

THE SYNAGOGUE AND ITS MUSICAL SERVICE

by Macy Nulman

“Where the cantorate will go from here is of course conjectural..... Whatever happens in the immediate future, there will be chosen voices as long as there are synagogues in America”. These conclusive words, written by Prof. Mark Slobin some thirteen years ago in his book *Chosen Voices - The Story of the American Cantorate*¹, are an appropriate opening for this article which deals with the current trends in synagogue deportment, its musical service, the caliber of its officiants and the perception of its worshipers. Slobin, profoundly discerning, correctly notes the irony that the “American Jewish religious movement most dedicated to prayer, the Orthodox, is currently the one least interested in the cantorate”.² What the Jewish community fails to comprehend is that the prayer service is not solely in the domain of the professional cantor but is part of *Kelal Yisrael*. Services are conducted thrice daily (*Shaharit, Minhah, Ma’ariv*), each having its own prayer-mode(s) and requiring a skilled *ba’al tefillah*. Torah reading, an important segment of the service which occurs four times a week, demands a person proficient in the cantillation of the Bible. Every Jew is required to utter the blessings for the Torah with its proper melody, especially on the High Holy Days. *Kiddush, Havdalah, Zemirot*, as well as leading in *Birkat Hamazon*, have a fixed mode of recitation. Thus, basic skills in Jewish liturgical music is everyone’s concern just as Torah study is prescribed not only for the rabbi but for every Jew. In the same measure, the rabbi, in addition to being the authoritative teacher of the law and appointed spiritual head of the congregation, is also charged, according to tradition, with specific musical practices in the service of the synagogue. He chants the *Haftarah* on *Shabbat Hazon* and *Shabbat Teshuvah*, serves as *makri* for the *Ba’al Toke’ah*, recites the *Sefirat Ha’omer*, sets the melody to be followed by the congregation when chanting the first verse of *Attah Hareitah* on *Simhat Torah*, chants the blessings at a wedding, chants the *Male* at a funeral, etcetera³. Thus, the study and knowledge of the traditional chants and melodies of the synagogue are also the rabbi’s responsibilities.

PRESENT STATUS

Never has the preservation of our musical heritage been so seriously challenged as today. Of late it has become fashionable to introduce alien melodies into the prayer service. Moreover, entire sections of the prayer service are chanted with incorrect prayer-modes or sometimes without traditional melody whatsoever. Our *nusha'ot* (prayer-patterns) are being debased. Lack of knowledge, misinformation, and indifference reign. So important are these prayer-modes that it is told of the Jerusalem *tzaddik* and *ga'on* Reb Zalman Bardn that when attending a Sabbath *Minhah* service, he heard the *Sheli'ah Tzibbur* utilizing a chant that had no relationship whatsoever with the Sabbath *Minhah nusah*. After the service was concluded he went to another synagogue to hear the repetition of the *Amidah* in the traditional mode. He went so far as to say that the "*niggun* of *Shabbat* should not be the *niggun* of the weekdays"! (paraphrasing the statement of "Your speech of *Shabbat* should not be for weekday speech").⁴

The *Sheli'ah Tzibbur* and worshipers are evidently permitted considerable latitude for musical expression, provided it is within the framework (or within the characteristic musical mode) of the individual *nusah*, and consonant with the spiritual mood which the prayers demand. Surely, having the congregation participate is justified; but to view the service like summer-camp where clapping, joining arms and swaying and even dancing are prevalent, does not seem to enhance the spiritual mood and *kavanah* of the worshipers. We run through the liturgy, rushing in and out of the prayer texts as if the task were to cover a maximum of space in a minimum of time. The "so-called *ba'alei tefillah*", in addition to lacking tonal expression, do not enunciate, do not accent the words correctly, and err in proper phrasing. Another consequence of this situation is that many of these people, sorely deficient in any training or experience find their way to leading synagogue services, thus sending a distorted message to worshipers who also do not know what a musical service of the synagogue should be or sound like.

Torah reading, too, has become garbled sound. In the introduction to *Sefer Letiferet Hakeri'ah*⁵ we find the following statement, "Unfortunately too many *Ba'alei Keri'ah* are almost totally ignorant of the rules of *keri'ah* and *dikduk*. Torah reading has become a travesty in many synagogues".

