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Rachel A. Brown

University of Tennessee - Knoxville, rbrown72@vols.utk.edu

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Jewish Liturgy in Music

Rachel Brown

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Part I: The History and Evolution of Jewish Liturgical Music

The phrase “Jewish liturgical music,” for most observant Jews, most likely conjures up an image of a Friday night or a Saturday morning Shabbat service in a synagogue sanctuary. The Ark that holds the Torah scrolls sits majestically on the *bimah* beneath the *Ner Tamid*, the “Eternal Light.” The cantor (or, in the case of my childhood synagogue, the lay leader) stands at the podium on the *bimah* and *dovens* the service, while the rabbi follows along, greeting latecomers to the service. Most observant Jews (and also less observant ones) can identify with some aspect of this picture, however loosely. Jewish liturgical music, however, embodies much more than the somewhat narrow definition of music that is used in the religious service. While music that is used in a religious context may be at the source of Jewish musical practice, this unique genre has grown organically from its religious roots into a type of music all its own.

In the same way that Judaism is an ancient religion, so, too, are its musical practices. Vocal music became extremely important to the religion during the Second Temple period, and it most likely evolved from ancient Jewish folk song, probably with influences from the music of surrounding cultures and countries. The Levites served as precentors for public synagogue services, and they sang the Psalms and chanted select portions of the Prophets and the Pentateuch. There were three main types of public singing in the service of the Second Temple period, all of which were based on the idea of “call and response.” The first type of religious singing was one where the leader intoned half of a verse, which was followed by congregational repetition. In the second type, the leader sang just half of a line and

the congregation repeated the last part of what he had sung. The final type is the most obvious form of “call and response,” where the leader would sing an entire line and the congregation would respond by singing the following line, as in the modern day recitation of the *Ashrei* prayer. One should not, however, assume that all public vocal music was responsive in nature. Solo, unison, and responsive forms of singing were all used in ancient times (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 20-1).

While vocal music was critically important to the ancient Jewish public worship service, instrumental music was also present. Following the destruction of the Second Temple, however, all instrumental music, both religious and secular, was banned, because it was considered disrespectful when the Jews were supposed to be mourning the fall of the Temple. This sense of universal mourning among the Jews increased antagonism toward the non-religious music from the pre-destruction period (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 93). This antagonism included the condemnation of Greek art and cultural life, as it was seen as being virtuosic and devoid of meaning, which was not only frivolous, but also obscene in the context of religious music. In fact, to many Jews, it was seen as “profane” (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 93).

The ancient synagogue (and also the ancient church, but that is beyond the scope of this discussion) favored simple musical and textual settings, as opposed to the virtuosic settings of some surrounding cultures. The music of the Second Temple period was quite elaborate, but modes from Palestinian folk music are all that survived from that period and continued to be used in synagogue chants. All instrumentation, dancing, and body motions of any kind were considered “heathen” worship practices and were banned (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 96). The use of

instruments on Shabbat and on festival days was “desecration” (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 97). Instruments were only permissible at joyful events, such as weddings. Even then, however, in order to prevent over-indulgence in frivolity, a glass dish was broken to remind the couple and the wedding guests of the destruction of the Temple (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 97). The voice was the only instrument viewed as suitable for worship. In fact, it was not until the year 1810 that the organ was introduced in the service of the Reform Temple in Seesen, Germany and instruments were used in some Jewish religious services again (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 96). Ideally, for the ancient, traditional Jews, instruments would not be used until the Temple was restored and the music of the Levites was brought back as the religious music in worship services.

In the first centuries of the Common Era, only simple, religiously- themed songs were allowed. Music only existed to interpret the text. This resulted in a very limited number of musical forms and, once a melody was associated with a given text, no further interpretation was necessary. In the case of solo Bible recitation, the lack of rhythmic development and strictly non-virtuosic text settings made music stagnate. Prayers, however, were allowed a certain amount of musical inspiration. Some musical embellishments, ornamentations, and solo recitatives were permitted to encourage freedom to express the text more accurately. Prayer modes (that is, the particular tonality in which prayers were to be performed), however, had to be unrhythmical and sung in a unison or call-and-response form. Prayer modes were syllabic, emphasizing sung words in the same way that they would be emphasized in

speech. Congregational contribution to religious music was sung “in one tone, with one mouth and in one tune” (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 98).

By the fifth and sixth centuries of the Common Era, people began to feel that Jewish musical expression needed to evolve. Poems were based on “verbal meters,” meaning that each line had a set number of words. By the seventh century, however, Jews still had not created new forms of music and poetry, because during times of persecution, they found the old, modal forms of music comforting. Until the eighth century, the Jews continued to develop modal forms and songs of supplication (“Selicha”) and petition (“Tachanun”). Just like for any other group of people, when the Jews were free from persecution and oppression, they cultivated new forms of poetry and music. The Jews’ neighbors, the Arabs, particularly influenced these new forms (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 100).

