



Singing Their Hearts Out

WHEN THE MUSIC STARTS, THE YOUNG MEN IN THE SEEACH SOD CHOIR ARE NO LONGER MENTALLY CHALLENGED ADULTS TRYING TO NAVIGATE A CONFUSING WORLD AROUND THEM. MICROPHONES IN HAND, THEIR VOICES EMERGE FROM A DEEP PLACE IN THEIR SOUL WHERE BARRIERS NO LONGER EXIST

BY **Meir Wolfson**
PHOTOS **Matis Goldberg, Yinon Fuchs**

The Key To Their Souls

Did Reb Shlomo Carlebach envision this moving rendition of his “Tov L’hodos LaShem” when he wrote his classic melody to those words so many years ago? If you were sitting at the Siyum HaShas in Jerusalem’s Binyanei Hauma on Sunday, August 5, you might have been one of those who burst into spontaneous clapping and rose to dance to the electrified beat. Among flashing cameras and stage lights, the excited ten-man Pirchei Seeach choir opened their act in perfect sync, and then gave way to the clear, sweet voice of their star soloist, “Avremel,” whose powerful notes and perfect harmony transfixed the crowd. At that point, you might have taken a second look at the stage to remind yourself who Avremel is.

Avremel is a severely autistic young man in his 20s, so uncommunicative that he cannot respond to any verbal instructions — even from his beloved choir leader, the indefatigable Chaim Sofer. One of the only windows into Avremel’s soul — and those of his fellow choir members — is music.

Seeach Sod in Jerusalem cares for 650 children and young adults with disabilities that range from slight emotional difficulties to severe autism and Down syndrome, mainstreaming them and letting them shine in their own way. And although all of the members in Seeach Sod’s Pirchei Seeach choir thrive on music, Avremel’s story is particularly moving. At the age of two, although he couldn’t talk and still can’t until today, he was already singing songs he heard in his home. By the time he was six, his family would play tapes of intricate Gerrer marches — some of which are difficult for accomplished singers to learn — and he would pick up the songs and sing along even though he could not communicate in any other way. “Avremel inherited the musical genes in my family,” explains his mother. “But it was in the Pirchei Seeach choir that his talent really developed.”

Even now, Avremel can’t follow verbal cues. When staff members want him to move from one place to another, they have to either take him by his hand or wave vigorously until he moves. When Chaim Sofer began to work with him, he couldn’t follow any musical instructions; today, he can only learn a song if it is recorded for him exactly as he is supposed to sing it, and he listens to the recording repeatedly until he performs it exactly as it was recorded. Yet Avremel has been gifted with a startlingly professional and compelling voice that makes you want to hear him sing over and over again.



Would Music Work?

A humble, affable man in his early 30s, Chaim Sofer’s eyes shine with pride as he talks about the achievements of his students. But the sparkle also tells another story — the story of a life path that began in the secular music world and veered off into an unexpected direction.

Chaim was born into a secular Israeli family, but he began to take an interest in religion when he was in high school. “My friend’s father became religious, and we had many heart-to-heart talks,” he recalls. “Although I wasn’t ready for religious commitment yet, the seeds were planted.” After studying music at the Rimon school and completing his army service, 20-year-old Chaim followed the path of many secular Israelis and went to “search” in India. Perhaps atypically, he wasn’t attracted by other religions or ashram adventures. “I always knew that if I would become religious, I would take up Orthodox Judaism.”

By the time he returned from India, he was almost ready for religion. First, however, he began to work with autistic children at a school in Tel Aviv. “I heard all kinds of mystical things about children with autism — that

there were deep secrets hidden in their souls — and I wanted to work with them.”

