

Singing Our Way to Jewish Identity

Larry Milder

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Songleading for a large group is an art form. It is part teaching, part performance, and part group facilitation. It requires a rare combination of skill and charisma.

Opportunities for large group singing have the potential to strengthen Jewish identity and create memories that participants may carry with them for a lifetime. Jewish singing happens in a variety of settings, from worship to the classroom to the family Seder. In the context of "intensive Jewish experiences," however, group singing has particular salience. Camps and youth group retreats are predicated on the notion that singing will not only be part of their core experience; it will be one of the most formative elements of the Jewish program they offer. Take, for example, the experience described by Dan and Lavinia Cohn-Sherbok, in their book *The American Jew*, of a visit to an unnamed Jewish summer camp:

Then a young man came forward clutching a guitar. He led a fairly half-hearted singing of the *Birkat ha-Mazon* (grace after meals) before we got down to the real business of after-lunch songs. All the songs had a Jewish theme; many were in Hebrew; and they were uniformly accompanied by clapping and impromptu dancing. The din was overwhelming.¹

A camp counselor, in the same book, recalled:

The friendship circles, the campfire, were all Judaism to me, and it was wonderful. The singing and dancing on Friday nights, that was Judaism to me and it made me want to be Jewish.²

What teens and young adults remember the most—what they speak of as the highlight of their Jewish experiences—is often the singing.

AFFECTIVE LEARNING

There is a good reason why singing is among the most powerful elements in conveying the Jewish meaning of an intensive experience. Cognitive activities tend to be individualistic; each participant is put on the spot. Singing, however, is a group activity. Without having to make any creed-based or intellectual commitments, the adolescent feels a part of the group. The emotional experience of identification for the participant can be cathartic. Hearing one's voice united with others in a burst of enthusiasm, or in a moment of sublime harmony, translates psychologically into a message of belonging.

If this were the extent of what we accomplished in our camps and youth groups, we might correctly regard it as insufficient, or worse, shallow. Obviously, there must be more to informal education than just good singing: There must be good cognitive learning that enriches an adolescent's breadth of familiarity with Judaism, as well as a range of affective experiences that provide depth to the meaning of Jewish practice.

If singing is not the panacea for the transmission of Jewish identity, it is, nonetheless, worthy of rigorous analysis. Something wondrous and powerful takes place in these moments of group singing and records itself indelibly in the minds and hearts of Jewish teenagers. We owe it to ourselves to understand better what makes for good singing, to work cooperatively toward achieving the highest Jewish impact in our song sessions, and to maximize our investment in providing the professional tools and resources necessary to make Jewish singing successful in the largest number of environments.

A CRISIS IN SONGLEADER TRAINING

The truth is that there just aren't enough musically talented, Jewishly literate songleaders to go around. It is a perennial problem for camp directors, who scramble each year to find a competent head songleader to set the tone for their summer camp's music program. Youth group retreats fare only slightly better. If singing is critical to the Jewish experience of participants, how can we ensure that an adequate pool of qualified songleaders is available?

Nor is the issue solely one of cultivating personnel. Songleaders, camp and youth directors, and our associated organizations have not taken the steps necessary to build the best possible music programs. What follows are some recommendations regarding the direction that we need to take to maximize the impact of singing on Jewish identity.

Training of Younger Songleaders

Every youth region and summer camp should have a plan for training high school students to be songleaders. Songleader training should be built into every event longer than a weekend. A songleader should be told up front when hired that it is part of his/her job to integrate up-and-coming songleaders into the song sessions.

Cultivating College Students

The frontline of songleaders in camps and youth movements is typically college and graduate students. These are the folks for whom songleading is a weekend or summer job. Although they may earn some significant income from songleading, they mostly lack the resources to pay for their own training or to purchase lots of Jewish materials. While many are enthusiastic, a significant number lack good musical skills and a solid foundation in Jewish sources. The result can be less inspired singing than they are capable of achieving, and an inevitable slide into non-Jewish repertoire. Lots of song sessions in Jewish camps and youth movement these days have devolved into high-volume mosh pits.

College students are the backbone of the present corps of songleaders, for some good reasons (they have the advantages of youth in relating to teens and kids, not to mention reservoirs of energy to draw upon); some uncontrollable factors (they are available, unlike music teachers with families and regular jobs); and some not-so-good reasons (they work for cheap). If we are serious about singing as a critical element in the Jewish experience of kids, however, we will have do more toward developing our songleaders to ensure that they know what they are singing and can do it well.

Professional Songleaders and Artists-in-Residence

Perhaps we need to think one step further about the level of professionalism we expect in songleaders. After some 30 years of development of a distinctly American Jewish folk repertoire, there are now a large number of experienced songleaders. The most famous are the ones who have left their mark as composers, and who continue to teach others. Most talented veteran songleaders, however, are simply underutilized.

