THE “UGLINESS” OF JEWISH PRAYER – VOICE QUALITY AS THE EXPRESSION OF IDENTITY[1]

Abstract: This article is based on the musical material and interviews the author collected in Hungary, France, Czechoslovakia, the USA and Israel in the course of thirty years of her fieldwork among the traditional East-Ashkenazi Jews. It relates to the aesthetic concepts of the prayer chant of the Ashkenazi Jews of East Europe (“East –Ashkenazim”) as it appears to have existed before World War II, survived in the oral tradition until the 1970s, and exists sporadically up to the present.

Keywords: Jewish prayer, “East –Ashkenazim“, “Jewishness”, voice quality, aesthetic of the *non-beautiful*, *ba’al tefillah*, *sheliach tzibbur*, *hazzan*, *kavvanah*, *Kedusha*, Avromi Tzvi Erbst, Jenő Róth

Preface

This article relates to the aesthetic concepts of the prayer chant of the Ashkenazi Jews of East Europe (“East –Ashkenazim”) as it appears to have existed before World War II, survived in the oral tradition until the 1970s, and exists sporadically up to the present. The word “Ashkenazi” refers to those Jews whose culture is considered to have crystallized in the Jewish settlements of Medieval Germany (“Ashkenaz” meaning German in Biblical Hebrew), and arrived in Eastern Europe with the migrating Jewish masses. The many dialects of Ashkenazi culture have two main branches: German (of the Jews of Germany and the surrounding German speaking countries) and East European (East Europe meaning primarily the territories east of and including Eastern Poland and Eastern Hungary). In this article, the word “Jewish” will refer to this group.

[1] This article is based on the musical material and interviews I collected in Hungary, France, Czechoslovakia, the USA and Israel in the course of thirty years of fieldwork among the traditional East-Ashkenazi Jews. I would like to thank the Soros Foundation, the CIES/USIA Fulbright for Israel, the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, the Collegium Budapest, Institute for Advanced Study, the Israel Science Foundation, and the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin for their generous support of my research at various stages, as well as Bar Ilan University for granting me leave of absence. This work could not have been written without the help of many devoted *ba’alei tefillah* who allowed me to record them and were generous with their time explaining musical issues. Many of them are no longer alive; may their memory be blessed.

In the prayer chant of these communities, three stylistic levels can be distinguished. Individual prayer normally consists of fast and simple recitative, while the prayer leader—known as the *ba'al* (plural: *ba'alei*) *tefillah*, meaning "master of the prayer" or "one who knows the prayer" or as *sheliach tzibbur*, meaning "the delegate of the congregation"—typically prays in a melodic and somewhat slower style, more "musical" than speech-like. The prayer leader is called a "cantor" (Hebrew: *hazzan)* if he can, in addition to these styles, also perform (and ideally compose/improvise) complex melodic elaborations on the basis of the simple melodies. In certain liturgical functions, the dividing line between the musical styles associated with these roles may be sharp—as, for instance, in some prayers of the High Holidays which are traditionally performed by a professional cantor in a florid style markedly different from the recitative of the individual and that of the singing of the simple prayer leader. However, such a clear distinction cannot be made in most other liturgical situations. Furthermore, in a traditional community every male member is able to function as a prayer leader, and it often happens that members of the community alternate in this role. As a result, the style of the prayer leader varies according to each individual, ranging from simple recitative to almost cantorial performance. In this article, I will deal with the prayer chant of the individual and of the prayer leader (*ba'al tefillah*). Their performances may be described as "chant," "recitation" or "singing". However, as the style of any given performance tends to be unstable, it would be impracticable to assign precise meaning to these words. I will therefore use them interchangeably in the course of this discussion.

The origin of this practice of prayer recitation/chant/singing is unclear but it is certain that by the beginning of the twentieth century, it had been universally accepted among the East Ashkenazim. After the disappearance of traditional Jewish life in Eastern Europe, Ashkenazi culture witnessed a revival in the United States and Israel. Some of the aspects of the old musical culture were preserved while others disappeared entirely. For instance, the current practice of prayer chanting places less emphasis on the individuality of the performance than was common in pre-war practice. In this article I will describe the practice that appears to have characterized Jewish prayer chant before World War II without reffering to the question of which aspects of this tradition survived or became modified in current religious Jewish culture.

A final note should be added on the use of gender. Jewish religion demands that every individual, including women, pray for himself or herself. There are stories of women prayer leaders who supposedly lead the women's congregations in larger synagogues, and there can be no

doubt that many of the women knew the melodies of the prayer chants. Nevertheless, the art of prayer recitation is primarily a male tradition. It would go beyond the scope of the present article to explain in which situations and in what manner, if at all, a given section would be recited by a woman. I will therefore use the word "he" to denote the third person singular and not the presently common "s/he" or "he or she."

"Muddy vesture of decay"

My first informant, a shabby elderly man, was recommended to me by members of the Jewish community as someone who knew "the old prayer melodies". His voice sounded like air blowing though a broken reed; it was whispery, crude and without color. His intonation was slippery and his rhythm imprecise to the point of being incomprehensible. He sang as though he had just recovered his voice after some terrible illness; his melodies were cut through by strange vocal effects that reminded me of coughing, hiccups and whispering. I could not understand how such a person could have been regarded an authentic prayer leader. And yet, it was surely the likes of him who lead the service in the myriads of little poor villages where besides the minimum for survival, "there was nothing, absolutely nothing."

Having recorded the melodies of several *ba'alei tefillah*, I transcribed a sizable repertory of prayers. With the help of the recordings and my transcriptions, I would learn the melody of a prayer and perform it – without text—for some of my informants, asking for their reaction. They were impressed by my singing but did not recognize the prayer, and for the most part, did not even think it was Jewish. "You have a beautiful, crystal-clear voice and this is a nice melody. It is probably from the Church," I was often told. Some thought that I was singing Gregorian chant.

