

“אָמַר רַבָּה בַּר בַּר חֲנָא: לְדִידִי”

(בבא בתרא עג:)

Music from a Pure Source

THE TEACHING

A Torah about music (נגינה): where a melody comes from and what it does to the listener. Music from a wicked musician makes it hard to serve Hashem; music from an upright one helps. A melody is drawn from birds: the two pure birds close to the source of prophecy, or the birds of the husk (קלפה).

The remedy, so that one can hear music from anyone, is learning the Oral Torah, Gemara (גמרא), at night. It repairs the voice and draws a thread of kindness (חוט של חסד) that shields even learning not for its own sake.

MAIN POINTS

- The metzora (מצרע), struck for his chatter, his evil speech (לשונו הרע), is purified with two pure, living birds. An upright singer draws his melody from those birds, which draw from the place of the prophets, so he is called a chazzan (חזן), from חזון, vision.
- A wicked singer draws from the birds of the husk, and their song is a snare: “כַּצְפִּירִים הָאֲחֻזּוֹת בַּפֶּחַ” (קהלת ט:יב), “like birds caught in a trap”, so are people caught.
- The Oral Torah is night: “בְּמַחְשָׁבִים הוֹשִׁיבֵנִי” (סנהדרין כד:), “He set me in dark places”, is the Babylonian Talmud. Learning Shas (ש"ס) repairs the six rings of the windpipe, where the voice comes from: “קוּמִי רְנִי בַּלַּיְלָה” (איכה ב:יט), “arise, sing out in the night.”
- Holy music builds holy מַלְכוּת, kingship, so David, who knew how to play, “וַיֻּדַּע נֶגֶן”, was fit to be king: “מֵאַחֵר עָלוֹת הִבִּיאוּ” (תהלים עח:עא). He could even lift a melody from someone unfit, from behind holiness, and raise it up.
- The tale: the frog (צפרדע) is a צפור דעה, a bird of knowledge, the voice, “קרא בגרון” (ישעיהו נח:א). Its sixty houses are the sixty tractates. The serpent that swallows it is learning to be called Rabbi; the raven (עורב) is learning at night, ערבית; and the tree is Avraham’s kindness, “וַיִּטֵּעַ אֲשֵׁל” (בראשית כא:לג).
- “עֲשֵׂה לְךָ רֵב, וְקִנְיָה לְךָ חֵבֶר” (אבות א:ו): repair your kingship through the windpipe, קנה. But once your words have power, judge everyone favourably, for Hashem made the world “לֹא לְתֵהוּ בְרָאָה, לְשֹׂכֵת יְצָרָה” (ישעיהו מה:יח), “not for emptiness, but to be lived in.”
- In exile, holy kingship is in exile too, and chazzanim cannot draw music from its root. In the future, when Hashem is King over all the earth, “כִּי מְלֶכֶּךָ כָּל הָאָרֶץ אֱלֻקִּים זְמֵרוּ מִשְׁכִּיל” (תהלים מז:ח), they will sing with understanding.

A PRACTICAL TAKEAWAY · OUR OWN REFLECTION

Choose carefully whose music you listen to. Learn a little Gemara at night. And judge people favourably, so that your song builds and never destroys.

In the full shiur: 1. The Birds, the Prophets, and the Remedy at Night · 2. A Thread of Kindness, King David, and Rabbah's Frog · 3. Judging Favourably, and Lifting Every Melody

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