

“GIVING VOICE”
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Sermon: “Giving Voice”

I’m incredibly envious that Meredith got a chance to learn from Rabbi Shefa Gold in person but I’m thrilled that she, Jennifer and Jay are treating us all to a taste of her music and magic. Shefa Gold is not Unitarian Universalist but, like Unitarian Universalism at its best, she encompasses more than just one single tradition. She encompasses a lot. She’s the author of *The Magic of Hebrew Chant*, a recording artist and the director of the Center for Devotional, Energy and Ecstatic Practice in New Mexico. She is known for the skillful way she combines her background in Judaism with Buddhist, Christian, Islamic and Native American spiritual traditions.

In an article¹ he wrote about her, another rabbi named Rami Shapiro asked Shefa Gold: “I’ve been told by many spiritual teachers, especially within the Hindu tradition, that the most powerful spiritual practice for our time is chanting. Would you agree with that?” “I’m not going to speak for everyone,” she replies, “but for me, chanting—the musical and rhythmic repetition of a sacred phrase from a holy text—has been the doorway into the depths of my own heart and into the heart of my inheritance, Judaism. For as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated with the sounds of Hebrew prayer, not just for what they meant but for where they could take me.”

She reports that she has found that if she focuses in on one phrase, repeating it with a compelling melody, then that phrase can transport her to what she calls “expansive heights and fathomless depths.” That is a very tall order for a simple chant, like the ones we’ve heard and sung today. Could that really be true, that it could do all that?

The Judaism that I grew up with would be skeptical. Being raised Jewish—with one Jewish parent and one UU parent—in my home meant ritual, history, culture, identity, politics, potato pancakes called latkes. It was great but it wasn’t very musical, and it didn’t have a lot to do with faith. So it wasn’t until I was older that I encountered the Jewish chants, prayers and songs that form the basis for Gold’s inspiration and legacy. And I never would have been able to articulate so clearly what she says, that focusing on one phrase is transportive. Yet I have experienced it.

It happened years ago, the very first time I set foot in Congregation Sha’ar Zahav, a gay synagogue I attended on and off for years. If you speak any Hebrew you will know that this story is set in San Francisco because *sha’ar zahav* means Golden Gate, a reference to the iconic Golden Gate Bridge. And for me, as cheesy as it might sound, the place was truly a precious gateway to many gifts and lessons, especially about faith, our learning and worship theme this month.

¹ <http://spiritualityhealth.com/articles/rabbi-shefa-gold-giving-voice-sacred-texts#sthash.k6oLlNxW.dpuf>

I don't use the word 'faith' lightly because I know that it can be a hard, even dirty, word for those who have been wounded by religious repression. Not only can faith remind some people of being punished for not having the "right" kind of spiritual beliefs, but there's also the reality that it's often one of those words that means so many things to different people in different contexts that it practically has no meaning at all, and is therefore worthy of suspicion.

So before we go much further, it feels ethical to define what I'm talking about today when I say faith. And then maybe I will get to hear from some of you during congregational response about what it means in your own life. For me, faith is not about rigid belief that doesn't make logical sense. It is about having a strong conviction in that which feels right, whatever it is that might feel right to you in your life. It's about trusting that if we're open in the right ways then we will get meaning from being in the world. It's about trying to figure out which ways open us up to life's goodness.

Back to my story. The first time a friend and I visited Sha'ar Zahav for a Friday evening Shabbat service, the person introducing and leading a song reassured everyone that the words were easy. Indeed, I was relieved that the whole chant was only a couple phrases, and they were not too tricky for my unfamiliar-with-Hebrew tongue to manage. The song leader explained that simple words are best because their simplicity helps us know how much is contained within. That seemed completely nonsensical to me until we all started singing, some swaying, some with eyes closed, each person in the room uttering the same sound that was made different by their individual tone, tempo, volume, spirit. There was so much there, so many layers of history and feeling and complexity and, well, faith.

There is an idea in Judaism that the Torah (or the bible) has seventy faces. It is said that the book can be turned and turned, around and around, for everything in existence is contained within it. Since seven is a magical number in Judaism that often stands for infinity, the idea here is that anything in the world can be traced back to, found in and explained by the Torah. It's all encompassing.

