

Invoking the Hanukkah Spirit: Spreading the Light and the Possibility of Prayer

It is a little known fact today that the synagogues of Europe in the centuries before migration to the United States were led by cantors, not rabbis. According to Emanuel Rubin and John Baron, professors respectively at the University of Massachusetts and Tulane University, and authors of a recently published textbook entitled, *Music in Jewish History and Culture*, the Hazzan was often the main person in charge of religious services in the small villages of Germany and Poland. He (and, of course, in earlier times, and in Europe, it was only 'he') also functioned as a *melammed* (teacher), *shochet* (ritual slaughterer) and *mohel* (circumcisor). Rabbis, who tended to reside only in the major urban Jewish centers, 'were Talmudic scholars and judges, whose wisdom was sought when a matter of Jewish law was at stake and who preached only a few times a year. They did not regularly conduct religious services or participate in life-cycle events, whereas the cantor did.' (p. 237) Thus, according to Rubin and Baron, when Ashkenazic communities were first established in the United States in the nineteenth century, the majority of the religious leaders of these congregations were Hazzanim, and not rabbis.

I begin my column this month with this particular perspective to reassert that our current model of cantorial leadership on the *bimah* of Congregation B'nai Jacob is part of a long, historic tradition on both sides of the Atlantic. This was in fact the 'way it was' at synagogues in America until the formal, degree-granting rabbinical and cantorial schools were established in the United States in the twentieth century and the systems of denominations, i.e. Orthodox, Conservative and Reform became 'big business' in Jewish America of the second half of the twentieth century along with the Federation and JCC systems. We all grew up with rabbis on the *bimah*, along with cantors, so we all assume that's the true order. But as Ira Gershwin once said, "It ain't necessarily so."

With the significant decline in synagogue membership and attendance across America at the beginning of the 21st century, I believe that alternative models will be the wave of the future. B'nai Jacob is not 'lacking', *per se*, but rather 'innovating' and 'drawing upon our ancestral synagogue traditions' of our European past. Those synagogues had communities of informed, skilled congregants who assisted the Hazzan by serving as volunteers on the *bimah*: the *ba'al tefillah* (prayer leader), *ba'al kri'ah* (Torah reader), and congregants who chanted *Haftarah*. During the High Holy Days, there were congregants volunteers who served as prayer singers, as well. Thus, the very practice I have undertaken to initiate here at B'nai Jacob has a long, historical tradition in our European Ashkenazic roots. I am deeply grateful to our volunteer regular assistants, including Sid Cantor, Frank Pratt, Anne Petite, Marc Coben, Yael Israeal and Jessica Mandelbaum, as well as all other congregants who step forward to serve as *Gabbaim*, take torah honors and give the occasional *d'var torah*. Also, thanks are due Anita Ollivierre who now prepares our weekly Torah reading schedule and also coordinates the volunteer assistants schedule with Sid for me. We are truly a community of Jews and a Jewish community – for, of and by, a true *Hevra*, coming together to assert our Jewish identity. With your ever increasing participation, you fulfill the *mitzvah* of spreading light to our community and beyond. So think about how you can participate!

Recently we initiated a reading of some of the Torah on Saturday morning in English to supplement the Hebrew chanting. Co-President, Jane Cantor, had this first-time honor and Pauline Danton and Sylvia Paul will be our next English Torah readers, respectively on November 17th and December 8th. These are changing and exciting times at B'nai Jacob, so I encourage you to attend services and see the changes in the making, and who knows, maybe even become part of them.

Oftentimes when we come to *shul*, we sit in the pews with little, if any, interest in the prayers we are reciting. The language of Hebrew escapes most of us, so we turn to the English translations and, for 21st century readers, they are mostly unsatisfying: stiff, old-fashioned, archaic and in the end, without meaning. That is why I like to tackle, from time to time, the meaning of certain prayers we recite regularly in our services to provide the congregation with some insight so that you might have a bit more understanding when you come upon the prayer 'realtime' during a service. This month I would like to say a few words about the prayer '*Hashkivenu*', literally 'Cause us to lie down'.

