

## The Role of the *Shaliach Tsibur*

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WHEN I WAS GROWING UP, I NEVER GAVE MUCH THOUGHT TO THE STRUCTURE AND DYNAMICS OF JEWISH PRAYER. YET, WHEN I WOULD EXPLAIN JEWISH WORSHIP TO MY NON-JEWISH FRIENDS, I WOULD SAY that when Jews pray, no one stands between us and God. We need no one to pray for us. Each of us has a direct line to the Almighty. I liked that idea of a direct connection to the Holy One. Jews from Abraham to Tevye have a history of talking quite comfortably, one-on-one, with God.

I realized, however, that this formulation leaves an important issue unaddressed: If we don't need anyone else to talk to God on our behalf, then what is the *shaliach tsibur* doing up there? How can we understand the role of the prayer leader?

The literal translation of *shaliach tsibur*, "messenger of the congregation," doesn't help much. Neither does the less literal but more accurate, "one who is appointed by the public for the function of leading prayer." There were times in our history when that expression was taken very seriously, when all the members of a congregation had to collectively agree on a candidate, often by public vote, before he was allowed to represent the community.

Today, however, the representative function has lost a good deal of its force. In fact, seldom do the *shaliach tsibur* and the congregation have any useful communication about prayer. If the members of a community

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were to talk to one another and to the leader about the factors that contribute to meaningful public worship and the qualities they value in a *shaliach tsibur*, they would be well on the way to deeper spiritual experience before they even opened their prayer books.

Among the expectations congregants often have for the *shaliach tsibur* is that of a surrogate *kohen gadol*, the High Priest in the Temple in Jerusalem. It was his responsibility to know the proper traditions—the right words to say, as well as when and how they should be said. So too, today the *shaliach tsibur* is expected to know the appropriate *nusach* (melody), the Hebrew words, as well as the structure of the service.

There is another way to understand the role of *shaliach tsibur* that is reminiscent of worship in the Temple: the *shaliach tsibur* as Levite. The Levite's job was to provide an impressive religious/musical performance. During the golden age of *hazzanut* (cantorial singing) at the end of the last century and the beginning of this century, Jews so loved the cantor's musical and liturgical performance that in the large synagogues of Europe and the United States they all but relinquished their own responsibilities for prayer. They have been intimidated about taking them back ever since.

Such deference is inappropriate. In one of the earliest talmudic sources describing the essential qualities of a *shaliach tsibur* (Taanit 16a), only minimal attention is paid to musical talent. The Talmud is much more concerned with a leader's maturity, piety, liturgical and halakhic knowledge than the musical realization of the prayers. Indeed, the rather modest requirement of a "pleasant voice" is placed tenth in the Talmud's catalog of desired qualities. When a *shaliach tsibur* draws undue attention to him or herself, the davener's line of vision becomes obstructed. To the extent that worship involves performance, both the congregation and the *shaliach tsibur* should be performing together. Their only audience must be God.

Still, the *shaliach tsibur* does function as music director, empowered with the weighty responsibility of choosing the melodies for certain prayers. Many congregants, especially during the High Holidays, do not feel as though they have been to services unless they hear their favorite melodies. I hear this every year from freshmen who come to services for the first time at our Hillel Foundation. "Rabbi, I enjoyed services but you know, you sing all the wrong melodies here." What are the "right" melodies? "The ones we sing at home!"

In truth, singing together is one of the ways that a community experiences unity. It is also one of the most accessible routes to transcendent experience. In communal prayer, an individual can hear and feel what it means to blend voice and breath, to create, even temporarily, a community of palpable beauty and harmony. The *shaliach tsibur* should be aware of the possibility for davening to be a transformative event as well as an opportunity to experience community on a deep level.

### *Conductor and Train*

For another approach, think of the *shaliach tsibur* as a conductor on a train. In fact, a train is a good metaphor for a worship service. Everyone on a train is headed down the track in the same direction. Yet while they are on the train, the passengers don't all do the same thing at the same moment. Some stand, some sit, some walk around. Traditional Jewish worship allows each worshipper to proceed at an individual pace. The leader is responsible for directing the collective flow of the service; he or she lets the worshipper know where the *service* is but not necessarily where the *worshipper* is in the service.

Related to this metaphor, consider the *shaliach tsibur* as a *moreh derekh*, a tour-guide, who takes the congregation on a path that ultimately may bring them closer to God. Jewish worship does many things to make that path more accessible: We follow a set order in the service. We return to familiar melodies. We even travel in a group. Yet the experienced *shaliach tsibur* knows that for all our intentions the journey is an uncertain endeavor, and we travellers who have joined the trip may be at very different points in our lives.

In Jewish worship, the journey is a process of *hitkarvut*, a drawing closer to the Holy One. In the synagogue, God's presence becomes real through community, through prayer and through sacred text. The *shaliach tsibur*, through the power of music, binds these elements together, and through their power, provides an approach to the divine.

