

Moishe Oysher: The Master Singer of His People

Arik Y. Luck

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Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
School of Sacred Music
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Advisor: Cantor Bruce Ruben PhD

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Introduction

Moishe Oysher (1906-1957) was a movie star, radio star, recording star, and a star cantor from the Golden Age of *chazzanut*. His contributions to Jewish music, both through Yiddish folk music and liturgical tunes, have provided a lasting legacy, a gift to future generations of Jewish music lovers. Familiar both by name and through his famous melodies to older generations of American Jews, Oysher is an obscure figure in the contemporary Jewish cultural milieu. This is partially because, despite his celebrity and prolific voice, little is written on Oysher. Moreover, having passed away at the early age of 51, his brilliant career was tragically cut short. While Oysher's international acclaim was once synonymous with the likes of Richard Tucker and Jan Pierce, it has significantly faded in the last forty years. As a result, this paper will endeavor to bring to light Oysher's contributions to Jewish music, by outlining his work in film, theatre, radio, concerts, and as a *chazzan*. Additionally, it will provide a musical analysis of his *Hin'ni* from the film *Overture to Glory*, a liturgical setting that typifies his work in *chazzanut*. Finally, this paper will offer suggestions regarding Oysher's successful reconciliation of his dual persona as both an actor and entertainer; and reflections upon this balancing act will be applied to today's cantorate.

Chapter 1

Part 1: Biography

Moishe Oysher was born on March 8, 1906, in Lipkon, Bessarabia. There are considerable discrepancies in documentation regarding the number of generations of cantors from which Moishe Oysher is descended, ranging from four generations to seven.¹ As a child he sang regularly with his father in the synagogue. He started acting as a very young boy under the direction of Eleazer Steinberg, at his school, *Habimah*. While he was still a young boy, the traveling Yiddish theatre came to town, set up a tent, and put on a great show. From then on, Moishe was completely transfixed by the lure of theatre. As a boy, both his *daven*-ing with his father, and his infatuation with the Yiddish theatre, fostered the beginnings of a “duality” of sorts between the theatre and the cantorate which remained with Oysher for his entire life. It would be expressed both artistically in his films, and within the context of his life in the cantorate.²

In 1921 Oysher immigrated to Montreal with his mother and his sister, Fraydele.³ They joined their father, Zelig Oysher, who had already moved there years earlier to find work. Right away Oysher joined up with a Yiddish theatrical company.⁴ Shortly after moving to New York in 1923, the family moved to Philadelphia where Zelig Oysher served as a *chazzan*. Although Zelig never achieved fame, he “had a hand” in training his

¹ Moishe Oysher’s niece, Marilyn Michaels, writes that he was descended from four generations of cantors in her article, “Moishe Oysher” (Linear notes from an unreleased recording) (year unavailable), p1. Linear notes from the record album *Kol Nidre Night With Moishe Oysher* (1957), however, indicate otherwise, saying that he is a sixth generation cantor. Other sources also vary.

² Marilyn Michaels, *Moishe Oysher*, linear notes to an unreleased album (year unavailable), p.1.

³ Fraydele also became a well known Yiddish actress and chazzante. Source: <http://www.marilynmichaels.com/fraydele.htm> (accessed June, 2008-December 2008).

⁴ Irene Heskes, Velvel Pasternak and Noah Schall, *The Golden Age of Cantors* (USA: Tara Publications, 1991), p.19.

son. Later in his life Oysher would pay lasting tribute to his father by using the pseudonym “Ben Zelig” when writing selected theatre pieces.⁵

Moishe Oysher returned to New York in 1928, this time as a young man with hopes of pursuing a career in the theatre. He had been cast to star in a play to be directed by Louis Weiss, and co-starring Weiss’s wife Florence. By the end of the production, Florence had left her husband, Louis, for Oysher, and the two would ultimately marry. They ran off together to Argentina with a traveling theatre troupe for two years. Upon their return to the United States, Moishe found theatre work in Newark and Williamsburg.⁶ He received his first big break with regular appearances on the Yiddish radio where he was known as *Der Mayster Zinger fun Zayn Folk*, “The Master Singer of His People.” This exposure catapulted Moishe onto the national stage and lead to many other opportunities. Throughout his varied career Oysher would regularly return to Yiddish radio, singing Jewish folk tunes, cantorial arias, and even commercial jingles, while also making charity appeals.^{7 8}

In 1935 Oysher made his *Second Avenue* debut in *Der Mazldiker Bokher* (Lucky Boy).⁹ *Variety* wasn’t quite impressed with *Der Mayster Singer*’s transition from the radio to the *Second Avenue* stage, writing that Oysher “has a fine voice, (but) ...hasn’t the vaguest conception of stage acting.”¹⁰ Mixed reviews by no means discouraged

⁵ Moishe Oysher, http://www.klezmershack.com/articles/weiss_s/luminaries/#oysher (date and author unavailable), (accessed June, 2008-December, 2008)

⁶ J. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Cinema Between Two Worlds* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 263.

⁷ Moishe Oysher, http://www.klezmershack.com/articles/weiss_s/luminaries/#oysher

⁸ In NPR’s *The Yiddish Radio Project*, Oysher can be heard singing his famous improvisational duet with Florence Weiss in a commercial for the “Stanton Street Clothier,” on the album *Music From the Yiddish Radio Project: Archival recordings from the Golden Age of Yiddish Radio, 1930s to 1950s*. Shanachie Entertainment, March 12, 2002.

⁹ J. Hoberman, 263.

¹⁰ Review of *Der Mazldiker Bokher* (no author available), *Variety*, November 16, 1935.

Oysher from pursuing his dream, however, the financial uncertainty during the Great Depression made work in the theatre ever more precarious. Like most actors, he did not always work consistently. Having missed an audition season in the city, he took the advice of friends and auditioned for a High Holiday Post at the First American-Roumanian Congregation on Rivington Street in the Lower East Side. He was accepted at this prestigious post, commonly known as "The Cantor's Carnegie Hall."¹¹

This new role as cantor was no stretch for Oysher, who used to brag that he could make "fifty dollars a *Shabbos*" back in his youth.¹² The theatre world was his passion, but the cantorate was the family trade, and a skill that came completely naturally to him. His singing at the First American-Roumanian Congregation caused an absolute sensation, and various other congregations began vying for his attention.¹³ While his talent on the *bimah* was indisputable, certain members of the religious community were hesitant to accept Oysher as a cantor, as in their eyes he was clearly neither a pious nor observant Jew, but merely an actor/entertainer who knew how to *daven*.

Part 2: The Development of the Star Chazzan in America and Moishe Oysher

Before continuing with the biographical life of Moishe Oysher, it is necessary to explore the root of the controversy between the "sacred" and the "commercial" within the cantorate. An examination of this controversy will give greater historical context to the story of Moishe Oysher. The ascension of the cantorate to a place of great prominence

¹¹ Marilyn Michaels, *Moishe Oysher*, 1.

¹² J. Hoberman, 263.

¹³ Marilyn Michaels, *Moishe Oysher*, 1.

within Jewish cultural life in America began with the rise of the “star” *chazzan*. As early as the mid 1880s a star *chazzan* had the ability to save a dwindling *shul*. This was the case when the *Anshe Suvalk* synagogue became the first known *shul* to officially import a star *chazzan* from Europe to help raise themselves out of increasing financial turmoil. Their strategy worked, and the congregation paid off its debt.¹⁴

Still, there were synagogues that were uneasy with the prospect of a “star” *chazzan* working for them. In fact, the “star” status often came as a double-edged sword for those cantors who were fortunate enough to achieve such wide recognition. While the fame and attention brought in increasingly higher salaries to the lucky and talented star cantors, it also brought greater scrutiny from the Orthodox community, many of whom looked upon star *chazzanim* with suspicion and contempt. This was still the case when Moishe Oysher became a star *chazzan*.

