

Dear Chavraya,

As a child, my dad was afflicted with a severe stutter, facing the cruelty of classmates and teachers who confused a fear to speak with lack of intelligence. Callous, they could not see that the only such lack was their own. Over time, my dad mastered the heaviness of his tongue. To this day, however, he still regards himself as one who stutters, though revealing only an occasional subtle hint of his former challenge. My dad had a beautiful deep voice, and he loved to sing, though his ability to sing was greatly affected by laryngeal cancer many years ago. He once explained to me that in song there is no stutter.

Moshe *rabbeinu*, Moses our teacher, was also afflicted with a stutter. At the very beginning of his career, when God first tells him to go back to Egypt bearing the call of freedom, Moses demurs, saying, *O God, I am not a man of speech... for I am heavy of speech and heavy of tongue*. In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat B'shallach*, having crossed the sea and now on freedom's shore, Moses finds the fullness of his voice in song. This Shabbat is also called *Shabbat Shira*, the Shabbat of Song. Central to *B'shallach* is the *Shirat Hayam/the Song of the Sea*, from which *Shabbat Shira* draws its name. With some playfulness, the first words of the song can be read in either past or future tense, *Az yashir Moshe/Then Moses sang*, or *Then Moses will sing*. Having the faith to sing but a few notes will help sustain faith along the way until we can in time sing the whole song. A melody lifts us up and helps us to look ahead. *Shabbat Shira* is a time to raise up song and to cross the sea of our impediments.

Singing is good for the soul. While some may be blessed with a special gift of voice, among the gifts that we are all given, everyone can sing. Don't let anyone ever tell you that you can't, or you may believe it and deny the world your song. Each person has their own *nigun*, their own soul-tune, to discover and bring into the world. Whenever a Bar or Bas Mitzvah student, at the start of our working together, tells me that she or he can't sing, I tell them emphatically that they can and that I'm going to prove it. As their voice begins to emerge, it is my response to a long-ago music teacher who told the child I was that I couldn't sing.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov understood that singing is about much more than voice quality or performance, recognizing the power of song to provide spiritual and emotional sustenance: *A 'nigun' and musical instruments have the great power to draw a person to God. Therefore it is good for a person to accustom herself, to enliven himself in every moment through a particular 'nigun,' to gladden one's soul, and in this way to bring oneself to cleave to God. Of a life that "flows on in endless song," another rebbe, Pete Seeger, sings: "It sounds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing?"*

In a beautifully warm discussion in the Talmud, the rabbis ask, *v'chaytzad amru shira / How did the children of Israel sing the song at the sea?* Central to all the varied answers is the belief that each and every one joined in the singing, each in their own way, including the children, those at the breast and even those in utero. As though in one great choir, offering song as a way of seeing, perhaps of insight, we are told, *natnu eyneyhem lomar shira / they gave their eyes to song*.

Even if at first there is but stutter and stammer, may *Shabbos Shira* inspire us each to hear our own *nigun*. Letting it rise from within and offering it then to the world, so we will come to sing with each other in joyful chorus as the children of Israel by the sea.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor