

The Jewish Weekly

It Once Happened...

Band of Brothers

By Avi Piamenta

At an early age I was introduced to music, a heritage of my family.

My uncle, Albert Piamenta, was an Israeli saxophonist who became famous for mixing Judeo-Arabic music with jazz. My mother also loved music, so much so, that the first piece of furniture she bought for our house in Tel Aviv was a piano. And my older brother, Yosi, was a guitar player who, in the course of his career, created a whole new style – a blend of rock and Israeli compositions, which had a major influence on Jewish music.

I grew up playing piano but, after a time, I discovered the magical sound of the flute and that became my instrument of choice. At age seventeen, I started performing with Yosi, who was then a soldier and playing in an IDF band. I vividly remember joining him for a concert just when the Yom Kippur War broke out in 1973. We performed for the soldiers on the front lines with bombs flying over us.

A year after the war we formed a band – called the Piamenta Band – which became very popular. So much so that when the famed saxophonist, Stan Getz – one of the greatest jazz stylists ever – arrived in Israel in 1976 and heard our music, he invited us to tour and record with him. That was the first time in history that a musician of such caliber collaborated with Israeli musicians, and it caused a media sensation.

As our fame grew, we were sent by the Israeli government to perform throughout the U.S. and Canada at 30th anniversary celebrations of the State of Israel. But, by this time, I had become Torah-observant, and shortly thereafter, I was exposed to the teachings of the Alter Rebbe, the 18th century founder of the Chabad Movement, and I decided to stay in New York to learn Torah and chasidic teachings. I also formed an informal yeshivah of other musicians which I called Mitzvah Goreret Mitzvah ("A Good Deed Produces a Good Deed").

Meanwhile, my brother Yosi also became more religious, and eventually the whole family moved to the Chabad neighborhood in Crown Heights. This greatly affected our music, as we learned more chasidic songs and began to include them in our repertoire, developing a unique style.



As time went on – I think it was in 1980 – we decided to write to the Rebbe to explain what we were doing, and the feeling we had that we could positively influence other Jews. In this letter of eight pages penned by Yosi – with which he included a photo album of the history of our band – he asked the Rebbe if he was worthy of doing what he wanted to do, which was bringing estranged Jews back to Judaism through music. In response, the Rebbe took the letter and crossed out the word “if” and what remained of that sentence was his answer to Yosi – “I am worthy of doing what I want to do...” He also wrote a long response to the other questions in his own hand, which I later learned was quite a rare thing for him to do.

First of all, the Rebbe wrote that, generally speaking, our plan to use music as a medium for disseminating Judaism was a great idea. He quoted the verse from the Book of Proverbs, “Know Him [G-d] in all your ways,” which indicates that people should use all their talents for holy purposes.

He then went on to analyze the present state of the field of music: He pointed out that a band which is as successful as ours – “1) capable of conquering hearts, 2) able to provide an ample livelihood to the people involved, 3) has already captured the market” – can make great inroads against the evil inclination out in the world.

But the Rebbe cautioned: “How can you ascertain that those whom your program will bring into the world of music will not also join the vast majority ... which has no [moral] restrictions at all? Indeed, its motto is: ‘everything is permissible for you; it is ideal that you try everything out yourself ... and only later decide on your own how you relate to all things without preconceived notions whatsoever.’”

This is exactly where we could play a major role, the Rebbe said. He went on to explain that, on one hand, “lives are literally at stake” and the kind of music that people were

listening to meant that there was a great need for our band. But, on the other hand, the state of the music world meant that we would face great challenges.

He warned us that we will need to fight the status quo and distinguish ourselves from others in the field, “to put to rest the misgivings of observant educators and leaders, whose concerns are based on the prevalent atmosphere in the world of music.”

He also gave us specific advice, recommending that we make clear through advertising that we had embarked on a new path. (The photo album showed him what our band was like through all the years, including before we were religious.) We needed to rebrand ourselves, so to speak, and this should be done, he wrote, “in order to allay the concerns ... that, in essence, the band, which has been around for many years, has not changed.”


He concluded by encouraging us to put out more albums of songs with positive messages and to continue to collaborate with religious organizations to arrange music tours and concerts. At the same time, he dissuaded us from opening a recording studio and a radio station – which was something we were dreaming about – since “our Sages teach us that ‘if you grab for too much, you will hold nothing.’”

Of course, we took his advice to heart and did what he said.

I, personally, was very much affected, and wherever I have traveled across the globe, I have sought to bring the messages of Torah to all those who come to hear my music. Whether I am playing in a Chabad House or at a music festival where the people have never seen a Jew wearing tzitzit and a yarmulke before, I know I have a mission to accomplish. I remember that “lives are literally at stake” but with some words of Torah, some words of light and hope in the face of darkness and despair, I can have a lasting impact.

Reprinted from email of Chabad.org.

Editor's Note: R' Avi Piamenta, the virtuoso flutist who formed one of the most iconic Jewish bands of the last generation with his brother Yosi Piamenta, passed away last Friday, 8th Tammuz at age 69.



Shabbat Times – Parshat Balak

	Candle Lighting	Motzei Shabbat	Motzei Shabbat ר"ת
Jerusalem	7:12	8:29	9:04
Tel Aviv	7:27	8:31	9:02
Haifa	7:20	8:33	9:05
Be'er Sheva	7:28	8:30	9:03



The "Still Small Voice" in Political Activism

By Mayer Jacob "Chic" Hecht

I was elected as the United States Senator from Nevada in 1982. A couple of years later, my brother, Martin Hecht, and nephew, Dr. Chaim Hecht, took me to Brooklyn to meet the Lubavitcher Rebbe at a farbrengen.

