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NEW WINGS FOR OUR PRAYERS: ON AMERICAN JEWISH MUSIC

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Robert Cohen

*Excerpted from **Open the Gates: New American-Jewish Music For Prayer, Vol. 1***

There is a Hasidic story which Martin Buber calls “The Treasure,” in which a Jew from Cracow dreams of a buried treasure in Prague, lying under a particular bridge. He sets out for Prague, only to find the bridge heavily guarded and any digging out of the question; whereupon a kindly guard, curious as to why he is frequenting the area, informs him that he too has had a dream of buried treasure, in which the treasure was buried in Cracow under the stove of (of course) the very Jew he is speaking to—who proceeds (of course) to return home to dig it up. The treasure was all the while, as it were, in his own backyard.

It seems to me that this story has more than a little to tell us about the attitude of most American Jews toward Jewish music. When I ask my students or lecture audiences what comes to mind when they think of “Jewish music,” they mention Yiddish folk songs or theater music; Eastern European klezmer music (usually as they have learned it from American revivalist bands) or cantorial singing in the style of “the old country”; an Israeli popular or folk tune; or perhaps a song from *Fiddler on the Roof*—a telling example, since a vicarious or nostalgic sense of Jewish identity seems to inform all of their choices.

Virtually never do they cite an example or two—or even a composer, or a genre—from the exhilarating variety of liturgically inspired folk music composed by American Jews in the last half-century. Yet if “Jewish-American identity,” as Jewish educator Irving Saposnik has written, “depends upon the songs we choose to sing, and how we choose to sing them,” then American Jews’ disconnection from their own musical treasures may reflect a larger alienation from the vitality and vibrancy of American-Jewish life generally. American Jews, by and large, do not know the value—or even of the existence—of what they have.

“Every Sunday in most American cities,” folksinger Pete Seeger has written, “various people get together and sing religious folk music. They don’t call it folk music, but it is, just as much as what is sung in the local coffeehouse.” Except for the reference to Sunday, the same is true, I would argue, with respect to many—or most—American Jewish places of worship today. In synagogues and minyanim (more informal services— sometimes conducted outside a synagogue) of every and no denomination, American Jews sing religious folk music—though, like Molière’s gentleman protagonist, they don’t know that they’re doing so. Much or most of the music they sing was composed in this country—though many of them don’t know that, either. And just as Jewish music has always taken on the coloration of its surrounding culture, contemporary American-Jewish music reflects this time and place—not only aesthetically, but sociologically and even spiritually. “You find the soul of a people,” wrote Samson Raphaelson in his preface to *The Jazz Singer*, “in the songs they sing.”

Thus, an informal society has required more informal music for prayer.

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We are an international community of people of many faiths calling for social justice and political freedom in the context of new structures of work, caring communities, and democratic social and economic arrangements. We seek to influence public discourse in order to inspire compassion, generosity, non-violence and recognition of the spiritual dimensions of life.

(Leonard Bernstein, according to a recent *New Yorker* essay, realized early in his career that “communication, not decorum, was what mattered.”) And what the sociologist Samuel Heilman dubs our “do-it-yourself culture”—plus what composer Michael Isaacson calls our “American disdain for elitism” (“We don’t want to be sung down to,” observes musicologist Velvel Pasternak)—has demanded more inclusive, more participatory music even as it gave rise, in many circles, to smaller, more participatory settings for worship. “I, for one,” wrote one participant in a recent Jewish music e-mail discussion, “do not wish to have someone else do my praying for me.” (By contrast, the 18th-century Berlin cantor Aaron Beer composed as many as fifty-two musical settings for every prayer or hymn—one for every week in the year—precisely so the congregation couldn’t sing with him!)

The trend has been away from so-called “edifice music”—composed with the “cathedral synagogues” of Europe and of much of 1950s America in mind—toward more inviting, more accessible music: less cerebral, perhaps; less austere; less regal. More “heart music” than “head music,” as one of my students beautifully put it; music that affords us some sense of “ownership,” as another (I think quite profoundly) observed. Music (to avail ourselves, briefly, of the categories of the theologians) more suitable to intimate conversation, with a God immanently accessible to us, than to florid declamation to the transcendent, distant God of our ancestors—the architecture of whose synagogues itself evoked, and underscored, that distance.

