"Kol Ishah?": A New Voice
The Chazzantes

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Cantorial Investiture

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
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***"Kol Ishah?"*: A New Voice:The Chazzantes**

Thesis by Hayley Kobilinsky Poserow, submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for cantorial investiture, February 10, 2005. Advisor: Dr. Wendy Zierler

Contents: 72 pages constituting eight chapters.

This thesis deals with a group of women known as the Chazzantes, who sang traditional cantorial music, or *chazzanut*, in various media from the 1920's to the 1970's and beyond. They were featured in concerts, as entertainers, on recordings, on radio, television and even in movies. As the only manner in which *chazzanut* was heard at the time was when sung by a man, the chazzantes manipulated their voices to sound like male cantors.

There is very little written information about the chazzantes other than this thesis. This work is the first full work dedicated to and about the chazzantes, their backgrounds, lives, careers, and accomplishments. The thesis also includes appendices of photographs of some of the chazzantes as well as a partial discography/filmography.

The goal of the thesis is to bring to light their accomplishments, analyze the phenomenon, and to place them in the context of the period in which they appeared.

The thesis is divided into an introduction, two contextual chapters to explain surrounding environment (including Yiddish stage performers and Jewish law, or *halachah*, which governs observant women's singing), the biographies of 6 of these women, analysis, and conclusion. Following the text are appendices, the partial discography/filmography, and references.

References included books and articles to shed light on the period of the phenomenon, several articles which mention the chazzantes briefly, two archives (of Fraydele Oysher and Jean Gornish, or Sheindele), and multiple interviews by the author of relatives of the chazzantes, conducted mostly in 2004 and 2005.

Table of Contents

"Kol Ishah?": A New Voice

In the early- to mid-20th century in America, several observant Jewish women, independent of each other, embarked on an unusual journey. These women, all with great respect for Jewish liturgical music, and also gifted with unique voices, began to record and perform this music publicly. Some were descended from generations of cantors, others from generations of Yiddish theater performers. All became expert purveyors of the cantorial style of the time, singing lengthy, ornamented, complicated liturgical compositions known as recitatives. (Unlike an operatic recitative, which is the "speaking" sort of music that advances the story and connects larger arias and ensemble pieces, a cantorial recitative is akin to the operatic "aria." The "speaking" function would best be described in cantorial terms as "davening.") It was unusual enough for women to be performing in early 20th century-America, much more for observant Jewish women to do so, but it was practically a foreign concept for women to sing liturgical music. Perhaps the most unusual aspect of their singing was their vocal production; as cantorial music, or "*chazzanut*," was only heard at the time as sung by men, these women manipulated their voices and vocal technique to sound like men. None of them hid their female identities, but merely listening to their recordings, it would be difficult for one to determine the prayers were not chanted by male cantors. The women usually performed with some sort of nickname or stage name, often a Yiddish name with added "diminutive" (or "little") and "beloved" (or "dear") endings (e.g., Sheinde becomes Sheindel (diminutive) and then Sheindele (beloved). Similarly, Frayde becomes Fraydel and then Fraydele). Some of them added "*die chazzante*," from the Hebrew "*chazzan*" and Yiddish "*chazn*," after the Yiddish name, with the intent to signify "the woman

cantor," but literally meaning, "the cantor's wife." The term "chazzante" resulted from a Yiddish manner of feminizing an otherwise masculine-connoted term. (Today's female cantor would be referred to in modern Hebrew as "*chazzanit.*") The term "chazzantes" soon became a way to refer to the entire group of women who sang such material at that time, and though some of them never personally used the term or rejected it entirely, it remained their moniker to the present.

The chazzantes gained popularity for their performances of *chazzanut* on recordings, but also in concert, on the radio, and occasionally on film and television. They performed in cities with major Jewish populations, including but not limited to New York, Philadelphia and Chicago, throughout Canada, and select international locales including various South American cities. They might have become prominent cantors in synagogues, if it weren't for *halachic* (Jewish law) restrictions on hearing a woman's voice in prayer (this topic will be discussed later). The chazzantes were thus unable to function as *sh'lichei tsibbur* (prayer leaders, or representatives, of a congregation) for traditional congregations. Even the most liberal congregations at the time would not accept a woman as *shaliach tsibbur*, and it wasn't until 1975 that the first female cantor was invested by Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, seminary of the Reform movement, and until 1987 that the Jewish Theological Seminary of the Conservative movement began granting the status of *chazzan* to women. As a result of the *halachic* restrictions, the only appearance of the chazzantes in synagogues were in concert and as entertainers at bar mitzvah and wedding receptions. Two of the chazzantes also sang at hotels' Passover seders and one sang during hotels' High Holiday services alongside male cantors (thus ensuring the prayers be deemed *halachically* acceptable to

the congregations, which, though advertised to be strictly observant, must not have been comprised of observant orthodox Jews due to the commingling of a man and woman's voices). With the demise of the period known as the "Golden Age of the Great Cantorate," which began around 1880 and began its formal decline in 1930, during which time *chazzanut* was considered "en vogue" and concerts featuring cantors drew large audiences, and the subsequent decline of Yiddish-speakers from 1930 to 1950, the careers of the chazzantes slowly tapered off. While some continued performing into the 1990's, their novelty was over by the 1970's, and with the arrival of women to the cantorate, the notion of the chazzantes became obsolete.

The chazzantes have been an element of Jewish musical history barely touched upon in existing research. Though many descriptions of Jewish women and liturgical music throughout history mention the chazzantes briefly, they have been overlooked, or perhaps shunted to the side in favor of more established areas of Jewish culture, e.g. Yiddish theater and radio. Perhaps the chazzantes have merited so little attention in histories of women and music because there were other women who assumed more prominent roles on stages of Yiddish theater, and male cantors of the day gained more fame singing in both concerts, on radio, and as *sh'lichei tsibbur*. To date, the most that has been written on this subject until today is a paragraph or two in chapters or encyclopedia articles about related topics, such as "women in music" or "Yiddish radio." Meanwhile, there is a great deal of information that has been written about Yiddish theater and radio, as well as the cantorate during its "Golden Age." Research on female *sh'lichei tsibbur* reveals instances of women functioning as leaders of congregations of other women at isolated points in history, as well as one notable instance of a

congregation in New York, Temple Avodah, which engaged a woman, Betty Robbins, as cantor in 1955, 20 years before female cantors were first invested.[1] While the chazzantes may not have played pivotal roles in history, changed the face of Judaism, or created a new group of empowered female prayer leaders, their success and popularity reveal a great deal about the time period, and their place in Jewish music history merits study.

Outside of two personal archives (of Sheindele, a.k.a. Jean Gornish, and Fraydele Oysher) and scattered newspaper clippings, the only sources of detailed information about the chazzantes are surviving relatives, as well as surviving recordings that demonstrate their art. This thesis seeks to produce the first full work devoted to the chazzantes, a task which includes: a) giving detailed contexts to the phenomenon of the chazzantes, including Jewish *halachah*, women on the Yiddish stage, the period known as the "Golden Age of the Great Cantorate," and female prayer-leaders prior to 1975, b) writing succinct biographies including background, career highlights, and vocal nuances, and c) analyzing the phenomenon from a number of perspectives, including tracing the development of the phenomenon from the 1920's to the 1970's, discussing acceptance and rejection by their families as well as the public, individual vocal and career comparisons, matters of gender identity, effects (or lack thereof) on women, performers, and society in general, and finally, the nature of inspiration for this work. A partial discography and filmography is also included, as well as appendices containing photographs of the chazzantes and images of memorabilia from their careers.

[1] Sandra Robbins, "Robbins, Betty," in Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia, ed. Paula E. Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore, (1998), pp. 1158-1159.

Note on Transliteration

When writing on subjects regarding Jewish institutions, one must inevitably make decisions regarding the transliteration of Hebrew and Yiddish terms. Many systems and versions of transliteration of various letters are often used, and all have relative merits. In this work, transliterations will be consistent, except when quoting from a source, in which case the original spelling will be presented.

Women on the Yiddish and Vaudeville Stages

The institution of Yiddish theater paved the road for women to be onstage and began the process of reversing the stigma of women performing. This stigma did not belong solely to Jewish culture, but had a long history in European and American theater. As far back as Greek theater, and stretching to the time of Shakespeare and beyond, men were preferred to women to play female roles onstage. This convention may have its roots in the tradition of Athenian performance, which was really a religious ceremony, and not surprisingly, dominated by the men who subsidized it.[2] Even once women slowly became part of theater companies in certain parts of Europe, audiences were not amenable. In 1629, a French touring company brought female performers to England, where they were termed "monsters" and hissed offstage.[3] Even in the 18th century, women were punished for performance; before the French Revolution, for example, French theater women were threatened with excommunication by the Catholic Church, which deemed women performers sinful and immoral. The theater women also inspired philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau to write missives opposing the influence of women on the art of theater.[4] Yiddish theater had similar constraints imposed upon it, but was somewhat ensconced in insular Jewish communities and followed an independent course of development to that of European theater. In the late 19th century, Yiddish theater reached the shores of America, where women had begun performing onstage in the late

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[2] Author unknown, "A Guide to Ancient Greek Theatre," found at: "http://anarchon.tripod.com/indexGREEKTH.html."

[3] Martha Fletcher Bellinger, "Elizabethan Playhouses, Actors, and Audiences," in A Short History of the Theatre (1927), pp. 207-13. Found at "http://www.theatrehistory.com/british/bellinger001.html."

18th century, the assimilated audiences of Yiddish theater were certainly affected by American culture, and political issues of the day played out on Yiddish stage, including those regarding women's position in society.[5]

The earliest roots of Yiddish theater lay in Purim plays (*shpiels*), appearing first in the 16th century, and developing throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. As the Purim season lasted a short time, performers in the troupes that formed to tour communities could not subsist on acting and generally worked in other trades the remainder of the year. The plays were generally accepted in the unconventional spirit of Purim, but some strictly Orthodox Jews objected to the raucous nature of the performances. It was long considered immodest for a woman to sing, and even more so to perform on stage, according to Jewish law (*halachah*), which to this day causes strictly observant Jews to consider a woman's singing immodest.[6] Thus men would play female characters, but according to *halachah*, men could not dress in women's clothing. Only on Purim were these restrictions dropped. There were, however, professional troupes in Yiddish-speaking 18th century Europe that contained female members, and there were certain female singers, clowns, or dancers who might appear onstage. Regardless, these performers were not considered actors, and were not official characters in the official *shpiel*. Due to a number of factors- a lack of "acceptable material" (only Biblical stories were presented), of community support, and of respect for the Yiddish language as

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[4] L. Clark, "Daughters of Eve: A Cultural History of French Theater Women from the Old Regime to the Fin de Siecle- Book Review," Journal of Social History (Winter, 2003). Found at "http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2005/is_2_37/ai_111897859."