The *Hashkivenu* prayer is recited in the evening services, *Ma'ariv*, for weekday, Sabbath, Festivals and High Holy Days, so it is considered a mainstay of the evening liturgy. It occurs in the service after the familiar *Barchu*, the *Shema*, and the *Mi Kamokha*. On Shabbat it anticipates the *V'Shomru*. This prayer is of ancient origins. According to Ismar Elbogen in his renowned compendium of extraordinary scholarship, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, its text goes back to the Talmudic period. It is unique in its consideration of the protective power of Adonai as we sleep and I have always found its text peaceful, restful, healing and comforting:

Hashkivenu Adonai Eloheinu L'shalom
V'Ha'Amidenu malkenu l'chayim
U'feros aleinu sukat sholmecha
V'Taknenu be'etsah tovah milfanehcha
V'Hoshienu lema'an shemecha
V'Hagen ba'adenu v'haser mealeinu
Oyev, dever, v'cherev, v'ra'av, v'yagon
V'haser satan milfaneinu umeachareinu
U'v'tsel kenafehcha tastirenu
Ki El shomrenu u'matsilenu Atah
Ki El Melech chanun v'rachum Atah
U'shemor tsetenu u'voenu l'chayim
U'l'shalom meatah v'ad olam
U'feros aleinu sukat sholmecha
Baruch atah Adonai
Hapores sukat shaom aleinu
V'al kol amo yisrael v'al Yerushalayim.

Cause us to lie down, Adonai, our God, in peace
And cause us to stand, our King, in life
And spread over us a Sukkah of your peace
And make us straight with good advice from your Face
And rescue us for the sake of your Name

And defend for the benefit of us,
And cause to depart from upon us
Enemy, plague, and sword, and famine, and grief
And remove Satan from before us and behind us
And with the shadow of your wings
You will hide us
For You are a God who guards and rescues us
You are a God who is a merciful and compassionate King
And guard our goings and comings
For life and for peace
From now until eternity
And spread over us a Sukkah of your peace
Blessed are you, Adonai,
the One who spreads the Sukkah of peace
Upon us and all your people Israel and upon Jerusalem.

This literal translation to my mind informs us more clearly of the Hebrew author's intention. Somehow the Siddur Sim Shalom translation doesn't make it for me. I find it rigid and formulaic, absent of feeling. But the Jules Harlowe '*drash*' just below the line in Siddur Sim Shalom, p. 34, is a quite successful English poetic rendering of the deep tenderness of our relationship with Adonai:

Protect us with Your gift of peace
By helping us to overcome temptation.

When we are weak, sustain us;
When we despair, open our hearts to joy.

Shelter us in Your embrace of peace
When we are caught by conflict or desire.

When we are torn, heal us;
When we are tormented, touch us with tranquility.

Cherish our fragmented lives;
Make our lives whole again through integrity.

When we deceive, turn us to You;
When we corrupt, capture our hearts anew.

Protect us from ourselves;
When we falter, help us to conquer the enemy within.

When we blunder, restore us;
With compassion teach us
That peace is based on Your truth.

The rich legacy of our Jewish prayer tradition provides us with many opportunities for finding contemporary meaning in ancient texts. Feel free to ask me about other prayer texts. It's a topic I love engaging in. For when we say the *Hashkivenu* blessing on a daily basis, "*Baruch atah Adonai hapores sukkat shalom aleinu...*" (Blessed are You, Adonai, who spreads the Sukkah of peace upon us"), we are indeed not only protected, comforted, and healed, but we ourselves become empowered to spread the light of our blessings from Adonai to others, our families, our friends, and beyond into our community.

And on the subject of spreading the light, I close my column with a few plugs, first for our annual **Shabbat Hanukkah Celebration on December 7th and 8th**. This year, on Friday, December 7th we will have a Latke Supper at 6 PM followed by a Friday Night Live! Special Hanukkah Musical Service, followed by a delicious Oneg Shabbat complete with tasty treats and lots of *freilach* and songs for the Hanukkah season (and, I hear, even some presents). Be sure to save the date! Please join us, as well, on Saturday morning, when we will have our English supplemental torah reader, Sylvia Paul, and more Hanukkah festivities. I look forward to seeing you all at this special occasion, as well as at our **November Friday Night Live! Musical Erev Shabbat on November 16th** and our supplemental English torah reader, Pauline Danton, on **Saturday, November 17th**. Our service on **November 16th** will be a special **Musical Healing Service**. I hope you will all make an effort to attend this new approach to the end of a hectic week, as we look to care for and nourish our souls with time for reflection, meditation and soft singing of niggunim and other prayers with new music during the Kabbalat Shabbat portion of the service. Remember, *Kol yisrael areivim zeh la'zeh*, All of Israel is connected to one another. Join us at B'nai Jacob and feel connected. B'nai Jacob is *Hamakom Yehudi Shelanu*, Bnai Jacob is our Place for Jewish Belonging. I wish you all a blessed and festive Hanukkah season and remember, spread the light!

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