

"THE CHICKEN SOUP APPROACH TO JEWISH MUSIC"  
by: Jack Gottlieb

Why chicken soup? You may well ask, especially if chicken soup isn't your cup of tea. But I suspect it is, for most of us, because it's warm, nourishing, comfortable and familiar. You begin to see a pattern? Aren't these the very same qualities we seek in our Jewish music: that it be familiar? and, after basking in its warmth for a while, we can expel a loud sigh of: "oy, is that a m'chayeh!"

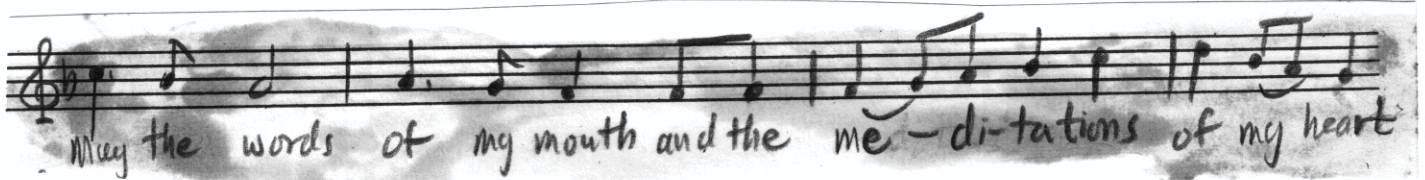
And yet, and yet -- you have to admit that even though chicken soup may be the Jewish answer to penicillin, it ain't exactly what you'd call a gourmet dish. I mean, it's not one of your high class soups like vichyssoise or gazpacho, is it? And so, if I may carry over the tasty comparison: how first rate is much of the Jewish music we hear? Alas, I regret to say that more than one informed musical expert regards it as second-rate stuff, strictly qua music. And, if that is really so, I suggest that all of us are somewhat to blame -- including the professionals in the field, like myself.

You see, we bring to the listening of Jewish music, in particular, certain preconceived expectations, which by definition limit a composer's creative inventiveness. For each of us, these notions are not necessarily identical. In fact, they often are mutually exclusive. Let's look at what I mean from the vantage point of this particular congregation.

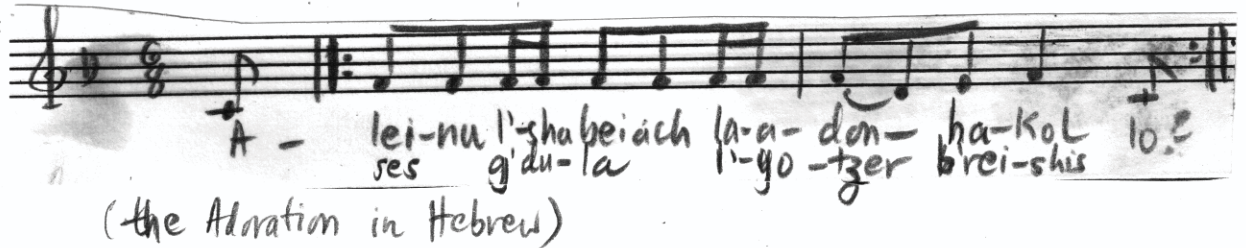
Temple Israel began its life in the tradition of strict classical Reform Judaism. It was pure, and owed its origins directly to Germanic or Viennese liturgical and musical sources. Over the years that purity gradually became "corrupted" by non-Germanic elements. As affluence lent a helping hand, the

Russian-Polish segment of the population entered the membership rolls, until it now constitutes a goodly portion of our Temple's personality chart. More and more, the character of Temple Israel is becoming a mixed bag; and that's good news, a healthy development. (After all, biologically speaking, a mixed breed is usually more than the sum of its parts. It is, in fact, a stronger organism.)

