

Hazzanut

IN THE MASORTI MOVEMENT

The Postmodern Hazzan

Like other roles in Judaism, the figure of the hazzan had and has an historical development, beginning with the social consolidation of the synagogue after the destruction of the temple, however we can take as an antecedent the menatzeach or choir director mentioned in Psalms, who was supposed to be in charge of the musical direction of the Temple. This historical development has always been directed by the social and cultural changes that Judaism went through in almost two millennia of diaspora. In recent years a question has emerged that worries those who work in this area: Is the hazzan an endangered species?

While orthodox congregations increasingly delegate liturgical tasks to their rabbis (and in many cases, they in turn delegate to officiating volunteers), the liberal currents have "distributed" the liturgical-musical responsibility to rabbis, organists, choir directors, vocalists and instrumentalists. This causes less and less people to become interested in training as hazzanim, given the low and unattractive labor opportunities, in most cases, financially rewarded as a part-time job as the liberal congregations must also keep organists, instrumentalists, choir directors, etc.

Darwin was not wrong: the key to survival is adaptation. Neither was Heraclitus arguing that change is the essence of things. If hazzanim can't (or won't) adapt to social, economic and cultural changes of the Jewish People, we will end up in a museum, showing our strange art in concerts and some other occasional ceremony.

How to think of the postmodern hazzan? First of all, one of the major paradigms of today is flexibility: a hazzan who wants to work full-time must fulfill liturgical, organizational and educational functions. But above all things, has to be a community leader, a reference that together with the rabbi bring together the members of the congregation to a growing involvement in Jewish life. He must understand that what people are looking for today in a synagogue is essentially a way to re-build their relationship with the Jewish People, a relationship that is both spiritual and ethical.

Many communities (especially in Latin America) do not have enough resources to hire the rabbi or rabbis necessary for the congregation, and therefore the hazzanim must not consider beyond our duty teaching a class on Judaism, visiting someone going through a difficult time or guiding those who want to organize a Shabbat dinner. As we say in Argentina, we have to know to "roll up our sleeves".

Obviously, all these tasks are not just a matter of goodwill but require adequate training. Always in relation to those who decide to work integrally as hazzanim, a good voice and some typical musical ornaments are no longer sufficient. We must have knowledge and skills that will allow us to become available to the community needs, that justify our presence and our role.

Many will not agree with this words and will argue that this is not the traditional role of the hazzanim. Personally, I can not agree more. It is a new role, consistent with new times. We are going through a transition that brings together hazzanim of the "old school", carriers of a great voice specialized in touching the hearts of the faithful with a high artistic level, and "postmodern" hazzanim capable of multitasking, a strange and marvelous mixture of artists, teachers, rabbis, cultural officials and community leaders.

When I started "working" as a hazzan, I couldn't wait for Friday night to show my vocal progress to my congregation and feel that I had a small but loyal audience. After some years, and although there must be a member of my congregation that comes to witness a strange musical show, I am realizing that my task is not to arise admiration or even move, but rather to connect and strengthen the link of every Jew with his spiritual, cultural and social heritage.

It is often said that the hazzan is an emissary of the congregation in prayers. Ladies and gentlemen, let me be a little "heretic" and disagree. The hazzan shouldn't be a messenger but a facilitator. As paradoxical as it sounds, the more we go down from our high (in many cases very high) bimot, the closer we are not only to G-d, but mainly to the members of our congregations, and the reason of our role in the Jewish society.

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