

Leonard Bernstein and the Boston Jewish Community of His Youth: The Influence of Solomon Braslavsky, Herman Rubenovitz, and Congregation Mishkan Tefila

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Abstract

This essay will place Leonard Bernstein within the context of the Boston Jewish community in which he was raised. It was at Boston's Congregation Mishkan Tefila, the family's synagogue, where Bernstein first encountered serious music. The essay places special emphasis on the role of Prof. Solomon Gregory Braslavsky, the music director and organist of Mishkan Tefila, whose influence on the young Bernstein was far greater than scholars have imagined. In 1973 Bernstein wrote to Braslavsky "[I] never forget the tremendous influence you and your music made on me when I was a youngster." Bernstein, I contend, meant what he said.

"I . . . never forget the tremendous influence you and your music made on me when I was a youngster," Leonard Bernstein wrote to Solomon Braslavsky in 1973.¹ No other American composer, one suspects, would have made so unlikely a claim in a letter to the music director of his childhood place of worship. Most contemporary biographers of Bernstein pay scant notice to this claim. To them, apparently, it reveals more about their subject's generosity of spirit than about the trajectory of his life. As a result, Braslavsky's name is scarcely known today, even by close students of Bernstein's work, and the impact that he and his synagogue made on the young Leonard Bernstein has received minimal attention. Bernstein himself, however, remained ever grateful to the synagogue where he first discovered music, and he felt particularly indebted to Braslavsky. Some of his central ideas about Jewish music and the relationship of Judaism to America owed much, we shall see, to what he learned in his synagogue as a youngster in Boston.

The Boston in which Leonard Bernstein (1918–90) was raised was a community of some 80,000 Jews. Most of them were recent immigrants or children of immigrants. Just a generation earlier, in 1880, the city had been home to only about 4,000–5,000 Jews, most of them from the historically Polish province of Posen (Poznań). The few elite German Jews in the city tended to associate with the largely humanistic Temple Israel, which they attended only occasionally. Less religiously inclined German Jews, including a young hotshot lawyer from Louisville named Louis Brandeis, who opened a law office in Boston in 1879, did not even go that far. Brandeis's

¹ Leonard Bernstein to Solomon G. Braslavsky, 31 January 1973, Congregation Mishkan Tefila archives, Chestnut Hill, Mass. By permission of The Leonard Bernstein Office, Inc.

connections with the Jewish community during his early decades in Boston were practically nonexistent.²

Among the small community of second-generation German Jews in Boston were three Americanized brothers named Frankel—Berthold, Max, and Milton—who oversaw the Boston branch of a barber and beauty supply business named Frankel and Smith. The firm advertised “everything for the use of the hairdresser, manicurist and beauty expert” and achieved substantial success.³

Samuel J (Shmuel Yosef) Bernstein, an ambitious 1908 immigrant from Beresdiv (today Berezdov) in the Ukraine, came to Boston around 1912 to work for the Frankel brothers. They became role models of a sort for him, exemplifying the kind of success that he himself sought to achieve in the Golden Land. Eleven years later, Sam—by then a married man with two children—opened up his own business, the Samuel Bernstein Hair Company. It took advantage of the midtwenties rage for curly hair—the so-called permanent wave—and thanks to the Frederic’s Permanent Wave machine, for which Sam acquired the exclusive New England franchise, he made a modest fortune.⁴

Eastern European Jews in Boston who leaped from rags to riches in a single generation, as Sam Bernstein did, formed an elite group among the Jewish immigrants. Seeking to trumpet their achievement, these *nouveaux riches* Jews commonly joined Mishkan Tefila, the most prestigious Eastern European synagogue in town. Sam Bernstein joined in the early 1920s.

