

The Vocation of the Cantor

Abraham Joshua Heschel

What does a person expect to attain when entering a synagogue? In the pursuit of learning one goes to a library; for aesthetic enrichment one goes to the art museum; for pure music to the concert hall. What then is the purpose of going to the synagogue? Many are the facilities which help us to acquire the important worldly virtues, skills and techniques. But where should one learn about the insights of the spirit? Many are the opportunities for public speech; where are the occasions for inner silence? It is easy to find people who will teach us how to be eloquent; but who will teach us how to be still? It is sure important to develop a sense of humor; but is it not also important to develop a sense of reverence? Where should one learn the eternal wisdom of compassion? The fear of being cruel? The danger of being callous? Where should one learn that the greatest truth is found in contrition? Important and precious as the development of our intellectual faculties are, the cultivation of a sensitive conscience is indispensable. We are all in danger of sinking into the darkness of vanity; we are all involved in worshipping our own egos. Where should we become sensitive to the pitfalls of cleverness, or to the realization that expediency is not the acme of wisdom?

We are constantly in need of self-purification. We are in need of experiencing moments in which the spiritual is as relevant and as concrete, for example, as the aesthetic. Everyone has a sense of beauty; everyone is capable of distinguishing between the beautiful and the ugly. But we also must learn to be sensitive to the spirit. It is in the synagogue where we must try to acquire such inwardness, such sensitivity.

To attain a degree of spiritual security one cannot rely upon one's own resources. One needs an atmosphere, where the concern for the spirit is shared by a community. We are in need of students and scholars, masters and specialists. But we need also the company of witnesses, of human beings who are engaged in worship, who for a moment sense the truth that life is meaningless without attachment to God. It is the task of the Cantor to create the liturgical community, to convert a plurality of praying individuals into a unity of worship.

Pondering his religious experience, a Jew will realize that some of the greatest spiritual events happen in moments of prayer. Worship is the source of religious experience, of religious insight and religiously some of us live by what happens to us in the hours we spend in the synagogue. These hours have been in the past the wellsprings of insight, the wellsprings of faith. Are these wellsprings still open in our time?

Following a service, I overheard an elderly lady's comment to her friend, "this was a charming service!" I felt like crying. Is this what prayer means to us? God is grave; He is never charming. But we think that it is possible to be sleek and to pray, "Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling." (Psalm 2:11). Prayer is joy and fear, trust and trembling together.

I grew up in a house of worship where the spirituality was real. There was no elegance, but there was contrition; there was no great wealth but there was great longing. It was a place where when seeing a Jew I sensed Judaism. Something happened to the people when they entered the house of worship. To this day every time I go to the synagogue my hope is to experience a taste of such an atmosphere. But what do I find within the contemporary synagogue? We are all in agreement about the importance of prayer. Cantors dedicate their lives to the art of leading our people in prayer. Indeed, of all religious acts, prayer is the most widely observed. Every Seventh Day hundreds of thousands of Jews enter the synagogue. But what some to pass in most of our services?

One must realize the difficulties of the Cantor. The call to prayer often falls against an iron wall. The congregation is not always open and ready to worship. The Cantor has to pierce the armor of indifference. He has to fight for a response. He has to conquer them in order to speak for them. Often he must first be one who awakens those who slumber, before he can claim to be a *shellah sibbur*. And yet we must not forget that there is a heritage of spiritual responsiveness in the souls of our people. It is true, however, that this responsiveness may waste away for lack of new inspiration, just as fire burns itself out for lack of fuel.

The tragedy of the synagogue is in the depersonalization of prayer. *Hazzanuth* has become a skill, a technical performance, an impersonal affair. As a result the sounds that come out of the *Hazzan* evoke no participation. They enter the ears; they do not touch the hearts. The right Hebrew word the Cantor is *ba'al tefillah* master of prayer. The mission of a Cantor is to lead in prayer. He does not stand before the Ark as an artist in isolation, trying to demonstrate his skill or to display vocal feats. He stands before the Ark not as an individual but with a Congregation. He must identify himself with the Congregation. His task is to represent as well as to inspire a community. Within the synagogue music is not an end in itself but a means of religious experience its function is to help us to live through a moment of confrontation with the presence of God; to expose ourselves to Him in praise, in self-scrutiny and in hope.