Much has been written about the connection between Jewish and Gregorian chant. In my opinion, with a few notable exceptions, similarities exist only in global aspects of modality and in certain melodic fragments—but this may hold true for virtually any two musical styles. When the totality of the melodic lore is taken into account, East-European Jewish and Gregorian chant seem markedly different. That being said, however, the attitude of my informants made me understand that the marker "Jewish" referred less to the melody than to the performing style. It was never explained to me which aspect of the performance was "Jewish", but it soon became clear which was *not*. I gradually understood that by their comment about my "beautiful, crystal-clear voice", members of the community meant to say that I did not sound Jewish.

Since we lack typology and terminology for performance style and vocal quality, it is not easy to explain in a scholarly manner what characterizes traditional East European Jewish chanting. Nevertheless, I will attempt to list some of its consistently recurring characteristics:

1. Slippery intonation. (Certain notes fluctuate within a melodic/ tonal/modal context. A given pitch may have several "versions", appearing lower or higher at different points of the piece; pitches may also become blurred through glissandi or other effects.)

2. Abrupt changes of rhythmic style. (A typical example: extremely fast recitation and relatively slow syllabic performance alternate abruptly, often without any global plan or relation to the meaning of the text.)

3. Unstable pulsation. (Prayer chant is not metric. Nevertheless, there is an underlying pulse which, is unstable; it could be described as a *rubato* pulsation).

4. An ambiguous relationship between the pulsation and the rhythmic patterns of distinct motives. (Although one can identify both the pulsation and the rhythmic patterns, the patterns do not necessarily fit the pulsation. For instance, one may feel that a motive begins on an upbeat even though this upbeat is not in time relative to the pulsation; the note in question sounds like an upbeat because of accentuation unrelated to the pulse.)

5. The overall voice quality is often coarse.

6. A variety of vocal effects – guttural and hiccup-like sounds as well as effects that imitate types of speech (whispering, weeping, shouting, etc.).

7. Arbitrariness in the application of these vocal effects in performance.

It is impossible to imagine traditional Jewish singing on the basis of the above list without having experienced it. Most of these characteristics (such as "slippery intonation" or "unstable pulsation") may be found in other musical styles as well but it is the particular manner in which these effects are achieved—impossible to describe in words—that creates the impression. Furthermore, Jewish chanting is very individualistic. Each individual has a different voice quality, a unique way of creating vocal effects, a personal take on rhythm and so on. The cohesive force that makes these many chanting styles "Jewish" in the eyes of the community is as difficult to determine as is the "correct" pronunciation of a language. For instance, there are countless American dialects, each with an infinite number of personal versions; nevertheless, a native speaker will instantly be able to distinguish the native accent from the foreign—

even though, objectively speaking, the difference between them may be smaller than between two native dialects.

What is important for this discussion, however, is less a precise circumscription of Jewish singing style—an impossible task in any case—than the source of its aesthetic ideal. There is a grain of truth in the anti-Semitic portrayal of Jewish singing as a "muddy vesture of decay" to use Shakespeare's words from *The Merchant of Venice*.[2] An infamous caricature from 1803 by Thomas Rowlandson[3] assigns the Gentile singer a metered and balanced melody, while the Jew, a hunched and exhausted figure, is represented by a confused flourish with an exaggerated range, displaced arpeggios and disproportionate jumps and trills. This caricature captures what Wagner described as the Jewish singers' "horrendous and ridiculous character" (Grauenhaftigkeit und Lächerlichkeit)" with its "gurgling, whinnying and prattling (Gegurgel, Gejodel und Geplapper)".[4] By the time of the Enlightenment, in the era of assimilation, many from within the Jewish community voiced their criticism of the noisy and chaotic nature of their ritual and the disorganized and unbalanced way of traditional singing. This view led to the reform of synagogal music. However, this was never universally accepted among the European Jews, and was, by and large, rejected among the traditional communities of East Europe. These communities preferred to continue chanting their "muddy vesture of decay."

Clearly, the primary reason for this aesthetic, which we might call the aesthetic of the *non-beautiful*, is the palpable need to accentuate that

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[2] This quotation from Lorenzo's soliloquy does not refer unequivocally to Jews. The verses describe the celestial music of the skies from which the harmony on earth would emanate, but those enclosed in their "muddy vesture of decay" are incapable of perceiving it. Although the line may refer to the human condition in general, there are grounds for a more particular reading that would single out the Jews as a group that is incapable of hearing the heavenly harmonies. Whether or not Shakespeare had Jewish sounds in mind, I find this line uniquely fitting in describing the effect of traditional Jewish chanting. Over several decades of lecturing about Jewish music, I have heard it said more than once that this music is "muddy" and emits a sense of "decay." See William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al., 2nd ed. (Boston, 1974), 5.1.54–65. For an interpretation of this line as referring to Jews see Ruth HaCohen, "Between Noise and Harmony: The Oratorical Moment in the Musical Entanglements of Jews and Christians," *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Winter 2006), 250–277.

[3] Thomas Rowlandson's caricature entitled "Family Quarrels, or The Jew and the Gentile" (1803) has been widely reproduced in articles about Jewish music, among others in Hanoch Avenary, "[Jewish] Music," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: The Macmillan Company, Keter Publishing House Ltd., 1971).

[4] Richard Wagner, "Das Judentum in der Musik (1850)", quotation and translation in HaCohen, "Between Noise and Harmony", 258.

prayer is not an art. Prayer does have a musical dimension, but this should not divert attention from its essence which can be attained only through *kavvanah*. For the sake of this discussion, the word *kavvanah* could be translated as devotion and/or concentration. The demand of *kavvanah* means that the individual should concentrate with all his might and from the heart on the meaning of the words. Yet, significantly, Jewish religious belief holds that *kavvanah* cannot be achieved merely through an inner mental-emotional process. Prayer does not exist without sound. It is not enough for the individual to think of the meaning of the text or meditate on some religious idea in silence; each letter of each word of the prayer must be vocalized, with utmost attention paid to its proper pronunciation.

