

Infusing Tefillah WITH TALENT

The Helfgot Brothers

Chazzanus is a world unto itself. Many people are clueless about this world. Others are so mesmerized by it that they pity the poor souls who are ignorant of its profound beauty. In order to provide an appreciation of this world to those who lack it, as well as further edification to those who already have it, Zman conducted an exclusive interview with the renowned chazzanim, Binyamin and Yitzchak Meir Helfgot, the latter widely acknowledged as “The Chazzan” of our times.

| Yakov M. Hirschson

On December 26, 1947, thousands of Jews from across northeastern America gathered in Carnegie Hall in New York to experience a glorious concert entitled “The Four Koussevitzky Brothers.” It was a historical event in the world of *chazzanus*. Moshe, David, Yaakov and Simcha Koussevitzky, each a famous *chazzan* in his own right, were making a joint appearance.

Never before in recent memory had there been such a family of *chazzanim*. While Moshe was famous for his powerful tenor voice, David attracted crowds with the unusual sweetness of his *chazzanus*. Yaakov was known as the greatest *baal tefillah*, and Simcha, according to some, boasted all the qualities possessed by the other three.

Now, half a century later, a new family of remarkable *chazzanim* has appeared: the Helfgot brothers. For the high holidays, three of them will be leading the prayers in famous *shuls* around the world—and there are more budding Helfgot *chazzanim* waiting in the wings. Aptly, there is a Simcha and a David among the Helfgot brothers, who soon became renowned as the “Current Day Koussevitzky Brothers.”

Zman was privileged to conduct an exclusive interview with two of the brothers, Yitzchak Meir and Binyamin Helfgot. They shared their life stories, including what inspired them to become who they are.

Ever since the days of *David Hamelech*, the *na'im zemiros Yisrael* – “Sweet Singer of Yisrael” – Jews have looked to add beauty and finesse to their *davening*. Because *tefillah* is such an important part of our *avodah*, and indeed our daily lives, it offers a wonderful venue for artistic talent in singing. *Chazzanus* is there to fill this niche in a way that can touch the Jewish soul like nothing else.

Chazzanus and Neginah

When asked to define the word *chazzanus*, most people are quick to respond that it is a particular style of singing. There are

those who prefer lively, dynamic singing while others enjoy more subtle and poignant melodies. And then there are those who sing... *chazzanus*. This would almost equate *chazzanus* with opera, *lehavdil*.

It is important to understand that *chazzanus* is certainly not opera. The true definition of a *chazzan* is simply a *baal tefillah*. The proof for this is no further away than your own *siddur* or *machzor*. The word *chazzan* is used regularly in place of the term *baal tefillah*. The *Mateh Efraim* lists the qualifications of the ideal *chazzan* as one who is pious, who is deemed worthy by the entire congregation and who possesses a voice that is both pleasant and powerful. (Note that a pleasant voice appears at the end of the list.)

In years past, it was common practice for every *shul* to have its own *chazzan* who was employed by the *kehillah*. His job was to *daven* before the *amud* every *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov* and to officiate at weddings and similar events.

Of the hundreds of *chazzanim* that abounded throughout the *shtetlach*, there were some who stood out among their contemporaries. Predictably, these *chazzanim* were very much in demand by the bigger *shuls*, who vied with each other for the privilege of having them as “their” *chazzan*. Usually, the *kehillah* that was the highest bidder prevailed.

Less well-to-do *kehillas* could not afford the cost of their own steady *chazzan*, but nonetheless went out of their way to hire one for a special *Shabbos* or for *Yom Tov*. This was no small feat, since it involved paying the *chazzan* both for his services as well as for his travel expenses. In an attempt to defray the steep cost of this venture, the *chazzan* would also schedule an appearance in the *shul* on a weekday, either right before or after *Shabbos*, when eager listeners would pay for the experience of hearing his rendition.

Interestingly, the *chazzan* generally was not a singer; he merely recited excerpts from the *tefillas* in his own particular *nusach*. A famous exception was the renowned



The album covers of two of the most prominent *chazzanim* of the twentieth century, Zavel Kwartin (left), and Yossele Rosenblatt (right).

Yossele Rosenblatt, who was both a stunning *chazzan* and a talented *baal menagen* (singer). Listeners can easily distinguish between his singing style in the sweet, poignant lullaby “*Shluf shoin mine tier kind*” and the song “*A Yiddishe Mameh*,” and his famous *Kol Beramah Nishma*. The first two are in fact songs, while the latter is a *nusach ha-tefillah*.

Chazzanus, Concerts and Cassettes

Early concerts – which consisted of a modest assemblage in the local *shul* – merely provided the wherewithal for the *chazzan* to cover his travel expenses, plus a nominal fee for his performance. Eventually, though, *chazzanus* evolved into concerts far surpassing the humble *shtetl* rendition.

Humble beginnings notwithstanding, the spread of *chazzanus* wreaked much spiritual havoc and destruction in *Klal Yisrael*. In the early 1900s, there were many Jews who, though eager to cast aside the “burden” of Torah and *mitzvos*, often chose nonetheless to adhere to certain superficial cultural aspects that appealed to them. Why forego gefilte fish, *matzah knaidlach* and potato *kugel*? By the same token, why forfeit the sweet delight of *chazzanus*?

Consequently, in many circles *chazzanus* became a type of “Jewish opera” rather than a vehicle to inspire the Jewish soul to *teshuvah*. High Holiday services in non-Orthodox synagogues and temples came to resemble concerts rather than holy convocations to connect to *Hashem*. Many Reform temples spared no efforts to obtain the best and most talented *chazzanim* to lead the services. Sadly, with poverty so rampant, numerous *chazzanim* from Orthodox backgrounds ended up on the podium of these arenas despite *halachic* and/or other problems such attendance posed.

Nevertheless, in the 1920s with the development of voice recording technology, *chazzanus* experienced a golden era. Undoubtedly, there were many great *chazzanim* living in prior times, but their names remain unknown due to the lack of technology that could record their voices for posterity.

Some of the first *chazzanim* with *yiras shamayim* to record their magnificent voices and splendid *nusach ha-tefillah* were Gershon Sirota, Zavel Kwartin, Yossele Rosenblatt, David Rothman and Mordechai Hershman. Some of the more memorable