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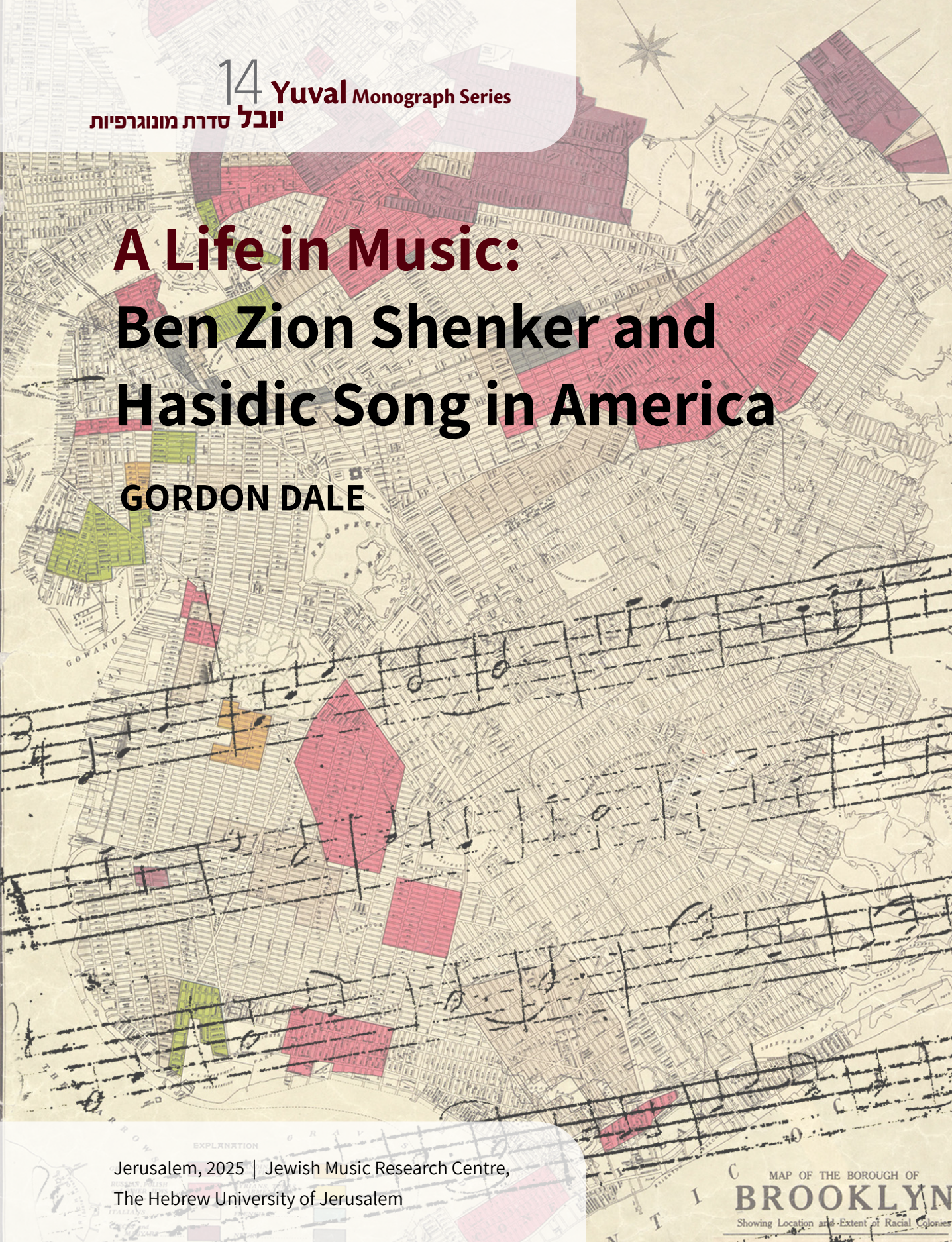
A Life in Music:
Ben Zion Shenker and Hasidic Song in America

GORDON DALE



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Editors: Michael Lukin and Edwin Seroussi

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The Hebrew University of Jerusalem ● Faculty of Humanities
Jewish Music Research Centre

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On the cover: Ben Zion Shenker's original manuscript of "Mizmoyr Ledovid," courtesy of Velvel and Aidel Newmark; "Map of the Borough of Brooklyn Showing Location and Extent of Racial Colonies," Created by the Ohman Map Co., Inc. 1920. (Pink highlighting indicates "Russian, Polish, and Other Jews"). From the New York Public Library. digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/5c726c30-846a-013b-5b09-0242ac110006.

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TRANSLITERATION

In this study, the editors and I have devoted special attention to the issue of transliteration. Speech patterns within the American Haredi community are characterized by the rapid combination of multiple languages, primarily English, Hebrew, Yiddish, and Aramaic. After much discussion, we decided that it was important to both represent the Ashkenazi pronunciation of Shenker and his community when presenting their own speech, as well as to conform to academic conventions in the transliteration of Hebrew and Yiddish terms. As such, the following transliteration system has been used within this monograph:

In the body of the text, I use Encyclopaedia Judaica's General Hebrew Transliteration guide. This system represents a contemporary Israeli Hebrew speech pattern and is commonly used in academic texts. Following other scholarly works, I modify the Encyclopaedia Judaica convention by transliterating the Hebrew letter "צ" as tz, rather than ẓ.

Examples: *Sheli'aḥ tzibbur, Shulḥan Arukh*

Secondly, in quotations and song titles, I seek to maintain an Ashkenazi pronunciation of Hebrew words. While there are numerous Ashkenazi pronunciations (and even much variation within the Hasidic community), at the recommendation of Cantor Prof. Eliyahu Schleifer, I have used an Eastern Ashkenazi system that represents Ben Zion Shenker's general pronunciation in the contexts of both speech and song. This pronunciation is most common to Lithuania, Northern Poland, and Northern Russia. Like many, Shenker's speech patterns were fluid and would borrow from various pronunciation styles, reflecting his contact with Jews whose speech in rooted in different regions

in Europe. Nonetheless, this transliteration style honors his primary way of vocalizing sacred Hebrew texts, which form the basis of his compositions.

Examples: *Khinukh, "Mizmoyr Ledovid," "Eyshes Khayil"*

Third, Yiddish terms and phrases are rendered according to the YIVO system, which is widely considered the standard for academic writing. While the YIVO system differs from contemporary Hasidic speech in several ways, it does provide a consistent set of principles that help to create uniformity across this work. In quotations, there is often ambiguity as to whether certain words should be presented as belonging to the Yiddish or Hebrew language. In such cases, I present them according to the Eastern Ashkenazi Hebrew system described above. Additionally, when quoting from an interview, I maintain the pronunciation of Yiddish terms that interlocutors conjugated according to English or Hebrew conventions.

Examples: *tsugepast, yidn, taytshed*

Hebrew and Yiddish words that have made their way into English and have a commonly accepted English spelling have been presented according to the English convention. These terms appear in dictionaries such as the Oxford English Dictionary and Merriam-Webster. Similarly, organizations (such as Hasidic sects, schools, and synagogues) and monikers that have Hebrew names and use an English spelling with a high degree of consistency will be spelled according to their convention.

Examples: Hasidic, Hashem, Shabbos, Chabad, Divrei Yisroel

Jewish holiday names are transliterated according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary.

Examples: Rosh Hashanah, Sukkoth

To facilitate readability, transliterations within quotations of published sources have been adjusted to conform to the above transliteration system.

At times, consistency in this transliteration policy results in differing spellings of a phrase appearing adjacent to one another. For example, when quoting a scholarly source on Proverbs 31:10 within the Sabbath home liturgy, I retain the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* spelling (*Eshet Ḥayil*). Yet when discussing Shenker's setting of this biblical text and quoting interviews with him, I use the Ashkenazi transliteration system described above (*Eyshes Khayil*). Such differences are intentional and reflect the dual values of representing Shenker's pronunciation of Hebrew while following the standards of contemporary scholarship.

The first appearances of non-English words are italicized.

FOREWORD

According to the Biblical account (II Kings 3: 15), the prophet Elisha summoned a musician to induce a prophetic state: "'And now bring me a minstrel.' And it came to pass that when the mistrel played [*kenagen hamenagen*], that the hand of the LORD was upon him."

The disciples of Rabbi Israel *Baal Shem Tov*, the founder of Hasidism, relate that he expounded upon this verse to teach about the ideal of sacred musical performance (Buber 1965: 73-74, Sears 1997: 90). The Baal Shem Tov taught:

> A deft player has various interests when playing, and boasts of his skill. Not so the instrument he plays on: it is silent and has no other interests. And this is the meaning of "and when the minstrel played" (II Kings 3: 15)—if the minstrel can play without any other interest, just like the instrument, the power of the Lord will come upon him.[1]

Thus, a musician who becomes like an instrument [kenagen hamenagen], devoid of self-interest, will be truly effective, and the hand of God will descend upon him. Such a musician may enter into a state of religious ecstasy, or even help others to experience prophecy (Ginsburgh 2015). The archetype of the selfless musician appears in many sacred music traditions, but it has particular weight in Hasidic Judaism, which accords the goal of *devekut*—cleaving to God—a central status in daily life. Musicians who display purity of intent hold a special place within this society; their music becomes a vehicle for broader spiritual pursuits.

In the context of contemporary Hasidic life, Rabbi Ben Zion Shenker is often understood to embody the image of the ideal musician, placing him in a position of prominence within his community. Viewed from a different angle, Shenker's popularity and framing as a model musician can be understood as a complex

1. Translation found in Schwartz 2022: 81.

interweaving of the circumstances of his life in Brooklyn, New York during a pivotal moment in Jewish history, his efforts in preserving the European Hasidic music tradition, his compositional skill, and his groundbreaking work toward the development of an Orthodox Jewish recorded music industry that created new venues for the circulation of this music. As "musical secretary" to the Modzitzer Rebbe, Shenker absorbed and preserved the venerated repertoire of this Hasidic dynasty rooted in Europe. He went on to transmit and expand this musical style through his own nigunim, which he distributed in unprecedented ways. Thus, Shenker was composing continuity as he shaped the Hasidic music culture of America and contributed original pieces by drawing on the European repertoire of Modzitz Hasidism and beyond, of the pan-Hasidic musical koine.

In this monograph, I tell the story of Rabbi Shenker's life through an ethnomusicological lens. Thus, in addition to engaging with Shenker's musical output, I also examine the broader context in which the composer lived and worked, and the ways in which he and others understood his music. Of course, Shenker's original compositions are a central component of his legacy. I am pleased to be publishing this biography alongside a comprehensive collection of Shenker's nigunim. This additional volume, published with the permission and encouragement of his family, includes over 450 pieces of music that Shenker himself organized in a series of binders.[2] Taken together, the two volumes offer a broad view of the world of a foremost composer and performer of Hasidic music in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

I feel enormous gratitude to those who contributed to the publication of this work. While the sheer number of such individuals makes it impossible to name them all, I wish to mention some who were particularly helpful in bringing these two volumes to light. Firstly, I thank Rabbi Ben Zion Shenker himself. For four years, Shenker and I spoke almost daily. My teacher in the world of nigunim, Shenker

2 See there for a more comprehensive explanation of the collection's contents.

extended tremendous kindness to me. I am grateful to Rabbi Shenker's family for entrusting me with the task of telling his story and overseeing the publication of his works. Thank you to his three children—Mrs. Esther Reifman, Mrs. Aidel Newmark, and Mrs. Brocha Weinberger—who generously shared insights and recollections of their father, animating the book. I am especially grateful to Velvel Newmark, my partner in the production of this book. His delightful nature, willingness to help, and patience have been immeasurable assets. I wish to thank the members of Congregation Imrei Shaul Modzitz, the Brooklyn synagogue in which Shenker prayed daily. During the eight years that I attended the synagogue and came to musical gatherings, these individuals became true friends. I wish specifically to mention Binyomin Ehrenkranz, Gabriel Greenberg, Yehuda Nathan, Avrum Kopel, Dovid Sears, Abie Spivak, Andy Statman, Shalom Tabi, Eliezer Zimmet, Zechariah Zimmet, and Zev Zylberberg. I extend special thanks to Gabriel Greenberg and Yehuda Nathan for offering important corrections to drafts of this book. Thank you to Rabbi Dov Stein, who permitted me to include his speech, which is found in this book. In addition, I am very grateful to the leaders of the regular Modzitz kumzits gatherings, Rabbis Aaron Orlander and Dovid Bick, and the talented accompanist for these events, Dov Lenchevsky. Thank you to Rabbi Yidel Feldman, whose deep knowledge of Shenker's nigunim has been an invaluable asset to this project. I am also indebted to Rabbi Meir Fund, who initially invited me to attend these events. These individuals taught me so much about the Modzitz musical repertoire, and Shenker's place within it.

I have also benefitted from the opportunity to share ideas with a wonderful network of scholars. I thank Professors Stephen Blum, Samuel Heilman, Tina Frühauf, Peter Manuel, Jeffrey Summit, and Jane Sugarman for their teaching and scholarship. The lessons I learned from you fill every page of this volume. I wish also to thank my colleagues at The Jewish Music Forum, Michael Leavitt and Samantha Cooper, who provided me with opportunities to interact with those at the cutting edge of Jewish music research. I have had the great fortune to be part of a network of Jewish music scholars with whom I consulted at various stages of

this project and whose work inspires me. Thank you to Rachel Adelstein, Joseph Alpar, Judah Cohen, Rebecca Cypess, Zev Feldman, Jeremiah Lockwood, Evan Rapport, Jessica Roda, Amanda Ruppenthal Stein, Samuel Torjman Thomas, and Tzipora Weinberg. You have all been vital sounding boards throughout my work on this book. A special thank you to Hankus Netsky, who generously provided me with a transcript of an oral history interview that he conducted with Shenker, as well as a transcription that appears in this volume. I wish to thank especially Mark Kligman, who has offered invaluable support at every stage of my career, particularly during the gestation of the present work. Thank you also to Rabbi Yosef Kaplan and Rabbi Shaul Seidler-Feller for their assistance with the Yiddish translation found in this volume.

I am grateful for the academic home provided by the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, where I have had the fortune of being surrounded by a team of highly talented scholars and musicians. In particular, I offer thanks to Jill Abramson, David Adelson, Dana Anesi, Merri Arian, Sarah Benor, A.J. Berkovitz, Josh Breitzer, Richard Cohn, Kim Geringer, Lisa Grant, Alyssa Gray, Josh Holo, Jason Kalman, Sharon Koren, Eli Lieberman, Andrew Rehfeld, Joyce Rosenzweig, Richard Sarason, Benjie Ellen Schiller, Joseph Skloot, Andrea Weiss, Maggie Moers Wenig, and Wendy Zierler. In addition, I thank the students with whom I have been privileged to share a classroom and from whom I have learned. Two of these students deserve special mention: Justin Callis and Marc Szechter have been reliable and careful research assistants. Without their help, I likely would not have been able to accomplish the many tasks related to the notation collection for the book.

I am deeply grateful to The Jewish Music Research Centre for publishing this work. Thank you to the two editors of this volume, Michael Lukin and Edwin Seroussi. Edwin Seroussi, an ethnomusicologist of the highest caliber, has overseen the production of these volumes and offered invaluable editorial suggestions at every stage. Michael Lukin, a leading scholar in all aspects of Hasidic music, has

been a tremendous asset to both this biography and the production of Shenker's sheet music, offering prompt and thorough support. They have been careful and thoughtful editors, and I am very thankful for all their efforts. I am also grateful to the JMRC's Director, Yoel Greenberg who has been very supportive of this project, and to Sara Tropper for her close eye and careful copy-editing. Thank you all so very much for investing your time, energy, and expertise in this work.

I wish to thank the institutions that supported the research that went into this work, particularly The Milken Center for Music of American Jewish Experience, The American Society for Jewish Music, and The Association for Jewish Studies.

Finally, I owe a tremendous debt of thanks to my family. I am forever grateful to my parents, Marilyn and William, and my brother and sister-in-law, Seth and Gabi, for all of the support that you have shown, both in recent years and throughout my life. I thank my wonderful children Henny, Eli, and Tehila, who sing Shenker's nigunim in our home, bringing them to life. You are a constant source of joy. Finally, I thank my loving wife, Rachel, for your endless support and kindness. I could not have written this book without you.

INTRODUCTION

On a pleasantly warm evening in October 2016, Rabbi Ben Zion Shenker sat at the head of a table in Brooklyn, New York, and greeted the assembled crowd in Yiddish, "*A gutn moed, yidn"* [A good holiday, Jews]. Approximately one hundred men and boys, most of whom were Hasidim, had gathered inside a sukkah, a temporary dwelling constructed annually for the holiday of Sukkoth. Even this relatively large sukkah was bursting at the seams from the crowd packed inside to participate in this annual evening of communal singing. Shenker began by teaching a jubilant *nigun* (*nign* in Yiddish; pl. *nigunim*; lit. "melody" but more broadly a Hasidic musical work, see below) from his newly released album, "*Shiru LaShem Shir Ḥadash*" (Sing to the LORD a New Song; Psalm 96). The ninety-one-year-old Shenker was indeed singing new songs to God and leading others in these songs of praise and religious fervor. Though this first piece was a rather short composition, the crowd continued to sing it in a loop for eight full minutes, each rendition reverberating with increased enthusiasm and joy.

As the night progressed, Shenker treated the crowd to other new compositions, as well as older melodies from the rabbinic leaders of his community, the Modzitz Hasidic dynasty. He told stories of how his pieces were created, such as the melody for "*Betseys Yisroeyl*" (Psalm 114, "When Israel [left Egypt]"), which he had composed in southern Israel more than fifty years earlier. Two of Shenker's great-grandchildren joined him, singing his lullaby-like composition for "*Hamalokh HaGoyeyl*" (Gen. 48: 16, "The angel who has redeemed") and the liturgical text "*Lekhu Vonim*" (Psalm 34: 12, "Come, children").

This latter piece was particularly striking, as the text speaks directly of transmission: "Come, you children, listen to me. I will teach you the fear of the LORD." Watching this ninety-one-year-old musician singing his own setting of

this text with his great-grandchildren was poignant and uplifting. The meaning of this moment, though, extended further: Shenker was teaching the gathering to live in awe of God and to express religious enthusiasm through song. As Shenker introduced these new melodies, his singing was an act of musical transmission, actualizing the religious values of Hasidism through music.

Shenker had been leading events of this kind for decades. However, this one would resonate in particular: Shenker passed away just one month later, making this his final public appearance. This Sukkoth program encapsulated some of the most important features of his life. Shenker was an integral figure in the preservation of Hasidic music after World War II, recorded the first-ever album of a Hasidic dynasty's repertoire, and served as the "musical secretary" (in his own words) to Rabbi Shaul Yedidya Elazar Taub, the second Modzitzer Rebbe, who was a prolific composer of nigunim. Shenker drew inspiration from the canon that he learned from the Rebbe to build his own musical repertoire of over four hundred nigunim. His place in the history of post-war Hasidic music is remarkable, and, in this final performance, he fittingly sang with his great-grandchildren a song focused on transmitting the knowledge he had acquired over the course of his life.

The life of Ben Zion Shenker (1925–2016) offers a window onto an important period of Jewish history. His music was shaped by the momentous events through which he lived and created many of the networks through which it was disseminated. For nearly a century after World War I, Shenker lived in Brooklyn and watched the Hasidic population transform into the vibrant community it is today. The role of the nigun in this community is illuminated by focusing on the work of one of its most respected creators and performers. The monograph, which serves as a companion to the first published edition of the complete collection of nigunim that Shenker composed, presents Shenker's biography and seeks to understand it in its historical, social, and musical contexts.

THE NIGUN

The term "nigun" refers to a musical work from the Hasidic repertoire that is viewed as sacred. This nomenclature is a bit slippery; indeed, the term "nigun" can simply refer to a melody, such as that of a folk song or a sacred chant, but most often refers to a specific musical category. Nigunim are most often performed as vocal works (though instrumental performances are not uncommon), and while harmonic accompaniment is sometimes added, the melody is considered the core of the piece. This focus on melody is partially linked to the contexts in which nigunim are sung, such as in prayer (which is nearly always a cappella in Hasidic and all Orthodox Jewish worship); around the Grand Rabbi's *tish* (a Hasidic gathering with singing and *Torah* teachings); or at home during Sabbath or holiday meals. Hasidic writings also emphasize the metaphysical importance of these melodies, with different Hasidic leaders offering their own explanations of the unique potential of melody to connect the human and the divine. Melody also takes priority over text. While some nigunim have a fixed text, many are either sung with vocables or are adapted to liturgical or paraliturgical text as contrafacts.

Many nigunim consist of two or three musical sections, each of which is repeated twice. Oftentimes, the first ending does not resolve to the tonic, indicating a return to the beginning of the section, while the second does resolve to a musical resting point (Mazor, Bayer, and Hajdu 1974). At the conclusion of the final section, the performers may choose to return to the beginning of the piece, and this cycle of repetition, a hallmark of nigun performance, continues as long as the singers desire. While this is the norm for many nigunim, other pieces, particularly the longer and more intricate ones that are akin to a suite of musical sections, have a clear ending. Shenker composed nigunim in both the simpler and more suite-like genres.

Nigunim may best be thought of as a discourse, rather than a bounded repertoire. As this study aims to show, in connecting the performer and the listener to the divine, nigunim are sacred artifacts in Hasidic life. According to Velvel Newmark, "[Shenker's] nigunim were his way of talking to God." While nigunim share a number of structural features, they are bound together by an association with holiness. This is in contrast with other repertoires of Hasidic life, such as Yiddish folk songs, popular music, and the music of host cultures. Thus, the identification of a piece as a nigun not only designates it as holy but also distinguishes it from non-sacred repertoires.

Nigunim have attracted the attention of music scholars for over one hundred years (see, e.g., Birnbaum 1907 for an early scholarly treatment of Hasidic nigunim). In *Studying Hasidism: Sources, Methods, Perspectives*, Edwin Seroussi provides a helpful overview of the literature and describes trends, methodological challenges, and directions for future nigun research (Seroussi 2019). Among the questions that he asks is, "How do the present-day Hasidic repertoires that were consolidated after World War II relate to those of the past?" While Shenker's story sheds scant light on the earliest days of the Hasidic nigun, it bridges the pre- and post-war periods, and characterizes the consolidation of the nigun in America, arguably the new center of Hasidism after the Holocaust. Shenker's role in musical transmission—both individual pieces as well as the nigun genre as a whole—is a central theme of this monograph.

Following Ellen Koskoff's work on nigunim in the life of the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic movement (Koskoff 2000), here I attempt to contextualize Shenker's music by exploring his musical training, life cycle events, his personal relationships, and the geo-political events that impacted him, as well as how the broader American soundscape shaped his oeuvre. As I hope to demonstrate, Shenker's nigunim defy neat categorization. This is due to both the wide range of musical variety found in his large corpus of compositions and the breadth of the unique Modzitzer musical repertoire that was Shenker's primary training

ground. Additionally, I attribute this complexity to the nature of the nigun as "a repertoire that defies classification" (Seroussi 2019: 201). Given the diverse musical sources and performative contexts that inspired Shenker, classifying his nigunim is indeed a challenge. What binds these diverse pieces together is Shenker himself. Thus, by treating key events in his life alongside his music collection, I aim to provide the necessary context for the inception of his pieces as well as for the discourses concerning his musical legacy. By focusing on the life and works of a single distinguished Hasidic musician, an uncommon method in this field (compare Mazor 1989), I seek to contribute to the ethnomusicological research on nigunim.

I wish to note that a Hebrew-language biography of Rabbi Ben Zion Shenker, *Yagil Vemalko* ("Be Joyful in His King," 2017), has been published by his friend and fellow Modzitz community member, R' David Zeira, and R' Shlomo Avraham. The book offers a vivid portrait of Shenker's life and includes many valuable images. My monograph differs by offering an ethnomusicological perspective in English, focusing on Shenker's role in shaping Hasidic music in America. I hope readers will find that it complements Zeira and Avraham's volume and adds a distinct dimension to the study of Shenker's legacy.

APPROACH AND METHODS

The biography is a useful medium for capturing both the particular stories of individual musicians and identifying broader themes that may be applied to other studies. Yet the representation of a life is always a fraught endeavor. Scholars of Jewish music have recently turned attention to biography while noting the importance of attending to the peculiarities of Jewish identities, the writer's positionality in relation to the subject, and the subjects' perception of their own contributions, among other considerations. A panel at the 2017 American Musicological Society conference titled "Jewish Studies, Music, and Biography" was devoted to this topic, and a colloquy of the same name was edited by Lily E. Hirsch and Amy Lynn Wlodarski and published in the 2018–19 issue of the journal *Musica Judaica*. In the colloquy, biographer Howard Pollack poses four questions that should be considered when crafting the biography of a Jewish musician: "What concrete ties does the subject have to Judaism and Jewish culture? How does *the subject* regard his or her person or work as Jewish? How do *others* regard the subject or his or her work as Jewish? How does the investigator regard the subject or his or her work as Jewish?"

In the case of Shenker, the answers to these questions might seem obvious. Shenker's music was always devotional, and the traditional precepts of Judaism ran through every aspect of his life. And yet, this maximalist impulse to answer Pollack's questions simplistically emphasizes their methodological importance. In attempting to understand Shenker's life and music, it is crucial to contextualize the shifting contours of the Jewish community itself rather than examine him in relationship to an ossified religious movement or congregation. Indeed, the biographical subject is not the only moving target; the dynamism of Jewish history itself must be similarly contextualized. Understood this way, the question of *how*

one regards a person or work as Jewish pushes us to understand the specific conceptions of Jewishness that exist for our subjects and their music, as well as the forces that shape the definitions used in our scholarly endeavors.

Probing the manner in which Jewishness, as a religious, cultural, and social system, existed in Shenker's life, we find that the particular expression of Jewishness that Shenker experienced was deeply informed by his American context. Shenker's Jewish context evolved over the course of his life, as Hasidim settled into life in the United States and established a vibrant community. By contextualizing not only Shenker's musical activities in their American context but also the changing discourses regarding music and Hasidism in America, we can begin to address *how* his music is regarded as Jewish, that is, the historicity of the Jewishness of his music. Similarly, the story told here offers historical context for a specific genre of music: the nigun. By examining the life of Ben Zion Shenker, considered by those around him a master composer and singer of nigunim, we have the opportunity to study this genre of music from a new angle and see how nigunim and the discourses associated with them are performed and conceptualized in American Hasidic life.

Each chapter of this study concludes with a brief "Reflections" section. There, I step out of the chronological narrative and share my observations about Shenker's life, in addition to examining discourses and historical trends that help to contextualize the material at hand. I conclude the study with a holistic reflection on Shenker's life and music. In so doing, I highlight the contribution of the rich content embedded within Shenker's story towards a more textured understanding of the role of music in contemporary Hasidism.

This biography draws on conversations with those who knew Shenker well, my reading of interviews, texts, and speeches that discuss his life and music, and my own experiences and interviews with him. As such, this work is grounded both in ethnography and historical research. I began attending Congregation Imrei Shaul

Modzitz, Shenker's synagogue, in 2012. Over time, Shenker and I developed a close relationship, and he often spoke with me about his musical life. In addition to our many informal conversations, I conducted a series of formal interviews with him in the summer of 2015. In this book, all quotations from Shenker are from these interviews, unless otherwise indicated. Moreover, I have been fortunate to have conversed with some of Shenker's closest friends and family, and I hope to represent their impressions of him accurately in this work.

In addition, I had the privilege of assisting Shenker with various tasks related to the last two records that he released during his life, recording rough copies of new nigunim as he composed them, and accompanying him to musical events and celebrations within his own family. Furthermore, I sat with him at dozens of prayer services at the Modzitz synagogue in Brooklyn over the course of four years. By the time we met, he had largely stepped away from his role as the main prayer leader in the synagogue. Nonetheless, I heard him lead services on numerous occasions, and was impressed by the expressive nature of his prayers. Through these ethnographic experiences, Shenker offered me access not only to a rich and diverse repertoire but also provided me with a window onto the development of Hasidism in America over the course of the long life that he lived. Notably, however, I make no claim to being an objective observer. As Lily Hirsch (2018–2019) describes in her work on musicologist Anneliese Landau, the biographer often becomes "entangled" in the subject's story, and I am indeed entangled in this work. Even so, I have taken great care to avoid hagiography. As Ruth Hellier-Tinoco (2003: 19) writes, ethnomusicological fieldwork "revolves around human relationships and one-to-one encounters." It is my hope that readers will find that this biography has been enriched by the friendship that I developed with Shenker.

In this telling of his story, Shenker is in the foreground. However, readers will also perceive the dynamic shifts in the cultural landscape that surrounds him. Through his own reflections, we get a sense of how Jewish life in Brooklyn

developed during Shenker's early childhood in the 1920s and 1930s, how the Modzitzer Rebbe's court rebuilt itself during and after World War II, and how the Ḥaredi community in America blossomed in the greater New York area into the twenty-first century. We come to understand how Rabbi Shenker built his career in the diamond industry (which was his primary source of income), how Jewish migration before and after World War II impacted his family, and how his relocation to various neighborhoods in Brooklyn reflect patterns of Orthodox life in New York City. I present these broader issues as constitutive of, rather than separate from, Shenker's musical life. The parallel publication of the collection of nigunim together with the biographical monograph affords the reader an opportunity to match Shenker's compositional activities with the different periods of his life. I have done this often throughout the writing of this book, and while at times I describe a piece's origin story, I encourage the reader to participate in expanding this matching to reveal Shenker's personal soundtrack.

As I hope to show, despite the features of his life that are quite unusual for an individual from the Hasidic community, in contemporary discourse Shenker is often considered the quintessential Hasidic music creator and performer.[3] In addition to offering a portrait of Shenker's life in music, this biography seeks to understand the discourse that thus situates him by reading him through the prism of the evolution of contemporary American Judaism and analyzing how Shenker's innovations have become mainstream for Hasidic musicians, and even non-Hasidic ones, in America and beyond. This contextualization aims to explore the factors that shaped his music and popularized it around the globe.

3 I use the term "Hasidic music" throughout this study. However, I recognize that there are many forms of music made by musicians who identify with Hasidism. My use of "Hasidic music" follows the language of those who taught me about music in Hasidic life in the course of my research. In Hasidic discourse, terms such as "Hasidic music" are used casually to reference music that firmly fits within the musical and social boundaries of normative Hasidic practice and to distinguish this music from its others.

A final word about biography: The nature of the way we tell stories is to focus on major events that lead to dramatic change. While this biography does indeed highlight key moments in Shenker's life, such moments do not capture the entirety, or even the essence, of the man. Shenker prayed three times a day, studied Torah every day, and interacted daily with his family and fellow Orthodox Jews. He looked forward to upcoming holidays and life cycle events such as weddings, *britot* (circumcision ceremonies), and bar mitzvahs that marked the growth of his family. For Shenker, music was completely intertwined with his service of God, and this disciplined constancy, which is a highly respected value in Orthodox Jewish life, structured his days and years. As his daughter Brocha Weinberger told me, "My father wasn't singing because he was looking for fame, or for attention. My father sang from the depths of his heart. Literally. And I saw that. I saw that. He was so well-versed in *Tehilim* [Psalms] and in *tefila* [prayer, liturgy], and all the words that he sang, [that] he was living those words. He was giving it over. It was like tefila in a song." Taking seriously the idea that Shenker's music was inseparable from the religious practices that were the scaffolding of his life, this biography seeks to situate Shenker's nigunim as an essential component of the "lived religion" of Hasidic Judaism (Orsi 1985; Hall 1997; Knibbe and Kupari 2020).

CHAPTER 1:
BEN ZION SHENKER: FAMILY AND EARLY YEARS

Ben Zion Shenker was born on May 12, 1925, to Mordechai and Miriam Shenker. Mordechai, whose family belonged to the Trisk Hasidic dynasty, hailed from the small town of Biskovitz (Biskupice) in the Lublin Voivodeship in Eastern Poland. When Mordechai was thirteen years old, his father, Avrohom, passed away. Mordechai's mother, Brocha, was an astute businesswoman and made a living as a "customer peddler," traveling between towns to collect orders, purchase goods, and deliver them to her clients. "She was a very good business lady," Shenker told me. "She served all the little towns around. All the gentile towns. They used to wait for her to come, they used to give her an order. They wanted this, they wanted that. She would go to the big town and buy it for them, and she used to sell it herself."

While his mother worked, the young Mordechai learned Torah with the rabbi of the town. "He used to spend a lot of time with the *rov* of the town," Shenker said. "He was practically brought up in that house. Since his father passed away at such a young age, the rov took over responsibility of bringing him up in the Jewish way. He learned with him, he taught him," Shenker said.

Meanwhile, Miriam Shafran, Mordechai's future bride, was growing up in Chelm, Poland. Portrayed in Yiddish folktales as the proverbial village of fools, Chelm was in fact a bustling center of Jewish life in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Poland. The Shafran family were followers of the Kotzker Hasidic dynasty. Miriam's mother worked and supported the family, while her father studied Torah full-time. As Shenker described:

> He used to travel to [the Kotzker Rebbe] and he used to stay there for weeks on end.[4] He would leave my grandmother to take care of whatever […] she had a little business going. She was the breadwinner. […] At that time, the *khsidishe yidn* [i.e. Hasidic men] used to sit and learn all day, and their wives did all the *handling* [business dealings], you know? I think my grandmother had like a fish market or something."

Chelm was among the towns that Brocha Shenker visited, and it was through connections that she developed there that a *shidukh* (arranged marriage) was suggested between her son Mordechai and Miriam.

The young couple wed in approximately 1921 and relocated to America shortly thereafter. Miriam's father, Yechiel Shafran, had been living in the United States since 1914. Like many Eastern European Jews at that time, Yechiel had intended to come to America to work for a short time, earn a bit of money, and then return to Poland. However, World War I made his return to Europe impossible, forcing him to stay in New York City. Though he had spent much of his adult life in Europe learning Torah while his wife, Aidel Henna, supported the family, Yechiel proved to be a good breadwinner during his time in New York.

Mordechai and Miriam Shenker's decision to move to America shortly after their wedding was largely motivated by a desire to avoid having Mordechai drafted into the Polish army. Mordechai travelled with papers issued in the name of a family member who had died years earlier but whose passing had not been marked by a paper trail. Before leaving Europe, Mordechai visited his rebbe in Lublin to request a blessing for success in his new life in the United States. The Trisker Rebbe was hesitant; he considered America a *treyfe medine*, an unkosher state.

4 The famed Kotzker Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgensztern (1787–1859), was an important early leader of the Hasidic movement, known for his witty sayings and brilliance in Torah knowledge. Yechiel Shafran was a devotee of the Kotzker Rebbe's grandson (Chaim Yisroel Morgenstern [1840–1905]), and great-grandson (Rabbi Yitzchak Zelig Morgenstern [1866–1940]).

Nonetheless, he agreed, and, as Shenker told me, "gave him a *brokho* [blessing] that his children should follow in his path. And Barukh Hashem [Bless God], that brokho came true."[5]

Like many Jewish immigrants, Mordechai and Miriam settled on the Lower East Side of New York. Mordechai found work using the rudimentary knitting skills that he had acquired in Poland. The garment industry was a major employer of Jews in New York City in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, employing "approximately 60 percent of the New York Jewish labor force" by 1867 (Sorin 1995: 74). Nevertheless, Mordechai struggled to balance his religious observance with employment demands. As Shenker explained,

> Every time that he worked for [a new employer] and he didn't come in on Shabbos, he would come in on Sunday and they would say, "Where were you yesterday?" And he would say, "It was Shabbos." And they would say, "You can't work here. Goodbye." And this happened a number of times. So, after about a half a year of struggling, he decided he's going to open up his own factory.

To fund the early stages of the business, Mordechai relied on an investment from his father-in-law. He called his company S&S Knitting Needles, referencing the Shafran and Shenker partnership.

Throughout these early years in New York, the Shenker family was steadily growing. After their first daughter (Rose) was born in 1922, followed by a son (Avrohom) in 1923, the family relocated to Williamsburg, Brooklyn. With the Williamsburg bridge having opened in December 1903, the Lower East Side and Williamsburg were now linked, and Jews seeking refuge from the cramped conditions of Manhattan found a better option on the other side of the bridge. The Orthodox Jewish community found its footing in Williamsburg in the early 1920s,

5 The phrase "Barukh Hashem" is used in many contexts in Orthodox speech patterns; here, as in most cases, it means "Thank God."

including a small Hasidic community that was well-established by 1930. Though these immigrant Jews could not have imagined it at the time, they were setting the stage for the development of a major Hasidic community in Williamsburg following the arrival of Hasidim who had survived the Holocaust in the late 1940s and 1950s (Mintz 1992: 248).

Mordechai Shenker opened his factory on South 3rd Street in Williamsburg, across the street from a small Hasidic synagogue affiliated with the Skver Hasidic dynasty, where he would pray every morning. As the owner of the factory, Mordechai no longer had to worry that his Sabbath observance would cost him his employment. The opening of the factory represented a new sense of stability. Economically, the business began to thrive, providing income for the growing Shenker family. Religiously, Mordechai was successful in finding a way to bridge his halakhic observance with the pressures of immigrant life. Socially, the development of a Hasidic community in Williamsburg and an infrastructure for Orthodox life meant that the Shenkers could live among those who shared their lifestyle, beliefs, and practices. Though still fairly new to America, they were beginning to find themselves on solid ground when their son, Ben Zion, was born in 1925.

Shenker described his youth as full of music, for which he credited his mother. Miriam Shenker, who during this period spent her days raising her children, "happened to be very musical," he told me. "And her father and mother were not musical at all, so it's really surprising. However, she did have one brother who came to America before they came, and she claimed that he sang in an opera. It could be that he sang in the chorus of the opera."

Mordechai Shenker, for his part, had a musical sense and served as a *sheli'aḥ tzibbur*, a prayer leader in the synagogue. Ben Zion Shenker recalled that his father would often sing nigunim at home. Among these were nigunim from the Modzitz dynasty that he had learned in Poland. According to Ben Zion, a man

from the community in Biskovitz used to travel to Modzitz during the *Yamim Noraim* [High Holidays] to pray in the community led by the first Modzitzer Rebbe, Rabbi Yisroel Taub (known by the title of his book, *Divrei Yisroel*). After the holidays, he would bring back the new nigunim that the Divrei Yisroel sang. As Shenker said:

> My father was exposed to that. Some of the things [nigunim he learned] he was actually able to teach us. There was one nigun especially, a nigun that we [the Modzitz community] sing for "Kevakoras" [*Kevaqarat*, "As a Shepherd"] on Yamim Noraim in [the passage of the liturgy that begins with the words] *Unesane Toykef* [Unetane Toqef, "Let us proclaim"], and my father used to sing it for us, but then, at a certain point he would say, "From here on I'm not responsible.' It was like a solo, a very difficult solo. And he couldn't do it! So he said, "I don't know it." […] But later on, when I got to Modzitz [became affiliated with the Modzitz dynasty], I learned what that solo was.

The Shenker family owned a Victrola record player, and three-year-old Ben Zion would sit in front of it for hours listening to records of cantors. The so-called Golden Age of cantorial music was in full swing at this time, and between the proliferation of recordings and the opportunity to hear cantorial music on Yiddish radio stations, the young Ben Zion's interest in ḥazanut was easy to satisfy. Like many listeners, he was particularly drawn to the music of Yossele Rosenblatt, and he learned to sing by imitating his recordings. Ben Zion's first performances, for his delighted neighbors, were of Rosenblatt pieces:

> I would stand outside with my mother to get a little air during the summer, and you had all the neighbors sitting around. And she'd say, "*Benele, zing Eloykai Neshama.*" And at first, I said, "No, no, no." But finally, how long can you say no? And people over there went crazy, you know? They couldn't believe it! I was all of four or five

> years old, and I was able to imitate Rosenblatt already. These were pieces that you had to have coloratura. Usually, kids don't have that.

The Shenker family continued to grow (in addition to his older siblings, Ben Zion also had two younger brothers, Nachman and Chaim Baruch) and relocated to the nearby Brooklyn neighborhood of Bedford Stuyvesant. Ben Zion spent one year in public school before being enrolled in Yeshiva Torah Vodaath,[6] which was headed by Rabbi Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, an important figure in twentieth-century Orthodox Judaism.[7] Even before Shenker attended Torah Vodaath, the school provided him with an important moment. Yossele Rosenblatt had come to the neighborhood to sing as guest cantor at a fundraiser, and five-year-old Ben Zion was able to see his musical hero in person (Netsky 2012). In 1923, Rabbi Mendlowitz and Cantor Rosenblatt had founded a publication called *Dos Yidishe Likht* [The Jewish Light]. The paper was seen as a means to counter assimilation and encourage modesty:

> [Mendlowitz] did not hesitate to speak out on any topic, no matter how delicate or controversial. Today, a meḥitzah is standard at a religious wedding, yet forty years ago, he had to speak out against the mingling of boys and girls at social events, decrying mixed swimming and dancing, which were accepted practices among so many in those days (Chinn 1983: 9).