We have adopted the habit of believing that the world is a spiritual vacuum; whereas the seraphim proclaim that "the whole earth is full of His glory". Are only the seraphim endowed with a sense for the glory? "The heavens declare the glory of God." How do they declare it? How do they reveal it? "There is no speech, there are no words, neither is their voice heard." The heavens have no voice; the glory is inaudible. And it is the task of man to reveal what is concealed; to be the voice of the glory, to sing its silence, to utter, so to speak, what is in the heart of all things. The glory is here—invisible and silent. Man is the voice; his task is to be the song. The cosmos is a congregation in need of a Cantor. Every Seventh Day we proclaim as a fact.

They all thank Thee,
They all praise Thee
They all say,
There is none holy like the Lord.

Whose ear has ever heard how all trees sing to God? Has our reason ever thought of calling upon the sun to praise the Lord? And yet, what the ear fails to perceive, what reason fails to conceive, our prayer makes clear to our souls. It is a higher truth, to be grasped by the spirit: "all Thy works shall give Thee thanks, O Lord" (Psalm 145:10).

We are not alone in our acts of praise. Wherever there is life, there is silent worship. The world is always on the verge of becoming one in adoration. It is man who is the Cantor of the universe and in whose life the secret of cosmic prayer is disclosed. To sing means to sense and to affirm that the spirit is real and that its glory is present. In singing we perceive what is otherwise beyond perceiving. Song, and particularly liturgical song, is not only an act of expression but also a way of bringing down the spirit from heaven to earth. The numerical value of the letters which constitute the word *shirah*, or prayer is equal to the numerical value of the word *tefillah*, or prayer.¹ Prayer is song. Sing to Him, chant to Him, meditate about all the wonders (1 Chronicles 16:9), about the mystery that surrounds us. The wonder defies all descriptions; the mystery surpasses the limits of expression. The only language that seems to be compatible with the wonder and mystery of being is the language of music. Music is more than just expressiveness. It is rather a reaching out toward a realm that lies beyond the reach of verbal propositions. Verbal expression is in danger of being taken literally and of serving as a substitute for insight. Words become slogans, slogans become idols. But music is a refutation of human finality. Music is an antidote to higher idolatry.

While other forces in society combine to dull our mind, music endows us with moments in which the sense of the ineffable becomes alive.

Listening to great music is a shattering experience, throwing the soul into an encounter with an aspect of reality to which the mind can never relate itself adequately. Such experiences undermine conceit and complacency and may even induce a sense of contrition and a readiness for repentance. I am neither a musician nor an expert on music. But the shattering experience of music has been a challenge to my thinking on ultimate issues. I spend my life working with thoughts. And one problem that gives me no rest is: do these thoughts ever rise to the heights reached by authentic music?

It has been said that at the time when one who had transgressed the Law brought his sacrifice to the holy temple in Jerusalem, the priest would look at him and perceive all his thoughts. If he found that the man had not yet repented completely, the priest would direct the Levites to begin to chant a melody, in order to bring the sinner to *teshuva*.

Music leads us to the threshold of repentance, of unbearable relevance of God. I would define myself as a person who has been smitten by music. As a person who has never recovered from the blows of music. And yet, music is a vessel that may hold anything. It may express vulgarity; it may impart sublimity. It may utter vanity; it may inspire humility. It may engender fury, it may kindle compassion. It may convey stupidity and it can be the voice of grandeur. It often voices man's highest reverence, but often brings to expression frightful arrogance.