Oysher, however, was not the first star *chazzan* to have a successful commercial career and to face criticism from the religious community. For example, many observant Jews, responding to a cantorial concert at Carnegie Hall by Cantor Gershon Sirota in 1912, “denounced the commercialism and vanity surrounding the superstars.” They viewed anyone who would use their voice for “musical rather than religious effect” with great suspicion.¹⁵ Their suspicion was exacerbated by the fact that star *chazzanim* were listened to on the radio and even (like Oysher himself) endorsed different commercial products,¹⁶ a blatant disregard of their status as religious leaders, simply for the sake of secular commercialism. Additionally, in many cases star *chazzanim* were also greatly

¹⁴ Mark Slobin, *Chosen Voices: The Story of the American Cantorate* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 52.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 59.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 61.

admired by completely secular Jews, further feeding the disdain within certain religious circles.¹⁷

Secular Jews admired *chazzanim* for several reasons. Because of the radio and the phonograph, *chazzanim*, previously relegated to the synagogue, now had an international stage from which to sing. As such, they were more widely accessible to Jews regardless of their level of observance. The rise of the star cantor in America also coincided with the Great Immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe and the birth of the Yiddish Stage. The massive amount of immigrants provided both a broader audience, and a larger talent pool for both the secular and sacred art forms. Cantorial style motifs on Second Avenue were also a staple within the regular musical format, enjoyed by the secular theatre-going crowd.¹⁸ Subsequently, a cantor's *daven*-ing in *shul* could share musical themes with a Jewish folk tune in the Yiddish theatre. Because there were not nearly enough synagogues on the Lower East Side to accommodate every Jew on the High Holidays, some of the great Yiddish theatres of the day would temporarily convert themselves into synagogues¹⁹ (and charge admission of course). They served as places where many Jews, including otherwise secular Jews who might not have a membership at any year round *shul*, chose to attend High Holiday services. Those in attendance received the added bonus of hearing a star *chazzan daven*. Thus, the lines between cantor and entertainer, sacred and secular, were somewhat fluid in this time period, angering

¹⁷ In my own family my great-grandfather, Jake Samson (1882-1981), a Chicago immigrant from Zhlobyn, Belarus, was a great fan of the star *chazzanim*, despite his secular Bundist oriented identity. He attended cantorial concerts regularly, and had a large record collection, despite the fact that he viewed the Jewish religion itself with suspicion. (Based on an interview with Gary Luck, January 7, 2009).

¹⁸ J. Hoberman, 259.

¹⁹ Mark Slobin, 58.

Jews who believed that the secular had no place within the sacred, and that entertainment and *daven-ing* should be mutually exclusive occupations.

Part 3: Biography Continued...

Taking strenuous exception to the fluidity between secular and sacred music, the devout Jewish community ultimately gave Oysher an ultimatum. In 1937 he was called before a board of Orthodox rabbis and told that he must give up his life in the theatre if he wanted to remain a cantor. Oysher told them that he respected them too much to make any promises, but that he would try out the *halakhic* lifestyle of a cantor and see how it felt.²⁰ An agreement was reached: Oysher would give up his career on the stage, and accept the position (and the salary and benefits) of a *chazzan*. This decision was no doubt made easier by the great financial offers he was receiving from various synagogues in the midst of the Great Depression,^{21 22} in contrast to the uncertain life of a performer.

For reasons which remain unclear, it appears that there was a loophole in Oysher's new *ba-al t'shuvah* status with the board of Orthodox rabbis. While he had accepted the suspension of his stage career, he was still allowed to act in the cinema.²³ Between 1937 and 1940 Moishe Oysher made three films: *The Cantor's Son*, *The Singing Blacksmith*, and *Overture to Glory*. These films further enhanced his stardom in the Jewish cultural world. He had achieved "matinee idol" status as a Jewish entertainer. In 1943, Oysher signed on to perform in *La Juive* and *Pagliacci* with Chicago Lyric Opera,

²⁰ Marilyn Michaels, *Moishe Oysher*, 2.

²¹ Ibid, 2.

²² Oysher's "contract" with the Orthodox rabbis appears to have been as fluid as his career. By 1942, he was acting on stage in the play *Bar Kochba* at the Civic Opera House in Chicago. Ibid, 2.

²³ The reasons for this are unclear. Perhaps it is because the Yiddish theatre held regular performances on Shabbat, whereas a film could conceivably stop shooting during the Sabbath.

when a sudden heart attack prevented him from following through with his contract.²⁴ His health would plague his ambitions for the rest of his career, though he never allowed it to stop him from performing in concerts or recording albums. Despite his continually ailing health, in 1956 he also co-conceived and starred in the film *Singing in the Dark*, for which he additionally contributed some music. In the same year, he recorded three very notable albums (in addition to the many others recorded throughout his career), which became staples in Jewish households throughout the country: *The Moishe Oysher Seder* (1956), *Kol Nidre Night with Moishe Oysher* (1957), and *The Moishe Oysher Chanukah Party* (1957 or 1958). Marilyn Michaels, Oysher's niece and the daughter of Fraydele Oysher, writes about her experience singing in the choir for *The Moishe Oysher Chanukah Party*:

"I was fourteen when I sang the duet with Moishe on the Chanukah (album). It was recorded at RCA Victor Studios with an orchestra and choir led by my father Harold Sternberg (Metropolitan Opera *Basso*²⁵). It was a thrill from beginning to end...very very exciting indeed... and I was a part of that. Moishe loved singing with me."²⁶

The distinct styles displayed in these three records: formal narration, Yiddish and Hebrew folk tunes, and *chazzanut* combined with full orchestra and choir, pumped new life into an otherwise fading genre.²⁷ Sadly, it was at this point in his career that Moishe Oysher's life was cut short, at the young age of 51. Two thousand people attended his funeral.²⁸

Part 4: The Oysher Celebrity Rumor Mill

²⁴ *Moishe Oysher*, http://www.klezmershack.com/articles/weiss_s/luminaries/#oysher

²⁵ Marilyn Michaels, "Fraydele Oysher," <http://www.marilynmichaels.com/fraydele.htm>

²⁶ Marilyn Michaels, email correspondence with author, December 14, 2008.

²⁷ *Moishe Oysher*, http://www.klezmershack.com/articles/weiss_s/luminaries/#oysher

²⁸ Ezra Levine, "Moishe Oysher" (unpublished hand written article on file at the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH), submitted March 30, 1984, p.1.

Rumors have surrounded Moishe Oysher throughout his career and after his death. While many of these rumors can not be trusted, their very existence is testament to Oysher's celebrity within the Jewish community. As a polarizing figure, he was loved by many Jews and eschewed as an impious fraud by others. The following is a list of some of these alleged "allegations":

- 1) Moishe Oysher had at times been known to take a cab or the train to and from services on *Shabbat*, so he eventually had to have an "entourage" escort him to *shul*. The entourage would serve as eye witnesses to the fact that he had indeed walked the entire route to and from *shul*, and thus not desecrated the Sabbath.
- 2) Moishe Oysher was rumored not only to smoke on *Shabbat* (thus desecrating the Sabbath by lighting fire), but to actually smoke in the *Shul* itself, claiming that it was necessary for the upkeep of his voice.²⁹
- 3) After driving to Brooklyn on Shabbat, Oysher was stopped in his car by a mob of angry mob of ultra-Orthodox Jews. Upset that he had desecrated the sanctity of *Shabbat*, they actually pulled him out of his car, and overturned the car.³⁰
- 4) Oysher's "matinee idol" appearance at one synagogue so infuriated some members of the Orthodox community that it resulted in organized protests and a police presence.³¹

²⁹ J. Hoberman, 265.

³⁰ Rabbi David Posner of Temple Emanuel in Manhattan claims that he heard this story from his professor while in seminary at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. (Conversation with the author on May 15, 2008.)

³¹ "Stage Star Rabbi to get Police Guard," *New York Evening Journal*, September 9, 1936.

- 5) Oysher was rumored to have smiled and winked at women in the balconies while *daven-ing* during services.³²

Chapter 2 STAR OF THE YIDDISH CINEMA

Part One: *The Cantor's Son*

Moishe Oysher's first film was a promotional vehicle that was written for him entitled *Dem Khazns Zundl* (*The Cantor's Son*). This film would serve to dramatize Oysher's previous "return to the fold" in a semi-biographical fashion. Film critic and historian J. Hoberman refers to the film as the "*Anti-Jazz Singer*," explaining that Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer* (1927), represents a clear departure from the nostalgia of the old-world, religious past, and an assimilation into the modern day world. While Jolson's character climactically sings the *Kol Nidre* for his *chazzan* father out of compassion for him, in the end of the film he ultimately returns to his career in secular vaudeville entertainment. Ten years later, Moishe Oysher's *Dem Khazns Zundl* represents the complete antithesis of the earlier Jolson scenario.³³ Instead of choosing secular entertainment, Oysher's character chooses the cantorate, just as in his real life, Moishe Oysher had agreed to suspend his theatre career for a position in the cantorate. Despite the nostalgic content of this film, however, *The Cantor's Son*, as a movie, was certainly frowned upon by certain Orthodox circles.

³² Cantor Robert Abelson, (interview with the author on September 23, 2008).

³³ J. Hoberman, 262.

