

Leyning is a Passion

Bernard Horowitz

For fifteen years, I have been the regular *ba'al kriah*, or Torah reader, in my shul, the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, and, for many years before that, at the Young Israel of Parkchester. Chanting the weekly Torah reading [*leyning*] and leading parts of the Shabbat service are a big part of who I am. Recently, I began to reflect upon where this passion for leyning comes from and what it means to me.

My grandfather, Louis Weiss, was a wonderful *ba'al tefilah* [prayer leader] with a rich baritone voice. Grandpa Louie had a profound influence on my early love for shul music. On most Friday nights, after dinner, the extended family would gather at our grandparents' apartment. At some point, Grandpa Louie would say to his grandsons, *Luz m'herrin a Shoichen Ad—Let's hear (the prayer) Shoichen Ad*. And we would sing out: *Shokhen ad marom v'kadosh shemo*. Grandpa Louie would nod approvingly. But it is what he would say afterwards that has remained with me—it's the magic secret of my leyning and davening to this day: "*Nisht from the gorgle*," he would say—meaning, the davening shouldn't emanate from the throat, but from deep down. I believe that he meant that both physically and spiritually. "*Nisht from the gorgle*," but from deep within. Today, when I finish davening or leyning, I need to breathe deep to release and relax. When the davening or leyning is particularly intense, it is in the muscles of my gut that I feel the strain and even pain—*nisht from the gorgle*.

In the years before my bar mitzvah, my family davened at the Young Israel of Bronx Gardens, a modern Orthodox shul about a mile from my family's home in the east Bronx. The rabbi, Solomon I. Berl, was, and remains, a master *ba'al tefilah* and *ba'al kriah*, an expert on *nusach*—the melody of davening—and on leyning. When Rabbi Berl davened or leyned, I was enthralled. Who can explain why? Why are some people moved by a painting while others glance and walk by? For me, it is the music of davening and leyning that I can't pass by. It seems to connect to my inner soul.

When I was nine years old, my older brother began preparing for his bar mitzvah. Every Friday, after school at Yeshivah Salanter, we would be dropped off at shul for his lesson with Rabbi Berl. I was the tag-along. I would play some basketball but I would also listen in. I would also practice a harmony duet I was to do with my brother: *Ve-hu yashmi'enu*. I was hooked.

Some years later, after my own bar mitzvah, my family began attending the Young Israel of Parkchester. Kelly Winkler, the chief gabbai, ba'al tefilah, and ba'al kriah, had a special commitment to the youth of the shul. He pushed us to daven and to leyn. At first, I would need several months to prepare a parshah, a weekly reading. My father, *alav ha-shalom*, would listen to me practice and make corrections. He would start by giving me a pile of pennies. With every mistake, he would take away a penny. We fought over every penny. He always gave in, because it was never really about the pennies. It was about striving for excellence and perfection.

My engagement with leyning also bears the mark of the man who sat in the third row behind the bimah. Louis Gitelman taught Hebrew in the public school system, and no mistake escaped his detection. He would call out corrections in a voice insistent and unmistakable. Each time I got up to leyn I felt mortal fear. But it pushed me to study harder, to prepare better, so that I could get through an entire parshah without hearing his voice from behind me. He fueled the quest for excellence.

As Rabbi Avi Weiss often reminds our shul, leyning—*kriat ha-Torah*—is an attempt in some small way to recreate the Sinai experience of revelation on an ongoing, weekly basis. I believe that *kriat ha-Torah* is also an attempt to re-experience the events that are recounted in it.

The Torah is God's communication, on both a personal and a collective level. As a personal message, the Torah is directed to each of us individually. We are commanded to read it and study it, and to incorporate it into our personal lives. That aspect of Torah reading does not require a ba'al kriah. Each of us must receive it and respond in his or her own way. But the Torah is also directed to us collectively, as a nation. That requires a public Torah reading which impels us to remember that we are part of the collective, dynamic, living body of the Jewish people. For me, this defines the responsibility of the ba'al kriah.

As all my mentors stressed, my first responsibility as ba'al kriah is to deliver the message correctly. The community has the mitzvah to hear the text correctly. I try to read the text precisely, pronouncing each word care-

fully, trying not to swallow any of the letters, making sure to put the accent on the right syllable.

Over the years I have added more elements to this quest for precision. As a yeshivah student in the 1940s and 50s, I learned the Ashkenazic pronunciation of Hebrew. I still follow this tradition when I daven and leyn, though I admit that I have been tempted from time to time to adopt the more contemporary, Israeli pronunciation. Over the years I have learned enough *dikduk*, or grammar, to distinguish between *t'nuot g'dolot* (long vowel sounds) and *k'tanot* (short ones), and would feel perfectly comfortable reading in Sepharadit. Indeed, when I teach youngsters from

modern day schools to leyn, I teach them in the Sepharadit. But I like the grammatical precision afforded by the Ashkenazic pronunciation. From the Mizrachi tradition, I have learned to distinguish between the two letters which are silent in the Ashkenazic tradition, aleph and 'ayin, and between the chaf and the chet, by giving the 'ayin and chet a pharyngeal quality (produced by constricting the pharynx). I also try to distinguish between the two types of sh'va, the two-dot vowel-sign, one type vocalized and the other not.