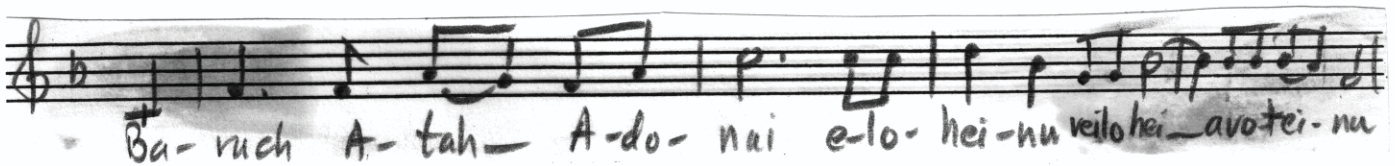
But what happens musically? Well, the fellow who went to Sunday school on Kingshighway grew up with and would like to hear:



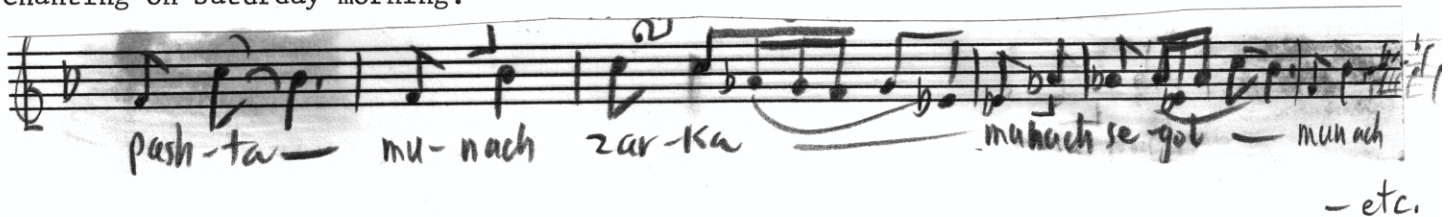
And the guy raised in a conservative schul, who is now one of our members, has fond memories of:



Then the Jew of a Talmud Torah background (the one who went to Hebrew School every afternoon after public school), he surely misses his davening:



Or someone recalls his Bar Mitzvah training, and would like to hear some Haftarah chanting on Saturday morning:



And there are many number of other needs and wants, based on "tradition" or nostalgia. There are those who would like to hear a gutsy Cantor, along with a top-notch male choir, or a mixed choir (I mean with females), or a weeping -wailing

Hazzan by himself. Still other congregants would prefer to be their own choir, in *other words* -- sing-along music. Then there are the younger folk who (at least in theory) crave swinging guitar "sh'mones" <sup>(trifles, folly)</sup> or they want to groove on Hassidic or Israeli jam sessions.

All of these, then -- legitimate requests, and all representative of this fairly new melting pot on the American Jewish scene: <sup>(a phenomenon yet to be fully evaluated)</sup> the large suburban Temple. ↑ Now, what do I do, as the Music Director of such a conglomeration? Subscribe to one element at the expense of another, or to all elements in a more or less equal share? Well, more often than not, we have tried for the latter alternative, with the result that at times the music in our services is, indeed, a kind of chicken soup. We toss in a bone, a little rice, some vegetables, a hank of hair and God knows what else.

It is no wonder, then, that an objective, intelligent listener might judge such a mish-mash as a lesser kind of music, since it lacks artistic unity and integrity. You may logically respond that services are not intended for this hypothetical critic, but for me, the worshipper. And, what "I like," of course, is what counts. And I concede you have a point. Yet children like a lot of candy, too, but they learn to grow out of it.

Well, are there any solutions? Sure -- one way would be to offer, on a regular weekly basis, one unified kind of service. Instead of having a Hassidic tune mixed in with a Viennese hymn, one Friday would concentrate mainly on east-European "chiri-bim-bams" and the next Friday would be devoted to the dignified school of Sulzer and Lewandowski; the third week to something new or American, and the fourth week to total congregational participation. Yet such a procedure, consistent with the order of services in the prayerbook, is not likely to succeed because it assumes that to achieve maximum effect -- educationally, aesthetically and religiously -- the same people would return week after week. And that, I don't have to tell you, is improbable.



