

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 reli-

Roslyn Dickens grew up on a turkey farm in Massachusetts, and is currently a filmmaker and photographer specializing in fundraising events for Jewish organizations. A ba’alat teshuvah for twenty years, she is a member of Lincoln Square Synagogue in New York and has studied extensively at the Jewish Renaissance Center.



One of the founders of Girls’ Night On, Leslie Ginsparg would love to see the open-mike show go on the road. “I would also like to start [organizing] concerts for the women who want to pursue this on a professional level.” Photos: Roslyn Dickens

gious 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 peo-

ple; 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

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.

[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



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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

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

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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

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

with people who don’t think that a women’s program could be successful or that a woman’s CD will sell. I can’t tell you how many people came to me [after the first Girls’ Night On performance] and said, ‘I thought this was going to be really lame.’ I could have told [them] it was going to be great.

“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 ishab* wouldn’t have been on the

reaching out to Orthodox female performers? When Kraar worked as regional coordinator in Canada for Mamapalooza—billed as the only cultural event of its kind—featuring “mom” musicians, poets, comics,

Kraar was first inspired to create a forum for religious women when she lived in Tel Aviv decades earlier and frequented Moshe Yess’s coffee house in the Old City of Jerusalem. “He hosted a women’s music night. It was amazing,

“Performing on that stage is something like an out-of-body experience for me. When I get up there and look out at that full house, I am always amazed.”

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 Giniger, Julia Blum and others.

“It’s All about the Art”

An only child of Holocaust survivors, Lynda Kraar, who is not observant, is a band-leader and composer who has been working in the music industry since she was sixteen. These days, Kraar splits her time between her native Toronto and her home in Teaneck, New Jersey. But wherever she is, she is eating, sleeping and dreaming of making music. Currently, Kraar is in the process of mounting a concert in the Orthodox community of Teaneck. “The goal is to provide a forum for Jewish women [who abide by the restrictions of *kol ishab*] to express their creative selves,” says Kraar.

How did Kraar get interested in

dancers and filmmakers, she saw that a band of talented women could fill a room. It inspired her to bring something similar to a smaller and lesser-heard voice and community: Orthodox women.

“For me, it’s all about the art and providing a real stage setting where women who would otherwise not have an opportunity to perform can do so,” says Kraar. “They deserve to be heard.”

“The plan is to help individual communities have parlor meetings and open mikes and create a culture where like-minded people can start sharing their art,” she says. Kraar hopes that this will help foster a new genre of original music. “We will tackle subjects like family life, moth-

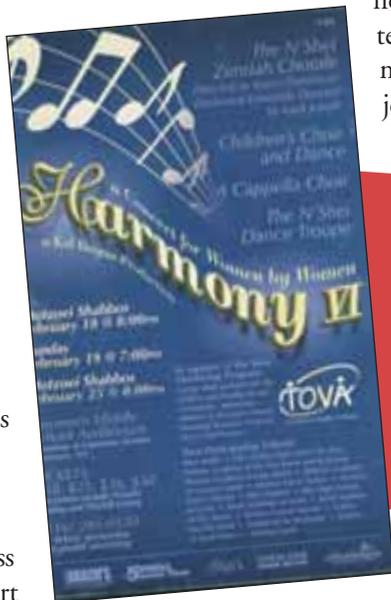
and it stayed with me all these years... I was heartened to meet Leslie, who had the same idea and had the vision, energy and talent to fuel it. I realized that people like Leslie and me are simply responding to the need in the community, and we have the ability to make it happen.”

With the Teaneck event some months away, Kraar is busy making plans. “We have our sites on next spring. We expect [Orthodox female] performers from the surrounding towns. The house seats about a thousand people, and we plan [on filling it].”

These are not the only venues for artistic religious women. Another talented and enterprising woman, Batya Travis, a mother and grandmother from Far Rockaway, New York, is the originator of Harmony, an all-female concert

that takes place in the Five Towns in New York every other year. Between 125 and 150 women and girls perform at the concert, which features a variety of art forms including song and dance. Performances, which run for three nights, are completely sold out.

“Performing on that stage is something like an out-of-body experience for me,” says Travis, who is a singer in her own right. “When I get up there and look out at that full house, I am always amazed. I can’t believe I actually did this from my



Over one hundred women perform at Harmony, an all-female concert that takes place in the Five Towns in New York every other year. Performances, which run for three nights, are completely sold out. “Harmony is a venue for personal growth, a place for establishing friendships and sisterhood,” says Harmony creator Batya Travis.

erhood/daughterhood issues, juggling jobs and domestic drudgery and so on,” says Kraar. “It will lament and celebrate our gender, even our aging. That’s a pretty rich vein. In it is all the comedy, poetry, music and tragedy that we feel.”

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, featuring both original and standard popular Jewish music. Except for the musicians, no one is paid, yet Travis consid-

ers the program a great success. 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

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 prohibition 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 sacrifice 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 outlet.”

“But it is not so simple,” 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 comparison 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



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“Our primary purpose is to raise money for *tzedakah* [to be distributed] within our community. To achieve that goal, we use what God has given us for the good of [the] community. 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 *shiurim* 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

by this experience, says Travis. “They always ask us to invite them back because it is such an amazing experience,” 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-

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,

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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?"

"The burden of being the world's most beautiful woman, or most talented singer or whatever, means that there is no life outside of that gift, and no context for anything. Bear in mind, even the most spectacular beauty, even the greatest talent will diminish over time. *Yiddishkeit* says, 'Let's avoid that trap, and let's remember that we are bigger than our art and bigger than our expression, we have many more facets to ourselves.... To be given a gift, any kind of a gift, is a big responsibility and sometimes a burden. I think that Torah gives you the best tools for channeling your gift," says Blum. "*Yiddishkeit* gives you a life that is more significant than just your gift. To think 'All I am is my art and its expression' minimizes the totality of who a person is. And that [applies] whether a person is Jewish or not, *frum* or not."

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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."

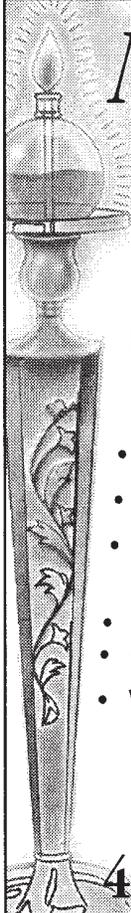
Blum recognizes all too well the pitfalls that often accompany talent. "The problem is when your physical person is your art," she says. "When you dance, your body is your art. When you act, your face is your art. From the time I was young, I became aware of this harsh relationship between wanting to 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

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." **IA**



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