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## SINGING AND SOLITUDE — *HALLEL* AND HISTORY

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The twentieth-century French moral philosopher Vladimir Jankelevitch was described by the American musicologist Richard Taruskin, as “The anti-Adorno.” What Taruskin meant was that, unlike Adorno, Jankelevitch approached music in strictly phenomenological terms. Where Adorno saw music as a language of symbols, articulating meaning, Jankelevitch listened to music only in terms of his experience of it. “Imagine!” exclaims Taruskin, “A philosopher who meditates on listening to music, not its ontology.” Jankelevitch’s Music is subjective, and performers and listeners in his model are music’s interlocutors, its partners, not its re-enactors or interpreters. While Adorno’s experience of music must penetrate the listener’s consciousness through a layer of Meaning, Jankelevitch’s experience of music is unmediated. It is all in the moment.

This argument about reality as we experience it is one of the premiere debates of Western philosophy. Is there an ontology of meaning? Does Truth exist, or are we only glimpsing shadows on the wall of a cave? Is truth subjective? Is it objective? Is meaning inherent or is it imposed? These questions about human experience are present in music, just as they are in painting and dance, poetry and prose. They run through philosophy, and they run through religion.

Like so many other tensions within human experience, the questions of meaning, of subjectivity and objectivity, find expression in Judaism. Particularly in the post-modern world, Jews, like all people, find themselves asking these questions. But Jewish tradition itself has been framing the questions for much longer. “In every generation one is obligated to see himself as though he himself had gone out of Egypt,” says Rabban Gamliel.<sup>1</sup> The key phrase in the statement is *ke’ilu*, “as if.” It indicates Rabban Gamliel’s desire that every Jew experience the Exodus from Egypt in a deeply personal way, with an awareness of the barriers—historical, physical, psychological—to actually achieving the experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Mishnah *Pesachim* 10:5

Rabban Gamliel clearly wants every individual Jew to have a first-hand experience of the founding redemptive moment of the people; he wants not only the meaning, but the truth of that experience to be internalized. But he cannot escape the reality of history: the Exodus happened generations ago.<sup>2</sup>

So Rabban Gamliel creates an act of theater: he constructs a role (redeemed slave) and gives every Jew a script (the Haggadah) and props (the Paschal sacrifice, *matzah*, and *maror*). The props are symbols of a life acknowledged as separate and apart, a life that is not the experience of the one partaking of the symbol, as Rabban Gamliel says himself:

“The Paschal sacrifice, because God passed over the houses of our ancestors in Egypt. *Matzah* because our ancestors were redeemed in Egypt. *Maror* because the Egyptians embittered the lives of our ancestors in Egypt.”<sup>3</sup>

This is a script to be acted out, and as such it is highly conscious of itself as an object to be used in helping the actor undertake a subjective experience. The distinction between “the lives of our ancestors” and the life of the individual partaking of and explaining these symbols is assumed, and the primary goal of the exercise is to experience the objective truth: God is the eternal redeemer of Israel in every generation.<sup>4</sup>

Such playacting is the centerpiece of the entire Biblical holiday cycle. Passover perhaps receives the greatest treatment, but its sister holidays in the agricultural cycle, Shavuot and Sukkot, are also said to be “*zekher leyetziat Mitzrayim*,” a commemoration of the Exodus from Egypt. On Shavuot the Jew is again given a script—this time by the Torah itself—in the form of *vidui bikurim*, the formula recited over the bringing of first fruits. The Rabbis added another layer to the playacting in understanding Shavuot as the moment of the giving of the Torah—thus traditional Jews stand in synagogue on Shavuot morning to hear Exodus 20 read aloud, *ke’ilu*, “as if” they are standing again at Sinai.

What Sukkot lacks in the way of an oral script it makes up for in staging. The Torah instructs the Jew to dwell in the Sukkah for the seven days of the holiday

<sup>2</sup> Jon Levenson’s highly worthwhile discussion notes that the force of the rabbinic move here is for the Jew to take history and make it his own story. I diverge from him here slightly, as will be seen shortly. See Jon Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*. New York: Harper Collins, 1987, pp. 38-39.

