

Hazzanut

AT THE MASORTI MOVEMENT

The Hazzan on the 21st Century

The Hazzanut is one of the trades that have undergone more transformations throughout history, all conditioned by the complex-and often tragic- experience of the Jewish people in exile.

What is Hazzanut? In essence, it is the job of the Shilchei Tzibur, to direct the prayers. This occupation was consolidated after the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash, when the choirs of leviim (along with all sacerdotal duties) fell into disuse, and Jewish religious dynamics largely concentrated in the synagogue. In other words, the Hazzanut is an eminently religious activity, resulting from the disappearance of the old institutions of Judaism.

But it is also our "art music", equivalent to western classical music. Perhaps the difference is that the latter was developed as part of a culture of expansion, while Judaism focused on surviving and preserved its original strictly religious character.

This had a palpable effect on the evolution of the office of the Hazzan, who gradually has also had to deal with educational work, taking the concept of "emissary" to a level beyond the musical: not only does he sing and inspire the prayer of those who hear him sing; he must also be a daily example and be present in moments of joy and grief of all families in their community. And his duty is not only to sing: it is to teach and transmit a passion for Judaism and a love for the tradition of Israel. His job is to teach others to lead prayers and connect to Torah and mitzvot through music and to help each person understand what they are living, thereby strengthening the ancestral identity of every Jew.

All of this does not mean that Hazzanim-especially in the last five centuries- have been insensitive or indifferent to what was happening in the musical world outside the synagogue. We have wonderful examples of synagogue music composed under the baroque-like patterns- like the traditional melody for Maoz Tzur- and since the nineteenth century, as part of the development of liberal Judaism (particularly in Germany), great personalities appeared, such as Jacques Fromental Halevy (1799-1862), Samuel Naumbourg (1815-1880), and perhaps the most important of this generation, Louis Lewandowski (1821-1894). With these composers, styles and classical structures permanently occupied a space in Jewish liturgical music.

The effects were felt quickly, and with the transition to the twentieth century came the great Hazzanim, which increased the performance of their craft to a level comparable to concert music (specifically opera). Gershon Sirota (1874-1943), Zavel Kwartin (1874-1953), Yossele Rosenblatt (1882-1933), Mordechai Hershman (1888-1940) and Moshe Koussevitzky (1899-1966) represent the first major "commercial" boom of the Hazzanut.

Why do we say "commercial"? Because all of these personalities developed their work when the radio and the gramophone were starting to be imposed as mass communication devices, and their voices were able to be heard in many more places thanks to these resources of modernity.

Since then, technology has become a two-edged sword for the Hazzan: thanks to it, people from his synagogue can listen to him at home, and he can be known worldwide. Moreover, he can become famous. This can be proved by the success they have had in media today Hazzanim such as Mizrahi, Helfgot, Finkelstein and Miller. But these apparent advantages make us face a new problem, rooted in the old question: What are the Hazzanim? Stars or Shiljei Tzibur?

This tension between tradition and modernity and between devotion and prestige has reached its climax with the rise of the Internet: today, there isn't a Cantor than is not linked with what is happening worldwide. Even if he is located in a remote synagogue anywhere in the world, he can hear what others Hazzanim do, get new materials, take or teach classes, or upload their own videos to be heard. And, frankly, we need not consider all that as something negative, but quite the opposite.

But with this technological progress, there is always the temptation to give more importance to the media role that what's important in the life of the Cantor, what defines their personal vocation and history: the moment they stand up in the midst of the congregation, to direct tfilot through melodies and words that Jews have used for thousands of years, and in all places where we took exile or Diaspora. In other words, the Cantor has the privilege and responsibility of being the flesh and blood link that not only brings us closer to Adon-i, but also unites us with all Am Israel, over time and space.

Is it possible for this vocation to be affected by technology and modernity? In general, Judaism is a vital tradition, intense, dynamic and has survived countless challenges, always stronger. So we trust that even in this case, devotion and sincerity will be those who give meaning to the advantages offered by today's world, and not vice versa.

But the individual temptation is there and thus the challenge of understanding that the Hazzan, before the Internet, the recording studio or concert music, is due to his kaal, to those he represents, so they can leave the shul with the satisfaction of having had a moment of contact with the Almighty, with the Transcendental and the Eternal.

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