



Craig Taubman

**ARTSON:** *What do you see as the gifts music can bring to Jews and worship?*

**CRAIG:** I consider the gift music brings to Jews and worship as the same gift that art brings to life. Music itself is the gift. It is a bridge. It is an exclamation mark, a period, a comma, a pause, a question mark. It's the gift that we bring to music and the gift that music brings to us. It's a give-and-take relationship. Music can take the mundane and make it holy; take the blasé and make it engaging.

Without music the world would be very quiet. Music creates contrast, much like that found in the movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, when it turns from black and white into color. We do the same thing in the service when we move from prayer to singing. The contrast between the two makes the distinction even more glorious.

To pray alone is meditation, but with a group, you can make music. If you listen carefully to a group of worshippers davening, you will notice that without even intending to, they are creating music through the gentle sounds of their murmuring. There is a certain music to the davening.

Instrumentation was originally forbidden in synagogues on Shabbat out of respect and mourning for the destruction of the second temple. But, there is new debate on this, being spearheaded by Rabbis Elliot Dorff and Elie Kaplan Spitz, and I believe that the inclusion of musical instruments in the synagogue will be an added gift to Jews and to their worship.

**ARTSON:** *What are the strengths of traditional Hazzanut worth preserving? What are the ways you are working to translate those strengths into contemporary music?*

**CRAIG:** It is absolutely essential to preserve traditional Hazzanut for the very reason that it has been around for a long time, and like a treasured grandparent, it has depth and wisdom, and people love it. It's like a fine piece of art. Traditional Hazzanut has deep roots and anything with roots has the potential to have limbs and to fruit and flower. Everything I write is influenced by these roots which were a gift passed on to me by my parents. But, that doesn't mean that we shouldn't explore

the many other wonderful ways to interpret the music of our faith. In fact, Jewish communities around the world have always adapted traditional liturgy to the flavor of the region. The Shema sounds very different in other countries than the way we sing it in the United States.

Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of the British Mandate for Palestine, said that, "Our job is to make the old new and the new holy." In my work, I use all of the tools available to me to do just that. One fundamental tool is my knowledge of Hazzanut, which I learned as a young boy from Cantor Carl Urstein of Sinai Temple. Another one of my tools is contemporary music. An example: I have combined the song, "Oh What a Beautiful Morning," with the traditional morning prayer that begins, "How thankful I am to wake up in the morning," and they are stunning together. Another example: In the musical, *The Rothschilds*, there is a song entitled, "In My Own Lifetime," in which a dying father asks if he will see peace in his lifetime and be able to see the promised land with his child. I couple that song with the Kaddish that ends with, "ya'aseh shalom, aleinu v'al kol Yis'ra'eil v'im'ru amen. May he make peace upon us, and upon all Israel, amen"; and it works beautifully. These are ways that I translate the strengths of traditional Hazzanut into contemporary music and try to make the old new and the new holy.

**ARTSON:** *What do you see as the aspirations and goals of today's Cantors in terms of what music can achieve?*

**ARIANNE:** I remember distinctly the first time I attended a Shabbat service. I was eight years old, and I went because Shabbat attendance was a religious school requirement. I remember walking into what felt like a very big sanctuary, sitting down by myself, and being completely mesmerized by the cantor. The words were foreign to me – I could barely read Hebrew yet – but his singing of the prayers captivated me in a way I had never felt before. At the end of the service, he invited the children onto the *bima* to sing with him. I sang out with all the feeling that was in me, and somehow, without literally understanding a word, I understood

what it was all about. From that day on, I knew I would one day become a cantor.

I tell this story not to give the impression that the role of a cantor is to make other cantors. I tell it because what happened that day, and on many occasions to follow, made a young girl growing up in a nonobservant family want nothing more than to live a life of Judaism. As a cantor, that is my ultimate goal – to inspire, to awaken, to ignite a love of Judaism so bright and so strong that it will make a positive difference in people's lives.

We face the challenge of a vast and beautiful liturgy that is written in Hebrew – not the native tongue of most American Jews! For those whose understanding of Hebrew is limited, music can bring our prayers to life and can bring about a feeling of understanding and a communal experience that is beyond the literal meaning of the text. For those who do understand Hebrew, various musical settings can convey different interpretations, various word paintings, and new insights. Music has power that transcends the written and spoken word.

As cantors, our aspiration is to reach hearts and to touch souls by being a part of our congregants' lives, teaching Torah, living a life of mitzvot, and through the unique gift of music.

אלו פינו מלא שירה כים, ולשוננו רנה כהמון  
גליו... אין אנחנו מספיקים להודות לך.

*If song could fill our mouths as water fills the sea, And if joy could flood our tongue like countless waves...it would never be enough to express our gratitude to You.*

*(Shabbat liturgy)*

**ARTSON:** *What are the ways the Cantors need to consider new models and styles to continue to enhance spirituality and community in Jewish worship?*

**ARIANNE:** Cantors need to consider and to evaluate all models and styles of worship and of music to determine which of these are most effective in enhancing spirituality and community in their congregations.

What touches one person does not necessarily touch the other. We need to strike a balance of different styles, woven together in a musical manner, so that we will indeed reach each and every person. That fine balance of style and of music will not be the same in each congregation; a cantor's challenge is to find what moves people most.

It is a testament to the vibrancy of Judaism that we have so many new artists, composers, and song leaders bringing their own melodies and styles into the world of Jewish music. Creativity is a reaction to a life force, and Jewish music is very much alive. In all times and places, the music of the synagogue was influenced by the popular music of the time, and we are fortunate that today is no exception. As cantors, we need to have our eyes, ears, and minds open to everything. We need to critique what we hear as to how it fits the text and the occasion, and after trying something new, we need to evaluate how it was received in our congregations.

We have a complex and beautiful tradition of *nusach* that equates seasons, holidays, times of day, and times of year with different melodic and harmonic patterns. The result of being immersed in such patterns is that knowingly or unknowingly, hearing a certain melody will elicit the feeling of Sukkot, or of Rosh Hashana, or of a Shabbat morning. *Nusach* and new melodies are not at opposite ends of a spectrum; rather, their roles are complementary, and can be seamlessly woven together to create a spiritual communal experience.

שירו לה' שיר חדש... שירו לה' ברכו שמו.

*Sing a new song to God... Sing to God, bless His name!*  
*(Psalm 96)*



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