While *The Cantor's Son* had a storyline which contradicted the earlier, and much more famous, *The Jazz Singer*, Oysher's personal style certainly drew inspiration from Al Jolson in his use of both cantorial and jazz motifs. Marilyn Michaels writes, "Moishe's signature riffs and improvisations were as unique as any great jazz artist... I've never heard or known of anyone who could do exactly what he did."³⁴ Both Oysher and Jolson represent the clear integration between improvisational jazz with improvisational *chazzanut*,³⁵ and certainly no one could so effortlessly transition between the two like Oysher, a master of both forms. Marilyn Michaels even claims that Sammy Davis Jr. once told her that Moishe Oysher was one of his premiere influences.³⁶

The Cantor's Son was directed by Ilya Motyleff, with music by the celebrated Jewish composer Alexander Olshanetsky. Commissioned to write the whole score for the movie, Olshanetsky also incorporated his previous hit song *Mein Shtetele Belz* into the film. The plot begins with a child Moishe Oysher (whose character is called Saul "Shloimele" Reichman), living in the "old country" village of *Belz*. The traveling Yiddish theatre comes to town, and Shloimele is immediately drawn into the exciting energy of the stage (just as Oysher had been in his real childhood). His father is furious, claiming that joining the theatre was as scandalous as converting to Christianity. This does not stop the ambitious young Shloimele. Unfazed, he runs off with the troupe,

³⁴ Marilyn Michaels, email correspondence with author, December 14, 2008.

³⁵ The integration between improvisational jazz and *chazzanut* was demonstrated in a lecture by Cantor Chaim Feifel at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, School of Sacred Music in Jerusalem. Feifel explained to a group of young cantorial students that *Chazzanut* is, at its roots, no different than jazz. To illustrate his point, he asked for a volunteer in the class to give an example of any jazz tune. After a tune was suggested, he began singing the tune, and then improvising on the melody line in a cantorial style, effortlessly jumping back and forth between jazz riffs and cantorial riffs. (From a lecture at HUC-JIR, Jerusalem, Fall 2004)

³⁶ Marilyn Michaels, (phone interview with the author on June 15, 2008).

leaving behind him the old country, his family, and his childhood sweetheart, a young girl named Rivka.

Sometime later, Saul arrives in New York City. A dashing young man played by Moishe Oysher, Saul is employed as a daytime janitor in a nightclub. A beautiful young American woman named Helen (played by Florence Weiss) hears him singing a tune as he is mopping the floor. She asks her current lover, the nightclub owner, to let them sing together that night at the club's cabaret. Her lover reluctantly complies. The result is the Oysher/Weiss duo singing the famous *Mein Shtetele Belz*. In the middle of the tune, Oysher offers almost Bing Crosby-like improvisational riffs in-between Weiss's rendition of the melody line. With the singing of *Belz*, a glorification of life in the old-country, the theme of "nostalgia" begins to surface, and will remain throughout the entire film.

Saul's singing at the club is of course a sensation, and he is immediately picked up by a radio producer who puts the talented young singer on his Yiddish radio show (another semi-biographical moment in the plot). While Saul greatly enjoys singing on the radio, he tells the producer that he is still, in his heart, a "Cantor's son," and wants to sing his father's music. The producer relents (somewhat comically), and Oysher sings his father's cantorial rendition of *Av Harachamim*. In a wonderful display of modern day nostalgia, the well dressed and clean shaven Oysher solemnly places his fedora on his head before singing the cantorial piece, a physical recognition of his lack of a proper and respectful *yarmulke*.

It just so happens that a cantorial search committee, after much arguing about what style of cantor to hire for the upcoming High Holidays, has decided to take a break from their arguing and listen to the Yiddish radio. They are completely stunned and

excited when they tune in at the very moment that Oysher's *Av Harachamim* comes on the air. Yossel, a comedic character on the search committee, runs straight to the radio studio and showers his praises upon Saul. Instead of hiring him for the synagogue, however, Yossel insists on becoming Saul's agent/manager. Together they tour the country and Saul Reichman becomes a national hit. He sends letters home to *Belz* about his great success, and even includes twenty-five dollars for his father to purchase a new *tallit*.

Despite his success in America, however, Shloimele is longing to return to his home in *Belz* just one last time. Yossel agrees to accompany Oysher on his journey back to the old country. Despite being greeted in *Belz* as a hero and conqueror of America, he is not as enthusiastic about his time away as the townspeople expect. He is simply thrilled to have returned home. Almost immediately, he encounters his childhood sweetheart Rivke, with whom he instantly falls in love with. Ignoring his relationship with his American girlfriend, Helen, Saul decides to stay in *Belz* and marry Rivke. Having re-earned the respect of his father, he is ultimately offered the post of cantor at the local *shul*, and the people of *Belz* live happily ever after.

Writer Ezra Levine offers an analysis of *The Cantor's Son* in a handwritten contribution to the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati. Levine claims that the film is really not about a talented young European having to choose between an American Jewish girl and a childhood sweet heart from the old country, but "the inward struggle of the choosing between the two lifestyles to which an immigrant has to emotionally adjust and select." The two love interests of the film "...represent the two impulses in Jewish life: one to be modern and the other to perpetuate our roots." Helen, the American, wants

Saul to stop singing cantorial chants, and focus instead on the “classics,” thereby embracing the modern world. Rivka is content to stay in *Belz*, and live the traditional life of a Jewish wife. Before the movie ends, Oysher is standing in front of a window and thinking about the matter. He decides to remain in *Belz* with his sweetheart, thereby rejecting modernity for traditionalism.³⁷ The conclusion was kitschy “proof” to the world that Moishe Oysher had come back to his roots: He was now a “kosher” cantor.

The semi-real life struggle between religious and secular life that Moishe Oysher portrays in *The Cantor's Son* is not a reflection of a broader spiritual struggle that was happening in late 1930s Jewish America. At this time in American Jewish history, Jews were in the process of “Americanizing.” As writer S. Ettinger notes, they were letting go of their old world past, and changing from “an immigrant community to an important segment of national cultural life.”³⁸ Jews had begun the move from working in manual labor to taking on professional roles in all walks of life.³⁹ This was a primary concern and goal of the American Jewish community. The old-world spiritual struggle portrayed in *The Cantor's Son*, therefore, was irrelevant to the every day realities of American Jews who were busy trying to pursue the American dream. It is true, however, that an older Yiddish speaking audience could have appreciated the nostalgic aspect of Oysher's on-screen struggle. Consequently, the debate between religious and secular, still a dilemma for Oysher and a source of drama in *The Cantor's Son*, had faded from popular Jewish culture in American.

³⁷ Ezra Levine, “Moishe Oysher,” 4.

³⁸ S. Ettinger, *American and West European Jewry Between the Wars*, from *A History of the Jewish People*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969), 988.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 984.

Part Two: *The Singing Blacksmith*

Moishe Oysher's second film, *Yankel Der Shmid* (*The Singing Blacksmith*) (1938), was a light hearted comedy set completely in the old country. The story is based on the play *Yankel Der Shmid* by David Pinski, written in 1906. The score and songs were composed by the great Jewish composer Jacob Weinberg. The film was directed by the noted director Edger G. Ulmer, who also had a successful career in Hollywood outside of the Yiddish cinema.⁴⁰ The film was shot on the grounds of a Catholic monastery. The bearded monks who lived there even served as extras on the set playing "villagers." Interestingly, the set was also positioned between a Nazi Bundist summer camp on one side, and a nudist camp on the other. The monks guarded the set at night.⁴¹

The plot begins with a desperate father bringing his young son Yankel to the local blacksmith. Yankel has flunked out of Yeshiva. The father, a simple illiterate carriage driver, pleads with the blacksmith to take in Yankel as an apprentice. The blacksmith, who doesn't have any children of his own, accepts the offer and puts Yankel to work immediately. Yankel is to serve three years of training without meals or pay. The film flashes forward some years through a skillfully shot montage, and Yankel, now played by Moishe Oysher, is a grown man, who has inherited the smithy from his former blacksmith and teacher.

The film cuts to the bar of an inn, where Oysher is singing a rousing song in his Romanian tradition, *The Sheppard's Dream*. He directs his attention mostly towards an appreciative young woman sitting in a nearby chair, while other Jews and gentiles at the

⁴⁰ Judith Goldberg writes in *Laughter Through Tears: The Yiddish Cinema*, that Edger G. Ulmer didn't even speak Yiddish or know that he was Jewish until he was in high school. (East Brunswick, NJ: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1983), 83.

⁴¹ Ibid, 87.

bar look on. Yankel is dressed much like the gentile peasants surrounding him in the inn. This is the audience's first hint that Yankel is as uninterested in being Jewish as he was when he was a boy. This will be a constant theme throughout the film. It appears that, unlike in Oysher's actual life, his character is not concerned with the impression he is making upon the Orthodox Jews. It may be that Oysher is acting out an internal desire to rebel against the Orthodoxy through an artistic medium.