Another solution that has been suggested is the so called "multi-track" service: that is, more than one type of service in the same temple at the same time, each marching (if you will) to the beat of a different drummer. And actually this practice is going on in some synagogues -- even in ours, to a certain extent. But this also makes an assumption: that a Temple is large enough to accommodate such simultaneous activities: a chapel service for the die-hard traditionalists, a youth service in the school building, the Couples Club doing their thing in the auditorium, and a fancy choir service in the sanctuary. Highly impractical or unlikely -- at least as far as musical preparations are concerned.

But is this the answer, really? Does it do away with the chicken soup approach to Jewish music? Are we not still catering to your taste, and to his "geshmack" and to their gastronomic delight? Isn't music again being asked to answer for everyone, without any sense of real adventure or discovery?

That, gentlemen, I submit is downright antithetical to Jewish thought. If you agree with me, that one of the pillars of Jewish strength over the centuries has been the love of learning, you cannot omit the love of learning music. By that I mean the eagerness and interest in being exposed to unfamiliar strains, yes--even to difficult sounds. So ~~suffer~~ <sup>but gain so much.</sup> a little. Think of the pleasure after the pain, once you realize that genuine musical understanding is akin to religious fulfillment. For you then have some insight into the creative process, which certainly must be part of a belief in God.

I mentioned earlier that all of us are guilty of second rating Jewish music, including the pros. Just give a listen to a typical Jewish music festival -- everything from soup to nuts: start off with renaissance or medieval music, to give it a chronological "authentic" touch, some Cantorial kvetching, a touch of Yiddish, perhaps some Ladino or Yemenite tune, an operatic prayer setting, ending

up with the inevitable "Fiddler on the Roof" or "Jerusalem of Gold." We do it because we believe this is what the ~~crowd~~ wants -- and they do, which is fine for a pops kind of evening. But to make it the sine qua non of every Jewish music concert is <sup>pernicious</sup> ~~ruinous~~, for it perpetuates the myth that our music has to mean something to everyone. <sup>- a common denominator</sup> Of course that's nonsense, for inevitably it leaves one with Reader's Digest comprehension, <sup>(and artismatism)</sup> neither "milchdiks" or "fleishiks."

At the risk of incurring your wrath, I must repeat to this Brotherhood exactly what I said three years ago when I was introduced to the Sisterhood. I <sup>have</sup> ~~am~~ not <sup>been</sup> here to please specific congregants or Boards of Directors or Rabbis. No, the only person I should try to please is myself. Now, wait a minute, before you start throwing eggs at me. That does not mean that I do not have certain responsibilities. Of course there is a need for <sup>doing the familiar and for</sup> congregational singing. No one denies that. But the decision as to which melodies are to be used cannot be based on "this was the way <sup>or what</sup> we did ~~it~~ before" or "yes, it may sound Methodist, but I like it." That simply is not sufficient reason. Although there may be textual considerations in some cases, that decision must be -- I insist -- a musical one. Bad music is bad music, no matter how you slice it. Christian music that passes for Jewish is still Goyish, no matter how dearly you may hold it to your breast. You wouldn't dream of a Rabbi delivering a sermon just to please you, just because he says things you would like to hear. No, you want to be inspired or enlightened, and on the basis of truth. Similarly, there is such a phenomenon as musical truth, and it is up to the professional to steer you away from musical lies and half-truths.

All well and good. But how do we go about learning musical truth, (the mechanics for instruction)? We have tried occasionally to have so called sing-ins, where music was learned, immediately prior to the service, in the sanctuary. And although these have been mildly successful, I think many of us may have been

intimidated by the dignity of the surroundings. Therefore, I would suggest that we ask you -- once in a while -- to skip coffee and dessert for your Shabbat meal at home, and, instead, have you come join us here for coffee and dessert in the auditorium. In other words, we have our Oneg Shabbat before, rather than after the service. And while you are sipping and munching, song sheets would be distributed (with the musical notes), and you learn some new tunes in a social and informal atmosphere where you might not be as stifled as in the sanctuary.

Now, before we open the floor to questions and comments, I do not want you to be left with the impression that I am anti-chicken soup. That would be like saying I am anti-semitic. There are of course, many fine works of Jewish music (as well as shlocky ones); and there even are masterpieces, which is rather remarkable, considering the history of our music. You see, as a culture we were always surrounded by a host society; and so it was natural that our music take on some of the characteristics of that host. We've had music affected by Christian sources, by foreign folk tunes, by Italian opera, by -- in other words -- the general musical peculiarities of a particular country or region.

