

The Milken Archive – Jewish Theological Seminary Conference
ONLY IN AMERICA: JEWISH MUSIC IN A LAND OF FREEDOM,

PUSHING THE LIMITS: TENSIONS BETWEEN TEXT AND MUSIC IN THE AMERICAN
SYNAGOGUE

Monday, November 10, 2003, New York Jewish Theological Seminary 3:30 pm

Presenting Panelists: Morton Shames– Moderator, Debbie Friedman, Raymond P. Scheindlin, Lawrence Hoffman, Mark Kligman, and Michael Isaacson

Music on the *Balanced Bimah*

By

Michael Isaacson, Ph.D.

Good afternoon. I was initially informed that I was invited from Los Angeles for this panel to represent the other side to Debbie Friedman's popular music. I wondered if that was to mean that either Debbie has some music that isn't popular (which is hardly the case) or if I had somehow become the authority on it (which I am certainly not).

While Debbie and I go way back to our NFTY camp beginnings and are assuredly mutual admirers and fans of each other's music (by the way, Debbie has recalled that, first listening to my camp songs way back at Kutz Camp in New York inspired her to begin writing her own – she probably thought "If Isaacson can do it I certainly can!" and today, with great pleasure, I sing Debbie's songs at my own Shabbat *minyan*. I recalled this during last Shabbat's parashat "*L'chi Lach*").

So, I take on this topic this afternoon not in any way to suggest that I am an adversary of Debbie's or anyone's "popular" music, nor that my own synagogue music isn't enjoying popular performances of its own, and especially not as an ideologist for any one exclusive stylistic musical menu for Jewish worship, but simply as one composer who, having contributed both easy songs and more considered synagogue compositions to the repertoire, speaks this afternoon additionally on behalf of four types of musicians whose work and message needs to be considered and heard.

- A. First, I speak on behalf of those who believe in a philosophy of balance in worship music; a balance of style, content, and diversity for all congregants.
- B. Second, I stand for a cadre of distinguished composers who have, in the past, created a notable body of synagogue music that is lamentably being overlooked in our worship today; works for trained cantors and choirs that is accompanied by instruments other than the guitar and vocal forces other than unison singing.
- C. Third, I represent those who are presently composing choral settings and *hazzanut*. ...And
- D. Lastly, I'm here for the generation of younger, highly talented composers who have all but given up composing for a genre, which, at the present, they perceive to be frivolous and unreceptive to their craft as seriously trained musicians.

In fact, for the past three years I've been contributing a column on today's precise topic to a periodical called *The American Rabbi*. I address and discuss Jewish musical ideas for Rabbis who hold so much influence in shaping our worship music. My column is called *The Balanced Bimah*.

Simply put, the column advocates balance as the key to how we best receive and use information and, in this afternoon's context, how we can best employ and appreciate both the literary and the musical aspects of an optimally effective Jewish worship experience.

Consider this: Our minds have both a cognitive function (the left side of the brain if you will) and an emotive function (the right side), when both sides are processing stimuli in balance we understand and feel on an infinitely higher level than if one side is dominant over the other. For example when listening to a piece of music what we cognitively know about its text, history, instrumentation, and architecture acts to enrich its sonic allure and heighten its overall emotional impact upon us.

An elevated synagogue *bimah* and its pulpit leaders may be similarly understood as the right and left sides of our Jewish worship consciousness. The left side of the *bimah*, the rabbi, guides our cognitive understanding through words, while the right side of the *bimah*, the cantor, stimulates our emotions through music. When they are in confluent balance sharing the *bimah* equally, we are the fortunate beneficiaries of an extraordinary worship experience. This gets even more delicate when you consider that each rabbi has a left-sided Maimonadean rationality and a right-sided Shneur Zalman folksiness and each cantor has a left-sided *nuschaot* aspect along with a right-sided *nigun* propensity. Each one and all four have to be in balance as well.

