

## THE KEY TO GOOD CANTORING

### PART TWO: EYE CONTACT AND FACIAL EXPRESSION

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This is the second in a four-part series on the various elements of animation. Animation is that element in cantoring that separates the beginners from the more advanced. Here is where we find a cantor who is prepared and confident, who can do more than simply sing the words on the page. In the first article we explored the value of memorizing the words and music that we are to sing each week. In this article we look at what we can do with our eyes and face to communicate more effectively the meaning of the responsorial psalm and other liturgical music.

The first step is to look at the words of the psalm we are to sing. What is the general message? Is it a joyful Easter psalm such as Psalm 118, “This Is the Day,” or is it a more somber Lenten psalm such as Psalm 51, “Be Merciful, O Lord”? Read through the words and make sure you understand the meaning of the psalm and, similarly, of any song that will be used. If you don’t understand the meaning, ask someone to interpret. It is absolutely critical that you understand the meaning of the words so that you can then communicate that meaning to the rest of the assembly. During the week, think and pray about the words you will be singing. Can you relate to what the author might have been thinking? Can you



feel the emotion?

It is up to the cantor as “animateur” to bring the words of our beautiful music to life. We must use appropriate facial expression to accomplish this and let our eyes speak the meaning or feeling as well. Do you feel the emotion in the songs you sing? If your psalm is a joyful

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and happy psalm, you must reflect that happiness on your face! If it is a more serious, contemplative, Lenten psalm, then your face must mirror that as well. This is similar to what an actor does during a play. We must use our face and eyes as tools to help convey the message of the music and to encourage our assemblies to sing! Being a cantor is not only aural but also visual. The more we do to animate through our eyes, eyebrows, and facial expressions, the more our congregations will sing.

There is one more aspect of this issue to be explored. It is simple, yet so powerful. Do you smile when you sing? Does your face show how much God loves us? How can we sing “Let all the earth cry out with joy to the Lord!” without a smile on our face? A smile goes hand in hand with so much of our music—whether the song is “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You” or “Jesus Christ Is Risen Today.” By singing with a smiling face, we are telling our congregation that we are confident, prepared, filled with the joy of God’s love, and longing to share that love with others.

This is the foundation of animation. When the cantor is able to animate the music—able to combine the words and music with appropriate facial expressions—the music takes on new life. Our congregations are then able to understand more fully the words and prayers present in the music. This is our second step toward successful animation. In the next article we look at another issue facing all cantors: the gesture—how much, how little, and when? ☺

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