



KI HEIM  
CHAYEINU  
כי הם חיינו



Discover the Joy  
of Shabbos

## The Spirit of Song

By Rav Paysach Krohn shlita (Shiur E9)

*Do you know the power of music? How can you tap into the power of music to elevate yourself? Do you know what the word 'Zemer' means?*

### *The Power of Music*

Each of us is endowed with an intellect and emotions. The relationship is complex. In part the complexity stems from the fact that we reason and decide with our intellect, but we act with our emotions. R' Yisroel Salanter has been quoted as saying that the longest distance in the world is between one's mind and one's heart.

Our mission is to clarify things with our intellect to the point that they become clear to our heart and thereby impact our feelings, actions, and thoughts. As the Torah tells us:

וַיִּדְעָה הַיּוֹם וְהַשַּׁבָּת אֵל לְבָבָךְ...  
...and you shall know the day and the Sabbath to your heart...

*Today you should know and then turn that knowledge over to your heart...*

The transition is hardly automatic. There are many barricades and roadblocks preventing what we know from connecting with what we feel. But that is our mission. On the one hand we must study and clarify what we learn to strengthen and intensify the message coming from the intellect. And on the other, we need to open our hearts and our emotions to receive that message. R' Yisroel Salanter saw this truth and he introduced *Mussar B'hispa'alus*. He taught that if you want to drill the truths of Torah and Mussar into your heart you must use music and song. The haunting

melodies that his disciples employed to achieve this connection would melt hearts of stone even before one listened to the words that they were trying to inculcate. A song opens the door to the heart and then we can open our heart to the song.

Music opens pathways to one's emotions and makes the heart receptive to the messages of devotion and truth.

Music is a pathway, indeed a highway, to the essence of man. The exalted service of the Koahnim in the Bais Hamikdosh was not valid unless joined with the chorus of voices and instruments of the Leviim. Their music was indispensable, even on Shabbos!

A Navi, a prophet, had to rise to levels of personal perfection that most modern readers would consider beyond the range of a human being.

Yet, after rising to those lofty levels of complete devotion to Hashem they could not receive prophecy without music.

### *The dark side of the coin*

Because music opens channels to the core of the person it must be guarded with multiple sentries. If left unchecked, music can open channels to the darkest side of a person's nature, as well. The decadence of the society that surrounds us can be readily traced to music that draws out a

*A Zemer lets you become aware of that which your head may not yet know, but which your Neshama is keenly aware of.*



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person's raw emotion, unchecked by the intellect. Music is a powerful tool, indeed. Employed correctly, in the service of the intellect, it can elevate us to the Heavens. Used improperly it can unhinge man from his intellect and reduce mankind to the level of the animal that is meant to serve man.

### *Shabbos and song*

With that background in mind, we can turn our attention to Shabbos. Shabbos is a taste and an entry point into the world of eternity. It is lofty beyond anything we can imagine so long as we are walking on earth. But we are meant to get a taste of things to come. Shabbos is not meant to be just another day of עולם הזה without some activities and maybe with some extra sleep. Shabbos is a taste of eternity.

To taste eternity, you need to step past what your intellect knows and encounter truths that only your Neshama knows. We wish to access, even for a day, the clarity about eternity and closeness (דביקות) to Hashem that our Neshama has stored up. Accessing your Neshama is a process like accessing your heart; it can be blocked by all sorts of distractions if you do not zero in and open some doors.

Once again, we turn to our trusty tools to open channels to our deepest self. Music and song.

### *Zemer and Shir*

We have two words which seem to both translate to mean song. But in our holy tongue there are no synonyms. So, what is the difference between them?

Shir may refer to poetry. It is an expression of the intellect. It is produced by the mind when one realizes something one did not realize before. It is not necessarily sung to a tune, though it may be.

Zemer may refer to that which is musical. It is the sound of one's soul. It springs forth either as the musical expression of the soul or as an invitation for the soul to share its precious gifts. It may be attached to a Shir, but it can also exist on its own.

But it must always be directed to drawing out the strains of holiness that are embedded in the soul.

### *Zemer and Pruning*

Interestingly, the word Zemer also means pruning. When one prunes, one cuts away the branches that are drawing life-giving sap but are not producing life-giving fruit. By pruning the tree, we give the healthy branches full access to the nurturing sap of the tree.

In that sense we can see that a Zemer not only opens up channels to our souls, it also cuts away the distractions and obsessive thoughts about materialism. It should not surprise us, then, that before turning to the declaration of our total devotion to Hashem in the Shma (and its accompanying Brochos) we first recite פסוקי דזמרא – which can be translated as verses of songs or verses of pruning. We must use the powerful knife of Zemer to cut past the mundane and distracting thoughts that prevent us from giving ourselves over fully to our Creator. Zemer opens pathways to our essence.



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### *Experience the music of Shabbos*

It is hardly enough to know that today is Shabbos. If we remain on the level of the intellect, we will miss the core of Shabbos as a gateway to eternity. Rav Shach זצ"ל bemoaned that there were families, even those with learned fathers at the head of the table, who were not able to transmit the beauty of Shabbos and its eternal blessings to the next generation. Rav Shach זצ"ל attributed the failure to the absence of Zemiros. Shabbos must be experienced by both the intellect and the emotions.

### *Not just singing*

When you listen and, hopefully, join in with the tunes of לכה דודי, שלום עליכם and אשת חיל and the various Zemiros, you will hear the sounds that elevate us to meet our Neshamos.

### *Not all songs are meant to be sung*

Klal Yisroel has a discerning ear. Some tunes have captured the hearts of the Gedolim and Tzaddikim because they are keys to open the gateway to the emotions and to the soul. Other tunes are imitations of the unchecked noises of the non-Jewish world and have not met with the approval of Klal Yisroel and its Gedolim and Tzaddikim. And because the stakes are high, we dare not invoke a tune or song which may not draw a connection to our Neshama. The opposite could be the effect and we would be giving attention and sap to a fruitless branch.

***Takeaway: I will try to keep in mind the powerful tool of music and use it to draw truth into my heart and to draw clarity from my Neshama.***

### *A song steps in when words fail*

There are times when we feel a need to go beyond the limitations of words. And, again, we turn to our trusty tool, the song.

I have been privileged to travel with groups to visit places in Europe where Torah and Yiddishkeit once thrived. Those are also places where countless Jews were slaughtered, most leaving nothing, not even a gravestone. When standing next to a grave where lie countless Jews who were killed without leaving a trace on earth, we did not have words. We could cry, but that would be undirected, unchecked emotion. We could do more than that. We could sing. And when we combined our tears with our song of גם כי אלך בגיא צלמות לא אירא רע כי אתה עמדי – *even while I walk in the shadow of death I do not fear because You are with me* – we were able to tap into the place where the experience made a difference. We took what our heads knew, that Bitachon is the only response to what we were witnessing, and we cut through with song to give access to our hearts.

Do not shortchange yourself. Connect with the song, with the Zemiros, and let yourself become aware of that which your head may not yet know, but which your Neshama is keenly aware of. Connecting with eternity is what Shabbos is all about.