This weekly publication evolved into a daily, though it ceased publication in 1927 due to financial hardship. According to the *Jewish Observer*, Rosenblatt embarked on a year-long tour to earn enough money to pay back the paper's investors. Rosenblatt's financial situation remained unstable for the rest of his

6 Pronounced Torah V'das.

7 Rabbi Mendelowitz was instrumental in building institutions and communities that have become central to the infrastructure of Orthodoxy in America such as Yeshiva Chaim Berlin, Beth Medrash Govoha of Lakewood, New Jersey, and Torah U'Mesorah.

life, but he continued to do benefit concerts. In approximately 1930, Rosenblatt visited the yeshiva to raise money for the school and conducted a morning prayer service. It was here that Shenker had the opportunity to see his icon:

> I remember my mother had me up in the gallery, among the women... I remember exactly what he looked like. He wore a long jacket and he wore a *khazonishe* [cantorial] hat and everything else. I listened to all of *shakharis*. I was there the complete davening. So, that's something which not many people can boast, really. (Netsky 2012)

In addition to providing Shenker with an education, Yeshiva Torah Vodaath was an important point of connection to European Jewish life. The rabbis who taught in the school were in contact with the leaders of European Orthodoxy and would speak about them during their lessons, providing a transnational experience. Shenker described hearing of the death of Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, known as the Chofetz Chaim[8]: "I remember when the Chofetz Chaim was *niftar* [passed away], actually. I was, I think, all of eight years old. It was 1933. All the kids knew who the Chofetz Chaim was, because the Rebbe used to speak about him...[9] I mean it wasn't like if you were in America you didn't know what was doing in Poland or Lithuania."

Shenker smiled when describing his schooldays: "I'll tell you one reason I was not the best student is because I was always into music so much that if I was sitting in a *shiur* [lesson] I would get a [musical] thought. And every time I sat in shiur I got a thought, you know? [Laughs]. And I would have to write it down, and if you've gotta do it in the middle of shiur, it's not easy. So that took away a lot from my studying."

8 The Chofetz Chaim is best known for two important works: *Shemirat Halashon* ["Guarding the Tongue," a book about the laws of proper speech], and the *Mishnah Berurah* [a commentary on the *Shulḥan Arukh*, The Code of Jewish Law].

9 Here the term "rebbe" refers to a male schoolteacher. As discussed below, in other contexts the term refers to the leader of a Hasidic dynasty.

Shenker's interest in music continued throughout his early years. When he was twelve years old, his friend Josh Silbermintz suggested that he join the Jewish boys choir in which he sang.[10] Ben Zion agreed to attend an audition, at which he impressed the choir leader and was accepted on the spot. Shenker showed up to his first rehearsal unsure of what to expect, as he had no formal musical experience and could not read music. He quickly found that he was able to learn by ear, but was turned off to the whole experience when he saw the conductor slap one of the children for singing off-key. While Shenker did not return to that choir, another choral opportunity soon presented itself.

The synagogue at which he and his family attended services hosted a bar mitzvah for a boy in the community. The synagogue was extra crowded, with many guests having come to celebrate the occasion. As usual, the young Shenker sang along with the communal melodies, attracting the attention of one of the guests, Joshua Weisser (who was also known by the last name Pildewasser). Weisser (1888–1952) was a Ukrainian-born Jew who had received an impressive musical upbringing. As a youth he had studied under several cantors, including Eliezer Gerovich (1844–1914), and went on to study at the conservatory in the city of Vinitsa, where he became the cantor of the local synagogue at the age of twenty-one (Jewish Music Research Centre, n.d.). Weisser immigrated to the United States in 1914 and held numerous cantorial posts in New York, served as the president of the Jewish Ministers Cantor Association of America and Canada (founded in 1897), and was a prolific composer and author of articles related to Jewish music. Importantly, Weisser also trained Jewish boys in the conventions of liturgical singing through the boys' choir that he organized. When he and Ben Zion Shenker met, a young Richard Tucker—who would go on to sing over thirty

10 Rabbi Yehoshua (Josh) Silbermintz went on to become a beloved educator in the New York Orthodox community, where he founded the *Pirchei Agudas Yisroel* youth group and led Camp Munk for nearly forty years. *Kollel Ner Yehoshua*, an institute for Torah study by adult men in Baywater, New York, is named after Rabbi Silbermintz.

leading roles for the New York Metropolitan Opera as well as become a life-long performer of Jewish liturgical music both in and outside the synagogue—was a recent alumnus of the choir.

On the morning that Weisser heard Shenker sing in Bedford Stuyvesant, he approached him, saying:

> "Is your father here?" So, I said yes. "Could you introduce me to your father?" So, I said I could. I took him over to my father. […] He says, "Mr. Shenker, I'm very interested in your son joining my choir. I happen to like his voice very much." My father listens; he says, "Choir? Eh, that's not for my son. He's a yeshiva boy, you know, I don't think it's a good idea." So, he says, "Well, why don't you think it's a good idea?" He says, "Well, you know, the caliber of the people in choirs today is not really what we're looking for." The people in choirs were really not—most of them were not really religious. They just had this—they liked to sing, or they had this little job, and so—and they went along. And [my father said], "I don't want him to mix with irreligious people […]. Children pick up everything, their environment, and I don't think it's a good idea." So, he tried to argue with him. My father was very reluctant. So, he asked my father his address […] He wants to speak to my mother. He thinks maybe he'll do better with her. So, sure, my father said, "You can come up."
>
> […] And sure enough, during the week, he just came up. He knocked on the door and […] started speaking to my mother, and she said the same thing […] he's a young boy, they're very impressionable. So, he said, "What if I promise you that wherever I go, I'll make sure that he stays at the rabbi's house? […] My mother said, "It's certainly a good point. […] But, you know, he'll be away *Roysh Hashono*, he'll be away *Sukos*. We want him at home." Anyway, he spoke so long

> until he actually convinced my parents he can take care of me, make sure that I'd be at the rabbi's house, and so forth. And that's the way it went. I joined the choir. (Netsky)

The experience of being in the choir was formative for Shenker in several ways. He was given alto solos from the very beginning, and was exposed to a great deal of repertoire, not only for the Sabbath and holidays, but also for weddings, at which they often performed. At these weddings, Weisser would serve as the officiant and the choir would perform both American popular songs such as "Oh, Promise Me" (by Reginald De Koven and Clement Scott) as well as wedding songs in Yiddish such as "*Vimale*" (Netsky). Another benefit of joining the choir was that he had the opportunity to visit other Jewish communities. Most of these were in Brooklyn, but each congregation had slightly different musical practices, exposing him to a variety of liturgical music. Weisser kept his promise and ensured that Shenker stayed at the home of the local rabbi in each location. This, too, had a musical impact on Shenker. When the choir performed in Bensonhurst, he stayed at the home of Rabbi Shlomo Aharon Kazarnovsky, a follower of the Chabad-Lubavitch dynasty of Hasidism, where he had his first encounter with Lubavitcher nigunim: "I had a very, very good impression of it then. I mean, they're a very serious type of nigunim" (Netsky 2012).

Additionally, when the choir performed in concerts featuring several cantors, Shenker's solos attracted the attention of important figures in the cantorial world, who praised his singing ability. Here Shenker speaks about his interaction with the Russian-born David Roitman, who served for fifteen years as cantor of Congregation Shaare Zedek in Manhattan:

> I sang a solo, "*Mekimi Meyofor Dol*" ["Who raises the poor out of the dust?" Psalm 113: 7]. That was the first time that I sang in public […]. It was a very nice piece for a child. And I sang it with a lot of feeling and everything else. And they had their coloratura [vocal ornament] in

> it, you know, […] I was able to coloratura. That was one of the reasons why he was so interested in having me in a choir. Very unusual that a boy soloist be able to really have a—do a very—a real khazonishe coloratura. And I had that. I did it very much with ease. So, when the concert was over, Roitman comes over to Weisser and says, *"Shike, ver hot gezungen 'Mekimi'?* So, who sang 'Mekimi'? So, he points at me. So, he comes over to me and gives me—pinches my cheek and says, "*Vest aroysvaksn a keyle* [Here grows quite an instrument] … You're gonna grow up to be something." (Netsky 2012)

Shenker's ability to sing coloratura at a young age made him a valuable choir member. While most boys aged out of the choir around the time they became bar mitzvah, Weisser held on to Shenker until he was fifteen. Shortly after Shenker's bar mitzvah, Weisser brought him to a recording studio to record Weisser's now famous composition, "*Der Alter Khazn*" (The Old Cantor), which would later be recorded by cantorial greats such as Moshe Koussevitzky. As Shenker's voice changed, Weisser would transpose the solos to a lower key so that he could continue to sing them. This became the topic of conversation when Shenker met Richard Tucker years later:

> [Tucker] used to come […] into the rehearsals because he enjoyed coming back to see the old boys… He was the cantor at the Conservative shul on Eastern Parkway [Brooklyn Jewish Center], which is now the Lubavitcher school, and they have a shul there also [...] Every Thursday night he [my father] used to go to the *shvitz* [sauna in the building], and he took me along. So I was once coming in the lobby, and I saw Richard Tucker in the lobby. So I go over to him and I give him *sholoym* [say hello]. And I say, "Do you recognize me?" He looks at me. "Who are you?" So I said, "Well, you know me since I was very young." […] I said, "I sang in Weisser's choir." He says, "Were you the alto soloist?" I said, "My name is Ben Zion Shenker."

> He said, "You were the alto soloist, weren't you?" So I said, "Yes." And he said, "Ohhh, you were a good soloist, I remember." […] He says, "Weisser didn't want to get rid of you, you know? He had you singing there until you were fifteen years old […]."

It was also around this time that Shenker made his radio debut. A regular Yiddish radio slot came about because of a chance encounter when shopping with his mother for a suit to wear at his bar mitzvah:

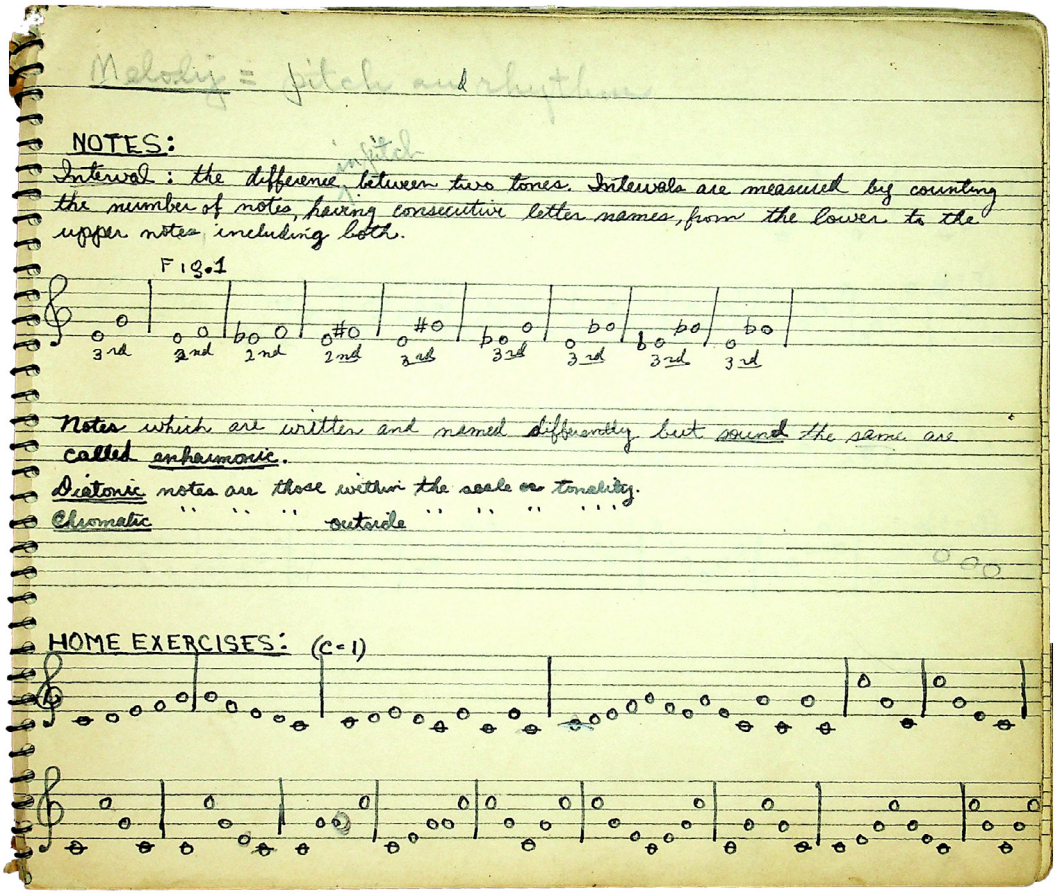
> My mother took me to one of these stores on the East Side, Lower Broadway, to buy a suit for my bar mitzvah. While we were there the owner of that store was the guy who had the radio show in Downtown Brooklyn on Sundays. So my mother told him as we were buying the suit that I sing very well. So he said to me, "Let me hear how you sing, let me hear how you sing." I said, "What for? We're trying to buy a suit over here!" My mother said, "Sing, sing." So I sang shortly. He says, "Would you like to sing on the radio?" I looked at him, like, "What, are you out of your mind?" So he said, "I have a radio show. I'd like to have you there." He said he would pay me. […] That's when I went to sing over there. It didn't last too long. My sister decided to go along with me one day, to try to get me a raise. [Laughs] […] But he said, "No, I'm not giving any raises. I can't afford it." So she said, "Okay, then he's not coming." "Okay, so he's not coming." And that was it […] But what happened was, somebody from a different radio station actually must have heard me, and got in touch with me […] and he wanted me to come there as a steady program, at 6:00 in the evening. I sang there for quite a while, until I saw that my voice is starting to go down a little. I knew myself that I had to go already.

However, the thirteen-year-old Shenker needed to overcome another obstacle before he could begin singing on the radio. His yeshiva held classes on Sunday

afternoons, the time of the radio slot he had been offered. Shenker approached his teacher, Rabbi Avraham Pam—who would later go on to head the school—and requested permission to leave for a few hours on Sundays. Rabbi Pam, who was only in his first year of teaching at the yeshiva, sent him to the head of the yeshiva, Rabbi Mendelowitz. In Shenker's recollection, Mendelowitz "was a very religious, serious person. But he knew the world also [...] he knew that there are things in the world that you have to do" (Netsky). Rabbi Mendelowitz granted Shenker permission, on condition that he avoid socializing with anyone at the radio station and return to the yeshiva immediately after his performance. Shenker agreed to the conditions; he would arrive at the radio studio on Fulton Street just ten minutes before his slot, not even leaving enough time for a rehearsal with the pianist. Having coached the pieces that he was going to sing that day (generally cantorial pieces, or Yiddish songs by composers such as Shalom Secunda and Abraham Ellstein) with Joshua Weisser, he did not need a rehearsal at the radio station and was able to perform well in the moment.

Shenker's musical training also took on a more formal aspect at this time. He began to take lessons with Seymour Silbermintz (1917–2000).[11] Seymour, who would go on to become a composer, recording artist, educator, and music director of K'hal Adath Jeshurun congregation in Manhattan, was eight years older than Shenker, and proficient in music notation and the fundamentals of music theory. The music composition and theory assignments that he gave Shenker enabled the young man to develop the skills he would need for his musical pursuits. The notebooks used for these lessons remain in the possession of Shenker's family and show that he was acquiring formal musical skills at this early age.

11 Seymour Silbermintz was the older brother of the aforementioned Josh Silbermintz.



[Notes from Shenker's first lesson with Seymour Silbermintz. Reprinted courtesy of Velvel and Aidel Newmark from the Shenker family's private collection]

When Shenker was fifteen or sixteen years old, just a few years after he began to study with Silbermintz, the composer held a lecture-demonstration at Manhattan Center, a prestigious hub for artistic performances in midtown Manhattan. Silbermintz arranged one of Shenker's pieces for performance at the event. After hearing his work performed at this respected venue, Shenker felt an increased motivation to continue composing and developing his musical knowledge. Shortly thereafter he began studying piano at the Henry Street Settlement, a Lower East Side initiative that offered a wide range of services, including arts programming. Indeed, the piano lessons augmented Shenker's musical focus

on vocal performance, transcription, and composition. The musical skills that Shenker developed through these diverse training opportunities proved highly valuable in a role that would shape the rest of his musical life, as he became the "musical secretary" to Rabbi Shaul Yedidya Elazar Taub, the Modzitzer Rebbe.

Reflections

In this chapter, we learn the stories of multiple generations of Shenker's family with a focus on their migration from Europe to America. Mordechai and Miriam Shenker's youth, and ultimately their journeys from Poland to New York, offer a window onto Polish Hasidic life in the early decades of the twentieth century. Among the themes that emerge is a negotiation between religious observance and earning a livelihood. As noted, Shenker described his maternal grandmother as the family's breadwinner, while her husband studied full-time, travelling periodically to spend time with his Rebbe. Similarly, Shenker's paternal grandmother was a businesswoman and single mother, while her son studied Torah in the home of the local rabbi. Interestingly, the gender roles related to labor that are implicit in these relationships flipped in America, where Mordechai Shenker took jobs in the textile industry while his wife raised the children. This is not to say, though, that religious life was any less important to Mordechai Shenker than it was to others in his family. Rather, the structure of life in New York was such that this was the best way for the family members to maintain their level of religious observance, while also sustaining themselves economically.

As we will see in the coming pages, approaches to balancing religious observance, Torah study, and work continued to develop throughout Shenker's life. Shenker himself was a working man but did not allow this to compromise his religious commitments. He was able to balance these competing forces largely because the Hasidic community in America had, by the time he reached adulthood, created a social and economic network in which one could pursue a living working

primarily with other observant Jews. Thus, the schedule and social norms of Orthodoxy created a structure within which observance was not only expected but provided one with social capital, marking the individual as truly belonging and as a trustworthy figure within the business network. The interplay between religious, social, economic, and employment networks, and their relationship to religious devotion, has long been a subject of interest to scholars of religion (Weber 1904, for example, in his study of the interplay between religious belief and economic behavior), and has been an important area of recent scholarship on the Hasidic community (Poll 2017; Richman 2017; Shuman 2021). We see these social, economic, and religious networks play out in the microcosm of Shenker's life.

Ben Zion Shenker's youth was molded by the immigrant culture in which he was raised. Though Shenker and many of his friends were American-born, his upbringing was marked by the flow of European Jews to the shores of the United States and the tensions that these individuals negotiated as they sought to establish themselves in their new land. Cultural creations blossomed, as evidenced by the cantorial craze in America. The praise that Shenker received for being able to imitate Yossele Rosenblatt at a very young age demonstrates the value attributed to this music by Shenker's community; indeed, cantorial music (and Rosenblatt in particular) represented to Jewish immigrants an enticing combination of piety and economic success (Sarna 1982; Shandler 2012).

The expansion of the Jewish immigrant community of the Lower East Side into Williamsburg can be interpreted as a symbolic achievement: the community moved past its point of entry into the country and into a new area that offered a better quality of life. The expansion and development of an infrastructure for Orthodox life was a visible sign of thriving and success. In addition, these Jews who established new Orthodox communities in Brooklyn in the early twentieth century were unknowingly laying a foundation that would help absorb their coreligionists who fled Europe before, during, and after World War II. As Deutsch and Casper (2021: 17–18) write:

> Most significant for what was to come, Williamsburg emerged during the interwar period as the most important center for Orthodox Jewish life not only in Brooklyn but also in New York City as a whole. At a time when most Jews in New York sent their children to public school, and young Jews were more likely to set foot in Yankee Stadium or Ebbets Field than a synagogue, the Jewish community in Williamsburg supported an abundance of religious schools, synagogues, mikvehs (ritual baths), kosher butchers, and other businesses.

Shenker's upbringing in Brooklyn was structured by involvement in community institutions, which provided for educational, religious, and social needs (though notably he attended public school for kindergarten; today Hasidic children are educated within their community's schools from the very beginning. Shenker mentioned this to me as if there was nothing unusual about it, which was likely the case for many at the time). For many immigrant groups, houses of worship are spaces in which highly localized practices from a homeland can be embraced in a new locale, and this was certainly applicable to the synagogues of Brooklyn. Shenker spoke about being with other Polish Jews in his synagogue, where familiar melodies were sung by the prayer leaders. These synagogues, as small institutions, could sustain particularity.

Other institutions, however, embraced a wider array of Orthodox Jews, drawing the lines of inclusion a bit differently. The students of Yeshiva Torah Vodaath came from a wide variety of backgrounds, which, again, Shenker spoke of as quite normative. Children from Hasidic families learned alongside children from families who practiced the Lithuanian style of Orthodoxy, and little difference was evident between them. As described below, Shenker saw Hasidic particularity become more prominent with the influx of Hungarian Hasidic Jews in the 1940s and 50s. Yet in Shenker's youth, those lines were not as significant.

Still other institutions catered to all Ashkenazi Jews, whether strictly observant or otherwise. While Shenker's participation in institutions such as the boys choir and Yiddish radio were permitted only reluctantly, they proved to be highly important in his musical development. Similarly, the availability of piano lessons at Henry Street Settlement was an opportunity to advance his musical skill while staying within the concentric circles of community. Significantly, however, the restrictions that were imposed on his radio performances and his participation in the boys choir indicate how Shenker walked a thin line between participating in activities outside his own immediate community and remaining sheltered from them. In both cases, adults in his life were concerned that participating in these musical activities would require him to socialize with non-Orthodox Jews, exposing him to values and lifestyles that were not appropriate for a young and impressionable yeshiva student. Therefore, they ensured that his time outside Orthodox supervision would be as brief as possible. By taking part in these musical practices, Shenker gained experiences that enabled him to be a musical innovator, while also remaining fully committed to Orthodoxy and adhering to the guidance and authority of his rabbis and parents.

Through Shenker's biography, therefore, we gain insight into community structures of Orthodox life in New York at this pivotal moment in which Hasidic society was taking root in Brooklyn. A close look at the institutions that facilitated his religious and musical education provides a window onto understanding the factors that were significant at the intersection of social belonging, identity, and religiosity. Seeing these institutions alongside the immigration stories of Miriam and Mordechai Shenker contributes to a holistic picture of how Jewish families became American across the generations.

CHAPTER 2:
"MUSICAL SECRETARY" TO THE MODZITZER REBBE

In 1940, the spiritual leader of the Modzitz Hasidic community, Rabbi Shaul Yedidya Elazar Taub, arrived in New York after a harrowing journey fleeing the Nazis. While music has long had a central place in Hasidic life, the leaders (rebbes) of the Modzitz community regarded music as a particularly potent tool in divine service. The rebbes in this lineage have all been composers and their nigunim gained global acclaim throughout the years.

The Modzitz dynasty traces its history to Rabbi Yechezkel of Kuzmir (1755–1856), who had studied with several Hasidic greats[12] and established Hasidic schools in Poland. He was regarded as a brilliant Torah scholar, however, his most notable contribution to Hasidism is likely his emphasis on music. He could not greet the Sabbath, he would say, without a nigun.[13] Even so, according to Shenker only a single nigun attributed to Rabbi Yechezkel of Kuzmir is known and sung among Modzitzers today—and even the provenance of that song has been questioned.[14]

12 First the Kozhnitzer Maggid and later the Seer of Lublin, who in turn was a student of the Baal Shem Tov's main disciple, Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezritch.

13 Shenker explained to me in a 2015 interview that it remains unclear whether Rabbi Yechezkel of Kuzmir was the one to compose these nigunim every week or someone else composed them for him.

14 In a 2015 interview, Shenker explainted that he learned the nigun that is believed to originate with the Kuzmirer Rebbe from a descendent of the Kuzmir Rebbe who lived in Los Angeles. Shenker had not heard this nigun at a Modzitz gathering previously.

At the instruction of the famous Kotzker Rebbe, the eldest son of Rabbi Yechezkel of Kuzmir, Rabbi Dovid Tzvi Taub of Neustadt founded a Hasidic community in the town of Jabłonowo, coming to be known as the Yabloner Rebbe. The Kuzmirer Rebbe's second son, Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu Taub, moved to the town of Zwoleń, where a community of Hasidim formed around him, and he became known as the Zvoliner Rebbe.

Like his father, the Zvoliner Rebbe was known for his musical talent. Contemporary Modzitzers describe him as a powerful ba'al tefillah (prayer leader), a "*menagen mafli pla'os*" (musician that performed wonders). One day, however, the Zvoliner Rebbe announced that the responsibility of singing to God was too great—and he stopped. His followers, who regarded him as spiritually gifted beyond the discernment of the ordinary person, accepted his decision.

However, the Zvoliner Rebbe sang once more, upon the death of one of his sons. The Rebbe received the tragic news on a Sabbath morning. He remained silent, perhaps in keeping with the dictum to avoid mourning on the Sabbath. Late that afternoon, however, during the communal singing that traditionally accompanies the third Sabbath meal, he broke out in a new poignant nigun. This is the only song that Shenker confidently attributed to the Zvoliner Rebbe.[15]

After his father's passing, the Rebbe's eldest son, Rabbi Moshe Aharon, took up the mantle of leadership of the Zvolin community. His second son, Rabbi Yisroel Taub (later known as the Divrei Yisroel after his most famous treatise), who was recognized as an outstanding Torah scholar, encouraged his father's followers to gather around his older brother. However, some insisted that he become their leader. According to Shenker, this was, at least in part, because the Divrei Yisroel possessed the musical skill necessary to uphold the family's musical tradition.

15 However, I heard a visitor to the Brooklyn Modzitz synagogue sing a nigun that he had learned from his grandfather, who said that he learned it in Zvolin. Other pieces are also attributed to the Zvoliner Rebbe, but Shenker explained to me that these pieces may have come from a descendent also known as the Zvoliner Rebbe, though he could not know for certain.

The Divrei Yisroel, who had composed numerous pieces during his father's lifetime, was apparently willing to take on the responsibility of singing to God, a responsibility that his father had felt was too weighty. The Divrei Yisroel's association with music may have been bolstered by the fact that his wife, Dobra Braindel, was the daughter of Chaim Shaul Friedman of Ozarov, a respected ba'al tefillah in the community who led the High Holiday prayers for both the Kuzmir and Zvoliner Rebbes (Geshuri 1952: 107-108).

Along with his followers, the Divrei Yisroel relocated to the Polish town of Dęmblin in the Lesser Poland Voivodeship (likely c. 1899, though Velvel Pasternak [1998: 17] dates it as early as 1891), which he, and soon his followers, referred to as Modzitz. The name Modzitz, it seems, was used exclusively by the Jewish community, and it may have been derived from the phrase, "przyjemny miejsce," meaning "a pleasant place" in Polish (The Jewish Home 2018: 44).[16]

The Divrei Yisroel remained in Modzitz until the outbreak of World War One, and in 1914, after a short stay in Berlin for medical treatment in which his leg was amputated, he relocated to Warsaw. Among his famous compositions is the "*Heymlozer Nign*" (The Homeless Nigun), which expresses his feeling of displacement because of the war. This nigun is often sung in Modzitzer synagogues during the Neilah service on *Yom Kippur*, the most emotionally intense prayer of the entire year.

The Divrei Yisroel represented an extraordinary amalgam of exegetical acumen and musical affinity. His commentary on the Torah, *Sefer Divrei Yisroel* (Lublin 1901–1930), which gave him his appellation, includes a passage that delves into the spiritual dimension of the musical scale. This text is an example of a Hasidic approach to music theory that examines musical themes through the lens of Hasidic spirituality (compare Ben Moshe 2014; Mazor 2002; Schleifer in Vinaver 1985; Seroussi 2019). His example demonstrates how one contribution of Modzitz to

16 I have heard variations of this point from several people in the Modzitz community.

the broader corpus of Hasidic literature centers on an understanding of music as part of the spiritual architecture of reality as experienced by Hasidim.

The Divrei Yisroel passed away in 1920. Although it is customary in Hasidic dynasties for the eldest son to succeed the Rebbe, in this instance, leadership passed to his fourth son, Rabbi Shaul Yedidya Elazar Taub. Despite his younger position in the family, The Imrei Shaul (as he became known) was widely regarded as a Torah prodigy and, like his father, was considered especially suited for leadership due in part to his exceptional musical talents. Within the Modzitz Hasidic tradition, liturgical prayer is characterized by an elaborate nusaḥ, a traditional recitative style performed by the cantor. The Imrei Shaul had achieved mastery of this intricate form, particularly in the chanting of the *Malkhuyot*, *Zikhronot*, and *Shofarot* sections of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy. Moreover, he was an accomplished composer, ultimately producing more music than any of his predecessors and arguably more than any Hasidic composer before him. Contemporary followers estimate his total musical output to number close to 1,000 compositions (Berger 2016).

Among the Imrei Shaul's pieces are his "operas," lengthy nigunim comprising several "movements." The first of these pieces was sung in 1920; the Hasidim, astounded by the work's complexity, exclaimed, "That's not a nigun, it's an opera!" The term stuck. Hasidim have thus sought to distinguish these pieces from the simple melodic style generally associated with the term "nigun," turning to the language of European art music to do so.[17]

17 The discourse regarding Modzitz music is replete with comparisons to European classical music; indeed, Modzitz music has been set for classical music ensembles on numerous occasions. Rabbi Ben-Zion Gold, who immigrated from Poland to America and served from 1958 until 1990 as the head of Hillel at Harvard University, observed, "At home we sang the Shabbat *zemirot* [songs sung during Sabbath meals] to the tune of Modzitz melodies. Before I went away to the yeshiva, I hardly knew any other nigunim. Years later when I began to listen to classical music, I realized that I had been prepared for it by Modzhits nigunim" (Gold 2007: 113).

Initially, the Imrei Shaul led the dynasty from Rakov, where he had been living prior to his father's death. Later, he moved to Karczev, and in 1928 moved to the nearby town of Otwock, which was the home to a vibrant Jewish community (Nathan 1988).[18] In Otwock, the Imrei Shaul established a Modzitzer yeshiva, Tiferes Yisroel, and began a publication called *Kuntres Maamarim* that included the Rebbe's teachings on the Torah (Wyszkowski 2010: 8). The Rebbe's singing on the Sabbath distinguished the yeshiva as a destination for travelers to the region.

The following excerpt, written by the distinguished folklorist and cantor Menachem Kipnis, conveys the experience of hearing the Imrei Shaul lead the music at the third Sabbath meal before sunset in Otwock:[19]

> When I entered the Rebbe's home, I felt as though transported to another world. In all the surrounding houses, lights already shone. Shabbat was already over, and only the Rebbe's home remained veiled in a curtain of darkness where hundreds of shadowy forms moved, bumping into the walls of the Rebbe's *Bet Midrash*.
>
> "Sssshhhhhh," people outside whispered, "ssshhhh, be quiet!" And through the open windows and doors of the Bet Midrash a wonderful voice could be heard, a tenor, spilling lyric tones […] The Modzitz style ignited the imagination […] just as somewhere, among the mountains of the east, someone created a hymn to the Creator, as though 'finding' it on his flute, and finding it filled with longing… hundreds of Hasidim joined the singing of this fiery nigun, until the atmosphere felt charged, as though the air, the house, the very trees

18 Wyszkowski (2010: 7) lists slightly different years for these moves. He states that the Imrei Shaul lived in Rakov from 1917-1924, Kortchev from 1924-1929, and Otwock from 1929- 1939. Otwock was also an important hub for Lubavitcher Hasidim. In 1936, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, moved to Otwock with many of his followers before ultimately fleeing to America.

19 This account is found in Meir Shimon Geshuri's *Neginah VeḤasidut b'veit Kuzmir u'Venoteha*. This translation can be found in Shmuel Barzilai's Chassidic Ecstasy in Music (2009: 197–200).

> and the Beit Midrash moved too, and were moved by this atmosphere. With each motif of the nigun, the atmosphere became more electric, as did the wonderment, the souls warming with Hasidic fervor, with Chassidic ecstasy.
>
> "This is the Rebbe's new nigun, just recently composed," I hear the Hasidim seated at an outdoor table whispering. If this indeed is the creation of the Rebbe—so I think to myself—then he is truly a great composer, one of the very few with such abilities in the field of Chassidic music, as music involves both song and words, and this is far better than the melodies we hear at *Habimah*."

The Imrei Shaul stood out among Hasidic Rebbes for his outspoken love of the Land of Israel at a time in which Zionism was largely discouraged by many of the most important Hasidic leaders in Europe. The Imrei Shaul visited Mandatory Palestine three times, and, in his teachings, he emphasized the importance of settling the Land of Israel. The Imrei Shaul greatly desired to move there from Poland, but World War II interrupted this plan. Instead, upon the outbreak of the war, he was forced to flee the Nazis, traveling the globe from Vilna to Russia to Japan. In Soviet Lithuania, the Imrei Shaul played an important role in saving an important institution of European Orthodoxy. In conversation with a group of Russian officers, he sought their favor by praising the Russian belief in socialism, telling them that the Torah was consistent with socialist values. In this regard, he mentioned practices such as the giving of tithes and priestly gifts, and the agricultural laws that required leaving crops for the poor. Impressed, the Russian officers helped the Imrei Shaul obtain an exit visa, which opened the door to the first transit visas for the Mir yeshiva, which, alongside the efforts of the Japanese consul in Kovno, Chiune Sempo Sugihara, helped the yeshiva and its students survive the war (Nathan 1988).[20]

20 See Wyskowski 2010 for the full story of the Imrei Shaul's flight from the Nazis, and Sugihara 2001 for a thorough study of Chiune Sugihara's contributions to helping Jews to secure visas to Japan during World War II.

The Imrei Shaul recognized the threat that the war posed not only to the Hasidim themselves but also to the nigun repertoire that they held in their minds and hearts. He thus took the unusual step of recruiting help to transcribe Modzitz nigunim in music notation, beginning a musical preservation project that would continue for the rest of his life.[21] In 1940, he arrived in San Francisco with a small group of family members.[22] He spent the Sabbath in Seattle, Washington, holding a tish that was hosted by Moshe Genauer. From there, he traveled to New York, where he settled in Brooklyn.

On the first Shabbos that the Imrei Shaul spent in Brooklyn, October 12–13, 1940, he was invited to a tish in his honor at a synagogue in Williamsburg. Shenker described his reminiscences of that evening in a presentation to Project Witness[23] in February 2016:

> I was then a youngster, fifteen-and-a-half years old, and together with my father and older brother, *aleyhem hasholoym* [Peace be upon them], walked in from Bedford-Stuy where we lived, to be at the Rebbe's first Friday night tish in the Clymer Street shul, also known as the Brisker shul, in Williamsburg. And together with hundreds of Yidn [Jews] who came to greet the first Hasidishe rebbe who fortunately managed to escape the *gehenom* [hell] that Poland subsequently turned into with the extermination of at least ninety percent of the Jewish citizens. Interestingly, the rov [Rabbi] of the shul, HaRav Levi Yitzchak Kahane, in his weekly *drosho* [exegetical speech]—you have

21 The YIVO archives mention that some of the notation was completed by a Jewish choral conductor named Duramashkin. I take this to be Akiva Durmashkin, a cantor and conductor who had studied at the Odessa Conservatory and was the father of three accomplished musicians, Henia, Fania, and Wolf (Brown 2020: 288).

22 The Imrei Shaul was among the first Hasidic Rebbes to reach America during the war. The sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, who also fled Otwock in September 1939, arrived about six months prior. After transiting through Germany, Latvia, and Sweden, he arrived in New York on March 19, 1940.

23 An organization dedicated to Holocaust education in the Orthodox Jewish community.

> to remember this was *poroshas Noyakh* , and the Rebbe's family name was *Taub* [Yiddish for dove]—the Rav greeted the Rebbe's arrival in America by quoting from the parsha:
>
> *Veloy motzo hayoyno manoyakh lekhaf raglo*, "And the dove could not find a resting place for the sole of his foot," referring to the Rebbe and all his travails until he arrived there, and concluded with his brokho that the Rebbe, the dove, the *toyb*—in Yiddish, a *taub* is a dove—will, *b'ezras Hashem Yisboyrakh* [with the help of the blessed God], finally find rest and solace, will be a *yoyno motzo manoyakh* [dove who has found his rest] in this wonderful country blessed by *Hashem Yisborakh* [the blessed God].

Following this experience, Shenker would sometimes walk to Williamsburg to attend the Rebbe's *tish*. When, several months later, it was announced that The Rebbe planned to spend Shabbos in Shenker's home neighborhood of Bedford Stuyvesant, the teen was eager to attend:

> There was a shul there with a lot of *Poylishe Yidn* [Polish Jews].[24] That Shabbos morning after davening we went over to say "good Shabbos." The Rebbe said we looked familiar because he'd seen us at his *Melaveh Malkas*.[25] We'd never spoken but he recognized our faces. So he invited my father to come to the meal by his *ba'al akhsanya* [host]. My father instructed us to go make *Kiddush* [recite the Sabbath prayer over wine] for my mother and then come back and *bentsh* [say the grace after meals] by the Rebbe.

24 Elsewhere Shenker has referred to this synagogue as the Van Buren Street Shul.

25 Lit., "Escorting the Queen," a light meal accompanied by singing on Saturday night following the departure of the Sabbath.

> When I went back, I sat on a little sofa behind the Rebbe and found a sefer [book] called *LaKhasidim Mizmoyr*, written by someone name Geshuri.[26] It was put out in 1935 and contained material on *negina* [music]. This guy was a *shtikel* [a little bit of a] musician and wrote music. The book also had a little biography of the Rebbe and other Rebbes who were *menagnim* [singers]. So I started reading the Rebbe's biography and found the music to one of his nigunim and started singing very low to myself. The Rebbe turned around and looked me over. I was 15, but didn't even look my age. "You can read notes?" He asked. "A little," I said. "Let me hear." So I started going through every page. (Frankfurter 2015: 67)
>
> And they were his nigunim that were in this book. And he was flabbergasted that a kid that young could [read music]. So then he asked me to sing on my own *Shir Hamaaloys* [Song of Ascents, Psalm 126] by the end of the meal …. I sang a nigun that I'd heard from a Lubavitcher who came from Europe. Lubavitch had a yeshiva in the same town where the Rebbe lived…. This fellow taught me a nigun that the Modzitzer Rebbe made in Poland at that time, and I sang that for Shir Hamaaloys. And the Rebbe couldn't believe that the nigun had made it to America already, because it was something that he'd made in the last couple of months, you know? At that time I was so nervous singing it that I was speeding up. I started off slow and I started speeding it up. When I finished, the Rebbe told me, "I gotta tell you something." He said, "When you sing a nigun, you gotta sing it like a clock: Tick, tock, tick, tock. Not like a train: Choo-choo-choo-choo [quickly accelerating in tempo]." He gave me a whole lesson! (Netsky 2012)

Shenker's budding relationship with the Imrei Shaul reflected the transnational flow of Hasidim and their music during this tumultuous time in Jewish history.

26 For biographical information, as well as an analysis of Meir Shimon Geshuri's scholarship, see Seroussi and Turgeman, 2020.

That the Imrei Shaul could compose a nigun in Otwock, send it to America with a Lubavitcher, where it would be memorized by an American-born teenager, while the Modzitzer Rebbe himself traveled the globe in search of safety, is a remarkable example of the complex routes that Jewish music traveled during World War II. Simultaneously, Meir Shimon Geshuri's work on Hasidic nigunim (carried out in Mandatory Palestine but based on his experiences in Poland) reached America shortly after its publication and was being read by Hasidic Jews there, further spreading the repertoire.

