

Revolution: From music to judicial

...and how it played out in Elul in Jerusalem

Elul, the last month of the Jewish year, was marked with two mass-crowd events: The ascent of Israelis of all political and religious backgrounds to Jerusalem, and the intensifying of protests against the government's judicial reform (or "revolution," as dubbed by protesters).

What was the origin of this year's protest? Many Israelis on both sides agree that it was not just the judicial reforms. Some point to the long reign of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu; others to built-up frustrations that the "1977 revolution," as it is known in Israel – the victory of the Menachem Begin-led Likud, which ended decades of Labor Party rule – is not ending, notwithstanding episodic breaks.

Indeed, during those 46 years there were anti-government protests for various reasons: The Lebanon War in the early 1980s, alleged corruption in the early 1990s, cost-of-living increases in the early 2010s, and Netanyahu's refusal to resign when he was indicted for corruption in 2020.

But perhaps it is the protest that did not happen that serves as a primary contributor to today's situation: the "music revolution" of the 1990s.

Until then, Israeli radio would only play "proper" music, excluding Sephardi/Mizrahi Middle Eastern music. With nearly half of Israeli Jews of Sephardi heritage, the demand led to the emergence of the "cassette industry" centered around the Tel Aviv bus station. There, people could purchase Sephardi music that the radio stations weren't playing.

In the decades that followed the "1977 revolution," there were no significant changes to the composition of non-government centers of power such as the media, academia, judicial, and civil service. But there was one area in which there was a major change: music! Starting in the 1990s, radio stations began playing Sephardi singers such as Zohar Argov and Zehava Ben.

This, some argue, led to two developments: Middle Eastern Sephardim were not properly "Ashkenazied" ("Europeanized"), and Ashkenazim were influenced by Sephardi Middle Eastern music, along with its religious themes and alleged shallowness.

As one prominent and highly respected politician at that time reflected: "Instead of us conquering Tul Karem, Tul Karem conquered us" (referring to the Palestinian city; he later apologized).

Fast forward 30 years, and one can see today the consequences of the music revolution and the religious themes that accompanied it.

The music revolution: From the clubs to the synagogues

In 1982, the song of the year was Benzin's "Friday" ("Yom Shishi"), in which the Israeli rock band described the week-long anticipation, day-by-day, to Friday night, when there is a party and "we stay all night till the next morning."

By 2019, the theme of this song was adapted (or hijacked) by Omer Adam. Same anticipation, day-by-day, to Friday night – yet not for the party but for Shabbat.

Another popular 2021 song, "I live from Shabbat to Shabbat," by singers Amir Benayoun and Subliminal, describes how time passes slowly until Shabbat – "the light that lights up my all life."

What a long journey the Zionist ethos has made through music: from parties in clubs during the 1980s, to the prayers in synagogues in the 2020s.

Had protests been held in the 1990s to stop the "music revolution" with the same vigor, organization, funding, and foreign pressure we see today, perhaps we would never have gotten to the judicial revolution. The public sentiment would have been different had it not been "conquered by Tul Karem."

But the music revolution happened, and its consequences were on high display 30 years later, during the month of Elul in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem in music

In Tel Aviv during this month, attempts to radicalize protesters accelerated. Bus stops and street signs throughout the city showed a fist with the word "Resist," some showing fire and flames. "Resist 2,700 messianic dictatorship laws," read the signs. It's not clear if we are meant to resist the Messiah or laws accelerating his arrival.

Yet in Jerusalem, as the month of Elul was about to start, a party was held at the Tower of David. Zehava Ben, the Mizrahi singer whose glass ceiling 40 years ago would have been the outskirts of the central bus station, was now on center stage at one of the world's most stunning citadels, energizing the crowd that included protesters and supporters of the judicial reform alike; those who are secular and religious: "God just give me a bit of luck," she sang.

Two weeks later, the music revolution was on display again at the Jerusalem Beer Festival, which attracts thousands of people, including those from Tel Aviv. The crowd was dancing to the hassidic music of haredi singer Shuli Rand. Something unthinkable in the 1980s.

While in 1982 the song of the year was Benzin's "Friday," in 1985 it was the sacrilegious song "Waiting for Messiah" by Shalom Hanoch: "Messiah is not coming, Messiah is also not phoning."

