

From My Desk- Retrieving a Lost Art

About 100 years ago, many Jews in the United States were recent immigrants from Europe. Those immigrants, and those who escaped from post-Nazi Europe brought with them the foods, customs and traditions that they knew from their childhood. They also brought their music. European Jewish music was as varied as the countries from which these people hailed.

Some of the genres of music were folk songs, poetic works, Hasidic songs and melodies, as well as “top tier” Cantorial music. An art form that has largely disappeared from synagogues in the 21st century, this music was for hundreds of years the Jewish equivalent of Italian opera. There emerged, during the years 1900-1950, a period of time known as “The Golden Age of Cantors”. America was blessed with many Cantorial stars who left Europe. In addition, a number of American born cantors were trained by these European chazzanim. Wealthy synagogues vied to employ the best cantors of the day.

For those who appreciated Jewish prayer, there was no experience quite comparable to attending a High Holiday service that featured a prominent cantor. In fact, in Brooklyn New York, I am told, several major synagogues existed within a one- mile area. Every year they competed as to which would hold the most people. In fact, my father, of blessed memory, remembered those “Cantorial fans” who would daven for an hour in one shul, run to the next shul for another hour, for the next hour to a third, and complete the last four or five prayer hours in yet one more synagogue. Their desire, it seems, was not so much to participate in communal prayer as it was to hear great cantors sing. For a cantorial buff, that must have been some experience. Soaring voices, inspirational liturgy, and, often, well-trained choirs combined to create magnificent High Holiday experiences. I have heard very elderly “Cantorial mavens” reminisce about the “Days of Awe”. With heightened anticipation of glorious music in the air, the weeks leading up to and including the High Holidays had a palpable spiritual quality.

The decline of formality and pomp in synagogue life during the last 50 years has eliminated the desire for grandiose services. The move

towards catchy tunes, coupled with the increased pace of life in general (computers train us to become used to receiving answers in seconds) has reduced our patience with sitting through lengthy worship. Indeed, it seems that when people dedicate time to slow down, it's often in meditation retreats, where silence is prized. That's why it's so important to "catch" what we can of a High Holiday service. To allow oneself the luxury of not feeling rushed, of allowing oneself to take just a few prayers and really think about them.

We have shortened our services mightily over the decades. We have incorporated popular tunes that seem to fit the meter of the words. But we have lost much of the grandeur of the liturgy in the process. We have succumbed to the power of our wristwatches. We have allowed the Broadway show tune to determine the limits of our Jewish musical taste. There is no easy solution to these problems, but our High Holiday cantor - Charles Taub- and I have been discussing what we can do. We hope to help congregants prepare musically and spiritually for the high holidays.

I will make available, by mp3 recordings, a few melodies Cantor expects to use. On Shabbatot preceding Rosh Ha-shanah, I will teach High Holiday prayers. We hope that this year we will all experience a High Holidays that will be moving and memorable.

Shanah Tovah Umetukah.