

Jack Gottlieb
Remarks on NFTY Music Trends
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I've been frantically trying to cut my remarks to the bone and I will speak very rapidly.

The music of the Jewish people is preeminently a music of single-line vocal melody. This idea of melody being "top dog" has persisted into our own times with the result that large-scale choral works, in the Jewish world, are more a rarity than a rule. Now by placing a high stress on melody, all the other parameters of music have, by definition, been pushed into playing secondary roles. Melody is the master, whose handmaiden is called Harmony, and whose valet is called Accompaniment. And beneath these two upstairs servants, at least in the Jewish household, are the kitchen help called Counterpoint, Rhythm, and Instrumentation. Therefore it's not at all inconsistent with history that guitar slingers – I mean singers – with their single-line vocals and occasional duo should have their day in the sun. However, their melodic output really has to be judged by the same standards as any other melodic composition: in other words, as art. And do these songs stand up under the scrutiny of the analytic microscope?

How, for example, do they approach the climax of the tune? In fact, is there any feeling for reaching a peak at all? Does the rise and fall of the melody seem capricious, or does it really satisfy us with a sense of genuine inevitability? In other words, does the tune seem forced? I submit that a NFTY [North American Federation of Temple Youth] tune such as [Arnie Lawrence's], "Beloved, Come to Meet the Bride" is an artificially induced conception because it has already shot its bulk, so to speak, in the second measure, having reached the highest note in the entire song [*sings*], "Beloved, come to **meet** the bride" – that high note [*in bold*], "**meet** the bride." It then proceeds to repeat this characteristic motive immediately [*sings*], "**Be**-loved...**meet the bride, be**-love..." That's in the refrain, and then in the A section it appears twice more – I won't sing them for you now – in the B section only once, in the C section two more times, and in the last section once again. Eight appearances in all! Now I suppose there's a kind of American Indian charm to this song, but I don't believe it was intended to be a rain dance prayer. In fact, I find it a clone-like job, not at all inspired.

Let's take another criteria. Do the tunes in question take advantage of their applied harmonies? Indeed, do their composers care anything about harmonic rhythm – that is, the rate and quality of chordal changes? While it is a fact that many folk tunes – I think of, "On Top of Old Smokey" – rely on basic tonic, dominant, and subdominant chords, I'm not convinced that their usage in some of these NFTY melodies is a case of following the maxim of the Shakers, "'tis the gift to be simple," or just a case of simple-mindedness. Take the [Dan Freeland/Jeffer Klepper] setting for "Modeh Ani." It's in the key of G, and contains six G (tonic) chords, seven C (subdominant) chords, and ten D (dominant) chords. Now there's one unexpected chord of F Major, a modal coloration – OK, no problem. But there happen to be seven progression of the C chord followed by

the D chord – seven of them – in a total of 24 bars. And that, folks, to me, is like a recording stuck in its grooves. Don't misunderstand me: I'm not saying that there have to be complicated modulations and the like. In fact, it *is* a gift to be simple, and what's more, it's damn hard to accomplish, because you have to be all the more convincing and fresh.

Going on, we need to ask how do motives and phrases in a specific tune relate to each other? Is there a distinctive developmental process going on? And that, perhaps, is the ultimate test, no matter how miniature a piece of music may be. If there's no growth, then we're dealing with another kind of music – in fact, another kind of religion. I refer to the kind of music heard in the East, hypnotic, *raga*-like, repetitive chants. Now in the NFTY setting (and I'm skipping a lot) of “L'dor vador,” do the melodic seeds erupt into natural rows, or into a Woolworth's plastic imitation? I want to show you what I mean. She has a leap, I believe, Ms. Debbie [Friedman], of an octave [*sings*], “L'dor vador nagid godlecha,” repeat. “Ul'neitzach n'tzachim,” sequence, “k'dushat'cha...” whatever. “V'shiv'chacha,” another sequence, “da-da-da-da,” oh come off it! If that's not a ripoff of the “Tara” theme [from *Gone with the Wind*], then like Rhett Butler, my dear, we should all never give a damn! [*sings* Tara theme]

And speaking of non-Jewish associations, what are we to make of the melody that NFTY is putting out for [Steve Reuben's] “V'shamru?” To me, it's something that Harry Belafonte could do very well. In Hebrew [*sings*], “V'shamru v'nei Yisrael, v'shamru et hashabbat.” Well, let me put some Calypso words to that [*sings*], “Day-o, day-o, da-daylight come and me wanna go home. Come Mistuh Tallyman come, tally me banana, d-daylight me wanna go home,” and so on.

Let's take the famous [Klepper/Freeland] “Shalom Rav,” and this is my last example. This is a fine, mainly fine tune; I really dig it. It's even suggestive of the Magein Avot mode. But – I don't have to repeat it for you – in one phrase I'm a little bothered. What page is it on – [*sings*] “Shalom rav, al yisrael amcha, da da da...” and goes on. “V'tov b'einecha l'vareich et amcha yisrael” – now, I can't help but think of the verse to “September Song!” I'm disturbed, because even though Kurt Weill, its composer, was a nice Jewish boy [*crosstalk*], OK, [*sings*], “When I was a young man courting a girl, I played me a waiting game...” Well, I'm exaggerating to make a point. Now [*crosstalk*] that's all right, Jeff this afternoon pointed out that in one of my songs I sounded like, “You must remember this, a kiss is just a kiss,” so [*crosstalk*] OK.

I will close up by saying I'm told congregations lap up this stuff – I don't know, I've been away from this scene from five years, regrettably so, and I want to thank you for inviting me here today, by the way. So I wonder if they lap it up, if they might not be better off coming to services with a Sony Walkman wrapped around their heads like a new form of tefillin [*laughter*]? What, for the life of me, is the point of going to shul to hear the same thing you can get in the company of your living room by turning on WPAT? But leaving that argument aside, on strictly musical ground – and that's all I'm talking about tonight – in the synagogue, the not-so-new trendy songs should at least be as artful as a Joni Mitchell or a Neil Diamond tune. And let us – I find so much art-less,

and in this case, that's not to be defined as innocent. In fact, I would call it insidious. Alas, to this **very** concerned listener, NFTY stuff ain't so nifty.

Transcribed by Joshua Breitzer, July 2010.