However, if there's too much music and not enough rabbinic readings and commentary on the *bimah*, it is as unbalanced as if there is no music at all. If all we hear is one kind of music like guitar strumming and unison singing, the service is as unbalanced as if even the finest Hazzan and choir precluded any congregational singing. All styles of well-crafted synagogue music are welcome and necessary on a balanced *bimah*; the key phrase, however, must always be *inclusive balance*.

Equally disproportionate is a service that presents musical or literary ideas that are too accessible or "popular". Judaism is a great religion that has sustained us because it has given us great spiritual ideas that were not always immediately accessible; as a result our people were challenged to grow, think, feel and act *na-aseh v'nishma*; to do and to listen" and we were all elevated in the process.

Today it seems that any thoughtful, contemplative silence during the service for any musical or literary concept that needs more than a nanosecond to fully comprehend is suspect and labeled as "heady or too intellectual"; how the mighty idea has fallen.

Our worship services need to return and dramatically regain a sense of musical balance and heightened textual and poetic interest for all members of our congregations, for all worshippers of every age in every stage of their lives.

Consequently, the solution is not a menu of divisional boutique services exclusively for specialized factions like singles, seniors, youth, women, or gay congregants. A devotional service should be about bringing us together in worshipping one God not separating or categorizing different worshippers. This fractionalization policy affirms that our differences are greater than our commonalities. It treats Judaism, as demographics not people-hood.

We must return to the durable idea of *Am Echad Lev Achad* – one people, one congregation. The contemporary worship service, while engagingly eclectic, must be inclusive for all. When we discard this notion, we unthinkingly forget history, we trivialize the present and we diminish hope for an elevated spiritual future as one, unified people. I suspect that the Sephardic community over many years, in its adherence to one synagogue for all, has learned this lesson far better than the Ashkenazim.

As in so many other areas of our lives today, ignorance is our common enemy and education is always our strongest ally. But it goes further than that. Not only must ignorance be identified but effective education must also be focused and lavished upon those who influence and design our Jewish communal tastes.

After almost forty years of presenting music and teaching at cantorial conventions, I now realize that I was literally preaching to the choir. Cantors knew something about their musical heritage and were not going about re-designing the synagogue service in 2000 by discarding a legacy of over 150 years of sacred music. Cantors weren't the pulpit leaders needing our guidance and instruction.

Their *bimah* partners, the younger rabbis, however, our new leaders, are the clergy who more appropriately deserve and require effective music education, a sense of music history and an enlightened cultural direction. Rabbis, while well trained in talking, urgently need instruction and first hand experiences in music listening to learn about the wealth of worthy sacred music that presently exists before they go about running a wholesale cultural clearance sale.

I don't think our rabbis set out to be cultural ax men or ax women. If you ask any rabbi he or she will profess a profound love of Jewish music; and I believe them. It is not their *n'shama* that is in need of repair; it is their musical lack of knowledge, their absence of music historical perspective, and their dearth of personal listening experience. When it comes to understanding our *y'rushah*, our legacy of Jewish music, most rabbis are like those limited souls, who when invited to an elaborate smorgasbord, eschew the gourmet delicacies laid out before them because they've only munched on hot dogs and s'mores over a campfire.

Is it any surprise? Rabbis have been given too little musical education as children; they probably don't play an instrument other than the guitar (if one at all), and are given no serious, substantive, cumulative, Jewish music education at Hebrew Union College or here at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

They've probably have never sung in a legitimate choir, they rarely attend classical music concerts, and most of their first-hand Jewish musical orientation and information comes from the few weeks during each summer when they attend Ramah or NFTY camps. Is it any wonder that rabbis believe that camp songs make up the sum total of the Jewish musical universe?

Yet, these are the leaders, not the cantors and music directors, whom we now entrust with our present and future musical content, values and decisions. Clearly rabbis should not be singled out as the only cultural culprits; they are most ably encouraged and abetted by the budget watchers on our temple boards ... but for quite another reason than esthetic preference.

A cantor, choir and organist are simply more expensive to financially sustain than a song leader with a guitar. It is much cheaper to buy into a "cross-over", homogenized, folksy sound than a more professional, comprehensive Jewish sacred music program. Today it seems serious *hazzanut*, trained choirs and instrumental music are relegated mainly to the real moneymaker services ...the *High Holidays*. Is profit on expenditure to be the primary criterion for our Jewish cultural goals now and in the future?