The oldest Jewish congregation of its kind in Boston, Mishkan Tefila traces its roots back to 1858, when Die Israelitische Gemeinde Mishkan Israel was organized by twelve recent immigrants from the province of East Prussia who broke away from the city’s first synagogue, Temple Ohabei Shalom, seeking a more traditional worship environment. The congregation subsequently underwent several moves and merged, in 1895, with a congregation called Shaarei Tefila. By the time the Bernstein family became members, it was known as Congregation Mishkan Tefila and was principally composed of wealthy Eastern European Jews, dubbed by the local Jewish newspaper “the risen generation of the second migration.”⁵ As a signal of their status and their aspirations to Americanize, these Jews parted from the traditionalism of their synagogue’s founders and sat men and women together

² Jonathan D. Sarna, Ellen Smith, and Scott-Martin Kosofsky, eds., *The Jews of Boston*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), 4–5, 343; Jonathan D. Sarna, “‘The Greatest Jew in the World since Jesus Christ’: The Jewish Legacy of Louis D. Brandeis,” *American Jewish History* 81 (Spring–Summer 1994), 348.

³ Burton Bernstein, *Family Matters: Sam, Jennie and the Kids* (New York: Summit Books, 1982), 36; Classified Ad 6 [Frankel & Smith], no title, *Boston Daily Globe* (18 March 1923), <<http://www.proquest.com>> (accessed 2 May 2008).

⁴ Bernstein, *Family Matters*, 61–65. Burton Bernstein reports that Sam might have made a large fortune but turned down the chance to co-invest with Charles Revson in the cosmetics business that became Revlon; Sam found Revson’s red nail polish too risqué. For the history of the permanent wave and the attendant growth in beauty salons that fueled Sam Bernstein’s success, see Julie A. Willet, *Permanent Waves: The Making of the American Beauty Shop* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

⁵ “Mishkan Tefila,” *Boston Advocate*, 17 May 1907 (?), as quoted by Gerald H. Gamm, “In Search of Suburbs: Boston’s Jewish Districts 1843–1994,” in Sarna, Smith, and Kosofsky, *Jews of Boston*, 150.

(rather than separately, as in Orthodox synagogues). They also shifted the language of the synagogue sermon and announcements from Yiddish to English.⁶

Mishkan Tefila became the first synagogue in Boston to align itself publicly with the new Jewish religious movement known as Conservative Judaism. Geared to young upwardly mobile immigrants like the Bernsteins, Conservative Judaism at Mishkan Tefila occupied what the congregation described in 1921 as “the middle ground between Orthodox and Reformed Judaism,” and it advocated (as Leonard Bernstein also later would) “Liberalism, Zionism and Social Service.” It sought to preserve elements of tradition, while adapting Judaism’s “creed and observances to the ever broadening experience and outlook of the human race.”⁷

In 1925 Mishkan Tefila—by then the premier congregation of its type in the city—opened a palatial synagogue on the corner of Elm Hill Avenue and Seaver Streets overlooking Franklin Park (see p. 20). The sumptuous building, through its monumental American Renaissance-style architecture and its conspicuous opulence (the cost, in current dollars, was about \$12 million), announced to Bostonians that Eastern European Jews in the city had arrived; “cathedral” synagogues would no longer just be built by Reform Jews with roots in Central Europe. The architects designed the new building “to express the ideals and aspirations of a great Jewish community” and as “a striking symbol to the world of our harmony with American culture and traditions.”⁸ Where so many young Jewish children of immigrants recalled dingy one-room immigrant synagogues and experienced tremendous dissonance between the Jewish and American components of their identities, the magnificent synagogue of Leonard Bernstein’s youth provided him with the warm reassurance that Judaism and American culture harmonized beautifully. It was a lesson that he never forgot and perhaps explains why he refused to change his name to something less Jewish, notwithstanding Serge Koussevitzky’s famous entreaty to him to do so.⁹

The rabbi of Mishkan Tefila, beginning in 1910, was Herman Rubenovitz (1883–1966). Born in Kovno (now Kaunas), Lithuania, and brought to Pittsburgh as a young boy, Rubenovitz came from a family that combined traditional Jewish learning, the values of the Jewish enlightenment (*haskalah*), and the ideals of Zionism. He graduated from New York’s City College (B.A., 1905) and attended the