[5] Gerald Sorin, The Jewish People in America: A Time for Building: The Third Migration 1880-1920 (1992), p. 101.

[6] See chapter on *kol ishah and halachah* for a further discussion of the topic of a woman's voice.

"artistic"- it was not until the 19th century that Yiddish theater began to emerge as a respectable art form.[7]

Indeed, the rise of secular education for Jews and the development of the scientific study of Judaism, that crossed the boundaries of what was formerly considered "acceptable," Yiddish theater became an area of great growth. New plays were written, with new themes (e.g. love stories and folk tales), and writing theater became a more popular pursuit. A new movement thus began in the 19th century amongst Central and Eastern European Jews: the Enlightenment, or *haskalah*. The question of what a woman's role should be, both in general and in Jewish society, became an important issue for *haskalah* writers. Regardless of new strides being made, women's roles were still played by men until approximately 1877. At that time, Avrom Goldfadn, the self-dubbed "Father of Yiddish Theater," wanted women to play the female roles he wrote. It is known that there were already several women performing Yiddish theater by 1877, including a woman named "Rosa" who performed in Istanbul taverns, and much like the chazzantes, all laid claim to be the first of her kind. The first major actress, however, was a young girl, Sara Segal, who ran away from home to join Goldfadn's troupe. In order to spare her of her parents' disapproval for women onstage, Goldfadn selected an unmarried actor from his troupe for her, and Sara married, taking her husband's last name along with a trendier first name and became Sophie Goldstein. This marriage of convenience eventually dissolved and she remarried, once again to an actor, becoming Sophie Goldstein-Karp. Sophie's daughter also became a Yiddish actress.[8] Family troupes were

[7] Nahma Sandrow, "Purim Plays," in Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater (1977), pp. 18-20.

[8] Nahma Sandrow, Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater (1977), p. 52.

thus created, and actor's wives were not only occasionally beckoned onstage, but became staples of productions. The appearance of women on the Yiddish stage may have taken many years, but swelled quickly in popularity; once women began performing onstage, the convention of men playing women's roles rapidly became outdated. The many actresses who soon appeared on the scene (now the trade was considered more suitable for women) began to marry the male actors. In these "family troupes," children would inevitably find their ways onstage as well, creating the tradition of Yiddish theater families; like many trades, including that of the chazzantes, theater artists would pass down their skills (and connections) to the next generation. Meanwhile, the music Goldfadn wrote drew on liturgical cantorial chants and opera motifs, creating a blurry line between sacred and profane. Eventually, the trend became reversed; Yiddish theater motifs began to infiltrate cantorial chants. It became a device to incorporate prayers into Yiddish theater and vaudeville, ranging from Sabbath prayers to those from wedding, funeral, or holiday services.[9]

Yiddish theater spread far and wide in Europe, troupes crossing borders regularly to perform. In 1882, Yiddish theater spread to America, and a play opened on the Lower East Side in New York. Several companies moved to America, and by the turn of the century, though performances were also held in Chicago, Philadelphia, and internationally in London, Paris Canada, South America, and Australia, New York was the center of Yiddish theater, housing two major companies.[10] Jewish immigrants who flocked to major cities enabled Yiddish theater touring companies to travel by 1910.[11] For the poor

[9] Ibid, p. 122.
[10] Ibid, p. 68.
[11] C. Baum, P. Hyman and S. Michel, The Jewish Woman in America (1975), p. 95.

immigrants, seeing Yiddish theater onstage was a luxury, but many managed to save enough money to purchase a ticket. The values presented onstage were often religious ones, and thus the theater created a cultural sense of "Jewishness" to which even those eager to abandon "Old Country" ways and beliefs could still hold strong.[12] Female performers became role models not only for immigrant Jewish women, but for American women in general. Issues played out on the Yiddish theater stage included family matters in an acculturating immigrant American society, motherhood's nobility, prostitution, and historical events such as the tragedy of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire of 1911, highlighting women's plight. In 1916, two Yiddish theaters, one in New York, the other in Chicago, mounted four-act productions on the then-taboo subject of birth control and its politics, the first appearing a mere three months before Margaret Sanger, crusader for the legalization of birth control, was imprisoned for violating laws aimed at preventing the spread of contraceptive information prior to the legalization of birth control which took place some 50 years later, between 1965 and 1972.[13] Some theater, however, was comic, mocking women in their struggle for equal rights, becoming doctors, politicians, and even rabbis and cantors. Women were often represented as either a nagging or dumb wife or as the quintessential Jewish mother. Nevertheless, the arts had become a means by which women could climb the social ladder in America. Yiddish theater had its own female stars, and women began writing Yiddish musicals and Jewish liturgical music as well, such as Rhea Silberta and Augusta Zuckerman (who used the pen-name "Mana-Zucca").[14]

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[12] Nahma Sandrow, Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater (1977), p. 77.
[13] Jenna Weissman Joselit, The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950 (1994), p. 64.
[14] Irene Heskes, "Yiddish Musical Theater," in Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia, ed. Paula E. Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore, (1998), pp. 1530-1531.

Meanwhile, another venue for Jewish performers was Yiddish vaudeville. Working women, introduced to new notions of sexuality and autonomy, began to reconfigure and reconsider their responsibilities. Jewish women were no longer voiceless nor powerless and began taking on some of the business-end positions of manager and agent, while still dealing with sexism and Jewish stereotypes. Onstage, they appeared in "pants parts" (dressed as men), in blackface, and in sexier settings than ever before.[15]

Yiddish theater continued to develop both "high art" styles and "shund" styles. ("Shund," meaning "trashy art," and generally referring to popular theater, was considered garbage by the intellectuals, but beloved by the masses). One could attend plays in New York at a large variety of houses and see similar plots to those on Broadway stages, radio, and in movies. In the years following World War I, cultural institutions enjoyed sudden growth and new opportunities. Yiddish began to decline in the 1930's, when the number of Yiddish newspapers decreased (along with American newspapers), and then as the world's Yiddish-speakers were diminished by the *Shoah*. As a result of all these trends and of assimilation, the regular use of Yiddish began to decline and English began to dominate as the primary tongue, though Yiddish theater persisted into the 1950's thanks to strong support of certain powerful and wealthy benefactors in the community as well as in the theater world itself.[16] By the 1950's, however, Yiddish theater and related performances moved to electronic media, including radio, recordings, movies and television.[17] While Yiddish theater still exists, and though there is a current

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[15] Peter Antelyes, "Vaudeville," in Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia, ed. Paula E. Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore, (1998), pp. 1437-1441.
[16] Nahma Sandrow, "Twentieth-Century America," in Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater (1977), p. 300.
[17] Adrienne Fried Block and Irene Heskes, "Music," in Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia, ed. Paula E. Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore, (1998), pp. 951-958.

renaissance of and interest inYiddish culture and music, its heyday was, though perhaps temporarily, over by the 1960's.

Yiddish theater and vaudeville proved to be vehicles to stardom for many female performers, beginning with Goldfadn's first actress (Sophie-Sara Goldstein-Karp) to greats such as Bessie Thomashefsky, Celia Adler, Sophie Tucker, Nellie Casman, and the unforgettable Molly Picon. In one recording, Picon imitates the florid runs of a cantor, a skill in which the chazzantes specialized. The world of the chazzantes crossed and/or joined paths with Yiddish theater, with Fraydele Oysher performing in plays and musicals written for her, often in pants parts,[18] and Mimi Sloan as half of the duo "The Feder Sisters,"[19] along with Bas Sheva,[20] who were among the performers featured in the vaudeville act-turned-movie "Catskill Honeymoon." Meanwhile, Yiddish radio featured these arts, and among them, Sheindele,[21] Fraydele, and Perele starred. The chazzantes may be considered an offshoot of Yiddish theater or vaudeville, but in truth their careers more closely paralleled the rise and fall of the Great Cantorate. Additionally, it was through the use of the liturgical music of cantors that the chazzantes found their unique niche. Yiddish theater made not only women's issues, but also female performers themselves, legitimate. While some chazzantes feigned disdain for the secular music performed on the Yiddish stage, many included it in their repertoire, and all certainly owed a debt to the field. The institution of Yiddish theater thus laid the foundation for all Jewish women who would eventually perform onstage.

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[18] Archive of Fraydele Oysher, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York, New York.
[19] Mimi Sloan, interviews, November 2004 through January 2005.
[20] Mark Hausman, interviews, January 2005.
[21] Archive of Jean Gornish, National Museum of American Jewish History, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Kol Ishah

Religious law, or *halachah*, does not just affect its adherents while in the synagogue, as observant Jews live governed by its tenets. From what one eats to how one dresses, *halachah* provides specific instructions. The observant Jewish woman, in particular, must be constantly aware of certain restrictions dealing with food preparation and modesty, but is exempt from many time bound positive commandments, as dealing with family and home is traditionally considered her primary responsibility. To properly describe the *halachic* context in which the *chazzantes* lived, one must investigate two issues: *kol ishah* (the voice of a woman) and the notion of a woman as *sh'liach tsibbur* (prayer-leader).

Kol Ishah is the term by which one refers to the laws dealing with hearing a woman's voice. The restrictions stem from a section of Talmud which states that one should not hear a woman's voice when reciting the *Sh'ma*. In the Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*), in tractate "*Berachot*," page 24a, there is a discussion of the conditions under which a man may or may not recite the *Sh'ma* in bed. Various opinions are given, depending upon who is present (a wife or children), if there is physical contact with the wife, and/or the ages of the children. The discussion then turns to women's garb, and what states of undress would create sexual arousement, and thus, be unacceptable times for a man's prayer. One example given is "*kol b'ishah ervah*," or, "the voice of a woman is nakedness/sexual incitement." The term, "*ervah*," or, "nakedness," comes from the same root (ayin-resh-vav) as the term "*erom*," also meaning, "nakedness," and coming from the story of Adam and Eve ("The two of them were naked... yet they felt no

shame...")[22] in Genesis, Chapter 3, verse 1. While the two terms have the same translation, they have different connotations, namely, "*erom*" means physical nakedness but has no sexual connotations, while "*ervah*" means naked with a connotation of sexual relations, often taboo sexual relations.[23] The term "*ervah*" appears repeatedly in Leviticus Chapter 18 in the context of various prohibited sexual relations. Therefore, "*kol b'ishah ervah*" imparts a taboo sexual connotation to the voice of a woman, the term "*ervah*" being recognizable to one familiar with Leviticus' list of abominations of the Canaanites.

