

Music and Reform in Mid-Nineteenth Century

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In 1810, during the French occupation of Westphalia, Israel Jacobson opened the Seesen Temple. The dedication ceremonies included between sixty and seventy musicians who performed a nondenominational cantata, a chorale in Hebrew and German, as well as German hymns, all accompanied by an organ. Jacobson continued to use organ music, choral music, as well as German prayers on a regular basis.¹ And he was not subtle in his musical borrowing, incorporating Bach's "O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden," from the *St. Matthew Passion* into his Jewish Songster.² Michael Meyer, historian of Reform Judaism explains:

Taken as a whole, the structure made a social statement: Jews worship as do Christians; they are their equals in religion as in civil life. No longer an Oriental, foreign faith transplanted to Europe, Judaism – like Christianity – is home-born in the accoutrements of its worship no less than in its loyalty to the state.³

The experiment ended with the collapse of the Westphalian Kingdom in September 1813, as Napoleon's empire fell apart. Musical reforms figured prominently in the earliest innovative efforts of the pioneers of the modernization of the Judaism. Eager to prove that Jews deserved equal rights, early leaders tried to show they could worship in a manner consistent with the esthetic norms of the Christian world.

The innovations continued in Berlin in the following years as Jacobson fled to the Prussian capital. A service created by the modernists, organized in the sumptuous home of Jacob Herz Beer (the wealthiest Jew in Berlin), included an organ and boy's choir that sang German hymns. The organ enhanced the esthetics and contributed to the decorum of the services, but also became one of the most controversial innovations of the new group. Rabbis wrote rival *responsa* that either condemned the organ as an imitation of Christian practices or allowed it because it was not an instrument specifically banned by the Talmud.⁴ In September 1823 a reactionary Prussian

¹ Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 42f.

² Eric Werner, *A Voice Still Heard: The Sacred Songs of the Ashkenazic Jews* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1976), p. 195.

³ Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, p. 41.

⁴ Werner, *A Voice Still Heard*, pp. 195ff. See also Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, pp. 50f. For a selection of some of the texts see W. Gunther Plaut, *The Rise of Reform Judaism: A Sourcebook of its European Origins* (New York: World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1963), pp. 165ff.

government, afraid of any rapprochement between Judaism and Christianity, closed the Beer Temple.

Reform finally found lasting success in Hamburg. Led by two gifted young men, Eduard Kley and Gotthold Salomon, the community followed or even exceeded the innovations of Berlin. A cantor was employed, accompanied by a bass and boy soprano, using melodies adapted from popular secular songs and German hymns, sung with Hebrew texts. There was a Jewish boys' choir and a gentile organist, in part to avoid the problem of a Jew playing an instrument on the Sabbath. German Church music mixed uneasily with Sephardic modes.⁵ For the sophisticated listener, this musical hodge-podge was intolerable and called for a more satisfying creative solution.

As Reform took hold Jewish communities became polarized. Angry polemics characterized both sides of the debate as some rabbis defended and others condemned the changes. They fought over the use of the organ, the singing of German hymns, and the use of mixed choirs. There was a pressing need for a new model for synagogue music that could appeal to both Reformers and traditionalists and further serve to reunite communities.

This was the situation in 1826 in Vienna when, at the age of twenty-three, Salomon Sulzer became the community's cantor. Fifty years later he recalled those turbulent years:

I encountered chaos in Vienna also, and was unable to discover a leading principle in this maze of opposing opinions. Most important was the task of fighting the notion that saw a complete break with our past tradition as the best means for a reform of public worship, and which intended to disregard the ancient and venerable continuity of our liturgy. It was the intention of the misbegotten experiments of Hamburg and Berlin to reduce the entire service to a German song before and after the sermon. . . . My endeavors to mediate between past and future and to recover the tradition, in order to prepare the ground for future progress, was fully appreciated by the community.⁶

Working together with the preacher, Isaac Noah Mannheimer, Sulzer forged a moderate Reform liturgy which served as the basis for his musical service that combined Ashkenazic nusach and contemporary compositional style and reunited the divided community. Both the liturgy and the music became models for Reform in Paris and Berlin, as well as in other parts of Europe.

⁵ Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, pp. 57.

⁶ Werner, *A Voice Still Heard*, p. 211.

