

Rabbi's Reflections:           The Importance of Song (Part 2)

Traditional *nusah* (literally "version") is a system of stock motives. Hence, many melodies exist for the same prayer, but they differ from one service to the next, creating a link to the seasons of the year, the days of the week, and the time of day. So the *nusah* differs between weekday, *Shabbat*, and festival prayers, and from morning to afternoon to night since the mood of each differs. Hence, every *Hatzi Kaddish* is time specific, and so differs not only from weekday to *Shabbat* to festival, and from *Shaharit* to *Minhah* to *Arvit* (morning, afternoon, night), but within each service as it marks the end of a small section of service, so it differs from *Shaharit* to *Torah* to *Musaf* services.

*Nusah* connects our emotions to our words. Over *Shabbat*, our mood begins joyously as it arrives and our preparations are complete, and ranges through the course of the day to sadness and nostalgia at its leaving. The weekday ranges from thankfulness at awakening and hope as we look forward to the day's activities, to worry at bedtime as to whether we will awaken in the morning. *Nusah* connects us to our past and to our people, to our language and land, and all of them to the rhythm of the holiness of time. By following the course of music from night to day, from weekday to *Shabbat*, from holiday to holiday, each of these motives enhance our emotions and tunes us in to our place in God's scheme, our place in God's universe, our place in God's time.

Our failure to appreciate this says much about our search for spirit that leaves behind our heritage as we become less familiar with the Hebrew, the structure of the service, the meaning of the prayers. It says much about our lack of respect for authority, that we bristle when told there are limits, that sees the search for the individual's spiritual well-being as more important than the community's, that even sees the community as a hindrance to our personal search for God. We cannot imagine how they help our spirit.

I wrote last month that tension about bringing in external music has existed since Psalms. There have been extremists on both sides: Rabbis Yehudah Leib Moses and Solomon Lifshitz complained about bringing in tunes from the theater and dance hall, while Rabbi Joel Sirkes even allowed church melodies if they were of universal appeal. The weight in the past was on selective accommodation, not frivolous change. Some of our most beloved melodies are from the outside. Some are now *nusah*. *Ein Keiloheinu* was a German organ grinder's tune. *Ma'oz Tzur* is a combination of church hymn and medieval battle song. *Eli Tziyon* was a Catholic hymn sung during the consecration celebration of St James in Sanitago de Compostella, Spain. Some of the popular *Hallel* tunes are from German drinking songs. Some of the popular Torah service melodies are German military songs (makes sense).

Professor Max Wohlberg, z"l, said that the composer should be knowledgeable, choose texts traditionally assigned to the congregation, and melodies should reflect the mood of the service. Sing aloud, without mumbling, regardless of tonality, joyfully (Psalm 98:4-5) and reverently, and learn new songs (Psalm 96:1; 98:1). "I will sing to the Lord as long as I live, all my life I will chant hymns of praise to my God" (Psalm 104:33).

-- Rabbi Michael Rascoe