CANTOR ELIZABETH SACKS: MUSIC THAT SPEAKS TO OUR EXPERIENCE

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HOLO: Welcome to the College Commons Bully Pulpit Podcast, Torah With a Point of View, Produced by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, your host and Dean of the Jack H. Skirball campus in Los Angeles.

You've tuned into a Bully Pulpit special series for Symposium One, which the Hebrew Union College convened in New York City in November 2016. Symposium One was organized around the theme of crafting Jewish life in a complex religious landscape. We at the Bully Pulpit had the privilege of interviewing some of the outstanding thinkers who participated in Symposium One, and we think you'll enjoy the conversation.

I have the pleasure of introducing you to Cantor Elizabeth Sacks, who is the Senior Cantor at Temple Emmanuel in Denver. Among her interests and her approach to Jewish music, Cantor Sacks got her BA in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations and Music from Harvard University, which since then, has been her springboard into ethnomusicology—which, in turn, frames her approach to Jewish music in our communal context. Cantor Sacks, it's a pleasure to have you and thank you for joining us.

SACKS: Well, thank you for having me. It's a pleasure to speak with you this afternoon.

HOLO: I want to ask you what you feel is the most urgent thing that we as a community need to think about in relation to Jewish music.

SACKS: One of the things that I talk a lot about is to try not to see any element of our worshiping experience in isolation, so that music is part of the whole experience. Music serves the text.

In turn, what text we choose can be in relation to what music we have available that expresses it in an emotionally evocative way. And this is all talking about sacred music, ritual music. There is a whole other area of music, Jewish music, that exists outside the worship experience—which often can and should influence what we do in worship. But it is created in its own space.

HOLO: Presumably with its own goals.

SACKS: Its own goals. Exactly. So not necessarily targeted towards worship.

HOLO: So in light of what you're saying, let's think holistically—but narrow the scope, so that you can think holistically within it.

SACKS: Thank you.

HOLO: So let's say in the synagogue, in the ritual moment, as opposed to in the hallway, what is the most urgent thing that we as a community should be thinking about?

SACKS: Trying to think about how we find and cultivate music that actually speaks to our current experience that can have ties to tradition and can have conversation with our tradition. And that is actually using a contemporary idiom so that it is communicative with our current Jewish congregations.

Sometimes we get into this oversimplification of Jewish music. There's traditional music. There's contemporary music. But that scale is so much more porous. It really has to be about what is moving people. What is speaking to people? What language do we see in our outside musical community that is pushing people? How do I look at what's happening in the art music world and in the pop music world and think about how I can translate some of that into our worship. Not by ripping off a Taylor Swift song and trying to sing a piece of Jewish liturgy to that. But thinking about what sounds are compelling about what's happening out there that we can use to communicate with people.

HOLO: As a congregant, it seems to me that the sophistication of your question often gets masked and deferred by a question I suspect you don't want to hijack your question, which is formality versus casualness. And you're the cantor so you're prisoner to that oversimplification, or that masking, or that hijacking. So walk us through what you have to do in your position to bring the congregation to a conversation that's not native to them.

SACKS: That's a really good question. Some of what I try to think about on a regular basis is what does the moment call for. There are moments in our worship experience that can and should demand tremendous formality. We just came through the High Holy Day season. There are a lot of prayers and ritual moments in those services that beg for some type of formality to express the profundity of what is happening. And it is hard to communicate the intensity of the moment without some type of formality.

And then there are other moments where you want the closeness and the casualness. And you want to be able to have what feels like a more intimate conversation because it serves the moment better. You know, what's the arc? Where are we in the worship experience, and how do I help people travel through a story, go on a journey in their worship so that they have experienced moments of both, without ever themselves feeling a prisoner to a particular style or musical sound. That it actually feels like each moment has been crafted in the nicest way, a non-manipulative way, in the nicest way to communicate the pure intensity of whatever the message of that moment is. I know it sounds very abstract.

