

The hidden power of singing, loudly, and no matter what you sound like

By Benjamin Shalva

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One evening in early fall, I stood at a podium in the chapel of a small suburban synagogue, facing a red brick wall. Behind me, facing that same brick wall, sat the “Friday Night Regulars,” a dozen or so congregants who, rain or shine, come hell or high water, gathered each week to welcome the Sabbath.

I, however, was no regular. I had joined the synagogue just a few weeks earlier as its rabbi. This was my Sabbath debut. I wrapped myself in my prayer shawl, recited a private prayer, took a deep breath, and began to sing.

Behind me, I heard nothing. I looked over my shoulder. Perhaps the entire group had stealthily exited the chapel, eager to get to the after-service schnapps. No, there they were. And to my surprise, I even saw mouths opening and closing. I lowered my volume. Nothing. I lowered it even more. Okay. Now I hear them. They were singing, sure enough, but with the volume one might use to accompany one’s own iPod in a crowded elevator.

[Video: The presidential front-runners, as seen through the eyes of children]

A year of Friday nights passed like this. I sang and swayed, hoping I’d hear another voice. Nothing. I needed help.

At the beginning of my second year at the synagogue, I publicized a series of once-a-month Friday night services accompanied by guitar. Attendance jumped from a dozen to one hundred and fifty. At our first gathering, I began with a few warm, rich chords on the guitar and then launched into a classic tune familiar to all. Yet, despite our crowd, despite my earnest strumming, the adult voices remained inaudible. The kids, meanwhile, sang happily on their own.

What a contrast—the adult’s cool stiffness and the children’s joyful noise. With just a little encouragement, the children had stepped onto the path of song. They had let go. The adults, on the other hand, had responded to this same invitation by tightening their throats, battening down their emotional hatches and sitting silently.

Song introduces us again and again to our inhibitions. Unlike small children, who’ve logged so few hours on earth, who’ve yet to construct personal parameters for shame, we adults can have a hard time letting go. Maybe we’ll raise our voices only in the shower, or at a concert when we imagine no one can hear. Give us enough drinks so we just don’t give a damn how we sound and, sure, we’ll grab the mic at the karaoke bar. The rest of the time, wanting to appear cool and collected, most of us tighten our throats.

Why? Why would a simple little song inhibit us? What do we fear might happen if we open our mouths and let go?

A lot might happen. A no-holds-barred ballad contorts the face. Where else, save in the dentist’s chair and the lover’s bed, would we open our mouths so wide? On the path of song, we might sweat. Or pant. Or bounce in our seats.

As the song builds, as we arch our backs in ecstasy, we may feel a lot like we’re out in the open making love. We are. Our song is a lover’s song. Our ecstasy begins deep in our belly. If we spend a great deal of energy putting ourselves

Our song is a lover's song. Our ecstasy begins deep in our belly. If we spend a great deal of energy putting ourselves together, clothes and hair, pressed and coiffured, personae carefully cultivated, the intimacy of song will feel threatening. We're losing our cool, expectorating, vibrating, out of control.

And if we travel far enough on the path of song, we risk triggering something truly transformational. Our own preschooler will emerge. The child in us will leap out and go wild. We do not act like children when we sing. We *become* children when we sing. We sing like we're fresh from the womb, new to this earth, releasing with raw, uncultivated abandon. Wild like a child.

Many of us don't want to go there. We feel ashamed of our wild child. Who knows what he or she might do? On the path of song, guaranteed, we will meet the child within. We will also run smack into our shame, the shame we felt when the world first let us know, "You're not worthy of love just as you are." We will dip our toes into shame's primordial pool, into the dark waters out of which, long ago, our ego emerged.

Then as we learn to sing with abandon, embracing our inner child, an innocent delight starts spreading into the rest of our life. We pause a little longer when we pass by wildflowers in bloom. We dance a little jig to elevator Muzak, not caring so much if our neighbors notice. The path of song extends our laughter and widens our smile. We cry more easily, too. The world moves us more, permeating our senses and nourishing our souls. As we set free the child within, we grow to love this precious life more, too.

Benjamin Shalva is a wandering rabbi, writer, meditation teacher, yoga instructor, and musician, living and working in Washington D.C. This article is adapted from his first book, "Spiritual Cross-Training: Searching through Silence, Stretch, and Song," published in January 2016 by Grand Harbor Press .

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