Shenker began regularly attending the Imrei Shaul's *Melaveh Malkah* gatherings on Saturday nights and morning prayer services at the small synagogue that he established in Williamsburg. As the relationship between the Rebbe and Shenker developed, the Imrei Shaul began to ask Shenker to transcribe nigunim for him in musical notation, continuing the music preservation efforts that he had started in Poland when the war began. Previously, the Imrei Shaul kept track of his compositions, in addition to those composed by the previous Modzitzer rebbes and their Hasidim, entirely in his mind. Shenker was well equipped for the task, having studied with Seymour Silbermintz and Joshua Weisser. When the Rebbe composed a piece that was particularly challenging to notate, for example, because of its fast coloraturas (a hallmark of his style), Shenker would call in Weisser to transcribe the piece. Weisser would continue this nigun preservation through his work with the Chabad-Lubavitch branch, notating the music that became the first volume of Chabad's *Sefer Hanigunim* (Brooklyn, 1948).[27] Weisser's formatting, down to the style of his Hebrew script, became the standard for transcribing nigunim at this time and was subsequently a model that Shenker copied.[28]

Shenker was impressed by the Rebbe's musical talents, but he was also impressed by his self-confidence, walking the streets of Brooklyn in full Hasidic garb. On one occasion, Shenker recalled, the Imrei Shaul walked to a celebratory kiddush

27 For an analysis of Sefer Hanigunim, see Koskoff 2000: 79-83

28 Weisser himself had published Modziter nigunim already in 1943. See Seroussi 2020: 126–7.

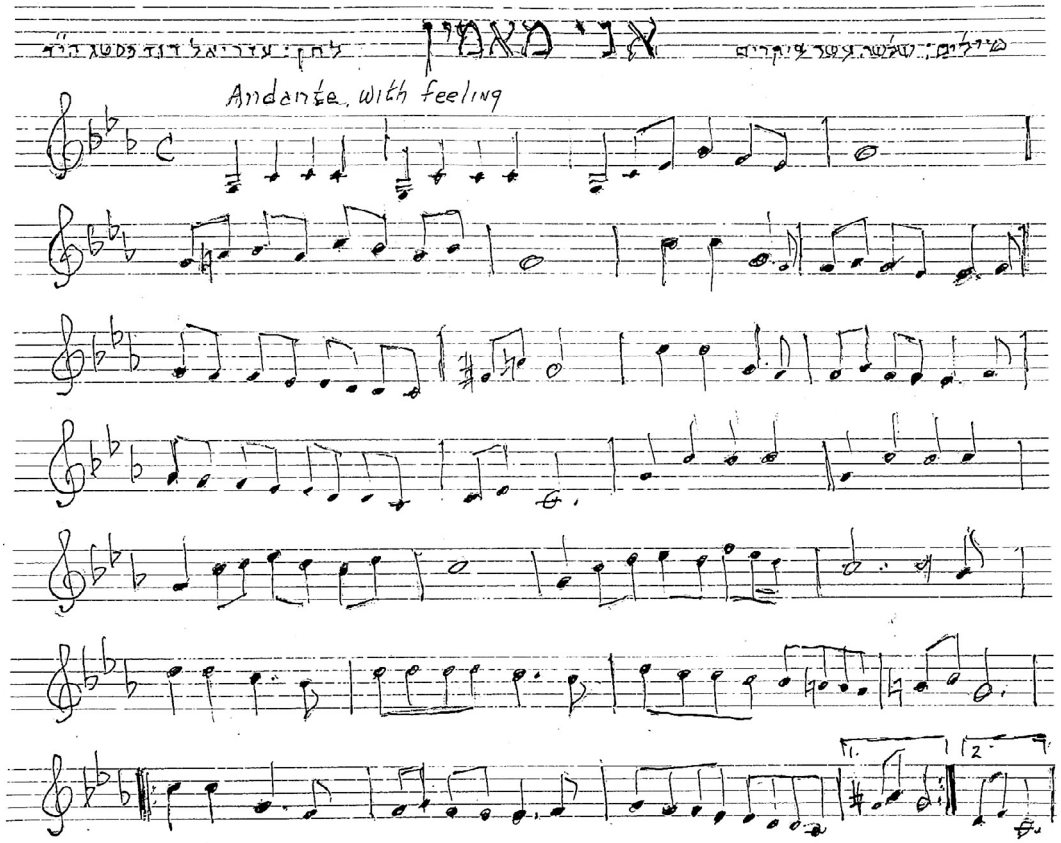
[light meal following the Saturday morning prayer service]: "He walked out with his *shtrayml* and his white socks, which was very daring but he did it anyway [...] Other rebbeim [rabbis] I know would not do it. Maybe because he had just come from Europe, and there was no problem walking out in Otwock with a shtreimel […] Even in Warsaw it wouldn't have been a problem."

As mentioned, Shenker described himself as "musical secretary" to the Rebbe. In his estimation, during the six years that the Imrei Shaul lived in America, he composed approximately one hundred new nigunim, which Shenker transcribed. Additionally, the Rebbe relied on Shenker for other musical needs, as is evidenced by an incident involving one of the best-known pieces of Hasidic music, "*Ani Maamin*" by Azriel Dovid Fastag. Shenker told the story at the aforementioned Project Witness event:

> In the Spring of 1945, there was a bris of a grandchild of the Rebbe, to which he invited a number of notables, people who he was close to, like the Kapitshnitzer Rebbe, the Stoliner Rebbe, Rav Zalmanovitch, the rov of the Polishe shtibel in Williamsburg, who was a *talmid* of the Sokotchover [...] and particularly Rav Yitzhak Hutner, the Roysh Yeshiva of Yeshiva*s* Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin. […] The Rebbe invited them all up to his private quarters, and as he was going up he also motioned to me to join them. I was startled. I couldn't imagine why he would want me there at this particular time. However, in the course of his conversation with us, he mentioned that he had just received a letter from Zurich, Switzerland, from a member of the Fastag family. They were known to be Modzitzer Hasidim for many generations. The letter described a very poignant but tragic story from Azriel Dovid Fastag, *Hashem yikoym damoy* [May God avenge his blood], on a cattle freight train traveling from Warsaw on its way to the infamous extermination camp, Treblinka. He sang together with the hopeless, hapless yidn [Jews] his song that he composed for the Ani Maamin [the

principle of faith by Maimonides]. "*Ani maamin be'emuno sheleymo bevias hamoshiakh,veaf al pi shyismahmeyha, im kol ze, akhake loy bekhol yoym sheyovoy"* "I believe with complete faith in the coming of Moshiach. And even though he may delay, nevertheless I anticipate every day that he will eventually arrive." The letter also stated that after Azriel sang together with this pitiful group being transported to their sure slaughter, he announced that if anybody should manage to escape from this train, I beg of you to learn the nigun and make sure to somehow have it reach his Rebbe, who is now safe in America. The Rebbe then handed over to me the sheet with the musical notation on it, and said, "Ben Zion, *leyn* [read]." He told me to read [i.e. sing the notation], which of course I did. I can truly say that there was no dry eye in the room as a result. […] The story doesn't end over here. The Rebbe, as a result, became the biggest exponent of the nigun, and he would sing it at every occasion possible. I remember that sometime in 1945, Lubavitch opened a yeshiva. […] They arranged for a Melaveh Malkah to celebrate the opening of the yeshiva, and they invited the Modzitzer Rebbe, *zikhroynoy livrokho* [may his memory be for a blessing]. […] The Rebbe accepted the invitation, and he made it his business to speak about the "Ani Maamin" and sing it for the audience. I remember it very vividly.[29]

29 Many questions remain about this nigun, and further research is needed to address them. Here, I will simply note that M.S. Geshuri's transcription of "Ani Maamin" differs from the manner in which it is sung today, including the way that Shenker himself sang the piece. I once asked Shenker about this, and he replied that he did not know where Geshuri got this incorrect version of the piece. Shenker appeared certain that he remembered the way that he had seen it notated when he first encountered the piece.



["Ani Maamin" by Azriel Dovid Fastag, handwritten by Ben Zion Shenker. Reprinted courtesy of Velvel and Aidel Newmark from the Shenker family's private collection]

Fastag's "Ani Maamin" achieved iconic status, serving "to shape popular memory of historical events accordingly" (Gilbert 2008: 121). For the Modzitzer community, the composition is not merely a collective song of "spiritual resistance" but a link to a specific individual—Fastag—who was a member of their community and a composer of several works that entered the Modzitz canon. Thus, the piece represents pre-rupture Modzitz life in Europe, providing a poignant connection with the community and its destruction. That Shenker was the first to sing this song to the Modzitzer Rebbe demonstrates the central place that the young man was beginning to assume within the Modzitz dynasty.

Reflections

Since the very early days of Hasidism, transmission has been a central and highly valued tenet of the community. As Samuel Heilman (2017: 10–13) has shown, the transmission of a Rebbe's teachings, leadership style, and holiness historically constitutes an important consideration in Hasidic leadership succession. As we see from the above account, the musical transmission of a Hasidic dynasty's repertoire is similarly important for the community. This applies not only to Modzitz, where music is particularly emphasized, but also many other Hasidic communities, where efforts to preserve and transmit nigunim were seen as important, particularly in the midst of World War II. Hasidic leaders understood the danger posed by the war, which threatened Hasidic expressive culture, not only Hasidic lives. These nigunim were not preserved as museum pieces but were recorded in writing to ensure the continuation of the dynasty and the memory of its leaders, and so that the nigunim could continue to be sung in service of God.

As the Imrei Shaul fled the Nazis, he continued his campaign to notate nigunim. When he finally arrived in Brooklyn, his hopes for a more consistent way of preserving the nigunim were realized when he met fifteen-year-old Ben Zion Shenker. The relationship was mutually beneficial, as Shenker was given access to a respected Hasidic leader in a way that was unusual for a teenager who was not a close relative. Shenker's access to the Rebbe, of course, was facilitated by the musical training he had received until that point, some of which, such as Weisser's choir, had been controversial within his immediate circles. Put differently, Shenker's experiences outside of the community provided the Rebbe with a skillset that was otherwise unavailable to him.

Shenker expressed a lifelong sense of gratitude to the Imrei Shaul and the Modzitzer community. Until his final days, Shenker worked to support Modzitz institutions by giving of his time, money, and, primarily, his musical skills. Yet,

he always felt that he should give more to Modzitz. An example was cited to me by Aaron Orlander, who discussed the Modzitzer Rebbe's visit to Boro Park over Shabbos in February 2016. Some had questioned if it was wise for Shenker, who was ninety years old, to undertake the challenge of uprooting from his home and staying in someone else's house so that he could accompany the Rebbe throughout the Sabbath. Shenker explained to Orlander, "I owe it to Modzitz. Because without Modzitz I would look completely different... Modzitz turned me into a mentsch."

Shenker was certain that Modzitz gave his life meaning. According to his family members, Shenker believed that had he not met the Rebbe, he likely would have become a composer of Yiddish theater songs or been among the many Jews composing on Tin Pan Alley. Instead, he helped to develop a sacred repertoire that is highly respected in Hasidic society, which he believed to be a better use of his musical abilities. Notably, while both Tin Pan Alley and Yiddish theater had ceased to be major musical forces in New York by the time Shenker began composing, the family's framing shows Shenker's thinking concerning the paths open to a Jewish composer in New York.

Shenker recognized the significance of his place in the chain of transmission of Modzitzer nigunim, but he occupied that position with humility. Rabbi Dovid Bick, one of Shenker's closest students, noted this deference to Modzitz:

> It's *mamesh* [literally] outstanding that such a genius, such a big person, should be able to be *makhnia* [to subjugate himself] to a Rebbe. […] Usually, when a person gets himself [to a certain level of achievement], he forgets from where he got his *khinukh* [education, upbringing], where he got his identity. But until his last day he was mamesh a [humble person].

Rabbi Bick went on to mention Shenker's behavior at the *yahrzeit se'udot,* the musical events commemorating the past Modzitzer Rebbes:

> At the *yortsaytn*, he *kimat* [nearly] never sang one of his nigunim. […] In the later years he started a little bit, but mamesh a little bit. Usually, he only sang the Rebbe's *zakhn* [lit. things i.e. musical works], and even the [nigunim by] other Hasidim. He used to sing [nigunim] from other Hasidim, but not from his [...] And he had so many good, good, good things [pieces]. And he was like, 'I'm on the side.' I think he felt like he has a mission here. He has to give over to the younger generations. He was, like, the bridge. And this is a very big thing for a big person like him.

According to Rabbi Bick, Shenker's commitment to Modzitz went well beyond model Hasidic citizenship and represented gratitude for the role that he had been able to play in the transmission of the Modzitz repertoire. This devotion is evident as well in the following anecdote. Shenker was in possession of a copy of the "Vilna Notes," a collection of Modzitz nigunim that was part of the preservation project undertaken by the Imrei Shaul. Gradually, Shenker recorded himself singing the entire collection with the aid of a handheld recorder. At the end of the last recording, he said, in Yiddish:

> With this, I finish a project that I started a few years ago. I never counted how many songs there are here, but there are a few hundred songs that I recorded. One may deepen himself in this and put different emotions and nuances into it. The main thing is that we want to preserve these songs for generations to come, and that's why we are invested in this, and we hope that in future generations when we won't be around, people will continue the golden chain of Modzitzer nigunim, and the nigunim will be famous in the world, [even] the ones that people don't know yet. There are still many songs that people don't know yet, and we can still publicize them. And hopefully a time will come when people will listen to these nigunim, and people will be inspired the same way we were inspired in our days.

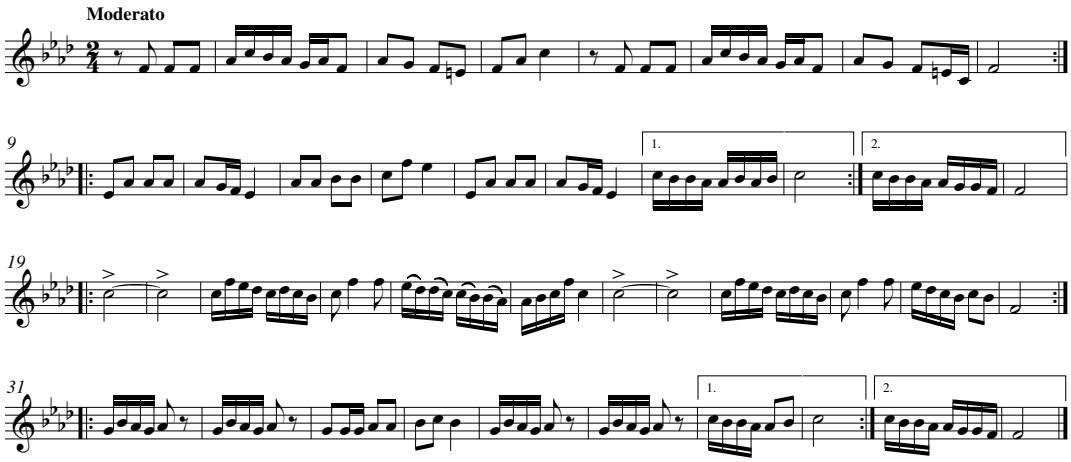
Shenker saw himself as an interpreter and also a mediator of Modzitz music. Notably, he felt that he had no monopoly on the performance, as another singer could "put different emotions and nuances into it." Thus, from Shenker's point of view, it was as a steward, not an authority, that he had dedicated himself to securing a future for Modzitzer nigunim.

CHAPTER 3:
BECOMING A COMPOSER OF NIGUNIM

Inspired by the music of the Modzitz synagogue, Shenker began writing his own nigunim at approximately the age of fifteen. While he had dabbled in composition in his lessons with Seymour Silbermintz, Shenker's early nigunim show a grounding in the Modzitz style rather than the Western Classical music style that marked his work with Silbermintz. Shenker's first nigunim demonstrate melodic development over the course of several stanzas, which is a feature of Modzitz nigunim. His first piece *"Nigundl"* [Little Nigun] begins in F minor, and, like many nigunim, is generally structured around four bar phrases.[30] Here the first phrase begins by establishing the tonic and rhythmic feel of the piece with its silent first beat (in performance this would likely be marked with a tap on the table). It is easy to imagine that, with this opening, Shenker had in mind the Imrei Shaul's lesson about the importance of maintaining a steady tempo. The first half of the initial *fal* (a musical section in Hasidic terminology) ends on the fifth scale degree, and it is followed by a nearly identical four-bar phrase that resolves with a cadence that dips down to the low fifth degree before resolving the tonic. The next fal marks a shift in tonality, moving to the relative major of A♭ but maintaining the steady eighth-note feel that underlies the piece, as well as the four-bar phrase structure established in the first stanza. Here, too, the initial phrase ends on the fifth degree and is answered

30 Seroussi and Mazor note that the term "nigndl" has a special meaning within the Modzitz community: "Modzhitz Hasidim use it to refer to tunes with special musical qualities, resembling the characteristics of ניגוני שמחה, such as moderate and even fast tempo, light and joyous mood, and mostly tripartite structure (ABC)" (1990: 136). In a handwritten collection of his notation, Shenker listed this piece as his second composition, but he later moved it to the first position.

by a very similar phrase. However, this time the first ending indicates a shift back toward the F minor as it lands on C, inviting a playful ambiguity, as the listener can hear this as the fifth degree of F but also the major third of A♭. The second ending, however, completes the shift back to F minor with a descending phrase that ends on the tonic. Here the intensity level increases, with a declamatory held note on the fifth (sometimes referred to as a "signal") that leads into the next stanza. These held notes contrast with the quick sixteenth notes that follow in the next phrase, which, following the patterns established previously, end on the dominant. Here Shenker includes another held note to begin the next phrase, this time on C, instead of the high tonic, followed by a phrase similar to the preceding one, this time landing on the low tonic. Based on the conventions of the nigun genre, one might expect the piece to end here. However, like many Modzitz pieces, instead it proceeds to another musical section. Here a pattern of four sixteenth notes followed by an eighth note and an eighth rest creates a short theme that forms the basis for this stanza. Like the second stanza, this can be heard as modulating to the relative major, with the first ending hinting at a shift back to F minor, which is solidified in the second ending.

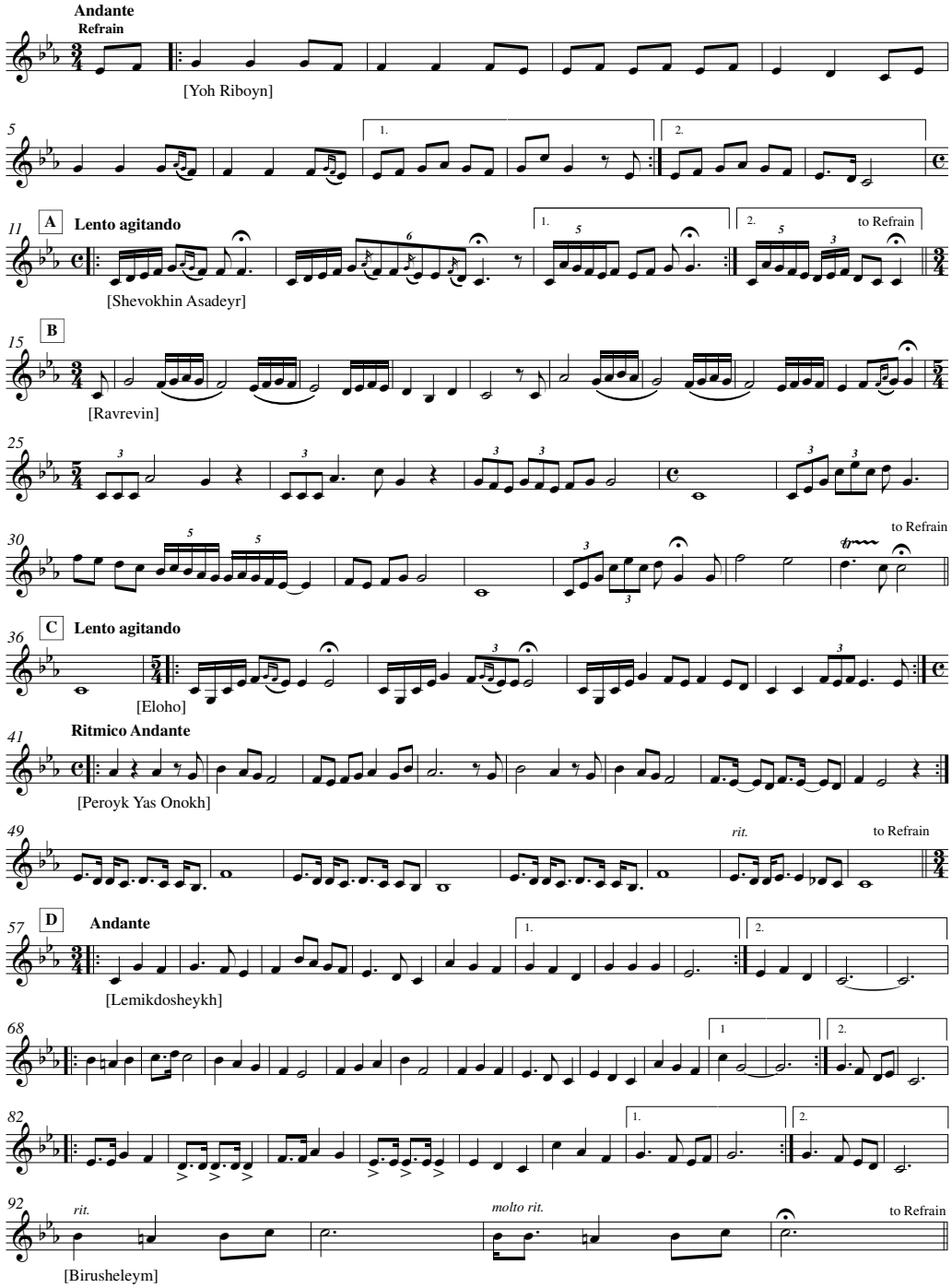


["Nigundl," composed in 5701 (1940-41)]

This was certainly not Shenker's most elaborate piece, yet we can see that, even in these early days of composition, he created multiple stanzas that cohered through commonalities in their rhythmic structure and melodic motion. Moreover, his inclusion of an additional and unexpected stanza showed compositional ambition. According to Aaron Orlander, the piece is squarely in the style of Modzitz: "The first nigun he composed sounds exactly like Reb Shaul … That's a real *Modzitzer* nigun." Clearly, the young Shenker sought to situate himself in the musical and social lineage of the Modzitz composers who had preceded him. "Nigundl" is a tantalizing glimpse into the musical legacy that would follow.

Shenker's compositions quickly became increasingly sophisticated. The sixth piece in his collection is a setting of a *piyyut* by Rabbi Yisrael Najara (c.1550–c.1625), "*Yo Riboyn*" (God, Ruler), which is often sung around the Sabbath eve table. The work begins with a slow, simple refrain in triple meter that stays within a small range of just a fifth. The verses shift to a series of fast and dramatic vocal lines with sustained notes at the end of each phrase. After several alternations between flowing recitative style sections and more metric stanzas, the piece settles into a metric waltz that changes melody in each stanza. Whereas many settings of the Sabbath table song repertoire feature an alternating refrain-stanza musical pattern, the practice of introducing new melodies for each verse is a feature of the Modzitz canon for long texts such as this one.[31] Notably, Shenker used Italian tempo indications, showing his familiarity with classical music notation conventions but also his view of his composition as possessing features common within the classical music idiom. His personal copy of the notation includes a few words at the beginning of each stanza to mark where each verse of the poetry should begin, and leaves to the reader to fill in the text. While this may prove challenging to a performer reading the piece today, it is an indication that this notation was likely intended to be a guide for Shenker himself. As a teenager,

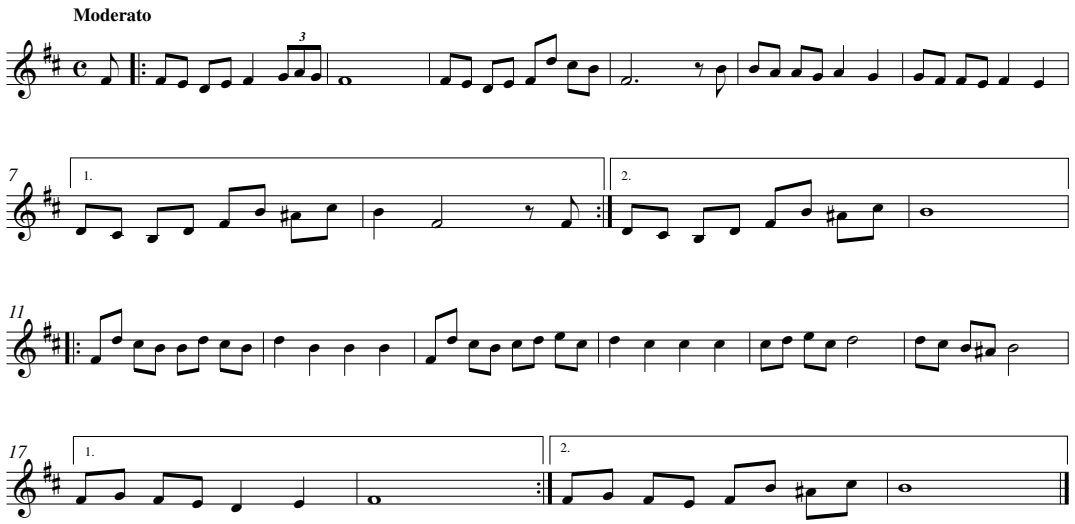
31 A popular example is a Modzitz melody that is commonly sung to the Sabbath table song "*Barukh Kel Elyon,*" which Shenker recorded to the piyyut "*Hakoyl Yoydukho*."



["Yoh Riboyn," composed in 5702 (1941-42)]

the young composer likely never imagined the value others would attribute to his works, or that they would attempt to perform them based on the score.

Even Shenker's early works include several that would become world-famous. "*Hamavdil,*" only the seventh piece he composed, is sung by Jews across the globe and ranks among his best-known pieces. Shenker explained that while walking one day with his close friend, Rabbi Moshe Wolfson (1925–2024),[32] he shared the song—which initially was wordless. Rabbi Wolfson suggested that the piece fit the text of "Hamavdil," a piyyut sung following the conclusion of the Sabbath. The music and words came together seamlessly. Decades later, the work became internationally famous when it was released on a commercial recording, as described below.

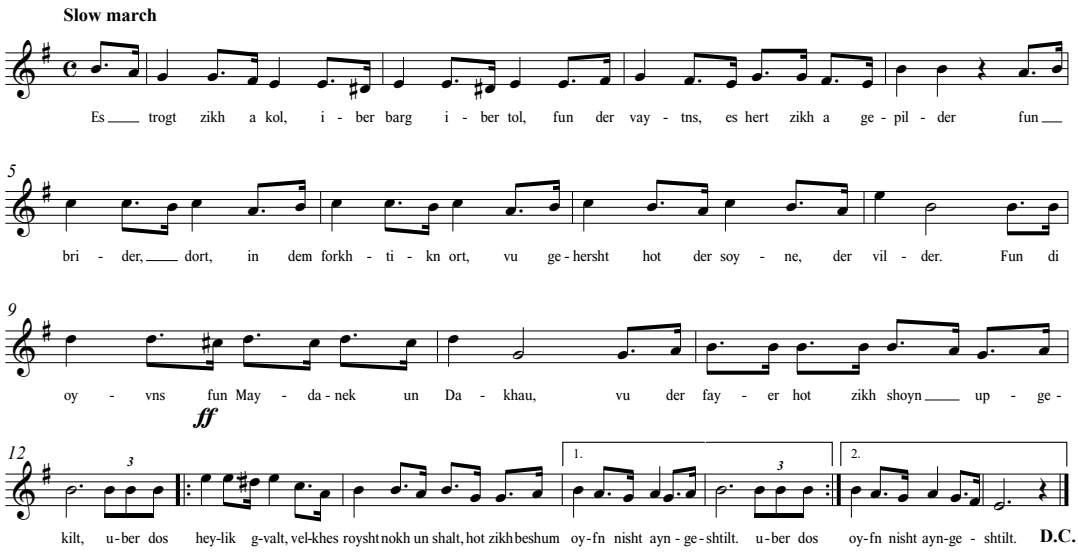


["Hamavdil," composed in 5703 (1942-43)]

Not long after, Shenker and Wolfson collaborated on a piece in Yiddish titled *"Dos Kol Fun Di Kdoyshim"* [The Voice of the Martyrs]. The young men were inspired to compose this piece upon hearing the tales of the Holocaust survivors then arriving in Brooklyn. Driven by a steady rhythmic phrase, the music has

32 Rabbi Moshe Wolfson would go on to become the *mashgiaḥ ruḥani* [spiritual guide to the students] of Yeshivas Torah Vodaath and the rabbi of the Emunas Yisroel community in Brooklyn.

a march-like, almost militaristic, feel that is reminiscent of partisan songs. The emotional lyrics, written by Rabbi Wolfson, should be read in the context of the post-Holocaust atmosphere as experienced in Brooklyn. The text pleads with the listener—the American Jew—to take up the mantle of responsibility for observing and transmitting the Torah within the context of the slaughter of European Jewry. Brimming with biblical references and messianic zeal, the piece insists that the Jews who did not perish in the Holocaust have a duty to serve God with increased fervor, thus endowing the death of the martyrs with meaning. Using the metaphor of a voice that travels great distances, the narrative frames the United States as a new center of spiritual life and the pursuit of the messianic era. The song demonstrates the religious responsibility that the two teens felt during the time they spent with the Imrei Shaul in Brooklyn.[33]



["Dos Kol Fun di Kdoyshim," composed in 5706 (1945-46). Lyrics by Rabbi Moshe Wolfson]

33 Rabbis Shenker and Wolfson would go on to collaborate again in 1970 on the song "*Koreyv Yoym*." The song appears on the album "*Mevaser Toyv*;" the Yiddish lyrics can be found in the liner notes.

The Voice of the Martyrs

דאָס קול פֿון די קדושים

A voice carries over mountains and over valleys
From afar we hear a commotion
From brothers over there in that dreadful place
Where the wild enemy reigned,
From the ovens of Majdanek and Dachau,
Where the fire has already cooled.
But the holy cry which still rumbles and thunders
Has not at all died down.

עס טראָגט זיך אַ קול, איבער באַרג איבער טאָל,
פֿון דער ווײַטנס עס הערט זיך אַ געפּילדער,
פֿון ברידער דאָרט אין דעם פֿאָרכטיקן אָרט,
ווו גענהערשט האָט דער שׂונא דער ווילדער,
פֿון די אויוונס פֿון מײַדאַנעק און דאַכוי,
ווו דער פֿײַער האָט זיך שוין אָפּגעקילט,
אָבער דאָס היליק געוואַלד, וועלכעס רוישט נאָך און שאַלט,
האָט זיך בשום-אופֿן נישט אײַנגעשטילט.
(אָבער דאָס אאַז״וו)

They are calling to us with a mournful cry
To brothers in a faraway land,
Hear our plea a before the sun sets
Thoughtfully consider our supplication
It has already been many years and generations
That we have held onto the Torah ourselves
Borne its heavy load, adapted ourselves to it,
And exerted ourselves to better understand it.

צו אונדז רופֿן זיי מיט אַ טרויעריק געשריי,
צו ברידער אין אַ ווײַטער מדינה,
הערט אונדזער געבעט, אײדער די זון פֿאַרגייט,
פֿאַרנעמט מיט געדאַנק אונדזער תּחינה,
שוין פֿילע יאָרן און דורות,
וואָס מיר האַלטן די תּורה אַליין,
געטראָגן איר לאַסט, זיך צו איר צוגעפּאַסט,
און באַמיט זיך איר בעסער צו פֿאַרשטיין.
(געטראָגן אאַז״וו)

The day of weeping and mourning arrived
We marched with pride to the flames
Driven like sheep, we marched to the end
We marched together with the Torah
The fire will consume the holy books
The letters will float away freely
Catch them, place them on parchment
And write them into holy books anew.

איז געקומען דער טאָג פֿון געוויין און פֿון קלאָג,
מיר מאַרשירן מיט שטאָלץ צו די פֿלאַמען,
געטריבן ווי שאָף מיר מאַרשירן צום סוף,
מיר מאַרשירן מיט די תּורה צוזאַמען,
דער פֿײַער וועט פֿאַרלענגן די ספֿרים,
די אותיות וועלן שוועבן פֿרײַ,
כאַפּט זיי אויף, אויף דעם פּאַרמעט אַרויף,
און פֿאַרשרײַבט זיי אין ספֿרים אויף דאָס נײַ.
(כאַפּט זיי אאַז״וו)

When we were locked up in the [gas] chambers, all that we hoped
Was that our death would serve a purpose
A sanctification of God's name on such a large scale
That the world had never experienced
A mission of true self-sacrifice.
We exhort you,
Serve Him in life faithfully and devotedly,
Just as we served Him in death.

אין די קאַמערן פֿאַרשפּאַרט, האָבן מיר בלויז געגאַרט,
אַז אונדזער טויט זאָל זיך האָבן געלוינט,
אַ קידוש-השם, אויף אַזאַ גרויסן פֿאַרנעם,
וואָס דער וועלט האָט נישט בײַגעווויינט,
אַן אמת מסירת-נפֿשדיקע שליחות,
האָבן מיר אײַך אָנגפֿאַרטרויט,
געטרײַ און איבערגעגעבן זאָלט איר דינען מיטן לעבן,
ווי מיר האָבן אים געדינט מיטן טויט.
(געטרײַ אאַז״וו)

Over mountains and over valleys the voice still carries	איבער באַרג איבער טאָל טראָגט זיך נאָך אַלץ דאָס קול,
It insists, it demands, and it calls	עס פֿאָדערט עס פֿאַרלאַנגט און עס רופֿט,
Let us agitate for unity and proclaim an oath—	לאָמיר אחדות אַגיטירן און אַ שבֿועה פּראָקלאַמירן,
Our response should be carried by the wind—	אונדזער ענטפֿער זאָל פֿאַרהילכן די לופֿט,
Our life is dedicated to God	אונדזער לעבן צו ג-ט איז געווידמעט,
To Him we commit our soul	אונדזער זעלע צו אים אָנגעפֿאַרטרויט,
To serve Him with devotion, if possible with life	אים צו דינען איבערגעגעבן אויב ס׳איז מעגלעך מיטן לעבן,
And when necessary, also with death.	און ווען נייטיק ווי אויך מיטן טויט.
	(אים צו אַז״וו)

To pray to Him and hope that through everything that occurred	צו אים מתפלל זיין און האָפֿן אַז דאָס אַלץ וואָס האָט געטראָפֿן,
There should be an end to all the pain	זאָל שוין זיין פֿון די צרות אַן ענדע,
Every heretic will know that the freedom-call of the shofar	זאָל שוין וויסן יעדער כּופֿר אַז דאָס פֿרייַהייטס-רוף פֿון שופֿר,
Is a reality and not just a legend	איז אַ ווירקלעכקייט און נישט קיין לעגענדע,
That the Uppermost chose Yaakov	אַז דער אייבערשטער האָט אויסדערווײלט אין יעקבֿ,
Exactly as was prophesied	אַזוי ווי עס איז פֿון נבֿיא פֿעסטגעשטעלט,
That all the years of exile, of persecution and turmoil,	אַז די אַלע יאָרן גלות פֿון רדיפֿות און בהלות,
Israel suffered only for the sake of the world.	האָט ישׂראל נאָר געליטן פֿאַר דער וועלט.
	(אַז די אַלע אַז״וו)

Over mountains and over valleys, how glorious will be the sound	איבער באַרג איבער טאָל ווי באַטעמט וועט זיין דאָס קול,
Of the footsteps of the news-bearers	פֿון די טריט פֿון די טרעגער פֿון די בשׂורה,
All the trees in the forests, every blade of grass in the fields	אַלע ביימער אין די וועלדער יעדעס גרעזל פֿון די פֿעלדער,
Together they will all sing	צוזאַמען וועלן אַלע זאָגן שירה,
Death will disappear forever	דער טויט וועט פֿאַרשווינדן אויף אייביק,
Faces will be free of tears	אויף קיין פּנים וועט נישט זיין קיין טרער,
The land will be full of Divine understanding	אָנגעפֿילט וועט זיין דאָס לאַנד מיט דאָס געטלעכע פֿאַרשטאַנד,
Like water covers the sea.	ווי די וואַסער וואָס דעקט צו די מער.
	(אָנגעפֿילט אַז״וו)

Around this time, Shenker became friendly with the Rosengarten family, who were Bobover Hasidim.[34] The Rosengartens had relocated from Toronto to Brooklyn, and the boys enrolled in Yeshivas Torah Vodaath, the same school that Shenker attended. They introduced Shenker to Bobover nigunim and, as he later related, this exposure impacted his compositional style: "And they taught me a lot of

34 A Hasidic dynasty that traces its roots back to Rabbi *Shlomo Halberstam* (1847–1905) in Galicia.

Bobov, and I was very influenced by it […] a lot of the compositions that I made in the 40s are direct influences from Bobov." Modzitz nigunim, Shenker continued, were seldom based on liturgical texts, while Bobov songs often were written for a particular text. Shenker's initial experimentation with writing songs for fixed text, which would be a common practice for him later in his life, stemmed largely from his interest in Bobov music.

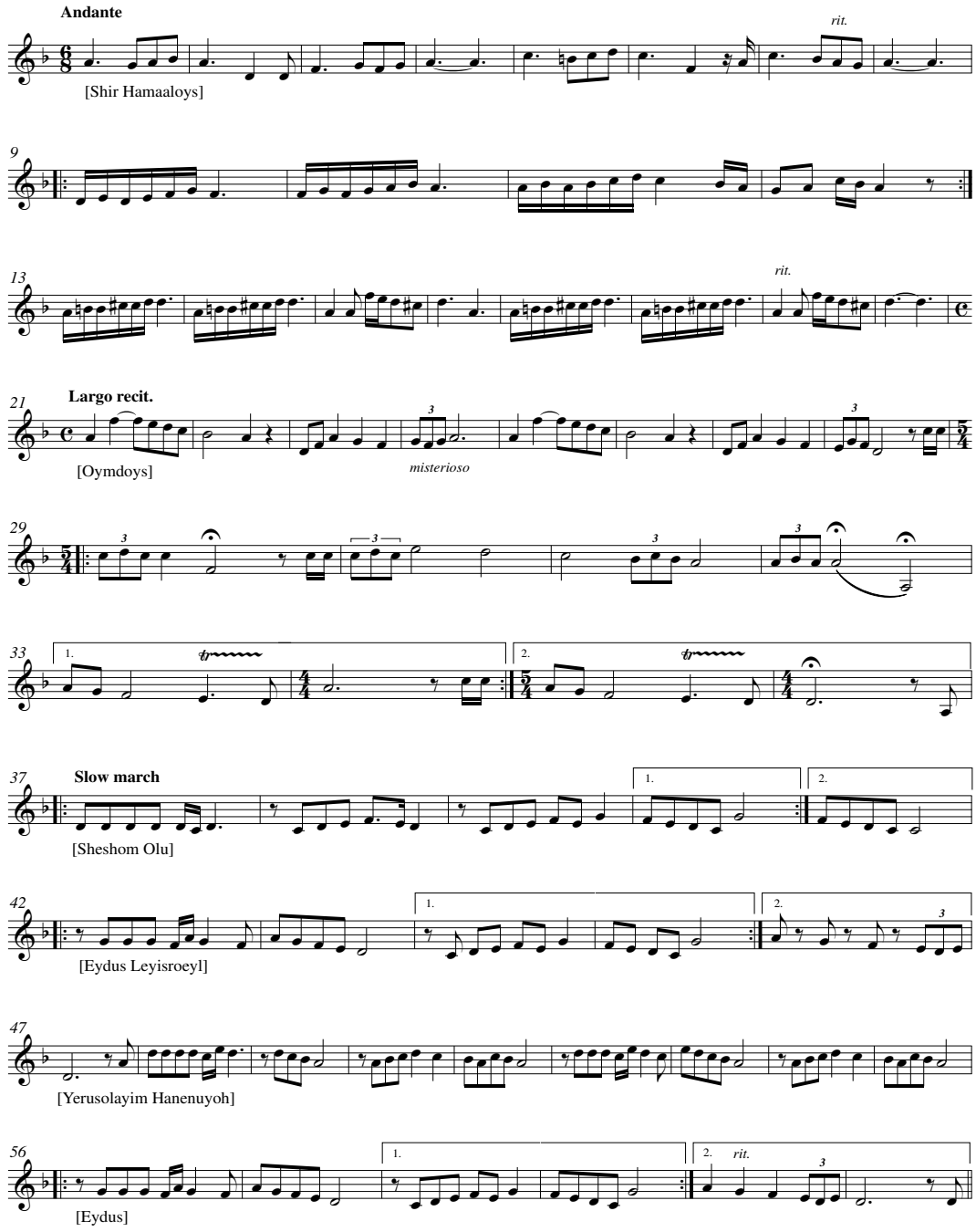
The Rosengarten brothers encouraged Shenker to pursue his musical career. In the summer of 1944 or 1945,[35] he and one of the brothers recorded a piece of music together in a shop in Monticello, New York. A fellow Torah Vodaath student, who would later become one of the most significant (though controversial) figures in Jewish music, came along: Shlomo Carlebach. According to Shenker, at this makeshift recording session in Monticello, Carlebach was too focused on his studies to sing:

> [Carlebach] went along with us to this recording also. He didn't open his mouth. He just sat with a sefer [sacred book] the whole time. [Laughs] That was typical of Shlomo Carlebach at that time. Very typical of him. He didn't even open his mouth. And they expected him to sing, that's why they took him along.