⁶ Gamm, “In Search of Suburbs,” 150; Albert Ehrenfried, *A Chronicle of Boston Jewry from the Colonial Settlement to 1900* (Boston, 1963), 425–27; *Congregation Mishkan Tefila 1858–1983* (Stoughton, Mass.: Alpine Press, 1984), 9; Gerald Gamm, *Urban Exodus: Why the Jews Left Boston and the Catholics Stayed* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 160. On the issue of mixed seating in interwar years Conservative Judaism, see Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), 241–42.

⁷ *The Jewish Center*, a magazine published by Mishkan Tefila (February 1921), as quoted in Herman H. Rubenovitz and Mignon L. Rubenovitz, *The Waking Heart* (Cambridge, Mass.: Nathaniel Dame and Company, 1967), 60. On Conservative Judaism in this period, see Sarna, *American Judaism*, 187–91, 237–42, and Michael R. Cohen, “Schechter’s Disciples: How Solomon Schechter’s Students Created Conservative Judaism 1902–1946,” Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 2008.

⁸ J. Frederick Krokyn as quoted by David Kaufman, “Temples in the American Athens: A History of the Synagogues of Boston,” in Sarna, Smith, and Kosofsky, *Jews of Boston*, 201–2.

⁹ *Congregation Mishkan Tefila 1858–1983*, 12. The story of Koussevitzky’s begging Lenny to change his name and the retort—I’ll do it as Bernstein or not at all—was recounted in “Wunderkind,” *Time*, 4 February 1957, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,723817-5,00.html>, accessed October 28, 2008.

Jewish Theological Seminary, where he became a disciple of America's foremost Jewish scholar, its president, Solomon Schechter; he was ordained there in 1908. He likewise came under the influence of Mordecai Kaplan, later the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, whose biography in many ways mirrored his own. Like Kaplan, Rubenovitz argued that "no good can come to Judaism either from petrified traditionalism or from individualistic liberalism."¹⁰ The two men also shared common cultural interests, particularly an appreciation for music and art. Rubenovitz joined Kaplan's circle and, in his own congregation, introduced significant ritual changes aimed at improving the aesthetics of Jewish worship, most of all by transforming the synagogue's music.¹¹

The music at Congregation Mishkan Tefila, when Rubenovitz arrived there, followed what the rabbi later described as "the old ways and methods":

The cantor, though possessing a fairly good voice, had very little musical education, and a choir, composed of men and boys, grouped around him in a semi-circle, and received their cues from him. During the lengthy High Holiday service the choir boys invariably became restless, often failed to observe their cues and had punishment administered by the cantor in view of the entire congregation.¹²

Persuaded that "if our youth were to be won for the traditional service, something more in keeping with good taste and proper decorum would have to be introduced," Rubenovitz traveled to Europe in 1913, serving as a delegate to the World Zionist Congress, and spent time visiting Sabbath services in the leading synagogues of Paris, Berlin, and Vienna. Those synagogues, influenced by the currents of Jewish religious reform, had gained fame in the nineteenth century for their choral music, thanks to the creative efforts of Samuel Naumbourg (1815–80) in Paris, Louis Lewandowski (1821–94) in Berlin, and Salomon Sulzer (1804–90) in Vienna. Sitting in those synagogues on the eve of World War I, Rubenovitz, according to his subsequent recollections, "beheld our traditional ritual clothed in glorious musical vesture, and carried out in a setting of great dignity and decorum." He resolved to bring some of that same "beauty and spiritual quality" into his own congregation.¹³

Soon after his return to Boston in 1914, Rubenovitz introduced organ music and a mixed choir into the Sabbath and holiday worship at Mishkan Tefila. Reform congregations had introduced such innovations years before, but among Conservative congregations, and among Mishkan Tefila's own members, they generated substantial controversy because they contravened traditional Jewish law. Ultimately the issue was decided democratically by a congregational vote. Rubenovitz's views

¹⁰ Rubenovitz and Rubenovitz, *The Waking Heart*, 58.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1–5, 58; Herman H. Rubenovitz, "My Rabbinate at Mishkan Tefila: A History from 1910 to 1946," Congregation Mishkan Tefila archives, Chestnut Hill, Mass.; "Rubenovitz, Herman H.," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Thomson-Gale, 2007), vol. 17, 509–10. On Mordecai Kaplan, see Mel Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), esp. 129, 179–91.

