

Rabbi Joshua Waxman
Temple Beth Rishon - Wyckoff, NJ
2nd Day Rosh ha-Shanah 5783

Hallelujah.
Praise God in the sacred sanctuary;
Praise God in the mighty firmament.

What a joy, what a blessing it is to be standing here in this sacred sanctuary and to praise God in the mighty firmament while looking at our magnificent new stained-glass windows which were so generously given to Temple Beth Rishon by Henry and Elaine Kauffman and which we had the great privilege of formally dedicating last week. As many of you know, these beautiful windows are based on the words of Psalm 150, and as we enter this New Year together I am filled with the wonder of this ancient majestic poem that underscores the ways in which instruments, music, and song can enable us to both offer and experience our praise most fully.

The psalm states:

הַלְלוּ-יְהוָה
הַלְלוּ-יְהוָה אֶל בְּקִדְשׁוֹ הַלְלוּהוּ בְּרִקְיעַ עֲזָו:
Praise God in the sacred sanctuary;
praise God in the mighty firmament.

הַלְלוּהוּ בְּגִבּוֹרֹתָיו הַלְלוּהוּ כְּרֹב גְּדָלוֹ:
Praise God for vast power
Praise God for abundant greatness

הַלְלוּהוּ בְּתִקְעַ שׁוֹפָר הַלְלוּהוּ בְּנֵבֶל וְכִנּוֹר:
Praise God with the sound of the Shofar
Praise God with harp and lyre

הַלְלוּהוּ בְּתֶף וּמְחֹל הַלְלוּהוּ בְּמִנִּים וְעִגְבֵּי:
Praise God with timbrel and dance
Praise God with strings and pipes

הַלְלוּהוּ בְּצִלְצְלֵי-שִׁמְעַ הַלְלוּהוּ בְּצִלְצְלֵי תְרוּעָה:
Praise God with resounding cymbals;
Praise God with clanging cymbals.

כֹּל הַנְּשָׁמָה תְהַלֵּל יְהוָה
הַלְלוּ-יְהוָה: Praise God everything that breathes;

The particular instruments Psalm 150 mentions – harp and lyre, timbrels, strings, pipes, cymbals and, of course most directly relevant on this Holiday, shofar – are all instruments that were used in the time of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, giving us a glimmer of insight into the celebrations that took place there more than 2500 years ago. But it's clear the list is meant to

be expansive not exhaustive, so can include all the instruments that have become part of the musical canon since, including piano, violin, clarinet, and guitar, all of which feature in our service this morning.

What is it about instruments that links them – or at least gives the potential to link them – to praise? Instrumental music – whether a blazing electric guitar solo or a glorious symphony – clearly has the capacity to stir us deeply, but that isn't the same as praise. In stirring us, they have the capacity to touch parts of ourselves that are usually closed off, powerful places of emotion and longing, and this can open us to the impulse to praise and give thanks. But I think what really makes instruments so powerful a vehicle for praise is that they have the capacity to take unarticulated impulses inside ourselves – joy, yearning, gratitude – and give them expression that can be perceived, moving us and moving others.

It's worth pointing out that in the context of the Psalm these impulses are put in the service of praising God, and for the author of the Psalm God was the reflexive and self-evident object of all praise. For some of us the language of 'praising God' may not sit comfortably – it sounds evangelical perhaps, or for those who aren't certain of their beliefs in or feelings about God it may not feel fully authentic or honest. First, it's important to recognize and affirm that this *is* Jewish language: the English word Hallelujah is in fact lifted directly from the Hebrew that appears in this Psalm and so many others, *hallelu-Yah*, which means 'praise God.' But we can also understand 'God' in this Psalm as referring to the Source of Being, the life and energy of the universe, the root of life – however and wherever we choose to understand and locate that. It's the same way that we can thank God for the gift of Creation on this Rosh ha-Shanah even if we don't believe the world came into being exactly as described in the Torah: it's a way of expressing awe and gratitude for the underlying beauty, majesty, and goodness of the world which we are blessed to share.

The Book of Psalms is traditionally ascribed to King David – King David the poet, King David the musician. In Hebrew, the book of psalms is called "Sefer Tehillim," or the Book of Praises" – the name of the book itself is derived from this word *tehillah* which is related to the word we repeat so many times, *hallelujah*, in this very last psalm of the Book. Psalm 150 is one of the shortest psalms – just six verses long. So why does this tiny little psalm have the honor of ending the entire book?