Yankel encounters the inn keeper's daughter Rivka (played by Florence Weiss), and is immediately taken with her, despite the fact that she has just become engaged. It is clear, however, that Rivka is much more interested in Yankel than she is in the very religious Raphoel, her arranged groom-to-be. Yankel, a consummate womanizer, courts Rivka as well as another woman. In a later scene at the bar, Yankel and Rivka sing a rousing improvisational duet that was a signature piece for Moishe Oysher and wife Florence Weiss. (The title of the *niggun* is not indicated, but is similar in melody and spirit to Oysher's famous rendition of *Chad Gadya* from the album *The Moishe Oysher Seder*). When other young women take note of Yankel's talent and charm, they are scolded by an old Jewish woman, who dismisses him as a "goy." This is another even more blatant reference to Yankel's total contempt for religion. Although this did not reflect Oysher's actual feelings about religion, it was indicative of his contentious relationship with the Orthodoxy. Of course, the rumors of his eye for the ladies, his smoking at inopportune times, and his supposed temper may be signs of an unabashed personality that he was unafraid to flaunt in front of anybody, be they secular or religious.

Later, Yankel is working alone in the smithy and sings a driving yet simple work song, *Strike the Hammer*, a masculine display of bravado which showcases the incredible

richness that this tenor also displays in his baritone range. Composer Jacob Weinberg made an interesting musical decision with this piece that perhaps was reflective of Yankel's relationship with his Jewish identity. While the piece is in a minor mode, which immediately indicates a Judaic flavor, its rhythmic core is much more distinctively "work song" oriented than it is "Jewish" oriented. The piece is in "common time" (4/4), with a driving accent on only the first beat of every measure. With this constant pounding of every first beat, the listener can almost hear a hammer abruptly striking. Weinberg's melody is therefore more akin to a chain gang song than it is a Jewish ditty. For a very brief one measure interval during the verse, however, the song slips into *Ahavah Rabah* (Ukrainian Dorian) mode. This could be interpreted as a subtle message of Yankel's character: While he is clearly ambivalent to his Jewish identity, and much more concerned with women and drinking than anything else, there is still no escaping his Jewish heritage. Weinberg's brief excursions into *Ahavah Rabah* mode are therefore a possible reflection of this reality.

At this point in the storyline Yankel is in pursuit of two different women when suddenly everything changes: His eyes fall upon a new woman, Tamara, and he is suddenly completely smitten. Upon meeting Yankel, she is intrigued by him as well, very much taken with his beautiful voice. Yankel later learns that she is an orphan, and is not treated well by her aunt and uncle. This intrigues him even more, and he walks the streets of town alone, singing his way towards her apartment. When he gets outside of Tamara's window, he reprises his song *Strike the Hammer*, this time singing with melancholy and changing the lyrics, alluding to the fact that Tamara has stolen his heart.

Yankel rescinds a previous vow that he would never marry, and visits the local matchmaker, asking her to arrange a match for him and Tamara. She doesn't think it is wise, but he forces her into accepting the idea. Tamara is an orphan, so the matchmaker goes to her aunt, who is hesitant about Yankel, a man known for womanizing and excessive drinking.⁴² The aunt knows, however, that as an orphan, Tamara has no other prospects, so she begrudgingly agrees to the match. Tamara finds out the news and instead of being happy, or even smiling, she walks solemnly away from her aunt and the matchmaker towards the window and gazes out looking sad. It is clear that Tamara is a troubled soul, perhaps suffering from depression.

Meanwhile, Yankel is outside waiting on the bridge for the matchmaker to come out of the house with news, when he is approached by his one time rival Raphoel, on his way back from the synagogue. They have a stormy exchange that illustrates the tension between the religious and the secular. Yankel asks Raphoel if he is returning from synagogue. When Raphoel answers affirmatively, Yankel tells him that he should go say Havdalah. Raphoel asks if Yankel has finished his, to which Yankel replies that he has. The exchange ends with Raphoel exasperatingly stating "You're always finished, aren't you Yankel?"

This exchange could serve as just one example for why some religious Jews so despised Moishe Oysher. Even though Oysher's character Yankel is strictly fictitious, it would be infuriating for some to see such ambivalence towards religion being portrayed by a man who in reality had *daven*-ed High Holidays at the First Roumanian Synagogue, like Yosselle Rosenblatt before him. Yankel's additional characteristic as a womanizer,

⁴² This is the first character portrayed by Oysher who has excessive issues with alcohol. He will visit the issue again towards the end of his life in the film *Singing in the Dark*. In both movies, the drinking starts off with good intentions and ends up causing a lot of problems.

which Oysher himself was rumored to be, would only have further insulted the religious community, who would not have condoned a person who professionally serves as a *shaliach tzibur* portraying himself as an anti-religious and illiterate womanizer.

As the plot continues, the matchmaker tells Yankel that the match has been agreed to. Yankel, overjoyed, runs to get his parents to join everyone for an engagement party. Tamara's uncle (and guardian) hears about the match and is furious. He says he can not allow it. "Such a nothing!" he says about Yankel. Ultimately, the marriage goes forward anyway. Tamara later gives birth to their first child. Yankel, under the influence of alcohol, is bragging to Rivka about his new son. After an awkward conversation together, they exchange a brief kiss, and are then interrupted to the complete disgrace of Yankel. In the end, however, Yankel grows up. He is offered a stern warning by his former teacher, the old blacksmith, who is now the town drunk. Yankel realizes that he doesn't want to turn out like this old man. He has to take responsibility for himself, his marriage vows, and his household. He throws Rivka out of his life for good, and begs Tamara for forgiveness. Tamara is glad that he feels ashamed. She forgives him saying, "When a person does not lose his sense of shame, it is a sign that he has not fallen." They look admiringly at their new baby boy in his cradle.

THE END

From beginning to end, the story of *The Singing Blacksmith* is not attempting to make any bold statements. It is lighthearted and fun, a chance for Yiddish character actors to live out classic Yiddish theatrical archetypes on the screen. This does not diminish the value of the picture, nor does it discount the commanding nature of Oysher's performance. *The New York Times* writes, "Moishe Oysher plays the title role with a

swashbuckling elaborateness which is matched by the unrestraint of his rich, cantorial voice. Over-long and frequently tedious in its homely minutiae, this film is not likely to have any appeal to a general audience, but should prove pleasant entertainment for persons who appreciate its flavored music and characteristic humors.”⁴³

The Singing Blacksmith clearly illustrates that Oysher is as much a perpetrator of secular Yiddish culture as he is one of religious Jewish culture. This is a noticeable statement coming immediately after his first film, *The Cantor's Son*, which appeared to be an attempt to reassure an uncertain religious crowd that Oysher was indeed a legitimate *chazzan*, and could be fully trusted and respected within that capacity. The release afterwards of *The Singing Blacksmith* only serves to prove that this was a false notion. Oysher wasn't proving anything to the religious community in *The Cantor's Son*, at least not beyond a strictly psychological level. He was merely acting out a role, just as he was acting in *The Singing Blacksmith*. This light comedy reminds us not to take Oysher so seriously. While he was a cantor with abilities that could be matched by very few in the field, he was also an actor, who, like all other actors, was looking for good roles that would be enjoyable and showcase his talents.

Part Three: *Overture to Glory*

Moishe Oysher's third film, shot in 1940, is called *Shtetl Chazzan*, which when translated into English means *City Chazzan*. The English title of the movie, however, is *Overture to Glory*. *Overture to Glory* is by far the most dramatic and poignant of Oysher's four films, and it has very much withstood the test of time. The music is by

⁴³ Frank S Nugent, "THE SCREEN; Pleasant Entertainment is 'Girl's School' at the Criterion — 'Always in Trouble' at the Palace At the Continental," *The New York Times*, November 3, 1938.

Alexander Olshanetsky (who also did the music for *The Cantor's Son*), and the film is directed by Max Nosseck. The opening credits say that the film is based on a legend, *Der Vilner Balabessel*. This refers to the legend of Yoel-David Levinshteyn-Strashunsky (1816-1850), a star chazzan from Vilna who was married off at thirteen years old. The word *balabessel* is an affectionate, almost ironic term meaning "master of the house." This refers to the irony of a thirteen year old who in charge of his household. The legend stipulates that, while on tour, Yoel fell in love with a Polish singer and ran off with her to Vienna. His affair and betrayal of his roots was punished with the loss of both his voice and his sanity. After wandering aimlessly from shetl to shetl, he eventually dies alone in an insane asylum before the age of thirty-five.⁴⁴

The story of *Overture to Glory* begins by establishing Moishe Oysher as "Yoel," chazzan of the synagogue of Vilna. Two outsiders from the Opera community come to hear Yoel sing at *Rosh Hashanah* services. Immediately, Oysher's complete mastery of chazzanut is on great display in his rousing and moving rendition of the prayer *Hin'ni*.⁴⁵ After the service, Yoel is formally introduced to the gentile strangers. Pleasantries are exchanged, but they are cut off by Yoel's father-in-law, who does not trust the gentiles.