¹² Rubenovitz and Rubenovitz, *The Waking Heart*, 31–32.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 33; Congregation Mishkan Tefila 1858–1983, 79. On Naumbourg, Lewandowski, and Sulzer, see the articles in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (2007) and in Macy Nulman, *Concise Encyclopedia of Jewish Music* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1975), 152–53, 181–82, 240–41.

prevailed, and, as he later reported with pride, "instead of decreasing, our membership grew rapidly."¹⁴

In 1923, around the time that the Bernstein family joined Mishkan Tefila, the congregation engaged a distinguished Russian cantor named Izso G. Glickstein (1891–1947) to strengthen the musical dimensions of its service still further. Trained in Budapest and Vienna, Glickstein had served as chief cantor in some of Hungary's foremost synagogues and possessed a voice noted for its "power, range and beauty." He was also a man of striking presence. Leonard Bernstein, who always had an eye for handsome men, recalled him as a "fabulous cantor . . . a great musician and a beautiful man, very tall, very majestic."¹⁵

Glickstein was joined in 1928 by a European music director who would transform Jewish music at Mishkan Tefila and profoundly influence Leonard Bernstein's life. This was Solomon Gregory Braslavsky (1887–1975), the first composer and student of music of any kind that the young Leonard Bernstein knew, and the man he credited for the "first real music I heard."¹⁶

Born in Kaligorka, Russia,¹⁷ the son of a cantor, Braslavsky was trained in his father's synagogue choir, which he later conducted. He also conducted, during his term of military service, various Russian army bands, which broadened his musical repertoire. In 1908 he moved to Vienna to study at the Royal Imperial Academy of Music, where he gained a thorough grounding in European music, focusing on composition, harmony, and conducting. On graduation, he became the conductor of Vienna's Jewish *Hakoah* Orchestra, organized and conducted the city's Jewish choral society, and was appointed professor of music at the Jewish Theological Seminary in Vienna. Forever after, following European tradition of that time, he was known formally as "Professor Braslavsky." Many prominent cantors studied under him in Vienna, and he befriended the greatest Jewish musical figures of his day. Indeed, his "Mizmor Shir Le-Yom Ha-Shabbos" (Song for the Sabbath Day, Psalm 92) was dedicated to the celebrated cantor Zavel Kwartin (1874–1953) and

¹⁴ Rubenovitz and Rubenovitz, *The Waking Heart*, 34; for background on these debates, see Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Question of Music in American Judaism: Reflections at 350 Years," *American Jewish History* 91 (July 2003), 195–203.

¹⁵ Humphrey Burton, *Leonard Bernstein* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 8; *Congregation Mishkan Tefila 1858–1983*, 80; undated tributes [1947] from Brotherhood Mishkan Tefila News, *Congregation Mishkan Tefila* archives; John Simon, ed., *Who's Who in American Jewry* (New York: National News Association, 1938), 335. The January 1947 edition of Mishkan Tefila *Temple Topics* reprints a letter from Bernstein (10 October 1946) in which he writes: "Please tell cantor Glickstein that he is still my favorite cantor." My thanks to Lily Kowalski for this reference. A copy of this letter is included in "Leonard Bernstein Collection Scrapbooks," Scrapbook 7 (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress Preservation Microfilming Program, 1999).

