A Melody of Their Own:
Orthodox Women and the Performing Arts

By Roslyn Dickens
Art, most artists would argue, is often the most essential part of who they are. A banker or an accountant may play the piano at home as a creative outlet, as a form of expression or for personal satisfaction. But the need to do so probably does not drive his every waking moment. Yet, the opposite is often true for the artist.

Decades ago I saw a PBS special where a ballerina was being interviewed. Her comment was poignant. “Dancing is life,” she said, “all the rest is waiting.”

Enter halachah and its attendant boundaries of kol ishah and tzeniut and suddenly an onslaught of restrictions drive artistic women from the stage, requiring them to stifle their most abiding impulses. And yet, more and more Orthodox women who feel that performing represents their deepest connection to their inner selves are finding ways to express themselves within halachic guidelines.

Ordinarily Makor, on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, is a place where Jews in their twenties and thirties from all backgrounds gather to connect with Jewish life, but one night every few months the place is transformed as religious women participating in Girls’ Night On take to the stage and perform for an all-female audience. An initiative that organizes performances for women by women, Girls’ Night On grew out of the Orthodox community but has broader appeal. Women ranging from Chassidic to secular congregate, forming a unique and supportive atmosphere. Anyone who wants to perform is welcome. “Most performers are singers or play instruments, although from time to time we have a few dancers, stand-up comedians and even poets,” says Leslie Ginsparg, one of the founders of Girls’ Night On. There is no charge to perform, and admission is only ten dollars.

Some months ago, I went to see Girls’ Night On to experience the show myself. Makor’s “café” had been reconfigured to accommodate over 200 people; still, there was standing room only. Some of the performers were actual professionals who had taken a step back from more conventional venues in order to comply with their Torah lifestyle. Some were trying to get their music out there, hoping that this would be a stepping-stone to something bigger. Jane Babits, a woman with a glorious and haunting voice, captivated the audience with two of her original compositions. Babits is not observant, but she relishes performing at Girls’ Night On because of the special atmosphere in the room. “I feel like I am in a safe place, I feel the support of these women,” she says. “It is unlike anything else I have ever experienced on stage.”

The very construct of women “talking” to women generates a wonderful atmosphere. The audience is warm and welcoming, not combative, which in itself is a departure from some open-mike entertainment. The performers understand and respect each other’s artistry. The Jewish connection makes the bond between performer and audience that much deeper.

A delicately boned woman, wearing eyeglasses and a tichel, approached the mike. Her expression was serious. Her song was even more so. Starting slowly, the song, a powerful political piece about the terrorist victims in Israel, grew in intensity, leaving the audience transfixed and devastated. A dark-haired young woman in a striped...
sweater came on stage and spoofed the dating scene. In her original composition, she lamented “the one who got away,” generating whoops of laughter and recognition from the largely single crowd. Toward the end of the first act, a tall woman in a brown, knit snood, crushed velvet jacket, floor-length skirt and high-top sneakers mounted the stage, her appearance completely at odds with the yellow, kidney-shaped electric guitar she was carrying. Within minutes the whole place was clapping and stomping.

“From the time I was little, I dreamed of being an actress,” says Ginsparg, who grew up religious. “I was always putting on plays in my living room and forcing my parents and my brothers and sisters to come watch.”

For Ginsparg, chances to perform were many: school, choir, summer camp. Those opportunities dried up when she finished college, but her desire to perform did not. “No matter what I was doing full time, there was always a part of me that was searching for a way to be involved in performing.”

Today, as a teacher of Jewish history at New York University and Touro College, Ginsparg sees the dearth of venues as a challenge. “The word halachah comes from walking a path. It’s not rigid. That’s a misconception,” says Ginsparg, who is a Wexner Graduate Fellow. “I view it as a path to be navigated, or maybe negotiated is a better word. Instead of viewing my life as limited by my religious observance, I realized I needed to be more creative in finding opportunities. I thought, ‘If I look for them, I’ll find them.’ But when I looked for them and didn’t find them, I thought, ‘Okay, then I’ll just have to create them.’ That’s how Girls’ Night On came to be.”

