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From Second Avenue to the Synagogue: The Vital Connection between Theater and Worship as Illustrated in the Life and Music of Abe Ellstein

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Master of Sacred Music Degree

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This thesis is dedicated to my husband Steve Feffer
for introducing me to Second Avenue and the Lower East Side;

my cantor Aviva Katzman who led me into the cantorate
and instilled in me the love of Yiddish;

and the blessed memory of Abe Ellstein.

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Everything should be as in real life.

-Anton Chekhov to the cast of

the first production of his play, The Seagull, St. Petersburg, 1896.

From Second Avenue to the Synagogue: The Vital Connection between Theater and Worship as Illustrated in the Life and Music of Abe Ellstein

Introduction

Theater is an inherent part of human existence. Its ubiquitous character is found in relationships and the roles human beings play and act out in daily life. Adults often ask children : "What do you want to be when you grow up? a detective? a nurse? a doctor? a lawyer? a cook? a rabbi? the President of the United States?" Children experiment with "what they want to be" by role-playing. This role playing begins at an early stage in child development. By the age of two children often try out "being parents" with a doll as the "baby." They role play by mimicking their parents. While parents help shape children's behavior and what roles they play in life, it is the individual's desires and imaginations that later help define roles and drive human beings to choose "what they want to be."

People play many different roles in their lives and these roles are the essence of human experience. Drama begins when infants take in their first breath at birth and continues until they breathe out their last. One of the modern German dramatists Bertolt Brecht states:

> One easily forgets that human education proceeds along highly theatrical lines. In a quite theatrical manner the child is taught how to behave; logical arguments only come later. When such-and-such occurs , it is told (or sees), one must laugh. It joins in when there is laughter, without knowing why; if asked why it is laughing it is wholly confused. In the same way it joins in shedding tears, not only weeping because the grown-ups do so but also feeling genuine sorrow. This can be seen at funerals, whose meaning escapes children entirely. These are theatrical events which form the character. ...It is no different from grown-ups. Their education never finishes. Only the dead are beyond being altered by their fellow men. ...The

> theatre is so to speak the most human and universal art of all, the one most commonly practiced, i.e. practiced not just on the stage but also in everyday life.[1]

Theater is vital to human interaction. Daily life is dramatized and "acted out," including the religious dimension of human experience. Religion stems from a theatrical impulse to praise a higher being publicly and communally in a quest to understand the great mysteries of life. Prayer and rituals, like most of early education, are learned by imitating parents' words and ritual observance. As human beings mature they either change, reject, or make those performed rituals their own. Often these acts bring them into a community where performed rituals are established and nurtured. In a religious setting, drama lies in a community's performance of worship and rituals. In the sacred theater, drama assumes a transcendent quality and brings human emotion to the edge of an unknown.

This paper is an exploration of the integral connection between theater and worship. I contend that this connection is one of the most important to understand for the future of religious worship to succeed. To prove my theory, I will use the life and work of Abe Ellstein, the famous composer for both Yiddish theater and film and for the synagogue. This paper is divided into three sections. First, I will examine the inherent drama in human life, the history of drama and its connection to worship, specifically Jewish worship. Additionally, I will explore the theatrical power of music through the role of the chazan who serves as both sacred artist and spiritual leader. I will trace the traditional role played by the chazan, and then investigate the later link established between the theater and the chazan, as sacred performer and liturgical artist. In the second part of this paper, I will explore that period in Jewish American History when the sacred and secular worlds of the synagogue and theater were strongly linked through synagogue artists, specifically chazanim and composers. Finally, I will show how the composer Abe Ellstein connected theater and synagogue through the theatrical impulse found in music of both the sacred and secular worlds at a time in Jewish American life when these two worlds were intertwined.

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[1]Bertolt Brecht, Brecht On Theatre, trans. and ed. by John Willet (New York: Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982), 152.

In conclusion, I will offer my own insights into the vital connection between theater and worship today and the importance of prayer leader as sacred performer.

Part One: The Vital Connection Between Theater and Worship.

In his book, From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play, Victor Turner defines and explores what drama is in daily life. He connects theater and ritual and confronts the drama in human being's daily lives, which includes the sacred drama of religion. Turner terms drama in life "social drama." Social drama exists on many levels: "In large scale modern societies social dramas may escalate from the local level to national revolutions." Social dramas not only thrive in conflicts that arise out of living but also are evident in the normalcy and routine of daily life. As he puts it,

> Social life, then, even its apparently quietist moments, is characteristically "pregnant" with social dramas. ...Thus the roots of theatre are in social drama, and social drama accords well with Aristotle's abstraction of dramatic form from the works of the Greek playwrights.[2]

By this Turner means that drama exists in every aspect of our lives, whether it be a major event such as a death or a wedding, or a mundane experience like shopping. These "social dramas" thus form life, and are at the core of human existence.

Worship and theatre evolved through the art of telling human "social dramas" and re-enacting them . The act of storytelling first emerged in Greek worship. Later, in fact, these staged social dramas became Greek tragedies. That is, Greek stories were used to act out religious beliefs in communities where storytelling was a means of communication. Storytelling became a way of dramatically presenting the events in their daily lives. Sacred stories of social dramas became "larger than life" in order to show the fear and judgment of the Greek gods. At its root, Greek worship was theater.

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[2]Victor Turner, From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play, (New York City: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 10-11.

Turner shows the historical connection between worship and theater by citing the theatre historian Phyllis Hartnoll. She begins her book, The Concise History of the Theater,[3] with a discussion of the development of Greek Tragedy. These plays were often accompanied by a "dithyramb (unison singing) sung around the altar of Dionysus during certain religious feasts." This dithyramb was a song praising Dionysus that

> came to deal with his life in much the same way as early medieval European Liturgical plays about the birth, life, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, narratives loaded with conflict, grew from the lyrical portion of the Easter morning mass. The mass, the Eucharist, itself was, of course, a drama with a scriptural script long before it gave rise to "Passion Plays."

The Passion Play is a Christian drama ordinarily performed immediately preceding the Easter holiday whose central theme centers on the life and crucifixion of Jesus Christ and his disciples. The play emphasizes the themes of the holiday through a dramatic portrayal of their leader. Hartnoll also emphasizes here how a religious service is a drama "with a script." As with the Greek dithyramb, Passion Plays illustrate the vital connection between theater and worship.

Drama is also evident in religious rituals performed outside a formal worship setting. In the chapter meaningfully entitled "Acting in Everyday Life/ Everyday Life in Acting," Turner brings the examples of birth rites among the Ndemu people of Zambia to illustrate the characteristic divisions between men and women.[4] The ritual acted out is a sign of the Ndemu people's separate and distinct feminine and masculine domains. The ritual surrounding the birth of each male or female child is a way of acting out and engendering the community, thereby setting guidelines for male and female roles. That is, repeated enactment of such rituals communicates communal norms and expectations.

Rituals must be performed. Unless the ritual is "acted out" its meaning is lost. Turner points out the significance of the performance of a ritual saying,

> Such an experience is incomplete though unless one of its "moments" is "performance," an act of creative retrospection in which "meaning" is ascribed to

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[3]Ibid.; p. 103.
[4]Ibid.; p. 110.

> the events and parts of the experience- even if the meaning is "there is no meaning." Thus experience is both "living through" and "thinking back."[5]

In other words, the memory from experiencing the performance of a ritual gives the ritual meaning. The ritual then becomes a symbol of a community as a part of its social drama. These ritual performances are then incorporated into a people's social drama and are then infused into the drama of their worship.

In ancient Judaism, worship was created around the dramatic event of the ritual sacrifice. Recall the ritual sacrifice of the burnt offerings or offerings of the first fruits, as mapped out in the Book of Leviticus. The acting out of this religious rite was essential to the communication between the Jewish people and their God. Ritual sacrifices were a crucial part of the social drama of Jews, for they allowed them to praise their God in a physical way. Eventually ritual sacrifice evolved into prayer. After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., the Jewish people replaced the ritual of animal sacrifice with a set liturgy, evolving from these sacrifices. This prayer became in effect a dialogue between a people and its God.

The liturgy, like a well structured play contains a warm up, a climax and a denouement. On Shabbat and weekdays, the warm up continues until the *Sh'ma* (Listen!) and its blessings and then the service nears a climax with the *Amida* (Standing Prayer). When the Torah is read (Mondays, Thursdays, Holidays, and the Sabbath), the Torah service is the climax. In all services, there is an *Aleinu* (We Rise) prayer that is the denouement, the wrap-up and the closure. The liturgy, based on these elements, encompasses a set form of worship that both tells sacred stories and praises the Jewish God.

Like the Greeks, Jews ritualize their history by dramatizing their sacred stories of the Torah. The *baal korei* (Torah chanter) is responsible for bringing the sacred text to life. Chanting the Torah is an art form in and of itself. The *taamim* (cantillation marks) aid the

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[5]Ibid.; p. 18.

chanter in the act of storytelling through the expressive power of these ancient melodies. The cantillation was created in order to enable the reader to emphasize words, using the correct inflection, and to empower the sacred text through the theatrical impulse inherent to the musical chant. This text, the core of the Jewish people's story, is brought to life by this performance which is vital to the meaning of the Jews' central ritual.

The Torah service, too, consists of dramatic devices and techniques. It is the Jews' story of revelation at Sinai. The service begins with a grand piece of music with the following text: "There is none like you, O God, among the gods that are worshipped, and there are no deeds like Yours. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and Your dominion endures through all generations."[6] The prayer leaders open up the Ark, which holds the Torah, and then chant additional praises to God before removing it. Props are essential to the Torah service. For example, the Torah is fully costumed, with a decorated cover, breastplate, a special pointer to read it, called a yad, and a crown. Following the removal of the Torah from the Ark, the drama continues as the prayer leaders carry the Torah into the congregation in what is called a *hakafa* (encircling), while worshippers touch their *tallitot* (prayershawls) or prayerbook to the Torah and then kiss the shawls' tassels. This is ritual, a gesture of respect to the Jews' most sacred book, which contains their sacred stories. The Torah is fixed at the center of the congregation's attention, either in the center of the sanctuary as in Sephardic congregations or at a special table for reading the Torah raised up on the *bima* (stage). It is then carefully undressed and prepared for the chanting. After the chanting, the Torah is lifted and opened up so that the congregation can play witness to the text, observing the letters that make up the story. Meanwhile the cantor chants a prayer which proclaims: "This is the Torah which Moses revealed to the people of Israel according to Adonai our God." The Torah is re-dressed and replaced in the ark while additional praises are sung. The entire Torah service is replete with drama, complete with

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[6]Chaim Stern, ed., Gates Of Prayer, (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1975), 417.

theatrical devices that provide an undercurrent of meaning to the worshippers. From beginning to end there are specific props, costume, performed rituals and music in the form of chanting that transform an "audience." In his book, The Art of Public Prayer; Not for Clergy Only, Dr. Larwrence Hoffman explains the importance of this sacred performance, "Each worship service is a rereading of a sacred script and the establishment of a new sacred reality, a world that did not exist until we willed it to, one that we establish anew with every sacred performance."[7] Clearly, this is an example of the drama in worship and the importance of the skilled performance of the service.

One of the most dramatic of all times in the Jewish calendar both in spirit and liturgy is the *Yamim Noraim* (the ten days of repentance). It is period of great awe and sobriety necessitating the techniques of high drama. The service leader is vital to the outcome of the worship experience. Props are clothed in white to symbolize renewal and purity. These ritual objects remind the worshipper that, "It is the new year, time for returning and repentance." In fact, tickets are exchanged for these services, as in the stage theatre. Today, in many Reform synagogues special musicians are hired and professional choirs rehearse. These are the holiest days in the Jewish calendar and the connection between theatre and prayer is at its apex.

