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Jonathan L. Friedmann

The Victory of Confession: *Ashamnu*, the *Shirah*, and Musical Symbolism in Jewish Worship

In one of the first modern studies of the relationship between music, religion, and emotions, E. Janes argued that musical sounds produce essentially universal human responses. "When we assemble in the house of God," he wrote, "the calming, solemnizing strains of music may serve to turn our minds away from the everyday pursuits by soothing our weary brains with sweetness."[1] According to Janes, this collective experience of music is possible because "all who are susceptible to music at all are affected in the same way, allowance being made for whatever is the result of the association. All are here on the same level; no difference exists, save in degree."[2] A musical passage that evokes grief for one individual will not inspire joy for another, nor will a piece that elicits hope for one cause despair in someone else.

While this conclusion seems naïve in light of the diversity of the world's music cultures, the idea of musical universality, at least within a given tradition or community, still holds true. This "contextual universality" of music–inspired emotions was treated extensively in the work of composer and philosopher

1. E. Janes, "The Emotions in Music," in *The Value of Sacred Music: An Anthology of Essential Writings, 1801–1918*, comp. Jonathan L. Friedmann (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 98.

2. Janes, "The Emotions in Music," 95.

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Leonard B. Meyer, who found that cultural and experiential influences within a group contribute to the formation of shared musical expectations.[3] For individuals participating in a religious service or another communal musical experience, certain melodies, modes, and motifs can inspire specific and shared emotional and intellectual associations. A song sung at the same time and place every year, or one that is bound closely to a certain concept or theme, acts as a "powerful retrieval tool" for collective sentiments and memories.[4]

This study explores the emotional function of musical symbolism in the synagogue. It examines in particular how the Ashkenazi *Shirah*, a melody derived from the chanting of the biblical "Song of the Sea," is used as a musical quotation in various parts of the Bible and liturgy, and how this melody inspires within worshipers shared feelings tied to victory and deliverance. This powerful association extends even to the use of the *Shirah* melody in singing the confessional prayer *Ashamnu* on Yom Kippur—a practice that suggests the victorious nature of confession. As a case study in music–generated meaning, this study will give support to Janes' argument for the collective and affective impact of ritual music.

SACRED TIME, SACRED SOUND

One of the primary functions of ritual music is to facilitate collective experiences. Music closely tied to specific occasions, texts, or concepts has the unique ability to convert a plurality of individuals into a community imbued with a "shared mythic consciousness."[5] In virtually all of the world's religious traditions, the sounds of song and chant demarcate sacred from secular time and space, and substantially comprise the emotional underpinnings of worship.

3. See Leonard B. Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1956).

4. Daniel J. Levitin, *The World in Six Songs: How the Musical Brain Created Human Nature* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 191.

5. Stephen A. Marini, *Sacred Song in America: Religion, Music, and Popular Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 7.

Through the direct pathway of human emotions, ritual music can stimulate a deep sense of unity among worshipers, and foster or enhance communication between humanity and the Divine. Taken together, these relationships—horizontal between individuals and vertical between the community and God[6]—form the foundation of religious life itself, and validate the prominent role of music within it.

In the synagogue, communal emotions are often stimulated by changes in the musical presentation of the liturgy. Modal and melodic variations serve to distinguish morning from evening services, weekdays from Shabbat, festivals from holy days, and so on. "In the context of ritual," writes Cantor Andrew Bernard, "music triggers emotional associations that bind worshipers to the significance of the moment and, simultaneously, to each other."[7] Much more than plain reading, the singing of liturgy works to fuse group focus, fastens the worshipers' attention on a particular occasion or section of liturgy, and evokes common associations through the shared experience of familiar sounds. For an individual aware of the musical nuances of the liturgical year, and in communities where musical choices are determined by the sacred calendar, music serves as an emotionally charged symbol of the sacred moment.