Before the ancient Israelites formed their worship practices, the ancient Assyrians, Babylonians, and Egyptians instituted a religious service with responsive prayers performed by a choir or the congregation and a priest, who served as the reader and precentor. Eventual Jewish worship, however, differed from other ancient peoples’ worship, in that the influence of the Prophets made possible the idea that G-d could be approached by anyone, even common people, without the aid of a priest. This relationship between G-d and the people of Israel has been compared to that of a father and his children (see the prayer “Ki Anu amecha”) (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 101-2). For people who did not have enough education to pray for themselves, a “man of the people” was appointed as an intercessor to express their wishes for them (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 102). During the Second

Temple period in Jerusalem, of course, the priests and the Levites said the prayers for everyone. In synagogues, however, a prominent, well-educated layman was given the honor of becoming the precentor, known as a “shaliach-tsibur,” or “messenger of the community” (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 103). As time went on and education became more standardized, more people could be involved in the service and could become a precentor. Visitors could even chant prayers when attending services at a foreign synagogue, because many prayers were based on popular folk songs and modes, especially in the Palestinian region. The precentor continued to read the Bible in public. This was so because, while more people gained knowledge of the Scriptures and most people could read from the Pentateuch and the Prophets, the more rarely used “five scrolls” (*mesillot*) required a more educated scholar or scribe to read them (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 103).

Synagogue precentors continued to improvise prayers in the Talmudic period until approximately 500 C.E. The most interesting of these improvisations were preserved and remained in use. This development of fixed melodies in prayer led to set qualifications for synagogue precentors in the second century C.E. At that time, men had to be familiar with all of the prayers in addition to being scholarly. A “sweet” voice became the most important quality in a precentor, as this was seen as a “heavenly gift to inspire devotion” (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 104-5). In order to foster a sense of humility in religious worship, the ancient rabbis and sages required the precentor to stand at a lower level than the other congregants in the synagogue (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 105). It seems that the ancient sages of Judaism were quite

concerned about the precentors becoming performers instead of remaining strictly in their religious role.

The ancient, simple style of prayers was in use until the end of the Talmudic period (the sixth century), when people began searching for new forms of poetry. The *piyyut*, a form of metrical poetry, was created with Islamic influence after the Muslim conquest. The *piyyut* necessitated more rhythmically and modally intricate, complex music, which in turn required professional singers who could devote themselves to the study and creation of new texts and melodies. The ignorance of the average layperson and these new musical demands led to the formation of a professional precentor position, known as a *chazzan* (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 105-6). These are the origins of the modern day synagogue cantor, a topic that will be discussed later.

I will now “fast forward” to several centuries after 70 C.E., the year that marks the beginning of the Jewish Diaspora. Ashkenazic Jews, that is, Jews from Eastern Europe, composed particular melodies for the prose texts in daily services. These melodies used distinctive modes to “give tonal expression to the idea of that day” (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 134). The rabbis of the Ashkenazim also desired special melodies for the unique atmosphere of holy days. On Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year), for example, the melodic motives were especially reverent and full of awe. The motives for Yom Kippur (the “Day of Atonement”) were ones of supplication and contrition. The idea was that, when Jews entered a synagogue on a holy day, they would be moved by the musical modes and motives that were inspired by that particular day. Ashkenazic Jews were the only ones to establish an

entirely new genre of “sacred melodies” for special days (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 134-6). For Sephardic Jews (those who came from regions such as North Africa and Spain), on the other hand, the acceptance of music in everyday life was more gradual. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Jewish and non-Jewish composers had written settings of many different texts for multiple occasions (Edelman, 48).

Religious institutions were not immune to the influence of secular, artistic movements. The *ars nova* caused the synagogue to begin accepting elements of secular music into the worship service, and this was paralleled in the church of that time. The church, like the synagogue, struggled with secular movements, but for the church, “it was a secularization only of the sacred spirit” (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 210-11). In the synagogue, however, the *ars nova* secularized Jewish worship practices, Jewish song, and Jewish culture and thought. This included taking out some of the quintessentially Jewish-sounding elements in music and making it sound more “European,” or, in many cases, more “German” (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 211).

Melodies that were composed in the eighteenth century with the musical and harmonic principles of the Italian and German schools had few to no traditional Jewish features. Jewish secular and sacred music and Italian and German music were so similar, in fact, that there was no discernible difference whatsoever (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 212). Texts performed in the eighteenth century, such as the *Kaddish* and hymns, were intoned. Composers did not choose rarely-used texts to set to music. They only composed melodies for oft-used religious texts. Because of

the lack of musical settings for new texts, many melodies were written for just a few texts (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 214).

