

D'var Torah for RH 2, September 17th, 2023
Congregation Beth El of the Sudbury River Valley, Cantor Vera Broekhuysen

Harmony: Consonance Plus Dissonance Equals Wholeness

L'shanah tovah! On Rosh HaShanah, we celebrate the beauty of the world and our community.

Beauty and desirability are often perceived as the result of symmetry. But things that are too symmetrical, too perfectly matched, don't feel real! Rabbi Josh directed me to a wonderful photography project created in 2014 by Alex John Beck. Beck creates images of his subjects in which both sides of their faces are symmetrical – he doubles the right side of his subject's face in one image, the left side in another. The result is uncanny. "I think they lack character— beauty is more based on character than an arbitrary data point," Beck says. "Humanity is messy and should remain as such."¹

Today I invite you to think about this messiness, this critical need for variation, in musical terms.

Unison: everyone making the same note

Harmony: different notes but they fit together in a pleasing structural way

The Greek philosopher Pythagoras first demonstrated the constant ratios of resonant frequencies that create harmony. He divided a stretched string by arithmetical ratios, and plucked it before and after each division. "He demonstrated that the intervals, or distances between tones, that the string sounded before and after it was divided ... are the most fundamental intervals the ear perceives."² They are the octave, the fifth, and the fourth. These are ear candy. These are the relationships between notes that make our ears say, oh yeah, we know these. We're comfortable with them.

***try this out, have congregation sing...*

- one note all together

- two notes that are a perfect 5th apart

Harmony depends on **constant ratios, constant relationships** between the two or more notes sounding at the same time. It requires **division**. You need different notes to be heard at the same time for there to be harmony.

Consonance is the normal range of tone combinations accepted by theorists and composers. It's what "sounds like it fits" to us. Contrast that with **dissonance** – Rabbi Josh used this word yesterday. From the Encyclopedia Britannica: "There is a tendency to confuse consonance with concord, or sweet sound, dissonance" — a sound outside of that range — "with discord, or clashing sound."³

Notice those value judgments? We often think of consonance as "good," dissonance as "bad."

Let's investigate.

***Have congregation sing now*

- start with unison

- then do two notes that are a major 2nd apart (R half stay on the note, L half move up a half tone, I demonstrate)

- finally, do a major 2nd apart and then resolve to unison

How did that dissonance feel? Did it feel like discord, a clash? Or did it feel good? How did it feel when we moved back into unison?

I want to push a little against denigrating, or "dissing" dissonance. Let's reframe it as "productive tension." Dissonance, in Western harmony, wants to resolve. It creates movement in music! Dissonance cries out for resolution, and helps music and our moods move fluidly between tension and release. The Encyclopedia Britannica again: "Dissonance ... has never been forbidden in music, for without it, music would be hopelessly static."⁴

(demonstrate with a V chord in a minor key, wanting to slide that half step up - the "Maria" line from West Side Story, by Leonard Bernstein)

Imagine that yearning cry of "Maria" without that chromatic tone. (demonstrate) Suddenly, it's not going anywhere, and neither is the love story!

When my husband, Mike, and I first got together, we didn't fight. (That was then; this is now.) He worried about that! In his model of a healthy relationship, differences and tensions were easily expressed so that they could be quickly resolved! Happily, we've fixed that.

I grew up in the world of classical and American folk music, which is built mostly on consonant harmony. Almost all of the musical tensions eventually resolve. My

parents, *zichronam livrachah*, may their memories be for a blessing, played Joan Baez, Chopin, the Beatles, Bob Dylan, and Bach on our old Quazar (anybody remember those?). When I got old enough, I added Maria Callas and Mahlatini and the Mahotella Queens to the mix.

In my teens I traveled and performed with Village Harmony, a world folksong organization based in Vermont. We'd rehearse for a week and then tour, staying in people's homes, and often both rehearsing and touring internationally. I lived for these trips. And I was lucky enough to go on nine of them, and to spend four extended periods of time in the Caucasus Republic of Georgia.