¹⁶ This claim is made on an undated manuscript found in Box 78, Folder 1 of the Leonard Bernstein Collection, Library of Congress. The page is entitled "A Cantata on Hebrew Yiddish Materials that Move Me" and asks "what are the Jewish roots I long for?" In this list Bernstein includes "First real music I heard (Braslavsky)." By permission of The Leonard Bernstein Office, Inc.

¹⁷ What Braslavsky called Kaligorka was officially known as Mokraia Kaligorka prior to 1917 and is now known as Mokra Kalygirka (in Ukrainian). It is about 75 km east of Uman in what was then Kievsky province but is now Cherkasy Oblast (district) of the Ukraine. According to the 1897 Russian census, the shtetl had 3,199 inhabitants, of whom 1,677 were Jews. Braslavsky attended high school in Uman, and some sources wrongly claim that he was born there. Thanks to Dr. Victoria Khiterer for her help with this note.

premiered in Budapest's famed Tabak Temple, where Kwartin held forth before his emigration to the United States.¹⁸

How Rabbi Rubenovitz secured Braslavsky for Mishkan Tefila is unknown, but the deteriorating economic and political situation in Vienna was likely a factor.¹⁹ The two men may have met at one or more of the Zionist congresses.²⁰ Whatever the case, Braslavsky brought a new level of musical creativity and seriousness to Mishkan Tefila. He introduced into the worship many European Jewish pieces for cantor and organ, along with new compositions of his own. His arrangements highlighted the tenor voice of Cantor Glickstein and engaged the mixed choir, which, as music director, he personally directed. He also served as organist, making full use of Mishkan Tefila's magnificent new pipe organ—second in size, in Boston, only to the organ at Symphony Hall. Reputedly he “evoked more musical color from the large instrument than had ever been heard before.”²¹ The resulting religious services achieved renown throughout New England for their musical quality. Each major service (and especially the late Friday night service) became, in effect, a musical performance, directed and conducted by Braslavsky with Glickstein as cantor. All kinds of music, “old and new, conservative and modern,” formed part of Braslavsky's repertory. “The main thing,” he insisted, “is that the music must be good and traditionally Jewish in character.”²²

This music was what Leonard Bernstein heard whenever he attended Mishkan Tefila. He began attending at the age of eight, two years before Braslavsky arrived (and also two years before his home had a piano), and was reputedly “so moved” by the organ and choir that he began to cry. Thereafter he attended frequently, usually on Friday evening, when the congregation was crowded with Jewish music lovers from all over the city.²³ Time and again, in letters and recollections, Bernstein

¹⁸ Major sources for Braslavsky's biography are the sketch in *Who's Who in American Jewry* (New York: National News Association, 1938), 130, and Israel J. Kazis, “Eulogy Delivered in Tribute to the Beloved Memory of Professor Solomon G. Braslavsky,” *Temple Mishkan Tefila News* (June 1975), in Congregation Mishkan Tefila archives. The archives also contain notes for several of Braslavsky's lectures and an interesting unidentified newspaper obituary. I am grateful to Danielle Gobuty for finding these notes and making them available to me. Braslavsky's 1938 application to serve as a temporary teacher in the Boston Public Schools, which contains some relevant personal data, is found in the Congregation Mishkan Tefila archives. For Braslavsky's collected music, see his *Shirei Shlomo: Songs of Solomon* (New York: Mills Music, 1963–64). For a photograph of Braslavsky in Vienna, see the article by Oja and Shelemay in the present issue.

¹⁹ The great Jewish historian Salo Baron left Vienna for the United States about a year earlier. He recalled that he saw no long-term future for the Jewish institutions in Vienna because of their great financial burdens. See Robert Liberles, *Salo Wittmayer Baron: Architect of Jewish History* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 32.

²⁰ An unpublished draft of a manuscript entitled “The Music of Mishkan Tefila,” found in the Congregation Mishkan Tefila archives, puts forth this hypothesis (8–9), but it is not found in the published version in *Congregation Mishkan Tefila 1858–1983*, 80.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.* The Mishkan Tefila Archives contain several talks by Braslavsky that attempt to distinguish “Jewish music” from “music by Jews.” At the congregation, he insisted upon playing only “Jewish music.”

