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THE MUSIC OF THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

Basya Schechter

The first time I had the urge to make sacred music, I was seven years old. I locked myself in the bathroom, and took the amazing mouthful of Hebrew words I had learned in yeshiva that day - *llu fnu maley shirah kayam*, "if our mouth were as full of song as the sea" - and tried to set them to a new melody. Holy words were forbidden in unholy places, but there, in the bathroom on 49th Street in Boro Park, Brooklyn, the largest Haredi community in the world, I began a lifelong struggle between the sacred and profane.

As it happens, I couldn't find a new melody, and just adapted those words to the tune of "Dayenu." The result? I sang it a few times, the pipes burst, and I was flooded with water: soaked, I silently wondered if this was punishment or reward. That was my first attempt at sacred songwriting and, despite the dubious outcome, the urge has stuck.

My early attempts at writing my own music were definitely not sacred. I went to Barnard as an English major and began to understand the possibilities of language. Growing up in Boro Park, most of us learned an English that made us sound as if Yiddish were our first language (even though for me it wasn't) - subjects and predicates were liberally and randomly exchanged for one another. We used Yiddish-translated expressions like "I'm staying by her for shabbos" and "You want I should make for you some room?"

I was living between worlds, eating at the kosher dining room, and keeping shabbos, but rebelling by hanging out with "boys" and taking up alternative philosophies. My ideas and actions would have been rejected as heretical by the community in which I was raised and that made the tightrope between the two worlds especially exhausting to walk.

I was often bleary-eyed at 3 A.M., agonizing over papers, with tests to study for, and an empty social calendar. I resented suddenly being in a co-ed world, with poor writing skills, worse social skills, and no skills at all for interacting with men. I was in a "profane" place and blamed the Orthodox "way" for my difficulties. During this time of alienation, even as people were not responding to me, the guitar did return my yearning for contact. I played my homemade chords and self-taught two-finger picking for hours till I'd zone out. Then I started to write lyrics.

I wrote angry, ironic, and cynical songs about love and the yearning for it - words like "It's in the morning, what should I do / Should I leave hungry and full of you / Or to the diner, special for two / Where I'll be full of eggs and sick of you." Or "When life is shit your mama's not to blame / Your daddy isn't guilty cause he came." Or the inevitable "Never trust a man who says he loves you / When he's lying there on top of you / It's just a feeling." The only song that had any reference to a Jewish subject was when I compared the chicken of *shlogn kapores* (the ritual of waving a chicken around one's head on Erev Yom Kippur) to Jesus Christ: "Chicken, chicken on the cross / I have sins if you have sauce / Be my gravy. be my wings / Relieve me of my earthly things." This was not sacred music, but it had that feel. The melodies were all in the harmonic minor scale, and sounded very much like the *zemitros* I grew up with.

Some years later, having exhausted my "angry singer-songwriter" reserve, I began traveling in search of inspiration. I had so little money that I would save just enough for a ticket, then hitchhike, work, and leave myself open to whatever was going to happen. On one trip I hitchhiked from Cape Town to Tanzania, stopping off in Harare to study marimba (an African wooden xylophone) in an ethnomusicology center. I saw concerts by Dollar Brand (South African master Abdullah Ibrahim) at a Grahamstown Arts Festival, and gumboot dancing (traditional rhythmic boot slapping and stomping) in Johannesburg. I went to Morocco, to Turkey, Eastern Europe and Germany.

These experiences really opened me up to a "world music sound," and my compositions started to shift. On the one hand, I was creating multicultural melodies, inspired by these experiences, but they felt orphaned because they no longer sounded good with English lyrics. On the other, my head was filled with biblical verses, mystical words and phrases that I had memorized for years in yeshiva, which still spoke to my heart. I let the two mingle in a "creative kiln" of my musical practice and developed a whole new personal musical language, full of Yiddish *tattshing*, Pirket Avot, liturgical songs and Torah trope that reflected my Askenazi background and my love for Sephardic, African, and Middle Eastern music. The resulting pieces formed the basis of my 2000 Pharaoh's Daughter release *Out of the Reeds*, in a way that began to crystallize my creative and personal journey into a sacred whole.

