

WHEN ISRAEL SANG TO AMERICA:
TOVA RONNI AND ISRAELI FOLK SONG

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Advisors: Rabbi Lisa Grant, Ph.D. and Dr. Gordon Dale

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This rabbinical capstone project had two principal manifestations: this paper and a recorded performance¹ at the New York campus of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion on December 6th, 2018. The success of both elements was enabled by the contributions of a great many mentors, teachers, institutions, collaborators, friends, and family.

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The performance evening was enriched by many collaborators. Eight members of the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music contributed their voices: Ze'eva Berman, David Fair, Toby Glaser, Benjamin Harris, Alexandra Kurland, Danielle Rodnizki, Emily Simkin, and Robby Wittner. Three female singers presented Tova's vocal repertoire in Hebrew, Yiddish, and English respectively: Cantor Inbal Sharett-Singer, Lea Kalisch, and Rosie Moss. The instrumentalists for the evening were Elana Arian, Ivan Barenboim, and Joyce Rosenzweig. In addition to her skillful performance, Joyce arranged several of the musical selections and rehearsed with the many vocalists. Lastly, the evening was enhanced by the presence of Ron Eliran, a star of Israeli folk-rock.

¹ The video-recording can be found at <https://livestream.com/huc/events/8469888>

I would like to thank my interview subjects who illuminated the fullness of Tova's character and career. Ron Eliran spoke of Tova's ability to push a musician's career forward and expand one's artistic vision. Zalmen Mlotek detailed Tova's contributions to the Yiddish arts world in particular. Cantor Inbal Sharett-Singer shared her perspective as a descendant of the musical tradition of which Tova was a pioneer. Bernard and Raya Gitlow told stories about Tova that dated back to the 1940s and helped me to understand the earliest years of the Israel-America relationship. Lastly, Isaac and Shura Rinkewich, Tova's brother and sister-in-law, recounted for me the biographical details of Tova's life that would have otherwise been unobtainable.

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Capstone Summary

Title: When Israel Sang to America: Tova Ronni and Israeli Folk Song

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Capstone Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination in Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion's Graduate Rabbinical Program in New York, New York

Capstone Summary: This capstone project was the documents and analyzes a significant cultural phenomenon: the ways in which *Shirei Eretz Yisrael* (Songs of the Land of Israel, or SLI) served as an important sphere of Israeli national culture and functioned as a bridge between American Jews and the Jewish State. In particular, the project focuses on the legacy and context of Tova Ronni, the author's grandmother and one of the first Israeli folksingers to have a performance career in the United States. The primary period under study is 1947-1972. This has two principal manifestations:

- 1) a paper that describes the relationship between cultural production and nationalism, and outlines Tova's biography, her historical context, and the cultural message of her primary genre, *Shirei Eretz Yisrael*;
- 2) a recorded performance¹ in which I recounted her story, played songs from her repertoire in collaboration with Tova's peers and musical descendants, displayed the material legacy surrounding her performance career in a 10-panel exhibit and digital presentation, and interpreted the Zionist message of Tova's life for a contemporary audience.

A significant aspect of this project was original archival work, cataloguing and digitizing the contents of 20 boxes of Tova's possessions which included Hebrew, Yiddish, and English newspaper clippings, concert programs and publicity, handwritten journals, correspondence, professional LPs, reel-to-reel recordings, and photographs. Additionally, I conducted five interviews with people who had personal and professional relationships with Tova: Ron Eliran (Israeli folk-rock singer and Tova's collaborator), Cantor Inbal Sharett-Singer (Tova's friend and mentee), Zalmen Mlotek (Tova's succeeding artistic director at the Folksbiene Theater), Raya and Bernard Gitlow (Raya was an early JNF colleague of Tova's and then they became lifelong friends), and Isaac and Shura Rinkewich (Tova's brother and sister-in-law).

¹ The video-recording can be found at <https://livestream.com/huc/events/8469888>

Introduction

As a child, most every Shabbat dinner table or family occasion was marked by the powerful and colorful singing of my grandmother Tova Ronni (1923-2006), a dynamic Zionist professional folksinger of the Jewish people. Tova grew up in the Yishuv, the Jewish community of Mandatory Palestine, and immigrated to New York City in 1947 where she became a musical emissary of the emerging Israeli culture and nation. Tova, who was often the featured musical act billed alongside Zionist politicians and fundraisers, participated in a broad effort to disseminate Israeli culture, engender political support, and raise financial capital for Israel. The predominant musical form of this period—and the genre which chiefly comprised Tova’s repertoire—was the phenomenon of *Shirei Eretz Yisrael*, Songs of the Land of Israel (SLI).

From her arrival in America until the mid-1970s, Tova performed at Jewish institutions throughout the United States, Latin America, and Canada, and recorded two albums of music supporting a message of Zionism and world Jewish solidarity. Tova resided in New York until her death in 2006. After her initial career as a performer, Tova then served as director of the Tarbuth Foundation for Hebrew Culture and artistic director of the Folksbiene Theater. In her nearly sixty-year career in America, her every word, outfit, gesture, story, and song bore the characteristic marks of her dynamic personality and Israeli identity. Our ancient texts tell us that from Zion will go forth Torah; for myself and a great many American Jews before me, from Israel came forth Tova, a folksinger who conveyed the lifestyle, landscape, and language of modern Israel.

Of course, Tova was part of a greater constellation of cultural ambassadors to America during Israel’s founding years: speakers, musicians, dancers, actors, artists,

writers, and more. Their goals were to share the excitement of the Zionist developments, fundraise from the relatively wealthy Jewish American populace, recruit individuals to make *aliyah*, and strengthen the political relationship between America and Israel. These efforts began before Israeli independence and continue in various manners to this day.

Previous scholarship has documented the particularly important role that music played in the formation of Israeli culture in Israel. In the interdisciplinary book *Popular Music and National Culture in Israel*, sociologist Motti Regev and ethnomusicologist Edwin Seroussi identified, defined, and analyzed the cultural significance of Israel's various popular music forms.² Moshe Shakeid asserted the centrality of music within Israeli identity in *Children of Circumstances*, his book-length cultural anthropological study of Israeli ex-pat communities.³ Various other scholars such as Jarden Gertler Jaffe,⁴ Dorit Amir,⁵ James Loeffler,⁶ and Yael Reshef⁷ have contributed articles about the importance and particular cultural messages of Israeli popular music.

Whereas these researchers focused on the impact of Israeli music on Israelis themselves, this paper focuses on the function that music played in the transmission of

² Motti Regev and Edwin Seroussi, *Popular Music and National Culture in Israel*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

³ Moshe Shakeid, *Children of Circumstances*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

⁴ Jarden Gertler-Jaffe, "With Song and Hard Work: *Shirei Eretz Yisrael* and the Social Imaginary," *University of Toronto Journal of Jewish Thought*, vol. 6 (2017): 131-152.

