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ISSACHAR MIRON:

TEACHING THE WORLD TO MAKE MUSIC

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

**THE FACULTY OF THE HEBREW UNION COLLEGE – JEWISH INSTITUTE OF
RELIGION SCHOOL OF SACRED MUSIC**

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BY

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INTRODUCTION

"WAKE UP GENERATION, A SONG HAS ARRIVED"

From Issachar Miron's composition "Ura Dor"

Media events such as *Live Aid* and songs such as *We Are The World* mark the beginning of the use of music for humanitarian purposes for those who were born at the beginning of the Internet age. The prevailing wisdom for the Baby-boomer generation is that ex-Beatle George Harrison's Concert for Bangladesh in conjunction with sitar player Ravi Shankar was the first endeavor of this kind. This information is inaccurate, for the principles and practices of this concept began at an earlier time.

In the world of Jewish music one of the most important champions of this idea was pioneer-composer Issachar Miron. At present Miron is something of an unsung hero in this regard since he achieved the goal of creating Tikkun Olam through composition and education rather than media attention. The underestimation of the importance of Miron's contribution is a result of the socio-economic and political conditions under which he worked, and needs to be revisited in order to understand how his efforts can serve as a model for future generations of Jewish composers, cantors, rabbis and any member of the larger Jewish community who chooses to use art to improve the world.

I have chosen to revisit the work of Issachar Miron because it was my good fortune to have developed a personal relationship with him and his family that revealed that his story has really never been told. His story is not just that of a composer, but rather it is a story of how an artist who through hard work and an insistence on living Jewish values can and did make the world a better place for generations of people. Moreover, Miron's work has been chosen for discussion not just because of the beauty of the music itself but because he presents to a new generation of Jewish clergy a means to achieve a desired and difficult goal.

In nineteen fifty-three Issachar Miron wrote the music to a song, which has become the embodiment of his message:

"Wake up generation a (new) song has arrived. Hand in hand from all directions our Hora has one heart. A song we will sing, we will sing it strongly.... We made a covenant of dance and will not break it. The feet become light, the eyes are filled with light, wake up seven times over, the song has come".¹

This is the message of "Ura Dor" and this is the message that informs the purpose behind all of Miron's work.

All of the operative words in "Ura Dor" can be applied to so much of Mr. Miron's music that one might say that the super-objectives for his art can be found in this one composition. During the course of this paper we will see how the phrases "Wake up", "hand in hand" and "from every direction" have become symbolic representations of the energy, compassion and inventiveness that Miron put into his efforts as a member of the creative Jewish community. Ironically, although, Miron has been "waking up" generations of people (Jew and non-Jew alike) for decades, students of the seminary who

¹ Issachar Miron, *Ura Dor*, Tel Aviv, Israel: 1953

are tasked with work that is primarily cerebral have shied away from this refreshing approach to improving the world that has more to do with actually "doing" than it does with simply talking. Perhaps this is why Miron has taken such a personal interest in my career and the careers of others who are new to the world of Jewish leadership.

The paper itself is based primarily upon first hand research with the composer. It has been supplemented by archival documentation that has been pieced together with the help of the composer, his family and his many colleagues. As a result, what follows must begin with background on the author's personal history with the composer, as this personal history opened up the door to previously unknown information on the impact of the composer's work in Israel and the United States, as well as, his personal views on the relationship between music and Tikkun Olam.

The approach to this paper will follow an order that best describes the composer and his efforts on many levels. The paper will begin with a chapter on my personal history with the composer. Chapters on the composer's work in Israel and the United States will follow. These chapters will begin with a look at a single musical work for each country that is representative of his endeavors. These works will also serve as metaphors for the composer's Tikkun Olam ideology. From these musical works we will backtrack to examine the events and conditions that led to their creation. The paper will then conclude with a chapter on the composer's ability to artfully weave his beliefs and practices on Jewish living into a work of musical invention, which will ultimately serve as a model for the creation of art that all Jewish clergy would do well to follow.

Chapter 1

A Personal Relationship

Issachar Miron: *"I would like to thank Pete Seeger for recording my Tzena, Tzena and making it a hit".*

Pete Seeger: *"I would like to thank Issachar Miron for writing Tzena, Tzena and for giving me a career."*

Issachar Miron and Pete Seeger at Miron's 85th birthday gala, April 2005

My relationship with Issachar Miron and his music is a personal one, although I cannot think of a single individual who I have met during the time that I have known him who would say that their experiences with him were anything but personal. As is the case with much of Mr. Miron's work my introduction to him begins with Israel. Oddly enough it took a trip to Florida from Israel for this journey to begin.

In January of 2002 I paid a visit to my parents during mid-year break from my studies at the Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. One of my many rituals when visiting my parent's home is to rummage through my father's most recent 33-rpm acquisitions. Most of his choices come from the classical music world although there is often a generous helping of Jewish music. On this particular occasion I found an old recording of "Cantorial Gems", an autographed copy of "The Exodus Song" by Richard Tucker, and an album by Toronto's celebrated cantor Louis Danto called "Louis Danto Salutes Israel". All of the albums were previously familiar to me except for the Danto album. I had only learned of Danto's work during my first semester in Israel.

Although the Danto album was lovely in its entirety there were four songs that really stood out upon first hearing. These songs were "Mayim Rabim", "Ura Dor", "Ufi Ruach" and "The Song of the Well" (Shir Ha Be'er). I was not sure why these songs

stood out but I know that each of them in their own way transported me to a different place emotionally. I wasn't aware of it upon first hearing, but this visceral reaction to these four songs was the beginning of my relationship with composer Issachar Miron.

The paper that follows this chapter is not about my relationship with Miron. It is about his relationship with the world and how he, decades before *Live Aid* and *Farm Aid* was able to use his gifts as a composer and teacher to create Tikkun Olam. As will be revealed in the chapters to follow, the timeliness of Miron's ability to use music to create peace is not only an often overlooked aspect of his work but is also an untapped source for modeling that all members of the cantorate could benefit from in a profound way. However, the journey that Mr. Miron had invited me on, and the relationship that developed between us ultimately led to the creation of this paper. Moreover, it was this wonderfully circuitous journey, filled with the composer's personal experiences and his desires to include me in his work and thoughts which gave me the proper perspective to ask the right questions and do the specific kind of research that led to the concept upon which this paper is based. Not only was this journey a rare opportunity for me to get to know the composer on a personal level, but it was also a necessary step in the research process since the modesty of this composer of some three thousand musical works often served to keep me at bay when attempting to discuss the importance of the humanitarian aspects of his work.

Although I became more and more familiar with Miron's work, it wasn't until the fall of 2003 that I had the opportunity to incorporate any of his music into my work at school. In preparation for a student practicum relating to the "Three Festivals" I decided to use his song "Mayim Rabim" for its relationship to Passover since the text for the

piece comes from three separate quotations from "Shir HaShirim". My coach for the project, Cantor Robert Ableson agreed to let me do the piece even though it was not a typical liturgical selection. The only real problem that he and I had was that we could not find the printed music anywhere. Everyone knew that Miron wrote "Tzena Tzena" and thought that the piece would be in a collection of his music, but no such collection exists. None of the Hebrew Union College faculty had the music and short of transcribing it from the Danto recording I was unsure of what to do. Overhearing my dilemma, Cantor David Lefkowitz of the Park Avenue synagogue suggested that I call Miron at his home in New York City. Lefkowitz had worked with Miron in the past on his oratorio "The Psalms of Israel" and told me that he would be pleased to receive a call from me requesting this piece of music.

With great trepidation I phoned Miron who was indeed delighted to be of help to me. Despite the fact that he was eighty-four at the time he informed me with youthful enthusiasm that he was always happy to be of help to the next generation of young cantors (I was 42 at the time). He agreed to leave a copy of the music for me with his doorman and requested that I keep him abreast of my progress with the piece and its presentation in the scheduled practicum. When I came to pick up the music a few days later I learned for the first time that Miron is not just a man of his word, he is a man of his word and then some. His doorman handed me a package with a copy of "Mayim Rabim" in his own hand, a compact disc with three recordings of the song and a letter explaining that the piece had been sung by such luminaries as Jan Peerce, Richard Tucker, Cantor David Koussevitsky, Metropolitan Opera star Misha Raitzin and pop star Kenny Karen among others. The letter went on to explain that the CD included the Koussevitsky,

Raitzin and Karen recordings and that he hoped to receive a recording of the piece from me when the practicum was completed.

