

A Study of the Relevance of Liturgical Music in Our Prayers with Specific Reference to The Meaning of the Texts

By: Cantor Paul Kowarsky

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When the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 A.C.E., the sacrificial system came to an end as a sign of national mourning. The Sages decreed that prayer would be the substitute for communicating with G-d through the sacrificial system.

The Talmud tells us that prayer is a Rabbinic Ordinance, but Maimonides contends that it is only the content of prayer and the number of services which are of Rabbinic origin. The basic obligation to pray, says Maimonides, is derived from the Torah.

In the Book of "D'varim," Chapter 11 verse 13, we find the commandment: "You shall serve the L-rd your G-d with all your heart." How do we do that? By praying to Him with all our heart.

Until the time of the Second Temple, there were no fixed prayers, nor set times for prayer, except for the "Sh'ma Yisrael" which requires us to do so twice a day – in the morning and in the evening. Otherwise, everyone prayed when and how he/she wished.

During the early period of the Second Temple, around 485 B.C.E., Ezra the Scribe and the "Anshei Knesset Hag'dolah" first fixed the number of daily services and their general outline.

The Torah tells us that Abraham prayed in the morning, Isaac at about dusk, and Jacob in the evening. And so we pray three times daily. In addition, three times daily corresponds with the "Korban Tamid" which was the communal daily service offered in the Temple.

A distinctive feature of Jewish prayer is communal worship, which is likened to a delegation appearing before a King – more effective than a person on his/her own. We pray in a Minyan and generally address 'OUR G-D' as opposed to "MY G-D." However, prayer in the first person singular does occur in certain parts of our davening. The end of the "Silent Amidah" is one example, as is the Cantor's private prayer to G-d, the "Hineni," recited on the High Holidays.

What transforms reading into prayer? "Kavanah" (devotion), the intent to communicate directly with our Maker, is what transforms mere reading or even chanting of liturgical texts into praying. And how do we achieve such 'kavanah'? I believe very strongly that music and song are directly involved in this transformation process. It is the power of music that stirs the heart, arouses the emotions and intensifies the mood as we stand before G-d in prayer.

My principal mentor, the renowned Chazen Shlomo Mandel, taught me that: "If the melody does not enhance the meaning of the words, and does not create a true spiritual experience for the 'Sh'liach Tsibbur' as well as for the congregation, rather read the prayers than sing them."

Let's pause for a moment, and consider what our services would be like if there was no singing or chanting whatsoever. (Illustrate from the Friday Evening Service – "L'chu

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N'ran'nah and L'chah Dodi.") Imagine what the mood of the entire congregation would be like if we just read 'Kol Nidrei' instead of singing it? (Illustrate).

For me, there is no doubt that melody and music maketh the mood and the atmosphere that meaningful Jewish Communal Worship requires. It is the mesmerizing effect of the synagogue chant that creates the spirit and awakens the soul.

Even in South Africa, where I was born and grew up, the Street Workers sing together as they work in the streets – to give them the strength and power to build. Similarly, we sing to give us the strength to concentrate on our prayers and the power to reach our Maker.

When the Chassidic movement arose in Poland some 200 years ago, the essential motto of both the 'Besht' and the 'Chabad' sects of the movement was: "Iv'du et Hashem B'simchah, Bo-u Lefanav Birnanah" – "Serve G-d with joy; come before Him in song" - a direct quote from Psalm 100.

Synagogue Song is divided into two general categories:

1. Cantillations; and
2. Nusach

Cantillations, consisting of the 'tropes' or "Ta-amei Hamikrah" is the melodic chant used for reading the Torah, the Haftorah and the Megillot. (Illustrate).

Nusach is the body of set melodic patterns which are used in the chanting of our prayers in the Ashkenazi tradition. (Illustrate).

"Scarbova" or "Misinai" Nusach means those special traditional melodic patterns which have developed into mandatory application over the years, such as the melody for the "Aleinu" prayer in the middle of the Amidah on the High Holidays , as well as, for example, the melodic patters that are used for the chanting of the Half Kaddish before the Amidah on the first day of Pesach when we chant the Prayer for "Tal" (Dew) and on Shemini Atzeret when we chant the prayer for "Geshem" (Rain). (Illustrate).

Each service has its own traditional Nusach or Nuscha-ot, as the case may be. Although the appropriate Nusach governs our chanting, we must bear in mind that Jewish Prayer is divided into four different segments:

1. Petition – For example: Rosh Chodesh Benching; Sim Shalom;
2. Thanksgiving (For example: Modim Anachnu Lach)
3. Praise (For example: Hallel)
4. Confessional (For example: Ashamnu on Yom Kippur).

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The music used for each particular prayer should be adjusted to conform to the category of prayer at the time of the service. Obviously, what we are praying for will determine how we actually sing the prayers. Our individual moods, feelings and emotions as well as current communal circumstances and events will govern the type of music used.

Incidentally, Nusach is basically made up of musical modes, which are structured melodic scales and patterns. About six of them have been named. But I will not go into detail here about the individual modes since it is outside of the scope of this lecture.

And so, when selecting music for the chanting of our prayers, we need to consider –

1. The text;
2. The category of prayer into which the text falls;
3. The particular service – Weekday, Shabbat, Yom Tov, High Holidays;
4. The Nusach;
5. Whether the melodies to be selected will be appropriate to meet the mood of the Sh'liach Tsibbur and the mood of the congregation for that occasion;
6. Which of the melodies will be congregational, which will be choral (with or without the Cantor), and which will be Cantorial, which are the three singing elements of our synagogue services here at Beth Tzedec.

Since we cannot alter the texts of our prayers, we do change the music and melodies so as to lend varied interpretations to the texts.

One of my tasks as Chazan is to attempt to balance these three elements at services; to use familiar as well as new and unfamiliar music so as to enable the congregation to learn, and also to ensure that our services do not become boring and mundane.

“Shiru Lashem Shir Chadash” (“Sing unto the L-rd a New Song”) says the Psalmist. I must ever be mindful of the appropriateness of the music to the text. Question: If we are so restricted and governed by all these aspects of prayer and Nusach, how is new music ever composed for the synagogue? That’s a separate topic for another time.