Music, before Tisha BeAb

MUSIC AND MOURNING

As we have already explained, during the three weeks between the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Ab we observe certain customs of mourning. We do not celebrate weddings, we do not recite Shehecheyanu, etc. What about listening to or playing music during these three weeks? The answer is not a simple "yes" or "no", and ultimately depends on the tradition of each community. Why? Among other reasons, because the Shulchan 'arukh, when mentioning the customs and restrictions of these three weeks, and in particular the restrictions once the month of Ab begins, does not indicate anything explicit about listening to or playing music during these days.

In the following lines, we are going to explain the different points of view about music and mourning in Jewish sources

HAPPY AND SAD MUSIC

Music is one of the highest expressions of happiness. When the people of Israel crossed the Red Sea and realized that they were finally free from their Egyptian masters, they were led by Moshe Rabbenu's sister, Miriam, to sing and play musical instruments expressing joy and happiness for their freedom. From Talmudic times or earlier, we know that music was also played at weddings and on many other festive and joyous occasions. Jewish tradition also refers to music in times of mourning. A person who is in mourning cannot play or listen to music, or attend a celebration where music is played, in the case of one's father or mother, for an entire year. Thus, when a grieving person attends, for example, a Bar Mitsva, he may participate of the religious ceremony but does not participate of the party when music is played at that event. With all these elements in mind, we must ask ourselves: since music is one, or the greatest, expression of happiness, and music is

avoided in times of mourning, is it allowed to play or listen to music during these three weeks, when we are remembering the destruction of the Bet haMiqdash?

I present two views of two contemporary rabbis, Rabbi Eliezer Melamed and Rabbi Obadia Yosef z”l.

THREE TYPES OF MUSIC

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed (Penine Halakha, Zemanim, 141-146) explains that not all kinds of music should be prohibited during these days. In his opinion, the original restriction of the Hakhamim about not listening to music as part of our mourning for the Bet haMiqdash, refers to celebratory music, that is, when music “invites” to dance, for example, or at a live concert, that people attend specifically to enjoy music. But not all music is “celebratory” music. Classical music; inspirational music or background music in a shopping mall or gym is not related to “celebration” or “happiness.” The same could be said of taking music classes or listening to the national anthem, etc. Rabbi Melamed also refers to melancholic music. The Talmud relates that in ancient Israel, sad music was played at funerals to inspire the hearts of the bereaved to enter a mood of sadness (Shabbat 151a). Based on the distinction between these three types of music (celebratory music, inspirational music and sad music), Rabbi Melamed says that: 1. One should avoid listening to celebratory music during the three weeks. 2. And until the beginning of the month of Ab, one might listen to inspirational or non-celebratory music 3. Once the month of Ab begins and until the 9th of Ab, only sad melancholic Jewish music would be allowed.

The popular Israeli religious radio station, Arutz 7, follows this opinion (www.inn.co.il).

SONGS vs. MUSIC

Rabbi Obadia Yosef z ”l has a different opinion. Based on a text from Maimonides, Mishne Torah (Ta’aniot 5: 12-15), where

he mentions the mourning traditions that the rabbis established after the destruction of the second Bet haMiqdash. Among those restrictions, he says (5:14) “□□□□ □□□ □□□□ □□□ □□□ □□□□□ □□□□ □□□ □□ □□□ □□□□□□ □□□ □□□ □□□□ □□□ □□□ □□□□ □□□□□… . “The rabbis also forbade playing musical instruments, and all kinds of music and any form of song. It is forbidden to rejoice with this music and listen to it; because we can’t forget the destruction of the Bet haMiqdash. ” While Rabbi Melamed explains that we should distinguish between joyful and melancholic music, Rabbi Obadia Yosef distinguishes between music played with □□”musical instruments”, which Maimonides mentions in this text, and singing songs without musical instruments. For Rabbi Yosef, what makes music joyful or celebratory is not its content, but the fact that the music is played with or without instruments. Rabbi Yosef indicates then that it is permissible to listen to or sing songs “a cappella”, that is, without instruments, until Rosh Chodesh Ab, even if the music is of a festive or celebratory nature.

CONCLUSION

Most Sephardic communities in our days follow the opinion of rabbi Obadya Yosef, and most Ashkenazi communities, the opinion presented by rabbi Melamed. There is also a third opinion, mentioned by Rabbi Melamed as well, that one should avoid listening to or playing live instrumental music from the 17th of Tammuz, and avoid all kinds of music (including electronic music) from the beginning of the month of Ab. Whenever we find a disagreement between rabbinic authorities regarding certain customs or traditions (minhagim), each person should follow the tradition of his or her community and family.