

[iii] Leonard Bernstein was the child of Ukranian immigrants, who lived the American dream, eventually owning and operating their own successful business. The Bernsteins moved from the outskirts of Boston to Boston proper and joined the most prestigious synagogue in town, Mishkan Tefila. The synagogue building was in the center of the city's Jewish neighborhood and the community constructed a sumptuous building and included the second largest organ in New England, the first being in Symphony Hall.

The Bernstein family became synagogue regulars on Shabbat and holidays. Leonard and his siblings attended the high quality Hebrew school program that took place five days per week. Yes, five days a week. I don't want to hear any kvetching about a one-day a week program ever again. Leonard Bernstein loved it. He graduated from the program with honors after five years of study. As he trained to become bar Mitzvah, he broke with the congregation's tradition which was for the students to present ready made speeches and delivered an articulate and personally crafted d'var Torah. [iv] Leonard Bernstein loved his synagogue and all that he learned there. Most of all he loved the music. He explained:

We were of the Conservative persuasion which allowed for an organ and a choir in a hidden choir loft, and when they let rip I used to go mad! We had a fabulous cantor who was a great musician and a beautiful man, very tall, very majestic. He would begin to sing the ancient tunes—they are not exactly melodies, because they are not really written down; they're traditional, handed down orally—and he had a tenor voice of such sweetness and such richness—with a dark baritonal quality, I now realize; I didn't know a tenor from a baritone in those days—and then the organ would start and then the choir would begin with its colors, and I just began to get crazed with the sound of choral music. [v]

While he clearly loved the cantor and his voice, Bernstein's greatest musical mentor and inspiration in these early years of his life was the music director of the congregation, Solomon Braslavsky. Trained in Vienna, Braslavsky brought musical renown to the synagogue. An eight-year-old Leonard Bernstein attending Friday night services with his father was moved to tears by the sound of the music, and especially the organ that made it seem as though God was speaking. In truth, because the organ pipes were hidden high from view, as the sound cascaded down, to a young child, God was in fact making this music. Braslavsky created musical programs that fused Jewish and Yiddish music with Western classical musical traditions. It was in the synagogue where Bernstein first heard Giuseppe Verdi, Felix Mendelsohn, Ernest Bloch, and Franz Schubert. It took some years for Leonard Bernstein and his siblings to understand that Dr. Braslavsky was not writing this music himself.

Braslavsky's mentorship of Leonard Bernstein was immersive. Bernstein learned to chant Torah, haftarah, and the chants for the festival scrolls. His synagogue involvement was a vital part of his upbringing, so significant were the relationships Leonard Bernstein made at Mishkan Tefila, it was the clergy who wrote recommendation letters that led to his acceptance into Harvard. He was married at Mishkan Tefila, and much later his children would become b'nai Mitzvah there as well.

Once Leonard Bernstein found music, there was no keeping him from it. Wherever there was a piano, he would play it. He would become the youngest conductor of the New York Philharmonic at age 25. He was the first American born and American trained conductor to lead a major orchestra. And as he began to compose, the Jewish music of the synagogue served as a backbone to his compositions. In his first symphony, Jeremiah, Bernstein utilizes Hebrew and the haftarah trope. In the third movement he turns to Eicha, Lamentations, possibly written by the prophet Jeremiah and uses the special trope for that biblical book, too.

And in his works from the 1960s like Dybbuk and the Kaddish Symphony, the sounds of the synagogue of his youth returned to his compositions. Even in his 1971 Mass, a piece commissioned by

Jackie Kennedy for the opening of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, his Jewishness could not be held back. Bernstein and his collaborator, Stephen Schwartz,

Took the Tridentine Mass, a highly-ritualized Catholic rite meant to be recited verbatim, and applied to it a very Jewish practice of debating and arguing with God. The result was a piece that powerfully communicated the confusion and cultural malaise of the early 1970s, questioning authority and advocating for peace. [\[vi\]](#)

Leonard Bernstein is the first American composer whose background in synagogue music makes a marked impression upon all areas of his work. Whether it was *Westside Story*, *Candide*, *On the Town*, *On the Waterfront*, *Wonderful Town*, or his sonatas, fugues or symphonies the sounds he heard as a child and his excellent education musically and Jewishly come through.

