

# Journal of Synagogue Music

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## WE HUNG UP OUR HARPS: RABBINIC RESTRICTIONS ON JEWISH MUSIC

By **PROF. JOSHUA R. JACOBSON**

This article, based on a lecture delivered at Cong. Shaarei Tefillah, Newton, Massachusetts on Shabbat Shirah, 1997, is dedicated to the memory of Prof. Marvin Fox זצ"ל.

אָן יִשְׂרָאֵל וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת =

Some 3,300 years ago, after escaping through the miraculously parted waters of the Sea of Reeds, *Moshe* led the Israelites in the singing of a great hymn of thanksgiving to God.

There is no question that שִׁירָה here means "song." This was not a recitation of poetry. This was music — accompanied by musical instruments.

וַתִּקַּח מִרְיָם הַנְּבִיאָה אֶחָת אֶהָרן אֶת־הַתֵּם בִּידָהּ

וַתִּצְאֵן כָּל־הַנָּשִׁים אַחֲרֶיהָ בַּתִּפִּים וּבַמַּחֲלָה.

Miriam played the drum, the *timbrel*, and all the women followed her with timbrels and dances. Joyous music making...with instruments...men and women... singing.. dancing.. playing.

Ah, but that was 3.300 years ago. Would the *Rabbis* have allowed such a celebration?

What did Rav mean when he said, some 1700 years ago:

The ear which listens to song should אֹדְנָא דְשִׁמְעָא זִמְרָא תִּעְקֹר be tom off.'

What did Maimonides have in mind some 800 years ago when he wrote:

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<sup>1</sup> TB Sota 48:a

It is prohibited to play musical instruments, or to sing any kind of a song or to make any sound resembling singing.<sup>2</sup>

גזרו שלא לנגן בכלי שיר וכל מיני  
זמר וכל משמיעי קול של שיר

And what was שמואל thinking when he said, some 1700 years ago:

[Listening to] a woman's voice is sexual enticement.<sup>3</sup>

קול באשה ערוד

One is hard put to find such restrictions on music in the Bible itself.

### Music in Ancient Israel

One of the first humans on earth, our mythic ancestor Yuval, is credited with the invention of musical instruments.

Adam's great great great great grandson, Lamech, had a son whose name was Yuval; he was the ancestor of all who play the harp and flute.<sup>4</sup>

וַיִּקְחֵהוּ לִמְךָ שְׁתֵּי נָשִׁים  
שֵׁם הָאֶחָד עֵדָה וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִית צִלָּה:  
וַתֵּלֶד עֵדָה אֶת־יָוֵל  
הוּא הָיָה אֲבִי יֹשֵׁב אֶחָל וּמְקִנָּה:  
וְשֵׁם אֶחָיו יִזְבֵּל  
הוּא הָיָה אֲבִי כָל־תַּפְשׁ כְּנֹר וְעֹנֹב:

In ancient Israel, music was considered an indispensable part of celebrations. When Yaakov is trying to escape from his father-in-law, Lavan catches up with him and tries to make his son-in-law feel guilty.

<sup>2</sup> Maimonides: The Laws of Fasting 5:14

<sup>3</sup> Talmud Bavli Berachot 24:a

<sup>4</sup> Gen. 4:19 -22

Why did you run off secretly and  
deceive me? Why didn't you tell me,  
so I could send you away with joy and  
singing to the music of drums and  
harps?<sup>5</sup>

למה נחבאתי לברח ותגנב אתי  
ולא-הגדת לי ואשלחך בשמחה ובשרים  
בתוף ובכנור:

Three thousand years ago, when King David brought the Holy Ark to Jerusalem.  
establishing that city as the political and spiritual capital of Israel. he arranged a  
wonderful parade featuring music by the fabulous Levite family singers and  
players.

