

Shabbat Shira at Beth Tzedec

By: Cantor Paul Kowarsky

Someone came to me after the Shabbat Shira Services on January 17, 1981 with the comment: "It was an electrifying experience to be in Shul today." I hope that he was positively shocked and not the reverse.

Shabbat Shira, the "Sabbath of Song" which heralds the annual Jewish Music Festival period, is the Shabbat on which the Torah portion includes the Song of triumphant joy, sung by Moses and the people of Israel when they crossed the Red Sea from slavery to freedom. It is for this reason that the service is traditionally dedicated to the enhancement of Synagogue worship through Jewish music, by highlighting, in liturgical song, certain passages of the Shabbat Morning Services.

In preparing the printed program for the music, I specifically included brief notes about the identity and lives of the composers. I chanted the service with the liturgical musical highlights together with the Beth Tzedec Synagogue Choir and Choral Group, both under the direction of Gordon Kushner.

The music selected for the service was both old and new, in the sense that some of the compositions had been heard before in our Synagogue, while others were being sung for the first time. As the Psalmist says: "Shiru LaShem Shir Chadash" ("Sing unto the Lord a new song"). Of particular interest was the "Sim Shalom" composed by Srul Glick. The piece, which was recently commissioned by Mr. Sidney M. Zweig in honour of the Beth Tzedec Choral Group, was premiered at Beth Tzedec on Shabbat Shira. My personal gratitude goes to Mr. Zweig for this wonderful gesture. I should like to see more members of the Congregation coming forward with the commissioning of new music.

The coffers of Jewish liturgical music are laden with the treasured musical riches of our heritage. I feel compelled, as Cantor of this great Congregation, to reveal these treasures to my congregants to the extent that I can, and thereby to enrich your lives by enhancing the services with beautiful music.

In my view, the essential musical elements of a meaningful and successful Synagogue Service are:

a) Congregational singing; b) Choral music; and c) Cantorial recitatives.

A sensible and properly constructed blend of these three elements, I believe, will produce the kind of service that is required in North American Conservative Synagogues in the 1980's.

Although on Shabbat Shira there was obviously a larger concentration focused on the musical elements of the service as a whole, if analysed carefully, the service was constructed so as to endeavour to produce the right blend of the essential three ingredients. Congregational singing, however, may have appeared to have been limited, but I submit that this was so only because of the fact that some of the pieces were, or contained, new congregational melodies, which obviously have to be learnt by repetition, before they can truly become congregational.

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A tremendous impression was made on the service as a whole by the more than fifty-voice Choir standing on the steps of the Bima. Both the Synagogue Choir and the Choral Group, who joined hands (or should I say vocal cords) for the occasion, sang with warmth and depth of feeling. Each member deserves the gratitude and compliments of the Congregation. The Choir and Choral Group were under the direction of Gordon Kushner, who did an outstanding job in conducting both Choirs, when they sang separately as well as when they sang together as a unit.

The Torah portion on Shabbat Shira was beautifully chanted by Debra Freeman, Stephen Margles, Harold Margles, Stanley Cappe, Howard Black and Samuel Glazer, led of course by our own expert "Baal Korei", Cantor Morris Soberman, all of whom chanted with the age-old traditional cantillations.

During the services, conducted by Rabbi J. Benjamin Friedberg and Rabbi Robert Binder, the newly elected officers and members of the Board of Governors of Beth Tzedec were formally installed by Rabbi Friedberg in a short, but most impressive ceremony, culminating in a very meaningful address by new President, Paul Rothstein. The "cherry on the top" was the Study Luncheon after the Services. There the musical atmosphere of the day was continued by guest speaker, Judy Feld Carr, an expert musicologist and authority in her field. In a powerful and moving address, she eloquently led her audience through the development of Jewish Music in times of persecution, and traced the effect of persecution on the music of our people. The luncheon ended with the communal singing of traditional "z'mirot" and the "Birkat Hamazon" led by Cantor Joseph Cooper and me.

After all is said and done, prayers are not songs per se, but rather a vocal communication with our Maker. In the same way that our feelings, moods and purpose of speech dictate the inflections of our spoken voice, so should the music of our prayers be governed by what we are trying to say to G-d.

And because our feelings constantly change, the melodies and music of our prayers must, of necessity, vary too. I shall constantly strive to enlarge the repertoire of each essential musical element of our services, so that we may continue to sing to G-d, and to feel and enjoy what we are doing. As the "Sefer Chassidim" puts it: "If you cannot concentrate when you pray, search for melodies, and choose a tune that you like. Your heart will then feel what you say, for it is the song that makes your heart respond."

Let Beth Tzedec continue "to serve G-d with joy, and to come before him in song".