

The Prayer Experience: Faith and Music

By: Cantor Paul Kowarsky

I believe that our faith and our feelings about G-d fluctuate constantly in sync with the vicissitudes of our lives. But if the core of our faith is stable and intact, then we do not deviate from our faith much beyond the extent of specific ritual performance. It is only when the very essence of our faith is unstable that our personal sufferings endanger our belief in G-d. Even when the tides are at their lowest in my personal life, my commitment to G-d comes to the fore when I am actually *davening*, in my capacity as *Sh'liach Tsibbur* (emissary of the people in prayer). It is at those times that I truly feel my connection with the *Kadosh Baruch Hu*, whose presence at such moments is my emotional tie to the liturgy which I am chanting.

Are the average congregants imbued with faith in the Divine? Is there sincere belief, or is there only a somewhat loose association with G-d? Are the members' synagogue affiliations rooted in religious conviction or are they linked to family ties or life-cycle events? Was not the very formation of synagogue communities in order to establish a core centre for religious worship and study? Do we come to Synagogue to pray or is our presence essentially social, cultural or perhaps superstitious? Do we come to *shul* to "enjoy the service" or to endeavour to experience divine inspiration and a spiritual experience through the chanting of our sacred prayers?

These questions are for contemplation. They are posed only so as to consider how to create a mood and ambiance in our Synagogue worship service, conducive to personal communication with G-d.

Prayer and song go hand in hand in seeking the Divine Presence. Our age-old traditional cantillation modes (trope) used by the *Ba'alei K'riah* in reading from the Torah and Prophets and our sacred *nuschaot* (prayer modes) guiding the chanting of our holy prayers are the conduits to our Creator.

The wealth of our liturgical musical legacy is tremendous. Why then is the *Chazan* constantly pestered to introduce popular hit tunes from the secular or Israeli repertoire into the Synagogue Service? What place does the melody for the ever popular romantic song – *Erev Shel Shoshanim* (Evening of Roses) have in our sacred *K'dusha*, or the beautiful melody for "Scarborough Fair" in *Adon Olam*?

Among the reasons often presented to me for the inclusion of such melodies are that the melody "fits" and the people are familiar with the tune. Do we have to lower the level of our congregational music to meet the secular musical standards of society, or are we better off by teaching the people the meanings of the texts and their appropriate traditional melodic enhancements?

It is the responsibility of the *Chazan* to ensure the proper interpretation of the meaning of our prayers through our traditionally prescribed *nuschaot*. The music chosen must correctly interpret and phrase the Hebrew texts to conform to the Shabbat, Festivals and Days of Awe, and the moods of the particular occasion. The musical portion of each service should allow sufficient time for the *Chazan* to interpret portions of the texts with

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appropriate Cantorial recitatives, for the Choir to sing its prepared musical compositions, and for the Congregation to participate throughout.

The treasure of our vast repertoire of liturgical music is a precious asset of our Jewish heritage, and must ever be nurtured and protected. In our effort to establish a divine inspiration within our prayer experience, we should welcome the innovation of new musical interpretations of our texts, provided that they are rooted in the traditional modes and motifs. - *Shiru Lashem Shir Chadash* – “Sing unto the L-rd a new song” says the Psalmist.

That which is new is often disliked and rejected. But we should not lose sight of the fact that what has become familiar was once new and unfamiliar. We must be amenable to musical variety and innovation. As Israel's late Chief Rabbi Kook (in whose Yeshiva I was privileged to study) wrote in 1943: "New songs will be created, breathing the love of G-d and echoing His mighty word. New and bright domains of culture will be discovered, tilled and fructified. The old will be renewed, and the new will be sanctified."