The rationale for this is completely different from what we associate with the demand of good diction in singing. The issue here is not primarily the comprehensibility of the text. (In the case of private prayer, this would be superfluous, since it is not directed toward an audience but meant to be heard only by God and the person who is praying). Rather, the letters should be pronounced for the sake of the pure joy that their sound evokes. It is believed that the sound of the Hebrew letters has beneficial power on those who pronounce them, on the community, and by extension on mankind at large. In Jewish mystical thought, words are described as having their spiritual roots in heaven. The spiritual power of the word is released when, with the voice of the believer in prayer, the sound of the letters rises up to heaven where they "arouse their spiritual roots."[5] As we read in a Hasidic tractate, "A person needs to uplift the words from below to above, to their root; that [happens], when a person connects and unites [in his recitation] word to word and sound to sound and breath to breath and thought to thought…"[6] One should, therefore, pray in a manner in which each and every letter is audibly and precisely pronounced.

However, since in the Hebrew script only the consonants are written, when pronouncing the text one adds many sounds—the vowels—that do not have their source in writing. While consonants and vowels receive the same emphasis in pronunciation, the sound of traditional prayer chanting nevertheless betrays the fact that the performer has before him a text containing only consonants. One of my informants told me, "I say *kaddish* for my parents every day. I say 'yissggaddal veyy-

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[5] *The Complete Art Scroll Siddur*, Translation commentary by Rabbi Nosson Scherman (New York: Meshora Publications, 1999), XVI.

[6] Dov Baer of Mezhirech (the Maggid), *Or Torah*, 59a, Quoted in Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism. Quietisitc Elements in Eighteenth Century Hasidic Thought*, transl. Jonathan Chipman. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univesity Press), 153.

isskkaddessh sssheme rabbbo…' every day in this manner, with such strong 'g'-s and 'k'-s and 'sh'-s and 'd'-s. The sound of the letters [i.e. of the consonants] is my security."[7]

In the Ashkenazi pronunciation of Hebrew, consonants are strong, sonorous and often guttural, while vowels are gentle, melodious and often pronounced as diphthongs, such as "oy", "ay" and "aiy". Furthermore, Ashkenazi Hebrew has an overall melodious intonation. The stress often falls on the penultimate syllable and phrases tend to be descending. Thus, the emphasis on the consonants creates a rough and "bumpy" performance while the melodious glissandi of the diphthongs are like "mud" that blurs and molds the notes together. This duality in the performance lends a special, sometimes bizarre character to the chanting that impresses us simultaneously as ragged and smooth, harsh and gentle, dry and melodious.

The demand of kavvanah: expressive prayer style (the case of Avrohom Tzvi Erbst)

Kavvanah is usually translated as concentration, meaning that the individual should concentrate *with all his might and heart on the meaning of the words*. Sacred texts characteristically speak of the "understanding of the heart" which is neither an intellectual nor an emotional process but rather a total and lived-through experience of complete involvement in prayer.

The Jewish religion does not demand that *kavvanah* manifest itself in performance. Nevertheless, although in theory it is an inner demand, the community hears and wants to hear concentration in the chanting. The singing of a good prayer leader is expressive; it brings the meaning of the text into focus through various effects. Most religious people, however, would oppose calling this "expression of the text," and with good reason. To say that the text is "expressed" in the music would suggest that certain meanings correspond to certain musical formulae, as, for instance, in the technique of "word painting" of Renaissance vocal music.

The expressivity of Jewish chant is of an altogether different nature. Through many years of practice, the believer internalizes the sound of the text to such a degree that he would be able to pronounce every letter perfectly without any effort. A devout person reads the prayer text as though oblivious to the fact that he is reading at all, while at the same time focusing on the meaning with all his might. It is believed that if a person prays in this manner, devotion and enthusiasm will lead his voice. A

[7] Conversation with Emil Goitein in the 1990s.

person lost in devotion may spontaneously fall out of tune, press suddenly on one note or another, let his voice fade or slip into whisper or speech, produce crude and unrefined sounds that occur accidentally and arbitrarily, forget the pulse, speed up or slow down, and so on. But he should refrain from deliberately displaying his understanding and should remain indifferent as to the outcome. The Besht, who is traditionally regarded to be the founder of Hasidism, is remembered as saying, "when I attach my thought to the Creator, I allow my mouth to speak whatever it wishes".[8]

A good illustration of such an "accidentally expressive" performance is the *Kedusha* section of the *Amidah* (the main prayer) for the *Shabbat Shaharit* (Saturday morning service) by Avrohom Tzvi Erbst (Example 1).[9] The *Kedushah* is the central part of the *Amidah* and is recited in a responsorial manner. The following is a translation of the section of which the parts performed by the *ba'al tefillah* are notated in Example 1:

Ba'al tefillah: "We shall sanctify Your Name in this world, just as they sanctify It in heaven above, as it is written by Your prophet, "And one [angel] will call to another and say:"

Congregation: "Holy, holy, holy is Hashem ["The Name", meaning God] Master of the Legions, the whole world is filled with His glory."

Ba'al tefillah: "Then with a sound of great noise, mighty and powerful, they make heard a voice, and raising themselves toward the Seraphim, those facing them say 'Blessed'…"

Congregation: "Blessed is the glory of Hashem from His place."

Ba'al tefillah: "From your place, our King, appear and reign over us, for we await You."