HOLO: I just finished a really, really wild and super engaging conversation with Neil Levin of the Jewish Theological Center of America who cares deeply about majesty, which is a familiar conversation in Reform Movement as well. He points out that Kol Nidre, which is the culmination, the climax of majesty in most people's minds in the entire liturgy of the year. That is the Sephardic tradition, because the meaning of the Kol Nidre is, in fact, rather transactional and not necessarily understood with such majesty and spiritual moment that the Sephardim give it their appropriate setting, musical setting, which is vippity vappity. And get it in and get it out, because they fulfill the obligation of the Kol Nidre.

Whereas we have, in fact, made it into something momentous, largely perhaps because we don't understand the Aramaic. But the music is so, you know, we all know the tune, and literally and metaphorically it strikes a chord right away. So there's something backwards in relation to what you just said.

SACKS: Yes, and I would say this is where the ethnomusicology comes in. There's so much more going on there, ritually, at that moment in Kol Nidre than the text. It is bigger than the text because of the history associated with that moment. Forget the actual words.

And we shared when I was the Associate Cantor at Central Synagogue for five years, we engaged in a project of completely recreating the Kol Nidre service. We recognized the essence of your question that the text, as it stands, was not communicating the meaning of the moment. So how could we change that? What could we do to help people articulate with them and for them what was really going on here, without taking everything away from them?

And the Reform Movement historically has tried many approaches to Kol Nidre, lots of different options. In the Union Prayer Book it was not there. The words were not there at all. All it said was, in some of the oldest copies, like it says the cantor intones the melody, or something to that effect. But they didn't have the text, because they were offended by it and didn't want it in there. But they recognized the power of the music, and they couldn't take it away.

So what we did, is we actually commissioned Larry Hoffman, Rabbi Hoffman to write a liturgical poem about what does that ritual moment mean, what does Kol Nidre mean that has nothing to do with what the words mean. If we were going to try to fill the melody with words that actually meant what we were thinking, what would those words be. And we weren't going to sing them. But we were going to read them as a poem, as an introduction to that moment.

And so we took this understanding that at every ritual moment, there are multiple levels. There is what does the text actually say. What is the congregation doing and feeling at that moment in time? Kol Nidre you are walking into what you already know is supposed to be the most important service of the year. How do you know that? You know that from your family. You know that from the Jews all around you. Even if you don't understand anything else that's going on in the service, you know that you're supposed to feel something that night.

And you're supposed to be there that night. It's the most attended service really throughout the High Holy Days. So you have anticipation. You have presence. You have, probably, a connection to history.

HOLO: Baggage, right. Absolutely.

SACKS: My father came. My mother came. My grandmother came. For some families—to the same synagogue, in the same seat, for many, many hundreds of years. And that's everything you're bringing to that moment, before you even open the prayer book. So that's what I mean when I say how do we create musical experiences, or make musical choices that speak to what's going on. That it's not just service to the text, although that can and should help. It's service to the energy in the room.

HOLO: If I were Larry Hoffman, no one asked, but if I were Larry Hoffman I would have just put in (Hebrew), because that is the prayer that we think when we sing Kol Nidre. But I want to ask you what liturgical moment, to use the word "moment," you're capturing these experiences that are bounded by the (Hebrew) by the order of the progression of prayer. What liturgical moment do you think is the most overlooked? The one most pregnant with potential meaning that we haven't taken by the horns and really – forget the mixed metaphor there.

SACKS: That's fine. I'm from Colorado, you know. We take lots of things by the horns.

HOLO: Cattle's always kosher.

SACKS: I had to buy a pair of cowboy boots when I moved there...

So actually, part of what I see as my responsibility as I think about being an innovator in worship is to take a look at what's happening in our services and say, where are we missing it? What are we doing without thinking? What are we just doing because it's there? And then, how do I break that apart and rebuild it so that we're not just doing that? Where am I bored? Where do they seem bored?

So we spend, Professor Janet Waltman and I, we spend a long time looking at different options. And we actually settled on Kabbalat Shabbat. The reason we did that was Kabbalat Shabbat traditionally is all about joy. It's supposed to be this joyous and light and creation. It's supposed to be this absolutely joyous way to usher in Shabbat and all the stories of the kabbalists dancing over the hills and all of this kind of stuff. And so they created this service made up of several psalms, like kingship psalms, right, 95, 96, 97, 98 that all talk about the greatness of God, the (Hebrew) of God, and why creation is so awesome, and we should be so happy that we get to do Shabbat in partnership with God, because God was the great creator.