Cantorial music is first of all music in the service of the liturgical word. Its core is *nussah*, and its integrity depends upon the cultivation of *nussah*. Elsewhere I have suggested² that one of the main causes of the decay of prayer in the synagogue is the loss of *nussah*, the loss of chant; and surely the disengagement of cantorial music from the *nussah* has been most harmful. To pray without *nussah* is to forfeit the active participation of the community. People may not be able to pray; they are all able to chant. And chant leads to prayer. What I mean by the disengagement of cantorial music from the liturgical word is not singing without words, but singing in a way which contradicts the words. It is both a spiritual and a technical matter. The Cantor's voice must neither replace the words nor misinterpret the spirit of the words. The Cantor who prefers to display his voice rather than to convey the words and to set forth the spirit of the words, will not bring the congregation closer to prayer. "Be humble before the words," should be the cantorial imperative.

Music is a serious pretender to the place of religion in the heart of man, and the concert hall is to many people a substitute for the synagogue. The separation of music from the word may, indeed, foster a spirituality without a commitment and render a greater service to the advancement of concert music than to the enrichment of synagogue worship.

A Cantor who faces the holiness in the Ark rather than the curiosity of man will realize that his audience is God. He will learn to realize that his task is not to entertain but to represent the people Israel. He will be carried away into moments in which he will forget the world, ignore the congregation and be overcome by the awareness of Him in whose presence he stands. The congregation then will hear and sense that the Cantor is not giving a recital but worshipping God, that to pray does not mean to listen to a singer but to identify oneself with what is being proclaimed in their name.

Entering the synagogue, I first relinquish all I know and try to begin all over again. The words are sometimes open, and at other times locked. Even in such embarrassment song is a sphere that will admit even the poor in faith. It is so far off and yet we are all there. Pride begins to fade bit by bit and praise begins to happen. The cantorial voice is a door, but often the banging of the door jars and tears our sensitivity to shreds.

Mankind is always on trial, and the cross-examination of the soul is audible in music. One of the things reflected in modern cantorial music is the lack of the sense of mystery which is at the very root of religious consciousness. Music gains its religious dimension when ceasing to be satisfied with conveying that which is within the grasp of emotion and imagination. Religious music is an attempt to convey that which is within our reach but beyond our grasp. The loss of that tension throws all cantorial music into the danger of becoming a distortion of the spirit.

Music is the soul of language. A good sentence is more than a series of words grouped together. A sentence without a tone, without a musical quality is like a body without a soul. The secret of a good sentence lies in the creation of a tonal quality to correspond to the meaning of the words. Such harmony is often

¹ Rabbi Bahya ben Asher, *Commentary*, Numbers 21:19

² See Heschel, *Man's Quest for God*, "Studies in Prayer and Symbolism" (New York:Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), pp. 51, 89.

painfully missing in cantorial expression. One is shocked to hear how magnificent thoughts are uttered in a false tone: sublime words and crude melodies. So much of what we hear in the synagogue is alien to our liturgy. So much of the music we hear distorts and even contradicts the words, instead of enhancing and glorifying them. Such music has a crushing effect upon our quest for prayer. One feels frequently hurt when listening to some of the melodies in modern synagogues.

It is a fact that just as there are speakers who are better than their words, there are Cantors who are better than their melodies. But this is not only a matter of personal importance. The future of Jewish prayer is to a considerable degree in the power of the Cantor.

The *siddur* is a book which everyone talks about, but few people have really read; a book which has the distinction of being one of the least known books in our literature. Do we ever ponder the meaning of its words? Do we seek to identify our inner life with what is proclaimed in the *nishmath*: "The soul of every living being blesses Thy name, Lord our God..."? And yet, there are those who claim that the *siddur* does not express the needs, wants, aspirations of contemporary man.

We must learn how to study the inner life of the words that fill the world of our Prayer Book. Without intense study of their meaning, we indeed feel bewildered when we encounter the multitude of those strange, lofty beings that populate the inner cosmos of the Jewish spirit. The trouble with the Prayer Book is that it is too great for us, too lofty. Our small souls must first rise to its grandeur. We have failed to introduce our minds to its greatness and our souls are lost in its sublime wilderness. It is not enough to know how to translate Hebrew into English; it is not enough to have met a word in the dictionary and to have experienced unpleasant adventures with it in the study of grammar. A word has a soul, and we must learn how to attain insight into its life. Words are commitments, not only the subject matter for aesthetic reflection.