David told the leaders of the Levites to  
appoint their brothers as singers to  
sing joyful songs, accompanied by  
musical Instruments: lyres, harps and  
cymbals.<sup>6</sup>

ויאמר דוד לשרי הלויים  
להעמיד את-אחיהם המשקרים  
בכלי-שיר נבלים וכנורות ומצלתיים  
משמיעים להרים בקול לשמחה:  
וכלי-ישראל מעלים את-ארון בריתה-  
בתרועה ובקול שופר ובחצצרות  
ובמצלתיים משמעים בנבלים וכנורות:

So all Israel brought up the ark of the  
covenant of the LORD with shouts,  
with the sounding of rams' horns and  
trumpets, and of cymbals, and the  
playing of lyres and harps.'

Music could also be a necessary Ingredient in inspiring a prophet to enter the  
mystical trance in which he would communicate with God.

After being annointed by Samuel, Saul was sent away with the following words:

'After that you will go to the Hill of  
God, where there is a Philistine  
outpost.

As you approach the town, you will  
meet a procession of prophets coming  
down from the high place

אחר כן תבוא נבעת האלהים  
אשר-שם נצבי פלשתים  
ויהי כבאך שם העיר  
ופגעתך חבל נביאים ירדום מהבמה

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5Gen. 31:27

61Chr. 15:16

71Chr. 15:28

and they will be prophesying with  
lyres, drums, flutes and harps being  
played before them."

וּלְפָנֵיהֶם נָבֵל וְחָף וְחִלְצִיל וְכִנּוֹר  
וְהָמָה מִהַנְּבָאִים:

When the prophet Elisha was hired as a consultant by King Yehoshafat, he told  
the king:

"Now bring me a musician."

וְעַתָּה קְחוּלִי מִנְּגִן

And when the musician began to play,  
the hand of the LORD was on [Elisha].'

וַהֲיָה כִנְנוֹן הַמִּנְּגֵן  
וַתְּהִי עָלָיו יְדֵהָ' .

MUSIC was also used as therapy to heal the tormented spirit.

Whenever the spirit from God came  
upon Saul,

וְהָיָה בְּהִיטּוֹת רֹחַ אֱלֹהִים אֶל־שָׁאוּל

David would take his harp and play  
with his hand.

וְלָקַח דָּוִד אֶת־הַכִּנּוֹר וַיַּנֵּן בְּיָדוֹ

Then relief would come to Saul; he  
would feel better, and the evil spirit  
would leave him."

וַיִּרְחַם לְשָׁאוּל וְיָטִיב לוֹ  
וְסָרָה מֵעָלָיו רֹחַ הַרָעָה:

Music was an integral and impressive part of the cult in the Jerusalem  
Sanctuary, the **בית המקדש**. The Mishnah (codified sometime around the year 200  
c.e.) describes the size of the orchestra and choir.

in the Sanctuary . . . They played at  
least two harps,...

בַּמִּקְדָּשׁ . . . אֵין פּוֹחַתִין מִשְׁנֵי נְבִלִין.

and at least two flutes.

אֵין פּוֹחַתִין מִשְׁנֵי חִלְצִילִין. . .

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8 1Sam. 10:5

! 2Kings 3:15

! 1Sam. 16:14-23

at least two trumpets .

... אין פוחתין משתי חצוצרות ...

and nine lyres, . .

(אין פוחתין) מתשעה כנורות ...

There were at least twelve Levites  
standing on the platform (to sing)..."

אין פוחתין משנים-עשר לויים

עומדים על הדוכן ...

Here is how the Mishnah describes one of the most joyous ceremonies of the  
year, the שמחה-בית השואבה

Men of piety and good deeds  
used to dance before them with  
lighted torches in their hands,

חסידים ואנשי מעשה היו מרקדים לפניהם  
באבוקות של אור שבידיהן.

and sing songs and praises.

ואומרים לפניהן דברי שירות ותשבחות

And the Levites played harps,  
lyres, cymbals and trumpets and  
countless other musical  
instruments.<sup>12</sup>

והלויים בכנורות ובנבלים ובמצלתיים ובחצוצרות  
ובכלי שיר בלא מספר

In ancient Israel, as in the neighboring countries. military victories were  
celebrated with parades, led by professional and amateur bands of women  
musicians, singing, dancing and playing the timbrel.