Soon after this, in 1946, Shenker journeyed to Mandatory Palestine with his father. The two planned to visit Mordechai Shenker's brother, who had moved there prior to World War II. On the ship, Shenker composed "*Shir Hamaaloys Ledovid Somakhti*," a setting of Psalm 122, which begins with the words, "I rejoiced when they said unto me, 'Let us go unto the house of the LORD. Our feet are standing within thy gates, O Jerusalem.'" Shenker explained that he would sing this piece on the deck of the ship during the trip, to the delight of his travel companions. One especially noteworthy aspect of this work is its clear grounding in the cantorial recitative style. "Somakhti" is a lengthy through-composed piece

35 Shenker was unsure of the exact year.

with numerous sections, similar to “Yo Riboyn” but even more extended, and includes a wide range of tempos and themes. Like other pieces in the cantorial style, “Somakhti” is highly dramatic, utilizing fast vocal runs and large leaps across its range.



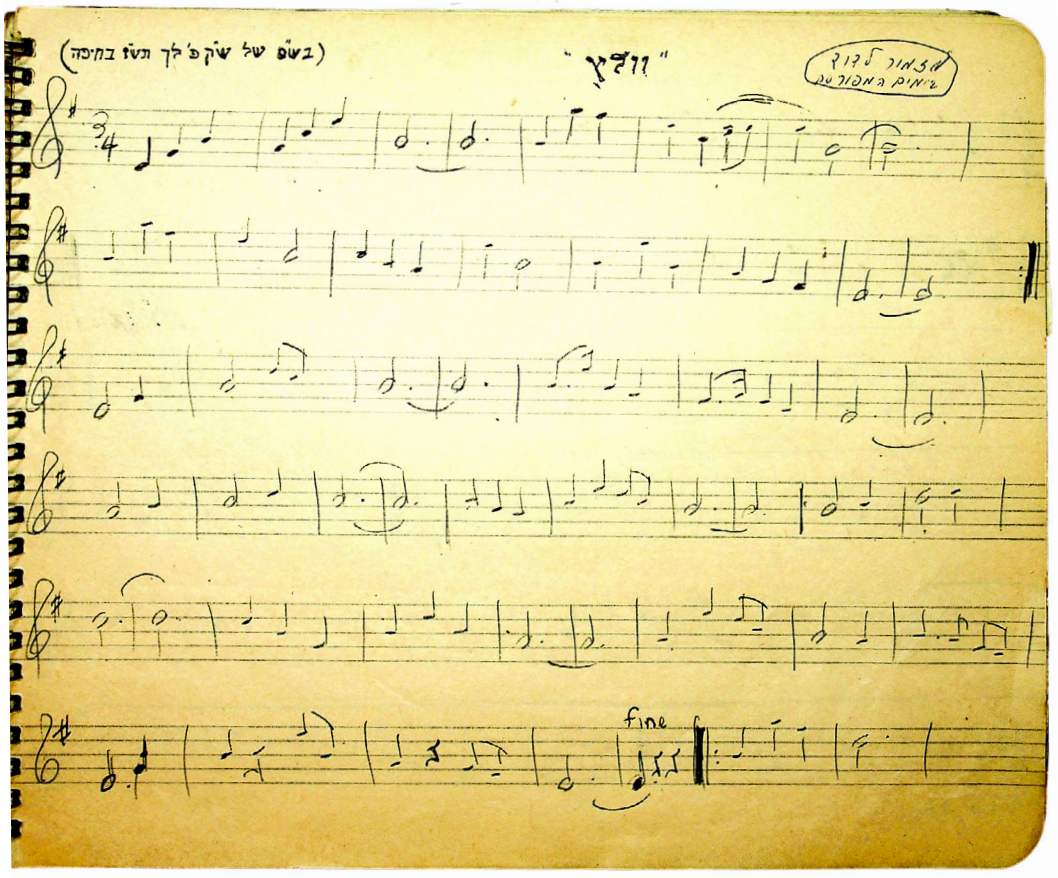
["Shir Hamaaloys Ledovid Somakhti," composed in 5706 (1946)]

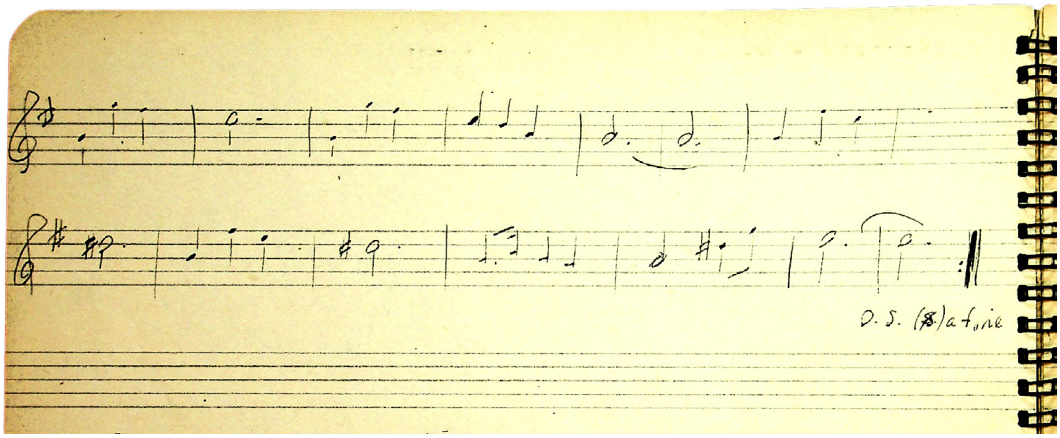
While *ḥazzanut*, cantorial music, was a vital component of Shenker's musical world, he never seriously considered a career in the cantorate. A number of factors contributed to this. First and foremost, Shenker wanted to remain strictly adherent to Jewish law. Many prominent cantors did not maintain a level of religious observance commensurate with that to which Shenker aspired. As Shenker put it, "The only one that was *frum* [religious, i.e. strictly Orthodox] was Rosenblatt. But he was one out of, who knows, twenty or so famous *khazonim* […] So, I was afraid of that, a little bit." Additionally, Shenker objected to repeating words of the liturgy within a synagogue service, a common practice among Golden Age performers of cantorial music. Such repetition might be used to accommodate a contrafact melody, emphasize a particular phrase, or enhance listeners' emotional experience, even though important rabbinical authorities objected to or expressed reservations concerning this practice. As Shenker explained: "You had to repeat words, and I thought that was against *halokho*, actually."[36] Finally, Shenker knew that the vocal abilities of the star *khazonim* were exceptional, and he was concerned that he would not be able to rise to the top of the field: "I never really thought that I could become a great *khazon*. I thought that if you want to become a great *khazon* you really gotta be on the top. As a *baal tefila*, I felt that I was on the top, but as a *khazon*, I don't think that I would have been able to be on the top."

Notably, these reflections were offered some seventy years after composing "Shir Hamaaloys Ledovid Somakhti." While the Golden Age of cantorial music was drawing to a close in the mid-1940s, it still resonated widely, and we cannot know for certain what the young Shenker thought about the cantorate as he journeyed to Mandatory Palestine. We do know, however, that nigunim were on his mind; indeed, he composed several pieces while in Israel on that trip. One of these pieces, "*Mizmoyr Ledovid*," went on to become one of his most famous compositions (Psalm 23). Shenker recalled:

36 For halakhic treatments of repeating words in cantorial music, see, for example, *Arukh HaShulḥan* 338: 8, or *Igrot Moshe*, *Oraḥ Ḥaim* 2: 22.

I was in Erets Yisroeyl. Right after the war my father wanted to go see his brother, whom he hadn't seen since 1921, and decided to take me along. His brother had made aliyah in 1935. I actually composed "Mizmoyr Ledovid" in my uncle's house. One Shabbos I didn't go to shul for *Minkho* because I felt a cold coming on, so I ate *shalosh seudos* at home. I started singing *zemiroys*, and when I got to "Mizmor L'David' *es iz mir ayngefaln* [Yiddish: it stumbled upon me)] something new, and I kept on going. It was still Shabbos so I kept on repeating it and repeating it to myself. I was also able to visualize it in musical notes. (Frankfurter 2015:72)





[Shenker's original handwritten notation for "Mizmoyr Ledovid" found in a notebook titled "BZ's compositions in Eretz Yisroel תש"ו *." The piece is simply titled "Waltz" here, but the title "Mizmoyr ledovid" appears in the top right corner, clearly added later. Reprinted courtesy of Velvel and Aidel Newmark from the Shenker family's private collection]*

Shenker's musical setting of Mizmoyr Ledovid has achieved wide acclaim and, for many, remains the default version of this psalm. Its reach extends beyond Orthodox communities, as it is frequently sung by non-Orthodox cantors, particularly in funeral settings. For Hasidim and other Orthodox Jews, however, the piece is primarily associated with *se'udah shelishit*, the third Sabbath meal, eaten late on Saturday afternoon, when this psalm is customarily recited. Notably, Shenker composed a number of settings for Psalm 23. This, his most famous, was created when he was just twenty-one years old.

During his 1946 trip to Palestine, Shenker paid a visit to the son of the Imrei Shaul, Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu Taub (1905–1984), who had settled there a few years earlier. The Imrei Aish (as he would come to be known after the title of his Torah commentary—*Aish*, the Hebrew word for "fire," is an anagram of the first letters of his names, Shmuel Eliyahu) had spent his teenage years in the home of his grandfather, the Divrei Yisroel, but moved back in with his parents after his grandfather's death. He married Rivka Zlata Kohn in 1926 and earned his rabbinical ordination in 1930 in Warsaw. In the summer of 1935, the Imrei

Aish and his father, the Imrei Shaul, traveled together to Mandatory Palestine, where they celebrated the festival of Lag Ba'omer at the tomb of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai in Meron (Upper Galilee). Later that summer, they visited the Western Wall in Jerusalem on Tishah Be-Av, a day of mourning marking the destruction of the first and second Jerusalem Temples. Moved by these experiences, the Imrei Aish told his father that he wished to remain. The Imrei Shaul, who was deeply dedicated to settling the Land of Israel, heartily approved. The Imrei Aish moved to Tel Aviv, and within a year his family joined him. He established a Modzitz synagogue in Tel Aviv, laying the foundation for the dynasty's foothold in the Holy Land. He was quickly recognized as a gifted Torah scholar and gained many followers (Hamodia 2019).

At the time of Shenker's visit, the Imrei Aish served as a *dayan* [judge], in the Tel Aviv rabbinical court. Shenker often found the rabbi poring over a volume of the *Shulḥan Arukh*, studying material relevant to pending cases. When Shenker visited, however, the Imrei Aish would take time out from his studies to sing his own original nigunim, and the younger man would step into his role as the dynasty's "musical secretary" to transcribe them. According to Shenker's estimate, the Imrei Aish had composed some fifty nigunim by the time he became Rebbe in 1947. His compositions would later be compiled in a volume titled *Mor MiBesamim* ("Myrrh from Spices").

Shenker's trip was musically formative. He was introduced to the Modzitzer Hasid and composer Shmuel Rosenbuch, whose work earned its way into the Modzitz canon and is sung regularly in Modzitzer synagogues. Upon hearing Shenker's "Mizmoyr Ledovid," Rosenbuch encouraged the young composer to continue on his musical path—a recommendation that was influential for him. Shenker also met Meir Shimon Geshuri, whose book had sparked Shenker's relationship with the Imrei Shaul. Notably, a request from Geshuri put Shenker into close contact with one of the most influential Jewish individuals of the twentieth century:

> Mr. Geshuri requested that I take some material back to New York to be delivered to a certain Rabbi Schneerson, who was the [previous] Lubavitcher Rebbe's son-in-law, and who would later become the Rebbe […] When I returned home, I went in search of this Rabbi Schneerson, and found his office at 770 Eastern Parkway in Crown Heights. Although I appeared there without any appointment, he welcomed me in. I had no way of knowing that in a few years he would become the Rebbe. […] He had a certain aura—some would call it charisma—that's for sure, and he took an interest in me. […] He wanted to know who I was, where I was learning and why I had gone to the Holy Land. [...] Not long after that meeting with the Rebbe, I started attending addresses that he was giving on special occasions. These classes were not specifically geared to Lubavitcher hasidim, and they had become popular with other yeshivah students in the area—students from my school, Torah Vodaath; from Chaim Berlin; and from other yeshivahs. The Rebbe would talk for something like an hour and a half, expounding on many topics completely from memory, without any notes … I, for one, thought that he was a genius, and I always left very inspired by the beauty of his teachings. (Chabad.org)

From these glimpses into Shenker's life and social network in the 1940s, we see that he had developed into an inner-circle Modzitzer Hasid with great dedication to nigunim. As musical secretary to the Rebbe, Shenker absorbed his teacher's musical style. As a regular at the Modzitz synagogue, he learned the repertoire of Modzitz nigunim that the Rebbe and the other Hasidim had inherited from their predecessors. Now, as a budding composer, Shenker was showing promise not only as a human repository for this music but also as a creator of it. In this role, Shenker, an American-born Jew from outside the Modzitz dynasty, demonstrated that, despite predictions to the contrary, Hasidism could survive and thrive in America. As a devoted student of the Imrei Shaul and an accomplished musician, Shenker embodied the promise of cultural continuity in this new land.

Reflections

In this chapter I analyze only a few pieces that provide insight into Shenker's musical inspiration and early compositional style. As we will see in the following chapters, composition became an ever-present activity throughout his life. His nigunim were inspired by many different sources and occasions: upcoming holidays, family celebrations, health issues encountered by family members, a line of liturgy, or simply a melodic idea that seemingly came out of thin air.

In studying Shenker's life and music, I sought to determine whether we can discern discrete periods marked by specific musical features. These attempts at periodization proved challenging. As previously noted, Shenker himself acknowledged periods in his life during which he drew inspiration from the musical traditions of other Hasidic communities. These reflections were often referenced by those I interviewed when discussing the evolution of his compositional style. Nevertheless, when I asked individuals familiar with his body of work about broader trends in his music over time, they consistently emphasized that, despite its stylistic variety, his repertoire remains firmly rooted within the Modzitz tradition (though some respondents noted that the nigun he wrote for the Lubavitcher Rebbe [discussed below] is more reminiscent of the Chabad than the Modzitz repertoire, a noteworthy exception to the general rule). Perhaps the Modzitz designation can be explained by the fact that Shenker often wrote music to be sung at the Modzitz synagogue. Moreover, for many decades he released records of Modzitz nigunim and was immersed in capturing a high-quality performance of these nigunim. In short, Shenker's commitment to the transmission and continuation of the Modzitz musical repertoire profoundly impacted his identity as a composer.

We can deepen our understanding of Shenker's compositional persona by placing him in his American context as a composer and recording artist. As will be elaborated below, in 1956 Shenker released the first album of a Hasidic dynasty's nigun repertoire and began releasing albums of his own nigunim in 1960. The

transition to recording nigunim meant that, as in the popular music market, there was an opportunity for the works to become a "hit." A Hasidic "hit" did not mean wide radio airplay or astronomical sales. Rather, a particularly popular piece would take hold of the Orthodox community's attention and be sung by wedding musicians and prayer leaders, as well as individual families at their various rituals. The pieces that Shenker believed had the potential to gain currency in this way were often the ones selected for recordings, whereas some of his longer and more meditative pieces were not released. Thus, we see that recording technology and the development of a Hasidic music industry impacted the types of nigunim that were released and their reception, similar to the mechanisms of production and consumption of the popular music industry.

Additionally, the American soundscape that Shenker inhabited shaped his compositional style. Scholars have discussed his oeuvre in a Jewish context, namely, the stylistic features of different Hasidic communities, cantorial music, Israeli popular music, and so on. Yet, scholarship has overlooked the sounds of American popular music as well as European classical music that Shenker encountered and absorbed. According to the American musician Andy Statman, who later collaborated with Shenker, Shenker's musical approach was likely (perhaps indirectly) informed by American singers such as Bing Crosby and Perry Cuomo:

> It's interesting. [Shenker] was a real Jewish-American composer. I always heard a really strong influence of Richard Rogers in his music, who was Jewish […] I mean, [Shenker] used to wait outside Ebbets Field as someone was leaving to give him his stub. He was an American kid, you know? So, he heard all this stuff. Of course, he loved classical music. He used to record it off the radio. But I'm sure he heard all this [popular music]. I also believe there are elements of, like, as farfetched as it sounds, in his lower register almost like a Perry Cuomo kind of influence … Like that kind of way of approaching a phrase. Or the

> tone he would get in the approach. I have no doubt [that he heard this music]. All of those sounds were ubiquitous. Bing Crosby, Perry Cuomo. He heard all that stuff. He heard all the Broadway show music.

Statman further contextualized Shenker among the American popular singers and composers of his day, suggesting that Shenker should be thought of among Broadway composers George Gershwin, Richard Rodgers, Irving Berlin, and Cole Porter, jazz musicians Duke Ellington, Billy Strayhorn, and singer-songwriters Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, and Hank Williams. "He belongs in this league of American greats," Statman told me.

This reframing of Shenker's life and music offers an important intervention for musicological research, in which genre considerations often limit comparison and contextualization. Situating Shenker's religious music within the context of the great American popular composers of the twentieth century not only improves our understanding of his compositions but also affords us a fuller picture of twentieth-century American music. Contextualizing Shenker alongside American popular singers and composers of the day, while noting that he was releasing records on which a "hit" song was desirable, opens the door to thinking of him as not only a liturgical musician, but also as a mid-twentieth-century American composer. Similar efforts to identify music that has circulated within American subcultures and therefore has been overlooked within the imagined "American mainstream" may offer new insights into the routes and impact of popular songs of this era.

CHAPTER 4:
EMERGING ADULTHOOD, BUILDING A FAMILY

Upon his return from *Erets Yisroeyl* in 1946, Ben Zion Shenker began a schedule of studying Torah for several hours each morning and working in his father's business in the afternoon. In addition, he took night classes at Brooklyn College, including a course offered through the music department. While he found the class somewhat elementary, he enjoyed the study of European classical music and maintained an interest in classical composers throughout his life.

In these post-war years, the Modzitz community in New York experienced a shift. In 1947, the Imrei Shaul realized his ambition of moving to Mandatory Palestine, leaving Shenker and the rest of the American community without regular contact with its most important leader. The Imrei Shaul settled on Kfar Giladi Street in Tel Aviv, where his son, Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu Taub (the Imrei Aish) lived and had established a Modzitz synagogue. The Rebbe passed away a short time later, on November 29, 1947—the same day that the Partition Plan for Palestine was adopted by the United Nations. For the followers of the Imrei Shaul, this was no coincidence: their leader's intense hope for Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel was coming about in his merit.

The burial of the Rebbe was complicated by the violence that broke out in Palestine upon the United Nations acceptance of the Partition Plan. Modzitzer Hasidim living in Jerusalem had purchased a plot of land on the Mount of Olives, where many great Jewish leaders are buried, with the intention of one day burying the Imrei Shaul there. A frequently told story in the Modzitz community

relates that, just before his death, the Imrei Shaul left a *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible) open to the final page of the book of Zechariah, which states that the Messiah will stop at the Mount of Olives before arriving in Jerusalem (Nathan 1988: 30). The Hasidim understood this as a sign that they should bury him there. However, with the violence that erupted in Jerusalem, the Hasidim were unsure of whether or not it was wise to transport his body from Tel Aviv. Shenker explained to me how they made their decision:

> They sent a delegation to Bnei Brak to the Chazon Ish [Rabbi Avrohom Yishaya Karelitz, 1878–1953], to ask an *eytsa* [advice]. He was a very smart man, and he was a man of great knowledge […] And he thought about it and he said, "My opinion is that they should take him to *Yerusholayim*, to *Har Hazeysim*." So they said, "We understand that there is a lot going on." He says, "The *Riboyno Shel Oylom* [Master of the Universe] will help." They'll get there and there won't be any […] [problem] because, and this is the reason, he says, a *yid* that was responsible for the Torah to be rescued in the whole generation […] he was responsible for it.

The Chazon Ish was referring to the Imrei Shaul's aforementioned success in clearing the path for the Mir Yeshiva to leave Europe, which saved the lives of many Torah scholars and preserved an important institution of European Jewish life. Indeed, the Imrei Shaul was buried on the Mount of Olives, with the Chazon Ish in attendance, though a headstone could not be put up until after the Six Day War of 1967 (Safier and Geberer 2022).

For Shenker, the Imrei Shaul's passing was a deep personal loss. The close relationship that they had developed in Brooklyn during the years in which Shenker transitioned from teenager to adult proved to be life altering. Not only had Shenker been the primary musical repository for one of the greatest figures in Hasidic music history, but he also learned the craft of nigun composition during

his time with the Imrei Shaul. With the Imrei Shaul gone, Shenker continued to sing the Modzitz repertoire and compose in the style he had learned from his Rebbe.

As Shenker entered adulthood, he began looking for a wife through the traditional match-making process known as *shidukhim*. In 1949, Shenker met Dina Lustig, whom he would soon marry.

Dina was born in Nyíregyháza, Hungary, to a Hasidic family and moved to Cincinnati on November 10, 1938. Her father, Avrohom, was a follower of the Sigheter Rebbe, Rabbi Chaim Tzvi Teitelbaum (1879–1926).[37] Avrohom Lustig had come to the United States in approximately 1934 to escape the draft in Hungary, working in America as a *meshulaḥ*, a collector of donations, raising funds for the Chayei Olam Yeshiva in Jerusalem. On his travels to the Jewish community of Cincinnati he learned that the *shamesh*, the attendant, of the Kneseth Israel synagogue had recently passed away, leaving a job opening. He applied for the position and was hired by Rabbi Eliezer Silver (1882–1968), who was the congregation's rabbi and an important figure in twentieth-century American Judaism. The two developed a close relationship, and Rabbi Silver successfully advocated for Lustig to be allowed to bring his family from Europe despite immigration quota restrictions.

37 After Rabbi Chaim Tzvi Teitelbaum's premature death in 1926, his eldest son, Rabbi Yekusiel Yehuda Teitelbaum, assumed leadership of the Sighet dynasty at the young age of fourteen. Rabbi Yekusiel Yehuda was killed in Auschwitz during World War II, and, following the war, leadership of the Sighet dynasty transferred to his brother, Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum, who had survived. In 1976, the Sigheter Rebbe's uncle, Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum (the Satmar Rebbe), passed away, and he was appointed by the Satmar Council of Elders to lead the Satmar dynasty. Following a one-year mourning period for his uncle (and weathering internal conflicts), Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum took over as the Satmar Rebbe in 1980. As a result, the Lustig family developed a connection to Satmar, however, they are also well-known in the Chabad-Lubavitch community because Dina's brother, Rabbi Chaim Meir Lustig, became a Lubavitcher after studying Tanya, a book of Hasidic philosophy written by the first Lubavitcher Rebbe. Rabbi Chaim Meir's son, Rabbi Hershel Lustig, became the principal of Oholei Torah, a large Lubavitcher yeshiva in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and therefore holds a position of prestige in the community (Mintz 1992).

Eleven years later, when Dina was looking to marry, Shenker's name was suggested. Shenker told me a humorous story about how he devised a plan to catch a glimpse of her before arranging their first date:

> So my wife taught in the release hour before she married me.[38] So, when they [suggested the match], I didn't know what she looked like. They told me she's a very good-looking girl. Very *eydl* [pleasant, gentle]. […] But of course, when you ask for a *shidukh* [match] you'll never know what's the real thing! So, I wanted to find out where I could see her before I made my first date with her. So, I had a good friend who also taught in the release hour, who knew who she was… So he said, if you want to see her, on Wednesday, this day, she teaches in Clymer Street Shul in Williamsburg. […] So I went to spy on her there! […] That's how I met my wife.

Dina and Ben Zion Shenker wed on November 10, 1949, and honeymooned in Lakewood, New Jersey. While on their trip, Shenker's friend, Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, who was studying in the new Lakewood Yeshiva, visited them between study sessions to learn nigunim from Shenker. The newly married Shenkers returned to Brooklyn and rented an apartment in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, near the corner of East 92nd Street and Clarkson Avenue, where they lived for approximately two years before moving to Crown Heights.

Shenker's relationship with his wife was the catalyst for one of his best-known pieces, a setting of "*Eyshes Khayil*" ('A Woman of Valor,' Proverbs 31: 10–31).

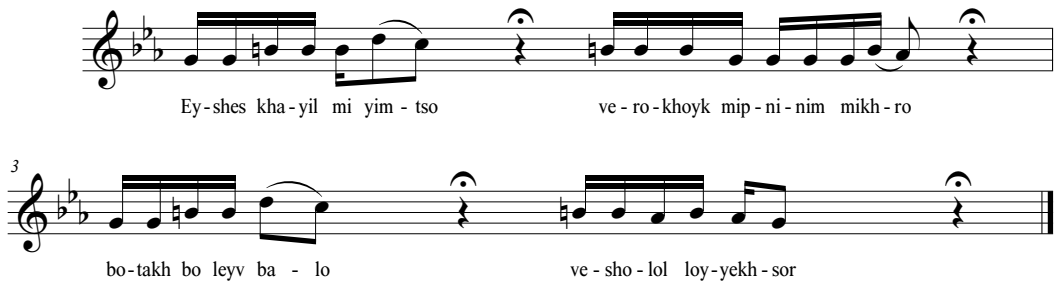
38 The term "release hour" [or "release time"] refers to the system in which public-school students in the United States study with educators in their own religious tradition before regrouping and resuming their secular studies. The Jewish program was run by Rabbi J.J. Hecht (1924–1990), an assistant to the Lubavitcher Rebbe. In addition to his well-known activities in promoting the teachings of Chabad-Lubavitch, including translating the Rebbe's speeches in real-time over the radio, Hecht made the initial suggestion to Dovid Werdyger that he record and release an album of nigunim (see below).

Orthodox Jews recite this text on Friday evenings just before beginning the festive Sabbath meal. As Wendy Zierler (n.d.) explains,

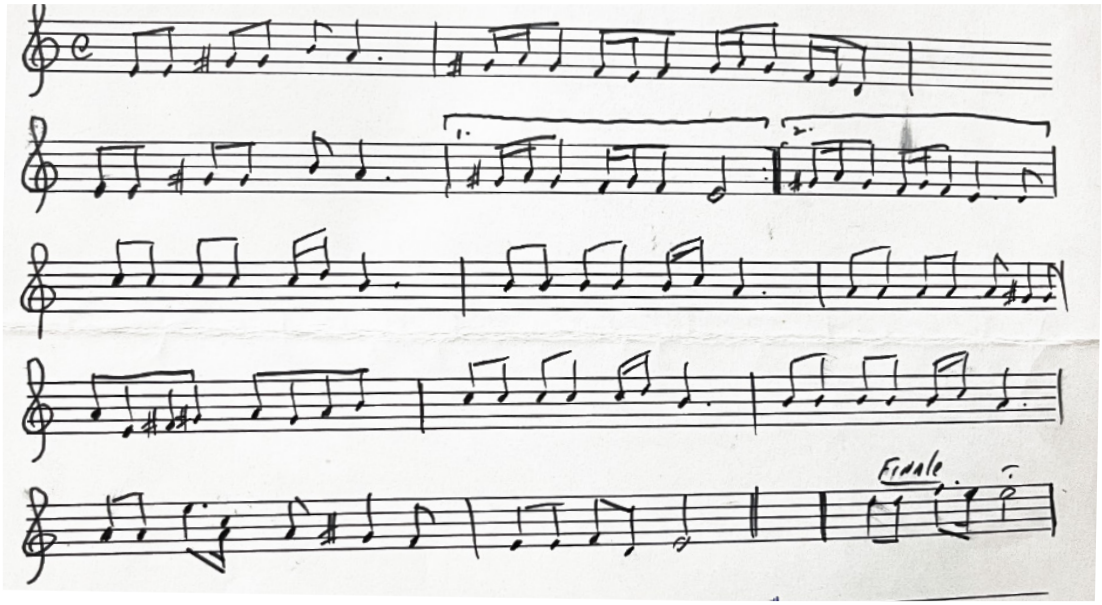
> Scholars say that the custom of singing *Eshet Ḥayil* at the Friday night table was initiated by kabbalists in the seventeenth century, who viewed Shabbat as an occasion of mystical union with the Divine. They understood Eshet Ḥayil allegorically as a representation of the Shekhina, the feminine presence of God. In a sense, we were living out our own contemporary allegorical interpretation of Proverbs 31, with the Woman of Valor being the Sabbath, whom we had welcomed, with renewed energy, into our midst.

Removed from its original Biblical context and repurposed for the Sabbath table, the text is understood today as a way to honor the matriarch of the household, who, through her dedication to the household, perpetuates the integrity of the traditional Jewish family.

According to Shenker, "Eyshes Khayil" was composed several years after his wedding. "I was very happily married and, *Barukh Hashem*, I felt that my wife was an Eyshes Khayil, and it was a tribute to her really." The piece, Shenker explained, was musically inspired by the slightly inflected manner in which the Imrei Shaul would read this text aloud. As he said, "In Modzitz they never sang Eyshes Khayil. The Rebbe used to say it. He used to say it in a certain kind of sing-song [...] It was like a recitative type of thing."



[The author's transcription of Ben Zion Shenker imitating the Imrei Shaul's recitation of "Eyshes Khayil" in an interview on August 13, 2015.]

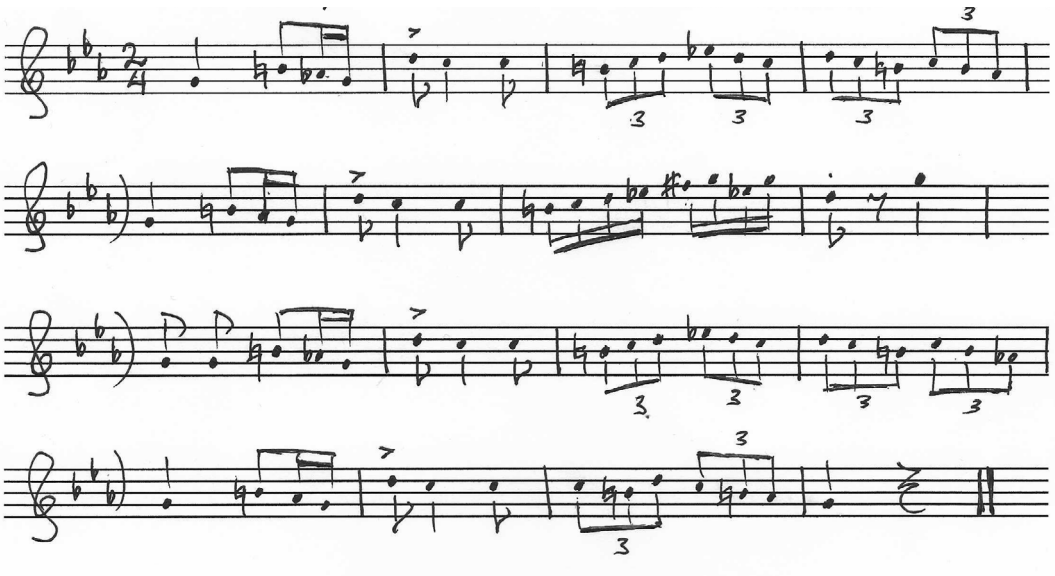


Second image: [Shenker's handwritten notation for Eyshes Khayil. Reprinted courtesy of Velvel and Aidel Newmark from the Shenker family's private collection]

Ethnomusicologist and klezmer musician Hankus Netsky has noted a similarity between Shenker's "Eyshes Khayil" and a piece by klezmer clarinetist Dave Tarras, titled "*In A Rumeynishn Shenk*" ("In a Romanian Saloon"). Halfway through the piece by Tarras, the meter changes from triple to duple, and a new melody sets in. According to Netsky,[39] when he played Shenker a recording of the Tarras piece, Shenker laughed and said that he may indeed have heard Tarras'

39 Personal communication with the author, 2022.

piece at some point in the past, but that any similarity was coincidental, or, at the very most, unconscious.



["In a Rumeynishn Shenk" by Dave Tarras, transcribed by Hankus Netsky. Courtesy of Hankus Netsky]

Alongside the personal joy of his marriage, another significant development in Ben Zion Shenker's life occurred around the same time: he received rabbinic ordination. The early 1950s saw widespread concern about the Korean War draft, and for Orthodox Jews, military service posed particular challenges, as it was nearly impossible to maintain a religious lifestyle in that setting. Shenker's father-in-law arranged for Rabbi Eliezer Silver to administer an ordination exam, as ordained rabbis were exempt from the draft. Shenker passed the exam and was formally recognized as a rabbi. Although he never pursued a career in the rabbinate, he possessed deep knowledge of Jewish texts and frequently shared Torah insights at family gatherings. This period also marked a creative turning point in his musical work, as the joy and stability of marriage coincided with a notable increase in his compositional output.

Dina and Ben Zion Shenker became parents of three daughters, Esther (Reifman), Aidel (Newmark), and Brocha (Weinberger). "He was a real fun father," Esther Reifman told me. "He loved to tell stories," Aidel Newmark added. "He loved to tell of his escapades, he liked to make jokes. He was lighthearted." Dina imparted to the girls a strong sense of European Jewry. "She was American, yet very European too," they told me. "She was a very elegant woman. Very beautiful, very well dressed. She always had a good word to say to everyone. She was really a wonderful person."

The family lived in Crown Heights, a Brooklyn neighborhood that was home to a diverse Jewish population, though it would later become almost exclusively a Chabad-Lubavitch neighborhood. According to Esther Reifman, "There were a lot of immigrants, a lot of Holocaust survivors. It wasn't strictly Chabad when we grew up. It was all types of people." The family spoke English at home, but Yiddish was encouraged as well, particularly by Dina's parents: "My mother's parents lived in Cincinnati, Ohio," said Mrs. Reifman. "And my grandfather would put a dollar in the mail every time we wrote him a letter in Yiddish."

Shenker's daughters explained that though their father considered himself a Hasidic Jew, he dressed in mainstream American clothing. His connections to Hasidism were clear: he had a close connection with a Rebbe, followed the formalized customs of Hasidic communities, and enjoyed teaching his children the histories of the various Hasidic dynasties. However, as a product of a non-Hasidic educational institution and a member of the American workforce, he was cleanshaven for most of his life and did not wear the signature long frock coats (known as a *bekeshe*) common to Hasidim. "He didn't put on a long [coat] because his father never wore one," his daughters told me. "That was a matter of respect for his father.[…] But when he went to Israel, he would put one on."

In the Israeli communities Shenker visited, his family explained, this element of Hasidic garb was a requirement for leading the prayer service. Later, he would

wear a long coat at Sabbath and holiday meals, even at home in Brooklyn. In addition, Shenker began to sport a beard when he was in his sixties, a physical feature important in many contemporary Hasidic social circles for spiritual reasons rooted in Kabbalistic literature. Shenker kept his beard trimmed, however, unlike most Hasidic men in the twenty-first century.

These changes to Shenker's appearance over the course of his life are noteworthy in that they represented changes in American Hasidic society. Many of these changes, several of my interlocutors explained, came with the influx of Hungarian Jews to Brooklyn, whose practices became dominant due to the size of their dynasties and the influence of their institutions. Thus, while it was common for Hasidic Jewish men to be cleanshaven in Shenker's youth, by the end of his life, it was nearly unheard of for a pious Hasidic man to shave his beard.

The Shenker home soon became a lodestone for musicians and others who simply appreciated music. As Aidel Newmark stated, "I remember there were certain individuals who would always come after the meals and sit and sing." Among the frequent visitors was Rabbi Herschel Newmark, a close friend of Shenker's whose son, Velvel, would go on to marry his daughter, Aidel. As she explained about her father and father-in-law, "They were friends, so they would jam together. They were very, very close friends from the time they were boys."

Though Dina Shenker was not musical herself, family members relate that she was highly supportive and very proud of her husband's musical abilities. The family owned a piano. Indeed, according to Aidel Newmark, "My father was always playing the piano. He'd come home from work and then just play the piano. [Once,] the piano was going so strong that—we had a neighbor who had given my mother a gift of [porcelain] flowers in a crystal vase. And it broke. How'd it break? The decibel! It was hysterical. And my mother, she felt bad, so she went and she bought the exact same flowers and stuck it in the vase and sure enough, it broke again!" The family explained that when he was playing music, "He was somewhere else."

"My mother used to say that she could never have an argument with him, because he would just zone out," relayed Esther Reifman. "He would just start singing," added Aidel Newmark, laughing.

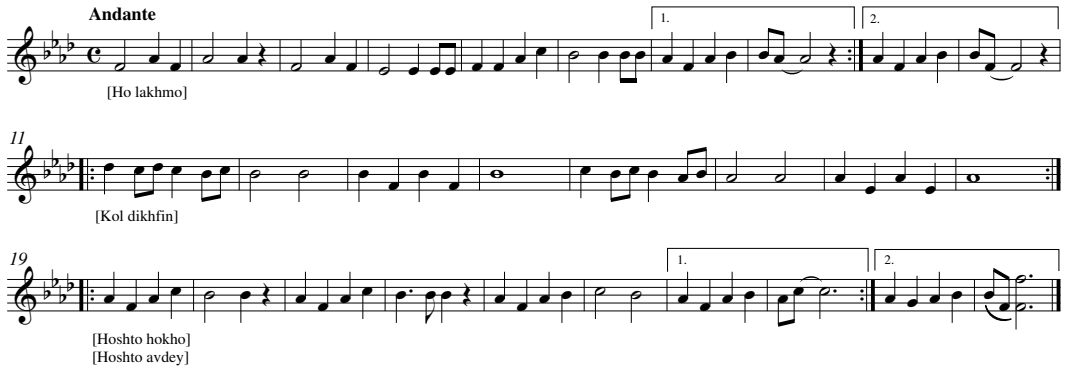
Shenker encouraged his daughters to develop their musical abilities. They took piano lessons and participated in choirs at school. At home, music was one of the ways in which Shenker connected with his children. Brocha Weinberger tells the following story:

> When I was small, I knew my father was something special. I used to get comments from teachers, like "Oh, that's your father!" So it felt good to have such a special father, but I actually felt him being special just father to daughter. Like, in the home. I remember I was humming, as a little girl […] I was just humming something that came to mind. My father said, "What's that your humming?" I said, "I don't know." And he actually notated it. He made me feel very special. He took out a piece of sheet music paper, and he notated what I sang. […] It made me feel very special [...] Actually we were going through things in the apartment [after he passed away], and I found that piece of paper. […] "Two of Brocha's melodies." I'm sure they were very simple, but it made me feel special.

Rabbi Shenker would sing at the Shabbos table to teach his music to his daughters, and he was immensely proud that they were all musically inclined. "They all had good voices. They all sang very well. They sang like a choir, you know? In fact, they all became choir leaders in their classes," he said. Furthermore, some of his compositions were based on the experiences of his children in school. In this regard, Esther Reifman told the following story:

> My teacher […] was teaching the *Hagodo* [the Passover *seder* liturgy], and she was teaching a lot of songs, and she asked me if my father has a tune for "*Ho Lakhmo Anyo*" [This is the Bread of Affliction]. And I

said, “I don’t know, I’ll ask him.” So, I went home and said, “Daddy, do you have a tune for Ho Lakhmo Anyo?” And he said, “No, but I’ll make one up.” And that’s the famous Ho Lakhmo Anyo […] And they would send me into all the classrooms, and I taught it to everybody in the whole school. They were all so excited about it.



[“Ho Lakhmo Anyo,” composed in 5721 (1961)]

For Shenker, music was a way of connecting with his daughters. He composed pieces for their school and summer camp functions and sang with them around the table at meals honoring the Sabbath and holidays. Shenker’s music-making, then, was not only for the synagogue; it was also a way of enlivening ritual in the home.

Reflections

One aspect of the years during which Ben Zion Shenker settled into his career, married, and became a father that shines through is the importance of his wife and daughters in his life, including his musical endeavors. Contemporary Hasidic discourse often frames the male and female spheres as distinct; indeed, gender separation for the sake of modesty is an important value in the community. This look at Shenker's family encourages us to consider the ways in which domestic life and intra-family relationships are important to Hasidic expressive culture.

As Kay Kaufman Shelemay (2009) notes in her study of Syrian Jews, music cultures often have a "hidden transcript," a domain in which music-making takes place but is obscured from view and therefore overlooked in the scholarly discourse. For Shenker, the home was an important site of music-making. His family life was a source of inspiration for his compositions, and an opportunity to share his music with his children. Domestic music-making, such as this setting in which Shenker sang with his daughters and transmitted music to them, is a crucial component of Hasidic life that remains in the hidden transcript, that is, an underrecognized but vital feature of the community's music-making. Glimpses such as this into domestic music-making offer a view of an important setting for group singing in Orthodox Jewish life.

