

## The Day The Music Died<sup>1</sup>

Shelach 5783

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Exactly 90 years ago to the day, on June 17, 1933, a remarkable event took place in Yerushalaim's Churvah shul. Starting hours before davening began, people began to stream into the Old City from all over, even the farthest of the newer neighborhoods. They came to hear the legendary Chazzan Yossele Rosenblatt lead services. Tickets were sold for the davening, and they were sold out well in advance, the cover charge benefitting Yeshiva Merkaz HaRav. People who didn't have tickets stood outside the windows just to hear. If that weren't enough, the sermon was going to be delivered by the Chief Rabbi of the land of Israel, Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook. Virtually every one of those who were there came back to hear Rav Kook three days later, when he delivered the eulogy at Yossele Rosenblatt's funeral...This past Wednesday was Yossele Rosenblatt's 90th yahrzeit. Who was he? Why did thousands of Jews pack the shul to hear him daven, and then to pay their final respects- and still visit his gravesite on Har Hazeitim? And why is his legacy still important? I believe there are three important lessons we can learn from his remarkable life, even for those who profess to hate Chazzonus.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to David Olivestone of Jerusalem for his magnificent article, "The legend, legacy of Cantor Yossele Rosenblatt" - <https://www.jpost.com/judaism/article-745658>

The first lesson can be found in the central event in this week's Parsha. After the spies return with their negative report about the land of Israel, the Jewish people worked themselves into a frenzy. Soon enough, they were prepared to do the unthinkable:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל־הָעֵדָה לְרָגוּם אֹתָם בְּאֲבָנִים, וַיִּכְבֹּד ה' נֹרְאָה בְּאֵהָל מוֹעֵד אֶל־כָּל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

*And the whole community threatened (lit. said) to pelt them with stones, and the Presence of God appeared in the Tent of Meeting to all the Israelites.*

They were ready to stone Moshe and Aharon, and the two spies who attempted to deliver a positive report, Yehoshua and Calev. What happens then? At the moment of the most serious danger, God reveals himself. Why now? Wouldn't it make more sense to conceal himself when Jews are behaving badly? Perhaps we can suggest that God revealed himself right now to strengthen Yehoshua and Calev, who followed their moral compass and didn't abandon them in the face of the ten other spies, and subsequent mob rule and mass hysteria. *God is found when people steadfastly stick to their principles*, and Chazzan Yossele Rosenblatt, in his short life and legendary career, did this time and time again. If Yossele had been a secular Jew, he would no doubt have been one of the greatest operatic tenors of his generation. The legendary tenor Enrico Caruso described his voice as being "of pure gold"; he could sight read any score and had perfect pitch. He was so sought after on the bima that when he was hired by New York's Congregation Ohab Zedek,

the shul had to raise the princely sum of \$10,000 per year- considerably more than the Rabbi made- and give him off as much time as he needed for concerts.

Yossele's principles would be tested after a concert he put on for the American Jewish Relief Committee at the New York Hippodrome- an event that raised over \$5 million in today's dollars. Present at the concert was the director of the Chicago Opera, Cleofonte Campanini, who made him a remarkable offer- \$1000 each for 17 opera performances in which he would play the role of Eleazar in La Juive. To sweeten the pot and overcome his hesitation, Campanini promised that he would not have to sing on Shabbos or Yom Tov, and would not have to shave his beard; Yossele was fastidious about his personal appearance and always looked like a well dressed, impeccably groomed and deeply devout Jew, which he actually was- on the trip to Jerusalem, some noted that he went to the mikvah every morning. Yossele did consider the proposal seriously; he had a showman's flair about him, but in an interview, he said "The cantor of the past and the opera star of the future waged a fierce struggle within me. Suddenly a voice whispered into my ear, 'Yossele, don't do it!'" He knew that his soul, his identity, was that of a Chazzan. In fact, after his refusal, his career exploded. The story of a cantor who sacrificed operatic stardom for his religious principles and identity made waves, and opened up many more possibilities for him. For example, he sang with Caruso on the steps of New York's City Hall, and deliver a sold out concert at Carnegie Hall as well.

Unfortunately Yossele's generous nature, personal warmth, love of every Jew and, ultimately, his gullibility left him a vulnerable target for con artists and bad investments. A partnership in a local Jewish newspaper went sideways, and he lost everything, forcing him to declare bankruptcy. Here, too, he stuck to his principles, taking on a punishing concert load on Vaudeville to pay off all his creditors, even though he was not legally bound to do so.

No doubt Yossele's personal piety and integrity attracted people to the concert halls, and especially shuls, whenever he appeared. But there was something else as well. The Talmud in Masechet Sotah (34a) tells us that Yehoshua and Kalev took a detour, separating from the rest of the group to pray at the graves of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, for help in resisting the scheme the other spies had contrived. Couldn't they have prayed anywhere? Why did they need to go to their graves specifically? I think it is because Tefillah is enhanced by the mood created in a certain place at the right time. Standing at that grave, Yehoshua and Calev felt the inspiration that moment was trying to create. Ultimately, that is the job of a Chazzan, to use the traditional modes and melodies that compromise proper *nussach hatefillah* to interpret the text, thereby connecting those in attendance with the emotions and thoughts the tefillah is trying to engender. A good chazzan can make you feel sad when the tefillah is a sad one, wistful and poignant when that

