

# MINYAN MONTHLY

Volume 8, No. 4

May-June 1995

Iyar-Sivan 5755

## DECISION-MAKING PROCESS ON THE USE OF A MICROPHONE

--submitted by Mark Hess

Upon the request of the Minyan's chair, Ruth Askren, a small subcommittee met in order to develop a process for making a decision about the use of a microphone in the Library Minyan. The subcommittee consists of Robert Braun, Marlynn Dorff, Rabbi Karen Fox, Norm Green, Mark Hess and Miriam Prum Hess. Below is a draft of their recommendations.

The process listed below is only a recommendation. The subcommittee welcomes input from all Minyan members. Please speak to any member of the subcommittee or mail your comments to Mark and Miriam Hess, 8963 W. 25th Street, L.A., CA 90034. We only ask that comments and suggestions be received no later than Tuesday, May 30, 1995.

Once all comments are received, the subcommittee will meet again in order to finalize the process and publicize it to the membership.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### BASIC GROUND RULES

- 1) Meeting notices including agendas will be mailed to all paid Minyan members at least two weeks in advance of a meeting. In addition, announcements will be made on Shabbat.
- 2) A beginning and ending time will be set and closely adhered to by the meeting chairperson.
- 3) The chair's role is to insure that all sides of an issue have an equal opportunity to be presented, with no bias shown by the chair, regardless of the chair's position.
- 4) An accurate summary of all key discussion items and decisions will be mailed to all paid Minyan members.
- 5) Key discussion items and decisions will also be summarized either as a drash or announcement on Shabbat.
- 6) Votes on this issue will be conducted through a mail ballot. A clear deadline will be printed on the ballot and votes not received on time can not be counted.

CLARIFICATION OF ISSUES TO BE  
DISCUSSED

Although the issue was initially presented as: "Should a microphone be used by the Minyan?" there appear to be many sub-issues which need to be explored and which may present alternative solutions. These include:

- 1) Enabling everyone in the congregation to hear the davening and the drash.
- 2) Enabling those who have a soft voice to be heard.
- 3) Halachic issues regarding the use of electricity.
- 4) Halachic issues regarding voice magnification.
- 5) The Minyan's move to a new location which is being designed with acoustics in mind.
- 6) The Minyan's history of accommodating a range of religious observance.
- 7) The aesthetics of using a microphone.
- 8) The change of atmosphere created by the use of a microphone.
- 9) When is a microphone needed? - (e.g. At all times?, Depending on the size of the Minyan - i.e. certain Haggim and Simchas?, Depending on the voice strength of the person davening or giving the drash?, For Haggim? For the High Holy Days?, Only when the room is completely open?)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION NEEDED  
FOR DECISION MAKING

- 1) It has been the Minyan's tradition to hold text-based study sessions on major policy issues which are being discussed by the congregation. It is therefore recommended that a scholar, either within or outside the Minyan, be asked to develop and offer such a study session. If the scholar is outside of the Minyan, an honorarium may be offered.
- 2) In past years articles have appeared in the Minyan Monthly on the topic of "The Use of Microphones." These articles will be reprinted in full and mailed out to members, and extra copies made available on Shabbat.
- 3) The series of drashot currently being presented on this topic will be printed and mailed out to the membership, with copies made available on Shabbat.
- 4) Chazzan Lipton will be asked to prepare material on the different types of microphones and how they work.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The subcommittee felt that a goal of the study process and information-gathering is to develop numerous possible solutions; therefore, no solutions are currently recommended.

## TIMETABLE FOR DECISION-MAKING

There are differences of opinion as to the timing of the decision. Some people feel that a decision should be made in time for these High Holy Days. Others feel that no decision should be made until we are in our new facility. While the goal is for the Minyan to be in the new chapel in time for the 5756 High Holy Days, we cannot be certain this will happen. Therefore, our location and its acoustic quality at this time are uncertain.

The subcommittee feels this interim decision requires a vote of the Minyan. Attached is a ballot for the first Minyan vote on this issue.

Please note: this vote is not on whether or not you are in favor of using a microphone. It will only determine whether or not a vote should be taken on this issue in time to implement the vote's decision for these High Holy Days. This vote will also not determine the use of a microphone at any future times. Your ballot must be returned no later than Tuesday, May 30, 1995. A ballot has been included for each Minyan member over Bar/Bat Mitzvah age.

A full timetable for decision-making will be established once an agreed upon process for decision-making is established and dates are confirmed for the study components.



