



SUKKOT

Shemini Atzeret / Yizkor

The Power of Eight: Do You Change The Song Or Does The Song Change You?

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THE POWER OF EIGHT

DO YOU CHANGE THE SONG OR DOES THE SONG CHANGE YOU?

ABSTRACT

Asa Yoelson's father was a cantor from Lithuania. Asa changed his name to Al Jolson and became one of the most famous musical performers in America. The Jazz Singer in which he starred ended the era of silent films, and its culminating scene is Kol Nidrei.

Melvin Kaminsky was born in Brooklyn and became a legendary comedian, producer, director, and actor. Melvin Kaminsky is better known as Mel Brooks.

When Brooks was fighting the Germans in World War Two, he would play Al Jolson the Jew's music to combat the Nazi propaganda blasted on loudspeakers.

Studies show that music makes shoppers spend more. And consumers follow the pace of the music. Marketers thus recommend that establishments who want consumers to stay longer and buy more to pipe slow music, while restaurants that want to turn tables quickly to play faster music.

The mystical power of music to change our lives is captured in the Talmud, which describes the seven, eight, and ten-stringed instruments played respectively in the 1) Temple, 2) in the days of the Messiah, and 3) in the World to Come.

Shemini Atzeret, the eighth day, is the day of eight strings, and holds the secret of the power of music – joining the seven strings of the present world and the ten strings of the future.

1. Al Jolson: Music in Movies

Gut Yom Tov! Chag Sameach.

Since today is Shemini Atzeret, when we begin to celebrate Simchat Torah, culminating the joyous seven-day holiday of Sukkot, it seems fitting to speak about the power of song and music in our lives.

Srednik, in the Kovno region of Lithuania, was a town with a Jewish population of 1,174 prior to World War II. On September 4, 1941, virtually all of the towns remaining Jews were shot and killed.

In 1886 in Srednik, Asa Yoelson was born to Moshe Rubin Yoelson and Nechama "Naomi" Cantor, the youngest of five children.

In 1891, his father, who was qualified as a rabbi and cantor, moved to New York to secure a better future for his family. By 1894, Moses Yoelson could afford to pay the fare to bring Nechama and their four children to the U.S. By the time they arrived – as steerage passengers on the S/S Umbria arriving at the Port of New York on April 9, 1894 – he had found work as a cantor at Talmud Torah Congregation in the Southwest Waterfront neighborhood of Washington, D.C., where the family was reunited.¹

To make a long story short, like his father who was a cantor, Asa Yoelson also entered into the singing business, only not performing in a synagogue. Asa Yoelson changed his name to Al Jolson and became the highest paid performer in America,² dubbed “The World’s Greatest Entertainer.”³

The *Jazz Singer*, a 1927 American musical film, starred Al Jolson. Reflecting his own personal life, the plot follows the son of a cantor who left the tradition to become a famous jazz singer, the tension between singing pop hits on Broadway instead of Kol Nidrei in Shul.

Prior to *The Jazz Singer*, commercial Hollywood movies were almost always silent films. Jolson heralded the commercial ascendance of sound films and ended the silent film era.

2. Jewish Affinity to Song

What is the power of sound, specifically the power of music?

Jews have always had a special affinity with sound and music. King David, the psalmist, was known as the “sweet singer of Israel.”⁴

Song played a significant role in the Temple. The Levites would sing and play music on a daily basis (the “song of the day” we say in our daily prayers is a reenactment of the Levites daily songs in the Temple), as well as during the Temple offerings and services of the Kohanim (Priests).

Our sages and mystics explain the power of song and its important role in Jewish life.

Rabbi Yehuda Halevi writes in his classic, *The Kuzari*⁵:

Music was treasured by the nation [Israel], which honored their songs and entrusted them to leaders of the people, the Levites, who engaged in song Holy Temple during the holy season. They had no need to work for a living, because they were supported by the tithes; they had no other occupation but music.

1 Jolson: The Story of Al Jolson (1972) by Michael Freedland.

2 Front Row: Evenings at the Theatre, Continuum International Publishing (2005), p. 109.

3 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al_Jolson

4 Samuel II 23:1.

5 2:64.

This Jewish enthusiasm and involvement with song continued through the ages, until this very day – from cantorial renditions of our prayers to Chassidic joyful and introspective compositions, from holiday celebratory songs to the painful cries of our haunting tunes – expressing the deepest yearning and longings of the soul as only melody can do.

So it's no wonder that Jews in modern times, including Al Jolson, have gravitated to music in one form or another.

The story of Al Jolson, the Jew and musician, bring to mind the story of another Jewish entertainer.