⁵ Dorit Amir, "Understanding the Role of Folk Songs in Jewish-Israeli Culture: Implications for Music Therapy," *The World of Music*, vol. 39, no.1 (1997): 111-127.

⁶ James Loeffler, "Do Zionists Read Music from Right to Left?: Abraham Tsvi Idelsohn and the Invention of Israeli Music," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 100, No. 3 (Summer 2010): 385-416.

⁷ Yael Reshef, "Hebrew Folksong to Israeli Song: Language and Style in Naomi Shemer's Lyrics," *Israel Studies-Indiana University Press*, vol. 17, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 157-179.

Israeli culture to the diaspora, and specifically to the United States of America. Though primarily examining other art forms and cultural touchpoints, Emily Alice Katz's work *Bringing Zion Home: Israel in American Jewish Culture, 1948-1967*,⁸ provided useful context for the study of how Israeli culture was presented to Americans.

In addition to a survey of relevant secondary literature, this paper includes interviews with Tova's contemporaries and collaborators, and original archival work exploring the cultural production surrounding Tova Ronni: her musical repertoire, newspaper articles about her, concert programs, musical recordings, photographs, book inscriptions, song pamphlets, correspondence, and more. The study of Tova Ronni's career provides insights into the ways in which the Songs of the Land of Israel genre served as an important sphere of Israeli national culture and functioned as a bridge between American Jews and the Jewish state.

Cultural Production and Nationalism

Theoretical Background

The study of modern Israel—and in particular its culture—can be contextualized within the study of the formation of national culture writ large. Following Gertler Jaffe, and Regev and Seroussi, I employ two well-popularized scholarly concepts to provide an overall frame for this endeavor: Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities"⁹ and Pierre Bourdieu's "field of cultural production."¹⁰

⁸ Emily Alice Katz, *Bringing Zion Home: Israel in American Jewish Culture, 1948-1967*, (New York: State University of Albany Press, 2015).

⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (London: Verso, 2006).

¹⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

Anderson describes nations as imagined communities in which cultural influences create a broad feeling of camaraderie among large groups of people. As it is with the Israeli case, “members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”¹¹ Nevertheless, common cultural elements and beliefs, in combination with political and geographical circumstances, foster individuals’ identity with a particular nation.

Anderson emphasizes that a codified written language plays a dominant role in the establishment of nations.¹² This is evident in the case of Israel, where the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language played such a significant role in establishing national identity.

Bourdieu urges the literary or art critic to go beyond the study of an individual’s contribution in order to look at the field of cultural production that surrounds an artistic endeavor. He writes that this approach enables us to see the “structural relations...between social positions that are both occupied and manipulated by social agents which may be isolated individuals, groups, or institutions.”¹³ Regev and Seroussi frame their own engagement with Bourdieu’s approach as studying an “arena of contest over the definition of the dominant and legitimate national culture, and its underlying doxa, the ideology of nationalism.”¹⁴ There are myriad cultural possibilities present within a given society, but through a combination of factors—including institutional

¹¹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

¹² Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 37-42.

¹³ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 29.

¹⁴ Regev, *Popular Music*, 5.

support, individual creativity, and happenstance—only certain forms become culturally dominant. Therefore, Bourdieu suggests that an understanding of art's function requires study of the entire field of cultural production, not just a given cultural artifact or individual.

Application to Israel Studies

Anderson's imagined community and Bordieu's field of cultural production are useful frames with which to study both the internal struggle within early Israel to establish dominant cultural forms, as well as the manner in which Israeli culture was presented to American Jews and non-Jews. Zionist cultural producers were imagining, inventing, and contesting what this new nationalism implied for its constituents and supporters.

Though the Zionist movement shared much in common with other national movements, it also had special characteristics deriving from its mainly diasporic origins. Zionism was not simply the emergence of a political nationalism from a geographically, or even linguistically, unified populace. As designated by the term *shlilat hagolah*, negation of the diaspora, many Zionists actively sought to create something new in contrast to existing Jewish cultures. "Moreover, since the cultures of the different Jewish groups that immigrated to the new country were diverse in their contents and meanings, the construction of Israeliness was a constant source of ideological contest and struggle."¹⁵

¹⁵ Regev, *Popular Music*, 2.

Though this struggle existed throughout Israeli society, Regev and Seroussi argue that outside of the Hebrew language itself, “popular music is the cultural form that most strongly signifies Israeliness.”¹⁶ Among the various forms of popular music that have held significant positions in Israel’s history, they identify SLI as the earliest form to gain dominance in the cultural marketplace.

Exporting an Emerging Culture

Simultaneous to the ongoing development of Israeli culture in the Yishuv and early days of the State, was the culture’s dissemination outside of Israel to both diaspora Jews and the broader world. As it relates to the United States of America, this phenomenon has been most thoroughly studied in Emily Alice Katz’s work *Bringing Zion Home: Israel in American Jewish Culture, 1948-1967*.

Katz argues that many scholars of American Zionism, including Edward S. Shapiro, Jonathan D. Sarna, and Gerald Sorin, have underappreciated Israel’s cultural impact during this pre-1967 period. In her criticism of their scholarship, she states “they frame Israel as a subconscious influence on American Jewish culture at most, something to be mentioned in passing.”¹⁷ Katz makes this assertion based on her study of four fields of cultural production targeted at American Jews that achieved widespread popularity before 1967: 1) “Israel books,” primarily non-fiction accounts regaling Israel’s beginnings; 2) Israeli folk dance; 3) Israeli-made goods; and 4) the presentation of Israeli fine artists and classical musicians.¹⁸ This paper functions as a complement to Katz’s

¹⁶ Regev, *Popular Music*, 2.

¹⁷ Katz, *Bringing Zion Home*, 4.

¹⁸ Katz, *Bringing Zion Home*, 17.

study of Israeli folk dance, as SLI and folk dance were companion art forms that became ubiquitous touchpoints connecting American Jews with Israeli culture.

Israeli culture needed to be repackaged and reframed when it was presented to American Jews. First, the aforementioned concept of *shlilat hagolah* posed a problem for Israel's cultural emissaries to America. The vast majority of American Jews, satisfied with and proud of their position in American society, never truly considered *aliyah* to Israel. Mainstream American Zionism maintained an attitude of American exceptionalism, asserting that "the long-term insecurity and periodic persecutions that had characterized Jewish life elsewhere in the Diaspora had dissolved in the light of American freedom and democracy."¹⁹ Therefore, the predominant message coming from Israel could not be negation, disparagement, or belittling of the Diaspora. Secondly, the American Jewish audience was never strongly fluent in Hebrew, so language issues had to be addressed. Finally, the lingering specter of dual-loyalty accusations necessitated adjustment to the political message that accompanied cultural programming.²⁰ For all these reasons, cultural ambassadors, such as Tova, could not simply reproduce one-for-one the cultural production that was occurring in Israel. Rather, they acted as translators and interpreters, reshaping and reformulating Israeli culture in a manner digestible to Americans.

