

Beshallah 5781 **Creating Beauty**

This morning we read the Song of the Sea - the huge, ancient poem sung by the Israelites as they crossed the Red Sea on their way to freedom.

When the Rabbis look at the wording of the Song, they find a commandment hidden in it. *Ze eli ve'anveihu* says the line - this is my God whom I shall glorify. Here is what the Rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud teach us:

What is the source for the requirement of: "This is my God and I will glorify Him"? As it was taught in a baraita with regard to the verse: "This is my God and I will glorify Him [anveihu], the Lord of my father and I will raise Him up." The Sages interpreted anveihu homiletically as linguistically related to noi, beauty, and interpreted the verse: Beautify yourself before Him in mitzvot. Even if one fulfills the mitzvah by performing it simply, it is nonetheless proper to perform the mitzvah as beautifully as possible. Make before God a beautiful sukkah, a beautiful lulav, a beautiful shofar, beautiful tzitzit, beautiful parchment for a Torah scroll, and write in it in God's name in beautiful ink, with a beautiful quill by an expert scribe, and wrap the scroll in beautiful silk fabric.¹

This concept is called *hiddur mitzvah*. We should notice how multisensual that passage is - the scroll, the quill and the tzitzit that we touch; the shofar that we hear; the etrog and lulav that we smell; and the sukkah itself, which involves all of our senses, a truly immersive experience. Performing a mitzvah beautifully is itself a mitzvah!

But *hiddur mitzvah* has both an outer and an inner aspect. When we create beauty, we turn the experience outwards; but in the creating of beauty, we also change something inside ourselves. Artists and athletes call this 'the zone' - the quiet place within that we get to when our energies are deeply focused. And it turns out that creativity - in all its forms - has the power to heal us even as we are creating beauty around us.

We have seen this in so many ways in our community over the past year.

¹BT Shabbat 133b

We've seen members of Shir Chadash, young and old, turn to art. There are no wrong answers in art, so we become free from our preconceptions and perhaps dare to engage our imaginations in new ways. Creating art also helps stave off cognitive decline as we get older and helps us become, and stay, emotionally resilient. And creating art can also offset depression.²

As Kurt Vonnegut wrote:

"To practice any art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow. So do it."

One of the gifts of this pandemic, one of the aspects of it that I hope we retain, is the way we are becoming each other's teachers. This morning we shout out Debbie Wells for her wonderful art and craft work with our littlest people, and also Emily Dvorin, who created such a lovely project for our teens over Hanukkah. Thank you for your work of *hiddur mitzvah*.

And then there's cooking. There's been a baking and cooking explosion at Shir Chadash since the start of the pandemic. Baking is good for us in many ways - an Irish novelist, Marian Keyes, has even written a book called "Saved by Cake" which describes how baking helped her through a bad bout of depression. For us here at Shir Chadash, Sisterhood's new "Good Lookin' Cookin'" class has become an institution of its own, attracting a devoted following, creating a new online community and producing delicious meals as a welcome side-effect.

And then there's the challah. I spoke about the challah on the High Holydays. Both the women we welcomed under the wings of Shekhinah a few months ago - Christina Jaimes Weber and Lizzie Gentile - have taken to challah baking with the same joy and enterprise that they brought to their own journeys to Judaism, and the results have been delicious. We will be using Leah Sterbcow's challah recipe as the basis for our next teen class - if the photos are anything to go by, the results will be remarkable. Leah now bakes every Friday for her family. Thank you, Shir Chadash bakers and cooks, for your work of *hiddur mitzvah*.

²<https://www.health.harvard.edu/mental-health/the-healing-power-of-art>

And that brings us to the weekly beauty we have created ourselves. Our online services have helped us maintain a sense of time and community even at this most challenging of times. Whether it is our dedicated prayer leaders and Torah readers - who I hope very much to welcome back to this Bimah once the current numbers have settled down - or the lay leaders who step up from here or out of town to raise their melodious voices on Friday night, we have been lifted by prayer and sacred chanting and melody and it has held us together, even helping us learn more about each other as we encounter each other every week. Thank you for your work of *hiddur mitzvah*.

And tomorrow evening we will once more participate in this mitzvah. Our 60th anniversary gala will be a beautiful event, and creating it has strengthened and deepened all of our relationships to each other. I want to take the privilege of the pulpit to shout out the Gala Committee, who have worked so hard to bring this event to us, and to offer my thanks to all the participants and to our producer for the beauty you have created. Tomorrow evening will be a true accomplishment and I look forward to seeing all of you there. Thank you for your work of *hiddur mitzvah*.

Let me finish with a Midrash. Our teachers tell us that the Children of Israel were scared of walking through the Red Sea. Mothers with their children worried about how to feed them on the journey. And the Midrash teaches us that the sea produced beautiful apple trees, so that any time anyone was hungry all they had to do was reach out a hand - so that even in the depths of the sea they could find sweetness.

May we carry the beauty of those apple trees into all of the beauty we have still to create. And may they sweeten our minds and our hearts and our connections to each other.

Shabbat shalom.