I made the decision to perform "Mayim Rabim" with guitar in order to make use of the flamenco-like syncopations in the accompaniment. As the day of the practicum approached a certain amount of second-guessing entered into my thoughts, as I knew that the musical liberties that I was taking in my arrangement would ultimately end up on tape and in the hands and ears of the composer. This notwithstanding I presented my work to the school on March 17, 2004. It was well received by both students and faculty although most of the faculty did comment on my choice of "Mayim Rabim" and my unusual guitar arrangement. With the faculty's mild reservations still ringing in my ears I sent a taped copy of the portion of the school's recording of the practicum that included "Mayim Rabim" to Miron.

During the next few days I built up enough courage to call him for a critique. On the morning of the day that I planned to call Miron I called in to my voice mail from school to check for messages. In keeping with the kind of pro-active enthusiasm that is so typical of Miron he decided to call me first. I will never forget hearing the first of his many comments to me in his refined Eastern European/Israeli accent:

"Hello Cliff this is Issachar Miron. Thank you for the tape of my "Mayim Rabim". I am impressed not only with the level of feeling that you convey with your lovely and powerful voice, but I am also impressed with the creativity and musical invention of your arrangement and interpretation. Please call me. I would like very much to meet with you. All the best and Shalom."²

² Issachar Miron, interview by author, March 19th, 2004, transcript, Thesis Project Collection.

I had hoped that Miron wouldn't have minded what I did with his song, but his comments exceeded my expectations. At the time I was not sure if he was simply being generous with his praise because I was a student, but I knew that only time would give me the answer to that question and so, I phoned him that night and set up the first of many meetings that we were to have in his spacious 85th street apartment.

Miron's busy schedule resulted in many postponements of our initial meeting, but he always called to reschedule. Our first meeting actually took place on June 29th 2004 at 4pm. This meeting set the tone for and became kind of a blueprint of the many meetings that were to follow. I was met at the door by Miron and the love of his life, his wife Tzipora. During the course of this paper I will be making reference to Miron's work as a model for an improved cantorate, but I must take this opportunity to explain to the reader that Miron's family life seems also to model the very embodiment of a happy marriage. Tzipora is only 3 years younger than Issachar and yet he and she flirt with each other like newlyweds. In fact on one occasion I asked Miron if he remembered what he was thinking about when he wrote the truly romantic music for "Mayim Rabim". He said, "You know I really don't remember, but I probably had just kissed my wife." At which point Tzipora came up to him and pinched his cheek with a twinkle in her eye that can be heard in so much of the indefinable magic that is in Miron's music. This was not an isolated incident. Tzipora took an active part in our meetings, listening, making suggestions and correcting her husband. (Tzipora was at home in this role because she is not only the manager of her husbands busy schedule, she is also a gifted pianist and has played with Miron all over the world and on many of his recordings.) What I learned from this dynamic was that Tzipora is the energy source that keeps Issachar's creative

battery charged. Singer-songwriter and close family friend Kenny Karen had this to say about their relationship:

"Issachar is a loving, undisputedly caring father and grandfather. but his entire world, all that he is, revolves around Tzipora, his remarkable partner in life. They are my heroes; they are everyone's heroes. They represent all that is meaningful in family life. Their respect for one another, their kindness to each other happens only in fairytales. In their case, it is the "real deal". When you write about Issachar and all that he continues to accomplish in his life, you are writing about the two of them. They are truly one."³

After an initial chat in the dining room with food that I had to eat before Tzipora would let me continue with my work, we all went into Miron's converted study-recording studio-archive. It was here that our meetings turned into coaching sessions. It was these coaching sessions on the music itself that taught me about the circumstances surrounding the music and about the man himself. This was a wonderful way to learn about his music and about how and why he created it.

In the coaching sessions this eighty-four year old man found the energy of his youth. He danced, cajoled, shouted and laughed so that I could find in myself the ability to use the syncopated rhythms, dissonant harmonies and changing tempos in his music to wake up in others the realities of possibility. Having basically grown up with Israel it would make sense that much of Miron's music would have this underlying sense of purpose. The feelings of hope and togetherness that must have been planted, nourished and encouraged during the creation of the State of Israel can be found in Miron's music and he was trying to help me find them. He helped me to find these feelings in many ways. One of the most memorable ways that he helped me to find these feelings was by

³ Kenny Karen, interview by author, December 6th, 2005, transcript.

asking me to participate in a gala birthday celebration in his honor that would expose me to a great deal of his music and to the many people who sing it.

The musical celebration of his work occurred on May ninth 2005 at the B'nai Zion House of New York City. The event was a virtual trip-tick of Miron's life and how he has used it to "wake up" one generation of people after the next with a single purpose in mind. As a Jew who saw much of the world where peace and harmony did not exist it has been his self-appointed task to lay the groundwork for the creation of these ideals through his music and through all those who were effected by it. The celebration was a testament to how this can be done.

The concert began with two important figures that one generally associates with the world of classical music. It is no accident that both Robert Sherman and Martin Bookspan should have an association with Miron as they both became familiar with his classical compositions including "Passacaglia For Moderns" while they were both radio personalities at W-QXR radio in New York. It was also during this time that Sherman used his position as folk music arbiter to publicize Miron's Klezmer work with Giora Feidman as a marvelous achievement. Miron's relationships with the two men continued to grow in the nineteen-seventies and eighties as a common interest in Israeli and Jewish music created opportunities for the men to work together on projects at W-QXR, Lincoln Center and the United Jewish Appeal.

As the familiar voice of the radio program "Woody's Children" Sherman acted as the master of ceremonies for the evening. Bookspan who has become known as the television voice of the "Live From Lincoln Center" broadcasts read several selections of Miron's poetry. I learned from Miron that although he shared many interests with

Bookspan and Sherman, it was the mutual love for Israel that sparked the friendships with the two men that has lasted nearly four decades. Sherman made remarks to this effect when he commented that the evening was both a celebration of Israel's fifty-seventh birthday as well as Miron's eighty-fifth birthday. In a private conversation Sherman confided in me that he and Bookspan would be eager to take part in any Miron celebration and that a fifty-seventh birthday celebration for Israel was as good a reason as any.

It should be noted at this point that the theatre at the B'nai Zion House has no wings and as a result all the performers waited in the audience with the rest of the crowd waiting to be called up to perform by Mr. Sherman. I had the good fortune to be sitting next to the first performer of the evening that deserves particular attention. Kenny Karen is known by many fans of American Jewish Music as the composer of "Jerusalem is Mine", however he is better known in the recording industry as "The King of the Jingles". Indeed it is true, although Karen (now sixty years of age) is an accomplished composer and concert performer his real claim to fame comes from his vast television commercial jingle repertory.

As Karen explained to me the jingles were significant in terms of his association with Miron as it was Miron's desire to align himself "hand in hand" with Karen that brought about the break in his career that he so desperately wanted. According to Karen, in the late nineteen sixties he was a struggling musician with a great sight-reading ability and no job. While looking for work as a studio singer in New York City Karen found himself at a recording studio where Miron was the arranger/orchestrator for an album that was about to start recording. As luck would have it one of the studio singers that was

engaged by the record company became ill and did not show for the assignment. Miron saw Karen, put the music in front of him and said, "Can you read this young man?" Being a polished sight singer if not yet a polished vocalist Karen sang it accurately and with finesse. Miron hired him on the spot. Miron who seems to have a penchant for helping young people used Karen again and again helping to establish him as a dependable and facile studio musician. Over the years Karen and Miron have worked together on many projects including a Karen album called "The Song and the Rose" in which he recorded many of Miron's compositions.

Karen wanted to impress upon me that Miron's desire to help young people is a large part of who he is. He took the time to explain this to me as he felt that I seemed to be the current individual that Miron was helping despite his advanced age. I began to realize that this was part of what the message "from every direction" was about and that I was living proof of what "Ura Dor" really meant.

Karen went up to sing on two separate occasions that evening. He sang four songs in total. The songs were pieces he had previously recorded in his own right but they were favorites of Miron as well. The renditions of "Chiri Bom", "Ani Maamin", and "This Year in Jerusalem" were all quite lovely, however the piece that moved the audience (and Miron) to tears was "The Town I Knew". This piece is sung in Yiddish and English and is about the world of violence and pogroms that Miron grew up with as a child in Poland. This song speaks of a world devoid of "Ura Dor" and what it means. It is a simple tune with an A-A-B-A scheme but it evokes the kind of longing for home that I imagine caused Miron to search for a new home in Israel.