Rosh Hashanah begins the "Days of Awe." The Shofar service performed on this day is a ritual signifying the Jew's "calling" to this important time. The liturgy reflects both the joy and trepidation of the New Year. It is, in fact, a script with drama that comes to life through the performance of the service leaders and their congregation. The *Unetane Tokef* section, traditionally appearing in the *Musaf* (additional) service of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, has some of the most fearsome and emotional texts in all of Jewish liturgy. It begins: "Let us tell how utterly holy this day is and how awe-inspiring." And continues with *Uv'Shofar Gadol* which proclaims the awesomeness of these days:

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[7]Lawrence A Hoffman, The Art of Public Prayer: Not for Clergy Only, (Washington D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1988), 237.

> The great shofar is sounded; a gentle whisper is heard; the angels, trembling with fear, declare: The day of judgment is here to bring the hosts of heaven to justice! indeed, even they are not guiltless in they sight. All mankind passes before thee like a flock of sheep. As the shepherd seeks out his flock, making sheep pass under his rod, so dost thou make all the living souls pass before thee; thou dost count and number thy creatures, fixing their lifetime and inscribing their destiny.[8]

This text shows how dramatic the High Holidays can be by employing metaphors. The image of God as a shepherd helps the congregation to understand its relationship to God at this sacred time. God takes on a human dimension and becomes both parent and judge. This relationship is a part of Jewish social drama. The *Unetane Tokef* section continues with the *B'Rosh Hashanah* prayer that claims that during this time God chooses "who shall live and who shall die." The text is as follows:

> On Rosh Hashanah their destiny is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, how many shall pass away and how many shall be brought into existence; who shall live and who shall die; who shall come to a timely end, and who to an untimely end; who shall perish by fire and who shall perish by water; who by sword and who by beast; who by hunger and who by thirst; who by earthquake and who by plague; who by strangling and who by stoning; who shall be at ease and who shall wander about; who shall be at peace and who shall be molested; who shall have comfort and who shall be tormented; who shall be poor and who shall be rich; who shall be lowered and who shall be raised. But repentance, prayer, and charity cancel the stern decree.[9]

The drama of this text, like that of most liturgy, depends on the cantor and composer to bring the words and the emotion behind the text to life. This text, usually chanted in Hebrew, may not mean a thing to the many congregants who do not understand Hebrew. While they have the text before them in the prayerbook, it is the awesomeness and fear that is evoked from the cries of the cantor that touch and awaken the soul of the listener. As illustration, consider the prayer *Kol Nidre* , the most beloved and revered chant in all Jewish liturgy. The text may indeed have nothing at all to do with the emotion connected to the sacred melody. *Kol Nidre* is the name given to the evening service that begins Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year. This prayer and its attendant haunting sounds are so important that it is recited three times so that if anyone is late, they

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[8]Phillip Birnbaum, trans., and ed., with intro., High Holiday Prayer Book, (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1951), 361.

[9]Ibid., p. 361

will still hear the prayer. The text is a legal document, written in Aramaic, announcing the renoucement of personal vows that will be made between this Yom Kippur and the next. The meaning of the text has over time diminished in importance; the musical performance of the prayer has become preeminent. Many Jews, especially Jews who only attend services on this day, connect with this prayer because for them it is a symbol of their Judaism. Some will seek out a synagogue with the best cantor so that on *Kol Nidre* they will be brought to tears.

This clear connection between the drama of the liturgy and the performance of the service leader, in this case through the music of the chazan, illustrates how important it is to study the history of the chazan, including especially his or her connection to dramatic art through the theatrical impulse in music. Understanding this connection is essential to the success of worship experience.

The significance of service leaders and their performance is demonstrated by the High Priest on Yom Kippur in the time that the Temple stood in Jerusalem.[10] The High Priest, referred to as the Holy of Holies, was separated from the rest of the community in order that he remain "pure" so that he could represent his people to God on Yom Kippur in the purest state. As written in Mishnah Yoma, tractate Yoma, the high priest is specifically instructed on how to lead his life in the week preceding Yom Kippur. During this week he must offer sacrifices to atone for himself, his household and the people of Israel. He also learns how to perform the Avoda part of the service, which during Temple times consisted of a service of sacrifices being offered by the High Priest for forgiveness from God on this Holiest day. As detailed in the Mishnah:

> They delivered him elders from the Elders of the Court and they read before him out of the rite of the day; and they said to him, 'My lord High Priest, recite with thine own mouth in case thou hast forgotten or lest though hath never learnt.' On the Eve of the Day of Atonement in the morning they made him stand at the Eastern Gate

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[10]The role of the leader can be compared to the role of the performers of the stories in Greek worship in that their presence and performance were vital to the success of the worship experience.

and passed before him oxen, and rams, and sheep in order that he become acquainted and versed in the Service.[11]

These specific guidelines and instructions of performance of the ritual here show the significance of the actions surrounding the Holy of Holies during this time and the importance of his **exact** performance of these rituals in order for him to serve his people successfully. He even had to rehearse his actions before the Day of Atonement. The role of the High Priest on Yom Kippur demonstrates the connection between theatre and worship because it was centered upon the performance of one individual and specific rituals that were prescribed for this particular event. There was an oral script and an order of sacrifice that shaped the Avoda service to instill the worship experience with a sense of holiness.

The chazan is an additional example of a religious leader whose performance is vital to the outcome of a worship. The chazan, in fact, acts as the bridge, in many ways, between theater and worship. The earliest reference of the word chazan in Hebrew literature is found in the Mishnah, which was compiled in the Tannaitic period around the beginning of the first century C.E. until approximately 220 C.E. Here the word chazan (which literally means "overseer") is mentioned in three different sections known as Tractates. The first is from the Tractate Shabbat, where the word chazan is translated best as "teacher." The second is from Tractate Yoma where the word chazan is best translated as "sexton." The third and final reference to the word chazan is in Tractate Sota, and is best translated as "the minister."[12] Each refers to a role played by the chazan in accordance with the laws of synagogue life, however, the exact role of the chazan during this early period is unclear. It can be hypothesized from these findings that during this time the chazan's role was more of a ministering or "overseeing" role like that of the role of the

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[11]Masehet Yoma, Tractate Yoma, Chapter One, Mishnah three.

[12]Tractate Shabbat, Chapter One, Mishnah Three; Tractate Yoma, Chapter Seven, Mishnah One; Tractate Sota, Chapter Seven, Mishnah Seven.

Temple President in today's synagogue. Mark Slobin explains the rise of the need for chazanim and their earlier role in Chosen Voices:

> Slowly, the notion of the hazzan comes into sharper focus as part of the classification of prayer leaders and crystallizes about the year 600. What happens is that the congregations begin to rely on someone to help them through the long sequence of Hebrew prayers that form the backbone of he service. Remember that Hebrew was not the Jewish vernacular when the Diaspora began. So worshippers let someone step forward-or elected a congregant- to serve as an "ideal" projector of prayer. This person was known as *sheliach tsibbur*, 'messenger (envoy, emissary) of the congregation', and was required to be a particularly pious and upstanding Jew.[13]

Already by the year 600, the chazan was a paid position, unlike that of the *sheliach tsibbur*. The role of the *sheliach tsibbur* was eventually subordinated to that of the worship leaders such as the chazan. The performance aspects of the chazan emerged later after the inception of the *pytanim* (liturgical poets). These *pytanim* were hired artists who wrote poems to add to the liturgy to beautify the service according to the commandment of *hiddur mitzvah* (beautifying a commandment). This poetry gave way to the chazanim's first connection with the world of art and their role as sacred performers, as Slobin contends:

> Why communities wanted the hazzan, whose contribution equaled and exceeded that of the sheliach tsibbur, is not totally clear, but many scholars feel the rise of this new sacred singer is tightly connected to the emergence of the piyut as vital expression of Jewish aesthetic and religious feelings. ...To create or sing a piyut required extra skill, so it is not surprising that the rise of the piyut and of the hazzan are coincidental, since they are probably interdependent. [14]

The rise of the *piyutim* (sacred poems) significantly changed the face of Jewish worship and the role of the chazan. This change seemed to emerge from the natural human desire to create art out of ritual and then to express it through performance. Because of the drama inherent in human life, it may have been inevitable that the chazan would take on the role as sacred performer. This relationship between the *pytanim* and the chazanim as sacred artists demonstrates the evolving connection between theater and prayer in Jewish worship.

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[13]Mark Slobin, Chosen Voices: The Story of the American Cantorate, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 5.

[14]Ibid., p. 6.

Through his connection with the written art of the pytan, the chazan became linked to the artistic world at large. As a sacred artist, the chazan uses the vehicle of music that uniquely has the power to affect the human soul. The chazan as sacred performer interacts with the audience/congregation in a religious environment. As the role of the chazan evolved, the connection between theater and synagogue developed and strengthened. It became necessary for a chazan to possess formal musical training, often learned by mimicking master-teachers of the cantorial art-chazanut. Like the child that learned how to "act" naturally from his parents, so, too, did the chazan "naturally" learn through mimesis to chant. Most were M'shorrim (boy singers who sang harmonies with the chazan) who worked closely with a chazan in a "shul choir" and learned their craft by the imitation of their chazan. The chazan became intimately connected to the institute of theatre in the Jewish America of the 1920's, during the height of the American Yiddish theatre.

In the following section, the connection between theater and worship will be further explored by examining the period in Jewish American history when synagogue artists lived and thrived in both the theater and in the synagogue. The composer Abe Ellstein in particular, embraced both worlds through his talents and understanding of the natural human attraction to the theatrical and religious impulses in music.

Part Two: The Connection Between Theater and Worship as Illustrated in the Lives of the Stage Actors from Second Avenue Yiddish Theater and Liturgical Artists of the Synagogue.

Until its demise at the beginning of World War II, the Yiddish theater gradually came to replace the synagogue for many first-and-second-generation American Jews. Especially for those living in New York City, Jews seeking to Americanize flocked to Second Avenue to watch spectacles performed in their "mama-lashn" (mother-tongue). The Yiddish theater drew crowds and formed a community of audience and performers. It offered an outlet for the fantasy, humor, and sorrow of Jewish social dramas. It also provided a platform for Jewish identity, on the stage and off, that fed the needs of secular but ethnic Jews. Most of the performers were former choirboys or chazanim who left the synagogue to pursue dreams on the stage of America and often found success in both the theater and synagogue. Therefore, they had the ability to draw from their experiences in both the sacred and secular worlds and bring to each the other's qualities. The artists' performances filled an emptiness in many Jewish souls that were lost in the New World. Because of the changing role of the synagogue at this time and the romantic appeal of the Yiddish theater, the role of the synagogue artists (the cantor and the composer) wove the worlds of the synagogue and theater together, a connection between theater and worship that continues to shape the synagogue artist today.

The shul choir gave birth to the creators of the Yiddish theater not unlike the Greek dithyramb gave birth to Greek Tragedies. The choir boys became familiar and often learned cantorial art from participating in the choirs that were an integral part of the synagogue worship. Eventually they took these sacred sounds into the secular world. Choirboys learned how to perform by using the ancient chant and melodies performed by

"their chazan." As Irene Heskes explains in her article, "The Golden Age of Cantorial Artistry," "For almost everyone, the main source of ear training was the shul chor (synagogue choir), a group which functioned as melodic support for the traditional *hazzan* in the absence of instrumentation."[15] Over the centuries, the liturgical choir was also a significant form of Jewish music education. Its musical performances were daily and constant, offering a wide variety of presentations at multiple religious occasions. As Heskes points out, there was often a natural evolution from choir boy to chazan. With the change of their voices, many of the boys matured into chazanic apprentices: "They might stay on as adult choir-singers in order to complete an appropriate form of cantorial training, serving the congregation as assistants wherever needed."[16] In other words, the synagogue was the home base for these artists and wherever they went the ancient melodies remained with them because, as they quickly learned, its dramatic and emotional power touched their audiences. By performing the music learned in the shul choir, a passion for drama led them on a path connecting theater and worship. The Yiddish theater became for many an opportune form in which to express their creativity within a new American idiom. It was their ticket to stardom and success in "the goldene medina" because it embraced the sounds of the Old World within the new American Jewish way of life.

