You’re Talking to God

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In the opening paragraphs of his thought provoking essay, Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo assails the smug complacency that has come to define our synagogue worship. Sadly, he does not devote much attention to the sorry state of public prayer, despite his central thesis that God has left the synagogue, seeking out those who seek Him elsewhere. And he is correct. Synagogue services lack feeling. They lack aesthetics. They lack a sense of encountering the divine via the mechanism of prayer. R. Lopes Cardozo aptly describes the symptom; we enter our prayer houses, put on the “auto-pilot,” as he terms it, and mindlessly mouth the time-worn prayers, giving them no thought and then head home to our Sabbath or holiday repast. He does not, however, describe how the ideal service, one that both uplifts the worshipper and challenges him or her spiritually, might appear.

Why do Jews come to the synagogue to pray? Is it merely a need to fulfill the technical halakhic requirement that one pray with a *minyan*, a quorum of 10 men, that directs one to the synagogue? Assuming that were the only reason people came to synagogue, our liturgy describes the recipient of our prayers as “. . .*haBoher beShirei zimra*. . .,” the One who prefers hymns and songs. We would be duty-bound to beautify our prayers as part and parcel of the requirement to pray. But for most people, it is not the technical requirement of a *minyan* that draws them to the synagogue; it is to interact with the deepest recesses of their souls and in some small way, to encounter the divine.

The Talmud records the dramatic aftermath to man’s creation, that fateful Friday afternoon. Adam, upon his creation, enjoyed the Garden of Eden. He thirstily drank from the two rivers that formed its boundaries, and ate of its produce. But he was totally unprepared for the advent of sunset and nighttime. As the world plunged into darkness, Adam, we are told, fell into mortal dread of a cold world bereft of sunlight. Fear of the darkness, and existential angst over how he might survive so cold and unforgiving a place, tormented him that night. But the next day, when the sun shone again, and Adam felt its warmth, the Midrash continues, he sang out the Sabbath Psalm: “It is good to praise God and to sing to His lofty name.” Humankind’s first creative expression was music—his first approach of the divine in song. The lesson to be derived from this Midrash is that creativity in prayer is to be found not only in the “*matbeah haTefillah*,” the core text, but in its exposition as well.

If, as Rabbi Lopes Cardozo posits, people are leaving the synagogue in favor of alternate venues that offer up greater profundity, it is due to the poor presentation of the liturgy that pervades our synagogues. Where there was once a noble and grand tradition of synagogue music, designed to both interpret the text and inspire the worshiper, we now have pithy little ditties worthy of a Romper Room sing-along. Gone is any attempt to infuse our services with meaning derived from aesthetics and artistry. Rather, our prayer leaders are merely pace-setters. Each is expected to sound like all the others. Creativity at the *amud* has been rejected in favor of homogenous and bland rote. It didn't used to be that way.

In his book about the hazzanim of yesteryear, *Legendary Cantors*, Samuel Vigoda, describes the approach of Nisi Belzer, (the cantor of the Great Synagogue in Odessa in the mid-nineteenth century) and says that his pieces on Rosh Hashanah usually began with the basses and worked through the baritones, then the second tenors, then the tenors and finally the boy singers. They were designed, according to Vigoda, to be legal briefs on behalf of Kelal Yisrael, before God. They began with the basses, putting forth simple straightforward notes (i.e., basic arguments) and the complexity of the "arguments" (i.e., the music) rising through the vocal systems until the altos, the young boys, echoed the basses, but with their innocent sounding pure tones. How could God not respond to such a structured presentation? How could the worshipper not have been moved to greater concentration and fervent prayer? The late great Cantor David Bagley, when teaching a student a particular piece, once exclaimed: ". . .YOU'RE TALKING TO GOD!" How many people who ascend a synagogue reader's desk do so with the sense that they are encountering the divine and representing the congregation before Him, the King of Kings? How can congregants be expected to find inspiration in the *tefillah*, if their representative before God lacks any sense of purpose? It is the aspect of representing a congregation before God and the awareness of the awesomeness of the task that is missing. There is neither the trepidation that accompanies advocating for the unworthy, nor the confidence that goes with defending the side of right. In most synagogues, one encounters only tepid emotionless utterances and puerile tunes that reflect nothing of the meaning of the words intoned; nothing to honor God's presence in what should be His sanctuary.