The *Gemarah* on "*kol b'ishah ervah*" cites from Song of Songs Chapter 2, verse 14, "Let me hear your voice; For your voice is sweet and your face is comely." (Other examples given include an exposed leg, quoting from Isaiah Chapter 47, verse 2, "Strip off your train, bare your leg, wade through the rivers. Your nakedness shall be uncovered, and your shame shall be exposed," and a woman's hair, quoting from Song of Songs, Chapter 4, verse 1, describing a beautiful woman using metaphors of animals, "your hair is like a flock of goats.") Rabbis broadened the law to incorporate any instance of hearing a woman's singing voice. Traditional Judaism viewed both men and women's sexual desires to be equal, but considered women to have the ability to be temptresses, particularly through use of their voices, and thus restrictions were placed in various realms: e.g. for modesty and as not to attract attention of other men, married women's hair should be covered in public.[24] This was part of the reason why women could not serve as *sh'lichei tsibbur*; their voices would tempt men's sexual desires and thus distract

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[22] Translations from JPS *Tanach*, Second Edition (2000).
[23] Rachel Biale, Women & Jewish Law: An Exploration of Women's Issues in Halachic Sources (1984), p. 177.
[24] Susan Weidman Schneider, Jewish and Female: Choices and Changes in Our Lives Today (1984), p. 67.

them from their prayer, "...for the voice of a woman leads to lewdness..."[25] The concept of separate seating in synagogues was used as an additional safeguard to prevent the distraction of men from their prayers by the sight of a woman or the sound of her voice, though the practice of separation in prayer dated from as early as the 13th century or even earlier, as women reportedly had their own reserved area in the First Temple.[26]

As men were *halachically* obligated to pray three times a day, but women were largely exempt from time-bound positive commandments, the same restrictions did not apply to men; if a man's voice distracted a woman from her prayer, it was not deleterious, as the woman was not obligated to say the prayer in the first place. Furthermore, only one who must fulfill the obligation of saying a prayer may say that prayer on behalf of a congregation, according to *halachah*. Hence the traditional symbolism of calling up a boy of Bar Mitzvah age to read from the Torah and, more importantly, say the blessing over the Torah in which the boy serves as "prayer-leader" (i.e. commands the congregation to say the prayer by using the *tsivui* form of "to bless": 'Bless Adonai!') marks the child's entrance into adulthood and his assumption of an adult's prayer responsibilities. A woman who is not obligated to say prayers is thus considered unacceptable to serve as prayer-leader. The interpretation of these commandments, however, varies. For example, though women are generally considered exempt from the time-bound commandment to hear the Torah being read, other authorities state that women are in fact obligated to hear the Torah reading, based upon a passage in Deuteronomy, Chapter 31, verse 12: "Gather the people- men, women, children... that they may hear and so learn to revere the Lord your God and to observe faithfully every

[25] C. Baum, P. Hyman, S. Michel, The Jewish Woman in America (1976), p. 10.

word of this Teaching." If women are considered obligated to fulfill this commandment, then they should logically be permitted to read from the Torah (assuming there is no issue of *kol ishah* or another issue preventing a woman from touching the Torah scroll, such as menstruation, making the woman considered *niddah*- excluded, or unclean).[27]

Being forbidden to sing lest they be overheard, women were (and still are in certain Orthodox communities) often isolated from elements of both daily and religious life.[28] It was not until the 1970's that the Reform movement ordained its first female rabbi and invested its first female cantor, predating the Conservative movement's similar actions. Even though the Reform movement had long considered certain *halachah* outdated for modern life, such as *kashrut*, and had started the creation of new rituals to include women, such as Confirmation and Bat Mitzvah, it was only within the last 35 years that egalitarianism caught up to Hebrew Union College, which finally allowed women to become clergy. The chazzantes, however, were part of the observant Jewish world, and knew of no possibility of becoming cantors. Though there was a female cantor, Betty Robbins, serving at Oceanside, New York's Temple Avodah in 1955[29], the chazzantes saw their art as their only outlet for liturgical singing. Most of the chazzantes attested to the fact that they never desired to serve as actual cantors, and never saw themselves as cantors by any means. Sheindele's nephew Rabbi Harvey Gornish, however, stated that he believed she sublimated her real desire to be a true cantor by

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[26] Israel Abrahams, Jewish Life in the Middle Ages (1960), p. 25.
[27] Rachel Biale, Women & Jewish Law: An Exploration of Women's Issues in Halachic Sources (1984), p. 24.
[28] C. Baum, P. Hyman, S. Michel, The Jewish Woman in America (1976), p. 10.
[29] Sandra Robbins, "Robbins, Betty," in Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia, ed. Paula E. Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore, (1998), pp. 1158-1159.

becoming an entertainer.[30] Sheindele was eventually billed alongside major cantors of the day, singing at hotels' High Holiday and Passover services. Fraydele Oysher insisted she would never serve as a cantor, and her daughter, performer Marilyn Michaels, claimed that even once women were being invested, she, nor her mother, ever desired to enter the field.[31] Fraydele was quoted as saying that although she had been offered the opportunity to sing in a Reform congregation (the identity of which is unknown), she declined, preferring instead "to remain on the stage, bringing the sound of the Synagogue to best taste, rather than trying to take a man's place at the pulpit."[32] Mimi Sloan, who didn't even refer to herself as a chazzante, stated that the concept of becoming a cantor never entered her mind, and that she was happy being merely an entertainer.[33] Regardless of their statements, and/or the presence or lack of any effect they had on women who would become cantors, it is logical and reasonable to associate and compare the chazzantes to the women who followed them into the actual cantorate; the short time which elapsed between the chazzantes' phenomenon and the investiture of the first female cantor, as well as the similar areas in which they worked necessarily connect them historically. It must be also mentioned that the public statements of the chazzantes regarding their aspirations to the cantorate or lack thereof may have been due to the pressure to conform to norms of society and expectations of a woman's (or a Jewish woman's) "proper" role and "proper" use of voice in performance as well as in ritual. At the same time, the chazzantes, whether intentionally or unintentionally, were breaking those norms by performing liturgical music. A biography of Fraydele Oysher stated that

[30] Harvey Gornish, interview, November 2004.
[31] August 2004 interview.
[32] "*A Chazendel auf Shabes*" program (biography), (date unknown).
[33] Mimi Sloan, interviews, November 2004 through January, 2005.

she didn't "think of or refer to herself as a pioneer of feminism. However, long before...women were embraced as Rabbis and Cantors in Synagogues throughout the world, Fraydele Oysher is the woman who played the major role in paving this new road for women."[34] Thus at least one chazzante chose to link herself to female cantors, perhaps even exaggerating the role her career played in assisting theirs. Each chazzante had a different opinion on the cantorate, and having been permitted to serve would not necessarily have altered the course of her career, though the chazzantes are clearly and inarguably linked to the institution of the female cantor.

[34] Fraydele Oysher biography, author unknown, found at http://www.marilynmichaels.com/fraydele.htm.

Biographies

Sophie Kurtzer

Sophie Kurtzer, apparently born in Odessa, and the aunt of Bas Sheva (see below), was the first woman to record *chazzanut* in the 1920's. Her 1924 recording of a Shabbat "*Kiddush*" is currently featured on two modern productions, the first, a collection of cantorial recitatives, "Mysteries of the Sabbath: Classic Cantorial Recordings: 1907-47," and the second, a collection of recordings of female singers of the early 20th century, "*Di Eybike Mame* (The Eternal Mother): Women in Yiddish Theater and Popular Song, 1905-1929" (on which she is credited as "Lady Cantor Madam Sophie Kurtzer"). Additional recordings are extant, but very rare, and include renditions of liturgical pieces "*Kol Adoshem*," "*Zorea Ts'dokos*," and "*Kadsheinu*." Kurtzer's voice is relatively high when compared to the other chazzantes, and she occasionally broke into her head voice to complete melismas and reach the climax of a piece. Still, her vocal production on these recordings mimics a tenor's. Though biographical information is scarce, Kurtzer's groundbreaking accomplishment of being the first chazzante to record *chazzanut* bears mentioning in such a study of the chazzantes.

Fraydele

Fraydele the Chazzante was born on October 3, 1913 in Lipkon, Bessarabia, to Zelig Oysher, one of six generations of cantors in the family.[35] Fraydele's brother Moishe followed in their father's footsteps, initially singing with his father in synagogue, and quickly becoming a highly respected and popular cantor, stage actor and movie star dubbed "The Master Singer of his People." Onstage performance "ran in their blood," and Fraydele began singing when her father realized she had a natural instrument. Apparently, he heard her singing to herself and "sent her to work." Upon seeing her first pay, $1.75, Fraydele's father became convinced that she would have a career. According to Fraydele's daughter Marilyn Michaels, Fraydele's career skyrocketed even before that of her brother Moishe.[36] Fraydele recounted the story of her first major job for several articles: She landed a job in a Manhattan theater just across the Brooklyn Bridge paying $18.00 per week. Upon arriving one day, she witnessed a large crowd outside, and initially assumed there was some disaster that would result in her losing her job, such as a fire. She inquired about the situation only to discover the crowd was there to purchase tickets to see the child singing star Fraydele. The feel-good story ends with Fraydele asking for and receiving a two-dollar raise for her popularity.[37]

In the 1930's, Fraydele met Harold Sternberg, an opera singer, and they married. Harold, a basso-profundo, performed opposite Fraydele during international tours, appeared on Broadway in several George Gershwin shows and was also a member of the

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[35] Author Unknown, "Moishe Oysher Began Career Singing in Synagogue" Jewish Journal, Plantation, Florida (May 18, 1989), p. 8B.
[36] Marilyn Michaels, interview, July 12, 2004.

Metropolitan Opera Company's chorus for 40 years. Fraydele and Harold had two children, Michael and Marilyn.

By the 1930's Fraydele was performing *chazzanut* onstage, but was also known for playing "pants parts" (when women played men) thanks to her short stature and athletic figure. At the end of such productions the "pixieish chassidic little boy"[38] would be revealed a woman, much like the title role of Yentl, popularized by Barbra Streisand's 1983 movie portrayal of Isaac Bashevis Singer's 1962 story, "Yentl, the Yeshiva Boy." It should be noted that Fraydele thus anticipated the cross-dressing concept later brought to public attention by Singer and Streisand. While it was unnecessary for Fraydele to disguise herself in order to sing *chazzanut*, as her performances were in great demand, having her play a young boy of Bar Mitzvah age created the perfect scenario for her to sing cantorial music within the realm of Yiddish theater. In one of the many musicals that were written for her, Fraydele is a woman masquerading as a male cantor who suddenly goes into labor on the *bimah*. The show ends with the rabbi screaming, "Oh, dear! The cantor is giving birth!"[39] This set-up is highly reminiscent of Purim plays, in which men dressed as women and vice versa, and reminds us of the roots of Yiddish theater being the Purim *shpiel*. The *kitl* (robe) worn by cantors of that time could surely have served as perfect costume maternity garb. The concept of the role of expectant mother being incongruous with that of cantor now seems outdated, with many female cantors who have children and families, but must have been highly amusing at that time. Fraydele's frequency of masquerading as males in order to sing *chazzanut* during Yiddish

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[37] Fraydele Oysher biography, author unknown, found at http://www.marilynmichaels.com/fraydele.htm. Also, "Fraydele Oysher, Yiddish Singer" (obituary) The Jewish Week (January 9, 2004), p. 23.
[38] Author Unknown, "Yiddish Soul" (liner notes).
[39] Marilyn Michaels, interview, July 12, 2004.

theater demonstrates her amusing self-image, perhaps bordering on self-mockery. Fraydele, however, may be described as more humorous than some other chazzantes, whose performances were strictly serious in nature, such as Sheindele's explanatory and educational concerts of *chazzanut*.

