

Black History and Jewish History
Shabbat Shirah, Parashat B'shallach 5783

“And Miriam the prophet took the timbrel in her hand; and all the women followed her, just as she had planned.” Those lyrics are by Debbie Friedman, but the words are mostly faithful to the biblical text. As the Torah tells it, though, Miriam isn't the only woman with a timbrel. All the women seem to have them! Echoing an ancient midrash,ⁱ Rutgers musicologist Rebecca Cypress asks: “Where did they get these timbrels? And even if they had them, did they have time to pack them in the haste with which they left Egypt?”ⁱⁱ

Perhaps the answer is that enslaved Israelite women had these instruments all along, intoning their prayers for liberation to musical accompaniment. Cypress “propose[s] an analogous case from more recent history, the enslavement of Black people[, which] ...suggests that it is perfectly reasonable for enslaved people to use musical instruments, both during slavery and upon their escape...The Black peoples who were kidnapped from Africa in the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries and forced into slavery had their own traditions of song and instrumental

performance. Forcibly separated from their homes, and very often from their families, they fused the individual musical traditions of their original nations with those of other enslaved Black peoples, keeping those traditions alive as a means of building and maintaining a sense of community and human dignity.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Cypress points to nineteenth century newspaper advertisements, seeking the return of Black people who had escaped enslavement, many of which indicate that the fugitive was a talented instrumental musician—and in some cases, that they fled with their instruments. She writes, “Even in their terrifying and pressured moment of escape, these enslaved people paused to take their musical instruments with them. This act should be understood as signifying defiance of their captors and resistance to the dehumanization that had been imposed upon them.”^{iv}

I am reminded of an insight shared by Professor Dorian Stuber, a Temple member, when he taught our Judaism 101 class about the Holocaust a couple weeks ago. He emphasized that resistance took many forms. Resistance may be identified not only the armed rebellions such as the famous Warsaw Ghetto uprising, but also in continuing to live as faithful Jews. Historian Marsha Frost

offers a poignant example, directly connected to our Torah reading this week:

“[E]ven in Theresienstadt, surrounded by despair, the camp’s inhabitants found ways to extract joy. In late 1942, someone stole a large block of wood from the Nazis running the camp. Into it, they carved an ornate ... Hanukkah [menorah]... A Hebrew inscription curves over the top: [*Mi Chamocha ba-eilim, Adonai?*]‘Who is like you, O [God], among the celestials?’”^v

We know from Torah, and from our Passover Haggadah, that God does not initiate the process of freeing the Israelites from Egyptian bondage until, after hundreds of years of enslavement and oppression, “The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God. God heard their moaning, and God remembered the covenant with [their ancestors]. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.”^{vi} The outcry of the Israelites, including the music of the women with their timbrels, is essential to their liberation. And we are also familiar with the ways that enslaved Black Americans drew on this Israelite experience of slavery and liberation to give them hope. We might not be aware of the detail that Cypress shares, quoting her colleague Kenneth Chelst: Enslaved Black people “understood their own song and

dance as ‘symboliz[ing] critical events in the Israelite journey to freedom and the Promised Land. First and foremost, [their] late night dances symbolized the Israelite march through the Sea of Reeds with their former masters in pursuit...’^{vii}

Just as enslaved Blacks compared their experience to that of ancient Israelites, American Jews have often identified with the Black experience. After all, the Torah repeatedly reminds us that we were “strangers in the Land of Egypt,” where our ancestors were enslaved, as Black people were more recently here in America. Jews were the quintessential “strangers” throughout medieval and modern European history, even as Europeans began to capture and enslave Black Africans. Perhaps that’s why Jews participated disproportionately in the Civil Rights Movement, with Jews comprising half of all white young people who took part in Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964, for example.^{viii}

Jewish people place a value on education about the history of our oppression. In 2021, a group of Jewish Arkansans—notably including a teen, David Ronnel, and his father Steve—were centrally involved in advocating for legislation that requires Holocaust education in public schools. This year, a further

push is underway to call for marking the last week in January as Holocaust Education Week in Arkansas. With Black History month coming immediately thereafter in February, the link is clear: Committed to remembering the stranger, Jewish Americans must be equally vigilant in assuring that both Jewish and African American history are taught honestly and comprehensively.