That night, Yoel sneaks away, claiming that he is just going for a walk, and visits the non-Jewish opera composer and producer in their Vilna apartment. Upon entering, Yoel is immediately seduced by the splendor of secular music, as various melodies are played for him on the piano. They also show Yoel what musical notation looks like in its printed form, and offer to teach him how to read it. Yoel is totally awestruck.

⁴⁴ Hoberman, p.258.

⁴⁵ A complete transcription and analysis of Oysher's *Hin'ni* from *Overture to Glory* appears in this paper as Appendix I.

In this scene, we see very clearly the great contrast that director Max Nosseck portrays between the Jewish world and the secular world. The synagogue where Yoel was *daven*-ing was very dark and candle lit. The message being portrayed through the scenery, cinematography, and the music, was clearly a message of fear and adherence before God. The apartment of the Polish gentile composer, however, is very well lit and spacious. The fact that the Poles are treating Yoel with such respect, and inviting him into their home, is a sign of changing attitudes towards Jews by the intellectual and artistic gentile community. We can see very clearly the inner conflict within Yoel, who lives an extremely repressed and controlled lifestyle, and is being invited in good faith to break out of it, into a place where he won't be controlled, where he will be allowed and encouraged to have artistic freedom. When watching this contrast between worlds being portrayed on film, one can understand the very real motivations for Jewish assimilation into modern society

Suddenly, Yoel is caught by the synagogue *shammass*, who had been spying on him under strict orders from Yoel's father-in-law. The *shammass* cries out, "It is healthier for us to get out of here. ...Have pity. Come away from here!" Yoel grudgingly complies when he realizes that he is officially being spied on by his own community. Upon his return, Yoel's father-in-law, the archetype of parental Jewish guilt, is beside himself with anger.

"What did I ever do to you to deserve this?" he says. "I've fed you since you were thirteen. Why do you disgrace me?" He demands that Yoel take a vow in front of the rabbi that he will never again visit the gentile's apartment. Interestingly, the Vilna rabbi does not force Yoel to make the vow, instead stating:

"I have faith in you. ...but never forget... you're the Vilna cantor. Remember who they were who preceded you – true followers of God. Yours is a position of great honor, believe it. Your prayers must be pure, unsullied. They are sacrifices to the Lord. Your heart must be pure, and all your thoughts. But how can they be when you confuse them with music of a world that is alien to us?"

It is interesting to note the contrasting methods in which the rabbi and the father-in-law deal with the threat of Yoel's "assimilation." The father-in-law gets extremely angry, and employs guilt tactics, while the rabbi remains calm and gentle, trying to reason with Yoel on a more rational basis. This tactic prevails in the short term, but ultimately the decision to assimilate lies with Yoel alone. In the end, Yoel's attraction to the secular musical world can't be stopped. He is offered a chance to "temporarily" leave his wife and son in Vilna, and journey to Warsaw to star in the Opera. This infuriates the rabbi and the father-in-law, but Yoel defies them and announces his intention to leave anyway. The rabbi warns Yoel that if he goes, he will be trapped between two worlds, and will feel at home in neither one.

Yoel ignores the rabbi's warning, and prepares for his departure to Warsaw. Before setting off, he has an emotional departure with his wife and son, Peretzel, and sings him a moving lullaby, *Unter Boimer*, for which Oysher himself contributed the lyrics. This gentle and soothing piece of music became one of Oysher's signature tunes.

In Warsaw, a now clean shaven Yoel is greeted by everyone with respect and enthusiasm. He immediately has great successes, and also catches the interest of a young gentile woman. It is implied that the two have an intimate relationship of some kind. As time goes by, Yoel starts to miss his Jewish roots. He wanders into a Warsaw synagogue to *daven* just one "last time." This, unfortunately, does not cure him of his feelings of internal emptiness, although he still continues on with his opera career in Warsaw.

Some time later, Yoel is about to go on stage for the fourth act of an opera premiere, when he is suddenly approached backstage by his father-in-law, who tells Yoel that the Almighty has punished him for his choices. Yoel's son Peretzel has just died. Yoel goes onstage, but says nothing. He cannot sing. Everyone in the opera house appears confused. Tears stream down his face. Yoel, barely able to move, utters a brief verse of the lullaby *Unter Boimer* that he used to sing for his son, and the curtain abruptly falls. Yoel is helped offstage and laid down. A doctor examines him and announces, "This man will never sing again."

In a state of total shock, Yoel leaves town and begins slowly wandering his way on foot back to Vilna. After a long journey (in which his beard has grown back, symbolic of his move back to his Jewish roots), he arrives back home at night in the pouring rain. He is weak, disheveled, and totally disoriented. He looks in the window and sees that no one is there. He realizes where they all are: It is *Kol Nidre*. Everyone is in the synagogue.

Services have begun, and Yoel silently enters through the front doors of the synagogue, unseen by anyone, as his replacement *chazzan*, Steinberg, starts singing *Kol Nidre*. Suddenly, Yoel cries out "*Din Darna...!*" from the back of the room. Everyone is shocked. He is helped to the *bimah*, and wrapped in a *tallit*. He finishes chanting the prayer, and at its conclusion, he collapses and dies. The rabbi, hovering over Yoel's body, says...

"...For them you sang... and for us you prayed... our beloved citizen of Vilna."

THE END

This film is extremely sympathetic towards gentiles and Jewish assimilation throughout. From the beginning, the gentiles are perceived by the audience as intellectual, forward thinking, well dressed, and kindhearted. The scenes in Jewish Vilna, contrastingly, evoke a very clear sadness. In Vilna, Yoel may be a dramatic and highly expressive chazzan, but off of the *bimah* he is almost completely silent much of the time, and totally under the control of his father-in-law. One can sense Yoel's feelings of constraint in Vilna even through the screen. The scenes in Warsaw at the opera house and in rehearsal are much brighter and happier. There, he is treated with respect and like a star. For the first time in his life, he appears (initially anyway) to be genuinely happy. Even though Yoel is punished by God with the death of his son, and despite his return to his Jewish faith by the end of the film, the viewer is left with a feeling of satisfaction that Yoel got to experience life on his own terms at least for a short while. While the film is certainly sympathetic to *stet* life, it also clearly illustrates that Judaism has had no choice but to move forward from it.

Just like Yoel in *Overture to Glory*, Moishe Oysher was himself many times trapped between the religious and the secular world, without having total acceptance in either field. This was alluded to in an article in *Variety* from 1936. The article explains that when Oysher had been hired by a congregation to *daven* the High Holidays, some angry temple members cancelled their synagogue membership in protest. They were repulsed by the idea of an actor/cantor. Later, when Oysher was *daven*-ing at the synagogue, his contract having been upheld despite the resignations, he was actually heckled by some congregants in the middle of the service. After the High Holidays were over, he then had trouble getting a job in the theatre, as some producers felt that

his presence, in light of the controversy surrounding him, may alienate some theatre patrons.⁴⁶ The events depicted in *Variety* illustrate that there is real life truth in *Overture to Glory*, when the rabbi warns Yoel that if he accepts a position in the opera, he will be trapped between two worlds, but will not feel at home in either of them. This was a reality that Moishe Oysher confronted from the first time he accepted the position at the First Roumanian Congregation at the age of twenty-five, until the end of his career. It seems, however, that Oysher had enough self-confidence to look past any sense of “not belonging” to either crowd. In an interview in *The New Yorker*, he bragged that he had served as cantor at “the most Orthodox synagogue in my town.”⁴⁷ In the theatre, as well, he took control of his own career, always contributing his own ideas and melodies to his various projects.

Part 4: *Singing in the Dark*

A few years before his death, and sixteen years after his last film *Overture to Glory*, Oysher conceptualized and starred in a small independent film in English called *Singing in the Dark* (1956). The film has been recently restored and preserved by the National Center for Jewish Film at Brandeis University. Music was written and orchestrated by the great Abe Ellstein. The film was directed Max Nosseck (the same director from the film *Overture to Glory*).

Singing in the Dark centers around a lead character named Leo, played by Moishe Oysher, who finds himself in postwar America with amnesia. He doesn't know who he is

⁴⁶ “An Actor or a Cantor, Yiddish Thesp's Worry,” *Variety*, July 22, 1936.

