

The Day the Women Sang

Why Does Jewish Law Oppose Men Listening to a Female Singers?

Rabbi YY Jacobson

January 29, 2026

L'ilui nishmas **Beila** bas R' **Yosef Yehuda**, a Holocaust survivor, on her yartzeit, the 8th of Shevat. Dedicated by her son, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren, all following b'darchei Hashem.

9 Soldiers Walk Out

The following story became a major news item in Israel, back in September 2011, reflecting the poor communication between religious and secular Jews, allowing for stereotypes to persist.

At a military event, Jewish female soldiers began singing solo as part of a military band. Nine religious Israeli soldiers chose to leave the auditorium, based on the law in Judaism that men should not listen to women singing. Regiment Commander Uzi Kileger warned them: "If you don't come back inside immediately, you will be refusing orders and will be dismissed from the course." (According to the General Staff orders, a religious soldier is entitled not to take part in recreational activity which contradicts his lifestyle and faith, but the orders do not apply to non-recreational military events.)

Indeed, four of the nine religious cadets who walked out were dismissed from their officers' course.

In much of the Israeli media, these soldiers were blasted for their "primitive behavior" and their tenacious adherence to an "orthodox custom" which denigrates women, advocating their voices to remain cloistered, so that they do not, "heaven forbid," express themselves uninhibitedly.

How sad when Jewish law is so misunderstood.

The Talmudic Source

The source of this law is in the Talmud[1] (the authoritative compilation of Jewish law, history and theology authored 1700 years ago) and in the Code of Jewish Law (known as the Shlchan Aruch).[2]

אמר שמואל, קול באשה ערוה, שנאמר כי קולך ערב ומראך נאוה.

The Talmudic sage Shmuel said, the voice of a women (singing) has intimate power; as the verse states: your voice is sweet and your countenance beautiful.[3]

The Babylonian 2th century sage Samuel is referring here to the description in the Song of Songs where the lover talks about his beloved. Listen to stunning words straight out of our Bible:[4]

עֲנֵה דוֹדִי, וְאָמַר לִי: קוֹמִי לָךְ רַעֲיָתִי יְפֹתִי, וְלִכִּי-לָךְ. כִּי-הִנֵּה הִסְתּוּ, עֲבָר; הִגְשָׁם, חֲלַף הַלֵּךְ לוֹ. הַנִּצְּנִים נִרְאוּ בְּאֶרֶץ, עֵת הַזְּמִיר הִגִּיעַ; וְקוֹל הַתּוֹר, נִשְׁמַע בְּאֶרְצָנוּ. הַתְּאֵנָה חֲנֻטָּה פִּגְיָה, וְהַגָּפְנִים סְמִדָּר נִתְּנוּ רִים; קוֹמִי לָךְ רַעֲיָתִי יְפֹתִי, וְלִכִּי-לָךְ. יוֹנְתִי בְּחִגְי הַסֶּלַע, בְּסִתֵּר הַמַּדְרָגָה, הִרְאִינִי אֶת-מְרְאִיךָ, הַשְּׂמִיעֵנִי אֶת-קוֹלְךָ כִּי-קוֹלְךָ עָרֵב, וּמְרְאִיךָ נְאוֹה

“Arise, my beloved, my beautiful one, and go to yourself. For behold, the winter has passed; the rain is over and gone. The blossoms have appeared in the land, the time of singing has arrived,

*and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. The fig tree has put forth its green figs, and the vines with their tiny grapes have given forth their fragrance; arise, my beloved, my beautiful one, and go to yourself. My dove is in the clefts of the rock, in the coverture of the steps; **show me your appearance, let me hear your voice, for your voice is pleasant and your appearance is beautiful!***"

But wait! Just open up the weekly portion, Beshalach, and you will notice a problem. No smaller a personality than Miriam, the older sister of Moses, and a prophetess in her own right—sings in front of many men, in the presence of her own brother Moses who has no qualms about her behavior.

Here is how the Torah describes it:[5]

וַתִּקַּח מִרְיָם הַנְּבִיאָה אַחֹת אַהֲרֹן אֶת הַתֵּף בְּיָדָהּ וַתִּצְאֵן כָּל הַנְּשִׂיִם אַחֲרֶיהָ בְּתַפִּים וּבְמַחֲלֹת. וַתַּעַן לָהֶם
מִרְיָם שִׁירָהּ לֵאמֹר כִּי גָאָה גָאָה סוּס וָרֶכֶב וְרָמָה בַיָּם

Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took the tambourine in her hand; and all the women followed her with tambourines and dances. And Miriam called to them: 'Sing to G-d, for He is most exalted; horse and rider He cast in the sea...'