Many thrived simultaneously in the theater and the synagogue because of the financial necessity of the times and because their audiences needed a new pastime. In fact, it became typical for the choir boy of second-generation Jews to embrace both worlds as chazan and stage actor during the 1910s and 1920s when the "Golden Age of Cantors" came about. This "Golden Age of Cantors" occurred almost simultaneously with America's "Roaring Twenties," when the American stage and screen were exploding with entertainment for the hungry American public searching for a new identity. Chazanim were naturally drawn into performing on the bima, the stage, and the motion picture scene

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[15]Irene Heskes, "The Golden Age of Cantorial Artistry," (New York: Irene Heskes, 1991), 8.

[16]Ibid., p. 8.

because of the theatrical impulse inherent to all of these venues. Audiences of all kinds were desperate for a new way to experience the innate theater in their lives. Heskes points out the vital connection between theater and synagogue as illustrated in the great synagogue and theater artists of this period:

> During the great movement to America from 1880 to 1930, an influx of exceptional liturgists arrived here, and they established a remarkable milieu in this country for Jewish devotional music. Those decades were a time of adaptation and evolvement, of survival and adjustment. That time also constituted a 'golden glory era' for two distinctive Jewish cultural achievements, and invigoration of two basic age-old Judaic traditions implanted upon modern American shores: Yiddish theater, as a composite of the folklore of the purimshpil (Purim play) and badchonus (minstrelsy); and hazzanuth (cantorial art), as a sacred religious artistry. In America, prolific talents flourished for both the stage and the synagogue, supported by eager audiences in a free society. Stars of the theatricals were adored by Jewish audiences, and vaudeville houses presented their favorite cantorial stars. At concerts and charity benefits, popular performers included ballads from Yiddish shows along with new arrangements of liturgical selections. Often, a theater or large meeting hall would be engaged to serve as temporary synagogue, with services advertised as featuring a reknown cantor, and that place would be filled by eager listeners.[17]

It seemed almost inevitable that a chazan would enter onto the theater scene at one time or another because of the strong connection between the theater and the synagogue of this period in Jewish American History. More often than not, chazanim found themselves on the theater stage either in a Yiddish musical theater show or as a concert performer of chazanut. This was the time of the "star chazan" when Jews and some non-Jews flocked to certain synagogues to hear their favorite star daven a Shabbat or holiday service. Synagogues made a name for themselves through the reputation of the chazan who performed both at the shul and also at the theater down the street. The music of both the Yiddish theater and the synagogue drew in audiences because of its powerful ability to reach the innate theatrical impulse of the human soul. Slobin writes about the importance of the role of the chazan in the synagogue of this time:

> The cantor was a congregation's most cherished possession, chief contributor to its standing and popularity. His utility was constantly visible to all members of the congregation. For some he provided aesthetic pleasure, to others spiritual uplift, to

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[17]Ibid., p. 9.

> most a combination of both. Beyond that he provided the community with a subject for critique and conversation...[18]

The cantor was the synagogue's performer who was able to reveal the music of the audiences souls through the theatrical impulse of prayer. It is this attribute then that audiences also looked for in the performers of the Yiddish theater.

Slobin further explains the connection between the chazan and the Yiddish theater:

> At the same time, he [the cantor] also worked in the Yiddish theater, which another hazzan who doubled in weddings and melodramas as a child has called 'a unique admixture of the Yiddish soul and the synagogue'. Second Avenue, as the Yiddish Broadway was called, was closely allied to the cantorial world in several ways. First, as we have seen, theaters were rented out as sacred concert and service spaces. Second, theatre performers, of whom Moishe Oysher (1907-58) is the most famous example, could cross over and become sacred song stars.... Third, cantorial numbers popped up repeatedly in the plots of Yiddish melodramas and musicals, and were recorded. Either genuine liturgical items being sung on stage by actors, sometimes with remarkably good sense of style, or pseudo-sacred songs were composed by secular tunesmiths. Even in this latter case, the dividing line is hard to draw, as many of those who made a living writing for the Yiddish stage also produced large amounts of sacred music on the side. Finally, there was considerable overlap in "audience", between the Yiddish theater and the synagogue. Except for the ultra-Orthodox and those too Americanized to straddle two languages and cultures, many listeners enjoyed and criticized performances on the stage and in the sanctuary every week.[19]

The performance of music had the power to transform an audience in the shul or in the theater. Much of the early and later music of the Yiddish theater used the modes and sacred sounds of the synagogue in musical productions because these modes and melodies were the basis from which these once-choir-boy composers learned how to write their music. This musical connection enticed many Jews to attend the shows and often Yiddish actors would add a piece of chazanut to a show to guarantee its success.[20] It provided a taste of their culture and reawakened their Jewish identity that had often become muffled in the new daily American routine. In Vagabond Stars: A World History of the Yiddish Theatre, Nahma Sandrow writes:

> And when the manager comes into the theater and sees the audience crying like Yom Kippur in the synagogue, then he strokes his belly and goes home to sleep in

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[18]Slobin, p. 54.
[19]Ibid., pp. 73-74.
[20]Isaiah Sheffer, interview by author, New York City, 27 June 1995.

> peace, for he knows that this week he will be able to pay wages and make a profit.[21]

These sounds gave the Jewish immigrants a taste of their Jewish roots and often became a replacement for synagogue attendance. The Yiddish theater became the new Jewish sanctuary. Nahma Sandrow, commenting on Yiddish stars in the theater, remarks "and there they perform...what was probably the functions of the actors of pre-historic times: they invoke, ritually, the magical essence of the tribe."[22] These actors, most of whom originated in shul choirs, knew exactly how to express the deep emotions of the Jewish soul, and many new immigrants, who had abandoned their synagogue, were searching for just that. The actors of the Yiddish stage served as both a chazan and a *badchen* (a Jewish jester) for the American Jewish audience. The chazan or actor who performed in the Yiddish theater brought both laughter through "shpil" (play) and tears through haunting renditions of chazanut, often propelling himself into "stardom." Both chazan and Yiddish actor, through performance, had the power to soothe and comfort the immigrant Jew in need of both approval by the New World and a reminder of the Old.

The performers had a gift culled from their past. Jewish music had, after all, embodied the soul of the Jewish people. This music spoke volumes, based as it was on Jewish musical traditions of yesteryear. Early Yiddish folk music was based mostly upon cantorial recitatives and Jewish modes. Since most of the artists were once "synagogue artists" they were knowledgeable in the Jewish modes. In World of Our Fathers, Irving Howe quotes Joseph Rumshinsky, one of the great Jewish composers of his time:

> Almost all music in the early Yiddish theatre-wrote Joseph Rumshinsky-was based on cantorial compositions...Goldfadn was not a professional musician; he played his melodies with one finger, but he had a natural sense of rhythm. He surrounded himself with cantors and singers, but his chief collaborators were two musicians, Michael Finkelstein and Arnold Perlmutter who had been choirboys and later violin

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[21] Nahma Sandrow, Vagabond Stars: A World History of the Yiddish Theater, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1977), 261.

[22] Ibid., p. 411.

> players in an orchestra...They created a conglomeration of cantorial prayers, secular marches and waltzes, with occasional original numbers of Goldfadn.[23]

Like the chazanim who ventured into the theater world, these composers came from the synagogue "shul chor" and the sacred music of their youth passionately poured onto the Second Avenue stage.

Abe Ellstein was a composer who lived during this vibrant time for synagogue artists. As a composer, his work reflects the connection between theater and worship resulting from personal experience in both the sacred and secular worlds. In the following section, I will study his life and music, which illustrate the human attraction to the dramatic and religious impulse found in music of both the theater and the synagogue.

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[23]Irving Howe, World of Our Fathers, (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc. 1976), 462.

Part Three: The Connection between Theater and Worship as Illustrated in the Life and Music of Abe Ellstein.

Abe Ellstein's music was popular with Jewish audiences of his time because he understood that drama is a natural part of human existence, whether found in the theater or in the synagogue, and he incorporated this fact into all of his music. Drama is at the core of music that has the power to transcend the human soul. It has the power to change the human emotional state. At the same time, much of American Jewry of his day was straying from the synagogue and finding solace and pleasure instead in the Yiddish theater, which as demonstrated in an earlier section, often employed the music of the chazan in order to bring the sounds of the synagogue into the theater. Like many chazanim of his time, Ellstein, as a composer, ably infused the music of the synagogue into the theater. This made his music wildly popular with Jewish audiences. Ellstein later was led to the opera scene where he strived to shed his "Second Avenue skin." But he failed miserably, for at least one of his operatic compositions denied his talent for connecting the organic dramatic impulse in synagogue music to the secular world. In this section, I will first present Ellstein's biography, highlighting the events and people that later enabled him to realize a connection between theater and synagogue worship. In particular, I will focus on his travels with Cantor Yossele Rosenblatt and Yiddish actor Molly Picon. Then I will show how Ellstein combined the dramatic sounds of both theater and synagogue through his work in the radio industry, which celebrated both sacred singers and stage stars. In conclusion, I will investigate the reviews surrounding Ellstein's opera The Golem, which show that when Ellstein deliberately denied his musical roots, he failed to produce music that reached his audience.

Ellstein's childhood was the beginning of a life filled with theater both in the sacred and secular worlds. He was born on July 9, 1907 in New York City to immigrants from Lithuania, who shared the dream of all new-comers to America: to make a better life for themselves and, principally, for their children. His was a close-knit, Orthodox family, which provided Abe a home steeped in religion and its accompanying sacred sounds. Ellstein later was to use these sacred sounds in both sacred and secular compositions. Like many synagogue artists, Abe's musical career was launched when Abe's older brother brought him into the synagogue choir (shul chor) at the age of five.[24] At the time, Abe's family could provide music lessons for only one child, and Abe's older brother Harry was designated. Ellstein's widow, Sylvia Regan Ellstein claims that Abe would watch Harry's lesson from the doorway of the kitchen, and afterward would repeat the whole lesson from memory along with his brother.[25] Harry, being a smart little kid, told his parents that "Abie" was a musical genius. So Harry brought Abe to the Third Street Settlement House and demanded that he see the best piano teacher because "my little brother is a musical

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24Leah Jaffa and Committee, "The Music of Abraham Ellstein (1907-1963) and Max Helfman (1901-1963)", (New York: National Jewish Music Council, 1964), 1.

25In a personal interview on December 15, 1994 with Ellstein's widow, she told me that they met in the New York theater world in 1939 while Ellstein was traveling with Molly Picon as her accompanist and composer. Sylvia was a successful playwright and having her first Broadway play, Morning Star, produced when they met. She and her agent had decided on hiring Molly Picon as the lead role of Esther, the mother, and it was through this connection that the two artists met and fell in love. Ellstein and Picon were limited in their travel at this time because of the dark shadow of World War II, and therefore the timing of Sylvia Regan's request to hire Molly Picon as her star was perfect. Sylvia Regan says that she was in the middle of rehearsals for her play when she first met Abe while he was waiting for Molly and her husband Yankl. She had no idea who this man was and later met him at a restaurant at Yankl's birthday celebration. He told her that he did not like her because he was mad that she brought Molly to Broadway before he did. She said to him, "Bubbele, I'm so sorry!" and they fell madly in love after this meeting. They were married in 1940 when Abe was making most of his music in the Yiddish theater world.

genius!"[26] Sure enough the head teacher asked Abe to play for him and agreed with Harry. Ellstein was immediately enrolled in the music school.[27]

Ellstein was a child prodigy whose early work was developed at the Third Street Settlement House and through his involvement in synagogue choirs. For starters, he had a natural gift for conducting, as the historian Avraham Soltes maintains:

> By the age of eight he had written his first opera (five pages), and at nine, organized a public school band. At the same time, he was accepted as a singer in the children's chorus of the Metropolitan Opera, during which time he studied the piano with the renowned Frederick Jacobi, and counterpoint with Charles Haubiel.[28]

Thus before the age of ten, Abe Ellstein was composer, conductor, and singer in the secular and sacred worlds.