is the theme of the tefillah, elated and excited when that is called for—even if you don't understand the words at all. He does this through the tunes he uses, the settings he composes or even how he uses his voice for various parts of davening. Even if you misguidedly hate Chazzanut, you know you've felt it when you heard a Chazzan who knows what he's doing. Think about when Shulem Lemmer was here—what an unforgettable davening that was. There was nothing Shulem couldn't do—Chazzanut, opera, popular music, Chassidische niggunim, and everything in between. People were at the edge of their seats, hanging on to every note when he sang *Lekel Baruch* on Shabbos morning, singing along with his *Avinu Shebashamayim* and dancing during *Birkat HaChodesh*. Everyone who was there told me that if davening had lasted an hour longer, they wouldn't have cared. That's what Yossele was like, too— he was that versatile and that engaging. That's why it is so tragic that the institution of the Cantor has been so awfully compromised in the Orthodox community, as the omed has been ceded to laypeople who often don't understand what a baal tefillah is supposed to accomplish. Perhaps it was the fault of chazzonim themselves, because Chazzanut later became synonymous with lengthy, operatic performances that Cantors viewed as vehicles for self aggrandizement. By all accounts, Yossele Rosenblatt was different. With his setting of “Uvenucho Yomar,” you feel the grandeur of the Torah returning to the Aron, and the Aron traveling in the desert. His setting of “Acheinu Kol Beis Yisroel” (long before Abie Rotenberg composed his famous setting) makes you feel his deep

concern over the fate of the Jewish people, and you will feel it too. When he sang “Ana Avda deKudesha Bruch Hu,” I am a servant of God, you heard him meaning it, and when you hear it, you will also be elevated and motivated to serve God. As I once shared, I once was listening to this last piece in the car with Shaya, who was a toddler, and Shaya said “He sounds like he wants his Abba.” How perceptive that is! No doubt, Yossele’s falsetto was acrobatic, and his pieces could be operatic and technically demanding when he stood at the omed, it wasn’t a vehicle for his self promotion. It was all sincere. Listen to the description of Rav Moshe Tzvi Neriah, Rav Kook’s faithful disciple and founder of the network of Bnei Akiva Yeshivot, of the davening that Shabbos:

*Yossele, with his deep tenor and the breadth of his improvisations, and with the fineness of his falsetto, amazed with his prayers. When his fine melodies poured through the sanctuary of the shul, the entire congregation held its breath. The prayer in the Churvah was a profound experience for him, as well, and the enthusiastic Jerusalemite congregation generated power and intensity for him. A Jew prays three times a day “Return to Jerusalem with mercy,” and here he merits to bring forth prayer so close to the Western Wall- is that a small matter? Yossele was not standing like a Cantor in front of a congregation, but like a Jew recounting his sins, beseeching before God.*

*...It is worth noting that in the yehi ratzon section of the prayer for the new month,*

*Yossele reached the heights of his ability, and the words “may God renew for us...” which concluded with the words “And with an imminent redemption” was like an announcement that the Redemption was drawing near and being fulfilled before our very eyes...*

*From Yossele we heard a tefillah that explained each sentence in the prayers, an explanation that penetrated the recesses of the heart...*

Yossele was a person of integrity, of spirituality, and of Ahavas Yisroel- and what really energized him was his love for Eretz Yisrael. That’s the basic theme of this week’s Parsha in the diaspora- the dangers of speaking ill of the land of Israel, and the importance of maintaining a positive perspective about it. Yossele had refused to appear in many films, save for one- The Jazz Singer, with Al Jolson, in which he played the role of a Cantor, singing Kol Nidrei. But In 1933, after the downturn of his fortune, Yossele was made an offer he couldn’t refuse. He was invited to travel to Palestine and film a movie called The Dream Of My People. He traveled to biblical sites in the land of Israel, and was recorded singing Cantorial pieces that describe those sites. He was there for 10 weeks, davening in shuls and Yeshivot in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, but it wasn’t just a professional engagement for a film shoot. It was a “pilot trip,” where he and his wife began to explore the possibility of making aliyah. The Zohar says that the *meraglim* spoke negatively about the land of Israel because they wished to preserve the prominent leadership positions they held outside it;

Yossele was prepared to sacrifice a still-lucrative career and live in the land of Israel. In order to finance the move, Yossele undertook a European concert tour and his appearance in the Churvah Shul was to be a “farewell Shabbos” before he would eventually return. Tragically, it was his farewell, in every sense of the word. The following day, he went to the River Jordan to record several segments of the film, and then to the Dead Sea. It was there that he suffered the heart attack that took his life, at the age of 51.

Yossele’s legacy lives on, of course, through his music, which is still rendered by Chazzanim everywhere- including pieces most people don’t know he composed or championed. The Shir Hama’alot that is so ubiquitous was a composition he performed; reportedly, the poet Chaim Nachman Bialik advocated that it, rather than Hatikvah, be the national anthem of the State of Israel. The Kaddish so many Chazzanim use at the end of Yamim Noraim davening (many of them incorrectly) was composed by a Chazzan named Jacob Gottlieb, also known as Yankele der Heiseriker (Jacob the Hoarse) and popularized by Yossele Rosenblatt. But what he stood for was so much more than just his music- and that’s why his legacy is so important for us. Take some time, even if you think you don’t like Chazzanut, and listen to his music, which is readily available on YouTube. After Shabbos, with the text of this sermon, you will receive links to the pieces I mentioned, and hear what I mean. I pray that you- that we- will be inspired by his example, and his voice, to live lives of integrity, never sacrificing our principles, and always listening to the inner



voice that tells us “don’t do it!” May we commit to live lives of musical prayer, and prayerful music- and to restore the bimah, in terms of the quality and emotionality of tefillah, to what it was. And may we always strive to connect our lives to Israel- while we are still alive.