



# I Dread Going to Shul

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I dread going to *shul*. The services are both uninspired and uninspiring. Nothing about what goes on there speaks to me spiritually or on any other level. Quite frankly, I find the entire process of sitting through seemingly interminable and boring services to be an exercise in tedium and futility. Whenever I attend services at my local synagogue, I dread it. From the time I wake up, get dressed and go, until it is blessedly over, I feel angry that I have to be there and frustrated that my precious free time has been wasted. I feel this way 52 weekends a year and on the holidays as well.

I am not a disaffected Jew who feels estranged from Judaism. Quite the contrary, I was born into an Orthodox family, and my wife and I are raising our children to be Orthodox Jews. To look at me is to see a mainstream modern Ashkenazic Orthodox Jew; a product of the Day School and yeshiva high school and post-high school yeshiva learning movement. I've served on the boards of the last two *shuls* to which I've belonged. I regularly enjoy opening a folio of the Talmud 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 loathe going to *shul* each Shabbat morning. My disdain for the services in my *shul* has nothing at all to do with my love for my religion. Indeed my ambivalence about going to *shul* is a function of my attachment to Judaism; both its religious and cultural components.

In 1912 a group of committed young Jewish men and women turned to the dynamic and popular Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan to help them form a society that they hoped would reinvigorate American Orthodoxy. That group, Young Israel, has become one of the most potent and important institutions on the American Orthodox Jewish scene. From the time those young men and women first met in the vestry room of Congregation Kahal Adath Yeshurun on Eldridge Street, in New York City, they began to reshape the way we pray. They felt a need to render synagogue services more relevant to the contemporary

worshipper. Young Israel did not edit the prayer book. To their great credit, they appreciated the value of the traditional rite of prayer. Rather, those men and women sought to strip away the “high church” trappings that were popular in those days. In order to increase member participation, they did away with the professional cantor and choir, substituting them with lay prayer leaders and congregational singing. The pilpulistic learned rabbinic address, which focused on the minutiae of Jewish law and was delivered in Yiddish, was replaced by the sermon rendered in English about issues of contemporary interest. In doing all that, the founders of the Young Israel movement sought to render traditional Orthodoxy more relevant and appealing to their generation. To a large degree, they succeeded. The Young Israel movement, coupled with the efforts of other communal institutions, advanced the cause of Orthodoxy in America. But in doing so, the newly minted American synagogues they created placed communal prayer on the slippery slope toward perdition.

The first members of the Young Israel were well acquainted with traditional synagogue music. It was the traditional prayer modes and the grand liturgical settings of Sulzer, Lewandowski, Gerowitsch, along with East European modal chant that they brought into their *shuls*; just without the professional cantor to lead it. When some of the repertoire proved unworkable in the new setting they sought to create, masters of liturgy such as Max Wohlberg, Israel Goldfarb, or Macy Nulman supplied easy-to-learn, pleasant melodies based upon the traditional Ashkenazic prayer modes. While this new music was far simpler and lacked musical flourish, at the very least it was steeped in the traditional prayer modes and in its own way conveyed the meaning of the prayers and the essence of the liturgy. Services lacked much of the pomp and circumstance of the statelier synagogues. They lacked the cultural trappings of the *shul* of a bygone era. People did not attend these *shuls* to be culturally enriched, as occurred in the synagogues that maintained the office of the cantor. Rather, these *shuls* were for serious dedicated prayer. But the camaraderie and renewed sense of purpose replaced and more than compensated for the ceremonious proceedings of the old style synagogues.