⁴⁷ “Free Lance” (no author listed), *The New Yorker*, January 14, 1956, 18-19.

or what his past is. Leo is living a very simple life as a hotel desk clerk. By chance, a close friend discovers that when Leo is given alcohol, he starts to sing. His voice is of course, spectacular, and Leo becomes a nightclub sensation. While he is beginning to gain some limited happiness in life, Leo is still troubled by his unknown past. He is seeing a psychiatrist, who is assisting him in trying to unlock his life's secrets. Through hypnosis, Leo starts to regain his memory, and soon his past comes flooding back to him. He remembers that his name is actually David. He had been a cantor in a great synagogue in Europe. His whole family had been killed by the Nazis. He was the lone survivor. Leo (David) immediately drops his impressive secular career and his celebrity, much to the chagrin of his best friend, and becomes a *chazzan*.

Singing in the Dark was a small movie. It was not widely released, and has been virtually forgotten. While the film itself is not extremely memorable, it has some beautiful songs. Additionally, this little known movie was one of the very first American features to confront the Holocaust, and also contains some of the first post-war footage of the ruins of the Berlin Synagogue and of the Rivington Street Synagogue.⁴⁸ The footage of Moishe Oysher walking through this rubble, a great synagogue in complete ruins, is terrifying.

Since it was based on his own ideas, the film itself could serve as a medium into Moishe Oysher's inner consciousness towards the end of his life. Now in his fifties, Oysher is still focused on the duality between cantor and entertainer. This is a conflict that never left him, having manifested itself on screen in *The Cantor's Son*, and *Overture to Glory*, and in his life as a cantor and a performer. In all of Oysher's films where this

⁴⁸ "Singing in the Dark," <http://www.brandeis.edu/jewishfilm/Catalogue/films/singinginthedark.htm> (accessed November 12, 2008).

subject is broached, he always returns to the cantorate in the end. This ran contrary to society, and even to Oysher's own life. With Oysher, it seems to be more accurate that he never left the cantorate, and he never left the stage. His duel between the sacred and the secular co-existed throughout his life and his career.

Chapter 3:

Relevance of Moishe Oysher to the Modern Day Cantorate

A life on the bimah or a life on the stage?

The dilemma between a "life on the *bimah*" or a "life on the stage" that Moishe Oysher both lived and portrayed is at least as old as the Yiddish theatre and the cantorate, and in even broader terms, it is probably as old as the theatre and organized religion. Certainly, as long as there have been actors and cantors, the conflict has always existed. It continues to this day, as many present day cantors are at some point in their careers confronted with a similar choice between the stage or the cantorate. Cantor Robert Paul Abelson, of Temple Israel in Manhattan, is one modern day living example of this dilemma. He says that he left the cantorate to pursue a career in opera, and saw a lot of success. Of course, during this time, he was not reaping the benefits of a secure salary and pension that he received when he was a cantor. This made life difficult, and after ten years, he eventually returned to the pulpit.⁴⁹ Certainly, when confronted with issues of leaving the cantorate to pursue other musical ventures, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, today's cantor may find answers by looking at the career of Moishe Oysher, who

⁴⁹ Cantor Robert Abelson, (interview with the author on September 23, 2008).

succeeded inside and outside of the cantorate for his entire career, while almost always doing so within the context of a broader Jewish culture.

A blend of different styles as a means of preservation

Moishe Oysher was a master of style. He could not only jump from one genre to another, but he was also able to interchange them at will, allowing his different musical tastes to not only co-exist, but to flourish together. Consequently, he appealed to a more diverse group of people, and subsequently increased the musical tastes of his listeners. For example, in 1950s, the so called Golden Age of *Chazzanut* was coming to an end. Oysher, a master of *chazzanut*, who most certainly didn't want to see the sacred art form die, combined it with more popular Yiddish and Hebrew folk music, a big orchestra, and a choir. Through this effort, he was able to not only sell many records, but further preserve the art of *chazzanut* as well, allowing it to farther flourish for a new generation of listeners.

Today's cantorial students are constantly struggling with the question of how to preserve Jewish musical genres from our great heritage. This is a difficult task, as many of these musical genres are no longer in the forefront of modern Jewish musical consciousness, or even secular musical consciousness. To answer this dilemma, many of today's best cantors are doing exactly what Moishe Oysher did over fifty years ago: blending different musical genres together as means of not only engaging the listener, but preserving fading musical gems, while simultaneously promoting the ones that are most compelling to the modern listener. This technique, used by Oysher in his albums of the 1950s, is very similar to the style of service leading that is taught to cantorial students in

the class *Empowering the Congregational Voice*, at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), School of Sacred Music in New York City. There, student cantors learn to satisfy the need of the modern congregation to participate in prayer (usually through folk music), while still attempting to preserve the musical integrity of our services, either through traditional *nusach* or the use of classical Reform repertoire. In this respect, Moishe Oysher's records produced in the 1950s are very much relevant to techniques being taught to and employed by cantorial students in the 21st century.

The resurgence of Nostalgia in the American Jewish Community

The sense of nostalgia portrayed in *The Cantor's Son* may be more apropos today than it was when it was released in 1937. At that time, *shtetl* life in Eastern Europe was facing ever increasing anti-Semitism, and was on the brink of being ravaged by war. Once the war began, it is doubtful that American Jews would have felt any sense of nostalgia for the "simple life" of the old country. The events of World War II and the Holocaust, which started soon after *The Cantor's Son* made its debut, practically rendered the film irrelevant in its yearning for the present day old country.

Since the World War II era, a great deal of Jewish assimilation has taken place in America. As modern Jews continued to blend into the general American society, they began, like all other cultures that assimilated, to forget or cast off their European roots. Today, while anti-Semitism still exists, there is a general acceptance of Jews as a whole within the greater American society at large. Consequently, some Jews may feel a renewed sense of nostalgia, an urge to explore and express the unique nature of their own Jewish identities. Moishe Oysher's deeply Eastern European Yiddish folk style,

combined with his mastery of *chazzanut*, serve as the perfect medium for re-introducing this great Jewish cultural heritage. This could be done within the context of *t'filah*, concerts, song sessions, or even new recordings of Oysher's original music.

THE MASTER SINGER OF HIS PEOPLE!

This was is a fitting title for a singer of Moishe Oysher's caliber and versatility. He sang for the Jewish people on the stage and in the synagogue. His appeal was both secular and sacred. In his time, his voice spoke to all of the Jewish people, from all walks of life, all over the world. Moishe Oysher has not been forgotten. His memory lives on in his films, his recordings, and in the presentations of his compositions in the concert hall and on the *bimah*. This is his lasting legacy.

APPENDIX: Analysis of *Hin'ni*, as sung by Moishe Oysher In the Motion Picture *Overture to Glory*

A NOTE ON THE TRANSCRIPTION OF THE MUSICAL SELECTION:

Because this is a piece of nusach, there is usually no time signature that is adhered to within the structure of the piece. Therefore, bar lines within the piece are sometimes used as a means of separating phrases, while no actual time signature is necessarily indicated. Also, there will not be in depth analysis of the choral music, as this was not arranged or directed by Moishe Oysher, but Olshanetsky. The choir's role will

be referred to only when their movements directly influence the analysis of the cantorial line since their role is primarily to echo and harmonically support the cantorial line.

This liturgical selection was chosen for analysis for several reasons. Most significant is the fact that it is one of the great examples of *chazzanut* captured on film. Additionally, it has never before been transcribed or analyzed. Also, the *Hin'ni*, in general terms, is a critical piece of liturgy which begins the *Rosh Hashanah musaf* service. In the *Hin'ni*, the *chazzan* humbly pleads with God for help with his/her great task: To seek mercy for both the cantor and the entire congregation. The *Hin'ni* serves as the “grand entrance” for the cantor during *Rosh Hashanah musaf*, as he/she traditionally enters from the back of the synagogue and slowly moves forward. If there was ever a cantor who could make a grand entrance, it was certainly Oysher. It is therefore prudent to examine how one of the great cantors of the twentieth century handled the *Hin'ni*, both stylistically and from a musically analytical perspective.

The opening phrase of the piece, in broad terms, encompasses the first two systems on page one. This is followed by a secondary opening phrase by the chorus.

Oysher's opening phrase can be further subdivided into three sub-sections:

- 1) The piece starts off very simply and directly, displaying an easy descent of one half-step from the A down to the G# on the word *Hin'ni* itself (starting just like the beginning of *Kol Nidre* from “Kol” to “Nidre”). This action does not yet firmly establish the mode. The descending minor 2nd instead displays a juxtaposition between *Magein Avot* in A, and *Ahavah Rabah* in E. Because Oysher hasn't gone to the root position on E cadentially, and is instead lingering on the 3rd (G#), the listener is left in a state of suspension. The relationship

between *Ahavah Rabbah* in E and A minor (or *Magein Avot* in A minor) is discussed further in Cantor Andrew Bernard's book, *The Sound of Sacred Time*. Cantor Bernard explains that the modulation (or hint at a modulation) from *Ahavah Rabbah* to a tonal center down one fifth, to either *Magein Avot* or minor, is a common one.⁵⁰ Oysher then jumps down to the root of *Ahavah Rabah* in E, and does a quick five note scale ending up a fifth, on B. This firmly establishes (however briefly) that we are in *Ahavah Rabah*. After a descending ornamented triplet, he then establishes himself once more on the third on G#.