This is our affliction. We say words but make no decisions. We do not even know how to look across a word to its meaning. We forget how to find the way to the word, how to be on intimate terms with a few passages in the Prayer Book. We are familiar with all words, but at home with none. The *siddur* has become a foreign language which the soul does not know how to pronounce.

In order for cantorial music to regain its dignity, it will not be enough to study the authentic pattern of our musical tradition. What is necessary is a *liturgical revival*. This will involve not only a new sense of reverence and faith, but also a new insight into the meaning of the liturgical words as well as an intimate way of uttering and appropriating the words. The decline of *hazzanuth* will continue as long as we fail to realize that reverence and faith are as important as talent and technique, and that the music must not lose its relationship to the spirit of the words.

It is important for the Cantor to study the score but it is also important to study the words of the Prayer Book. The education of the Cantor calls for intellectual and not only aesthetic achievements. In Judaism study is a form of worship, but it may also be said that worship is in a sense a form of study; it includes meditation. It is not enough to rely on one's voice. It takes constant effort to find a way to the grandeur of the words in the Prayer Book.

What are we exposed to in the atmosphere of the synagogue? We are exposed neither to sacred words alone, nor to spiritual tunes alone. This, indeed, is the essence of our liturgy. It is a combination of word *and* music. Great as music is, it is neither the ultimate nor the supreme. The ultimate is God and the medium in which His guidance has been conveyed to us is *the word*. We have no holy music; we revere sacred Scripture, sacred words. Music is the language of mystery. But there is something which is greater than mystery. God is the meaning beyond all mystery. That meaning is concealed in the biblical words, and our prayers are an attempt to disclose to ourselves what is concealed in those words.

For all its grandeur, there is something greater than music. At Sinai we heard thunder and lightning, but it was not the music of the elements but the word, for the sake of which the great event happened. The Voice goes on forever, and we are being pursued by it. We have neither icons nor statues in our synagogue. We are not even in need of visible symbols to create in us a mood of worship. All we have are the words in the liturgy and reverence in our hearts. But even these two are often apart from each other. It is the task of music to bring them together.

"Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord, and who shall stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, and who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully" (Psalm 24:3-4). Not by might of voice, not by strength of talent alone, but by the sense of awe and fear, by contrition and the sense of inadequacy, will a Cantor succeed in leading others to prayer. The Cantor must constantly learn how to be involved in what he says, realizing that he must also teach others how to attach themselves to the words of the liturgy. He has a secret mission to convert, to lead people to a point where they can sense that arrogance is an abyss and sacrifice is eternity.

There are hardly proofs for the existence of God, but there are witnesses. Foremost among them are the Bible and music. Our liturgy is a moment in which these two witnesses come to expression. "On the evidence of two witnesses a claim is sustained." Our liturgy consists of the testimony of both music and the word. Perhaps this is the way to define a *ba'al tefillah*. He is a person in whom the two witnesses meet. He is a person in whom a spiritual equation takes place—the equation of song and soul, of word and mind. The self and prayer are one.

I should like to conceive *hazzanuth* as the art of the *siddur* exegesis, as the art of interpreting the words of the liturgy. Words die of routine. The Cantor's task is to bring them to life. A Cantor is a person who knows the secret of the resurrection of the words. The art of giving life to the words of our liturgy requires not only the personal involvement of the Cantor but also the power contained in the piety of the ages. Our liturgy contains incomparably more than what our hearts are ready to feel. Jewish liturgy in text and in song is a spiritual summary of our history. There is a written and an unwritten Torah, Scripture and tradition. We Jews claim that one without the other is unintelligible. In the same sense we may say that there is a *written and an unwritten liturgy*. There is the liturgy but there is also an inner approach and response to it, a way of giving life to the words, a style in which the words become a personal and unique utterance.

