

## **From thirty years of age and up, until fifty years of age, everyone who comes to perform the work of service. (4:47)**

*Avodas avodah*, work of service, seems to be redundant terminology. *Chazal* (*Arachin* 11a) explain that this term refers to the musical accompaniment, which was work that was performed to enhance the service. Music has the power to sweep us up into its mood and rhythm. One can be in no particular mood -- or even in a depressed state and filled with negativity -- but as soon as he hears a catchy tune, lively music or a song, the beat begins to take over and his mood perks up and changes. Our whole energy is transformed and our morose spirits forgotten. We are one with the music as we move to its rhythm and become enchanted with its melody.

Music requires both rhythm and melody if it is to capture the attention of the listener for a period of time. Rhythm alone soon becomes boring, and melody without rhythm is quite bland. The rhythm establishes the mood and energy of the music, but it is the melody that speaks to the heart and soul. Music transcends and transports, connecting the listener to another place, another time. Music allows us to connect outside of ourselves. Music is the language of the heart, penetrating much deeper than the written word.

Every *tefillah*; daily, *Shabbos*; every *Yom Tov*, with its individual accompanying songs, is unique and endemic to the mood and message of the day. Every text, every period, has its own specific tune that evokes the emotion of the day. Song and spirituality are interwoven.

A young couple managed a healthcare facility which was home to a number of Jewish patients stricken with Alzheimer's disease. They decided to prepare a *Pesach Seder* for the group. Those in the know told them that they were wasting their time. The residents were oblivious to their surroundings. These young, idealistic hosts felt that singing could overcome memory loss. On the *Seder* night all the preparations had been made, and the patients wheeled in. They began the *Seder* by chanting *Pesach* melodies; the response was non-existent. Finally, they came to *Dayeinu*. When they began this well-known song with its generational melody, eyes opened, the residents straightened in their chairs; most tried to follow the melody and even move their lips. Music transcends time and reaches into the soul.

Music can catalyze one's return to *mitzvah* observance. During *Horav Chaim Volozhiner's* tenure as *Rosh Yeshivas Volozhin*, three premier students fell prey to the pernicious winds of the *Haskolah*, Enlightenment Movement. The Berlin *Haskalah* was a powerful evil inclination that wreaked havoc on the minds of some religious men and women who were lacking in their heartfelt relationship with *Yiddishkeit*. Intellectually, they were there, but the emotion which is derived either from the *mussar* teaching -- which allowed one to introspect into himself -- or *Chassidus* -- which, powered by joy in *mitzvah* performance, added new life and vibrance to observance -- was lacking in their lives. Each of these students excelled in a certain area. One hailed from an illustrious lineage. The second one was an extraordinary *baal middos*, possessed refined character traits. He

was truly a special person. The third was a brilliant *Talmud* scholar. His ability to understand and delve into the most difficult dialectic was without peer. One can imagine that the loss of these three exceptional students took its toll on the *yeshivah*, and especially on the *Rosh Yeshivah*. *Rav* Chaim wept bitterly over the loss of such peerless young men to the secular, heretical world outside the *yeshivah* milieu.

One night, his revered *Rebbe*, the *Gaon, zl, m'Vilna*, appeared to *Rav* Chaim in a dream and said, "My dear student, I will have you know that *z'chus avos*, the merit of descending from illustrious Rabbinic Torah leadership, does not protect from the scourge of the *Haskalah*. Likewise, *middos tovos*, refined character traits, do not protect one from the tentacles of the *Haskalah*. The only merit that will ultimately help to extract one from this evil pit of heresy is Torah. The Torah will not allow one who had studied it with diligence to fall into the pit of *kefirah*, apostasy. He will return."

Years passed, during which *Rav* Chaim investigated the whereabouts of his ex-students. The student who had descended from an impressive pedigree of Torah leaders had long ago forgotten his roots. He had assimilated into the gentile crowd and was living as one of them. The one whose exceptional *middos* distinguished him from his peers had become a philosopher, and, after having assimilated, became a profound thinker and lecturer lauding a life of culture, rather than religion. The third student, who was the Torah scholar par excellence, used his sharp mind to excel in secular law and had become a law professor of great distinction.

One day, *Rav* Chaim heard loud knocking at his door. He opened the door to greet a man who asked if he could speak with the *Rav*. The man was invited into *Rav* Chaim's study, at which juncture he began to weep profusely. "*Rebbe*, do you not recognize me?" he wailed. At first, *Rav* Chaim did not recognize him, but then it became clear that he was the brilliant *Talmudical* student who had swayed off the *derech*. *Rav* Chaim rose from his seat, embraced his student as would a father who had just discovered his long-lost son after years of searching for him. "Tell me, my son, what precipitated your return to Jewish observance? Who/what saved you from sin?" (The fact that he had returned was an indication that his separation from observance was just that – not a severance.)

The student began recounting his past years away from the *yeshivah*, "I threw myself into secular law and excelled beyond anyone's expectations. I was doing very well, and I even enjoyed my studies and the work, but the *geshmack*, joy and satisfaction, the sweetness that accompanied my Torah study, was non-existent. I made every attempt to add some life, some spice and excitement, to my secular studies – all to no avail. My gentile friends claimed that my problem was that I was still Jewish. Once I would baptize myself, my life would change. I would be a different person. This is, however, one last resort that I refuse to embrace. I would never renege my *Yiddishkeit*. Unfortunately (or, perhaps, fortunately), I was informed that unless I were to change my faith, my tenure at the university would come to an early end. They could not allow a Jew to hold such a distinguished position. I realized now that I had come to a crossroads, I needed to decide which way I was going, with whom would my allegiances be. I asked them to allow me three days to

render my decision.

“I vacillated back and forth, unable to resolve my quandary, until, on day three, as I was walking down a street in the Jewish neighborhood, I heard a sweet song. I was drawn to that *niggun*, the chant of a young man studying a *blatt Gemorah*. The sound was overwhelming. This is what I had been missing. No matter how much one excels in secular studies, he remains extrinsic to them. When I learned Torah, I was one with the Torah. It enveloped me, and I sang to it as I studied it. The *niggun* showed me that studying Torah is much more than the simple acquisition of knowledge. It is a relationship! It is something to sing about. That song catalyzed my return.”

Tears rolled down *Rav Chaim's* face as he realized the truth of his saintly *Rebbe's* words: The one who has studied Torah will one day return.