Musical symbolism in the synagogue comes in three major forms: *nusach ha–tefillah*, contrafact, and musical quotations. *Nusach ha–tefillah* refers to melodic patterns or prayer modes that traditionally govern the chanting of the liturgy. *Nusach* is chanted freely without fixed rhythm or meter, and may be improvised within the prescribed modal and motific framework. Specific melodic patterns vary depending on the section of liturgy, time of day, day of the week, or date on the calendar; and the proper use and understanding of *nusach* "guarantees that a Jewish 'Rip van Winkle' could sleep for 20 years and identify the

6. For the concept of horizontal and vertical relationships in religious life, I am indebted to Rabbi Mordecai Finley, professor of Jewish thought at the Academy for Jewish Religion, California. This insight was gleaned from an informal discussion.

7. Andrew Bernard, *The Sound of Sacred Time* (Charlotte, NC: Temple Beth El, 2005), ix.

service to which he had awakened just by the musical motifs."[8] As one scholar notes, *nusach* is the "record of musical syntax" in Jewish worship[9]: it elicits among liturgically literate congregants[10] an array of shared emotions, both specific to the themes of the particular prayer or day (such as tranquility or lament) and related to broader concepts (such as Jewish continuity or nostalgia).

Melodic contrafact can also function as a mnemonic device, storing and prompting emotions and memories. Contrafact is the process of creating a new composition on an already existing one. Within the synagogue, this device is frequently employed to stir up sentiments linked to a certain time or place. According to musician and research scientist Daniel J. Levitin, this process of retrieval is an essential part of the ritual experience: "Rituals tie us to the event itself, and to a cycle of history in which similar events have previously occurred and will continue to occur. They are a form of externalized, social memory, and when marked by music, they become even more firmly instantiated in both our personal and collective memories."[11] Certain melodies are linked indelibly with specific sacred times, and bring to mind immediately the personal and communal significance of the day.

Examples of contrafact in Jewish worship include the adaptation of holiday melodies to *Mi Chamocha* ("Who is like You"), a prayer found in evening and morning services throughout the year. This custom developed in Ashkenazi communities of Western Europe as a way of delineating sonically one holiday

8. Marsha Bryan Edelman, *Discovering Jewish Music* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 15.

9. Lawrence A. Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer: Not for Clergy Only* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 1999), 232.

10. In contemporary synagogue practice, Orthodox congregations adhere strictly to the use of a–cappella *nusach*, while liberal denominations (Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, etc.) utilize *nusach* in varying degrees, but also "balance" the service with cantorial art songs, congregational folk tunes, choral pieces, and other musical forms accompanied by instruments. For more on the differing musical preferences of Jewish denominations, see Jeffrey A. Summit, *The Lord's Song in a Strange Land: Music and Identity in Contemporary Jewish Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

11. Levitin, *The World in Six Songs*, 191.

from another. On Hanukkah the representative theme for *Mi Chamocha* is taken from *Moaz Tzur*, which commemorates the triumph of the Maccabees. On Passover, the melody is derived from *Addir Hu*, which longs for the re–establishment of the Jerusalem temple "speedily and in our day." Shavuot finds *Mi Chamocha* sung to *Akdamut*, an Aramaic poem sung prior to that festival's Torah reading; and during Sukkot, it adopts the melody used for the shaking of the *lulav*. These variations demonstrate the power of a familiar melody, even when detached from its original text, to forge instantaneously musical associations. Upon hearing these time–specific tunes, the listener is not only reminded of what day it is, but also of the various personal and communal memories, relationships, sentiments, and sensual experiences associated with that day: a childhood synagogue, a grandparent, the taste of holiday foods, etc.

Musical quotation is the practice of incorporating recognizable phrases or short melodic lines into a piece of music. Unlike contrafact, which adapts entire texts to pre–existing melodies, quotations are musical snippets that call to mind the larger tune from which they are derived. And in contrast to the examples above, musical quotations in synagogue services typically evoke emotions linked to a *different* context, not the occasion being observed. For example, in many American congregations it is customary to quote from the melody of *Hatikvah*, the Israeli national anthem, when chanting the words praising devotion to the land of Israel in the blessing for the congregation (*Mi Shebeirach*).[12] This practice not only marks a stark departure from the modal *nusach*, but also inspires within worshipers sentiments attached to the Holy Land. Just as the sound of *Hatikvah* stirs emotions and arouses a sense of unity among Jews wherever they are, this brief musical passage can, to a smaller extent, bring worshipers into solidarity. Through these familiar and meaningful sounds, the community is transported temporarily from liturgical time to the emotional context of Jewish nationalism.

