

Shavuot 2018 Sermon Slam
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I call this the dvar which is unlikely to win me any friends, but I want to emphasize that what I'm about to say is not personal at all; in fact I have seen the phenomenon that I am about to describe everywhere I've prayed in the US and Israel.

On Shavuot celebrate our receiving the 10 Commandments. One of those is famously not to worship idols, and we typically have an image of idol worship as people bowing down to statues. But in modern times Dennis Prager, I believe an affiliated Conservative Jew like us, lists modern idols that are good things to have in our lives, but we should not worship them. For example, education: good thing to have in our lives, worthy of doing something to achieve, but not to be worshipped. Same with art. And I would add music.

It's a legitimate concern that we may worship music too much, and this is why: we have authentic knowledge of what words to say when we pray, but no preserved melodies—even the trope marks mean different notes to different folks. So we make up our own as people and as communities. They give us pleasure but do they serve the G!d of truth we are supposed to serve, the Sovereign of sovereigns, Who deserves our best efforts at “the Kings Hebrew” as it were, or are they mere songs that serve our own tastes and can be sung with words slurred in almost Maimonidean terms as we might slur our words while under the influence?

For example, consider Adon Olam: every melody that I know including my favorite one puts the accent on the last syllable of the word **מֶלֶךְ**. Well if you don't know Hebrew then this is merely a mistake and I believe in a G!d Who forgives these kinds of errors. But if you do know Hebrew and you sing it to the melody, you've just told a lie: You're saying “at that time G!d was called meLEKH,” when a Hebrew speaker knows full well that G!d was called MElekh. A lie is merely a knowingly given untruth.



This is not Ashkenazic or Sfardic or even Bronx/Brooklyn, it's just wrong (the vertical line under the mem is a stress mark), and done just to serve the tune. It happens to be a fixable problem—by twiddling with the syllables earlier in the line, **מֵלֶךְ** can be pronounced MElekh in every tune that I know of (and all other stresses in the line come out right too).

Another example: look at the Ahavat Olam prayer: in the 2nd paragraph there's a word **קֹדֶשׁ**. We've taken to pronouncing that word in song as kawdSHEH-kha. Well that's a double one: it's not only that the stress is on the wrong syllable (should be on the last one), but Hebrew generally doesn't allow for an EH vowel in that position in a sentence. It's the same reason we don't say "V'ahavta eit ad-nai elokekha b'khol lvavEHkha—it just wouldn't be Hebrew.

This is also a fixable problem, in that by playing with the stresses earlier in the line we can get all of them right and pronounce **קֹדֶשׁ** as kawdshKHA.

So I urge consciousness of the words that we pray that are supposed to express our highest and noblest ideals.

Dave Sherman

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שבת שלום