

# RECLAIMING AMERICAN JUDAISM'S LOST LEGACY: THE ART OF SYNAGOGUE MUSIC

Excerpts of a panel discussion by the leading American Jewish liturgical composers of the 20th century, introduced by Cantor Bruce Ruben, Ph.D., Director, School of Sacred Music; moderated by Dr. Ismar Schorsch, Chancellor Emeritus of the Jewish Theological Seminary; presented at HUC-JIR on November 12th as part of a conference on bridging the gap between liturgical history and current practice, co-sponsored by the American Society for Jewish Music, HUC-JIR, JTS, Congregation Emanuel of the City of New York, and Temple Emanuel, Great Neck, NY.



## **Cantor Bruce Ruben, Ph.D.:**

Liturgical music has changed dramatically in the last decades. These changes have given rise to a polarization in American synagogues. Some characterize it as a conflict between art and folk music, others as the conflict between performance and participatory modes of worship. This conference seeks to have a constructive dialogue concerning these issues.

In lieu of one generation bemoaning the musical expression of the next, let us remember that all of the composers on this panel were also reacting against the style of their previous generation by incorporating jazz, gospel, rock, and adventurous harmonies into their settings of Jewish music.

We live in a society in which at least two generations of Americans have had little or no music education in their public schools. The European tradition that informed the music of our concert halls, opera houses, and our musical theater is no longer part of the musical vocabulary of the majority of American Jews. There is a crisis in all of these genres that parallels the lack of direction in synagogue music as well.

Our situation reminds me of a Hasidic story: A lost person encountered another in the forest. The first asked the second to please show him the way out. The second replied, "I cannot, for I too am lost." The first responded, "Then let us at least hold hands and find the way together."

*(From left) Michael Leavitt, President, American Society for Jewish Music; composers Sam Adler, Charles Davidson, Jack Gottlieb, Michael Isaacson, and Gershon Kingsley; Dr. Ismar Schorsch, Chancellor Emeritus, Jewish Theological Seminary of America; Dr. Bruce Ruben, Director, HUC-JIR School of Sacred Music; composers Stephen Richards, Simon Sargon, Ben Steinberg, and Bonia Schur; and Dr. Mark Kligman, Professor of Jewish Musicology, HUC-JIR/New York.*

**Dr. Ismar Schorsch:** This extraordinary panel brings together composers of enormous accomplishment in the general field of music and in the Jewish field of music: composers who come from within a tradition of synagogue music, composers who come from outside our religious movements, academics who have spent much of their life teaching, cantors who have served important congregations with distinction, and composers with diverse national backgrounds, from Germany, Israel, and Latvia, to North America.

What is important about this gathering is that it is the beginning of a conversation between composers and cantors, between cantors and rabbis, between lay leaders and religious leaders. None of us alone has the answer to the changes taking place across the Jewish community. But together I think we may come closer to discovering the right direction.

Does a composer have an audience in mind when he or she composes or is there a greater degree of abstraction in the creation of Jewish music?

**Samuel Adler:** Your question reminds me of the occasion when the American composer Elliot Carter's *Symphony for Three Orchestras* was programmed by the Cincinnati Symphony. Anticipating the audience's difficulty with such a highly complex work, Carter was invited to explain his music to local communal and business leaders. He told them, "I write music for you because, as a business person myself, I know how complex your business is these days – problems with the labor unions, industrialization, modernization, and, of course, the international market. So I write the most complex music for you because you understand it." Consequently, at the end of the musical season, his piece was ranked by subscribers as third in popularity among the 100 works performed that season!

Meanwhile, in my highly educated congregation in Toledo, we treat congregants as if we were in a *shitl* (Hasidic synagogue) and have to start with a *nigun* (melody) because it's supposed to give us 'spirituality.'

When I write music for the synagogue, it doesn't have to be complex, but it has to somehow talk about the text the way I understand it and the way I have lived with it all my life. And that's why I write synagogue music, and that's why for me it is a real religious catharsis.