The Lord commanded Noah: "Go into the *tevah*, you and all your household" (Genesis 7:1). *Tevah* means ark; it also means word. In prayer a person must enter the word with all he has, with heart and soul, with thought and voice. "Make a light for the *tevah*." The word is dark. This is the task of him who prays: to kindle a light in the word.³ Humbly we must approach both the word and the chant. We must never forget that the word is deeper than our thought, that the song is more sublime than our voice. The words enhance us. The rabbis maintain that "those who carried the Ark were actually carried by the Ark."⁴ And indeed he who knows how to carry a word in all its splendor is carried away by the word. He who has succeeded in kindling a light within the word will discover that the word has kindled a light within his soul. Where is the *Shekhinah*? Where is the presence of God to be sensed? According to *Tikkune Zohar* the *Shekhinah* is in words, God is present in sacred words. In praying we discover the holiness in words.

Song is the most intimate expression of man. In no other way does man reveal himself so completely as in the way he sings. For the voice of a person, particularly when in song, is the soul in its full nakedness. When we sing, we utter and confess all our thoughts. In every sense *hazzanuth is hishtapkhuith hanefesh* (outpouring of the heart). There is a story about the Ba'al Shem who was once listening most intently to a musician. When his disciples asked him why he was so absorbed in what he heard, the Ba'al Shem replied: When a musician plays he pours out all he has done.

Indeed, a Cantor standing before the Ark reveals all his soul, utters all his secrets. The art of being a Cantor involves the depth, richness and integrity of personal existence. There is a story about a Hasidic rabbi in Galicia, among whose adherents were many *hazzanim*. Their custom was to gather at the rabbi's court for the Sabbath which precedes Rosh Hashanah. At the end of their stay they would enter the rabbi's chamber and ask him for his blessing that their prayers on Rosh Hashanah be accepted into heaven. Once, the story goes, one of the *hazzanim* entered the rabbi's chamber immediately after the Sabbath to take leave of the rabbi. When the rabbi asked him, why he was in such a hurry to leave, the *hazzan* replied, "I must return home in order to go through the *Mahzor* (The liturgy for the Days of Awe) and to take a look at the notes." Thereupon the rabbi replied, "Why should you go through the *Mahzor* of the notes; they are the same as last year. It is more important to go through your own life, and take a look at your own deeds. For you are not the same as you were a year ago." The *hazzan* was no longer in a hurry to leave.

Awe is the prerequisite of faith and an essential ingredient of being a Cantor. The loss of awe one must feel in the presence of a congregation, unawareness of how poor we are in spirit and in deeds, is a dangerous deprivation.

A learned man lost all his sources of income and was looking for a way to earn a living. The members of his community who assisted him for his learning and piety, suggested to him to serve as their Cantor on the Days of Awe. But he considered himself unworthy of serving as the messenger of the community, as one who should bring the prayers of his fellow men to the Almighty. He went to his master, the rabbi of Husiatin, and told him of his sad plight, of the invitation to serve as a Cantor in the Days of Awe, and of his being afraid to accept it and to pray for his congregation. "Be afraid—and pray," was the answer of the rabbi.

³ According to the Ba'al Shem

⁴ When the priests that bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord crossed the waters of Jordan (Joshua 4:11 ff.), "the ark carried its bearers" (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 35a).

Dedekind and Cantor met in Switzerland when they were both on vacation there. Cantor had sent Dedekind a copy of the paper containing his construction of the real numbers. Dedekind responded, of course, by sending Cantor a copy of his booklet. And so begins the story. Cantor was 27 years old and very much a beginner, while Dedekind was 41 and at the height of his powers; this accounts for the tone of deference in Cantor's side of the correspondence. Significantly, Cantor's formulation of the question had changed. Rather than asking whether there is a bijection, he posed the question of finding a bijection. This is, of course, because he believed he had found one.