

# *Jewish Choirs – Is it Good for the Jews?*

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The last time the Bears were in the playoffs, *Shabbat Shirah* happened to coincide with *Erev* Super Bowl Sunday. My “sermon” that day was my attempt to explain how, using the rules of Talmudic exegesis, we could predict that the Bears would be victorious over the New England Patriots the next day. As you will painfully recall, that didn’t turn out so well. So even though the Bears begin their journey through the NFL playoffs tomorrow, I will NOT be talking this Shabbat about the Bears, nor will I again lead you in a round of “Bear Down, Chicago Bears.” I’ll now pause a moment for those who wish to leave... ☺

My freshman year of college was a special time for me, as I’m sure it was for most all of you. I have especially fond memories of Freshman Orientation week, when all new students showed up early for a week of programs and presentations targeted especially for us. I remember driving from New York to Philadelphia with

my brothers, who agreed to *shlep* me and my stuff to school, arriving on campus, looking forward to a new life, in new surroundings, and new friends. I recall the welcome package we were handed as we arrived on campus - the only part of its contents that I remember, I can't mention from the *bimah* 😊. I smile as I reminisce about how at Freshman Casino Night I won a gift certificate to the local deli by shouting out the answer to a trivia question, again, neither the question nor the answer can I repeat on the *bimah*! 😊

But perhaps the most memorable, certainly the most ultimately impactful experience, occurred at the campus Hillel. We were introduced to all the things the Hillel had to offer us, as well as treated to presentations by some of the local Jewish groups, including the Arbel Chorale, a group of college kids and young adults from across the city, who came together to sing Jewish a cappella music, rehearsing weekly and performing at synagogues, concert halls, and venues throughout the greater Philadelphia area.

I was blown away! Other than leading services in my *shul* at home, I had no experience singing, and no formal music training

other than on-again, off-again piano lessons for the prior eight or so years. And I fell in love with the group and with the idea of singing! Here were people like me – young, Jewish – who loved to sing, loved to sing in Hebrew and Yiddish, loved enjoying their Judaism through song – and, it seemed to me, loved each other’s company!

I auditioned for the choir – a story in and of itself! - and was accepted. Sunday evening rehearsals were the highlight of my week. And I got involved – at my audition, they said they saw me as a potential leader of the bass section, something I would learn later was not necessarily a reflection on me as much as it was on the basses in the choir at the time – and on basses in general, I learned even later! The following year, I was Business Manager of the choir. My credentials? Two semesters of Introductory Economics, and summers working in my father’s jewelry store on 47<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan.

Fast forward to today. I’m a Jewish music professional. And one of the highlights of my year is attending the North American Jewish Choral Festival each summer. Over 500 participants –

singers - professional and amateur, cantors, choir directors and conductors, composers, music educators – gather from all across North America and beyond, to sing, learn and share the joy of Jewish music.

This past year, a special feature of the Festival, aside from going with three members of our congregation, was the presentation of the results of the “First-Ever Survey of Jewish Choral Activity in North America,” commissioned by the Zamir Choral Foundation. I was very excited upon hearing the results and conclusions, and I wanted to share just a little bit of that with you.

The survey was designed by Dr. Diane Tickton Schuster of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles, a national expert on adult and experiential Jewish learning and author of the book Jewish Lives, Jewish Learning: Adult Jewish Learning in Theory and Practice, as well as by Dr. Ezra Kopelowitz, a sociologist in Israel who has conducted numerous surveys for major Jewish organizations. The survey was designed in conjunction with Matthew Lazar and the leadership of the Zamir Choral Foundation, which sponsored the survey. I had

the pleasure of exchanging emails as well as speaking at length to Dr. Schuster this week in preparation of this talk.

Among the survey's goals for collecting data about Jewish choral singers and their experiences were:

1. To find out why singers participate in Jewish choral activity;
2. To obtain demographic and Jewish identity information about singers, both adults and teens;
3. To learn about Jewish choral activities in synagogues and communities.