## REPRINTS

Following are articles appearing in the Minyan Monthly Dec. 1990-Mar. 1991 on the topic of microphone use, in the order first printed. They have been reduced for reasons of space, and to keep down mailing costs.

If you have other articles on this topic, and/or if there are recent drashot to be published, please contact the editors of the Minyan Monthly as soon as possible.

### A SOUND SYSTEM FOR THE MINYAN?

--Lida Baker (Dec. 1990)

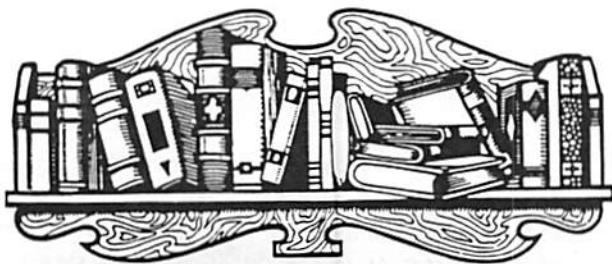
Installing a sound system to connect the chapel and childcare rooms, as was suggested at the end of Shabbat Service on November 17, 1990, would necessitate using a microphone in the chapel. This is sure to be a controversial issue. I would like to start the debate by expressing my firm opinion that the Minyan should use microphone, especially during High Holiday services, but perhaps in the chapel as well.

The congregation would benefit from the use of a microphone in at least two ways. Obviously, if a microphone were used, it would be easier for congregants to hear which melody the shaliach tzibbur was using, to learn new melodies (this is especially important during High Holiday services), or to discern whether the imatot were being included; during the Toran reading, people could hear the Hebrew pronounced clearly; it would be easier to hear the person delivering the drash. Using a microphone might also help to ease one of the biggest sources of tension in the Minyan right now - the question of whether small children should remain in the chapel during services. If we used a microphone, maybe it wouldn't matter so much if a child made a little noise.

Speaking as a frequent shaliach tzibbur and Toran reader, and as a person who has led High Holiday services for the Minyan, I find it difficult to lead services without a microphone. Having to sing at the top of my lungs - especially in the Mirror Room - leads rapidly to voice strain. This in turn impairs the aesthetic quality of the singing. To put it simply: an overworked voice does not sound good.

This is not a trivial point. As a shaliach, I use my voice to lead and facilitate the congregation's spirituality through prayer. If my voice is hoarse and off-pitch (it's hard to hit the right notes when one is singing too loudly), the entire tone of the community's prayers is adversely affected. As a congregant, I have sat in the Mirror Room and been totally distracted by a shaliach screeching to overcome the dead acoustics of that room. It is hard to have a spiritual experience in such circumstances.

Thus it is clear to me that both the congregation and the people leading services would benefit from the use of a microphone, especially in the Mirror Room. The reasons I have given are based on practical and aesthetic considerations. I know that there are people in the Minyan who oppose the use of a microphone on principle. Perhaps we can hear from them next month.



## NO MICROPHONES FOR THE MINYAN

--JOEL GROSSMAN (Jan. 1991)

In last month's Minyan Monthly, Lida Baker, a dedicated member to whom all members owe a great debt, has suggested that the Minyan begin using a microphone for shabbat and High Holiday services. Lida invited those with feelings on the issue to respond to her article, and I accept that invitation. I strongly disagree with Lida's proposal, and urge the Minyan not to alter its minhag (custom) of many years to conduct services without a microphone.

The use of a microphone on shabbat or Yom Tov raises important halachic, communal and aesthetic issues. I will not address the halachic issues in this article because it is clear to me that whatever my personal views may be, the Conservative movement, and the vast majority of Minyan members, do not see the use of a microphone as a halachic problem. I will therefore, base my argument on other issues.

The communal issue is, in my view, of paramount importance. There are a number of Minyan members who are extremely uncomfortable with the use of microphone on shabbat and Yom Tov. At a minimum, these members would

decline any role in the Minyan which would require them personally to use the microphone. They would, therefore, be excluded from serving as shaliach tzibbur, Torah reader, darshan, gabbai, and even from having an aliya. Many of the people thus affected frequently serve in these roles. Some feel so strongly about the issue, they would stop coming to the Minyan altogether.

I see no reason why members should be excluded from the Minyan on this issue. The minyan (not to mention Orthodox synagogues) has functioned quite well without a microphone for years. The slim benefits outlined by Lida do not outweigh the exclusions it would bring.