In Erbst's performance, the first line ("Nekadesh…" – "We shall sanctify…") is rendered with an upward jump of a fifth (C-G) and followed by fast recitation on the fifth (G).[10] The fanfare-like upward jump

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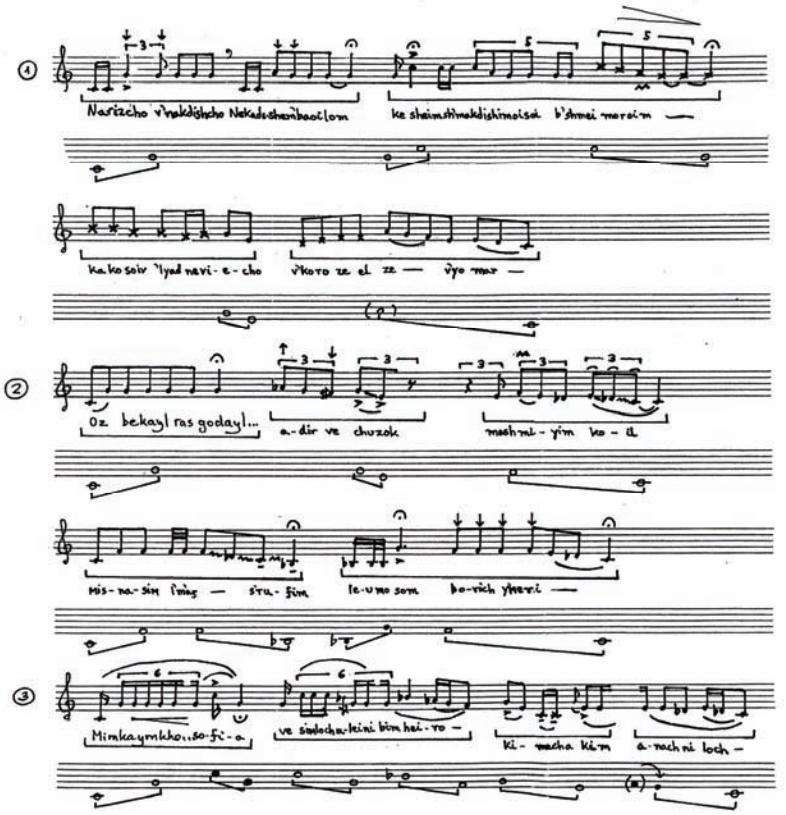
[8] Liqqutei Yeqarimm 2b, Quoted in Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, 184.

[9] Avrohom Tzvi (Hermann) Erbst was one of my main informants representing the traditional recitation style. He served as the *ba'al tefillah* for many congregations, among them those of the Hunyadi tér and the Károlyi Gáspár tér synagogues. This performance was recorded by my colleague and assistant, Dr. Balázs Déri in 1999. I analyze other aspect of this piece and of Erbst's art in my "The Unbearable Lightness of Ethnomusicological Complete Editions: the Style of the *Ba'al tefillah* (prayer leader) in the East European Jewish Service", *Studies in the Sources and the Interpretation of Music. Essays in Honor of László Somfai on His 70th Birthday*, ed. László Vikárius and Vera Lampert (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 7–18.

[10] In this example, the Hebrew text is transcribed to English phonetically, faithfully following Erbst's pronunciation. Note that this transcription does not correspond precisely either to the written Hebrew letters or to their accepted transcription in standard Ashkenazi Hebrew. Note also that the double beginning of the first line occurred

highlights the meaning of the text: it calls on, as it were, the congregation to sanctify the Name of God. In the next phrase, another fanfare-like motive reaching to the high C' emphasizes the word "shem" (in Erbs't pronunciation: "sheim" = Name) while the rest of the words are rushed over in an out-of-tune descending melody.[11]



in order to correct a mistake. Erbst began to recite a different *Kedusha* text that opens with the word "Na'aritzcho…", and then noticed this mistake and corrected the first word to "Nekadesh…". I preserved the double beginning because it is more than a mistake. "Na'aritzcho…" would be the beginning of a version of the Kedusha used in certain Hassidic or very religious communities at this liturgical function, and thus the mistake is meaningful to many in the congregation. As for the musical rendition, only the two beginnings together reflect the excitement and strength with which Erbst begins his *Kedusha*.

[11] It is extremely difficult to render the feel of tempo in notation. The quintuplets in this line, and later the sextuplets in the line "Mimkaymkho sofia…" may be interpreted by the reader of this transcription as calm and florid ornaments and not necessarily as the speeding up of the tempo of recitation. Consider, however, the layout of the text: many syllables are jammed corresponding the notes of these melodic lines and this gives the impression of an overall rushed performance.

While the upward jump may appear to be an effect expressing the meaning of the text, there is no apparent reason for speeding up in the rest of these sentences. Rather than highlighting its meaning, the melodic descent, the fading out of the voice and the slipping out of tonality contradict the meaning of the words "as they sanctify It [God's name] in heaven above."

Some of the same underlying melodic ideas occur in each section. Regardless of the concrete meaning of the text, sections begin typically with a fanfare-like upward gesture followed by fast recitation. In the middle of each section the melody reaches up to the higher register while the ending descends using more or less the same melodic pattern for each line. The intonation is slippery throughout and the melody is ragged displaying an array of strange vocal effects. For instance, on the word "chuzok" (strong, powerful), Erbst presses on the syllables producing a speech-like, harsh sound with glissando. There is an emphatic trill-like figure on the syllable "mi" in the word "mashmiyim" (they make heard…)[12], a change of voice quality on the syllable "kol" (voice), a guttural effect with glissando on the syllable "fim" ("fim") in the word "seraphim" ("s'rufim") and "ri" in "ymeri" (they say), and a strong accent almost like an outcry on the syllable "som" in the word "leumosom" (against them/facing them). Unlike sections 1–2, section 3 is surprisingly "clean". Its performance is smooth and the intonation is relatively clear, although the voice quality remains coarse. In this section Erbst's voice breaks only once, producing an almost weeping effect, on the syllable "kim" in the word "mechakim" (we await…).

