

Rabbi's Column

All metaphors break down eventually, and this next one will as well at some point - which does not make it any the less accurate.

A congregation is like a band/chorus/orchestra/symphony. When everything goes well, and everyone is focused, then the feeling is phenomenal and everyone knows they have been through an experience that required all of them working together. People do not have to be equally talented for an amazing experience to occur.

Sometimes, though, a person who is used to being the soloist is seated (or standing) with everyone else and either forgets to blend in, or never learned how to be one of the crowd in the first place. It is the unfortunate group which does not have the opportunity to help train the talented soloist in ways to be an unnoticed part of the crowd. In a good performing group, it is only the trained ear which can pick out the individual instruments/voices. If the untrained ear can pick out individuals, then it is to be hoped that the individual, at that moment, has a solo part.

One of the Cantorial teachers in my seminary had an amazing capacity for volume. His voice could fill an auditorium with poor acoustics. When I knew him, he sang as if every room was like that. Whenever I had the dubious pleasure of being near him, I lost all capability of focusing on the service. My brain fled from the constant loud volume, and rarely returned by the Mourner's Kaddish.

Out of respect for him, those near to him sacrificed their attempts at God focus on a consistent basis. Fortunately he was neither present at all services, nor were the rooms we prayed in always too small for his voice, so there were spaces I could stand at times and relegate his voice to the background.

When a group is performing there is no time to work out any kinks. Practices are where the kinks are worked out.

I often considered a religious service within a congregation as a performance. However, I have recently seen that regular services with a floating population are more like practices. There is time to work on creating an experience which goes well, and where everyone feels they are equally contributing and all are following the chosen leader/conductor. The person in front is most like a lead singer, and the congregation is like the back-up singers. Sometimes the lead singer will quiet down to let the back up singers be heard, but most times the lead singer should be the loudest voice which everyone can hear, just in case something about the melody changes.

One practical ramification of this is that sometimes, if I feel it necessary on the way to an extraordinary experience, I may stop to review something that needs a bit more work, or will let somebody know that their wonderful talents need to be expressed as part of the group, and not overpowering it.

Happy 69th Birthday, Israel!

Looking forward to the celebration of next year's milestone 70 years young.