**Charles Davidson:** I was very lucky. In professional life I wrote for myself. So I didn't need to think about the congregation, although in my congregation they seem to understand what I was writing.

**Ben Steinberg:** I think it is a humbling experience when a synagogue composer prepares to illustrate a piece of Jewish

text, a prayer, a poem, or something that deals with Judaism or Jewish life. Sam Adler put it very well when he talked about an audience that goes to symphony concerts and listens to fine music, yet cannot remove its classical music ears on the way to the sanctuary, where as congregants they suddenly find themselves infantilized. For me the composition of a new piece of vocal music involves study of text that takes me well over half the time I have assigned for writing that piece. That is not to say that I, or anybody else on this panel, could not sit down and dash off a tunelet. That's a very easy thing to do. Our challenge is to illustrate texts that are very profound and in which we have been raised. My father was a cantor in an Orthodox synagogue, and before I could speak, as a small child, he taught me the modes, the *nusach*. I literally grew up on my father's knee learning these things that became as natural to me as breathing.

The study of texts that followed as I grew older was the experience that gave me a humility I carry to this day. To presume to illustrate those profound Jewish words that are part of our lives is a great challenge. Studying those texts is essential. As a trained composer and closet

musicologist all my life, I have tried to wed a sense of history with the messages of the texts.

**Bonia Shur:** I came to the synagogue not by upbringing but by necessity. I came from Israel to America for one year. As a necessity to earn money for survival, I found a job for the holidays as a music director in an Orthodox synagogue in Los Angeles. That was the first time I confronted the texts of the prayers as a composer and as a temple-goer, and I found such discrepancy between the music and text, I was stunned.

Later, as a music director in Seattle, I decided in the first year to let the congregation have their music that they had had for 75 years. But the following year, in February 1968, we reviewed the music that they had been using since before World War II, in which the text and music were completely discordant.

I spent the next six months looking for prayers where the music had the same force, depth, and image as the text. This was my first encounter with the liturgy. And since then, I have always looked at the music as an encounter with the text rather than a melody. This is quite an assignment for a composer. I remember the Hebrew text *Ki*

*ein shomea tefilah ata* (for you are God that you listen to prayer) when I compose. I was not raised to pray but when I write music I have a responsibility to be honest, truthful, and direct, and amplify whatever the text says.

**Jack Gottlieb:** Hazzan David Putterman, who commissioned so many wonderful works right across the wide spectrum of American music for Park Avenue Synagogue, repeatedly said to me, "A service is not a concert." He never said that the concert might be a religious experience. And that is what I try to address. When I listen to music, I see notes. That's my first entry into the musical

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## Rethinking Worship Music on a Balanced Bimah

Excerpted from the keynote address by Michael Isaacson, Ph.D. [The full text can be found at [www.huc.edu/read/isaacson](http://www.huc.edu/read/isaacson) or at [www.jewishmusic-asjm.org/isaacsonspeech.html](http://www.jewishmusic-asjm.org/isaacsonspeech.html)]

### Four qualities that distinguish works of significant Jewish music:

- Cognizance of simultaneous time: the work simultaneously reflects previous Jewish culture and/or learning, an aspect of living today, and creative elements and new interpretive ground that projects the genre into the future.
- The work must elevate one's thinking, spirit, and emotive life.
- The artistic work must create a *Havdalah*, a separation between the sacred and the mundance.
- A sacred musical work should offer an artistic *midrash*, an informed interpretation of the text or idea being presented.



**HUC-JIR Artist-in-Residence Joyce Rosenzweig accompanies the conference's Choral Workshop on "Choir-Building Techniques."**

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spectrum. I try to get beyond that to really experience what's going on – the sense of oneness where I go outside of myself, so to speak. That is what I've always strived for in my music.