We read in שירת הים how the victory over the Egyptian any was celebrated by  
the Israelite women:

Then Miriam the prophetess,  
Aaron's sister, took a drum in her  
hand, and all the women followed  
her, with hand-drums and  
dancing.<sup>13</sup>

ותקל מרים הנביאה אחות אהרן  
את־התוף בידה והצאן כל־הנשים אחריה  
בתפים ובמחלות:

Hundreds of years later the Israelite women came out to celebrate the victory  
over the Philistines:

<sup>11</sup> Mishnah Arachin 2:3-6

<sup>12</sup> Mishnah Sukkah. Chapter 5:4

<sup>13</sup> Exod. 15:20-21

the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with hand-drums and three-stringed lyres.<sup>14</sup>

והצאנה הנשים  
מכל-ערי ישראל לשיר והמחלות  
לקראת שאול המלך  
בחפים בשמחה ובשלשים:

And the Psalmist gives a poetic description of one of these parades:

In front are the singers, after them the instrumentalists; with them are the maidens playing hand-drums."

קדמו שרים אחר נגנים  
בהוד עלמות תופפות:

In order to arrange a proper funeral, the ancient Israelite was expected to hire a band of professional women singing dirges:

Consider now! Call for the wailing women to come: send for the most skillful of them.<sup>16</sup>

התבוננו וקראו למקוננות ותבואנה  
ואל-החכמות שלהן ותבואנה:

Maimonides, writing in twelfth-century Egypt, noted that it is a husband's obligation to hire at least one professional wailing woman for his wife's funeral.

When a man's wife dies he is obliged to arrange a proper funeral with eulogy and wailing as is the practice here.

מתה אשתו  
חייב בקבורתה  
ולעשות לה הספד וקינים  
כדרך כל המדינה.

Even a Jewish pauper must have at least two flutes and one wailing woman.<sup>17</sup>

ואפילו עני שבישראל לא יפחתו לו  
משני חלילין ומקוננת.

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141Sam 186

15 Ps. 68:25

16Jer. 9:16-19

17 Maimonides Mishneh Torah Nashim 1423

Apparently in fourteenth-century Spain there were still professional women who sang dirges. An ordinance from Seville reads, "If a (Christian) knight or burgher dies. . . Moorish and Jewish women should not be hired for lamentations."<sup>18</sup>

So when did the restrictions on music begin?

### A Nation in Mourning

After the destruction of the Sanctuary, the Israelites were in no mood to rejoice with happy songs. In the book of Lamentations, Jeremiah describes the devastating scene:

The judges are no longer seen at the gates. The young men are no longer heard singing.<sup>19</sup>

זָקֵנִים מִשְׁעָר שָׁבְתוּ בַחֲוֵרִים מִנְּגִינָתָם

The Levite musicians, exiled from Jerusalem, imprisoned in בבל, were asked to entertain their captors with sacred music from the Bet HaMikdash. now lying in ruins. They wrote of this experience:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion.

עַל-נְהָרוֹת בָּבֶל שָׁם יָשְׁבֵנו גְּסִיכֵנוּ  
בְּזָכְרֵנוּ אֶת-צִיּוֹן:

By the willows there we hung up our harps.

עַל-עֲרָבִים בְּתוֹכָהּ תָּלִינוּ כִנּוֹרֵינֵנוּ

For there our captors, our tormentors, demanded gleeful song, "Sing us some of your songs from Zion."

כִּי שָׁם שְׁאֲלוּנוּ שׁוֹבֵינוּ דְּבַר-יִשְׁרָאֵל  
וְתוֹלְלֵינוּ שִׁמְחָה שִׁירוּ לָנוּ מִשִּׁיר צִיּוֹן:

But how could we sing the Lord's song on foreign soil?<sup>20</sup>

אֵיךְ נִשְׁיר אֶת-שִׁיר ה' עַל אֲדָמַת נָכָר

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<sup>18</sup>Taitz (1986). p. 52

<sup>19</sup> Lamentations 5:14

<sup>20</sup> Psalm 137: 1-4



What a contrast from the celebrations described in Psalm 126. perhaps marking the end of the first exile:

A song of pilgrimage.