Other musicals written for her include "*Fraydele's Chosone*" (Fraydele's Wedding) and "*Mazel Tov Fraydele*" (Good Luck, Fraydele). She also starred in "*A Chazendl Oif Shabbos*" (A Little Cantor on Shabbat) and "*A Chazn Oif Yom Tov*" (A Cantor on the Holidays). The titles of her musicals as well as her top billing reveal Fraydele's popularity; "The Little Queen" or "The Golden Girl" starring the "Famous Star- Incomparable Singer! The 'Judy Garland' of the Yiddish Stage"[40] and "The One and Only Chazente, The Beloved Singing Star Freidele Oysher"[41] would certainly sell out the house. Interspersed in these shows were cantorial selections, which were a novelty in the context of the Yiddish theater, especially when performed by a woman.[42]

Once Fraydele performed a concert (while 8 months pregnant with son Michael), at Brooklyn's Orthodox Stone Avenue Talmud Torah. The rabbi approached her and asked her to leave the *bimah*, as women were not permitted to be so close to the ark. Fraydele stated, "Rabbi, I can show you a miracle! I can sing the performance, I'll do the concert and if you don't leave me alone I can have the baby right here! Please go back and sit with your rebbetzin." She later stated that this pronouncement was her effort to "make a break for women to sing wherever and however they want."[43]

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[40] "*A Chazendel auf Shabes*" program (date unknown).
[41] Ad for "*Der Freilacher Kabtzen*" performance, The Jewish Stage (October 1950), page unknown.
[42] Fraydele Oysher biography, author unknown, found at http://www.marilynmichaels.com/fraydele.htm.
[43] Paula Wolfson, Jewish Mothers: Strength, Wisdom, Compassion, page unknown. Found at "http://www.lloydwolf.com/mothers.html."

Fraydele was given star treatment as she toured around the country and internationally, including high pay (sometimes a percentage of a production's total gross), luxury hotel rooms, car and driver. Fraydele, like Sheindele, also branched into radio broadcasts, singing on the radio in New York on WLTH, a station which focused on serving the throngs of Yiddish-speaking listeners in Brooklyn.[44]

Fraydele, like other chazzantes, sang favorite Yiddish folksongs along with her theater numbers and *chazzanut*. Among her regular numbers were "*A Zemer'l*," "*Dem Milners Trer'n*," and "*Momele*."

Like many chazzantes, Fraydele was billed as the "only" or "first" female cantor. She claimed that Reform temples sought her as their cantor long before the first cantor was invested by Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 1975.[45] She explained her rejection of such offers by expressing her preference "to remain on the stage, bringing the sound of the Synagogue to best taste, rather than trying to take a man's place at the pulpit."[46] While Fraydele touted modesty (one biography states that Fraydele didn't "think of or refer to herself as a pioneer of feminism" but then describes her as "the woman who played the major role in paving this new road for women"[47]), she also had a humorous boastful side. In one interview, Fraydele acknowledged the existence of other chazzantes: "There may be one or two other lady cantors...but not as good as me. Now, did you ever see such humility?"[48]

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[44] Henry Sapoznik, "Brooklyn Yiddish Radio, 1925-46" Jews of Brooklyn (2002), p. 228.
[45] Author Unknown, "Moishe Oysher Began Career Singing in Synagogue" Jewish Journal, Plantation, Florida (May 18, 1989), p. 8B.
[46] "*A Chazendel auf Shabes*" program (biography), (date unknown).
[47] Fraydele Oysher biography, author unknown, found at http://www.marilynmichaels.com/fraydele.htm.
[48] Sidney Fields, "Our Local Redgraves" Daily News, New York, New York (date/page unknown).

Like many families involved in the world of Yiddish theater, Fraydele's children carried on the family tradition of Yiddish performance. Marilyn Michaels, her daughter, started singing at age 7 alongside her mother, and became known as a popular Yiddish songstress and comedienne. She recorded several albums with her mother, which were produced by Harold. She also starred in the Broadway musical, "Catskills on Broadway."

Fraydele continued to perform, often with her daughter Marilyn, well into the 1980's alongside other stars of Yiddish theater and vaudeville such as Molly Picon, Nellie Casman, Jackie Mason, Miriam Kressyn, and even Cantor David Kusevitsky. Outliving her husband Harold, Fraydele became ill and died on January 5, 2004 at age 90 in her Manhattan home.

Sheindele

Sheindele die Chazzante, née Jean Gornish, was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1915 or 1916 to Samuel and Ida Gornish. Samuel's Jewish education ended when his father died, but he became the religious leader of his remaining brothers, and sought to live a religious life. Samuel worked as a junk-seller, he offered rooms to let as a realtor, and also served as a *baal tefillah* (prayer leader), with a tenor voice, in synagogue. He married Ida Pelz, the daughter of a charismatic teacher named Menachem Mendel Pelz, and together they had 10 children, 8 of whom survived. Samuel was greatly admired by his children, who often vied for his attention. His daughters, while feeling great respect for their father, felt it necessary to compete for his time, as Samuel was more involved with his sons.

All of Samuel and Ida's sons would eventually serve as *baalei tefillah* in their synagogues, but their daughters could not have such an opportunity, as there were no female cantors at the time and the daughters were not even taken to synagogue. While some of the daughters studied instruments, one daughter, called Sheindel, or Jean, had a unique voice, and like her father's, was a rich tenor (lower than the common female voice). When the family sang *z'mirot* around the table after Shabbat dinner or at the Pesach seder, Sheindel was clearly the leader; her voice was strongest, and her love for the traditional Jewish music made her sing enthusiastically. The Gornish family seders would last from the early evening until 2:00am, and passersby on the street would stop and listen to the singing until the early morning hours. Following her graduation from high school, Sheindel performed as soloist with several bands, but eventually focused on liturgical music, singing in several major cities. According to the New York Mirror, "her

great popularity on the concert stage gained for her the attention of radio sponsors and as a result of her unique style of singing and colorful voice, has been heard over the radio more than a thousand times. Sheindele prefaces each number with brief explanations in English, elucidating the history and shedding light upon the background of each hymn and prayer."[49] In fact, upon perusal of her personal music books, in which are notated songs as common as "Ma Oz Tsur" and as intricate as florid cantorial recitatives, one can read her prepared synopses of each prayer.

Sheindele's career spanned from the 1930's to the 1960's, during which time she appeared on several Yiddish radio stations, including WDAS and WPEN, and had her own program, "The Sheindele the Chazente Program," on WEVD, a Yiddish New York radio station, became a spokesperson for Planter's Peanuts, and performed numerous concerts. She was billed as a "Unique Interpreter of Jewish Melodies,"[50] and "The Only Woman Cantor in America,"[51] though many of the chazzantes billed themselves as "the only" or "the first" chazzante. Sheindele not only sang text and music generally reserved for men, but she sang in a voice nearly indistinguishable from that of a man, and even wore the hat and robe, or miter and *kitl*, typically worn by a male Orthodox Jew (see Appendix 1A, 1C). In Chicago, where Sheindele appeared in 1943 and 1944, she found major success, garnering favorable reviews from the Chicago Daily News and the Chicago Sentinel. In the following review, Sheindele was compared to a recent performance by a Paulist boy's choir:

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[49] Nick Kenny. "Woman Cantor Stars on WEVD." New York Mirror (July 11, 1960), page unknown.
[50] Advertisement for the Aaron Coffee Company, circa 1950.
[51] Author Unknown. Sunday Independent, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania (December 31, 1944), page unknown.

"Much as Father O'Malley's boys of the Paulist Choir brought medieval Catholic Church music to a lay audience in Orchestra Hall last week, so on Sunday afternoon a beautiful, slender, stately and earnest young woman, clad all in white, in the same auditorium, gave to all comers an intimate idea of time-honored Jewish liturgical chants... Her bringing of the ancient liturgical music of her people to the multitudes is less orthodox than the singing in secular halls of the Paulist Choristers. For the Paulist boys, including the young sopranos, are a direct and simple reversion to ancient Church practices, while "Sheindele" intones prayers generally reserved for males.

To a lay listener the young woman's rich alto chantings were dramatic and right.

She offered no apology, in either word or manner, for what she was doing. She gave the impression that she had as much right as a man to appeal to the God of her fathers to "cast not off our people," to "hear our voice."

Her manner and her voice were dramatically easy and without restraint. Were she to choose the secular stage, she would be an instant hit, so authoritative, so sure is she, without sacrifice of feminine dignity.

Her audience, naturally, was overwhelmingly Jewish, and the reception of each of her numbers was proof-positive that anything freakish there might be in her invasion of a man's world was overwhelmingly offset by her artistry.

Whether it was the actress in her or the priestess that aroused the enthusiasm, I was not competent to judge."[52]

This commentary on Sheindele's performance, including an analysis of her musical selections and the observations of a woman in "a man's world," brings up many issues which faced the chazzantes during their careers: Were they feminine enough or were they improperly masculine? Did they flout their tradition? If not, did they do the tradition justice? Did they belong in what was then perceived as a man's world? Finally, one of the most interesting questions to the present-day researcher, what was the public opinion of chazzantes? C. J. Bulliet's observations of the dramatic public approval given to Sheindele offer the modern reader invaluable insight into the minds of the chazzante's audiences in the 1940's. Though her talent was in a field then considered somewhat

improper and certainly unusual for a woman, Sheindele not only won audience support, she won critical praise.

Though newspaper articles at the time describe Sheindele's parents' strenuous objections to her performing concerts around the country, and her father not accepting her as a cantor, even being "shocked at her boldness,[53]" today, her orthodox nephew, Rabbi Harvey Gornish, recalls the family being greatly supportive, and never questioning Sheindele's performing or goals thereof. However, if Sheindele had pursued singing as a cantor, the family agrees her father would have been upset.[54] Meanwhile, men and women alike listened to Sheindele's singing in concert and on the radio, knowing full well this was a woman singing with a voice that simply sounded like a man's. The issue of *kol ishah* was not a deterrent to most observant Jewish listeners at the time, and Sheindele was even featured at High Holiday services and Pesach seders at hotels catering to observant Jews. Though she was billed alongside major cantors of the day, Sheindele most likely served as an assistant, or perhaps sang only at the meal, thus allowing the male cantors to run the service and keep it "kosher." Regardless, in a "Letter to the Editor" published in 1946, one writer sarcastically stated,

> "We had a situation here recently in which the press announced a "strictly Orthodox service," in which a chazante would officiate. Assuming it is proper for a woman to lead at an Orthodox service- I leave that to our rabbis- why hippodrome the affair?
>
> I shouldn't be surprised if next year some enterprising congregation, strictly Orthodox, were to announce a Kol Nidre service lead by the Dionne quintuplets. Sincerely Yours, Joseph Gross" (source unknown).