At the age of seventeen, Ellstein was accepted into and awarded a full scholarship to the Julliard Graduate School of Music, which provided him a strong classical and formal background in all areas of music. It is here that Ellstein studied conducting and composition with Albert Stossel and Rubin Goldmark. This classical training empowered Ellstein to make sense of the sacred modes that he originally learned in the synagogue and further proved their connection to the inborn dramatic impulse in music. He found an unusual theatrical quality in the liturgical compositions of his youth that appealed to both sacred and secular audiences. For instance, he now had the ability to analyze and combine the Eastern modes of his youth in the shul choirs with the Western tones of the classical music genre that he was now learning. The Julliard School gave Ellstein a foundation in classical technique that enhanced his natural gift and later would mark Ellstein's music. Ellstein's sacred and secular musical education led to his recognition of the inherent theater

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[26] A Settlement House was a place where new immigrants could go to receive help in adjusting to American life. These places offered classes in English and other areas such as music. Many, such as the famous Henry Street Settlement House, also provided free medical care to immigrant families.

[27] Sylvia Regan Ellstein, interview by author, 15 December 1994.

[28] Jaffa, p. 1.

in human life, which enabled him to write music that both stimulated the mind and pulled at the heartstrings.

As important as Julliard was for providing Ellstein with classical music techniques, it was the summers with Cantor Yossele Rosenblatt that led Abe to understand more clearly the connection between the music of theater and worship. It is through this relationship that Ellstein created a musical bridge between the secular world of Julliard and the sacred world of Cantor Yossele Rosenblatt.[29] With Rosenblatt, he returned to the music and life of his youth, but now with the knowledge of a trained composer. While touring with Rosenblatt, Abe saw the different styles of a cantor who was both a sacred actor and a concert performer.[30] On the Sabbath and festivals Ellstein accompanied Rosenblatt experiencing the sacred and holy work of a cantor. Whereas, on other days he saw him as a star concert singer who performed both sacred and secular compositions for his

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[29]In an interview with Sylvia Regan Ellstein on December 15, 1994 she claimed that at the age of nineteen Ellstein started touring and accompanying with Rosenblatt. Ellstein's brother Harry had stayed in the sacred musical world of the synagogue while Abe ventured into a bigger world of music. Harry wrote many musical compositions for the synagogue and became a popular accompanist for many chazanim. One time Harry was too ill to accompany Rosenblatt and so he called upon his brother Abie. Rosenblatt liked Abe so much that he told Harry that he would rather have his brother play for him. Harry obliged because he understood his brother's musical genius. So Rosenblatt took Abe under his wing and when Abe graduated from Julliard in 1926, Ellstein went on a world tour with him until about 1932.

[30]These notes are also taken from the Sylvia Regan Ellstein interview on December 15, 1994: On these tours, Rosenblatt showed Ellstein the many different faces of the Jewish globe. By performing all over Europe with Rosenblatt, Ellstein saw and experienced the people and music of Eastern Europe. Once they were traveling through Europe on a train and it was nearing sundown on a Friday afternoon so Cantor Rosenblatt became nervous to arrive where they were going before the Sabbath would begin. Rosenblatt pulled over the porter and asked him to please stop the train as soon as possible so that he could find a place to celebrate the Sabbath. The train pulled into the nearest town and Ellstein and Rosenblatt deboarded and found there a quiet little village. As they walked, the hour drew closer to sundown when the Sabbath begins. Since they had no where to stay, they continued to walk around until they could find some other Jews to celebrate the Sabbath. Suddenly Ellstein saw a man dressed in Sabbath clothes and he approached him. The man ignored Ellstein and said to Rosenblatt, "Yoselle Rosenblatt-what are you doing here?" So the man welcomed the two of them in his home for the Sabbath. Here Rosenblatt performed the sacred duties of a chazan on the Sabbath and then at the close of the Sabbath he went on to the next town to give a concert in a theater of both Yiddish folk songs and cantorial classics.

audiences. The audiences often were the same for both events, worship and concert, and they were mesmerized and moved by the drama inherent to both performances.

While on tour with Rosenblatt in the early 1930s, Ellstein met the famous Yiddish star Molly Picon and entered the Yiddish theater, to where he would also bring sacred sounds. Together they became a dynamic duo of Yiddish theater and film, traveling throughout North America, South America, and Europe together creating music, (she wrote lyrics for many of his melodies) and winning the hearts of Jews the world over. Just as Rosenblatt and Ellstein brought the sacred sounds to the hearts and minds of many Jews wanting to hear the drama of the chazan, Ellstein and Picon brought both sacred and secular sounds to the hearts and minds of many listeners who wanted to hear both the cries of the chazan and the laughter of the *badkhn* (Jewish jester) without going to shul. His musical gifts easily led him to the worlds of synagogue and theater then being developed on the Jewish American landscape. This was where his talents would be most appreciated because American Jewry was seeking comfort more often than not in the theater, which acted like its synagogue.

It was through the partnership between Ellstein and Picon, and the marriage of their talents in the Yiddish theater, that led them from the streets of the Yiddish theater into the world of Yiddish film, where they were able to cast a spell upon millions of Jews who hoped to escape their own lives through the screen. Ellstein incorporated themes of the sounds of the sacred modes and melodies of the synagogue into these film scores, as in the score of Yidl Mitn Fidl (Yiddle with a Fiddle), created in Poland in 1936 with Joseph Green, the first producer of Yiddish films. Yidl Mitn Fidl, starred Molly Picon and became one of the most famous Yiddish films. Molly appeared as a young girl disguised as a boy so she could play in a klezmer band in order to help support her father. Prior to her entrance, the band is hopelessly incompetent, and no one in the town can bear to listen to them. She saves the band through her impish charm and the genius of Ellstein's music.

The theme song of the film entitled "Yidl Mitn Fidl" uses the poetry of Itzik Manger.[31] Ellstein captured the joy of this poem in his composition by using the melody from the chorus of an old Yiddish folk song "Tsen Brider" (Ten Brothers).[32] The score for Yidl Mitn Fidl uses a minor scale that often slides between diatonic and a chromatic tones. The score for the scene labeled "Chusen-Kale" (Bride Groom) begins in a minor key but goes into Ahava-raba mode, a mode used on Shabbat morning and in weekday nusach characterized by the augmented second between the second and third notes of the scale. This mode is also sometimes referred to as "the Jewish mode" because of its Eastern sound. By instilling the sounds from the synagogue into these scenes, Ellstein successfully brought the innate dramatic impulse of sacred music into the secular world.

Ellstein continued to incorporate sacred melodies into the secular world in Mamele (Little Mother) in 1938. Mamele is a dramatic story of a young girl, played by Molly Picon, who is called "mamele" because she has supported her family since her mother's death. Her father is a lazy man who takes advantage of his "mamele" and does not allow her to have any sort of personal life for she is always too busy ironing or preparing for the Shabbos meal. She turns for solace to her windowsill, listening to her friend across the street playing the sad sounds of the fiddle. She longs for personal happiness because she lives only for the sake of her selfish family. She falls in love with the man across the street and eventually gives up her family for her love. The melodrama of the story is enhanced by Ellstein's infusing sacred modes that his audiences adored.

The score itself, written by Ellstein, captures the sounds of the Jewish home, including the festival of Sukkot, Shabbat, and the Jewish wedding. The sounds for the Sukkot scene are in a minor mode that at times skips to a major sound like that of the

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[31] Itzik Manger (1901-1969) was a Yiddish poet and dramatist, who was born in Czernowitz, learned Yiddish folklore and poetry from his father. Much of his poetry expresses delight in the entire universe, and finds beauty and value even in suffering and sorrow. Encyclopedia Judaica, Volume 11, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 874.

[32] Eleanor and Joseph Mlotek, comps., Pearls of Yiddish Song, (New York: Education Department of the Workmen's Circle, 1988), 258.

traditional *nusach* (melody) for the *Mi Chamocha* (Who is Like You?) chant for Sukkot. It also plays with the interval of the augmented second that is prevalent in Jewish music as mentioned before in the Ahava Raba mode. The Jewish public during this time wanted to hear these religious sounds in their secular world so that they could recall the sacred melodies of their childhood in the Yiddish films or theater where they now sought comfort.

Mamele brought Ellstein enormous fame during this developmental stage of his musical career because the Yiddish theater and film industry was at its most popular. Note the press release for the movie from Sphinx Film Corp.:

> Abe Ellstein is the youngest composer on New York's East Side. The author of the endearing songs, which Molly Picon **chants** in "Mamele", the Yiddish film at the...Theatre, has a string of musical hits tucked away in his bosom; and he has yet to turn thirty. Mr. Ellstein started his meteoric career as a pianist and accompanist for Molly touring the world over with the bubbling comedienne.[my emphasis][33]

Abe Ellstein wrote music for Molly Picon to "chant," a word most often associated with the synagogue and the chazan. The author of this press release used the word chant to point out Ellstein's connection to the sacred world and of the sacred sound inherent in his music. The three most popular songs from Mamele are "Mazl" (Luck),"Ikh Zing" (I sing), and "Abi Gezunt" (Be Healthy). "Mazl" is a song that captures the yearning that many Jews felt about their lack of luck in the Old and New Worlds. It is a soliloquy of a Jew waiting for brighter days and wishing for luck, captivating Jewish audiences because of its reflective, plaintive sound that echoed the melodies of the synagogue. "Mazl" is a song of both hope and loss that many Jews felt in America during Ellstein's time: hope for a new life, but at the same time a sound of mourning for the Old World.

Another song made famous by the film is the great love song, "Ich Zing." In the film Molly Picon and her love, played by the actor Edmund Zayenda, sing this ballad. As he plays the song on his piano, Molly comes along and falls in love with him. Ellstein's ballad alludes to the text of *Shir Hashirim* (the Song of Songs), which is a biblical book

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[33]Sphinx Film Corporation Press Release for the film Mamele, (New York City: 1939), 7.

read on Passover allegorized by *midrashishts* (story-tellers) into a love song between God and the people Israel. Here, in the midst of the love between two people, Ellstein reminds his audiences of the love between human beings and their God.

"Abi Gezunt" is the third song that propelled Ellstein and Picon to fame. This song appealed to their audiences because it celebrated the carefree attitude that many of them embraced in order to drown out their sorrows. The problems once forgotten in the restful music of Shabbat needed a new outlet, as shown in a brief translation of the chorus: "the air is free, the sun shines for rich and poor alike, as long as you're healthy, you're happy."[34] Seymour Rechtzeit claims that during this period of financial distress and troubling transitions, this theme was well loved by the Yiddish theater and film-goers.[35] These sounds propelled them into another world, an escape into fantasy. The sounds of *freylich* (cheerful) dances were a rich musical Jewish tradition that surrounded religious ceremonies and Ellstein now infused these into his theater and film compositions.

In his next film A Brivele der Mamen (A Letter to Mama), also produced in 1938 Poland but without Picon, Ellstein brought tears to the eyes of his audiences because his music carried them back to the days in the shtetl where families were separated by oceans and many in America gave up their religion for the New World. The story begins with a family that is united in Poland. Tickets are bought eventually for the father and son to go and settle in America. They depart and become lost in America, while the mother mourns them. The son had been a magnificent singer destined to become a chazan. Once in America he becomes a theater and concert star. In the end, mother and son are reunited in a scene where the son sings "A Brivele der Mamen." While the son never became a chazan, the mother is so happy to see him that she does not care. The song "A Brivele der Mamen" was written by Solomon Shmulwitz in 1921, but only made popular after World War I at

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34 Norman H. Warembud, Great Songs of the Yiddish Theater, (New York: Ethnic Music Publishing Co., Inc., 1975), 10.

35 Seymour Rechtzeit, interview by author, 8 December 1994.

the height of Jewish immigration.[36] This film's story haunted Ellstein's audiences because it demonstrated the struggle between the Old and New Worlds It also held out hope, showing how conflicts they encountered in a new environment could eventually be resolved.

