

Standing Before God: Music, Prayer, the Religious Life

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I stand tonight in a long shadow. I was never privileged to listen to Peter Lipton deliver a Kol Nidre sermon, but from reports of others, and from having heard him speak many times myself on different occasions, I can imagine the elegant combination of wit and passion, intellectual challenge, inspiration and entertainment, that his Kol Nidre sermons contained. To use an American baseball metaphor that he would have appreciated, I feel like an inadequate pinch-hitter when the star slugger has had to leave the game.

I will therefore not attempt to imitate what Peter would have done had he been standing here now, on his 54th birthday. No one can do that. Instead, I am going to try something I rarely do in public speaking: to draw from deep inside myself and talk about a theme that brings together two deep loves and commitments: music and the religious life.

Some of you are aware that before I decided to go to rabbinical seminary, I was once very serious about classical piano. That was many decades ago, as a matter of fact, my peak was the year I graduated from secondary school, in 1962. At one point, I realized that I would never be competitive with the very best pianists, and that playing the piano could always be a source of joy for me, so long as I did not need to earn a living from it. And so it has been. It is from this experience that I draw tonight.

The full day of worship on YK, beginning with the hauntingly plaintive melody of Kol Nidre, leads many of us to feel that we are confronting the Ultimate, that—to use the words of *parashat Nitzavim*, we are standing before God. Each year we have this opportunity to put our priorities in order, to take stock of ourselves and render account for our lives at a time when it is still possible to change for the better. I want to suggest to you tonight that there are three ways in which, metaphorically speaking, we stand before God, and in each case, an analogy with music can help us understand the dynamic of this confrontation.

1. First, we stand before God, as individuals, each rendering account for ourselves in our own uniqueness. This is an occasion when we cannot shift the blame to others, when there is no point in making excuses, when pretensions and self-deceptions are of no avail. However often we may be able to fool or deceive others, on this day—as we prepare for our annual appraisal before the ultimate line-manager—honesty and truth are the rule. And this process does require preparation. Yom Kippur is not only individual introspection, it has a special liturgy. We need to get our prayers in order. And it is this process that I found illuminated by my experience as a pianist.

Mostly I play, for my own relaxation and enjoyment, pieces that I learned in the late 1950s or early 1960s. But some months ago, I decided to learn a new

piece: Bach's Fugue in C# Minor from the Well-Tempered Clavichord. It is only 4 four pages of notations, based on a short, simple melody, but it adds two counter-melodies, and it is in five voices, so there was a challenge here. As I went through the various stages of learning this piece from scratch, I began to think of the analogies between mastering a new piece of music on the piano and someone learning the Kiddush or the *Ve-Ahavta* or *U-netaneh Tokef* or any other prayer of our liturgy.

We start with symbolic notations on a page. For music it is the notes on two clefs of five parallel lines each, representing pitch by their placement and length of time by the details of their appearance. For prayer, it is the Hebrew letters on the page, consonants and a special arrangement of dots and lines representing vowels. For the novice, neither of these two notations means anything. The code has to be learned, which note on the two sets of five parallel lines corresponds to which key on the piano keyboard, which Hebrew letter represents which sound.

The next step is to begin creating the sounds signified by the symbolic notations, slowly training the fingers to touch the right piano keys in succession, slowly training the lips to produce the right sounds from the mouth. As we progress in this process, we will be making mistakes, depressing the wrong key, making the wrong sound; we are corrected by a teacher, eventually we can correct ourselves when we know that the sound is incorrect. Eventually we get to the point where we can, slowly, reproduce on the instrument or through our voice the proper sounds in the proper order as signified by the symbolic notations.

But we still have not yet reached the level of *meaning*. For a musician, it may be awareness that this is the major theme, and that is a secondary theme, and at some point they may be in counterpoint with each other; that the piece is in a certain key, but may unexpectedly modulate into a different related key, or shift from minor into major and back again. For the prayer, ideally we will understand: yes the central theme of the *Kiddush* is the holiness of Shabbat, here there is an allusion to the creation of the world, now an allusion to the Exodus from Egypt, a reference to God's special relationship with the Jewish people, a phrase echoing a biblical verse, and so forth. And that takes us to a different level.