I was the ninth of the eighteen performers, which put me right in the middle of the show. Miron told me that he placed me at what would have been the beginning of the second act, right after folk singer Laura Wetzler's rendition of "Shir Eres" (a lullaby), because he felt that the robustness of my two selections and the robustness of my voice would wake up anyone who might have been put to sleep by the lullaby. It was not until the formulation of ideas that went into the writing of this paper that I had any real sense that I was part of the "wake up" strategy. I believe that Miron put me in the middle of the concert in order to give me time to relax and also time to reflect on what I was actually embarking upon.

During my last rehearsal at Miron's home one week prior to the concert he shared with me the long list of luminaries that had either recorded or performed in concert the two pieces that I was to perform. Miron felt that it was important for me to know the kind of legacy that I was continuing with my performance. Accordingly, he reminded me that "Mayim Rabim" (from Miron's Wedding Service) and "Ura Dor" was sung by Richard Tucker (whose recording I have), Jan Peerce, Misha Raitzin, Cantor Louis Danto, Cantor David Kousevitzky and Kenny Karen among others. I was glad to learn about my place in the long list of tenors who performed his work, but it heightened my sense of nervousness about the whole affair. In retrospect I think Miron knew this would happen and did this so I could get the nervousness out of my system before the week of the concert.

His scheme worked. Although I was nervous about doing well, the idea of having Tucker and Peerce on my shoulder only served to make me feel proud and honored to be in such good company. Both "Mayim Rabim" and "Ura Dor" are written in a folk style but are meant to be sung in as full throated a manner as the singer can manage. This is

easier said than done as the tessitura of both pieces ends up right in the tenor's passagio and as a result the climactic notes must be produced in as secure a way as possible otherwise cracking on the note is the inevitable outcome. I was aware of this in rehearsals but in performance I took Miron's advice and concentrated on the texts. In *Mayim Rabim* (from *Song of Songs*) we have an outcry of unashamed love and in "Ura Dor" we have one exclamation after another. I only realized after the fact that the subtleness in the performance was only found by giving the music the integrity it was due. The different harmonic voicings in each measure along with unexpected changes in tempo were as present as the rhymed couplets in a Shakespeare sonnet. It was my job in paying close attention to the text to allow these subtleties to come out in the music.

Although I must say that my memory of the performance is a bit hazy as a result of the event itself, I did feel successful in achieving my goals of "waking up" the audience, standing "hand in hand" with the music itself and by approaching the endeavor "from all directions" in order to reach all those who were reachable. I did appreciate the round of applause that I received from the crowd but there were three comments in particular that stood out for me. Kenny Karen was the first to congratulate me and said that the spot of "Miron protégé" had been admirably filled by me. Miron's son-in-law Michael Schleider who knew about my April 2006 concert of Miron's music at HUC asked me for an advanced invitation. Lastly, Miron himself singled me out in front of the entire audience and thanked me for finding in the music what he put there.

I would be derelict in my duties as an ethno-musicologist if I did not give mention to the final performers of the evening. The group known as "The Work O' The Weavers", which is a musical combo, whose chief goal is to preserve and pass on the work of Pete

Seeger and the Weavers presented several Miron works. For the final work they called Pete Seeger up to the stage and they all sang "Tzena, Tzena, Tzena". They sang the famous Carnegie Hall version, which includes the original Hebrew, Arabic and English. The idea behind the round in the three languages was to suggest that "harmony" could exist between diverse peoples the same way it could in music. Pete Seeger became so excited by the rendition that he remarked that he felt like he was only seventy again (Seeger is eighty-five). Upon the conclusion of the song Miron got up on stage and thanked Seeger for giving him his first hit in America by recording "Tzena". Without letting a second pass Seeger thanked Miron for giving him a career by allowing him to record "Tzena" in the first place.

When the concert was over I realized that although Miron had many admirers, he had even more friends. A few days later I phoned Miron and asked him how it was that he should have so many friends. His response caught me by surprise. He said that he really didn't know. All that he was sure of was that among the people he chose to surround himself with were people who sought to make the world a better place. As my research and visits to the Miron home continued I learned that Miron created many opportunities for people to improve the world through music and so it made sense that his closest friends were of the same mind as he was. I feel very fortunate to be able to include myself in this ever-expanding group.

CHAPTER 2

Israel

"His evocative and beautiful niggunim have the tone and weight of a moving Jewish testimony"

Elie Wiesel from the forward of Issachar Miron's book

Eighteen Gates of Jewish Holidays and Festivals

In order to understand anything relating to Miron's accomplishments as a peace-maker one must begin with his music. This at first might appear to be a daunting task as Miron's musical output is vast. He has composed some three thousand musical works including oratorios, instrumental works, vocal works, liturgical works and music for film, theatre and television. However, if we take a look at one of his most simple and straightforward compositions we can gain a tremendous insight into the kind of impact he had on Israeli music and the state of Israel. We will also learn a great deal about the nature of his philosophy on the ability of music to foster peace and brotherhood in places and among people where "harmony" was a rare commodity.

Any small school child that has attended a pre-consecration "Tot-Shabbat" is familiar with the melody to the song "Ma Yafe Hayom". This song has become such an integral part of the American Shabbat experience that Cantor Jeff Klepper in his book ⁴"Songs for *Growin'*" attributes the song to tradition rather than to Miron. Although this is just one of many accounts in which this familiar melody has been incorrectly and often

⁴ Jeff Cantor Klepper, Freelander, Dan Rabbi, in *Songs For Growin'* (New York: Transcontinental Music Publications / New Jewish Music Press, 2002).

unconsciously classified as "Mi Sinai", the song is definitely Miron's composition. Moreover, it is only one part of a larger work that is emblematic of Miron's ability to create music for the express purpose of creating peace and goodwill.

The story behind the creation of "Ma Yafe Hayom" is the story of Miron's Israel. This was an Israel in which Miron seemed to have seven full lives even though he was still a young man, according to Cantor Saul Meisels, former vice president of the Cantors Assembly in America. It is certainly an Israel that warrants a detailed discussion of just how it became the center of creativity for this artist.

Issachar Miron, born Stefan Michrovski, came to Israel from Poland. He was born on July 5th, 1920 in Kutno, Poland. In Poland he attended Liceum College where he received his BA in 1939 and then went on to his MA from The University Conservatory of Music in Poland. At the age of 19 Miron emigrated to Palestine as the pre-Holocaust climate in his native Poland was making life impossible for him and his family. Miron lost his family to a pogrom-like fire in which his home and his town were destroyed. Rather than blame the rest of the world for his loss he left for Israel to work with the Jewish Brigade of the British Army and Israeli Defense Forces because he believed that he could make a difference there. He would not leave Poland however, without collecting the musical memories of this event that would ultimately lead to the creation of two moving musical works that serve as a reminder to peace loving individuals everywhere of how precious and fragile life really can be. The works are "I Remember" for cello and piano, which was recorded by Jasha Siblingstein, the principle cellist of the Metropolitan Opera and the song "The Town I knew" which was later recorded by Canadian singer-songwriter Kenny Karen.

After a year with the Jewish Brigade of the British Army, Miron became the Officer in Chief of Humanities, Arts, Music and Entertainment for the Israel Defense Forces. This was a position that he was to keep until 1944. At first, one may sense some degree of contradiction between the military and art or even between the army and Tikkun Olam, but one must keep in mind that Miron was in the army to create peace, and through his music he was able to use the military as a means to that end.

Miron's army songs earned him a special place among his comrades in his position with the IDF. It was through his work in the army that he was to receive what his colleagues at the Cantor's Assembly would call "immense and deserved popularity"⁵. This comment is born out of the fact that the first exposure most Americans had to Miron was from a wartime song that was to become one of the great hit tunes of the World War 2 period. This song was called "Tzena Tzena". The song was written just after the war and although the original lyrics written by Miron's army buddy Yechiel Chagiz (who would go on to collaborate with Miron on other wonderful songs such as "The Song of the Well" and "Ura Dor") did not directly speak to the issues of peace and Tikkun Olam the song itself did serve as a call for togetherness and solidarity in the new state of Israel. The song which incidentally was rediscovered and recorded by Pete Seeger and the Weavers in 1950 was to go on (with new lyrics in three different languages) to become one of the single most requested and performed songs at peace rallies all over the world and was then recorded by artists from almost every genre of music from the London Symphony to Chubby Checker.