²³ *Congregation Mishkan Tefila 1858–1983*, 78–82; Burton, *Leonard Bernstein*, 8; “Wunderkind,” *Time*, 4 February 1957.

attributed his early musical interest to the synagogue's music, and he remained indebted to Braslavsky and to Mishkan Tefila for the rest of his life.

"I have come to realize what a debt I really owe to you—personally—for the marvelous music at the Mishkan Tefila Services," he wrote in a letter to Braslavsky on 10 October 1946. "They surpass any that I have ever heard; and the memories I have of them are so bright, strong and dear, that I shall probably never be able to estimate the real influence those sounds exerted on me."²⁴ Eighteen years later, in 1964, he paid lavish tribute to Braslavsky in an extraordinary autobiographical letter sent to the Cantors Assembly of America:

Before I ever heard a concert, recital, or opera, before I had ever touched a piano, or knew that an organized musical life existed—before all these, I heard the music that Professor Braslavsky caused to be made at Temple Mishkan Tefila. I shall never forget that music, nor cease to be grateful for the power, conviction and atmosphere with which it was conveyed. I may have heard greater masterpieces performed since then, and under more impressive circumstances; but I have never been more deeply moved. Braslavsky's music and music-making will always be with me, as a cherished memory and influence. Long life to him.²⁵

In still another letter, which he sent to the then eighty-six-year-old Braslavsky in 1973, Bernstein penned the lines with which this article begins: "I think of you very often, and never forget the tremendous influence you and your music made on me when I was a youngster. I am always grateful and remember you tenderly."²⁶

Bernstein particularly recalled an arrangement of the hymn *Adon Olam* (Lord of the World) that Braslavsky had composed, apparently for the high holidays. He described it as being of a complexity "not to be believed. Each stanza was a setting with organ interlude and great introductions. The basses would enter alone and then the sopranos—this is when I discovered that there was such a thing as counterpoint: great obbligatos floating from on high. 'Arrangement' is too small a word. It was a great composition. I knew every note of it because I heard it every year: it was like an opera."²⁷ He greatly missed Braslavsky's high holiday music after he left Boston. Perhaps for that reason, as well as out of a sense of profound obligation, he subsidized, in the early 1960s, the publication of Braslavsky's setting of the high holiday prayer *Un'saneh Tokef*.²⁸

There is much that we do not know concerning the relationship of Bernstein to Braslavsky in these early years, but there are hints that it was also a deep personal

²⁴ Bernstein to Braslavsky, 10 October 1946.

²⁵ Leonard Bernstein to Stuart Rosenbaum (20 March 1964), Congregation Mishkan Tefila archives. By permission of The Leonard Bernstein Office, Inc. The Harvard Seminar uncovered this letter and made it available to me.

²⁶ Bernstein to Braslavsky, 31 January 1973.

²⁷ Quoted in Burton, *Leonard Bernstein*, 9. Professor Joshua Jacobson, who generously read and commented upon this paper in draft, pointed out to me that Bernstein, looking back to his youth, anticipated his own subsequent priorities. He recalled being more attracted to the composition and conducting of Mishkan Tefila's music than to the cantor who sang it. Unfortunately Braslavsky, *Shirei Shlomo*, does not preserve this *Adon Olam* arrangement.