With foreign influences increasing and Jewish people craving new forms of music, we must briefly discuss the difference between Jewish folk music and Jewish art music. Folk music can be defined as spontaneous song creation that appeals to the masses and can be performed by anyone. This can include secular and religious music (Edelman, 39). Art music, on the other hand, is generally written by a trained composer and is more musically challenging, with a melody and some kind of accompaniment. It also uses more complex musical patterns than the verse-chorus pattern of the folk song genre (Edelman, 39). Jewish art music as a genre is fairly recent, as it is a Western construction. In Eastern music, the melody is paramount and Western harmonic ideas do not exist. Eastern music, in fact, is very much related to folk music, because the melodies are fluid and no two performances are alike; the songs are never repeated in exactly the same way. Art music illustrates the idea of music for its own sake (Edelman, 40).

This presented a problem in the early twentieth century, as rabbis forbade music for its own sake since the destruction of the Second Temple, forcing formally trained, Jewish composers to make their living composing outside the Jewish, religious sphere. These composers were, unfortunately, a rarity, as only Western European Jews had the opportunity to gain formal training and perform and compose in non-religious settings. Although it was still very difficult for Western European Jews to assimilate into European culture and society, they were still afforded a certain amount of political and cultural freedom, thanks in large part to

the “intellectual enlightenment” (Edelman, 71-2). Eastern European Jews, however, were not so fortunate. Only politically well-connected citizens were allowed opportunities for quality higher education, which effectively excluded a large portion of the Jewish population of Eastern Europe from realizing their potential in a variety of fields, not the least of which was music (Edelman, 71). Because of their rejection from Eastern European society, the remaining Jewish community that had not been forced out or killed began to feel a sense of “Jewish nationalism,” which led to the proliferation of Jewish musical and literary works (Edelman, 72).

This led to questions about the qualities that constituted specifically Jewish music. Some people believed that cantorial musical ideas and styles defined Jewish music. Others asserted that the folk song genre best represented Jewish culture and that all Jewish music should be derived from there (Edelman, 79). As Jewish musicians and composers began experimenting with more varying forms of composition and music, some became concerned that they were trading the idea of music being clearly Jewish in favor of originality. Early Jewish song composers wrote music for Hebrew and Yiddish texts, appealing to the Jewish audiences’ need for “Jewish nationalism” and effectively appeasing concerns that their music would not be obviously Jewish (Edelman, 83-4).

At this point, a word must be said about sources. The majority of the information that has been presented up to this point has come from two major sources, both of which are vital to the study and understanding of the history of Jewish music. The first is Abraham Zevi Idelsohn (1882-1938), who authored both *Jewish Liturgy and Its Development* and *Jewish Music: Its Historical Development*.

Born in Latvia in the Russian Empire, Idelsohn became a cantor and composer; but he is most notably the founder of the modern study of Jewish music and its history. Many consider him to be also one of the first major ethnomusicologists in the world. His studies and extensive research led him to create the *Thesaurus of Hebrew Oriental Melodies*, a ten-volume collection that took him nineteen years to compile which, when coupled with the more than one-thousand recordings he made himself, constituted the first major, academic study of Jewish recitation of the Bible. He also composed the first Hebrew opera in 1922, *Yiftah* ("Jephthah"), using traditional, Jewish melodies.¹ Idelsohn's works are invaluable to the study of the history of Jewish music around the world.

The other major source used thus far is Marsha Bryan Edelman's *Discovering Jewish Music*. Ms. Edelman is currently a Professor of Music and Education at Gratz College and the director of the Tyson Music Department. She holds degrees from Columbia University and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (Jewish Women's Archive, 1). Her book, *Discovering Jewish Music*, helps to provide a basis from which one can understand the trajectory of the development of Jewish music throughout history.

¹ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Abraham Zevi Idelsohn," 1.

Part II: The Cantorate

During times of oppression and abuse of the Jewish people, many communities found themselves without any qualified candidates to become a professional *shaliach-tzibbur*, or congregational prayer leader, so the communities' need became especially pressing (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 106). These were the roots of what Jews today would call the modern Jewish cantorate.

The term *chazzan* initially referred to a secular, governmental position. This was a person who oversaw courts and communal affairs (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 106). These positions can be traced back to ancient times. In the last years of the Second Temple period, *chazzanim* were caretakers of community interests. After the destruction of the Temple and the Jews' loss of political power and autonomy, the *chazzan* became obsolete, and the position only remained with a fraction of its original power, and only within the synagogue (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 106). In the sixth and seventh centuries, during more times of strife in many Jewish communities, the *chazzan* became the regular precentor in religious services, largely because of the fact that he was always present in the synagogue anyway (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 107).

After the idea of a permanent cantor in the synagogue became established, congregations began demanding a certain level of vocal artistry from those leading religious services, beginning with a pleasing vocal sound. An Eastern European *chazzan's* voice was his most powerful asset in procuring a singing position. Jewish communities wanted a "sweet" voice, which usually took the form of a slightly nasal lyric tenor. The tenor's voice was particularly suited to the position of a cantor,

because he possessed a natural sweetness and could navigate fast and difficult passages with vocal agility, or coloratura (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 192). Almost all great cantors from Eastern Europe were tenors. The few who had lower, baritone voices “tenorized” their sound, meaning that they added a brighter color and some nasality to their performance (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 192).