This paradigm would also provide inspiration for the American Reform movement. Beginning in 1842, Isaac M. Wise, a founder of American Reform, spent two years studying at the University in Vienna while he was in his early twenties. Wise had Shabbos dinner every week at Mannheimer's home and spent every Sunday with Salomon Sulzer, establishing relationships he would nurture for the rest of his life. Those years were formative for Wise, who was becoming more liberal during this period. He developed a deep and consistent interest in synagogue music and its relationship to Reform worship. He also embraced Vienna's moderate approach to Reform, seeking to keep unity in the communities he would serve. Max Lilienthal, who would be Wise's able partner in the cause of American moderate Reform, was in correspondence with Mannheimer during the period (1838) when Sulzer was composing his ground-breaking *Schir Zion*. Lilienthal would also become a moderate Reformer and an advocate for Sulzer's music.⁷

Central European Jews, faced with limits on their right to live in cities, marry, and conduct business, as well as with recurring anti-Semitism, increasingly chose to immigrate to America as an alternative to waiting for emancipation. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, German and other Central European Jews began coming to the United States in ever-increasing numbers. Many of these early arrivals were young people in search of freedom and economic opportunities. They soon outnumbered the tiny Sephardic community (about 2000 at the time of the American Revolution) and began creating their own synagogues. They looked to rabbinic leadership to help them adjust to American life.

This was the situation when Max Lilienthal arrived in November 1845 and Isaac M. Wise followed half a year later. Lilienthal was appointed "Chief Rabbi" of three German synagogues in Manhattan – Anshe Chesed, Rodeph Shalom, and Shaarey Hashamayim. Wise arrived in the spring of 1846, and with Lilienthal's help became rabbi of Beth-El in Albany, New York. Both struggled against their lay leadership as they tried to institute their programs.

⁷ James G. Heller, *Isaac M. Wise: His Life, Work and Thought* (New York: UAHC, 1965), p. 75. See also ed. David Philipson and Louis Grossmann, *Selected Writings of Isaac M. Wise* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke Co., 1900), p. 10. Earlier, in Prague, Wise had earned his keep by copying music for a living. *Ibid.*, p. 9. See Bruce L. Ruben, "Max Lilienthal: Rabbi, Educator, and Reformer in Nineteenth-Century America," (Ph.D. dissertation, City University of New York, 1997), p. 42. The first volume of *Schir Zion* was published in 1840.

The rabbis wanted to improve the dignity and decorum of services. They resented the tumult of congregants shouting out the prayers, the raucous bidding for honors, the endless *misheberakhs*, and the constant coming and going of congregants. Lilienthal pushed hard for changes, beginning with his inaugural sermon, and submitted a set of rules of decorum to the board.⁸ Early on, Wise visited Lilienthal's synagogue and described the service:

The congregation was orthodox, and just as ill-behaved as in Germany. The cantor had on a Christian gown, trilled like a mock nightingale, and leaped about like a hooked fish. After the selling of the so-called *mitzvoth*, I lost patience with the intolerable sing-song with which the reader intoned the portion and read from the Torah and with the innumerable *Misheberakhs*. "Why is this nuisance tolerated in a metropolis?" I asked my neighbor.⁹

Though Lilienthal was still traditional during this period, he, like his more liberal friend Wise, wanted to improve the esthetic level of the service:

Dr. Lilienthal had ordered from Vienna a copy of Sulzer's *Shir Tziyon*; but his mighty Parnass declared obstinately that he opposed once and for all its introduction into the chief synagogue. I listened to the bitter war of words, and put an end to it by buying the *Shir Tziyon* and taking it home with me.¹⁰

In 1847, armed with one of only two copies of "*Shir Tsiyon* in America, Wise worked hard to establish a choir in Albany. He found two basses and trained the children in his religious school to sing the other parts. After a few months they made their highly anticipated debut:

The whole community was in a state of feverish excitement; men, women, and children flocked to the synagogue; yes the choir sang; but, I pray you, do not ask how. It made no difference to our *chazzan* whether he began or ended a few notes lower or higher; he passed with surprising ease from one key to another, and the choir was expected to keep pace with him. The shipwrecked notes were mixed up fearfully and wonderfully, until finally every one sang *ad libitum*, and stopped only when the text was finished. However, there had been singing; there was a choir, and everyone took for granted that the singing would improve.¹¹

Wise even taught singing lessons three hours a week to help the choir. Poor as it was, this choir was his first step toward reform of the service. Wise put it succinctly: "Sulzer's songs! Who will not worship?"¹² Later, in 1851, he would also introduce the music of Samuel Naumbourg, whose *Zemiroth Yisrael* had been published in Paris in 1847. Wise stayed "au courant" with the musical

⁸ Ruben, "Max Lilienthal," pp. 98ff.