The music that Ellstein wrote for these Yiddish films, like his theater songs, captivated his audience by their magical and mystical qualities that remained with the audience long past their departure from the theater. These melodies that they hummed on their way home from the theater echoed the songs sung by generations of parents and children on their way home from the synagogue on the Sabbath. They were not only made famous by these productions, but later chazanim and Yiddish stars performed and recorded them in concerts on the bima and stage. Ellstein created new music for the new American Jews of his time, a music that infused Yiddish film and theater with the sacred sounds of the synagogue.

In an interview, Isaiah Sheffer, the artistic director of Symphony Space in New York who was a friend of Ellstein's, maintained that the creators of the Yiddish theater were always drawing out melodies from the sacred sounds of the synagogue. He said that theaters would "squeeze some chazanes [cantorial music] whenever they could into a show in order to win over the audience." He also said that "the theater used three major religious elements-the *Purim-shpiel*, (Purim play) the *badkhn*, and the chazan in order to be a popular play."[37] Many of Ellstein's theatre melodies prove this to be true. An obvious example of this is in his composition, "Vos Iz Gevorn Fun Mayn Shtetele?" (What Has Become of My Hometown?). He composed this piece in 1949 with Isadore Lillian who wrote the lyrics. It was featured in an operetta, starring Menashe Skulnick at the Hopkinson Theater in Brooklyn and sung by Lillian Liebgold and Lilly Lilliana.[38] The

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[36]Warembud, p. 26.
[37]Isaiah Sheffer, interview by author, 27 June 1995.
[38]Warembud, p. 228.

song begins with a sad melody, a lullaby longing for a time gone by.[39] The text reminisces about a hometown winter night scene and recalls the days of going to the synagogue and listening to the chazan's sweet voice. It continues with the direct words of the chazan who sang "Kevakarat" (God is our shepherd and we are God's flock) on the High Holidays. This middle section is an example of how the sacred sounds of the chazan were mixed into the sounds in the theater. This composition of cantorial music is in the "Ukranian Dorian " mode, which because of its atonal, Eastern scale is a mode only a musician highly educated in the Jewish modes would be able to incorporate correctly. The text of the lyrics of the song also shows a yearning for the sounds and lifestyle of the shtetl that so many Jewish audiences wanted to hear and relive. The music enabled them to dramatize their old life and recall their past social dramas in an unparalleled way. Both actors and chazanim recorded and performed this song in the theater and the synagogue.

In the radio world as well, Ellstein demonstrated his understanding of the dramatic impulse that connected the music of synagogue and theater as both chazanim and Yiddish stars entered his studio. His Yiddish radio shows offered a wide variety of programming including melodramas, Yiddish theater scenes, famous cantors reciting cantorial recitatives, big band orchestras, and current news and gossip about the stars of both the synagogue and theater.[40] Because of Abe's close relationship with Rosenblatt many chazanim would come into the radio studio to sing liturgical or theatrical pieces, and Ellstein had the knowledge to accompany any of them with or without written music. Isaiah Sheffer, who worked with Ellstein on his radio show claims: "Cantors would come into the studio all the time right along with the theatre stars and often they would say to Ellstein, '*Retsei* in E phraygish' [a Jewish mode-Phrygian], and they would be off creating their own cantorial masterpiece on the air."[41] Ellstein also became good friends with Seymour Rechtzeit who

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[39]It was common for songs in the Yiddish theater to yearn for the past because often the present reality in America was too traumatic to cope with.

[40]Seymour Rechtzeit, interview by author, 8 December 1994.

[41]Isaiah Sheffer, interview by author, 27 June 1995.

was a master of Yiddish folk songs and radio shows. Together they conducted a radio show three times a week that later went on television as the "Abe Ellstein Orchestra." In an interview with Seymour Rechtzeit, he explained that Ellstein's orchestra became his trademark and is found on many recordings of both Yiddish theater stars and chazanim of his time.[42] Ellstein's orchestra and his radio experience easily combined the sacred and secular worlds of the people and music that shaped Ellstein's life and allowed him to reach a greater Jewish American audience that wanted to hear sounds from both worlds in the privacy of their own homes.

As the popularity of radio weakened because of the invention of the television, so, too, did the Yiddish theater and Ellstein seek other outlets for work. The Yiddish theater was losing popularity mainly because less people were speaking Yiddish. So just as Ellstein's audiences once left the synagogue, now they were leaving the Yiddish theater for even more secular entertainment on Broadway and television. Instead of abandoning his audience Ellstein joined them, and, with his playwright wife Sylvia Regan Ellstein, he brought his talents to Broadway and opera.[43]

Like his audiences, Ellstein began to disassociate himself from the Second Avenue "Jewish" theater in order to appeal to a greater musical audience. In his opera, The Golem, he denied his talent for incorporating sacred music into the "theater" and, as a result, failed miserably. Isaiah Sheffer maintained:

> When Abe was working on The Golem, he would call me up frequently and say, 'You just watch kid, this is going to be an up-town opera.' He kept saying 'up-town opera' as if to say his previous life on Second Avenue was lower than this and not worthy of praise.[44]

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[42]Ellstein's recordings for Victor, Columbia, and lesser labels number over 300.

[43]In 1950 Ellstein collaborated with Walter Bullock on the Broadway musical hit, What A Day. Then Ellstein became more serious about his music and entered the opera world where he wrote his first one-act chamber opera in 1958, The Thief and the Hangman. This won Ohio University's Seventh Annual competition for American Chamber Opera. It was televised nationally on ABC where Ellstein met Jan Peerce. (Jaffa, p.1-2.)

[44]Isaiah Sheffer, interview by author, 27 June 1995.

In 1960 Ellstein was commissioned by the Ford Foundation to write The Golem, based on the 16th-century legend of the Prague Ghetto.[45] Ellstein considered this opera to be his "ticket" out of Second Avenue. Sheffer claimed that on opening night, he and his friend sat in the audience and from the very first notes they thought that

> nothing was melodic. It was very straight tone, almost tedious. He had masked his Second Avenue talent because he so badly wanted to be 'up-town'. There wasn't a tune you could hum. The whole opera was a denial of his talent.[46]

In his determination to earn a world-class name for himself Ellstein had failed to draw upon the theatrical and religious impulses of music from his youth, his true talent. The reviews that appeared in the New York Times the next day broke Ellstein's heart. One of them read:

> Mr. Ellstein's music was so conventional and so lacking in originality that it sometimes actually got in the way of the action. His musical approach, on the whole, though was neutral. His aim was to underline the mood of the libretto, and a good deal of "Mickey-Mousing," in which the music does what the person on stage is doing. Thus when the Golem enters the crypt, thump, thump, thump, the tympant go thump, thump, thump. The composer has made little attempt to write in a Hebraic idiom. There are several vague suggestions of cantillation and Jewish melodies, but for he most part the melodic substance and the harmonies are in the orthodox late romantic style, with a few minor dissonance's inserted here and there.[47]

Ellstein, in his desperation to succeed outside of the Second Avenue theater, failed. He had not used his great talent of infusing the sounds of the sacred world, that embodied the roots of human drama, into his music. He buried sacred sounds that came from the synagogue beneath a desire to make a name for himself beyond his Jewish audience. Many of Ellstein's friends claim that this failure was what led to his tragic death a year later.[48]

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[45] Ellstein wrote the score for this opera that opened on March 23, 1962 at City Opera at City Center Theater and his wife, Sylvia, wrote the libretto.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Harold C. Schonberg, "Opera 'The Golem' Given Premiere at City Center". New York Times. (New York: March 23, 1962.)

[48] With the exception of his wife, Sylvia Regan Ellstein, everyone that I discussed Ellstein's life with said that the failure of this opera killed him a year later, when he tragically died on Friday, March 22, 1963. His wife explained that night to me in an interview on December 15, 1994. He was speaking at Temple Adath Israel on a Shabbat evening during Jewish music month. She said that all he way to the synagogue he complained about speaking, and "Abe never complained about speaking about Jewish music." She continued in a quiet, shaken voice: "We sat together during the service and all

Examining the failure of The Golem shows that Ellstein, in his quest to appeal to a different audience, left behind his true talent which was to infuse the theatrical impulse of the sacred music of the synagogue into the secular world.

This musical failure was unique. It was the first and last time Ellstein strayed from his talent that was celebrated in the sacred and secular worlds. Through Ellstein's connection to the synagogue as a child musician he was able to learn from its theatrical impulse that touched human souls and bring this into the Yiddish theater where much of his audience "worshipped." After World War II, many of his audience either left the Jewish scene altogether or returned to the synagogue, and Ellstein followed them. He brought the techniques he had used into the theater, originally borrowed from the sacred setting, back into their original space. He did this in two ways: through the opera and sacred singer, Jan Peerce; and by composing major works for synagogues.

The compositions Ellstein wrote for Peerce are some of his greatest cantorial pieces. Besides being collaborators in music, Ellstein and Peerce were close friends. Peerce said in his memoirs:

> Abraham Ellstein was a very dear friend of mine from my early music days: a fine musician, composer, conductor, arranger. He conducted my records of *Yiddish Folk Songs* and *Cantorial Masterpieces* and composed for me a cantorial masterpiece called "Vi-li-rusholayim Ircho" (And to Jerusalem, Thy City, Return to Mercy). Whenever I needed a new composition or arrangement, I'd call Abe. Invariably he'd sound harassed: "Jan, I'm so busy right now. Why did you have to call me at this particular time? I can't do it. But tell me what I'm missing out on. What was it you wanted?" I'd tell him. He'd say, "I'll try it, but you may have to wait two or three weeks, Maybe longer." And I could rest assured that next morning he'd call up to say it was ready.[49]

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through Abe kept saying 'I don't want to speak Bubby, I don't want to'. This was very unusual behavior for Abie because he never was nervous to speak about his music-he loved to. When it was time for the sermon part of the service Abie was called up to the bima in front of an audience of more than 800 people. He began his speech and as he was raising his hand up to illustrate how many times the notes in liturgical music rise to dramatically emphasize the power of God, he dropped dead to the floor. My Abie died of a brain aneurysm that took away his sacred life."

[49]Alan Levy, The Bluebird of Happiness-The Memoirs of Jan Peerce, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1976), 266.

They had a mutual love for music in the sacred and secular worlds that came from their deep understanding of the dramatic impulse in music. Because of their friendship, Ellstein's funeral was one of two at which Peerce ever officiated.[50]

One of Ellstein's most famous pieces, (as mentioned in Peerce's memoirs) and most recorded by artists the world over is "*V'Li- Rusholayim Ircho.*" This piece was recorded by Peerce and Ellstein on the record album, Jan Peerce Sings Cantorial Masterpieces with Choir and Orchestra Conducted by Abraham Ellstein. It is written in "E Phraygish" or Phrygian mode and begins with a recitative cantorial style. This style was often used in the theater in order to infuse the music with sacred sounds. Ellstein enhances this piece theatrically by combining the cantorial recitative of the synagogue with the memorable refrain of the theater music. The accompaniment which is written for piano is played by Ellstein's orchestra on this recording. The orchestra accompaniment makes the piece sound as if it derives from a film score because of its dramatic, heightened exposition. The instruments add intensity that emphasizes the dramatic and religious impulses in the music. Like film scores, the music underlying many cantorial pieces (as illustrated in Ellstein's compositions) has a musical force that leads the listener to a climactic point and then has some form of denouement or resolution that comforts the listener. This technique of composing a piece is similar in both liturgical and theatrical compositions because they tell a story or create a mood for some sort of occasion. "*V'Li-Rusholayim Ircho*" like many of Ellstein's compositions does this exact thing.

The liturgical text itself is powerful:

> Return in mercy to thy city of Jerusalem and dwell in it as thou hast promised; rebuild it soon, in our days, as an everlasting structure, and speedily establish it in the throne of David. Blessed art thou , O Lord, Builder of Jerusalem.[51]

The text is served by the dramatic musical pulse provided by Ellstein and by the strong voice of Peerce. Even without Peerce's voice there is a clear dramatic impulse that had

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[50] Ibid. p. 296.