⁵ Saul Meisels and Miron Issachar, "The New Music of Israel," *Proceedings of the 15th Annual Conference-Convention of the Cantors Assembly of America* 15 (May 1962).

The success of "Tzena Tzena" and other songs like it were of no small consequence for Miron as they would open doors for him in the world of music education in the new state of Israel that would ultimately change the way Israel was to see itself through the lens of music. It was also the time when government officials saw the kind of impact that Stefan Michrovsky was going to have and requested that his name be changed to reflect his Israeli identity. Taking his name from the biblical tribe, Stefan became Issachar. He then adopted the popular Israeli surname Miron.

Miron has said that "Without a proper historic perspective it is extremely difficult to define the various stages of continued development of the Israeli song"⁶. From a musicological perspective this may be true, however from an ethno-musicological perspective this is a relatively inaccurate assessment. The reason for the inaccuracy of this assessment is that it was Miron himself who during his post-army tenure in Israel (1944-1961) was to introduce the people of Israel to its own music. The vast amount of work that Miron was to almost single-handedly create for the purposes of educating the people of Israel about its music, served to give the new state a sense of its own history, a new sense of identity and a way of monitoring its own social, political and emotional evolution. What better way could a composer use his gifts to improve the world he was living in?

Just two years after Israeli statehood Miron took the position that would enable him to begin his efforts as an educator. In 1950 Miron became the National Deputy Director of the Israeli Ministry of Education and Culture. Through his endeavors here he was able to initiate Israeli music appreciation in educational institutions and various

⁶ Ibid

cultural venues. With the realization that this was only the beginning of a long process Miron sought to share his message with everyone he could both in and out of Israel. Feeling that the work being done through the Ministry should be shared with the United States, Miron served as the trustee for the America For Music Library in Israel, which has its headquarters in Chicago. He served in this capacity for ten years.

The output of music under Miron's guidance became enormous. Because of his gifts and passion for sharing and creating music in Israel, Miron took on several important posts that ultimately made him an influential conduit for the exposure of music to the Israelis. From 1950 to 1960 he was the Senior Vice President of ACUM (The Society of Authors, Composers and Editors of Music in Israel). He was the first Vice Chairman of the Israeli Composers League (1953-1959), Chief Musical editor of the Israeli monthly magazine "*Zemiroth*", and Chairman of Israeli Composer's League Publications Inc. (1951-1960). His creation of music and music education programs from 1953 to 1962 included such foundational works as the collection "Famous Songs of Israel" (which was later published in the United States by Mills Music), "Kolot Aleph" and "Kolot Bet" (two songsters for two voices that codified many familiar Israeli folk themes) and "Sing a Song of Israel" (a work for unison or two part choir that was simple yet engaging enough to capture the imagination of the public.) This of course does not take into account the thousands of smaller projects that found themselves in the hands of Israeli school children who learned about Israel and Israeli music in small classrooms without ever knowing the name Miron. It is difficult to actually estimate the impact Miron had on Israel in the aforementioned capacities. Perhaps, Cantor Meisels of the CA said it best,

“ After demobilization he (Miron) devoted himself to music education in Israel and to the various organizational tasks in the field of music to which he has so wholeheartedly contributed to the new spiritual up-building of the Jewish State” (1962).⁷

This chapter began with a discussion of the song “Ma Yafe Hayom”. By returning to this discussion we return to what the author this paper feels is Miron’s single most important association in Israel in terms of creating Tikkun Olam. From 1953 to 1961 Miron was the Director General of the Commission for Cultural Music Programs in association with the America-Israel Cultural Foundation. His first job as Director General was to head up the “Committee for Musical Programs in Immigrant, Minority and Border Settlements”. When he began this project in 1953 Israel was experiencing an extremely large influx of immigrants. In fact, during the decade that was to follow statehood, Israel was to receive more than 100,000 immigrants a year from over 70 different nations. In *Reader’s Digest’s* first article on the state of Israel “*The Sound of Singing in Israel*”, they focused on this issue and the question of how people from lands as diverse as Iraq, Iran, Kurdistan, Morocco, Germany, Eastern Europe, India, Syria, the Soviet Union and South Africa could all live peacefully together, especially when these people were moving into a country the size of New Jersey that already had some 103 Arab villages in place. The answer to the question was “music” and the “music maker” was Issachar Miron.

Miron’s idea was to create community choirs in each of the settlement areas. Although each community was comprised of strangers most of whom were prejudice suspicious, and scared of each other Miron said “ People can’t sing in harmony one night

⁷ Ibid

a week and be enemies the rest of the time"⁸. He was right. Oscar Schisgall the author of the *Reader's Digest* article described a rehearsal that he witnessed of over 200 people in a tiny village this way:

"These people from many nations sang together with verve and joy. They sang Polish tunes and Russian tunes, Yemenite and Arab songs. It was hard to believe that in this merry group there were sad-hearted refugees from all over the world, people who only recently resented getting together. Tonight, clearly, they were welded by music."⁹

According to Schisgall the way Miron was able to overcome the resistance of the mixed ethnic groups was by patiently putting together 4 or 5 of a particular voice type together at a time, by ethnic group. Soon curiosity overcame those whose prejudice originally kept them from singing and community-by-community choirs were formed. The resistance of the many different groups provided not only challenges for Miron but also many opportunities.

According to Miron the most stubborn ethnic group that he dealt with were the Yemenites. He felt that this was not to do with a lack of musicality but rather a sense of insecurity as to how their music would fare amongst many of their sophisticated European neighbors. Miron was willing to do just about anything to make this project work and as a result he was to change the way Israel was to think of Yemenite music forever. In order to put the Yemenites at ease he sought out the help of a Yemenite rabbi who agreed to teach him a number of Yemenite songs. Most of the songs that Miron was to learn were the work of 19th century composer Shalom Shabazi. As is the case with many gifted musicians and composers, Shabazi's only method of preserving his music

⁸ Oscar Schisgall, "The Sound of Singing in Israel," *Reader's Digest*, May 1962.

⁹ Ibid

was to teach it to others with the hope that it would be passed down from generation to generation. He could not read or write music. Miron knew this when he heard the melodies from the Yemenite rabbi and notated them as fast as he could. He had hoped to teach these songs to all the communities so that the Yemenites could feel the kind of dignity in their music that the other ethnic groups did. In doing this it is believed that Miron was one of the first individuals to systematically set down these Yemenite melodies for future generations to learn. Aware that his notation lacked a genuine Yemenite flavor, Miron gave a Yemenite concert in the town of Zagdiel a few weeks after he met the Yemenite rabbi. He purposely made as many mistakes as he could so that his Yemenite audience would correct him. Feeling great gratitude for presenting the music the Yemenites were generous in their coaching of Miron's renditions of the songs. The coaching turned into singing and eventually the singers became full-fledged choir members.

Miron went on to create choirs for children and the elderly, and began to expand the pool of music to include music of all the nationalities. The choirs had become so popular that regional "Choir Competitions" developed. Miron composed new music for the choirs that dealt with themes of life in Israel. One such song had to do with the meaning of Shabbat for those who were just learning about what it meant to have a day to peacefully observe the beauty of a new homeland. The song was called "Shir Shabbat". The song is a round with an opening recitative solo in E minor and four repeatable intertwining melodies that are written in the relative major (E). Written in 1958 Miron had intended for this round to be a pleasant choral piece for his choirs. According to Miron sometime in the 1970's "some teacher" decided to change the first four words of

part 2 from: "Lovely are the hills, Shabbat Shalom" to another phrase that scanned in exactly the same manner. The words "Love-ly are the hills" are sung in a simple 4/4 time measure of four eighth notes and a half note. (B, E, G#, B, A). This is the exact rhythm of the phrase "Ma Ya-fe Ha-yom". Miron didn't mind the interpretive error to Shimshom Halfi's original lyrics, as they did not impact his melody in any way. The change however was to effect Miron in a significant way as this change combined with the original part 3 of the round ("Shabbat, Shabbat Shalom" sung three times followed by "Shabbat means peace") has gone on to be one of the single most popular Shabbat melodies that we have in our cannon of Shabbat music today.

