

Daniel Jeremy Silver Collection Digitization Project

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Worship and Song, 1967.

Worship and Song Daniel Jeremy Silver November 26, 1967

Music is our second mother tongue. The spoken word is an excellent vehicle for communicating ideas, specific detail, fact, but we stammer and falter when it comes to the expression in words of our deepmost feelings, of our emotions, or the description of our moods. Melody is worth how many thousands of words when it manages to communicate to someone else the terror of loneliness, the warmth of love, the beauty of a sunset, the anxiety of life. This is what the wise old merchant of Jerusalem, Ben Sirah, tried to tell his children some twenty-two centuries ago when he said: when there is music pour not out words. Music can in a very short space convey to us, communicate to us, depths of meanings that it would take us volumes to try and get across. Here in the sanctuary a well-chosen tune can evoke four millenia of our history. It can somehow express all the confusion and the determination of our search for God. So it is that the Zohar says, that mystical treasury of our people, there are palaces which open up only to music. Now, music clothes words, ritual, and graces them and gives them meaning. Over the long centuries our people have read from the Sefer Torah as we read from it this morning. And in every generation most of the people who have listened to the reading of the Scripture did not understand it. Hebrew was not their tongue, but yet, they understood it for music, the cantillation, the chant, translated the Torah into their understanding; and though they may not have comprehended the surface meaning, they understood the richer, the deeper symbolic meaning, the whole burden of the search for God, the whole grandeur of the history, the heroism of our people. This they understood, this music gave to them,

A Bible is, as you might expect, rich in song. Indeed, the Scripture originally was entirely melodic, poetic. Long before scribes set down the saga of our people on parchment, there were professional balladiers in every tribe whose function it was to set the saga, the

history into poetic form and music, with the holy days and in the holy places to recite these sagas for the benefit of all. Music not only evokes meaning, but it evokes memory, permitting the people to pass on century after century the unwritten stories about people in almost original form. If we were to begin to tell the history of our day and pass it down to our children it would change in the transmission, but once it has been sculpted into song the song can be taught exactly. The saga could be preserved as it was originally made. And so it was, from the second millenium into the first millenium the great histories of Genesis, the great moods of our patriarchs and the message of the early times was maintained and transmitted adequately.

And there were in ancient Israel schools in which competent and devoted men could be trained in the ritual song, the tribal song of our people. And they, after their schooling, would go out and make the rounds of the tribes and of the cities, and on market days at the sacrifices in the holy sanctuary they would sing and people would listen, and since the song was the same in Ephraim as in Juda and in Don as in Ascher there was one people and there was one tradition and the tribes were united. And then in the days of the kings and in the days of David and Solomon music was brought officially into the Temple sanctuary. There was a professional cult, the Levites. They were a guild, a professional guild of chorusters and of orchestra people and there was a definite repertoire of the music, of the chant, of the song which was to accompany the holy processions and the various devotions. And these people were to be paid out of the tithe that all of Israel brought to the sanctuary. There is a tradition among our people that song validates the sacrifice, that without song the sacrifice is incomplete. A ritual which is bare-boned, which is simply an act, does not begin to evoke the bite and the meaning that it ought to evoke, so the rabbis held that unless there was a backdrop of music, the spoken tongue of worship, unless there was communication on the deeper levels, on the melodic level, the simple

performance of ritual was not satisfactory and not complete. And so it is, that our people have a rich musical heritage, and so it is that music has always accompanied the devotion of our people, but the music has changed. In the early days it was simple, the sung word, and probably little more. And then we bow from the Middle Eastern culture the entire musical tradition of that culture, a tradition which had begun in the city-states of Sumer and Akad, and we brought their orchestras and their instruments and their total quality into our worship. That was the music that was heard in the sanctuary. It was music of a very high quality as is testified by the grandeur of the spirit of the Book of Psalms. But if you and I could be translated back into the Temple I think we would find the music more disturbing than satisfying because it is not our music, but theirs; not the music of the West, but the music of the East. Our music is rather square shaped. It has a definite structure. There is a predictable variation between tones on the scale. Our music is sophisticated. It moves from development to development, building towards a theme, the whole intricate symphony. Middle Eastern music is different. In the West a composer writes the notes and writes the words, and though an artist may give a new reading to the score the score is produced as it was written. In the East there were no scores. There were simply groups of notal arrangements, familiar patterns of notes, to which the artist, the choir, the orchestra fitted the words as they saw fit. Music was more nasal, it was higher pitched, it was less full-bodied, it was less complicated, and the artistry lay in the singing rather than in the composition. A man could fit as many words, as many stresses, as much meter as he wanted to to this predictable arrangement of notes. The artistry, the aesthetics lay in the most skillful rendering of this music. And there are different gradations between the notes; the difference in the scale is infinitely more complex than is our own.

