

Section Three: From Our Colleagues

When I Hear the Shofar I Taste Chocolate: Seeking the Synesthetic on the High Holy Days

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An Introduction to Synesthesia

It's a glorious night at the symphony. Michael is listening to the Los Angeles Philharmonic play a Mozart violin concerto. The opening movement in G major is a longtime favorite of his and as he listens his mouth is filled with an overwhelming taste of chocolate. Not just any chocolate, but a slightly bitter Belgian chocolate. Sitting a few rows away at the same concert, Rosalie is enjoying the opening phrases of the concerto and as she listens red bars and green circles float in front of her as the soloist begins to play. Robert, sitting toward the back of the orchestra, glances down at this evening's program. As he reads the program notes, all the letters and numbers have different colors. For Robert, the number seven appears red, three is green, nine is black, and each letter of the alphabet has a corresponding color as well.

Michael, Rosalie, and Robert are not only symphony subscribers; these concert goers are also synesthetes: persons with a neurological condition in which two senses are physiologically coupled. These sensory matchings are not the same for every synesthete and no two people experience the exact same form of synesthesia.

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For example, one individual with musical-taste synesthesia may taste chocolate when they hear a musical composition in the key of D major. Another might experience the taste of wild blueberries when a middle C on the piano is played. An individual with grapheme-color synesthesia associates certain numbers or letters with colors. Whatever form the synesthesia takes, it is an involuntary action and cannot be turned on or off at will.

Estimates vary on how many people are synesthetic. Oliver Sacks in *Musicophilia*¹ approximated that one in two thousand persons exhibit true synesthesia. But these numbers are a mere estimate as many synesthetes refuse to self-identify for fear of social ostracization. Many fear if they reveal their condition to others they might be labeled “strange” or “crazy” or will be accused of fabricating their observations. Other synesthetes move through life aware they perceive the world differently, but never identify it as synesthesia—only because they do not have a name for their condition. Synesthetes, according to Veronica Gross of Emmanuel College in Boston, often do not know that anything is “wrong.” In fact, many synesthetes are often silent about their condition until they hear about it on a television program, a radio broadcast, or read an article in a newspaper and only then realize that they are neither mentally ill nor alone in their observations and perceptions.

Cultural Synesthesia

There is another variety of synesthetic experiences that are also intersensory experiences but without the medical or neurological basis of the synesthesia as described above. This cultural or social synesthesia is a fusing of the senses through events that deeply implant within individuals specific events, experiences, or rituals. According to Professor Steve Odin, these synesthetic moments are so profound “that the boundaries of the senses actually merge, and the multivariate sense qualities—colors, sounds, flavors, tactile and thermal sensations—all seem to melt into a continuum of feeling.”²

Odin employs the Japanese tea ceremony to illustrate this form of synesthesia. The tea ceremony includes visual elements (the various vessels and pots used for making and holding the tea), aural stimulus (the sound of water boiling in the kettle), scent

(incense burning), and even touch (the asymmetry of the *raku* tea cup). Events such as this tea ceremony are described as a synesthesia forged through the “simultaneity and harmony of multivariate sense-impulses” with the end result being a gathering “of diverse sense impulses within a physiological sensorium.”³ This synesthesia is one in which the senses are not joined together but rather the “multivariate sensations of color, sound, scent, and flavor interpenetrate in profound unity while simultaneously retaining their unique qualitative natures.”⁴

The synesthetic is possible in even more everyday events. Theologian Don Saliers in *Music and Theology* presented the example of his young daughters and neighborhood friends learning jump rope songs. The fusion of words, music, and communal dancing produced a multisensory form of embodied ritual that also enhanced community. According to Saliers, these children participated in a form of synesthetic matrix as they sang and jumped to “Miss Mary Mack Mack Mack . . .” This union of activity produced “a simultaneous blending or convergence of two or more senses, hence a condition of heightened perception.”⁵ According to Saliers, this synesthesia not only heightens our awareness, but assists in encoding memory and creating long-lasting associations.

Ethnomusicologist Steven Feld expands this notion by stating, “As places are sensed, senses are placed, and as places make sense, senses make place.”⁶ Our senses provide us with an appreciation and awareness of not only the event itself but the event’s location, participants, and emotions and feelings associated with the event.