The primary goals of this reformulation are summarized by what Steven M. Cohen and Charles S. Liebman have called the "Mobilized model." Israeli culture was presented to American Jews in order to catalyze their Zionist political advocacy and

¹⁹ Katz, *Bringing Zion Home*, 9.

²⁰ Katz, *Bringing Zion Home* 10-11.

philanthropic activity. The fund-raising pitch was that American Jewish funds were needed “to support social welfare needs that largely flowed from the rescue of Jewish refugees and their resettlement in Israel. More generally, the funds were meant to lend material support to...security needs.”²¹

In addition to this explicitly Zionist goal, American engagement with Israeli culture also served Jewish communal goals that were not specifically Zionist. Israeli independence came at a time when American Jews were adapting to new circumstances in which Jewish culture would be more intentionally constructed. In the pre-war period, Jews were largely located in urban areas where ethnic Jewish culture was organically manifested in informal ways on the “Jewish street.” After World War II, due to greater assimilation, decreasing immigration, and the move to the suburbs, Jewish culture became more “selected and selective, ...a group project of increasing import” for American Jewish institutions such as synagogue and community centers.²² Israeli art and music was presented as a new and exciting array of Jewish cultural activities for the American Jew.

Institutional leaders who advocated engagement with Israeli culture “premised their behavior on the idea that a reasonable degree of cultural difference buttressed democratic claims and maintained cultural vitality, enriching American life even as it aided America’s cause in the larger postwar world.”²³ Though engagement with Israeli

²¹ Steven M. Cohen and Charles S. Liebman, “Israel and American Jewry in the Twenty-First Century: A Search for New Relationships” in *Beyond Survival and Philanthropy*, ed. Allon Gal and Alfred Gottschalk (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College), 5.

²² Katz, *Bringing Zion Home*, 13.

²³ Katz, *Bringing Zion Home*, 11.

culture would become more controversial and divisive in the late 1960s and beyond, in this early period the “promotion and consumption of books, dance, fashion, household ornaments, music, and art presented satisfying avenues for American Jews to grapple with Israel’s role in American life.”²⁴

Shirei Eretz Yisrael

Defining Shirei Eretz Yisrael

The Israeli music that had the greatest impact on American Jews and that formed the majority of Tova’s repertoire has been labeled *Shirei Eretz Yisrael*, Songs of the Land of Israel (SLI). This is an umbrella term for the folk music that was most popular in the Yishuv and early years of the state. Though the exact contours of the music are difficult to specify, Regev and Seroussi provide the following definition of the term:

Israeli folk music whose origins are mostly ‘Russian ballads and East-European rhythms brought to Israel by the founders of Israeli society in the first half of [the 20th century]’²⁵ and whose lyrics ‘generally deal with national themes and agricultural topics.’ Its creators ‘are not, for the most part, anonymous,’ its arrangements ‘tend to be acoustic, based on accordion, guitar, and piano,’ and it is performed on ‘ceremonial occasions’ or in *shirah be-tzibbur* (communal singing). The latter tends to ‘symbolize national consensus and patriotism.’²⁶

SLI music claimed to essentially represent the land of Israel and exist in contrast to previous Jewish music. The extent to which SLI was specifically “religious” or “Jewish” is missing from Regev and Seroussi’s definition. Though there are numerous songs that, aside from their use of Hebrew, demonstrate no evidence of a Jewish context,

²⁴ Katz, *Bringing Zion Home*, 17.

²⁵ Later in their chapter on SLI, Regev and Seroussi expand their definition to include song-writing through the mid 1960s. Regev, *Popular Music*, 58.

²⁶ Regev, *Popular Music*, 55.

there are also many which deal with religious language and themes, or were intended for use during holidays and ritual moments. Often, SLI lyrics offer a subversive take on traditional language, as is the case with the famous Hanukkah song, “Mi Y’mallel” (“Who Can Retell”), which substitutes human heroism in place of God’s saving power as the crux of the Hanukkah narrative. Additionally, lyrics that were traditionally for synagogue use were given new melodies and new performance venues outside of the synagogue. One such example of this secular adaptation of religious text is Emanuel Amiran’s setting of “Ki Mitzion” (“From Zion”) composed for the 1942 play *Ha’adama Ha’zot (This Land)*.²⁷

The secular and nationalist nature of the genre was in keeping with the outlooks of the dominant institutions of its era. Applying Bourdieu’s construct of a “field of cultural production” to SLI, it is evident that this music gained its popularity because of factors beyond the musicians’ organic efforts and the music’s pure artistic merit. Many musical traditions were present in the Yishuv—cantorial, Hasidic, Western classical, Western popular, Jewish Arabic, and the music of the co-resident non-Jewish Arab population—but there was a self-aware institutional push to have SLI emerge as a unifying and distinctly “Israeli” cultural touch point. Major institutions such as the Histadrut Labor Union and the State’s Ministry of Education pushed SLI into the mainstream. Music educator and critic Menashe Ravina’s 1949 letter to the Ministry of Education exemplified the goals of these efforts:

Singing in public is one of the best means to unify the masses and to inculcate the new melos being created in our country. Singing in public has also a great value of

²⁷ “כי מציון תצא תורה” *Zemer Reshet*, <https://www.zemereshet.co.il/song.asp?id=574> (accessed Jan. 1, 2019).

teaching the Hebrew language to the new immigrants. There is a need to create a group of leaders who will know not only the melody but also the meaning of the lyrics.²⁸

In addition to assessing the competitive landscape of a given art form, Bourdieu also encourages the study of the cultural production that surrounds it. For SLI, in addition to the the aforementioned phenomenon of *shirah b'tzibbur*, an important adjacent arena of cultural production was the emergence of the newly invented “Israeli”²⁹ folk dance.

The creation and dissemination of Israeli folk dance was of prime importance to the Zionist institutions of the Yishuv. For example, the Histadrut supported the massively successful Kibbutz Dalia folk dance festivals of the mid-1940s, and later in the 1950s the Histadrut established the first national dance company which endeavored to bring Israeli dance to newly developed towns across throughout the country. The exponents of Israeli folk dance believed the form was crucial for the “creation of the new Hebrew body, muscular, proud, and free—everything the cringing stunted Diaspora body was not” and that dance would be “a key component in building a new national community with a store of shared symbols and experiences.”³⁰ Together, SLI and Israeli folk dance contributed to the sense of “imagined community” among citizens of the Yishuv and the early State.