12. This prayer is found in the Shabbat Torah service in the section following the chanting of Haftarah.

Perhaps the most frequently quoted melody in Ashkenazi custom is the *Shirah*, derived from the biblical cantillation of the "Song of the Sea." A spontaneous proclamation sung by the Israelites after crossing the Red Sea (or Sea of Reeds), the *Shirah* is the first recorded devotional song in the Hebrew Bible: A distinctive melody developed for chanting this portion of the Torah Scroll, which in Jewish tradition has come to be the signature sound of glory and triumph. Whenever and wherever a portion of this melody is applied to different texts, and no matter how varied these texts may seem, the knowledgeable listener is stirred to a sense of victory or elation, perhaps even feeling as though he or she is experiencing the mythic moment when the Israelites crossed the Red Sea.

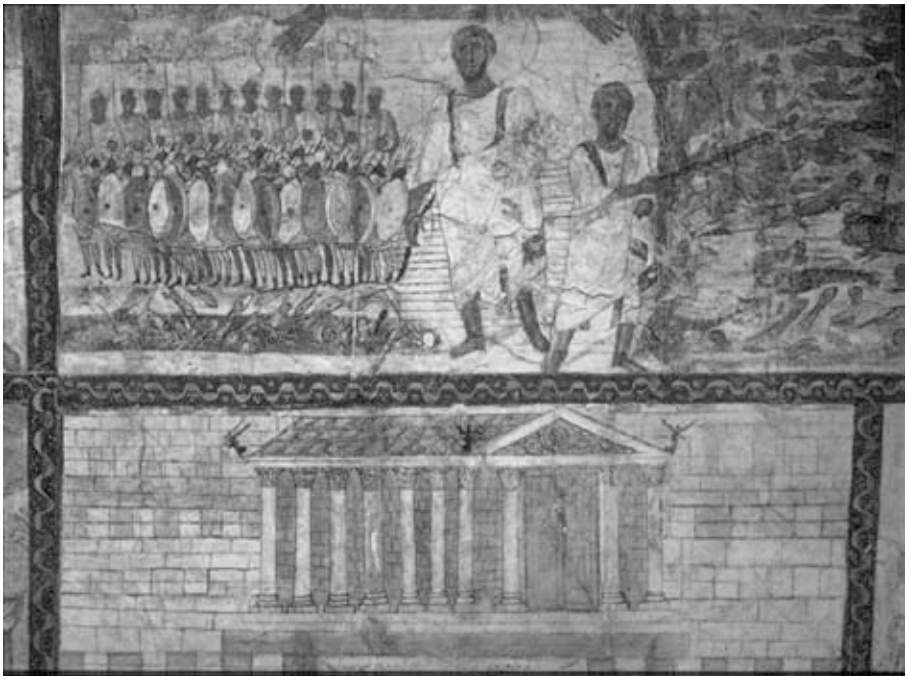
THE *SHIRAH* MELODY

"In every epoch of Jewish history," writes Cantor Macy Nulman, "song and chant became a significant mode of expression. When the Jewish people were victorious over their enemies and when God saved them from disaster, their thankfulness and joy were expressed through the medium of song."[13] There are numerous examples of post–victory songs of gratitude in the Hebrew Bible, including the *Shirah*, Deborah's Song (Judg. 5), David's hymn of thanksgiving (2 Sam. 22), and in a variety of Psalms. When individuals or groups were compelled to express intense feelings tied up with moments of profound release, the Bible tells us, they instinctively turned to music, the "tonal analogue of emotive life."[14] But their singing did not stem from gratitude alone. Rather, as one scholar noted, "man sings when the gulf between God and man is at its greatest, either because of His manifest greatness or our own manifest weakness."[15] In the case

13. Macy Nulman, "The Shirah Melody in the Ashkenazi and Sephardic Traditions," *Journal of Jewish Music and Liturgy* 7 (1984): 12.

14. Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 27.

15. Lippman Bodoff, "Fear and Awe: May Man Bring Song to Prayer?" *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought* 23:1 (1987), 65.



"The Children of Israel crossing the Red Sea; the Temple in Jerusalem," mural from the synagogue at Dura–Europos, Syria, ca. 244–245 CE.

of the *Shirah*, it was precisely at the moment when the Israelites felt the tremendous chasm between their own fragility and the mighty hand of God that song poured forth from their lips. Their victory was dependent on Divine intervention, and their gratitude conveyed a mixture of fear and awe.

Rich in imagery, hyperbole, and poetic flare, the *Shirah* text expresses "the unrestrained enthusiasm of the Israelites over their miraculous rescue from disaster."[16] It spans Exodus 15:1–18 and can be divided into four sections: (1) an introduction beginning with the words "Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord…" (vv. 1–3); (2) an account of the defeat of Pharaoh's chariots and army (vv. 4–12); (3) God's redemption and guidance of Israel to the prom-

16. Jeffrey H. Tigay, "Exodus: Introduction and Annotations," In *The Jewish Studies Bible*, eds. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004),136.

ised land (vv. 13–17); and a short coda: "The Lord will reign for ever and ever!" (v. 18).[17]

The literary structure of the text and the indication that it was simultaneously spontaneous and communal suggest that it was a call–and–response. Nineteenth–century musicologist William C. Stafford wrote that in performing this ode, "the Israelites were divided into two great choirs—Moses and Aaron being at the head of the men, and Miriam at the head of the women. Whilst the former sung the canticle, the latter would appear to have answered them by repeating the first stanza, accompanying their singing with the sound of tabrets, or timbrels, and with dancing."[18] But it is impossible to know for sure the exact manner in which the *Shirah* was first intoned; while the text of this famous song has been transmitted from generation to generation, its original tune is irretrievably lost to history. Nevertheless, both the layout of text in the Torah Scroll and the music to which it is chanted mark a dramatic break from the norm. Its verses are arranged metrically like "bricks in a wall,"[19] rather than in the standard parallel columns, recalling perhaps Israel's experience as brick–laying slaves.[20] Musically, the *Shirah* is not bound to the usual system of biblical chant, which utilizes prescribed musical patterns indicated by a system of textual accents called *te'amim* ("tastes"). It exists instead as an independent tune that in both sound and structure establishes a perceptible departure from the cantillation, and resembles "the martial notes of a trumpet–call" signaling a moment of victory.[21]

The Ashkenazi *Shirah* melody is among the oldest in the synagogue.[22] Because it was utilized infrequently during the liturgical year, it did not experience

17. Tigay, "Exodus," 136.

18. William C. Stafford, *A History of Music* (London: Constable and Co., 1830), 77. This conjecture follows BT *Sotah* 30b.

19. BT *Megillah* 16b.

20. Bruce Kadden and Barbara Binder Kadden, *Teaching Tefilah: Insights and Activities on Prayer* (West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1990), 49.

21. Francis L. Cohen, "Ashira," *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1905 ed., vol. 2, 188.

22. Elihu Feldman, "Shirat Hayam: A Triumphant Song of Jewish Victory," *Hayenu* 45:8 (2000): 3

the same degree of variation and melismatic development as Torah chant, which was used every week. Its strong pentatonic character also points to its antiquity, as the pentatonic is among the earliest established scales.[23] Moreover, there is a close similarity between the Ashkenazi and Sephardic *Shirah* melodies, suggesting that the tune—or at least its fundamental properties—predate the development of these rites.[24] The features unique to either tune can be attributed to rhythmic rather than tonal differences. While in Ashkenazi synagogues the *Shirah* is chanted freely by a single reader, it is customary among Sephardim for the congregation to sing the melody together—a practice that necessitated its conversion from chant to a metrical tune. And, importantly, the *Shirah* melodies—Ashkenazi and Sephardic—are essentially "universal," displaying little denominational or regional variations within these rites.