My technical consultant is my cousin, Richard Steiner, a Professor of Semitic Languages at Yeshiva University and a scholar of Hebrew grammar. My wife, Roberta, recollects with amusement that I was once on the phone with Rich for about half an hour discussing some arcane grammatical question, perhaps whether some sh'va should be vocalized or not. After the call, she looked at me expectantly and said, "Well...?" I paused, looked at her, and said, "...I'm still not sure." Hebrew grammar, after all, is not an exact science.

Some people find grammar tedious. But it is important to make careful distinctions. Even seemingly trivial differences in pronunciation can radically alter the meaning of the text. For example:

Vayir-u means "They saw," as in *Vayir-u ha-mitzrim* [The Egyptians saw] (GENESIS 12:14).

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Vayi-re-u means "They feared," as in the verse, *Vayi-re-u ha-'am es Hashem* [The people feared the Lord] (EXODUS 14:31).

Vayir-'u (with an ayin) means "They grazed," as in *Gam ha-tzon ve-ha-bakar al yir-'u* [the flocks and the herds shall not graze] (EXODUS 34:3). When I read these *psukim*, I want the meaning to be clear.

But there is more to leyning than correct pronunciation. There is also the trop, the notes of the leyning. Timing, cadence, and other musical elements help to open up the meaning of the text. A reading can be technically correct but spiritually and emotionally bereft. I want the community to be emotionally engaged. I don't always reach that goal. But there are times while I'm leyning, when I'm really on my game, that the flow is so powerful to me that I feel and experience what I'm reading. Those moments are so intense, so precious. Once, after I finished leyning parshat B'Shallach with the account of the splitting of the Red Sea, someone said to me, "When you read that I could feel the water lapping at my feet." Others have said to me, "I don't really understand the words, but when you read today I was able to understand what you were reading." At such moments, I know I have truly leyned.

Even during the parshiot of Shemot which deal with the details of the building of the Mishkan [Tabernacle], the importance of the text must be heard and felt. I try to read these sections precisely but with a quickened and steady voice, in keeping with the subject matter. In contrast, when there is a narrative portion, the drama of the text needs to be brought out. Take the very poignant scene when Esav returns to his father Yitzchak after hunting and preparing a meal for his father, in order to receive his father's blessing of the first born. The way I read this passage must convey Yitzchak's feelings as he realizes that something has gone very wrong. And when I read: *When Esav heard the words of his father, he cried out an exceedingly great and bitter cry and said to his father, 'Bless me too, father,'* (GENESIS 27:34)—the congregation must hear, must feel Esav's despair, as he realizes the terrible truth.

I want to pass along my passion for leyning to the next generation. My father, Julius Horowitz, *alav ha-shalom*, used to teach young boys who were approaching bar mitzvah how to daven musaf. They were not yeshivah or day school kids who read Hebrew with ease and knew the prayers. They would come to the house and my father would sit with them, week after week, making slow, painstaking progress. What's more, many of them couldn't sing very well. What sounds would emanate from that room!

My brother and I insisted on a two-door policy. "Two doors!" we would shout before the young man arrived, meaning that we had to be insulated from my father and his *talmid* [student] by two closed doors to muffle the sound.

But my father's students learned, and established a link to the shul experience which they never would have had otherwise. That's his legacy to me. When I teach young men and young women to leyn or daven, my father is my role model, although I am nowhere near his level of dedication. Just as he did, I teach for the love of it.

When I was growing up, leyning and davening in all Orthodox shuls were restricted to men. Women's participation in shul activities was limited to kissing the Torah when it went around. So it is not surprising that my narrative reflects a chain of tradition passed down from male to male. While my sister's love for shul music was also nurtured by Grandpa Louie and by my father, she didn't have the shul opportunities that I had. Still, she absorbed much of the feel and flavor and rhythm of the shul experience and feels it very deeply to this day. Today, things are very different. My sister has had occasion to leyn. I teach girls as well as boys and hope that some of them will get hooked, as I did.

I always tell my students that the goal is to give their mothers *nachas*, to bring tears to their mothers' eyes when they leyn on their bar or bat mitzvah. Mothers are like that, more than fathers. My mother still loves to hear me leyn. Recently, she told me that when I was young she just loved to listen to me practice. She could be as mad as anything at me for something I had done, but when she heard me leyning, she melted and all was forgiven. Who knew? I could have gotten away with anything. She had to wait almost fifty years to tell me this?

My parents' pride in me kept me practicing through high school and college, no matter how heavy my test schedule was, so that leyning became part of who I am. And if I can be heard back in the far recesses of the shul when I daven and leyn, thank my mother for that, too. "Bernard," she tells me to this day, "remember that you're not leyning for yourself alone. Make sure you are loud enough so that even the ladies in the back can hear you." And to that I say, Amen.

Bernard Horowitz taught mathematics at the Bronx High School of Science for 37 years until his recent retirement. He now teaches at the Abraham Joshua Heschel High School in New York City. He wishes to thank Rabbi Avi Weiss for the inspiration and prodding which produced the original dvar Torah. He also wishes to thank Dr. Phil Schneider, a very talented listener, who helped draw out many thoughts and memories.