Community and Society Archive

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Bach, Talmud and Civic Engagement

I have been rehearsing for the past several months to sing Bach's B-minor mass with the Collegiate Chorale, one of New York's large choruses. While I am one of over one hundred voices, I am expected to learn and perfect my part and to do so as soon as possible after receiving the music. The first rehearsal of the year often includes sight-reading through a piece. Usually this experience is daunting, particularly for someone like me who learns music by ear and who has never developed good sight-singing skills. I swim through the pages and pages of complicated note patterns. The notes are impenetrable, particularly in Bach, full of endless series of melismas. The piece seems huge and distancing. I reach for the bits of familiarity, but they pass by so quickly that they offer little satisfaction. But I know by now, at least intellectually, that the fun in singing a complicated piece of music is the difficulty of learning it and the remarkable satisfaction of breaking through.

Over the next few weeks, I spent a great deal of time with the piece at home.

Actually, the first time I picked it up it seemed hopeless and I immediately put it down. And I did this even though I had a tape of my part and in spite of the fact that I have sung in choruses for quite a few years and have mastered pieces even more difficult than this one. Gradually, I worked through the different movements, spending hours on it. And as I knew would happen, it began to disentangle to the point that it became difficult to remember why the notes had seemed so hard at first. The series of notes began to turn into phrases. I knew I was on my way to music.

On a recent Saturday, my chorus rehearsed at Riverside Church. It was a sectional rehearsal, just for the tenors and basses. Everyone was very aware of their commitment to the group: if they did not learn the music, everyone would be thrown off; a potentially perfect sound would be marred. The conductor reminded us of this with uncomfortable frequency. I was concentrating hard and beginning to have the confidence to sing out, since I finally knew the notes.

At some point during the rehearsal, I realized that the piece had begun to reveal itself to me. I was able to observe the ingenious layering and texture of the piece and this was just with the tenors and basses singing. I felt almost physically lifted off the floor, as sometimes happens when you are singing with the right combination of concentration, attentiveness to the surrounding voices, proper use of your whole body to support your voice, and involvement in the music. I found myself a bit teary eyed, as I thought about the act of singing a piece that had been sung and reinterpreted over hundreds of years.

As the piece began to open before me, I was reminded of an experience I had with a Talmud text six months earlier. I was sitting on a plane next to a colleague and we decided to use the time to look at a particularly difficult piece of Talmud. As is often true of such texts, this one seemed remarkably arcane. It was about the question of acceptable reasons for not participating in the Passover sacrifice. In addition, the argumentation was complicated, so much so that it was necessary to write out a chart tracing the competing claims of the different participants in the conversation. My head hurt and I didn't really feel like going on. I was yawning, feeling increasingly drowsy. I was aware of the stale airplane air and of the baby crying somewhere else in the cabin. The flight was packed. But I pushed on, trying first to understand the text and then to interpret what it could possibly offer us. It has been after all a very long time since Jews brought the Passover sacrifice. And why should I care that those who are unclean or who are away on a journey are exempt from the punishment of "karet" (spiritual cutting off from the community) that results from not bringing the sacrifice?

It is difficult to describe how impenetrable this text seemed, and this was not the first time we had picked it up. And unlike the familiarity I had with the process of learning music, I did not know for sure that sometime in the future I would discover the payoff. Suddenly the text opened up, and we found ourselves grappling with essential questions about commitment to family, community and country. I had forgotten entirely about the crowded plane.

There is nothing like a common challenge, achieved through collective discipline and nuanced cooperation, to create a sense of individual engagement. This sense of individual efficacy and joint enterprise is too infrequently part of our non-work lives; it creates a particular type of communal experience. Certainly it is not part of most gatherings, whether it be for synagogue or for a cocktail party. Consider your average dinner party, where conversation too often deteriorates to the overly personal or the trivial. Contrast this with the salons of Paris and Berlin in which the pleasure for participants came from the experience of joint creativity, whether in intellectually demanding parlor games or in struggling together with a difficult philosophical passage.

Notably, the common challenge of mastering Bach is quite different from other sorts of common challenges that bond groups of individuals together (for example, hatred of another group, fear, or desire for family-like intimacy). In fact, community is made each week with people who come from very different ages and backgrounds and professions, but who all happen to love to sing. One of the most moving moments of my week is looking around the room at the rehearsal and seeing each individual struggle to sing the right notes, concentrate on keeping time, and lose herself in the process. Most of the time, I don't even know the names of the people I sing next to. The notion of the "chevruta" (study partnership) in the Beit Midrash is, similarly, a particular kind of relationship -- generated by the discipline and creativity of engaging with a difficult text, not by the need for personal relationship.

There is an additional compelling facet to the bond created in learning and then singing a Bach piece: the connection with a long tradition of performance and interpretation. Singing Bach ties one back in time and space to hundreds of people who have sung the piece. The composer was, in turn, in dialogue with musical traditions when writing the piece. The conductor is also in conversation across time with other interpreters of the piece. Talmud study too involves one in a complex and multilayered conversation between rabbis and generations of interpreters.

Until I began to think about this comparison between Bach and Talmud, I had not understood why choral societies figured in Robert Putnam's 1990 book,

Making Democracy Work, among the civic associations that help sustain healthy democracy. Sure I know, as a political scientist, that civic associations are groups that exist beyond the family, which are not connected with either business or government. Such groups need not be directly involved in improving public life. What they offer individuals is the opportunity to engage in a communal, creative enterprise, around a common challenge, that rests on individual responsibility to the collectivity. And this engagement is about something other than forming family-like relationships.

This type of vibrant communal life can take various forms: singing Bach with a chorus; struggling with a partner to make an arcane piece of Talmud meaningful for our contemporary lives; cooking a complicated meal together in preparation for a community seder; discussing important issues of the day at a salon; reading a play together; or playing in a softball league. In each of these we transcend our particularisms, we become more fully human, we discover who we are as individuals and community, and we connect the present with the past.

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