

וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו יְהוָה בְּאֵלֶיךָ מִמַּרְאֵי וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב בְּתֵח-הָאֵהָל בְּחֹם הַיּוֹם:

Vayera elav Adonai b'elonei mamre v'hu yoshev petach ha-ohel k'chom hayom.

Adonai appeared to him [Abraham] by the terebinths of Mamre, as he sat in the tent-opening in the heat of the day. [Gen. 18:1]

When I decided to compose a piece for the triple anniversary of Temple Sinai, celebrating congregation, Rabbi and building, I asked Rabbi Glazier if he had a favorite text that might be appropriate. We were having this conversation last fall at the kiddush following a Shabbat morning service, and he mentioned the first verse from parshat Vayera, which had been the parsha of a recent week. In midrashic sources, the rabbis interpreted Abraham's sitting in the tent-opening as indicating that he was watching for travelers to whom he might offer hospitality. Surely this was a fitting theme for a celebration of congregational life.

As I experimented with musical settings, I noticed that a rendering of the traditional cantillation marks (also known as *trop*, from the Yiddish term) from the verse could serve as a melodic motif. The piece began to take shape as a commentary, both musically and textually, on the development of liberal Judaism, of which the Reform movement is the senior branch: rooted in tradition, but grafting historical and modern elements together into a living organism.

The piece opens with a solo chant of the original text in Hebrew using the *trop*, in the non-rhythmic style of a synagogue Torah reading. The chant then turns into melody with a fixed rhythm and a simple harmony, reminiscent of a medieval conductus. (Notice that melody--it will return later.) The addition of two more voices, still singing the Hebrew text with the *trop*-based melody woven among the four parts, brings the style forward in time to a more Renaissance-like homophony, which is then restated by the entire choir. Next, the original theme is expounded in Baroque-like polyphony by a quartet of voices.

So far, we have remained well within traditional synagogue practice: the text is in the original Hebrew, sung *a cappella*. But now elements of liberal practice begin to emerge with the introduction of instruments. The violin states the original theme, accompanied by piano, and the viola and cello join to restate it. A short bridge derived from haftarah *trop* then leads back to the theme, now joined by the choir singing a near-literal translation of the text in English.

Having stated the text, we turn to midrash. An adagio section sung by the bass soloist states the midrashic interpretation linking the text to the idea of hospitality. Then the soprano soloist picks up the idea, and the piece takes on a modern flavor. When the new theme has been established by the soloist and choir in call-and-response fashion, the strings remind us of the original *trop*-based melody (somewhat modified to fit, but firmly grounded in the original) as a counter-melody to the new theme. When the altos hear this, they decide to go back and sing the Hebrew again (it's hard to restrain determined altos!), while the rest of the choir stays with the new theme and midrashic text. This is the moment in the piece most directly reflective of recent liberal Jewish practice: simultaneously performing original text and associative interpretation, in both Hebrew and the vernacular, blending venerable themes and modern harmonies. A short rendition of the midrashic theme in five-part *a cappella* close harmony provides a moment of calm, before the choir and instruments return to conclude the piece.

Acknowledgements: Thanks to Rabbi James Glazier, Mark Leopold and the Temple Board for their continuing support of the choir and music program at Temple Sinai; to the members of the choir, soloists and instrumentalists for their skill, dedication and good humor; and to my wife and יָדִיד נָפֶשׁ Judy Alexander, for opening new worlds to me בְּכֹל יוֹם תְּמִיד.

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סיון תשס"ו / May 2006