

Preserving Nusah in the 21st Century Conservative Synagogue

By Benjamin Tisser

Tradition and Change

The title of a 1958 book by Rabbi Mordechai Waxman, “Tradition and Change” became Conservative Judaism’s motto during the 1960s as the movement thrived in rapidly growing suburbs all across the United States. The fledgling Conservative congregations were located far from the old Jewish neighborhoods that had connected them to traditional folkways and rituals. Adrift amidst a sea of sudden change, these congregants of overwhelmingly Eastern European backgrounds were torn between a strong desire to retain Jewish tradition in some form, along with a perhaps even stronger urge to fully integrate into the fabric of an increasingly upbeat post-war American life. The new suburban communities vied with one another in commissioning leading architects to design sanctuaries: the so-called “Edifice Complex.” Many newly organized groups remained affiliated with their former congregations back in the cities, others struck out on their own. All of them engaged dynamic young rabbis and cantors, as if to declare, “We are here to stay.”

While the Golden Age of East European *hazzanut* in America had ended by the 1960s, a younger generation of American-born cantors was already emerging. Synagogue attendance reached new peaks, and youth and adult choruses were in high fashion. Synagogue music—whether performed *a cappella* by a cantor or by an organ accompanying a soloist and mixed choir—was given priority. The happy coincidence of pews overflowing with participating worshipers is easily explainable: hardly a family didn’t have at least one member in an adult, youth or children’s chorus, or in a junior cantors or Torah readers club. In addition, a steady supply of catchy prayer melodies kept arriving through recordings made at the Hasidic Music Festivals in Israel. This situation prevailed through the 1980s.

Beginning in the 1990s, congregational familiarity with Hebrew underwent a drastic decline among Conservative Jewry, as did synagogue attendance. Some would blame this on the poor quality of afternoon school education. Others claim that a shift in the values that our larger society now considers important is to blame. Jews have become so Americanized that they prioritize their children’s participation in Saturday sports over attending Shabbat services (save for a family *simhah* or a friend’s Bar/Bat Mitzvah invitation). Economic tightening recently has certainly played a role in declining membership, as synagogue dues have risen significantly. Still, this factor by itself would not explain the crisis, since membership is not required for Shabbat attendance, and most congregations will at least partially subsidize dues and/or High Holy Day tickets to maintain their affiliates’ loyalty.

Whatever the underlying causes of this decline, I have witnessed it at the synagogue where I grew up: Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, California.¹ I remember that at my first Shabbat leading services alongside Cantor Herschel Fox in 1990-91, there were two *b'nei mitzvah* and at least one other *simḥah* (either an *aufruf*, baby naming, anniversary, etc.), par for any given Shabbat during the year. The 600-seat Sanctuary was full and the partition into the Social Hall was opened to accommodate 900 more attendees. When the service began at 8:45 a.m., there were already 150 worshipers in place, and full attendance was achieved only by its conclusion at 12:30 p.m.. The Cantors Choir which helped lead the entire *Shaharit*, would follow the Torah processional through the Sanctuary, singing *L'kah adonai ha-g'dulah* with the congregation as one-by-one they joined their parents in the pews. As we walked, I recall nodding to members (a number of them Holocaust survivors who were among the synagogue's founders in 1959 and are now long since gone) as they extended Yiddish-inflected greetings and encouragement to us: *Gut shabbes! yasher koyakh!*

Some twenty years later, my wife and I attended Shabbat services at Valley Beth Shalom to celebrate the naming of our daughter. At first, time seemed to have stood still. Again, two *bnei mitzvah* and an *aufruf* were scheduled. But looking around, I noticed only about 20 worshipers there to recite the Mourners Kaddish following *Birkhot ha-shahar*. When the service ended, the sanctuary seats were still not filled and the partition had not been opened. I did not recognize the majority of attendees who had come as guests of the *B'nei mitzvah* families. My two-fold conclusion: first, most of the regulars from my boyhood years had either passed on, moved away or were by now physically unable to attend, and second, for whatever reasons, their children have not taken their place. I learned that from its peak membership of 1,850 families, Valley Beth Shalom was now down to 1,400 families. This decline of 24% was seemingly not enough to create panic for a large congregation like VBS (to the extent that the worship experience was caused to change greatly in nature over those two decades), but in many small Conservative synagogues it would be calamitous, causing the leadership and clergy to re-evaluate the religious services they offer, among other things.

