

Tips for Leading a Great Shabbat Davening

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1. Keep things simple

- a. People like to learn new tunes, but can't sing full-force while learning them. And you only get 6-8 good melodies per service. So limit yourself to 1-2 tunes that less than half of the *kahal* knows (~3:1 or 4:1 ratio).
- b. Preview. If you want to use a new tune for *kedusha*, start by humming it while people are finishing the silent *amida* or running through once without words first.
- c. Don't change tunes too much. Usually two melodies for *kedusha* is enough – more and it just feels disjointed.
- d. Phrasing: Fit the words to the tune before you start. Many texts break up logically, or in one usual way, so follow that when you can. You get the maximum participation when you minimize unpredictability.
- e. It's ok to squeeze the words a bit to make it fit the tune so as to keep with more natural phrasing. Best to do that at the beginning of a phrase.
- f. Sing clearly and simply, no trills or harmonies. Don't be breathy. The key is to make it easy to follow you and for the *kahal* to be able to figure out as quickly as possible what melody you're using.

2. Give Clear Signals and Guidance

- a. Be aware of when people are likely to be uncertain – that's when you need to be extra loud to let people know where you are. This may be about phrasing, which part of the melody you're on, or whether or not you're going to continue the niggun after the words are done.
- b. Lead with confidence: Start strong and clear, then let people follow. When you want a tune to end, raise volume and slow down; when you want it to continue, loudly continue the rhythm through the last word. When a melody is over, audibly start mumbling the next text to cue people.
- c. Start a fraction of a beat ahead of everyone else so that people can hear where you are and follow along – both where in the text and which part of the melody. For that 1/16 of a beat everyone will be able to hear you, but they won't even notice you did it.
- d. Be decisive. There usually isn't a right or wrong about how to do things, but be aware that a group of 100 people is hard to shepherd.

3. Sing in a Range that Everyone can Follow

- a. It hurts *ruach* when people want to sing but doing so requires jumping octaves. Altos need to be the most careful about this, since sopranos and most men have similar ranges.

- b. Lowest note should be A, highest should be D. This gives you a full range of 11 notes (i.e. 1 ½ octaves). You should start in the key of C or D. If you start on an A, most men are stuck either croaking any note below the tonic or having to drop the octave when you get to a 5th above it.
- c. Your key is not always the note you start on, but it's almost always the note the melody *ends* on. So sing through to the last note and check if that is roughly correct. Also, if you start in D and stay in one key you're safe.
- d. Golden rule: Be aware of the people singing with you. If you get into a key that works for them, stick with it. And if you hear people struggling with the key, just make sure to adjust up or down for the next song.

4. Control the Pace

- a. The *nusah* parts of davening should be brisk but not rushed. Slow enough that you don't stumble over the words, but not drawn out – people are there to sing along more than to listen.
- b. Choose melodies thoughtfully: Vary the tempo, try to find tunes that fit the meaning of the words, and avoid tunes that tend to drag.
- c. Keep a steady rhythm. We all have a tendency when leading to get faster and faster as we build up energy. On the other hand, the *kahal* often tends to slow you down. Find a way to keep your rhythm as steady as you can, or reassert the desired tempo at the beginning of a new tune or verse.
- d. Emotion yes. Emoting no. Don't overdo it – let your own experience of the moment and of the music guide you.
- e. Banging on the table can be good, but in moderation and not too loud. And avoid loud clapping (and during the amida, jumping).

5. Relax and Enjoy it

- a. It's important to know the words fluently, but don't stress about shvas and whatnot. That is the focus in *laining*, where the precise pronunciation is paramount, but the *siddur* is rabbinic Hebrew (largely) and hearing the exact words is less central.
- b. But DO get to know the *nusach* well enough to give it some variety. There are many small variations you can work in once you're comfortable with the basic motif, and once you're not worrying about remembering it, that allow you to avoid monotony.
- c. The question of whether you are a "good enough" *shatz* is largely a function of whether it was a "nice davening". It should be pleasant, successfully bring people in, not drag. That's it. The role of the *shatz* is not to be dominant but to be a conductor. What we are striving for is where the dominant voice is that of the whole *kahal*.
- d. Don't sweat the small stuff. And it's mostly small stuff.