Music changes. There was always reason in Israel, sing unto the Lord a new song.

Creativity was encouraged and musical traditions of our people grew over the centuries.

There is, therefore, no objective reason why we should not introduce into the music of the sanctuary the musical idiom of our day, jazz or atonal music or even rock and roll because if music is, as I claim, a language, and since all language is circumscribed by a specific culture, a specific time and a specific place, a music which is in a language which is no longer understood is irrelevant to ritual because ritual has meaning. Ritual seeks to impress you with certain values and certain virtues. But I must add a word of caution. There are people borrowed in ancient times from the musical legacy of the Mid-They borrowed selectively. There was music which they did not allow into the Temple compound. There are progressions of notes, these modules of melody familiar throughout the Middle East, which are sensuous, which are erratic, which speak of the animal urgencies and not of the spirit, not of discipline. Canaanite worship, heathen worship is often orgiastic. It was a fertility cult and by various rites they tried to stimulate the fertility goddess. In the ancient Middle East there were the Dynesia rites, all manners of worship to the gods of joy and to the gods of ecstasy, and to the god of wine; and the music which accompanied this worship was sinuous, was exciting and sensuous and bodily, lusting, and our fathers ruled that it had no place in this place for our thoughts are on the higher things where we seek to conquer the more base nature of man, where we seek to change the human beast into a human being. And so there are very rigid rules, or there were rigid rules, as to what was acceptable and what was unacceptable; what music was permitted and what music could not be sung. And in Hellenistic times, in the last centuries B. C. E., our fathers came to the regretful conclusion that almost all music was vulgar, coarse. The Hellenistic civilization was not unlike our own. Hellenistic civilization was affluent, sophisticated, they despaired of man; they despaired of human nature; they despaired of peace; they dispaired of civilization and felt that there had been an attempt to raise man from the mud, from the jungle, from the pristine, but that men would always

be at one another's throats, always pulling themselves back down into the jungle. And the music of this era was music which appealed to the young. It stimulated the body, it excited the emotions, and this music was deliberately ruled out of the sanctuary. Indeed, the rabbis in the second and third centuries B. C. E. began to suspect all music. They said that when music enters the threshold destruction enters the house. When the youngster claps the rock and roll radio to his ear homework is no longer done. He no longer thinks of discipline but of grabbing hold of life, of being lustful, lusty. Now we might not be as pure track and were our ancestors, but there is certainly in our civilization a large degree of truth in the observation that most of the music that we produce is not designed for the mind, for the soul, for the spirit, but simply to allow us to break through some of the carefully built-up disciplines which are the disciplines of civilization, to break down these gifts of our parents,, the gifts of our conscience, who turn us again into wild beasts.

What I am trying to say is simply this, that worship has a focus. We speak here of wisdom, not of folly, We speak here of discipline, not of the disintegration of personality. We speak here of hope and not of despair. We speak here of possibility and not of animality. We speak here of man becoming Godlike, not man becoming like unto the animals. We speak here of love which is both sensual and sacred and not of love which is simply sex. We speak here of life in its highest possibility and not simply of life in the jungle, on the sidewalk with its most violent and cruel aspects.

And so the music that we choose for our worship must be carefully chosen. The idiom may be contemporary, needs to be contemporary, but the message, the words, the language that it speaks must speak of the commandment, of holiness, of duty, the possibility and of God. We ought to avoid the temptation to bring into the sanctuary that which is new simply

because it is new, without discrimination as to what it is saying to us; and we must bring into the sanctuary that which is new which speaks to us what is required of us and by whom, the possibility of opportunity.

Moses Ibn Ezra, the great poet of the Middle Ages, said music can be, must be, in the synagogue a faithful messenger of God. Truly, that must be our yard stick and truly we have tried here for that to be our measure.



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