



*Parashat BeShalach*

## Can a Woman Play Music with Men?

**Dear Rebbetzin,**

Is it a good thing for a Jewish woman to play music on a fiddle or other instruments?

- A. If so, in which kind of situations should she play? (Only at home, or even in public? Only with other women present, or both women and men, or only with immediate family present? May she play music only with other women or also in a group with men? )
- B. What kind of music should a Jewish woman play? Should it be only Jewish music or is Irish or old-time fiddle or classical music good to play?
- C. Is it a good idea to teach music and if so would it be only to girls, only to other Jews, or could she also teach non-Jews?
- D. Which kind of music would be ok to teach?
- E. What about teaching violin according to the Suzuki Method?

The questions seem complicated to me since music comes from many sources and has such a spiritual effect. There are also *tzniut* and *yichud* issues. A music student may be in situations that would not be right for a Jew to be in, such as playing in mixed orchestras etc. If you can help me with these questions, it will be much appreciated. Thank you for your help.

**A female musician – Miriam Shiransky** (name changed)

**Dear Female Musician, Miriam,**

I believe that it is wonderful for a Jewish woman to play any kind of music and whatever kinds of instrument(s) she enjoys because music is a way to express the *neshamah* (soul). It helps both oneself and the listener to get in touch with their spirituality and connect with Hashem. “Why were the Levites selected to sing in the Temple? Because the name Levi means cleaving. The soul of one who heard their singing at once cleaved to G-d” (*Zohar* 2:19a). We, moreover, learn about the centrality of music in the Torah from this week’s *parasha*’s Song of the Sea.

**Women Praise Hashem with Drums and Dance**

*Parashat B’Shalach* teaches us that Jewish women have a special connection to music. Whereas both the Israelite men and women sang praises to Hashem for their delivery from the Egyptian slavery and the miracle of the splitting of the sea, only the women played instruments and danced.

**ספר שמות פרק טו (כ) ונתקח מרים הנביאה אחות אהרן את התוף בידה ונתצאן כל הנשים אחריה בתפים ובמחלות: (כא) ונתען להם מרים שירו להשם...**

“Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines, dancing. And Miriam answered them, ‘Sing to Hashem...’” (*Shemot* 15:20-21).

Our redemption was in the merit of the women, who recognized the importance of praising Hashem with music, and therefore packed these tambourines, despite the rush of the Exodus.

“In the merit of the righteous women of that generation, our forefathers were redeemed from Egypt” (*Babylonian Talmud, Sotah* 11b). It was their strong emunah that the Holy One, Blessed be He, would make miracles for them, that prompted the righteous women of that generation to prepare

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tambourines and dances (Rashi, *Shemot* 15:20). Under the leadership of Miriam, the women accompanied their praises to Hashem with drums and dances, and thereby merited to receive the highest level of prophesy (*Mechilta, Beshalach* 3).

### May Women Sing with Men?

Since music is so central to Judaism and in particular to Jewish women, we must find creative ways so that Torah observant women's musical talents do not get stifled by concerns of modesty. From the Song of the Sea, we learn about the separation between men and women during their music and song. Moshe led the men in song, whereas Miriam led the women. However, the issue is not clear cut, as our *Haftorah* records that Devorah, the prophetess, sang a song of praise to Hashem together with Barak, the son of Avinoam (*Shoftim* 5:1). According to the simple reading of the text, Devorah was married to Lapidot and not Barak. The Talmud teaches, "*Kol Isha ervah*" – the voice of a woman is nakedness (*Babylonian Talmud, Berachot* 24a). Consequently, the *Shulchan Aruch* rules that men are prohibited from hearing women sing except for their immediate family (*Orach Chaim* 75:3). This doesn't imply that women are forbidden from singing. There are plenty of opportunities to sing with and for women as well as children, who after all, comprise more than half the world's population. When it comes to singing *zemirot* at the Shabbat table, there are different opinions. The Talmud states that two voices cannot be heard simultaneously (*Babylonian Talmud, Megillah* 21b). This statement is the basis for the lenient opinion that the *Kol Isha* prohibition does not apply to two or more women singing together. There is also a leniency in regards to singing *zemirot*, singing songs to children, and lamentations for the dead, since in these contexts men do not derive pleasure from the woman's voice (*Divrei Cheifetz*). Based on this opinion, women do sing together in the presence of men at our Shabbat table- albeit not at the top of their lungs.

