

## **Sarah King**

### *Member of the Village Temple Board of Trustees*

Thirty years ago, I was up on the bimah like I am tonight as I was becoming bat mitzvah. It was taking place in France where I am from, in the synagogue of Neuilly, right outside Paris. One of the largest communities in France.

Unlike my daughters, Summer and Anais, who have been singing with the choir in our services since age 6, this was my first time on the bimah, my first experience in front of the congregation, my first public speaking experience really, and it was very intimidating.

Back then, in my community, few girls celebrated their bat mitzvah, and it was done on Friday night. For boys, the bar mitzvah would lead the prayer service, but girls could not lead the congregation, so the rabbi and cantor would go through the entire service, and then the bat mitzvah would re-do some of the prayers and their speech. But I was an early overachiever, so I studied the entire prayer service. In my case, the congregation would go thru the entire Friday night service once with the rabbi and a 2nd time with me. By the end they would be very hungry.

So there I was, a 12-year old girl, flanked by my rabbi on one side and my father on the other, facing hundreds of unfamiliar faces (men downstairs, women upstairs) but I had studied hard and I was ready. Yet I opened the prayer book, about to start Lecha Dodi, and I drew a complete blank, I could not remember the melody. My tutor had taught me a different melody, a beautiful and rare one. I knew it perfectly but at that moment it wasn't coming back. Nothing. My rabbi and father started singing the traditional Lecha Dodi melody, but I refused to start, this was not it. After what felt like an eternity of awkward silence and puzzled looks in the first rows, my rabbi's wife who was my tutor, rushed from the kitchen. Somehow instead of standing by me, she was in the kitchen with my mother preparing the oneg. But she noticed the silence, ran to the balcony nearest me and sang the first few notes. It all came back to me, and I led the congregation through Lecha Dodi, an entire Friday second service and more. My mother rewarded their patience with the best oneg they had ever seen.

When Rabbi Koster asked me to come talk to you about my favorite prayer, I chose instead to talk about the one that many years ago challenged me. Lecha Dodi.

Like many other prayers, Lecha Dodi is sung to many melodies, by one account 2,000 of them. The prayer dates back to 16<sup>th</sup> century Safed (or Tsfat) a time and place of extraordinary Jewish life, creativity, and mysticism. It was composed by the Kabbalist Rabbi Shlomo Ha-Levi Alkabetz.

Solomon Alkabetz (1505-1584) was born in 1505 to refugees in Salonica, Greece. Escaping the Inquisition in Christian Spain, his family, like many others, was welcomed in the Muslim Ottoman Empire. I found interesting to remember that when Christians persecuted Jews, Turkish Muslims welcomed them with open arms. The Sultan issued a formal invitation to Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal and they started arriving in the empire in great numbers. The Sultan is said to have mocked the Spanish king's lack of wisdom: "Ye call Ferdinand a wise king but he's a fool, he who makes his land poor and ours rich!" So Spanish Jews settled in Greece and Turkey, and even in Israel when it became part of the Ottoman Empire (1517).

Rabbi Alkabetz married and settled down in Adrianople, Turkey. He was studying Kabbalah with his friend Rabbi Yosef Karo on Shavuot night when a maggid – a Divine voice - called upon them (at their midnight mystical Tikkun) “to hurry and make aliyah and not to worry, for God will provide them financial support.” Some time after, the study partners traveled to Israel and settled in Safed (probably around 1535) where they each left a great impact on Jewish practice for centuries to come. At that time, Safed was bigger than Jerusalem in number of Jewish families and Jewish life. Karo and Alkabetz joined a circle of extraordinary scholars and mystics that included:

- Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (who married Alkabetz’s sister), a central figure in the development of kabbalah – the mystical religious interpretation of Judaism - and founder of a kabbalah academy which he ran for 20 years
- Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, known as the holy Ari, and considered the most innovative mystic of the era, [who with his student Haim Vital together created and disseminated a new interpretation of mysticism called Lurianic]
- And several other poets and singers and scholars.

Rabbi Yosef Karo, will become the author of the code of Jewish law, the Shulchan Aruch.

Rabbi Alkabetz was a charismatic speaker and inspired his audiences with his knowledge of [Kabbalah](#). A prolific author, he wrote some works on the Bible, and others of a Kabbalistic nature. I read that there were two kinds of Kabbalistic leaders. There were those who wrote Kabbalistic secrets about how the universe worked, and there were those who created rituals/prayers, which assumed the Kabbalistic secrets. Alkabetz was primarily the second kind.

For example, he developed the habit of going with his students to pray and meditate on the graves of known righteous leaders, *tzaddikim*. Alkabetz is also credited with initiating the ritual of going into the fields, all dressed in white, just prior to sundown on Friday to physically welcome the [Sabbath](#) bride.

Despite his prolific writings on both the Bible and Kabbalah, Alkabetz is best-known for his writing of *Lecha Dodi*. The holy Ari included Lecha Dodi in his ritual of the siddur, and thus it eventually became an integral part of the Shabbat liturgy of Jewish communities everywhere.

A few things about Lecha Dodi:

The author signed his name - "Shlomo HaLevi" - in the acrostic formed by the first letter of the first 8 verses. If you look in your book, page 17, check each paragraph: Shin, Lamed, Mem, He, etc.

The verses of L’cha Dodi lead us from two verses about Shabbat to six verses about Jerusalem and the messiah and then back again to end with Shabbat.

There are several inspirations behind Lecha dodi.

1. The term “L’cha Dodi” is taken from the Song of Songs traditionally attributed to King Solomon
2. Alkabetz based the theme, "Come out my beloved, the bride; let us welcome Shabbat" on the Talmud’s account of how two pious Rabbis from the 2nd century would welcome the Holy Day (Shabbat 119a): “Rabbi Chanina would wrap himself in his cloak and say, “Come, let us go and greet the Shabbat Queen.” Rabbi Yannai would don his robe and say, “Enter O bride! Enter, O bride!”

Based on quotes of the Bible and Talmud, Alkabetz's composition integrates Kabbalistic ideas about the nature of Shabbat into mainstream Judaism. Lecha Dodi is arranged in such a way that it leaves one with a sense of the lost and found element – a lover being reunited with his beloved. Whether we have any idea of its full mystical significance, we can't help but be inspired by the powerful, poetic, romantic nature of the Lecha Dodi.

Finally, it is a universal custom that during the singing of the last verse, the entire congregation rises and turns to the open door, to greet "Queen Shabbat" as she arrives. I want to leave you with another possible explanation that I came across in my research. It came from Rabbi Lazar Shore of Memphis, TN; this is the answer his rabbi gave him when he asked the same question 75 years earlier and which was the same answer his rabbi's rabbi had given him years earlier. "Only the wealthy members of the congregation prayed close to the aron kodesh in the old days. When they turned round they were compelled to see those in the congregation who were in need of a good meal, financial help or perhaps some emotional support."

To me this is Judaism: a mix of romantic inspiration and very practical matters - maybe we turn to welcome the Shabbat in a mystical gesture, but then maybe we also do so to look out for one another and take care of those in need, as a true community.