It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze those tonal-melodic and rhythmic ideas that make this performance at the same time exciting and magnificently controlled. The performer is completely in command of his emotions and the performance is a superb example of controlled improvisation. There is balance between standard and unexpected elements and the proportions and timing are effective. As for the characteristics of the performance, most of the effects described above appear without any apparent reason and there are only a few that could be interpreted as ways to highlight some meaning embedded in the text. The guttural sound on the word "chuzok" (strong) perhaps highlights the notion of strength by playing out in sound the effort with which the singer pronounces this word. The extremely fast recitation after the fan-

[12] I do not think that this vocal effect occurs here because of the guttural sound with which the letter "ayin" should be pronounced, since Erbst, like most Yiddish speaking Hungarian informants, do not pronounce either "aleph" or "ayin"—sounds which are audible in the North-African dialects of Hebrew.

fare-like jump and the slipping out of tonality at the end of the first line can be seen as an indication of the general state of mind of the performer—his excitement and enthusiasm.

A remarkable idea of this performance is that after the first two parts, which were replete with strange vocal effects, the third section is suddenly "clean." This is the most important moment in the *Kedusha*, for it is here that, after the description of the monumental scene of heavenly voices, the people cry out, asking God to appear and reign over the world. This section brings the prayer back to human dimensions with a text that is close to earth and almost intimate. The weeping-like breaking of Erbst's voice in the sentence "we await You" expresses the desperate longing for the harmony and light emanating from God's.

But could not these "effects" simply be mistakes? This supposition would be plausible, since as we have seen, although some of them might seem connected to the text, others would be difficult to justify on a textual basis.

In a sense, they *are* mistakes. And this is precisely the point: these vocal effects are expressive because they result from the prayer leader's excitement and enthusiasm that spontaneously "destroy" the attempted cleanness of the melodic lines and his would-be "crystal-clear" voice. But there is a logical problem with this explanation which I have often received when confronting my informants with this question. I felt as though there would be an *a priori* consensus that the mistakes of certain prayer leaders are the outcome of their devotion. These mistakes came about because the prayer leader was not paying attention to his voice, the argument went; he was not paying attention because he was immersed in devotion. But what differentiates, objectively speaking, the mistakes that are the outcome of devotion from those resulting from ignorance? Furthermore: what prevents a prayer leader from preparing the "mistakes" beforehand—in which case they would no longer be the result of spontaneous enthusiasm, but aspects of a premeditated composition?

The answers to these questions are not straightforward. In fact, improvisation and spontaneity are not crucial for the truthfulness and effectiveness of the prayer. There are many prayer leaders who prepare the melodies together with their "accidental" expressive mannerisms. Even in the case of those *ba'alei tefillah* who do not compose their prayer completely, dozens of performances of the same service result in a more or less fixed form. This in itself is not a problem as long as the community feels that at the time of prayer, the *ba'al tefillah* is devoted to the text, that he is, as it is often said: "*in the prayer*".

I have met a few prayer leaders who, like Erbst, do not prepare the melodies but sing a different version every time. In Erbst's case, the final form of the prayer is always created on the spot. He is unable to sing the prayer for the sake of a recording in the context of an artificially set-up session. It is only in the synagogue and during the service that he is in the proper state of mind to create a powerful and effective performance. Of course, the general idea of the melody and the global direction of the prayer remains more or less the same, but the micro-effects are improvised. Having heard Erbst pray many times, I observed that he usually sings the *Kedushah* with some of the same effects. For instance, he often rushes through phrases in fast recitation and quite often (though usually not as much as in this example) sings somewhat "off key". Most of the actual solutions, however, are particular to this recording, as for instance, the breaking of his voice on the word "mechakim" (we await).

Historical documents suggest that expressive performance achieved by *specific rhythmic and vocal effects* has been a vital feature of Jewish chant for many centuries. The tradition seems to go back to the Middle Ages, and perhaps even to Antiquity. Zalman of St. Goar, a disciple of the famous rabbi Jacob Levi Moellin, known as the Maharil (c. 1356–1427) left behind a detailed description of the rabbi's singing style.[13] In his tractate, Zalman "notated" with words the Maharil's special performing mannerism for several of his prayers. According to this account, the Maharil used a variety of vocal effects, moving abruptly from one to the other in order to express various emotional states such as mourning and outcry. His voice oscillated between soft and strong, weak and loud, and he used extended melodies to emphasize the importance of certain words.[14] The technique of using a tense-voiced extension of the melody (an elongation of a note or a melisma) in order to highlight certain words appears to be an ancient practice, mentioned already in the Talmud.[15] It is not clear from these accounts to what extent such mannerisms were planned or spontaneously produced.

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[13] R. Jacob Levi Moellin, known as the Maharil (c. 1356–1427) served in the double capacity of rabbi and cantor in various German and Bohemian communities and is credited with the "invention" (which was more likely reform or refinement) of Ashkenazi synagogal music. His dicta on liturgical customs and chants were collected by his disciple, Zalman of St. Goar, and published in 1556 as *Sefer Minhagei Maharil* which contains also Zalman of St. Goar's notes about the Maharil's performance. See Avenary, "[Jewish] Music," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 607.

[14] For instance, Zalman of St. Goar writes: "He used to extend [the tune at] the word 'Thou' very much, obviously concentrating his mind on the faculty of "Thou" known to all the adepts of Mystics." See *ibid*., 607.

[15] For instance in the Berachoth tractate of the Talmud, pages 13b; 61b; 47a; 30a.

