

Liturgical and Musical Aspects of Shavuot

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When God gave the Torah at Sinai, Moshe was taught the melodious tune (*neimah*) that accompanies scriptural reading. It is on the festival of Shavuot that we mark the anniversary of the revelation at Mount Sinai - *zeman matan torahteinu*--the season of the giving of our Torah.

The Origin of Biblical Cantillation

Moses spoke and God answered him with a loud voice

Exodus 19:19

This teaches that God instilled in Moshe power and assisted him with His voice and the tunefulness that Moshe heard, he transmitted to the Israelites

Mekhilta D'Rebbi Yishmael, Yitro, 4

משה ידבר והאלהים יעננו בקול:

שמות יט:יט

מלמד שנתן הב"ה כח וגבורה במשה, והיה הקב"ה מסייעו בקולו, ובנעימה שהיה משה שומע בו, היה משמיע את ישראל מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל יתרו - פרשה ד

The saintly Judah HaHassid, in his *Sefer Hahassidim*, remarks based on this same verse that God taught Moshe the Biblical modes. Simhah ben Shmuel, a pupil of Rashi, notes further, "The method of chanting the accents was revealed to Moshe; when one should draw out the tune, raise one's voice, dwell on a syllable, stand, raise, lower, and when to rest." This method of chant with its various modes has been preserved and transmitted orally from generation to generation, from century to century, and has remained authentic to this day. A striking fact about Biblical cantillation is that despite centuries of isolation from each other, Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews use motives which are surprisingly similar and have a common ancient ancestry. Biblical cantillation has surprised many a musicologist and is considered to be the most ancient source of Jewish music.

The Aseret Hadibrot and its Festive Melody

The reading of the Torah on Shavuot is highlighted with the cantillation of the *aseret hadibrot* (the Ten Commandments). When standing in awe and listening to the 120 words it contains, the worshipper feels the trembling experienced by those at Mt. Sinai. This spectacular event manifests itself in the synagogue when the reader chants the *aseret hadibrot* in accord with the *ta'am ha'elyon*; that is, according to the superlinear position of the *te'amim* (accents) in much

the same way that it was likely read and given at Mt. Sinai, stressing that the commandments are ten in number. In contrast to the ta'am ha'elyon is the ta'am ha'tachton, the sublinear position of the te'amim used when one reads the aseret ha'dibrot for oneself. The objective of the ta'am ha'tachton is to break up longer verses and bring together the shorter ones with the view of easing and equalizing the reading. Ya'akov Emden and other rabbinical scholars have commented that the accent marks in the ta'am ha'elyon are more pronounced in character than those in the ta'am ha'tachton. The accent marks of the ta'am ha'elyon are of higher pitch and require strong dynamic levels; those of the ta'am ha'tachton are of lower pitch and call for less dynamic levels. Therefore, when the aseret hadibrot is cantillated in public and especially on Shavuot, which commemorates the giving of the Torah and is identified with the anniversary of giving the aseret hadibrot, these verses must be chanted with the festive melody (ta'am ha'elyon) and not with the low chant (ta'am ha'tachton) meant for individual reading.

The Akdamut Melody

A piyut (poem) highlighting the festival of Shavuot, introduced into the synagogue service prior to the reading of the Torah, is the ninety line Aramaic poem called Akdamut (Introduction), composed by the eleventh century hazzan and paytan (poet), Meir ben Isaac Nehorai. During his lifetime, he was forced to debate the priests who attempted to persuade him to forsake his faith and accept theirs. He answered them appropriately and scorned them. As a legacy, he left his famous Akdamut poem that is in praise of Hashem, the Creator of the Torah and Israel.

Since there was no old melody that was fitting to this new text, the author no doubt had to borrow the melody from other sources. Several musical settings have been notated by Abraham Baer in his nusach anthology entitled Ba'al Tefillah. Two settings, still used today, originate from the Eastern and Western European branches of Ashkenazic rite. The more popularly known melody of Eastern European origin claims great antiquity by its psalmodic style of recitation and has been applied to Kiddush of the "Three Festivals." In some communities it was also adapted to a recital called Reshut Le-hatan Torah, an introduction to the person who is honored with the aliyah for the reading of the concluding section of the Torah on Simhat Torah morning. Another melody serves as a motto theme in numerous German synagogues that follow the Western European tradition and is applied on Shavuot to parts of Ma'ariv, Hallel and Duchenen. It has been suggested that this tune with its variants has its origin in secular German folk song transmitted in the specifically Germanized tradition of chanting Psalms.

The Akdamut melody has become universally known in both branches of Ashkenazic rite and is immediately recognizable. In generations when Jews faced persecution and forced conversion, they found strength and encouragement in this tune which became associated with the Jewish faith. Perhaps it is for this reason that the melody is used as a seasonal theme at the outset of each of the Shalosh Regalim when reciting Kiddush.

King David as Musical Innovator

A significant practice observed on Shavuot that contributed greatly to the development of Jewish chant and melody is the custom of reading the book of Ruth, and the book of Psalms. Among the various reasons given is that King David was born and died on Shavuot and since David descended from Ruth, the reading of this book where the birth of David Hamelekh is recorded is appropriate to the occasion.

King David's songs became part of one of Israel's most precious legacies- The Book of Psalms, Sefer Tehilim. David, the "*N'im Zemiroth Yisrael*," the 'sweet singer of Israel," and King David himself is known for playing the kinnor, and is identified as musical innovator, founder and legislator of Temple Psalmody.

The book of Psalms and Temple psalm singing greatly influenced our daily Shabbat and holiday prayers and its music. On Shavuot afternoon or on the second evening, the Book of Psalms is recited in its entirety in some congregations. Our sages note that the five books of psalms correspond to the Chamisha Chumshei Torah and King David's Book of Psalms is a revelation of the aspect of song which is contained in the Torah. For this reason, King David said "*Z'miroth Hoyu Li Chukecho*," (your statutes were music to me) ps. 119:54

The musical mode for reading Ruth is different from Torah cantillation. Although employing the same te'amim (tropes) it is read in a more lyrical style and in the Ashkenazic tradition, it is the same melody used for Shir Hashirim on Pesah and Kohelet on Sukkot. The common melody for all three scrolls is to indicate that all three festivals have the same historical significance.

May the music associated with the holiday of Shavuot serve as a means for better understanding its liturgy while celebrating our *z'man matan toratenu*.

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