

## The Question of Music in American Judaism: Reflections at 350 Years\*

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Clamorous debates over music have been a feature of American Judaism since at least the beginning of the nineteenth century. Indeed, questions concerning music in the synagogue have stood second only to questions concerning women in the synagogue as prime sources of disputation, dividing synagogues and sometimes even landing up in court. Like women, music is at once alluring and dangerous; it delights the senses but it may also stir up passionate disagreement, undermine the established order, and distract people from the solemnity of worship. In the eyes of synagogue leaders, therefore, both music and women have demanded careful regulation. Ultimately, issues surrounding music, like the better known issues surrounding women, have helped to define what American Judaism is all about.

Let us examine several of these issues, and the debates that they generated, debates that, by no coincidence, took place at roughly the same time as synagogues were debating women's issues and related concessions to modernity.

The first debate concerned the character of the music. In the Sephardic synagogues of the colonial era (and later, for that matter), music was as tightly regulated as the synagogue ritual. Indeed, the music was inseparable from the ritual. Both were hallowed by tradition, what was called in Hebrew the *minhag*, the synagogue's ritual or custom as passed down from generation to generation. Shearith Israel, today known as the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York, and all of the other colonial synagogues closely conformed to the traditional *minhag* as practiced by Portuguese Jews in Europe and the West Indies. Innovations were prohibited; "Our duty," Sephardic Jews in England once explained, is "to imitate our forefathers."<sup>1</sup> On a deeper level, Sephardic Jews believed, as did the Catholics among whom they had so long lived, that

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1. *El Libro de los Acuerdos*, edited and translated by Lionel D. Barnett (Oxford, 1931), 3; see Herman P. Salomon, "Joseph Jesurun Pinto (1729-1782): A Dutch Hazan in Colonial New York," *Studia Rosenthaliana* 13 (1979): 18-29.

ritual could unite those whom life had dispersed. They wanted a member of their Nation, as they called it, to feel at home in any Sephardic synagogue anywhere in the world: the same liturgy, the same customs, and the same music. As late as 1841, a president (parnas) of Shearith Israel articulated the synagogue's ideology in response to those who sought to change it: "Let any of us, arriving from almost any part of the world, meet," he declared, "we feel ourselves at home, and join in the service of the synagogue, on any day, at any time, even to the different tunes."<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately for colonial Jews, many local Protestant churches were equally conservative in their musical traditions. "Established texts and known tunes were essential to the worship" of most colonial churches, "while non-verbal utterance, musical improvisation, individual spontaneity, and liturgical flexibility were generally absent."<sup>3</sup> The Congregational church in Weston, Massachusetts, in 1724 reflected local custom when it approved a list of fourteen tunes to be used in its worship, and warned the chorister to use no others "unless he has further order from the Church."<sup>4</sup> Churches, like their synagogue counterparts, promoted the virtues of tradition, regularity, and order through their choice of what to sing. Just as men, women, children, and slaves all had a fixed and carefully determined place in God's house, so too did sacred music.

The late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries witnessed a whole series of innovations in American religious life: the great Protestant awakenings, disestablishment, church-state separation, the rapid growth of new denominations, and the like; and unsurprisingly, these produced changes in music as well. The same revolutionary spirit—the so-called contagion of liberty—that affected so many other aspects of life, also unleashed demands for innovation in liturgy and song; parallel developments, of course, were taking place in Europe. Initially, the synagogue resisted such innovations and attempted to impose discipline. "Every member of this congregation shall, previous to the singing [of] any psalm, or prayer, remain silent until the [Hazzan] shall signify the tone or key, in which the same is to be sung," an 1805 by-law of Shearith Israel declared. "Those who are so inclined may then join therein, with an equal voice, but neither higher or louder than the Hazzan."<sup>5</sup>

2. David de Sola Pool and Tamar de Sola Pool, *An Old Faith in the New World: Portrait of Shearith Israel, 1654–1954* (New York, 1955), 99.

3. Nym Cooke, "Sacred Music to 1800," *The Cambridge History of American Music*, ed. David Nicholls (Cambridge, 1998), 82.

4. As quoted in Cook, "Sacred Music to 1800," 91.

5. Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States: A Documentary History, 1790–1840*, 3 vols. (New York, 1963), 2: 520.

In 1818, however, we find a proposal by "a number of Young gentlemen of the Congregation, who proposed forming a class, with a view to improving the Singing of the Synagogue." A century earlier, such singing schools had precipitated dramatic changes in Protestant sacred music, setting the stage for trained choirs, art music, and a gradual shift away from a participatory liturgy and toward a more performance-oriented one, led by the musically gifted. In a controversial opinion, however, a committee of Shearith Israel leaders warned that "all innovations on customs and forms established for a long series of years . . . should be approached with great caution and deference." Without entirely rejecting the idea of a music class, they warned against "discord in shool, by some singing who have been under rehearsal, & others endeavouring to drown their Voices who have not had an opportunity of attending the rehearsal and who may disapprove of a select number singing in shool."<sup>6</sup> Articulated here is the fear that music might become a divisive force within the synagogue, undermining established norms and resulting in the creation of a musical elite that would in time seize control of the divine worship.