While studying in Israel, Ginsparg attended a few “wildly popular” open-mike nights that were organized by a ba’alat teshuvah. “Sitting in the audience, I was just blown away,” says Ginsparg. “There was so much talent in the room, and these women who just had so much inside of them were coming from all different places in Israeli society.

Could Ginsparg have imagined such success when she started Girls’ Night On a year and a half ago? “Not in my wildest dreams,” she says. “All over the country people know about it. I think the kind of growth it has had in such a short period of time tells you something. Girls’ Night On isn’t bedieved, [post facto] … it’s lechatchila, [ideal]…. Is it enough? No. But [it] is growing by leaps and bounds. People keep telling me to ‘think big’, so Girls’ Night On is now chartered. It’s an official entity with a web site [www.girlsnighton.com].”

Looking to the future, Ginsparg says she would love to see the open-mike show go on the road. “I ran a program with high school girls to get the next generation involved,” she says. “I would also like to start [organizing] concerts for the women who want to pursue this on a professional level.”

CDs of the events are also available. “The first CD that we recorded at Girls’ Night On is a compilation of singers, but there are plenty of women who could carry a CD on their own,” says Ginsparg. “I am frustrated. I wouldn’t say I am frustrated with halachah, as much as I [am] frustrated with [post facto] … it’s lechatchila, [ideal]…. Is it enough? No. But [it] is growing by leaps and bounds. People keep telling me to ‘think big’ so Girls’ Night On is now chartered. It’s an official entity with a web site [www.girlsnighton.com].”

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“I have spoken about this program to non-observant audiences, and not one [secular audience member] said to me, ‘Why are you doing it for women only?’ And these are people for whom kol ishah wouldn’t have been on the map. Instead they said, ‘Wow, what a great idea!’ Only in [the Orthodox world] was someone asking ‘Why [only women]?’ Outside no one ever asked me that.”

Ginsparg will be heartened to know that more and more women’s music is getting “out there.” Judaica stores around the country stock impressive selections of female artist CDs by Kineret, Malky Taub Gingham, Julia Blum and others.

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headquarters in my kitchen. “There are women who started
with Harmony as children, who today
as young mothers are bringing their
own kids to Harmony,” muses Travis.
The music is mostly religious, fea-
turing both original and standard popu-
lar Jewish music. Except for the musi-
cians, no one is paid, yet Travis consid-
ers the program a
great success.

“Our pri-
mary purpose is
to raise money for tzedakah [to be dis-
tributed] within our community. To
achieve that goal, we use what God has
given us for the good of [the] commu-
nity. It’s a gift to give to Hakadosh
Baruch Hu.”

Some fourteen years ago, Travis
had the idea of bringing the community
together through song and dance. Back
then while there were many shirurim in
the community, says Travis, women
who were hungry for self-expression had
nowhere to go. Harmony affords
women the opportunity to be creative.
Even for those who don’t sing or dance,
Harmony enables them to use their
administrative or production skills for a
higher purpose. “Harmony is more than
a setting in which women can express
themselves artistically. Harmony touches
women and allows them to tap into
their own spirituality. It is a venue for
personal growth, through art—a place
of nurturing, a place for establishing
friendships and sisterhood,” says Travis.

Interestingly, most of the female
musicians who provide back up are not
Jewish, but they are incredibly moved
by this experience, says Travis. “They
always ask us to invite them back
because it is such an amazing experi-
ence,” she says. “They don’t understand
the words but they feel that there’s
something special. It is sister to sister;
there is kedushah in this.”