I fell in love with Georgian and Balkan folk music. These two folksong styles really welcome and live in dissonance. There's one Balkan song, *Vrhpolje*, that is entirely a combination of whole and half-step dissonances, just like the major second you all sang a few minutes ago — pitches uncomfortably close to each other for the Western ear. They buzz, and they don't resolve!

We use harmony and dissonance as relational terms. Harmony sometimes becomes code for "what is comfortable to us," while dissonance becomes code for "what makes us uncomfortable" or, even stronger, "what asks us explicitly or implicitly to change." Think of the phrases "cognitive dissonance" and "cultural dissonance."

Our Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur rituals attest to our communal need for productive discomfort, productive dissonance.

We center the sound of the shofar. A shofar plays just one note at a time, but it makes a powerful, blaring sound at odds with the rest of our music. The shofar's natural intervals may seem dissonant indeed to our ears. Trying to achieve unison tones with multiple shofars at the same time is usually an exercise in frustration, so when Rabbi Josh managed to match his shofar's pitch with mine at BE InSpirEd's Kehillah last Sunday morning, I took that as a phenomenally good omen!

We read in the medieval Spanish commentator and halakhist Rambam's *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot T'shuvah* that "Even though [the reason] the shofar is blown on Rosh HaShanah is because of a biblical mandate, it still has a hint at some meaning, as if it says, 'Wake up, you sleepers from your slumber! Get up from your nap, nappers! Sift through your actions and return with repentance (*teshuvah*)!'"⁴

Other kinds of dissonance in our lives can be like a shofar: they can wake us up to action. Dissonance pierces any echo chambers in which we might be letting ourselves too comfortably cocoon. Sometimes those dissonances tell us that someone is hurting, and things need to change. The logo of *T'ruah*, the Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, is a shofar for exactly this reason: a shofar call can lead to change that creates justice where injustice had become comfortable.

My mother, Jacqueline, was not an observant Jew, but she was always moved by the shofar on the High Holy Days. She'd say, "The sound of the shofar is a healing sound." I think that's because the shofar's dissonance helps to lead us to where healing needs to happen.

In my previous pulpit, I got to know a woman named Gerda Kalman, *zichronah livrachah*. She died two weeks ago. Gerda was born in Vienna, and was three years old when the Nazis invaded. She and her mother escaped first to Czechoslovakia, and then to Shanghai, where she lived for several years in the Shanghai Jewish refugee community. Gerda and her husband eventually came to New Hampshire. She earned Bachelor's and Master's degrees, and then worked as a history and social studies teacher in the New Hampshire public schools for more than two decades. She was deeply generous with her religious community, ferociously intelligent, and free with her opinions. The highest compliment Gerda gave was "Thank you for making us think."

Gerda and I loved and respected one another. AND, we held very dissonant views about politics and politicians, in both America and Israel. Neither of us changed our views as a result of our friendship. We both continued to express ourselves honestly, respectfully, and passionately. Once a month our community met to talk about Israel, and Gerda was there each time. She never hesitated to share her views and to disagree openly with me.

Gerda and I ALSO had many moments where we were in total harmony: discussing congregational life and synagogue needs, studying the *parashah*, joking, eating a meal together, talking about the Sho'ah and sharing concerns about anti-Semitism. We had different experiences and sensibilities, but we shared similar goals and perspectives. There was variety but no discord.

And finally we had some moments of unison: singing/saying the exact same thing. Services were a big part of that. Gerda was a Shabbat morning regular; she never missed a Shabbes morning in the chapel, and when services moved to online

during COVID, she very quickly pivoted and attended by Zoom. Often I would invite her to lead the prayer for Israel.

We all need some times of relational unison — times when, like the angels in the K'dushah, we speak/sing with one voice! When we're in unison, we affirm each other all together, as one.

We also need moments of relational harmony. Our services aren't all shofar all the time — we sing and speak together, in harmony and in unison! Sometimes a single voice is featured, sometimes many. Within these voices, within our services and our entire year, we need to hear the dissonant notes that say "change is needed," even as we disagree over what, exactly, is the right change to make. Dissonance keeps the music, and us, moving and growing.

