



**All About That Bass**  
***Parshat Vayera***

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by Rav Hazzan Aliza Berger

Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

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This summer, I was sitting at Tanglewood, eyes riveted to the stage, listening to a vocal chamber music concert. They had just started playing *Songs of a Wayfarer*—a gorgeous set of songs originally written by Gustav Mahler and arranged by Arnold Schoenberg. The songs are dramatic and expressive, with the flutes and clarinets dancing lilting harmonies, piano and harmonium together adding depth to the sound, and strings weaving their own melodies. I couldn't take my eyes off the stage.

If you know anything about classical music, or really music in general, you know that bass players often get stuck with musical lines that could be best described as boring. Their job is to root the music, to create a foundation on which the flourishes and dramatic expression of the other instruments can dance. Though there are pieces which feature bass players, they are more often relegated to support.

This piece was no exception. In *Songs of a Wayfarer*, while the other instruments are executing gorgeous lyrical lines and dancing through harmonies, the bass player is rhythmically plucking away at the same low note for almost 20 minutes. “Bom” ..... “Bom” ..... “Bom”.... It's a part that could make even the most boring parts look exciting.

And yet, I couldn't tear my eyes away from the bass player. He approached each repetitive “Bom” as if it were the most exciting and interesting sound, moving his whole body with the rhythm of the piece, carefully plucking and then moving back in time to start moving

again. You could see the piece written in the expression on his face, changing as the other instruments danced melodies around him. And in the few instances when he got to play a melody or a line, the bass player acted as if those notes were no more satisfying than the monotonous plucking that filled the rest of the piece. If you were just watching the concert and not listening, you might think the bass player had the most interesting part of all.

I left the concert hall thinking about what it must have been like for that bass player—what's it like to be selected as one of the best musicians in the country, and when you arrive at Tanglewood, you see that you're stuck playing the same low bass note for 20 minutes—a part that could largely be played by an amateur. If it were me, I could imagine being bored. Resenting the repetition. Envy the other players their drama. I could imagine going through the motions, but not investing in those low notes the way the bass player did.

What enabled that bass player to approach each of those repetitive low notes with so much joy? How did he embrace literal monotony with enthusiasm and full-hearted engagement?

Though we aren't playing bass at Tanglewood, if we mapped out our days on a score of music, we'd probably discover that the majority of our lives appear quite similar to that bass part in *Songs of a Wayfarer*. Most of our waking hours are spent doing the same tasks. Week after week, we shop at the same grocery stores, buy the same foods, do the same work, pay the same bills, cook the same meals, wash the same laundry.

After thousands of hours of practice, we should be virtuosic Star Market shoppers. We should be able to fill out a school form with serious expertise. And yet, all too often, we sit on that life stage, going through the motions without joy or even attention.

We live out repetitive moments in auto pilot. We wander down the aisles of the grocery store glued to our lists, placing peanut butter and coffee in our carts without noticing the music in the background or the people around us. We go to work and stare at our email, we move automatically waiting for our coffee to kick in and fuel the energy we once felt. We are waiting for that big dramatic moment—the success at work, the winning lottery ticket, the big romantic gesture, the nachas of watching our children soar through the world. And in the meanwhile, we're just plucking away.

Our rabbis had a name for this feeling, or rather they had a name for when you're just going through the same motions. When our rabbis created the Jewish calendar, they named each month. Tishrei is the first month of the year, full unique magical moments, full of shofar, full prostrations, building sukkot, shaking the lulav, dancing with the Torah. Kislev has got the light of Chanukah, miracles. Nissan is full of matzah and Exodus. And then there's Cheshvan, the month which we are in now.

Cheshvan comes along with nothing to its name—no special holidays, no fast days, no unique practices. That's how Cheshvan earned its nickname—Mar Cheshvan. Bitter Cheshvan. Bitter because of all the empty spaces. Bitter because our rabbis regretted the return to normal, average rhythms. Bitter because every year, after the majesty of the high holiday season, our rabbis yearned for virtuosic music of special holidays instead of the monotonous bass line of Mar Cheshvan.

But Cheshvan is also bitter because when the holidays recede, all the bitterness in our world comes into sharper focus. We've lived it this year. Mar Cheshvan. The bitterness of hurricane after hurricane, homes damaged, and Puerto Rico still largely without power and significantly without aid. Mar Cheshvan.

This week, we felt that bitterness even more as we watched a normal, ordinary day turned upside down by terrorism. The bitterness of a truck mowing down pedestrians in a place where children go to learn how to ride a two-wheeler and where friends enjoy a sunny afternoon. Bitterness as we read about the ten Argentinian friends who spent the whole last year planning a trip to New York to celebrate their 30<sup>th</sup> high school reunion. Ten friends who are now five, carrying injuries and psychic scars. Mar Cheshvan.

Ordinary time can feel like a bitter pill to swallow. But just because we keep hearing the same low notes of terrorism and natural disaster and personal grief does not mean that is the whole story. Mar Cheshvan, the bitter month of Cheshvan, is not about marinating in bitterness or depression. Mar Cheshvan is all about how to get beyond the bitterness of ordinary time. I read a piece in the Wedding section of the New York Times that speaks to the essential spirit of how we life up ordinary time.

This piece told the story of Ms. Chaudhary who, in 2005, was sitting in a New York bar with her friend Abby. They had gone out searching for eligible bachelors only to find that the bar scene lacked any serious candidates. So, the two women sat together talking about their dreams for the future and the partners who they hoped would walk by their side.

The next morning, Abby was heading out for coffee in Park Slope. She noticed a young man walking across the street who looked like the ideal partner Ms. Chaudhary had described the night before. Abby sighed, wishing that he had been there the night before so Ms. Chaudhary could have met him. Suddenly, Abby found herself running towards him, saying “Sir! Excuse me! I have this friend...”

Turns out the young man was a Harvard graduate from South Asia, just like Ms. Chaudhary. His name was Previn Warren. He was also a bass player—he played in a band called the States and he was open to meeting a complete stranger. He gave Abby his phone number.

When Abby called to tell Ms. Chaudhary the good news, her friend wasn't sure how to respond. As Ms. Chaudhary shared with the New York times, "it was adorable that she ran after him, but you never know. He was just some guy!" She decided to call him anyway, thinking it was just a kind of neighborhood thing.

It turned out to be so much more. Their first date lasted until 3 AM. A second soon followed. It wasn't long before they were clear they wanted to share a life together. As Mr. Warren shared, "It felt like destiny. This is the only relationship I could ever imagine wanting to be in." They married in 2010.

Abby was living an ordinary moment. Here she was walking the streets of New York alone after a late night with friends, sans caffeine and filled with that fuzzy groggy feeling you get when you've had too much fun and too little sleep. It would have been easy for her to fall into the pit of loneliness, into worries about her future, into frustration with the traffic. Into the space of Mar—of bitterness. But instead, she was looking around and noticing the people around her. Instead, she was thinking of her friends and seeing possibility in ordinary time.

We can all do that.

Yes, the universe has scored low notes which are unfolding all around us, but that's not everything that's been written. Yes, sometimes we're caught in the drudgery of repetition, but we can find inspiration in the everyday rhythms and play those notes joyfully and intentionally. Mar Cheshvan doesn't have to be bitter.

The truth is, most of life is an ordinary moment. A repeating bass line. A Cheshvan without holidays. An ordinary day that, like this past Tuesday in New York City, can turn tragic. We can base our lives around the bitterness of our world or we can choose to transcend the bitterness of the world and seek out, find, and savor the beautiful melodies that are also there if only we can open ourselves to their sound.