Rabbi Daniel Rosen comments on Daniel Schwartz’s article, “I Dread Going to Shul”, that appeared in issue 9 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, and which is posted on the Institute’s website, jewishideas.org

I read with interest Daniel Schwartz’s analysis of a problem he encounters with shul – in that, as I gather it, the singing is present but does not underscore the message of the content. He sees the move towards a more modern sound as one which has brought along a concomitant separation from the professional chazzan whose understanding of the words and ideas, plus musical theory enhances the entire shul experience by infusing another dimension of meaning.

I also sometimes dread shul. I dread the shaliach tzibbur whose voice cracks, who misses notes, who doesn’t know Hebrew very well, or who thinks that inspirational tunes come from Broadway or a Carlebach LP. But what I dread more than that is the professional chazzan.

The shaliach tzibbur serves as a representative of me and of the kahal and way back when, when fewer people were trained to understand the davening, it was the tefillah by the sha”tz which allowed the listener to be yotzei. Thus, someone who says every word and understands its meaning is vital. But music is not. Yes, the levi’im were trained and sang with a choir in the beit hamikdash, and I await, every day, a return to that. But we also had korbanot and while I await their return also, that is not what effects my kavannah currently. Nothing reduces me to tears (from yawning) more than someone who lengthens the davening through song.

Please don’t get me wrong; I love music and have studied and played it myself. And I love the occasional tune in davening, especially when we all can sing along – maybe for kel adon, or the 13 middot, but davening for me, even in the communal sense, is marked by silence and a straightforward approach to saying the words. The basic and familiar lilting melodies of shacharit on Shabbat are pleasant as we move through them at a timely pace. The singing of passages in any sense more (like kedushah) is painful to me. I don’t talk during davening. I stand for most of davening. I also love davening and try to teach my students and my own children to investigate and measure each phrase and syllable. I try to feel the meaning of every word during davening but listening to a musical performance which does not represent what I feel in my heart is a distraction. And I and those in my modern Orthodox shul are comfortable enough with the meaning of what we say that being “educated” by someone through a medium which only lengthens the process is counterproductive. I am not united in song. I am united through words said plainly and with a deep respect for them and their message.
Daniel Schwartz replies:

I thank Dan Rosen for his reasoned comments on my piece. I hoped to start a conversation about the aesthetics of davening and our musical heritage, and he certainly has picked up the gauntlet. But when one considers that his comments are in response to my article, it becomes ever clear that the two sides of this issue, rarely talk to each other. Rather they tend totalk past each other. There seems to be little in common between Mr. Rosen’s approach to communal prayer the one I espouse.

Mr. Rosen treats prayer as a largely private affair. It is marked by silence and his private contemplation of the liturgy. It seems, from his comments, that Mr. Rosen’s communal prayer is comprised of others doing likewise, in technical fulfillment of the requirement to pray with a minyan. In such a model, there is no room, much less need for aesthetics. Dirshu et Hashem behimatzoh, seek G-d where He may be found, comes to mean that one ought not expend energy on creating an environment of sanctity and respect for the Divine, for the encounter with the Divine and the environment to foster it must come within the worshiper, the result of his silent contemplation. Indeed external aesthetics are a distraction in Mr. Rosen’s model of tefillah.

Has “Mr. Rosen” (and here I refer not only him but all those who look at prayer similarly) never felt lonely, or worse yet, alone when “he” prays? In “his” model what is “he” to do on those days when the learned contemplation “he” seeks proves elusive? From where will “he” derive the comfort and meaning our liturgy (in parts and at times) provides us on those occasions when “he” is too beset by doubts, or personal strife to allow the text of the siddur to guide “him” to solace? Does “He” simply fold his tallis and go home on such days and wait for a more propitious time to pray?

What has “Mr Rosen” to say to the less theologically inclined than “he?” In “his” approach to prayer, what room is there for the neophyte? How can “he” demonstrate the powerful influence of prayer on an elementary school student, on a new returnee to observance, on “his” own children? What can “he” offer them, except his own private contemplation? Does “he” feel no responsibility to others, or are his prayers his and his alone?

To be sure there are points in our liturgy that intend precisely what Mr. Rosen describes as an ideal prayer model. The Kriat Shema recited upon retiring for the evening which begins with a plea that one’s sleep not serve as a segue to death, is an example. Indeed even our national catastrophe of Galut, especially the exile of G-d’s presence, is cast as a private contemplative service traditionally recited alone. Those who follow the Chayei Adam’s admonition to recite Tefillah Zakah prior to Kol Nidre (its Sabbatean origins notwithstanding), do so in private. (I well remember the image of roshei yeshiva covering their faces with their tallitot and saying the prayer.) Those are intensely personal prayers designed to be said alone, to invite the private encounter with the Divine, “Mr. Rosen” so idealizes. But those are exceptions to the general principle that Jews pray together as a unified whole.

A synagogue is more than a mere amalgamation of individuals each serving/seeking G-d in his own private fashion. Had our tradition intended that, there would never have been any standardization of the liturgy. As soon as the Temple is Jerusalem was completed, the Shira, the Kriah, the appointment of the “Chazzan Hakenesset,” (who while not a prayer leader kept the congregation of non-priests unified in the service by lifting the Torah scroll and indicating when to respond “Amen” or “Ki leolam chasdo,”) all indicate that Judaism expects people to come together in service of the Almighty and not remained cloistered in the enveloping mental process of private contemplation.

The question then is how to effectively unify a congregation, and by extension klal Yisrael, in its
Divine worship. Like everything, tradition supplies the solution. Prayer is a spoken act. The prayer modes, which vestigially reflect the Shira of the Temple, provide the framework within which the liturgy is to be chanted. They are the hermeneutics by which the liturgy ought to be prayerfully interpreted. Yesh harbeh panim l’Torah. There is considerable latitude (with the exception of certain melodies referred to as “MiSinai,” like Tal/Geshem, Hamelech, Neilah, Aleinu, Ochila laKel, which can never be altered) in how to apply the modes to the text. Each cantor, trained in the tradition of nussach, brings his own unique approach to the liturgy. Each congregation sets its standards for what resonates with its critical mass of parishioners. But the unifying element in all of it is nussach.

Mr. Rosen, like many people who read my article, picked up of my personal preference for “high church” chazzanut. Indeed I am very fond of that style of davening. I find comfort and inspiration in ceremonious synagogue proceedings. Rabbis and cantors in canonical vestments, a well trained choir, pomp and circumstance in a cathedral synagogue all add to my prayer experience. But that was not the main focus of my piece. Rather I hoped to steer people toward seeing that our nussach, the modes that can serve to unify us in prayer and connect us to our collective past stand on the brink of obliteration. We dare not let it disappear.

The basic prayer modes, are derived from the cantillation systems for reading the Bible. Those in turn developed from the vestigial memory of the Temple Shira. Nussach is the last remnant we have of the Temple rite. I have always found it painfully ironic that every year we come to schul, sit on the floor of a darkened sanctuary and weep over the loss of that Temple. We spend a full day afflicting ourselves and mourning all of our lost glory. Yet we never think twice about our current abandonment of that last remnant of days gone by. That dissonance can not be resolved by silent contemplative prayer of individuals. Only a unified celebration of our musical heritage will preserve us.

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