Here we have it black-and-white: Days after their departure from Egypt, as the Jews cross the Red Sea, just a few weeks away from the Revelation at Sinai, and in the presence of Moses and some one million men—Moses' older sister, the prophetess Miriam, leads all of the women in song. What happened to the admonition against women singing in public?

To be sure, the Torah has not been given yet. Nonetheless, if the Torah would define this as immodest and inappropriate behavior, how is it that at such an elevated moment they would engage in this?[6]

Let me share a fascinating insight by the Italian sage and Kabbalist Rabbi Menachem Azaryah of Fanu (1548—1620), in his book *Kanfei Yona*. [7]

The Reason for a Law

Let's go back a step: Why does Jewish law not want the man to hear a female sing?

It is not because women's singing is somehow not up to par or unholy. To the contrary, the feminine song has an electrifying power to it, it capturing her beauty, majesty and soulfulness. True, in our society we don't pay enough homage to a woman singing because our over exposure to everything and anything often dulls our senses to the sensations of intimate power. Whenever you are overexposed to something, your senses become dulled to the grandeur involved.

The Torah attempts to **fine-tune us to subtlety**; to cultivate within us an appreciation of deep energy and soulful emotion, to detect the vibrations of the inner heart. The Torah wants us never to lose our sensitivity to the sensual energy transported in the sweet, pleasant sound of a woman singing. As the Song of Songs puts it:

הִרְאִינִי אֶת-מַרְאִיךָ, הַשְּׁמִיעֵנִי אֶת-קוֹלְךָ כִּי-קוֹלְךָ עָרֵב, וּמַרְאִיךָ נְאוּהָ.

"Show me your appearance, let me hear your voice, for your voice is pleasant and your appearance is beautiful!"

Own Your Intimacy

The Torah always maintained that every human being, woman and man, has the right and duty to respect, safeguard and cherish their intimacy, their inner sacred space. [8]

A woman must own her inner intimate power; it is her secret from G-d that she ought to treat with the utmost dignity. Never should a girl or woman feel pressure that she needs to impress strangers through her body and voice. Her soul, body, and voice belong to her alone and no one else. The pressure on so many wonderful people to use their most precious selves to entice and engage deprives them of a peaceful, wholesome, and confident life. Woe to a society that indirectly teaches young women that their value and self-esteem come when members of the opposite gender are infatuated by their physique.

A woman's beauty, like every person's beauty, must be owned by her, and must be preserved, protected, and nurtured with sensitivity and delicacy. It is too fine, too sacred, too subtle, to be pulled through the gutter. It is not cheap. The laws of Judaism focusing on modesty are not intended to repress the woman; they are intended to create an environment where she can be most natural and real without someone manipulating and misusing her intimacy for his selfish needs.

Women and girls should sing; their music has unique energy and power. When women begin singing, the men ought to leave the room as a sign of respect toward the woman. The man is making the statement that her intimate soulfulness does not belong to him. Music is spiritual; singing comes from the soul. And if he is going to use her singing as a tool for his own physical enjoyment, never mind for a promiscuous thought, he is violating her dignity.

When the Veil Was Removed

Now we will understand why after the splitting of the sea Miriam and all the women sung out loud.

In the song that Moses sang with the men before Miriam, they declared: "This is my G-d!"[9]

Says Rashi: This is my G-d: He revealed Himself in His glory to them [the Israelites], and they pointed at Him with their finger [as denoted by the word: "this is my G-d"]. By the sea, a maidservant perceived what prophets did not perceive.