Let me show you what I mean with a quickie survey.

I have chosen some beloved melodies, and I would like to demonstrate their Protestant or Catholic sources. First, here's a tune we just sang in worship service this evening:

EX. MI CHAMOCHA

Now here is a Hymn out of a Protestant Hymnal called Sun of My Soul (that sun is spelt: S- U- N):

Ex. SUN OF MY SOUL

If you wish to play the game of chicken versus the egg, as to which came first, the Mi Chamocha was written by Salomone Sulzer, ~~who lived in Vienna in the 19th century.~~ In a Catholic Hymnal, we find that the original tune for the other, <sup>however, was to be found</sup> in the Katholisches Gesangbuch, published in Vienna, c. 1774.

Here is another Sulzer melody, used frequently in our services:

EX. HODO AL ERETZ (8 bars)

By way of comparison, a setting of the Latin prayer Panis Angelicus ("Bread of the Angels") by Cesar Franck, who was--more or less--a contemporary of Sulzer's:

EX. PANIS ANGELICUS (8 bars)

*cut*  
~~In the case~~ <sup>in this case,</sup> the similarities ~~are~~ are less identical, but they do show the same general affinity for religious music. So <sup>what</sup> ~~what~~ is the differentiation between <sup>the</sup> ~~what is~~ Jewish and <sup>the</sup> ~~what is~~ Christian -- only the words?

As a third example, <sup>I give you</sup> ~~here is~~ a ~~XXXXXXIX~~ Catholic Communion Hymn. Listen carefully, and you tell me which very well-known Jewish hymn it resembles:

EX. MERCIFUL SAVIOUR

O.K. Any ideas? That's right:

EX. EYN KELOHEINU

One final set of comparisons. Dating from 1523, here is part of a Lutheran chorale:

EX. Nun Freut Euch

Of course that is very much like:

EX. MOOZ TSUR

1804-90



Now, mind you, I am not throwing this tune-detective stuff at you just <sup>to</sup> give us <sup>all</sup> a sense of inferiority. No, my purpose is to deflate the sanctity with which we endow these melodies. I am talking about notes and harmonies, ~~am~~ not talking about words. ~~Logically, then, it follows,~~ <sup>then: what</sup> ~~which~~ would be genuine? Jewish musicalizations of ~~all~~ these? Well, for instance, here is an acceptable setting of MI CHAMOCHA:

EX. arr. by Helfman

Why is this <sup>one</sup> ~~kosher~~ <sup>for Sabbath</sup> and not the one by Sulzer? Because it makes use of the musical mode, assigned by tradition, to the Sabbath Eve. The mode is called Adonai Malach (<sup>demonstrate</sup> but that needn't concern us here).

As for Eyn Keloheinu, here is another version, arranged by the Dean of Jewish composers, Heinrich Schalit:

Ex. by Schalit

If that sounds strange, it's because it is based on a near-eastern tune, characteristic of Oriental Jews.

And, finally, I'd like you to hear another setting of MO-OZ TSUR, as <sup>composed</sup> ~~given~~ by a non-Jew-- ~~Benedetto~~ Marcello, who lived from 1686-1739. This, at least to my ears, far less Christian sounding than the tune we all know so well!

Ex. Marcello.

What does this survey tell us? Something quite obvious. If our music has been so greatly influenced by the dominant society of a particular age, ~~it follows~~ <sup>also influenced</sup> ~~that it should be infiltrated~~ by the culture of our day. Here we are, living in St. Louis, Mo., U.S.A. in the year 1973, and still we are ~~are~~ bulldozed by music that belongs to Vienna, ~~and, in~~ <sup>viintage</sup> Europe of 1873. I say, enough already! We have the talent and resources in our country. It is up to you Temple goers, and to your <sup>counterparts elsewhere</sup> ~~compatriots~~--are you going to persist in maintaining a museum of the past in Jewish music, or you going to insist on laying a new foundation for future generations