**Q: A cappella albums - singing without instrumental accompaniment - are becoming more and more common, especially during The Three Weeks and Sefirah when we are noheig not to listen to music. Is it halachically permissible to listen to a cappella music during these times of the year?**

**Harav Yisroel Belsky shlit”a:** Lately, it has become a trend to take every possible pleasure that one can think of and figure out ways to make them permissible at all times. Whether it is the imitation of non-kosher foods, making all chometzdike delicacies kosher l’Pesach, or other similar things, we find this attitude now more than ever. People cannot live for one minute with compromising on pleasures that they are used to or wish to experience. Often, the heteirim to permit such activities are, at best, based on very weak reasoning.

One such example is the desire to listen to music during Sefirah and The Three Weeks. It has become a trend to produce “Sefirah tapes,” referred to musically as “a cappella“. The wide acceptance of such tapes has not been with rabbinic approval. Indeed, many of the gedolei rabbonim have ruled that one should not listen to this type of music during Sefirah and The Three Weeks. Unfortunately, because the music albums are being sold in the stores, people think that they must be glatt kosher. If they aren’t acceptable, people say, why would a Jewish store sell them?

**A Cappella**

There are basically three types of a cappella.

One is where the musical sounds originate from human voices but the natural properties are digitally modified with computer software to attain quality of sounds that are not humanly possible, thus making it sound more like regular music. Such a cappella is halachically not viewed as being any different from regular music.

There are other forms of a cappella which sound very similar to regular music, although no digital modification is done to the voices. These types of a cappella should also not be listened to during Sefirah and The Three Weeks, as will be explained shortly.

The third type of a cappella is where regular songs are sung by an individual or choir. There is nothing halachically objectionable about listening to such a cappella during Sefirah and The Three Weeks.

To properly understand this topic, it would be helpful to briefly relate some technical information provided by experts in the music industry as to how a cappella music is created.

**Digitally Modified A Cappella**

Every sound is made up of many different sound waves, each at there own frequency. The individual frequencies and the velocity of each sound wave give each sound its unique tonal properties.

There is a process called equalization whereby one can alter the natural balance of frequencies. Equalization is used on almost every recorded sound we hear. It is most commonly employed to shape a sound, bringing out its own properties better. However, equalization can also be used to create a special effect. For example, a click with one’s mouth, or a chhhh sound, can be equalized to sound like a drum. If the tonal balance is changed beyond the capabilities of what a human can do, then the music can no longer be considered human sounds, but rather computer-made sounds, and would be prohibited during Sefirah and The Three Weeks.

A second modification made is to the pitch of the notes. A bass guitar can play notes almost twice as low (two octaves lower) as a human voice can go. Therefore, in order to simulate the bass notes, some album producers lower the pitch of the notes beyond the capabilities of the human voice. This process of transposing the notes down an octave or more would also change the status of these notes from vocals to computer-generated sounds, and would be prohibited during Sefirah and The Three Weeks.

One can also record a person sounding individual notes (e.g. an individual drum hit, a trumpet sound, etc.) and transpose it in one’s computer to every possible note and play back these notes using an external controller, such as a keyboard. One can now play this “voice” as an instrument on a keyboard and technically stimulate a “one man band”, although the sound of each key on the keyboard originated from human voices. This process, which is called “sampling”, would definitely change the status of the notes, and make them prohibited during Sefirah and The Three Weeks.

A third modification made is to the timing of the notes. The rhythmic structure of all music can be charted on a grid. The most common breakdown would be charted in eights. That means that each rhythmic hit would take place at exactly one interval of eights. It is not humanly possible for a musician to play 100% on the grid. This slight imperfection is what gives live music its human feel, as opposed to machine music which sounds much more rigid. It is even harder for a person to create a rhythm with his mouth, and keep it perfectly on grid. Many albums take the rhythmic parts and digitally place them exactly where they belong on the grid. This process is called quantization. Though this does not change the sound of the voice, when used in combination with any of the above processes it would give the sounds more of a status of music.

**Unmodified A Cappella**

There is a common misconception that music is ossur during Sefirah. Nowhere in Hilchos Sefirah or the halachos of The Three Weeks does it mention that there is a minhag not to listen to music. All that is mentioned by the earlier poskim is that there is a minhag to abstain from rikkudim u’mecholos, dancing.

If so, where does the entire issue of not listening to live or recorded music during Sefirah and The Three Weeks come from?

It appears that although there was no specific minhag not to listen to music, there was a minhag to abstain from things that bring about an excessive amount of enjoyment. Furthermore, technically, due to the churban Beis Hamikdosh, music should be forbidden all year round. However, there are certain kulos which we rely upon. It is during Sefirah and The Three Weeks that we have accepted upon ourselves not to rely on these kulos and practice aveilus in this regard. Music has this power more than most things that people do for enjoyment. Music can take someone out of this world, so to speak, and make him forget, at least temporarily, all his worries and problems. Thus, whether the music is live or recorded, it produces this effect, which is contrary to the minhag. A cappella that sounds very similar to music is also included in this minhag and should not be listened to.

Some rabbonim feel that once it sounds like music and is being played from an electronic device, that, too, renders it a musical device which is forbidden.

Some others take it a step further and maintain that any music that stimulates the desire to dance - even mere vocals - are forbidden. Be that as it may, if the sound of the a cappella is identical to ‘regular’ music, it should definitely be avoided.

**Choirs**

A cappella music that was not modified at all, and sounds like a group of people singing, would be permissible.