reflected on what it means that the source for writing the Torah in a scroll is our sentence in Deuteronomy, “*write ye this song*.” What does a text that to a great extent is legal have to do with song? Rabbi Epstein explained that throughout Jewish history, the Torah has been studied, poured over, and interpreted with the constancy of creative reflections, adding to a veritable harmony of insights throughout the ages.

As he puts it, “this is the glory of the Torah.” Then he adds, “and all the Torah is called a song, and the glory of a song is that the voices are different from one another, and that is the essence of its beauty.” Understood this way, every act of Jewish learning is an encounter with the harmonies that make up the Torah. If, despite Jewish history being filled with suffering, persecution, and pain, Jews themselves loved life and filled it with holiness and joy, it is because every one of them was

aware that he or she experienced this great song; that in learning it they were playing music; that they were thereby becoming part of an intergenerational “orchestra of exiles.” If the Torah is compared to a song, it is because music is the embodiment of covenantal continuity.

Rabbi Sacks, who used similar imagery in his own interpretation, put it this way:

Music is a form of sensed continuity that can sometimes break through the most overpowering disconnections in our experience of time.

Faith is more like music than like science. Science analyzes; music integrates. And, as music connects note to note, so faith connects episode to episode, life to life, age to age in a timeless melody that breaks into time. G-d is the composer and librettist. We are each called on to be voices in the choir, singers of G-d’s song. Faith teaches us to hear the music beneath the noise.

This, in turn, brings us back to Joshua Bell, who was once known as a violinist prodigy, and then overnight became famous as the violinist everyone ignored in the subway. This bothered him. And so eventually, the *Washington Post* announced that Joshua Bell wanted a do-over. He would perform again in D.C. in public. This time, of course, a crowd gathered. But even more interesting is the Stradivarius that Bell played at the subway. It was the long-lost Stradivarius of Bronislaw Huberman, which had surfaced after Huberman’s death. Bell had sold his own Stradivarius in order to purchase Huberman’s, and one of the first places that he played that violin was in Israel. As Bell reflected:

Growing up hearing about Huberman as a child, coming to play for the Israel Philharmonic was very special to me. I had just acquired the Huberman violin.

When we think about it, it is a resonant symbol of the miracle of Jewish endurance. The violin, the soul of Bronislaw Huberman, was brought home to the orchestra he founded: an orchestra whose founder had

inspired so many Jewish musicians to find their way home. And this also provides us with another metaphor for interpreting Moses’ final commandment in the Torah.

Our soul is our Stradivarius; the Torah is our sheet music. “*Write ye this song for you*” means that Jews achieve continuity by living their lives to the music—to the tempo—of the Torah, and through understanding the wonder of a people that truly was an “orchestra of exiles,” but which never stopped dreaming of coming home.

The Stradivarius that Joshua Bell played with such passion on the Metro platform in D.C., the instrument that sorrowfully sang at the subway as hundreds of commuters unknowingly passed by, was the Huberman Stradivarius. Just as those who passed him did not know that it was Joshua Bell, just as they did not know that it was a violin virtuoso playing an unbelievably expensive violin in front of their faces, those passersby were also unaware that the violin being played contained the story of the exile, endurance, and return of the Jewish people. And if this violin was made famous in the newspaper as being the instrument used to play a masterpiece while everyone was too busy to notice, then, in the end, that instrument should remind us about what faith is: the ability, as Rabbi Sacks said, to “hear the music beneath the noise.”

With this song in Deuteronomy, and the blessings bestowed by Moses that follow, the life of this greatest of Israelites will come to an end. But while Moses will indeed die, he will also live, and in more than one sense. The Talmud notes the curious Hebrew words that introduce Moses’ more famous song at the sea during the Exodus. “*Az yashir Moshe*,” commonly translated, “Then sang Moses.” But read literally, it can also be understood as “Then Moses *will* sing.” And so the rabbis read it. “How do we know from the Torah that ultimately the dead will be resurrected?” the rabbis ask.

The answer is from Moses’ song: “then Moses *will* sing.” Moses will one day sing again, in the future. It was my teacher Rabbi Norman Lamm who read this Talmudic teaching as reflecting both a statement about Jewish doctrine and about the musical power of the Torah text: to paraphrase Rabbi Lamm, we can learn that the

Torah can quicken the deadest of spirits from the fact that Moses still “sings” to us in the Torah today.

When we study Torah, then Moses *will* sing. We *will* witness, and we *will* hear the most extraordinary concert on earth: the call of Judaism in our lives and the voices of those who have come before.

Joshua Bell no longer plays at L’Enfant Plaza. He performs before adoring audiences, and a front row seat to his concerts no doubt costs a great deal. But in the final commandment of the Torah, we are called to comprehend that each of us every day is provided the best seat in the house to the concert of Jewish generations—if only we are willing to make the time to listen.

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*Discussion Questions:*

1. Rabbi Soloveichik discusses how Jews' millennia of Torah study constitute the "harmonies that make up the Torah." A harmony is formed when different notes come together to make a new sound. How do the distinct voices of our different sages make the "song" of Torah richer?
2. In what ways does the study of Torah help Jews hear "the music beneath the noise," of which Rabbi Sacks spoke?

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