The story is told of Reb Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev: Once while he was visiting a city he went to the synagogue. Arriving at the gate he refused to enter. When his disciples inquired what was wrong with the synagogue, they received the reply: "The synagogue is full of words of Torah and *Tefillah*." This seemed the highest praise to his disciples and even more reason to enter the synagogue. When they questioned him further, Reb Levi Yitzhak explained: "Words uttered without fear, uttered without love do not rise to heaven. I sense that the synagogue is full of Torah and full of *Tefillah*." I wonder if

Reb Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev would enter many of our synagogues today?

THE WORSHIPERS

Attending current Orthodox synagogues are four different types of worshipers. Those who studied in *yeshivot* in the United States and in Israel, *ba'alei teshuvah*, persons who arrived in the United States on the eve of the Holocaust, and a type which no one would call "worshipping Jews". Let us briefly analyze the background of these worshipers and explore their relationship to the synagogue and its musical service. The *yeshiva*-educated worshiper, in all likelihood, *davend* his entire lifetime with a *minyan*, most often in a *shtiebel* or "*yeshiveshe*" - *minyan*, where a skilled *ba'al tefillah* was never employed. The *minyan* had no pews and he sat at a *tish* (table) or stood at a *shtender* ("stand"). Let me tell you what a father of a child with this background related to me. He had to attend a relative's *Bar-Mitzvah* in a large synagogue in Brooklyn and he took his ten year old son along with him on *Shabbat* morning. When the rabbi walked up to his seat on the *bimah* the boy asked "who is he and why is he sitting there"? The *Sheli'ah Tzibbur* came in with his special garb and the boy again asked his father "why is he dressed in that outfit? When the *Sheli'ah Tzibbur* began to *daven*, in full voice, the young boy remarked "his voice sounds funny". The father, himself never attending such a service, had no answers for his son. The *ba'al teshuvah*, on the other hand, is a worshiper who moved from the non-observant to an observant life-style. Traditional synagogue-song is strange to his ears. He was introduced to Judaism and the synagogue service with melodies adapted from secular and Israeli folk song as well as *hasidic* patterns. What appeals to him are the jazzy, swinging, feet-tickling and out-of-mode prayer tunes. The third type of worshiper left war-torn Europe when he was a child and had little time to absorb the synagogue sounds. He does remember that his father and grandfather prayed in a *kloiz* (a room) in Europe and he, too, would like to follow in their footsteps. He always remarks "I love *hazzanut*". Recently I met this type of Jew around the High Holy Day period and I asked him "Where are you *davening* for the *Yamim Nora'im*"? He said, "in a *shtiebel*". I then remarked to him "but you like a *Hazzan* and a choir, why don't you *daven* in the large shul in your neighborhood with the *Hazzan* and choir"? His answer was, "I like a *Hazzan* at a concert, on T.V., on a record, on a cruise, but not at the *amud* (pulpit). At the *amud* I like a *ba'al tefillah* to *daven* for me". The fourth type, "not what anyone would call a worshipping-Jew" does not attend services regularly and comes to the synagogue on special occasions only or on holidays. He is what we would call "part of an audience" rather than a congregation. He has no understanding of the service at all and is indifferent to its music. This chaotic situation of changing the *mesorah* of our synagogue prayer-modes and melodies was no doubt brought on by these four categories of worshipers.

FIXING THE PRAYER MODES

It seems that prior to the time of Rabbi Jacob Molin (*Maharil*; 1365-1427), who was greatly responsible for unifying synagogue ritual and its music, there was freedom in choice of melody for the prayer service. The *Rambam*, Yehudah Halevi, and Yehudah He-Hassid all felt that "when praying, select a beautiful sweet melody and adapt it for the prayers".⁶ Yehudah He-Hassid who lived in the latter half of the twelfth century wrote in his *Sefer Hasidim*,⁷ *Ukheshetipaleil emor otam be'oto niggun shena'im umatok be'einekha* ("When praying say your prayers with the melody that is most pleasant and sweet to your eyes"). However, it was not until Rabbi Jacob Molin, who Israel Abrahams described as "the forerunner of a whole class of clerical musicians"⁸ that our prayer chants became fixed. These melodies are currently known as *Skarbova* (from the Polish *skarb*, "treasure"; thus, from treasure, "official") or *Misinai Niggunim* ("as if handed down from Mount Sinai"). Tradition in synagogue song meant so much that his ruling is brought down in the *Rema* to *Orah Hayyim* 619 that states that "local customs and universal traditional melodies should not be changed". His rulings and practices became the guiding light for all Ashkenazic Jewry,⁹ Rabbi Aaron Kotler of Lakewood is known to have called in a student who was to officiate for the High Holy Days and he said to him among other matters: "*Zuhlst gut aynhazrn die Skarbova Niggunim* ("you should review the [High Holy Day] melodies very well").¹⁰