Both high school and college students need to see professional songleaders in action. The best way to get younger people excited about songleading is to provide them with charismatic role models. Camps and youth movements ought to create artist-in-residence programs, to involve the best professional songleaders in selective appearances. The aim would be to raise the caliber of singing for everyone, and to cultivate an expectation of excellence when someone stands in front of a group to get them to sing. What's more, the use of artists-in-

residence could provide enhanced opportunities for mentoring and instruction of college students and younger songleaders.

Funding for Songleader Training

Teacher training for songleaders does exist. There just isn't enough money to send all those who could benefit from it, or to duplicate the programming in enough places.

Olin-Sang-Ruby Union Institute in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, sponsors an annual songleader training institute called Hava Nashira, which has brought the best composers, performers, and songleaders together to teach in a supportive atmosphere. The CAJE Conference continues to offer outstanding workshops in which music teachers can expand their repertoire and hone their craft.

If we are serious about building a cadre of superior songleaders, we need to advocate for increased scholarships to these programs and for additional training opportunities at other times and places.

Networking Among Songleaders

It is also true that songleaders have not been working together as a team nearly as much as would be desirable. Typically, a songleader goes to a regional event without any knowledge of what has previously been sung, without the ability to build on an existing repertoire, and without familiarity with the versions of songs that previous songleaders have used.

A simple tool could enhance the work that songleaders do immeasurably: the compilation of a repertoire list that gets passed from one songleader to the next. I have begun such a list in my youth group region (NFTY-Northeast). As a volunteer, I maintain a master list of every song that is sung at each regional event. Prior to an event, I send the list to the designated songleader or provide a copy to the regional advisor to give to the songleader. At a glance, the songleader can see everything that has been sung over the past couple of years. All s/he has to do is to check off which songs s/he does, add new songs to the bottom of the list, and return it to me.

If every region and camp kept such a list, it would make a huge difference in the ability of a songleader to walk into an event and get kids singing. It would also help songleaders know what new material they ought to teach, and encourage them to make the effort to stay on top of new material without dropping old favorites.

On-line discussion groups for songleaders, such as Hanashir, are an important step forward in this kind of cooperation. More needs to be done along these lines, such as a web site that would enable songleaders to check which version of a song they know by comparing it to sampled melodies.

Standardization

Songleaders are artists, and, consequently, usually don't like being told how to play a song. On the other hand, many songleaders have great respect for the composers of the music they use. If they could, they would play and sing their songs just as the composer envisioned, or just as they first heard it.

Unfortunately, the folk process has a way of reducing songs to their least common denominator. In the hands of the less musically adept, there is a tendency toward a flattening out of melody lines, the disappearance of harmonies, and the abandonment of syncopation and rhythmic complexity. The natural tendency to make songs easier to sing and play does not make them more popular. What turns kids on to a song is often its novel musicality or its rhythmic interest.

For all the sacrifice it might mean in terms of personal and regional variations in melodies, we need to work harder at singing songs the same way, so that it will be easier for songleaders to repeat the songs that others are doing.

The most practical tool we could create for this purpose would be a series of repertoire tapes explicitly designed for songleaders, with harmonies and rounds demonstrated, and accompanying chord charts. The recent publication of a new *NFTY Chordster* is certainly a step in the right direction.

Songleaders themselves need to make a greater commitment to purchasing albums and sheet music and learning the material, thereby by supporting the composers. However, much of the repertoire used in camps and youth groups is not readily available this way. Furthermore, songleaders need demonstration tapes on how to sing songs in parts. The decline of harmony and rounds could be substantially reversed simply by putting recorded instructional tapes in the hands of songleaders.

THE EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVE

Songleading is an exciting art form with an educational goal: the cultivation of Jewish identity. On the one hand, it is having a tremendous impact, as the testimony of teenagers indicates. On the other hand, we are clearly not keeping pace with expanding needs and a growing repertoire of songs. We must increase our investment in the strategies and resources that will realize the full potential of singing as a path toward Jewish identification.

With Jewish musical creativity at an all-time high, the time is right for more serious attention to songleading as an art form with the potential to affect large numbers of young Jews. The next generation of Jewish leaders may very well be the ones we teach to "sing a new song."?

Rabbi Laurence Milder, Ph.D., is the rabbi of Congregation Beth El of Bangor, Maine, and the former director of NFTY's songleader training institute, Zimria.

FOOTNOTES

1 Dan and Lavinia Cohn-Sherbok, *The American Jew*, Eerdmans Publishing, 1995, page 166.

2 Ibid, page 176.