But time ticks by, and with each passing generation the artistry of prayer was continually downplayed; that culture of artistic and ceremonious services disappeared. As Orthodoxy began its ascendancy in post-WWII America, as yeshivot and Day Schools sprang up in communities all over the country, an emphasis on personal *kavanah*, individual concentration and introspection during prayer, began to replace the time-honored tradition that the *hazzan* should both interpret the meaning of the prayers and inspire the congregation collectively to spiritual heights. Communal prayer became less of a group effort and more an amalgamation of individuals gathered to do the same thing in technical fulfillment of the requirement that one pray with a minyan. The older members of the *shuls* passed away, and the alumni of the yeshivot began to ascend to the *bimah*. The vacuum created by their ignorance of the traditional music of prayer was filled with modified Hassidic melodies and the occasional Israeli folk melody, in keeping with the new ethos of communal prayer. The music became a way to move the individual alone in his particularistic quest for spiritual succor, and not to unite the *tzibbur*, the congregation as a whole, in the divine worship that can only come from a communal framework, *berov am hadrat Melekh*. As popular Jewish music assumed a decided rock-and-roll beat and feel, in slavish imitation of the world around us, our sacred liturgy now sounds no

different from the sounds one might hear on a popular radio station.

It was not callous disregard for the music of old; rather it was a combination of ignorance and the desire to do precisely that which their forebears had done, to render prayer “relevant” that held sway. Curiously, one can observe the indirect proportion between observance and fealty to halakha on the Orthodox scene along with the concomitant emphasis on praying with *kavanah*, and the aesthetic present in their synagogues.

It is against the historical backdrop and because of what has become of our prayers that I dread going to *shul*. I despise following the prayers of someone who has never bothered to translate and seriously ponder the meaning of the prayers he supposedly intones on my behalf. I loathe hearing tunes applied to the davening simply because they “fit” the text rhythmically but do nothing to convey the meaning of the text. I bemoan the lack of dignity that pervades the public presentation of our prayers. I resent 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 sing along. I yearn for the “high church” atmosphere of a bygone era.

My disdain for the current state of prayer is about more than my offended aesthetic sensibilities, and it’s about more than my fear that traditional prayer modes and old fashioned hazzanut stand on the brink of extinction; although those both weigh heavily upon me. I am genuinely dissatisfied and spiritually unfulfilled by those 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 Temple in Jerusalem included a conservatory to train the Levites in the singing that had to accompany the daily offerings. The purpose of that conservatory was to insure that the music of the Temple was every bit as impressive as befits God’s house. (Don’t our synagogues, our mikdeshei me’at, deserve no less?) The sages who arranged the order of our prayers did so with a purpose. The text of the siddur is supposed to speak to the worshipper, to remind him/her of his/her place in God’s creation, remind us of what is truly important, to celebrate the occasions that bring us to synagogue. The music of prayer is supposed to elucidate and clarify the meaning of prayer. There are reasons why certain prayers are traditionally chanted one way and others differently. Those modes were assigned to assist us in our understanding of the liturgy. It saddens me every time I witness the complete disregard for this most powerful and potentially uplifting experience.

I truly think that the founders of the Young Israel movement and all those who came after truly believed in the truth of their mission. But I also believe that they did not understand the role of the *shaliah tsibbur*, the cantor.

A hazzan, be he professionally trained or not, must assume a role similar to that of a modern day rabbi. A rabbi is a teacher. He teaches his congregation how to live as good Jews. He does so by personal example and via his spoken word. A rabbi teaches Torah; he interprets the words of our sacred literature and renders them relevant and meaningful to his congregation. He does that publicly in classes and via his sermons. Should a rabbi content himself to simply present that which is easy for his flock to understand and digest? Should he simply say that which is popular? Such a course of action, while

convenient at first, is a sign that the rabbi truly does not understand his function. No good teacher wants his/her students to be the same people at the end of the term that they were at its beginning. The act of teaching is to foster intellectual growth and curiosity along with imparting information. A rabbi must foster growth in his congregation; both intellectual and spiritual growth. He must challenge his congregation to think about what he says; he must make them struggle with the texts of the Torah and the Talmud; he must make them ponder issues deeply, even at the risk of causing them temporary intellectual pain and spiritual distress. For only in those times of challenge will the congregation grow under the rabbi's dedicated tutelage. For the rabbi to be a true teacher, he too must struggle with the issues, wrestle with the text and experience the same "pain" and "strife" he inflicts upon his devotees. The same holds true for a hazzan.

