

Hazzanut

AT THE MASORTI MOVEMENT

Is the existence of an institute for the formation of Hazzanim important?

When reflecting upon the epistemological requirements of any profession, some questions that might arise are the following: What is there to know about a particular discipline? Is there a lot or little to learn? Is it easy or difficult? How is the knowledge generated and confirmed? Is it real knowledge or is it just a matter of opinion, guessing and intuition? To what extent is the academic study of that discipline just a complement or a sine qua non necessity? Is there much to be discovered about that discipline or do its most prominent figures already know most of what there is to learn about it?

Hazzanut is a discipline and as such it is not exempt from these questions.

Now, nobody would doubt that a school for architects, lawyers and chemists must exist. Nobody in their right mind would allow to be operated by a surgeon that didn't attend university. And moving on to the religious realm, no Jewish community would take a rabbi whose knowledge isn't recognized by some renowned institution. However, I have attended more than ten discussions (and I'm sure that while you're reading this article, many more are being generated around the world), either face to face or through the web, as to whether Hazzanut is a discipline that must be learned in a school or if it is enough with vocation, intuition or the teachings received from others before you in your profession. In fact, there are many hazzanim found in prestigious roles in Jewish communities who have never attended a school for hazzanim, and many of them are considered the best in the profession. How does that happen? I have a theory about it.

Occupations that require today, by international consensus, an enabling title, have the following qualities: 1) They are very old, 2) Generally they have very defined fields of action

You could argue that Hazzanut is also a very old discipline with its origins in the era of the Second Great Temple of Jerusalem, and that it appears in the Jewish sources as the Shulchan Aruch and the Mishna. At this point I would say that while this is true, the hazzan as a full-time professional, only starts to become a reality as of mid-nineteenth century, with the rise of liturgical compositions. Previously, according to the oldest sources, the hazzan should have the following qualifications: Possess a pleasing appearance, being married and having a beard, even Maimones decided that the hazzan that recited the prayers on Shabbat and weekdays didn't need to have a pleasant appearance for everyone, he could even have a not entirely flawless reputation, as long as he kept a life free of moral reproach at the time of his appointment. These qualities are easy to have, in fact during the Middle Ages in general, any Jew older than 18 years old possessed them, although they were mostly chosen by their voice. When the new liturgical compositions and musical instruments emerged in the synagogue, the hazzan could no longer be just about anyone, he had to have the vocal and musical training to interpret them, and it is here when, for the first time, Hazzanut starts to be understood as a profession. Therefore, the truth is that the Hazzanut understood as a profession is really very new.

Although the passage of time has changed a bit the field of action, we know that a doctor is a professional who is responsible for the maintenance of health, an architect builds structures for housing and commercial activities, an elementary school teacher teaches to read and perform basic mathematical operations, a rabbi is a spiritual leader and a judge. However, Hazzanut constantly increases its functions and it is really difficult today to define what is or what does a Hazzan do. Economic, political and social changes have created a situation where the chazzan isn't only an experimented musician and liturgy connoisseur. The chazzan is also a Torah reader, a laadut (Judaism) teacher, a spiritual leader, a choir director, an administrator, a representative of the Jewish community towards the Gentile world and why not, foremost, a member of his community with all that that implies.

The novelty of Hazzanut as a professional discipline and the difficulty in defining its functions will continue to give us an issue to talk about and discuss.

As an example I would say that at first doctors only learned from their predecessors and with time, the importance of systematic study and academic respect were understood. I am convinced that the same will happen with Hazzanut. Time will increasingly prove the importance of the necessity of academic preparation of the chazzan, based on new necessities that the future holds for this emerging discipline.

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