

Machshavot Tovot, Diburim Tovim
Rabbi Jeff Silverstein - Kol Nidre Sermon 5786

A couple of years ago, while sitting in traffic on my way home in LA, my Spotify DJ played a song for me that I had never heard before. It was a blend of electronic dance music and something right out of the shtetl from which my ancestors fled to America. For a few minutes, while crawling down Wilshire Boulevard, I was entranced by the music and by the Hebrew words which came after a significant amount of yai dai dai's... "Machshavot Tovot, Diburim Tovim." Good thoughts. Good speech. When I got home, I cycled back through the playlist from the drive and added it to my liked songs. I have listened to this song at least once a week since I discovered it but, until quite recently, I knew nothing about where it came from.

A couple of weeks ago, I was browsing Israeli news on the internet when I came across a headline from the television network Reshet 13: *Chotzeh Generim uMigzarim*- Crossing genres and sectors. There was a video attached to the report that I decided to watch. Within seconds of skipping the ad before, I heard a familiar melody...it was the song! The story that followed, of how a Chabad nigun from the 19th century transformed into a modern hit in Israel, excited and inspired me, and I will now share it with you.

The melody goes something like this: (sung) ay yay yay, ay ay ay ay ay yay yay yayaayay.

The story goes something like this:

Around 80 years ago there was an effort to collect as many Chassidic nigunim as possible and notate them musically in a book. Thus, Sefer HaNigunim, the book of niggunim was born. Of the collection, our nigun is number 73. In the report from Reshet 13, Mendi Bloi, a nigun researcher and podcast host, explains that though this niggun was officially numbered and marked as special for shabbat and yom tov, there is no information about its provenance, but that it probably comes from the mid 19th century. Though we don't know it's precise origin, we do know how it spread.

At some point in the 1930's, the melody made its way to a young Chassid in Romania by the name of Yisroel Dubroskin. Yisroel was the son of a rabbi and was known as a gifted student...and by a certain nigun that he was fond of singing. When he was only 10 years-old, he was deported and sent to the Nazi camps. Those who were with him during the Holocaust also remembered him for the nigun he sang. Even at the darkest time for Jews in recent memory, when so many lost hope and faith, Yisroel shared the melody and added words that affirmed his belief and uplifted those around him.

He chose the words of Psalm 139:7-8:

אָנָה אֵלֶיךָ מְרוּחֶךָ וְאָנָה מִפָּנֶיךָ אֶבְרַח:

אִם־אֶסֶק שָׁמַיִם שָׁם אַתָּה וְאִצִּיעָה שְׂאוֹל הַנֶּקֶד:

Ana elech meruchecha, v'ana mipanecha evrach.

Im esak shamayim sham atah, vatziah sheol hineka.

Where can I escape from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I descend to sheol, you are there too.

We can understand why a young, religious boy going through the horrors of the holocaust would choose these words. They gave him and his fellow prisoners hope, and helped them keep their *Emunah*, their trust in God, even in the darkest of times. Tragically, despite surviving the Holocaust, Yisroel was killed in 1956, in a terrorist attack that took place on the outskirts of his new home in the Israeli town of Kfar Chabad. We, the collective Jewish world, lost Yisroel when he was only 21 years-old, but we did not lose his song. His fervor for the melody and his belief in the words he applied to it were strong enough to keep the nigun going for generations to come.

And so, over 50 years after Yisroel's tragic death, popular Israeli singer Chanan ben Ari recorded a new cover of the nigun with the words that Yisroel himself had selected. The song appeared on an album from Tzama, an organization in Israel dedicated to preserving and sharing nigunim. They are clearly doing a great job, because from that point in 2016, the melody began to slowly permeate into the Israeli subconscious. Then in 2021, a Chassidic singer name Moti Weiss carried the niggun with him while he traveled in the Philippines. But Moti sang his own words:

Sung: "Machshavot Tovot ayayayayayay, Diburim Tovim ayayayayayayay."

“Good thoughts, Good Speech.” Eventually Weiss recorded his rendition as a single that has since swept across Israel and the Jewish world, generating covers and remixes and an astounding number of plays globally and in my car.

The rest of the story of this nigun is still being written, and we are now all part of it. We are the carriers of the melody, and we are the beneficiaries of the message. Especially on Kol Nidre, as we look backwards over our lives in order to move forward, we must take this song and its words into our hearts. Machshavot Tovot. Diburim Tovim. Good thoughts. Good Speech.

In our Jewish tradition we learn that our thoughts and our words hold practical and spiritual weight. In fact, this lesson is one of the very first ideas we encounter, sourcing back to the very beginning of the beginning of the universe. We learn from the third verse in the torah, “vayomer Elohim yhi or, vayhi or”...God said let there be light and there was light. The tools which God used to form and shape our universe were words and speech! Then, only a little later at the end of the same parsha, we learn the gravity of our thoughts.

וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה כִּי רַבָּה רָעַת הָאָדָם בָּאָרֶץ וְכָל-יִצְרָר מִחֲשַׁבְתּוֹ לָפוֹר רָע כָּל-הַיּוֹם:
*Vayar Adonai ki raba raat haadam baaretz v'chol-yetzer
machshavot libo rak ra kol-hayom*

“And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that all the impulse of the thoughts of his heart were only evil continually.”

God decided to destroy humanity not merely because of the actions they had committed, but because their *thoughts* were only ever evil. God knew then as we do now, that thoughts become speech and speech become actions, and so if we only ever think bad thoughts, we have no future.

The rabbis of our tradition also knew this. There is a story in the Talmud about two sages, one named Pinchas, and the other, Shmuel. Pinchas had suffered the loss of a close relative and was sitting in mourning when Shmuel came to visit to offer his condolences. When Shmuel saw that Pinchas has long nails, he asked why pinchas had not cut them. Pinchas, took offense to the question and replied “if your relative had died, would you take the matter so lightly?” Shortly after, Shmuel suffered the death of relative. When Pinchas came to offer his condolences, Shmuel threw his own fingernails into Pinchas’ face, saying “Don’t you know a covenant is made with the lips?” The rabbis of the talmud believed that words literally had the power to influence the future. I think, on some level, we believe it too.

On Yom Kippur, we spend our 25 hours of fasting in deep contemplation about the past. And yet, this holiday is about securing a future. Not long ago we heard the words of Kol Nidre. We repeated three times this legal formula- All Vows and prohibitions and oaths and consecrations, made by definite terms and by ambiguous phrasing, that we may vow or swear or prohibit upon ourselves, from this yom kippur to the next, we repudiate them. All of them are undone, struck, cancelled, null and void, they have no force, they are not in effect. Our vows are not vows and our prohibitions are not prohibitions and our oaths are not oaths.

When we call out this plea it's as if we are asking "Please, God, don't let our minds and our mouths make life harder for us. Don't let our thoughts turn into speech and then to deeds for which we will again have to atone."

Kol nidre, as we recite it, is about freedom- it is a moment that guarantees that we maintain the ability to do and be anything. We are freed in advance of the things we may promise to ourselves in moments of anger or fear, or relief or passion. We will no longer be locked into those states or the identities they produce. We do not have to be those people. We can be better, and we can remain free to change and adapt when the patterns we fall into no longer serve us. We can make different choices, we can set better intentions. We can think better thoughts, we can speak better words.

But it's hard. In our world today we are surrounded by machshavot and diburim meod lo tovim, that are very much not good. Constantly, on our phones, televisions, and radios, on our telephone poles, in our neighbor's yards, we are inundated with negative thoughts and negative speech. And, all too often, we see them become negative actions. We watch angry protestors destroy public property. We see enraged students turn places of learning into fortresses of hate and exclusion. We witness people who drink hate from the internet spew it back out into the world through gun violence.

We are constantly exposed to other people's negativity- and it affects us. Sometimes without even being conscious of it, they turn our hopes into fears and our dreams into nightmares. They make us think bad thoughts, and give us reason to want to speak bad words. Sometimes the world around us feels like a bottomless downward

spiral. But it doesn't have to be that way for us. We can change the momentum that would pull us down and cause us to either shrink away from the world or make it worse. It is not easy, but just as God used words to create the universe, we also must use them to create a new reality for ourselves. We can use words to lift us out of the depths and back towards the real eternal cycle of relationship between God and the Jewish people. And we can sing them:

Sung: Machshavot tovot ayayayayayyaayay. Diburim Tovim
ayayayayayayayayayay.

When I first heard this melody and these words, they erased my frustration at the traffic around me and helped me gain a new perspective on my experience. I think, right now, we are all stuck in some kind of traffic ...and I know we could use some new perspective. So As we move beyond Yom Kippur and into this year, let us meditate on this nigun of unknown origin, that has uplifted the psalms and brought hope to the people, that survived the holocaust and terror in Israel, that has traveled around the Jewish world and even through the Philippines. Let us affix it in our hearts and minds and let us plant it so that it takes root in our souls. When we do this, the harshness of the cold world around us will no longer be able to pull us down, for this nigun will raise us back up. There are so many blessings that I want for us this year, but if I can only choose one for tonight, it is this: Machshavot Tovot, Diburim Tovim. May you only know good thoughts and good speech. Let us sing these words together. May this be God's will.