

You Can't Stop the Music

Category: Devarim, Ha'azinu

What was the main attraction in the Temple?

The Chazzan

Throughout this High Holiday season, every synagogue makes a special effort to get a good cantor. Of course, the wealthier the shul, the better the chazzan will be. Afterwards Jews will be asking each other, "Nu, how was your chazzan?" Many Jews even come to Shul on High Holidays only because of the chazzan. Some congregations even add choirs to accompany their cantor's performance. In such places the High Holiday prayers are like a concert.

When did this all begin? Who came up with the idea of that you need a chazzan to lead the prayers and that prayers must be full of songs and melodies? Why couldn't we just say the prayers and go home? What's the point of all this music?

The style of our prayers is founded upon the service in the Holy Temple. I always wondered what draw there was in the Temple that brought the Jewish people back to it three times every year. True, it is a mitzvah to visit the Temple on holidays, and true those who came witnessed miracles. Still, even miracles become commonplace after you see them enough times and people don't run to see something commonplace.

The draw was the Levites' musical performance.

The Temple

It was the Kohen's job to bring the sacrifices upon the altar, the Levites were not allowed to do this. Instead, they were charged with two jobs. They were the guards at the gate (not for security, G-d protects His own house, but out of respect) and they sang and played music while the service was being performed.

Obviously, a Levi who wasn't musically inclined was given guard duty. But every single talented Levi was sent to perform, either in the choir or in the orchestra. And every time a sacrifice was brought onto the Altar, especially on holidays,

they'd strike up the music.

Picture this, hundreds of men singing, hundreds of instruments playing... It's described a little in the last chapter of Psalms, "Praise Him with a shofar blast, with harp and lyre, timbres and dance, stringed instruments and flute, resounding cymbals..." It must have been magnificent! Jews who came to the Temple were treated to the biggest concert of the age.

Many of the songs the Levites sang were included in Psalms. Chapters that begin with "To the choirmaster" or "A song" were definitely among them. All of the chapters we know as "The Songs of the Day" were among them. Some say that the tune of Kol Nidre dates back to the days of the Temple.

The Power of Music

The music was very important to the service. Its purpose was to inspire the person who came to seek atonement and awaken the feeling of repentance in his heart.

Shazar, the former president of Israel tells a story about the power of music.

He was born to a Chabad family but moved to Israel and left his heritage behind. At the end of his life he reconnected to Judaism and to the Rebbe. He writes that it was a certain melody, the Alter Rebbe's niggun was his rope and helped pull him back to his roots.

Before leaving Russia, he visited his grandfather one last time. As his grandfather escorted him out, he said, "You know the Alter Rebbe's niggun very well. If you are ever in doubt whether or not your life is on the right track, try to bring this niggun to mind. If you can't, it's a sign that you must change your ways for you have strayed and become lost."

This song stayed with Shazar his whole life. However, on the fateful day when the UN was voting on Israel's right to statehood Shazar was on Israel's representing committee and he had a bad feeling. As he sat, caught between hope and fear, he tried to bring this niggun to mind. He couldn't remember it. His fears were now cemented; the day would surely end badly.

Looking around, desperate for a ray of hope, Shazar saw a man who looked

Jewish. He scribbled the following note to him, “Ana Hashem Hoshia Na,” which means, “Please, G-d, please save us.” A few moments later a note came back, “Ana Hashem Hatzlicha Na,” meaning, “Please, G-d, please grant us success.” Suddenly that illusive niggun was playing in his head, allaying his fears.

The Musical Torah

See the power of music. One Chassidic melody brought hope and strength to a Jew throughout his life and eventually brought him back to Judaism.

In this week’s Parsha, as well as in the past two portions, the Torah is referred to as a song. “Moses came and spoke all the words of this song.”

Why does Torah call itself a song?

Torah is not simply a rule book, to be read dryly as a lawyer might read a book of laws. Torah is meant to move the reader the way a song does. The Torah’s song is meant to lift you up to a higher plane.

Also, music never gets old. No matter how many times you hear some songs you’re always willing to hear them again. You never want to hear the same speech twice. You’ll never hear, “Encore! Encore!” after a speech.

This is why the Torah is read in a tune. This way it will never get boring and we’ll read it again and again, because this song must never end.