[51] Phillip Birnbaum, Daily Prayerbook-Hasiddur Hashalem, (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1949), 90.

worked for Ellstein's music in the Yiddish theater and film and now in the sacred score. The accompaniment acts just like a film score would for a scene in a film in that it provides mood enhancing undertones that lead the listener into each "scene" of the piece. Another example of the theatrical techniques is found following the climax of the cantorial recitative [in the section that only uses the words "Bonei Yerushalyim"(Builder of Jerusalem)]. This is an illustration of Ellstein's ability to create a memorable melody in a piece that soothes the audience by appealing to its inherent dramatic impulse that requires both climactic points and denouement or "recovery." These kinds of melodies are what make his music masterpieces because they comfort the listener in the theater or in the synagogue.

Ellstein composed another liturgical setting for Peerce, this one deriving from the popular High Holiday favorite "Avinu Malkeinu." The text reads:

> Our Father, our King, be gracious to us and answer us, though we have no merits; deal charitably and kindly with us and save us.[52]

Here Ellstein takes the traditional folk melody and embellishes the cantorial line in order to make the piece more dramatic. The folk melody is not his creation; however, the way in which he dramatizes the melody is his own. Moreover, his choral parts show his gift for creating a masterpiece out of a simple tune. The familiar melody calls the listener to his or her past and then introduces a more elaborate cantorial line to emphasize the power of the drama in its musical center. This drama plays on both the person's memory of the original folk melody and the theatrical elevation of the uncomplex, but haunting tune. The familiar tune conjures up the old memory while creating a new experience for the audience.

The composition "*Sh'ma Yisrael* (Hear Ye, Israel)" illustrates both the recitative and coloratura styles shared by many opera and cantorial compositions. At the core of both is their inherent theatricality. These tell a story, creating an exposition, climax and denouement. Written for tenor and piano, like many of these pieces, it was recorded on the album Jan Peerce Sings Cantorial Masterpieces. The translation of the text is as follows:

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[52]Phillip Birnbaum, High Holiday Prayerbook-Complete, (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1951), 275.

> Hear O Israel the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. You are our God, You are our Father, You are our King, You are our Redeemer. You are the One who has compassion over us and who watches over all living things. You will be to us our God.

The piece as recorded begins with a dramatic accented crescendo that one also could hear in a film score. It uses a technique that the composer Max Helfman, also a close friend of Ellstein's, used for his composition "*Sh'ma Koleinu* (Hear Our Voice)" where the voice part enters in at the climax of the crescendo in a dramatic entrance of the word "Sh'ma!"(Listen!). This is exactly the same dramatic technique used in both compositions to emphasize the word "Listen!" The accompaniment under this first phrase "Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad" is a series of tremolos on the piano that is a frequently used device in cantorial music. Then it continues into a more classical operatic style in the voice and piano parts. This second section of the piece begins with the words "Hu Eloheinu, Hu Avinu, Hu Malkeinu, Hu Moshieinu" sounds like it could be coming straight from the music of the operatic world. The vocal part has a strong coloratura line with the accompaniment sometimes echoing the voice part but mostly using fluttering type notes in the octave above the soprano line. The next passage of the piece comes more from the cantorial style because it is free recitative, with a multiple series of tremolos underneath the vocal line. The piece concludes with the words "Lihiyot Lachem Leilohim" and returns to the operatic line of the second part of the piece (Hu Eloheinu, Hu Avinu, etc.) resolving with an operatic/cantorial ending where the voice part builds to a wail on a dramatic high note.

"*Yismechu* " (Rejoice With The Sabbath) illustrates how the dramatic technique of the theater was instilled in liturgical music. The text comes from the Sabbath *Musaf* (additional) service and is translated as:

> Those who keep the Sabbath and call it a delight shall rejoice in thy kingdom; all the people who enjoy the seventh day shall fully enjoy your goodness. Thou wast pleased with the seventh day and didst hallow it; the most desirable of all days

didst thou call it-in remembrance of the creation.[53]

This composition begins in the Ahava Raba mode, which as mentioned above is the correct mode for the Shabbat morning service. The beginning of this piece starts with a joyful and playful melody that allows the text to come through its sound. The second part of the piece goes into a coloratura, operatic line with the words "*Am M'kadeshei She-Vi-i Shabbat*" (The people who keep it holy will rejoice in the Sabbath). The accompaniment is intricate, weaving in and out of the melody and the coloratura line of the voice part. The vocal line continues alternating between a more operatic/cantorial line and the chorus of the "Yismechu" section. By doing this Ellstein keeps the popular melody and then combines it with *chazanut* (cantorial art music) in order to give his audiences both the drama of the theater and the drama of the synagogue. In the conclusion of the piece, there is the cantorial device of the tremolo that is added underneath the vocal line to add drama to prepare the listener for the ending high notes that is characteristic of both cantorial and operatic compositions.

Ellstein also brought the sounds of the theater into the sacred world through works commissioned by synagogues. These "special" compositions often became large theatrical synagogue and concert productions. Ellstein's knowledge of the theater enabled him to form compositions overflowing with intense emotions based on a specific theme or story that came from social dramas in Jewish life. "Ode to the King of Kings" is a cantata written by Ellstein, commissioned by Rabbi Avrohom Soltes of Temple Shaarei Tefilla in East Orange, New Jersey in 1957 that exhibits Ellstein's use of drama in sacred music. The text, based on Shmuel Yosef Agnon's "Introduction to the Kaddish," is a work dedicated to those who died in Israel's War of Independence.[54] The text alone is a cry for the injustice over the deaths of those Jews fighting for peace. The text alternates between English and the Aramaic text of the Mourner's Kaddish, expressing a plea for peace for

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[53]Birnbaum, Daily Prayerbook-Hasiddur Hashalem, 396.

[54]Barry Serota, The Music of Abraham Ellstein featuring Jan Peerce, (Chicago: Music Internationale, 1990), cassette liner notes.

Israel. The dramatic text is served by a haunting composition that is march-like in quality and employs both angry and desperate emotions. The music is agitated through its quick chant-like montra that plays with chromatic notes and its frequent jumps of the fifth interval, both descending and ascending. The piano line rolls in many triplets underneath the choral parts that overlap each other. The piece keeps on driving into a frenzy as the solo part comes in, and dramatically keeps building upon this theme of soldiers dying for peace and the Kaddish that is said for them. The Rochester Democrat and Chronicle reviewed the oratorio saying:

> As a representation it was none too coherent, but in passion, fervor and the plaintiveness that characterizes much serious Jewish music it was a work of considerable grip and power.[55]

This composition's urgency and drama is naturally enhanced by the text's "social drama" of war. It echoes the theater of realism and offered to the audience not comfort but inspiration and awakening.

Ellstein's last work before his death, "The Redemption-A Hanukah Oratorio" commissioned by Temple Emanuel of Great Neck, New York, also shows Ellstein's ability to infuse drama into sacred music. Hanukah is a festival of great drama because it involves a story of a small army of Jews standing up to and defeating their enemies in a fight for religious freedom. The music is interspersed with a narrator that tells the story of Judah Maccabee who led this group of freedom fighters. The composition carries the story by splitting the bass and soprano solo lines into characters telling the tale of Hanukah. The narrator speaks of the characters weeping, and it is as though the choral lines weep. The narrator describes various characters and the solo or the choral line in effect "become" that character. The narrator adds to the drama of the piece. The spoken and sung words work together as a play acting out the sacred story. In the conclusion, the tremolos in the music are underneath the narrative line as the text speaks about the lights as "a sign and a token of

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55"Oratorio Impresses," Rochester Democrat and Chronicle, (New York), February 21, 1963.

the living God."[56] Then the narrator speaks above the choral line about the miracle that the oil lasted eight days. In the finale, the chorus is singing an exciting hallelujah praising God for the miracle of Hanukah. This piece vividly echoes the dithyramb found in Greek worship, in which they acted out their stories and praised their gods with drama and music.

Ellstein discussed the importance of preserving and reviving the drama found in music, first found in religious melodies, in an essay he wrote in applying for a Guggenheim fellowship:

> Out of a life-long study of and devotion to the historic Hebrew liturgy, there has evolved in me the intention of creating works in the modern musical idiom, embodying these ancient cantillations. Through my work I hope to make a contribution to the continuous process of rebirth and preservation of the spiritual and religious impulse in music.[57]

As a child, Ellstein grew up learning the traditional modes and cantillations in his "shul choir" like many synagogue artists. He understood the power behind this sacred music from the beginning of his musical career. It held the key to a way into the human soul. This drama is embedded in the "spiritual and religious impulse in music". The drama that human beings were created by and that they create in life is at the center of this impulse. It is through his knowledge, talent, and experiences that he realized the musical connection between theater and worship. He lived in a time when the theatre often acted as the synagogue and chazanim performed on both sacred and secular stages. It was his encounters in the two places that led him to utilize the dramatic force in music inherent to both. His music in the theater and the synagogue appealed to the sacred and secular worlds because it fulfilled a human need for drama through the intense emotions of music. This citation from his Guggenheim application expresses his passion for his Jewish musical heritage and his knowledge of this "religious impulse" in music. This impulse was established by the Greeks through the dithyramb and made manifest in the Jewish context through worship and later the Yiddish theater. Through the "social dramas" of the theater

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[56]Abraham Ellstein, "The Redemption", text by Samuel Rosenbaum, (NewYork: Mills Music, 1963), 57.

[57]Jaffa, p. 2.

and the synagogue, Ellstein's music brought his audiences to another place where the human soul encountered itself in either a divine place with God or a spiritual place of the unknown.

Part IV: Concluding Thoughts on the Vital Connection between Theater and Worship.

I knew from the very beginning of the process of deciding on a Senior Project topic that I had to work on something that involved my theater background. I knew this because as I continued to study for and work in the cantorate, I found more and more connections between theater and worship. My experiences and training as an actor for the theater gave me a solid background in order to understand this connection and why it is vital to the future of worship. In this section, I will first look at how liturgists Janet Walton and Larry Hoffman have connected art and worship. Then I will discuss my theater training and how it has affected me as a cantor and offer my own ideas on how to interpret the connection between theater and worship for today's prayer leaders. I will also investigate the connection between the actor in the theater and the prayer leader, specifically through the chazan and the role of music in worship. In conclusion, I will discuss Ellstein and how his life and music have helped shape my study.

If we approach worship as a dramatic art, we then see it as artists see their work and their world. In her book, Art and Worship: A Vital Connection, Janet Walton is introduced by Robert McAfee Brown who says,

> I will highlight one reason why Christians [all religions] need artists of all sorts in rehabilitating our liturgical life- a reason that may be implied but is never quite so boldly stated in Professor Walton's pages: we need their help so that we can get beyond the most unrelieved boredom of so much of our corporate worship. This is not, I hasten to add, to say that sculptors or dancers or poets are to be sought simply to spice up our bland Sunday mornings with a little novelty. It *is* to say, most emphatically that the message that has been entrusted to us, and which we have so deeply betrayed, is at such a far remove from dullness, that it is almost an oblique tribute that we have been able to transform it so spectacularly into something unspectacular. ...So we either miss the divine presence, or clothe it with such familiar verbal and physical trappings that no one could care less. And it is the particular contribution of artists(one among many), that they have an uncanny ability to find the extra-ordinary in the midst of what is ordinary. ...The artists, it

> seems, not only have an infinite capacity for excitement, but also a high degree of capacity to excite us, by celebrating the excitement in what has become ordinary to us.[58]

Thus, the artist has the ability to bring worship to life again and this is why it is necessary for religious leaders to think of themselves as sacred actors and liturgical artists. Walton explores the role of artist and how it can help our worship services, stating:

> The key to the problem, I believe, is that artists understand how to make connections. Artists like Picasso express what is intangible in ways that people can grasp. And as the effectiveness of rituals in churches, temples, shrines and homes decreases, it seems clear that what is lacking is connection. New hymnals, renovated church spaces, more communal participation by way of praying or reading together, better trained leaders, all these are not enough. What we need are connections: expressions of the need to love and be loved, or the fear and reluctance to die, that are connected to the faith of our particular religious tradition. we need assertions of tangible concern about the inequity so pervasive in our world, and within the demands of ritual we need an indication of a will to challenge systems that perpetuate injustice. We need to know what it is to believe in a God who is intimately involved with human realities, a God whose "essence" may be difficult to understand, but who nevertheless is present in familiar and unfamiliar forms. We need to link joy with God and one another.[59]

Walton here emphasizes the important concept of artists as people who make connections. And I am taking this one step further by arguing that prayer leaders must also think of *themselves* as sacred artists in order to create a honest worship experience that is conducive to making real connections. We can learn from artists, but we must in turn become them ourselves. Sacred performers cannot rely on the craft of another artist. They have to take it upon themselves to nurture their own art. With the help of artists and learning the craft of liturgical art, religious leaders can resurrect worship and bring beauty and holiness back into what has become mundane. Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman explains worship as art in his book , The Art of Public Prayer. As he puts it:

> That is what I mean when I say that religion is not the search for limits and theological truths alone, but for patterns that provide meaning out of chaos: exactly what dancers do with random movement, composers with arbitrary noise, and painters with pointless shape and color-they show us how the raw elements of experience can be envisioned as cohering in meaningful ways. In its essence

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[58]Janet Walton, Art and Worship: A Vital Connection , (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1988), 10-11.

