

## To Cantors and Rabbis: A High Holiday Message from the 13th Century September 8, 2015

Rabbi Sh'lomo b. Adret (Rashba / רשב"א, d. 1310 in Barcelona) was one of the outstanding *rishonim*, or “early” (pre-16th century) rabbinical writers. His Talmud commentaries (*hidushim*) are regarded as classics of the genre and are standard features of the *yeshiva* curriculum. Rashba was also a recognized halakhic authority, and his collected responsa (*t'shuvot*), numbering in the thousands, cover the entire range of Jewish law and practice.

One responsum of his (vol. 1, no. 215) is especially timely for rabbis and cantors at the *Yamim Nora'im*, the High Holiday season. Here's the question (*sh'eilah*):

שאלת עוד בשליח צבור שקולו ערב ונאה לשומעים ומאריך בתפלתו כדי שישמעו העם קולו ערב. ומתנאה בזה ושמח בקולו ודעתו בכך בעת שהוא מתפלל. ואומר שראוי הוא בכך ושיהא שמח בלבו. אם ראוי למחות בו שראוי לעשות תפלתו תחנונים והיאך יהיה זה מתחנן מתוך שמחה

*“Your question concerns a shaliaḥ tzibur, a prayer leader whose voice is sweet and pleasing to his audience and who makes the service last longer because he wants the congregation to hear his sweet voice. He rejoices in this talent of his; he is mindful of this while he is leading the prayers; and he says it is entirely proper for him to rejoice. Would it be proper to point out to him his error: namely, that what is truly ‘proper’ is that he make his prayer a heartfelt supplication, and that one cannot pray in that fashion when one is consumed with such joy?”*

Much has changed since the thirteenth century. Much, but not everything. Rashba's correspondent raises a problem quite familiar to those who lead our communal worship – for example, to the rabbis and cantors who serve as *sh'lihei tzibur* – and to those who attend our services. Simply put: is there a necessary conflict between the *art* of prayer and the *experience* of prayer? On the one hand, we recognize that public prayer is an art form and that, like all other art forms, its successful realization demands significant professional expertise. On the other hand, we worry that our focus upon the service's performance values – the cues, the choreography, the well-crafted words and phrasing, the “sweet voices” – comes at the expense of their actual ability to pray, to feel the substantive inner experience of prayer. And we wonder how that attentiveness is perceived by the community: do our people see us (as Rashba's correspondent apparently saw his own *shaliaḥ tzibur*) primarily as performers, as artists fixated upon the externals of worship, rather than as pray-ers from the heart, the sincere seekers of God that our words and song proclaim us to be?

Rashba begins his answer (*t'shuvah*) as follows::

דברים אלו אחר כונת הלב הם אמורים. אם שליח צבור זה שמח בלבו על שנותן השבח וההודאה לשם בקול: תשובה ערב ובנעימה ושמח מתוך יראה תבוא עליו ברכה

*“These things are determined by the prayer leader's intention. If this shaliaḥ tzibur is rejoicing because he is able to praise God with his sweet voice, if he experiences that joy in an attitude of reverence, then he deserves your blessing.*

So far, this is hardly surprising. All of us would doubtless agree that the performance values of public worship are not ends in themselves. Our professional satisfaction at a “job well done” is appropriate only to the extent that the “job” is performed in the attitude of reverence (יראה, *yirah*, standing in awe before God) that is the goal and purpose of prayer.

Yet this does not mean that Rashba discounts the importance of those skills. On the contrary: שאחד מן הדברים המחויבין למי שמורידין לפני התיבה הוא שיש לו נעימה וקולו ערב

*“For one of the qualities we require in a prayer leader is that he possess musical ability and a sweet voice.”*

Here he quotes the Talmudic passage[1] that describes the ideal *shaliaḥ tzibur* as one who is skillful at the art of public prayer and blessed with the vocal and musical talent necessary to “draw the heart”[2] of the worshipers. It turns out that the “performance values” are not merely externals of public worship; they are intrinsic to it. Indeed, they are halakhic requirements, expectations that Jewish law sets for the prayer leader.[3] The *shaliaḥ tzibur* of whom the correspondent complains may indeed take an unseemly pride in his skill set, but it is nonetheless a set of skills that the *halakhah* wants him to have... so long as it is not *all* that he brings to the role:

אבל צריך להתפלל בכבוד ראש ... ויעמד באימה כמי שעומד לפני שכינה

*“He must, however, pray with an attitude of seriousness,[4] standing in awe as one who stands before the Divine Presence (Sh’khina).”[5]*

In other words, this is not a case of either-or. The prayer leader is expected to be proficient in *both* artistic skill *and* prayerful intention and is evaluated according to his – and today, we would add “her” – capacity to combine them, so that the external expression of prayer becomes a faithful index of inward orientation.

לפיכך שליח צבור זה אם שמח ועומד ביראה וכדכתיב (תהלים ב) עבדו את ה' ביראה וגילו ברעדה הרי זה משובח. אבל אם מתכוין להשמיע קולו ושמח לקולו שישמעו העם וישבחוהו הרי זה מגונה. ועליו ועל כיוצא בו נאמר (ירמיה י"ב) נתנה עלי בקולה על כן שנאתיה

*“Therefore, if this shaliaḥ tzibur can fuse his joy (professional satisfaction) with the appropriate reverence, as it is written: (Psalms 2:11) ‘Serve God with reverence; rejoice before Him with trembling,’ then he is worthy of praise. But if his real intention is that his voice be heard, if his true joy is the praise he will receive from the congregation on account of his voice, he is worthy of contempt. About such things it is said (Jeremiah 12:8): ‘She raised her voice against Me; therefore I have rejected her.’”*

Here, as is so often the case in *halakhah*, the problem we face is not to choose between the “good” alternative and the “bad” one but rather to draw a proper balance between two positive goals. So how can we be sure that we have attained the right balance between satisfaction in our professional competence and the attitude of reverence that is the ultimate goal (*takhlit*) of prayer? At this point, Rashba rightly leaves it up to us; as he says at the outset of his *t’shuvah*, these

things are determined by “the prayer leader’s intention” – כוונת הלב, literally, “the direction of the heart.” Only the rabbi or the cantor can tell what is in her heart. Is she functioning entirely within the realm of performance values? Or is she able to ascend to *yirah* in spite of (or perhaps *because of*) her preoccupation with the art and artifice of public prayer?

Just another task to think about as we prepare to lead services this High Holiday season.

*Shanah tovah* to all.

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[1] *B. Ta'anit* 16a: רבי יהודה. עמדו בתפילה אף על פי שיש שם זקן או חכם אין מורידין לפני התיבה אלא הרגיל אומר מטפל ואין לו יש לו יגיעה בשדה וביתו ריקן זקן ופרקו נאה שפל ברך ומרוצה לעם ויש לו נעימה וקולו ערב

[2] See Rashi’s comment to the above passage.

[3] *Shulḥan Arukh Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 53:4-5. These are presented as *ideal* requirements, to be sure; sometimes, you have no choice but to select a *shaliaḥ tzibur* who just can’t sing. But it says something that the tradition imagines its ideal prayer leader as someone endowed with performance ability.

[4] *B. B'rakhot* 30b (*M. B'rakhot* 5:1): אין עומדין להתפלל אלא מתוך כובד ראש

[5] *B. Sanhedrin* 22a: המתפלל צריך שיראה את עצמו כאילו שכינה שרויה כנגדו שנאמר (תהלים ט"ז) שויתי ה' לנגדי תמיד