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Lecha Dodi to me is the music. There are so many moving musical settings for Lecha Dodi and I have shared links below to several of them.

Lecha Dodi was composed in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, which was a time of great turmoil and suffering for the Jewish people after the expulsion from Spain in 1492. Therefore there was a great messianic fervor throughout the Jewish world but especially in the Galilee where the messiah was expected to first arrive. The culmination of this was the so-called false messiah, Shabbatai Zvi, who caused a sensation among the Jews until he converted to Islam about 100 years later.

The poem that we usually read in the Reform prayerbook has only three or four verses but in fact the poem as written has many more. The excluded verses are about the great *Shabbat* of Messianic deliverance, and I'll comment a bit on that later.

The chorus of course talks about the Shabbat bride. You should be joyful as you would be at your own wedding. Of course it has other connotations. For example, Shabbat was the traditional time for consortium of husbands and wives, not surprisingly after they may have taken their only bath of the week.

I have found a wonderful translation:

*Come, my friend, the Bride to meet,  
The holy Shabbat let us now greet.*

*“Keep” and “Remember” in one Divine word.  
Our people at Sinai God’s command heard.  
Our God is one; and One is God’s name,  
God’s is the glory! God’s is the fame!*

*To greet Shabbat now let us go;  
Source of blessing, it has ever been so.  
Conceived before life on earth began,  
Last in God's work, first in God's plan.*

*Yerushalayim, Shrine of our "King,"  
Arise from your ruins, arise and sing.  
Enough have you dwelled in the vale of tears,  
Your God will mercifully dispel your fears.*

*Shake off your dust, arise from the mire;  
Dress, my people, in your proudest attire.  
Through a descendant of David, the poet-King,  
Redemption and freedom God will bring*

*Rouse yourselves! Rouse yourselves!  
Your light is coming, rise up and shine.  
Awaken! Awaken! utter a song,  
The glory of the Lord is revealed upon you.*

*Do not be embarrassed! Do not be ashamed!  
Why be downcast? Why groan?  
All my afflicted people will find refuge within you  
And the city shall be rebuilt on her hill.*

*Your despoilers will become your spoil,  
Far away shall be any who would devour you,  
Your God will rejoice concerning you,  
As a groom rejoices over a bride.*

*To your right and your left you will burst forth,  
And the Lord will you revere  
By the hand of a child of Peretz,  
We will rejoice and sing happily.*

*Come in peace, crown of her husband,  
Both in happiness and in jubilation  
Amidst the faithful of the treasured nation  
Come O Bride! Come O Bride!*

As you see, the yearning for a break from the burdens of the everyday week is a central theme – a day to grow close to God as well. But the deeper yearning for a break from a hard life, anti-semitism, and persecution is perhaps more cogent. The son of David, son of Peretz refer to the messiah coming, as does the rebuilding of Jerusalem. So is this relevant to us and to myself today? Well, yes and no. Certainly we do not suffer the terrible persecution our forefathers did living in *this* country. But we cannot dismiss, and I as the son of a holocaust survivor certainly cannot forget, that anti-semitism is still a fact of life in much of the world and we should never take our good fortune for granted.

As I considered what other meaning the prayer has to me, I pondered the notion of the week. Shabbat is a wonderful concept of course. The idea from ancient times, when day to day existence was a struggle, that people would take a day and make it a day of rest and of spiritual awakening is truly an amazing concept. Which is why it is attributed to G-d and the creation story in the book of Genesis. But it goes well beyond that, I believe. Consider this, why do we even have a week of seven days? Other civilizations had different cycles, the Chinese 5 and 10 days, the Romans initially 9. The inventor of Shabbat also invented our week and our weekend. Before this there was no week, every day was the same. One can understand that our ancestors knew months by the cycles of the moon and days, of course. There is something magical about seven days. Did it exist before the Jewish people came along? Apart from our Torah, the first historical references to Shabbat are Babylonian, and given the Jewish exile there during that time, it is very likely that the concept came from our tradition. I don't know if there is also

something organic in us and our body rhythms that revolves around this seven day cycle, but it is marvelous and certainly worthy of celebrating, as we do every Shabbat.

But to me, Lecha Dodi is the music. Apart from the Shabbat bride, I don't think about the words when I sing it. Here are some great musical renditions:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rl7Tvm7AX6U>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9hnkvBFftA>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRMjlWKYxos>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3zERmcPtNE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NC19kaPCMYM>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwCIKaDIU38>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OECf2oPD4Pw>

*and a medley of many*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=548bj50nT4>

## **Barbara L. Leopold**

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**LECHA DODI** was written to honor and escort Shabbat. It was composed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Rabbi Shlomo Halevi Alkabetz (c. 5260-5340 / 1505-1584), one of the Safed Kabbalists, who used to walk into the fields at the edge of their village in Galilee in order to greet Shabbat, the Jewish day of rest. They surveyed the beauty of creation through the natural panorama that lay before them and honored Shabbat with special composed hymns sung as they “escorted” Shabbat to their homes.

Rabbi Alkabetz was one of the members of the Safed circle of scholars and mystics, which included several renowned rabbis including Rabbi Yitzchak Luria who is said to have included this hymn in his edition of the *siddur*, and thus it eventually became an integral part of the

Shabbat liturgy of Jewish communities everywhere. Although I have never sought to trace my lineage back to Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, I do wear carry the Luria family name proudly – as my own middle name (NB: my mother was born a Luria)

In this particular hymn, the images of the Shabbat Queen and Bride combine to link the formal and personal (“intimate”) aspects of Shabbat, and to reconcile the commandments to both “remember” and to “observe” (or to “keep”) Shabbat.

