

Hazzanut

AT THE MASORTI MOVEMENT

History of the Ta'amei Hamikra

Since the beginning of Judaism, music has accompanied us in the same way as other aspects of our culture. Sometimes we get music as an inspiration that comes from within the depths of our being, it fills us with joy, we rejoice in it and gives sense to the lives of many, guidance on their paths, inspiration or perhaps communication with God.

It is perhaps a kind of expression of our soul. We vibrate with it!

It is vital that our ancestors introduced musicalization to Bible readings, religious services and our folklore.

In our case, I think with pride about this great contribution that Judaism gave to sow the musical basis of liturgy in the Western world and I am sure that without realizing it, we don't pay due attention to this exciting subject.

Perhaps that's why I decided to write about the history of the Ta'amei Hamikra.

The Teamim are a set of graphic symbols that are below or above the Biblical texts. However, they are not present in the Torah scrolls used in the synagogue. Each sign represents a composite musical phrase that is attached to words.

The name "Teamim" is the plural of Ta'am, which means flavor. The function of Teamim, besides providing a pleasant melody to the reading of the verses, is to indicate the syntactic division of the verses, while emphasizing the meaning of the text.

The medieval poet and biblical commentator Abraham Ibn Ezra (1093-1167) wrote in his book "Moznaim" that any interpretation of a verse that wasn't properly read with its respective Teamim should not be heard.

The Teamim or Taamei Hamikra (Biblical Accents) are very old, and according to Simcha Ben Shmuel, a student of Rashi (1040-1105), the method of singing was revealed to Moshe Rabeinu at Mount Sinai, along with the rest of the Torah. However, it is known from various sources that these signs were developed much later and are most likely from the post-Talmudic era.

Before its appearance, according to the Talmud (Brachot 62a), a set of hand signals was used by the Tomchim (assistants of the public reading of the Torah). Through hand signals they told the Baal Kore (the person that reads the Torah out loud during religious services), with movements (ups and downs), the melody.

In a Talmud commentary, Rashi (1040-1105) testifies to witnessing such reading system performed by Jews from Eretz Israel, even though at the time the written signs were already in use.

The names of each Teamim refer to the hand movements. For example, Zakef – vertical, Tiphah – raised hand, Pashta – stretching. All these indicate different hand movements. This system is still used today in certain congregations.

The punctuation of the Teamim was developed in two different systems. The Babylonian or Taamei Bavel (Babylon Teamim) and the system of Eretz Israel. The system used today is the one from Israel, while the Babylonian system was completely forgotten.

The symbols of each Taamei were introduced by a scholar from Tiberias called Rabbi Aaron ben Asher (900-960 CE). Coming from a family of Masorettes (Anshei Hamesora), Jews who succeeded the soferim or scribes in the responsibility of making reliable copies of the sacred scriptures.

In his work, Dikdukei Hateamim (Grammatical rules of the accents), he established the vocalization of the signs and how they look. He even gives us some clues about the musicalization of the Teamim, describing different tones.

These signs consist of lines, semicircles and dots. We can see the development of many of them from the hand motions.

There are 28 signs or Teamim that are divided in two main categories: Mechabrim and Mafsikim.

Not only are they applied in the reading of the different parashot of the yearly Jewish cycle, they are also used in the reading of the Haftara, the Megillot and many historical sources say that these originated the "Nusach", different melodies that today accompany the texts of our Sidurim and Machzorim and in our prayers.

These signs have several names. Trop is one of them and is probably derived from the Greek word "Tropos" (manner or mode). Apparently this word was first used by Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rashi, 1040-1105) to refer to the melody of the Bible (Genesis Rabbah 36).

Another term used for the Teamim is Neimot, plural of Neima (chant), which means pleasant. This name shows the importance of reciting the verses of the Torah with music, because it creates a feeling of pleasure.

Some scholars suggest that this term is derived from the Greek Neuma (sign), a kind of musical tachygraphy (shorthand) used by the church between 680 and 1000 CE, and is etymologically related to the Hebrew word Neima.

It is certainly an art because the person that will read Torah in public must prepare well in advance, not only because of the difficulty of the language, which is quite old and different from modern Hebrew, but also because the melody has to be memorized.

This is a millenary legacy from our sages. A creative way to generate interest in the Torah. Another reason to attend synagogue with a touch of "Biblical Flavor" that palls and sweetens our beings.

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