Feeling the pressure of rising costs and dwindling congregations, board members seek a band-aid remedy by touting the new, in vogue, "Jewishness" of continuous congregational singing. They encourage their rabbis: "Let's get *Friday Night Live* or the *BJ service* and they'll surely cure our congregational problems."

While these events are well attended by mostly young singles as inexpensive meet and greet dates and Friday Evening pre-pub hopping warm-ups, I challenge anyone here to report that temple membership or financial support of any substance has significantly increased by those singles (not their bill paying parents) attending these cocktail parties disguised as services. As a matter of fact, these events, perceived as "freebies" by the young singles are, ironically, more expensive for their struggling parents' generation to regularly produce than elevated Shabbat musical services. Furthermore, I can guarantee you that the components of these "cross-over" musical "raves", predicated on an *au courant* timeliness, will become outdated even faster than what they have prematurely replaced.

You might think "Michael Isaacson's got it all wrong! In the synagogue of 2000 we don't want to stay quiet and passively listen to a five minute vocal performance by some Hazzan or choir - we want to participate!"

You know, it's funny but I never hear rabbis saying: "Instead of the congregation sitting down, becoming quiet and thoughtfully listening to me deliver a forty-five minute sermon, Let's save some time and money and get a lay leader up on the *bimah* and the entire congregation can all participate in an enthusiastic free for all about what they think the parsha is about!"

I don't see rabbis abdicating their professional homiletic and pedagogical mission; but I do observe them asking the cantors to abdicate their musical calling in favor of a lesser one.

Again, why should we be surprised? Rabbis and temple boards are People of the Book not People of the Score. When it comes to words; rabbis understand the spiritual importance of periodic congregational silence and thoughtful listening in contrast to continual congregational speaking.

In regards to words, rabbis comprehend that our services must include active listening, reflection, and learning; what our rabbis in this generation particularly have yet to be effectively taught and fully appreciate is the value of a congregation's periodic silent attention to sacred musical enrichment as well.

So, how do we regain a balance between the spoken word and a thoughtful, mature appreciation of the best sacred musical settings of our liturgy?

I would suggest that it is not the existing musical settings that are musty and need replacing so much as it is the sub-standard performances that they receive by inadequately trained singers and soloists with too little rehearsal time. When you hear magnificent performances of our best compositions, the music clearly shines through.

From time to time, we, unfortunately, hear a less than dynamic rabbinic sermon diminish the brilliance of a weekly Torah portion, but we don't throw out the Torah. In more capable hands, or with greater preparation time, the same truth will shine with inspired, insightful light.

It is the same with *hazzanut* and choral synagogue music; we must learn to distinguish the skill of the musical messenger from the intrinsic value of the musical message.

So, the first step in musically balancing the *bimah* is enlightening rabbis, temple boards and congregations to the great legacy of our existing Jewish music through the very best performances of it both live and on recordings. Rabbis and congregations need to actively listen, not just mindlessly hear, they need to learn the *midrash* of this music before they discount, dismiss, and discard it.

For this reason, I'm most pleased to participate in this conference and to personally congratulate the Milken Family Foundation for their Herculean achievement in documenting and archiving the finest performances of our great legacy of American Jewish music. I am grateful for the opportunity to have brought this idea to Lowell Milken and been of service at the Archive's inception. I have noted to Lowell and I tell you all now:

The Milken Archive will be remembered long after we are all gone as the singular most important Jewish musical achievement of our age.

Now that we have been given the gift of this astounding collection, it is our obligation to embrace it as the basis of an on-going educational course of action.

Today, I propose to both the Conservative and Reform rabbinic and cantorial professional associations that they mandate that, as a firm condition of membership, a comprehensive Milken Archive Seminar be required in each semester that student rabbis and cantors are in residence at JTS, HUC, or the AJR in Los Angeles to enable them to hear, many for the first time, what wonderful Jewish music has preceded them on this earth and what is available to them as part of a *balanced bimah* musical menu in their future. Together we must address and remedy the present institutional and rabbinic myopia of synagogue music.