Mechanical prayer or transcendence: flowing prayer style (the case of Jenő Róth)

Many regard the Erbst praying style as the perfect realization of *kavvanah* because his prayer is simple and yet passionate. This style does not suit everyone, however. Some find his tempo too fast and his voice ragged and uncontrolled; "all over the place." Once, I played for Erbst six different recordings of the *Amidah* section of the *Minchah* (afternoon service) for Shabbat from my collection. I asked him to choose the performance that reminded him the most of the way people prayed in his village. Without hesitation, he chose the performance of Jenő Róth (Chayim Benjamin Ben Ha-rav Shmuel Rata)[16] and claimed that his way of chanting was the most authentic. Unlike Erbst, Róth recites the prayers mostly without unusual vocal effects. He sings in a fine and clear voice, never out of tune. Although he recites the prayers extremely fast, perhaps even faster than Erbst, he connects the notes with such ease that the overall impression is calm and lulling. The notes flow from his mouth seemingly without effort, as though he were not singing at all but merely letting his voice pour out like a gently flowing river.

I asked Erbst why he thought this performance was the most authentic.

"Because he doesn't do anything that's not essential. In prayer, you should not do anything that's not essential. This is how they sang in my village and in our yeshiva," he answered.

"If this is the traditional way, then why do you pray differently?" I confronted him.

"My way is also traditional. I don't pray in his way because it doesn't suit me. I am a simple man and never had the occasion to learn. It is not difficult to say these words and not difficult to sing these melodies. What is difficult, indeed terribly difficult, is to concentrate on the meaning of each word. You need to pray for many years in order to be able to do both at once—sing the text properly and concentrate on the meaning. If you are able to do this, if you don't just sing but understand the meaning of the words with your full heart, then people will hear this from your singing. But there is an even higher level. It's when you concentrate on the words with all your might but nobody hears your concentration. It's when you sing…you just sing…simply. But in order to do that you have to study for many years, I mean, study Jewish matters, like the Torah and the Talmud. Today very few people can pray the way Róth did."[17]

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[16] I recorded the complete Shabbat liturgy of Jenő Róth (Hebrew name: Chayim Benjamin Ben Ha-rav Shmuel Rata) between 1977 and 1980 in Budapest.

[17] This text is a compilation of several conversations I had with Erbst in the 1990s. Torah is the name for the Hebrew original which the Christian tradition calls the five books of Moses. The Talmud is a collection of tractates compiled in the course of

When I discussed Erbst's and Róth's styles with *ba'alei tefillah* in Hungary and later in the USA and Israel, a variety of explanations were offered for the difference between them. Some, like Erbst himself, associated the difference with the level of learning, while others suggested that they might reflect different local traditions. Several *ba'alei tefillah* associated variously Erbst's or Róth's style with that of "some small village", while there were others who held Róth's singing to be somehow Hassidic.

It is impossible to substantiate any of the above suppositions.[18] Erbst was born in a small village in an impoverished territory of Austro-Hungary. He acquired the art of the *ba'al tefillah* during the 1950s in Budapest, where he settled after the war, in a small prayer-house where Jews from various regions gathered and taught one another. In those years, Erbst encountered the world of concerts and opera and became an enthusiastic music lover. Classical music is still "one of the most important things" in his life.

Róth was also born in a small village, but went to study at a famous Hassidic yeshiva while still a child. After a few years in the yeshiva, he embarked on the study of *hazzanut* (the art of the *hazzan*, or professional cantor). He became a *hazzan* after the war and was also a highly-respected *ba'al koreh* (master of Torah cantillation). Róth was able to pray in a variety of styles including the simplest prayer recitation—which he described as "the sephardi way, as they did it in our village", the prayer singing which he called "the Hassidic way", and the modern cantorial style ("as the Ashkenazim do it; that is, the modern people here in Budapest").[19]

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several centuries since late Antiquity, containing transcriptions of rabbinical discussions relating to the oral laws of the Jewish religion. The Talmud forms the basis of Jewish learning.

[18] Although Jewish singing has been recorded since the beginning of the twentieth century, documentary recordings that would guide us in questions of vocal quality are virtually non-existent. Most recordings from before WWII were preserved either on phonograph cylinders (ethnographic recordings) or on commercial discs. The commercial production focused on what seemed feasible to sell, which meant artistic performances of widely acclaimed cantors. Since every religious Jew was familiar with the ways of the simple prayer—most being able to function as prayer leaders—it was not commercially viable to record this kind of chanting. But mostly the same was true for ethnographic recordings. Since the phonograph cylinder was expensive and could hold only a few minutes of music, ethnographers wanted to preserve a fragment of something unusual. Recording of commonplace recitation and recording of complete services were out of the question. As a result, the documentary recordings we have today are both sporadic and generally unrepresentative of the art of the prayer leader: a few fragments from arbitrarily selected locations from Eastern Europe and somewhat more extensive (although by no means sufficient) recordings from after the war—mostly from Israel.

[19] By "Sephardi way", Róth did not mean the tradition of the Spanish Jews but that of the Hassidic sects and their followers who used the Sephardic version of the prayer

There can be no doubt that Erbst's and Róth's recitation styles reflect their life experiences, the most decisive of which were probably those of their early childhood.[20] Nevertheless, it would be difficult to claim that their singing represents the tradition of a specific region or religious group. By the time our recordings were made—with Róth in the 1970s and with Erbst in the 1980–90s – they had internalized a variety of styles. Like most of my other informants, they did not consider the regional origin of the melodies significant.

It seems that the performing styles of simple recitation were, by and large, the same throughout the East-Ashkenazi regions, except for a few specific mannerisms associated with certain Hassidic groups. Erbst who was brought up in a remote village in Carpathia recognized the style of his village in the performance of Róth whose childhood was spent in a village of the Great Plains in Hungary. The fact that the same *performance types* recur all over Eastern Europe is remarkable, considering the vast geographical territory on which Jewish prayer chant was practiced. We have to keep in mind, nevertheless, that there are countless personal variations within each type. The following explanation, which I often heard and which puzzled me at first, is illustrative of this attitude: "You want to know where this melody is from? Well, it's my personal version. But this is the authentic way—it's the same all over the Ashkenazi world." This means that people attach great importance to the fact that their style of performance is markedly individual, at the same time recognizing that the highly personal styles of their own and of other belong to a few basic performing types.