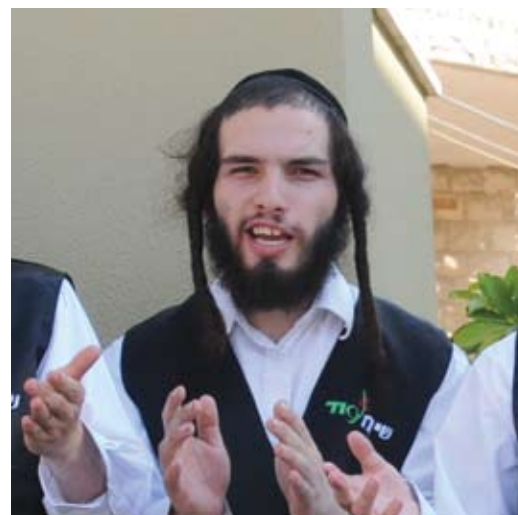
A year later, he was fully observant, and he decided to take some time off to learn at Yeshivah Tomchei Temimim in Ramat Aviv.

At 27, Chaim married and found a job working with special children in a religious institution in Bnei Brak to Seeach Sod in Jerusalem. The child, who had Down syndrome, would spend the entire trip to and from his school singing or humming. “It was obvious that music was the way into his life, and I wanted to take advantage of that.”

At the time, Chaim was a *rebbe* for 21-year-olds at Seeach Sod, and he was curious: did any other students connect with music? Sure enough, several of the children had musical talent — some could sing, others could even pick up the rudimentary skills of playing some instruments. He began to work with a group of young men, teaching them to sing as a choir, and they performed at a Seeach Sod fundraising event. The performance brought down the house, to the delight of the

performers. “We have one young man whose autism is only slight,” says Tzvika Cohen, who is in charge of the adult division. “His primary disability is that he has a very gratifying tendency to ask many questions, and he comprehends that people find him irritating. When people rushed over to congratulate him and to rave about his singing, he became a changed person. Instead of seeing himself as the annoying person who people avoided, he had something to be proud of.”

Chaim Sofer credits Seeach Sod head Rabbi Shimon Levy for throwing himself behind the choir. He built music rooms for both the children and adult divisions and a mini recording studio where Pirchei Seeach’s albums are recorded. Chaim has been working with his group since, and they have performed in many venues, including the Israeli Knesset, induction ceremonies for Sherut Leumi (National Service) for both the secular and religious volunteer corps, as well as their own famous Simchas Beis Hasho’eivah celebrations, where they’ve performed alongside Mordechai ben David, Lipa Schmeltzer, and Cantor Chaim Adler of the Jerusalem Great Synagogue.



Avremel's Language

"When I began working with Avremel," recalls Chaim Sofer, "he never knew when he was supposed to sing and when he was supposed to stop. I would have to take the microphone away from him when he wasn't supposed to sing solo, and return it to him when it was time for another solo. But over time, he did develop an understanding of when he's supposed to sing solo and when he's supposed to sing with the rest of the choir."

Incredibly, Avremel has even learned to harmonize while the choir sings the base melody.

But for all that Avremel has developed, some things remain the same. When we arrive in middle of a rehearsal and the singing stops, Avremel's eyes are blank. "He's in his own world most of the time," whispers Chaim. But there's a shocking transformation in Avremel when he's singing. His eyes seem to gain focus, and he's able to stand in one place. As he sings, he waves the hand that's not on the mike in what seems to be a spastic movement, but is actually rhythmic. "I once tried to stop him from doing that," says Chaim, "because it's not so aesthetic for the audience to watch. But then I realized that that's how he keeps his rhythm. If he doesn't wave his hand, he can't sing on tempo."

The second the singing stops, Avremel withdraws. His eyes are vacant again, and he's on the move. And when the time comes for the photo op, a staff member has to take him into another room to prepare him, even though most of the others can tuck in their own shirts and fix their beards and *peyos*.

"Can I talk to him?" I ask Chaim as the rehearsal draws to a close.

"He won't be able to answer you," he answers. "If anything, he might 'reply' by singing the jingle of a commercial he heard on the bus on the way here yesterday. Music — in any form — is his only way of communicating, and what he sings in response to your question will probably be without rhyme or reason."