This focus on the domestic sphere is particularly important for nigun research. In a January 2023 lecture for the Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, the ethnomusicologist Naomi Cohn Zentner demonstrated the diversity of musical routes that lead to and from Hasidic Sabbath meals. Using the example of a famous Modzitz melody "*Proyk Yas Onokh*," which is a stanza of the song "Yo Riboyn," she describes the ways that Hasidic nigunim travel beyond Hasidic circles and set the mood for the Sabbath table among non-Hasidim:

> [Proyk Yas Onokh] is one example of one of the songs that are sung around the Sabbath table which are particular to the Modzitz Hasidim but have become popular worldwide. And now we understand that the nigunim of the Hasidim are not only sung by the [Hasidim], but are also sung by the [non-Hasidim] who hear the beauty of this song, and who hear the lovely connection that it has to sitting around the table and making this more than just a meal [by] making it something that has spiritual meaning. These melodies are adopted as part of the family repertoire of zemirot Shabbat, which can be for non-Hasidic families as well as the Hasidic families. (Cohn Zentner 2024)

The domestic sphere offers many opportunities for the performance of nigunim; indeed, families develop their own repertoire of songs, use them to create specific ambiances at their meals, and transform them according to the needs of their family. A key locus of nigun composition, transmission, and transformation, it is a rich site for future study.

CHAPTER 5:
FROM SYNAGOGUE TO RECORDING STUDIO

The Shenkers' decision to settle in Crown Heights was part of a larger shuffling of Brooklyn's Hasidic population that took place at the time. As large numbers of Holocaust survivors began arriving in New York in the 1940s and 1950s, Williamsburg's longstanding problem of insufficient affordable housing became an even more significant issue (Mintz 1992: 248, Deutsch and Casper 2021: 45). By the end of 1949, the city government was beginning to explore opportunities for creating low-income housing in South Williamsburg (Deutsch and Casper 2021: 46). This would later be a key factor in the growth of Hasidic Williamsburg, but in the early 1950s, young couples like the Shenkers relocated to other neighborhoods of Brooklyn in search of more space. Many families opted to move to Borough Park, a neighborhood in the southwestern part of Brooklyn, where Jews had begun settling in the early years of the twentieth century (Mintz 1992: 100). Crown Heights too, where Ben Zion and Dina Shenker settled, was becoming a predominantly Orthodox community. The Lubavitcher Rebbe's arrival in Crown Heights in 1940 had changed the demographics of the neighborhood:

> For the most part, the Jewish population in Crown Heights was secular or moderately religious. Synagogues were Conservative rather than Orthodox. News that the Rebbe has settled in Crown Heights attracted Lubavitcher Hasidim and other Orthodox Jews who had fled Europe. Soon there was a small but growing Hasidic and Orthodox community (Mintz 1992: 139).

Indeed, Crown Heights included a diverse mix of Orthodox Jews during the 1950s when the Shenkers made their family home together. As Mintz noted in his book *Hasidic People: A Place in the New World*, "A number of major and minor Hasidic courts, including Kapitshnitz, Sighet, Belz, Ger, and Stolin, among others, established themselves in the neighborhood" (Mintz 1992: 100).

In Crown Heights, Shenker was a regular prayer leader, first at the Kozhnitz shtibl,[40] then later at a Modzitz shtibel that opened on President Street. The congregation met at the home of the widow of Rabbi Chazkel Taub, a member of the Modzitz rabbinic family, who had passed away at a young age. The community's musical highlight of the week was the festive third meal on Sabbath afternoon. As Shenker explained:

> And so, we had people come from the neighborhood—some of them I didn't even know even. And we had two people that used to come every Shabbos, [they] lived in the neighborhood, but they weren't—they were strangers to us. And they never introduced themselves … One *motsey Shabbos* [Saturday night, after the conclusion of Shabbos], they come over to me. They said, "You know, we've been coming here for the last couple of months. You probably noticed us. We sit on the side over there. But we enjoy your music very much. We know that Modzitz has a lot to give to the world. […] 'Would you want to record this music?" I said, "It would be very nice, I guess, if we did. But I […] can't see myself doing recording. […] You need to be professional to do that." (Netsky 2012)

> I mean, I was in business. I was at that time in the sweater business in my father's factory. [...] So I tell him, "What do I know about recordings?" So he said, "You know, the people over here, they sing

40 A small prayer house belonging to the Polish Hasidic dynasty known as Kozhnitz.

> very well. If you got them together and rehearsed the pieces, and if you had, maybe, two-part harmony. You've got a nice group here. You've got people who sing along with you. They are quite musical." And these were all people that were busy with jobs, and everyone had his own thing. I didn't know exactly how to crack that nut. So I just told him, "You're just talking about something that I can't picture getting involved in." But he got my dander up anyway, you know? I started thinking about it.

The man who approached Shenker that evening was a public-school teacher named Benedict Stambler. Along with his wife, Helen, he would go on to reissue historical 78rpm recordings as LPs, in addition recording many of the most important figures in American Jewish music of the 1950s and 1960s on their own label, Collectors Guild. Shenker's response was a good indicator that the Hasidic community saw itself as being socially distinct from those who would record music. No professional recording of a Hasidic community's nigun repertoire had ever been produced, and it was unclear to Shenker whether this would be permissible as part of Hasidic social and religious practice—whether it was appropriate for his, or any, Hasidic music to be consumed via recordings.

As the idea continued to percolate in his mind, Shenker wrote to the Imrei Aish asking for permission to make a recording of Modzitz nigunim. The Rebbe, however, did not reply. When a fellow congregant at the Modzitz synagogue in Brooklyn, Rabbi Akiva Besser, mentioned that he was traveling to Israel, Shenker asked him to bring up the issue with the Imrei Aish. Rabbi Besser, who was a follower of the Radomsker Rebbe but was knowledgeable about Modzitz nigunim, agreed to do so. Shenker related their conversation:

> So [the Rebbe] was telling Akiva the reasons why he is hesitating. He doesn't want to be the first one to do it. Because he knows that it is, like, a radical step. "Nobody ever recorded any *Khasidishe* music. All

> of a sudden, I'm going to be the one to give my okay? […] I really don't know," he says. So Akiva tried to tell him from the point of view of preserving the music. For posterity […] Every Rebbe would like his music to be preserved, no? And we'd have an outlet for Hasidic people who don't have any outlets. They don't go to the movies, they don't listen to radios. So, this would be the nicest type of entertainment they could have. And sure enough, with the way he spoke to him, he said, "Okay, we'll try it."

Rabbi Besser returned to New York and reported that the Imrei Aish had given his permission. Shenker, along with members of the Modzitz synagogue, began to hold rehearsals on Saturday nights following the Sabbath. Among the participants in these rehearsals was Velvel Pasternak (1933–2019), an accomplished musician who would go on to transcribe and publish nigunim through his own press, Tara Publications, eventually one of the largest producers of Jewish music materials in America. Pasternak, who was studying music at the Julliard School and education at Columbia University, sang in the choir on the first record Shenker issued and would later become the choral director for Shenker's own recordings of his nigunim.

The first Modzitzer record, titled *Modzitzer Melave Malke Melodies*, was released in 1956 as a fundraiser for the Modzitz community. The Modzitzer Rebbe wished to relocate to a more central location in Tel Aviv, and Shenker saw the record as an opportunity to help him to do so. He explained how the record was used to support this goal:

> We printed 500 pieces to start off with. And we wanted to make it as a fundraiser for Modzitz. So we sent [the record] out to people. We had a list of people that Reb Shaul had [as devotees] while he was living in America. […] So we took that list and sent it out with a letter saying that we are trying to raise funds. At the time, the Rebbe in

> *Erets Yisroeyl* was living in Tel Aviv in a very bad neighborhood. And they wanted to move into the center of town. But there was no money. To do that you have to have backing. So that was one of the reasons why we put out this record. […] We didn't think anything would ever happen with it, but sure enough, people sent in donations.

Modzitzer Melave Malke Melodies was well received. As Shenker told me: "I got a letter from a rov [rabbi] who [years ago] was a classmate of mine who [now] was a rov in Buffalo. I got a letter after he got this [record], and he said that it's *mayim korim al nefesh ayeyfo* "[like cold water on a tired soul'; Proverbs 25: 25]." Shenker's former classmate was playing on the second part of the verse from Proverbs, "So is good news from a faraway land." Given the enthusiastic response, Shenker and the team of his friends who had worked on the album decided to approach a local shop that sold Jewish religious books, asking if it would be interested in selling the record:

> We said, "Well, maybe we should start looking [at a] way of distributing in regular stores." So, I went to one of the stores that I knew the proprietor there, and I told him, "We have this thing out." So, he says, "Give me a copy; let me listen to it." So, he listened to it. He says, "It sounds great! […] Sure we can sell it." So, he gave me an order. And once one store had it, another store got wind of it. So, they started calling us for the record. […] The five hundred were gone already, the first five hundred. We had to make, like, a thousand. It kept on going. We kept reprinting it, reprinting it. And then, when we put out that—we wanted to put out twelve-inch 'cause ten inches went out of style. So, what I did—we took some of the stuff from there, and we added some new material. This was it. (Netsky 2012)

The record's impact was highly significant. According to Mark Kligman (2001: 98), the 1956 release of *Modzitzer Melave Malke Melodies* was "a pivotal

development," in that it was the first record of a Hasidic dynasty's nigunim and essentially launched an important component of the Orthodox Jewish music industry. Children's recordings of Jewish songs were already sold at Jewish bookstores, but a recording of Hasidic nigunim sung by Hasidim was a novelty for the Orthodox consumer. Shenker's recording inspired musicians to begin recording the music of other Hasidic dynasties, such as Ger, Melitz, Chabad-Lubavitch, Skulen, and Bobov.[41] Singers Yankel Talmud (1885–1965) and David Werdyger (1919–2014) became well-known Hasidic artists for their recordings of Ger nigunim. Additionally, this recording opened the door to the Yiddish folk music of Yom-Tov Ehrlich of the Karlin-Stolin dynasty (see Weinberg 2023) and later to the popular music of singers such as Mordechai Ben David (b.1951, the son of the aforementioned David Werdyger), who began releasing records in the 1970s.

In addition to contributing significantly to launching the Orthodox Jewish recording industry, Shenker's record was a turning point in how people listened to nigunim. Prior to this, nigunim were primarily heard as unaccompanied pieces sung during the Sabbath meals, during prayers, or at a Rebbe's tish. Now, however, nigunim could be heard in one's home, in the voice of a skilled singer, and with instrumental accompaniment. This new format fundamentally shifted the sonic experience of nigunim. Even when, later, the same recorded pieces were sung a cappella

41 Parallel musical preservations were taking place within the Chabad-Lubavitch community, helping us to understand the Modzitz recording as part of a broader Hasidic musical-preservation project. Within the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, an organization known as Nichoach (Nigunei Chasidei Chabad) was created in 1944, enabling musically talented Hasidic men to come together thrice weekly to learn the dynasty's nigunim (Derher 2018: 37). The sixth Chabad Rebbe's interest in collecting musical notation stretched back as far as 1935, eventually leading to the publication of Volume 1 of *Sefer Hanigunim* in 1948, with additional volumes following in 1957 and 1980 (Klein 2019: 8). Following the release of Volume 2 (thus shortly after the first Modzitz recording was released), the Lubavitcher Rebbe instructed Nichoach to begin producing recordings of the nigunim. The first Nichoach recording was released in 1960, ultimately leading to the release of sixteen albums of Chabad nigunim (Klein 2019: 9). Notably, the musical preservation efforts of both Shenker and Nichoach were aided by Velvel Pasternak, Joshua Weisser, and Seymour Silbermintz.

extemporaneously in community contexts, their commercial recording provided a reference point by which accuracy and artistry could be measured. Furthermore, these recordings provided a new way to learn nigunim, an alternative to acquiring them via oral tradition in liturgical or domestic contexts. Indeed, nigunim that were released on early recordings of Hasidic music have become the default melodies for certain portions of the liturgy in Orthodox synagogues and for domestic events to this day.

Shenker's recording of Modzitz music spread Modzitz nigunim widely beyond the community, reinforcing the dynasty's reputation as a leader in the realm of nigunim. Shenker recognized that his record represented an important shift in the consumption of nigunim by Hasidim and saw the positive feedback he received as evidence that releasing the record was a positive step. "It was a change in the whole atmosphere really. But it was a good change, I think. The fact that everybody latched on was pretty much an indication that they all thought that it was a good change."

Furthermore, the record introduced Modzitz nigunim to new audiences unfamiliar with Hasidic music entirely. Even prior to entering the recording studio, Shenker recognized that the record had the potential to broadcast the music widely, and he felt a responsibility to make the music appealing to these new listeners. He chose to include piano accompaniment (later recordings would include orchestral accompaniment), which would sonically mark the nigunim as possessing the sophistication of European art music. The inclusion of accompaniment, and even the manner in which he sang, were thus directed toward the Jewish consumers of classical music. As he told Hankus Netsky:

> I wanted to have it sound a little classical also. I didn't want it to sound very provincial, you know? […] We're facing a world. It's not gonna be only for our own people. This is the stuff that's eventually gonna be heard by people that enjoy classical music, enjoy all kinds of music. And this has to be presentable.

Though the Modzitzer Melave Malke Melodies record was a success, Shenker was never at complete peace with the product. At the time of recording, Benedict Stambler had urged Shenker to include his own nigun "Hamavdil." Shenker feared that including a piece of his own on a record designed to disperse nigunim composed by Modzitz rebbes would be improper, but he gave in to the pressure. And indeed, there was backlash from some in the community on this point. When Shenker and I spoke about the issue in 2015, nearly sixty years after the album's release, he expressed his longstanding regret. On the rereleased version of Modzitzer Melave Malke Melodies, five of the melodies from the first record were retained, and six new melodies—all written by Rebbes of the Modzitz dynasty—were included. Notably, Shenker's setting of "Hamavdil" was replaced with a setting of the same text composed by the Imrei Shaul.

Following the success of this debut album, Shenker began working on a recording of his own nigunim, *Joy of the Sabbath*.[42] It was released in 1960 and included pieces such as "Mizmoyr Ledovid" and "Eyshes Khayil." The success of this new album undoubtedly contributed to Shenker's revered place in Hasidic music historiography.

Yet despite releasing his own music, Shenker remained dedicated to recording and promoting the traditional Modzitz repertoire. Shenker's devotion to Modzitz was constant, even in times of transition from one Rebbe to the next, and even as he continued to write and record his own nigunim. In the 1960s, Shenker's first album recouped its production costs. From that point on, all profits from the sale of the record were sent to the Modzitzer Rebbe. These funds ultimately went toward the founding of a Modzitzer yeshivah in Israel, which opened in 1980.

Despite the popularity of his records and his talent as a vocalist, Shenker never aspired to become a concert performer, even as several Hasidic recording artists went on to have robust careers as performers. Similarly, while he respected the

42 The record cover also presented a Hebrew title, "לכבוד שבת".

musical skill of the Golden Age cantors, and even knew many of them personally, as described above, he did not wish to be associated with the cantorate. As a *sheli'aḥ tzibbur* in his home congregation, however, Shenker was a confident presence. Jews would walk considerable distances to the Modzitz synagogue in Brooklyn to hear him lead services and sing during se'udah shelishit. Modzitz's reputation as the most musical Hasidic community was widespread, and with Shenker's records becoming popular, the synagogue became a destination for Jewish music lovers, even long after the Golden Age of cantorial music had ended.

Reflections

The 1956 release of Ben Zion Shenker's first Modzitz record was a turning point in the history of Hasidic music in America, shifting the ways that people consumed, and indeed thought about, nigunim. As discussed above, Shenker recognized that this was a potentially controversial move, and the Imrei Aish was hesitant to give his permission to proceed with the project. The arguments that ultimately persuaded the Rebbe to give his consent are noteworthy, as they relate to facilitating the development of musical entertainment that is acceptable for consumption by Hasidic Jews and the importance of preserving the repertoire for future generations. Both arguments point to changes in the mentality of the postwar Jewish community. As the Hasidic community gained its footing in America and Israel after the dust settled from World War II, and large numbers of Jews relocated to, and within, these two new centers, the consciousness of the need to preserve the intangible culture of the community that had nearly vanished in Europe became acute, as the Imrei Shaul had presaged years earlier.

Relatedly, there was also an impulse to adapt desirable features of their host culture to fit the needs of Hasidic life, which over the course of several decades

in turn shifted the contours of Hasidism as new activities, technologies, and social interactions became acceptable and commonplace, while others were deemed inappropriate. As Asya Vaisman-Schulman notes in her study of Hasidic women's musical practices (2009: 153–154):

> […] older women in their late 50s and 60s, particularly those born in Eastern Europe, talked about having listened to "Jewish radio" in their youth and being familiar with its songs, having popular Yiddish tapes or records, or even sometimes having gone to the theater, all now completely forbidden in their Hasidic communities. None of the interviewed younger women in their 20s and 30s, however, owned any tapes of secular music, they did not listen to the radio, and they certainly never attended the theater.

Though numerous factors affected Hasidic listening practices in America, the advent of the Orthodox music industry and its ability to provide culturally sanctioned alternatives to non-Orthodox recordings is at least partially responsible for this shift.

Shenker became well-known for his recordings but generally avoided the spotlight. His few concert appearances were either for charities within the Orthodox community or for the benefit of the Modzitz dynasty. One of the primary reasons that he avoided concerts was that he did not view himself as an entertainer, an important distinction considering the development of Orthodox popular music, which mirrored trends in the American popular music industry. Contemporary Orthodox popular music began to develop in the early 1960s, with ensembles such as The Rabbi's Sons and Simchatone gaining popularity (Kligman 2001: 108). While Shenker's career overlapped in some ways with stars of the Orthodox popular music industry, he saw his compositions as nigunim, rather than pop songs, finding the distinction to be important in how to properly present these pieces. His performance practice

reflected this difference, even on stage. Aidel Newmark told me that family members would point out to him that other singers would move around and entertain the audience, but this was not how he performed or even how he thought of his music:

> When he would sing on a stage, he would stand and sing. And we would laugh, and we would say, "Come on, take a look at that guy. He *shokels* [shakes, sways] this way, he shokels that way." It just wasn't in his headspace. You're not entertaining, you are singing! You are not the entertainment! You are singing a nigun!

Esther Reifman added, "Somebody once asked him, 'Why don't you give concerts?' and he said, 'Because I don't know how to dance!'

Intriguingly, while the Rebbe was persuaded to permit the recording of nigunim partly because it would be appropriate entertainment for Hasidic consumers, Shenker still did not think of himself as an entertainer. For Shenker, the performance of nigunim was a sacred act, and he wished it to remain so. If people chose to listen to sacred music rather than popular music in their leisure time, all the better. Similarly, as noted, he did not want to be associated with Golden Age cantors, many of whom sang in prayer services but did not strictly observe Jewish law, and performed sacred music in concerts to entertain audiences. While he did sing cantorial and Yiddish pieces on the radio as a child, as an adult, he generally preferred to keep sacred music in sacred contexts, only consenting to do a concert when it was for the benefit of others and, even then, maintaining a performance practice that signaled that he was there to sing a sacred repertoire. This approach to singing nigunim demonstrates how Shenker viewed the nigun repertoire as distinct from cantorial concert pieces and Orthodox popular music. It also exemplifies the evolution of musical taxonomy and listening practices of this segment of the American Jewish community during the mid-twentieth century.

CHAPTER 6:
ENTERING THE DIAMOND INDUSTRY, PURSUING COMPOSITION

Shenker was becoming well-known for his musical skill, but his income still came from his work in his father's factory. When, in the early 1960s, the factory closed,[43] Shenker was forced to pivot quickly. Years earlier, he had worked for a short time in a diamond polishing business owned by a Modzitzer Hasid.[44] Now, he again sought work in the diamond industry, finding help from Rabbi Moshe Heschel, who, in 1968, would become the Rebbe of the Kapitshnitz Hasidic dynasty. According to Velvel Newmark:

> [Rabbi Heschel] came over and gave him [Shenker] a whole parcel of goods, and he gave him his customer list. And he said, "Here, go try and sell them." He gave it to him to get him started. And [Rabbi Heschel] said, "Listen, the Riboyno Shel Oylom [Master of the Universe] gives *parnoso* [livelihood]. So, whatever I'm going to get, I'm going to get anyways. So, if you sell to one of my customers, that means that I'm not supposed to have [that customer]. So, here, try and sell them."

43 A factory worker embezzled money, resulting in the company's foreclosure.

44 By this time, the Hasidic presence in the diamond industry was well-established. The American diamond industry had experienced a period of low sales following World War II, bounced back in the 1950s, and experienced significant growth in the 1960s. According to Shield, "Diamonds went from being 25 to 30 percent of jewelry sales to around 60 percent in the 1960s, helped by new advertising and the growth of large retail chains that sold diamonds at reduced prices to the middle class" (Shield 2002: 36).

Shortly thereafter, Shenker partnered with Joseph Borenstein, a Gerer Hasid, and the two founded B&S Diamonds. The company, located on 47th Street in Manhattan, the industry hub, was based in the "Diamond Dealers Club" and sold mainly to jewelry manufacturers.[45] Shenker saw using his in-law's home in Cincinnati as a base as a good opportunity and would often travel to Ohio. In the early days of the business he was away for ten to twelve days each month, staying with his wife's parents and commuting to Dayton and Columbus for meetings. These travels not only enabled him to support his family but also proved to be a productive time for his compositional output; indeed, the commute afforded him the opportunity to create melodies. His piece "Heytivo Virtsoynkho Es Tsioyn," which has a humorous origin story, was composed on one such drive. As Shenker explained, when the nigun entered his mind, he became enraptured with the melody. Lost in thought, he began, unaware, to accelerate on the highway. Siren blaring, a police officer began to follow Shenker, who was so focused on the nigun that he did not notice. As Esther Reifman, told me, "The officer stopped him and said, 'Sir, do you know that you are doing ninety miles an hour?' He had no clue." Shenker explained that he had been composing a song and hadn't realized that he had been speeding. Fortunately, the officer was sympathetic and let him off with just a warning. After the family heard the story, related Aidel Newmark, "We got him a tape recorder so he could stop on the shoulder and record if he had a good thought and wouldn't do this again."

The event was consistent with his mindset while composing, as he would become lost in the music and become oblivious to anything taking place around him. This experience of sole focus on a nigun was not just a feature of Shenker's personal musical life; it is in alignment with Hasidic beliefs concerning music. As a tool for connecting to the Divine, the nigun pulls one away from the physical world, toward the spiritual. Those who are particularly skilled in music completely lose

45 For Hasidic participation in the New York Diamond Dealers Club, see Richman (2006).

sight of the mundanity surrounding them, instead becoming immersed in the spiritual, Godly experience of creating holy music. The following excerpt, drawn from an interview about Shenker's encounters with the Lubavitcher Rebbe, illustrates the power of music in Hasidic thought:

> It was the morning of the first day of *Sukkos* [in 1965]. He [Shenker's father] was going down the stairs carrying his *lulav* when he missed a step and fell. He hit his head against the wall and suffered a concussion. By the time he was found and rushed to the hospital, he was in a coma.
>
> The situation was dire, and the family dispatched me to request the Rebbe's blessing. When I got to 770, the Rebbe was in middle of a *farbrengen* [gathering]. Many hundreds of hasidim were packed into the *sukkah*, and there was no way I was going to get through to the Rebbe.[46] But Rabbi J. J. Hecht, one of the Rebbe's close hasidim, noticed my distress, and after I explained the situation, he had two guys pick me up by the arms and plunk me down right in front of the Rebbe.
>
> The Rebbe seemed startled at first, but when he saw how distraught I was, he asked me to tell him what happened, which I did as briefly as I could.
>
> The Rebbe asked for my father's name and his mother's name. When I told him, the Rebbe suddenly said, "Sing a nigun." I was taken aback, because I didn't feel much like singing, but I obeyed. I sang a nigun of the Modzitzer hasidim, a popular one, and before long all the hasidim gathered there were singing with me. It actually brought me a great deal of comfort.

46 770 is a reference to 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn, the world headquarters of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement.

> Then the Rebbe asked Rabbi Hecht to give me his private number, which I memorized because I couldn't write on *yoym toyv*. He instructed me to call him if there was anything I needed to tell him, and I did call the Rebbe's home at two in the morning, when my father's situation turned for the worse. He answered the phone himself.
>
> Although my father passed away the next day, on the first day of Khoyl Hamoyeyd, he was able to come out of the coma long enough to say *vidui*, the confession prayer, for which I was grateful. Remember, we were not Chabad hasidim, but that was the level of personal interest the Rebbe took in us. (Chabad.org)

This story, like many heard in Hasidic circles, suggests the Lubavitcher Rebbe's belief that by singing a nigun, Shenker might influence the spiritual world to affect his father's health. Initially upset that he was being asked to sing under the circumstances, Shenker came to believe that his father briefly came out of the coma, reciting the end-of-life prayers, may have been because of the nigun that he sang in the Rebbe's presence.

Shenker continued to compose throughout the 1960s, both during his travels and at home in Crown Heights. At times, these melodies occurred to him spontaneously; on other occasions, they were a response to a request to compose a nigun for a special occasion. The latter was the case for one of his best-known works, "*Yosis Olayikh*." The piece is based on text found within Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz's (c. 1500–1576) piyyut *"Lekha Dodi,"* the centerpiece of the liturgy for welcoming the Sabbath. It continues to be performed at Jewish weddings across the denominational spectrum. In the following quote, Shenker relates how he came to compose the work for Yoeli Weiss,[47] who had helped him learn the ropes of the diamond industry:

47 Weiss was also the brother of Shenker's sister's husband.

> He spent a lot of time with me, and he did it only as a favor. So I felt *hakaras hatov* [gratitude]. After a while, when he became a *khoson* [he became engaged] and he was planning his wedding, he called me at the diamond club, and he said, "Ben Zion, now it's payback time." [laughs] I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "I'm a *khoson*, you know?" I knew about it. He said "I'm gonna make a wedding now. I want you to compose a nigun for my wedding." He knew that I had made a nigun for his brother's wedding, for everybody in the family there, so why not for his wedding also. I said, "you know, I never did it for [someone who is] not a member of the family." And he said "Well, now you're going to do it." And it was "Yosis Olayikh." Probably the best nigun I ever made.

"Yosis Olayikh," like many of Shenker's nigunim, was premiered by Joe King, a Jewish band leader who, though not Hasidic himself, carved out a niche by performing at Hasidic weddings in Brooklyn (Sapoznik 2006). Shenker thus saw King quite often, and had even hired him to perform at his own wedding. Whenever one of Shenker's relatives became engaged, he would compose a new piece and bring it to King to perform at the wedding. King, however, only did so begrudgingly, apparently not appreciating the extra work of having to learn a new piece for the event: "Whenever I would come up with a new nigun, he would say, 'Another one? Another one? Come on! I'm getting tired of it already!' And with 'Yosis Olayikh' he did the same thing!'"

Many years later, Shenker encountered King at a hotel. He told the following amusing story about the meeting:

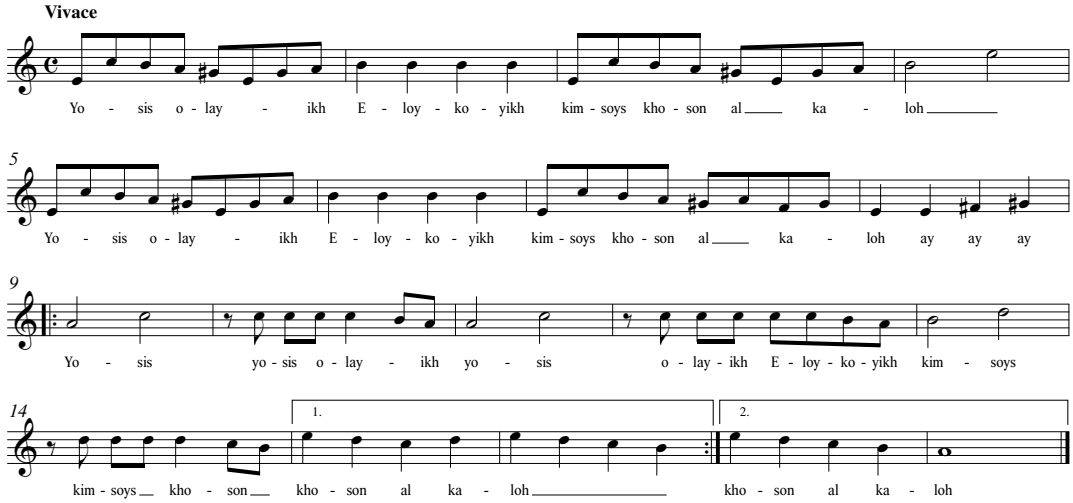
> I met Joe King. "What are *you* doing here?!" He says, "What are *you* doing here?!" So he says he's retired, and that's where he's living right now. I think he said he lost his wife, so he's living there by himself […] and at that point my music was well known all over,

> so he tells me, "You know, Ben Zion, you know, who's the guy who publicized all your music? That was Joe King, no?" I said, "Yeah, but Joe King didn't want to do it, remember?! Joe King used to say, 'Another one?!" He said, "You're right, you're right! When you're right, you're right."

As Henry Sapoznik (2006) notes, Joe King later redirected his attention to performing for Modern Orthodox Jewish communities, while "former sidemen like [clarinetist, Rudy] Tepel and the Epstein Brothers divided up the territory he left behind." Such observations are helpful for understanding how the Orthodox music industry functioned through musical networks. Furthermore, these musicians, who made a living from playing at Orthodox Jewish weddings, were important in fostering the promotion of pieces that became popular in the Orthodox community. As these musicians brought Shenker's pieces to weddings, and they became standards of the repertoire, his nigunim became part of Orthodox communal life through an additional route—live performances by other musicians—even if the identity of the piece's composer was gradually forgotten as ubiquity separated the melody from its origins. Ethnomusicologist Rachel Adelstein refers to these melodies as "Songs that Go Like This," emphasizing the difficulty that many people have when attempting describe a well-known melody without knowing its provenance. Such songs, she writes, are thought of "as semi-anonymous, 'traditional' tunes" (2024: 16).

Despite it fame, "Yosis Olayikh" is one of Shenker's simplest compositions, with two sections of eight measures each. As is common in nigun form, each section repeats, with the B section ending the first time on the dominant, and the second on the tonic. The melody uses the harmonic minor scale, outlining and emphasizing the dominant-tonic movement that is prevalent throughout the piece. In the A section, the melody alternates between eighth-note phrases that outline the I and V chords and give a sense of motion, which immediately contrasts with steady quarter or half-notes that offer a solid rhythmic foundation. This pattern reverses

in the B section, with straight half-notes in the beginning of the phrase that are followed by an eighth-note phrase which provides a slightly syncopated feel due to the eighth-rest on the first beat of the measure. These rhythmic contrasts, simple harmonies, and well-known text that mention a bride and groom make the piece ideal for wedding dances. Additionally, the V-i cadence at the end of the work helps to create a loop back to the beginning, allowing for limitless repetitions of the nigun.[48]



["Yosis Olayikh," composed in 5727 (1966)]

Like "Yosis Olayikh," Shenker's popular setting of "*Velirusholayim Irkho*" (which was composed shortly thereafter) was also dedicated to a friend who helped him make his way in business. In January 1968, Shenker visited Israel to sing at the *bar mitzvah* of Avrami Goldfinger, whose father had given Shenker goods on consignment as a favor. "Without that, it was not really very easy to get credit

48 The opening phrase of Yosis Olayikh is very similar to the beginning of a nigun sung in the Breslov Hasidic community. I do not know if Shenker was familiar with this nigun, or if the similarity is coincidental. For more above the Breslov nigun, see https://nigunimbimbom.org/1440/.

in New York when you come into business for the first time. But we had such a strong relationship that he trusted me completely, and Barukh Hashem it worked out." Shenker's experience on the flight to Israel, which included a layover in Paris, is interesting as it cuts across several political and social categories of Jewish life in the aftermath of the Six Day War. The story involves a chance meeting with Rabbi Yitzchak-Meir Levin (1893–1971), who was a member of the Israeli parliament representing Agudath Israel.[49] Below, is the story, as told to me by Shenker:

> As I came to the airport, I saw a whole delegation there from the *Agudas Yisroel* for Itcha-Meir Levin [Rabbi Yitzchak-Meir Levin]. Itcha-Meir Levin was a *khaver Knesset*, he was a member of parliament, and he was president of the World Agudas Yisroel. He was going back from America to Erets Yisroeyl, and he was on that same plane. […] He was an older man, he was feeble, and they had nobody on the plane who could take care, who could watch him and sit with him. And here I come along—wow, such a *simkho* [joyous occasion]. So, I knew already that this would be my job. I have to talk to him. Later on we got off in Paris, and we walked together in the airport for quite a long time. […When] we got back onto the plane, they handed out an Israeli newspaper. I wasn't sitting right next to him… But constantly I looked back to see how he was doing […]. The newspaper had an article about Naomi Shemer, the composer of "*Yerusholayim Shel Zohov*." They said how she composed it, and how she wrote the lyrics herself, also.

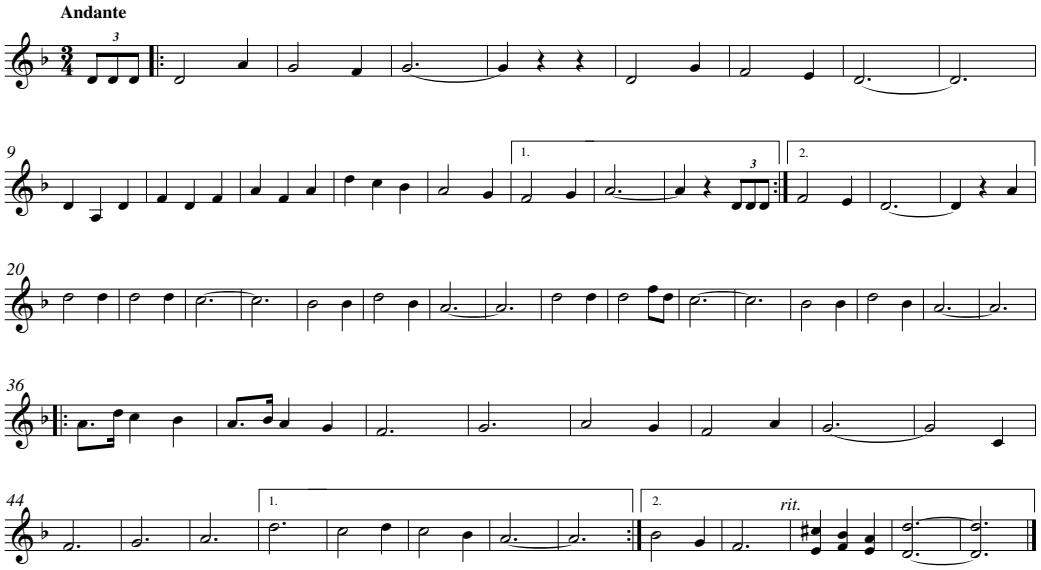
49 A political party that was an outgrowth of the Agudath Israel Movement founded by Levin's father-in-law, the Rebbe of the *Ger* Hasidic dynasty, in Europe as a religious anti-Zionist counter to the growing political power of secular Zionist parties among the Eastern European Jewish masses.

A beautiful song. So as soon as I read that article, I said, "You know, I'm coming now to a *simkho* in Erets Yisroeyl and I have to bring something new obviously." So I said, "What can I do that would be something about Yerusholayim." That was the thing that ran through my mind. So I took out a siddur, and I opened it up to "Velirusholayim Irkho."

It opened right to "Velirusholayim Irkho." I said, "Wow!" And I started composing on the spot […] [sings]. I said, "How am I gonna remember this thing?" So I took out a piece of scrap paper and I started writing lines. […] Within minutes I had the whole thing down. […] The fellow that sent me tickets met me at the airport, and I told him that I even have a new song that I composed on the plane that I will probably present at the bar mitzvah. The bar mitzvah still had a few days to go. In between, I was invited, he had a fellow working for him who was a son-in-law of Itche-Meir Levin. That was his most trustworthy person. And this fellow was making a wedding, before the bar mitzvah, and he invited me to come to the wedding. So, I come to the wedding, and they asked me to sing. I didn't want to sing this song, because I didn't want to jump the gun. So I sang something else. Itche-Meir Levin was there by the wedding. So, he walks over to me after the wedding and he asks [in Yiddish], "You are the person who went along with me?" So I said, "Yes." So he says, "Why didn't you tell me you were Ben Zion Shenker?" So I said, "Why didn't you ask me?" [Laughs]

The text of "Velirusholayim Irkho" is taken from the weekday Amidah, the central prayer of the Jewish liturgy. In this portion of the liturgy, the petitioner asks God to return to Jerusalem, rebuild the Temple, and establish the messianic monarchy. In Shenker's notation, "Velirusholayim Irkho" opens with a pickup of three eighth notes prior to the half note that begins measure one, suggesting

that Shenker had in mind the word "Yerusholayim" (Jerusalem) rather than the liturgy's full text, "Velirusholayim" (and to Jerusalem). I observed Shenker sing it this way at a wedding, and I have heard others sing the piece in the context of a service by incorporating sixteenth notes in place of the eighth note pickup to accommodate the extra syllables.[50]



["Velirusholayim Irkho," composed in 5728 (1968)]

Like many of Shenker's nigunim, the A section in "Velirusholayim Irkho" uses a rhythmic motif, which we first hear in measures 1–4, and is repeated in measures 5–8. In the earlier portion of the melody, the jump is from the tonic to the fifth, landing on the fourth as the harmony moves to the iv chord. In measure 5 the melody goes from tonic to the fourth, which is reflected in the iv harmony that

50 One interlocutor noted that the work's opening phrase shows a strong similarity to the theme from the 1960 film "Exodus." I do not know if Shenker saw this film. However, in light of his strong attachment to Israel, it is certainly possible that he did see it, and it is likely that he heard the theme song, which was composed by Ernest Gold. What we do know is that Shenker was highly averse to conscious "borrowing" of musical material, and would sometimes edit his own nigunim when others pointed out a musical phrase that was too similar to one found in another piece in his canon.

is implied, before walking down to the tonic. Measures 9, 10, and 11 use an arpeggiated D minor chord that rises by a third in each measure, before jumping to the high tonic in measure 12 and descending to the dominant and continuing the quarter note pattern.

The B section, which begins at measure 20, is the high point of the piece, both melodically and emotionally. Here Shenker sings "*Uveney uveney oysoh*" (And build and build it). The word "uveney" appears only once in the liturgy; the repetition represents a dramatic plea to God to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Just as this rebuilding is the apex of all of creation according to Jewish eschatology, Shenker jumps up to the minor third above the tonic, as if to indicate that this rebuilding is above the level of the natural world. The C section of the piece is lower in emotional intensity and tessitura. Here the text speaks of establishing "the throne of David," that is, the leadership of the messiah, who, according to Jewish tradition, will be a direct descendent of King David. Shenker repeats the word "*meheyro*" (quickly) to show the longing for the speedy onset of the Messiah's reign. The resolution of the piece to the tonic represents this establishment of a new world order and its permanence, evoking the serenity of the Messianic age. The melody closely matches the emotional arc of the text, and the repeated words help to add a further layer of interpretation.

"Velirusholayim Irkho" can be counted among a number of Shenker's nigunim informed by the victorious mood in Israel following the Six Day War. At this time, Shenker visited Israel several times, and on one occasion led Friday night services at the Western Wall. He included his melody of "Yosis Olayikh," making it a festive and joyous service. His love of Israel can be seen in numerous pieces that he composed in this period, such as nigunim he wrote to the texts *"Yevorekhekho Hashem Mitsiyoyn"* (May God Bless You from Zion)*, "Mi Yiteyn Mitsiyoyn"* (Oh, That the Salvation of Israel Would Come from Zion), and *"Yiboneh HaMikdosh"* (The Temple Will Be Built). These pieces are signified "Allegro" and seem to be modeled on the sounds of the Eastern European dance genre known as *horah*

that became associated with the folk dances of modern Israel. In 1968, Shenker released the album "Songs of the Land," full of original compositions that relate to the Land of Israel, even singing with Israeli Hebrew pronunciation on several pieces instead of his usual Ashkenazi pronunciation. The back of the record presents a short introduction:

> Because of continuous oppression, the Jew has been forced to develop an impenetrable shield and seclude himself from the enemies. Rushing to the ghetto sometimes worked; many times it did not. So for solace, comfort, and peace, the Jew took to prayer, study, and meditation. Some things, however, cannot be alleviated through introversion. Feelings must be expressed outwardly, tensions must be relieved, fears eased, burdens lightened. And so the Jew turned to music—the poetry of the soul—for relief.
>
> How long can one suffer quietly?
>
> After the Six Day War, a new era in Jewish history began. No longer would the Jew be subservient, for he now had Eretz Israel—all of it! The *joy of the land* was now the inspiration and the hope of the Jew.
>
> The electric heartbeat of Israel is expressed in many modern Hebrew melodies that have appeared recently, but the *joy of Israel*—the soul of our people—reverberating with a glorious heritage, is best expressed by the Chassidic temperament, which reflects the essence of the Jew.
>
> Sit back with pride and enjoy this album *Joy of the Land* which exemplifies the Chassidic spirit—the essence of the Jew.