[59]Ibid. pp. 14-15.

> religion is thus an art, our life of prayer a celebration of the particular artistic patterns that our religious culture has chosen to encode.[60]

Therefore we must be creating and exploring artists, constantly searching for the power of prayer through the beauty of our writings and of our rituals. Then the possibility of the transcendent spirit of God can come into our experience in our daily social dramas and through our sacred performance. By turning into artists, clergy can learn the power behind artistic expression and in turn make sacred connections.

My artistic training was a part of me from a very young age. I believe my theater training is one of the most valuable educations that I have because now, as a cantor and sacred artist, I understand its importance. From the age of twelve until I was twenty-one, becoming a trained actor was my life's goal. I was in every play possible throughout my junior and senior high school years. When I was fifteen I went to a theater summer program at North Carolina School of the Arts where my love for performing was nurtured by renowned instructors from all over the world. Then in the summer of my seventeenth year I went to Northwestern University's summer theater program where I recognized that my life's work should be in the theater. Those summers when I was soul-searching and trying to figure out where I belonged, I knew that the theater had a profound impact on me. It was during those summers that I began to learn the "real" art of acting and the power of true performing.

I went on to study theater arts with an acting emphasis at the University of Iowa. Here I learned many acting techniques including Stanisvlasky and Grotowsky, but it was not until my junior year when I found the Meisner technique which transformed my approach to acting. In the introduction of Meisner's book, Sandford Meisner on Acting, Sydney Pollack explains Meisner:

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[60]Lawrence Hoffman, The Art of Public Prayer: Not For Clergy Only, (Washington, D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1988), 142.

> Sanford Meisner's work was, and is, to impart to students an organized approach to the creation of real and truthful behavior within the imaginary circumstances of theatre.[61]

Meisner believed that the only way to attain true acting on stage was to make it as real as in life. I found myself becoming more vulnerable to experience having an honest, real interaction with my scene partner. One of the first exercises in the Meisner technique is called "the Repetition." It involves two scene partners repeating the same phrase over and over again until the affected "acted" words clear away to reveal the honest emotions of both persons. The words became instruments for our true emotions to break through. This was only the beginning of our journey in finding true and honest performing. As I studied this technique I became less aware of myself in my scenes and I focused on being in the presence of this other person and reacted to our experience together. I found that true acting is so difficult because we as human beings put up many barriers to hide behind in "real" life so that when we are in a vulnerable situation where we can have an honest experience it is often difficult to break these down both on and off "the stage." We as human beings have many layers that are often in the way of our inner selves that house our true emotions. Through studying the Meisner technique of acting I found myself more capable of tapping into my emotions, allowing myself to be more open in my real life and on the stage. I discovered that whether in the theater or in worship, the performance must be real and honest or it will not work.

My experience in the theater has enabled me to be honest and open in my craft as a cantor. As a cantor I should not "act like a cantor " or "sing like a cantor"; rather, I am my true self in the role of cantor. I may have learned through mimicking cantorial styles, but unless I incorporate that training to become my own, it will not work. I allow myself to find my inner voice as a cantor and express myself through the words and melodies of Jewish prayer. They are vehicles to expressing myself in worship and they enable me to

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58Sanford Meisner, Meisner On Acting, introduction by Sydney Pollack, (New York: Vintage Books of Random House, Inc., 1987), xiv.

experience a transformation between myself and the congregation and together through honest performing we can have a sacred connection.

This concept of "real" acting is difficult to explain because as John Harrop, a British actor and director, states in his book Acting:

> The debate derives its force from the phenomenological fact that an actor has, in a sense, to be both himself and someone else at the same time. This kind of paradox is dear to the academic mind, while it has more truth in philosophy than praxis-unlike philosophers and literary critics, actors are obliged to make a specific choice in the moment of action-yet in the realm of language it is a problem. And it is in language that we are obliged to discuss the nature of acting.[62]

Often when "acting" is brought into a discussion it has negative connotations in either the theater or in worship because many people think of acting as something that is put on, or "fake." Even on stage, acting is bad when it is not a genuine experience between the performers. If the clergy people are not acting as themselves in their role then, just as in the theater, the worship experience loses depth and sincerity.

Sacred performing is unique because the drama occurs mainly in the interaction between the leaders and the congregation. This is usually not a trait of "stage acting," where the audience and performers live in two different worlds. In worship there is only one world shared between the leaders and their congregants and the action involves both the actors on the bima and off of the bima. In addition, there are also dramatic moments between the leaders on the bima when they share a moment that is primarily observed by the congregants. When this occurs the congregation still experiences the drama of the moment as a unit and not as two distinct worlds like that of organized stage theater. This also occurs when there is a dramatic moment on the bima between spiritual leaders and their God which allows the congregation to become moved or transformed through their leader's spiritual experience.

Religious leaders in worship and ritual need to live "in the moment" by being aware and reacting to the experience as it happens so that the theatrical experience of worship

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[62]John Harrop, Acting, (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 4.

"works." The leader should not play like the self-conscious actor that is constantly aware of every line or every note and continuously critiques him or herself in the moment. This kind of performance will not be easily believed as honest and pure. John Harrop states:

> Presence, as the word suggests, has to do with totally being present in the moment- we spend much of our time as human beings living in the past or future. The actor fills the moment, and his or her energy radiates out into space to draw in the audience with the power of the magnetic field set up. The actor is a transformer, plugged into the energy of the universe, capturing and transforming that lightning into communicative energy. The more kilowatts per instant the actor can radiate, the more will be his or her power in the moment and the stronger the presence.[63]

Prayer leaders, like the actors, must be themselves living in the presence of their congregation. Just as in the theater, the performance of a prayer leader can be artificial and self-absorbed and therefore fail. Also, as in the theater, if the prayer leaders only experience themselves in worship, then the congregation will never feel a part of the experience, thus alienating them and resulting in a failed encounter. The self-consciousness of the leader can only devalue the prayer experience because then it becomes one-dimensional and cold. The prayer leader must be emotionally connected and open to the experience with the congregation in order for the worship to succeed. Only when the prayer leader does this can there be an effective worship experience, just like the actor and his or her audience.

Like actors on the theater stage, spiritual leaders draw from within themselves and become vulnerable to emotions that are drawn out from the worship or ritual experience. The experimental actor and director Joseph Chaiken says in his book, The Presence of the Actor,

> When we as actors are performing, we as persons are also present and the performance is a testimony of ourselves. Each role, each work, each performance changes us as persons. ...Through the working process, which he himself guides, the actor recreates himself. By this I don't mean that there is no difference between a stage performance and living. I mean that they are absolutely joined. The actor draws from the same source as the person who is the actor.[64]

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[63]Ibid., p. 112.

[64]Joseph Chaikin, The Presence of the Actor , (New York: Atheneum, 1980), 6.

Religious leaders must therefore connect their spiritual energy to their performance. They must draw upon their inner emotions in order to express fully the soul and beauty of the music and chant of Jewish prayer. They must learn how to do this by experience or actually taking some sort of acting class. Through acting techniques a person becomes able to reach a vulnerable state that leaves one open to experience the worship rather than just going through the motions of the written liturgy. Each service must be performed as if for the first time because on the stage and on the religious bima each performance of a play or a service is unique and separate from all others.

The sacred performing of religious worship is a skill that is learned through specific techniques that allow the spiritual leader to express himself/herself through the drama of the liturgy. It is through the "repetition"-the *Kevah* (Repetition) that, like the Meisner acting technique, allows the leader to reach a place of inner awareness and true emotion. Some religious leaders have a natural charisma, an instinct for the art of worship, while others must try harder to learn how to be better artists in order to make a connection with their congregation. Meisner explains the notion of instinct in his book that is made up of scenes from his acting class:

> "We begin by discussing instinct. Now let's discuss where talent comes from. It is my belief that talent comes from instinct. What does that mean? Can anybody explain?"
> Rosemary [a student] holds up her hand. "I think we all really have the same instincts, and if we allow ourselves to be simple and uncluttered, then those instincts or talent will appear. *If* you allow yourself to be open and honest."[65]

Honesty is the key to allowing oneself to "be" in the presence of an audience or a congregation. Techniques that allow a stage and a sacred actor to find their inner self are the essence of honest performing.

If religious leaders are "sacred actors" to the stage of worship, we must also be liturgical artists with our "sacred scripts," our liturgy. The "art of public prayer" is one of the most important connections between theater and worship and it lies in the performance

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[65]Meisner, p. 30.

role of the sacred actor. As sacred performers in worship, clergy search for meaning and inspiration behind the words in their sacred script. Too often religious leaders rely on the words as a vehicle for prayer when they themselves give no set direction (*Kavanah*) or spirit behind their words. The script becomes forced, mumbled, and meaningless and the congregation and the leader is left uninspired and empty. As Lawrence Hoffman claims:

> Slowly but inevitably people confuse praying with reading, as if the liturgy were a theological treatise, in which case the only thing that matters is the context of the text. They go home either admiring or dismissing what the text that morning said, in the same way they leave a class in philosophy or psychology as a disciple or critic of Plato's Republic or Freud's trifold division of the psyche.[66]

The sacredness of the service becomes lost. These sacred words should be treated as art and performed in a way that beautifies them. This can be done simply or elaborately in order to bring the words of the script to life. There is so much grandeur and depth to our texts that it is unfortunate when they are glossed over like a text book.

Another aspect of Jewish worship that is theatrical is the art of the sermon. The sermon is a chance for religious leaders to use their skills in writing and orating to communicate or teach something to their congregation. This is a written personal monologue that must be well prepared and rehearsed. It is much more than a speech, but rather it can be a glimpse into a person's soul and intellect. Through the sermon the congregation can understand how its spiritual leader thinks and feels. It is a performance that teaches and hopefully captivates its audience. The sermon is an example of a place in worship where usually the leader is speaking to the congregation, and it is not answering back verbally. It is a place in worship for the congregants to learn, listen, and reflect as they experience the performance of their leader.