Changes in Popular Culture

When calculating shifts in congregational life, we should also include the many societal changes that have occurred over the past several decades. Among the most relevant to this article are preferences in popular music, widespread use of the Internet with its resultant desire to “belong,” the diminished importance of community and the growth of what I will call a “transaction-based society.”

In my younger years at school or summer camp, great value was placed on the “community sing.” Everyone looked forward to music class, the campfire *kumzitz* or other large

¹ Valley Beth Shalom's membership now numbers 1,400 families. Edward Feinstein has been Senior Rabbi since 2003, and Herschel Fox has served as Senior Cantor 1981. The congregation is closely affiliated with a K through 6 Day School (the Harold M. Schulweis VBS Day School) on the synagogue campus.

gatherings that involved group singing. Although music that we heard on the radio did not easily lend itself to communal singing, we were not so far removed from the folk rock music our parents' generation that we didn't also enjoy sharing. It was a great source of fun to bring one's guitar and join a few friends in singing together during the afternoon or evening; this was something young people had been doing for generations. However, by the 1990s, fine singing by a leader had been replaced by the entire group singing in unison. In Conservative Judaism, this trend had presumably been started by the national movement's Jewish camping program (Ramah) of the 1950s and 1960s. Its Tsunami-like effects apparently came in a series of waves that were felt most strongly when former campers, who had married and were raising children of their own, had reached leadership age in synagogues.

This generation of parents (who were in their forties) was now charged with the responsibility of setting policy for the way services were to be conducted. Perhaps (and naturally so) they did not feel the need for a strong and safe Jewish community as deeply as their parents did, who had grown up hearing daily about the decimation of European Jewry. For the most part, the 1990s' synagogue leadership had been born here. They were automatically a part of American society and did not need to join a synagogue in order to forge friendships and enjoy a rich social life. Many in their circle came from Hebrew school or youth group (USY) or had attended the neighborhood public school together with them, especially in metropolitan areas where a high percentage of the population was Jewish. The synagogue became a place to go only on the High Holidays, its clergy to be contacted only for Life Cycle events.

If we consider today's Internet-dominated society, the issue is further magnified. We can now be part of communities the world over through this virtual reality medium. In fact, on Facebook we have access to hundreds of thousands of communities in which we can interact with others who share our common interests. And the best part is that it costs us nothing! There is no need to spend thousands of dollars annually for membership in a synagogue or even a country club when we can video chat and correspond from the comfort of our Barcalounger. Finally, we can watch live-streaming services from some of the country's leading synagogues on the Internet for free as well.² Why, then, should we join a congregation?

This thought process of living in part of what I have designated a transaction-based society. While the cost of living has risen exponentially, income level has increased slightly at best, a factor not to be ignored. This disproportionate growth in personal expenditures has caused many people to carefully consider expected return in any transaction. In a large community, synagogue membership for a family may cost as much as \$3,000-\$4,500 a year. That is in addition to extra security fees, building fund dues, preferred High Holy Day seating premiums, *b'nei mitzvah* fees, Hebrew school tuition, youth group dues and activities, men's club and women's league memberships, etc. Even with partial subsidies by the Congregational Foundation, the balance is no small expenditure for a young and growing family who are bound

² Some examples of free-streaming religious services available online are: Shomrei Torah Synagogue in West Hills, California; Stephen S. Weiss Temple in Bel Air, California; and Congregation Beth Yeshurun in Houston, Texas (the largest Conservative congregation in North America).

to ask, “What do we get in return?” After all, there are viable alternatives. One might obtain free *B’nei mitzvah* training at Chabad, or for a nominal fee to a private tutor who is also a cantor, rent a hall and stage a ceremony for family and friends. One might also send a child to an unaffiliated community Hebrew school for far less than the cost of congregational membership, and at the same time have more of a say in the direction their family’s Jewish journey will take. It is this sort of thinking that has synagogues across the country reconsidering their offerings in order to make themselves more marketable to the Jewish “consumer.”