More than 2,000 individuals completed the survey, an impressive number in and of itself. Among the survey's findings that I found most illuminating:

\* "More than three-quarters of respondents have been members of synagogues for more than ten years and synagogue attendance is strong: 56% attend at least 2-3 times per month and 13% go to synagogue at least several times *per week*"

\* The survey respondents are highly educated professionals: 89% hold bachelor's degrees; 38% have master's degrees; 27% have doctorates

\* The survey editors see these adults as:

- “actively engaged in Jewish life through synagogue membership;
- dedicated to Jewish communal service through affiliation and leadership roles, and;
- engaged in spiritual meaning-making within a Jewish framework.
- Most of their friends are Jewish;
- they regularly attend Jewish adult education programs;
- they contribute to Jewish charities, and;
- they regard being Jewish as ‘very important’ in their lives.”

\* “In terms of participation patterns, Jewish choral singers are distinctive in their high levels of involvement in the groups in which they sing.... [And in contrast to many other Jewish communal] leaders (e.g., board members, committee chairs, event planners) who ‘come and go’ in Jewish communal activities,

Jewish choral singers tend to participate long-term, over many years.”

\* Based on responses to the question “‘*[Jewish choral singing] enables me to integrate my Jewish life with my musical life,*’ the findings indicated a particularly strong benefit accruing to younger singers. These findings about what the surveyors termed ‘the Integration benefit’ suggest that younger singers are likely to be responsive to Jewish activities they believe help them integrate aspects of self and thus enhance personal wellbeing.”

Of course, there’s much more in the findings that I can share with you, but I want to read to you one paragraph from the Executive Summary of the Survey in the section entitled “Summary and Implications.” I am grateful to Dr. Marsha Bryan Edelman, who was our guest here at Beth El on *Shabbat Shirah* two years ago and is the administrator of the Zamir Choral Foundation, for allowing me to share information from this unpublished Executive Summary of the Survey:

*“The initial data analysis suggests that Jewish choral singers are a distinctive subgroup of leadership in the contemporary*

*American Jewish community. The singer's self-reports show that they are spiritual, intellectual, interested in developing themselves Jewishly and in making connections with other Jews. As individuals who choose group activity as their means of musical expression, they are intrinsically collaborative. In their persistence and dedication, they are accustomed to cooperatively pursuing goal-centered tasks over long periods of time. As activists in Jewish communal life, they participate experientially as they learn, build community, and engage others through music.*

*“The survey findings also suggest that, beyond their choral group participation, Jewish choral singers typically involve themselves in other volunteer and community education roles. When the survey respondents were asked about their current engagement in Jewish communal life, a third indicated that, not only were they synagogue board members/religious school teachers/volunteers in Jewish organizations, but also that they had increased their level of involvement over the past three years. In the open-ended comments, various singers described how participation in Jewish choral activity has brought them closer to Judaism and/or enabled them to more authentically engage in Jewish life.”*

So, what's the point, you might ask? Good question! I asked Dr. Schuster the same question, and she listed these as her main points:

*“...choirs are mini-communities that help singers share responsibility, create common products, challenge one another, and celebrate together. At their best, they are models of social and democratic responsibility-taking. For Jews, they offer wonderful adult and experiential learning opportunities.”* She added that she was *“...glad to expand on these points and try to link them to why this is good news for Jewish communal institutions.”*

Last night, as I pondered what I'd learned this week in preparing to talk to you today, I thought back to my first real musical experience, with the Arbel Chorale of Philadelphia. And looking at that experience through the light of the findings of this survey, I realize that so much of it rang true for me: Being part of a small, self-contained community, working collaboratively towards shared goals, how it led me to leadership roles, both within the choir as well as within the greater Jewish community, and especially how it afforded me the opportunity to gain competence, as well as develop myself Jewishly in a way that was meaningful, particularly to me - through singing.

So am I suggesting that all of you join the synagogue choir?

*Absolutely not!* First of all, there's only a limited number of seats in the choir loft. And I've *heard* some of you sing, and ...well, never mind that! 😊 But I think we can learn from this by extending the model beyond the scope of a choir, in the manner that perhaps Dr. Schuster was suggesting at the end of her summary points above. At Beth El, we are fond of saying that there are many doors through which people enter into the synagogue community, leading to different groups engaged in different pursuits, following a variety of paths of involvement. To the extent that these activities engage our members in the ways that a choir engages its singers, we stand a greater chance of strengthening our sub-communities, which while their members may have entered via separate doors, all exist under the same communal roof, that of our Beth El community, and thereby make us a stronger community.

*Shabbat Shalom!*