Temporarily, then, the "Young gentlemen" of the congregation were thwarted. Music, however, remained a focal point of controversy in Shearith Israel, a vehicle for expressing tensions between tradition and change. When a new hazan, Isaac Benjamin Seixas, was appointed in 1828, he was specifically warned not to introduce into the synagogue "any profane melodies or those used in Christian churches," a sure sign that some wanted to liven up synagogue worship with just those kinds of tunes.<sup>7</sup> Seixas was also warned not "to set . . . the tone or key so high as to preclude the Congregation from taking part in the singing, and thereby causing disorder and confusion," again an indication that music in the synagogue had become a battleground, in this case between a musically talented hazan and congregants more interested in group singing than in performance.<sup>8</sup> In the context of their day, however, these seemingly superficial and inconsequential disputes over synagogue music really reflected deeper disputes that touched at the heart of synagogue life, including such issues as cultural absorption (selective borrowing from the surrounding culture) versus cultural retention, and participatory worship versus performance-oriented worship. Indeed, in arguing

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6. Ibid., 2: 494-96; see Pool and Pool, *An Old Faith in the New World*, 152-53.

7. Pool and Pool, *An Old Faith in the New World*, 178.

8. Ibid., 154.

over the kind of music that they wanted to hear, congregants were really arguing over the kind of Judaism that they wanted to experience.<sup>9</sup>

The petition of the "Young gentlemen" of Shearith Israel in 1818 points us to a second area of debate within American Judaism. Beyond the question of what music to sing, there was also the question, already alluded to, of *who* should sing the music. Colonial Jews, like their Calvinist neighbors, believed in general and unregulated participation, or what we would call communal singing. Men and women sang together in Sephardic synagogues: the women above and the men below. This practice initially influenced some immigrant congregations. Joseph Jonas, in his lively 1843 memoir concerning the founding of the Jewish community of Cincinnati, provides us with a particularly rich account of musical traditions in the congregation that he helped to found in 1824, known as Bene Israel (today, Rockdale Temple). "The original founders of our congregation," he wrote, "were principally from Great Britain, and consequently their mode of worship was after the manner of the Polish and German Jews; but being all young people they were not so prejudiced in favour of old customs as more elderly people might have been, and especially as several of their wives had been brought up in Portuguese congregations [that, incidentally, is a significant comment; it sheds light on the Sephardic practice and how it spread to Ashkenazi synagogues]." He continued:

We therefore introduced considerable chorus singing into our worship in which we were joined by the sweet voices of the fair daughters of Zion, and our Friday evening service was as well attended for many years as the Sabbath morning. At length, however, large emigrations of our German brethren settled amongst us; again our old customs have conquered and the sweet voices of our ladies are seldom heard; but we have so far prevailed as to continue to this day, the following beautiful melodies: the 29th Psalm [Mizmor Ledavid] which is chaunted as the procession slowly proceeds to deposit the Sepher Torah in the ark; also *Ein Kelohenu* and after the service is concluded none attempt to quit their seats until the beautiful hymn Adon Olam . . . is finished, being sung by all the congregation in full chorus.

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9. These debates never reached a final resolution. See, for example, the findings of a 1973 survey at Congregation Beth Israel in Houston (Reform) concerning the musical content of that congregation's liturgy: "Half the people want the format left exactly as it is and half want it changed." As quoted in Kay Kaufman Shelemay, "Music in the American Synagogue: A Case Study from Houston," in *The American Synagogue*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Hanover, NH, 1987), 405.

Jonas's account, among many other things, introduces us to the theme of gender, the question of whether women's voices should be heard in the synagogue—one of the many women's issues linked directly or indirectly to questions concerning music. In different ways, debates over women's voices in the synagogue would continue down to contemporary times, taking the form of such questions as: Can women sing in a choir? Can women serve as cantors? And can female voices [*kol isha*] be heard at all? Jonas's account also charts the gradual elimination of congregational singing, which over time became restricted in many places to a few set pieces surrounding the Torah service and at the conclusion of the liturgy. The bulk of the music in large synagogues was taken over by trained singers, the most significant mid-nineteenth-century innovation being the introduction of the choir. This change is traditionally dated to 1845, when a regular choir of men and boys was organized at Temple Emanuel in New York, but we know of occasional choirs as early as the 1820s, and there is some evidence of a regular mixed choir at Beth Elohim in Charleston a few years before.<sup>10</sup>