In an interview I asked Miron what he thought about the popularity of this tune. He said that he was indeed pleased that the melody caught on but was even more pleased that it achieved the desired effect as a choir piece that served to unite a group of strangers. His response was perhaps a bit more eloquent when he spoke about the subject in the original 1962 article:

"We are acting on the simple principle that music is an international language which everybody can understand and enjoy. It brings people together spiritually and emotionally. We are using it as a tool to shape a harmonious nation."¹⁰

¹⁰ Ibid

Chapter 3

THE UNITED STATES

"Your fine original folk oratorio has evoked such an unusually heavy listener response as to suggest its potentialities in other countries."

Louis I. Teicher CBS Television executive on the popularity of Miron's

"The Golden Gates of Joy"

One afternoon in the spring of 2005 Miron sat me down in his living room and opened a photo album. At first I thought that he was going to show me an album of clippings from his career. Instead he showed me a family photo album. It was the wedding album from his daughter Ruth's wedding. The wedding took place in 1968 only seven years after Miron emigrated to the U.S. It was also the year he became a naturalized citizen.

Although the album was filled with family I couldn't help noticing that I recognized many of the guests as some of the most important people in the world of Jewish music in America at that time. At one table I located composer Shalom Secunda, at another table I found Cantor David Kousevitsky and at yet another table I saw singer Sidor Belarski. What I had come to learn about this wedding was that it was not just the marriage of Miron's daughter to her betrothed, it was a larger "wedding", a coming together of sorts, of all the various relationships and personalities that helped to define Miron's contributions as a composer, teacher and humanitarian in the U.S. In fact, from all accounts including a New York Times article, the ceremony, its preparation and the reception that followed, seemed more like a celebration between a large, loving

congregation and its Cantor Emeritus and his family than a simple wedding between two people.

This is not an accident. In so many ways Miron's contributions to the Jewish People through his gifts as an artist exemplify some of the very best characteristics that one would hope to find in the cantorate. Perhaps, this is why Miron has taken it upon himself to help those of us who are beginning cantorial careers, as well as, so many others who simply sought out his guidance in order to better use their gifts to improve the world. If one were to look at the guest list for this festive occasion one could easily begin to understand how the people in Miron's world were effected by his desire and ability to live his life by following the three basic principles found in *Pirkei Avot* that have become part of Torah Service liturgy: *Torah, Avodah* and *G'milut Chasadim*.

An essential element in understanding how all these people were so positively impacted and why Miron embodies these principles for me as a cantor is that he has *lived* these principles. It is one thing to understand all of the important concepts of Judaism and how they relate to Tikkun Olam but it is entirely another thing to fill ones days with the kind of action and activity that brings these concepts to life. It is the author's hope that the following examination of the different ways in which Issachar Miron took personal responsibility for improving the world during his most active years in the United States will inspire future Jewish leaders in America to take the same kind of pro-active approach to their work as leaders of the Jewish People.

There is one additional but fundamental characteristic that makes Miron an ideal role model for the creation of a new kind of cantorate. The skill and sensitivity with which Miron can combine elements of Torah, Avodah and G'milut Chasadim in his

creative works shows the kind of nuance and attention to detail that brings to mind the saying "God is in the details". This particular issue will be discussed in depth in another chapter which will take an analytical look at how all of those elements come into play in the creation and presentation of his virtuoso setting of the "Sheva Brachot" blessing that was written as part of "Prothalamia Hebraica"; his Jewish Wedding Service.

TORAH

In considering Torah as one of the three characteristic ideals that Miron represents it is my desire to look at Torah in the broadest manner possible. In Miron's world Torah equals all Jewish knowledge. Miron's gift was not simply his mastery of vast amounts of Jewish knowledge it was his skill as a master teacher of this knowledge. Perhaps if all Jewish professionals had the love of teaching that Miron had, they too would have the kind of guest list at Shabbat services that Miron had had at his daughter's wedding.

Although many of the guests at the Miron wedding were recipients of his teaching efforts, a few groups in particular stand out. These groups were Miron's friends and colleagues from the Cantors Assembly and those of the Jewish Teachers Seminary. It is unfortunate that Miron's associations with these two groups have been forgotten by many despite the fact that they had great impact on how Americans viewed and learned about the Israeli Song.

The Cantors Assembly has been mentioned previously in this paper. By way of general background the Cantors Assembly is an international brotherhood of cantors from the Conservative Movement of Judaism and began in 1947. In an attempt to educate their membership about Israeli music the Cantors Assembly formed an initial association with

Miron in 1961 during an annual Cantors Assembly convention in New York. So conducive to camaraderie and brotherhood were his first meetings and presentations to the membership of the Cantors Assembly in 1961 that he was flown in from Israel to New York to celebrate Israeli Independence Day with the CA in New York in 1962. In honor of Israeli Independence Day he was to give a workshop on Israeli Music to the membership of the CA in May of that year.

As is so typical of Miron's ability to find common ground with anyone who wants to learn, he chose to open his lecture "The New Music of Israel" with the following remark:

"I feel it is my pleasant duty to convey the warmest greetings and regards of our Composers League in Israel to all of you. We know that you are doing wonderful work for Jewish and Israeli Music and we hope that ties between us will turn to real brotherhood through music"¹¹

The fact is that the state of Israeli Music in the U.S. was in its infancy at this time and the American Cantorate was not doing particularly "good work" with Israeli Music. Yet, Miron found a way to begin his lecture without "lecturing". He began by creating a feeling of warmth and good will with all who were present. Although the lecture Miron was about to give was about Israeli Music I can't help but think that his opening remark would serve as a helpful model for clergy. A cantor encountering a new B'nai Mitzvah student, young couple looking to be married or even and anxious prospective congregant would benefit from this kind of thoughtful remark.

¹¹ Saul Meisels and Miron Issachar, "The New Music of Israel," *Proceedings of the 15th Annual Conference/Convention of the Cantors Assembly of America* 15 (May 1962).

The original circumstances under which Miron was to present his topic; "The New Music of Israel" were ideal. He was to have 3 hours in which he was to discuss and present new music in Israel with the assistance of three cantors from the tri-state area along with his accompanist and wife Tzipora. It bears mentioning that among the three cantors was the young chazzan Moshe Nathanson who was to follow in Miron's example in Israel as an editor and composer of Jewish Music with the creation of the now classic three volume musical anthology known as "Zamru Lo". Because of scheduling difficulties that are commonplace at these conventions the time for this presentation had to be cut in half. The time constraint of 90 minutes was compounded by the fact that upon his arrival at the 1962 convention Miron quickly learned that he could not effectively discuss "New" music in Israel because as Miron put it,

"I was surprised that some of the most important compositions of the first stage of Israeli Music, works of Idelsohn (composer and author of many fundamental works on Jewish Music including "Jewish Music" and "Jewish Liturgy" which are now required reading for any first year cantorial student), Karchefsky and even Engel (Miron was the winner of the coveted Engel Prize for Composition in 1959), are absolutely unknown to you (the CA) and also, the great era of the state of the last 25 years which really created the character of the Israeli song is unknown to you".¹²

This was not an admonishment; it was a statement of fact. Cognizant of the fact that the education of this group of American cantors was far more important than the order or content of his original presentation, Miron completely changed what he was going to do in order to make the learning experience for the group one that would serve as a foundation for future learning on the subject.

It is clear from my research and my personal experiences with the composer that many weeks of preparation went into the original presentation however, it was the

¹² Ibid

knowledge, the “Torah” of music that was most compelling to him. This ability to leave his ego at the door and open new doors of opportunity for learning was deeply appreciated by the CA and would also serve as another model that would infuse the future cantorate with cantor/congregation relationships based on a love of knowledge rather than need for the “knowledge” that many clergy seem to have that they *are loved*. This is certainly not to say that cantors and others who serve the Jewish People should be devoid of ego, however Miron’s example which we will see employed several times in this chapter sets priorities in a manner that the author of this paper believes would be most befitting to clergy.

The Cantor’s Assembly lecture albeit somewhat impromptu proceeded with what Miron called “A Brief Report” on the 25-year development of the Israeli Song that the CA membership was lacking. Although the lecture itself is fascinating what I find even more interesting is the simplicity with which Miron taught the subject matter. It would have been perfectly acceptable for him to pepper his lecture with a myriad of Israeli musical terms as Israeli Song is his area of expertise, but this kind of jargon in Miron’s thinking would not serve his audience. Rather than prove to the CA membership that he was an expert on the subject of Israeli Song (Miron is indeed an expert on the Israeli Song as he was the editor of over 2000 Israeli Songs during his tenure with the Israel Ministry of Education and Culture) by creating a language barrier, he used simple and effective analogies to make his points clear.