But if the individual has such great freedom in creating his own style, then what is the reason for fundamentally different performing types? How is it possible that both the ragged performance of Erbst and the smooth chanting of Róth are regarded as typical and authentic?

I believe that the origin for these extreme contrasts in the performing types of simple recitation lies in the contradiction that is embedded in the idea of prayer. In order to understand this built-in contradiction, it is necessary to explain some basic aspects of traditional religious life. The center of the Jewish religion is study; that is, the reading, learning, discussion and contemplation of the sacred texts, especially the Torah and

book. Róth's "Sephardi"-style performance is the one described in this article: a simple though animated lulling flow of recitation. Róth's "Hassidic way" of singing was similar to his "Sephardi" recitation but contained a few additional melodic and vocal elements. The "Ashkenazi" or "modern" way meant the cantorial art of what may be called the conservative branch of Judaism.

[20] See my "The unbearable lightness of ethnomusicological complete editions".

the Talmud. In the Jewish tradition, however, learning does not translate into the acquiring of knowledge for a purpose. The sacred texts are so long and complex, that no matter how much one studies them, one will never control them completely. Learning should be done for the sake of learning alone and the emphasis is always on the *process*. Consequently, a religious Jew reads an enormous amount of text each day. Even if he spends little time with study *per se*, he gains religious instruction from the prayers read during the obligatory daily services, amounting to several hundreds of pages of Hebrew text. Prayer is also a form of study. As large sections of the same prayers recur in each service, the believer reads a monumental body of identical texts aloud day after day.

For a practicing Jew, prayer becomes something like a virtuoso art: reading lengthy texts out loud, extremely fast and without mistakes is about as difficult as playing a virtuoso musical piece. And as in the case of virtuoso musical performance, the performances of the prayer often become mechanical.

There is thus a contradiction between the demand of reading (i.e. fast reading of long texts with perfect pronunciation) and that of *kavannah* (understanding/concentration/devotion). Except for a few rare, inspired moments, it is virtually impossible to live up to both demands for the full length of the ritual. The rushed weekday morning services, for example, are hardly the ideal context for spiritual devotion. This problem has been recognized and discussed since Talmudic times and the solution to it has never been simple.[21] But similarly to the case of learning, the essence of prayer lies in the *process*. The believer "lives" with the prayer texts, so to speak; he prays differently each day, sometimes mechanically and sometimes with devotion. Religion does not encourage automatic prayer, but accepts it as part of the reality of everyday life. It is considered important that one read the prayers even if he feels unready to concentrate on the meaning of the text—for there is always a possibility that hearing his own voice saying the words will inflame his heart. And even if this does not happen, his mechanical prayer today may prepare him for concentration tomorrow.

Erbst told me once: "Last night I could not sleep. I turned on the light and opened the radio. A piece by Mozart was playing. I opened the Book of Psalms and began to read it with Mozart in the background. My mind was not there but I read them through anyway—all the 150 psalms. Then I went back to sleep. But when I woke the next morning, I had the

[21] I explain the consequences of these considerations for the musical practice in my "Orality as Religious Ideal: The Music of East-European Jewish Prayer", *Yuval* 7 – *Studies in Honor of Israel Adler* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), 113–153.

feeling that this was not quite right, that I had read the psalms without paying attention to them, with the music on. So I decided to read them again with *kavvanah*. And believe it or not, I did it. Early in the morning before my family got up, I read them again and my mind was clear and I paid attention to the words from beginning to end."

The daily practice of reading on the one hand and the demand of *kavvanah* on the other are forces that pull the performing style of the prayer in different directions. The endless repetition of the text results in a smooth, indifferent and dull murmur, while devotion breaks this uniformity, creating expressive moments in the performance.

Expressivity alone is not enough to make a chant sound "Jewish." The prayer of a good *ba'al teffilah* should reflect the whole of his way of life, which in the case of a religious Jew means the daily practice of prayer reading. It may sound paradoxical, but the congregation expects to hear not only *kavvanah* in the singing of the prayer leader, but also traces of his endless daily mechanical prayers.

The highest level of prayer is when one's devotion does not manifest itself in the superficial aspects of the performance. Rather, veiled by smooth performance, so to speak, it "glows as if from within." Although such a "flowing prayer" may seem unemotional and mechanical to the outsider, it is often the result of an ecstatic state of mind that is, however, completely controlled. A Hassidic text describes this state of mind with the following words: "…thus in prayer he is able to engage in the service of God, so that his service is not visible to people at all. He makes no motion whatsoever of his limbs, but only within his inward soul it is burning in his heart, and he will cry out in silence because of his excitement…"[22] Another source teaches: "At times, when a person is attached to the supernatural world, to the Creator, blessed be He, he must guard himself not to perform any motion, even in his body, so as not to nullify his attachment."

Similarly to the case of expressive prayer, one is left with the question of how to distinguish between a recitation which is uneventful due to boredom and one in which the monotony results from a transcendental state of mind. In prayer, as in a musical performance, there is no simple criterion by which the "truthfulness" of a performance could be objectively defined. Yet the initiated feel the difference; there is something in the voice quality—in the breathing, the tempo, the minuscule melodic turns—that betrays the attitude of the performer.

[22] Dov Baer of Mezhirech (the Maggid), *Liqqutei Yeqarim*, 14.a and 1d., quoted in Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, 185.

Afterword

The style of traditional Jewish prayer cannot be simulated. One may think it possible to learn "to sound Jewish" simply by imitating the mannerisms of a certain performance. But there are no shortcuts here. Unless a person has recited the prayers daily, acquiring, through several thousand readings of the same words and over many years, a technique of fast recitation, he will stand out immediately as not "Jewish" – regardless of how closely he reproduces the typical "muddy" Jewish mannerism and even how truly devoted he is to the prayer.