The *chazzan* fulfilled the Jewish communities’ need for popular music that represented the Jewish people and gave musical expression to the Jewish story with all of its pain, strife, and triumph. It was the *chazzan’s* duty to interpret the large part of Jewish history from the Exodus from Egypt to the fall of the Second Temple. They were tasked with distracting the often-disenfranchised Jews from their everyday troubles (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 192). Because *chazzanim* were always looking for texts to which their audiences and they themselves could relate, the cantors from Eastern Europe were able to revive much literature from antiquity and have it set to music (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 193). Many of the texts that they found were of a lamenting nature, and history has attributed that type of attitude to the cantors themselves, and also to Judaism. Because the basis for most Jewish music was the minor tonality, Anglo-Saxons interpreted this to mean that the Jewish people themselves were melancholy (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 194).

Around the time of the Renaissance, *chazzanim* decided that they would become full-time synagogue precentors, abandoning their other responsibilities within the synagogue. Cantors, like Jewish music itself, were not immune to outside influences. *Chazzanim* were so influenced by travelling minstrels, that they began to travel around to different cities and perform concerts (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 204).

Many cantors took inspiration and melodies from the secular theatre and dance genres and added Jewish texts to them. Some were even accused of borrowing melodies from Catholicism. Some rabbis believed that this did not pose a problem, so long as the melodies that they borrowed were not from a Christian service. “The custom of the *chazzanim* in our generation is to invent tunes, and to transfer tunes from the secular to the sacred” (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 208-9). Some Jews, however, worried that the introduction of compositions by the *chazzanim* and secular melodies jeopardized Jewish liturgical tradition.

“The *chazzanim* run through the main prayers with such rapidity that even the swiftest horse could not follow them; while on the Kaddish or Psalm tunes they spend so much effort and time that the annoyed congregants begin to converse” (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 209). This drawn-out manner of singing was an attempt by the *chazzanim* to extend the texts of certain prayers, in order to give the congregation plenty of time for silent, personal meditation (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 158). Many congregants, however, detested such practices. Prayers such as *Kol Nidré*, *Aleinu*, the *Barchu*, and the *Kedushah* were so musically extended by the cantors, in fact, that that people began complaining that the service was much too long, and they also voiced concerns about the introduction of foreign melodies that they viewed as unnecessary for the practice of the rituals (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 209).

As it turns out, the introduction of foreign melodies into cantorial music was necessary for the development of the Jewish liturgical song. Because *chazzanim* continued to move away from the traditional Jewish folk song genre in the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they used increasingly complex musical material, transforming synagogue music into art music. Communal reactions to Jewish art music sung by cantors were extreme, with people either resenting it for excluding average laypeople from musical, religious expression, or appreciating its novelty. At this point in history, it is clear that there was a shift in cantorial priorities. They no longer needed extreme religious zeal, but only a beautiful voice (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 212).

Because early cantors were not formally educated in music and musical notation, they learned their music and prayers by rote, and so needed a good memory for music (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 216). In the first half of the nineteenth century, Eastern European cantors often did not write down their own compositions, so the choirs that sang with them had to memorize the cantor's spontaneous chants (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 297). By the late nineteenth century, Eastern Europe became more amenable to accepting Western European culture. Cantors began purging liturgical music of ornamentations and embellishments, in imitation of a cantor named Salomon Sulzer, one of the most famous and influential European cantors in history. It is said that in Russia, without Sulzer's direct influence, cantorial imitations of him sounded similar to Russian Greek Catholic priests (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 306).

The other major shift for the cantorate in the early nineteenth century was the immigration of Central European (especially German) Jews to America. Because the most qualified cantors and rabbis happily remained in Europe, the quality of Jewish public worship in America was significantly lower than many Jews were used

to (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 316-17). The most enthusiastic and financially able congregations went so far as to “import” cantors from Europe to America. The industry was so competitive that when a synagogue hired a particularly talented or well-known cantor for the High Holidays, they advertised it in newspapers and other publications (Edelman, 128).

The early to mid-nineteenth century saw a dearth of ordained rabbis in America. Cantors took on those communal responsibilities in addition to their musical ones, purely because of a lack of qualified rabbis. They performed ritual slaughter(s) (*shechitah*), circumcisions, marriages, burials, and the regular religious services. These services were not as musically taxing as European services, because the immigrant population did not consider the services as important as European congregations did (Edelman, 125-26). As could be expected, European Jewish music was largely Americanized and many of the more exotic and “Oriental” elements were removed, their detractors citing them as “meaningless” (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 316-19). The cantor in America lost his historical ability to interpret Jewish liturgical song, and because most cantors lacked the necessary training in modern music and singing with organ, they were largely unpopular among American Reform congregations (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 320-21).