Dealing with Change

A major question facing contemporary synagogues is that of identity. Is the synagogue still an institution whose main focus and offerings are religious services, with a variety of social and educational programs supplementing them? Or has the modern synagogue become more of a cultural and community center, with religious services downgraded to equal status with any of the former supplementary offerings? Increasingly, the second possibility is now becoming a reality. This may explain the many liberties I have observed being taken with synagogues’ liturgy and ritual.

Thirty or forty years ago, Conservative worship lasted three hours, included a substantial and well-prepared rabbinic sermon and at least one substantive cantorial recitative delivered with great artistry and regard for its underlying liturgical implications. We are now seeing diminished attendance in every congregation where this model persists. The clock determines the duration of prayer, and this has radically altered the function of both rabbi and cantor. Instead of a sermon conveying timeless truths, we have multiple impromptu “infomercials” referring to sensationalist headlines. Rather than chanted hazzanic interpretation, we get a non-stop chain of simple melodies designed to keep people busy.

One influence on the choice of music other than Camp Ramah repertoire has been the steady stream of recorded Neo-Hasidic hit tunes that inundated American synagogues of all persuasions, beginning with the Tel Aviv musical *Ish Hasid Hayah* (“There Once Was a Hasid”) in 1968, and followed by decades of annual Hasidic Festivals from 1969 on. Set to words that appear in the liturgy, the syncopated tunes quickly caught on and have remained indelibly stamped upon the subconscious awareness of American synagogue goers who reflexively click on them every time those words come up in a *Siddur* or *Mahzor*.

As another musical source, history has shown that our people, dispersed among the nations for so many centuries, had no choice but to incorporate the sounds of their particular host culture into their worship experience. In this respect, American folk and popular music has proven no exception. We hear this influence in the music of Jeff Klepper, Michael Isaacson, Craig Taubman and the late Debbie Friedman²¹, whose unmistakably jazz-and-folk-rock-oriented compositions remain as popular as ever.

On the one hand, we must acknowledge that committed and talented composers such as these have familiarized a generation of hebraically-challenged Jews with the words of the prayer

book. By clothing prominent sections of the liturgy in easily accessible melodies and catchy rhythms, they have provided a growing number of synagogue newcomers an attractive entry point into a world whose only lingua franca until recently has been the Hebrew of the Bible and medieval poetry. On the other hand, wholesale adoption of these “easy”—often simplistic—settings may have cost us our treasured cantorial heritage, thus establishing what Hazzan Alberto Mizrahi terms “A tradition that has forgotten what the tradition is.”³

One thing we have learned from the continuing popularity of this easily singable contemporary congregational repertoire is that today’s synagogue goers want to participate actively in the worship experience. By the same token we should note that participation can come in many forms: singing along through an entire prayer, singing only the congregational refrains, following the cantor’s chant in an undertone and singing aloud only required responses such as *Amein*, *Kein y’hi ratson*, etc., listening mindfully to a rabbinic sermon or cantorial recitative. The bottom line for those who are charged with leading services: in order to maintain a congregation’s interest as well as prayer momentum and energy level for several hours, we must provide regular opportunities for people to join in the singing.

Some Conclusions

1. *Kavvanah* as a determinant

Through almost a year of visiting different communities in order to closely observe the ways in which their worship services are run, I’ve come to the conclusion that the challenge of retaining *nusah ha-t’fillah* is not specific to any one locale, but confronts synagogues all over the country.

The key to any measure of success in this confrontation is excellence. I learned this lesson from Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove of the Park Avenue Synagogue in New York City. He contends that with a finely-trained hazzan, a professional music program and well-delivered sermons, the prayer service will have by default an air of excellence which excites and attracts the congregation. This is as opposed to the “campfire songs, sung together in perfect mediocrity” that Hazzan Alberto Mizrahi speaks of in a blog posting⁴. The truth is (and it pains me to say so) that *hazzanim* who habitually feature such music cannot and do not connect to it; and we know that if the delivery is not sincere (one definition of *kavvanah*), the prayer will never move people—and perhaps even less so the One to Whom it is directed.

³ In a personal communication to the author, April 2013.

⁴ Mizrahi, Alberto. ““Nusach” – Say It Quietly!” Web log post. *Alberto's Voice*. Self-published, 30 July 2012. Web. 5 Aug. 2013.