The Six Day War was clearly eschatologically significant for Shenker, coming to the foreground in his contemporary compositions. Though Hasidism has had a tenuous relationship with Zionism and many highly respected Hasidic leaders are

anti-Zionist, Shenker, like the Imrei Shaul, had a deep love for the State of Israel and, even in his later years, kept close track of Israeli politics. While he spoke in Yiddish with many of his acquaintances in Israel, he understood modern Hebrew and was in close contact with friends and family who lived there. Furthermore, Shenker's music circulated in Israel, primarily through his commercial recordings, but also through nigunim transmitted through performance within the transnational Hasidic community.

Shenker continued to compose and release albums, enhancing his public image as a creator profoundly connected to Hasidic nigunim and their transformative spiritual power. His recordings were consumed not only by the Hasidic public, but also by the leadership of the Hasidic community. Shenker told me that the Imrei Ḥayim (Ḥaim Meir Hager, the Rebbe of the Vizhnitz dynasty, 1888–1972), had acquired copies of reel-to-reel tapes that Shenker had made and listened to them frequently. The Imrei Ḥayim himself had a strong musical sense and famously interpreted a verse from Genesis to be about music. As Edwin Seroussi writes:

> For example, the Imrei Ḥayim, R. Ḥayim Moshe [sic] Hager of Vizhnitz (Vijniṭa) (1887–1972), whose musical gifts are well documented, as is the elaborate musical pageantry of his renewed court in Israel, elaborated a famous commentary on Genesis 43: 11. In this verse, Jacob says to his sons, "Take of the best produce of the land [mi-zimrat ha- 'arets] in your vessels, and take an offering to the man."
>
> For the Imrei Ḥayim, "of the best produce of the land" are songs and melodies (zemirot venigunim) from a "low place"—from the earthly realm. Those songs and melodies are uploaded "in your vessels," thus are raised by the tsadik who makes them holy by revealing their concealed holiness. "The man" (ish) who receives this "melodious present" is God, as written (Exodus 15: 3): "God is a man (ish) of war."

In 1965, the Vizhnitzer Rebbe's granddaughter, Sarah Hager, married Rabbi Issachar Dov Roke'aḥ, who was at the time being groomed to be the next Rebbe of the Belz dynasty (he would officially step into that role in July 1966). According to Shenker, the Vizhnitzer Rebbe took Rabbi Rokeach on a vacation to welcome him into the family and teach him about Vizhnitz. During this time, the Vizhnitzer Rebbe played recordings of Shenker singing for the soon-to-be Belzer Rebbe. The Belzer Rebbe thus too became an admirer of Modzitz nigunim.

A few years later, in the summer of 1972, Shenker was in Israel for a family wedding. During a sheva brakhot celebration[51] that was held at the Modzitz synagogue in Bnei Brak, he was approached by a man who identified himself as the Vizhnitzer Rebbe's gabbai (assistant). The Rebbe, said the gabbai, wished to see him. Arrangements were made for the gabbai to meet Shenker in the nearby town of Givatayim a few nights later, following the fast of the 17th of *Tammuz*. Shenker described the encounter:

> Givatayim to Bnei Brak is a very short distance, but on the way, he had a cassette recorder, and I heard my voice singing on the thing. So I said, "What is that?" And he says, "You'll soon find out." […] Sure enough, when I arrived there, he had a whole bunch of guys there standing outside the room, and when I go in there they all want to go in together with me [to see the Rebbe]! So the gabbai says, 'The Rebbe gave me orders. Nobody, but nobody, is to go in except for Reb Ben Zion.'… So when I walked in, the Rebbe was sort of lying on a couch. And as I walked in, he said, "Ah, here goes the khazn who never gets *hayzerik* [who never gets hoarse]." I didn't know what he was talking about, you know? So, he saw that I was stunned, and he said, "I have listened to you for twelve hours in one shot, and you haven't gotten hoarse yet!"

51 One of the parties held nightly for the week following a wedding.

Shenker learned that the Vizhnitzer Rebbe had obtained seven reels of him singing a combination of Modzitz nigunim and his own compositions, signaling that his recordings touched even the highest levels of the Hasidic community, making an impact on its most significant spiritual leaders. In fact, Shenker shared with me that the fifth and present Bobover Rebbe (Rabbi Ben Zion Halberstam) was encouraged by his father, the third Bobover rebbe (Rabbi Shlomo Halberstam [1908–2000]), to listen to his records.[52] This practice, the Rebbe believed, would cultivate in his son the proper character traits needed by a rabbinic leader.

In the early 1970s, Shenker was given an opportunity to sing again for the Lubavitcher Rebbe. The invitation came about through Rabbi Yosef Wineberg, who lived near Shenker in Crown Heights. This time, Shenker would be contributing to Chabad's own musical canon by composing a nigun in honor of the Rebbe's birthday:

> One day he came to me and said, "You know, every year on the Rebbe's birthday—which is the 11th of Nissan—we present a nigun to the Rebbe. But this year, the nigun didn't seem to catch on. Would it be possible that you compose a nigun for the Rebbe?"
>
> I didn't know what to say, because I wasn't even sure how to go about it. I asked him if it had to be in the style of Chabad, but he said it didn't have to be. He gave me a free hand to compose anything I wanted.
>
> So I started thinking about it, and I came up with a melody to a verse in Psalm 73, which is the psalm one says at age 72 [to mark being in one's seventy-third year]. When I had the nigun ready, I called him

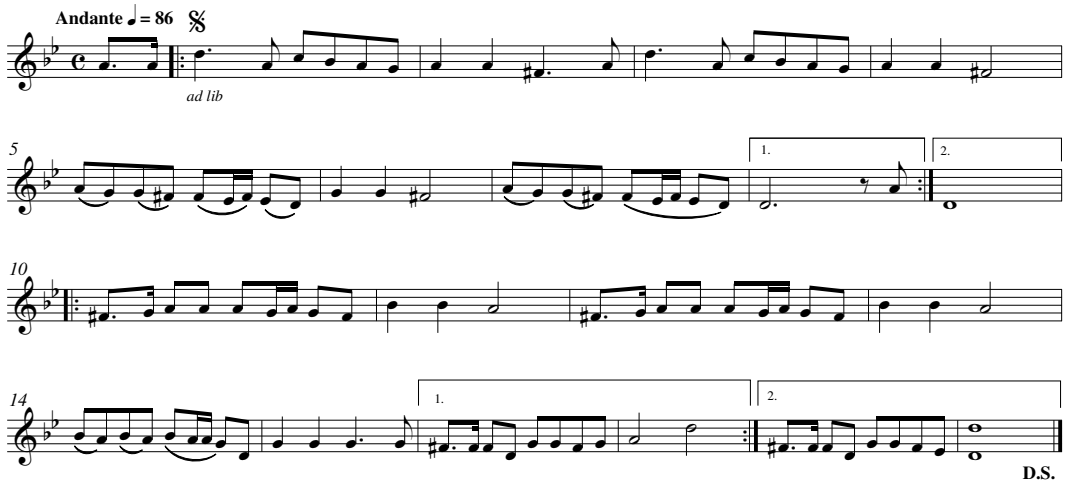
52 Following the death of Rabbi Shlomo Halberstam, his son (and half-brother to Rabbi Ben Zion Halberstam), Rabbi Naftali Halberstam, became the Rebbe. His passing in 2005 resulted in a succession crisis, leading to Rabbi Ben Zion Halberstam becoming known as the Bobover Rebbe and Rabbi Mordechai Dovid Unger becoming known as the Bobov-45 Rebbe (named for their headquarters on 45th Street in Brooklyn).

and asked, “What do you want me to do with it now?” He said, “Come to the next farbrengen and sit behind the Rebbe. And when I give you the signal, start to sing.”

So that’s what happened. At the signal, I started to sing: “VaAni Kirvas Elokim li tov—As for me, the nearness of Gd is my good.”

At first, everybody was stunned. But then the Rebbe turned around and smiled, so I continued to sing, making the beat a little faster. All of the sudden the Rebbe became very animated, and he started waving his hands. Everybody picked up the melody, and we sang it over and over.

My wife was sitting in the women’s section, and a lady who didn’t know that she was my wife said to her, “*S’iz ungenumen! Der Rebbe hot dos ungenumen!*—It’s been accepted! The Rebbe has accepted it!” (Chabad.org)



["Vaani Kirvas Eloykim," composed in 5735 (1975)]

"*Vaani Kirvas Eloykim*" is a two-section nigun in the *Ahavah Rabbah* mode on D. In particular, the major third degree is highlighted through its use as a resting point in the A section, which establishes the "major/minor feel that Ahavah Rabbah tends to have" (Klein 2019: 76). The nigun begins with a jump from the fifth scale degree (A) up to the high tonic (D), firmly establishing the tonal center. On beat three, the implied harmony changes to the VII chord, as the A this time proceeds to C, before changing back to D in the next measure, as the melody descends and ultimately lands on F#, the major third. As is frequently the case in Shenker's nigunim, the phrase is repeated twice. The following phrase continues to descend down to the tonic, though in measure six it jumps back up to land on the F# again. As the phrase repeats in measures seven and eight, however, it ultimately resolves to the low tonic in both the first and second endings. The B section continues to emphasize the F#, but here it is used slightly differently. Beginning in measure ten, we see that F# is the starting point for the phrase rather than the resolution, though the dotted eighth note on beat one serves to emphasize the pitch and highlight the Ahavah Rabbah character of the piece. This is further advanced through the B♭ to A resolution that completes the phrase. As one would expect, the first ending leads back to the beginning of the B section; here this is

accomplished through a jump to the high tonic. The second ending finishes with stepwise motion toward the low tonic, which includes the major third to flatted second interval before reaching the tonic.

Shenker's "Vaani Kirvas Eloykim" is rarely sung in Lubavitch circles today, however there is one recording of it being sung at a farbrengen at Chabad World Headquarters in Brooklyn on 5 June 1974. In the recording, the Hasidim diverge slightly from Shenker's notation, creating greater rhythmic uniformity and conjunctive melodic phrases where Shenker had intended jumps to the tonic.

According to Shenker, he did not initially set out to have "Vaani Kirvas Eloykim" sound like a Lubavitcher nigun. However, due to a number of its features, it fit neatly into their canon. The nigun *"Sheyiboneh Beys HaMikdosh,"* which the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe often requested to have sung at public gatherings, is a useful point of comparison for placing Shenker's nigun within the Lubavitcher soundscape. This piece is also a two-section nigun in the Ahavah Rabbah mode. It leans heavily on the major third, and is intended to be repeated at length.[53]

Throughout the 1970s, many of Shenker's compositions were written for family celebrations, such as bar mitzvahs and weddings, including those of his daughters. As his three daughters were married and his grandchildren were born, it became important to Shenker that he transmit both the nigunim of Modzitz and his own compositions to his family. Like the aforementioned domestic singing with his daughters, Shenker made a special effort to sing at Sabbath and holiday meals so that his grandchildren would learn these repertoires.

53 However, *"Sheyiboneh Beys HaMikdosh"* is sometimes sung with a cantorial recitative attached to it. The seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe would often call on Cantor Moshe Teleshevsky to sing in cantorial style the text that, in the liturgy, precedes the words sung in the piece. The nigun, though, is frequently sung without the inclusion of the recitative, which is why I suggest that the core of the piece consists of two sections.

[Shenker singing at the wedding of his daughter, Aidel, to Velvel Newmark on August 16, 1976. He is accompanied by Yidel Turner on viola. Reprinted courtesy of Velvel and Aidel Newmark from the Shenker family's private collection]

In addition to the musical support that he provided to the Modzitz community in America, Shenker also felt responsible for ensuring that the community could sustain itself. An important turning point in the life of the American Modzitz community took place in the early 1980s. At this time, Ben Zion and Dina Shenker, like many of the Jewish residents of Crown Heights who were not Lubavitch, left for other parts of Brooklyn. The Shenkers settled in the Midwood section of Brooklyn, which was becoming a major center of Ashkenazi Orthodox life with the spillover of Jews from crowded nearby neighborhoods. (Shelemay 1998: 81).

For the Shenkers, another draw of Midwood was the new Modzitz synagogue run by Rabbi Yisroel Dovid Taub (son of the aforementioned Rabbi Chazkel Taub). Shenker's stay in that synagogue, however, was short-lived. Owing at least in part to tensions that arose surrounding his recordings of the Modzitz repertoire and the attention it brought to him, there was a falling out in the community. Shenker, along with many of the community members, started a new synagogue called Congregation Imrei Shaul Modzitz on Coney Island Avenue. The rabbi of the synagogue was Rabbi Hershel Zvi Newmark, Shenker's old friend and now the father-in-law of his daughter, Aidel. In addition, Shenker continued to play a leadership role, both in the musical aspects of the prayer services and in

encouraging members to donate funds so that the synagogue could continue. While the year 5744 (1984–85) saw a slowdown in his compositional output, the establishment of the new synagogue may have inspired Shenker to compose more in the following years.

In their new space, Shenker included his family members in the music-making. As his grandsons grew, he would invite them to participate in a choir that he organized every year for the High Holidays. In the months leading up to Rosh Hashanah, Shenker would compose at least two new nigunim for the liturgy, though some years he crafted as many as seven new pieces. The choir members would come to his home, where he would teach them the new compositions they would accompany during the service. As melody is the dominant musical component within the nigun genre, he taught only the melody; any harmonies or embellishments were improvised by the choir members. In teaching the nigunim, Shenker would accompany himself on the piano, though the services were a cappella, as stipulated by *halakhah*. The choir members would bring portable recording devices to these rehearsals with which they could practice later. Typically, one new nigun for the *"Kadish"* prayer that concludes the liturgy would be introduced during the first, late-night *Seliḥot* service of the year. The remaining nigunim would first be heard by the community at the Rosh Hashanah service itself.

On May 6, 1984, the Modzitz community received the devastating news that the Imrei Aish had passed away. The Rebbe had been in America just weeks before, and the American Modzitz community had enjoyed the rare opportunity to spend a Sabbath with him. The Rebbe was greeted with a nigun that Shenker had composed for the occasion, which is listed in Shenker's collection as a nigun for "Kadish," composed in 5744.[54] With the Imrei Aish's death, his son, Rabbi Yisroel Dan Taub, was appointed to lead the community.

54 In addition, a nigun that the Rebbe taught on that trip remains a staple of the Saturday morning *Musaf* service at the Brooklyn synagogue.

Rabbi Yisroel Dan Taub, or as he became known "The Nakhlas Dan," which was the title of his erudite Torah commentary, was born in Warsaw in 1928, making him the first Modzitzer Rebbe who was younger than Ben Zion, though this did not diminish the degree of reverence Shenker showed to his Rebbe. The Nakhlas Dan had moved as a child to Tel Aviv when his father decided to relocate to Mandatory Palestine while accompanying his grandfather, the Imrei Shaul, on a trip. At approximately the age of 22, he married Rachel Shedrowitzky, the daughter of Rabbi Shmuel Aharon Shedrowitzky of Bialystok, who was a leader of Agudas Yisroel in Poland. The Nakhlas Dan, like all other Modzitzer Rebbes, was a composer, though his nigunim are generally not as well-known as those of his predecessors. Though he was a well-respected rabbinical presence in Tel Aviv, and was the scribe of the Tel Aviv Rabbinical Court, the Nakhlas Dan chose to move to Bnei Brak, the epicenter of the Ḥaredi community in central Israel, in 1995. More than simply a personal move, his presence there shifted the center of Modzitz life to a Ḥaredi hotspot. The Rebbe's relocation put the dynasty in the heart of the Ḥaredi world in Israel, both geographically and socially. This move must have pleased Shenker, who was committed to helping to sustain the dynasty. Ever since the 1956 Modzitzer Melave Malke Melodies record, he had donated all profits from the Modzitz albums to the Modzitzer Rebbe. The development of institutions and the building of new centers is cause for celebration in Ḥaredi life, and Shenker looked forward to promoting the expansion of the Modzitz community, now in Bnei Brak.

Alongside his steady stream of compositions, Shenker spent a great deal of time in the recording studio, releasing eleven records between 1956 and 1975. At this point, Shenker took a break from recording, largely due to a heart condition that resulted in several cardiac episodes. Dina Shenker was nervous about the invasive surgeries recommended by the doctors, and the couple even took a trip to Boston to investigate homeopathic remedies. In the early 1980s, Shenker underwent a quadruple bypass surgery. The surgery was generally successful but cardiac problems continued to plague him for the remainder of his life and were

responsible for his break from releasing records. Aware of the strength of her husband's desire to make music, Dina Shenker took responsibility for ensuring that he did not exhaust himself in so doing. As Aidel Newmark told me:

> My mother was very concerned that he was overexerting himself. So many people would ask him to sing at their weddings. She wanted to "gag" him because she felt it was detrimental to his health. My father wouldn't say no to anyone.

Under his wife's watchful eye, Shenker limited his musical responsibilities to his duties at the synagogue and composing at home. In 1980 he released a record titled "Ben Zion Shenker Sings His Latest Popular Chassidic Songs." The next record was only released in 1991, followed by another album in 1995.

In addition to his cardiac issues (in the 1990s, Shenker collapsed from a heart attack while singing at a sheva brakhot celebration), Shenker slipped and broke his hip on a business trip to Cincinnati with his business partner. The partners were on their way to the airport, and despite the intense pain, Shenker boarded the plane. He notified his family of what had happened, and they arranged for Hatzalah, the Orthodox Jewish ambulance service that provides free emergency services, to meet him at the airport and take him directly to the hospital in New York, where doctors were successfully able to repair his injuries.[55] Velvel Newmark vividly remembered an event from this period:

55 Hatzalah is an emergency medical response service operated by members of the Orthodox Jewish community. Hatzalah was founded in 1965 in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, to ensure fast response times by stationing volunteers and ambulances within the heart of the community. EMS responders are volunteers, and all services are provided free of charge. Today, sixteen Hatzalah branches in and around New York City coordinate their training, equipment, and dispatch under the umbrella of "*Chevra Hatzalah*." A parallel organization "*Ezras Nashim*" was established in 2014 to provide emergency care by and for women, in line with norms regarding modesty within the community (Ezras Nashim's struggles to gain legitimacy were explored in the film "93Queen"). Both organizations work in partnership with the city's police and fire departments, as well as local hospitals. Their development illustrates how Orthodox Jews in New York have built self-reliant institutions that are structured around their unique culturally specific needs and actively engage with the city's broader civic infrastructure.

> [The hip injury] was before Pesach [Passover], and I remember he didn't want to be in the hospital for Pesach. […] He pleaded and begged, and the doctor gave him a furlough for Pesach. He could go home, but with a bunch of conditions. So, we made him a *minyan* [a prayer quorum] at home … And in the morning, he told me that I should go bentsh *Tal* [recite the blessing for dew, which is part of the Passover liturgy and often sung to an ornate musical setting]. I said, "Me? You are here, you go bentsh Tal!" So he *krikhts* [shuffles] up with his walker to bentsh Tal. He stood, leaning on the walker, and in the middle of Tal he really gets into it and he puts his hands up like this [a gesticulation of sincerity in his prayers]! And he forgot where he is, and he almost fell! We caught him!

In the late 1990s, Shenker was diagnosed with Stage II colon cancer. He was successfully treated with surgery, but he continued to require close observation by his doctors, ultimately needing a heart valve replacement when he was in his eighties. These health issues would temporarily constrain his music-making.

However, he was always eager to return to full swing. I recall visiting him in the hospital after heart surgery in approximately 2014, and he was excited to discuss music and his recording projects that were under preparation. When, in a 2015 interview, he stated, "music is the air I breathe," he was not simply being poetic, but capturing the necessity of music in his life (Frankfurter 2015). A prominent rabbi once told me that, in his view, it was halakhically permissible for Shenker to listen to music during the Omer (the period between Passover and Shavouth, in which Orthodox Jews generally refrain from listening to music as a sign of collective mourning), because making music was genuinely life-giving for Shenker.

Rabbi Shenker's music making increased markedly after the passing of his wife in 2012. With the constraints she had placed on his musical activity now lifted, he

pushed forward with several projects, both in the synagogue and in the recording studio. His final two records, which he recorded during this time, would go on to be important capstones to his life.

Reflections

The narratives regarding the circulation of Shenker's music offer further insight into the role of nigunim in Hasidic culture. The stories of Shenker's recordings and compositions reaching Hasidic Rebbes demonstrate how nigunim are consumed by even the highest levels of the religious-social order. Hasidic Rebbes are considered to be individuals who have attained an exceptionally high spiritual level, with the ability to bring about miracles through their prayers and their insights into the divinely orchestrated workings of the world. Therefore, for a Rebbe to listen to Shenker's nigunim indicates that consumption of this repertoire is a spiritually beneficial activity. We see this in how the Bobover Rebbe was instructed to listen to Shenker's records, and in how the Vizhnitzer Rebbe made a point of sharing Shenker's recordings with the Belzer Rebbe. The Lubavitcher Rebbe's acceptance of Shenker's nigun into the Chabad canon is another indication that the piece was of a sufficiently high spiritual status, such that he deemed it appropriate for his community to consume and accept as part of its heritage. While Chabad-Lubavitch has a long history of coopting melodies from the gentile surroundings through a process of "musical tikkun" ("repair," see Koskoff 2000: 76–79; Mazor 2002), no such process was needed in the case of Shenker's nigunim, which were immediately accepted.

Despite this high degree of respect for his music, Shenker's pieces were not always sung as he originally composed them. I was with Shenker when he listened to the recording of 'Vaani Kirvas Eloykim Li Tov' sung at a farbrengen and he was disappointed when hearing that the piece was sung incorrectly. I also witnessed an event at which he corrected a wrong note that the crowd was singing in

his famous "Hatoyv" nigun. He proceeded to teach the proper way of singing the piece, and then continued the nigun, with everyone now singing the phrase correctly.

Such changes to the melody are not surprising, considering that nigunim are generally transmitted orally. Shenker, like many Modzitzers whom I have met, was very concerned that nigunim be sung according to the composer's intention. While recordings by the composers provide a record of the composer's intent, even these recordings must be considered a snapshot in time. Individuals close to Shenker told me that he himself did not always sing his own nigun exactly the same way. Indeed, he would occasionally choose to sing the same melody to new lyrics, which required modifying the melody to fit the new text. Thus, the fixing of nigunim through written and recorded media has not fully mitigated the element of variability in the oral performances of nigunim. While this phenomenon forces us to ask what it means to perform a nigun "correctly," we can see that for Shenker, melodic and rhythmic elements of the phrasing remained essential to the identity of the nigun and should not be changed. While even a recording does not "freeze" a nigun for the sake of future performance, Shenker and those in his community valued the retention of the essence of a nigun, even while minor details would change across the nigun's lifespan.

As described, Shenker's health problems began to impact his life more significantly in the mid-1970s. In this recounting of Shenker's health challenges, the spiritual and the physical clash. The story of Shenker singing the "Tal" blessing is instructive because it demonstrates the manner in which the power of music nearly overcame his weakened state, but his physical limitations ultimately caught up with him. Recent scholarship on nigunim in the Chabad-Lubavitch community shows that precisely this experience is expressed in the musical movement of devekut nigunim, a subsection of the repertoire specifically intended to facilitate a spiritual clinging to God. Raffi Ben-Moshe (2014) has shown how the mystical concept of *ratzo-v'shov* (ebb and flow), the experience of the soul reaching toward

God but being pulled back to the world of physicality, is present in the melodic motion of nigunim. Just as melodies go on excursions that create tension but ultimately resolve, the soul too experiences this spiritual journey as one sings a nigun.[56]

A recurring theme in stories told by Shenker's family and friends is that the composer would become completely engrossed in his music—even to the point of forgetting his physical self. Of course, the physical did at times hold him back. His recording career slowed during times of illness, and even his prayer leading was more limited. Dina Shenker knew that her husband was inclined toward agreeing to every request to sing, and, concerned for his health, she strictly limited his exertion.

In his later years, Shenker increased his musical activity despite his physical ailments. This musical engagement was deeply meaningful for him, and he was enlivened by his musical projects. While he was making music, Shenker appeared decades younger than he was. Thus, Shenker's legacy is marked by this deep engagement with spiritually enriching nigunim, which competed with the inexorable physicality of his advanced age. In this way, Shenker's life neatly fits the discourse concerning spiritual health associated with nigunim. Shenker's engagement with nigunim was so deep that his music-induced experiences of spirituality helped him overcome, albeit temporarily, the physical world. This, I would suggest, is a key component of his legacy.

56 Ben-Moshe 2014; see also Klein 2021.

CHAPTER 7: PARALITURGICAL MUSICAL ACTIVITIES

In addition to his prayer-leading responsibilities, Shenker led paraliturgical musical events at the Congregation Imrei Shaul synagogue in Brooklyn. Outside of the regular weekly cycle of prayer services and the Sabbath afternoon se'udah shelishit, two types of musical events regularly took place: yahrzeit se'udot and *kumzitsn*. Beginning when the Imrei Shaul was in America, the Brooklyn Modzitz community began to mark the anniversary of the death of past rebbes in the Modzitz lineage with a "yahrzeit se'udah," a light meal honoring the individual who was being remembered.[57] While food is indeed served at these events, the focus is not the cuisine but rather music and the Rebbe's teachings.

According to Jewish tradition, each new day begins at sundown, and yahrzeit se'udot are generally held on the evening of the anniversary of the Rebbe's passing. The customary evening prayer service is held, and then the back row of tables in the synagogue are pushed together to form a continuous seating area. Shenker would take his place toward the center of the table. The synagogue's rabbi, Rabbi Newmark, and later Rabbi Dov Stein (who served the congregation from 2013 to 2018), would sit next to Shenker, and his students Rabbis Dovid Bick and Aaron Orlander would sit across from him. Proximity to Rabbi Shenker and the synagogue's rabbi was, unofficially, an honored position, and if a guest of stature were to arrive mid-program, seats would be shuffled to make space toward

57 According to Gabriel Greenberg, whose family has long been connected to the Modzitz dynasty, the Divrei Yisroel would have a yahrzeit seudah after visiting the grave of the Kuzmir Rebbe. Thus, the yahrzeit seudah was not an American innovation, but rather extended back further to life in Europe.

the center of the table (though at times such guests would demur and sit in a more peripheral part of the room). The other participants would sit around the table or at one of the other nearby rectangular tables in the synagogue. These tables were covered and set with baskets of plasticware and trays of *gefilte fish* and *challah* rolls. Potato *kugel*, its aroma wafting from the oven downstairs, would later be distributed to those in attendance. A table at the front of the synagogue would be laid with baked goods and several bottles of Scotch whisky. Participants would often mark the occasion by "making a *lekhayim*," (toasting "to life"), and "making a *mezoynoys*" (making the appropriate blessing and partaking of a pastry or cake).

During Shenker's tenure, the yahrzeit se'udot of the Divrei Yisroel and Imrei Shaul would draw crowds of up to 150 people, while smaller events included roughly 40–60 attendees. In general, only men would attend these events, though for some of the more popular yahrzeit events, particularly those of the Divrei Yisroel and Imrei Shaul, some women would participate from the small balcony section upstairs and look down at the singers below.

The room was equipped with a wireless microphone and speakers that were hidden atop the bookshelves that lined the back wall. Many individuals would bring personal handheld recording devices, which would be placed on the table in front of Shenker so that the event could be enjoyed again later, or simply preserved for posterity.

Guests would chat with each other, primarily in Yiddish, as they began to eat and waited for the music to begin. Shenker would often begin the yahrzeit se'udah with the piyyut "*Yedid Nefesh*," most commonly attributed to the sixteenth-century kabbalist, Rabbi Eliezer Azikri (Chwat 2010). There are many settings of "Yedid Nefesh"' in the Modzitz canon. These pieces, which generally begin in "flowing rhythm" (Frigyesi 1993) and transition to a steadier pulse toward the end of the piece, are often challenging to sing. They include fast runs and, because these pieces often last ten minutes or more, remembering all their musical sections

requires study. Following this opening piece, Shenker would sing a shorter nigun, generally from the *ba'al hilula*, the individual being commemorated.

After these two opening pieces, it was customary for the rabbi of the synagogue to speak, generally in Yiddish, though, during his tenure, Rabbi Stein would sometimes choose to speak in English, for about ten minutes. These speeches would generally revolve around a Torah insight from a Modzitzer text, and stories would be told to highlight the teaching's profound meanings. In commemorations of some of the earlier rebbes of the dynasty, about whose lives less is known, teachings from alternative Modzitzer texts would be offered.

At this point, Shenker would either continue singing himself or pass the microphone to someone else. There were several individuals who would sing at nearly every yahrzeit se'udah, and they would contribute to the event by preparing a nigun in advance. Like Shenker's opening pieces, the convention was to sing one intricate and lengthy nigun first, followed by a short metric piece that invited communal singing. While some of these singers were from Modzitz families, others, raised in different Hasidic dynasties, were nonetheless knowledgeable about the Modzitz repertoire. Between musical pieces, Shenker would often explain the history of a piece, telling the crowd who composed it and for what occasion. While the pieces sung were generally from the ba'al hilula's canon, for the earlier rebbes whose music had largely been lost, Shenker would select pieces that in some way connected to that individual. In our conversations, Shenker explained to me how the Imrei Shaul would honor those who perished in the Holocaust by singing their music, and how Shenker himself selected music for these events:

GD: …you were saying about how you choose which nigunim you are going to do.

BZS: Right, so when it came to the Kuzmirer yahrzeit and the Zvoliner yahrzeit, I would choose nigunim that were composed by different composers in the dynasty that were known as court composers. In other words, like Azriel Dovid Fastag. He made a lot of nigunim. The Rebbe used to sing his nigunim. And you had

Yankel Ruderman. The nigun that I use for *"Yekhadsheyhu"* is Yankel Ruderman. That's a masterpiece, that piece, you know?.

GD: So it's not just any random Modzitz nigun.

BZS: It's something that has a connection.

GD: So even if it's not the Rebbe's composition, it's somebody who is connected with him in some way.

BZS: Yeah. And the Rebbe [the Imrei Shaul] used to sing them also. I understand […] that the Rebbe in Europe, while these composers were around, he never sang their nigunim. He sang his own.[…] He would ask them to sing their own. He would appoint them to sing "*Kol Mekadeysh,*" let's say. And they would sing their own nigun. And he would ask them, "What's that nigun?" And they would say, "I just made it" […That's] how he picked it up himself. He learned the nigunim from them. But over here in America, after the Holocaust and when things became known that all the people were decimated, so on the contrary, he tried to sing *more* of their nigunim. For their *zikaron* [memory]. And he used to say very often that he's singing a nigun of Fastag, Azriel Dovid Fastag.

Shenker would also lead a kumzits twice annually, on Sukkoth and on Passover. The word kumzits (the Yiddish pluralization, kumzitsn*,* is generally used in the community) is a contraction of two Yiddish words, meaning "come" and "sit," encapsulating the fraternal atmosphere cultivated in these musical gatherings. In the Israeli Zionist context, the kumzits became an outdoor singing event usually accompanied by portable instruments such as acoustic guitar, hand drum, and accordion, often around a campfire. This format was a popular activity in Israel in the 1940s and 1950s and has been referred to as "the Sabra's favorite leisure activity" (Almog 2000: 184). In Hasidic contexts, however, the kumzits is generally held indoors in a synagogue or private home.

Kumzitsn differ from yahrzeit se'udot in several ways. Instrumentation is a key element in the former, while the latter are generally unaccompanied. Modzitz kumzitsn in Brooklyn are accompanied by an electric keyboard, which provides a harmonic grounding for the nigunim. In Shenker's later years, the kumzitsn also included mandolin and clarinet, as Andy Statman had developed a collaborative relationship with Shenker.

In addition, kumzitsn generally draw larger crowds (up to approximately 250 people, in my experience), and the repertoire chosen is designed to encourage communal singing, rather than to commemorate the death of a Rebbe. Shenker would feel greater latitude to include his own compositions in kumzitsn, and he would often be joined by popular Hasidic singers, such as Cantor Yitzchak Meir Helfgot, and Rabbi Abish Brodt. These singers would generally sing music from the Modzitz canon but on occasion a well-known cantorial piece would be sung, for example Yossele Rosenblatt's famous setting of "Tal."

While yahrzeit se'udot are designed to inspire contemporary attendees through the memory of a past Rebbe, the kumzitsn are an opportunity to feel and express "*simkhes yontif*" – "holiday joy." For Hasidim, the nigun is a key element in the expression of joy. In her study of music in the teachings of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, Chani Haran Smith (2010: 4) explains that music and joy have been paired in Hasidic practice and belief since the movement's inception. As she writes, "[Hasidism] emphasized the importance of serving God with joy, and singing was regarded as the best means to achieve this."[58] The mystical writings of Rabbi Nachman and others delve into the spiritual mechanisms that facilitate the achievement of joy through music. In contemporary Hasidic communities, kumzitsn can be heard pouring onto the street during the evenings of the intermediate days of Sukkoth and Passover. The Modzitz kumzitsn are among the most popular of all Hasidic courts because of the dynasty's reputation for musical richness.

58 See also Seroussi 2019: 218-219.

While the yahrzeit se'udot and kumzitsn were regular events tied to the calendar, Shenker would also lead musical gatherings when the Modzitzer rebbes would visit the Brooklyn Modzitz community. The present Rebbe, Rabbi Ḥaim Shaul Taub (b. 1948), assumed the position upon the death of his father, the Nakhlas Dan, in 2006. A warm and quiet individual, the present Rebbe twice skipped a grade at his school, *Yesodei HaTorah*, because of his intellectual acumen. He pursued studies at the famed Ponevezh yeshivah, where his teacher Rabbi Yosef Kahaneman reportedly referred to him as "my missile," for the power and precision of his mind. After gaining rabbinic ordination, he led the Modzitz synagogue in Tel Aviv, became a member of the Chief Rabbinate of Tel Aviv, and was the leader of the Modzitz yeshiva in Bnei Brak. Following the precedent set by the previous Rebbes, Rabbi Ḥaim Shaul Taub began singing his own nigunim at public gatherings. Several of them have become popular in the Modzitz community and even among Hasidim from other dynasties.

I attended two large public events in Brooklyn presided over by the present Modzitzer Rebbe, with Shenker leading the singing. The first was in 2015, in a hall directly across the street from the Modzitz synagogue and the second was on a Friday night in 2016, in a hall in Boro Park. At these *tishn*, long rectangular tables are covered in white tablecloths and positioned end to end and side to side to create one large table space. The Rebbe sits at the head of the table on an elevated platform, while men either sit alongside the table or, for larger gatherings, stand in bleachers that have been arranged around the sides of the room. People of importance are seated around the table, and Shenker was always given the honor of being seated close to the Rebbe. Shenker would often be joined by several of his students, who would also sing nigunim at the *tish*. In addition to singing, the Rebbe distributes small plastic shot glasses of liquor as a greeting to those whom he recognizes either because of a family connection to Modzitz or perhaps because they had supported the dynasty's schools or charitable institutions. The Rebbe also shares words of Torah, often on the week's Torah portion.

The present Rebbe is soft-spoken, but this does not detract from the power of his words; those present have expressed to me that they are very impressed by his erudition. The Rebbe's trips to America are filled with private meetings with individuals seeking his guidance or blessing, and his public appearances at a tish or Melaveh Malkah generally include fundraising efforts; during an event that is not held on Shabbos, his assistants at times make a public appeal requesting funds from those who are able to donate to support the charities that the Rebbe endorses. Shenker was always the musical attraction at New York area events featuring the Rebbe, and, even in his later years, would travel beyond Brooklyn to be present for the Rebbe's appearances. One such occasion took place in February 2016, when at the age of 90, Shenker spent Shabbos in Lakewood, NJ, and led a rousing Melaveh Malkah. Though the travel was physically taxing, Shenker was energized by the experience of singing at these events with the Rebbe, and he would later recount the details of the event to those who had been unable to attend.

Reflections

In addition to being enjoyable entertainment, the paraliturgical events described here serve important functions for those in attendance. While Modzitz is a relatively small Hasidic dynasty, analogous events take place in larger communities as well. Events such as yahrzeit se'udot, kumzitsn, Melaveh Malkahs, and tishn go beyond auditory experiences because the nigunim sung call to mind specific individuals and events that are significant in Hasidic historiography. As Shenker suggested, the nigunim of the Hasidim who were killed in the Holocaust, for example, bring those from the past into the present. Furthermore, the stories that surround these nigunim reinforce Hasidic teachings about the spiritual power of music and the greatness of the composers who wrote the pieces. As ethnomusicologist Kay Kaufman Shelemay suggests (1998: 26), "Beyond

its practice, musical transmission is surrounded by a complex of concepts and materials that travel alongside actual performance […]. The process of transmission is concerned with reconciling the past with the present […]"

The yahrzeit se'udah is an important occasion during which music serves to weave the memory of revered leaders of the past into the lives of contemporary Hasidim. The yahrzeit se'udot use Torah exegesis and storytelling to bring past rebbes into the consciousness of the present-day community, reinforcing the Hasidic values expressed through the lives and music of the individuals honored on these occasions. Those in attendance celebrate continuity as they perpetuate the legacy of the Modzitzer rebbes by singing their nigunim, and placing themselves within the dynasty's lineage.

Furthermore, these paraliturgical musical events reinforce the process of socialization of the participants into their Hasidic community. By becoming familiar with the Modzitz repertoire, a relationship is built between listeners and the dynasty. The benefits are multi-directional. The listeners gain inspiration from the nigunim, learn the repertoire to sing in their own homes, and develop a connection to a distinguished Hasidic community. At the same time, the Modzitz community is strengthened by an audience that absorbs the nigunim and creates a vibrant atmosphere within the synagogue. Professor of Jewish Studies and English Ezra Cappell, who is a descendent of the Divrei Yisroel, explains his experience of visiting musical events at the Modzitzer shul in Brooklyn:

> I would listen with rapt attention as my grandfather's cousin, Ben Zion Shenker, sang the beautiful and haunting nigunim of my great, great grandfather, Rabbi Yisroel Taub of Modzitz. Each nigun came with a story that my grandfather would whisper into my ear as the hundreds of loyal Hasidim swayed to the mournful strains of Ben Zion's voice; I heard history, both his and mine, unfold in each note. (Cappell 2009)

Today, the events are led by Rabbis Aaron Orlander and Dovid Bick, and the repertoire continues to be transmitted to those who attend Modzitz community events. In addition, the events live on through audio recordings made with handheld recorders. Following each event, a recording is made available to members of the community. When I began attending events in 2012, burned CDs were distributed in the days and weeks following events, and in the coming years a download link was made available. These links are distributed beyond the Brooklyn community through Hasidic online forums. Music fans post on Yiddish language forums and share files of Modzitz events that take place in Brooklyn and in Israel. People can also request files of certain pieces, which other enthusiasts are generally happy to share. Like many music-making communities, the internet has brought about a significant change to musical transmission that enables perpetuity, though perhaps at the expense of the interpersonal elements of live events.

CHAPTER 8:
RE-ENTERING THE RECORDING STUDIO

Shenker's musical activity in his final years may well have extended his days. After several decades of recording hiatus, Shenker released two albums in the last three years of his life, *"Hallel V'Zimrah"* (2014) and *"Shiru LaShem Shir Ḥadash"* (2016). Shenker worked ceaselessly on these records, deciding which nigunim should be included, what the best accompaniment would be for each piece, how the songs should be sequenced, and whether a track that he had recorded was good enough or required another take. This immersion in musical activity seemed to inspire more melodic ideas, and he composed many new nigunim, which he would notate and then edit until he was fully satisfied with them.

"Hallel V'Zimrah" and "Shiru LaShem Shir Ḥadash" were produced by Andy Statman, who also played mandolin and clarinet on the records. The backing vocals were provided by the Yedidim Choir, conducted by Cantor Shimmy Miller. Shenker and Statman had first met at the Modzitz synagogue, which Statman had initially visited because of the dynasty's reputation for musicality. At the synagogue, he became enraptured by the Modzitz nigunim sung by Shenker. As Statman put it,

> I was very taken by the nigunim, and Ben Zion wanted me to learn the nigunim. He started writing out things for me, and he taught me a lot of music over the years. … He would write it out for me, and he would also sing it for me on tape. I learn most of what I do by ear, by slowing records or tapes. And, I remember when I played back one of

> the *deveykus* nigunim, he said, "You're playing exactly what I sing!" [Laughs]. I said, "Yeah, that's what I'm *trying* to do. I'm trying to get the exact phrasing."