Jews today, I think, want closeness and spiritual connection—to God and to each other—not distance and reserve. And so today’s prayer music must invite, even demand, emotional and spiritual engagement, not respectful or awed (or bored) “appreciation”; enabling a journey inward, perhaps, as much as upward (as theologian Arthur Green has it). And with characteristic American pragmatism, we are open to whatever music “works” to make that movement, and that connection, happen.

The style and even the instrumentation of our religious music reflect these spiritual needs: the inclusive, inviting guitar rather than the distancing organ; the congregational melody favored over the coloratura cantorial solo. So the folk idiom of 20th-century America provided what Lawrence Hoffman calls the “cultural backdrop” for the liturgical music of this generation, as the “spirit of the age” furnished a spiritual template. And just as the children of Beethoven and Schubert in the 19th century—most prominently, Salomon Sulzer of Vienna and Louis Lewandowski of Berlin—created a then innovative style of liturgical art music in the Romantic Classical idiom of their day, so the children of the Weavers, Pete Seeger, and Peter, Paul & Mary in the late 20th century created a now distinctive style of liturgical folk music—an indigenous American product.

That music would also necessarily come to reflect what ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin calls “America’s fascinating propensity for interchange”: our inclusionary multiculturalism, our eclectic musical palette. So the last several decades have seen generous helpings of Jewish folk and Jewish jazz, Jewish bluegrass and Jewish country, Jewish rock and Jewish world music. (And, in an adjoining neighborhood, the ongoing creation of new genres of klezmer-inspired, Middle Eastern-inflected jazz—or is it vice versa?) All of these cross-cultural fusions came naturally to the baby boomer generation (and, increasingly, to their biological and spiritual children): Jews who, the sociologists would say, were “living in two cultures”—the Jewish and the American—and, unlike either immigrant Jews or the generation that followed them, felt at home in both.

They were more at home in the world than other generations of Jews as well. Cantor Sherwood Goffin observes that “Jews used to come to synagogue to cry,” but there has been an exuberance, a joyfulness, to this era of Jewish renewal—an ingenuously celebratory quality. “The ghetto Jew looked backwards and complained of his mournful fate,” writes music historian Peter Gradenwitz; those who emigrated here, remarked George Jessel (!—at Jolson’s funeral), “[w]hen they sang, . . . sang with lament in their hearts and their voices.” But the Jews of

the 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s no longer had to sing in sorrow; the late 20th century and the early 21st, in a largely benign America, has been a time (to quote from Ira Gershwin's song "Stairway to Paradise") for gladness, not sadness.

As it happens, there was a historical movement within Judaism that spoke to the condition of post-'60s American Jewry—however incongruously in some respects—musically, emotionally, and spiritually. This was Hasidism.

A pietistic, devotional "Jewish renewal" movement of 18th-century Europe (what survived the Holocaust was successfully transplanted to the United States), Hasidism taught—it came as a healing message at a time of alienation and trauma among many Jews—that every Jew was precious in God's sight, and that God valued primarily sincerity in worship, joyfulness in His service, and the desire (which He reciprocated) to be close to Him. And Hasidism taught that music—especially the form of prayerful or spiritual melody that Hasidim called a *niggun* (plural *niggunim*)—was both the ultimate expression of joy (*simchah*), of wholehearted devotion (*kavanah*), and of (longing for) closeness to God (*d'veikus*)—and a means without equal for attaining these states.

In our generation, contemporary *niggunim*—music composed in a Hasidic style or, to a greater or lesser degree, inspired by that style—have been important vehicles of spiritual connection (just as the *mitzvot*, or commandments of the Torah, are intended to be): of intimate relationship, or yearning for relationship, with God as well as of community with others. Contemporary Jews have, I believe, experienced *niggunim* as profoundly liberating—as opening up new channels of worship and inspiration, of celebration and joy, of meditation and healing.