For the chazanim or cantors, their performance is vital to the overall success of the service because the music is often the most loved aspect of worship and prayer. From the very beginning of worship music has played a vital role. The Greek dithyramb, for example, was a unison hymn that was sung around the alter of Dionysus during religious

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[66]Hoffman, p. 225.

feasts that brought a community together in song to praise their god. The power of music calls upon our inner souls to listen and to speak. Music has the ability to reach our mind and heart. It literally can enter and physically affect our body and emotional state. Thus the role of the cantor is one of the most unique in the connection between theater and prayer. Cantors are vital because they are a vehicle for the magic of music. They take the notes on a page or the cantillation marks of a sacred text and bring them to life through their performance. Lawrence Hoffman says about the power of music in prayer:

> Without doubt, people get emotional about music in ways that they do not when they hear words. Philosophers from the beginning of time have recognized this unique ability of music to move us, sometimes to tears, sometimes to revolutionary zeal, and sometimes to more complex emotional states we never even knew we could realize.[67]

Music calls upon us to delve deep within us and allows us to experience many emotions. The cantor's role is to incorporate music into most aspects of worship. Jewish music has many different functions. It structures time for us and tells us what time of year it is, according to all the holidays. In traditional Jewish music, for instance, the sound of the prayers in the weekday morning, afternoon, and evening services are different. Also, Shabbat evening and morning services have distinct modes that cantors use to signify each service. Each Jewish holiday has its own thematic melody that musically signifies what "time" it is in our calendar. When we hear these melodies our emotional connection to the music is also triggered. Hoffman states,

> In part, certainly, music's emotional strength seems related to what it is, music, and therefore to whatever elements constitute music as its own art form. In part, too, it derives from the fact that music is a syntactic code, which recalls the past to memory and serves, therefore, as an ideal medium of recollection.[68]

We reconnect to the melodies of our past. The music serves as our way into worship. The cantor calls us to worship by chanting, and the music leads us on a journey together.[69]

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[67]Ibid., 263.

[68]Ibid.

[69]The music in worship also causes us to bond with one other because we share in the performative act of singing together. One of the ways music binds us together in worship is through the art of niggunim. Niggunim are a certain kind of music that is merely a repeated, wordless melody that can begin or end a service. Traditionally

Cantors are crucial "sacred performers" because they must draw from their experience and emotions to perform the prayers successfully . As we have seen in Ellstein's world, cantors traditionally learned their craft from a very young age. They were often choir boys who assisted the chazan in performing the service. As children mimicking the actions of our parents to learn how to "act," the chazan learned his craft by first listening to and mimicking his cantor and then allowing himself to make the art his own. The training of cantors has changed greatly since then, however. While cantors still learn their craft from listening and working with great chazanim of today, the performance aspect of the cantor of today has been reduced because the cantor today has many more roles to fill besides that of a sacred performer. This does not mean that the importance of the cantorial art is lessened but rather, it means that it is just as important as it ever was, if not more so. There is so much dishonesty and artificiality in today's world that our congregations need pure, truthful performances from their clergy. The role of the cantor as sacred actor must draw from the acting of the stage theater in order to have the techniques to reach an honest state. The performance of gifted cantors comes from deep within their being like that of talented actors. Cantors shed their most protective layer and open themselves up to the congregation in order to render the prayers with pure honesty and raw beauty. The best cantors are also great actors in that they have the ability to give fully of themselves to their music and to their audience.

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niggunim were originated by Chassidic Jews in Eastern Europe. These niggunim would be sung fervently around the study table of their rabbi. The wordless melodies can become very dramatic when they reach certain levels of performance. The sounds of the chant of the niggun surrounds everyone in a room and can become quite infectious. The Chassidic rabbis say that niggunim are one of the highest forms of prayer because it is not bound up in words so that the meaning must come from deep within us. It reminds me of the Meisner acting exercise called "The Repetition" where scene partners repeat the same words over and over again until an organic change occurs. This exercise acts as a vehicle to reach true emotion through repetition just like the niggun. Niggunim are an example of the importance of music in prayer and the connection between theater and prayer. In Jewish worship, our music is our way into the beauty and drama of our prayers and the role of the chazan as sacred performer is the key to the sacred communication between the leader and audience and their God.

Cantors have a unique role; combining the worlds of worship and theater is both their challenge and their gift. Understanding the significance of the connection between drama inherent in our daily lives (in our "social dramas") and the art of worship is important for the spiritual leader and is vital to the future of worship. Since the Greeks, there has been a direct connection between theater and worship. Sacred performing has been and continues to be a natural form of acting that comes out of the acting in our daily lives. The sacred performer of the bima and the actor of the stage have a connection in that they both must become vulnerable to the power of their music and the script of their texts in order to perform with honesty and believability. The role of the cantor is significant to the connection between theater and worship because of its theatricality, and through its musical function in prayer it has the ability to transform a congregation into another state of emotion.

The role of the cantor also involves training students for a ceremony in observance of Bar and Bat Mitzvah, the ritual signifying the attainment of Jewish adulthood. Richard Schechner, the performance artist and theorist, describes the roles played by chazanim and their Bar and Bat Mitzvah students by separating the two into unique categories, demonstrating how they interact and what type of actor each one is. In his book Between Theater and Anthropology, he distinguishes ritual performances from theatrical performances:

> I call performances where performers are changed 'transformations' and those whose performers are returned to their starting places 'transportations'- 'transportation' because during the performance the performers are 'taken somewhere' but at the end, often assisted by others, they are cooled down and reenter ordinary life just about where they went in. ...Transformation performances are clearly evidenced in initiation rites whose very purpose is to transform people from one state into another. ...People are accustomed to calling transportation performances "theater" and transformation performances "ritual."[70]

Transformation performance is exactly what the Bar or Bat Mitzvah experiences. The Bar and Bat Mitzvah students work with the cantor for months preparing and rehearsing their

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[70]Richard Schechner, Between Theater and Anthropology, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 125-130.

service. In most cases, as a student cantor, I have seen these thirteen-year-olds go through some sort of transformation in their Bar or Bat Mitzvah year. One of my students said to me as he rehearsed for his service, "It's just like being on stage. I love the attention!" I replied that yes it was similar to being on stage but that the experience would not end when his Bar Mitzvah ceremony was over, unlike that of his school play which ended last week. Like the theatrical experience where the actor is transported into another world and then brought back to ordinary life, the B'Nei Mitzvah are transformed and moe toward becoming Jewish adults once they experience the real life ritual of being called to the Torah. By reading or chanting from the Torah the child experiences a transformation that hopefully remains with them.

The significance of a Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremony depends on the quality of training (or the rehearsal process). As in the theater, the quality of the performance of a play is heavily dependent upon the talent of the director and the actors. It may be that a production may have a bad director or talentless actors and this will certainly influence the outcome of the performance. This is also true of the B'nei Mitzvah process. Cantors are much like directors as well as performers who train their students to "perform well." For me it has always been important that the students understand from the very beginning their Torah portion and through the chant they learn how to dramatize the story. They become sacred story-tellers. I explain and show them the importance of bringing this ancient text to life by dramatizing the events through the inflections and intonations of the cantillation. Torah chant is the vehicle for making the drama of the story come alive and is an important example of the vital connection between theater and worship. Not unlike the Greek dithyramb which plays out in song the stories of the Greek gods, the ancient Torah chant dramatically brings to life the stories and laws of the Jewish people. Schechner explains:

> In a transformation performance the stars of the show may not be the best performers, technically speaking. Asemo and his age-mates can't dance as well as the older men any more than a bar-mitzvah sings his part from the Torah as well as the chazan. Throughout the initiation process the older men have concentrated on getting the boys through doing what must be done for the initiation to be completed, for it to work. Interestingly, the word 'drama' derives from the Greek

> root dra: to do; to make. Similarly, at a wedding the attention is on the marrying couple, at a bar mitzvah it's on the bar mitzvah boy, and so on. But whatever the abilities of the transformed, the transported need to be skilled performers. Everywhere the pleasure an audience gets from a transformation performance depends greatly on the skills of the elders and/or professionals who train, guide, officiate, and often performed with the transformed. The bar mitzvah boy is praised for his singing, but the chazan better sing better...[71]

In today's Reform synagogues, students learn their Torah and Haftarah portions from a tape that the cantor prepares, or from a cantillation class that teaches them the cantillation systems. In my experience many times the student will mimic my inflections, trying to sound like the tape or class demonstrations of the chant. I will coach them on chanting so that they will also use their own talents to dramatize the text. They have to make their portion their own by bringing themselves into their performance. It is a combination of the fixed melody and the character of the individual who is performing the text that creates the transformation. A similarity between the actor and the Bar or Bat Mitzvah is that the B'nei Mitzvah have to chant according to the melodies of the trop marks of the system of cantillation and read the fixed liturgy just as the actor in a musical must sing the written notes of the score and say the words of the text. However, they both must bring themselves into the text and the melodies. This example illustrates yet another important connection between theater and worship and actors and prayer leaders.

Understanding all of these connections between theater and worship and actors and prayer leaders is vital to the future of worship and its ability to transform a congregation through the performance of prayer. In order to find meaning through our expression we must understand ourselves and be truly honest in our performance. Through my journey into Abe Ellstein's world I have been able to draw these conclusions on the connection between theater and worship. When I walk the streets of the Yiddish theatre, known now as the East Village, I imagine stepping into their world filled with melodies from the synagogue and the Yiddish theater. Each person I met that knew Abe talked of his talents and his beautiful music. They were cantors, actors, and writers for the Yiddish theater and

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[71] Ibid., 132.

the synagogue who told me of this wonderful time in Jewish American History. It was a time where cantors performed on sacred and secular stages. Ellstein's world became a place where I felt I would have belonged, as an actor and as a cantor. The Yiddish language and music simply and honestly had a way to reach into my Jewish soul like nothing else. It has real and genuine emotion at its core. The more I learned of Ellstein and his world, the more I fell in love with a time gone by that is vital to study in today's sacred world. Through his travels with Cantor Yossele Rosenblatt and actor Molly Picon, I saw how the synagogue and the theater were connected and how they could work together and learn from each other. Through his music I found the pure drama of our sacred stories elevated by the power of its religious and dramatic impulses. Ellstein's passion for religion and art came through in his music for both the theater and the synagogue. Through his life and music I found myself standing at a point in my own life where my sacred and secular stages came together.

As I said, I am thankful for my theater education in countless ways. When I left the professional theater in order to pursue the cantorate, I knew of their vital connection and the connection between theater and worship from the first time I led services from the bima of Temple Sholom in Chicago, Illinois. However, I did not understand the extent of the importance between the prayer leader and actor until two years into my training as a cantor. I kept finding myself referring to the theater and theater techniques in critiquing the performance of my colleagues. It was difficult to explain to them the power of "real" acting because of their initial negative reaction to the connection to performing and the cantorate and worship and theater. For many of them, their idea of acting was somehow ungenuine, not real, which is the definition of "bad acting" for those who have studied the art of the theater. All too often they were "playing the role of cantor" and not being themselves as a cantor. I seek to challenge their ideas of the connection between theater and worship through my own experiences in both arts.

I also found my theater connection to be vitally important in my vocal training as a singer. In my approach to singing I had to allow myself, my voice to come through, not the voice I thought I had. I found a teacher who has allowed me to incorporate my acting techniques into my singing and when everything works, my inner emotions flow easily and naturally from the notes of the music. I allow the power of music to take over me and I am able to give myself to the audience (congregation) honestly and openly. My own vulnerability allows for this human and spiritual connection between myself and my congregants, and myself and God.

When I was choosing a Senior Project topic I asked Cantor Israel Goldstein, the director of The School of Sacred Music, if there was anyone from the Yiddish theater that I could base my thesis on and he immediately said, "Abe Ellstein." It has been through my study of the life and music of Abe Ellstein that my belief in the vital connection between theater and worship has been nurtured and strengthened. It was the music of the Yiddish theater that drew me into Judaism and then the cantorate. Through studying the world of Abe Ellstein and learning about the time in Jewish American History when the cantorate was most connected to the theater, I found my voice, my Jewish soul. I also finally figured out why my theater training was so important to the success of my cantorate. His world became my world in the theater and the synagogue. His ability to appeal to his audiences were due to the fact that he drew on the innate theatrical impulse in music that could make both human and sacred connections. When I walk past the Second Avenue Deli and stop to look down at the "Yiddish Walk of Fame," I reach the stone commemorating Abe Ellstein and I stand in his presence, soaking up his world that celebrated the connection between theater and worship. I can only hope that what I have learned will affect my cantorate and reflect his world.

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