Rand surprised the audience by performing this song, making reference to the late religious philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz, who said that a messiah is not someone who is here but something you aspire to (akin to an asymptote function, or in the words of Shlomo Artzi in his song "Hardufim": "Both you and I will not get there in most likelihood.")

While Adam took the theme of "Friday" and gave it a religious spin, haredi singer Rand did not even bother. He kept the song as is, and just changed its meaning.

As Rand was performing in Independence Park, a short walk away in Sultan's Pool was a performance by Artzi, the legendary secular singer, loved by Israelis for more than 50 years.

With the backdrop of the Old City walls, Artzi sang, "No, no, I will not give up on you," echoing the words of prophets who lived inside the walls 3,000 years earlier, and of the Torah itself: We might be at the bottom of spirituality, in exile, in grief, in despair, in darkness, but God promised us: He will never give up on us. Similarly, Artzi intoned in another song: "In remote control, I stare from afar. I will not let you go until the love returns to us."

Change is hard, and so are domestic rifts that come with it, but the music revolution and its consequences underscore that Israelis – demonstrating or supporting – are a nation of believers!

Two weeks later, as Elul and the year were coming to an end, religious singer Ishay Ribo performed at the same venue. Now the lyrics were no longer latent nor subject to interpretations. These were deeply religious songs that touched the souls of the crowd of secular, religious, protesters, supporters, Mizrahim, Ashkenazim (in Menachem Begin's words: Jews!) – those at Sultan's Pool, and those watching from above.

Ribo finished his Sultan's Pool concert, which also concluded the month of Elul and ushered us to the new year, with the final line of his flagship song: "Happy is the nation in which God is its lord." ■

The writer is the author of Judaism 3.0 – Judaism's Transformation to Zionism (Judaism-Zionism.com).



'CASSETTE INDUSTRY': Satisfying demand for Sephardi music. (Gritt Zheng/Unsplash)



JUDAISM & MODERNITY
MOSHE TARAGIN

The Four Species of Sukkot are fundamentally different from the typical items used for the performance of a *mitzvah*. Objects which are generally employed for mitzvot come in two varieties. Some of these, such as a Sefer Torah, contain the written word of God. While a Sefer Torah contains the entirety of God's word, *tefillin* and *mezuza* parchments contain excerpted "highlights" from the Torah.

Other mitzvah objects, while not containing Torah texts, possess historical symbolism. These recall important historical milestones, moments when the very same objects were utilized. For example, eating *matzah* recalls our exodus from Egypt when we ate the very same *matzah*, amid the chaos of our speedy departure. Likewise, our modern *sukkot* are replicas of the actual huts which sheltered us from the harsh desert conditions during our journey to Israel. Consuming matzah or residing in a *sukkah* reconstructs foundational moments of Jewish history.

These two brands of mitzvah objects represent the two primary avenues of religious experience: God's word and Jewish history.

The *Arba Minim* (Four Species) of Sukkot are different. Devoid of any preexisting religious symbolism, they don't bear words of Torah, nor do they directly recall any historical precedent. There was no momentous event in Jewish history which featured the Four Species. The Four Species of Sukkot have no classic historical or divine symbolism.

DIVINE BEAUTY in nature: The Four Species conjure up a third avenue of spiritual connection – the beauty and diversity of God's natural world. The bouquet of the Four Species incorporates a variety of natural elements. The tall *lulav* is harvested from a towering date tree, while the aromatic *hadassim*, or myrtle branches, are gathered from a lowly bush. The *lulav* grows on a tree which produces delicious and nutritious fruit, and yet the *hadassim* branches stem from a bush which is barren of fruit but imbued with sweet fragrance. The *etrog* (citron) is a fruit with a pleasant scent and proven medicinal benefits, due to its high concentration of vitamin C. The sinuous *aravot* are cut from whispering reeds which rise alongside murmuring brooks. Together, these four assorted components encapsulate nature's beauty, variety, and functionality. Together, they showcase the divine masterpiece of nature. On Sukkot, clutching these four icons of nature's beauty affirms that God can be discovered not only in His word or in His historical intervention but through nature as well.

