

JOURNAL OF JEWISH MUSIC AND LITURGY

Cantorial Council of America

in conjunction with

The Philip and Sarah Belz School of Jewish Music
Yeshiva University, Volume XXIII

"HIS LIFE WAS A SONG"

A Memorial Tribute to Philip Belz

by Norman Lamm

Philip Belz cut a unique figure in Memphis, in the South, indeed in all American Jewry. He was a man of generous philanthropy on behalf of many and diverse causes, but he had a special affinity and affection for Yeshiva University of which he was a Trustee, and especially for the Philip and Sarah Belz School of Jewish Music. Here he was the eponym, the major Benefactor, and almost - a pupil.

He was a man of many talents and many endowments. He was especially drawn to music and to song. His life was cohesive and consistent, and there was a bond that tied together the various aspects of his life: his avocation, namely, his love of music, and his *Yiddishkeit*--his commitment to Judaism, to Torah, to its hoary traditions, and to his people.

The Kabbalists were wont to represent ideas, concepts, and notions by the metaphor of *hekhalot*, palaces or royal chambers. Every great theme was assigned to a different *hekhal*. Thus, there is a *hekhal* of Torah, a *hekhal* of piety, and so on. One can, in this manner, discern the relation of various themes or concepts by their geography, that is, how close one theme is to other sublime notions. This gave rise to many creative and novel expressions of the ideals of Judaism by means of the *hekhalot*.

Thus, a great Hasidic master taught that the *hekhal ha-shirah*, the royal chamber of Song, abuts the *hekhal ha-teshuvah*, the chamber of Repentance. What he meant, of course, was that song-even if not every song, not always-has the capacity to arouse people to self-transcendence, to lift them above the everyday and the prosaic to new levels of inspiration and perception, so that when the voice rises so do the heart and the soul become uplifted and try to connect with that which is eternal and pure beyond words. Song has the mystical power to stimulate action in the sphere of repentance.

Philip Belz exemplified this propinquity of *shirah* and *teshuvah*, of Song and Repentance (or spiritual experience). A favorite song of his, written by him and his cherished friend Edward Hubbard, was called "My Life is a Song." The refrain reads as follows:

"His Life Was A Song"

My life is a song,
A song that I'm singing
With notes gently ringing in heaven and earth.
My life is a song, with the melody soaring,
My love is outpouring,
For whatever it's worth--my life is a song

Love indeed was a hallmark of his life--all kinds of love, love of individual friends and relatives and all human beings, even strangers, and also love of his faith, his Torah, his people. And these loves he celebrated in his song. When love grows so powerful that words alone cannot embrace it, song and music are called upon to give it expression.

Family played a major role in his life. That too found its voice in his song:

My family is a symphony,
A light in which to bask;
Every day is an aria,
What more can I ask?

Thus was his love of family transmuted into song. *Teshuvah* means the ability to change one's self, an awareness of one's own limitations and therefore the challenge to overcome those inhibiting limitations. And so Philip sings:

Sometimes I may need tuning,
It happens by and by,
But the best of ways bless my days
And raise my voice on high

And he looks back upon his past:

In the winter of my life I look back upon my history
And discover there's no mystery to living well,
In the winter of my life I discover that it's Spring again
And I begin to sing again and feel its spell

If that reads well as poetry, it is far more soaring when sung--and sung properly.

Phil's *teshuvah*--his repentance, his piety, his love, his profound faith--found expression not only in song and not only in writing, but also in action, in

conduct. He was dedicated to his synagogue, the famous Baron Hirsch congregation of which he was the major pillar. It found expression in his love for Israel and for Jewish education. But he had a special love (as his family attests) for Yeshiva, and most of all for the Philip and Sarah Belz School of Jewish Music.

There are in the Torah several instances of *shirah*--poetry meant to be sung. One of the greatest of them all is the *Az Yashir*, that majestic victory song sung by Moses and the Israelites after they miraculously crossed the Red Sea and were saved from the swords of Pharaoh and the hordes of Egyptians ready to slay them. We recite this song daily in our Morning Service: *Az Yashir Moshe u-vene Yisrael*, "then Moses and Israel sang this song to God." The Rabbis of the Talmud were, as usual, extremely meticulous in analyzing every passage, indeed every word, of the Torah. Thus they pointed out that the word for "sang" is, in the Hebrew, not in the past (*shar*), but in the future (*yashir*). Why so? The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 91b) explains: from this we learn the principle of the resurrection of the dead: Moses and the Israelites will, some day, sing this song (again).

Now, that may seem fanciful *derush* or homiletics, but I prefer to read that equation the other way around as well: we not only infer the dogma of resurrection from the singing, but we learn that the singing leads to resurrection. By that I mean: song contains the seeds of eternity, of immortality, of deathlessness. Indeed, the Torah refers to Torah itself as song: *Kitvu lakhem et ha-shirah ha-zot*, "Write for yourselves this song"--and this verse implies the commandment to write out the Torah. It is a song that can heal the sick, revive weary spirits, elevate downtrodden hearts, and rescue frustrated men and women from disillusionment and disappointment and even from despair. Torah is eternity ensconced in music.

Hence, what Philip Belz has done, what he has accomplished in his remarkable journey in this life, and what he has achieved in supporting and expanding and enhancing the Philip and Sarah Belz School of Jewish Music, will last for generations. It will prove an enduring contribution. It is his *Az Yashir*, the song of his immortality.

Tehei nishmato tzerurah bi'tzeror ha'hayyim. May his beautiful soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life.

Sing, Phil, sing your song--the song that was your life--and may its loveliness keep your memory alive in the hearts and minds of all who were privileged to know you, to the very end of days.

Dr. Norman Lamm, President of Yeshiva University - noted scholar, author, and lecturer.