The songs on my most recent CD, *Haran* (2007), are also set to biblical texts - in Hebrew, Ladino, and Aramaic, but tap into a more mystical and meditative part of me. In this work, kabbalistic poetry is paired with psychedelic

rock and electric keyboards mix with oud, ney, santur, and kora. Haran is a city whose name means "road," or "mountaineer," and was an actual crossroads between trade routes connecting Asia and the Middle East. It was also the beginning of Abraham's spiritual journey to Canaan and for me represents those crossroads I have passed and those at which I still find myself.

In 1999 *The Jewish Week* ran a full-page story about my background and musical journey, and I started my re-entry into the Jewish world that I had chosen to stay away from. But this was a different Jewish world than I had known before. In this world musical instruments could enhance the experience of Kabbalat Shabbat. It was a world with a movement to match every possible style of practicing or not practicing Judaism. And it was a world that was opening up exponentially to the fusion of personal artistic expression and Jewish heritage. I was fully welcomed into some of these new places, like Congregation B'nai Jeshurun (where I've been resident musician accompanying Friday night services for some years now), Brotherhood Synagogue, Drisha (a liberal women's "beit midrash"), as well as JCCs and synagogues around the country. I was equally welcomed into the downtown avant-garde Jewish music scene at the Knitting Factory, Tonic, and Tzadik records. I compensated for a lack of formal musical training by innovating and drawing on a wealth of influences from new friends.

The secular arts world too has responded favorably to my Jewish work - as well as individual listeners letting me know they enjoyed my recordings or performances - I have received grants from state institutions and composers' organizations. Ironically, it is only the larger, well-funded, more mainstream Jewish organizations who, perhaps threatened by my biography, have used my work to promote what they call the "new Jewish culture," but have failed to support any of my projects.

I moved easily between many other communities that invited me to serve, perform, or teach. It was inspiring; I could belong when I wanted to, and I could retreat when I wanted to. It was this freedom to retreat that showed me how much I had longed for, and needed, that possibility. The truth is, while I had left the "orthodox world," it was not so much about leaving the orthodox world or Judaism, as leaving the constant social pressure of needing to be publicly consistent - at schools, in the neighborhood, at camps, and among my family. The constant need to keep up appearances was physically and emotionally draining. I had a complicated childhood: a lot of instability and sensitivity, difficulties in school and making friends. When I did finally leave, I more than anything wanted to retreat. I wanted to leave before I was sent away.

At a recent Shabbos rooftop party someone asked me how I came up with the name "Pharaoh's Daughter." I told them that about ten years ago my parents confessed that I was adopted from an Egyptian royal couple whose daughter had had a daughter out of wedlock. "That's why I look so Sephardic," I said. So, although I'd grown up orthodox in Boro Park, I wanted to re-connect with my biological roots. Inventing this fun story was such a relief from the facts: I was so sick of telling my own story over and over again. The truth is that "Basya," in the commentary, is the grace name given to Pharaoh's daughter by the rabbis in thanks for saving Moses.

Now, many years later, when I create I am no longer confined to secret places like my bathroom. I walk through the streets of New York riffing out loud on one idea or other; I travel to the cliffs of Montauk, or the Moroccan Sahara, or to caves in Turkey and, like a prayer, I attune myself to my surroundings and I let what's already inside me, or what is clamoring for entry, float to my attention. I find myself in a state of evolution, or annihilation, or creation, or all at the same time. Through the process of creating my music I feel that "I am" in the world.

Making music has been an elemental part of my identity for as long as I can remember and more recently it has become an integral part of my Jewish identity as well. Not all my songs can be considered sacred, even the ones composed from religious texts, but they are certainly inspired experiences. I reject the dichotomy between sacred and profane. The so-called sacred is full of dissonance and tension; art of pure spirit and loveliness makes me anxious because of its imbalance. I equally reject pure profanity in favor of the interconnectedness of the two. It is the dialogue between sacred and profane that I try to live in while I battle my emptiness, present and past.

For better or for worse I think the more emptiness you grow up with, the more space you have in which to create. The more absent you feel - alienated, exiled, removed from the insularity of the interiority of Jewish community, living on the periphery - the more there's a *tzimtzum*, a withdrawal of darkness into itself, and the more room for something to fill that space.