Statman became a regular at the Modzitz synagogue, but their musical worlds seemed too disparate for Ben Zion to consider a collaboration. Andy Statman had built a successful career as a bluegrass and klezmer musician, gaining wide acclaim, including a prestigious award from the National Endowment for the Arts in 2012. Shenker was pleased that Statman had shown an interest in Modzitz nigunim but it did not dawn on him to discuss a collaboration. "I didn't think that he was interested in anything like this," Shenker told me, "and I never thought of initiating a conversation that we should do something together." Their mutual friend Bentzion Zeitlin urged them to collaborate on a record. About this, Shenker told me,

> I had composed quite a lot of stuff over the years. I had stuff from before that was never recorded. Bentzion Zeitlin was actually the one who brought the whole thing to fruition. He kept nudging me …. He used to come twice a week at least with a recorder and we would sit sometimes from 9:30 at night until maybe 10:30 or 11. They [the upstairs neighbors] never complained [laughs]. They enjoyed it actually! [laughs]. [Zeitlin] never was satiated. He had a very big appetite [for music] […] So anyway, it was he who started talking about me getting together with Andy Statman. Because he was a big fan of Andy's and he was a big fan of mine.

Statman further recalled the background to their joint productions:

> Ben Zion was always writing great music. At one point he was, in the Orthodox Jewish music world, a big star. And then as time went on, tastes changed, styles changed, and while he was still respected, he was kind of fading more and more into the distance. At the same time,

he was still writing fantastic music. He was always the preeminent interpreter of Modzitz music, and while his voice might not have been as brilliant in terms of the range, he just got better and better in terms of understanding nuance and style and expression. His expression just got deeper and deeper and deeper. And I think he became more and more fearless, and more concerned with expression and feeling than with a "perfect" performance, like a *khazn* type performance […]. [His] singing of his own melodies is not documented. Him singing them the way he intended for them to be sung. And the other thing is that his style of piano playing was the perfect accompaniment for what he did. […] He may not have been a chopsy [virtuosic] player, but he knew exactly what he wanted to play and how to play it. And when he sang at home, it was just an amazing experience. I used to get together with him to rehearse songs for the Yamim Noraim [High Holidays]. Each year he'd write a batch of songs, and I'd always come over with a mandolin. […] At one point I said, "Ben Zion, you know, we should just do some recordings of you with no production. Just you and the piano, and you singing the nigun as you want it to be sung, so that the nigun doesn't become a hostage to an arrangement. Sometimes, with some of these arrangements, the nigun becomes sort of a Music Minus One vehicle for an arrangement.[59] Rather than the arrangement serving the nigun, the nigun becomes the vehicle for the arrangement. So, I said, let's just get the real thing here. … I got Bentzion Zeitlin interested as well. […] He liked it when I backed him up on mandolin. It gave him some sort of rhythm and some sort of counterpoint, but it wasn't overwhelming, and it enhanced what he was doing. So we started that and we did one test session in the studio.

59 Music Minus One refers to a series of recordings designed as practice tools for musicians. With these recordings, users can pan the audio to hide the soloist, allowing one to play the part of the soloist while practicing. Statman is making the point that nigunim can similarly become obscured in the elaborate arrangements that characterize commercial recordings of Hasidic nigunim.

> It worked out pretty well, and Ben Zion saw the possibilities of it. […] He was sold on it… So we just went at it with a vengeance.

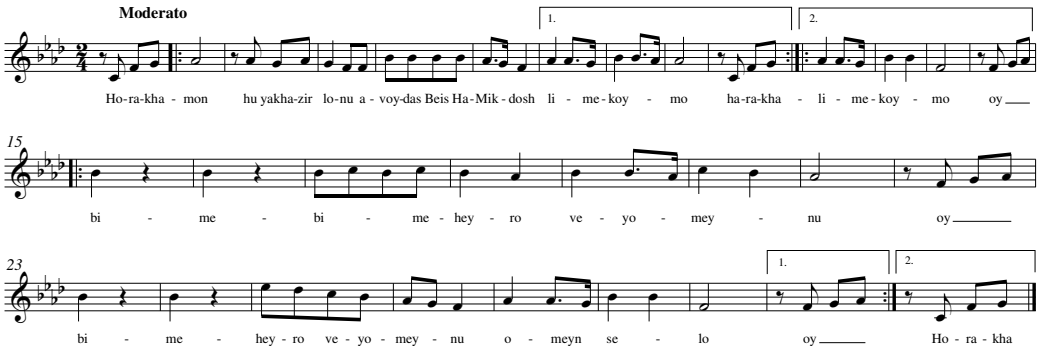
Despite Shenker's advanced age, he participated in the project with enthusiasm and focus. Statman testified:

> Well, first of all, he'd have to climb over snowbanks to get in the studio from the cab. When there were huge snowstorms, he'd feel horrible and he said, "I'm just doing this for my record. I wouldn't do it for anything else." And I would think we were going to have to call *Hatzalah* when we got to the studio. But as soon as he started to sing, his whole facial expression changed. He was full of energy. […] He'd be exhausted by the time he came home. I would get out of the taxi with him, and I used to wait—he told me to go on—but I used to make sure he got in. […] His grandchildren have said to me, and so did Velvel [Newmark], that these records really kept him going in the last years.

Their first record together, "Hallel V'Zimrah," included twenty nigunim, highlighting pieces related to Passover. The Passover theme not only gave Shenker parameters for deciding which pieces to include but also provided a marketing angle, as the record was released before the holiday with a cover note advertising, "Including seven songs for the *Pesach Seder*."

One of the pieces from "Hallel V'Zimrah" that has garnered attention in the Hasidic community is Shenker's setting of "*Horakhamon Hu Yankhileynu*," a text from the Grace after Meals for the Passover seder. The song was originally composed to a similar text, "*Horakhomon Hu Yakhazir Lonu*," which is recited after the counting of the Omer, a brief ritual that is performed during the forty-nine days between the second day of Passover and Shavuot. The texts are similar enough that the melody required only minimal adjustments for the different lyrics. More importantly, however, the emotional quality of the texts matches

that of the melody. Both texts speak about a longing for the messianic era while focusing on different aspects of this long-awaited period. In "Horakhomon Hu Yakhazir Lonu," the text speaks of longing to reinstitute the sacrificial service of the Temple in Jerusalem, while "Horakhamon Hu Yankhileynu" speaks of the way that righteous people will bask in the glory of God with crowns atop their heads. The nigun is a simple minor melody with two sections, and it follows the standard convention of repeating each section twice. In the recording, the piece begins with Shenker playing the melody on piano, with Statman joining, echoing, and harmonizing on clarinet, as well as playing soft harmonies on mandolin to add harmonic support and an additional timbre. In the first introduction of the vocals, Shenker sings the melody himself in a gentle tone, with little embellishment. In the repetition of this A section Shenker is joined by the Shira Choir, which, like Statman on clarinet, echoes Shenker's melodic phrases and provides vocal harmonies. Shenker's voice rises in dynamic level as the melody reaches into a higher pitch range in the B section. The high point of the melody is a high E♭ on which Shenker sings "*Beziv HaShekhino*" ("In the radiance/aura of the Divine Presence"); the high note illustrates the grandeur of God's radiance. "Horakhamon" is a clear example of Shenker's ability to convey the meaning of a text through a simple, singable melody. The arrangement and production on the record are consistent with Shenker's preference during this period of his life for simple presentations of the music that focus on the melody and religious intent of the nigunim.



["Horakhamon Hu Yakhazir Lonu"/"Horakhamon Hu Yankhileynu," composed in 5766 (2006)]

"Hallel V'Zimrah" differs substantially from most contemporary Orthodox popular music albums. The record is noticeably sparse, with only lead vocals, vocal harmonies, piano, clarinet, and mandolin. While Shenker no longer had the bright tone and large range of his earlier recordings, his singing still conveys a depth of emotion through dynamics and idiomatic ornamentation. Compared to Orthodox recordings that take on the sounds of American "Top 40" hits, "Hallel V'Zimrah" emphasizes melody, intentionally distinguishing the spirit of Hasidic nigunim from Orthodox pop songs. Shenker believed that these Jewish pop records strayed too far from the conventions of nigunim and the traditional community's musical practices. In the following excerpt, the Orthodox newspaper *Yated Ne'eman* references this sonic experience:

> Andy Statman points out that these sessions were basically recorded as live performances in the studio. This way, the living spirit of the music would be preserved and not obscured.
>
> To lovers of true *Hasidic negina* [song], this will be welcome news. Above all, these performances seek to be faithful to the spiritual intent that underlies this entire genre of music.[60]

60 Yated Ne'eman, March 28, 2014.

Shenker's record is "welcome," the Yated Ne'eman author implies, because other contemporary recordings do not convey the proper "spiritual intent" of nigunim. This aesthetic is understood as spiritually beneficial because, through its production style and prioritization of melody, it conveys religious sincerity.

The musical piety that was associated with Shenker's record was related to both spiritual and social concerns. Shenker, like many individuals in the Ḥaredi community, believed that properly delivered nigunim could reinforce the beauty of Orthodox life, penetrating the heart and strengthening one's religious resolve. By contrast, some Orthodox popular music is perceived as a potential gateway to non-Orthodox culture. Concern for the spiritual wellbeing of Orthodox youth is a common theme in Ḥaredi society, and Shenker's music came to be seen as a positive force in the lives of the younger generation. I had an opportunity to discuss this phenomenon with Shenker:

BZS: What's happening now is that a lot of the young yeshiva boys are being exposed to this type of music [pop music], and they are going along with it. But the *Rosh Yeshivas* [Heads of Schools] are seeing a trend which is not a very good trend. Because with this type of music, you can go on the fringe, you know. If you become too inspired by it. It's not a kosher type of [outlet].

GD: I remember you telling me, actually, that when you put out your last CD you wanted to make sure, specifically, that it got into the yeshivas.

BZS: Yeah. Well, I'm getting a lot of feedback now from some of my *eyniklekh* [grandchildren] who go to different yeshivas in Lakewood that the Rosh Yeshiva in fact, just this past week, he said something to the effect—he knew my great-grandson who is in this class was there. And he said to the class, "You know, people think it's a good idea that yeshiva boys have a proper Melave Malka after Shabbos. It's a very good idea, I think. Even if they are doing it by themselves on their own, and they sit down and listen to a good CD of Ben Zion Shenker."

GD: Oh yeah?!

BZS: Yeah, that's exactly what he said! [Laughs] And [at my nephew's] wedding […] they had a lot of Rosh Yeshivos there. The *khoson* [groom] learned in Philadelphia, and here and there, so there were quite a few Rosh Yeshivas there. When I started singing "Velirusholayim Irkho," I saw such a pleasant look on their faces. They were so happy to hear it. Something that inspired them a little bit, you know? So obviously it has some sort of effect. And they came to the conclusion that this is the type of music that they want their children to be inspired with.

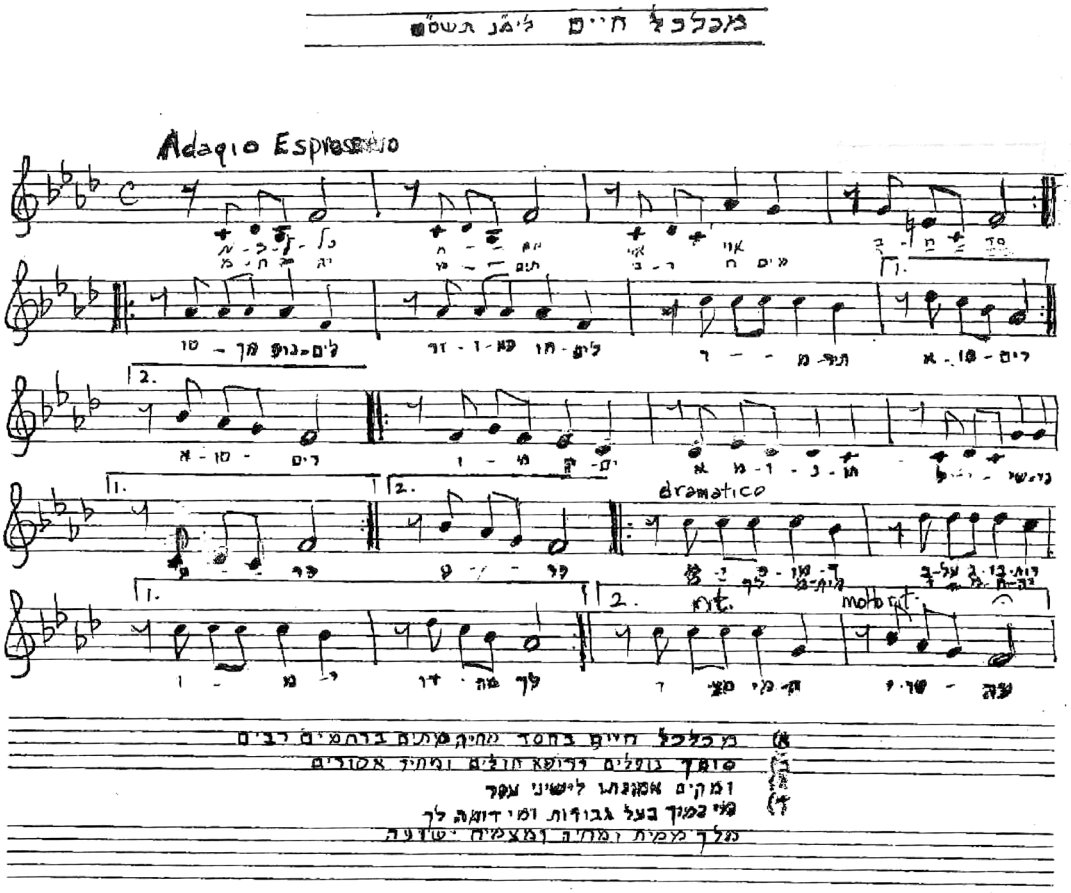
Shenker continued to be concerned for the future of Jewish music as it relates to the spiritual temperament of his community. When asked in an interview with Hankus Netsky what he wished to communicate to future generations, Shenker spoke about the music that Orthodox Jewish musicians were choosing to compose and perform. While many younger musicians were performing in the styles of popular music that are prevalent in "mainstream" American pop culture, Shenker believed that the style of nigunim that he had inherited from earlier Hasidic musicians, and that he himself helped to propagate, was a more proper style of music for Orthodox Jews to consume: "I'm still traditional," he said, "and people keep telling me, 'You gotta keep on recording your stuff, because that's the stuff that we want to remain with. We don't want to remain with this all this baloney.'" This, he went on to say, was what he hoped to accomplish through his work with Andy Statman.

Shenker's "Hallel V'Zimrah" was well received, and the ground was paved for another album. "Shiru LaShem Shir Ḥadash" was released during Sukkoth, in October of 2016. The album has fifteen tracks, several of which include vocals by Shenker's great-grandchildren. The inclusion of the children on the album can be seen as a gesture to intergenerational transmission to the youth who will sing these nigunim into the future and use these settings in the liturgy recited both in and out of the synagogue. For example, Shenker's setting of *"Hamalokh Hagoyeyl"*

(Gen. 48: 16), a text that is part of a prayers recited immediately before going to sleep, is a lullaby that can be sung by children and parents together. Thus, this music is functional, accompanying its listeners through the daily liturgy, and inspirational for the young people who sing them and consolidate their Hasidic identities as they develop into adults.

One of the pieces on "Shiru LaShem" that has remained a staple at Modzitz gatherings is "*Mekhalkeyl Khayim,*" composed for the High Holidays in the year 5769 (2008). This text is part of the *Amidah* prayer, said thrice daily, and has been set to music many times by the rebbes of Modzitz, in what have become some of their most beloved nigunim. Shenker's setting is based on a rhythmic motif that runs through much of the nigun. The rhythmic motif consists of an eighth rest, followed by three eighth notes and a half note (in section A and at the end of all other sections) or two quarter notes (sections B, C, D). The nigun consists of four short sections of four bars, each of which is repeated twice with open and closed endings. Interestingly, this nigun does not follow the more common four-section nigun formula of a constant rising in the pitch level until a peak is reached, usually in the third section (this allows a descending motion in the fourth towards the return to the beginning section in the lower register). Rather, the third section descends back to the lower register, enhancing the rise of the pitch to its highest level in the D section, which Shenker notes as "dramatico." Indeed, on the recording, he sings this last section with a higher level of expressivity, as the pitches reach their peak in the nigun.

"Mekhalkeyl Khayim" is simple in construction. Nonetheless, the song's repetitive rhythmic motif inspires the spirit of religious devotion among the Hasidim. At one Modzitz event, an attendee told me that he believes this to be Shenker's greatest nigun—and had said as much to Shenker. The composer had replied that he may be correct. Indeed, in his later years Shenker valued the emotional experience of those attending his performance over the complexity of a nigun or the virtuosity required to play it well.



["Mekhalkeyl Khayim," composed for the High Holidays of 5769 (2008). Reprinted courtesy of Velvel and Aidel Newmark from the Shenker family's private collection]

As described above, "Shiru LaShem" was made available in time for the annual Sukkoth kumzits, and some attendees purchased copies of the album on site. The event was held in the sukkah of the Reifman family, where Shenker was staying for the holiday, and many notable musicians from the Hasidic community were in attendance.[61] The sukkah was bursting beyond capacity, and from my seat inside I could see young Hasidic children who climbed onto the roof and were peeking in through the slats of the bamboo mats that covered the sukkah. One of Shenker's

61 A sukkah is a temporary dwelling constructed for the holiday, in observance of the biblical verse, "You shall live in booths [sukkot] seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths, in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I the LORD your God." (Lev. 23: 42–43)

adult grandsons played an electric piano that was set up in the corner for the event, and Shenker sat at the head of a long table, with his students on either side of him.

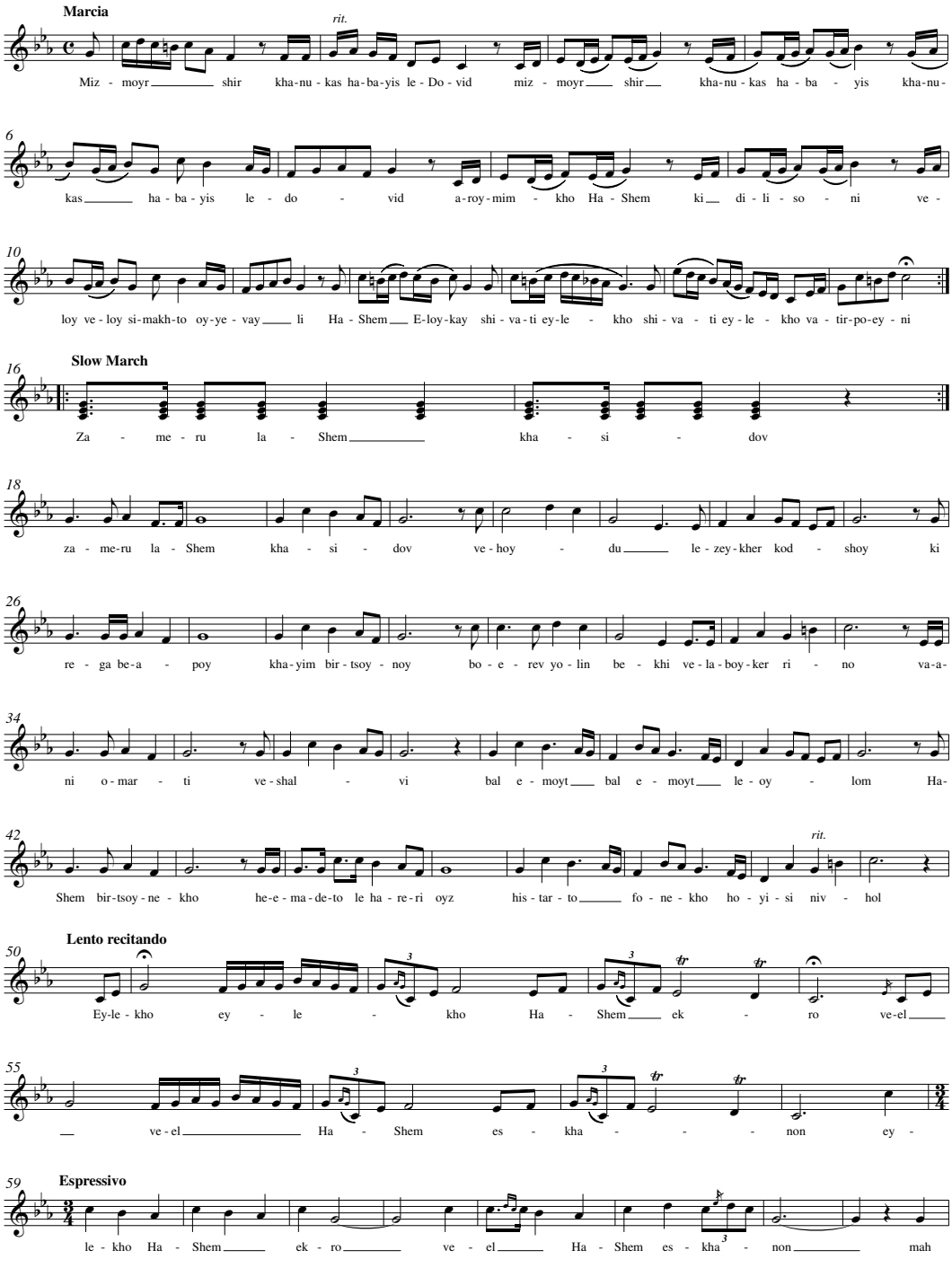
Shenker was clearly energized by the music and the enthusiasm of the participants at the kumzits, and was proud to have released his new album. However, his health had been poor during the previous months, and he had tired quickly while working hard on the release of "Shiru LaShem." In fact, he had even considered skipping a *yahrzeit se'udah* that had taken place a short time before the holiday. For most ninety-one-year-olds, this would not have been a difficult decision to make. Shenker, however, was deeply devoted to these important events on the Modzitz calendar. As the yahrzeit se'udah was to begin, the assembled crowd still did not know whether Shenker would be attending. I recall turning to Rabbi Meir Fund, who was sitting next to me at the event, and asking if he thought the composer would be coming. Rabbi Fund replied, "He'll be here. Right now, his *yeytzer toyv* [good inclination] is telling him to come, and his *yeytzer hora* [bad inclination] is also telling him to come." Shenker arrived a moment later, accompanied by a watchful student, and treated the crowd to some of his best-known pieces as well as selections from his new record. Reflecting on the event later, Shenker felt that the evening had been a rousing success: the crowd returned home inspired.

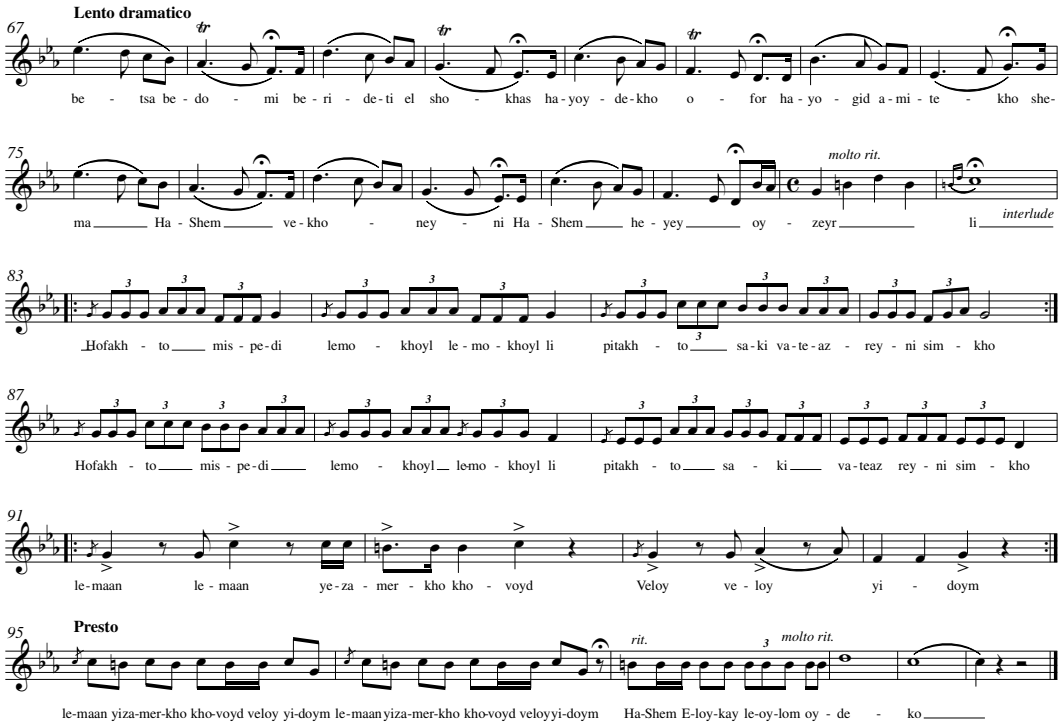
The completion of "Shiru LaShem" was a significant accomplishment for Shenker, and his friends and family were pleased that he was able to enjoy the fruits of that labor. Notably, a number of tracks that he began recording in the studio did not make the final cut and remain in varying degrees of completion. He had worked particularly hard on recording one of these works, a setting of Psalm 30, "*Mizmoyr Shir Khanukas Habayis*," which displays the inspiration that Shenker drew from classical music conventions. Based on an earlier nigun ("Eyn Kitzvoh," written for the High Holidays of 2008), "Mizmoyr Shir Khanukas Habayis" includes six distinct sections, which function as movements within

the piece, each with a different emotional character. Shenker labeled the first section "Marcia." Marches are common in the Modzitz repertoire (similarly to other Hasidic dynasties), and this section of the piece fits that model. It opens at a rapid pace (approximately 120 beats per minute, though he lets the pulse flow even within this upbeat introductory section), beginning in C minor. On the draft recording, Shenker plays piano and Statman plays mandolin, which enables us to hear Shenker's intended harmonies. As is frequently the case in Shenker's nigunim, the piece is based on i, iv, and V chords, with an occasional shift to the relative major (here, E♭ major). This introductory section includes the first four sentences of the psalm, ending with the line, "*Khiyiysoni miyordi voyr*" ("[You] preserved me so I should not go down into the pit," Psalm 30: 4).

The piece continues with a slower section and a new musical theme. A march rhythm sets the mood for the new section. Shenker wrote this rhythmic opening with a full C minor chord in root position, one of the few places in the notation of his nigunim where he includes harmonies. This static chordal march rhythm is sung to the words "*Zamru LaShem Khasidov*" (Sing to God, O loyal ones), introducing a new portion of the psalm, much in the way of the rhythmic "signal" found in the opening of the internal sections of many Hasidic nigunim. The melody of this section, sung over the slow march rhythm that becomes an ostinato, is sung softly. Compared to the march in the preceding section, this B section is much calmer, perhaps reflecting the singing of "His loyal ones." Nonetheless, it has a steady pulse and a sense of forward motion. This contrasts with the third section of the piece, which begins on the words "*Eylekho Hashem Ekro*" ("To You, God, I called," Psalm 30: 9). Here the character of the piece changes considerably, as the rhythm becomes flowing (even though the notation is still in 4/4), and the recording is much sparser in its texture. In the notation, Shenker marked this section "Lento recitando," and added by hand "ad lib" in his personal notation. In the recording, Shenker repeats the line "Eylekho Hashem Ekro" three times, doubling the word "Eylekho" to further emphasize the addressee of the plea offered by the praying individual. On the last of these

three repetitions, the music changes, acquiring a steadier pulse, as the meter changes to a slow 3/4 with a descending phrase in quarter notes. On the next line, "*Ma Betsa Bedomi*" ("What profit is in my blood," Psalm 30: 10), the melody stretches to its highest pitch in the piece, yet Shenker's singing is still somber. The two-measure musical phrase heard here becomes an extended sequence of four repetitions, each time beginning one scale degree lower. This sequence is then repeated, again beginning on the high E♭, but concluding with a clear cadence bringing an end to this D section. The fifth section of the piece introduces a new musical idea, a triplet pattern in 4/4 that is similar to that found in Shenker's famous setting of "*Keyl Odoyn*" included on the "Shiru LaShem" record. The change in mood matches the text in this portion, as Shenker sings "*Hofakhto Mispedi Lemokhoyl Li*" ("You turned my mourning into dancing for me"), the music gains energy and pace. This energy is carried into the sixth section, "*Lemaan yezamerkho khovoyd veloy yidoym*" ("So that my soul will sing to You and not be silenced"). Here the triplet feel is gone, but rests within the phrases help to preserve the intensity that the previous section introduced. The section repeats twice, then moves to the conclusion, marked "Presto" in the notation. Fast eighth-note patterns give a final push to the end of the piece, but an extended pause surprises the listener right before the final words of the Psalm, "*Hashem Eloykay Leoylom Oydeko*" ("O Lord, my God, I shall thank You forever"). These final measures of the composition, held whole notes, clearly imply a V-i cadence that ends the work dramatically. Conveying the desire to praise God with song and enduring gratitude, these words were on Shenker's mind in his final days as he worked on his recordings. The text of the Psalm captures the mission of his life, and this rich setting encapsulates the deep expressivity that he was able to achieve as a mature composer.


Marcia
rit.
Miz - moyr shir kha-nu - kas ha-ba-yis le - Do - vid miz - moyr shir kha-nu - kas ha - ba - yis kha-nu-
6
kas ha - ba - yis le - do - vid a-roy-mim - kho Ha - Shem ki di - li - so - ni ve -
10
loy ve - loy si-makh-to oy-ye - vay li Ha - Shem E-loy-kay shi - va-ti ey-le - kho shi - va - ti ey - le - kho va - tir-po-ey - ni
16
Slow March
Za - me - ru la - Shem kha - si - dov
18
za - me-ru la - Shem kha - si - dov ve - hoy - du le - zey - kher kod - shoy ki
26
re - ga be-a - poy kha-yim bir - tsoy - noy bo - e - rev yo - lin be - khi ve - la - boy - ker ri - no va-a-
34
ni o - mar - ti ve - shal - vi bal e - moyt bal e - moyt le - oy - lom Ha-
42
rit.
Shem bir-tsoy - ne - kho he-e - ma - de-to le ha - re - ri oyz his - tar - to fo - ne - kho ho - yi - si niv - hol
50
Lento recitando
Ey-le - kho ey - le - kho Ha - Shem ek - ro ve-el
55
ve - el Ha - Shem es - kha - - - non ey -
59
Espressivo
le - kho Ha - Shem ek - ro ve - el Ha - Shem es - kha - non mah



["Mizmoyr Shir Khanukas Habayis," composed in 5769 (2008)]

Reflections

Shenker had several motivations in pursuing his final two albums. First, and most importantly, these projects were a continuation of his life's work and an opportunity to release music that he had not previously made widely available. Secondly, according to those close to him, Shenker had a desire to be seen as actively relevant in the Jewish music industry. As an older musician who was thinking about his legacy, gaining a place in the larger scene of Jewish music beyond his immediate circles must have been an attractive prospect. Thirdly, the music that Shenker released was representative of his musical and social vision for the more socially and religiously conservative sector of the Orthodox community, where Shenker was most at home. Through these records, Shenker was offering

a corrective to the direction in which he perceived the Orthodox community was moving, as music that was based on conventions of American pop hits were becoming native to this sector.

In contemporary Ḥaredi discourse, popular music is often seen as entangled with, or even a proxy for, social challenges. Among the more conservative members of society, Ḥaredi pop music is often understood as challenging the desire of the community's leadership to mark clear boundaries with non-Orthodox communities and more generally with the non-Jewish world. Moreover, general popular music is suspected of being a platform for Orthodox youth who are chasing the inappropriate goal of stardom, and therefore is considered an intrusion of foreign sounds into the community's sacred domain. Nigunim, by contrast, are seen as a tool for devekut, cleaving to God, and are associated with distinguished Jewish figures of the past. As the spiritual and social opposite of pop music, nigunim are an antidote to social concerns about the strength of the boundaries preserving the distinction of the Ḥaredi community.

Despite the musical similarities between much of the community's pop music and many nigunim, the rhetorical divide between them plays out in the lived experiences of contemporary musicians. Shenker's anecdote about performing "Velirusholayim Irkho" to calibrate the mood at a wedding is telling. While the loud music of the youth was popular and inspired energetic dancing, the positive looks that he received from Roshei Yeshiva were confirmation that this was the more appropriate atmosphere for a wedding in this religious community. The experience is aligned with the tales of Shenker's music being consumed by Hasidic Rebbes and demonstrates how nigunim are representations, even embodiments, of social and spiritual health. As Shenker entered his nineties and considered his legacy, these social considerations were surely on his mind, and he took great pleasure in knowing that community leaders were recommending his records to the younger generation for their musical and spiritual needs.

CHAPTER 9:
SHENKER'S PASSING AND LEGACY

In the weeks after Sukkoth in 2016, Ben Zion Shenker saw the release of "Shiru LaShem" in stores and received positive feedback from those who had heard the album. He was featured on the cover of *Hamodia*'s *Inyan* magazine, a popular periodical in the Ḥaredi community, in connection with the release of his new record. However, his health continued to worsen. On November 19, 2016, I attended Sabbath morning services at the Modzitzer synagogue. As usual, I took a seat directly across from Shenker. I was troubled to see that he was disoriented, though he did recognize and greet me warmly. He seemed unable to recite the morning prayers, and when a gentleman seated next to him attempted to assist him with finding the correct page in the prayer book, Rabbi Shenker told him that today the sheli'aḥ tzibbur would have to pray on his behalf. Shortly thereafter, the aide who had been living with Rabbi Shenker for the past few months helped him to his feet and escorted him home.

The next day, I received a call from Gabriel Greenberg, a Modzitzer friend. Shenker, he said, had passed away early that morning. I made my way to Shomrei Hadas, a funeral home in Boro Park, Brooklyn. During the packed funeral, family, friends, and several rabbis delivered emotional eulogies. One of the Modzitzer Rebbe's adult sons was visiting America and spoke, his address punctuated with sobs. The speeches praised Shenker's greatness as a musician but also emphasized his kindness as a person. Cantor Yitzhak Meir Helfgot, whom Shenker respected greatly, sang *"El Male Raḥamim,"* a musically moving centerpiece of the Ashkenazi funeral liturgy. The rendition of this prayer was noteworthy: On the words "*v'yanuaḥ b'shalom al mishkavo*" ("And he shall rest peacefully on his resting place") Cantor Helfgot sang the text to the melody of Shenker's famous

setting of "Mizmoyr Ledovid." With this seamless integration of the melody, he may have been implying that the "resting place" that Shenker had made, his accomplishments in this world, was his repertoire of nigunim. This contribution to the world, Helfgot's singing suggested, was a boon to Jewish life, and Shenker could rest comfortably on it in the afterlife. Shenker was laid to rest in the Floral Park Cemetery in New Jersey, the final resting place of several important leaders of Hasidism in America, including the rebbes of the Bobov, Spinka, and Kaliv dynasties.

During the *shiva* period, guests visited Shenker's family to express their condolences and share memories. The following story, told by Brocha Weinberger, shows the interlacing of Shenker's musical production and personal relationships:

> When we were sitting shiva for my father, a woman came and she said that she wanted to share with us something that was very important to her. She said that when she was a single girl, her father [had been] friends with my father. And he always asked my father, "*Im Yirtze Hashem* [God willing], when my daughter gets married, could you please make up a song for her wedding?'" And my father said, "Okay." Her father was *niftor* [passed away], before her wedding. And she said that when she did get married, she remembers that all of a sudden my father came in and he had a song that he had composed. And he sang it at her wedding. He kept his promise. She was wowed. But he had told her father, and a promise is a promise. But that's how my father was. He was always true to his word. He gave that over to us too.

In the weeks that followed, as Rabbi Shenker's friends and family coped with his passing, words of praise for Shenker appeared in Jewish periodicals and circulated among the Modzitz community, both in Israel and the United States. As the mourning for Shenker continued, the leadership of Congregation Imrei Shaul Modzitz needed to reassign musical leadership for the synagogue's *yahrzeit*

se'udot and kumzitsn. This role was given to Shenker's student, Rabbi Aaron Orlander.

Some three weeks later, the synagogue held *yahrzeit se'udot* for the Divrei Yisroel and the Imrei Shaul, whose *yahrzeits* are marked within days of each other. These events were clearly a time of transition for the community. Orlander stepped into his leadership role with grace and humility, choosing to share the microphone with others in the room. This sent the message that he was not interested in shining the spotlight on himself but rather favored inclusion and community. Orlander invited his friend and fellow expert in Modzitzer nigunim, Rabbi Dovid Bick, to join him in this leadership. The synagogue also experimented with turning off the room's fluorescent lights and instead using candles to illuminate the room. This change, a dramatic deviation from established practice, was not accepted, as some members of the community found it too dark to move about safely. I also noticed for the first time at a *yahrzeit se'udah* that one individual, whom I had never seen before at a Modzitz event, became visibly intoxicated. It may have been a coincidence that this took place on the first occasion that Shenker was not present. However, it is also possible that Shenker's absence was understood by this individual as a vacuum in authority, even though Orlander had been appointed to lead the music and the synagogue's rabbi was present. In any case, it was clear that Shenker's passing left the assembly in uncharted territory.

On the evening of the Imrei Shaul's yahrzeit, Rabbi Stein delivered a passionate speech in tribute to Shenker's extraordinary religious devotion and the impact of his music. The talk alternated between Hebrew, Yiddish, and English. I have adapted it here, including non-English words only when it is important for understanding the meaning of the text.[62] I also present here the verse in the Book of Joshua on which Rabbi Stein's talk is based.

62 See the Appendix for Rabbi Stein's unmodified text.

Rabbi Stein's speech focused on a dramatic episode in the book of Joshua in which Joshua appealed to God to pause the natural movements of the sun and moon so the Israelites could maximize their victory over an alliance of southern kings:

יהושע י׳: י״ב-י״ג

(יב) אָז יְדַבֵּר יְהוֹשֻׁעַ לַה׳ בְּיוֹם תֵּת ה׳ אֶת־הָאֱמֹרִי לִפְנֵי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר לְעֵינֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁמֶשׁ בְּגִבְעוֹן דֹּם וְיָרֵחַ בְּעֵמֶק אַיָּלוֹן׃ (יג) וַיִּדֹּם הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וְיָרֵחַ עָמָד עַד־יִקֹּם גּוֹי אֹיְבָיו הֲלֹא־הִיא כְתוּבָה עַל־סֵפֶר הַיָּשָׁר וַיַּעֲמֹד הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ בַּחֲצִי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלֹא־אָץ לָבוֹא כְּיוֹם תָּמִים׃

Joshua 10: 12-13

(12) On that occasion, when the LORD routed the Amorites before the Israelites, Joshua addressed the LORD; he said in the presence of the Israelites: "Stand still, O sun, at Gibeon, O moon, in the Valley of Aijalon!" (13) And the sun stood still and the moon halted, while a nation wreaked judgment on its foes — as is written in the Book of Jashar. Thus the sun halted in midheaven, and did not press on to set, for a whole day;

Rabbi Stein's speech

Joshua prayed that the sun stand in the middle of the sky to give the Jewish people the chance to defeat the enemy and get back home before the Sabbath … So Joshua sang songs of praise. That's written in Chapter Ten in the Book of Joshua. Rashi in the Talmudic tractate 'Avoydo Zoro' (Idol Worship) asks a brilliant question. The verse says, "Vayidoym hashemesh, veyoreyakh omod" ("And quiet was the sun, and the moon stood still"). Vayidoym means "it was quiet." The sun became quiet. It should say "vayaamoyd hashemesh" (the sun stood still), like the moon! Why does it say "vayidoym"? Rashi says a wonderous thing: The verse says in Psalms, "From the rising of the sun to the sunset it praises the name of God." The sun, from the first moment of sunrise until sunset, never stops for a second giving song and praise to God. "From the rising of the sun to the sunset it praises the

name of God." When Joshua prayed for the sun to stop in the middle of its orbit, immediately "vayidoym hashemesh"- it stopped. But it was also "vayidoym." It stopped singing praise. The song of the sun is constant. It was in orbit. But the minute it stopped, it was "vayidoym," silent. Rashi explains that the world was missing songs of praise. So immediately, Joshua felt that he had to compensate for the missing songs of the world. And immediately, Joshua began singing songs of praise to make up for the terrible loss of the sun's song. This is what Rashi wrote. We know that Ben Zion dedicated his life to singing songs of praise to God. Literally, "From the rising of the sun to the sunset it praises the name of God." I remember sitting here for the third Sabbath meal, he would turn to me and say, "This nigun I composed seventy-five years ago." Seventy-five years ago, Ben Zion was still a young kid! He was composing nigunim literally from his sunrise until his sunset. I'll never forget, the last Shabbos during the kedusho portion of the Musof prayer, the last melody, Reb Ben Zion was banging on the table, singing. Literally a few hours later, he passed away.[63] Literally, from his sunrise until his sunset… He never stopped singing songs of praise. This wonderful sun, this wonderful star. He never stopped offering songs of praise. And now it's a situation in which the sun is standing still. This sun is standing still. There's no more song of praise. He stopped giving songs of praise. So, of course, someone has to compensate for this tremendous void. He was the sun! The sun's song of praise–it is over! It's up to his students, and his friends, and this synagogue—this is his synagogue! It's up to his synagogue, and his students, and those close to him, and his friends to try to fill this tremendous void. To try to compensate and continue the strength of song that was lost.