And then we looked at the reality of when Kabbalat Shabbat happens and what we see going on in our congregations. And the reality for most Reform synagogues, I believe, is that Kabbalat Shabbat is the first thing that people come to in a week. We are not daily

practitioners so much anymore. Most people are not coming to morning. They, if we're lucky, they come every Friday night. And that's the first service that happens when they step in the door.

So where are they coming from? That should be our next question. Is what the service communicates a good feeling for people who are stepping into Shabbat right at that moment? And, in my experience, people are coming from a whole lot of different places. Not everyone is coming into Shabbat, and Kabbalat Shabbat in particular, ready to be ecstatic with joy.

I worked in a large urban synagogue, Central Synagogue in Manhattan on 55th and Lex, and people would literally come from the office building next door to Kabbalat Shabbat. So they could have closed a deal on the fifth floor of the building on 56th and Lexington, walked 40 feet and are there in Kabbalat Shabbat. And they are not ready. They need a little bit more liminality before they get into actual prayer.

If you asked a random congregant, I'm not sure how many people know any of the words that they're saying, what any of them mean. And if you asked them what they get out of Kabbalat Shabbat, I think they would say the music is really happy and pretty. And that's what it – it's kind of like a nothing throw away. But it doesn't do anything for them.

How could we take Kabbalat Shabbat and actually make it a transition experience, actually just be very blatant and say, "You're all coming from different places. Some of you are coming here ready for Shabbat in a state of joy. You've had a fantastic week and you can't wait to celebrate with your community. Some of you are coming really stressed out. You've had a very tough week and you are looking for some sanctuary," no pun intended, "to calm yourself down. Some of you are in really deep pain. You have come from a really terrible week and you are looking for solace and connection and a way to talk to God, and to talk to a divine presence that you're not sure is there anymore, for all kinds of reasons." How do we acknowledge that?

And so, with the freedom that comes with our Reform Movement, we decided, you know, I'm not sure the kingship psalms really work for us in that kind of experience. Let's not do them. Let's think about what other kind of poetic experience we could create that mixes music and poetry that speaks to that theme. And we created a thesis statement for the service that Kabbalat Shabbat should acknowledge that we come from diverse backgrounds and diverse experiences in our week, and yet, also helps us affirm our faith in community and God, something like that.

And then we picked poems that we thought represented different people's potential experiences and threaded them with a musical piece set to the text from Isaiah (Hebrew), My House Shall Be a House of Prayer for All People. And that was the theme of the service. And the poems were interactive. People said lines. And leaders said lines. The congregation said lines that were all first person. I bring my special this. I am excited. I am in pain. I am in this. To help people get that sense that you, singular, can come any way you want.

And at the very end, we transitioned into (Hebrew) as kind of like the ultimate let us all welcome Shabbat wherever we come from. So I think that moment has a lot of potential for helping people feel like they're not just stepping into business as usual. They're actually stepping into something that acknowledges where they're coming from. They don't have to leave their past self when they walk in the door. That was a very long answer to a short question.

HOLO: A great answer. And a compelling one. I'm not sure if it already answers the next question, but maybe you have another example that will answer this one as well. It feels like it could answer this one, which is how does music get at, by which I mean poke or cultivate or resolve, the tension between the community's interest and the individual's interest in prayer? And how can we make that tension productive? You could have answered with that.

SACKS: Right. I think the beauty of music is that there are a myriad of ways to participate in a musical experience. You can listen and be - I don't like to use the word passive, because I don't actually think when you're listening you're passive. I think there's a lot of active listening going on. And, neurologically, we know that's true.

When music's being played, our brains are going all over the place. So you can listen and be part of the experience that way. You can sing and be part of the experience that way. You can sing in harmony with someone very purposefully. You can sing by yourself. So I actually think music is one of those experiences that dances on that line really well between the individual and the community. It gives people a lot of different ways to connect.