Jewish religious music in America (especially that in the Reform movement—those congregations founded by Jewish settlers from Germany and Bohemia) continued to be increasingly influenced by Christianity and the church in the nineteenth century. Hymn tunes used in Reform congregations were often borrowed from church liturgy or composed by Christian composers in the Christian

style. These hymns were sung in English or in German, in contrast to the almost exclusive use of Hebrew in previous centuries in Europe. Synagogue organists, many of whom were not Jewish, regularly set Jewish texts to Christian music. In fact, Jewish liturgical music was so “westernized” that opera arias and classical music were used in religious services (Edelman, 126). American Reform congregations often kept their cantors, but the *chazzan* had virtually no musical influence anymore. Influence was wielded mostly by Christian organists and musical directors in the Reform movement, and even rabbis became Americanized and less connected to the “Old World” traditions (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 321-22, 329, 333).

American congregations founded at the end of the nineteenth century by immigrants from Hungary, Russia, and Poland were generally Orthodox. While these Orthodox synagogues were usually not overly strict, they adhered strictly to “traditional” Jewish customs and music (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 333). In Orthodox congregations, the *chazzan* still led the religious service, and the liturgical music was a major incentive for service attendance. In fact, the *chazzan* was so essential to the life of a synagogue, the very existence of an Orthodox synagogue was dependent on the musical and vocal talent of the *chazzan* (Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, 334).

The twentieth century saw the advent of cantors in the recording industry. Controversy arose over whether cantors’ recording religious and secular music was sacrilegious. The distribution of these cantorial recordings meant that many congregations could bring in famous cantors to their synagogues for concerts with their regular choirs, and sometimes even with full orchestras. Cantors obtained musical managers and performed in major concert venues for largely non-Jewish

audiences, sometimes even performing their own compositions. Some people thought that the transition from cantors performing liturgical music to cantors performing in professional operas was a natural shift, but very few cantors went in that direction. Richard Tucker, Jan Peerce, and Joseph Schmidt are notable exceptions. The most famous American cantors remained observant Jews (Edelman, 129).

During the 1930's and 1940's, many synagogues claimed to support the creation of new music, but in practice this was not the case, since the cantor and choir often took over the roles of rabbi and congregation, and there was less community involvement in the creation and performance of music. After World War II, European influence in synagogue music decreased rapidly as American Jews created their own musical leadership. Rabbinical seminaries opened their doors to cantorial students to be trained officially. Those who originally taught at cantorial schools had been trained in the European style, meaning that many elements of the traditional cantorial style remained intact and in use (Edelman, 134-35). By the 1960's, however, congregants increasingly felt that Jewish liturgical music no longer provided the spiritual satisfaction for which they yearned. Synagogue music had changed very little in the one-hundred years of Jewish immigration to the United States, because Jewish immigrants tended to believe that continuing their European traditions somehow made their religious practices more authentic, and they also used those traditions as a type of shield against the pressure for change from American popular culture. In fact, this generation of immigrant Jews was unique in its ability to prevent the ideas of surrounding cultures to influence American Jewish

music. Some might argue that it was “artificially frozen” in the nineteenth century (Edelman, 138).

Jewish liturgical music, like any other type of music, had to adapt with changing opinions and tastes in order to remain relevant. Some synagogues (mostly Reform ones) began using pianos and electric guitars to imitate jazz, rock, and other types of popular music in their worship services--largely to appeal to a younger demographic set. Some synagogues held training sessions before services to teach congregants the new music in the service (Edelman, 139-40). By the late twentieth century, the line between popular and worship music ceased to exist (Edelman, 142). Cantors gradually complied with congregations’ wishes for them to explore new musical avenues for liturgical music. 1987 marked the first appointments of female cantors in America, and many of these new cantors were more than willing to experiment with new types of music in the service (Edelman, 143-44).

Part III: Text Background and Analysis

The prayers that are discussed in this section are those that are to be performed in the accompanying recital. They were chosen, largely, because their musical settings were readily available and accessible. Unfortunately, much Jewish liturgical music has not been written down and notated, and much of the music that has been written down is not easily accessible. The following are examples of prayers that have been set to music by famous composers or have been popularized in Jewish religious services and at Jewish summer camps, and have been widely published.

Avinu Malkeynu

Avinu Malkeynu is a prayer that is said between the holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, known as the Ten Days of Penitence (MJL, 1). The prayer, translated as “Our Father, our King,” begins every line with the words “Avinu Malkeynu” and ends every line with a petition.² Five of the petitions correspond directly to the Five Books of Moses. “Inscribe us in the book of happy life” refers to the Book of Genesis, the “book of redemption and salvation” refers to the Book of Exodus, the “book of maintenance and sustenance” refers to the Book of Leviticus, the “book of aiding merit” refers to the Book of Numbers, and the “book of forgiveness and pardon” refers to the Book of Deuteronomy (MJL, 2). The number and order of the petitions, however, vary depending on the religious rite. For example, Ashkenazi Jews say the prayer every morning and night after the *Amidah*

² *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2008, s.v. “Avinu Malkenu.”