Avremel's mother sees an incredible change in her son. "Ever since he joined the choir and started appearing on stage, I've noticed an astounding improvement in his behavior and self-esteem. Chaim Sofer took Avremel's inner talent, polished it, and brought it out full-color. Even though Avremel doesn't speak, I know when there's a performance coming up because there's a certain excitement in his eyes."



Repeat Performance

At the rehearsal, the choir members take up their positions, and Chaim turns on the music to which they would sing "*Tov L'hodos*" at the *siyum*. Although he plays several instruments, Chaim prerecords the music for performances not only to free himself to conduct the choir, but also for a much more significant reason. "Autistic people must work with routine," he explains. "If the musician were to stray even slightly from what they were used to hearing, it would throw them off and they wouldn't be able to adjust."

In fact, the choir members grow so accustomed to the routine Chaim teaches them — when to sing and when to stop for a solo, when to slow down toward the end of the song and when to change tempo in the middle of the song — that they will often correct him. "During a practice, for example, I raised my hands to remind them to stop for a solo, but then they gave these quiz-zical looks. I realized that they were correct; I taught them to sing one more bar before the solo."

It takes about two full weeks for them to learn a single song, and Chaim only teaches one song at a time. The choir sings not only simple classics such as "*Tov L'hodos*," the more modern "*Ki Hirbeisa*," and the like, but also complex compositions with difficult words, such as Avraham Fried's Hebrew song, "*Aleh Katan*," the rendition of which moved even the most cynical Israeli Knesset members.

Autism and other mental illnesses can be marked by an inability to emote, and when I ask Chaim whether his choir members are nervous before an event, he thinks for a while before answering. "I can't say that I see nervousness," he says finally. "There's excitement, but no nerves."

"Music is the way into their *nefesh*." Chaim Sofer brings out the best in his choir



The Song We All Sing

There's a certain natural *chein* (charm) that Hashem implants into the mentally disabled. When we walk into the rehearsal room in Seeach Sod's Ma's center for adults and a staff member announces that *Mishpacha* is doing an article on their choir, a buzz fills the room. "*Seeach Sod zeh hachi tov!*" Dovid, a choir member, announces proudly. Later on, when a staff member instructs the young men to straighten their tzitzis for the photos, Dovid misunderstands that we want him to take them off. "*Ani Yehudi!*" he exclaims proudly, with a measure of righteous indignation at our perceived intent to make him appear less Jewish.

Menachem is the *chazzan* in the group. Plagued by both physical and mental handicaps and near blindness, he is nevertheless a happy, easygoing young man who developed a strong affinity for *chazzanus*. Toward the end of the rehearsal, I ask to hear some *chazzanus*, and he clears his throat and begins "*V'liYerushalayim ircha b'rachamim tashuv*." His fellow choir members are quick to join in.

When staff members at Seeach Sod learned about Menachem's love for *chazzanus*, they arranged for him to sing a duet with Cantor Chaim Adler, who is extremely devoted to the organization and the choir. "Menachem is actually on a very high level

for all of his disabilities," explains Chaim Sofer. "Chazzan Adler came only a short while before the event, but they were able to sing the duet having practiced it only a couple of times."

There is something simultaneously heart-breaking and heartwarming about spending time with the Pirchei Seeach choir. Heartbreaking because of the immense barriers that these young men face that turn performing tasks that we take for granted into gigantic challenges. But heartwarming, because there's no competition or jealousy among these young men. Each one is happy for his respective position. And the amazing achievement of having young men overcome their immense challenges and gain confidence through their music is a sight that astounds both religious and secular audiences.

And there's one more message, apparent in the spontaneous singing and dancing that gripped the audience as Pirchei Seeach took the stage at the Siyum HaShas. If these limited men can feel joy from the gifts they were granted and sing "*Tov L'hodos LaShem*" with such enthusiasm, how much more do we owe praise for the innumerable treasures He showers on us morning and night — *L'hagid baboker, baboker chasdecha, v'emunascha balaylos*...



When traveling, it is a wise practice to inspect your hotel or motel room – and mattresses – for bed bugs, prior to occupying it.

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