שיר המעלות

When the Lord returned the captives of Zion we were almost dreaming.

בשוב ה' את-שיבת ציון היינו כחלמים

Then our mouths and tongues were full of joyous song!<sup>21</sup>

אז ימלא שחוק פינו ולשוננו הנה.

The Mishnah records that shortly before the destruction of the Sanctuary by the Romans, the people of Jerusalem were in no mood to have banquets with music.

When the *Sanhedrin* ceased to function, song ceased to be heard in the places of feasting<sup>22</sup>

משבטלה סנהדרין

בטל השיר מבית המשתאות

But as time passed, Jews got used to life in exile. In fact, many Jews in Babylon became quite well-to-do. Maybe life on foreign soil wasn't so bad after all, Some Jews no longer felt the need to be in mourning for the desolation of Zion. They wanted to celebrate. They wanted to participate in the rich activities of the surrounding culture. It may have been at that point that the Rabbis instituted laws to curb the desire for wine, women and song, formalizing a long-standing, but now eroding, custom.

This statement by Rav in the third century seems to imply that a threat of punishment was required in order to keep people away from the banquet halls of Babylon and their associated musical mernment.

The ear which listens to song should

אמר רב אודנא דשמעא זמרא תעקר

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<sup>21</sup> Psalm 126: 1-2

<sup>22</sup> Mishnah Sotah

be tom off 23

Writing hundreds of years later. Maimonides still stressed the historical reasons for Jews' refraining from music making.

[The rabbis at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple] prohibited playing musical instruments, singing songs and making any sound resembling song. It is forbidden to have any pleasure - therein, and it is forbidden to listen to them because of the destruction [of the Temple].\*

וכן גזרו שלא לנגן בכלי שיר  
וכל מיני זמר וכל משמיעי קול של שיר.  
אסור לשמוח בהן  
ואסור לשמען מפני החורבן

The Maharal of Prague, writing in the sixteenth century, acknowledged that music is a natural activity for humankind-making music is a reflection of a normal life. But as long as we are in exile then our lives are not normal. Singing takes our minds off our troubles and allows us to forget our problems. But the Jew should never forget that he is in exile, that he is in mourning for the destroyed Sanctuary. Therefore the Jew should not indulge in the pleasures of music.<sup>25</sup>

### Orgiastic Music

But mourning for the בית המקדש was not the only reason for the Jew to refrain from music. There was another reason. Music, associated with the pagan orgies or secular banquets of the surrounding culture, was seen as an activity which would distract the Jew from the expected norms of ethical behaviour, מוסר. Jews were expected to answer to a higher authority. Many rabbis cited the words of the ancient Hebrew prophet Hoshea:

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<sup>23</sup>TB Sota 48:a

<sup>24</sup> Maimonides: The Laws of Fasting 5:14

<sup>25</sup>Kahn I:62

Rejoice not, O Israel, for toy, as do  
other people; 26

אֶל־תִּשְׂמַח יִשְׂרָאֵל | אֶל־גִּיל קְצָמִים

Among the “other people,” music was associated with seductive songstresses and excessive imbibing. Sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll apparently had its counterpart in the ancient world.

Addressing his fellow Jews in third century Palestine, Rabbi Yohanan said:

Whoever drinks to the accompaniment of the four musical instruments brings five punishments to the world; as the prophet Isaiah said: “Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink. that stay up late into the night, till wine inflame them! And the harp, and the lute, the timbrel and the pipe, and wine, are in their feasts: but they regard not the work of the Lord.” (Isaiah 5: 1 I-1 2)27

כל השותה בארבעה מיני זמר  
מביא חמש פורעניות לעולם שנאמר  
ה' משכימם בבקר שִׁכָּר יִרְדְּפוּ  
מֵאַחֲרֵי בִנְשָׁף יֵין יִדְלִיקֵם  
וְהָיָה כְּנֹר וְנֹבֵל תֶּף וְחִלְצִיל וְיֵין מְשִׁתִּיהֶם  
וְאֵת פִּעַל יְהוָה לֹא יִבְטְחוּ  
וּמַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵיו לֹא יֵאָדָּרוּ

### The Dangers of Acculturation

Yet other authorities objected to music for other reasons. Singing non-Jewish songs, abandoning the ancient Israelite music in favor of new gentile melodies, was a manifestation of assimilation. Samuel Archevoltt, a sixteenth-century Italian Rabbi, condemned the practice of cantors who were singing holy prayers to the melodies of popular secular tunes.