3. Mel Brooks: Music in War

Melvin Kaminsky was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1926 to Jewish parents from Germany and Ukraine. Kaminsky lost his father when he was two years old, and in retrospect, reflects on that event as the genesis for his farcical comedy style:

"I'm sure a lot of my comedy is based on anger and hostility. Growing up in Williamsburg, I learned to clothe it in comedy to spare myself problems – like a punch in the face."

Melvin Kaminsky became Mel Brooks.

Before he could complete his degree in psychology from Brooklyn College, Brooks was drafted into the Army to fight during World War II. He served as a corporal in the 1104 Engineer Combat Battalion, 78th Infantry Division as a combat engineer.

Mel Brooks, in his profound wit, describes being a combat engineer:

"I was a combat engineer. Isn't that ridiculous? The two things I hate most in the world are combat and engineering."

One of his tasks during the war was to defuse land mines, and he also fought in the Battle of the Bulge. It has been reported that when the Germans played propaganda recordings over loudspeakers, Brooks responded by setting up his own sound system and played music by Al Jolson, the Jewish musician.

When reminiscing on his years in the Army, Brooks trots out his trademark humor: "War isn't hell... War is loud. Much too noisy. All those shells and bombs going off all around you. Never mind death. A man could lose his hearing."⁶

Noise, sound, music – what is their power and how does Shemini Atzeret teach us to harness it in redemptive and messianic ways?

⁶ <https://www.military.com/veteran-jobs/career-advice/military-transition/famous-veterans-mel-brooks.html>.

4. The Power of Music

The Chassidic masters say that “song is the quill of the soul.” Words (spoken or written) are the quill of the mind and heart. But song reveals deeper dimensions of the soul, which cannot be expressed in words.

This power is seen even in the Al Jolson and Mel Brooks stories. Mel Brooks combated the German propaganda with that the Germans hated most: Music made by a Jew.

We can see the power of music even in our bottom-line, corporate world:

A 2007 study in the *European Journal of Scientific Research*, entitled “Effect of Background Music on Consumer’s Behavior: A Field Experiment in an Open-Field Market,” has shown that background music causes increased sales.⁷

A famous study by Ronald E. Milliman published in the 1982 *Journal of Marketing*⁸ found a staggering 34% increase in time spent in a supermarket when background music was played, with a corresponding increase in sales.

The research found that people move slower when slow tempo music is played.

A study conducted in two supermarkets found a massive increase in sales when slow tempo music was played: “In this study the average gross sales increased from \$12,112 for the fast tempo music to \$16,740 for the slow tempo music. This is an average increase of 38%.”

Furthermore: “Customers moved slower when slow music was played, taking 128 seconds, and faster when fast music was played, taking 109 seconds.”

The same effect has been observed in restaurants: clients tend to linger when the music is slow and soft.

If you run a fast-moving restaurant where you don’t want people to linger, you could be better off playing loud, fast tempo music.

However, retail environments often prefer customers to stay longer in their stores, so slower, softer music is more appropriate.

Another study found that customer spent 23% more money in a restaurant when slow music was played. Interestingly, most of the increase in spending came on the drinks bill (which grew by 51% on average), which is a high margin item in most restaurants.

An article citing various studies says: “A person is likely to stay in a restaurant playing soft music 20%

⁷ <http://moodmixes.com/images/EJSR2007.pdf>.

⁸ <http://moodmixes.com/images/1251706.gif>.

longer than if the music is loud, with a slight increase in the amount of money spent on food and drinks. For grocery stores, it was found that the volume made no difference on how much money was spent. Another study by Caldwell and Hibbert (2002) found that when slow music was played, patrons stayed for 20% longer but also spent more on food and drink - in fact, up to 50% more. In other words, to keep your customers, keep it soft and slow. And likewise, if you want quick turnover, speed things up and keep it loud.”⁹

Many other studies have confirmed Milliman’s initial results, which is a significant reason why music is usually found in retail environments.

A study by Yalch and Spangenberg (2000) found: “Analyses revealed that individuals reported themselves as shopping longer when exposed to familiar music but actually shopped longer when exposed to unfamiliar music. Shorter actual shopping times in the familiar music condition were related to increased arousal.”¹⁰

In that same study, classical music has been found to increase the amount of money people are willing to spend. Generally, people will choose more expensive goods when classical music is playing.

The studies also research decibels and music volume, why bars turn it up but other establishments turn it down.¹¹

One thing is loud and clear: if corporate America and marketing experts are focusing this much energy into music they pipe into their speakers, we definitely know that the subliminal and overt power of music is significant.