In reviewing the text of the lecture Miron makes a concerted effort to be brief and to the point in his explanations. As a result of this economy of words I personally learned more about the origin of the Israeli Song from this lecture some 30 years after it was

delivered than I did during an entire year in Israel. A brief analysis of the lecture will give the reader a deeper understanding of Miron's skill in sharing his love of knowledge and his deep understanding of Jewish thinking. The format that he used serves as a wonderful model of how one can take a traditional Jewish learning methodology and adapt it to a contemporary lecture. Having been asked to deliver several "Sermons In Song" I have effectively adapted this way of teaching to my own cantorate.

One cannot be certain that any of the members of the CA were aware of it, but Miron's lecture closely follows the *PARDES* format that is usually reserved for biblical analysis. Keeping in mind that for Miron all of Jewish knowledge is Torah, the *PARDES* methodology resonates on many levels. The *Pshat*, the literal meaning (and message) of the lecture is that Israeli Song can be analyzed historically and culturally. The *Remez*, hint or implied meaning of the lecture is that despite its developmental history, the Israeli Song has a mystical identity that is completely unique to itself. Miron uses a litmus test of sorts to reveal the *remez*. He suggests that if you take an Israeli song such as Idelsohn's Hava Nagilah, which he describes as a "Hasidic Song in Israeli clothes", and sing it in another language...." it will still bear a special significance and Israeli character".¹³

The *Drash*, search or homiletic meaning of the lecture comes out of Miron's comparison of the Israeli Song to that of other "melting pot" cultures such as the United States. As Miron put it, "There exists a certain analogy between Israel and the United States where people from all over the world came and formed one nation."¹⁴ He goes on

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

to ask what the American Song actually is. He suggests that the Negro Spiritual, Irish Folk Song, Dutch Song and American Indian Song may have as much to do with the nature of the American Song as the Yemenite, Persian Jewish and Hassidic Song have to do with the nature of the Israeli Song. The major difference, he points out though is that the Israeli Song has running through its core two elements that the American Song does not have; the living Hebrew Language and Biblical Cantillation.

The Drash continues with fascinating information on four different developmental stages of the Israeli Song (Miron includes himself in the third stage), which are demonstrated by the cantors who were chosen to assist him. The details of the remainder of the lecture could be the subject of another paper and are not imperative for this discussion, however, the case Miron builds in his Drash would lead one to believe that there is a contradiction between the identifiable musicological components of the Israeli Song found through the analysis of its four historical stages and the almost magic qualities that make it undeniably Israeli. The solution to the seeming contradiction that Miron so delicately built in his Drash comes in the *Sod* or hidden secret in this wonderful lecture. According to Miron "Spirit is something abstract and cannot be measured and defined as can be done with exact sciences"¹⁵. He reaches a state of closure on this topic as he reminds his audience that this kind of contradiction is to be expected when discussing musicology "in the land of miracles"

Many of the same people who attended this lecture/workshop in 1962 were also in attendance at the Miron wedding in 1968. As previously mentioned Cantor David Kousevitsky was one of those individuals. By 1968 Miron along with Kousevitsky, Sidor

¹⁵ Ibid

Belarski, composers Nacum Nardi, Ruth Rubin and Shalom Secunda had already been involved in another educational endeavor that was borne out of Miron's work in Israel and the U.S.

The Jewish Teachers Seminary was founded in 1935 as part of the Workman's Circle organization. Although Jewish music had always been part of the curriculum at the institute, it was not until Miron became chairman of the music faculty in the mid 1960's that the program became comprehensive enough to offer college degrees in Jewish Music. With Miron's leadership the school was able to put together a faculty of experts that enabled the school to offer a broad range of courses including Israeli Song (Miron was chief instructor here), Yiddish Folk Song, Art Song, Cantillation, Jewish Modal Music and Liturgical Music. A new generation of students would now be able to add a deep understanding of the music of Israel to their Jewish Music education due to Miron's efforts. It was as chairman of what came to be known as the Hertzelia Institute of the Jewish Teachers Seminary that Miron was to make one of his most important contributions to the next area in which he serves as a role model for cantors and those who seek to create Tikkun Olam through art.

AVODAH

Avodah is often defined as worship or service. The ability and desire to pray does not come easily for everyone. Composers of liturgical music endeavor to create a mood for a particular type of service or occasion in order to assist in prayer. This is a difficult task as musical associations effect people differently. Miron however was particularly successful in this area of composition. So effective was Miron in the creation of music for

prayer that he received the Kavod Award for Distinguished Contribution to Jewish Liturgical Music from the Cantors Assembly of America in 1964.

Miron's liturgical composition output is not only vast it is also uniquely creative. My research shows that out of the 3000 musical compositions that Miron has had published that 1000 were liturgical in nature. Rather than discuss these compositions by category or musical invention, I have chosen to look at Miron's liturgical music in terms of the particular characteristic that makes his music the exemplification of one of the most favorable ideals that future generations of clergy could learn from in terms of prayer music and avodah in general. Earlier in this paper I referred to Miron's proclivity for putting his love of teaching before his ego. When one examines his views on liturgical music one quickly learns that the over-arching principle that permeates all of his endeavors is not selflessness, it is relevance.

Having earned a great deal of cache as the chairman of the music faculty at the Jewish Teacher Seminary the New York Times published an article that Miron had written on the subject of relevance in liturgical music that had originally been written for the music trade publication "ASCAP Today". The fact that this Israeli Immigrant of Orthodox Jewish parentage could write such a compelling essay on the relevance of liturgical music in America was something of a welcomed peculiarity. This was so much the case that Miron received the Deems-Taylor Award for Creative Writing from ASCAP when "Rocking the Cradle of the Lord" was published on February 9, 1969 in the Sunday New York Times.

The message of this essay is as simple and profound today as it was in 1969. Miron explains the problem of relevance eloquently:

"Like new shoes, contemporary liturgical music – no matter how well made – may pinch highly sensitive spots, not only in some elderly worshipers, dogmatic in their belief, but even of progressive young men and women brought up on the knees of tradition." ¹⁶

Despite the difficulties of the task, Miron is acutely aware of the consequences of not addressing the issues of relevance. He quotes the lyrics of a song made famous by Willard Robinson the late orchestra leader of the Deep River Orchestra: "The devil is afraid of music". Miron concludes from this, "that worship now as always needs music for its survival – to frighten away the devils of today." ¹⁷

In order to address just how one achieves relevance in liturgical music Miron assesses the meaning of tradition and how it relates to relevance:

"We often think of tradition as absence of progress but, in fact tradition results from endless efforts, evolutionary and revolutionary achievements fought for every day from the beginning and for as long as people will live on this earth." ¹⁸

How do these "endless efforts" translate into composition for Miron? It is as if he sees his listeners as his congregation. As his congregation changes over time his compositions seem to be responses to the question: What does my congregation need from me at this time and what is the best way for me to serve them?

During a time of civil unrest in the U.S. Miron wrote the interfaith oratorio "The Golden Gates of Joy". Just as he had adapted his lecture to meet the needs of the CA in 1962, this Jewish composer not only wrote an interfaith service, but also allowed it to be performed by the Ray Charles Singers in presentations that featured a priest, a minister as

¹⁶ Issachar Miron, "Rocking the Cradle of the Lord," *New York Times*, February 9th 1969, sec. D.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

well as a rabbi as its narrators. Peace was the basic message of the oratorio which was seen by millions of viewers on CBS – TV's "Lamp Unto My Feet", NBC's "Catholic Hour" and ABC's "For Thou Art With Me". It is difficult to imagine a rabbi or a cantor today who would go as far out of his/her comfort zone to achieve this kind of relevance with a congregation.

In 1967 Miron wrote "Rock and Rest" which was a Sabbath Service designed to reach that element of the Jewish youth that was far more interested in rock music than it was in the sounds of awe and majesty that emanate from a grand pipe organ. The text for this service was that of Shabbat liturgy but the musical setting was unique. Miron was able to achieve relevance here by creating a contemporary blend of Sephardic Cantorial modes with rock rhythms for two choirs, orchestra and rock n'roll combo.