Furthermore, after their graduation, during the summers our clergy should be required, as other professional practitioners are, to periodically attend Milken Archive In-service Enrichment Courses to augment, refine, and balance their musical information; in other words, to give all synagogue music equal study.

This archive orientation course then must “go on the road” traveling across North America and Israel as part of a comprehensive 21st century musical educational policy of reaching every member of the North American Jewish community. I am convinced that:

Disseminating and teaching the contents of the Milken Archive’s sonic treasures now and in the future is as vital to its ultimate success as the triumph of its initial recording stage.

If our people cannot connect to this music in a communal or classroom setting then let us create radio and DVD programming that encourages this music to be played, discussed, and appreciated by all listeners in commuting autos while they snail to or from work in rush hour; that’s my idea of *Drive-Time Judaism!*

Balance, balance, balance shalt thou pursue; both in life and in worship. When we achieve a balanced *bimah* we also affirm God’s gift of musical awareness. Our congregations are diverse, polyglot assemblies that need diverse tastes satisfied by the best elevation of both the spoken word and synagogue music of all styles and all periods. Simplistic, juvenile liturgy and adolescent camp music demeans our religious maturity as a people.

But before we can offer the widest menu, we must educate our leaders about the profound jewels that lie before them. Do we throw out rabbinic *Midrash* because it’s more than a few years old? Why are we doing this to our musical *Midrash*, our synagogue music? We need to regain and rededicate the temple for all Jews of every age at every stage in their lives.

Balanced, intelligent, creative, eclecticism is the most effective way to attract the widest cross section of our community back into one, unified, service. Undoubtedly, the service has to sparkle. Our rabbis have to be better and more knowledgeable and our cantors, singers and instrumentalists must be first-rate as well.

There has never been a viable alternative to quality control in business, art, or in effective worship. But let us always remember that quick fixes fall into disrepair just as quickly.

When we achieve a balance in content by educating our leaders, when we balance and treasure the classic along with encouraging the innovative, and when we balance the more lofty, less immediate idea with the “fast-food” accessible bon bon; we will ultimately realize the success of a truly *balanced bimah*.

Let me close with an anecdote that will add a finer perspective to the still bigger cultural dilemma.

When I was first starting out in Los Angeles as a motion picture composer I was assigned a symphonic orchestra to perform my dramatic scores each week for the first of television’s mini-series “Rich Man Poor Man”. Then some years later, because of economics, I was asked to cut down the orchestra from a 30 member string section to 15 live players and include a string synthesizer to give the illusion of a robust, full string section. Still later I was asked to replace all the live string players with two string synthesizers and winds and brass emulators.

After a few more years new, younger, producers, who were never brought up on the beauty of a live string section, would ask me “Can you give me a score with that real string synthesizer sound?”

My friends, that’s how the myopia and hyperbole of culture drags us all down. First it is temporary economics, and then it becomes economics with aesthetic rationalization, and finally with lack of memory and ignorance the trivial substitute is hyped as an equally elevated concept; but, the truth is, it is not and in the process of fooling ourselves into thinking it is, our cultural thresholds are inevitably and consistently lowered. Somewhere we must stand up and observe, “The Emperor has no clothes!”

Will our cultural values as Jews resist this all too slippery slope and be renewed by the enlightened possibilities of the Milken Archive? Or will this recorded repository merely serve as an aural museum of the great and majestic musical treasures that we once possessed and held dear in the not so distant past?

Shuvu b’nei adam – I pray that we, as a people, once again regain our equilibrium and return to a *balanced bimah* of unified worship that inspires us through the greatness of both words and music.

Shuvu b’nei adam – Only then, when this synchronistically balanced *bimah* once again advocates higher standards over mere expedience, and the poetic over the sound byte will we be re-elevated and be re-empowered to go up, grow up, and ascend the Mountain of the Lord. *Kein y’hi ratzon*, may this elevation return in our lifetime.