### May a Woman Play Music with Men?

A. There is only a halachic issue for women to refrain from singing in the presence of men and boys above the age of nine. I am not aware of any halachic prohibition for a woman to play music without singing in the presence of men. Whether it is recommended for a Jewish woman to play in front of men, or even together with men depends on the situation and the *minhag* (custom) of the community. I, personally, do not play guitar in the presence of men, here, in Bat Ayin, but I will play my guitar to accompany my extended family at our annual Chanukah party, when they sing Chanukah songs. Playing together in a group with men, could entail a non-*tzniut*, intimate setting. I would not play together with another man expect in a family situation, for example, with my nephew in his mother's presence. However, professional musicians, who play in big orchestras where there are both men and women playing is not an intimate setting, and may be ok. Any questionable situation should be presented to a competent rabbi.

### Which Kind of Music is Suitable to Play and to Whom May a Jewish Woman Teach Music?

B. Regarding the kind of music to play, I would recommend Jewish music, especially Chassidic *nigunim*. However, non-Jewish music, such as classical and folk music, may also have sparks of holiness that can be elevated when we play them for the sake of Hashem. One of my favorite, non-Jewish songs is Stairway to Heaven, by Led Zeppelin, played on the harp. Although there are no explicit rules, I do believe that we must be careful with what music we play and hear. Rebbe Nachman explains that if we hear music from a musician who is not pure, but mainly intends to

gratify his ego and make money can actually harm our service of Hashem. Yet, hearing music from a kosher musician benefits our service of Hashem (*Kitzur Likutei Mohoran* 3).

C. I do not believe that there is any prohibition for a woman to teach music to men as long as it does not violate the laws of *yichud* (seclusion). However, customs vary in different communities. In our community of Bat Ayin, we hold that a woman may teach women and girls of all ages and boys until the age of Bar mitzvah. Yet, she cannot sing in front of a boy older than nine. My son had several female piano teachers when he was a young boy. While teaching a boy between the ages of 9-12, the woman teacher must adhere to the laws of *yichud*, and preferably teach during the day hours, when other people may pop in.

D. Whichever music is ok to play is ok to teach. (See my answer on B.)

E. I think the Suzuki method of teaching is a wonderful way that a mother can bond with her child. It all depends on the interest of the child and the family situation.

### Music Makes Plants Grow and Brings Sustenance

The kind of music that we need to play depends on the kind of plants that grow in our land. According to Rabbi Nachman, there is a symbiotic relationship between our plants and our music. The specific kind of music that we play is made from the melody of the plants that grows in our place while our musical melodies also cause the plants to grow. Each place has a different melody, and there is a special melody for the land of Israel. Ya'acov intuitively knew that Yosef's melody was the melody of the land of Israel, since he was going to sustain the children of Israel. This is why he sent him, "from the זמרת/zimrat – melody of the Land- in your vessels" (*Bereishit* 43:11). Because each plant has a specific song in *Perek Shira*, it has a particular melody that helps it grow. Our holy ancestors were shepherders who empowered the plants to grow by playing the melody of the plants of their place. Great leaders are in tune with the melodies of the plants of their place, since it is their responsibility to bring down sustenance to their people. Each leader has a melody that pertains to him and the people he sustains (*Likutei Moharan, Mahadura Batra* 63).

### Music Brings About the Mashiach

Integrating music and song into the Torah experience is a very powerful tool in bringing people back to the Torah way of life. Through singing *nigunim*, playing music and participating in drumming workshops, we can attain a feeling of closeness with Hashem and restore emotional attachment to Torah observance. Musicians that study Torah can elevate people and raise them from their normal state of consciousness through music. "Had Chezkiyahu recited song at the downfall of Sancheriv, he would have become the King Mashiach, and Sancheriv would have been Gog and Magog. However, he did not do so..." (*Midrash Song of Songs Rabbah* 4:20). Through the aspect of melodies and tunes – the aspect of *Azamra* – I will sing praises, the Mashiach of the G-d of Ya'acov and the Sweet Singer of Israel will come, may it be soon! (*Likutei Halachot, Orach Chaim, Laws of Waking up in the Morning* 1). So let us follow in the footsteps of Miriam, our teacher and role model, and let us dance our way towards the Mashiach with our soulful music and song!