- 2) In the second sub-section, the choir establishes a new root (in A-minor), but Oysher still has yet to do so. He plays more fervently off of the juxtaposition between the A-minor chord and the E-major chord (root of the previous *Ahavah Rabah*) in an ascending pattern. This is done on the words *nir-ash v'nif-had mi-pa-hat*, "*perturbed and frightened in fear (of Him)*."⁵¹ As the notes increase in range, so does the feeling of intensity. This is followed by a quick jump up a fourth, for a quick excursion to a D minor chord on the word *Yisrael* (who is enthroned on the praises of Israel) on a high F. Here the listener is left in total suspension for the phrase to resolve itself. Cantor Noah Schall is surprised that Oysher is singing this high at this point in the piece.⁵² For several reasons, this is not a typical vocal choice for this early in *Hin'ni*. First, *Hin'ni* is a very long piece of liturgy. Consequently, a cantor needs to be very cautious to pace him/herself. Also, the piece will eventually build to an extreme point of drama

⁵⁰ Cantor Andrew Bernard, *The Sound of Sacred Time* (Andrew Barnard, 2005), 19.

⁵¹ All English translations from *The Metzudah Machzur* (Lakewood, New Jersey: Judaica Distribution Center, 2000), 293-294.

⁵² Cantor Noah Schall (interview on 1-14-09).

when the *chazzan* asks God to rebuke Satan. With such high drama coming later, it is surprising to begin singing high notes this early. Finally, the *Hin'ni* itself comes at the beginning of the *musaf* service, with a lot more materiel to cover before the cantor will be done for the day. In a lecture on High Holiday *daven*-ing in Jerusalem, Cantor Eliyahu Schleifer warned that a *chazzan* must be extra cautious in the *Hin'ni* to not overdo his/her singing, lest he/she run out of vocal stamina so early in the process of *daven*-ing *Rosh Hashanah*.⁵³ Cantor Israel Goldstein adds that Oysher almost always, to his knowledge, sang in his full voice in his upper register.⁵⁴ It is interesting to note that Oysher is going “against the grain” of traditional practice by singing full voice on this high note at this particular early point in the piece.

- 3) Finally, in forming a simple E-major7 chord, Oysher very elegantly and gently establishes an A-minor mode in his repetition of the word *Yisrael*. (This repetition is not liturgical, but rather a musical choice.)

In Oysher's opening phrase, one senses an immediate flavor of fear, almost apprehension, but then a feeling of comfort and reassurance when the cantor reminds God that although he fears Him, he is “enthroned upon the praises of all Israel.”

After a musical choral interlude, Oysher continues with a *parlando* on the root of the A-minor chord on the text *bati* through *l'fa-ne-ha*, “*I have come to stand and to plead before you,*” at the top of page two. After rising to the 3rd on a C, he does a quick

⁵³ Dr. Eliyahu Schleifer (lecture from HUC-JIR, Fall, 2004, Jerusalem).

⁵⁴ Cantor Israel Goldstein (interview on 1-12-09).

repetition of a descending pattern ending on the root of an E-chord. The choir repeats amha Yisrael, and then Oysher does so again, in a simple ascending pattern, finally riffing a bit at the end of Yisrael. This leads into an accentuation of a-sher (on a-sher sh'la-hu-ni), by the means of accenting the third on the SHER of a-sher, and then a *parlando* on a-sher sh'la-hu-ni. The choir echoes the accentuation, and then reinforces the A-minor key.

Now Oysher goes into his first small *melismatic* section, starting on a brief *parlando* on C, the minor-third of the root, on the text mei af al pi she-ei-ni ch-dai,⁵⁵ *even though I am not worthy*. The *melisma* is on the word ch-dai (*not*) *worthy*. A *melisma* on this particular word reinforces the importance of the sense of total humility before God that is required by the chazzan, the central theme of Hin'ni. The structure of the *melisma* is essentially an ascending pattern of three notes, which, after descending to the root of the A-minor chord, ascends up and then down a major 2nd, starting on B, the major second in the key signature.

Next, there is a recurring pattern, starting with the last measure on page two, v'hagun l'khakh, and solidifying at the top of page three with la-khein (repeated twice). Once the pattern is solidified, the choir repeats this portion of the pattern (a simple ascending 4th interval) as a repeated echo of Oysher's continued ascension. On avaqeish mimkha, Oysher slips in an excursion into Ukrainian Dorian mode on A. After repeating avaqeish mimkha with a high note on an A and following the scale down to C and then up a major third to E, Oysher begins a quick maneuver which will ultimately lead to an extended *melisma* resolving in C-Major. This happens on Elohei Avraham, Elohei

⁵⁵ The Hebrew here has slight variance between *The Metzudah Machzur* and Moishe Oysher's pronunciation. Transliterated in this analysis is Oysher's version of the text.

Yitzhaq, veilohei Yaaqov. First, he goes up a fourth to a D-minor chord on Elohei Avraham. We then go up a fourth again to G-major chord on Elohei Yitzhaq. This is where the chord remains through the following *melisma*, which will ultimately lead us down a fifth to C-major. The *melisma* starts on a high G, descends down an octave, and then begins an ascending pattern, which can be divided into groups of three (see page three, system three, 10th-12thnote, 13th-15th note, etc...), and which will cover exactly one octave. Oysher then drops from the high G again, down a major third to the E on Yaaqov, finally resolving the maneuver into C-major. The progression from Elohei Avraham through Velohei Yaaqov is a typical, yet effective build up in intensity, which, at its peak, will then serve as a logical transition point for the next section of liturgy.

Following a choral interlude on *Adonai, Adonai, Eil, Rahum, v'Hanun*, Oysher makes an unprepared modulation first up a fourth to F-major, and then immediately to D-minor on Sha-dai, Ayom, v'Nora. This leads to a quick repetition of an ascending triplet pattern, which then transfers into an A diminished chord, ultimately leading us to a regular A-minor chord on *shol-chai* (see bottom on page 4), via a descending pattern on the repetition of the word *a-lai (to seek mercy) ... for myself*. While it is customary in certain religious circles to never repeat a word of liturgy, in emphasizing the personal through this repetition in a descending pattern, Oysher is making an appropriate choice for the chazzan in the midst of the *Hin'ni* prayer.

After a choir interlude, Oysher goes into a very stylized extended *parlando* section, which according to Cantor Israel Goldstein, can also be referred to as Zogen in Yiddish. In the film, at this section Oysher places his *tallit* over his head and sings in a low almost exaggerated and dramatic baritone register. Cantor Noah Schall says that this

technique was sometimes used by some of the great cantors who also had a low range. This exaggerated Zogen effect continues from page 6, first system, all the way through to just before the *fermata* on p.6, line 6. The segment serves as a bridge between the middle section and the concluding phrase. Within this stylistic section, at the beginning of line four, Oysher does a brief excursion into *Adonai Malach* in C, which resolves itself back into A-minor via a scaled ascension starting on C, going up to the lowered seventh on B-flat, then quickly back down the scale returning to C (beginning of line 6), and finally dropping to the root of A-minor.

Now Oysher employs another very stylized technique, practically humming while running scales on the word im with almost a closed mouth (see the *fermata* on p.6, line 6). This starts on the C (the minor third), down to the root on A, and never rises above the fifth. Oysher employs this tactic extremely quickly, and it is very difficult to delineate a definite transcription. The run eventually settles back on the root of the A-minor scale.