The sad thing is that in our commercial world the sublime energy of music is used (or abused) more for manipulating people and selling products than for spiritual elevation and transcendence. Instead of allowing the song to change us, business changes the song for personal gain. But still, we can use these corporate analytics to demonstrate the potency of music and song, which originates from its spiritual roots.

Indeed, music is essentially messianic and redemptive: it releases the energy hidden within our souls and within the world around us, and by doing so helps bring personal and global redemption.

⁹ http://moodmixes.com/images/slave_to_the_music.pdf.

¹⁰ <http://moodmixes.com/images/S014829639900003X.pdf>.

¹¹ <http://moodmixes.com/advice>.

5. Cycle of Seven

The power of song is especially pronounced in the holiday of Sukkot, which is called the “time of our rejoicing.” During the seven days of Sukkot we celebrate through song and dance. Each day we increase in the celebration, until we reach its apex on Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah, when the song – the quill of the soul – reaches its highest point, revealing the deepest dimensions of our hearts and souls.

The secret of Shemini Atzeret lies in its name: the eighth day of gathering.

Eight represents transcendence, a state that goes beyond the natural cycle of seven – seven days a week, seven years of the Sabbatical *Shemitta*, seven times seven weeks of the Omer, seven divine attributes and human emotions.

The natural cycle of seven includes the holy Shabbat, the seventh day of the week, which is a state of song and transcendence, which is why we sing *zemirot* (melodies) on Shabbat, but a transcendence that is part of and within the seven-day cycle and structure of existence. The song of Shabbat elevates the entire week.

Once a year, the seven days of Sukkot, the “time of our rejoicing,” recharges the “batteries” of joy for the entire year. Think of it as the annual “central nervous system” and “engine room” of joy: Sukkot opens up a new reservoir of joy and song, transmitting all the joy and song we will experience throughout the days of the year.

But this all is still the joy relating to the seven-day cycle of existence, corresponding to the seven days of Sukkot.

6. The Eighth Day of Transcendence

After completing the seven-day cycle of Sukkot celebration we come to Shemini Atzeret, the eighth day of gathering, when we are able to reach the eighth dimension of transcendence.

The Talmud¹² clearly states that *shir* (song) is one of the six ways that Shemini Atzeret differs from the rest of the festival of Sukkot (acronym *PaZaR KeSheV*): *Pa’yis* (lots), *Zman* (*she’he’chiyanu* blessing), *Regel* (holiday¹³), *Korban* (offering), *Shir* (song), *Bracha* (blessing¹⁴).

Like the eighth day of the *brit mila*¹⁵, Shemini Atzeret heralds in a level of supra-natural transcendence into the joy of the seven days of Sukkot. As demonstrated in the exuberant song and dance on this day.

¹² Rosh Hashana 4b.

¹³ The Rishonim differ as to what this refers to. See Rashi and Tosafot ad loc.

¹⁴ The Rishonim differ as to what this refers to. See Rashi and Tosafot ad loc.

¹⁵ See Likkutei Torah Shemini, Lamnatzayach al haShemini.

7. 7, 8, or 10 String Harps

Every day of the holiday of Sukkot the Levites would play music and sing the special song of the day on the platform (*duchan*). On Shmini Atzeret they played a different song, differentiating Shemini Atzeret from Sukkot. This song was¹⁶ Psalm twelve, beginning: *For the conductor on the Sheminit, a song of David*.

What is the *Shminit*? Rashi on the verse says that it refers to the eight-string harp. And it is derived from an interesting Talmud¹⁷:

We learned in a Braita: R' Yehuda said, "The harp in the Temple has seven strings, as it states, the fullness (*sova*) of joys in Your presence¹⁸, don't read *sova* (fullness) but rather *sheva* (seven). The harp of the Messianic days has eight strings, as it states, *For the conductor on the Sheminit, on the eighth (sheminit) string*.

The harp of the World to Come has ten strings, as it states, Upon a ten-stringed harp and upon a psaltery, with speech upon a harp¹⁹, and it states, Give thanks to the Lord with a harp; with a lyre of ten melodies make music to Him. Sing to Him a new song.²⁰

This Talmud teaches that the regular Temple harp has seven strings, the Messianic harp has eight, and the one of the World to Come, which is the culmination of the Redemption, has ten.

And, on Shemini Atzeret, literally meaning the "gathering on the eighth," the eighth day of gathering, *Lamnatzeach al hashminit* – *For the conductor on the Sheminit* was played by the Levites in the Temple, a taste of the eight-string harp of the Messianic days.

8. Bridging Existence and Beyond Existence

Our holy sages and mystics²¹ explain the power of music and the 7, 8, and 10 string instruments as three levels and dimensions of transcendence in the soul's and the universe's cosmic journey.