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[52] C. J. Bulliet "Beautiful Girl Cantor is Dramatic in Recital." Chicago Daily News (December 26, 1944), page unknown.
[53] Author Unknown, Chicago Sun Times (December 24, 1944), page unknown.
[54] Harvey Gornish, interview, December 4, 2004.

It is clear to the reader of this letter that, unlike the assumption that might be made after reading C.J. Bulliet's review of an earlier performance (see above), Sheindele was not welcomed by all to sing liturgical pieces.

In 1955, with the appointment of Betty Robbins to the pulpit of Temple Avodah of Oceanside, New York[55], there was debate regarding who was the first female cantor, as many chazzantes would bill themselves (or be billed) as the first of her kind. An article in The Bulletin of Philadelphia clarified that, "Jean Gornish acted as cantor at Orthodox Jewish meetings as early as 1936. However, she never officially occupied a synagogue pulpit, performing more as a solo singer or assisting the Rabbi... Robbins is believed the first woman appointed to the pulpit of a Reform Jewish synagogue. Miss Gornish says she never accepted an official appointment to the Orthodox Jewish pulpit, though often urged."[56]

Sheindele's formal recording, *Sheindele Sings the Songs of Her People*, contains both Hebrew and Yiddish melodies. Her family describes this accomplishment as her "last hurrah." Sheindele, who was never married, died on April 28, 1981, and was buried in a suburb of Philadephia in a family plot. Her sisters made certain that her gravestone bore a music staff to commemorate her passion.

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[55] Sandra Robbins, "Robbins, Betty," in Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia, ed. Paula E. Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore, (1998), pp. 1158-1159.
[56] Author Unknown, The Bulletin, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (August 18, 1955), page unknown.

Bas Sheva

Bas Sheva, neé Bernice Kanefsky, was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on February 11, 1923.[57] Her father was Joseph Kanefsky, a cantor at the prestigious Hunts Point Synagogue in the Bronx, New York, her mother was a concert singer, and her aunt was the first to be known as a chazzante, Sophie Kurtzer, who began recording liturgical music in the 1920's. Bas Sheva (who was often dubbed "Bash" by friends and colleagues), the only child of Joseph and his first wife, possessed a rich voice with great projection power. These talents landed her at the New England Conservatory of Music, where Bas Sheva was heard by composer Louis Nizer, who insisted upon having her sing the score to a show he had written, "The Story of a People," which dealt with Arab-Israeli politics. The show resulted in Bas Sheva debuting in New York, and her career was born.[58]

It was the tradition for cantors to teach the trade to their sons, thus resulting in "dynasties" of cantors and long lines of cantors in one family (e.g. Moishe Oysher being the 6th generation of cantors in his family). Breaking somewhat from tradition, Joseph began to teach Bas Sheva. Though she never learned Hebrew, she began to sing with her father at wedding receptions and became known as a "lady cantor." He taught her to sing liturgical recitatives phonetically. (Later, his two sons from his second marriage, Sheldon and Ian, also became cantors.) At one "gig" with her father, Bas Sheva met the bandleader, Adolph (Al) Hausman, a talented conductor, pianist, and accordionist. Al

[57] Unless otherwise noted, all information was obtained through interviews with Mark Hausman in January, 2005.

also came from a musical tradition; his relatives were musicians who played at upper-class balls in Europe. They were married in the mid-1940's, just after the end of the second World War, and had their first and only son, Mark, in 1953. Bas Sheva's father was clearly supportive of her career, as were her in-laws, the Hausman family, which idolized her for her later stardom and bragged about their relationship to her. Bas Sheva's first recording, entitled "*Soul of a People*," with an orchestra conducted by Capitol recording artist Harold Mooney, gave her a unique reputation in the world of show business.

Bas Sheva, like many chazzantes, had a large following in the "borscht belt" of the Catskill Mountains in New York. She and Al would rent out a bungalow and travel from it to various hotels, at which she would perform an evening show. The hotels' evening shows usually consisted of a 45-minute musical act followed by an hour-long comedian's act. The audiences, mostly Jewish, contained many Holocaust survivors as well as those otherwise affected by the war. Jackie Mason, then an up-and-coming comedian, observed the emotional response of the audiences following Bas Sheva's performances, and noticed the following comedic acts flop. He rearranged the classic formula for their performances so that Bas Sheva would always follow him, ensuring both of them a positive audience response.

In 1949, a group of seasoned Catskill performers, including singers, dancers, actors and comedians, were filmed in the vaudeville show-turned movie, "Catskill Honeymoon." Bas Sheva was featured, along with Mimi (Feder) Sloan and Sylvia Feder

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[58] Author Unknown. "December 11th-Donor Dinner! Springfield's Outstanding Social Function of the Year: Bas Sheva to Entertain Donor Guests." Home News, Springfield, Massachusetts (November, 1956), p. 1.

(see chapter on Mimi Sloan), singing both her signature piece of *chazzanut*, Israel Schorr's "*SheYibone Beis HaMikdosh*," for which she donned a *yarmulke* on camera, along with an unusual selection, both for the Jewish audience as well as for a female singer: the aria "*Vesti la giubba*" from the Italian Leoncavallo opera, "*I Pagliacci*." "*Vesti la giubba*," an aria intended to be sung by a tenor, was performed by Bas Sheva in a serious fashion, and sung in the same manner a man would; rather than utilize the upper portion of her voice (head voice) for high notes, she used the lower part (chest voice) and "belted"[59] it to the top notes. (A man's head voice would be referred to as "*falsetto*," and would not be used in an operatic aria such as this.) Such unusual selections sung by a women helped put Bas Sheva in the spotlight. One review of a performance of the same aria compared her with the famous Italian tenor, Beniamino Gigli: "Who is this woman, who dares defy tradition and sing an aria only our greatest tenors have dared tackle, thought I. My mind quietly dwelled on the possibility of hearing Gili [sic], the great Italian tenor, approach with the same quiet dignity an announcement that he would now sing the 'Bell Song' from 'Lakme.'" (The humorous comparison requires the reader to know that the "Bell Song" is an operatic aria for a coloratura soprano, the highest human voice.)[60]

In 1951, Mickey Katz, clarinetist and comedian, put together a revue to run on Broadway in New York and then tour Philadelphia, Montreal, and continuing cross-country to the West Coast. Similar to "Catskill Honeymoon," his show, "Borscht Capades" (punning on the popular "Ice Capades"), featured a variety of Jewish acts,

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[59] "Belting" refers to the "Broadway-esque" style of pushing one's lower chest voice to powerfully sing high notes.
[60] Bob Ellis. "Greater Miami After Dark." AM- Miami Beach, Miami, Florida (March 23, 1951), page unknown.

including music and comedy. Mickey Katz, along with his son Joel Grey (then a young newcomer to the stage), included Bas Sheva as a featured act. (Following her death (see below), Katz replaced her with a young girl dubbed "Little Tanya" who sang standard Yiddish repertoire such as "Raisins and Almonds" and "Yiddishe Momma," and revised the show, renaming it "Hello Solly," punning on "Hello Dolly.") Bas Sheva was quickly becoming a highly-sought-after performer.

In concerts with stars such as Buddy Hackett, Molly Picon and Harry Belafonte, it was Bas Sheva whose performance was placed at the end of the program. Apparently like Jackie Mason, no performer wanted to follow her act and inevitably be compared to her. Meanwhile, Bas Sheva's "*Soul of a People*" with Harold Mooney also caught the attention of fellow Capitol recording artist Les Baxter, a popular star in the 1950's. He was one of the first to have his own television show on which he conducted an orchestra, and was known for his lounge-style music. In 1954, Baxter wrote "*The Passions*" for her voice and recorded her singing both wordless melodies and children's folksongs with unusual instrumental arrangements. The liner notes comment that Baxter used "as an instrument the remarkably sensitive voice of Bas Sheva- a voice whose vivid colorations range from the gutteral [sic] snarl of savagery to a delicate and lyric beauty."[61] The recording still has a large cult following and is now grouped into the category of "exotica." Though certain tracks from the recording were included on later collections, neither Bas Sheva nor her family saw royalties, as she was advanced the royal sum of $10,000 for the production, but alas, with no future profit possibilities. Interestingly enough, her renditions of the liturgical pieces on "Soul of a People" were considered so

[61] "The Passions" (liner notes), (author/date unknown).

unique with her melismatic style that she was credited as partial composer. If that recording had become hugely successful, she would have reaped huge profits.

While Bas Sheva's repertoire included music that was not liturgical in nature, including popular hits of the 1940's and 1950's (e.g. "Rock-a-bye Your Baby With a Dixie Melody," "Purple People Eater"), it was her renditions of liturgical settings that became her calling card, and which eventually attracted the attention of Ed Sullivan. Bas Sheva debuted on March 25, 1956 on the Ed Sullivan Show alongside such major stars as Nat King Cole and Andre Segovia. Ray Bloch, the music director of the show, handed his baton over to Al in a rare move, allowing him to conduct the (unseen) orchestra for his wife. In this appearance she sang her most popular recitative, "*SheYibone Beis HaMikdosh*," towards the beginning of the program. In a rare case of public objection to the chazzantes, the Orthodox Union of Rabbis, which had gotten wind of Bas Sheva's impending performance, wrote a letter to the Ed Sullivan show, detailing how it was inappropriate for a Jewish woman to be performing on television, especially singing liturgical music, and even more so without appropriate head covering. Fortunately, their letter was ignored, and Bas Sheva's rendition was hugely successful. Within eleven months she was asked back to give an encore performance of the same number, and this time, on February 3, 1957, was given the prestigious closing act position.

Bas Sheva went to extremes to ensure her success on the Ed Sullivan Show. She had a dramatic rhinoplasty and underwent dental procedures to repair a large space between her front teeth, lost a large amount of weight, and styled her hair short in the popular fashion of the time, resulting in her looking like a Jewish version of Judy Garland

(see Appendix 2A). In the words of her son, Mark Hausman, she "really went Hollywood for that spot."[62]

Bas Sheva suffered a tragic, premature death. In 1960, she and Al agreed to perform one show on a cruise ship in exchange for passage to Puerto Rico, where they had further engagements. Bas Sheva was severely diabetic, insulin-dependent, and already suffering vision loss. She had been told by her doctor to cease her performance career lest it kill her. On the ship she suffered a bout of seasickness and was taken to the ship's infirmary, where she was given an injection of medication to aid the seasickness. It is not known whether or not the ship's doctor knew of her diabetic condition, or what exact interaction took place, but her heart stopped and she died, at the mere age of 37, leaving behind seven-year-old Mark. Her untimely passing was covered by Walter Winchell in his column in the New York Mirror, on February 27, 1960.