Many commentators feel that the Book of Psalms could easily – and maybe appropriately – have ended with Psalm 149 which offers a messianic view of a world at peace and with Israel's enemies subdued. But the Book of Psalms does not end with this historical image of Israel looking to the future. Rather, we have this addition of Psalm 150 which acts as a coda, a term I am purposefully drawing from music, because this psalm highlights the role that music, instruments, dance, and song can and should have in our relationship with God. Psalm 150 doesn't belong to any particular time or place but rather reaches into a timeless, universal sense of what it means to be alive and describes what our souls might feel and might be compelled to express through the intangible medium of music.

Sometimes our emotions are too deep for words, and it is only the ecstasy of wordless music that can give expression to what we are feeling. Our Psalm is, perhaps unsurprisingly, intimately linked with this time of year, beyond the general themes of praise and thanksgiving. First, it is traditionally recited not only as one of the preliminary Psalms (as is the case for the morning service every day of the year) but also as one of the passages traditionally read during

the Shofarot section of the Rosh ha-Shanah Musaf service, recognizing God in connection with Revelation which the Torah tells us was accompanied by shofar blasts. The thirteen times the word '*hallel* – praise' appears in the Psalm are also connected by various commentaries either with the thirteen months of a Jewish leap year such as the one that has just come to a close, or to the thirteen attributes of mercy – the passage from the Torah speaking of God's promise of forgiveness which forms a central part of the High Holiday liturgy. The opening verse also links the Sanctuary – the place where humans praise God – with the heavens, symbol of Creation; in this way, we are told our prayers here today, like Creation itself, are a means for uniting the realms of heaven and earth, which can serve as a model for us all as we consider our own actions and how we might wish to act better in the year just begun. So exploring the meaning and significance of this psalm could not come at a more appropriate time of year.

One of the poetic aspects of Psalm 150 that strikes me most powerfully is the parallelism contained in each of the first five verses as brought into relief by the Torah scholar Abby Lerner. I just mentioned the hope for unification of heaven and earth found in the first verse.

Verse two now calls us to praise God in power and strength, "*b'gvurato*," but also to praise God "*k'rov gudlo*," in God's abundant greatness. Here, strength and greatness are seen as contrasting, with greatness serving as a foil to strength. And indeed, many commentators understand God's greatness to be in opposition to God's might. While 'greatness' is seen as the ability to do *hesed*, to be compassionate and show mercy, 'strength, *gevurah*' is associated with the attribute of justice. On Rosh-ha-Shanah it makes sense to praise God in connection with the attribute of justice – after all this is the time of accounting for our actions, and we described God sitting in judgment over each and every creature. But it's also critical that we praise God for compassion, as the whole of our liturgy this season is imploring God to "*aseh imanu, tzedakah v'chesed, v'hoshienu* - please deal with us with righteousness and mercy, and deliver us." On Rosh-ha-Shanah, we pray that God will overcome the attribute of justice: not mete out what justice demands, but rather will temper that justice with mercy. We understand that while God could exult in *gevurah*, in strength and justice, we are all better off if God revels in *gedulah*, in the greatness and willingness to be compassionate and merciful; and this can serve as well as a model for ourselves at this season as we turn toward others around us in understanding and forgiveness.

Verses three, four, and five bring that parallelism into the listing of the instruments: *Halleluhu b'teka shofar*: Praise God with the loud and powerful blast of the shofar, but also in the same verse we are called to praise God with the much softer strains of the string instruments like the lyre and the harp. *Halleluhu b'tof u'machol*: Praise God with drum and dance, but also the softer strings and wind instruments, *minim v'ugav*. And then in verse five, we are exhorted to praise God with *tziltzelei shama*, described by some like castagnettes, as little cymbals meant to accompany other instruments and melodies; but now the parallelism shifts and instead of going from a louder to a softer instrument we conclude with perhaps the loudest one of all, the *tziltzelei truah*, the huge sound of the clanging cymbals that reverberates even as the percussionist stands at the back of the orchestra. Taken together, we move through a dizzying array of instruments and sounds, mirroring the myriad and kaleidoscopic ways in which the beauty of the world – tall trees, snow-capped mountains, rushing rivers, vast deserts – all reflects the praise of its Creator.