IMPACT OF THE FIXED MODES

The absence of these hallowed *niggunim* during prayer would be unthinkable to any worshiper who has an inbred affinity for the feelings and stirrings of the heart, rendered by the proper *nusah*. Just as the *Avodah* in the *Bet Hamikdash* was accompanied by a certain order of *shir* (melody), primarily vocal, so must our *Avodah* in the synagogue maintain a proper contact and order of *shir*, of *niggun* and *nusah* as we, in our way, make our offerings of prayer.¹¹ Adapting trite, sentimental, exhibitionistic, and cheap melodies into the *nusah hatefillah* has never had a place in the service of the synagogue. The changing and disregard of traditional tunes stimulated the antagonism of the *mitnagdim* and in 1786 the *hasidim* of Cracow were excommunicated not only for abusing the traditional melody but for corrupting the biblical modes.¹² The cult-like dancing, too, during services must be banned. Rabbi Aaron Wertheimer writes in his authoritative book called *Law and Custom in Hasidism*,¹³ "Dancing, though, was not common during the prayers themselves except on *Shemini Atzeret* and *Simhat Torah*. At the conclusion of the prayers of almost every festival, though, they would dance, and they would sometimes do so on *Shabbat* at the *Se'udah Shelishit*".

THE DECLINE OF THE *SHELI'AH TZIBBUR*

Despite the decline of synagogue music reaching historic heights, synagogues still do not employ a skilled *ba'al tefillah* (not a *Hazzan!*). Any congregant leads the service, even during the High Holy Days. I was told of a rabbi who, after he concluded his sermon at *Selihot*, called out to the congregation "who wants to say *Ashrei?*" Little did he realize that this was the first service introducing the *Yamim Nora'im*. To him it seemed as if it were a regular daily *Minhah* service. The excuse that adequate funds are lacking to engage a skilled *ba'al tefillah* is not valid. In the past even the poorest synagogue employed someone special for the High Holy Days.

The *Hazzanim*, too, may be at fault for the ignorance, misconception, and apathy that prevails in our synagogues. Appearing at concerts and performing on cruises undermines the profession as a whole. At one time concert-giving was a necessity because this was the only outlet a Jew had for listening to any music. Erroneously, this period of concert-giving is called the "golden age of *Hazzanut*." But this period was a golden age only for a small number of gifted *Hazzanim*. For the majority it was scrounging for a living, and living in constant fear of dismissal and abysmally degrading placement practices.

The professional *Hazzan* must heed the guidelines set forth by Pinchos Minkowski, many of which still have application today. Among Minkowski's eighteen *takkanot* (enactments) for the *Sheli'ah Tzibbur* he wrote "The person who carries the responsibility of leading the liturgical service is firstly a *Sheli'ah Tzibbur* and afterwards an artist. He can be the greatest performer but his art must be treated with secondary importance. Primarily, he must remain a *Sheli'ah Tzibbur*." Minkowski continues, "A distinguished cantor should not wave his hands or head nor practice any theatrical mimicking during the service. These special effects belong in a circus or theater, but not in the synagogue."¹⁴ When Frederick Handel performed his oratorio *The Messiah* in London for the first time, King George II said to him "You amused me very much master!" Handel replied "Your majesty, my intention was much more to better than amuse anyone!"¹⁵ This should be the outlook and objective of a *Sheli'ah Tzibbur*; not to amuse but to uplift the congregation in prayer.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

It is time to establish a central authority for the purpose of clarifying the current status of the synagogue and its music. There is no quick fix or simplistic solution to remedy this critical situation. Once we see the problems more clearly, with a fresh position and outlook we will be able to bail out of the clutches of bankruptcy with new determination and purpose. But I

repeat, it will be no easy task.

I propose three steps that we take that may reach a maximum effectiveness so that good results will eventually follow:

1. Let us imitate the world of Torah. It was Rabbi Meir Shapira, head of the famous Yeshiva Chachmei Lublin in Poland who on February 2, 1931 (15th of *Shevat* 5691) inaugurated what is known today as the *Daf Yomi*. By studying one leaf or *daf* of *Gemara* every day, a person can complete the entire Babylonian Talmud in about seven years. This has proven to be one of the most successful projects in the Torah world. Today, thousands upon thousands are studying the *Daf Yomi* on a regular basis.