At some point, when we have played the piece frequently enough, we discover that we no longer need to be looking at the notations on the page, no longer need to be thinking about where to place our fingers on the keyboard. We can focus entirely on the music itself. And there are moments when the musician feels as if she is soaring aloft on a current of sound, brought into a totally different plane, in touch with the genius of the composer and the glories of what inspires the human spirit. And so with our prayers: there are moments when we can turn away from the text on the printed page, and sing the words freely, naturally, feeling the beauty of their sound and meaning, sensing that we are in touch with some power greater than ourselves. Perhaps some of us felt this singing Kol Nidre tonight. No one can do this preparation for us; we learn to pray, as we learn to play, alone.

2. But it is not only as individuals that we stand before God. Most of us come to Yom Kippur with one or two or three other human beings uniquely special to us: the members of our immediate family—parents, partners, children. Our en-

counter with God is also a function of the way we interact with those in this close circle of those human beings we know the very best. Here too, music provides for me an illuminating analogy.

During the period when I was fairly good at the piano, I played only solo music. It wasn't until some 15 years after my peak that I was introduced to music for two pianists. This was by a member of the congregation I was serving outside of Boston while I was working toward a PhD degree and then teaching full-time at Harvard. He was actually a better pianist than I was, but he encouraged me to learn the bass part of Schubert's F Minor Fantasy, one of the glories of 4-hand piano music. I played it frequently with him; then after he made *aliyah* to Jerusalem, I found an elderly woman in our apartment building who also played the treble and seemed to enjoy my playing the piece with her. I played it with my own piano teacher at a celebration of my parent's 40th wedding anniversary.

Then, while I was at Washington University in St. Louis, our History Department was joined by an African-American woman who was an outstanding violinist; she encouraged me to learn a few violin-piano sonatas. We played together for several years, until she died of breast cancer at age 47. Whenever I hear the beautiful violin melody in Beethoven's Spring sonata, I still feel a stab of pain.

With solo music, you play for yourself. You want it to be good enough to do justice to the music, and to be satisfying for yourself, and that can be an inducement to keep practicing and improving. But when you are playing with another person, either sitting next to you on the piano bench, or standing beside you with a violin, a new dynamic is in place. You not only listen to the sounds you are creating; you have to listen closely to your partner as well, as she is listening to you. The two of you communicate with subtle cues from each other. You respond carefully to slight variations in tempo in order to keep together. You adjust the dynamics—how loudly or softly you play—not just in accordance with your own mood, but also in accordance to what you are hearing: softer if she has a melody line, louder if it passes over to you, in balance if you are playing in counterpoint.

If you play something sloppily, because you haven't practiced enough, or because you become distracted or careless, you are no longer just annoyed at yourself. You feel bad that you have let your partner down. You can fake a passage if playing for yourself, but not if you are playing as part of a pair, or a trio or a quartet. You feel that you want to do your very best for someone else, so that together you will be the best you can be. What I discovered from this experience of making music in partnership is that there is a kind of intimacy with this other person, an intimacy that comes from being absolutely interdependent in reaching your goal. On this Day of Atonement, we can become more deeply aware of making the music of our lives not just as individuals but in partnership with those to whom we feel the closest.

3. There is a third dimension of our standing before God today: as part of a *community*, and part of a *people*. All of us together, despite our differences, have common goals, and we depend on others beyond ourselves and beyond our immediate families to achieve them. The musical analogy for this is the large ensemble - the orchestra, the chorus, or the combination of both. One of my favourite pieces of music is Brahms' German Requiem. I remember hearing it performed back in 1967 in the Kings College Chapel; I heard it at the

Barbican in London last spring; each time it is a profound experience. Unlike the great Requiems based on the Latin Requiem mass (Mozart, Verdi, Faure), this is a Protestant liturgy, based on passages from the Hebrew Bible and New Testament.