Clearly, ugly voice *per se* is not the prerequisite for sounding "Jewish". On the contrary, there are ample historical documents that single out the beauty of the voice as one of the most important aspects of effective prayer. For instance, it is told of Elijah ben Solomon, known as the Gaon of Vilna, that "he stood to pray word by word, with pleasant sounds and a subtle melody. Whoever heard him…melted like wax before the flame of his concentration. For he concentrated on every single word of the service and produced each sound and utterance with a pleasant tune and with power."[23] People came from far away to be inspired by the experience of just being close to him when he prayed. "They gazed in wonder at how a person could reach such a level of love of God." It appears from this account that pleasing musical performance ("pleasantness of sound"), musical sophistication ("subtle melody"), deep and immediate emotional effect ("melted like wax") and *kavvanah* ("concentration") act together and are all part and parcel of the prayer.

How, then, should one define the "Jewish element" in the performance of Jewish prayer chant?

The answer to this question is complex. Prayer is a multifaceted phenomenon and each of its "essences" calls for a different attitude, which in turn may manifest itself in different manners of execution. Prayer is service to God, a ritual—something to be performed even when one is indisposed. Prayer is a personal outcry expressing the individual's secret desires and fears. Prayer is "the service of the heart"—the believer's devotion for and concentration on the spiritual meaning of the words. And finally, prayer is the yearning for the infinite.

Thus, in the Jewish tradition, prayer allows the believer to occupy himself with a body of textual material, to be educated and moved by it, be bored with its repetition, and perhaps ultimately inspired to reach out toward the "world beyond". The performance tradition of prayer is as

[23] This and the next quote are from Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 37.

diverse as prayer itself is many-sided; of the many types, this article presented only two. To speak of performance types, however, is not entirely appropriate; it would be better to say that the above examples realized, in a unique manner, two of the many potential directions of prayer. The concrete realizations were personal; we would not hear Erbst's or Róth's chanting style in quite the same way from others, even though some of the tendencies observed in their performances are typical. The "Jewishness" of Jewish recitation has to do not so much with concrete musical aspects as with certain underlying tendencies in the practice of and attitude toward prayer.

The East European Jews lacked the cultural space necessary for the development of a purely artistic mode of expression with a refined technique and professional performing tradition similar to the grounded art traditions of some other religious chants, such as the Gregorian or Coptic. In the East European Jewish milieu, the prayer was relegated—or perhaps raised—to the domain of the everyday and the everyman. As such, it behaved much like a spoken language that emerges from a basic sense of grammar and pronunciation, which, however, manifests itself in real life in an array of seemingly arbitrary and haphazard characteristics.

Јудит Фриђеши

„РУЖНОЋА" ЈЕВРЕЈСКЕ МОЛИТВЕ – КВАЛИТЕТ ГЛАСА КАО ИЗРАЗ ИДЕНТИТЕТА

(Резиме)

У студији се разматрају естетски концепти молитвеног певања Ашкенази Јевреја из источне Европе, који су у усменој традицији постојали све до седамдесетих година 20. века, а који су спорадично опстали све до данас. Акценат је стављен на певачку праксу пре Другог светског рата.

У певању поменуте јеврејске заједнице разликују се три стилска нивоа: лична молитва, коју одликује брз и једноставан речитатив; предводник у молитви или представник заједнице, познатији као *ба'ал тефилах* (*ba'al tefillah*) или као *шелиах цибур* (*scheliach tzibbur*), обично упражњава мелодичан и успорен певачки манир који мање подсећа на говор а више на певање; најзад, вођа у молитви – кантор (*hazzan*), уз наведене начине примењује и умногоме комплексније мелодијске разраде једноставних напева.

Линија која раздваја ове музичке стилове и дате појачке улоге, у зависности од обредне радње, може бити наглашена. Дистинкција у односу на упрошћени мелодијско-ритмички речитатив долази посебно до изражаја при молитвама за веће празнике које изводе професионални појци певајући врло украшене мелодије. Важно је нагласити и то да у традиционалним јеврејским заједницама сваки мушки члан може бити предводник у молит-

ви; штавише, често се дешава да ту улогу сви периодично понове. Резултат овакве праксе јесте мноштво појачких манира, будући да сваки појединац уноси у интерпретацију нешто посве лично. У студији се, дакле, разматрају начини извођења који се могу означити као „појање“, „рецитовање“ или „певање“.

У фокусу пажње су, такође, особености и аспекти „јеврејског“ интерпретативног модела; прецизније речено, не оно што оне јесу, с обзиром на то да је дијапазон варијантних елемената готово непрегледан, него више шта оне нису или какве не треба да буду. Неке од главних карактеристика појачког манира Ашкенази Јевреја јесу следеће: несигурна интонација, изненадне промене у ритмичком стилу, нестабилна метрика, доминанти гласовни квалитет који се одређује као сиров – неиспрофилисан, затим посве произвољно примењивање разноврсних гласовних ефеката (грлени звуци и они који подсећају на штуцање, имитација звиждања, викање итд.).

С обзиром на то да је јеврејско појање крајње индивидуално, сваки појац има слободу да искористи сопствене вокалне квалитете и особене начине примене вокалних ефеката. Но, важније од трагања за одговором на питање који је појачки стил исправан, или описивања какви они могу бити, јесте питање извора естетског идеала појачких манира Ашкенази Јевреја. Примарно оправдање за естетику јеврејског појања, или тачније, антиестетику – естетику ружног, треба видети у аксиому да молитва није уметност. Молитва има музичку димензију, али она не сме да одвлачи пажњу са суштине која се достиже једино кроз тзв. *кованах* (*kavvanah*) – посвећеност и/или концентрацију. Пратећи интерпретације познатих јеврејских појаца, ауторка расветљава захтеве које *кованах* поставља, као и различите начине које у задовољењу истих одабрани појци спроводе.

(Резиме сачинила Весна Пено)

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