[62] Letter from Mark Hausman to Cantor Erik Contzius (June 1, 2002).

Mimi Sloan

Mimi Sloan, née Miriam Feder, was born to Moishe and Sabina Feder, from Lodz and Warsaw, Poland, respectively, two seasoned performers of Yiddish theatre.[63] Moishe, a baritone, was a member of the highly respected Vilna Troupe, while Sabina performed in the Polish opera company "*Hazomir*" as a lyric soprano. Sylvia, the older daughter, was born while the family still lived in Poland. After emigration to America, Miriam was born in Brooklyn, New York. Sabina continued performing Yiddish theater in New York at the Bronx Art Theatre and the McKinley Square Theatre.[64] In the tradition of Yiddish theater performers, entertainment became a family business. Moishe and Sabina, stage performers themselves, were very supportive of their children's performance efforts, their daughters being, to quote Mimi, "born in the proverbial trunk" of traveling stage performers; Sylvia was nearly born on stage when Sabina went into labor during a performance in Poland![65] The two sisters sang from a very young age, and formed the duo "The Feder Sisters" in their teens.

Together Mimi and Sylvia performed around the United States and in Canada, including Chicago, Pennsylvania, and New York, but were especially popular and thus performed mostly at major hotels in the Catskills. Still a teenager, Mimi introduced herself to John Effrat, President of the Broadway Show League, an organization that showcased new young talent. Effrat highlighted Mimi in one of his productions held in the Booth Theatre on Broadway, but at the time, she sang popular numbers, such as "*Why*

[63] Unless otherwise noted, all information was obtained through interviews with Mimi Sloan from November 2004 through January, 2005.
[64] Sylvia Roebuck, interview, January 2005.
[65] Ibid.

was I Born?," a piece from Showboat made famous by Helen Morgan. It was popular Yiddish and Hebrew liturgical pieces, however, which made Mimi (and Sylvia) famous.

"The Feder Sisters" generally sang only Yiddish favorites, and were featured in the revue/variety show-turned movie "Catskills Honeymoon" (in which they sang a swing-influenced version of the well-known Yiddish folk song, "*A Zemrl*"), as well as on television, where they performed three guest spots on the 1950's "Kellogg's Variety Show" with Victor Borga. One appearance, in which they sang a version of the popular song, "Orange-Colored Sky," but with special German lyrics written by Sylvia's first husband Max Kletter, received laudatory reviews from the mainstream media, which would later compare them to the Andrews Sisters.[66] They also performed with Yiddish theater star Molly Picon in one of her "star vehicles," *Abi Gezunt*. Both Sylvia and Mimi continued to perform independently; Sylvia performed Yiddish theater as a leading lady, and Mimi eventually branched out on her own under her married name, Mimi Sloan. Her husband, Daniel (Danny) Sloan, whom Mimi married in 1954, was a Conservative rabbi who taught her *chazzanut*, which Mimi termed, "cantorials." Though the *chazzanut* she was learning was entirely different than the Yiddish music she had previously sung, Mimi loved the liturgical music immediately. Danny Sloan was dedicated to his wife's singing, and served not only as her teacher, but as her sound engineer and stage manager. For Mimi's recordings, Danny directed, arranged music especially for her voice as well as instruments, and even wrote new lyrics. They moved to a home in the Catskill Mountains of New York to be closer to Mimi's primary performance venues.

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[66]Sylvia Roebuck, interview, January 2005.

Mimi did recordings for United Artists with arrangements by noted composer and arranger of Jewish music, Abraham Ellstein. When asked about how her music was accepted by the public, Mimi stated that her "cantorials" were performed "past the stage" when a woman singing such traditional music would not be acceptable; though it was already in the 1970's when she began performing "cantorials" (Mimi was the youngest of the group here termed "chazzantes"), Mimi states that she never once experienced criticism for performing liturgy generally only sung by men, though Sylvia suggests that those who felt Mimi's repertoire inappropriate would simply not attend performances. Mimi recalls having specific requests for various pieces of chazzanut shouted out from the audience. Art Raymond, host of Yiddish radio shows "Raisins and Almonds" and "Bagels and Lox" in New York and Philadelphia, respectively, wrote Sloan's recordings' liner notes and summed up her power onstage:

> "A night club entertainer par excellence, a belter of the blues and an exciting singer of sultry standards, Mimi is a star in her own right. Her numerous personal appearances in theatres and supper clubs throughout the country have earned her the title, "The Inimitable Mimi Sloan."...Once in a very great while, when she senses that her audience is "right" for the material, she digs down into her portfolio and comes up with a Moishe Oysher melody. Invariably, she tears the house down and the audience won't let her leave the stage..."[67]

When performing in the Catskills and elsewhere, she recalls that generally her audiences were mixed, including her performances at Carnegie Hall and Town Hall, but that occasionally, men would refuse to listen to her perform. She states that she later discovered that these men would furtively enter the auditoriums to listen to her sing.

[67] Art Raymond, "Mimi Sloan Sings Moishe Oysher Melodies" (liner notes).

Mimi was familiar with the other chazzantes, Fraydele, Sheindele, Bas Sheva, and Perele Feig, though she never termed herself a "chazzante," and states that she never desired to become a cantor. Sylvia agreed that the concept of becoming a cantor never occurred to them, and that they referred to the chazzantes as "cantors" only in the sense of "theatrical cantors."[68] While Mimi never served as an official cantor, like Sheindele die Chazzante, she did co-lead Passover seders with Danny at hotels in Florida, where restrictions on hearing a woman's voice were not strictly upheld due to the nature of one's prayer obligation at a seder versus at other services (see chapter on Jewish law).

Most of the cantorial music Mimi performed was Moishe Oysher's, having received permission from his wife Theodora (Teddy) to use it. The Oysher family "felt that she was the only singer who could do justice to this specialized exponent of Jewish music."[69] Some of the pieces were Yiddish standards, such as "Mein Shtetele Belz," or "Unter Boimer," which were commonly known to Jewish audiences, and also in the repertoire of Oysher. Many of the pieces, however, were at least partially in the style of *chazzanut*, before adding more instruments and upbeat rhythms. These selections included "*Yibuneh*" and settings of "*Sim Shalom*," "*Ki Hine KaChomer*," "*Sh'ma Yisroel*," and "*V'Lirushalayim Ircho*." Mimi also performed renditions of Oysher's popular and highly ornamented pieces, including "*Ha Lachma Anya*" and the "patterlike" favorite "*Hagadah* in Song" from *The Moishe Oysher Seder* album.[70] She released two solo albums of Oysher's music, "*Mimi Sloan Sings Moishe Oysher Melodies*" and "*Mimi Sloan Sings More...Moishe Oysher's Richest Encores*." Mimi recalls Danny's

[68] Sylvia Roebuck, interview, January 2005.
[69] Art Raymond, "Mimi Sloan Sings Moishe Oysher Melodies" (liner notes).
[70] Art Raymond, "Mimi Sloan Sings Moishe Oysher Melodies" and "Mimi Sloan Sings More: Moishe Oysher's Richest Encores" (liner notes).

instructions to learn Oysher's ornaments; she wrote the "scat-like" syllables as lyrics and practiced them slowly until she could achieve his speed. Moishe Oysher's selections were arranged in higher keys to suit Mimi's powerful soprano voice, though in many instances they were still quite low and Sloan's voice could be mistaken for a tenor *chazzan*. Even in the later years of her career, Mimi worked with Mickey Katz, famed Jewish comedic singer and performer, in concerts around Florida.

Mimi Sloan continued to perform until her husband and teacher Danny died in 1992, at which time she felt she could not continue. Today she and her sister Sylvia are retired and live in Florida.

Perele

Perele Feig was a popular chazzante, performing at bar mitzvah and wedding receptions, in concerts, and on Brooklyn's popular Yiddish radio station WEVD. She also recorded *chazzanut*, and extant recordings of her renditions of "*Yishtabach*," "*O'shamnu mikolam*," and "*V'hu Rachum*" (some with her brother Joel Feig, a known choir leader, at the piano) are excellent examples of her uncannily low voice. Cantor Jacob Ben-Zion Mendelson, at whose bar mitzvah she sang, refers to her voice as a "foghorn."[71] Her voice seems like a baritone's, and her melismas are emotional and authentic. It is nearly impossible, even as a skilled listener, to determine she is a woman based on her vocal recordings. Like Sophie Kurtzer, scarce information is available regarding Perele, particularly biographical information, but she was a contemporary and colleague of the other chazzantes, and thus merits mention in a study of the chazzantes.

[71] Conversations with Cantor Jacob Ben-Zion Mendelson, 2004.

Chazzantes from the 1920's to the 1970's and Beyond

The chazzantes were mostly active from the 1920's to the 1970's. There were great changes within the duration of the phenomenon itself, like the great changes taking place during that period in American music. Each of the six women herein identified as chazzantes had unique voices as well as unique career paths. The differences between the chazzantes' careers were likely due in part to their individual qualities, strengths and style, but also largely due to the different time periods and venues in which they sang. It is therefore valuable to detail and trace the development of the chazzantes, beginning with Sophie Kurtzer in the 1920's and ending with Mimi Sloan in the 1970's.

The phenomenon of the chazzantes can be said to have officially started with the first woman to record *chazzanut*, Sophie Kurtzer, the so-called "Lady Cantor Madam Sophie Kurtzer from Odessa," whose 1924-1925 recordings were theretofore one of a kind. At the beginning of the phenomenon, a unique talent such as Sophie Kurtzer's could take off in a "modest style," that is, to find success on a small scale, not ruffling too many feathers, but making a definite impression. Though she gained popularity with the public that was willing to accept her, her performances didn't reach very far, nor did she branch out into many forms of media. Kurtzer did not produce many recordings[72], nor did she have opportunities that later presented themselves, such as longer recordings on LP's, movies, or television, and recorded only on 78's. With very little information available on her, one cannot know the public response to such an unusual performer, if any. However, during the 1920's in America, at the cusp of slowly-changing beliefs

[72] Refer to Partial Discography/Filmography, p. 1.

regarding women's roles in society, for Kurtzer to record *chazzanut* and have it survive, even landing in 21st century compilations of "classic cantorial recordings," was a major accomplishment. Her singing must have made a noticeable impression. Of course, had there been a huge public outcry at the concept, it might have found its way into a publication. Perhaps it was a result of Kurtzer's low-key entrance into the spotlight that began to form the foundation on which the chazzantes built, or perhaps it was the lack of such a spotlight that allowed her to record, away from critical ears that might have stopped such a groundbreaker in her tracks. One important note is that Kurtzer's voice, while still mimicking a tenor's, remained high and unmistakably female, akin to that of Mimi Sloan, the last of the chazzantes, minus the "Broadway belting" sound and large orchestral accompaniment Sloan used in the 1970's. Kurtzer's voice type and technique must be noted along with a discussion of the early chazzantes. With any higher a voice, she might have been unable to mimic a man's sound, and thus unable to produce such recordings at the time. With a lower voice, such as that of Perele, a later chazzante, her mimicry might have been so accurate that it could have caused a backlash of public opinion, also preventing the future phenomenon.