The purpose of all creation is to create a Divine home in this lowliest of worlds. To transform the very structure of the physical universe, which on its own is self-absorbed and hostile to sanctity into a refined and spiritual environment, where G-d is comfortable as one is comfortable in their own home.

¹⁶ Rashi ad loc quoting from *Misechta Sofrim*.

¹⁷ *Erachin* 13b with *Maharsha* ad loc.

¹⁸ *Psalms* 16:11.

¹⁹ *Psalms* 92:4.

²⁰ *Psalms* 33:2-3. The "new song" is written in the masculine, *shir* nor *shirah*, which implies the World to Come (*Maharsha*).

²¹ See *Maharsha* to *Erachin* 13b. *Siddur Im Dach* on *Mizmor Shir Leyom Hashabas* (189a). *Pirush Hamilot* from the *Mitteler Rebbe*. *Alei Asor*; *Kotonti* 5737.

How do we bridge such diametric opposites – the immortal divine with the mortal mundane; the infinite with the finite, the Creator with the creation – without compromising either?

Explains Kabbalah and Chassidus that G-d devised a series of interfaces that bridge these two paradigms. In general, these interfaces consist of three levels and stages:

- 1) Nature. Existence. Immanence.
- 2) Beyond nature. Transcendence. But one that still relates to existence.
- 3) Transcending transcendence, which is beyond all existence.

These correspond to the three harps – the seven-string harp, the eight-string harp and the ten-string harp.

1. Since the purpose of creation is to transform and not override existence, and the world was created with the parameters of a seven-day and seven- dimensional cycle, we first have to elevate this seven-level structure, with the seven-string harp of the week and of Sukkot – the harp of nature, the transcendent song of the natural order.

2. Then comes the eight-string harp of Shemini Atzeret, which adds a sublime note beyond nature. A joy that breaks through natural boundaries and introduces the song of *Shminiti*, of eight, a new celebratory note not found in the cycle of seven.

This is a taste of the messianic age, in which the natural world will not be suspended (as Maimonides²² writes), but the world will reach state of peace and harmony. Divine unity will permeate the 7-tier structure of existence, reflected in the 8-string harp – the seven infused with the Divine One. In the words of the Kabbalah: The intellect of Binah (the eighth sefirah) will infuse the seven emotional attributes.

3. Then comes the World to Come, which will entirely transcend the 7-cycle natural order and change the world as we know it. At that point all the three intellectual faculties will be revealed (today they are concealed), elevating the seven emotions and be introducing them to a “new song” consisting of all ten faculties²³ -- the 10-string harp.

9. The Power of Shemini Atzeret and Yikor

Now we can appreciate the unique power of Shemini Atzeret:

1. Firstly, this eighth day lifts us up from the natural song of the 7-day cycle to the transcendent eight, in an explosion of unbridled joy and celebration.
2. Secondly, Shemini Atzeret serves as a bridge and interface between the natural 7-string harp and the utterly transcendent 10-string harp. We cannot jump from the 7-cycle natural song of our present-day existence to

²² Mishne Torah, Laws of Kings 12:1-2.

²³ All ten nations will be conquered, the Kini, Knizi, and Kadmoni in addition to the seven nations that were already conquered in the Land of Israel.

the 10-dimensional song of the World to Come, without going through the 8-string song of Shemini Atzeret.

Shemini Atzeret is the day of eight strings, and holds the secret of the power of music – joining the seven strings of the present world and the ten strings of the future.

This also explains why we say Yizkor on this day, because this solemn prayer connects the souls of our loved ones, who are now in a completely spiritual state, with us who are residing in this material world (of seven).

Yizkor, like Shemini Atzeret, introduces the transcendent eighth dimension to our seven-cycle reality.

10. Let's Sing and Dance

Ok, enough talk.

Now is the time to sing and dance.

Enough talk about transcendence of eight. Now let us actually experience it.

If a business, whose objective is the bottom line, invests time and energy into changing how people shop by tweaking the music in their stores and restaurants, how much more so must we tweak the music in our lives to change how we live?

11. Do You Change the Song Or Does the Song Change You?

Actually, in business or war music is changed to suit people and their self-interest.

Shemini Atzeret behooves us to let go and allow the song to change us!

We are all musicians. We are born into nature, playing the seven-stringed instrument of the workweek and Shabbat, of holidays and cycles. But we aspire to the ten-stringed instrument of the World to Come, of perfection, of the day that is completely and eternally Shabbat.

We get there by simply adding one sublime note, one divine string into our lives, turning the seven into the eight.

This, my dear friends, is Shemini Atzeret!

Chag Sameach and good Yom Tov!

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