Although many synesthetic occurrences take place in the secular realm, the environment of sacred ritual is an opportune setting for the synesthetic. Rituals and liturgies that invite the participation of all the senses not only serve to create deeper and richer memory and help to form cultural religious and ethnic identity, but also “have the capacity to give value and meaning to the life of those who perform them.”⁷

The Synesthetic in Jewish Tradition: Sinai, Seder, Summer Camp

One of the most famous synesthetic events occurs after the Israelites are presented with the Ten Commandments. In Exodus 20:15 we read:

Now all of the people were seeing
 the thunder sounds
 the flashing torches
 the shofar sound
 and the mountain smoking;
 when the people saw,
 they faltered
 and stood far off. (Exod. 20:15)⁸

According to the Torah, a communal synesthetic experience was present at Sinai: The multitude *saw* the sound of thunder; the Israelites *saw* the sound of the shofar. So powerful was the moment of revelation that the boundaries between sight and sound momentarily vanished and the synesthetic occurred.

The Passover seder is another ritual experience offering opportunities for the synesthetic. Like the tea ceremony, the seder involves all the senses. We read the Haggadah; we sing blessings and songs; we smell the soup heating on the stove and the brisket roasting in the oven; we taste the symbolic foods around the seder; we touch the decorative and sacred objects on the table; we reach out and hug and kiss family and friends gathered for the evening's celebration. All of this total body engagement contributes to the synesthesia of the event. A variety of senses are employed as part of the seder and this creates a sense-rich layering that in turn triggers other sensual memories and awareness.

Seder is not recalled in sequence or as a series of atomistic moments, but rather in its totality. The Haggadah's brilliance is that it leads us through an ancient ceremony discursively shuttling us back and forth between the historic and the contemporary: One moment we are slaves in Egypt, the next moment we are twenty-first-century Jews tasting *charoset*. The didactic nature of the Haggadah is enhanced through the use of story, song, food, and ritual. We not only learn the story of the Exodus, but the experience of seder becomes physically embodied. Leach describes this type of synesthetic event as one of condensation and fusion.⁹ By the end of the evening, all of the multiple and multi-channeled elements of the ritual are combined and condensed into a single, memorable experience we call "seder."

My own research and analysis of the Shabbat experience at residential Jewish summer camp revealed Shabbat to be a synesthetic experience as well. When campers spoke of Shabbat, it was

presented as a swirl of memory with the senses intermingled. Campers spoke glowingly of a Shabbat filled with songs, swaying with arms wrapped around each other as they sang “Shalom Rav,” the scent of sycamore trees, the sound of the ocean’s waves, the gleam of hundreds of campers wearing white shirts, the dining room filled with the scent of freshly baked challah and roasted chicken, and a joyous song session filling the dining hall. Those interviewed recalled vividly Shabbat at camp and considered it to be one of the most salient and long-enduring memories of their total camp experience. The multisensory summer camp Shabbat celebration enables a synesthesia that permits this experience to remain within the body and mind and acts as a focus of profound, long-lasting, and rich memories. Vibrant recollections of Shabbat at camp remain with the camper for years after the camp experience has ended. Because the initial experience was so profound, even isolated elements from the camp experience (the scent of baking challah, a favorite melody from the after-dinner song session, for example) can serve as a mental trigger that kindles a remembering of the camp Shabbat experience even though it initially took place many years before.

Opportunities for Synesthesia in the High Holy Days

There is no doubt that Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur create significant memories for congregants. The remembrances are forged from the sheer emotion, sacred importance, and the liturgical depth of these Days of Awe. Music and communal song undoubtedly play a large role in the creation of memories, especially the stirring melodies of *Kol Nidrei* and *Avinu Malkeinu*. But, I wonder, can the High Holy Days become more sensorially integrated like the Jewish summer camp Shabbat and the Passover Seder and thus ultimately provide the congregation with an experience that is not only synesthetic in nature but is also more memorable and thus creating a deeper connection to community and to the sacred.

Synesthetic opportunities are possible through the development of those senses not normally part of the liturgical experience: taste, smell, and touch.

Taste and Smell

The High Holy Days are filled with speech, song, and written word, but they lack the elements of touch and taste. Sephardic and

Mizrahi Jews have a tradition of an Erev Rosh HaShanah seder-like ceremony with Talmudic roots (*Horayot* 12a) in which a variety of fruits and vegetables are used to represent aspirations for the New Year. Congregants should be made aware of this custom to share with guests around the Erev Rosh HaShanah dining table, but it is also possible to bring this Rosh HaShanah seder into the synagogue. Imagine how delighted the community would be to see tables laden not only with the requisite apples and honey but with festive fruits and vegetables accompanied by blessings and explanations available to be tasted as part of a prelude to Erev Rosh HaShanah.

