

## **Beshallah 5779** **The Lightning Tree**

Today is the Shabbat when we read the story of the crossing of the Red Sea and relive the singing of Moses and Miriam in their triumph. It is this singing that gives this Shabbat its special name - *Shabbat Shirah*, the Shabbat of song. In the Torah service we physically re-enacted this moment. What is harder for us to imagine, but it is there in the wording of the Torah, is exactly how noisy it must have been. It's not clear whether the leader called and the group responded, or whether it was two groups singing in harmony - but whichever way, the sound of 600,000 people singing at the tops of their voices must have been quite impressive.

And soon there will also be a full moon, and that means it's Tu Bishvat.

Can we find a connection between these two things? Why, yes we can. Let's begin with the singing part.

I chose the words *shir* and *shirah* for this week's brochure to enable us to begin to explore what singing is and what it achieves. Because all of us will have been able to experience how there is an alchemy about singing. Something special happens when we sing.

Take this, for example:

*Ma Tov...*

Or perhaps this:

*Avinu malkenu...*

Or even this:

*Oh when the Saints...*

It feels good to sing together, right?!

There's actually a scientific basis to this. Singing exercises the brain and relaxes muscle tension; it improves our breathing and our posture; it even has elements of pain relief and some scientists believe it sustains a healthy immune system as well. And when we combine our voices, singing has been shown to create a tangible sense of happiness and wellbeing. People are measurably happier after they sing. And because every human being can sing - and every human being truly can, because there are no wrong notes, only harmonies - singing together is a real way to combat the loneliness that exists at every level of our modern life. Perhaps that's why there has been an explosion of people joining community choirs.

So it's quite reassuring that our own tradition has been placing communal singing front and center for all this time. And it's even more reassuring that our community's name is about singing.

So let's leave those thoughts over here for a moment while we think about trees.

I learned only a couple of weeks ago what some of the scientists in this room might already know or even have researched - that trees communicate with each other. I think many of you know that our director of community education, Jennie Lavine, started out as a biologist - and when I was asking her about this, she confirmed that those live oaks reaching towards each other all over the city are indeed in conversation. If, for example, insects attack a tree, it will send out chemical signals that stimulate its neighbors' immune systems, helping them to resist the insects' assault.

And it's not just the parts of the tree we can see. As a rough guide, there is about as much of a tree below the ground as there is above it. Rather like in the movie *Avatar*, where all organisms are connected and manage their community through a kind of electrochemical communication between the roots of trees, communities of trees stay in touch with each other via a kind of plant internet made up of an interconnecting network of fungi. It's been shown that trees can exchange the chemicals they need to survive, with nitrogen and phosphorus seeming to move around on demand, while 'donor' trees send carbon to smaller saplings which - because they are in the shade - need more of it to grow. Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg calls this 'a kind of subterranean mixed dancing.'

But I'd rather think of it as a kind of singing. Melodies and rhythms, harmonies and silence, the trees make music, calling and responding like Moses and Miriam and the Children of Israel. [As it says in the book of Psalms - *All the trees of the forest are singing...*].

I have one more thought to add. I've spoken before about my sister's work singing with adults who have dementia and her initiative to create small groups of 'companion voices' to sing at the bedsides of those who are dying. I have thought of her often in the past weeks when I would visit Joan Berenson - either by being in the room or through facetime - to sing with her and her family. Even when Joan was unable to speak, she reacted to the singing almost to the very end of her life. And just a day or two ago, I came across a beautiful image for this. A United Methodist minister, newly diagnosed with dementia, drew a tree and painted it black to show it had been burned.

As he explained it, the tree had been struck by lightning but there was still growth because the roots were deep.

And so we can pull together the message of the coincidence of Shabbat Shirah and Tu Bishvat. It's a message about singing in community or singing together. Like the Children of Israel on the seashore, singing together reminds us of our history and who we have been and are still to be; but like a forest of trees, when we sing together we are communicating with each other at the deepest level, the level of our roots, the level that can still hear the voices even when our own voices have fallen silent.

As we continue to sing together as a community, may we grow strong; and may our roots grow deeper.