The words in the second section are based on a passage from Deutero-Isaiah (similar to a passage at the end of *Unetaneh Tokef*): “*Denn alles Fleisch, es ist wie Gras ... das Gras ist verdorret, und die Blume abgefallen* : For all flesh is as grass, and all human glory like the flower of the field; the grass withers, the flower falls away.” It is a very sombre mood, soft, slow, mournful, in a minor key. Then comes an absolutely electrifying moment, with a total change in the music, picking up speed, increasing its volume, shifting to a major key, for the words, “*Aber des Herrn Wort bleibt in Ewigkeit*: But the Word of the Lord, endures forever.” The first syllable of *Ewigkeit*, eternity, is prolonged—like the *tekiah gedolah* we heard last week—to give at least a hint of something truly lasting. And then another verse from Isaiah: “The ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs, and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads (Isa. 35:10).

The last time I heard this music, I thought of the 200 or so individuals who contributed to the extraordinary performance the audience had heard. Playing different instruments, sometimes ensemble, sometimes in brief solos. The choral part also had soloists and dozens of people blending together to sing soprano, alto, tenor, bass parts. Everyone had trained to hone their skills and practiced for many hours, both individually and together. Any one of those individuals could spoil the sound if they were sloppy or careless, entering at the wrong moment, playing or singing the wrong note, or just not quite on pitch. Together, under the conductor’s leadership, they brought to life the music of an inspired German nineteenth-century composer, and the words of a Jewish prophet from antiquity, and left us all deeply moved and inspired. I remember thinking at the end, We human beings can certainly make a mess of things, as is evident every day from news throughout the world. But that music shows that sometimes we can also get it right, we are also capable of creating something of transcendent beauty.

This brought back a memory of my own participation in choral music. It was the summer of 1961, I was not yet 17 years old, participating in music programme at Fontainebleau in France. Nadia Boulanger, the legendary music teacher, conducted a chorus composed of the entire group of participants in the programme. We were rehearsing a little-known oratorio called *Jephthah* by the Baroque composer Carissimi, about the Hebrew judge who fulfilled his vow to sacrifice his daughter. In the last section of this piece, there is an unusual modulation, in which all four voices move simultaneously to different notes, composing a chord in a surprising new key. As we were changing and adjusting our pitch, each one of us would of course be listening first to ourselves, then to the others singing the same part, and then to the other voices. But we would also be looking at the face of our conductor, Mlle. Boulanger.

If we were not absolutely together, if anyone was even slightly off pitch, if one of the four voices was too loud or too soft, there would be a look of dissatisfaction, unease, consternation, and we would know that the sound we were producing together was not yet right. If everyone “nailed it” for this modulation, pre-

cisely on pitch and on time, then the most beautifully radiant, serene expression would come over her face. That was our reward; we tried so hard, together, to produce that look of satisfaction. (I had a similar feeling in watching on television the members of Daniel Barenboim's West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, composed of Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs performing at the Proms last month, working together to make beautiful music and to gain the approving smile of their maestro conductor.)

And so we stand before God tonight: not only as individuals, not only as family units, but as the community of Beth Shalom, as part of the Movement for Reform Judaism, the Jewish community of the UK, the Jewish people throughout the world, all human beings. Each of us has an individual contribution to make in accordance with our own unique talents and capabilities. Some may be soloists, some playing together with 11 other second violinists or singing with 29 other altos. We can encourage each other, help each other, knowing that anyone who fails to fulfil her own responsibility and potential has an impact on the overall performance of the community.

Taking our own parts seriously, preparing, practicing, doing the very best we can, working together in harmony with each other, we can produce a result as individuals, as loving and committed partners, as a community, as a people, as a nation, as human brothers and sisters, that will make the divine conductor, who *depends on us* to create harmony rather than dissonance, pleased with our efforts. *Ya'er Adonai panav eleinu*. May we so act that God will look radiantly upon us and give us peace throughout this Day of Atonement and into the darkness of the future beyond.

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