Religious Music/Muzak: Thoughts for Vayakhel-Pekudei

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By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Vayakhel-Pekudei

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When we visit malls, take elevators, or get put on hold on telephone, we frequently find ourselves hearing some sort of music. Actually, this music is often called muzak, based on the Muzak corporation which first developed it.

It's a strange kind of music. It is played in order to create certain psychological moods. It can subconsciously induce shoppers to spend more time and money at malls; it can affect our moods in ways the purveyors wish to influence us. Muzak sounds like regular music but it generally has no beginning, middle or end. We hear it in the background and hardly pay attention to it. After hearing muzak, we don't walk out whistling a tune we just heard. Indeed, we hardly remember having heard it.

Real music is an art form. Muzak is a psychological device. Real music seeks to elevate us or move us emotionally. Muzak seeks to generate background noise that can manipulate us into thinking we've heard music.

Just as there is a vast difference between music and muzak, there is a vast difference between real education and pseudo education. Genuine teachers provide us with skills; more than that, they provide us with ways of thinking on our own. Genuine teachers open our minds to new ideas, encourage us to work independently, stimulate creativity. On the other hand, there are teachers who are stale and boring, who talk at students rather than with students. There are teachers who are entertainers, more interested in being popular with students than with challenging and teaching them. They pretend to teach, but lack the content, vision and imagination of real teachers.

If we think back to the many teachers with whom we've studied, we can rejoice in those who have actually taught us and pushed us to our limit. But we can also

remember those who provided educational “muzak,” who blathered on, who lacked originality, who joked around rather than opening our minds.

The difference between genuine and pseudo education is particularly problematic when it comes to religion. Real religious teachers not only teach us the dos and don’ts of Judaism; even more importantly they teach us how to approach our holy texts and observances with a sense of awe. They provide us with spiritual uplift; they expand our range of ideas and experiences. When we are in the presence of genuine religious teachers, we feel their authenticity and honesty, their idealism, their quest for truth, their innate humility.

“Muzak” types of religious teachers give the external impression of teaching religion but they lack content and authenticity. They teach religion by rote. They do not convey a grand religious vision but are satisfied to present anecdotes and platitudes that don’t inspire and don’t allow us to grow or to think for ourselves. They preach about prayer but don’t take prayer too seriously themselves. They speak about Torah study but their own study is shallow. They tell us to observe mitzvoth, but they lack gravitas in their own religious behavior.

In describing the building of the Mishkan, the Torah indicates that God chose Betzalel to head the construction project. Betzalel is described as a person endowed with the spirit of God, with wisdom and understanding. He not only was gifted as an inspired artist; he had the ability to teach others.

In his commentary on the Torah, the 19th century Italian Rabbi Yitzhak Shemuel Reggio notes: “Added to the amazing qualities with which God endowed Betzalel and Aholiab, He added also the power to teach building skills to the wise of heart; for there are many sages who have deep ideas in their hearts, but they are unable to explain them to others. The Torah testifies that Betzalel also had the power to teach the aspects of construction [of the Mishkan] to other wise people, and these wise people were then able to perform according to the instructions they received.”

Betzalel was a genuine artist who had the genuine talent to communicate his skills and vision to others. This is the mark of a special kind of genius—the ability to instruct, inspire and empower.

All parents and grandparents—indeed all of us—are either conveyors of real Jewish education or pseudo Jewish education. Through our own knowledge, commitment and example, we teach—for better or for worse—how Judaism is to be lived. Authentic, honest and humble religionists are able to communicate the beauty, the music of Jewish living. Careless, insincere and egotistical people

preach the muzak of Jewish living. It may sound like Judaism, but it is inauthentic and unconvincing. Just as music is different from muzak, so genuine religious teaching is different from pseudo religious teaching. Our responsibility is to choose the way of authenticity.

Angel for Shabbat