_back to the source_ The prohibition against women
singing in front of men is based on a
gemara in Berachot:
The voice of a woman is ervah, as
the pasuk [in Shir Hashirim 2:14] states:
“Let me hear your voice because your voice
is pleasant and appearance attractive.”
Rashi explains that the pasuk in Shir
Hashirim indicates that a woman’s voice is
attractive to a man, and is thus prohibit-
ed to him. Rav Hai Gaon writes that this
restriction applies to a man who is reading
Keriyat Shema, because a woman’s singing
will distract him, while Rosh disagrees
and writes that the gemara refers to all
situations and is not limited to Keriyat
Shema. The Shulchan Aruch rules that
the kol ishah restriction applies to both
Keriyat Shema and other contexts. Rema
and Beit Shmuel clarify that this prohi-
bition applies only to a woman’s singing
voice and not to her speaking voice.

Leah Kohn, the director of the
Jewish Renaissance Center, a women’s
learning program in Manhattan that
provides classes for women of all ages
and all levels of observance, often
encounters women who have to sacri-
fice their professional singing or acting
careers to become religious. “I tell these
women that they must not deny their
talent, they must find an outlet for it,”
Kohn says. “If a person has something
powerful [within] that is not allowed to
develop, it will grow and fester. It is not
healthy. For this reason, I encourage
each woman to … find her own out-
let.”

“But it is not so sim-
ple,” Kohn cautions. “Within
the context of an Orthodox
life, it is not acceptable for a
woman to perform for an
audience that includes men,
whether she is singing or act-
ing or dancing, and this certainly
changes the possibility of performing as
a profession. While there is no compari-
son in terms of money or glamour to
men’s options … for most women who
seek to embrace a Torah life, there are
many other compensations.
Entertainment and art in general don’t
occupy as large a place in Orthodox life
as they do in secular society. People who
live a Torah way of life have more
important things to do with their time
and money; there are [other things to
do]: children to raise, tuition to pay,
mitzvot to do, the studying of Torah.”

One of the most famous female
vocalists who performs for strictly
female audiences around the country is
Julia Blum. A ba’alat teshuvah, Blum

For one night every few months Makor, on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, is transformed as religious women participating in Girls’ Night On take to the stage and perform for an all-female audience.
began studying music at the age of three, and was performing professionally by twelve. She shared a vocal coach with Barbra Streisand and Madonna. “I had everything that people think you’re supposed to want,” says Blum, who attended both Harvard and Yale. “I could have had [a career in Hollywood] and I chose not to, because I thought there was something better and that was Torah.” Blum travels several times a year performing concerts for women and selling her two CDs—Stand Tall and Songs of the Heart. “My situation is ideal and unique,” she says. “My background made for an unusual and easily marketable package. I feel very grateful that a venue has been created for me, and I feel very satisfied.”

Blum recognizes all too well the pitfalls that often accompany talent. “The problem is when your physical person is your art,” she says. “When you dance, your body is your art. When you act, your face is your art. From the time I was young, I became aware of this harsh relationship between wanting to express myself and having to ‘sell myself.’ Yiddishkeit is not the problem; the problem is one that is inherent in having your body and your face be your art. That doesn’t mean that a woman shouldn’t have an outlet for her talent. But to say ‘because I can’t sing in front of men, I have no way to express myself’ is silly.”

While the drive for self-expression is a fundamental part of a performing artist’s nature, Blum gauges self-expression differently. “Just how is self-expression measured? When I sing for myself at the piano and a wonderful sound reverberates around the room, is that not expressing myself? If my teenager sits and listens to me, aren’t I expressing myself?” Blum asks. “If I sing for ten people, is that enough? Does it have to take place in a stadium? At what point does it count? Is it just a numbers game?”

“Blum’s perspective and priorities are enviably clear. Rather than seeing art as her life, she sees her life as art. “People want to live forever, they want to be important, they want to make a difference,” Blum says. “But being on MTV is not going to do it. Even getting an Academy Awards is not going to do it. Who even remembers who won the Academy Award four years ago? And the secular world doesn’t offer anything much better than that. “When you live a Torah life, you can say, ‘Everything that I do all day is important, holy and meaningful.’ And when I leave this world, all I’ll have is every mitzvah that I did.”

“Years ago, singing was at the core of the life I envisioned for myself. These days that seems like a very modest goal…. I would rather have a ‘B-plus’ career and an ‘A-plus’ life.”