Even Miron's celebrated oratorio "The Psalms of Israel" was written as a response to a need from his "congregation". There was a conflict concerning the recitation of the text of Hallel on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the State of Israel. The conflict developed as opposing factions argued for and against the idea of putting Yom ha-Atzma'ut on the sacred calendar. The argument between those who were in favor of this practice and those who felt that the practice was blasphemous resulted in the forced resignation of an Israeli Army cantor who refused to follow the instructions of Rabbi Shlomo Goren, then the Chief Rabbi of Israel to chant Hallel on Yom ha Atzma'ut.¹⁹

¹⁹ Cantors Assembly Staff, "Some Reflections on the "Psalms of Israel", "
Proceedings of the Cantors Assembly Thirty Second Annual Convention (Spring 1979).

Miron found a way to resolve the infighting that was going on in his homeland. He took the sacred Hallel text and composed a "quasi secular" work which expressed "the exaltation which Jews feel upon the redemption of their land and yet, because in Israel it (the oratorio) was not sung as part of the synagogue service, could not possibly offend those who were opposed to including Hallel in the Yom ha Atzma'ut celebration.

There are many examples of Miron's solution oriented approach to being relevant, but the key issue here is that his solutions worked and they were of lasting value. The "Psalms of Israel" serves as a perfect illustration of this point. This oratorio has become an important work in the world of Jewish oratorio and the Musical Heritage Society's recording with Cantor Louis Danto helped to turn Miron's setting of "Mi ka' Adonai Eloheinu" into a classic for cantor and choir. Some years ago Hebrew Union College Cantorial Student David Katz chose to study the "Psalms of Israel" for both his senior thesis and recital. It will probably come as no surprise to the reader that in an attempt to be of 'service' to the generation of students that would learn from Katz's work, that Miron served as his coach and musical advisor on the project.

G'MILUT CHASADIM

Although there were many faces in the Miron wedding photos that I did not recognize, upon questioning Miron I was informed that many of the guests were "friends" of his who he met during the course of his career and others were friends whose career paths crossed with Miron's. I asked Miron to explain the difference between the two

categories of guest and what I learned from him was that the first group of "friends" were individuals who he worked with in the many organizations and associations that he belonged to, and that the second group were people who Miron had helped in the establishment or growth of their careers. I asked Miron about his consistent and often unsolicited attempts to help organizations and individuals. Miron responded with what I believe is the philosophy that embodies all of his relationships in the Jewish world. He said the following; "It is all about Jewish values. You have to be in love with Jewish culture and tradition. If you live with Jewish precepts of life it (the act of becoming involved with others) is not labored – it is spontaneous"²⁰

In her article on the topic of *Hesed*, Rabbi Sara Paasche-Orlow said, "Hesed is laid out as a broader value than Tzedakah because it can be done not only with money but with ones person"²¹. This is the kind of spontaneity that Miron was referring to. He felt that whether his humanitarian efforts effected a large organization like the United Jewish Appeal, or a single individual like the Russian tenor Misha Raitzin, that he did what he did because he believed that helping others was the Jewish thing to do. It didn't matter to Miron whether his efforts to repair the world changed one life at a time or thousands. Creating acts of loving-kindness were and are a way of living and it was the effect of these acts that I saw in the faces of so many in the wedding photos.

There are many organizations that benefited from Miron's assistance but the one organization that benefited from his acts of G'milut Chasadim more than any other was

²⁰ Issachar Miron, interview by author, November 14th, 2005, New York, transcript, Thesis Project Collection.

²¹ Sara Paasche-Orlow, Rabbi, "Acts of Loving Kindness - The Foundations of Jewish Service Learning," *Jewish Education News*, Spring, 2001.

the United Jewish Appeal. I use the UJA as the primary example here because Miron approached the UJA not as an independent contractor, but as a volunteer. Miron went to the UJA to rescue many of their musical programs that began to flounder after the Yom Kippur War. Miron says that his success and longevity at the UJA had to do with his desire to infuse the organization "with a love for Israel and the uniqueness and unity of the Jewish People". Using his creative gifts as his tools Miron began a personal campaign to share that "uniqueness" with the world. He scripted, composed and directed many of the UJA's radio, TV, film, concert and dramatic programs in the 1970's and 1980's. Many of these programs including "We Are One" and "Proclaim Liberty" were seen all over the U.S. before some of the largest Jewish audiences in history. The stage show "We Are One", "caught the imagination of the Jewish People" and was brought to Broadway in New York City for a benefit performance.

According to singer-songwriter Kenny Karen: (composer of "Jerusalem is Mine" and long time protégé of Miron)

"... in the 70's and 80's Issachar was everything at the United Jewish Appeal. He was the director of the creative department, writing, directing and producing a multitude of shows nation wide; we recognized this mutual sense of admiration, we held on to its essence and never let go".²²

Some wonderful original music came out of Miron's work with the UJA. Israeli singer Ron Eliran fondly recalled a 1974 UJA convention entitled "Joining Hands and Hearts" during which over 3000 Americans were to visit Jerusalem and Tel Aviv for two weeks of information sharing and music. For the occasion Miron together with lyricist Don Almagor collaborated on a song based on the popular Passover saying "Next year in

²² Kenny Karen, interview by author, December 6th, 2005, transcript.

Jerusalem". The song was entitled "This Year in Jerusalem" and was used as a processional for the American guests for performances of "We Are One" at the Jerusalem Theater. The music is truly inviting and robust and the lyrics capture the spirit of welcome: "Now at last the dream comes true and we'll meet this year in Jerusalem." There is a wonderful recording of this song by the Russian tenor Misha Raitzin. Although many gifted singers have recorded this song I mention Raitzin because his life and career in the US were greatly impacted by one of Miron's acts of Hesed.

Raitzin was a gifted Russian Jew who was a tenor with the Bolshoi who was eager to sing in the US in the late 1960's. Because of the political climate at the time Raitzin could not leave Russia and pursue an American singing career. At the time Miron was associated with the offices of the music manager Sol Hurok. Hurok was the great impresario for whom the Roxy Theatre was named and who created the path from the music hall to the Metropolitan Opera for Jan Peerce. With Hurok's help Miron arranged for work related papers that got Raitzin into the U.S. after persuading him and his family to relocate to Israel to work with the Israeli Philharmonic. After three years with the Philharmonic, Miron arranged for Raitzin to come to the U.S. to audition for the Metropolitan Opera. Soon thereafter Raitzin made his debut as Dimitri in "Boris Godunov" at the Met and became one of their principal tenors for many years.

In an article by Leslie Rubinstein of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater NewYork, Raitzin was quoted as saying "Although I was alone my joy was in singing

Hebrew songs aloud." He said, "They were forbidden in public in Russia."²³

Perhaps, Miron understood this from his days in Kutno or maybe he simply knew that Raitzin was a truly gifted Jewish artist. Whatever the reason was Raitzin and Miron became very close friends. Ironically, it was the day after recording many of the selections of Miron's "Legendary Voices of the Jewish Wedding" that Raitzin died. Miron said of Raitzin's passing in 1990 that he died like a Tsadik; in his sleep. I can't help but think that Raitzin must have felt that his friend Miron often lived like one.

Raitzin came to the U.S. in 1975. Obviously he was not one of the many guests at the wedding of Miron's daughter Ruth. This notwithstanding Raitzin's story and the story behind Miron's association with his guests from the U.J.A. and Jewish Teachers Seminary serve as symbolic "snapshots" of the kind of relationships that he had and still maintains here in the United States. There are many marriages in Miron's life. The marriage to his wife, the marriages of his children, the marriage of music to the written word and the marriage of his art to his love for Judaism. In the next chapter we will discuss how all these "weddings" can be found in his art.

²³ Misha Raitzin, "For A Family of Soviet Émigrés, Special Meaning in Hanukkah." interview by Rubenstein, Leslie (New York, NY, December 1980), *UJA/Federation Educational Resource Center* (Fall 2003).