2. Considering time and space

In a recent book, Michael Isaacson describes a phenomenon that he calls “the simultaneity of time.”⁵ He posits that “when an orchestral musician plays in the present, she is also remembering the past and energizing the future...” It is not enough to simply play the notes on the page! In order to foster the audience’s desire to keep listening, the musician must be continually aware of the measures she has just played as well as the notes ahead, so that the piece is in constant development. The rise of a climax must give way to the slow, beautiful cadence. I submit that a cantor must bear this caution in mind even more so than a player of secular music.

Isaacson continues by proposing that,

... in the most considered Jewish music there is a simultaneous resonance of antiquity (or recollection of former times), a presence of compelling attractiveness to the music itself and, in the best works, an innovative suggestion of where that particular music or the overall genre can progress in the future.

This notion is in direct line with a 3rd-century Mishnaic teaching (Avot 3.1):

Concentrate on three things and you will not fall into the grip of sin—know from where you came, where you are going, and before Whom you will have to give account and reckoning.

We are living in the second decade of the twenty-first century, in Los Angeles or Chicago or New York or South Florida, yet we must be cognizant of our hope, and look with hope to the future. Among the synagogues I visited, B’nai Torah of Boca Raton and Anshe Emet of Chicago have most thoroughly absorbed this philosophy. Both institutions offer inspiring worship that reflects (and respects) several resplendent eras of synagogue music in the past, woven into a seamless tapestry that is their present service.

3. *Nusah* as a constant

Nusah ha-t’fillah—the prescribed mode in which a particular prayer is sung at a specific liturgical moment—is perhaps the most accurate “clock” we possess. It grounds us in sacred time, makes us aware of consecrated moments in a normal day, alerting us that something special is about to happen or reminding us that a holy day is upon us. What more effective means of accomplishing all of the above is there than through music that has reached the status of “sacred,” over time? We recite the same prayer texts day in and day out, yet by shifting musical gears to accommodate a special liturgical occasion we alter the entire mood of a given service while creating an unexpected aura of freshness and celebration—if done without fanfare.

No matter what other musical styles are sung in the synagogue, *nusah* should play the “host”—and the others must remain “guests.” This is not to claim that every paragraph chanted during a service needs to sound like an imitation of Israel Alter or Moshe Ganchoff or David

⁵ Michael Isaacson, *Jewish Music As Midrash—What Makes Music Jewish?* Self-published, 2007:105-126.

Kusevitsky (all of whom taught *Hazzanut* at Hebrew Union College or the Jewish Theological Seminary). Let the words sung in nusah be uttered in a way that is appropriate to the hazzan singing them, to the worshipers who are following along, and to the world in which we live.

Some would have every traditional hazzan wearing mitre and robe and bringing forth a certain sound. There likewise exists a sense that traditional nusah, often misunderstood as being synonymous with hazzanic recitatives and concert pieces, is sung exclusively by cantors in love with the sound of their own voice. It has been my observation that neither of these opinions holds sway in most synagogues, certainly not in the ones I visited in conducting research for my thesis. In step with the majority of Americans who know how to temper nostalgia for the past with needs of the present, *hazzanim* in this country have learned to be judicious in keeping glimpses of the early 20th-century's Golden Age techniques and phrasing within modest proportion to the amount of worship time they spend focusing on the musical preferences of today's congregants.

4. Repertoire choice

It may seem obvious, but not all musical styles are appropriate to every congregation. While widely-known melodies like Israel Goldfarb's *Magein Avot* or Meier Finkelstein's *L'dor Va-dor* might appear to be universally accepted, particular congregations may have their own ingrained favorites which they will defend to the death when faced with the prospect of changing them. In such instances, where *minhag ham-makom* (local custom) prevails, trying to instill a setting by Joe Black or Josh Nelson will not work—unless it is simply featured as a one-time novelty, by a religious school class, for example. With every innovation comes potential upset for a segment of the congregation who attend faithfully every week. Avoiding this natural resistance to imposed change requires careful preparation of one's audience over months.

