

“What Stirs the Soul”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

Words are powerful but music stirs the soul.

If you read the Bible or the Mishna without a melody, teaches the Talmud, it is as if God has given defective laws. (Meg. 32a) The lilt of song liberates words to express what is latent inside of them. The best preachers have rhythm, the finest expressions of the human spirit take wing with song.

“So sang Moses and the children of Israel.” (Ex. 15:1) Moses had trouble with speech but not with song. He longed to sing. There is a Talmudic tradition that God considered making King Hezekiah the Messiah. But in the end, Hezekiah could not bring salvation. Why? Because despite the many miracles God worked for him, Hezekiah did not sing. (San. 94a) One cannot be the Messiah if one's soul is fettered, if the heart is locked up — if one's spirit has no song.

Yehuda Halevy, the great Hebrew poet, wrote to Zion that he was, “a harp for all your songs.” Poetry and song in Hebrew are expressed by the same word, *shir*. The lyric and the lyre can catch the current of the human soul.

Why do we sing? In the end, the author of Shir Hakavod says it best: “I sing hymns and weave songs because my soul yearns for You.”