What can we say? How can we justify  
the actions of a few huanim of our  
day, who chant the holy prayers to the

ונחנו מה נדבר ומה נצתק  
על קצת חזני דורנו

26Hosea 9:1

27Talmud Bavli Sotah 48:a

tunes of popular secular songs?

שמנגנים התפילות הקדושות

בנגוני שירי חול מההמון.

While reading sacred texts they are  
thinking of obscenities and lewd  
lyrics.<sup>28</sup>

ומתוך הדבור המקודש  
יפול ברעתם נבול פה ודבר צרוה

Yet, Archevolti's contemporary, Rabbi Israel Najara of Tsefat, encouraged Jews to sing Hebrew texts to gentile melodies. His anthology of *piyyutim*, *Shirey Yisrael* (published in 1587) is a collection of sacred songs to be sung to the tunes of popular Arabic and Turkish songs. One of the songs from this collection is the popular shabbat **zemer**, **Yah Ribon 'Alam**. **Najara** acknowledged that people liked singing the popular songs of the surrounding culture. He thought that by creating poems with sacred words that resembled the lyrics of the secular songs, he could encourage non-religious Jews to enjoy singing songs in praise of God, while using tunes they knew and enjoyed.

### Liturgical Music

All authorities seem to have agreed that music **was** not forbidden in the synagogue liturgy. Yet there were some restrictions. The use of musical instruments was forbidden. And, according to some authorities, cantors had to be careful not to sing in an ostentatious manner. Writing in the 16th century, Rabbi Joseph Caro warned,

It is not good . for a Shaliah Tsibbur  
to stretch out the prayers merely to  
show off his pleasant voice.<sup>29</sup>

ש"צ שמאריך בתפלתו  
כדי שישמעו קולו ערב ...  
לא טוב עושה :

To answer that objection, Rabbi Leone of Modena, Italy wrote in 1622:

<sup>28</sup> Rabbi Samuel b. Elhanan Archivolti (15151611, Padua) *Arugat HaBosem*, Venice. 1602: quoted in Adler RISM, p. 101.

<sup>29</sup> Shulchan Aruch 53:11

The cantor is enjoined to chant his prayers with a most pleasant voice.

...

If assistants who have been graced by the Lord with sweet voices stand beside him and improvise an accompaniment . as is the common practice among the Ashkenazim, and if it happens that they harmonize well with him, should this be considered a sin?

Are these individuals on whom the Lord has bestowed the ability to master the technique of music to be condemned if they use it for His glory?

If so, then cantors might as well be told to hee-haw like donkeys and refrain from singing sweetly. .

No intelligent person, no scholar ever thought of forbidding the use of the greatest possible beauty of voice in praising the Lord, blessed be He, nor the use of musical art which awakens the soul to His glory. .

We have proved that Rashi, Tosafot. Maimonides and all the great authorities forbade music only in connection with feasting and regal luxury, while they permitted it in all other situations.

### Music in the Workplace

There were a few other cases where the Rabbis relaxed the prohibition and allowed music.

What if music were being created not merely for sensual indulgence, but for some more parctical reason? In the Talmud Bavli we find the following formulation:

ומצוה על הש"ץ  
להנעים קולו בתפילתו ביותר . . .

אם יעמדו אצלו מסייעים  
אשר חננם ה' קול ערב . . .  
כנהוג כל היום בין קהילות האשכנזים  
יזמרו עמו  
ויקרה שיתיחסו ויערכו לו  
האם יחשב להם לחטא?

ואם כן אטו בשביל שחנן ה' לאלה  
ידעת החכמה כסדרה  
ובאים לכבד בה ה'  
יהיו חטאים בנפשותם?