SLI's Impact in America

Though there was a burst of interest in SLI following Independence, the music had been finding its way to American Jewish listeners for decades thanks to “individual Zionist *shlichim* (emissaries), returning tourists (including professional composers and

²⁸ Regev, *Popular Music*, 28-34.

²⁹ “Israeli” is in quotation marks because the dance form emerged during the pre-Independence period.

³⁰ Katz, *Bringing Zion Home*, 53.

musicians), and the occasional visiting performer.”³¹ The accessible folk aesthetic helped listeners feel nationalistic connection to the pioneering *Halutzim* in Palestine. One commentator described SLI as the “love potion” drawing the American Zionist’s heart to the land of Israel.³²

As Katz outlines in her chapter “Hora Hootenannies and Yemenite Hoedowns,” SLI and Israeli folk dance reached great popularity in the American Jewish community, but its success was for different reasons than the genre’s success back in the land of Israel. “In the context of American society, Jewish dance was not a centralized national prerogative but the cultural pursuit of a small ethno-religious minority.”³³ Jewish cultural institutions—camps, synagogues, youth groups, etc.—promulgated these forms throughout the country.

One aid to the music’s dissemination was printed sheet music coming from Israel and intended for a diaspora audience. Song pamphlets of popular SLI selections were printed with multiple translations attached, including English, French, and Spanish. Emphasizing the connection between SLI and dance, many of these pamphlets included dance-steps. Additionally, the Jewish National Fund (JNF) printed song-sheet postcards intended for settlers to send back to their families or for tourists to purchase and bring home. Ethnomusicologist Jarden Gertler-Jaffe emphasizes that the sharing of these materials helped create a sense of imagined community common to both Israelis and diaspora Jews. “The circulation of these songs allows listeners and singers to also identify

³¹ Katz, *Bringing Zion Home*, 127.

³² Katz, *Bringing Zion Home*, 127.

³³ Katz, *Bringing Zion Home*, 53.

as ‘model Israelis’ without acquiring citizenship or living in the area. Those people who identify with the public of SLI know themselves to be ‘the people’ of Israel.”³⁴ SLI’s promulgation invited American Jews to view themselves as the intended “folk” of this folk music.

SLI Today

The genre is past its heyday in Israel, but still forms part of the national consciousness. SLI plays an outsized role in the canon of music played during national commemorations and *shirah b’tzibbur* events. Kehilat Zion in Jerusalem, which labels itself a *Kehila Eretzyisraelit*, a Land of Israel Congregation, uses the SLI song *Shir Ha’Emek (Song of the Valley)* to open its Shabbat evening service. This demonstrates the extent to which this canon is still understood as uniquely and authentically Israeli.

When asked about contemporary awareness of SLI, Cantor Inbal Sharett-Singer, a native Israeli and mentee of Tova’s, responded: “It is known and loved as something that transcends to this beautiful old Israel full of peace, hope, togetherness, and unity that we once had. I think the music is very much alive still. And even now it has been put into electronic music, pop music.”³⁵ As Cantor Sharett-Singer remarked, togetherness and unity were central to the original message of SLI and its contemporary use as well. Nevertheless, SLI was a musical form that had boundaries and kept certain ethnicities or creative efforts outside its purview. Regev and Seroussi identify numerous other genres within Israeli music, but specify that Israeli rock and, later, Musiqā Mizrahit, are the two

³⁴ Gertler-Jaffe, “With Song and Hard Work,” 138-141.

³⁵ Inbal Sharett-Singer (cantor), in discussion with the author, October 31, 2018.

most significant forms to emerge that, like SLI before them, claimed to be essentially Israeli or indigenous.³⁶

As for SLI in America today, the most self-evident arena for the music is in the Israeli folk dance events which are common to summer camps, JCCs and other communal settings. Additionally, SLI music still forms part of the common repertoire of music in religious school and synagogue prayers. However, younger listeners are less likely to know that its historical or geographical origins are distinct from other synagogue music they hear.

In the next section of the paper I present a condensed biography of Tova Ronni, an Israeli folksinger whose career demonstrates many of the themes outlined thus far about SLI's impact in America. Following the biography, I present a more thorough analysis of the cultural production surrounding Tova's performance career and her role in the transmission of SLI from Israel to America and the greater diaspora, when SLI had its greatest reach and cultural significance from the post-war period until the mid-1970s.

Tova Biography

Birth and Włocławek

Tova was born as Doba Rynkiewicz in Wolożławik (Włocławek), Poland, to her parents Jacob Rynkiewicz and Genia née Sukerbrood in 1923 (no birthdate specified).³⁷

³⁶ Regev, *Popular Music*, 11.

³⁷ Hebrew spellings on the birth certificate: דובא רינקיעוויץ בת יעקב רינקיעוויץ וגעניא לבית סוקרברוד (צוקרברוד)

<p>THE CHIEF RABBINATE of JAFFA & TEL-AVIV DISTRICT</p> <p>P. O. B. 9 — TEL. 4305-6</p> <p style="text-align: center;">No. <u>447/1944</u> מס.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">CERTIFICATE OF BIRTH</p> <p>This is to certify that on ground of testimony of trustworthy witnesses as entered in the records of the Local Chief Rabbinical Office, under No. <u>447/1944</u> it results that:</p> <p>M. <u>Saba Dyniewicz</u> was born at <u>Wloclawsk</u> to his/her parents:</p> <p>Name of father: <u>Isaac Dyniewicz</u> Name of mother: <u>Genia nee Sukerbrod</u> On <u>1923</u> year</p> <p>In proof and virtue of which the present Certificate is issued to be used in all cases of necessity.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Tel-Aviv, Eretz-Israel, (Palestine) date <u>8th July</u> 19<u>44</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;">THE CHIEF RABBINATE of JAFFA & TEL-AVIV DISTRICT</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>[Signature]</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">הרבנות הראשית למחוז יפו ותל-אביב</p> <p style="text-align: center;">ת. ד. 9 — טלפון 4305'6</p> <p style="text-align: center;">תעודת לידה</p> <p>הננו מאשרים בזה בתקף הראוי על יסוד עדות של אנשים נאמנים כרשום בספר הרבנות הראשית המקומית תחת מספר <u>447/1944</u> כי ה' <u>זקנו בנקיטת</u></p> <p>נולדה ב <u>וולוצק</u> להוריו:</p> <p>שם האב: <u>יזעק דינעוויץ</u> שם האם: <u>ג'ניא ניי סוקרברוד</u> ביום <u>לחדש</u> שנת <u>תרצ"ג</u></p> <p>ועדיא באעה"ה פה תל-אביב. ארץ-ישראל. יום <u>כ'</u> לחדש <u>תמוז</u> תש"ד</p> <p style="text-align: center;">הרבנות הראשית למחוז יפו ותל-אביב</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>[Signature]</i></p>
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Birth certificate issued by the Chief Rabbinate of Jaffa & Tel Aviv District just before Tova's departure to America.