Moreover, I believe microphones should be barred on purely aesthetic grounds. Use of the microphone will lead to more, not less, talking and other noise. No one will feel constrained to keep his child quiet during the Torah Service, or to refrain from talking during the K'dusha when he/she knows that the microphone will let everyone hear above the din anyway.

The best example of this is our service on Purim night, when a microphone is used. The microphone relieves everyone of the duty to be quiet during the Megillah reading. Putting it simply, the aesthetic argument boils down to this: our Minyan has a beautiful tradition of silence during the service, including the Torah reading. The microphone will go a long way toward destroying that tradition.

Lida's article discusses her personal voice strain caused by leading services in the Mirror Room on the High Holidays. She asserts that the Shaliach Tzibbur must shout the whole service to be heard. Respectfully, while this may be true of Lida's voice, it is not true of the many others who serve in this capacity. Along with Shelly Dorph, I have been assigning High Holiday services in the Minyan for ten years. Not one other Shaliach Tzibbur has complained to me about the lack of a microphone, or declined to lead services because of this.

To be fair, some members have complained that the acoustics in the Mirror Room are poor, and some have suggested that a microphone would help. To respond to this genuine concern, the committee has changed the logistics. I believe it helped this year. There are other changes that could be tried, such as an elevated Bema, before a microphone is introduced. Again, I think use of a microphone on the High Holidays would encourage talking, because the talkers would feel that their neighbors could hear anyway. Now those who wish to talk are driven by K'vod hatzibbur to go outside first.

Finally I invoke the concept of "minhag Yisrael K'din hu", an established custom is tantamount to a law. We in the Minyan have established the minhag of conducting a service without electronic amplification for many years. It is a lovely minhag, which hearkens back to a simpler, non-technological era, linking us to the thousands of communities who davened without microphones before they were invented. The members of those communities trained themselves, like the members of our Minyan have trained themselves, to be quiet so the Shaliach Tzibbur, darshan or Torah reader could be heard. (Yes, I know, those communities also davened without air conditioning in the summer. I do not object to technology per se, only to that which carries a significant human cost.)

To sum up: (1) we do not need a microphone; (2) the microphone's introduction will cause some members, for halachic reasons, to stop leading the service or even to stop coming to the Minyan; (3) use of the microphone will destroy the self-discipline that keeps people quiet during davening and torah reading; and (4) our community has an established minhag of not using a microphone. For all these reasons, I urge the Minyan not to change its minhag on this important issue.



### A SIMPLE DESULTORY PHILIPPIC

--Mitch Miller (Feb. 1991)

I believe all of us in the Library Minyan have a great regard for hearing and appreciating the effort that our daveners have put into preparing for a service, be it a regular Shabbat service or the High Holidays. What we want to hear, I believe, is the voice of the davener - not the mechanical, amplified tones of a P.A. system. It is precisely because I appreciate the davener's effort that I am unequivocally opposed to the use of a microphone in the Minyan.

My objections to the use of a microphone can be

divided into three categories; halachic, aesthetic, and communal.

First, the halachic issue: While I certainly do not pretend to be an expert on the halacha of microphones, I do know that it is at the least, very problematic, and to many of us, insurmountable. I leave the discussion of the halacha of microphones to others more qualified than I to analyze the problem. However, it is clear that use of a microphone would require a halachic analysis in accordance with established Minyan procedures. Obviously, this has not yet even begun.

Second, aesthetics: When a microphone is used, it becomes the center of attention. Rather than the prayer service being the object of everyone's notice, the microphone becomes that object. The microphone is too tall, it's too short, it falls over, it's not working. It requires a constant stream of attention which totally disrupts the service and destroys all hope of concentration on what the davener is actually doing. Rather than enhancing enjoyment of the service, it detracts from, if not destroys it.

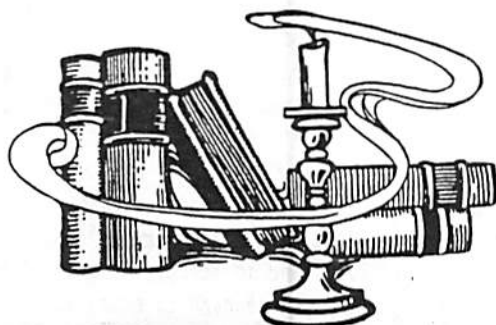
I fully understand that in the Mirror Room for High Holidays, interference is caused by the shape of the hall, the fact that people are gathered outside in the foyer talking, and so forth. However, I believe these are problems which need to be cured, not by the addition of a microphone, but by greater attention to the arrangement of the seating, the number of people who come to the Minyan service, and to the people talking in the foyer. Last year we made great strides towards solving these problems. I am convinced we will make further strides in this direction, which will hopefully eliminate, or at least substantially reduce, the noise problem.