Artist Tara Mizrahi digs more deeply into an exploration of the specific instruments the Psalm mentions, and the order in which they appear. She writes: “the order itself reveals more and more involvement in the physical as the list goes on. The ways of worship go from the air (shofar) to the hands (lyre and harp) to the entire body (timbrel and dance). Perhaps this teaches that we may praise God by our spiritual openness - as well as our involvement in the physical world.” In other words, that praise isn’t supposed to be a purely intellectual exercise, neatly and decorously accomplished through polite words, but is something we’re invited to experience in and maybe even express with our bodies, the wholeness of our beings.

She also observes that the variety of instruments the Psalm includes emphasizes the point that there is no single way to praise God – not just the harp, or not just the flute, or not just the shofar, but rather that many paths are acceptable and perhaps even necessary: whatever instrument we ourselves represent is an indispensable part of a larger whole, but is incomplete and inadequate when offered alone; the complexity of God cannot be captured or encompassed by any one of us individually but can be more closely approached when we join our separate aspects and selves as one, just like an individual can certainly pray alone, but certain prayers cannot be said without a collection of individuals, a minyan.

At the most basic level, the psalm leads us to realize that we are all connected, all part of a wondrous tapestry, a beautiful orchestra that creates a harmonious symphony of God’s praises. We are not a string quartet, or a jazz band, or a virtuoso soloist. No, we, humankind, are the whole orchestra. Some of us provide melody. Some of us provide rhythm and beat. Some of us provide drama or cheerful ringing bells. Some of us provide body and richness to this amazing music. But each one of us has a role to play to contribute to the glorious whole – every one of us is needed and every voice is heard in the grand praise of God.

And finally, we arrive at our last verse: “*Kol ha-neshamah tehalel Yah* – every living soul shall praise God, *Hallelu-Yah*.” Breath is central to our Psalm: the word “*neshamah*, soul” – is connected with the word *neshimah* which means breath - not in any way a coincidence because we read in Genesis that God breathes a soul into Adam, and the soul is often referred to in Jewish sources as the breath of life. An ancient midrash reads “*kol ha-neshamah*” in our verse as “*kol ha-neshimah*,” every breath will praise God. When we recognize the breath we draw in – constantly, miraculously, without effort or thought or intention – as a gift, and especially as a gift of soulfulness, then we are primed to return that breath to God through our mouths in the form of prayer... or through instruments in the form of music as our Psalm invites.

An instrument is a means to give voice and expression to our innermost feelings, but it’s important to remember that it’s those feelings that ultimately matter and not the instrument itself. The Talmud says: “*Tannu rabanan* – Our Rabbis taught: There was a flute in the Temple, which was smooth, subtle, made of reed, and from the days of Moses. The King commanded that it be covered in gold leaf, but it made its sound no longer sweet. After they removed the overlay, it returned the sweetness of its sound, like it was before. There was a cymbal in the Temple, made of bronze, whose sound was sweet. It was cracked, and Sages sent for skilled workers from Alexandria, Egypt, who repaired it, but its sound was no longer sweet. They removed the repair, and its sweet sound returned, as it was before. (B. Arachin 10b) The message is clear: it’s not the externals that matter, the vessels; but rather the praise and gratitude they evoke in us. Our new stained glass windows are, of course, stunning; but their

beauty also lies in their ability to move us in ways that deepen our connection with God, this synagogue, and one another.

And the idea of being connected with one another is where I want to close my reflections on the 150th Psalm on this Rosh ha-Shanah. The closing line, as I noted before, translates as “every living thing will praise God.” Rosh ha-Shanah is, of course, a Jewish holiday. But it celebrates Creation, which – unlike Pesach which marks freeing the Israelites from Egypt or Shavuot which celebrates the gift of Torah to the Jewish people – is universal. “Every living thing, *Kol ha-neshamah*” the Psalm exclaims: gratitude, thanksgiving, and praise are quintessentially Jewish, but in no way exclusively Jewish – the desire to express gratitude and to give praise with words or with melody are intrinsic parts of all religious traditions, and are embraced as well by people who do not necessarily identify with any religion. Creation is a gift for all living beings: this precious, fragile, wondrous world belongs to us all and the deepest form of gratitude and praise is one that unites all people, all God’s creatures. And all of us in turn offer different types of praise – we make use of different metaphorical instruments – but they are all beloved by God and the diversity of sounds only adds to the richness of our song.

In this New Year, may we find ways to give expression to our deepest hopes and longings, to experience gratitude and return the breath we have received in the form of prayers to God and words of kindness to others, may we be open to recognizing the profound interconnectedness of all people and of this world we are blessed with, and so add our own notes of praise to the symphony of being: *Kol he-neshamah tehalel Yah, Hallelu-Yah!*