Bernstein was a proud Jew. He refused to change his name to something more American. And he was a Zionist with a strong connection to Israel. He conducted the then Palestine Philharmonic in 1947 and would go on to help found and regularly conduct the Israel Philharmonic. He helped forge the creative arts and music program at my alma mater, Brandeis University.

Leonard Bernstein lived an “and” life. He was a great American composer and he was not the greatest lyricist. He was a father and a man who struggled with his sexual identity. He was an American and he never hid his Jewish identity.

I don't know if we have any composers or conductors in our presence tonight the likes of Bernstein. However, we are all here as human beings searching for meaning. So how do we add some more “and” to our lives? Perhaps we can learn from comedy.

In improvisational comedy, “yes, and” is an important technique. As Tina Fey explains it:

The second rule of improvisation is not only to say yes, but YES, AND. You are supposed to agree and then add something of your own. If I start a scene with “I can't believe it's so hot in here,” and you just say, “Yeah...” we're kind of at a standstill. But if I say, “I can't believe it's so hot in here,” and you say, “What did you expect? We're in hell.” Or if I say, “I can't believe it's so hot in here,” and you say, “Yes, this can't be good for wax figures.” ... Now we're getting somewhere. [\[vii\]](#)

Fey continues:

To me YES, AND means don't be afraid to contribute. It's your responsibility to contribute. Always make sure you're adding something to the discussion. Your initiations are worthwhile. [\[viii\]](#) Our lives are an improvisation. And they are varied, beautiful, difficult, wonderful, challenging, inspiring, and meaningful. And it is when we embrace the “and” that we are best able to bring our full selves to it.

Yom Kippur comes to remind us to be like a *vav*, to embrace the and, to stand tall with a hook into heaven, to be fully present, to allow the music of our tradition and the words of the ancient Hebrew to connect us to God and to our Jewish family on this sacred day. And, the challenge is to stay connected all year long.

Yom Kippur, Shabbat Shabbaton, is the day for re-centering ourselves, connecting to our own successes and failures and committing to do better in the New Year. It is the day when we speak aloud of faults, name our vulnerabilities, and come out at the end, we pray, with direction and focus to be our best selves every day of this New Year. The haunting melody Kol Nidre tugs at our hearts as does

the sound of the shofar like an alarm to be like a *vav* with our feet planted and still connected on high to our Jewish heritage, to God. The challenge is for this to be a day that infuses our souls with meaning that we carry on to every day.

So, in order to embrace the “and” in this New Year we can say YES AND. We can contribute with positivity, good intentions, and know those things will be reciprocated from others. We can meet with people with whom we might disagree and we can make sure they are our adversary not our enemy. We can continue to find ways to infuse Judaism into our lives and go about our daily business. To read Jewish books and articles, listen to Jewish podcasts from which we can learn new things. And if they’re of the right age, ensure that our children’s Jewish education is a priority. We can make sure our kids finish homework, get to soccer, baseball, and dance and that they are present for their Jewish learning and community. We can work hard to provide for our families and we can give tzedakah. We can stand tall like the letter *vav* and be vulnerable to the mysteries of the universe. And like Leonard Bernstein, we can be American and Jewish.

As it says in the Torah portion we will read tomorrow, it is not too hard for us to do, it is just as easy as a simple song.

**The sermon anthem was “Simple Song” from Bernstein’s *Mass*.

[i] From *A Treasury of Chassidic Tales*, Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin, Mesorah Publications, Ltd., NY, 1980; 1992.

[ii] Wolpe, David. “Honoring the and” *The New York Jewish Week*, July 11, 2018. <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/honoring-the-and/>

[iii] I took an online course with Dr. Jonathan Sarna of Brandeis University celebrating the 100th anniversary of Leonard Bernstein’s birth on June 25, 2018. Much of this material comes from that webinar.

[iv] Ibid.

[v] Ibid, p. 30.

[vi] <https://leonardbernstein.com/works/view/12/mass-a-theatre-piece-for-singers-players-and-dancers>

[vii] Fey, Tina. *Bossypants*. Little Brown and Company, 2011. P. 84.

[viii] Ibid.

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