Like most Jewish communities in Eastern Europe in the early 20th century, the Jews of Włocławek were active in a wide range of political movements. Włocławek had

active branches of the Bund, the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), Po'ale Tziyon, and Mizrahi (Orthodox Zionist movement).³⁸ Tova's family were ardent Bundists, advocating a secular Jewish socialist agenda. They did not have intentions to move to Palestine until anti-Semitism provided the push, and a wealthy cousin, Samuel Schneiderman, provided the pull.³⁹

Schneiderman had achieved business success in New York City and then made *aliyah* in the 1920s or early 1930s. On Allenby Street, he established the *American Dress Company*, one of Tel Aviv's first dress factories. In 1932, in pursuit of a hometown *shidduch* (arranged romantic match) he visited Tova's family in Włocławek. He was appalled by the evident signs of burgeoning anti-Semitism. Upon returning to Palestine, he put up 1000 British Pounds with a local bank which would serve as sponsorship for any family that wished to leave Poland.

Just after Schneiderman's visit, Tova's father Jacob was assaulted during an anti-Semitic riot and his hand was broken. Soon thereafter, Jacob left for Tel Aviv. The rest of Tova's immediate family and her mother's extended family followed in 1933. Tova's father's extended family, including Tova's grandfather who was a rabbi, did not seize this opportunity to leave. Ultimately, they perished in the Holocaust.

³⁸ Marcin Wodzinski, "Włocławek," *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/W%C5%82oc%C5%82awek> (accessed Jan. 1, 2019)

³⁹ Biographical details come primarily from interview with Isaac and Shura Rinkewich, Nov. 15, 2018. Additional context gleaned from array of documents in Tova's archive, which are referenced for specific details and quotes.

Yishuv

Tova was ten years old when her family arrived in British Mandatory Palestine in 1933. They became part of the *Yishuv*, the Jewish community of Palestine. Though they generally associated with Labor Zionist circles, Tova's father also established a Tel Aviv branch of the Bund in his carpentry shop. Resentful of the intolerance they experienced in Poland, the family resolved never to speak Polish again. In addition to their familiar Yiddish, the entire family began to learn Hebrew. In particular, Tova and her two siblings became fully immersed in the language as they attended *Gimnasia Tel Aviv* and *Gimnasion Erev*, Hebrew-language middle and high schools.

Tova's early journals show her dedication to the emerging Hebrew culture. The journals are filled with clippings and hand-copied versions of Hebrew songs, short stories, recitations, and jokes. Already in her early teens, Tova began to find success and recognition in the performing arts. In addition to acting and singing, Tova won several prizes related to monology, the art of monologue-giving and dramatic recitations. Monology was an in vogue art form of its day. A monologist, a performer within this style, was called a *karyan* (male) or *karyanit* (female), though today this Hebrew title simply means radio announcer.

In her early teens, Tova participated in a competition to discover young talent and won the first-place prize for her recitation of "Al Titnu Lahem Rovim" ("Don't You Give Them Guns"), a poem by Natan Alterman. The prize was given by Max Brod, an important Jewish-Czech writer and the biographer of Franz Kafka. With Brod's recommendation, Tova was accepted as a student of Habima Theater, the national theater of Israel.

As a *karyanit*, humorist, and singer, Tova landed many appearances on radio and the stage throughout the Yishuv. Additionally, during World War II, Tova performed in Damascus and Aleppo for Jewish soldiers of the British army stationed there, as well as the local Jewish population. In 1945 and 1946, she performed in Cyprus for Jewish refugees who were being held in British detention camps. In many of these performances she accompanied political and intellectual leaders of the Yishuv, among them future prime ministers Shimon Peres and Moshe Sharett.⁴⁰ During this period, Tova also worked as a director in children's theaters and as a kindergarten teacher. It was also at this time that Tova, as was typical of the era, began to utilize a Hebraicized version of her name, substituting Ronni for Rynkiewicz. Ronni comes from the Hebrew root for joyful song.



Tova performing before executives of the Jewish National Fund and dignitaries. JNF executive director Mendel Fisher, 2nd from left, and future Prime Minister Moshe Sharett, second from right. Late 1940s or early 1950s.

⁴⁰ "Tova Ronni," *LaMishpacha Hebrew Monthly*, Oct. 1998, 5.

Arrival in USA

In 1947, Tova sought to advance her theater career by studying in New York with Lee Strasberg, the acclaimed teacher of method acting at Actors Studio, and Erwin Piscator, the founder of the Dramatic Workshop at the New School. Thanks to her popularity within the Yishuv, it was easy for her to secure a visa to the United States and acceptance into the theater programs. Nevertheless, she received letters from her American family members expressing concern that she would be financially dependent on them. Tova starkly replied “I am confident that I have the talent to find my own work.”

Undeterred, Tova made the journey in September 1947, at the age of 24. Tova preserved her pocket journal from that year, a little calendar published by the SAJ, the Society for the Advancement of Judaism. For the first entry, dated Erev Rosh Hashanah, Tova noted "באניה לאמריקה," on the boat to America.

Tova did not initially intend to remain permanently in the United States. A newspaper profile in February 1948, records her aspirations and response to current events in Israel:

My dream is to found a Children’s Theater in Palestine where both Jewish and Arab children may be taught dramatics so they will be able to act for other children. When the partition plan was announced by the United Nations, I quickly wrote home to see if they needed me to help, but I was told that it was more important that I study for a year and then return to Tel Aviv to work with the children.⁴¹

In the meantime, as she had assured her concerned American cousins, Tova had to earn a living alongside her theatrical studies. In America, Tova’s audience was of course

⁴¹ “Singer of Palestine Folk Songs Charms Children’s Audience at JY,” *The Jewish Ledger*, Rochester, Feb. 23, 1948.

not as Hebrew-literate as back home and would not be entertained by the language-intensive poetry and monologues she had recited in the Yishuv. The days of Tova the *Karyanit*, the monologist, mostly came to an end. Instead, Tova began performing the more accessible folk music of SLI. Within months of arriving in the United States, she was already booking shows throughout New York and the greater country. As her early JNF colleague Raya Gitlow remarked, “the Jewish people never had anything like her. A Jewish singer that speaks a little Yiddish and tells them about the Holy Land.”⁴²

Tova’s early success with folk song changed the course of her life as she began to focus ever more on her singing career and less so on acting. Likewise, she saw that there was a substantial living to be earned by meeting the demand that American Jewish audiences had for an authentic representative of SLI. After the late 1940s, in newspaper articles and correspondence Tova stopped expressing a desire to make a permanent return to Israel. Additionally, during this time she met her husband, Hy Moss, and began building a family.