In the years following Sophie Kurtzer's breakthrough in the field, the phenomenon enjoyed years of comfort while the public sought new forms and new quantities of entertainment. The public became accustomed to, yet intrigued by their craft while the chazzantes created some controversy by "pushing the envelope," appearing in more forms of media, expanding repertoire to include non-liturgical music, and touring major cities. Perele recorded 78's as well as performing as an entertainer in synagogues and in concerts. Fraydele began performing in the Yiddish theater, where women were

already performing for several decades, and there found a new opportunity to sing *chazzanut*. It was already considered more permissible, even in the late 1920's and early 1930's, for women to perform on the Yiddish stage, and due to the comedic nature of many of the productions, behavior normally frowned upon was instead smiled upon. While in the theater, Fraydele was able to dress as a boy or man and mimic a bar mitzvah student or cantor, thus singing *chazzanut*. Her niche was a uniquely safe place to perform such music, and ensured her an audience to which *chazzanut* was somewhat a novelty, and which already expected to see women onstage, as opposed to audiences of straightforward concerts of *chazzanut* which might have caused reaction to a woman's vocal performance with shock or disapproval. Additionally, Fraydele's relationship to brother Moishe Oysher granted her distinction and additional star status, further demonstrating the importance of the specific time period (towards the end of the Great Cantorate's "Golden Age") to the success of the phenomenon. Her dual strengths of Yiddish performance and *chazzanut* gave her broad access to stage opportunities; playwrights wrote scripts *around* her, and specifically designed them to showcase her singing talent. During her career, she encountered some criticism for seemingly ignoring *halachah*, but in her humorous and comically immodest/aggressive nature, laughed at her detractors and tossed off their comments, daring anyone to prevent her from following her art. Thanks to her popularity, Fraydele recorded several LPs and appeared regularly on the radio.

Meanwhile, Sheindele was making her way independently in Philadelphia, performing *chazzanut* in straightforward concerts, initially presenting it alongside other music of the day and age, but then devoting herself solely to liturgical singing to

commemorate the Jews who were suffering and dying in the Holocaust overseas. Sheindele also educated her audiences, explaining the meaning and nuances of each liturgical selection. Her serious nature and insistence upon high standards for her art resulted in more public reaction, including the notable 1946 instance of mocking criticism of the concept of female cantors (a mere nine years before the first female cantor was appointed to a pulpit, and only 29 years before the first female cantor was invested by a seminary), and conversely garnering huge critical praise for her emotional and prayerful renditions of the liturgy. This made her a desirable commodity to draw clients to various hotels, year after year, where she would sing Passover and High Holiday services alongside other major male cantors of the day. A new male cantor would be hired each year, but Sheindele became a mainstay. In this way, one might state that Sheindele was a groundbreaker in her own light, as she walked closer than any other chazzante to the boundary of "being" a *shaliach tsibbur*. In addition to her LP recording and participation in certain services, her show on the radio made the chazzantes a known entity, reaching thousands of Yiddish-speaking listeners.

The arrival of Bas Sheva on the scene was perhaps the pinnacle of the phenomenon. Bas Sheva, with a low and rich voice, managed to succeed in every pursuit, and in a mere 37 years of life. She expanded her repertoire to include more secular music, performed in concerts, made recordings, starred on Broadway, and succeeded on film and television. In the period following WWII, hotels in upstate New York catered to Jewish couples and families, and there she found a community of people reminiscing about the sounds cantors made in Eastern Europe, and was able to sing to a welcoming audience. Though, in the notable case of Orthodox rabbis petitioning Ed Sullivan to

restrict her from performance on television, there was some public objection, Bas Sheva was widely accepted for her performances of *chazzanut*.

Finally, as the novelty wore off and fans of *chazzanut* moved on to other forms of entertainment, the era came to a close with one final "hurrah," here in the form of Mimi Sloan relying on the most popular music of Moishe Oysher while presenting herself in the latest styles. At this time it would take a performer as strong and as adaptable as Sloan to recreate the novelty of women singing liturgical music 50 years after it began, and at the end of the era of *chazzanut*'s popularity. Mimi Sloan performed alongside Bas Sheva in "Catskill Honeymoon," and with her sister on television and in Yiddish theater in the 1950's, though she didn't begin to sing *chazzanut* until the 1970's, a decade following Bas Sheva's death. Other chazzantes were still performing chazzanut, including Fraydele and Sheindele, but the audiences were changing. The "Golden Age of the Great Cantorate" (1880-1930) had come to its close, and the music deemed "popular" no longer included *chazzanut* as a mainstay. Moishe Oysher, however, was legendary. When Mimi's husband received permission from Oysher's wife Theodora for her to perform his arrangements, they were guaranteed record sales. Her vocal feats in the imitation of Moishe Oysher's ornamental style were stunning, and she became yet a new novelty within the chazzantes' novelty. Now in the 1970's, Mimi exhibited glamour and style on her album covers (see Appendix 3A-3B), comparable to Cher in the "Sonny and Cher Show," sang with a brassy Broadway sound, and did not mimic a male voice as much as her predecessors, though the comparison could be made merely due to the nature of the music and vocal nuances one must make within. Though women were now able to become cantors, Mimi specifically states she never even considered the path, and that it

never crossed her mind.[73] She remained a performer, clinging to her heritage of Yiddish theater performers. Her voice was strong and feminine at once, and was a product of the changing face of popular music in America.

The chazzantes' continued performances into the 1990's in smaller venues is logical, considering the fans, somewhat diminished but still a sufficient audience in major Jewish areas, were still interested in attending performances. The lack of later "stars" can be attributed to both the changes of popular music and the decline of *chazzanut*, as well as the arrival of females' cantorial investiture in the 1970's, making the art more common, and the chazzantes' niche obsolete.

[73] Mimi Sloan, interviews, November 2004 through January, 2005.

Chazzantes: A Comparison

Voices

It would be a serious omission to overlook a discussion of each of the chazzantes' voices in relation to the rest. Within the extremes of the chazzantes' voices (a particularly low female voice and a relatively high voice), there were voices which may have used a similar vocal range but which had unique qualities and certainly unique techniques of production. The first to be mentioned must be the low extreme, Perele Feig.

Perele had, by far, the lowest and heaviest voice of all. Nearly indistinguishable from that of a male baritone, Perele's voice as recorded on 78's and off radio broadcasts has a surprisingly large volume at the very low end, and sounds rich and easily produced along the rest of the range. Her pronunciation of Hebrew was similar to that of cantors of the day, including altered vowels for color, and her melismas contained the nasality often heard from male cantors. She also mastered the "*krechtz*," or cry, found in *chazzanut*. Her production of high notes also mimicked that of a baritone, using a quiet head voice, seemingly difficult to produce when done by a man, but easy for a woman. By making these notes sound "covered"[74] and quiet, she copied a male cantor's sound very effectively.

Sheindele's voice, while not as low as Perele's, retained a large range including a powerful chest voice which could produce a substantial low sound and also belt high.

[74] "Covered" sound is a technical vocal term used to describe a muffled sound created by pressure on the larynx, causing air to not circulate and thus create less resonance. "Cover" itself is a method of modifying vowels used by male singers to sing through a break, or passagio, in the voice without cracking.

Unlike other chazzantes, Sheindele rarely utilized her head voice, perhaps because it tends to sound more feminine. Her voice could be mistaken for a tenor's or a light baritone's. Her melismas are masculine-sounding in production and are accurate in style to the male cantors of the time.

Sophie Kurtzer's voice was similarly sized and placed to that of Sheindele. Though Kurtzer possessed a large range, she lacked much of a low range, and so she utilized her substantial head voice by making it sound hard to produce, and thus akin to a male tenor's falsetto.[75] She could produce very fast melismas with trills and also used vowel modification and the *krechtz* for color. Though her extensive use of her head voice could be occasionally recognized as a woman's, especially on held notes, often it is difficult to determine she is not a male tenor.

Fraydele Oysher had a good-sized chest voice, on which she relied heavily, and the ability to make the low end of that chest voice sound very dark or light. Her renditions of *chazzanut* very accurately mimic a male davening sound, reciting Hebrew very quickly and utilizing the emotional *krechtz*. She is recorded in various styles, which affords the listener an opportunity to hear her sound like a man singing *chazzanut* and like a woman singing Yiddish favorites, particularly when singing duets with her daughter Marilyn, who did not mimic a man's voice or technique with her higher voice. Fraydele did, however, have the belt and vibrato of a Broadway performer, as expected considering her extensive theater experience.

Bas Sheva's voice had a larger chest range, that is, it had a similar low range start to that of Sheindele's, but had a more powerful and higher chest voice. Additionally, her

[75] Falsetto is a man's head voice.

chest voice production when singing *chazzanut* had a wide vibrato, more than that of Fraydele's, in the style of popular singing at the time, namely comparable to Judy Garland's voice in the way Bas Sheva attempted to model her looks after Garland. While she used the male cantors' style of vowel modification and ornamentation, Bas Sheva's voice and technique is inherently more feminine-sounding than other chazzantes' and is perhaps because of the time period; she sang *chazzanut* later than the others, and may have been more marketable by singing the music in a more feminine voice.

Mimi Sloan had a high soprano voice, but mostly used her belting chest voice, very powerful and with a great deal more vibrato, and thus, Broadway sound, than the other chazzantes. Again, Sloan was the last of these women to begin singing *chazzanut*, and it was a very different time in Sloan's 1970's than Kurtzer's 1920's. She could sound like a woman, similar to how Bas Sheva sang, and not have to completely imitate a man's vocal characteristics to succeed with their repertoire. She capitalized on highly complicated ornamentation found in Moishe Oysher's music, which she could sing as fast as he did.

Chazzantes as Ground-Breakers

While it cannot be proven that the chazzantes opened doors for other women, or that they even made efforts to do so, with time comes historical perspective. One might posit that the phenomenon of the chazzantes was a harbinger of the times; women were more often accepted performing onstage, feminism was growing, and the field of entertainment was becoming a deep well of opportunity. Others could accurately state that the timing of the phenomenon's appearance was fundamental; Orthodox Judaism had

not yet tightened the restrictions of *halacha* on its adherents, the Great Cantorate and *chazzanut* was in its heyday, and Jewish female performers were still a novelty. Regardless of what brought the phenomenon to the scene in the early-to-mid twentieth century, the chazzantes' accomplishments played an important role in the history of women as well as the history of Jewish women. The chazzantes were more than mere entertainers; they demonstrated that women could effectively communicate prayer through their voices.