Third, the communal problem: I have always believed, and continue to believe, that one of the prime appeals of the Minyan service is that it is on a human scale. It takes place in a relatively small group setting, and it is easily possible to know (at least by sight) the vast majority of people with whom we daven every week. The fact that we are directly listening to the voice of the davener, or the darshan, or the Torah readers, is specifically what many people are looking for.

We do not want the long distance echoes of the public address system. We want the intimacy of being able to be within eye- and ear-shot of the person at the bimah. To add a microphone would be to say we have exceeded that point. We would be no longer a group of people who meet together as a community to pray. We would now just be another mass institution which needs mass communication devices.

The idea that we should have outside speakers in the playground so that the service could be broadcasted is the ultimate extension of this. Aside from the rather overbearing effect this would have on the children, I strongly question whether we want to have our services conducted like the Indianapolis 500, with speakers carrying the sound out to those who can't get good enough seats. If we are truly too big for personal contact, then my reaction would be to give serious thought to dividing the Minyan rather than installing a microphone and sound system.

I certainly sympathize with the Ba'al T'filah who wishes to be appreciated for his or her efforts. But I prefer to hear those efforts with my own ears, and hence be in a position to appreciate the davening all the more, than hear them through the wailing, squeaking, thumping, crackling and booming of a microphone.



### MICROPHONES REVISITED

--Norman H. Green (Feb. 1991)

In the last two issues of the *Minyan Monthly*, Lida Baker and Joel Grossman began a lively discussion of the merits and drawbacks of using a microphone in the Minyan's services. Even if these two did nothing for the Minyan, they should be appreciated and commended; in fact both are highly dedicated to the Minyan and its activities.

On the whole, in this discussion, I agree with Joel that the perceived benefits of microphone use are not as great as the disadvantages.

Nevertheless, it may be that he overstates the case. While no more than one Shaliach Tzibbur has complained about the lack of a microphone on High Holy Days, some potential ones have refrained from volunteering because of the lack of a sound system. Even at Shabbat services, some leaders are difficult to hear, and it can be virtually impossible to make use of a melody or niggun not regularly used by the Minyan, sometimes even when an announcement has been made, if a substantial number of people commence singing independently. Of course, at other times such singing genuinely assists the Shaliach Tzibbur.

I personally have been told that my leadership of services in the main sanctuary is of higher quality than it

usually is in the chapel and that I have even been generally on key. I attribute this to the microphone used there, which enables me to hear myself far better than I can in the chapel.

Yet if we attempted to fashion a Minyan to fit each member's fantasies of perfection, we would need 200 different Minyanim, an impractical solution. Consequently, we must continue to consider changes in our practices cautiously. Even if traditional understandings of Halacha are not to be given a decisive veto in such a matter, Halachic considerations certainly should not be ignored. To some extent, we should try to consider the possible unanticipated effects of proposed changes, as Joel ably did last month. Further, some weight should be given to the intensity of members' feelings, as well as the mere numbers on each side of such an issue, as we seek some sort of consensus.

Let us hope that other means can be found to solve or alleviate the principal problems that introduction of a microphone would be intended to address.

### DUELING DECIBELS

--David Ackerman (March 1991)

A few months ago, Lida Baker suggested that the Minyan use a microphone during High Holiday services. I would like to add my support for this idea, as well as to respond to the arguments against using microphones that have appeared in the *Monthly*. In this discussion I refer only to the use of a microphone for High Holiday services. While I would not object to the use of a microphone on Shabbat, I do not find it necessary.

The shaliach tzibbur serves two important functions. First, described by Lida, is providing musical leadership for the service: setting melody, key, tempo, and mood through the choice of nusach. This is important and would certainly be helped by the use of a microphone.

However, the shaliach tzibbur also serves a halachic function, that of permitting members of the kahal to fulfill the mitzvah of tefillah by listening to the chazzan and responding with "Amen." It is clear to me that if you cannot hear the chazzan, you cannot be made "Yotzah." This is an important concept, particularly on the High Holidays when there are many guests who may not be fluent with the liturgy. Since the Mirror Room is a particularly "dead" room acoustically, a microphone would permit the shaliach tzibbur to be heard by all.