A hazzan is not merely a precenter of the liturgy. He is a teacher of prayer. He interprets the mahzor or the siddur and renders it relevant and meaningful to his congregation. The prayer modes are the hermeneutics he employs. If all a hazzan does is sing some popular tunes for the entertainment of the congregation, or if all he does is sing big pieces to impress the congregation 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. Leading prayer is not about timing the service so it ends before the cholent burns, nor is it about entertainment. It's not even about artistry for its own sake. It is about teaching the congregation what the prayers are, and what they mean. To do that a hazzan must wrestle with the text of the siddur. He has to ponder the depths of his soul and make the liturgy meaningful and relevant to himself. He must lead and teach both by exposition and by example (thus the halakhic requirement that a communal cantor must be known for his personal piety). If the cantor is unclear as to what prayer means to him, his message to the congregants will likewise be unclear. Once a cantor understands what the liturgy means to him, he must then go about presenting it, teaching that meaning to his students within the confines of accepted exposition of the text (with the liturgical hermeneutics, the *nusah*). Sometimes that meaning will be challenging to the congregation. It may make them tremble or weep. Sometimes it may be whimsical or entertaining. But the message notwithstanding, the cantor MUST always be interpreting the text of the siddur and teaching the interpretation to his students (i.e. the congregation). That is what the unconquerable Cantor Moshe Koussevitzky meant when he stated "I daven with the peirush," I pray according to the meaning of the words.

Sadly, so very few people today, cantors and congregants alike, understand this basic concept. But imagine what it would be like if those who ascended the reader's desks in our *shuls* aspired to that ethic. How much more meaningful would services be if those who lead them seek to musically impart the meaning of the siddur to the rest of the congregation? How enlightening would it be if the melodies we sang actually served to illuminate and interpret the liturgy? 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. Consider the new sense of communal unity that might arise out of such an endeavor. Think for a moment how well received such prayers might be before God.

We in the Orthodox community have attained higher levels of Torah scholarship. Never before have there been as many opportunities for Torah learning in as many media as we

have before us now. A good portion of that material rightly focuses on improving our praying. But all of it is about the individual's relationship to the praying. Nothing (to my knowledge) focuses on enhancing communal prayer. Both the great Hassidic masters and even the Gaon of Vilna, the very symbol of non-Hassidism, taught that God gave us the gift of music to reveal the hidden secrets of His creation. Prayer, that which codifies our affirmation of the creation, deserves to have its secrets revealed. The key to that revelation is in our hands.

American Orthodoxy has come a long way. It was not long ago that one had to search high and low for a complete set of the Talmud in this country. In barely a century, we have standardized kashruth, created fine institutions of Torah learning on the elementary and high school levels and beyond. In the wake of the Shoah, we have experienced a renaissance. When others were convinced we would disappear as an anachronism, we thrived. But in the process we abandoned and forgot about a sacred tradition; that of the music of prayer. The Maharil referred to certain synagogue melodies as coming from Sinai. Indeed he attached such great importance to the preservation of the *nusah* that he recounted his belief he was punished with his daughter's death because he once departed from the traditional melodies when he was a *shaliah tsibbur* on the Yamim Noraim. Yet despite the significance historically placed upon *nusah*, we sloughed it off and never looked back. The pathetic state of our prayers is the natural consequence of what began in 1912 as a noble experiment to render Orthodoxy more accessible to the masses.

But it doesn't have to remain this way. All is not yet lost. All it takes is for people to make the effort. If our day schools and yeshivot taught our children *nusah* as part of their already existing music programs, and integrated that tutelage into the praying in school, *nusah* might be saved. If rabbis devoted a small percentage of their oratory to preaching about the importance of our musical heritage, and the need to maintain it in the synagogue, people would take the issue more seriously. If synagogues utilized a small portion of their programming budgets to occasionally engage real cantors at Shabbat or festival services, our sacred song would again return to the synagogue sanctuary, where it belongs and not remain consigned to the concert stage. If people simply stopped to consider the music to which they pray and insure it comports with the historical *nusah*, if people started to consider how to convey the meaning of the liturgy when they lead in prayer, if people began to take the music with which they pray as seriously as the atmosphere they seek to create for their Torah learning, prayer can be saved. At the very least, if we as a community make this small change, we would all once again love to going to *shul*.