during the Ten Days of Repentance, except on Shabbat, when petitions are forbidden. The particular day may also determine the wording of the prayer. On fast days, such as Yom Kippur, the prayer substitutes “remember us” for “inscribe us,” and at the Ne’ilah service at the end of Yom Kippur, “seal us” replaces “inscribe us.”³

Modern religious practice generally has the entire congregation sing the words “Avinu Malkeynu,” and then the cantor or precentor will recite the rest of the line. In many congregations, the reader freely improvises new verses into the text. The ark (the structure that houses the Torah scrolls in a synagogue) is open during this prayer, so that the entire congregation may see the Torah scrolls.⁴

The text of this prayer has been faced with much controversy in recent years. According to the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, the words “Our Father, our King” refer to “two complementary aspects of the relationship between G-d and man,” which refer to “intimacy and awe.”⁵ One Reform rabbi states that the text makes G-d both “distant and approachable, stern and merciful” (Sarason, 1). Many Reform Jews, however, are extremely against the harsh, penitential text, and younger Jews are especially angered about the exclusively masculine portrayal of G-d in the prayer (Sarason, 2). The idea that we are asking for favor using this particular text highlights the idea that decisions are made by “fathers and kings,” not “mothers and queens” (MJL, 1). Despite these concerns, most Reform congregations have kept the traditional text, for two reasons. The first is that many people believe that gender-neutral language would diminish the concrete images that the “Days of Awe” require, and the second

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

is that a change to “Our Parent, our Sovereign” would make the prayer more vague and less personal (MJL, 1).

Kol Nidre

Kol Nidre, an Aramaic phrase meaning “All Vows,” is the prayer that begins the holy day of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. It is recited in the evening, and it is the only time in the entire year that prayer shawls (*tallitot*) are worn at an evening service. The Kol Nidre prayer is “such a dominant part of the Jewish religious psyche that it is commonly used to designate the whole of the Yom Kippur Eve service” (Solomon, 1). As one rabbi put it, “its melody is so daunting that hearing the first few bars can send shivers down the spine and remind the internal, spiritual clock that the time for repentance has begun” (Solomon, 1). This is one of the few prayers in the Jewish liturgy where the melody is better known than the text. With that being said, however, it seems that it is never chanted in quite the same way in different congregations (Jacobs, 1).

The core of this prayer may be seen in the following translation: “all vows are absolved, remitted, cancelled, declared null and void” (Kol Nidrei, 1). Essentially, the prayer releases people from the oaths that they were not able to fulfill in the year before. It is important to note, however, that Kol Nidre only applies to vows made between man and G-d. It has no effect on vows between men and other men (Jacobs,10). From the Kabbalah perspective, not only does Kol Nidre annul the vows that man was not able to keep with G-d, but it also asks G-d to do the same, and to

ask for man's forgiveness (Silberberg, 1). This gives man a great deal of power in his relationship with G-d.

Kol Nidre is chanted three times by the cantor (or precentor or lay leader). Each repetition becomes louder and stronger. The *Mahzor Vitry*, a *siddur* (prayer book) from the 9th century, states that the first repetition should be very quiet, like a peasant nervously approaching a king for the first time to request a favor, the second repetition should be a little louder, and the final repetition should be the loudest, as if the person is comfortable in the presence of the king (Solomon, 1). By the end of all three recitations, the atmosphere of the service has changed significantly to a serious one, and Yom Kippur may officially begin (Solomon, 1).

Kol Nidre's origins are particularly mysterious. The romantic and popular version holds that the prayer was recited by the Spanish Jews during the time of the Inquisition in the 15th century, as a way to negate their forced conversions to Christianity by atoning for the sin of denying their own religion and renewing their Jewish faith. While it is certainly possible that the Spanish Jews did, in fact, use the prayer this way, the more scholarly version suggests that the prayer originated much earlier. The first definitive citation of Kol Nidre is from the 8th century, but the text is reminiscent of the Jewish Babylonian legal contracts from the 6th and 7th centuries (Solomon, 1).

Non-Jews throughout history have had misconceptions about the purpose of Kol Nidre. Even Jews themselves, however, have not always looked upon Kol Nidre kindly. Mid-19th century Reform rabbis worried that non-Jewish Germans would see the text of the prayer and assume that it was used by Jews to make oaths in business

and then easily break them, just by reciting the prayer. In order to appease other Germans and reassure them of the Jews' commitment to German nationalism, they attempted to remove the prayer from Jewish religious practice. While many individuals agreed with the sentiment of the rabbis, Kol Nidre was too much a part of the Jewish psyche, and they demanded that it be chanted anyway (Solomon, 1).

Kaddish

The Kaddish is a much more varied and widely used prayer than many people realize. In fact, it is used in four main forms and places in the Jewish religious service and in Jewish observance. The *hatzi Kaddish*, or "half Kaddish" contains two paragraphs and one line of response for the congregation, and it is only used between sections of the liturgy in the Jewish religious service. *Kaddish shalem*, or "full Kaddish," is said by the service leader or precentor at the conclusion of each of the main sections of the service, and it includes an additional three paragraphs (Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy*, 84). *Kaddish yathom* is the "orphan's Kaddish" or, as most modern Jews know it, the "Mourner's Kaddish." Mourners recite it during their eleven months of mourning following a death, and also on the *yahrzeit*, the anniversary of someone's death. This version of the Kaddish omits the third paragraph from the otherwise full Kaddish. The *Kaddish derabbanan*, "rabbinical Kaddish," is said after Talmudic recitation or study. (Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy*, 85-6).