QUOTING THE *SHIRAH*

The Ashkenazi *Shirah* melody, with its trumpet calls and festive cadences, is intimately associated in the Jewish psyche with divine deliverance and the accompanying feelings of triumph and joy. Precisely because this melody is so indelibly linked with the biblical episode, it has the potential—even when set to different words—to stimulate a sense of victory and gratitude. The *Shirah* imbues a text with added and instantly discernable interpretive meaning, often unlocking emotional content hidden beneath the surface of the words.

The *Shirah* melody is comprised of two parts: an opening and closing line. In liturgical practice, these short melodic sections appear either as a pair or separately at various times and in various passages thematically linked to the Exodus event. Because of the brevity of this melodic material, and because it is generally adapted to small portions of a larger text, such instances are classified as musical quotations rather than contrafact. But while concise, this specific combination

23. Abraham W. Binder, *Biblical Chant* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1934), 69.
24. Binder, *Biblical Chant*, 70; Nulman, "The Shirah Melody," 16.

of pitches and durations has the remarkable ability to recall immediately both collective and affective memories: it evokes the shared experience of a paramount moment in Jewish mythology, and stirs within individual listeners the emotions associated with it.[25]

For example, in congregations across denominational lines, after the reader completes a book of the Torah, the congregation sings the words "Be strong! Be strong! And may we be strengthened" to the second part of the melody. "In this case," writes Cantor Elihu Feldman, "it is no doubt used to mark a moment of triumph and jubilation at the completion of a book of the Torah."[26] The second part of the *Shirah* tune is also used when reading from the Torah Scroll on Simchat Torah, when it is applied to the conclusion of each of the six days of creation: "And it was evening and it was morning…" (Gen. 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31). Here, too, the melody draws the listeners' attention to moments of tremendous achievement.

The entire *Shirah* melody is used to add "a majestic tone" to the portion of the Book of Numbers that recounts the Israelites' journey from Egypt to their final encampment in Transjordan (Num. 33:10–46).[27] These verses are sung in pairs (33:10–11, 12–13, 15–16, etc.), each of which marks a successful stage in Israel's wilderness itinerary. And on Shabbat, the opening words of Psalm 95 may be sung to the *Shirah*: "Come, let us sing unto God, raise a shout to our rock and deliverer." This custom highlights the text's reference to God as deliverer—a concept central to Exodus 15—and establishes Shabbat as a day of victory. As Feldman relates, "We use this tune to emphasize that we were able to live through the past week successfully and will be recharged for the week to come."[28]

25. Dorothea E. Hast, James R. Cowdery, and Stanley Arnold Scott, *Exploring the World of Music: An Introduction to Music from a World Music Perspective* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt, 1999), 52.

26. Feldman, "Shirat Hayam," 3.

27. Joshua R. Jacobson, *Chanting the Hebrew Bible: The Complete Guide to the Art of Cantillation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002), 625.

28. Feldman, "Shirat Hayam," 3.

In each of these instances, the *Shirah* melody marks the completion of one stage and the arrival at another, a progression analogous to the transformative journey across the Red Sea. In Nulman's words, "The worshiper is stimulated to a mood of victory and a sense of hopeful living in the face of an unknown and unpredictable future…the easily recognizable melody recalls this sentiment of victory."[29]

ASHAMNU

Less explicit is the connection between the *Shirah* and the confessional prayer *Ashamnu*. In Ashkenazi synagogues during Yom Kippur, *Ashamnu* begins with a quotation from the first part of the *Shirah* melody.[30] On its surface, this practice seems to contradict the text's plaintive tone:

> We have become guilty, we have betrayed, we have robbed, we have spoken slander. We have caused perversion, we have caused wickedness, we have sinned willfully, we have extorted, we have accused falsely. We have given evil counsel, we have been deceitful, we have scorned, we have rebelled, we have provoked, we have turned away, we have been perverse, we have acted wantonly, we have persecuted, we have been obstinate. We have been wicked, we have corrupted, we have been abominable, we have strayed, You have let us go astray.[31]

Ashamnu travels through the Hebrew alphabet, each letter beginning a different moral transgression. This alphabetical form conveys that all sins have their source in the neglect of the Torah, which is scribed with these twenty–two sacred letters.[32] It is phrased in the plural form to emphasize the common

29. Nulman, "The Shirah Melody," 20.

30. *Ashamnu* is sung to the *Shirah* melody during the Yom Kippur evening, *Selichot*, and *Minchah* services. This practice is also prevalent in the *Selichot* service prior to Rosh Hashanah.

31. Translation from Nosson Scherman, ed., *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur: Nusach Ashkenaz* (New York: Mesorah, 2005), 777.

32. Macy Nulman, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Prayer* (Norhvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1993), 38.

responsibility that underlies every sin. Rabbi Isaac Luria asked, "Why was the confession arranged in the plural number so that we say 'We are guilt–laden' instead of 'I am guilt–laden'? Because all Israel is one body, and every individual Israelite a member of that body."[33] Thus, while the acrostic suggests the endless ways individuals may fall short of holy ideals, its plural form frames individual failures as a communal responsibility. As the Talmud declares, "all Jews are answerable for one another."[34]

The grave words of *Ashamnu* seem antithetical to the triumphant strains of the *Shirah*. *Ashamnu* spells out in detail "how we tend to sin, to negate the promise of life, in our own existence,"[35] which is a far cry from the celebratory and life–affirming words sung following the Red Sea crossing. Moreover, worshipers stand slightly bent and beat their chests at each mention of sin, indicating that evil stems from the heart.[36] In fact, the only obvious link between these texts is that *Ashmanu* is sung as a call–and–response between cantor and congregation, a method that recalls the responsorial singing of Moses and the Israelites in the Exodus account. Yet while this manner of singing in Exodus emphasizes the collective nature of redemption, its use in singing *Ashamnu* suggests collective sinfulness.

Ashamnu's connection with the *Shirah* melody, then, appears an example of what Barbara Babcock termed "symbolic inversion": "any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in any fashion presents an alternative to commonly–held social codes, values, and norms, be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious or social, and political."[37] When attached to the *Shirah* tune, this relentless list of transgressions, epitomizing human fallibility and

33. Nulman, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Prayer*, 39.

34. BT *Shevu'ot* 39a.

35. Alfred Jospe, "Salvation by Withdrawal?" in *To Leave Your Mark: Selections from the Writings of Alfred Jospe*, eds. Eva Jospe and Rachel Jospe (New York: Ktav, 2000), 243.

36. *Midrash Rabbah* on *Kohelet* 7:2

37. Barbara A. Babcock, ed., *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 14.

our apparent helplessness in the face of our darkest impulses, is overlaid with a sense of exaltation. The music symbolically inverts the prayer from darkness to light.

The few scholars who have attempted to explain the link between *Ashmanu* and the *Shirah* see the melody as providing a sense of hope to worshipers seeking exoneration from sin.[38] But in both the Exodus account and the other texts to which the melody is applied, the *Shirah* marks a victorious moment *after* the completion of a journey or task, not a longing for future release. It can thus be argued that the connection between *Ashamnu* and the *Shirah* melody is based on the notion that confession itself is a triumphant act.