In Judaism, as in American Protestantism, the introduction of choirs transformed worship. Henceforward, congregants were instructed to "be perfectly silent," or at the very least to recite prayers "in a low tone of voice so as not to interfere with the Hazan or Chorus, and in no case to disturb the worship." The choir, in effect, diminished the role of congregants, who became passive auditors of the service. Karla Goldman points out that choirs likewise deprived men of their proprietorship over the worship and, ironically, placed them closer to the traditional [non-participating] synagogue position of women.<sup>11</sup>

The benefit of the choir, in addition to the quality of its music, was its role in promoting a new atmosphere within the synagogue, one characterized by reverential awe. In America, as in Germany, choir music combined with grand styles of synagogue architecture, formal garb, and an enhanced emphasis on decorum to shape a refined, elevated atmosphere, one that reflected Jews' rising status in society and sought to bestir worshippers to high-minded thoughts, introspection, and moral improvement. Mid-nineteenth-century Jews, influenced by their high-church neighbors, considered this to be the essence of religion, and they

10. Irving H. Cohen, "Synagogue Music in the Early American Republic," *Gratz College Annual of Jewish Studies* 5 (1976): 20, but see n.24 where he concedes that the choir at Charleston's Beth Elohim was earlier; see also *Occident* 2 (April 1844) available at [www.jewish-history.com/Occident/volume2/april1844/charleston.html](http://www.jewish-history.com/Occident/volume2/april1844/charleston.html).

11. For the quotes and the analysis, see Karla A. Goldman, *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery: Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism* (Cambridge, 2000), 87–88.

optimistically believed that, through the creation of this new atmosphere within the synagogue, the image of Judaism would be improved, a new era would dawn, and anti-Judaism would disappear. To take just one example among many, New York's new Shaaray Tefilla synagogue, the most magnificent to that time, was portrayed in the *Occident* following its 1847 dedication (a dedication, by the way, where much music was performed) as a place where a Jew felt himself "proud at being an Israelite," conscious that he was "but an atom in creation, yet still an instrument in God's hands," and finally a place where "being one of His chosen was made manifest in the sight of the Gentiles."<sup>12</sup>

Choirs never fully resolved the question of who should sing in the House of God. Traditionalists insisted that only male voices should be heard, although they also admitted prepubescent boys into the choir to allow the music to soar into the higher ranges. Reformers insisted that both men and women should be admitted into the choir, and some made their peace with non-Jewish choristers as well, so long as their glorious voices created an atmosphere conducive to awe-inspiring worship. A generation later, both traditionalists and reformers partially reversed themselves, promoting full congregational participation in at least some synagogue singing for fear that too passive a service was driving congregants away. These raging tensions—between participation and performance, between congregational singing and choir music, between the demands of tradition and the allure of modernity—never could fully be resolved. They reflected deep-seated differences over aesthetics, over prayer, and over Jewish law that continue to divide American Jews from one another to the present day.

The third and perhaps most famous of the great debates over synagogue music concerned instrumental accompaniment of music—what might be called the great organ controversy. Organs had first appeared in America in churches early in the eighteenth century. Their glorious tones promised to harmonize cacophonous congregational singers and drown out noise. Even more than choirs, organ music was also designed to inspire worshippers with a reverential sense of awe, bestirring them to moral improvement.

Jews, of course, traditionally eschewed instrumental music in the synagogue, just as English Puritans, early-American Lutherans, and Scottish Presbyterians barred it from their churches. Jewish law strictly

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12. *Occident* 5 (August 1847), on-line at [www.jewish-history.com/Occident/volume5/aug1847/shaaray.html](http://www.jewish-history.com/Occident/volume5/aug1847/shaaray.html); see Michael A. Meyer, *Judaism Within Modernity: Essays on Jewish History and Religion* (Detroit, 2001), 223–38.

enjoined the playing of musical instruments of any kind, even at home, on the Sabbath and holidays. But in nineteenth-century Germany, based in part on Jewish precedents from Italy and Prague, the pioneers of Reform Judaism introduced the organ into their "temples," believing that the instrument could promote the kind of refined and uplifting spiritual experience that they associated with modern worship. On both sides of the Atlantic, the organ became in time a visible and audible marker of Reform, dramatically distinguishing the new mode of Jewish worship from its traditional counterparts.<sup>13</sup>

