

The Bridge from Prayer to Action: How Do We Cross Over?

Cantor Shoshana Brown

Most people outside the Jewish world do not know what a *cantor* (*chazzan* in Hebrew) does. A *chazzan*, a cantor, is a spiritual leader and teacher whose specialty is to lead the synagogue's prayers and to give the pray-ers uplift through the vehicles of music and song. Another name for the *chazzan* is *sh'liach tzibbor*, or "representative of the community." The *sh'liach tzibbor's* role is to "represent" the community to God...which is not to say that each Jew does not have the responsibility or the ability to speak to God on his or her own behalf, but rather that this person—ideally—is trained in the traditions of Jewish prayer and is charged with keeping him/herself open as a clear vessel, a conduit, through which both petitions and blessings may flow. In the "Old Country," you would rarely find a cantor who offered prayers in the synagogue *for a living*; usually he (they were all *men* back then!) had another job, such as shoemaker, butcher, or occasionally as a teacher of Jewish children. In the New World, with the prospering of the Jewish community, synagogues could afford to hire cantors to simply be *cantors*, and they began to train in a more professional and academic way than their Old World counterparts had done. They began "performing" complicated, showy musical settings of prayers, sometimes drawing even non-Jews to the synagogue to hear something akin to opera. Often they had the additional role of conducting a choir, and going to synagogue became, for many Jews, less of an opportunity to "talk to God," and more like attending a concert. Of course concerts, or the opera, can be *moving*, but they do not require active *participation* on the part of the attendee. *Congregations* became *audiences*, and, alas, the typical worshiper became less engaged, disempowered to make the words of prayer his or her own.

The other title for a cantor, however, *chazzan*, is thought to be related linguistically to the Hebrew word *chazon*—vision. Having recently seen the magnificent and powerful film *Selma*, I have been thinking about this role. The Rev. King was certainly a *visionary*—not just for one congregation, but for a whole *nation*. One close colleague of the Rev. Martin Luther King was the Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972), a teacher at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and refugee from the Hasidic Old World, the only member of his family to escape from the Nazis. Although there was no attempt to depict Heschel in *Selma*, Heschel was famous for his support of Dr. King and civil rights: he walked with King from Selma to Montgomery, and many civil rights workers were said to have been carrying copies of his book *The Prophets* in their coat pockets as they marched. Fortunately for Heschel, he was not the rabbi of a congregation, but rather an academic, and so, although many in the administration of the Jewish Theological Seminary looked askance at Heschel's actions, he did not lose his livelihood on account of his visionary activities (although he very well could have lost his life). Although not a *cantor*, Heschel was earnestly concerned with the role of the cantor, and of prayer, in the American synagogue. In 1970 he wrote an article for the journal *Conservative Judaism* entitled "On Prayer," in which he pleaded:

"Prayer is either exceedingly urgent, exceedingly relevant, or inane and useless...Prayer as an episode, as a cursory incident, will not establish a home in the land of oblivion. Prayer must pervade as a climate of

living, and all our acts must be carried out as variations on the theme of prayer...Prayer must not be dissonant with the rest of living. The mercifulness, gentleness, which pervades us in moments of prayer is but a ruse on a bluff if it is inconsistent with the way we live at other moments. The divorce of liturgy and living, of prayer and practice, is more than a scandal, it is a disaster. A word uttered in prayer is a promise, an earnest, a commitment. If the promise is not kept, we are guilty of violating a promise... Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehoods. The liturgical movement must become a revolutionary movement, seeking to overthrow the forces that continue to destroy the promise, the hope, the vision.”

Heschel’s words help me, as a cantor, to find the bridge between prayer and vision, prayer and action—and inspire me to help congregants make their prayers *their own*, rather than a libretto that they “follow” while someone on a stage sings out a story that is entertainment, make-believe. Without *vision*, we cannot reach for a better world for all creation. Without rolling up our sleeves and getting our hands dirty in the real world, we cannot pray with sincerity, we dare not approach God. I am grateful for the legacy of both King and Heschel. May we all be equal to the task of carrying out their words, their visions—the *songs* of their lives.

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