Finally, on the top of page seven, Oysher moves into the finale (concluding phrase) section of the piece, with a totally unprepared modulation from the A-minor up a fourth, into D-minor on v'tig-ar (*rebuke*). The unprepared modulation comes as a complete surprise, as if to awaken the listener to the great importance of the upcoming phrase. Oysher sings the word v'tig-ar on a second inversion of the D-minor chord. He repeats v'tig-ar in a sort of ascending pattern, this time singing the D-minor chord in root position, and holding a high A full voice. Now he does a quick *melisma*, descending to the third (F) and forming quick triplets which ascend, while moving one half-step up and one half-step down (see p.7, first system, last measure) for two series, then repeating on the highest series, and back down to the D-minor root. The brief *melisma* culminates

with the word ba-sa-tan ((*Rebuke*) *Satan*), up the fourth to the G, and then quickly down to the third on F. The choir repeats ba-sa-tan, and Oysher does a very fast *melisma* on l'val (*that*). The *melisma* starts on the third, descends to the root, back to the third, down to the root again, this time up to the fifth, down to the fourth, and now begins a descending pattern, emphasizing the third, the second, and finally, the root in descending triplets. Finally, he lets out a huge *yas-tinei-ni* ((*that Satan*) *not accuse me*) starting on the third, going down to the second, up to the fourth on a *fermata* (joined with a full chord by the choir), and then down to the root of the D-minor for the final note. The sheer magnitude of Oysher's intensity is inescapable here, particularly when he asks God to "rebuke Satan." The high drama of this section of the Hin'ni did not go unnoticed by director Erik Greenberg Anjou, who included it in his documentary film *A Cantor's Tale*.

Cantor Israel Goldstein notes that none of the maneuvers on display in this Hin'ni from *Overture to Glory* are unique to Oysher himself. His modulations and transitions are all common strategies among the *chazzanim* of his time, employed in their own renditions of Hin'ni and elsewhere. Much can be said, however, for the great speed with which Oysher goes through his *melismas*. Cantor Goldstein can only compare the intense pace of Oysher's *coloratura* to that of the great Cantor Zavel Kwartin, a contemporary of Oysher's, who died in 1952. Although Oysher's speed was comparable to Kwartin's, his maneuverings within the melismatic structure were much less complex than Kwartin's intricate patterns. Despite this, Oysher demonstrates a solid ability in his expression and an execution that is matched by few. His Hin'ni, captured on film in 1940 (and since transferred to DVD), will forever serve as both an audio and visual document of one of the great Cantors of the early twentieth century in all of his glory.

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E A15

cantor

male choir

Hi-n' ni Heh aw ni Mi-mah as nir

Hmm...

ash v'hit-chad mi-pa-chad yo-sheiv t'hi-los kis-rau-ell t'hi-los kis-rau-ell

(mf) (p)

Answer

choir

choir

9

baw-si la-a-mo ul'-chis-cha-nen l'-fawne-chaw al am'-chaw yis-ray - eil

Al Am' chaw yis-ray - eil. Ah-sher / A-sher she-law-chu n

Am - chaw yis-ray - E!

(me) Al al pi she-ei-ni ch-dai

hah-gun l'-chawch

Handwritten musical notation on three staves (treble, alto, and bass clefs). The melody is written in the treble clef. The lyrics are: law-chein law-chein ah-va-keish min-chaw ah-va-.

Handwritten musical notation on three staves (treble, alto, and bass clefs). The melody is written in the treble clef. The lyrics are: law-chein law-chein.

Handwritten musical notation on three staves (treble, alto, and bass clefs). The melody is written in the treble clef. The lyrics are: keish min chaw El-lo-kei Ab-rawhamm El-lo-kei Yitz-chawk.

Handwritten musical notation on three staves (treble, alto, and bass clefs). The melody is written in the treble clef. The lyrics are: Ab-rawhamm yitz-chok.

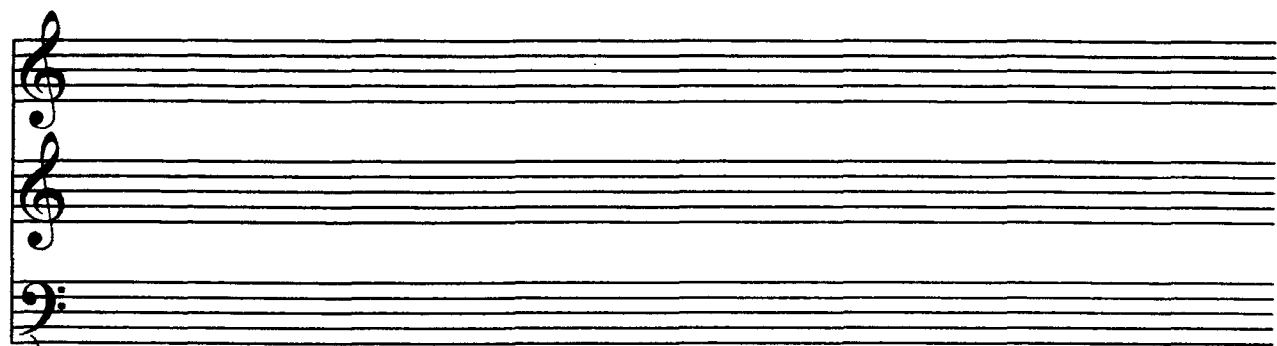
Handwritten musical notation on three staves (treble, alto, and bass clefs). The melody is written in the treble clef. The lyrics are: rei-lo-kei Ya-ah-koiv.

Handwritten musical notation on three staves (treble, alto, and bass clefs). The melody is written in the treble clef. The lyrics are: rei-lo-kei Ya-ah-koiv.

Handwritten musical notation on three staves (treble, alto, and bass clefs). The melody is written in the treble clef. The lyrics are: rei-lo-kei Ya-ah-koiv.

Handwritten musical notation on three staves (treble, alto, and bass clefs). The melody is written in the treble clef. The lyrics are: rei-lo-kei Ya-ah-koiv.

unprepared
modulation to Dm



Handwritten musical notation for the first system, featuring three staves (treble, alto, and bass clefs). The melody is written in the treble clef, and the accompaniment is in the bass clef. The lyrics are: "shah — Dai au-yom v-no-raw he-yei raw matz-li-ach Dar-Ki". Above the staff, there are handwritten notes: "FM" and "Dm". Below the staff, there are handwritten notes: "(ff) sha-dai" and "(p)".

Handwritten musical notation for the second system, featuring three staves (treble, alto, and bass clefs). The melody is written in the treble clef, and the accompaniment is in the bass clef. The lyrics are: "A-sher a-ni-holech la-a-mad ul-va-kesh va-dar-mim Re-chaim a-". Above the staff, there are handwritten notes: "A Dim" and "3". Below the staff, there are handwritten notes: "A-sher a-ni-holech la-a-mad" and "Re-chaim a-".

Handwritten musical notation for the third system, featuring three staves (treble, alto, and bass clefs). The melody is written in the treble clef, and the accompaniment is in the bass clef. The lyrics are: "ola l'et o-lev ve el — shol chav". Above the staff, there are handwritten notes: "Am" and "Am". Below the staff, there are handwritten notes: "ola l'et o-lev ve el — shol chav".

Choir
Interlude

Handwritten musical notation on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The notation consists of three measures. The first measure contains a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. The notes are: treble clef (G4, A4, B4), bass clef (G3, A3, B3). The second measure contains a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. The notes are: treble clef (G4, A4, B4), bass clef (G3, A3, B3). The third measure contains a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. The notes are: treble clef (G4, A4, B4), bass clef (G3, A3, B3). The notation is written in a simple, handwritten style.

go Next page

Empty grand staff (treble and bass clefs) for musical notation.

Empty grand staff (treble and bass clefs) for musical notation.

in key
of D minor

Handwritten musical notation on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The notation consists of two measures. The first measure contains a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. The notes are: treble clef (G4, A4, B4), bass clef (G3, A3, B3). The second measure contains a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. The notes are: treble clef (G4, A4, B4), bass clef (G3, A3, B3). The notation is written in a simple, handwritten style.

choir
at end
of piece

Yogel 4:00 speaking in secular "parlando"

*

* for lyrics to these lines, consult
"The Metzudah Machzor" p.294

Handwritten musical score for the first system. It consists of three staves: a vocal staff in treble clef and two piano staves in bass clef. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The vocal line begins with a treble clef and a key signature change to one flat. The lyrics "Sig-ar" are written under the first two measures, and "ba" under the third. The piano accompaniment features long, sustained notes with ties across measures.

Handwritten musical score for the second system. It consists of three staves: a vocal staff in treble clef and two piano staves in bass clef. The key signature has one flat. The vocal line continues with the lyrics "sah-tan", "bahy", and "sah-tahn". The piano accompaniment includes sustained notes and some melodic movement in the right hand.

Handwritten musical score for the third system. It consists of three staves: a vocal staff in treble clef and two piano staves in bass clef. The key signature has one flat. The vocal staff is mostly empty, with the lyric "I-val" written under the first measure. The piano part features a very dense, fast-moving melody in the right hand, consisting of many sixteenth notes.

Handwritten musical score for the fourth system. It consists of three staves: a vocal staff in treble clef and two piano staves in bass clef. The key signature has one flat. The vocal line includes the lyrics "Yas-ti-nei" and "ni". The piano accompaniment features sustained notes and some melodic movement.