<sup>3</sup> Mishnah *Pesahim* 10:5

<sup>4</sup> Clearly there is also a highly subjective element to Rabban Gamliel’s statement: “In every generation, every person is obligated. . .” Rabban Gamliel implicitly acknowledges that different generations will have different experiences of redemption. Nevertheless, the primary focus is on the historical event: Rabban Gamliel does not say, “In every generation, every person is obligated to see how he or she has been liberated this year,” as we moderns might do. Rather the focus is on the Exodus from Egypt and experiencing the meaning of that singular event.

“So that your descendants will know that I caused the Children of Israel to dwell in *sukkot* when I took them out of Egypt” (Lev. 23:43). Again, we encounter playacting intended to re-create an experience from the past, but acknowledging the barriers that exist between the actor and the original model. It is once again “*ke’ilu*,” “as if.”

In contrast to the three pilgrimage festivals stand the two other seasonal Biblical holidays, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. These holidays do not appear in the lists of the agricultural festivals in Exodus 23, 34, and Deuteronomy 16. Unlike the *regalim*, which involve the entire people, the Days of Awe, as the Rabbis termed them, seem most significant only within the Tabernacle. Further, while they are grouped with their cousins under the general heading *zekher leyetziat Mitzrayim*, their focus is less on historical re-enactment than ongoing relationship maintenance with the Almighty: “It is a day of atonement, to make atonement for you before the Lord your God” (Lev. 23:28). To be sure, there is an aspect of relationship-maintenance to the *regalim*, particularly *Shavuot* and *Sukkot*, as indicated by the verses “You shall rejoice before the Lord your God” (Deut. 16:11), and “Three times a year . . . all your males shall appear before the LORD your God in the place that He will choose” (Deut. 16:16). Nevertheless, the overall thrust of the *regalim* is as I present them here, in accordance with Rosenzweig’s approach (see below). In fact, these verses, as well as the similar verses (Ex. 23:17, 34:23), do not alter my main contention; they merely demonstrate that the historical re-enactment is to take place before God and in a manner of rejoicing. The qualitative difference between the *regalim* and the *yamim noraim* is still fundamental. In other words, the *regalim* create an act of theater to commemorate or re-experience history, while the theater of the High Holidays is about true experience in the moment. High Holiday theater is the Jankelevitch to the Adorno of the *regalim*.

This point is eloquently made by Franz Rosenzweig in *The Star of Redemption*. “The Days of Awe place the eternity of redemption into time. . . In the annual return of this judgment, eternity is stripped of every trace of the beyond, of every vestige of remoteness; it is actually there, within the grasp of every individual and holding every individual close in its strong grasp.”<sup>5</sup> The effect of this on the individual, continues Rosenzweig, is to shine a light “into the most hidden corners of being. . . . There is no more waiting, no more hiding behind history. The individual confronts judgment without any intermediary factor. . . . On these days, the individual in all his naked individuality stands immediately before God.” According to Rosenzweig, *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* are designed to force the Jew to confront his existence and take a full accounting of his actions, not to re-experience history.

<sup>5</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star Of Redemption*. New York: Holt, Reinhart, 1970, p. 324.

A close reading of the Mishnah supports Rosenzweig's view. We have already noted Rabban Gamliel's statement in the last chapter of *Pesachim*, which emphasizes the holiday's playacting character. In contrast, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria's words at the end of Tractate *Yoma* impress upon the reader the immediate, ahistorical character, of the holiday:

Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria interpreted: "You will be purified from all your sins before God" (Lev. 16:30): The Day of Atonement enacts atonement for sins between man and God. But for sins between man and his fellow, the Day of Atonement does not enact atonement until his fellow wills it.<sup>6</sup>

Likewise, the Mishnah in *Rosh Hashanah* speaks of continuing, actual judgment:

The world is judged at four times: At *Pesah* concerning produce; at *Atzeret* concerning tree-grown fruits; on *Rosh Hashanah* all the creatures of the world pass before Him like *bnei marom*, as it is said, "He Who fashions their hearts alike, Who understands all their deeds" (Ps. 33:15). And on *Hag* they are judged concerning the water.<sup>7</sup>

These *mishnayot* do not discuss the judgment of *Rosh Hashanah* or the efficacy of *Yom Kippur* in historical terms. Neither is fundamentally about commemorating an historical event.<sup>8</sup> Rather, just as it did in the time of Aaron, *Yom Kippur* continues to actually effect atonement in the penitent, and *Rosh Hashanah* continues to be the Day of Judgment for humanity.

