Sounds for Contemplation on a Lyre

Sermon One

Source: Judah Moscato, Sefer nefutzot Yehudah (Venice: Zuan de Gara, 1589), 1a–8a.

Sermon 1 is a eulogy to music, understood in its most inclusive sense as “harmony.” It begins with an enigmatic midrash about a kinnor (lyre) that, hanging over David's bed, is blown by the North Wind at midnight, whereupon it plays of itself and David rises and studies Torah until the break of day (s. 4). The rest of the sermon explains the midrash, its relevance to the day on which the sermon was pronounced (Simḥat Torah), and its implications for Jewish observance. It first establishes the mathematical basis of music as a science for measuring intervals: consonances are defined by their harmonic ratios. The science was thought to have been inaugurated by the Greeks, though wrongly so: the Hebrews were its inventors (5–14). God is the perfect embodiment of music in His essence, as reflected in His creation of all heavenly bodies and creatures: the nine spheres resonate with music, the angels intone songs (15–44). The Holy Name (yhwh) encompasses the principal consonances: octave, fifth, fourth, third, and their compounds (45–55). Man, created in the image of his Maker, is ordered in intervallic ratios: harmony is implanted in his soul, which, attracted to song, reacts to it by producing its own song (56–84). He is likened, in his musical construction, to a kinnor, yet for his potential kinnor to play properly, i.e., actuate the music in his soul, he must pursue a path of righteousness: by hearkening to a divine instrument, he responds by duplicating its pitches (85–90). The original midrash is now reinterpreted (and its different versions in the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud compared): David's body and soul were built in harmonic ratios, his mind was awakened by the sounds of his kinnor when the North Wind blew upon it at midnight, at which time, “sailing forth upon lofty speculations,” David played on his kinnor by deepening his knowledge of Torah (91–113). Because the midrash was not easily applied, God saw to providing a consummate example of harmony for all to emulate: Moses. His name pertains to music (via the muses and other correspondences in its etymology); he was ever in tune with a divine spirit; he composed a perfect song, Torah, or Belief, to be added to the seven Liberal Arts as the eighth and highest science (114–131). Torah relates to Shemini ʿAtseret (The Eighth Day of Convocation) and Simḥat Torah, marking the completion and renewal of readings.
from the Pentateuch; it relates to Song, for just as Torah is perfection, so is the octave (or “eighth”) in music; it relates to circumcision, which, performed on the eighth day after the male child is born, introduces him into the faith (132–142). Though all should strive to be like Moses, clearly none can reach his perfection; nor are persons expected to, rather they are measured by the degree to which they exert themselves to observe his laws (143–164). Because humans are fallible, David is offered as a more reasonable example for them to follow: he repaired his sins by endeavoring to walk on “an upright path,” whereby, in time, his kinnor, as stated in the midrash, played of itself (165–174). That God’s “laws [Torah] had become songs to [him]” (Psalms 119:54) can be illustrated by his book of psalms, especially the last one (150), where, in each verse, David renders praises to God through song, as should the people of Israel after his example (175–186). The movements of the spheres connect with those of the soul (one toward essences, the other toward their incorporation in matter); the seven terms for song (Psalms 150:3–5) connect with the seven sciences; the eighth term (“cymbals for jubilation”) connects with Belief, or Torah, the eighth science (187–204). With the coming of the Messiah, the world will become perfect in its harmonies: a new song will be sung when the Jews are released from suffering and subordination (205–211).

[Fol. 1a] [1] The first sermon, entitled “Sounds for Contemplation on a Lyre (kinnor)” for the day of Simḥat Torah (Rejoicing in the Law).

1 Higgayon be-khinnor, after Psalms 92:4. Higgayon is from the verb la-hagot, meaning to utter sounds (words, pitches) and further to reflect on them, hence higgayon in the double sense of speech (or music) and its underlying rationale. Cf. Leon Modena, Galut Yehudah [Judah’s Exile]: Novo dittionario hebraico et italiano cioè Dichiaratione di tutte le voci hebraiche più difficili delle scritture hebrehe nella volgar lingua italiana (1612), where, in a later edition (1640), higgayon is translated as canzone (84b, in connection with Psalms 92:4) and as logica (appendix to same edition, 5a). In biblical times the kinnor seems to have referred to a lyre, analogous to the ancient Greek lyre or its larger counterpart, the kithara, in Italian cetera or cetra, though Modena rendered it as leuto (9b, in connection with Genesis 4:21) alias lauto (39a, in connection with 1 Samuel 10:5). For David de Pomis, cetera and leuto are interchangeable: Tzemaḥ David [David’s Plant]: Dittionario novo hebraico, molto copioso, dechiarato in tre lingue (1587), 63a (“cetera, o ver secondo la commune espositione leuto”). Abraham Portaleone translates kinnor, however, as arpa, harp: Sefer shiltei ha-gibborim [Book of the Shields of Heroes] (1612), 8b (“kinnor . . . called in a foreign tongue arpa”); see below, chapter 6, p2:11. On the kinnor as a lyre in the context of the initial midrash (sentence 4 below), yet a harp in the music practice of Moscato’s time, see Don Harrán, “The Levi Dynasty: Three Generations of Jewish Musicians in Sixteenth-Century Mantua” (in reference to three harpists from the Levi family).

2 Simḥat Torah marks the end of Sukkot, or the Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:34–36).