The Kaddish, in its original form, was not related in any way to other prayers or to death. It was originally recited by a teacher at the end of a lesson and only served as a prayer for the coming of the messiah. The Kaddish is written in mostly

Aramaic with some Hebrew, which was commonly used by Palestinian Jews in the Second Temple period (Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy*, 86). Because there is no mention of the destruction of the Second Temple in this prayer, scholars have deduced that the Kaddish must have been written before the destruction of the Temple, making the prayer undeniably ancient.⁶ The Kaddish, which translates as “holy” or “sanctification,” is recited while standing and facing in the direction of Jerusalem.⁷ The purpose for the Kaddish prayer is the wish for the redemption of mankind by the messiah and praising the name of G-d. As with many ancient prayers, however, the Kaddish was often used by the Jews in times of communal and national distress, and when a loved one died, in order to provide some type of consolation and comfort. It was intended to remind Jews of the root of their faith (Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy*, 86).

The Kaddish was so sacred, in fact, that its recitation in the Babylonian period required a quorum of ten adults, now known as a *minyan*. The main point of the prayer can be found in the congregation’s responding line, “yehe shemê rabba mevarach,” (Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy*, 86). The translation in English is “May His great name be blessed for ever and to all eternity.”⁸ This line is meant to be recited loudly by all of the Jewish adults that are present, as if the congregation has the power to influence G-d in their favor. Women have been permitted to recite the

⁶ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Kaddish,” 696.

⁷ *Ibid*, 195-96.

⁸ *Ibid*, 696.

Kaddish while in mourning (sitting *shiva*) and at synagogue since (as late as) the seventeenth century.⁹

One modern interpretation of the text holds that Jews must praise G-d equally for the good things in life and the bad things in life (Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy*, 87). This interpretation comes from the long-held Jewish belief that we, as humans, must accept both the joyous times and the tragic ones as part of life. “Man is obliged to give praise for the evil [that befalls him] even as he gives praise for the good.”¹⁰ In popular culture, this idea is illustrated in classic songs, such as “Sunrise, Sunset,” from the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Considering that much of the world (Jewish and non-Jewish) believes the Kaddish to be a prayer uniquely associated with death and dying, a brief discussion of this misconception must be included here. The Kaddish prayer is not directly related to death. It is not said for the purpose of helping the souls of the dead enter into heaven, and it cannot atone for the sins of the dead. The source of this misconception is Rabbi Akiva, one of the most famous of the ancient, Jewish scholars. According to Akiva, the Kaddish is “a recognition of the parent’s merit,” because the children of the deceased honor their memory through the prayer and the required response of the congregation (Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy*, 87).

The Kaddish is unique in its variety of musical interpretations throughout history. In its diverse forms, its melody can vary from speech-like recitatives to elaborate solo vocal and choral works. In the Ashkenazic tradition, for instance, the Kaddish that is recited before the *Amidah* (the central prayer in Judaism) is

⁹ Ibid, 696-97.

¹⁰ Ibid, 696.

beautifully melodic, while in Sephardic congregations, the Kaddish that is said before the *Barchu* (the call to worship) is heavy with ornate coloratura (vocally fast) passages. In all Jewish traditions, the Kaddish is recited with different melodies at different points in the service and on holidays and festival days.¹¹

Classical composers have also attempted to set the text of the Kaddish to music. Leonard Bernstein's setting of the Kaddish, written for a narrator, a choir, and an orchestra, has been described as a "lawsuit with G-d."¹² Maurice Ravel's setting of the Kaddish prayer is particularly intriguing. It, along with "L'Enigme éternelle," was written in 1914 for the set "Deux melodies hébraïques." Ravel orchestrated both songs in 1919-1920 ("Deux melodies hébraïques").

Ravel's *Kaddisch* begins with an open chord in the accompaniment, followed by speech-like, unaccompanied words in the voice. The first, acapella section of the piece can be sung with much freedom of rhythm, or rhythmic elasticity. The entire piece seems to recall the tradition of cantorial music, where the cantor may sing a prayer freely, according to his unique interpretation of the text. This theory is further confirmed by the chordal texture of the piano accompaniment throughout the entire piece, which allows the voice freedom of rhythm and more musical expression and phrasing. The piano accompaniment in the middle section becomes briefly more complex with arpeggiated decachords, highlighting the laudatory nature of the text in praising the name of G-d.

Most interesting, however, is Ravel's omission of the congregation's responsive line, the core of the entire prayer. Perhaps Ravel viewed this line simply

¹¹ Ibid, 697.

