

SWEET SINGERS OF ISRAEL

The Position of the Chazan in the Modern Jewish Community

By C. GERSHATER

THE position of Chazanim and Chazanut in western Jewish communities is a subject which, time and again, crops up for discussion in the columns of the Anglo-Jewish press.

There is, it ought to be mentioned, no recognised and authoritative training centre for cantors. As a result the character of the profession depends upon the personal attainments of each particular member, and upon the importance which Jewish communities attach to his position. Amongst modern Chazanim there are just as many scholars as ignorant individuals, chosen merely for their vocal abilities.

America is to-day considered the leading centre of Chazanut. One has only to glance at the advertising columns of the New York Jewish press to obtain a gloomy and distressing picture of the decline of a noble profession. Mushroom - congregations, built in years of prosperity at almost every corner of the Jewish quarters, are now using the Chazan as a means of covering their deficits.

The Chazan has been deprived of the dignity of the "Shliach Tzibur" and has become a prey for impresarios and theatrical agencies. In fact, the nomenclature used by Jewish columnists in America is fairly characteristic; there is a "Chazanim-market," whose rises and drops are often dependant on the latest Rooseveltian moves "towards recovery." There is a Chazanim-season (very quiet after the High Festivals!); there are Chazanim-stars, Chazanim-canaries and Chazanim - wonder-children. A product of one agent's brain is the "wonder-twins-Chazanim," who officiate jointly on Fridays in a New York shool.

This appalling treatment of one of the most sacred institutions has not spelt fortune to congregations or cantors. The synagogue has benefited but little by the theatricalisation of the House of Worship; the youth who count most, have not flocked to the services. They find the "crooning stars" of the music-hall more attractive than the "nightingales" of the synagogue. As for the Chazanim they can find neither spiritual nor material security under such conditions. It is significant that the "king of Chazanim," a man known for his piety and learning, who recently died during a singing engagement for an American film company in Jerusalem, left little behind him.

Place of the Chazan.

THE economic crisis in the United States has recently sent many

"larks" and "nightingales" flying across the Atlantic to seek their fortune in Jewish communities of Europe. The solemn and austere "Jewish Chronicle" has for some time past been gravely perturbed by their singing in the synagogues of London and the Provinces. Respectable wardens wrote to complain of the vulgarisation brought into the Holy Services by congregants who flock to listen to "concert-antics." One contributor was induced to write a special article, discussing: "The Place of the Chazan in the Congregation."

The writer quoted two opposing views taken by communal leaders, one that such an artificial form of filling the synagogue does not lead to any religious experience on the part of the worshipper; the other that to engage a sweet-voiced cantor is traditionally the most legitimate way of attracting people to the House of Worship.

The Qualities of a Cantor.

THERE is another aspect which has to be considered in any discussion of modern Chazanut:

Are we fully justified in looking upon the cantor only from the viewpoint of the chanting of Services? Do we not thereby limit the scope of an office which is, or should be, more and more expanding?

The question is of particular importance to communal life of South Africa, in view of the elaborate arrangements which a Johannesburg congregation has just made for the engagement of a famous Chazan and of the general position of the Jewish Ministry, which is under discussion to-day in many parts of the country.

In the past when the intellectual standard of matters Jewish was high amongst us, it was quite convenient for a Jewish community to define rigidly the functions of its officials and to desire speciality, rather than versatility. In a community where almost every member was learned in religious matters, where proverbially speaking, every Jew was a Chazan, a "lamdan," a teacher and a preacher, it was feasible that the Rabbi be chosen for some special quality, such as extreme piety, or modesty, or some special achievement as a writer of Talmudic commentary, and that the Chazan be chosen only by reason of his sweet voice.

Nahum Sokolow has aptly described the attitude which prevailed in Jewish communities towards the Jewish Minister:

"... if the Rabbi engages actively

in communal affairs... well and good. If he does not, so long as the people know him to be a distinguished scholar and a devotee of learning, they will not condemn him for it... A similar attitude prevailed regarding the Rabbi's ability as preacher; as to whether he delivers beautiful sermons or is a tongue-tied speaker... In important communities the Magid—an officer next in importance to the Rabbi—delivered the sermons... When voice was looked for, the Chazan was there, open to the criticism of anybody and everybody." (Haani hakibutzi, pp. 57-8).

These conditions which Mr. Sokolow rightly describes as tending towards "a definite uplifting of communal affairs," no longer prevail in our communal life. The learned layman, well versed in Jewish matters and fully capable of sparing the Rabbi, the preacher and the Chazan for some special and single branch of communal activity, is to-day becoming rarer. A vast field of extra-professional activity must needs fall on the shoulders of the cantor, as well as of the Rabbi.

No Jewish Home.

THE deficiency of Jewish experience, religious observance and learning in the modern Jewish home, has brought about a transformation of Jewish life. Ceremonies, festivals and other religious observances, which in former days were practised in the home, have to-day been relegated to the organised institutions of the community. The school, the lecture-hall, the meeting-room, have to perform the functions of an almost extinct Jewish home and a demand for a Jewishly cultured and active leadership is growing in every sphere of communal life.

In this scheme of communal activity, there are many tasks awaiting the enterprising cantor, who does not regard himself and is not looked upon as a mere singer of services. The growing demand for cultural activity, as evidenced at the recent Bloemfontein Zionist Conference, will not be satisfied by lectures only. Music—Jewish music—should play a great part in the religious and cultural advancement of our community. In this direction lies one of the primary duties of the cultured Chazan. To the Chazan we must look for the establishment and direction of Jewish choral societies, the encouragement of Jewish performance and composition, the inculcation of a love and appreciation of the Palestinian Hebrew melody and the Yiddish folk-song.

The difficulty of training our children to participate in synagogue-

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