The Rebbe spoke to me and said, "your top priority should be to get the Jews out of Russia."

I replied that my late mother was an immigrant from Russia who had to flee with her family to escape death at the hands of the Russian Cossacks.

"The key," the Rebbe said, is "quiet diplomacy."

At that time, the Cold War with Russia was still on. In 1985, a very important vote came before the U.S. Senate. President Reagan needed my vote to break a tie. The vote was very important to the President.

I had been a top supporter of President Reagan; I felt he was the best friend Israel ever had in the White House. So, I met personally with him and told him of my decision to back him with my tiebreaking vote.

I then asked if I might bring up a concern on my mind. President Reagan graciously agreed. I told him that my late mother was an immigrant from the Soviet Union, and only by the grace of G-d am I standing before you today in the United States Senate.

I urged the President to place increased emphasis on the release of tens of thousands of Soviet Jews before the next summit conference. "Those who are allowed to leave the Soviet Union, Mr. President, should not be just elderly, but children, teenagers, doctors and scientists. All should be allowed the basic human right of freedom."

President Reagan expressed tremendous concern.

I was President Reagan's last appointment before leaving for the Reykjavik, Iceland Conference which took place in early October 1986. At that meeting I presented him with a list of names of 1,200 Soviet Jews who had applied to emigrate from Russia.

I reminded the President that the numbers could reach in the millions, but this would be a start. I used "quiet diplomacy" as the Rebbe had recommended; only he, an aide of his, and myself were in the Oval Office.

President Reagan gave the list of 1,200 names to Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev at the Reykjavik Conference and spoke of its importance. Within weeks a trickle of Jews began to leave Russia. Soon the trickle mushroomed into tens of thousands.

After President Reagan left office and I became Ambassador to the Commonwealth of the Bahamas, he and Mrs. Reagan came to the Bahamas to vacation. They invited my wife and me to a cocktail party for a few friends. I told the President what a wonderful service he did for the Jewish people in getting the Jews to leave Russia and I asked why he never mentioned the act in public.

Mrs. Reagan said that Mr. Gorbachev told them that there were many around him that did not want the Jews to leave Russia. If we made it public, the exodus would stop. So, President Reagan used "quiet diplomacy" with Mr. Gorbachev.

The story continues with a human touch. My brother, Marty, who has had trouble with his feet, went to Scripps Clinic in La Jolla, California. He was assigned a doctor who referred him to a specialist.

The specialist examined him and asked a question, "As your name is Hecht, would you know a Senator Hecht?" Marty answered with a smile, "He is my brother."

The doctor became very emotional and replied that I had saved his wife, mother and father-in-law. They were on the list and told to be at the airport at a certain time. They did not know what to expect. They boarded the plane and took off for Vienna. With what money they had, they sent a telegram of thanks to President Reagan.

Since that time, I have met many more Jews that were on that list. The Rebbe's advice and instructions on using "quiet diplomacy" resulted in the saving of hundreds of thousands of lives, and a stronger Israel where the majority immigrated.

Reprinted from an email of KabbalaOnline.org.

How is it possible that we name one of the key portions of the Torah, after the evil king of the Moabites, Balak?

It is in the Parsha of Balak, that we come across two foes of the Jewish people, Balak and Bilam, but there was a significant difference between the two.

With Bilam what you saw was not what you got. Bilam presented himself as a man of Hashem, a great spiritual giant, a prophet, a person who is there always to do the right thing. A good individual, but deep down he was corrupt and that is what we find out as the story unfolds within the Parsha.

Balak however, was very different.

Balak was upfront, everybody knew he hated the Jewish people, he wanted to wipe us out, that is why he hired the services of Bilam.

With Balak, you knew where you stood with him and that was a tiny redeeming feature of an outrightly evil person.

I've always been fascinated by the fact that the archetypal non-Kosher food, is swine.

If you want to identify something that is most definitely non-kosher, it is food which comes from a pig.

But it is fascinating because actually, the pig scores 50% in the test of Kashrut, because there are two requirements in the Torah, for an animal to be kosher.

The pig has one of the requirements, it has cloven hooves, however it does not chew the cud.

So you see outwardly, the pig expresses to the world: 'I am kosher, everything's ok about me', but inwardly it is outrightly non-Kosher.

That is dangerous. That is hypocrisy, which is totally unacceptable and that is why swine is the worst of all non-Kosher foods in our minds.

In Parshat Terumah we're taught that the ark, which was in the sanctuary and later the Temple, was laden with gold, both on the inside and the outside, in order to teach us the lesson of 'תורו בברו', your values internally, need to match the persona you have externally.

So therefore, from the title of the Parsha, we are reminded that unlike Balak, we should be as good as gold, both inside and out. One way is by praying with all our hearts for all those who need a recovery from sickness, for the release of the hostages, as well as praying for our soldiers and healthcare professionals, and Chevra Kadisha members worldwide, and for those who need healing, shidduchim, children and parnassah and may we be blessed to have the most awesome, gorgeous, beautiful, peaceful, healthy, amazing, relaxed, spiritual, sweet, and happy Shabbat.

Yossi

The Jewish Weekly's PARSHA FACTS

NUMBER OF MITZVOT: 0

NUMBER OF PESUKIM: 104

NUMBER OF WORDS: 1455

NUMBER OF LETTERS: 5357

HAFTORA: Micah 5:6 - 6:8

Sunday, July 13, is Shiva Asar B'Tammuz, 17 Tammuz, a Public Fast Day, the beginning of the Three Weeks.

This week in Israel, we study Chapter 6 of Pirkei Avot.

פרשת בלק



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