חלילה. נגזור אם כן על שלוחי צבור  
שיהיו נוערים כחמורים  
ולא ינעימו קולם . . .

ולא עלה על דעת שום בן-דעת או חכם  
לאסור מלשבח לה' יתברך  
בקול היותר נעים שאפשר  
ובחכמה הזאת המעוררת הנפשות לכבודו

הרי הוכחנו לעיל שרש"י ותוספות ורמב"ם  
וכל גדולי עולם לא אסרו זמרא דפומא  
אלא להתענג כמו בין או במלכים  
אבל בכל אופן אחר - שר"י

R. Huna said: The singing of sailors  
and ploughmen is permitted but the  
song of the “garda’ey” is forbidden.”

אמר רב הונא  
זמרא דנגדי ודבקרי שרי  
דגרדאי אסיר

Why were sailors and farmers allowed to sing? And who were the “garda’ey”  
and what was the problem with their singing?

Rashi explains:<sup>31</sup>

The song of the sailors helps  
them work faster.

זמרא דנגדי - מושכי ספינות בחבל שרי  
שאינו אלא לזרום במלאכתם.

The song of the ploughmen is  
used to calm the oxen that are  
pulling the plough.

ודבקרי - שמזמרים בשעה שחורשין  
ואינו אלא לכוין את השוורים לתלמיהם  
שהולכין לקול השיר דערב עליהם.

But the song of the garda’ey.  
(presumably “weavers”) is purely  
for their own pleasure and  
intertainment (it has nothing to  
do with their work).

דגרדאי - אינו אלא לשחוק.

According to another interpretation” the *garda’ey* were tanners, considered to  
be vile and vulgar <sup>מא33</sup> whose songs were coarse and full of curses. The  
implication of this interpretation is there is no objection to singing *per se*; music  
doesn't need to have a justification. The only objection is to songs whose lyrics  
are vulgar.

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<sup>30</sup> TB Sota 48a

<sup>31</sup> loc. at.

”The *Arukh*, see Kahn l:p. 69

<sup>33</sup> See also Kiddushin 82b

So we might say that there are two basic attitudes: One that music is inherently a corrupting force in the life of a Jew, and that it should be shunned. Exceptions to this principle can be made only where it can be proven that music has a noble or practical purpose (such as music in praise of God or to facilitate one's work). The second attitude is that music is basically OK, it is good for the soul, and need be avoided only in those cases where it is connected with something evil (such as the banquets of the pagans or the vulgar lyrics of weavers' songs).

### Wedding Music

Music for the wedding feast was another occasion for which nearly all authorities agreed that an exemption from the prohibition should be made. After all, the ban on music was merely a rabbinic law, whereas the commandment to gladden the hearts of the bride and groom was from the Torah itself.

The Talmud tells us of prominent rabbis who would dance at weddings, juggling sticks and even dancing with the bride.

They say that R. Yeudah bar Il'ai used to take a myrtle-wood baton and dance before the bride, singing: 'Beautiful bride and graceful.' -

אמרו עליו על רבי יהודה בר אילעאי.  
שהיה נוטל בד של הדס ומרקד לפני הכלה.  
ואומר כלל נאה וחסידה.

R. Samuel the son of R. Isaac used to dance while juggling three [batons].

רב שמואל בר רב יצחק - מרקד אתלת.

R. Aha used to dance with [the bride] on his shoulders."

רב אחא מרכיב לה אכתפיה ומרקד.

The medieval Tosafists clarified that there are no restrictions on singing at a wedding.

Singing which is associated with a mitzvah is permitted: for example the rejoicing with bride and groom at the

ושיר של מצוה שרי

wedding feast.<sup>35</sup>

כגון בשעת חופה שעושין  
לשמח חתן וכלה:

The same principle appears in the writings of the sixteenth-century Polish rabbi Moshe Isserles.

But everything is permitted for the sake of a Divine commandment, such as [rejoicing] in the home of a bride and groom.<sup>36</sup>

וכן לצורך מצוה.  
כגון בבית חתן וכלה.  
הכל שרי :

And in the fourteenth century, Rabbi Jacob Moellin, the *Maharil*, ruled that one must not celebrate a wedding without a band.