Cantorial Council of America and the Belz School of Jewish Music must establish a service to be studied regularly in all parts of the world. Each member of CCA, as well as others, should attract persons to study the service in order to preserve our heritage. Outreach should be done by everyone to include the masses; young and old. Our goal should be to teach the prayer modes as they were handed down from generation to generation and to demonstrate to the world that our prayer-modes are authentic, authoritative and everlasting. Details as to the music-printing, tapes, and general procedures should be a joint venture between CCA and BSJM.

2. A successful turnaround needs multi-pronged solutions to resolve each problem. When entering a synagogue lobby today one notices numerous pamphlets, brochures, and flyers filled with words of Torah. These are issued by such organizations as the National Council of Young Israel, Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, Pirchei Agudath Yisrael, Ohr Sameyach, Students Organization of Yeshiva University and many others. Never did I notice anything in these publications concerning *tefillah*. CCA together with BSJM should issue a flyer on a regular basis containing aspects of *halakhah*, customs, and music of the *tefillot*. Such information may help to reshape the prayer service from what it is to what it must become. We *should not* underestimate the power of publicity and exposure.

3. Different organizations (e.g. Lubavitch) in the *hasidic* world offer prizes to students who memorize portions of *Mishnayot*, Talmud, or prayers. CCA and BSJM should institute such a project, offering students (teenagers) a prize if they successfully read a *Sidrah* on *Shabbat* or lead in a prayer service of the synagogue. This can be publicized and become incentives for teenagers to pursue liturgical music education.

Turnarounds are seldom accomplished by one person. The above projects also require manpower and financial support. Excuse-making is the

major roadblock to achieving the outcomes we deserve. The longer we fail to recognize the problems, the longer we wait to get a firm grip on the current trends, the longer it goes unattended, the more problematic it becomes in terms of getting the results we want.

There was a time when erudite worshipers did not flinch for even a moment to raise their voices to condemn the slightest offense against the reverence of our *nusah hatefillah* of the service. And most shocking of all is the deafening silence and non-action of our yeshivot, day schools, and outreach programs. Why is there no passionate outcry to stir Jewish masses to protest the outrageous approach to *tefillah*? In a climate such as ours, a generation grows up that, though devoting much time to studying rabbinic texts, does not devote any time for the study of *tefillah* or any synagogue skills. Standards and tone must be set now by the Cantorial Council of America and the Belz School of Jewish Music at Yeshiva University in order to create a climate for success. Our motto should be "Jewish Music is a sound part of Jewish education".

FOOTNOTES

1. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989, p. 284.
2. Ibid., p.94; see also pp. 127-129.
3. Cf. "Functional Obligations of the Rabbi in the Musical Service of the Synagogue," Macy Nulman, *Concepts of Jewish Music and Prayer*, CCA, 1985, pp. 131-136
4. Eliyahu Kitov, *Hasidim and Anshe Ma'aseh*, vol. 4, p. 160.
5. Maurice Gellis and Dennis Gribetz, Monsey, N.Y., 1982, p. 11.
6. Rabbi Avraham Eliezer Hirshowitz, *Otzar Shalaym Leminhagay Yisrael*, Pardes Publishing House, Inc. New York, NY 1963, 209:5
7. Lewin-Epstein, Jerusalem, 1963, par. 158.
8. *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, Atheneum Publishers, New York, 1969, p.255.
9. Rabbi Gedalia Felder, *Sefer Yesodei Yeshurun*, vol. 1., p. 40.
10. This was told to me by Rabbi Mordecai Shapiro of Miami Beach, FL.
11. *Halakhah and Minhag in Nusah Hatefillah*, Rabbi Gedalia Dov Schwartz, "Journal of Jewish Music and Liturgy", vol. 13, p.4.
12. S. Dubnov, *History of Hasidim*, Tel Aviv, 1930, chap. 3: Kadmoniyoth, Wettstein, Cracow 1892, p. 62.
13. Ktav Publishing House, Inc., Hoboken, NJ 1992, p. 158
14. *Moderne Liturgie in undzere Sinagogn in Rusland*, vol. 2, 1910, pp. 242, 243.
15. Dr. Schz Zur, *Aesthetik der Musik*, "Die Musik des Geistes", Stuttgart, 1900, pp. 112, 155.

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