It would be many years until women were widely accepted as cantors, but audiences around the world listened with enthusiasm as these women sang liturgical chants. While most of the chazzantes manipulated their voices to sound like men, thus making the *chazzanut* more "authentic" sounding, their voices were still recognizable as female, especially in the upper vocal range. Additionally, the chazzantes never hid their gender; they performed as women, they were advertised as women, and their recordings bore their images. Though some of the chazzantes donned male garb (Fraydele dressed as a Yeshiva boy or male cantor with *payes* (side-curls), *tzitzit* (fringed garments), and suit for theater performances and in publicity photos (See Appendices 4B-F), and Sheindele donned the male cantor's garb of miter (cantor's head-covering) and *kitl* (robe) also for publicity purposes), most chazzantes performed in feminine concert attire, as can be seen on video and in other photos. They did not try to be men, but rather forged their own paths, each unique, in the world of Jewish entertainment. The chazzantes held court in various media, including Yiddish theater, concert stages, recordings, radio, and even movies. The one area in which they could merely walk the thin borders was serving as actual cantors. While Sheindele served alongside male cantors for High Holiday and

Passover services, and Mimi Sloan co-led Passover seders, none of them found regular positions in the synagogue. Before Barbara (Horowitz) Ostfeld was invested by Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 1975, there was Betty Robbins, who in 1955 took a pulpit without investiture, but in the majority of synagogues, women would not have been accepted as cantors, neither by congregants nor by their own supportive families. The chazzantes' devotion to publicly singing liturgical repertoire made the critical first step of recognizing women as potential *baalei tefillah*. To quote from a biography of Fraydele Oysher, she "doesn't think of or refer to herself as a pioneer of feminism. However, long before...women were embraced as Rabbis and Cantors in Synagogues throughout the world, Fraydele Oysher is the woman who played the major role in paving this new road for women."[76] Though the chazzantes did not likely directly influence the decisions of women to become cantors, they can be viewed as an historical link between the *zogerin* (also referred to as *forzogerin*, *verzogerin*, or *zogerke*) who first appeared in the 15th century, leading women in separate prayer sections, and the arrival of female cantors of the late twentieth century.

It is logical to wonder why, if the chazzantes probably did not directly influence the career choices of today's female cantors, a female cantorial student (who, additionally, had never heard of the chazzantes until mid-way into the study program) would devote a thesis to them. Many people today are still unable to fully accept a female voice chanting *chazzanut*, and even cantors, criticizing such women chanting, will call attention to the physical differences apparent when the woman sings. The difference in range alone becomes a stumbling block to fully accepting a woman as *sh'lichat*

[76] Fraydele Oysher biography, author unknown, found at http://www.marilynmichaels.com/fraydele.htm.

tsibbur. Meanwhile, as many as 81 years ago, the chazzantes accomplished the task of singing the same music male cantors did, and their renditions, while generally performed in non-liturgical settings, were accepted by the public. Their manner of imitating a male voice, while still infusing it with passion, emotion, and prayerful respect of the liturgy, is a thrilling accomplishment. It seemed obvious that more attention was deserved of these women. They, like any female performers on the Yiddish stage, were groundbreakers for the position of women in society, bringing otherwise taboo women's issues into the spotlight. It could even be argued that they accomplished more than theater performers, for singing liturgical music in the masculine public sphere, in defiance of so many social conventions, was itself an enormous feat. It wasn't until the 1930's that women were accepted to be singing solos publicly. Not coincidentally, women and men began to be seated together in more liberal congregations around this time.

Research

Upon initial research of these women, one finds scarce information. They are occasionally mentioned in articles about Yiddish theater or radio, but there are no full works which have been devoted to the chazzantes. To accomplish the task of writing about the chazzantes, many small extant resources (including some videos, audio recordings, and newspaper clippings) and remaining sources (audience members, friends, and relatives) were pulled together. In interviews, sources were questioned on not only biographical information, which up to this day has not been compiled anywhere, but also vocal training, cantorial influence, and the public and family reactions to their careers. Sadly, during the research for this thesis, Fraydele Oysher died, but her daughter Marilyn

Michaels donated her archives to the YIVO Institute in New York, which became an additional labor of love to me when I was permitted to organize and catalogue Fraydele's archive. Additionally, I was granted access to archives of Sheindele in Philadelphia which contained many rich sources.

Upon beginning this research, word was spread about my topic, and soon I was offered opportunities to perform in the style of the chazzantes and educate audiences on their careers. The growing interest has already led to two concerts of their music, at the Eldridge Street Synagogue Project in New York and at a Connecticut reform synagogue's educational evening event, in addition to the upcoming recital presented in partial fulfillment of cantorial investiture along with this thesis. At these events, I am sometimes lucky enough to meet people who listened to the chazzantes on the radio or may have even heard them perform in concert. Even the local ice-cream man in Brooklyn had a story of listening to Fraydele and her brother Moishe practice in their apartment, which was conveniently located across the air shaft of his own apartment building. It is my hope that the chzzantes will become a topic more often covered in discussions of female Jewish performers and their effects on a developing American Jewish culture.

Appendices

Appendix 1A
Publicity photo of a young Jean Gornish, already sponsored by the Planter's Peanuts Company, singing on New York radio station WEVD.

Appendix 1B
Advertisement for Jean Gornish's WEVD radio show, sponsored by Planters Edible Oil Company.

Appendix 1C
Publicity photo of an older Jean Gornish in all-white High Holiday Cantor's garb.

Appendix 2A
Publicity headshot of Bas Sheva from Capitol Records, taken after her make-over, and reminiscent of Judy Garland.

Appendix 3A
Image of Mimi Sloan taken from her album, "Mimi Sloan Sings Moishe Oysher Melodies"

Appendix 3B
Image of Mimi Sloan taken from her following album, "Mimi Sloan Sings More...Moishe Oysher's Richest Encores"

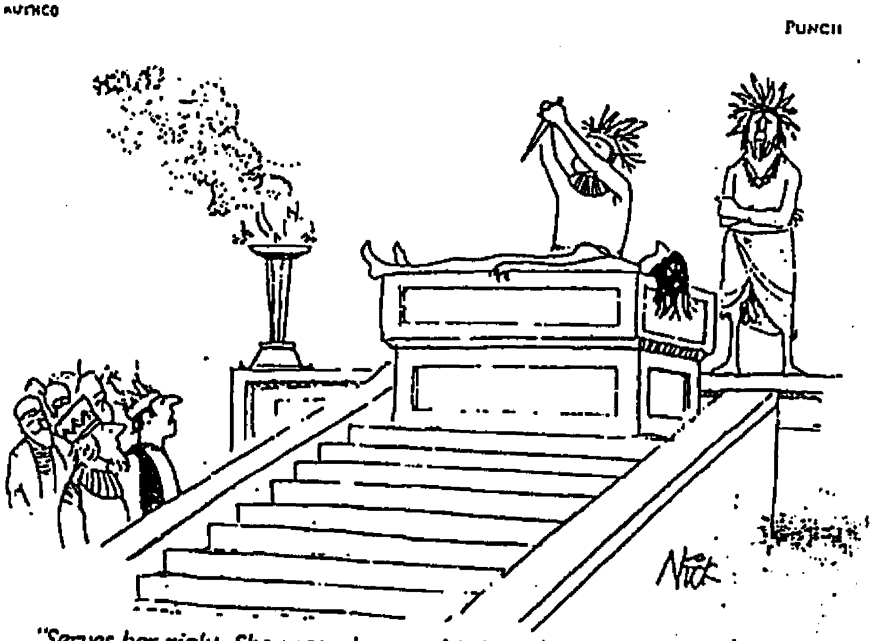
Appendix 4A
Photograph of a young
Fraydele Oysher in
feminine garb.

Appendices 4B-E
Assorted photographs of
Fraydele Oysher dressed as
a yeshiva boy, as she would
appear in theater performances.

FRAYDELE OYSHER

Appendix 4F
Fraydele Oysher dressed in
a masculine suit, presumably
for publicity purposes.

Appendix 5A
The topic of women's participation in religious life is often treated with some level of mockery.



"Serves her right. She was always whining about women not being allowed to participate in the services."

Partial Discography/Filmography
(in alphabetical order)

Perele Feig

O'shamnu mikolam/V'hu Rachum (78 rpm)

Jean Gornish (Sheindele)

Sheindele Sings the Songs of Her People (Margot M 613)

Bernice (neé Kanefsky) Hausman (Bas Sheva)

Deep Night/Rock-a-bye Your Baby With a Dixie Melody (#2848) (78 rpm)
Have You Seen My Love?/Bremerhaven (#45-6002) (78 rpm)
Flame of Love/I Just Wanna Be Your Loving Baby (78 rpm)
Caravan/My Mother's Eyes (78 rpm)
Soul of a People: Hebraic Chants by Bas Sheva (Capitol L 8287)
The Passions (Capitol LAL 486)
Easy Rhythms for Your Cocktail Hour (1995)
Ultra-Lounge, Vol. 1: Mondo Exotica (1996)
Incredibly Strange Music Vol. 2
Film: Catskill Honeymoon (Martin Cohen Enterprises, Inc.)
Television appearances: The Ed Sullivan Show (3/25/1956 and 2/3/1957)

Sophie Kurtzer

Mysteries of the Sabbath: Classic Cantorial Recordings: 1907-47 (Yazoo 7002)
Di Eybike Mame (The Eternal Mother): Women in Yiddish Theater and Popular Song, 1905-1929 (WERGO LC 06356)

Fraydele Oysher

The Moishe Oysher Chanukah Party (Banner BAS 1023)
An Oysher Album: Moishe and Fraydele Oysher, Marilyn Michaels (Michaels MIC 102)
An Oysher Heritage
Fraydele Oysher and her Daughter Marilyn: Songs My Brother Moishe Sang (Tikva T-84)
Yiddish Soul: Fraydele Oysher and her Daughter Marilyn Michaels (Michaels MIC 001)
Para Cantar Y Reiri Leo Fuchs (Londisc RL 115)
Variety Yiddish Theatre (Banner BAS 1011)
Funny, It Doesn't Sound Jewish (Theophilous Music, Inc.- CD companion to book "Funny, It Doesn't Sound Jewish" by Jack Gottlieb")

Mimi Sloan
(as Feder Sisters)

Some Like it Yiddish (LP UA UAS 6160)
Yiddish Maestro Please (LP US United 82030)
Gila Flam Miscellaneous 78 rpm Selections (*Gets Mir A Yingele*)
Vos Zol Men Zingen/A Polkele (78 rpm)
Eshet Chayil: Women Singing Yiddish- Vol. 3
Tanz Mit Mir- Yiddish Ballroom Dance
Film: Catskill Honeymoon (Martin Cohen Enterprises, Inc.)

(as Mimi Sloan)

Art Raymond Presents Mimi Sloan (Golden Dream)
Mimi Sloan Sings Moishe Oysher Melodies (Tikva T-102)
Mimi Sloan Sings More...Moishe Oysher's Richest Encores (Tikva T-121)
Broadway appearance: The Education of H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N

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