5. Instrumental accompaniment

My research confirms that Conservative congregations remain divided on this issue. The number of those who now do employ varied instruments during worship—ranging from hand-held drum to guitar to organ—is greater than the historical estimate of 10% that earlier studies revealed, yet nowhere near a majority or even parity. Nonetheless, from personal experience I would argue that instrumental enhancement of the music adds levels of enchantment to the service like nothing else. This endorsement comes with a caveat: that both the accompanying instrument and accompanist are carefully selected to suit the purpose and space. Here are three cases in point:

From 1967-1995, Aminadav Aloni was the organist at Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, California. His background was as an Israeli classical-and-jazz pianist. He perfected his organ playing on the job so well that his accompaniment of prayer was almost indescribable. One might have been subliminally aware of music in the Sanctuary, yet of a non-intrusive nature that seemed to come and go organically with the underlying textual meaning-- nothing more, nothing

less. Even more impressive was the fact that all instrumental music at Valley Beth Shalom was customarily improvised. Its only “set” characteristic was a mood that varied with the one that happened to prevail in the Sanctuary that week. This, in turn, depended upon the disposition of attendees, the energy level of the cantor’s chanting and the resultant flow of the service.

By way of contrast, Aryell Cohen has served as organist and choir director at Sinai Temple in Los Angeles for 38 years. The temple is famous for its large electric-pipe hybrid organ and for its well-rehearsed professional choirs. There is not a moment during the cantor’s officiating without a carefully prepared musical event taking place. The organ playing can only be described as meticulous, sometimes with an added overlay of string pads, and the choir produces every note and syllable flawlessly. It is impossible to deny the grandeur of this multi-leveled devotional exercise.

A third option is offered by B’nai Torah of Boca Raton whose mostly-volunteer choir, conducted by Cantor Mitch Martin, joins the officiating cantor for the Torah and Musaf services. While the choir regularly presents prepared compositions ranging from Meir Finkelstein’s elaborate arrangements to arrangements of well-known cantorial recitatives to settings based on melodies from the Sephardic tradition, the group is equally at home holding chords to support *hazzanic* improvisations. In sum, each of these three congregations’ musical heritage and preferences reflects the stylistic proclivities of its community, and every one of the varied treatments is equally effective—in its own distinctive manner.

6. A cautionary note

Although the paradigmatic services described above represent excellent examples of well-planned Conservative worship experiences, it must be emphasized that many people do not come to synagogue to hear the same style of music they can listen to on the radio. True, our congregants enjoy the new modern sound in their everyday world—no matter how often it is played or sung. Yet they are not drawn to *shul* because of the brilliantly arranged music or well-rehearsed choir or unobtrusive organ or cantor’s voice or rabbi’s sermon—alone. What moves people to true and fervent prayer goes much deeper than any of these elements could—by themselves. It is what Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin of the National Center for Jewish Healing calls “a collective unconscious memory” of what Jews past and present have gone through. The sounds, rituals and surroundings of the synagogue bring forth in worshipers’ conscious awareness “resonances from that heritage”⁶ and connect them as nothing else can—to their people, their inner selves and their place in God’s universe.

⁶ Nina Beth Cardin, *A Leader’s Guide to Services and Prayers of Healing*, 1996.

7. A final thought

Ideally, the team of Rabbi-and-Cantor should work in unconditional support of one another. I would encourage rabbis to spend time listening to different styles of synagogue music—as they are currently being practiced—including variations of traditional nusach. This would go a long way towards leveling the playing field with their cantorial colleagues, while still retaining expertise in their distinct area of knowledge and skills. It would likewise behoove cantors to acquire as much familiarity with rabbinic texts (Biblical and Talmudic references to music and life cycle rituals, for starters) as they are able, even incrementally; the Internet has thankfully opened this door. By then making decisions jointly, based on the same information, the team has the ability to collaborate in the most effective way possible in enhancing the prayer experience for congregants, while ensuring the continuity of the beautiful sounds of our tradition *midor l'dor*.

Benjamin Tisser has served as Hazzan at B'nai Torah Congregation in Boca Raton, Florida since 2013, alongside Cantor Udi Spielman. This article was adapted from his Masters Thesis at the H.L. Miller Cantorial School of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, that same year. It was researched and written under the supervision of Hazzan Alberto Mizrahi.