Once there was a king who decreed that [in his realm] the playing of musical instruments was forbidden. [Now it happened that a couple was about to be married and inquired if it would be proper to hold a wedding without musical instruments.]

פעם אחת גזר המושל  
שלא ינגנו בכלי שיר

The Maharil ruled that the bride and groom must be taken to another city so that the wedding could be held with musical instruments?'

וצוה להוליך חתן וכלה לעיר אחרת  
לעשות שם החתונה  
כדי לנגן בכלי שיר.

Despite what was clearly a popular practice with nearly universal rabbinic support, some authorities forbade the playing of musical instruments, even at weddings. Rabbi Meir Auerbach instituted a ban that was endorsed by the

<sup>35</sup>Tosafot to Gitin 7a

<sup>36</sup> Shulchan Aruch Orah Hayim 560:3

<sup>37</sup> Mishnah Serurah (Ba'er Hetev) Shulhan Aruch Orah Hayim 338:2



Ashkenazi rabbis of nineteenth-century Jerusalem. forbidding instrumental music at all weddings which took place in Jerusalem.

**The Voice of a Woman**

Yet another restriction **was** that involving the singing of women. For centuries, women were forbidden to sing aloud in both synagogue and church.

The voice of a woman was considered lustful, sexually enticing.

Our Rabbis taught:	תנו רבנן
Rahav inspired lust by her name:	רחב בשמה זינתה.
Yael by her voice:	יעל בקולה.
Avigail by her memory;	אביגיל בזכירתה.
Michal daughter of Saul by her appearance.'	מיכל בת-שאול בראייתה.

R. Joseph said:	אמר רב יוסף
When men sing and women join in - it is licentiousness;	זמרי גברי ועמי נשי - פריצותא
when women sing and men join in - it is like a fire raging in flax. <sup>39</sup>	זמרי נשי ועמי גברי - כאש בנעורת.

What would distract a man from praying the **Shema**? According to the Talmud Bavli: a woman's naked leg, and her exposed hair. and .

R. Samuel said. The voice of a forbidden woman (or, according to other translators, [Listenmg to] a woman's voice is sexual enticement).	אמר שמואל קול באשה ערוה
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38TBMegila 15a  
39TB Sota 48a

Does R. Samuel's ruling imply that an artful woman's voice is inherently arousing at any time, or merely that it is forbidden to be distracted while one is praying? It would seem that the original intent in this context was to avoid listening to a woman's voice while engaged in a religious activity which required concentration, such as the recitation of the Shema.

In another well-known talmudic passage, Rabbi Yehudah refuses to send regards to his colleague's wife, fearing that his intentions might be misinterpreted. Yehudah quotes as his source the dictum by Rabbi Samuel.

[Rabbi Nahman said to Rabbi Yehudah:]Will you send a greeting to [my wife] Yaltha? נשדר ליה מר שלמא לילתא?

[Rabbi Yehudah replied:]Thus said Samuel, 'the voice of a forbidden woman.' אל הכי אמר שמואל קול באשה ערוה

In that passage, the reference *seems* to be to the *speaking* voice of a woman.

Matmonides, in his *Code* quotes the talmudic term used by Rabbi Samuel: לשמוע קול הערוה. In Maimonides' formulation the expression is קול באשה ערוה. Maimonides understands the word ערוה to be a noun. An ערוה is a woman whom a man may not marry. To hear her voice, whether singing or speaking, is prohibited, as it may be alluring and tempt a man into an improper relationship (such as mixed dancing). One may imply from this statement that there is no objection to listening to the voice of a woman who is not ערוה; for example one's own wife, or even an unmarried man listening to an unmarried woman.

A man who does any of these things is susceptible to a forbidden relationship.

Men are forbidden to make gestures with the hands or feet

העושה דבר מחוקות אלו  
הרי הוא חשוד על העריות.  
ואסור לאדם לקרן  
בידיו וברגליו

or to signal with the eyes to a woman who is forbidden.