The ubiquitous honey cake could also enable an enhanced Rosh HaShanah synesthesia. Honey cakes baking in the synagogue kitchen and then served at the end of services as part of an *oneg* could help to enhance the relationship of scent and taste to the holidays. Like Proust's madeleine, the aroma and taste of honey cake could become associated with myriad memories connected with the joy of Rosh HaShanah.

Touch

The sound of the shofar is one of the most ancient sounds present in the synagogue's musical repertory and when the *baal t'kiah* raises the shofar and the calls of *t'kiah-t'ruah-sh'varim* resound through the sanctuary, the ancient world meets modernity. The most ancient of musical instruments could be used to create a synesthetic matrix featuring not only sound, but sight and touch as well.

The new CCAR *machzor's* repositioning of the three rubrics for the sounding of shofar (*Malchuyot, Zichronot, Shofarot*) throughout the service rather than having them appear sequentially as is common in traditional High Holy Day prayer books is a first step in highlighting the shofar as elemental in the ritual of the Yamim Noraim. However, more can be done to enhance the shofar's power. For example, in lieu of just one shofar blower on the synagogue's bimah, a more dramatic approach with potential for greater impact would be the organization of a shofar "choir" comprised of multiple *baalei t'kiah* lining the aisles of the synagogue. This choir of shofarot would present greater visual impact, surround the congregation with the clarion call of the ram's horn, and present worshipers with a vibrational and tactile energy from the shofarot. A singular

shofar provides incredible impact; a shofar ensemble would be an unforgettable addition to the Rosh HaShanah liturgy.

Other opportunities for enhancing touch exist within the liturgy. During the chanting or singing of *Mi Shebeirach* congregants could be asked to hold hands or put their arms on each other's shoulders. As the cantor recites the Priestly Blessing or a final benediction, all those wearing tallitot could be asked to share their tallit with those around them and feel enveloped not only by the tallit but by the community as well.

We should also encourage congregants to experience the power of full prostration during the Great *Aleinu*. The physical act of falling to one's knees in the presence of God is not only humbling but a physical representation of full emotional and spiritual supplication before the Almighty in which we physically declare, "We surrender. Please help us, God. Protect us. Guide us." There are no words in the liturgy that can fully express this moment of physical prayer; no text in the *machzor* can adequately describe the moment of the Great *Aleinu*.

Tasting Chocolate

When we are part of synesthetic events, these experiences become encoded and implanted within us. We hold onto these memories and reflect upon them as years pass. When ritual is deeply embodied and synesthetic (like the experiences of summer camp Shabbat and the Passover seder) not only are our feelings and beliefs enhanced, but the participation in these rituals joins us to a larger, broader, Jewish collective. The new *machzor* will surely enhance the experience of prayer for a new generation of Jews. But that experience can be greatly enhanced if we make a concerted effort to move beyond the pages of the prayer book. We need to present our congregants (and I dare say clergy as well) with ritual moving beyond music and spoken or read text that permits worshipers to experience prayer with all their senses and moves our worship—and indeed ourselves as worshipers—to a higher spiritual plane. Creating synesthetic worship may transform the High Holy Day liturgy from beautiful and emotional words to life-altering fully embodied ritual. Don Saliers reminds us, "If we only take in the literal surface of what we hear in words and song, the awakening of the deeper dimensions of reality and of the soul are prevented.

When the singing and the hearing allow us to 'taste and see,' we come to 'hear' more. The soul is awakened to a humanity stretched more deeply before the mystery and the glory of God."¹⁰

May our prayer be guided not only by words of our mouth and the meditations of our heart, but the tastes and scents of the seasons, the reverberation of the shofar, the healing touch of our neighbors, and the communal embrace of our fellow worshipers.

Notes

1. Oliver Sacks, *Musicophilia* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007).
2. Steve Odin, "Blossom Scents Take Up the Ringing: Synaesthesia in Japanese and Western Aesthetics," *Soundings* 69, no. 3 (Fall 1986): 256.
3. *Ibid.*, 259.
4. *Ibid.*, 270.
5. Don E. Saliers, *Music and Theology* (Kindle ed.) (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), Kindle location 171.
6. Steven Feld, "Waterfalls of Song," in *Senses of Place*, ed. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1996), 91.
7. Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 45.
8. Translation from Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983).
9. Edmund Leach, *Culture and Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).
10. Saliers, *Music and Theology*, Kindle location 301.