²⁸ Solomon G. Braslavsky, *Un'saneh Tokef* (New York: Amberson Enterprises, 1962). See *Congregation Mishkan Tefila 1858–1983*, 118, where Bernstein's sponsorship of the publication is disclosed. For evidence of his nostalgia for this music, see his letter to Braslavsky, 10 October 1946, cited in notes 15 and 24 above.

relationship, extending far beyond the joys of just listening to Braslavsky's grand music. One biographer reports that Bernstein took organ lessons with Braslavsky and served under him as a cantor for the youth service.²⁹ A newspaper obituary, when Braslavsky died, claimed that Bernstein came and "studied music" with him while at Harvard.³⁰ No mention of this latter claim appears in *Leonard Bernstein: The Harvard Years*,³¹ but it is striking that into his thirties Bernstein addressed the very formal Viennese music director with the familiar sobriquet "Brasy," something that even Rabbi Rubenovitz did not do. The informal tone and family news ("the baby is beautiful beyond words") contained in Bernstein's handwritten 1952 letter to "Brasy" suggest an intimacy with the man that extended far beyond that of the average congregant. One suspects that Bernstein appreciated—sooner, perhaps, than others did—the breadth and depth of Braslavsky's knowledge, and the significance of his lifelong interest into the question of what made music distinctively Jewish (parallel to Bernstein's interest, first expressed in his Harvard senior thesis, into what made music distinctively American).³²

There may even have been more to their association. Years later Bernstein reported to Braslavsky (whom he now addressed formally as professor), "You may be happy to know that I am at work on a ballet based on *The Dybbuk*. It's full of our old tunes!"³³ This reference, of course, was to the ballet on which Bernstein and Jerome Robbins collaborated, based on the Yiddish drama by S. Ansky; it debuted in May 1974.³⁴ The curiosity here is the word "our." Does it refer to "our" old Jewish tunes, which he learned from Braslavsky, and from his own father, who came from a Hasidic background and enjoyed singing Hasidic music? Or does "our" suggest some earlier now-forgotten musical collaboration between the two men?

Whatever the case, Bernstein maintained his ties to Mishkan Tefila long after his departure from Boston. In 1945 he sent the Mishkan Tefila museum an inscribed copy of his First Symphony, *Jeremiah*. In 1948, 1949, and again in 1969 he spoke at Mishkan Tefila. He appeared there on other occasions as well, always sat on the pulpit when he visited, and warmly embraced Braslavsky whenever he did.³⁵

Nor did he neglect Rabbi Rubenovitz. Thanks to him and the congregation, Bernstein had attended his first symphony concert back in 1932. The Boston Pops concert was a benefit for the Histadrut, the Zionist Trade Union Movement in

²⁹ Meryle Secrest, *Leonard Bernstein: A Life* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 14. Secrest relies on the recollections of Bernstein's former neighbor Mitchell Cooper.

³⁰ Unidentified newspaper clipping in Congregation Mishkan Tefila archives.

³¹ Claudia Swan, ed., *Leonard Bernstein: The Harvard Years 1935–1939* (New York: Eos Orchestra, 1999).

³² Leonard Bernstein to "Brasy" [Solomon Braslavsky], 19 September 1952, Congregation Mishkan Tefila archives; see also note 22 above. By permission of The Leonard Bernstein Office, Inc. Leonard Bernstein, "The Absorption of Race Elements into American Music" (B.A. honors thesis, Harvard University, 1939).

³³ Bernstein to Braslavsky, 31 January 1973.

³⁴ Burton, *Leonard Bernstein*, 422–44.

³⁵ Congregation Mishkan Tefila archives contain all of these materials; for information on his other visits and his embrace of Braslavsky, I am indebted to an interview with Bernice Kazis, who grew up at the congregation and is the widow of Rabbi Rubenovitz's successor, Rabbi Israel J. Kazis. Bernice Kazis, interview with the author, 9 September 2006.

