

So now, write this song for yourselves. (31:19)

Simply, this “song” is a reference to *Shiras Ha’azinu*, which foreshadows *Klal Yisrael’s* future. *Chazal*, however, interpret this “song” as applying to the entire Torah, thereby redefining Torah from a book of law, ethics and way of life, to the song of the Jewish people. *Horav Yosef Kahaneman, zl*, the *Ponevezer Rav*, explains that the Torah should be the Jew’s song of life that reaches into his innermost emotions and accompanies him throughout his life’s journey. Torah celebrates with him during his moments of joy and mourns with him as he traverses periods of pain and travail. It is his constant companion, his partner, his colleague, his friend. Torah speaks to a Jew’s emotions. Our relationship to the Torah is one of feeling. Song is a powerful manner of communicating emotion, of conveying our feeling, of expressing our passion. A human being is a creature of emotion. Our relationship with the Torah is how we express our feelings. Indeed, when we learn, we sing.

The Jew who views the Torah through the eyes of cold intellect, ‘sans’ the passion and vibrance that accompanies one who relates to the Torah as his song of life, lacks the ability to properly transmit and communicate Torah to others, to the next generation. When a Jew studies Hashem’s Torah, he studies it with his soul, his spirit. Such study must be replete with emotion, which gives way to song. When *Horav Chaim Zaitchik, zl*, was liberated from the Nazi internment camp, the first thing that he sought was a *Gemorah*. He settled for a page from a *Talmudic* Tractate. Shaking, he took the pages in his hands and held it close to his heart. His life had been resuscitated. For the past few years he had been unable to learn. His life had no meaning. It had now been returned to him. The Torah was his song.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks quotes *Horav Avraham Shapiro, zl*, who related the story of two great *rabbinic* figures, both accomplished and distinguished scholars, who met and compared notes concerning their families. One lamented the loss of his children to the alien winds of the *Haskalah*, secular Enlightenment. The other sage was fortunate that his children followed in his path of commitment, giving him the *Yiddishe nachas*, satisfaction and pleasure, for which every Jewish parent yearns. What factor determined the variant courses chosen by their children? *Rav Shapiro* explained that when it came to *Seudah Shlishis*, the third *Shabbos* meal, the time when many a Jew expresses himself to Hashem and to His gift of *Shabbos kodesh* through song and Torah thoughts, one spoke Torah, while the other sang songs. One conveyed a Torah dimension that was cold and intellectual, without passion or emotion; the other conveyed love for Hashem, passion for His Torah, excitement about living as a Jew. Is it any question which path a child will follow?

I often meet Jews who long ago have assimilated with the gentile society in which we live. When I ask them what it is they remember of Jewish tradition (so to speak from their youth; their exposure to an observant grandparent, etc.), their response is to (often) sing an old Jewish folksong – such as *mein shtetele Belz* or even *havah nagillah*. This has remained as the basis of their Jewish identities; this is to what they were once attached – and continue to remember. For these lost souls, all that remains of their Jewish identities are the Jewish songs they heard as children.

Jewish song played a pivotal role in the lives of the survivors of the World War II persecutions and murder of millions. In August 1945, as World War II was drawing to a close, a ten-year-old Jewish orphan name Valya Roytlender sang a song entitled, "My mother's grave," to a Soviet musicologist in Bratslav, Ukraine. "Oh Mama, who will wake me up?" the boy sang in *Yiddish* to the tune of a popular *Yiddish* folksong, "Oh Mama, who will tuck me in at night?" Another singer sang about the Jews' survival of Hitler's attempt to kill them. "You are not my first enemy; before you, I had others, your bleary end will be on Haman's tree, while the Jewish People will live on and on." These songs were *Yiddish* glory. For the most part, the singers were far from Jewish observance, but their hearts were firmly anchored in Judaism. Hence, the songs.

These voices, presented through the vehicle of *Yiddish* song, told the story of their travail, their suffering at the hands of Stalin's barbarians. For many of the survivors, the songs were their only memories of their Jewish past, their parents, or grandparents. They did not have access to Jewish learning, but song, the language of the heart, was their lifeline that kept them firmly anchored in Judaism as they knew it. Most of the music's authors died in the camps, but their compositions were smuggled out in the form of manuscripts or in the memories of the survivors. This was their Jewish experience. It was these songs that filled the survivors with a sense of pride in who they were.