Nor may he loke with her nor engage in any levity.

Nor should he smell her perfume nor admire her beauty.

It is likewise forbidden to listen to the voice of a forbidden woman or to gaze upon her hair.<sup>40</sup>

או לרמוז בעיניו לאחת מן העריות

או לשחוק עמה או להקל ראש

ואפילו להריח בשמים שעליה

או להביט ביפיה אסור.

ואפילו לשמוע קול הערוה

או לראות שערה אסור.

In some of the later halachic works the expression לשמוע קול הערוה has been reinterpreted. In the Shulhan Aruch. Rabbi Joseph Caro uses the term קול זמר אשה and Rabbi Moshe Isserles uses ערוה as an adjective modifying the word קול ערוה. קול ערוה is now to be translated not as “the voice of a forbidden woman” but as ‘an enticing voice.’ Here is the passage from the Shulhan Aruch. First Rabbi Caro:

While one is reciting the Shema, one should be careful to avoid listening to the voice of a woman singing.

יש לזהר משמיעת קול זמר אשה  
בשעת קריאת שמע:

And now the words of Rabbi Isserles:

But once he's accustomed to a voice, it is no longer considered stimulating.”

אבל קול הרגיל בו אינו ערוה

Of course, these prohibitions couldn't prevent women from singing. A vast literature of folksong has come down to us: the creations of many generations of women singing lullabies to their children and love songs to themselves.

<sup>40</sup> Maimonides: Laws of Prohibited Relations 21:2

<sup>41</sup> Shulchan Aruch: Laws of the Recitation of the Shema 75:3

Since women could not sing in the presence of men, they were of course prohibited from serving as *sheliah tsibbur* in a liturgical service. Yet there are hints that at various times in our history women have put together their own, separate *davenmg*.

In the Rhineland, in the town of Worms, a group of women had their own synagogue, adjoining that of the men. The tombstone of a woman who died in the thirteenth century, reads as follows:

This headstone commemorates the eminent and excellent lady Uranya bat harav Avraham who was the master of the the *synagogue singers*. She **also** officiated and sang hymns with sweet melodies before the female worshippers. In devout service may her memory be preserved.<sup>42</sup>

### **Tame That Tune**

Throughout the ages, authorities in various lands have realized the importance of musical censorship. In the fourth century before the common era, Plato wrote of the necessity to regulate which music would be heard in the ideal republic. And in more recent times, Tipper Gore has lobbied for the introduction of warning labels on the covers of all recorded products.

The rabbinic authorities were equally impressed with the power of music. They recognized its ability to arouse the passions, whether manifest as love for God or lust for women. They recognized the necessity for music in prayer, in celebrations and even in the workplace. They recognized that a people uses song as a vehicle for ethnic self-identification. They ensured that a Jew would be defined not only by what he ate and read, but also by what he sang and what he heard.

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<sup>42</sup> Israel Abrahams. *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: JPS. n.d.; reprinted.. NY: Atheneum. 1981). p. 26.

Some rabbis even envisioned a musi which would have its place in the utpoia of the messianic era. We will close with the final sentence of a sermon delivered some four hundred years ago by Rabbi Judah Moscato of Mantua. Italy.

And then [in the perfect time to come], we,	ואז אנחנו בשם ה' אלקינו
in the name of the Lord our God. will sing	נזכיר שיר חדש זכר ושלם.
a new song, complete and perfect,	
which will resonate to the vibrations of the	ולקול צנוריו. תתעורר המוסיקה העליונה
music of the heavenly spheres,	
and the angels will joyfully sing	וברן יחד יריעו כל בני אלהים.
antiphonally and in harmony.	וקרא זה אל זה.
until the whole universe will be completely	עד יתמלא כל העולם כלו
filled with light, joy, happiness and	אורה ושמחה וששון ויקר.
honor. <sup>43</sup>	

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<sup>43</sup>Rabbi Judah Moscato (c.1530 - 1590) *Nefutsot Yehudah* (quoted in Israel Adler, ad. Hebrew Writings Concerning Music. RISM. Munich: G. Henle. 1975.)

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