A second distinguishing feature between the High Holidays and the pilgrimage festivals is the recitation, or absence, of *hallel*. It is the relationship between *hallel* and the phenomenological character of these two sets of holidays that we ultimately wish to explore.

The Talmud famously discusses the lack of *hallel* on the High Holidays:

Why do we not recite *hallel* on *Rosh Hashanah*? Rabbi Abahu said, 'The archangels said before the Holy One, Master of the Universe! Why does Israel not recite Song [i.e., *hallel*] before you on *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*? He said to them, Is it possible that the king sits on the throne of judgment, and the books of life and the books of death are open before him, and Israel would say the Song?<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Mishnah *Yoma* 8:9

<sup>7</sup> Mishnah *Rosh Hashanah* 1:2

<sup>8</sup> The association of *Yom Kippur* with the giving of the second tablets of the Ten Commandments is rabbinic, and not Biblical, in origin.

<sup>9</sup> *Rosh Hashanah* 32a

Traditionally we read this Gemara as a statement of the character of the day: Is it possible, asks God, that *hallel* could be appropriate on such a day? Singing is inappropriate on such a momentous and solemn occasion, just as it is inappropriate at the moment the Egyptians are drowning in the sea.

But perhaps this reading deserves re-examination. Perhaps the subject of God's statement is not the High Holidays, but *hallel*: The question is not, "Is it appropriate to recite *hallel* on the High Holidays?" but "Are the High Holidays appropriate occasions for the recitation of *hallel*?" The emphasis of the question is on *hallel*, not the High Holidays, with the implication that there is something intrinsic to *hallel* that is at odds with the character of *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*. If we pursue this reading in light of our findings about the approach to symbol and experience and the respective characters of the High Holidays and the pilgrimage festivals, we may arrive at a new understanding.

The Talmud explores the character of *hallel* in the following *beraita*:

Our Rabbis taught: This *hallel*, who said it?

Rabbi Eliezer says: Moses and Israel said it at the time they stood at the sea. They said, "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, [but to they name give glory, for thy steadfast love, and for thy truth]" (Ps. 115:1), and the holy spirit responded and said to them, "For my own sake, for my own sake will I do it: [for how should my name be profaned? And I will not give my glory to another]" (Is. 48:11).

Rabbi Judah says: Joshua and Israel said it at the time that the kings of Canaan stood against them. . . . Rabbi Elazar haMaodi says: Devorah and Barak said it at the time Siserah stood against them. . . . Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria says: Hezekiah and his helpers said it at the time that Sanaherib stood against them. . . . Rabbi Akiba says: Hanniah, Mishael and Azariah said it at the time that the evil Nebuchadnezzar stood against them. . . . Rabbi Yose the Gallilean says: Mordekhai and Ester said it at the time that the evil Haman stood against them. . . .

And the Sages say: The prophets between them established for Israel that they should recite it in every time of trouble, so that they should not come upon Israel, and that when they are redeemed they should recite it on their redemption.<sup>10</sup>

Two major points stand out from this section: first, *hallel* is repeatedly associated with historical events and personalities; second, in each case *hallel* was originally a spontaneous outpouring of emotion to God. But this spontaneous moment of subjective experience became reified into a moment of national historical memory, and the original spontaneous *hallel* became a symbolic medium

<sup>10</sup> *Pesahim* 117a

for commemorating the salvation that produced that original cry.

While of course it is inappropriate to sing songs of joy during judgment (imagine the Egyptians singing on the shore as their fellows drown in the sea), the deeper point here is that, in the mind of the Talmud, the idea of reciting *hallel* outside of an historical context is antithetical to the idea of *hallel* itself. And it is for this reason that *hallel* is absent from *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, which, as we have attempted to show, are fundamentally ahistorical holidays.

