

Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, wrote:

Judaism is a religion of words, and yet whenever the language of Judaism aspires to the spiritual it breaks into song, as if the words themselves sought escape from the gravitational pull of finite meanings. There is something about music that intimates a reality beyond our grasp. Words are the language of the mind. Music is the language of the soul. ... The Torah is God's libretto, and we, the Jewish people, are God's choir, the performers of God's choral symphony. (from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks's devar Torah on Nitzavim -Vayelekh 5769)

Two years ago Boston Conservatory Director Karl Paunack gave this advice to his students:

"You're not here to become an entertainer, ... You're here to become a sort of therapist for the human soul, a spiritual version of a chiropractor, physical therapist, someone who works with our insides to see if they get things to line up, to see if we can come into harmony with ourselves and be healthy and happy and well."

The great American composer Charles Ives wrote in 1920,

Beauty in music is too often confused with something that lets the ears lie back in an easy chair. Many sounds that we are used to, do not bother us, and for that reason, we are inclined to call them beautiful.

In a recent article Daniel Schwartz wrote,

I dread going to *shul*. The services are both uninspired and uninspiring. Nothing about what goes on there speaks to me spiritually or on any other level. ... I loathe hearing tunes applied to the davening simply because they "fit" the text rhythmically but do nothing to convey the meaning of the text. I bemoan the lack of dignity that pervades the public presentation of our prayers. I resent the fact that the public worship ... has become little more than a "Romper Room" style sing along. I yearn for the "high church" atmosphere of a bygone era. (*Conversations: The Journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals*, Winter, 2011)

Here's a beautiful passage about choral singing from a wonderful French novel called *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*. This is from the journal of a precocious 12-year old girl. She's on her way to the gymnasium for the school choir concert.

Every time, it's a miracle. Here are all these people, full of heartache or hatred or desire, and we all have our troubles and the school year is filled with vulgarity and triviality and consequence, and there are all these teachers and kids of every shape and size, and there's this life we're struggling through full of shouting and tears and laughter and fights and break-ups and dashed hopes and unexpected luck—it all disappears, just like that, when the choir begins to sing. Everyday life vanishes into song, you are suddenly overcome with a feeling of brotherhood, of deep solidarity, even love, and it diffuses the ugliness of everyday life into a spirit of perfect communion. Even the singers' faces are transformed: I see human beings, surrendering to music.

... I can hardly keep myself from sobbing. ... I look down at the ground because it's just too much emotion at once: it's too beautiful, and everyone singing together, this marvelous sharing. I'm no longer myself, I am just one part of a sublime whole, to which the others also belong, and I always wonder at such moments why this cannot be the rule of everyday life, instead of being an exceptional moment, during a choir. (*The Elegance of the Hedgehog*, Muriel Barbery; translated by Alison Anderson. New York: Europa Editions, p. 185)

"To sing like this, in the company of other souls, ... and to make those chords so rich that they bring tears to your eyes. This is transcendence. This is the power that choral singing has, that other music can only dream of." —Garrison Keillor

The URL for Chorus America is <http://www.chorusamerica.org/>.

The URL for the Zamir Chorale of Boston is www.zamir.org.

Best wishes.

JOSHUA JACOBSON
zamirboston@me.com