When my service was presented at Park Avenue Synagogue, the late Shalom Secunda reviewed it, saying "I didn't know if I was in the synagogue or in a theater." Maybe in those days, there was such a dichotomy. I don't believe that exists anymore. We cover the whole wide spectrum, but there is a difference between being a composer and a songwriter. Irving Berlin was a great songwriter. We don't consider him a composer, whereas Stephen Sondheim is a composer and a songwriter. Perfectly fine disciplines, both ends. But what's missing now in the synagogue is the composer and there is only the songwriter who is more interested in the tune and not the whole package – the arrangement, the harmony, the counterpoint, everything that clones the sacred text. And right now I think this is sorely missing in the synagogue.

**Simon Sargon:** Although it may be a hard truth to face, we musicians must deal with the reality that ultimately it is the rabbinical leadership that determines the future of synagogue music. The choir that I was privileged to lead for 27 years at Temple Emanu-El has long been recognized as one of the outstanding synagogue choirs in America.

**HUC-JIR cantorial students, alumni, and conference attendees sing choral music during a workshop.**

How did it achieve this elevated status? It was Rabbi Levi Olan who was the driving force behind the establishment and development of the Temple Emanu-El Choir. When he arrived in Dallas in 1949, one of his top priorities was to create a choir of real musical excellence at the Temple. So he hired a proven professional musician, Sam Adler, and gave him the charge to build such a choir. Then, throughout his tenure, Rabbi Olan continued to support the choir, encouraging it to educate the congregation musically, to stretch musical tastes, to reach out with its repertoire. Absent this kind of rabbinical backing, the Temple Emanu-El Choir could never have grown and flourished as it did. Of course nothing can be done without a music director or composer of ability. But for better or worse, the range and quality of our creative efforts depend upon the level of music that our rabbis are willing to accept.

**Stephen Richards:** When considering those we're composing for, we need to remember that the reasons that people come to

synagogues are very varied. But I think there are four basic elements, which change as the times change in terms of how they're balanced: [1] to experience wonderful music; [2] to hear wonderful interpretations of the text's depth and complexity, as explored by composers; [3] to connect with historical tradition, hear what has gone before, and relive the traditional heritage; and [4] to experience the pastoral element.

When we compose music for the synagogue, we have to take into mind the real question: "who are we writing for, and what do they expect?" Many expect the *nigun*, the participation, to be able to sing the music as well as to listen to it. Some people expect to be moved in certain ways by the music, to experience the joy of Shabbat or festival within the music, so I think that the pastoral element is extremely important. But as a composer, when I have an assignment or a commission or decide to write something for the synagogue, I try to balance those elements within my own mind. And I think at different times, the balance really changes

**Gershon Kingsley:** Religion is something which comes inside. I believe creativity is the spiritual within us. So our creation, what-



**Composer Yehudi Wyner and HUC-JIR cantorial student Marcy Kadin rehearse.**

ever we feel about the text, is the so-called spiritual side or God-side in us. When we compose, we are the closest to the idea of religious experience. This is creativity.

**Michael Isaacson:** As Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in "On Prayer," "Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, and falsehood. The liturgical movement must become a revolutionary movement, seeking to overthrow the forces that continue to destroy the promise, the hope, and the vision."



I think the best audience and the best kind of synagogue music is subversive, which means that accommodation comes into a religious experience. Thinking one thing, hoping for perhaps another. But if you are really good at what you do, and you work subversively, then you can give them a revelation. Each one of us goes about it in a different way.

But the last thing I think any of us would want to do is to give them what they expect. If you give a congregation what they expect, you're not needed. They already have it. You're redundant. But if you find that one door that's subversive, one door that can reach their vulnerability, and touch them in a way that they hadn't expected to be touched, then you've succeeded. Then you've given them a musical *midrash*.

**Dr. Ismar Schorsch:** So many congregants don't know a word of Hebrew and are uninformed about the meaning of a particular prayer for which you are composing. There is such a gap between the text and the congregant. I think the challenge that we all face is we are interpreting a text that does not resonate for the people for whom we are composing. How do you bridge that gap? You've emphasized the importance of integrity, a centrality of the text. But if you have a congregation in front of you that is so highly secular, for whom these religious texts stir no thoughts or emotions, what do we do to bridge that gap?