Many of Tova’s early concert bookings were arranged by Mendel Fisher, the executive director of the JNF and a lifelong Zionist philanthropist. Just as the Histadrut had sponsored the proliferation of SLI in America, the JNF and other Jewish American institutions were instrumental in SLI’s growth in popularity in America. Tova became Mendel’s preferred singer for JNF events, and Mendel helped her book additional gigs throughout the United States and Latin America. Tova and Mendel became lifelong collaborators and friends.

⁴² Raya Gitlow, in discussion with the author, Jul. 17, 2018.

Records

Tova recorded two professional albums during her career. The first, *Israeli Dances*, was published in 1956 by Tikva Records, a Jewish record label in New York. This album exemplifies the close relationship between SLI and Israeli folk dance. The album included dance instructions for each song. Furthermore, on the album cover, Tova is given equal billing with Dvora Lapson, the dance consultant of the album. Lapson, a native New Yorker, was a prominent Jewish dance educator and choreographer.⁴³

Tova's second record was *Songs of My People*, produced by Roulette Records, a non-Jewish record label in New York City. Compared to her first record, this album featured a larger variety of Jewish folk music. In addition to a few selections from the SLI canon, *Songs of My People* included both famous and obscure Yiddish songs of European origin. Though the song list is more diverse than her first album, Tova's bio on the back of the LP emphasizes the narrative that modern Israel provides a redemptive answer to a plagued history. "From Baranovitsh to Dimona is the long road a martyred race has travelled; old and new, tragedy and hope; from the shtetl to Israel reborn."⁴⁴

⁴³ Tikva Ensemble featuring Tova Ronni, *Israeli Dances*, Tikva Records, 1956, 33^{1/3} rpm.

⁴⁴ Tova Ronni, *Songs of My People*, Roulette Records, 1967, 33^{1/3} rpm.



Tova's Two Professional LP's

Later Career

The primary span of her performance career lasted until the early 1970s, after which she took on ever greater roles in Jewish arts institutions. From the mid-1970s until the late-1980s, Tova served as director of the Tarbut Foundation for the Advancement of Hebrew Culture, a Zionist arts and education foundation founded by philanthropist Abraham Goodman. While at Tarbut, Tova produced multiple television series about Jewish life, organized educational weekends around historical Jewish themes, and presented concerts of Israeli music.

Tova then served on the board of the National Yiddish Theater Folksbiene from the early 1990s until her death in 2006. For several years in the mid-1990s she was

artistic director there as well. She is credited with installing the theater's first simultaneous translation devices which expanded the theater's potential audience.⁴⁵

In Tova's later career and before, Tova served as a mentor for newer Israeli artists aspiring to make it in New York. Leaning on her established network and pioneering experiences in bringing Israeli music to an American audience, she was of great aid to younger musicians. She was instrumental in helping Misha Raitzin, an operatic tenor originally from the Ukraine. After he had established himself in the Tel Aviv Opera, Tova facilitated his debut in America which led to his tenure at the Metropolitan Opera.

Additionally, Israeli folk-rocker Ron Eliran credits Tova with furthering his career in America, specifically noting how she encouraged him to write the English-language Zionist song "If You Will It," a tribute to Theodore Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism. About Tova, Eliran stated, "she knew how to advance the career of any artist. She could have managed anyone to success."⁴⁶

Framing a Performance & Field of Cultural Production

Though some of Tova's concerts were intended to be simply entertainment or "art for art's sake," the majority of her concerts were part of public events with specific ideological, political, and practical goals. Her music was intended to give American Jews a sense of emotional connection to Israel, demonstrate that Israel and America were natural political partners, and stimulate financial support for Israel. These goals were

⁴⁵ Nahma Sandrow, "Yiddish Theater in the United States," *Jewish Women's Archive*, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/yiddish-theater-in-united-states> (accessed January 1, 2019).

⁴⁶ Ron Eliran (Israeli folk rock singer), in discussion with the author, Nov. 21, 2018.

manifested in her performance choices and the various elements that surrounded her concerts: with whom she toured, how newspapers and other publicity described her, her song choices, and the way in which she framed her musical selections.

Use of Music to Support Zionist Fundraising Efforts

Many of Tova's performances were part of specific fundraising efforts, most frequently in support of the Histadrut, the JNF, and the sale of State of Israel bonds. Within the numerous examples of such events contained in her touring publicity, here are two event descriptions that bookend her performance career and demonstrate her role in such efforts.

In January 1949, Tova performed at the Jewish Community Center of Yonkers, New York at the "Israeli Histadrut Celebration and Concert" which was part of a Histadrut Campaign dedicated to the first anniversary of Israeli independence. Tova shared her billing with two guest speakers: Abraham Haft, a representative of Israel's War Ministry for the settlements in Emek and Galil, and Isaac Hamlin, the National Secretary of the Israeli Histadrut Campaign. Additionally, the evening featured a new Israeli film called "Freedom Bond." Within this context, Tova received top billing and was described as a "young, prominent Israeli artist in a program of the newest Israeli songs."⁴⁷ By emphasizing Tova's youth and her new repertoire, the event likely hoped to create a sense of excitement in parallel with the State of Israel's newness and early development.

⁴⁷ Farband Branch 314 of Yonkers NY, *Israeli Histadrut: Celebration and Concert*, (Yonkers, Jan. 16, 1949).

A program for a 1972 concert appearance at the Adath Israel Congregation of Montreal was specifically billed as a “State of Israel Bond Dinner” and featured the following description: “Strengthen Israel: The cost of migrating and integrating a Soviet Jewish family in Israel is \$25,000. By our purchases of State of Israel Bonds, we are determined to save as many Soviet Jews as possible.”⁴⁸ This call to action suggested to supporters that offering assistance to world Jewry *and* funding the State of Israel were mutually intertwined.

In service of these Zionist fundraising efforts, Tova shared billings with various politicians, intellectuals, rabbis, military personnel, and performance artists including: future Israeli Prime Ministers Moshe Sharett and Shimon Peres, Israeli President Dr. Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, US Senator Birch Bayh, US Congressmen Emanuel Celler and Franklin Delano Roosevelt Jr., Protestant scholar Dr. Carl Herman Voss, and Jewish American celebrities Moishe Oysher, Molly Picon, the Barry Sisters, Henny Youngman, Felix Fibich, and others.⁴⁹

Newspaper Profiles and Concert Publicity

In newspaper profiles and concert publicity, Tova was presented as a paradigmatic representative of the “Israeli.” Her performances were often construed as exhibitions of Israeli music writ large, rather than just one performer’s personal repertoire. For example, her 1956-1957 personal press materials, which were reproduced in numerous newspaper articles and concert programs, state:

⁴⁸ Adath Israel Congregation, *32nd Anniversary Celebration and Purim Dinner Dance*, (Montreal, Mar. 5th, 1972).