But if *niggunim*, sung with proper devotion and intensity, could, Hassidim believed, open the gates of Heaven ("In the highest heavens," they would quote the Zohar, the sourcebook of Jewish mysticism, "there is a certain Temple with gates that can be opened only by the power of song"), one charismatic singer in our time opened the gates for a new generation of *niggun* makers. As a child in Berlin and Baden, near Vienna, Shlomo Carlebach was saturated with traditional Jewish religious music; after he came to America, he immersed himself in various Hasidic communities and also absorbed something of the folk revival atmosphere of New York's Greenwich Village. He was to provide the transition between European- and American- Jewish music by making music with a Hasidic flavor accessible to young Americans—and by singing with a guitar, an instrument theretofore unknown in Jewish religious music.

Shlomo Carlebach had a phenomenal gift for melodies that conveyed yearning and joy, sweetness and exultation all at once—and that, as journalist Yossi Klein Halevi has written, "could be so compelling . . . that after a single hearing one seemed to have always known [them]." His melodies have been sung by Jews all over the world: "from California to the New York Island"; from Moscow and Madrid to his Moshav Modiin community (and a host of other congregations) in Israel; from the yeshiva world to the Jewish counterculture. And his example inspired an entire generation to set traditional, and some original, verses to their own, new melodies—some in his style, some less so, some not at all so—fueling what musician David Nulman calls "the democratization of Jewish music" in our time. The result has been a garland of new Jewish music—of new wings for our prayers. A selection of these—it is necessarily limited, and excludes as many gifted composers and musicians as it includes—makes up this CD.

The renaissance of Jewish liturgical folk music that this album (partially) chronicles has not been without controversy, however. Folk music generally, and so most Hasidic music and almost all of the *niggunim* of today, is informed by an aesthetic of simplicity—"an artless, unself-conscious quality," in folksinger Oscar

Brand's words. "Any damn fool can get complicated," remarked Pete Seeger in an appreciation of Woody Guthrie. "It takes genius to attain simplicity."

For folk music mavens, according to Jon Pareles in the *New York Times*, "[m]usic was not a commodity owned and dispensed by professionals but a heritage open to everyone"; this was the ethos of Moe Asch's legendary Folkways record label. "The most important art," according to this understanding, "came from ordinary people, not the elite."

The elite, however—at least with respect to Jewish music—was sometimes of a different mind. The decline of art music in the synagogue, and the ascendancy of neo- (or quasi-) Hasidic folk music, has been a source of near-apoplectic distress, it seems, for some (but not all) cantors, some composers, some connoisseurs of earlier genres, and other guardians of the Jewish art music tradition.

Among many upholders of more classical styles, aesthetic rather than spiritual or devotional criteria—specifically, "high art" aesthetic criteria, derived from Western European art music and, even more problematically, from church music—are invoked to define what Jewish prayer music should sound like. So contemporary niggunim are derided for their lack of "aesthetic elevation" or "musical sophistication" or condemned as "insufficiently challenging"—as though these melodies are being submitted for a doctoral dissertation rather than offered up in prayer. Mark Slobin's distinction between "the music of presentation" and "the music of participation" may be useful here, for the critics seem to be mourning the loss of the sort of virtuosic art music that many of today's Jews might enjoy in a concert hall but would never allow in their services.

Indeed, the naysayers sometimes seem clueless with respect to what *amcha* (the Jewish people) need in spiritually inspiring music today, inveighing instead against the lack of "stateliness" or "dignity" or "decorum" in our synagogue music. (For the embedding of these qualities in 19th-century Western European synagogue art music, the classicists are eternally grateful to Salomon Sulzer; and in a bizarre homage to the 18th-century Aaron Beer, one Jewish music critic wrote in praise of one 20th-century composer that she disdained "the attempt to be immediately accessible to a congregation"!)

The critics would be discomfited, no doubt, by Lawrence Hoffman's description of contemporary American liturgical music as "open, changeable, and democratic—maybe even chaotic."

