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Women's Whispers: The voice of a woman

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Photo by: Lydia Polimeni

Gentlemen, I have no voice (so those hoping to be aroused should listen elsewhere). Sometimes hoarse, sometimes low and creaky, what sound can I produce with no training and no practice?

When my daughter came to her Bat Mitzva, she was frum, shy and proper and declined both ceremony and celebration. In this she followed me, who shuddered in relief as I walked up to my silent unmarked Bat Mitzva in the women's gallery at Sydney's Mizrahi synagogue.

Age has made me bold. When a girl is born, her father receives an aliya to announce her name. In parallel, I petitioned to receive an aliya and read Torah at Shira Hadasha in Jerusalem, to mark my daughter's life Bat Mitzva in her stead.

Shira Hadasha is a medley, wading in a civilization deluged with history, rising to gasp the air of a radical present. It invites women to read Torah and honors them with aliyot but permits only men to lead davar shebekedusha.

I conferred with an American rabbi regarding my plan to read Torah. The Mishna discusses women receiving aliyot; he said he couldn't condemn the practice. But he did not wave away the prohibition against hearing a woman's voice – *kol b'isha erva*. He pressed me to ask a Jerusalem Rabbi, known for his sympathy to women's issues.

I did not go to the great man himself but to one of his henchmen. Explaining my

intention to read from the Torah at Shira Hadasha, I raised the problem of the woman's voice. There was a pause; it lasted some months. When the henchman indicated his readiness to talk again, he opened with the pronouncement that kol isha did not apply in ritual contexts. He brought proof from a legend of his rabbi's illustrious grandfather.

As to my reading Torah, however, *that* would be impossible. Wayward are these new prayer services, leading who knew where! Being married to the scion of an exalted rabbinic family, my participation would give them imprimatur.

So I attended Shira Hadasha as a member of the audience and marked the Bat Mitzva another way.

My daughter turned 12, lost her faith, became a citizen of the world. At the urging of our American rabbi, she and I attended Segulah, a community where women and men participate equally in the full liturgy, songful service. It has revived my daughter; she is Jew again. But by decree of a Jerusalem rabbi, I sit at Segulah mute as I have been all my Orthodox life.

This man, he permitted my voice but trammelled up my spirit.

By some oversight, the rabbis did not forbid a woman's voice on the written page. The loophole appears to have gone unnoticed and unutilized. Nehama Leibowitz was reportedly gagged from emitting her biblical writing for a couple of decades, but otherwise women have not been voluble enough to be the object of such injunctions. Moreover, what is to prevent a woman writing in a man's name? There is a rumor that the poorly drafted parts of Rashi in the Talmud were written by his daughters. Perhaps half our scholarship was published under such ruses!

During the visit to Israel we made for my daughter's Bat Mitzva, we were cajoled into attending a musical produced by the Raise Your Spirits production company. This group was formed during the second intifada so the women of Gush Etzion could stand against Arab terror with song.

What could be worse than an amateur musical created by housewives and physical therapists in the Occupied Territories? But an old friend had a daughter performing in it and she wouldn't get off my case till I bought tickets. The night we went it was pouring and cold; the bus lurched through the Judean Hills while I tried to catch what my boss on the phone from America was haranguing me about.

We sat down in the amphitheater. The performers before us were all sizes, dressed in flowing, loose folds suitable for the shapes of childbearing women. And when they opened their mouths, they had the voices of angels.

I do not understand how a voice can be sexually arousing. If I can listen all day to Jessye Norman and Sara Bareilles, beautiful voices perfected by the digital miracle, what can a live song bouncing off concrete walls, performed by billowing housewives

possibly accomplish? My daughter argues against me. A mother's voice is the primordial stimulus the unborn child receives from the universe: the sound of a woman is the most arousing thing there is.

This winter, Raise Your Spirits has composed another musical. It is many years since I have been to Israel; many duties detain me in the Diaspora. But I am come now to hear real women singing new songs about ancient women's stories: Ruth and Naomi, Deborah and Yael.

I travel many days to hear sublime voices, undigitalized and unperfected, in a concrete hall in Judean Hills, and I answer those voices the only way I know how: a black stain on a white, unblemished page.

Kol b'isha erva.

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