

"THE MUSIC OF OUR LIVES"

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5772 — Thursday, September 29, 2011

Congregation B'nai Jehudah — Overland Park, Kansas

Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff

"Turn that music down!"

"You just don't appreciate what I listen to!"

"If it was music, I could appreciate it. But it's just noise!"

Sound familiar? If you were ever a teenager, then undoubtedly you or friends of yours had this "conversation" with parents. It is an age-old debate over social norms. Clearly, it isn't just about music. Hair, clothing, tattoos, movies...they each have been and still are flashpoints between one generation and the next. Regardless the issue, to quote Bob Dylan, "the times they are a'changin'."

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I spent some time recently re-reading Frank Adler's seminal history of our congregation, "Roots in a Moving Stream." During our first hundred years, there were more than a few struggles that centered around prayer, prayerbooks, music, and tradition. The issues ranged from too much Hebrew in the then "new" Newly Revised Union Prayerbook to whether one could wear a tallit on the bimah to chanting the Kiddush on Friday night to whether boys would be allowed to be called to the Torah with the title of Bar Mitzvah.

As Tevye came to understand in Fiddler on the Roof, given new realities, we must respond with creativity. The same is true with B'nai Jehudah. And while we may not have always been as flexible and as fluid in dealing with the issues mentioned, the **intent** from the beginning was to be open. To quote Frank Adler, "Progress and

Reform were the aims of B'nai Jehudah from the start."¹

Once flashpoints of controversy, these matters eventually became part of our congregation's norms. We now have B'nai Mitzvah regularly. Each of us individually decides whether to wear kippa and tallit. Hebrew is deeply integrated into our educational and cultural life at B'nai Jehudah. Our daily and Shabbat prayerbook changed radically a few years ago. Mishkan T'fila is an entirely new approach to liberal prayer. Some love it. Some yearn for "the good old days of" the old Union Prayerbook. But, nonetheless, we move forward with the times.

This morning, we have experienced part of that progress and reform. The musical and liturgical path we followed for the first half hour was scored by Noah Aronson, a talented young musician. No, it isn't Debbie Friedman. And it surely isn't Janowski or Sulzer. But it is the way much of Jewish prayer seems to be heading in the years to come.

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"We sat in a circle, eyes closed...Our teacher began to sing, "Yahy dai dai dai dai dai." At first, I felt a bit uncomfortable...I closed my eyes tightly and listened. The music became more familiar, the repetition of the melody got stuck in my head...Soon no one was there but the music and me. I felt carried away in song. I heard my voice alone. Then I heard it surrounded by everyone else. We were in unison. Individual voices sang the same melody...

Our teacher told us the song was

called a...*niggun*, a song without words. It was a powerful form of Jewish meditation.

Even now, years later, the tune of that melody is still in my head...It [is] as if the rhythm of my soul [is] found in between the notes. What [is] it about the *niggun* that drew me in?

...The more I thought about it, the more I realized music...transcends language...[With] music, we connect to something beyond ourselves. We feel united with other human beings and to our deepest selves...Judaism teaches that the mouth, the instrument of our bodies, connects the heart with the soul. When we join body with soul, we are complete. The music creates a state where we are in tune with our essential spiritual selves....

At its essence, music can be an expression of prayer. Perhaps this is why the Hebrew word for prayer, *tefilla*, and the word for song, *shira* have the same numerical equivalent. Through song we can access the true yearnings of our soul, our prayers."²

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When I think of High Holidays at B'nai Jehudah, I still hear the stirring trumpet echo of the shofar calls on Rosh Hashanah from the '60s. And whether you liked it or not, the electric ark doors opening at 69th and Holmes were truly an emotive experience. I have no doubts that the same emotions were elicited back in 1939, when the congregation heard the voice of its first cantor, Alfred Rosbasch. In reflecting on that beginning,

Rabbi Mayerberg said: "We shall never forget his first participation in a Sabbath eve service...With skillful musicianship he brought a glow of beauty and warmth to the whole ritual. It seemed to us that all the pathos and all the hope of a tormented world were integrated in the lovely tones of his baritone voice and the traditional melodies he sang."³

How we pray and what we pray have changed dramatically in our 142 years. It was altered each time we changed prayerbooks over the decades. It reshaped itself as musicians and cantors brought their own sensibilities to our prayer experiences. And our rabbis were influenced by national trends and personal intuition, guiding us in connecting with that which is beyond us...and yet, deep within.