Chapter 4

The Sheva Brachot and Prothalamia Hebraica

“One doesn’t tell the artist what colors to put on the canvas”

From Issachar Miron’s

18 Gates of the Jewish Holidays

To analyze a piece of Miron’s music from a strictly musicological perspective without paying close attention to the deeper and more subtle reasons for its creation is like trying to study a weekly torah portion from a strictly literary perspective. Without pursuing an understanding of the purpose and the nuance that lies beneath the surface we rob ourselves of the full experience. For Issachar Miron the creation of a work of art, in this case a piece of music is not a formulaic experience. In fact the experience has as much to do with the message that is being conveyed as it does with the invention of the musical ideas. He draws from all areas of his experience that are appropriate to the work in question. For his Wedding Service, Prothalamia Hebraica he brought into focus all of the many different “weddings” in his life that were mentioned in chapter 3. He also drew upon the elements of Torah, Avodah and G’milut Chasadim that were also mentioned in the previous chapter. In order to better understand just how Miron did this we will look at how the different elements mentioned above went into the creation of the “Wedding Service” with particular musical attention paid to the musical setting of the “Sheva Brachot”

Despite the fact that we will be discussing composition here I believe that the reader will find parallels to Miron's other creative endeavors in this chapter with a particular parallel to his work with the Cantors Assembly in 1962. In chapter two Miron's concept of Torah was defined as all Jewish knowledge. His desire to combine this love of knowledge with his love of family is the basis for this beautiful but complex service. The service is complex because the wide range of styles used to create the service came from Miron's decision to share the work of composition with his daughter (the bride) and his son-in-law to be. Although his daughter Ruth is an accomplished concert pianist the task of finding a common thread that runs through her work and that of her husband was not an easy task. I believe Miron knew this and used it as a way to teach his art and the art of working together with his daughter and son-in law to be.

The service itself has nine compositions in total. The second piece of the service, Ma Dodech and the eighth piece, Simeini were written by Michael Schleider and Ruth Miron Schleider respectively. The Ma Dodech of Michael Shcleider is sandwiched between Miron's masterful Birkat Irusin and his lilting Mi Adir. The simple, sweet melody of Ma Dodech has the mark of Miron's hand as a guiding force in the insertion of a small rhythmic niggun that gives the piece a bit more depth and length. The combined effect of Schleider's original melody and Miron's niggun is quite effective on the recording. The marking Con Anima (Ecstatic, Rhythmical, with Devotion) are the telltale signs that Miron has also been mentor to his daughter in the creation of "Simeini" which is a rather dramatic peace that only a cantor of great skill could negotiate that far into the service. The selection of long time friend and associate Cantor David Kousevitsky is simply another example of Miron's ability to weave different parts of his

experience into his art. Many of his friends and colleagues from the Cantors Assembly officiated at the service, but it was Cantor Kousevitsky who bestowed an act of loving kindness to the Miron's by offering to lead the service. He then recorded the service commercially with Issachar and Tzipora.

The Sheva Brachot is a particularly difficult piece of text to set to music, especially accompanied music. There is a tendency in composing for this text to become repetitious because of the difficulties many composers have in finding musical invention for the seven different occasions in which "Baruch Atah Adonai" are chanted. Many liturgical composers also often rely upon the symmetry of verses in order to establish a melodic scheme. The text for the Sheva Brachot is unusually asymmetrical and is therefore particularly difficult to find melody for.

Miron has approached the Sheva Brachot from the same point of view that he has approached all other pieces mentioned in this paper. He uses relevance as his guide for musical invention and textual interpretation. How does a composer like Miron remain true to the text while endeavoring to communicate the grandeur of the marriage of his first child? He finds his relevance by combining musical styles so that he can stay in touch with his traditional musical roots while he creates the kind of musical majesty that was befitting of the occasion.

The opening bars of the introduction to this piece are written for and played on the pipe organ. The melody is simple straightforward and somewhat reminiscent of Lewandowski's version of L'cha Dodi for voice and choir. The large choir makes its entrance with the interval of a minor third on the word "Baruch". The cantor sings his response by repeating the word "Baruch" and continuing with the blessing "...Atah

Adonai". This call and response continues for quite some time however, it is Miron's idea that the cantor and the choir should be singing in two different styles. The choir has taken on the original theme of the organ with its "high church" harmonies, but the cantor is singing hazzanut. Cantor Koussevitsky was a master at hazzanut who became famous for his use of short rhythmical melodies before the conclusions of his recitatives in his work in America during the "Golden Age of Cantors".²⁴ His short but elaborate melismas fit in perfectly well between the full chords of the organ and the choir.

I cannot help but think that Miron is sending a message to his friends and his family with this setting. Just as he did with opposing forces in his settlement choirs in Israel and just as he did with his problem solving approach to Hallel, Miron found a way to come to terms with his traditional background and the more stylized music needed to convey the size and spirit of the emotions he wanted to communicate on his daughters wedding day. The juxtaposition of the musical styles of the 19th century Western European Synagogue with that of the 19th and 20th century Eastern European Shtetl could have created a rift in the music that would have made musical invention impossible, but the call and response approach worked perfectly.

There are many reasons for the success of the call and response approach to the setting of this series of blessings. Firstly, Miron is a master craftsman as a composer and was sure to put both the choir and the cantor into the kind of perfect focus that one would expect from an expert photographer. Secondly Cantor Kousevitsky and the retinue from

²⁴ Velvel Pasternak and Schall Noach, *The Golden Age of Cantors* (New York: Tara Publications, 1991).

the Cantors Assembly performed the music in the exact way Miron intended. Most importantly however, is the *Sod*, Miron's hidden meaning.

What more perfect a gift could a father give to his children than a model for working out their differences in the life they have ahead of them? Just as the Traditional Hazzanut and High Church Reform music alternate for the attention of the listeners, Miron is sending the message of communication to his family. Call and response is more than musical invention here, it is a metaphor for the kind of life that he and his wife Tzipora share. The fact that the texts are not symmetrical gives Miron further reason to continue his lesson to his children. Here art imitates life's unevenness and asks of us to work at living in harmony with each other. His musical treatment for the unevenness of the texts requires that the cantor and then the choir each take their turn in the spotlight. By the time the piece reaches "*b'gan Eiden mikem*" the listener is no longer clear as to who is doing the "calling" and who is doing the "responding". The voice of the cantor and the voice of the choir keep maintain their individuality throughout the entire piece and yet they work together to express the meaning of the text in a beautiful and poetic manner.

The commercial studio recording of this piece and the entire service can be found on the CD entitled "*Legendary Voices of the Jewish Wedding*." The recording is quite wonderful and makes a genuine effort to capture the energy of the day of the wedding and the premiere of the work itself, but one can only imagine what it must have been like to be among the many fortunate individuals who were present that day. Although this wonderful gift was intended for his daughter, every one of the guests at the Miron

wedding went home with the gift of a musical midrash that would linger in their hearts
and souls for years to come.

Concluding Thoughts

"In music as in life there must be movement"

Issachar Miron

Miron has made the observation that; movement characterizes both his music and his life. It is true that there are many dance like qualities in his compositions. Professor Eliyahu Schleifer of Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem even remarked that "His rhythmical patterns resemble those of Israeli folk dances and at times one has a feeling that one could invent Israeli choreography even for his most serious pieces."²⁵ The parallels in his life are also true. He traveled from Europe to Israel and from Israel to the United States. And even more importantly he moved from one project to the next with the hope of creating peace and brotherhood in the world. Although all of this is accurate there is another side to his "movement" that I have found to be an even more compelling and descriptive characteristic.

In all of his work Miron has had the ability to move the heart. The ability to get people to love one and other and seek peaceful solutions to problems is a gift that has come across in his music, his teaching, his friendships and even his mentoring. Issachar Miron has been a part of my life during most of my academic career at Hebrew Union College. As I enter the world of the cantorate I will heed his lessons about pro-activity and the uniqueness of Judaism, but I will never forget to follow his example as a leader

²⁵ Eliyahu Schleifer, Professor, Research from Israel, e-mail message to Cliff Abramson, October 17th, 2004.

from the heart whose love of humankind and respect for the human condition is the very essence of what I hope to be as a Cantor and what I hope to share with other leaders in the larger Jewish Community.

In the acknowledgments of his wonderful book *The Eighteen Gates of the Jewish Holidays and Festivals* Miron writes, "I am the sole living member of my family...In March of 1942, my family, with all the other dearly beloved Kutno martyrs, perished in Chelmno-the first death camp of the *final solution of the Jewish question* in Poland".²⁶ Almost sixty years after an event that has paralyzed the lives of so many, this same man has brought to my attention that just like the perpetual movement of the heart, life has an inertia of its own that must be paid heed to if we are to live full lives. The "Niggun of the Jewish Soul" resounds in that heart and I am proud to say that because of Issachar Miron it has touched mine.

²⁶ Issachar Miron, *Eighteen Gates of Jewish Holidays and Festivals* (New York: Jason Aronson Inc, 1993).

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