It was a unique moment. The inner spiritual core of the universe came to the fore. At such a moment, there is no room for distortion. When the presence of G-d is felt, when the organic unity of the universe is experienced, each of us experiences not our brute, selfish superficial self, but with our innate holiness and love. Then the intimate voice of the woman will only inspire people to greater moral and spiritual heights. Gone is the concern that someone will use a female voice for superficial and immoral pursuits. On the contrary, the voice of Miriam and some one million girls and women sublimated souls and kindled hearts.[10]

[1] Talmud Berachos 24a

[2] Orach Chaim section 75 and Mishna Berurah ibid. (There are some opinions that this applies only during the reading of the Shema, see https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%A7%D7%95%D7%9C_%D7%91%D7%90%D7%99%D7%A9%D7%94_%D7%A2%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%95%D7%94)

[3] For a detailed halachic discussion about this, and the leniency introduced by the German Rabbis of the 19th century to listen to many women singing together, as well as the leniency to hear women singing when they are singing together with men, as well as the leniency to listen to girls younger than 11 sing, see: http://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%A7%D7%95%D7%9C_%D7%91%D7%90%D7%99%D7%A9%D7%94_%D7%A2%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%95%D7%94

Several halachic (Jewish law) authorities are of the opinion that a recording or a radio transmitted singing voice of a woman who one does not

personally know would not be actually prohibited. Others say that one should refrain from hearing a woman sing in any format through any medium. In today's time this might seem severe, but the Torah puts such enormous value on the bond between a husband and wife that it does not allow for any potential damage to a man's undivided and unequivocal devotion and attraction to his one and only partner in life. Click here for more on this subject.

The "*Sridei Eish*" (Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg (1885-1966)) opines that it may be permitted for women to sing along with other men. There are also those who are of the view that the restriction against men hearing women singing doesn't apply to women who are singing in a group, since no individual is calling attention to herself.

[4] Song of Songs 2:10-14

[5] Exodus 15:20-21

[6] See the various explanations given by: The Vilna Gaon, Tzeida Laderech, and Tzafnas Paanach on the verse. The Tzaida Lederech suggests that is why the women used the drums to eclipse the singing voices. The Vilna Gaon and Tzafnas Panach suggest that in Hebrew there is a grammatical distinction between addressing women vs. men. In English we would say, "she spoke to them," and the "them" can refer to men or women. In Hebrew we must distinguish: "To them" referring to men is "lahem;" "to them" referring to women is "lahen." What is fascinating is that the verse about Miriam states *וַתִּקְרָא לָהֶם לְשִׁירָהּ לֵאמֹר*, "And Miriam called to them: 'Sing to G-d,'" "to them" as though she was addressing men. Indeed, say the above commentators, the women never sang, because men should not be listening to women singing. And there were plenty of men present. Miriam was telling the men to sing to G-d. The women merely played the instruments. Each of these explanations seems difficult.

[7] Kanfei Yonah 4:36. The point was explained at length by the Lubavitcher Rebbe in a public address on 15 Shevat 5732 (1972), showing how Rashi clearly gives us the answer to the question.

[8] Rabbi Yitzchak David Grossman, Rabbi of Migdal Haimek, once consulted the Lubavitcher Rebbe about making a choir comprised of Russian Jewish children who recently immigrated to Israel. The Rebbe encouraged the idea and shared with him how to explain to the girls that they ought not to be part of the boys' choir:

"קולה איז פארבונדן מיט איר שיינקייט, איז כדי פארהיטן איר שיינקייט ס'זאל נישט זיין הפקר דארף מען איינארדענען אין אזא אופן".

"Her voice is reflective of her beauty; in order to preserve her beauty it should not be squandered and 'free for all,' it should be arranged in this way" (where boys and girls do not perform together).

[9] Exodus 15:2

[10] That is why in the seventh blessing we recite at a chupah and during the seven subsequent days we talk of the time when it will be heard in the streets of Jerusalem "the voice of the groom and the voice of the bride." We can all use a dosage of the woman's voice. We all need feminine music in our lives. Yet the world is not ready for such intense energy without protection. Can we hear the spiritual holiness in the feminine song? When the sea parted, the sea representing that which lay in the subconscious holiness of man, below the surface, parted within us and we could appreciate the spirituality of the woman, the Divine nobility stemming from her soul and body, from her music and her voice. When the sea—representing the depth of our souls—closed up again, we must be cautious not to violate the sacred energy of a woman, till the time of Moshiach when we will be ready to listen to the "voice of the bride." (See at length in the Maamar Meharah Yishama in the Derushei Chasuna of Rabbi Schmuel of Lubavitch, the Rebbe Maharash (Derushei Chasunah pp. 82-89 and all the references noted there.)