

Reclaiming the Music of Prayer

By Daniel B. Schwartz

I am a mainstream Modern Orthodox Jew, a product of the Jewish day school movement. I've served on the boards of the last two shuls to which I've belonged. I enjoy opening up a Gemara and studying its wisdom. My greatest joy would be to see my children grow up to be even more religiously committed than I am. And yet I find going to shul each Shabbat morning difficult. Services are, for the most part, uninspired and uninspiring. Nothing that goes on in shul speaks to me spiritually. I am genuinely dissatisfied and spiritually unfulfilled by the services that I attend week in and week out.

Part of why we pray is to be enriched. Part of why we pray *publicly* is to be enriched aesthetically. The Mishnah goes to great lengths in describing how the *shirah* (song in the Temple) was to be intoned.¹ The Temple music was not merely an aesthetic accoutrement, but rather an integral part of the sacrificial service. In fact, according to some opinions in the Talmud, singing the wrong *shirah* invalidated the offering it accompanied.² Moreover, a Levite who wished to par-

ticipate in the *shirah* had to train for five years³ and no Levite past fifty years of age could intone the *shirah*, since one's voice begins to decline at fifty.⁴ The purpose of all these laws was to ensure that the music of the Temple was befitting God's house. Do our *mikdashai me'at* deserve any less?

In 1912 a group of committed young Jewish men and women formed a society that they hoped would strengthen American Orthodoxy: Young Israel. These young people felt a need to render synagogue services more relevant

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to the contemporary worshipper. Seeking to strip away the "high church" trappings that were popular in those days, they did away with the professional cantor and choir, substituting them with lay prayer leaders and congregational singing. The pilpulistic rabbinic address, which focused on the minutiae of Jewish law and was given in Yiddish, was replaced by the sermon, which concentrated on issues of contemporary interest and was delivered in flawless English. Services lacked much of the pomp and circumstance of the more

stately cathedral-style synagogues. But no one attended these shuls to be culturally enriched; they came for serious dedicated prayer. The camaraderie and renewed sense of purpose found in these new shuls more than compensated for the lack of the ceremonious proceedings of the old-style synagogues. By making all these changes, the founders of the Young Israel movement sought to render traditional Orthodoxy more relevant and appealing to their generation. To their credit, they succeeded.

The original members of Young Israel were well acquainted with traditional synagogue music. The traditional prayer modes (*nusach*) and the grand liturgical settings of Salomon Sulzer and Louis Lewandowski, along with Eastern European modal chants, were the same as before, but without the professional *chazzan*. When some of the repertoire proved unworkable in the setting the young people sought to create, masters of liturgy like Max Wohlberg, Israel Goldfarb and Macy Nulman supplied easy-to-learn and pleasant-sounding melodies based upon the *nusach*. While this new music was far simpler than the original tunes and lacked musical flourish, it conveyed in its own way the essence of the liturgy.

But with each passing generation, the artistry of prayer was further down-

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played; the culture of artistic and ceremonious services almost disappeared. As Orthodoxy began its ascendancy in post-World War II America and as *yeshivot* and day schools sprang up in communities all over the country, an emphasis on personal *kavanah* and introspection during prayer began to replace the time-honored tradition that the *chazzan* should both interpret the meaning of the prayers and bring the congregation collectively to spiritual heights. Communal prayer became less of a group effort and more of an amalgamation of individuals gathered together to do the same thing in technical fulfillment of the requirement to pray with a minyan. Older members of shuls died out and yeshiva alumni began to ascend to the bimah. The vacuum created by the new generation's ignorance of the traditional music of prayer was filled with modified Chassidic melodies and the occasional Israeli folk melody. As popular Jewish music assumed a decidedly rock-and-roll beat and feel in slavish imitation of the world around us, our sacred liturgy at times began to sound no different than what one might hear on the radio.

I loathe hearing tunes applied to the *davening* simply because they "fit" the text rhythmically but do nothing to convey the meaning of the words. I loathe the lack of dignity that pervades the public presentation of prayer. I loathe the fact that the public worship of the denomination that lays claim to having the most educated and committed Jews has become little more than a "Romper Room"-style singalong. I yearn for the majestic shul atmosphere of a bygone era.

A *chazzan*, be he professionally trained or not, must assume a role similar to that of a modern-day rabbi. A *chazzan* is not merely a preceptor of the liturgy, he is a teacher of prayer. He interprets the *machzor* or the siddur and renders the prayers meaningful to his congregation; the prayer modes are the hermeneutics he employs. If all a *chazzan* does is sing popular tunes to entertain or impress the congregants with his

vocal abilities and musicianship, he is an abject failure—much like the rabbi who fills his sermons with jokes and teaches little about Jewish life and values. A *chazzan* must wrestle with the text of the siddur. He must ponder the depths of his soul and make the liturgy meaningful and relevant to himself first. He must lead and teach both by exposition and by example (thus, the halachic requirement that a communal *chazzan* must be known for his personal piety). If the *chazzan* is unclear as to what prayer means to him, his message to the congregants will likewise be unclear. Sometimes the meaning that emerges from the *nusach* may challenge members of the congregation. It may make them tremble or weep. Sometimes it may be whimsical or entertaining. But the message notwithstanding, the *chazzan* must always be interpreting the text for the *kahal*, community.

Sadly, very few people today—*chazzanim* and laymen alike—understand this basic concept. But imagine the sense of awe and majesty that might fill our sanctuaries and our hearts as a result of well thought-out, meaningfully presented public prayer. Imagine the new sense of unity that could emerge.

The sainted Maharil referred to certain synagogue melodies as coming from Sinai. Indeed, he attached such great importance to the preservation of the *nusach* that he believed his daughter had perished because once, while serving as *shaliach tzibbur* on the Yamim Noraim (Days of Awe), he had departed from the traditional melodies.⁵ The great Chassidic masters,⁶ and even the Vilna Gaon, the very symbol of non-Chassidism, taught that God gave us the gift of music to reveal the hidden secrets of His Creation. Prayer, that which codifies our affirmation of Creation, deserves to have its secrets revealed. The key to that revelation is in our hands.

If we simply stop to consider the music to which we pray and ensure that it comports with the historical *nusach*, if we start to think about how to convey the meaning of the liturgy when we

daven for the *amud*, the music of prayer can be saved and the essence of *tefillah* preserved. **IA**

Notes

1. *Mishnah, Arachin* 2:6
2. *Arachin* 11a
3. *Chullin* 24a
4. *Ibid.*
5. Shlomo Spitzer, ed., *Sefer Maharil Minhagim shel Rabbeinu Yaacov Moelin* (Jerusalem, 1988).
6. Velvel Pasternak, *Songs of the Chassidim*, vol. 2 (Jacksonville, Florida, 1971), 1-11.

Those who wish to lead and chant synagogue services according to the Ashkenazi nusach, may wish to purchase Be a Baal Tefillah. Featuring Cantor Sherwood Goffin of New York's Lincoln Square Synagogue and Belz School of Jewish Music at Yeshiva University, the CD is available from the Davka Corporation at www.davka.com/cgi-bin/product.cgi?product=442.



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