I just want to share with the community a very interesting teaching of Maimonides. The verse says, in the Song of the Sea, "Then he will sing," in the future tense (Exodus 15: 1). Rashi says, "From here, we have an allusion to the resurrection

63 Here Rabbi Stein used the term "*nistalek,*" which literally translates to "disappear" but is a euphemism used in Hasidic discourse to refer to the death of a particularly righteous individual, usually a Rebbe (see Luban 2019).

of the dead [a feature of Messianic times] in the Torah." And the commentators want to know, why specifically in the Song of the Sea? Here is where God alluded to the resurrection of the dead, specifically at the Song of the Sea. There must be some connection. And I'd like to suggest a simple explanation. The Mishno says in Tractate *Sanhedrin*, that there are evil people who, God have mercy on us, are not going to be included in the resurrection of the dead. Maimonides says, in his commentary on the Mishnah, something very interesting: it's not a punishment. It's not a consequence. So why are these evil people not included in the resurrection of the dead? Maimonides says that the resurrection of the dead is based on one principle. It's a brilliant comment of Maimonides. It's based on the principle of "The righteous, in their death, are called living."[64] Maimonides says a wonderous thing. He says that if you have a coal, which is extinguished, as long as there is one spark, one tiny bit, one spark of life that still exists in the coal, then you could reignite it until it turns into a great flame. But if that spark is gone, you could blow from today until tomorrow. There's nothing to do scientifically. You can't reignite this coal, which is completely extinguished. Maimonides explains that this is the same as the resurrection of the dead. The resurrection of the dead is possible because of the principle that the righteous in their death are called alive. We don't see it, but there's still a spark of life that still exists. That spark of life, in future times, will ignite the great flame of the resurrection of the dead, Maimonides explains. And in the case of an evil person? Maimonides explains that even in their life they are called dead. They have no spark of life, so scientifically there's no place for the resurrection of the dead to apply to an evil person. Our rabbis ask, "Where is this spark of life?" This spark of life that prompts us to call the righteous alive? We find the answer in the last Midrosh Tankhumo on the Torah. A brilliant midrash. Where does this manifest itself, this shred of life that a righteous person has after his death? He can't eat, he can't hear, he can't see, he can't move. What do you mean, he has a spark of life? The midrash says a wonderous thing. A righteous person after his life, he

64 This is a Talmudic concept explained in BT *Berakhot* 18 a–b.

can't do anything. But there's one thing that righteous person can do. You know what it is? A brilliant teaching from our rabbis! He can do one thing after his death. He can sing. "They will sing on their beds" (BT Berakhot 5a). So, it is simple that this spark of life, of song, doesn't leave after one's death. That's the foundation, I think, for explaining why the allusion to the resurrection of the dead is specifically in the Song of the Sea. Because song is the spark of life. And that spark of life will ignite the great flame of the resurrection of the dead. It's not just an allusion. It is upon the power of song that the idea of the resurrection of the dead is based. Because that is the spark of life that exists after death.

It's obvious that Reb Ben Zion was unique in his generation in this area, in music. His song to God, he was "the great one among giants" (Joshua 14: 15), he was one of a kind in his generation. And, of course, after his death, great ones in general "in death they are called alive," they "sing upon their beds." All the more so, the master of music in our time, Reb Ben Zion, of course after his death he still has this spark of life, of singing upon his bed. And it is simple that when we sing his nigunim, when we sing the nigunim that he taught us, it's simple that "his lips move in the grave." He sings with us, singing upon his bed. He still has the power of music. And this spark of life, of singing upon his bed, will soon ignite the big flame of the resurrection of the dead, speedily in our days.

The synagogue did find its footing over the coming months, and Orlander, with Dovid Bick at his side, continued to lead the synagogue's yahrzeit and kumzits events. Others within the synagogue community agreed to lead the liturgical and paraliturgical singing, and one of Shenker's grandchildren even stepped into the role of cantor on the High Holidays. Skilled musicians have emerged to participate in the musical life of the synagogue, but Shenker's absence is still felt. As a pillar of Modzitz, as a human archive of Hasidic music, and as a composer of new nigunim in a style associated with previous generations, his passing has left a void.

While this transition was happening in Brooklyn, around the world, musical events were taking place in honor of Shenker's life and music. These events varied in size and scope. In a synagogue basement located close to the Modzitz synagogue, I was in attendance when twenty people gathered to sing Shenker's music and share memories. In Manhattan, three cantors came together to sing Shenker's music and then uploaded the recording to YouTube. In Israel, Mordechai Sobol conducted an orchestra, choir, and solo vocalist performing Shenker's music. The Modzitz community in Israel also honored Shenker with a kumzits focused on his music. These musical commemorations demonstrate the reach and importance of Shenker's nigunim in the hearts and minds of contemporary Orthodox Jews, well beyond the Hasidic community.

On the occasion of Shenker's first yahrzeit, members of Congregation Imrei Shaul Modzitz organized a musical celebration in his honor. Unlike a yahrzeit se'udah, this was a concert in which participants were encouraged to sing along, punctuated by spoken words of tribute. The organizers originally planned to host the event at the Modzitz synagogue. However, as word of the event spread and it became obvious that interest was great, the event was moved to Congregation Gvul Yaabetz, a much larger synagogue located on the same block. Both the men's and women's sections were packed. Significantly, the Modzitzer Rebbe was also in attendance. A small group of musicians were gathered on the *bima*, the raised platform in the front of the synagogue, which served as a stage. The main musical leaders were Rabbis Aaron Orlander and Dovid Bick, and the event also featured Cantors Shimmy Miller and Yaakov Moetzen, as well as Shenker's friend and renowned Hasidic musician Abish Brodt, with his son, Moshe Brodt. Musical accompaniment included two of his close friends and musical collaborators, Andy Statman on mandolin, and Eli Cohen on keyboard. In addition, Shenker's friend and neighbor, Abie Spivak, came on stage to perform Shenker's famous "Mizmoyr Ledovid" on violin, with which the crowd sang enthusiastically. Speeches, delivered in English, focused on Shenker's dedication to "Avodat Hashem" [service of God] and kindness to his fellows. These talks all sent the

message that Shenker was the epitome of a committed Jew, through his focus on serving God, which included his dedication to his music and its impact.

The community was treated to some of the composer's most beloved pieces as well as several of his lesser-known ones. The enthusiastic singing of the hundreds of people in attendance conveyed the message that this music was an ideal vehicle for their religious aspirations. In this way, the gathered crowd realized Shenker's ambition of serving God through music.

Reflections

The event marking Shenker's first yahrzeit was a moving tribute to his life and music. Initially, I was surprised that the speeches did not focus on his music. I came to understand, however, that this was culturally appropriate. Shenker's life had been dedicated to God, as expressed through the path of Modzitz Hasidism. His nigunim and prayer leadership were a primary way that he expressed his religious devotion, but it was this underlying devotion—the highest goal of Hasidism—that these eulogies emphasized. Furthermore, his connection to Modzitz was on display, as the Modzitzer Rebbe attended the event. While he did not speak, the Rebbe's presence was a visible sign that Shenker had been a pillar of the Modzitz community.

Among the many speeches honoring Shenker that I heard following his passing, a number did mention his music and the transcendent feelings that it evoked. Rabbi Stein's speech was unique in that it provided a metaphysical, eschatological frame for the artist's talents. In his discourse, Rabbi Stein described Shenker's music continuing into the world to come and contributing in an important way to the arrival of the Messianic era. Those of us who are still alive have an obligation to sing his music in this world, while Shenker sings along in the next.

Through these commemorations of Rabbi Shenker, we see that his music is believed to lead to proper character traits, facilitate an ecstatic prayer experience, and even to bring about the Messianic era itself. These events reveal a discourse in which music unlocks the highest goals of Orthodox life. With this in mind, we can appreciate the esteemed place that Shenker plays within Hasidic historiography.

CHAPTER 10:
FINAL REFLECTIONS ON A LIFE OF MUSIC

Ben Zion Shenker's life offers a unique opportunity to examine the transmission and development of the Hasidic nigun in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Shenker's career in music was characterized by activities that were pathbreaking and unconventional, yet his compositions remain a model of Hasidic devotion to those in his community. To understand Shenker's framing in contemporary discourse, I will contextualize it within three domains: the ever-changing American-Jewish context in which he lived, the nigun as a Hasidic ideal, and the centrality of liturgy in his compositions.

Shenker as an American Composer

Ben Zion Shenker's musical life was shaped by its American context, which spared him the fate of his co-religionists in Europe during World War II. As an American, Shenker avoided the war entirely, absorbing the music culture of European Hasidim who arrived in New York as refugees. As the Modzitzer Rebbe's "musical secretary," Shenker became an inheritor of the Modzitz canon, internalizing its compositional style and later creating new works in the spirit of this musical Hasidic dynasty. Shenker functioned in the Modzitz community and beyond as an authority on the nigun repertoire. Due to his secure life in America and close relationship with the Modzitzer Rebbe, he enjoyed a direct link to an esteemed musical lineage, and his own compositions came to be closely associated with Modzitz.

Shenker, like American Hasidism itself, benefited from the freedom of religion, separation of church and state, and upward social mobility to which immigrants could aspire in twentieth-century America. While Shenker's life was deeply impacted by the modern transnational migration of Jews and their cultural productions between Europe, Israel, and the United States, it was also shaped by Jewish institutions that thrived on American soil, such as the Henry Street Settlement and New York's Yiddish radio stations, and, later, economic networks such as the New York textile and diamond industries. Musically, Shenker's experiences in Weisser's choir enabled him to learn about Jewish music and sing with distinguished *ba'alei tefillah*. Jewish boys' choirs had roots in Europe that extended well into the past, but America offered a safe haven to develop such choral practice. Comparing the social-religious situation of the late 1930s in Brooklyn with the same time period in Eastern Europe, we can appreciate the importance of Shenker's American context.

The technology to which Shenker had access in New York played a major role in the spread of his music. When he began recording nigunim in the mid-1950s, Shenker transformed what was primarily an oral tradition into one that is also recorded. The fixation of music on records impacted not only the transmission of music but also contributed to musical standardization of certain sections of the synagogue and Jewish home liturgy.[65] Shenker's melody for "Eyshes Khayil," for example, is sung to this day by Jewish families around the world. Shenker was thus an active agent in the shift towards the fixing of Hasidic nigunim in musical notation and recordings through important tasks related to transcribing and recording Modzitz music. As Seroussi writes:

> Hasidic masters first perceived fixation of the nigun, in musical notation and later on in sound recordings, as detrimental and undesirable. Whatever the dangers of these techniques of capturing (in

65 Even if minor adjustments to the compositions were made by individual singers.

> fact "freezing") a nigun may have been, Hasidim eventually embraced both practices wholeheartedly. However, listening to a commercially recorded nigun, even if recorded by Hasidic musicians for the daily consumption of a Hasidic audience, is a radically different experience from participating in a live performance in a Hasidic context (Seroussi 2019: 212).

Indeed, the very criteria by which contemporary discourses frame Shenker as an emblem of authenticity are themselves based on his innovations. Shenker's music practices, which were so closely tied to his American context, have become mainstream in the music of American Hasidism, and subsequently global Hasidism. Shenker played an important role in re-making Hasidism in America. His innovations—such as performing in media outlets that catered to a wide popular audience rather than to a restricted public at liturgical or paraliturgical events, contributed to the dissemination of these traditional practices, eventually rendering them mainstream.

The Nigun as Musical Embodiment of the Hasidic Ideal

The music genre known as "nigunim" is, in Hasidic (and today, more broadly, Ḥaredi) discourse, a musical embodiment of communal values on both spiritual and social levels. The many stories about nigunim that associate this musical genre with spiritual health, religious devotion, and miracle-working are expressions of the belief that nigunim facilitate a relationship with God, who acts on behalf of the musician or listener. This musically driven connection is an achievement of devekut. Indeed, a subset of nigunim are specifically known as devekut nigunim, as characterized by the longing expressed through their slower tempo, the flowing rhythms of the melody, and an evocative vocal production. However, in Hasidic belief, all nigunim have the potential to facilitate devekut; this spiritual potential is precisely the criterion by which a piece becomes categorized as a nigun as

opposed to a pop or folk song. The boundaries of the category may be difficult to define but the taxonomy is evident in the Hasidic discourse on music.

The nigun genre also has social significance; indeed, Hasidim associate nigunim with cultural continuity. The importance of faithfully transmitting music in this society is palpable; it guarantees the successful transmission of the values associated with the music, ensuring the continuation of Hasidic life in the future. With the nigun canon of a particular Hasidic dynasty, Hasidic Jews provide their youth with an inheritance that they can claim as their own. Like the *yahrzeit se'udot* described above, the singing of a nigun binds past and present, bringing previous generations and the memory of their holiest Hasidim into the lives of contemporary community members. In this regard, we might think of great rabbinic authorities who, through their exegetical writings, are felt to live on beyond their deaths. Shenker's preservation of Modzitz nigunim through recordings fulfills this function, not only in documenting endangered music, but also in making it available to large constituencies in the comfort of their homes.

Additionally, the creation of new nigunim that are stylistically similar to those associated with earlier generations of Hasidism represents a refusal to assimilate. The threat of acculturation has been central to discussions about Hasidic immigration to America since the mid-1800s (Biale et al. 2018: 539). The continued practice of composing nigunim conceptualized as an "authentic" continuation of the community's performance practices is one form of affirmation that Hasidism has been able to survive those threats and continue thriving to the present day. Reflecting on Shenker's corpus in its totality, Aaron Orlander explained to me, "He found his own voice, but it's all in the Modzitz style. No one could say that it's not a Modzitz nigun." Largely due to his musical pedigree as musical secretary to the Imrei Shaul and as the voice most associated with Modzitz nigunim in recent decades, Shenker was regarded as a faithful representative in the chain of tradition.

Others, such as Velvel Newmark, perceive Shenker's musical legacy differently. As much as Shenker was informed by the Modzitz style, says Newmark, he was also inspired by the musical styles of other Hasidic communities, ultimately creating his own voice. Shenker took upon himself to impart this Hasidic repertoire and its ethos to the younger generations as part of an ever-present desire to transmit revered Hasidic values and ideals.

As stated above, the nigun genre must be understood in relation to Orthodox popular music. These musical styles are best understood together as a continuum rather than as discrete categories. In this regard, we might recall anthropologist Ayala Fader's analysis of Hasidic speech patterns that operate on a spectrum of "sounding Hasidic" to "sounding Modern" (2009: 138). To sing traditional nigunim or new nigunim composed in traditional styles is to "sound Hasidic," and therefore "to sound" socially and religiously pure. By contrast, popular music can connote a certain openness to assimilation and a belief that this music is relatively innocuous even if not fully approved by communal leadership.[66] Shenker's works are considered true Hasidic nigunim and thus are associated with "sounding Hasidic" in the strongest sense. Many individuals with whom I spoke mentioned relatives who are "very Hasidish," who listen to Shenker's records for entertainment. This recalls tales, noted previously, of the Bobover Rebbe being raised on a musical diet of Shenker records, which were supposed to help instill in him the worldview of a Hasidic leader.

66 To be sure, the appropriateness of Ḥaredi popular music is debated and many believe at least parts of the scene to be fully appropriate. Nonetheless, the paradigm I describe here remains an accurate representation of the social perceptions of these musical styles because of the suspicion with which pop music is viewed and the reverence with which nigunim are transmitted.

Liturgy

A primary thread running through Shenker's life is his dedication to liturgy. Shenker composed pieces for specific portions of the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur liturgy nearly every year, employing the same musical style annually (e.g., he composed seventeen march settings of the liturgical text "*Eyn Kitsvo*"). This is the approach taken by the Modzitzer rebbes, and Shenker took their cue in this regard. Moreover, these musical styles artfully paint the text and facilitate their delivery in prayer during the holiday services. While many people have sung Shenker's nigunim in their homes, and still others are familiar with them through his recordings, a large number of his compositions were originally intended for prayer services and made their debut in the synagogue.

As an accomplished *ba'al tefillah*, Shenker was highly proficient in delivering the liturgical text with meaning, either through his use of *nusaḥ* or communal melodies. Shenker's prayer leadership was experienced by far fewer people than his recordings and compositions, but those who heard him lead services were profoundly moved by the experience. People would walk great distances to hear Shenker lead sections of the liturgy that traditionally emphasize elaborated musical performance, such as the blessing of the new month or the prayers for dew and rain. Given the many options for prayer services in the area, the widespread interest in the Modzitz synagogue is telling. The impact of his liturgical singing can, at least partly, be attributed to his ability to express through his singing the literary contents of the texts with great nuance, a feature that reveals his deep understanding of the liturgy.

The centrality of liturgy in Shenker's nigunim was captured by his daughter, Aidel Newmark, who said of her father:

> He was the real deal. His music was *emes* [truth]. And the way he sang, he *taytshed* up [explained] the words. A song wasn't just a song,

> it was an absolute translation of the words. And they have to fit. They have to be *tzugepas* [fitting, appropriate].

Shenker's ability to "translate" the liturgical text into the medium of Hasidic nigunim is one of the key factors that made him "the real deal."

For Shenker, prayer was an ecstatic experience. When leading services, reality gave way to a transformative feeling as he became lost in text and music. The popular Hasidic singer Avraham Fried said of Shenker, "He lived and he breathed his davening. His *yiras shomayim* [fear of Heaven] were the wings that carried his *tefilos* [prayers] and those of his congregants upwards to *Gan Eyden* [Heaven]" (Eller 2016). Shenker led the *Ne'ilah* service, the concluding prayer of Yom Kippur, late into his life. *Ne'ilah* is the highlight of the entire annual liturgical cycle and takes place after twenty-four hours of fasting. I witnessed Shenker, in his late eighties, standing as he led this service with strength and precision. "His last drop of blood he put into that [service]. He gave all of his *koykhoys* [strength, energy] away to *daven*," Orlander told me.

Shenker's dedication to prayer inspired those who witnessed him serve as sheli'aḥ tzibbur. As his daughter, Esther Reifman, put it:

> His *tefillah* [prayer leading] was absolutely remarkable. Just to watch him daven [pray] was a *limud* [lesson] in itself, because he was so connected to the Riboyno Shel Oylom [Master of the Universe]. He had such a, literally a discussion with Him. He was really a holy man. There's no other way to put it.

Devotion to the liturgy also animated his paraliturgical work. Shenker was frequently asked to write music for family celebrations. Rather than wait for inspiration to strike, he would often ask that the person who had requested the nigun select a passage of text, to which he would write a melody. The text served as inspiration and helped to ensure that the music and words matched in terms of their emotive qualities.

Shenker's emphasis on liturgy represented a shift in Hasidic music. Early Hasidic nigunim, almost entirely wordless in the 1930s, began to change. With the Imrei Shaul's "Proyk Yas Onokh" in 1935, the Modzitz rebbes regularly began to compose with words.[67] Regarding this change, Shenker told me:

> I never heard the Rebbe say this, but I have an explanation. *Khsidishe negine* [Hasidic music] never was based on words. You sang a nigun. A nigun you could apply to anything you want. […] You could sing it for "Yedid Nefesh," you could sing it for "*Heyeh im Pifiyos*."' I mean, you could find three different [texts] and sing the nigun that the Rebbe made not based on words. […] Reb Mayer Shapiro was the first Hasidishe person—he wasn't a rebbe but he was a Rosh Yeshiva—to compose everything to words.[68] And he taught it to the yeshiva boys in Lublin. Those were the songs they used to sing, and he composed quite a few songs. I think that was the catalyst that the [Modzitzer] Rebbe started composing on words. He saw that it became a very popular idea. People were starting to sing nigunim with words, short nigunim with words, and he never had that type of nigun. So he started composing quite a bit of them.

Shenker did indeed create wordless melodies and would sometimes later find texts to match them. However, he also continued the practice of composing with specific texts in mind. In Shenker's work, words and melody interpenetrate, the impact bidirectional. This is the very process that informed Shenker's leading of prayer services. While he conveyed the meanings of the text using the conventions of nusaḥ, his nigunim elevated the liturgy through the crafting of melodies that emphasized the structure and emotional contents of the text.

67 This nigun is today often sung to the text "Mimkomkha Malkenu" in the Sabbath morning service. Thus, the practice of applying melodies to diverse liturgy has persisted.

68 Rabbi Meir Shapiro (1887–1933), head of the Chachmei Lublin yeshiva in Poland, popularized the daf yomi study program, in which people study one page of Talmud per day.

With these considerations in mind, we can appreciate both the innovative nature of Shenker's career in music, as well as the discourse of authenticity that accompanies it. In post-World War II America, Ben Zion Shenker gave new life to the nigun. A gifted musician, he capitalized on the opportunities presented to him by the American social context, in which he was born and acted, to preserve and expand the Hasidic music canon of Modzitz and beyond. Shenker's pedigree as the "musical secretary" to the Imrei Shaul, as well as his prolific nigun production, contributed to his reputation as a model hasid. With the nigun repertoire understood as an encapsulation of Hasidic ideals, Shenker's dedication to the traditional liturgy, and his religious devotion as expressed through Hasidism, he is perceived by the community as the quintessential Hasidic musician. The American context, which provided an ideal setting for this enterprise, also enabled Shenker's innovations to blossom through the work of other Hasidic musicians. Shenker's final days were dedicated to ensuring that through his own compositions and his singing at the Modzitzer synagogue, the nigun repertoire would live on, even beyond his own lifetime. And indeed, with each new technology for distributing music that arises, Shenker's works are re-released.

Shenker's last release, "Shiru LaShem Shir Ḥadash" is aptly titled. Even as a senior member of the Hasidic community whose musical legacy was paralleled only by the Modzitzer rebbes themselves, Shenker had little interest in resting on his laurels. The mission to create new nigunim of devotion not only animated his life; it appeared to prolong it. It was, as his daughter Aidel Newmark put it, his "oxygen." As the preeminent interpreter of Modzitz nigunim, the creator of some of the most widely sung Hasidic nigunim, and an important shaper of the ways that Hasidic music is transmitted and consumed in the present day, Shenker composed continuity throughout his ninety-one-year life. Shenker's nigunim continue to inspire, both in the Hasidic community and beyond. His musical legacy is alive and well, invoked at weddings, funerals, prayer services, and Sabbath and holiday meals the world over.

May his memory be a blessing.

APPENDIX

Rabbi Stein's speech (original):

Yehoshua was *mispaleyl* that the *shemesh* should stop, *emtsah hashomayim* to give *klal Yisroeyl* the chance to defeat the enemy and get back home before Shabbos... So Yehoshua sang *shiro*. That's over here in *kapitel yud* in Yehoshua. So Rashi in the *gemoro* in *Avoydo Zoro* asks a *moyrodika kasha*. The *pasuk* says "*Vayidoym hashemesh veyoreyakh omad*." So what's "*vayidoym*"? *Vayidoym* means, "it was quiet." The *shemesh* became quiet. It should say "*vayomad hashemesh*" like the *yareakh*! What's "*vayidoym*"? Says Rashi a *dovor niflo*: The *pasuk* says in *Tehilim*, "*mimizrakh shemesh ad mevoyoy mehulol sheym Hashem*." The *shemesh*, from the first moment of sunrise, until *shkias hakhamo* never stops for a second giving *shiro vesishbekhoys* to *Hakodoysh Borukh Hu*. *Mimizrakh shemesh ad mevoyoy mehulol sheym Hashem*. When Yehoshua was *mispaleyl* for the *shemesh* to stop in the middle of its orbit, immediately *vayidoym hashemesh*—it stopped. It was *omad*. But it was also *vayidoym*. It stopped singing *shiro*. The *shiro* of the *shemesh* is *kol zman*. It's *meshameysh*. It was in orbit. The minute it stops, it was *vayidoym*. *Zogt* Rashi, the world was missing *shiro*. So immediately Yehoshua felt that he had to compensate for the *khisoroyn shiro* of the *velt*. And immediately Yehoshua began singing *shiro* to make up for the terrible loss of *shiras hashemesh*. *Dos shtayt* in Rashi. We know Ben Zion dedicated his life to singing *shiro* to *Hakodoysh Borukh Hu*. *Mamosh mimizrakh shemesh ad mevoyoy mehulal sheym Hashem*. I remember sitting here *shaloysh seudoys*, he would turn to me and say, "This nigun I was *mekhadeysh* seventy-five years ago." Seventy-five years ago, Ben Zion was still a young *bokhur*! He was *mekhadeysh* nigunim *mamosh* from his sunrise, *mimizrakh shemesh ad mevoyoy*. I'll never forget, the last Shabbos, *musof beshaas kedusho*, the last nigun, Reb Ben Zion was banging on the table, singing. *Mamosh* a few

hours later he was *nistaleyk*. *Mamosh mimizrakh shemesh ad mevoyoy*... He never stopped giving *shiro*. And now it's a *matsov, begiboyn doym*, this *shemesh* is *omad*. This *gevaldiker kholol*. He's the *shemesh*! The *shiras hashemesh*—it's over! It's up to his *talmidim*, and his *yedidim*, and his *khaveyrim* to try to be *memaley* this *gevaldiker kholol*. To try to compensate and be *mamshikh* this *koyakh* of *shiro* that was lost.

I just want to share with the *oylom* a very interesting Rambam. The *pasuk* says, *beshiro*, "*Oz Yoshir*," *beloshoyn osid*. Rashi says, "*mikon horemez liskhiyas hameysim baToyro*." And the *mefoyrshim* want to know, why *davko* in the *shiro*? Here is where *Hakodoysh Borukh Hu* was *meramez liskhiyas hameysim*. *Davko* by the *shiro*. There must be some connection. And I'd like to suggest a *poshute pshot*. The *Mishnah* says in Sanhedrin, there are *reshoim* that, *rakhmono litslon*, are not *oymeyd* in *tekhiyas hameysim*. The Rambam says in *Peyrush HaMishnoyoys*, something very interesting: it's not a punishment. It's not an *onesh*. So why are these *reshoim* not *oymeyd* in *tekhiyas hameysim*? So the Rambam says this *tekhiyas hameysim* is based on one principle. A *moyrodika* Rambam. It's based on the principle of *tsadikim bemisoson keruyin khayim*. The Rambam says a *dovor niflo*. He says that if you have a coal, which is extinguished, but as long as there is one spark, a *mashehu*, a *nitsoyts* of *khiyus* that still exists in the coal, then you could reignite it until it turns into a great flame. But if that spark is gone, you could blow from today until tomorrow. There's nothing to do scientifically. You can't reignite this coal which is completely extinguished. *Zogt* the *Rambam*, that's *tekhiyas hameysim*. *Tekhiyas Hameysim* is *khol* because *tsadikim bemisoson keruyin khayim*. We don't see it, but there's still a spark of life, of *khiyus*, which still exists. That spark of *khiyus loasid lovoy* will ignite to the great flame of *tekhiyas hameysim*, *shteyt* in Rambam. A *rosho*? *Zogt d'Rambam*, *afilu bekhayeyhem kruyim meysim*. They have no spark of life, so scientifically there's no *mokoym* for *tekhiyas hameysim* to be *khol* on a *rosho*. *Khazol* ask, "Where is this spark of life?" The *nitsoyts* of *khiyus* that *tsadikim keruyin khayim*. The last *Medrash Tankhumo al haToyro*. A *moyrodika Medrash*. Where does this manifest itself, this *nitsoyts* of *khiyus* that a *tsadik* has

akhar misosoy. He can't eat, he can't hear, he can't see, he can't move. What do you mean a *nitsoyts* of *khiyus*? The *Medrash* says a *dovor niflo*. A *tsadik leakhar misosoy*, he can't do anything. But there's one thing that a *tsadik* can do. You know what that is? A *moyrodika Khazol*! He can do one thing *leakhar misosoy*. He can sing. *Shene'emar*, *yeranenu al mishkevoysom*. This is how he ends the *Medrash Tankhumo*. He says, it says in *Khazol*, *tsadikim bemisoson keruyin khayim*. Where? They can't eat, they can't move, touch, smell, taste. There's one thing they can do. *Yeranenu al mishkeoysom*. They can still sing to *Hakodoysh Borukh Hu*. *Azoy shteyt* in *Khazol*. *Yeranenu al mishkevoysom*. So it's *poshut* that this spark of *khiyus*, of *shiro*, that never leaves, *leakhar miso*, that's the *yesoyd*, I think, that the *remez* of *tekhiyas hameysim* is *davko* in the *shiro*. Because *shiro* is the spark of *khiyus*. And that spark of *khiyus* will ignite to the great flame of *tekhiyas hameysim.* It's not just a *remez*. It's *bekoyakh shiro*, the *musag* of *tekhiyas hameysim*. Because that's the spark of *khiyus* which exists *leakhar miso*.

It's *pashut* that Reb Ben Zion was a *yokhid bedoyr* in this *prat*, in *negino*. His *shiro* to *Hakodoysh Borukh Hu*—he was the *godoyl boanokim*, he was a *yokhid bedoyr*. And *avaday*, *leakhar miso*, *tsadikim* in general *bemisoson keruyin khayim*, they have *yeranenu al mishkevoysom*. *Kol shekeyn*, the *baal negino bizmoneynu*, Reb Ben Zion *avaday*, *leakhar miso* he still has this spark of *khiyus*, of *yeranenu al mishkevoysom*. And its *pashut* that when we sing his nigunim, when we sing the nigunim that he taught us, it's *pashut*, *shesifosov dovevoys bakever*. *Er zingt mit yeranenu al mishkevoysom*. He still has the *koyakh* of *negino*. And this spark of *khiyus*, of *yeranenu al mishkevoysom*, will *bekoroyv* ignite the great flame of *tekhiyas hameysim bimheyro biyomeynu*.

APPENDIX · BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Concise entries on selected musicians, rabbinic figures, and family members associated with Ben Zion Shenker. These notes provide essential context rather than comprehensive biographies.

INDIVIDUALS

Dovid Bick (b. 1971)
Brooklyn-born rabbi from a Medzhybizh rabbinic line; grandson of Rabbi Moshe Bick (Bronx) and son of Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Bick (Bnei Moshe Medzhybizh, Boro Park). Frequent singer at Modzitz events led by Shenker; a principal vocalist after 2016.

Azriel David Fastag (1888–1942)
Polish-born Modzitz Hasid and noted singer at the Rebbe's *tish*. Deported during the Holocaust (records indicate Auschwitz) and perished in the war. His final composition, *Ani Ma'amin*, was transmitted to the Modzitzer Rebbe in New York and popularized thereafter; now widely sung at Holocaust commemorations.

Ernest Gold (1921–1999)
Vienna-born American composer. Emigrated in 1938; built a Hollywood career with scores for *On the Beach* (1959), *Exodus* (1960), *The Secret of Santa Vittoria* (1969), the Broadway musical *I'm Solomon* (1968), and numerous television works.

Ben Zion Halberstam (1874–1941)
Second Bobover Rebbe; born in Bikofsk (Subcarpathian region). Succeeded his father, Rabbi Shlomo Halberstam (1847–1905). Murdered by the Nazis in July 1941; succeeded by his son, Rabbi Shlomo Halberstam (1907–2000).

Moshe Mordechai Heschel (1928–1975)
Second son of the Kopyczynce Rebbe, Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel. Ordained at Mesivta Tifereth Jerusalem; left the diamond trade in 1968 to lead Kopyczynce in New York. Fluent English counselor who attracted a diverse following; died after a cerebral hemorrhage.

Israel Meir Kagan (1838–1933)
Rabbinic leader known as the Ḥafetz Ḥayyim. Born in Dziencioł (today Dzyatlava, Belarus); later in Vilna and Radin. Author of *Ḥafetz Ḥayyim* (1873, on the laws prohibiting harmful speech), *Mishnah Berurah* (1884–1907, a commentary on the Oraḥ Ḥayyim section of the Shulḥan Arukh), and other authoritative halakhic works.

Moshe Koussevitzky (1899–1966)
Belarus-born star of the "Golden Age" of cantorial music (~1901–~1950). Served in Vilna and Warsaw (Tłomackie Synagogue, succeeding Gershon Sirota); toured internationally; sang opera in the USSR during WWII. From 1952, cantor at Temple Beth-El, Brooklyn; buried in Jerusalem.

Yitzhak Meir Levin (1894–1971)
Gerer dynasty scion and Agudat Israel leader in Poland; emigrated to Mandatory Palestine in 1940. Member of Israel's first Knesset and long-serving Agudah statesman.

Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz (1886–1948)
Hungarian-born educator; immigrated to the U.S. in 1913. From 1922 shaped Yeshiva Torah Vodaath (Brooklyn) and founded influential institutions (e.g., Camp Mesivta; Aish Dos teachers' seminary), advancing Orthodox education across North America.

Aaron Orlander (b. 1968)
Brooklyn-born cantor and professor of social work (Touro University). Paternal roots in Galicia; maternal Grunwald musical lineage (Hungary). Close disciple of Shenker; regular Modzitz singer and, after 2016, a leader of Brooklyn Modzitz musical gatherings.

Avrohom Yaakov Pam (1913–2001)
Born in Vidz (Lithuania); moved to New York in 1927. Taught at Mesivta Torah Vodaath from 1937, ultimately as *rosh yeshiva*. National Orthodox leader, including advocacy for Jewish education for Russian immigrants to Israel.

Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994)
Born in Nikolaev (Mykolaiv, Ukraine); married Chaya Mushka, daughter of the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe. Emigrated to New York in 1941; became the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe in 1951. Built Chabad-Lubavitch into a global outreach and education movement.

Shmuel Aharon Shedrowitzky (1907–1978)
Son of the Kovrin-Bialystok Rebbe; secretary of Agudat Israel in Vilna and associate of Rabbi Hayim Ozer Grodzinski. Reached pre-state Israel in 1943; later chaired Agudat Israel (Tel Aviv) and the city's Religious Council. Buried at Kiryat Shaul.

Andy Statman (b. 1950)
Queens-born clarinetist/mandolinist. Studied mandolin with David Grisman and saxophone with Richard Grando; later apprentice to klezmer great Dave Tarras. Integrates bluegrass, jazz, klezmer, and Jewish devotional practice.

Moshe Teleshevsky (1927–2012)
Russian-born rabbi-cantor; performed publicly from age eleven. In the U.S., renowned in Chabad as "the Rebbe's chazzan," frequently singing at gatherings of the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe. Died on Sukkot 2012.

Richard Tucker (1913–1975)
Brooklyn-born operatic tenor (birth name Rubin Ticker). Trained with Joshua Weisser and Zanvel Zilberts; served as a cantor before his 1945 Metropolitan Opera debut. Maintained a parallel commitment to Jewish liturgical repertoire.

Joshua Weisser (Pilderwasser) (1888–1952)
Born in Nova Ushytsia (Ukraine); choirboy under Cantor Eliezer Gerovich. Emigrated to New York in 1914; adopted the surname Weisser; served multiple pulpits. Community leader (president, Jewish Ministers Cantors Association of America), teacher of Richard Tucker and Ben Zion Shenker, and prolific composer/writer on liturgical music.

Moshe Wolfson (1925-2024)
New York-based rabbinic mentor (mashgiach, Yeshiva Torah Vodaath) and later rabbi of Emunas Yisroel (Borough Park). Protégé of R. Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz; frequent attendee of Brooklyn Hasidic courts, including Modzitz. Revered Hasidic leader; passed away at age ninety-nine and was buried in Tiberias.

SHENKER FAMILY MEMBERS

Yechiel Shafran (1866–1941)
Maternal grandfather; lived in Chelm; immigrated to the U.S. in 1914.

Aidel Henna Shafran (née Lederer; d. c. 1943)
Maternal grandmother; from Chelm; immigrated after WWI; settled in Brooklyn.

Brocha Shenker (dates unknown)
Paternal grandmother; lived in Turka (Poland); killed in the Holocaust.

Mordechai ("Max") Shenker (1892–1965)
Father; raised in Biskovitz (Poland); immigrated to the U.S. c. 1921.

Miriam Shenker (née Shafran; 1896–1983)
Mother; raised in Chelm; immigrated to the U.S. c. 1921.

Avrohom Lustig (c. 1905–1975)
Father-in-law; from Nyíregyháza (Hungary); immigrated c. 1934; settled in Cincinnati.

Rose Glasner (née Shenker; 1922–2017)
Sister; born in New York; assisted Rabbi David Silver in Harrisburg; moved to Israel c. 1949 (teaching in Tel Aviv); later returned to the U.S. (Maryland).

Avraham Shenker (1923–2007)
Brother; Brooklyn-born; married Tzipora Taub (daughter of the Modzitzer Rebbe). Lived in Crown Heights, then Giv'atayim and Bnei Brak (Israel).

Nachman (Nathan) Shenker (1928–2019)
Brother; Brooklyn-born; divided residence between Israel and Brooklyn; later returned to Queens.

Chaim Baruch ("Bobby") Shenker (b. 1935)
Brother; Brooklyn-born; settled in Far Rockaway; attorney.

Chaim Meir Lustig (c. 1928–2010)
Brother-in-law; Hungarian-born; immigrated in 1938; lived in Chicago, then Crown Heights (from 1956); educator and head of Crown Heights *Bikur Ḥolim*.

Dina Shenker (née Lustig; 1929–2012)
Wife; from Nyíregyháza; immigrated in 1938; lived in Cincinnati and Brooklyn.

Esther Reifman (née Shenker; b. 1952)
Daughter; Brooklyn educator; also teaches ESL.

Aidel Newmark (née Shenker; b. 1956)
Daughter; Brooklyn educator (first-grade boys) and professional event planner.

Brocha Weinberger (née Shenker; b. 1962)
Daughter; taught at Bais Yaakov schools (Flatbush/Boro Park; BYA) and has a gift presentation business.

Herschel Newmark (1926–2016)
Close friend from Torah Vodaath; rabbinic posts in Hartford, Kansas City, and Montreal; from 1984 rabbi of Congregation Imrei Shaul Modzitz (New York).

Velvel Newmark (b. 1953)
Son-in-law; born in Hartford; lived in Kansas City and Montreal; moved to Brooklyn in 1976 after marrying Aidel Newmark.

THE MODZITZ RABBINIC LINEAGE

Rabbi Yehezkel Taub of Kuzmir (1772–1856) — *"Kuzmir Rebbe"*
Disciple of the Seer of Lublin and the Kozhnitzer Maggid. Became Rebbe in 1827; settled in Kuzmir (Kazimierz Dolny). Centralized music in Hasidic devotion; reputedly desired a new nigun each Sabbath.

Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu Taub of Zvolin (1820–1888) — *"Zvoliner Rebbe"*
Plonsk-born successor to his father; relocated the court to Zvolin (Zwoleń). Known for exceptional musical gift, later curtailed out of spiritual responsibility. Succeeded by his eldest son, Rabbi Moshe Aharon Taub.

Rabbi Yisroel Taub (1849–1920) — *"Divrei Yisroel"*
Second son of the Zvoliner Rebbe; drew many followers after 1888. Led from Modzitz (Dęblin) c. 1891 to World War I, then from Warsaw. Remembered for the Torah commentary *Divrei Yisroel* ("Words of Israel," originally published in four volumes, 1900-1929) and complex, extended nigunim central to the Modzitz canon.

Rabbi Shaul Yedidya Elazar Taub (1886–1947) — *"Imrei Shaul"*
Succeeded his father in 1920; left Europe during World War II, settling in Brooklyn (1940) and re-establishing Modzitz. Achieved his aim of settling in Eretz Israel in 1947; died months later, on the day the UN Partition Plan was announced. Author of *Imrei Shaul* ("Utterances of Shaul," 1960), and composer of many popular nigunim.

Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu Taub (1905–1984) — *"Imrei Aish"*
Born in Lublin; traveled with his father to Eretz Israel in 1935 and remained in Tel Aviv, serving Modzitz there. Became Rebbe in 1947; composer of many nigunim (compiled in *Mor Mi-Besamim, "*Myrrh from Fragrant Spices,*"* 1985). Author of *Imrei Aish* ("Utterances of Fire," 2005).

Rabbi Yisroel Dan Taub (1928–2006) — *"Nakhlas Dan"*
Born in Warsaw; in Tel Aviv from 1936. Led Modzitz from 1984; moved the court to Bnei Brak on Lag ba-Omer 1995. Composer, halakhic authority, and member of Agudat Israel's *Mo'etzet Gedolei ha-Torah*. Author of *Nakhlas Dan* ("Inheritance of Dan," 2018-2023).

Rabbi Ḥaim Shaul Taub (b. 1951) — *present Modzitzer Rebbe*
Raised in Bnei Brak; educated at Ponevezh. Former Modzitz *rosh yeshiva*; became Rebbe in 2006; composes new High-Holiday nigunim annually; member of Agudat Israel's *Mo'etzet Gedolei ha-Torah*.

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