⁹ Wise, *Reminiscences*, p. 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 51. See also See also *Kantor Salomon Sulzer und seine Zeit: Eine Dokumentation*, ed. Hanoach Avenary (Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke, 1985), p. 255.

¹¹ Wise, *Reminiscences*, p. 53. See also *Kantor Salomon Sulzer*, ed. Avenary, p. 116.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 52.

developments of the moderate Reformers in Europe.¹³ Later Wise would explain the choir's centrality to his Reform

agenda:

It is scarcely conceivable now what a victory for culture and progress the introduction of a synagogue choir was at that time. No reform of the Jewish service was possible until the Jewish ear had again become accustomed to harmony and beauty.¹⁴

Within two years of the quarrel over Sulzer's music, Lilienthal succeeded in establishing a choir in his New York synagogue. In May 1850, Anshe Chesed, driven by rivalry with Temple Emanu-el, sought to modernize its service. The congregation looked to Vienna as the model for changes it instituted, which included a significant outlay of funds for a choir director and a mixed professional choir.¹⁵

When Wise accepted a lifetime position at B'ne Yeshurun in 1854, he immediately began the task of building a choir. Wise organized a group of young people into a society and hired a singing teacher. Fortunately, the cantor in his new job, Marx Moses, "had not only a good voice, but was possessed of the necessary musical training." After a few weeks the choir performed Sulzer's Friday evening service. Wise exclaimed:

That was a great Friday evening for Cincinnati. Members of all the congregations flocked to the synagogue, and filled it. The harmonious strains of Sulzer's music resounded for the first time in a synagogue in the western part of America, to glorify the dawn of a new era.¹⁶

Max Lilienthal arrived in Cincinnati a year later. During his first summer, he also pushed for a choir in his slightly more traditional synagogue, Bene Israel. He formed a society and collected about \$500 to support a mixed choir to be used at services. The synagogue engaged an architect to design a gallery for the choir, which performed for the first time during the festival of *Sukkot*, and both became permanent features of the synagogue.¹⁷

Over the next twenty years these two rabbis worked tirelessly to bring their moderate, Viennese-inspired model of Reform to their congregations. More importantly, they hoped their

¹³ Ibid., p. 212.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 260.

¹⁵ Ruben, "Max Lilienthal," pp. 137f. See also Hyman Grinstein, *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York, 1654-1860* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1945), p. 364.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 259.

¹⁷ *Bene Israel Trustee Minutes*, August 19, September 16, 1855, and March 23, 1856.

vision would become a unifying approach for all of American Jewry. They called numerous conferences of American lay and rabbinic leadership in the hope of finding that unity. The fruits of their efforts were the establishment of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1873, followed by the Hebrew Union College in 1875. Both institutions were meant to serve all of American Jewry. The UAHC had no ideological requirements for membership. The college curriculum was traditional enough to be acceptable to all but the most Orthodox.

This unity would not hold, however, as radical Reform rabbis asserted their leadership over the movement in the 1880s and 1890s. By then Lilienthal had died and Wise alone was not able to stem the tide of what would become Classical Reform Judaism. Their approach did away with the cantor in all but a few major congregations. A choir, led by a non-Jewish soloist, performed mostly hymns. The radical Reform style of Berlin and Hamburg had won out over the Viennese model – at least until the twentieth century when congregations began to return to more traditional Jewish liturgy and musical expression.¹⁸

More traditional Jewish leaders met in the basement of the Spanish Portuguese Synagogue and laid the groundwork for the Jewish Theological Seminary. The seminary, at first an Orthodox institution, gradually took on the mantle of Americanizing the massive influx of Eastern European Jews that began in the late 19th century.

¹⁸ Werner, *A Voice Still Heard*, p. 234. For a study of this transition back towards tradition see Benji-Ellen Schiller, “The Hymnal as an Index of Musical Change in Reform Synagogues,” in *Sacred Sound and Social Change*, ed. Jan Walton and Lawrence Hoffman (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1992), pp. 187-212.