**Samuel Adler:** That is the most important and the most difficult question to answer, and I think it's a very good one for us all to confront. We have the same thing in secular music today. That is why music directors and conductors talk so much. You

know, you go to a concert and Tilson Thomas turns around and talks twice as long as the piece he is going to play. Now we don't have to do that. But I have an answer to this. We can have diversity of text interpretation, so that when the congregation sings "Sh'ma Yisrael," not every week is rote.

In Dallas after the Friday night service, we would have an *Oneg Shabbat*, at which we would perform a new Shabbat work, singing it three or four times for them as Max Helfman would. I think that it is very important to present the congregation with different musical interpretations of text, to teach the congregation what this prayer has meant to a variety of composers from the past to the present.

To accuse some of us, especially me, of not being able to write a tune a congregation can sing is really unfair, because my real claim to eternal fame is that I wrote the music to the "Hamotzi" that everybody sings. They don't even credit me as the composer any more, they call it 'traditional.' While all of us could write tunes that are tailor-made, I think that many of my colleagues also feel that we have to express what we deeply feel is in the text. The congregation may not know the intricacies of the text, but may be able to learn it better through its musical interpretation than just by reading the text. And I think it is important for them to know that even one composer, setting the same text, could have so many interpretations of this text.

**Charles Davidson:** Fifty years ago, the people in my German-founded congregation in Philadelphia didn't know Hebrew either. Nor did the rabbi tell the cantor what music

to do or how to do it. And I don't know if today or yesterday it's a different situation in Reform congregations, where the cantor is supposed to be in charge of the music.

Cantors today pander to the musical level of the congregation, which is not what it was forty years ago. If you took a poll of people in various synagogues today to see who goes to the opera or who listens to WQXR, I think there would be a much, much lower percentage than forty or fifty years ago.



[From left] Composers Simon Sargon, Ben Steinberg, Jack Gottlieb, Charles Davidson, Sam Adler, and Michael Isaacson in the multi-media HUC-JIR Museum exhibition, "A Living Legacy: American Jewish Liturgical Composers of the 20th Century."

I think that that is the kind of music that many congregants today understand and can welcome into their hearts.

Max Helfman's influence on our generation was in itself a reaction against the four-part fugal arrangements that required congregants to sing in synagogue, and to which people no longer had the time to sit and listen. So I think that the composing world at that time, in general, created a vacuum of sorts in synagogue music. Perhaps we didn't provide what was required.

I think that now one has to return to some traditional aspects that were the foundations of synagogue music prior to our times.

I've spoken to young composers who are writing for the synagogue – a lot of them are cantors – and they say "Well, I'm expressing myself and I really don't want to connect with things that have gone before." I think we have to make congregations and cantors aware that there is a rich heritage of Jewish music that has preceded all of us, and that somehow

in our musical genius we can incorporate that heritage in our compositions so that it strikes a contemporary note.

**Gershon Kingsley:** We all knew Max Helfman personally. He was not only our teacher, he was creating something new when the state of Israel was created in 1948. Suddenly, we had a renaissance in Jewish music. With Helfman as the music director at the Brandeis Institute in Los Angeles there was not only music, there was dance and new theatre too. Throughout those years, there

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were music directors in addition to cantors and rabbis. But over the years, the music director position has disappeared due to financial reasons, and the cantor has taken over the music director position. The general quality of composing has declined a bit because cantors were not composers in the sense that the music directors were.