Palestine, and Rubenovitz, with his dual interest in music and in Zionism, reserved several tables in the congregation's name. Sam took his son along, and they were treated to Ravel's *Bolero*, conducted by Arthur Fiedler (1894–1979). Bernstein later looked back on this concert as a central experience in his early musical life.³⁶ Fiedler was himself Jewish; he had become conductor of the Pops two years earlier, having joined the Boston Symphony Orchestra (in which his father was first violinist) at the age of twenty.³⁷ Although the two men had no known relationship, the fact that a Jew could hold such an important position in Boston musical circles must have had some influence on Bernstein, particularly at a time when his father was warning him against a career in music, because (as Bernstein later explained) “to him ‘musician’ was a word like ‘beggar,’ a person who came around to weddings scraping on his fiddle and begging a few kopeks.”³⁸

Three years later, Rubenovitz recommended Bernstein to Harvard. “From my observation of Leonard Bernstein,” he wrote rather perfunctorily, “I believe him to be reliable, industrious and persevering. . . . If admitted to Harvard University, he will, in my opinion, be a worthy addition to the student body.”³⁹ He was probably more helpful in encouraging him as a public speaker. Indeed, biographer Joan Peyser theorizes that Bernstein’s “somewhat affected, orotund speech was modeled on Rubenovitz.”⁴⁰ Bernstein acknowledged Rubenovitz’s influence in 1964, on the occasion of an eightieth birthday tribute to the rabbi, when, in typically extravagant style, he laid bare his debts: “He gave me my first notion of public speaking, of declamatory passion and timing, a sense of balance and moderation in reasoning; a liberal view of argument; an enormous sense of dignity and the basic divine element in man. More than that, he taught me humility; and even more, he married me to my beloved wife.”⁴¹

The fact that Bernstein responded so fulsomely to Mishkan Tefila’s request for remarks on the occasion of this tribute is revealing. Just one month earlier he had penned an even more magniloquent letter, quoted above, to the Cantors Assembly, in honor of Solomon Braslavsky. The two letters, taken together—even if discounted for Bernstein’s propensity to hyperbole—leave little doubt as to the influence on him of his childhood synagogue.

Biographers might take their cue from what Bernstein wrote. Congregation Mishkan Tefila—its music, its music director, its cantor, and its rabbi—all left a strong imprint upon him. It was there that Bernstein first discovered the power of

³⁶ Burton, *Leonard Bernstein*, 19–20.

³⁷ See Peter C. Holloran’s fine biographical sketch of Fiedler (with bibliography) in *American National Biography* (online edition), <<http://www.anb.org/resources.library.brandeis.edu/articles/18/18-01981.html>>, accessed October 28, 2008; and Ehrenfried, *Chronicle of Boston Jewry*, 700–701.

³⁸ Bernstein, as quoted in Jack Gottlieb, *Funny, It Doesn’t Sound Jewish* (New York: SUNY Press, 2004), 178.

³⁹ H. Rubenovitz to Harvard Committee on Admission (1935), Herman H. Rubenovitz Papers, ARC 99, Box 1, folder 12, Jewish Theological Seminary archive, New York City. I am grateful to Dr. Michael R. Cohen for this reference. Courtesy of the Jewish Theological Seminary archive.

⁴⁰ Joan Peyser, *Bernstein: A Biography* (New York: Billboard Books, 1998), 24.

⁴¹ Leonard Bernstein to David Stern (27 April 1964), Congregation Mishkan Tefila archives. By permission of The Leonard Bernstein Office, Inc.

grand music, there that he learned to appreciate Jewish music, there that he was tutored in public speaking, there that he was imbued with pride in his Jewish heritage, and there that he saw how Judaism and American culture could be harmonized. The congregation and the Boston Jewish community of his youth go far to explain the centrality of Jewish themes in Leonard Bernstein's music.⁴²

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⁴² Paul Myers comes closest to the mark: "Probably the greatest influence was the music heard each week at Temple Mishkan Tefila which, in addition to the tenor cantor singing traditional melodies, boasted an organ and a choir. Many of Bernstein's works are influenced either by Judaism or Jewish musical traditions, most notably in the symphonies *Jeremiah* and *Kaddish*, in the ballet *Dybbuk*, in *Chichester Psalms*, *Hashkiveinu*, Concerto for Orchestra (incorporating *Jubilee Games*) and one or two unexpected places." Paul Myers, *Leonard Bernstein* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), 16–17. See also Gottlieb, *Funny, It Doesn't Sound Jewish*, 178–85.

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