Others profess themselves "embarrassed"—sometimes to the point of mortification—by today's religious folk music. "Why [should] we admire great music in Christian traditions," complains the distinguished synagogue composer Ben Steinberg, "while consigning our own music to forgettable sing-along toe-tappers? Why should Jews encounter glorious prayer music only in the concert hall and the church?" "Great" and "glorious" are, obviously, in the ears of the beholder, and "forgettable" sounds like wish fulfillment. (Or denial. Astonishingly, Cantor Macy Nulman's otherwise instructive *Concise Encyclopedia of Jewish Music* does not have an entry for Shlomo Carlebach, the most prolific composer of Jewish liturgical music in this or, possibly, any century—an omission comparable to excluding Richard Rodgers or Bob Dylan from a comparable reference book on American popular music.) But what sort of understanding of Jewish music is conveyed in the notion that music that invites singing and dancing—in a tradition that not only exhorts us to "Sing unto God a new song" but also proclaims, "All my bones shall praise thee"—is ipso facto unworthy?

Another eminent composer, Samuel Adler, denounces "the false egalitarian attitude . . . that . . . guitar strumming . . . is equal to the Biblical quotations set to music by Bach, Stravinsky, or Bloch"—though some of these "quotations" are attributed to King David, "the sweet singer of Israel," who strummed, or plucked, the lyre-like kinor ! By contrast, for the Jewish fusion musician and composer John Zorn, "All music is on equal grounds . . . there's no high art and low art." (Folksinger Theodore Bikel writes that his campus concerts would be sponsored sometimes by the folk song society of the college and sometimes by the English or history or sociology department, but never by the music department: "Their

brows did not droop so low as to consider folk music to fall within their discipline.”)

Even more bizarrely, another reviler, a hazzan (cantor), disparages “the here-and-now ‘spirituality’ [in quotes] of [again] guitar-strumming . . . prayer leaders”—but what other kind of spirituality, in or out of quotation marks, is there? To demean the here and now is, presumably, to exalt the vicarious and nostalgic—which is where we began.

For the defenders at the gates, folk music simply cannot, by definition, achieve the “aloof beauty” that one contemporary composer justly praises in the music of the early-17th-century Italian Jewish composer Salomone Rossi and that some still admire in religious music today, when so many Jews seek closeness rather than distance. “It is reprehensible,” writes Samuel Adler, “to project the unadorned colloquial”—what about the adorned colloquial?—“as though it were sublime.” To this, I believe, music historian Richard Crawford replies when he observes that, in the 20th century, “[we] learned . . . that all kinds of music performed in the popular sphere [have] turned out to be transcendent.”

I believe that today’s Jews are seeking, in the words of Cantor Benjie-Ellen Schiller, “sacred music that is both inclusive and transcendent,” both inviting and sublime. There may always be a time and place—perhaps, sometimes, in the synagogue; perhaps in the concert hall—for the stately majesty of Sulzer and Lewandowski, for the ethereal harmonies of Rossi, and for the works of some contemporary liturgical composers working in a more formal style. There will surely always be an important place in our prayer-song for the distinctive modes of Jewish musical chant that we call nusach; for what Lawrence Hoffman calls “the singsong sound of davening [traditional Jewish worship of a certain style]”; for what cantor and composer Charles Davidson calls “the distinctly Jewish give-and-take between a cantor [or, I would add, any knowledgeable service leader] and a knowledgeable congregation.”

But the mystical Zohar says that when the Jewish people leave their final exile on the way to their, and everyone’s, final redemption, they will leave, as after they left Egypt, singing. Then they will need, I believe, not only some of the cherished musical traditions of old, but some of these enchanting new melodies as well. “If you cannot concentrate in prayer, search for melodies, and if you pray, choose a tune you like. Then your heart will feel what your tongue speaks; for it is the song that makes your heart respond.” (Yehuda ben Samuel of Regensburg)

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Robert Cohen lectures widely on Jewish music and American folk music; he wrote the NPR documentary "One People, Many Voices: American-Jewish Music Comes of Age" and produced OPEN THE GATES!, the compilation CD discussed above. To listen to samples or purchase OPEN THE GATES!, please visit: cdbaby.com/openthegates

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