

## LEONARD BERNSTEIN AND THE MUSIC OF BOSTON'S CONGREGATION MISHKAN TEFILA



**FROM A YOUNG AGE**, Leonard Bernstein attended religious services at Congregation Mishkan Tefila, the first synagogue in Boston to align itself with Conservative Judaism. Geared to young upwardly mobile immigrants like his parents, the synagogue occupied what it described in 1921 as “the middle ground between Orthodox and Reformed Judaism.” It advocated (as Leonard Bernstein 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.” It introduced Leonard Bernstein to the power of great music.

In 1925 Mishkan Tefila opened a palatial synagogue on the corner of Elm Hill

Avenue and Seaver Street overlooking Franklin Park. The sumptuous building, through its monumental American Renaissance-style architecture and its conspicuous opulence, announced to Bostonians that Eastern European Jews like the Bernsteins had arrived.

Rabbi Herman Rubenovitz (1883-1966), a Lithuanian immigrant and Zionist who graduated from City College and the Jewish Theological Seminary, presided over this magnificent synagogue. He looked to create in Boston an American version of the great choral synagogues of Paris, Berlin and Vienna. His goal was to see “our traditional ritual clothed in glorious musical vesture, and carried out in a setting of great dignity and decorum.”

Rubenovitz introduced organ music and a mixed choir into the Sabbath and holiday worship at Mishkan Tefila. Among Conservative congregations, and among Mishkan Tefila’s own members, such innovations generated substantial controversy because they contravened traditional Jewish law. Ultimately, the issue was decided democratically by a congregational vote. Rubenovitz’s views prevailed, and as he later reported with pride, “instead of decreasing, our membership grew rapidly.”

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). 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.”

Glickstein was joined in 1928 by a European music director who would 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 Bernstein knew, and the man he credited for the “first real music I heard.”

Born in Kaligorka, Russia, the son of a cantor, Braslavsky was trained in his father’s synagogue choir. In 1908 he moved to Vienna to study at the Royal Imperial Academy of Music, where he gained a thorough grounding in European music. 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.

Braslavsky brought a new level of musical creativity and seriousness to Mishkan Tefila. He introduced into the worship many European Jewish pieces, along with his own compositions. 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.

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.”

This was the music that Leonard Bernstein heard whenever he attended Mishkan Tefila. He began attending at the age of 8, 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. Time and again, in letters and recollections, Bernstein attributed his early musical interest to the synagogue’s music.

“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 to Braslavsky in 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.”

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.”

Alone among America’s great composers, Leonard Bernstein began his musical life in a synagogue.

A longer, annotated version of this article, titled “Leonard Bernstein and the Boston Jewish Community of His Youth: The Influence of Solomon Braslavsky, Herman Rubenovitz, and Congregation Mishkan Tefila,” appears in the *Journal of the Society of American Music*, 2009 (Volume 3, Number 1).

Photograph of Leonard Bernstein at the Park Avenue Synagogue, 1945. Image courtesy of The Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary, David J. Putterman, Park Avenue Synagogue Papers and Music Scores.