

THE SONG THAT NEVER ENDS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

This Shabat is called Shabat Shira, the Shabat of song, due to the great and beautiful song of Moshe and the people of Israel that comprises a central part of the Torah reading. All of the different communities of the Jewish people have devised particular melodies and intonations for the recitation of this song. The song is such an important part of Jewish history and traditional Jewish life that it is included in the morning prayer service every day of the year. This song has accompanied us throughout our long journey from the banks of the Yam Suf to this very day.

A song is composed of many parts. It has words, lyrics and it also has within it variant musical themes that appear when it is performed. It also has a melody a distinctive chord that more than anything else characterizes and identifies the entire song. Even when the lyrics become fuzzy in ones mind and the background music fades in our recollections, the melody of the song can still continue to haunt us, inspiring us and jogging our memories and senses. That is why this Shabat is still called Shabat Shira, because the melody of Moshe and the people of Israel has remained with us even though the words and overall musical theme may have been forgotten by a large portion of the present-day Jewish world.

There was a Jewish professor of philosophy in Toronto in the latter part of the twentieth century by the name of Emil Fackenheim. He was a non-observant Jew who nevertheless wrote with great understanding and appreciation of Torah and Jewish tradition. I met him once and had an interesting conversation with him. He told me the same incident is recorded in one of his books that when he attended public school in Germany, the teacher insisted that all of the class sing Christmas carols. His father, though not an observant Jew, felt that this was unfair to the Jewish students in the class, especially to his little Emil.

So he went to the teacher to plead that the Jewish students be excused from singing these Christian songs. After a long discussion, the father and the teacher reached an accommodating compromise. The Jewish students would only hum the melody and not be required to sing the words themselves. Fackenheim, by now a refugee from German anti-Semitism and Nazi brutality, then said: We should not have even hummed the melody!

The main question in Jewish life today is What melody is being hummed? The prevailing melodies of the progressive Western culture are also injurious to our survival and well-being. There are Jews who still know the words to our great song but have forgotten the melody. They are being deprived of the true beauty and world-view of Torah and its value system. There are those Jews who no

longer know the words but the melody of the song still haunts them. For them, at least, there is much hope that they will add the correct Torah words to their unforgotten melody. But, unfortunately there are those who no longer know neither words nor melody and disappear from Jewish life.

We, here, who are fortunate enough to remember everything about the song, its words, music and melody, are duty bound to teach the song to all with whom we may come in contact. Then we will hear the great song of Moshe and Israel sung again, loudly, clearly and melodically throughout Israel.

Shabat shalom.

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