In recent years, efforts in several states, particularly in the South, have adopted legislation that calls for teaching “opposing viewpoints” whenever a “controversial issue” is discussed. You may recall that one Texas school administrator imagined that the new law in that state required teaching “opposing views” of the Holocaust.^{ix} The legislation was aimed at Black history, and yet the loudest outcry came when Jewish history was threatened. Don’t get me wrong: There is no legitimate “alternative view” about the Holocaust—and the same may be said of slavery, peonage, convict leasing, racist terror lynchings, and Jim Crow—all of which fall under the heading of white supremacy.

Make no mistake: Black history is under attack from the Governor of Arkansas and may soon be threatened in the General Assembly. While Governor

Sanders has signed an executive order prohibiting **all** indoctrination in public schools, the Arkansas *Times* reported earlier this week that she distributed “Ben Carson’s ‘Why America Matters,’ best described as a Christian propaganda tract, in Helena public schools.”^x Meanwhile, the African American Studies curriculum has been singled out as the **only** subject matter targeted after the Governor’s executive order. While I typically avoid partisan references from the pulpit, given the affiliation of our Governor and the supermajority in the General Assembly, findings from 2021 polls of Republicans must be shared to understand the impulse guiding our Arkansas government today: “A Monmouth University poll found that 46 percent of Republicans disapprove of teachers educating students on the history of racism.” Lest that poll be dismissed as an outlier, “A USA Today/Ipsos poll...found that fewer than 40 percent of Republicans supported schools teaching about the ongoing effects of slavery, and a Reuters/Ipsos poll in July found that 32 percent of Republicans opposed teaching **high school** students about racism’s impact in the U.S.”^{xi}

Rabbi Randy Sheinberg encourages us all to be “the Miriams of our times, the...bearers” of timbrels. And, like Miriam, Moses, and all people of every gender

at the shores of the Sea, we are blessed with a song “that doesn’t come out of nowhere.”^{xii} Our ancestors, be they enslaved Israelites, enslaved Black Americans or both, began singing their songs of liberation while they were still in bondage. Still, they found new moments in which to sing—celebrating freedom, lamenting steps backward, and then rejoicing liberation once again.

At the outset of this Black History month, we who demand that Jewish history be taught forthrightly must add our voices to those insisting that Black history be imparted in all its complexity. Let our voices rise in remembrance of oppression. Only then may we sing freedom’s song.

ⁱ *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael* 15:20.

ⁱⁱ Rebecca Cypress, “Miriam’s Song and the Persistence of Music in Dark Times,” *Lehrhaus*, January 30, 2023, [Miriam’s Song and the Persistence of Music in Dark Times - The Lehrhaus](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ Cypress.

^{iv} Cypress.

^v Natasha Frost, “Amid the Holocaust’s Horrors, Many Jews Found Ways to Mark Hanukkah,” *History*, December 20, 2019, [How Jews Celebrated Hanukkah During the Holocaust - HISTORY](#).

^{vi} Exodus 2:23-26.

^{vii} Cypress.

^{viii} [A Brief History of Jews and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s | Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism \(rac.org\)](#).

^{ix} Sharon Pruitt-Young, “In one Texas district, teachers were told to give ‘opposing’ views of the Holocaust,” *NPR*, October 15, 2021, [Southlake School District under fire for administrator's Holocaust comments : NPR](#).

^x Lindsey Miller, “Indoctrination alert! Gov. Sanders hands out Ben Carson’s Christian-propaganda kids book in Helena public schools,” *The Arkansas Times*, February 1, 2023, [Indoctrination alert! Gov. Sanders hands out Ben Carson's Christian-propaganda kids book in Helena public school - Arkansas Times \(arktimes.com\)](#).

^{xi} Brooke Midgan, “Nearly half of Republicans polled say schools shouldn’t teach history of racism,” *The Hill*, November 10, 2021, [Nearly half of Republicans polled say schools shouldn’t teach history of racism – The Hill](#). Emphasis mine.

^{xii} Rabbi Randy Sheinberg, D’var Torah for the Board of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, February 2, 2023.