The first known proposal to introduce an organ into an American synagogue came in 1840, just as the members of Charleston's Beth Elohim were completing a magnificent new building in the Greek Revival style (the congregation's former building, on the same site, had burned to the ground in 1838).<sup>14</sup> Thirty-eight members, seeking to extend the spirit of innovation represented by the new building, and, in their own words, "anxious to embrace every laudable and sacred mode by which the rising generation may be made to conform to and attend our holy worship," petitioned for a congregational meeting "to discuss the propriety of erecting an organ in the synagogue to assist the vocal part of the service." The congregation's popular minister, Gustavus Poznanski, a native of Prussian Poland and himself an able musician, sanctioned the innovation of an organ on religious grounds, and with his blessing the congregation voted forty-six to forty in favor of installing one. The reformers having won the day, the traditionalists, particularly those born abroad, left to form a new congregation, Shearith Israel. That name, which would subsequently be adopted by various other breakaway traditional congregations in the nineteenth century, established an eponymous link between the local traditionalists and New York's pioneering Sephardic synagogue. It also reflected the traditionalists' sense of themselves as a surviving "remnant of Israel."

Within a few months, moderate reformers, alarmed at the rapid changes that their more radical brethren were making in the liturgy, and alarmed by Rev. Poznanski's open declaration that "he knew no stopping

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13. R.J. Stanislaw, "Musical Instruments in Churches," in *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, ed. Daniel G. Reid et al. (Downers Grove, Ill., 1990), 790; Meir Benayahu, "Da'at Hakhme Italya Al Ha-Neginah B-Ogev Be-Tfilah," *Asufot* 1 (1987): 265-318.

14. For what follows, see Allan Tarshish, "The Charleston Organ Case," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 54 (1965): 411-49; William J. Hagy, *This Happy Land: The Jews of Colonial and Antebellum Charleston* (Tuscaloosa, 1993), 240-56; Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York, 1988), 233-35.



place to Reform in this enlightened age," joined forces with Shearith Israel's members and endeavored to recapture the leadership of Beth Elohim. Their aim were to check the "great and growing evil" of reform, to abolish the organ, the quintessential symbol of innovation, and to "restore concord and harmony." A complicated legal struggle ensued, and for the next three years the battle shifted to the courts.<sup>15</sup>

In Europe, judicial and government intervention generally spelled bad news for advocates of Jewish religious reform.<sup>16</sup> But in Charleston the result was different. The legal precedent set forth in the so-called "Charleston organ case" and subsequently upheld on appeal, significantly affected the course of Judaism in America by establishing that "questions of theological doctrine," and issues such as whether a synagogue may accompany its music with an organ, should not be decided by the courts at all. "Matters of that kind," Judge A.P. Butler of the Court of Appeals declared in 1846, "must necessarily belong and should be committed, to the jurisdiction of the body that has the right of conducting the religious concerns of ecclesiastical corporations"—meaning, in the case of Judaism, the individual synagogue's own board of trustees. The court also determined that "in a country where toleration is not only allowed, but where perfect freedom of conscience is guaranteed by constitutional provision," religious change was inevitable. No synagogue charter, the court declared, could establish "the exact kind of music that was to be used in all future time."<sup>17</sup>

The court's ruling made it all but impossible to mount a successful legal challenge against a majority bent on reforming traditional Jewish practice through organ music, mixed seating, or other means. Proponents of religious reform could proceed virtually without fear of legal or governmental challenge, while proponents of Jewish tradition could win only by persuasion, not by appealing to courts of law. Henceforward, questions concerning music in the synagogue would be decided just like so much else was in America: by majority rule.

More than previous disputes over music (disputes over the type of music to be played or disputes over choirs), the organ dispute also clearly separated Reform Jews from their opponents, who in response began to call themselves "Orthodox." The terms "Orthodox" and "Orthodoxy,"

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15. Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 234; Tarshish, "Charleston Organ Case," 435, 438.

16. Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 52; Anne J. Kershner and Jonathan A. Romain, *Tradition and Change: A History of Reform Judaism in Great Britain, 1849-1995* (London, 1995), 39-41.

17. Tarshish, "Charleston Organ Case," 439-45.



scarcely known in American Jewish life before 1840, turned up repeatedly thereafter. Indeed, Orthodox became the term of choice for Jews who opposed the Reform innovation of the organ, and advocated what they called "true adherence to our holy religion in its ancient form."<sup>18</sup> Within a generation, the organ, along with mixed seating, became visible and audible boundary markers separating Orthodoxy from Reform.

Thus, unlike colonial Jews, who had hoped that their repertoire of Sephardic synagogue music, severely regulated and limited by tradition, would *unite* the American Jewish community, late-nineteenth-century Jews found that music had come to represent all that *divided* Jews from one another. Much like the better known questions surrounding women in the synagogue, questions concerning music in the synagogue—what music is appropriate, who may sing that music, and whether the music may be accompanied by instruments—helped to shape the very nature of American Judaism, in all its pluralistic glory.

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18. *Occident* 3 (April 1845): 5 (May 1847); I have used the on-line version available at <http://www.jewish-history.com.occident> (search under "Orthodox," "Orthodoxy").