Almost from my first introduction to Lecha Dodi 10 years ago, I have embraced it as a transitional point in the Friday evening service, hence in my week. And since I was introduced to Lecha Dodi at Village Temple, I associate it with certain sounds and rituals – a shifting of octaves from line to line, as we open with the refrain in the higher octave of cantor or soloist and then move to Rabbi Koster’s smoky tones, and continue alternating back and forth between the two within each stanza. [Indeed, I do not experience Lecha Dodi in the same affecting way when the two alternating voices and tones are not present]. And then there is the practice of standing as one body and turning towards the doors of the sanctuary for our penultimate stanza in order to welcome in Shabbat (and also, upon occasion, the unsuspecting visitor).

Despite knowing no Hebrew and paying little attention to the English translation, nevertheless I quickly came to consider the music and text associated with this hymn a meaningful moment in the service -- a peaceful ritual that I look forward to as a point of transition: from work and the hectic pace of daily routine to the promise of a slower pace at week’s end. And yet I find it ironic that I was asked to comment on the meaning I find in Lecha Dodi.

Ironic that I am to comment on a prayer linked with the Sabbath Bride, when I consider myself decidedly “un-bridal”:

My long-term partner and I decided to marry for practical reasons (logistical and financial); no wedding planning, no wedding guests, no bridal party, no wedding dress, in fact no dress period, though there were witnesses; and a Rabbi — by mutual agreement, the sole requirement with regard to our ceremony! (I also must admit to roses, courtesy of my mother, and to champagne courtesy of my father)

Ironic because with the exception of a period of approximately 12 months in my mid-teens, my relationship to a synagogue or to (*erev*) *Shabbat* services did not begin until I was approaching the age of 50.

Ironic because while I enjoy services and becoming more familiar with the prayers, and can even recognize the appeal of *Shabbat* observance, I do not see the “keeping” of *Shabbat* as something that fits into my own life.

So how do I explain what I experience when reciting this prayer as part of this congregation? And why does it make me feel like I am being welcomed home? Perhaps I am developing a sense of *keshet* (connection) with others in the Village Temple community. As a historian by training and inclination, I often take the long view and, in that context, can see the attraction of this hymn and this weekly ritual as tied to my Jewish identity, which I have come to see as deeply rooted even if the Jewish garden where it grows has most often been only informally and intermittently tended.

While thinking about what I was going to discuss in relation to *Lecha Dodi*, I was struck a few weeks ago by what Rabbi Koster wrote about the issue of holiness and place in her letter to the Village Temple congregation in the March/April issue of *Keshet*:

The Rabbi points out that the great Ga'on Rabbi Saadia (10<sup>th</sup>-c. Babylonia) was one of the earliest to recognize that holiness is not intrinsic to any particular site; that holiness is the result of what we do and the meaning we can focus into a particular moment of special ritual. She explains further: “In our synagogue and houses of study we can encounter God. But God does not need sacred space. If God is everywhere, then all space is equally sacred, presenting equally an insight into God’s presence and promise.” Adding, finally, that “[s]acred space is religion’s accommodation to human beings.” Our sense of meaning and connection is heightened when this sense of sacred space is combined with signs of sanctity (i.e. the Torah scroll, *Shabbat* candles, *Tallit*) and our ability to hear “sounds that recall religious fervor.”

She adds that while “God may not need our rituals,” that “being fully human requires establishing reliable tools to focus our attention, to help us concentrate on who we are and

what we value, to link us to the universe” [a concept that I identify with] “and its creator” [a concept which is much more of a struggle for me].

In closing, Rabbi Koster thanked the participants/voices in this year’s Martin Luther King Jr. service for helping create this sacred space for our community, which leads me back to Lecha Dodi. For me, Lecha Dodi is the transformative point in our service, the ‘sign’ and ‘sound’ which creates a sense of a different and peaceful space – what others might more comfortably call a religious space or a sacred one.

Before closing, I’d like to address a personal dimension of what commentators identify as an inner tension of Judaism that is also reflected in the hymn: i.e. the two versions of the commandment to keep Shabbat found in the Tanach – i.e. to “remember” (Exodus 20:8) and to “observe” (Deuteronomy 5:12) .

*“‘Keep’ and ‘Remember’ in a sole command/ the solitary God did us command” or, in another translation, “‘Observe’ and ‘Remember’ in a single work/ spoken by our Creator, beyond compare.” [Lecha Dodi, stanza 1]*

This dichotomy is reflected in a tension I experience from time to time – being enticed by the hymn, and when in synagogue more generally, to the possibilities of ‘keeping’ Shabbat, of setting a day apart from the others and connecting its observance with Jewish ritual. Yet the reality is that I have never seriously contemplated doing so. And it seems to me that if we really explore the meaning of Lecha Dodi, rather than just enjoying it, then we may be led to think more seriously about what it really means for us not only to greet, but to embrace, “the inner light of Shabbat”.

Might that mean not just greeting it in song, but actually putting Shabbat ahead of the other things that fill our Saturdays (whether errands, dance or exercise classes, social life, work, travel)?

Although Jews are a people of the word, you’ll note that I have focused more on connection to ritual and to sounds than to the meanings of the words in this hymn. Though words are usually my ‘thing’, in this case I am going to leave any further discussion of the stanzas and meaning of the hymn to others – perhaps to tonight’s second commentator.

All this fits in well with why The Village Temple and its siddur and services have been a good fit for me – they leave space for each of us to focus on what works for us individually – music, perhaps, or the Hebrew or the sidebar texts or the Rabbi’s commentary. Or, perhaps, the English translation of the prayers (and yes, the translation in English falls deliberately last on my own list).

*Barbara L. Leopold, 28 March 2014 / 26 Adar II 5774*