¹² Ibid, 697.

as redundant, considering that the entire prayer praises G-d's name, and the congregational line adds only the element of praise for G-d's name in future generations. Or, perhaps Ravel wanted the entire piece to be reminiscent only of solo cantorial music, so he took out remnants of congregational participation. Or perhaps that line did not fit musically. Or perhaps it is an entirely different explanation. Like Ravel's entire setting of the Kaddish, the omission of this line carries with it an air of inscrutable mystery and the sense that every performer will bring to it a different interpretation.

L'Dor Vador (Kedushah)

L'Dor Vador is the last section of the *Kedushah*, the third blessing of the *Amidah* prayer. *Kedushah* means "holiness," and the blessing sanctifies the name of G-d.¹³ The *Kedushah* is, in fact, the central blessing in the Shabbat and festival versions of the *Amidah*. Interestingly, however, this blessing is not standardized in its melody and is recited differently in different parts of the world.¹⁴

L'Dor Vador is one of three lines (all of which are from Bible passages) that constitute the core of the *Kedushah* blessing. Translated, the L'Dor Vador verse reads: "The Lord will reign for ever, Thy G-d, O Zion, unto all generations, Halleluyah" (Psalms 146:10).¹⁵ The most important aspect of this line is the idea of the continuity of G-d's presence and influence on humanity. While the *Kedushah* as a whole focuses on praising the name of G-d, L'Dor Vador, which ends the *Kedushah*

¹³ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2008, s.v. "Kedushah," 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 1.

blessing, fixates on G-d's constancy throughout all future generations. Sol Zim's arrangement, which is used in many synagogues as the melody to which L'Dor Vador is recited, is particularly festive and joyous. It suggests an image of youthful dancing and merriment, which is particularly appropriate for a blessing that celebrates G-d's continuity to generations of youth.

Y'did Nefesh

Y'did Nefesh is a famous *piyyut* (poem) in Jewish liturgy that seems to be surrounded by much uncertainty. While the kabbalist Rabbi Elazar Moshe Azikri (1533-1600) published a version of the poem in his lifetime, another version of the poem was unearthed in a commentary from approximately 1437, suggesting that its roots are significantly older. Historically, there were variations in the text of Y'did Nefesh, depending on which *siddur* (prayer book) one was looking at (Schachter-Shalomi, 2).

The text of Y'did Nefesh also has a certain amount of mystery to it. "A person appeals from the inner most depths of his soul to G-d" (Ftaya, 1). This suggests some secrecy in the communication between man and G-d when reciting this text. Another curious element of the text is that in the first line alone, there are three separate references to G-d: the words "Yedid," "Av," and "Melech," which translate to "lover," "father," and "king" or "master" (Ftaya, 1). In the Bible, Israel is the community of both the children and servants of G-d. The reference to a parent-child relationship evokes the idea of unconditional love, while the master-servant relationship implies total obedience of the servant toward the master. This dual image of the relationship

between the Jews and G-d is not only found often in the Midrash, but also in much other Jewish literature (Ftaya, 1). This mysterious relationship is at the heart of the poem, *Y'did Nefesh*.

Shalom Rav

Shalom Rav is, quite simply, a prayer asking for peace (“Shalom Rav”, 1). It occurs at the end of the Friday night Shabbat *Amidah*, and it corresponds to the morning service recitation of *Sim Shalom*, another prayer for peace. It is thought to be a particularly appropriate ending for the Shabbat evening service, as it asks for peace for all of Israel and for all time, as opposed to a more self-focused prayer (Ball, 1).

The prayer was originally only said silently, and because no particular melody was popularized in the religious service, many musical renditions exist. The most famous of these musical settings is the melody that cantor Jeff Klepper and Rabbi Dan Frelander composed in 1974, which is the tune that most Jews are familiar with today. Interestingly, their melody did not gain acceptance through traditional channels like the synagogue service, but instead was made popular at Jewish summer camps and among Jewish youth. From there, it made its way into the synagogue and has become the standard melody for the prayer Shalom Rav in religious services (Ball, 1). The tune is particularly melodic, evoking a relaxed and peaceful atmosphere that is particularly appropriate for the content of a text that prays for peace and is only sung on Shabbat.

As far as the future of the American cantorate is concerned, there are about as many opinions as there are Jews to have them. Those with a very traditional view of Jewish music believe that authentic Jewish music died in the shift from using traditional *nusah* (the traditional melodies that had been used in Jewish religious services for centuries, known as Mi-Sinai tunes) to using communal performances and newly- composed melodies. Some find it ironic that there has seemingly been a shift backwards in the replacement of cantors by lay leaders in religious services. Others have a more optimistic view, saying that the Jewish need for change and “active participation” in services has necessitated these major shifts in synagogue music, and that this is a natural progression (Edelman, 144). No matter what events occur for the Jewish people in the future, one thing is certain: Jewish music, like Judaism itself, is destined to keep evolving to fit the needs and desires of the Jewish community at large.

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