Like so many problems that confront us today, a possible resolution to the stilted, boring, and vapid synagogue services can be found in our not-so-distant past cultural history. In November, 2006, an Israeli website featured a video of a very nice memorial gathering at the grave of great cantor Moshe Koussevitzky, *z"l.* Mordechai Sobol, a preeminent spokesperson for cantorial music, and an expert in the field, spoke about the profound and everlasting impact Koussevitzky had on *hazzanut.* One of his points was that although Moshe Koussevitzky did not compose any of his "signature pieces," no one identifies those pieces with their true composers. They are all known as "Moishe's *Hatei*," or "the Koussevitzky *Esa Einai*." No one speaks about the "*sheYibane Beis haMikdosh*" of Israel Schorr, or of Schorr's "*Hatei*," or about Yardeni's "*Esa Einai*" or of Kotlowiz's "*Aneinu*." Still, Koussevitzky deserves to lay claim to these melodies and call them his own. He internalized them and modified them to fit his unique voice and distinct persona. When he sang those pieces, he was not simply singing music by Yardeni or by Schorr. Those compositions simply supplied the backdrop for the artist to present *his own music*. Shlomo Carlebach once said that he didn't like to sing other people's compositions since they were not the products of his soul. He and the great cantors of old preferred to toil in the fields of *tefillah,* to continually perform a comprehensive "*heshbon haNefesh*" and discern what in the siddur rang significant to them and then transmit that awesome emotion to the congregation. Our tradition assures us that "*devarim haYots'im min haLev, nikhnasim laLev,*" that sincerity, honestly expressed, makes an impression on the listener. Our prayer leaders, laypeople, and professional cantors alike, have to follow the example of the greats of old. They must look at the liturgy, personalize it, and set about transmitting that meaning to the congregation. "*Aseh Toratkha kevah, ve'al ta'aseh tefilatkha kevah*." Uniformity and predictability in prayer, especially in the way one presents it when leading a service, is impossible and contrary to prayer's own intrinsic ethic. No two people are ever entirely alike, and no two people can *daven* the same way—and no one person

should *daven* the same way all the time. Moods change, and thus the experiences and vicissitudes of life should shape the way we address God, understand prayer, and convey it to the masses. Hazzanim today deny themselves the *zekhut* of being unique individuals. It pervades Jewish society. Yeshivot have become (to paraphrase R. Yitzchak Hutner, *z"l*) "*wurst fabriken*." The yeshivish uniforms of apparel and doctrine have come to dominate even that which should be special and unique. Our approach of the divine has been co-opted, and it shows in contemporary synagogue services.

Sadly, so very few people understand this basic concept. But imagine what it must be like to experience real meaning-packed prayer presented by a leader who labors intensely to both show the worshiper the meaning of the liturgy as he understands it and in doing so veritably puts his own soul on display. What must it have been like to sit in *shul* as a congregant on that Rosh Hashanah morning in Rovno in the 1880s when Zeidel Rovner premiered his *Melokh*, or on the Shabbat in Odessa when Rozumni first intoned his *Av haRahamim*, or the Yom Kippur afternoon in the 1920s when Israel Alter first presented his *BeRrosh Hashanah Yikateivun* with the immediate reference to the *Viddui*. Can anyone fathom what that must have been like; to hear these *hiddushim* in prayer for the first time? Imagine that day in Rovno when Rovner sang "*veYeida kol pa'ul ki atoh pealto*" as a soft contemplative phrase and then moved into the duet with the bass at "*veYomar kol asher neshama beApo*," and he sang it again and again and again; four times altogether. I promise, no one looked at his or her watch. But I'm sure people gave very serious thought to what it means to have a soul implanted within one's body and how that soul enables us to perceive the majesty of the divine. Perhaps a few trembled at the prospect of "meeting God" via his *neshama*. What were people thinking the first time Kwartin cried out *Tiher R. Yishmael*? What anguish did he evoke with his pitiful sobs over the martyrdom of the sages? How humble and in awe of God was the congregation privileged to hear the premier of Yosselle Rosenblatt's *Hineni*? I have no doubt that the sensitive congregant who heard Pierre Pinchik lecture God on the concept of *Am haMuvhar* when he chanted the *Ahava Rabbah*, stopped to think about his exceptional relationship with the Almighty. These were hazzanim who had a sense of mission. It was not their voices that ruled the day, not even their musicality. It was their drive to impart the meaning of the text to the congregation that mattered.

Prayer stands at a precarious precipice. People are forgetting how prayer is supposed to sound. In the 1920s the great cantor and musicologist Leib Glantz went to the *shtibels* of the New York's Lower East Side to hear old Jews pray the daily *Shaharit*. From their intonations, he composed his classic *Shomer Yisrael* for the *Selihot* service. In doing so, he preserved something of the essence of how prayer, at its most intimate and meaningful, should sound. It's a sound worth listening to and remembering. It is the sound of a people who carried their sacred liturgy from the smoldering ruins of Jerusalem into the diaspora. It is the song we sang when we built the grand synagogue of Granada, the Shulhoff of Vilna, the Altneushul of Prague. It is the song of our nation and our history; hopefully of our future destiny. And it exists in a unique and beautiful form in the soul of every Jew. It is the key to opening up the meaning of the prayers to us. God is a "*boher beShirei zimrah*" and it's time for us to be as well. Maybe then, God, and all of us will come home.