⁴⁹ List culled from various articles and concert advertisements in Tova’s archive.

Tova Ronni is the very essence of Israel—young, vibrant, and magnetic. Born a sabra (native of Israel), she is steeped in the lore of her people. She sings from the heart and interprets the sorrow, the joy, and the optimism of the Israelis in a manner that is universally understood.⁵⁰

It is worth noting that Tova embraced the identity of a native-born Israeli, though she actually moved to Palestine when she was already ten years old. Given that her family departed Poland because of persecution, and the way in which Israelis understood themselves to be part of a pioneering project to create a new identity in which many changed their names and rejected use of their languages of origin, it is understandable that Tova marketed herself as such.

Numerous newspaper profiles and concert advertisements likewise emphasized Tova's authenticity as such an essential representative of the early State of Israel. She was described as the "the first lady of Israeli folk songs,"⁵¹ "one of Israel's outstanding exponents of that nation's culture,"⁵² and "songbird of Israel."⁵³ Her entire identity and manner were noteworthy and symbolic of Israel, as one article commented on her clothing: "she wore an unusual embroidered blue blouse made in Tel Aviv."⁵⁴ In these early decades of Israeli statehood, Tova's sabra identity was a rare commodity even in New York City, and all the more so as she toured throughout America. Therefore, she

⁵⁰ *The Jewish Arts: A Directory of Artists*, (New York: National Jewish Welfare Board, 1956).

⁵¹ "Back Israel's Bond Drive," *Rockford Morning Star*, Oct. 18, 1951.

⁵² "Independence Bond Dinner for Israel Drive Wednesday Night," *Vermont Sunday News*, Jul. 15, 1951.

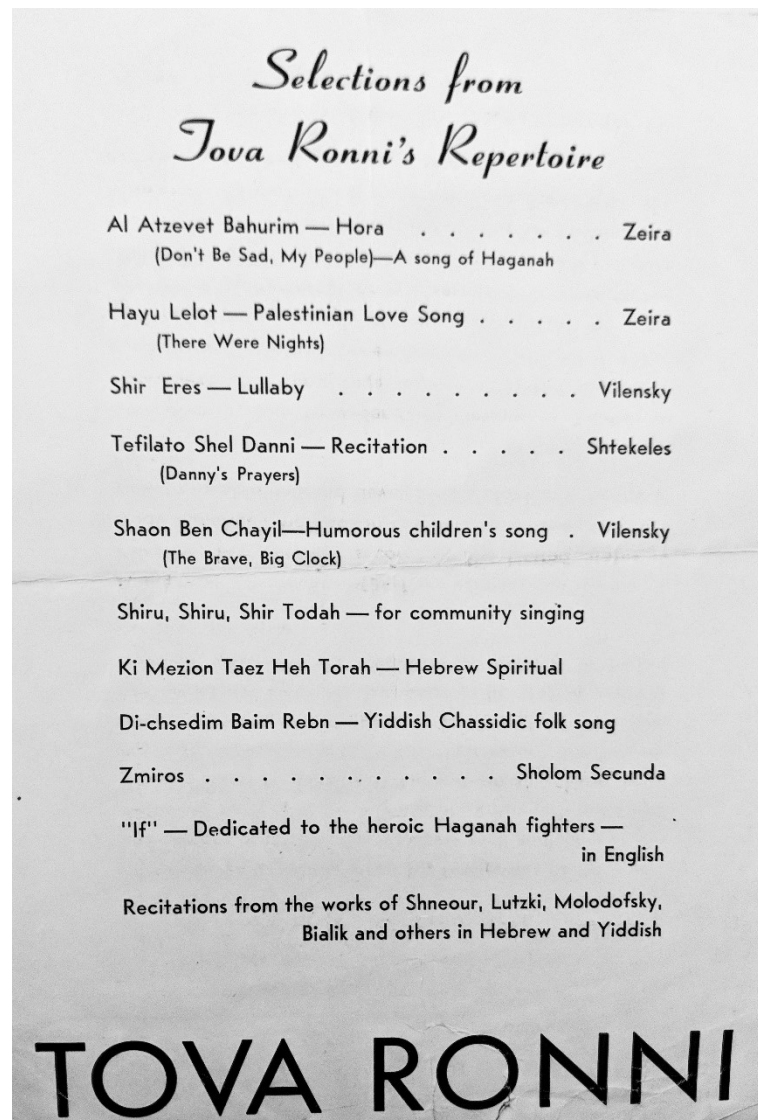
⁵³ "Burea Honors Three at Gay Dinner Dance," *Miami Beach Sun*, Apr. 22, 1959.

⁵⁴ "Singer of Palestine Folk Songs Charms Children's Audience at JY," *The Jewish Ledger*, Rochester, Feb. 23, 1948.

could present herself as a stand-in for the entire nation of Israel and give American Jews a sense of familiarity with an entity much greater, and more diverse, than herself.

Performance Repertoire

Tova's repertoire carried various cultural messages to her American audience. Several songs in her performances were specifically labelled "Haganah" songs, dedicated to the Jewish paramilitary organization during the British Mandate period. These songs would impress upon the American audience the material needs of the Israeli defense



Tova's Earliest Publicity Materials in America

effort. In her early performances and first record, many of the songs are about the preciousness of the land of Israel.

Two such examples are “Negev Shelanu” (Our Negev) and “Shiru, Shiru Shir Todah” (“Sing a Song of Thanks”). The latter’s lyrics continue: “Sing a song of thanks for the blessing of the land...because from all corners of the world our siblings have returned to Zion.” Both of these songs identify the listener as part of the same group as the singer. This rhetorical device and the *shirah b’tzibbur* communal aesthetic contributed to the notion that “identifying yourself as a member of the public addressed by SLI’s ‘we’ meant that you could see yourself as a model ‘Israeli.’”⁵⁵ Tova’s charismatic ability to impart this feeling contributed to her popularity and success.

On-Stage Banter and Set-ups

Equally significant to the repertoire choices that Tova made was the way in which she set up the songs for her non-Hebrew speaking audience. As one description writes “she has won particular acclaim for intriguing interpretations that precede the lyrics to songs of Israel.”⁵⁶ The following two examples of her stage banter demonstrate some of the cultural work that she was doing outside of the songs themselves. They come from a 1972 reel-to-reel recording of a concert she gave at Grinnell College in Iowa.

After opening the show with an SLI version of *Shalom Aleichem*, she told the following joke.

Shalom. As you by now know I do come from Israel, specifically Tel Aviv, and that’s the way we greet each other. When we meet we say shalom, when we part we say

⁵⁵ Gertler-Jaffe, *With Song and Hard Work*, 142.