But we can still go further, and to do so we return to Jankelevitch. In an essay entitled “The Inexpressive Espresso,” Jankelevitch plays with two kinds of approaches to music, which are really two approaches to language and to life itself. Under the first paradigm, he says,

We declare that music shall be, like all other languages, the bearer of meaning and an instrument of communication, whether it explains certain ideas, or suggests certain sentiments, or describes landscapes or things, or narrates events. . . . If music is thus simple language, meaning will preexist in a direct line to this language, which will constitute the second-level explanation of that meaning. . . . Under these circumstances, one is led to ask whether our ears, far from being organs of hearing, are not rather more the cause of our deafness: does physiological hearing place us in communication with the world of sound, or bar us from the music of the angels?<sup>11</sup>

This is the Adorno way of thinking to which Taruskin refers. Music is a language to be written and read, behind which stands a world of meaning that only awaits our decoding. But Jankelevitch offers another, radically different view through a critique of the dominant paradigm:

The idea of an absolutely tacit music, unexpressed, disembodied, is in the very end a conceptual abstraction. . . . Because down here on earth there is no gratuitous action; no cause is entirely the cause, and no effect is exclusively an effect. . . . The poetic act does not stand in relation to a single unique meaning, in a one-sided and irreversible subordination, but to a mutuality of correlations. . . . The poet will never conceive his poem in advance of making it but in the act of making it, because *in poetry there is no gap between speculation and action, no distance, no temporal interval* [emphasis added].<sup>12</sup>

It is this last point, the emphasis on unmediated musical experience, that interests us. The first paradigm, which posits a meaning behind or beyond the music—that is, the experience—is that of the *regalim*, with their scripted

<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Jankelevitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, trans. Carolyn Abbate. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. pp. 25-26

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* pp. 28-29.

attempts to commemorate history through symbol. And the music sung on those days—*hallel*—is likewise a scripted attempt to commemorate history, to memorialize an event of ancient days. The second paradigm, which sees the musical experience not as symbolic but rather current, not signaling any time or place far away but rather fully present in the moment, is the paradigm of the *High Holidays*. *hallel* is a music too laden with meaning—and purposefully so—to work on *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*.

Which leads us to ask, What *is* the music of the High Holidays? Immediately the answer comes to mind: *kol shofar*, the sound of the shofar. The shofar's blast is meant to be an 'unmusical' music: A raw, emotional sound, a sound of crying, and a coronating blast of the trumpet. To be sure, the shofar's sound can be interpreted. But its sound is essentially primal, not part of a language, not part of history, not part of civilization. We hear in the *shofar's* blast whatever we hear: the cry of a mother, the call to battle, the herald of the king. It is simply sound, a music waiting for someone to make it meaningful.

Both of these musics have their place: Strauss's story-telling *Heldenleben* and Debussy's experiential *Nocturne* are both classics. Both offer the listener, and the performer, a moving experience. But they are different, just as the *regalim* and the *yamim noraim*. The theater and the song of the festivals connect the Jew to his history, his people, his destiny as a member of the nation of Israel. They make us experience the grandness of our past, and see ourselves as part of a larger historical project that transcends our particular moment on the planet. They facilitate our participation in the language of Israel.

But language has its limits, and individuals cannot only be members of something larger than themselves. We must also tend to our own egos, our own individual lives. We run into irrational moments, moments when we cannot participate in the language of society, when we must retreat from society. At these moments, God is the only One who understands, the only One preventing us from being utterly alone. These are the moments—the non-linguistic, deeply personal moments—that the High Holidays attempt to facilitate.<sup>13</sup> “You know the secrets of the universe, the hiddenmost mysteries of all being,” says the *Yom Kippur Mahzor*. “You probe the innermost chambers and test thoughts and emotions. Nothing is hidden from You, nothing is concealed from Your eyes.” On these days, as on no others, we stand “naked before God,” in Rosenzweig's words—without community, language, or history, as babies reborn to our pre-verbal state. There is a music here, but it is not the music of *hallel*; it is the music of a child's cry.

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<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note the compensatory nature of our rituals in this regard: Passover, fundamentally a national experience, is ordained to be observed in the home, as it continues to be through the *Pesah Seder*; *Yom Kippur*, fundamentally a personal experience of atonement, is observed in the synagogue with the rest of the community. Community and individual are never very far apart, though the focus of each holiday tilts heavily towards one or the other.