I do not find the halachic question to be a serious barrier to using a microphone. After all, this is hardly a ground-breaking issue. The JTS Law Committee has published tshuvot permitting microphones. The Minyan has merely to make a decision.

I also do not find the issue of the weight of communal minhag to be compelling. The Minyan has made many changes in minhag in previous years. If we can change brachot (such as adding the imahot) why can't we add a microphone?

The question of aesthetics is harder to argue. After all, matters of taste are personal and require no external justification to be valid. However, I think the aesthetic argument presented by Mitch Miller is a description of a "Worst Case Scenario" which doesn't have to occur. I have participated in many services with microphones where none of these things has occurred. For the Minyan as a group, it really comes down to how many like it and how many don't.

As to the argument that there is only one shaliach tzibbur who feels the need for a microphone on the holidays: well, there are at least two.

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TORAH GABBAI ('IM) NEEDED

The position of Torah Gabbai is unoccupied. The job consists of orchestrating the Torah service at least once a month, and lining up others to do it whenever possible. Good Hebrew reading skills are required, and Torah reading skills are recommended though not essential. Call Arnie Wuhrman for more information, (310) 657-5533.

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Please MAIL or FAX all changes and updates to the Minyan List to:

MITCHELL R. MILLER  
315 S. BEVERLY DRIVE  
SUITE 501  
BEVERLY HILLS, CA 90212

FAX NO. (310) 551-1929

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WANTED: Clip art for the Minyan Monthly, especially on Jewish themes. If you have or can recommend any good books, please contact Sharon Williams, (310) 838-1316.

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MINYAN COMMITTEES/CONTACTS

- Chair, Steering Committee  
Ruth Askren (213)935-1492
- Minyan Treasurer  
Dale Bodenstein(213)937-7443
- Reading Torah or Haftorah  
Val Goldstein (310)837-5503
- Gabai'im-Shabbat/Holiday Services  
Torah Honors  
Alan Broidy (213)933-8894  
Eric Lesin (213)933-3096  
Art Metz (310)276-6905  
Itzhak Yaron (310)657-3760
- Drashot  
Mark Rothman (213)659-0269
- Torah Gabai'im  
(temporarily vacant-see  
Gabbai)
- Child Care Committee  
Teri Cohan Link(213)272-7401  
Fran Grossman (213)933-5040  
Michelle Wolf (213)954-8681  
Larry Harris (310)556-7778
- Hospitality  
Abby Harris (310)556-7778  
Debbie Abeles (310)652-1505
- Kiddush  
Judy Weinstock (213)933-1772  
Carl Sunshine (213)934-7889
- Membership  
Michaei Rogson (213)939-5124
- Minyan Guide  
Carl Sunshine (213)934-7889
- Minyan Monthly  
Sharon Williams(310)838-1316  
Dianne Winocur (213)652-4597  
Michelle Wolf (213)954-8681
- Ritual Committee  
Ronnie Cohen (213)658-8057
- Scheduling Events-Master Calendar  
Val Goldstein (310)837-5503
- Shiva Minyans  
Norm Saiger (310)837-5927  
Rachel Green (213)938-8110

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 DON'T FORGET WE'RE STILL COLLECTING  
 CANNED AND PACKAGED FOODS FOR  
 \*\*\*SOVA\*\*\*  
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## Editor's Column

--by Sharon L. Williams

This month's issue is devoted to microphones in the Minyan. I have published all the articles I could find from previous issues. If any opinions printed herein have changed significantly since then, feel free to update us in the near future.

Drashot recently given are not included, due to the short time available for getting out the enclosed ballots. If those concerned wish to submit a copy (on disk or paper) I will be happy to print them in the next issue of the Monthly. There is still plenty of time before a final decision is made to hear from all who wish to express their ideas.

I hope all who feel strongly will speak up, rather than taking a fatalistic view that "whatever happens will happen". In the setting of our own community especially, every opinion counts and carries weight. I, for one, have listened carefully to each and every position, before forming my own. There are doubtless others within the Minyan who are still undecided. Perhaps it is your view that will make the difference in their vote!

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 Mail or FAX articles for the  
 Minyan Monthly to:

Sharon L. Williams  
 9114 Olin Street  
 Los Angeles, CA 90034  
 PHONE: 310-838-1316(H)  
 FAX: (310) 838-1675  
 (Call in advance to fax)

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