⁵⁶ D. Pinsky & Z. Wolofsky Branch of the Labor Zionist Alliance, *Annual State of Israel Bond Dinner*, (Montreal, Mar. 18, 1972).

shalom. I was told that recently an American tourist came to Israel without knowing any Hebrew and noticed this phenomenon. He stopped an Israeli on Allenby Street, that's the main street in Tel Aviv, saying, "sir, I notice that you Israelis, when you meet you say shalom, when you part you say shalom, is Hebrew such a poor language that you cannot have different words? Let's say shalom for hello, and something else for goodbye. The Israeli laughed and answered saying, "sir, the Hebrew language is not a poor language at all, as a matter of fact it is a very rich language, but you see we Israelis are such a busy people that most of the time we don't know if we are coming or going.

This joke, and its use in Tova's performance, conveys several cultural messages.

First, it demonstrates the ongoing struggle that the Hebrew language faced in establishing itself as a rich modern language on par with English and other world languages.

Secondly, the punchline that Israelis are too busy to bother with the difference between hello and goodbye is a nod to the image of Israeli industriousness needed to build up the young country. Finally, the premise of the joke focuses on an American traveler to Israel, which perhaps derives from the post-1967 increase in American tourism to Israel following the Six-Day War.

Another song introduction emphasizes Israel's internal diversity.

I'd like to run the gamut of Israeli folksongs, but you know we have so many types of people, from at least 72 countries, and each with their ethnic tradition and habits. I'd like to sing one Yemenite song, *Miriam bat Nissim*.

This diversity was an important selling point to demonstrate a parallel between Israel and the United States: the myth of a multi-ethnic melting pot society. "Miriam Bat Nissim" was written for and recorded by Shoshana Damari, a Yemenite-born immigrant to Israel. Tova's choice to sing a specifically Yemenite song likely reflects the particular authenticity that was ascribed to the Yemenite culture in Israel, which was "seen as providing a connection to the ancient Hebrew culture that supposedly existed prior to the

Jewish diaspora.”⁵⁷ In the Grinnell recording, Tova imitates her Yemenite manner of singing and employs “the guttural technique, seen as typical of Yemenite singing traditions.”⁵⁸ Today, some would criticize this sort of imitation given that Tova was of Ashkenazi origin, and the power dynamics within Israel favored the Ashkenazi community over the Yemenite one. However, as described in her publicity materials, Tova sought to embrace a quintessentially “Israeli” identity which would permit her to perform music from any of its subcultures.

An Israeli Folksinger

All the elements of Tova’s music career—song choices, costume, publicity, on-stage banter, performance contexts, and shared billings—came together to connote that Tova was not just offering her own creative expression, but rather that she was an essential representative of the Israeli folk, or even more broadly, the Jewish people, as her second album *Songs of My People* suggests. She carried a message that the emerging Israeli culture, though brand new to an American audience, was already theirs. Thanks to her charismatic presentation during the exciting first years of Independence, she was received with great appreciation by her American Jewish audience.

Conclusion

I grew up with Tova’s powerful voice resounding at family occasions and a superficial awareness that she had been a performing folksinger. As I began this project, Bernard Gitlow, my first interview subject, said, “I can say one thing we knew. She did a

⁵⁷ Gertler-Jaffe, “With Song and Hard Work,” 145.

⁵⁸ Gertler-Jaffe, “With Song and Hard Work,” 145.

big job for Israel and the Jews. She was a very powerful woman.”⁵⁹ When I heard these words, I wondered internally if this was just the laudatory reminiscence of a dear friend, or if she had indeed been as influential as Bernie suggested. As I researched deeper into Tova’s career, I have found two complementary truths. First, that Tova did indeed have a significantly greater impact than I had understood, and secondly, that the broader circumstances—the unique historical moment of Israel’s founding, the identity-forming potential of the communally-oriented SLI corpus, and the strength of the Zionist institutions that would benefit from Tova’s message, or as Bourdieu would call these collectively “the field of cultural production”—facilitated Tova’s far-reaching influence.

Though the Zionist movement was informing Jewish-American identity for decades prior, Israeli independence in 1948 was a watershed event. For American Jews, suddenly there was a nation that was theoretically their own, and yet most knew very little about it. It would be years until American tourism to Israel became widespread, but in the meantime American Jews’ curiosity about Israel was piqued. Unsurprisingly, American Jews had great interest in the arrival of Tova and her contemporary cultural ambassadors.

Shirei Eretz Yisrael, the Songs of the Land of Israel, was a genre well-suited for introduction to American Jews. Since its initial percolation in the British Mandatory period, this genre was intended to help engender the “imagined community” of the Jewish Yishuv. The lyrics often spoke in the 2nd person about a sense of togetherness, a common past, and a shared destiny. Similarly, the forum for this music was often

⁵⁹ Bernard Gitlow, in discussion with the author, Jul. 17, 2018.

communal, either in ceremonial moments, *shirah b'tzibbur*, or folk dancing events. These elements invited Jewish listeners to experience the music as their own. The aspects of the music that could be off-putting were minimized; the ideology of *shlilat hagolah* was tempered, and the Hebrew-language gap was offset by easily learnable choruses and the pure novelty of experiencing Hebrew as a living language. As many audience members have attested, Tova excelled at drawing people into the music through her skillful set-ups and dramatic interpretations.

Beyond the individual efforts of musicians, many institutions helped foster SLI's popularity, first in the Yishuv and early State, and then in America. Though many musical forms were present in the ethnically, ideologically, and religiously diverse communities settling the Yishuv, the European secular Zionist institutions wielded significant power. By sponsoring music and dance festivals, facilitating the printing of song sheets, and promoting SLI in the educational system, organizations such as the Histadrut and the State Ministry of Education played a significant role in spreading the music. The music was similarly buoyed in America by the Jewish National Fund and other Zionist organizations. Tova's performance choices were congruous with these organizations' interests. She espoused a deep love for Israel and aroused feelings of Jewish solidarity from her listeners. This proved to be an effective fundraising tool which made Tova an asset for various campaigns such as the sale of Israel Bonds and saving Russian Jewry.

Tova's earliest career aspirations were centered around the Hebrew theater. When she arrived in America, her goal was to further her understanding of dramatics and then return home. As her early letters and journals attest, she first thought of folk singing as a

side-gig to support her theater education. However, Tova's arrival in the founding days of Israel proved to be an auspicious moment for the musical form known as *Shirei Eretz Yisrael*. Tova became in-demand by an audience thirsting for connection to Israel, and an institutional fundraising network for whom advancing Tova's career was mutually beneficial. During that same era, other Israeli cultural ambassadors were finding their niches in which they could transmit the spirit of their homeland to the American Jewish community. Together these performers and interpreters created a cultural bridge that formed a significant basis for the America-Israel relationship that continues—with all its complexities—to this day.

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