

Elevator Music: May Instruments be Played in Shul to Uplift the Davening?
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Adapted from the writings of Dayan Yitzhak Grossman

VINNews reports:

Several Gedolim in Israel, led by[1] Hagaon Harav Gershon Edelstein shlit"a, released a statement effectively banning musical Slichos events which have become prevalent in recent years on the first night of Slichos. The letter essentially says that what is supposed to be a sacred gathering has become an entertainment event.

Here is a translation of the sharply-worded text:

"Regarding those who 'breach boundaries' to change and overturn the sacred gatherings of the Slichos davening, [by transforming it] into a recreation event by holding 'Slichos evenings' with the participation of singers and orchestras, both in shuls and [outside] in the streets, who, rather than fulfilling 'shaking and trembling from the day of your coming (before Hashem for judgment),'[2] replace the davenings and pleas [being practiced] in all communities of Israel to prepare and approach the Days of Judgment, with a musical performance, while destroying the tradition of 'Yisrael Saba.'

"We hereby call on the organizers, Baalei Tefila, and singers, to cease their activities, and [we call upon] the public not to break any barriers in the Kerem Bais Yisrael. And in the merit of the firm stand to protect the sanctity of Israel, may they all be blessed with a kesiva v'chasima tova for all good and happiness for all days." [3]

This opposition to musical Slichos follows a venerable tradition of opposition to the introduction of music, particularly instrumental music, to davening and the shul, with the additional objection that music is inconsistent with the Slichos mood of "shaking and trembling from the day of Your coming." Exponents of this tradition obviously had to grapple with the historical-halachic fact of the performance of music in the Bais Hamikdash during the offering of *korbanos*, and in particular in the context of the *nisuch hamayim* (water libation) on Sukkos, a beloved tradition still commemorated today by *simchas bais hasho'eivah* gatherings:

The pious and men of action would dance before them with the flaming torches that were in their hands, and they would say before them words of song and praise. And the *levi'im* would play on harps, lyres, cymbals, trumpets, and countless other musical instruments...[4]

In this article and a follow-up, we survey the opposition of several *gedolei* Torah to music during davening and in shul, and the distinctions they draw between the music played in the Bais Hamikdash and that under debate in the contemporary context.

It is important to note that all the sources we discuss were composed not in a vacuum, but in the context of the fierce battles of classical Judaism against the nascent but burgeoning Reform movement of the nineteenth century. The Reformers had begun to introduce elements of Christian worship, such as organ music, into davening, and the traditionalists'

abhorrence of assimilationist tendencies certainly influenced their vehement opposition to the practices in question.[5] (It is noteworthy that the minhag in Prague's old and venerable Altneuschul was to accompany *kabalas Shabbos* with an organ and/or other musical instruments. According to some accounts, the musicians played until before *Bo'i veshalom* or *Mizmor shir leyom haShabbos*,[6] while several nineteenth century Prague rabanim recorded that the musicians were "obligated" to lay down their instruments half an hour before *Barchu*. [7]) In 1819, during the First Hamburg Temple Dispute (a fierce controversy over the Hamburg Temple, "the first permanent Reform shul and the first ever to have a Reform davening rite"), the polemical work *Eileh Divrei Habris* was published, comprising "letters of reprimand and condemnation" against the Hamburg reformers. Many of these letters discussed the playing of organs in shul—on Shabbos and Yom Tov in particular, as well as in general—and some of them sharply reject the introduction of (instrumental) music in shul.

The Chasam Sofer

We see that our ancestors who established the davening did not ordain (the use of) musical instruments in davening, and even though this (use of) music (in davening) began with us, in the Bais Hamikdash service, our ancestors nevertheless abandoned it. It is thus evident that it did not meet their approval (to utilize music in davening after the *Churban*), due to the principle that "From the day the Bais Hamikdash was destroyed, there is no joy before Him." [8] And I have already written elsewhere that in my humble opinion, the reason the text (of Tehillim 137:4) reads "How can we sing the song of Hashem 'upon the alien's soil?'" [9] rather than 'before aliens,' is to foreclose the possibility of music even before Hashem when we are upon the alien's soil... [10]

R' Mordechai Banet

What mitzvah is there to play instruments during davening? It is actually inappropriate to commingle the joy of strange service [11] (i.e., instrumental music) with the joy of the soul at the time of the (reciting of) praise and song and might and power [12] to our G-d. The song of the *levi'im* was primarily vocal, [13] in the manner of our recitation of the *trop*, and they would sing each word according to its meaning and character. This is different from our case, where the melody and song of the playing of the organ has no connection to our recitation of the song, and on the contrary, it disturbs the concentration, and in place of understanding that one should glorify himself with contemplating and knowing Hashem, [14] he directs his attention to listening to the musician, for it is pleasant to him. [15]

[1] Given that Rav Edelstein's signature appears as an addendum to those of the other signatories, in the form of "I, too, join," I do not know the article's

basis for the claim that the latter were “led by” the former.

[2]This is an apparent mistranslation (by the author of the article, not that of the proclamation) of the phrase from the Slichah Bemotza’ei Menuchah, recited on the first night of Slichos: זָהָלִים וְרוֹעֲדִים מִיּוֹם בּוֹאָדָה, which clearly refers to the Jewish people’s “shaking and trembling” before the day of Hashem’s coming, rather than the people’s coming before Hashem.

[3]Gedolim Release Letter Opposing Musical Slichos Events. VINNews. <https://vinnews.com/2022/09/16/gedolim-release-letter-opposing-Slichos-night-kumzitz/>.

Cf. Rabbonim Letter Against Musical Slichos. Hefkervelt. Sep. 16, 2022.

[4]Mishnah Sukkah 5:4.

[5]Both R’ Ovadia Yosef (Shu”t Yabia Omer *cheilek* 3 Y.D. *siman* 24 *os* 6) and R’ Osher Weiss (Minchas Osher Vayikra *siman* 33 *os* 4) have asserted that various declarations by great *poskim*, including R’ Shlomo Kluger and R’ Moshe (Maharam) Shik, that particular practices popular in their time were forbidden as *chukos hagoyim*, are not defensible from a technical halachic standpoint, but should rather be understood as products of their historical context, as extreme measures necessary to combat the Reformers.

[6]Eileh Divrei Habris pp. 5, 31.

[7]Ibid. p. 17. Cf. Shu”t Melameid Leho’il *cheilek* 1 *siman* 16 p. 14; Shu”t Kapei Aharon (Epstein) *siman* 20 *os* 1.

[8]Yalkut Shimoni (Eichah) *remez* 1009. Cf. Avodah Zarah 3b: “From the day the Bais Hamikdash was destroyed, there is no longer any making sport (*sechok*) for Hakadosh Baruch Hu.”

[9]Tehillim 137:4.

[10]Eileh Divrei Habris p. 10. All translations of this work in this article are my free translations.

[11]From Yeshayah 28:21.

[12]Tehillim 68:36.

[13]See Arachin 11a, Hilchos *Klei Hamikdash* 3:3.

[14]From Yirmiyahu 9:23.

[15]Eileh Divrei Habris p. 15.