

It may have been a surprise for some at the Rosh Hashanah evening service to hear the following words sung as a preface to one of our prayers: "Take this soul, living in my skin and bones; take this soul and let it sing. YHVH, YHVH, always pain before a child is born; YHVH, YHVH, always dark before the dawn." Those words were written by Bono of the rock group U2, and no, they aren't traditionally attached to the Hashkiveynu prayer. Yet, the words speak clearly to the literal and metaphorical redemptive cycle of night and day, the prayer's main theme. The song also invokes the mysterious four Hebrew lettered name for God which somehow incorporates past, present and future all at the same time. Not to mention that Bono is a rock star who takes religion seriously and works passionately towards the Torah mandated ideal of debt relief for world's most vulnerable citizens. Still, it is a fair question. While Jewish prayer has long been set to a variety of contemporary musical idioms, do songs written for a secular audience have a place in our prayer service?

I am guided by the image of the Havdallah candle. Havdallah is often talked about in the language of separation, but the candle tells another story. It is actually multiple candles, braided together to make one. This intertwining teaches me that it is always possible to extract the miraculous from the mundane. Just as some prayers meant for religious purposes fail to inspire, some words and music we might otherwise hear on the radio so moves the spirit that they fit right into shul.

I remember the first time that I attended the second day Rosh Hashanah service that is led by Rabbi Jim. Right after the silent Amidah, and without introduction, he sang 'If It Be Your Will,' a Leonard Cohen composition. It was definitely a heart opening moment for me and it guided the intention of all my prayers for the rest of those Days of Awe. In subsequent years, I have heard Jim sing various 'secular' pieces in that same liturgical slot, including the Louis Armstrong version of 'It's A Wonderful World,' Randy Newman's 'Louisiana 1927' (which carried a special resonance as it was sung on the High Holidays directly after Hurricane Katrina), and a Beach Boys song called 'Smile.'

Sometimes, as I sing the Gevurot, our prayer indicating our intention to imitate God's strength, I think that a perfect complement would be Bruce Springsteen's elegy for the men and women on 9/11 who "went up the stairs and into the fire." The song is certainly written like a prayer: "May their strength give us strength, may their faith give faith, may their hope give us hope, may their love give us love." Singer-songwriter Peter Himmelman (who is actually an Orthodox Jew, but his music is not intentionally 'religious') has written a song that certainly expresses the Jewish outlook on holiness: "All these impermanent things; oh how they fool me, dominate and rule me...Why keep hanging on to things that never stay; things that just keep stringing us along from day to day?" Speaking of holiness, many of us have been moved to tears when Leslie sings Leonard Cohen's 'Halleluyah' at services. I have heard songs that 'act like prayer' from many musical worlds, including classical, reggae, jazz and hip-hop.

I do not believe that even the most 'heavenly' popular songs should appear to overwhelm a Jewish prayer service, but it is my experience that an occasional well-placed surprise can be very powerful. This is the moon of Chesvan, known as the 'bitter moon.' May all of our prayers help lessen the bitterness and increase hope and allow us to believe with 'liturgist' Bob Marley that "everything's gonna be alright!"