One simple chant. One single book. Can these finite things really unlock all the secrets of the world?! Well, maybe. Faith is a mysterious thing but Unitarian Universalism has a practical way of making sense of it. In our tradition, we are practiced in seeing the infinite wisdom in one limited thing. It's why we are open to a diversity of expressions of spirituality; we trust that they can all offer meaning and put us in touch with the great over-arching goodness in life.

I experienced this recently when I embarked on the adventure of learning how to cook kushari, an Egyptian dish made of lentils, macaroni, rice, crispy onions, fried garbanzo beans and a delicious tomato sauce with ginger and cardamom and about a million other spices. Good stuff! The first time I made it, it took me two full days of sweating in the kitchen and somehow the stress of timing it all just right practically threw my back out and I had to lay down on the couch and complain. But it was amazing how much easier it was to make the second and third times I cooked it.

And since then I have attempted—with reasonably successful results—some other North African and Indian dishes that also involve similarly-spiced tomato sauces. One single, simple recipe made me a better cook holistically!

It even made me a better-educated global citizen and religious scholar because I had to research a spice blend I couldn't buy ready made in a local store but was able to create myself. Reading up on it caused me to encounter an article about the ancient trade routes of various spices and how commerce prompted inter-religious interaction—interesting information that, let's just be honest,

will probably one day make its way into a sermon. But my point today is that even cooking is an example of how one finite thing can open up doors of vastness.

Finding a path to wide knowledge—in the spiritual or culinary realm—is not the same thing as knowing what to expect from life. Faith can't offer us that. It would be among the falsest of harmful religious truisms to insist that it could. Meredith talked about this in her *Call to Gather* when she shared that she has come to realize that the things that give her the most faith are, to her surprise, not actually those that make her feel in control or in charge.

So if cooking or ancient Hebrew chants are not guarantees of control then what might they offer us? About the chants, Shefa Gold says: "The true blessing is the capacity to listen ever more deeply. To listen to the sound and the silence. And in this listening I am opened to the truth of essential unity that embraces all diversity."

She continues: "Come to a sacred text with a vulnerable heart, acknowledging your own place of longing. Then, let yourself play with the sound of those words. Imagine that they are incantations whose power will be unlocked through your loving intention, through melody, harmony, rhythm, and breath. And then pay careful attention in the silence to what door has been opened by the chant. Resolve to enter. Let the beauty of chant move you through that door, and take pleasure in every step of the journey."

In Shefa Gold's worldview, faith is a way to move. A route back to self. Not a recipe for how to keep hardship at bay, but a path to a place of trust, a way to dive back into that which can hold and ground you. Former US Poet Laureate Kay Ryan uses a surprising figure to explore this idea of entering back into oneself: our local boy from back in the day, Harry Houdini. As a Jewish immigrant, he must have had his faith challenged by his literal and cultural journeys from Budapest, Hungary to Appleton, WI and then to Milwaukee and New York City and then eventually all over the whole world. This piece suggests that his true magic in being able to open himself up by merging with his art yet still retain the capacity to return to himself. It's called *Houdini*:

Each escape
involved some art,
some hokum, and
at least a brief
incomprehensible
exchange between
the man and metal
during which the
chains were not
so much broken
as he and they
blended. At the
end of each such
mix he had to
extract himself. It
Was the hardest
part to get right
routinely: breaking
back into the

same Houdini.

In a minute, we'll have another piece of special music. It's called "Kosi R'vayah," which translates to "my cup is overflowing." I heard a woman once talking about how this is a chant that she uses each year with her family and friends at Pesach, the spring holiday that's called the Passover in English. In the ritual meal, called a Seder, that commemorates the survival of the Jewish people as they left slavery for a new, unknown freedom, four glasses of wine or juice are drunk by participants.

This woman, whose story was featured on a website called ritualwell, wanted some way to keep people's attention on what the drink symbolized, not the practical questions of merlot vs. chardonnay and whether there was grape juice that had been chilled and, by the way, did you hear that latest bit of gossip? She wanted more focus.

Thus began a tradition of inviting everyone at the table to chant, in Hebrew, "my cup is overflowing," so that the act of getting a beverage became not a distraction but a pathway back to listening. Back to stillness. Back to keeping the faith in the midst of life's distractions.

After all, faith is most meaningful not when it's ordered or required, but when it's shared in a beautiful way. Maybe even when it's chanted.

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