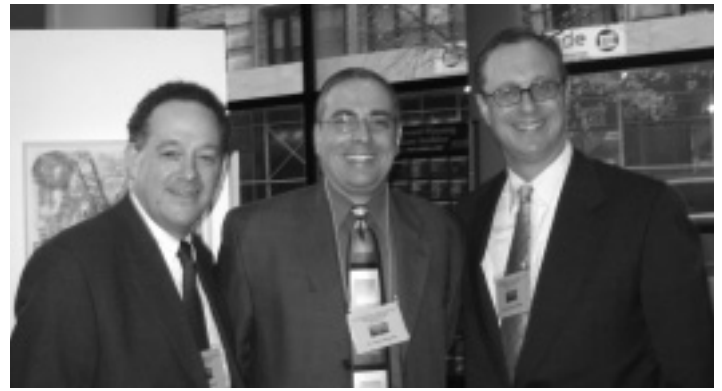
**Jack Gottlieb:** I just want to make a quick side comment about something that we have not yet addressed, which is the issue of that monolithic monster called the organ. You cannot carry an organ down into the congregation and have everybody come along with you. What can the guitar offer us in its coloristic capabilities and its dimensions versus what the organ has in terms of its orchestral quality? This is a big difference. Most of the music for composers on this panel was written with keyboard in mind, not with guitar. That is a big issue that needs to be addressed in some way.

**Ben Steinberg:** There have been styles associated with every school of composition down through the centuries. That's just

as true of synagogue music as it is of serious concert music. However, the style of a piece of music, no matter what approach a composer takes, must interpret the message, which has to reign, has to be supreme. The style can vary up to a certain point, but the music must retain its function as an appropriate illustrator of the words in mood and meaning, clarifying rather than obscuring the text message. It's obvious that some styles serve that function better than others.

Every composer writes the way he or she hears. To my ear, the Jewish musical style must have a degree of dignity and must say something new about the text. This is true in all the arts, including literature, painting, and, of course, music. The composer is saying "Here's an old text, listen to how I interpret it; listen to how I've written it. You may find yourself looking at it from a different point of view and seeing something you haven't thought about before." That's the magic, not just of musical composition, but of all the arts.

**Ismar Schorsch:** To what extent is the synagogue a reflection of



(From left) Michael Leavitt, President, American Society for Jewish Music, Dr. Mark Kligman, Professor of Jewish Musicology, HUC-JIR/New York, and Dr. Bruce Ruben, Director, HUC-JIR School of Sacred Music.

what goes on in the outside world? To what extent is it different? If the synagogue is a carbon copy of the outside world, who needs it? If the synagogue is totally different, then those people coming in from the outside may be unable to relate.

We need to bear in mind that synagogue music is not concert music, that the synagogue is a sacred space rather than a secular space. And there is a different language called for in a sacred space than in a secular space. I think that much of what is going on has lost that sense of difference between the sacred space and the non-sacred space, where the outside world is overwhelming the sacred space. But what you get is a replication of the secular, rather than a distinctive, sacred style, vocabulary, and language.

A number of years ago, the CCAR felt the need to write a new *siddur*. The *Gates of Prayer* had become obsolete, and the CCAR in its wisdom decided, before imposing another prayer book on the Reform Movement, that maybe they should go out and hear what Reform congregants are doing and thinking.

So they got funding from the Lily Endowment and from the

Cummings Foundation for a study. Forty-seven congregations agreed to participate, some 10 to 15 congregants representing the diversity within each synagogue were selected, and the requirement was that in talking about worship they had to come to three services in succession and keep a diary. There was an ethnographer who supervised the project.

What came back has recently been written up by Rabbi Peter Knobel and Daniel Shechter, the grandson of Solomon Shechter, in the *Journal for Reform Judaism*. Everyone agreed that music was critical to the religious experience. To quote the words of Shechter and Knobel: "The importance of music cannot be overestimated." Music should draw people in, not encourage them to be observers. Music should be woven into the fabric of the service, not showcased. That's the tension with which we are grappling.

But above all, I think it is important that communication take place between the rabbi, the cantor, and the congregation. There is too little of that taking place. It is that collaboration that holds out the greatest promise for creating music that will give a sense of the sanctity of the space. ■



(From left) HUC-JIR cantorial students Raina Siroty, Rebecca Moses and Joanna Alexander with Dr. Eliyahu Schleifer, Professor of Sacred Music and Director of the Cantorial Program, HUC-JIR/Jerusalem.