Obviously, the most direct way to serve God and to discover religious meaning is to study His written word and to apply His divine will to our daily lives. God Himself lies beyond the reach of human comprehension and expression, and for this reason Judaism always prioritized Torah study over philosophical inquiry. Alongside Torah, remembering historical milestones and recalling divine miracles also provide us access to God and to religious meaning.

The Four Species provide a third route to discovering Him, independent of His word and unrelated to any historical context. We can identify God in the magnificence of His natural world.



PICKING MYRTLE plants, one of the Four Species, for use in 'lulavim.' (Maor Kinsbursky/Flash90)

We can likewise trace Him in the grandeur of the world within us

NATURE OF mankind: If we can discover God in the beauty of the world which surrounds us, we can likewise trace Him in the grandeur of the world within us. Just as the beauty of nature speaks of divine glory, similarly the magnificence of mankind reflects divine wisdom. Nature signals God through its beauty, while mankind reflects God through His innate human virtue.

For this reason, the *Midrash* associates the Four Species of nature with four major human organs. Establishing this correlation between elegant articles of nature and human organs underscores that both nature's splendor and the magnificence of mankind reflect God.

The *etrog* corresponds to the human heart, the seat of our emotions and our consciousness, each of which is exclusive to human beings. The *aravot* symbolize lips and the capacity for cognitive communication, a trait which we alone possess. The *hadassim* leaves evoke human eyes. Though many animals can see, and some have better sight than humans, we are the only creature gifted with vision, allowing us to imagine realities which don't yet exist. Our eyes work differently. Finally, the *lulav* corresponds to the human spine, which is structured as a double curve, aligning our heads and torso into a vertical line above our feet, allowing us to walk upright. We don't face the ground, scraping by on our knuckles, but stand upright and noble before God.

The Four Species remind us that, as God's masterpiece, we are delicately crafted and, additionally, are endowed with innate purity and intrinsic virtue. The Four Species invite us to trace God through nature's beauty, as well as through the grandeur of human potential and the glory of human virtue.

Human kindness and "natural" morality are expressions of God's will and should inspire religious meaning.

As religious people, we strive for a more elaborate religious experience which incorporates commandments, Torah study, prayer, and historical consciousness. However, we also accredit the intrinsic moral values of a pure human heart. Virtue and nobility were downloaded into our hearts by God, and they must also provide religious inspiration.

RESPECTING GOOD human beings: This concept has particular resonance on Sukkot and special urgency for this coming Sukkot. Sukkot is a *chag* of unity, one of the three times a year during when the entire population

pilgrimage to Jerusalem for a national convention. Additionally, once every seven years, on this *chag* the seminal moment of Sinai when we all stood united before God was reenacted through the ceremony of *hakhel* (assembly).

After a year of social strife and intense and even violent disagreements, we are in desperate need of recipes for national unity.

There are many varieties of unity, but the most superior and durable unity must be built upon mutual respect and acknowledging the merits of people with different lifestyles. Appreciating that differing values enhance our own experience fosters greater unity and enables a more profound feeling of solidarity. Appreciating and respecting the "other" is crucial to genuine unity.

However, respecting others who are different doesn't always come easy for religious Jews. Torah and religion are so primary to our identity that we legitimately struggle to respect those who operate outside the boundaries of classic religious observance.

The first step to mending our ruptured social fabric in Israel is learning to respect other members of our struggling democracy, especially secular Jews.

Many secular Israelis lead deeply meaningful lives of values, of moral, spiritual, and patriotic commitment to our people, to this land, and to our joint history without being classically "religious."

There is something magical about the encounter between a Jewish heart and the soil of our homeland. When the two meet, something deeply spiritual emerges, even if that spirituality isn't framed in classical religious terms.

If we respect their values and lifestyle, even without completely validating a non-religious lifestyle, we must also accommodate their wants and interests. If Orthodox Jews are unable to identify any value in secular Israel, genuine unity built upon mutual respect will remain elusive.

The "natural" symbolism of the Four Species illustrates that natural human goodness is an expression of the divine, even when it isn't accompanied by full religious commitment. We should respect all good human beings, and in particular, those with whom we share both this land and a common destiny. ■

The writer is a rabbi at Yeshivat Har Etzion/Gush, a hesder yeshiva. He has smicha and a BA in computer science from Yeshiva University, as well as a master's degree in English literature from the City University of New York.