HOLO: So, now I'd like to go a little bit more sociological rather than liturgical. We're still in the synagogue. I personally perceive, you know, I attend lots of synagogues and go to my own, and I perceive the pendulum swing favoring more participatory music—I mean, people sing, more participatory music in synagogue over the course of the last 40 years which is my age of awareness.

But as I say that, and as I wrote this question, I was thinking, you know, the truth is it's not that I hear or myself sing more now—or, as far as I can tell, anyone else, sings more than we did in my massive, conventional, suburban Conservative synagogue in the '70s. Rather, what I think I'm seeing is that the tone, the style, the body language of the cantor, the dress—that they claim to be more inviting to participatory prayer. Am I being unfair?

SACKS: No, I think there is a narrative that goes exactly in that direction. Some of your question makes me think I grew up in a Conservodox community, and I came to HUC having almost no experience in a Reform world.

HOLO: Likewise.

SACKS: So it was really an education for me, vis a vie these five years here. Wonderful education. But I remember stepping into, my very first year, a very heated debate among

older students and faculty on participation by the congregation. And was it fair that the congregation was demanding to participate more. And how could we do that as cantors, and how do you balance musical art and participatory music—which I think sometimes is a code word for contemporary music, or simple music, which neither of which I think has to be true.

And for me, coming from a Conservodox background, I just remember being a little stymied, because I was raised with this concept that we were halakhaly obligated to participate. There are points in the service where you are required to sing. So that having a conversation about how should or should not the congregation participate was odd, culturally odd for me.

And I think, if you look historically, at our liturgy, it's been clear that congregations have been participating in a lot of different ways and a lot of different styles for a very, very long time. I think there was a strain within the Reform Movement as they adopted a classical atmosphere and a classical aesthetic for a small number of years that focused more on active listening than active singing.

If you speak to clergy that work at Temple Emmanuel here in New York, they will talk about the power of active listening and what that feels like to have that space constructed for active listening. But it can get to this idea of the tension between the particular or the individual and the collective. And if we are shifting a little bit more to the idea that our congregation is not just a blob of congregation, but there are actually individuals in the congregation who pray individually in a particular way, are we creating experiences that enable differentiation better, and therefore, enable people to feel like they're participating differently and more deeply than just saying, "We. We. We."

HOLO: Differently or differentiatedly.

SACKS: Right. Differently or differentiatedly. Exactly.

HOLO: Okay, good. I buy it.

SACKS: Excellent.

HOLO: Okay, so do you have a favorite nigun?

SACKS: Do I have a favorite nigun? Oh I have so many, uh…

HOLO: And will you sing for us?

SACKS: Oh okay.

HOLO: Alright. We're going to get a nigun from Cantor Sacks.

SACKS: You're going to get a nigun from Cantor Sacks. Now I feel like I have pressure to come up with something obscure and original.

HOLO: No, no. Just something that's going to get someone to stop their car and jump out when they listen to the podcast.

SACKS: Right. Right.

HOLO: Or sway.

SACKS: I hope they don't jump out of any cars listening to the broadcast. That would be bad…

So I have – I tend to favor nigunim in a particular Eastern European style that tried to mirror our connection like Hasidic nigunim that try to mirror our connection to God through climax of music. So, I mean, they have a vertical, a vertical understanding of the Divine much, much more than horizontal.

So the idea is that the music moves up and higher as you grow in intensity, because you are straining to reach the Divine. So those are the ones that I like. That's my Harvard education for you to deconstruct right there.

So this is a nigun that I've used in a lot of different services for a lot of different texts. I'm not going to use any text right now, because I think you can move it all over the place. But it starts low and slow and goes like this…

(Singing)

HOLO: Cantor Sacks, thank you very much for joining us. It was a real pleasure to talk to you and to listen to you.

SACKS: Thank you very much for having me. This was a lot of fun.

HOLO: You've been listening to the College Commons Bully Pulpit Podcast produced by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion. We hope you enjoyed this podcast and please join us again at CollegeCommons.HUC.edu.

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