When I look back on my relationship with Gerda, I treasure every facet of it - unison, harmony, and clash. All together, these ways of relating to each other made a healthy, life-giving whole. The opportunity to live in loving and respectful dissonance with her was a profound blessing in my life. We didn't convince one another of wrongness or rightness, but Gerda made me think, and I grew because of our friendship. I learned from Gerda about Jewish pride and resilience, about generosity and loyalty, and about how personally surviving the Sho'ah can impact a Jewish relationship to the modern State of Israel. Every time I prepared to write or speak about Israel during my time in Haverhill, I heard Gerda's voice in my mind; because of our relationship, I knew that whatever I deliver about eretz Yisra'eil needed to take into serious account her perspective and her lived experience. Her voice will stay with me.

I have always been drawn to the beauty of music in which many different melodies and voices are heard, literally and metaphorically. So too our Jewish tradition. We say with humour but with deep affection, "two Jews, three - or three hundred - opinions!"

In *Aroch HaShulchan, Choshen Mishpat*, we learn that "All the differences between the Tanna'im, Amora'im, Ge'onim, and Poskim, if we are to understand the matter truly, are all words of the living God, each is a facet of halakhah. On the contrary, that is the beauty of our holy and pure Torah. The entire Torah is called a song, and a song is beautiful when all of its voices differ one from another; this is the essence of its polyphonic pleasantness (ne'imot). Anyone who swims about in the sea of the Talmud can see the harmony in all of the voices differing from each other [but yet coexisting]."⁵

This year, in Beth El's communal emotional life, we have experienced beautiful harmony. We've experienced profound dissonance. And we've experienced moments of overwhelming unity. I've only been here for two months, and yet I've had these experiences together with you.

Exploring these ways of being in relationship to one another - unison, harmony and dissonance - through MUSIC can be a healing process for a kahal. Music can be a safe space to try this out, to see how it feels. We are a profoundly musical congregation. I still shiver in awe and pleasure each time I lead a song and feel your waves of voices washing back over me. We can learn as a community from the music we make.

The practice of making music together helps teach us that we need everyone's voice, consonant and dissonant, multi-voiced and all as one. There is no wrong way of singing together. Human messiness is a beautiful thing.

The question isn't "how can we eliminate dissonance." That would leave us stagnant, static, and hurting. The question is rather, how can our loving relationship as a community hold and affirm us, dissonance and all? How can we sing the song of Beth El together? Because our Beth El song is extraordinary. It is deeply feeling, deeply learning, deeply caring, deeply moving. It called me all the way down from North Andover.

I want to sing this song with you. I want your love to flavour it and your Torah to shape it. I want us to hear one another, and to create with one another, with dissonance and harmony and unity and mess.

This Rosh HaShanah, I want to bless us, Beth El...
To listen to when something needs to resolve
To be willing to live with dissonance that does not resolve
To be dynamic, not static
To make stirring harmony together that moves us towards a more just world
To join together as one

As Gerda would say, *zay gezunt*. You and your families and our Beth El congregation as one should have a happy, healthy New Year.

1. <https://time.com/2848303/heres-what-faces-would-look-like-if-they-were-perfectly-symmetrical/>
2. "harmony", Encyclopaedia Britannica, published May 9th 2019, <https://www.brittanica.com/art/harmony-music>, accessed Sept. 13th 2023
3. ibid
4. ibid
5. *Rambam Mishneh Torah, Hilchot T'shuvah* 3:4 (as translated in Joey Weisenberg's *The Torah of Music*, p. 183)
6. *Aroch HaShulchan, Choshen Mishpat*, introduction (Yehiel Mikhal Epstein, 1829-1908, Lithuania) as translated in Weisenberg p. 211
7. "harmony", Encyclopaedia Britannica, published May 9th 2019, <https://www.brittanica.com/art/harmony-music>, accessed Sept. 13th 2023