Today, we continue on that journey.

As cherished as our prayerbooks and melodies are, we hear from many how they struggle with spirituality. They are not moved by the words of our prayers, by the music we sing, or by the lessons we teach. There is a yearning, a longing for meaning, connection, and continuity. We believe it **can** be found in prayer...words, music, and meditation...here at B'nai Jehudah. We presented one response to this yearning earlier this morning. We know there are many other visions with which to experiment.

So, today, I announce a new project and invite as many who want, to join our new Tefillah Team. For those who thirst for a sense of kedusha, of spiritual wholeness, this is for you. Together, we will spend the winter

exploring prayer in all its various facets. Together, we will pray, experiencing different moods and methods in expressing our words and music. And together, we will reflect on what we feel in our souls and learn with our minds. What we learn will guide our congregation in its search for spirituality and meaning, crafting both what and how we pray on Shabbat, holidays, and each day of the week.

This is not an onerous task or long-houred committee work. (If you want some long-houred committee work, let me know. I can find you something. But this is not that!) Rather, we invite those who wish to join us on this journey to commit to four things: 1) participate in two in-person learning sessions with us, understanding traditional views of prayer and music – purpose, philosophy, and practice; 2) watch 5 10-minute on-line videos (or DVD), where we and/or guest teachers will explore modern expressions of Jewish prayer, meditation, music, and spirituality; 3) come to 10 Erev Shabbat services between November and April; and 4) fill out an online (or written) and anonymous "reflection response" after each service attended. Regardless of how many wish to participate, the data – as well as ongoing conversations – will shape how we will nurture our congregation's spirituality in the decade to come.

For those willing to open themselves and learn with us, we promise the following: all the information gathered will be freely shared AND we will treat one another and our process, according to our three core values: open hearts, kedusha, and derech

eretz.

We know many of the reasons folks come to services: we have kaddish to say, we have a life-cycle event to celebrate, we have friends we want to see. Perhaps, we have made it a routine, and – yes – at times, we just feel a need to connect to God. Through this process, we hope that when we **do** come to B'nai Jehudah to pray, for whatever reason, we will feel inspired, we will feel connected, we will be transformed.

For those here today who are not members of our kehillah kedusha, our holy community...first and foremost, we welcome you and urge you to become part of our family. But regardless, the invitation is for you, too. And the overall message is the same for those who are our family and those who are guests: discover prayer in your lives, find the Jewish music that touches your heart and nourishes your soul, seek out those moments that connect you to that which is both beyond you and within you. Grow and be inspired by seeking Jewish meditative practices that cultivate spiritual qualities such as gratitude and humility, that link our inner lives to actions in the outer world. So doing, may we refine the ability to hear the voice of our own soul, discerning that which is holy in our experience, and discovering how we are meant to partner with God in the world.

It is an ambitious endeavor. But one whose value can be immeasurable. We may be wary or we may be inspired by these ideas. But, no matter what, as Bob Dylan reminds us, "the times, they are a'changin'."

- ¹ Adler, Frank; *Roots In A Moving Stream*; The Temple, Congregation B'nai Jehudah, Kansas City, 1970; p. 22
- ² Barnett, Samantha; "The Quill of the Soul;"
http://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/1388688/jewish/The-Quill-of-the-Soul.htm
- ³ Adler, Frank; *op. cit.*, p. 182