

THE LAST KOL NIDREY

As we approach the High Holidays, something to think about is the characteristic sound of Yontov services.

This year as every year, Jews all over the world will gather on Yom Kippur Eve for a type of religious experience that is unique. Not just unique in Judaism, but unique to Judaism. Three elders will stand facing the congregation. Each one holds a Torah scroll. The people stand in silence. And the Cantor chants a text which is not a prayer. It is a legal formula. And yet it brings tears to many eyes. People listen with rapt attention. In fact, we speak of going to services specifically to "hear Kol Nidrey". Not to say it.. To hear it. And that is its unique quality.

The melody is what we long for, year after year. With other sung texts, the music accompanies the lyrics. Kol Nidrey is the opposite; here the words are an accompaniment to the melody. It is the Cantor's voice that prompts the emotion.

What's he singing? It may sound like the epic of Jewish suffering, but it is only a symbolic release from vows. In fact, throughout history Jewish authorities -- including revered Rabbinic scholars -- tried to abolish Kol Nidrey in order to avoid the embarrassment it could bring their communities when renegades misused its text against them: "See? Jews' commitment is worthless, because on Yom Kippur they cancel it..." But despite rabbinic concerns, the people wouldn't give up Kol Nidrey. They had to hear it; they still do. The Hazzonishe moil-- literally "the Cantorial mouth" --sends those sounds ringing into the Jewish ear, and bringing the sigh to the Jewish mouth, the tear to the Jewish eye.

It is a dramatic moment in our year. A stirring memory in our lives. And it may soon become a thing of the past. Without rabbinic prohibition. Without treacherous misinterpretation. We may soon hear our last Kol Nidrey. This year, there will already be services where someone will play a recording of Jan Peerce singing Kol Nidrey, because no live voice is competent to do it. Cantorial art as we know it for the last several generations is in serious decline.

Having spent the greater part of my life as a professional Hazzan, I am not just nostalgic for the "good old days" or for what is called the Golden Age of Cantorial art. The conditions that produced a Yossele Rosenblatt or a Moshe Kusevitsky are not the conditions of today. But the conditions that produce some of the less qualified soloists who function as cantors now, do not give us a Kol Nidrey experience. That's not a complaint. That's a fact. Young people trained in summer camps and music schools may have fine talents, but expressing the spirit of a Jewish community at prayer is not necessarily one of those talents. You can sing Kol Nidrey to the plunking of a guitar, but why?

The economics of Jewish life being what it is, we have to expect to make sacrifices. People who do not daven require no traditionally skilled leader. Except on Erev Yom Kippur. Therefore there is less and less opportunity for a cantor with traditional skills to find a job. On the other hand, there is considerable demand for songleaders to work in Jewish schools and camps. So -- music is music. If Susie can sing camp songs, let her sing Kol Nidrey.

Gresham's Law thus begins to apply to Jewish Music. Remember that, from high school Economics? Simply paraphrased, it goes like this: the cheap stuff drives the good stuff off the market.

Is there a constructive solution to this problem? Is there a way to provide songs for our children and also a religious musical experience for adults? To my knowledge, there is only one solution. It's unlikely to happen in any widespread way. But there is no alternative: Basic knowledge.

That's the magic formula. Not knowledge for the professionals. Knowledge for the members. Vocal music occupies a vital position in Jewish life, from King David to the Levites on the steps of the Sanctuary to today's Alberto Mizrahi and Shuli Natan -- just as instrumental music expresses our emotions from the Shofar to the Klezmer band. We need to get familiar with it.

What is a Cantor? A Cantor is a Shliakh Tsibur -- a representative of the community. The Cantor has a duty to represent the Jewish people in prayer, to sense their feelings, to stimulate those feelings, and to express them aloud through the text and melody of the prayers. Qualifying for such a task means, first, that the Cantor as Representative, must be responsible for the same Mitzvot as the constituents. In traditional Judaism men are responsible for some Mitzvot that women are not, so women are not qualified as cantors. Some men are not either. Not because they are not technically responsible for the Mitzvot, but because they habitually fail to do them. As famous a voice as Moishe Oysher was once denied the opportunity to officiate for the High Holidays because he was known as an actor who habitually violated the Shabos.

Other Mitzvot get violated too, of course, by the Cantor and the Rabbi and the congregants. That's why we have Yom Kippur. But in another Cantorial highspot of the season, the Hin'ni, he prays: "Do not hold them (the congregation) guilty for my errors, and do not make them responsible for my faults." To say that prayer and mean it, you need to know what mitzvot you may have violated. That counts at least as much as the quality of a voice.

Fortunately for our generation, some knowledgeable and qualified leaders are still around to represent our communities in prayer. Most congregations this year will be able to "hear Kol Nidrey." And there are cantorial schools and private instructors trying sincerely to train sincere leaders for the future. And yes, some of them are women. Whether they succeed or fail depends largely on you.

A classic old Yiddish comedy song called "Hazzonim af Probbe" (Cantors at an audition) satirizes typical 1920's candidates for a High Holiday position. The auditioning committee hears an old shtetl-type Hazzan and rejects him: "That's not what the public wants." Then they hear a German Oberkantor, and come to the same conclusion. The guy who gets the job is the one who sings Yismach Moshe to the tune of "Yes sir, that's my baby!"

Less and less is this a satire. More and more is it an accurate description of our taste level. This coming year, 5770, will you make it your business to find out what you should require of a ritual representative?

Will you hear another Kol Nidrey?

I hope, deeply and passionately, that you will. And I wish you and yours a year of health, fulfillment, and increased knowledge.