THE VICTORY OF CONFESSION

The linking of *Ashamnu* with the *Shirah* melody originated within Hasidic Judaism, a revivalist movement founded in eighteenth–century Poldolia and Volynia (regions now part of Poland and Ukraine). Using earlier traditions of Kabbalah and medieval pietism as a foundation, Hasidism emerged as a populist religious praxis centered upon joy and ecstatic devotion. This approach challenged both the asceticism of earlier piety movements and the hierarchical academic rabbinic culture of Eastern Europe, and provided the masses a way of bringing a palpable sense of God into their daily lives.[39]

From its inception, musical expression has held a prominent place in Hasidic ritual. Music is integral to the movement's goals of attaining joy in God's service, and forging a "complete merger" of the human soul with the Divine.[40] The Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidism, taught that the soul could not soar

38. Nulman, "The *Shirah* Melody," 20; Feldman, "*Shirat Hayam*," 3; Charles Heller, *What to Listen for in Jewish Music* (Toronto: Ecanthus, 2006), 234.

39. Shaul Magid, "Ethics Differentiated from Law," in *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*, ed., William Schweiker (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 179–180.

40. Hanoch Avenary, *Encounters of East and West in Music* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1979), 158.

without melody.[41] Another Hasidic master claimed, "There are castles in the upper spheres which open only to song."[42] This high appraisal of music is in some ways a continuation of medieval mystical ideas. Yehudah the Pious, for example, taught: "Whoever is unable to arrange his words well, should express his supplication, praise or penitence by means of melodies…"[43] Like these earlier mystics, Hasidim are not concerned with musical aesthetics; their music is intended solely to cultivate an elevated devotional experience. "[T]he tunes of this secluded microcosm," wrote musicologist Hanoch Avenary, "are not aimed at any audience, do not strive for external beauty, and cannot be measured by purely artistic standards. Only by means of participation can their ravishing, moving, exalting power be realized."[44]

The most significant Hasidic musical innovation is the *niggun*: a wordless melody sung to inspire emotional states. A *niggun* is endless, not limited by verses of text, allowing the singer's emotions to pour forth without concern for language. As one scholar put it, these tunes "give voice to that which is too intimate to be uttered in words."[45] Historically, Hasidic communities would gather during holidays and other special occasions to sing their own *niggunim*, usually composed by their *Rebbe* or leader. Wordless singing eventually made its way into the synagogue, where it typically introduces or concludes liturgical prayers.

It was through this migration of *niggunim* into the synagogue that the *Shirah* melody came to be connected with *Ashamnu*. This custom, first introduced by the Hasidim, was later adopted throughout the Ashkenazi world. To this day, synagogues ranging from Orthodox to Reform use the wordless singing of the *Shirah* to introduce *Ashamnu* on Yom Kippur. Yet few are able to reconcile

41. Irene Heskes, *Passport to Jewish Music: Its History, Traditions, and Customs* (New York: Tara, 1994), 119.
42. Avenary, *Encounters of East and West in Music*, 158.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid., 160.
45. Ibid., 159.

the apparently contradictory choice of this joyous melody for the confessional prayer.[46] Indeed, to understand this selection as more than simply random or ironic, one must have an appreciation of the role of confession in Hasidic thought.

Hasidic ethics teach that human beings are constantly pulled between good or godly impulses and the *yetzer ha–ra*, the evil inclination. In this framework, sin results from allowing the *yetzer ha–ra* to direct one's thoughts or actions. But through repentance, the return to God and goodness, these sins can be atoned. In the words of Rabbi Louis Jacobs, "Repentance has the power of erasing the sin as if it had not been committed."[47] It is this philosophy of sin that gives confession a victorious quality: confessing one's transgressions and embracing goodness marks the defeat of the evil within. This is why Hasidic master Elimelech of Lizansk called confession "a marvelous antidote to the evil inclination":

> A man should tell his mentor who teaches him God's way, or even to a trustworthy friend, all the evil thoughts he has which are the opposition to Holy Torah, which the evil inclination brings into his head and heart, whether while he is studying Torah or offering his prayers or when he lies on his bed or at any time during the day. He should conceal nothing out of shame. The result of speaking of these matters, thus actualizing the potential, will be to break the hold over him of the evil inclination so that it will possess less power to entice him on future occasions, quite apart from the sound spiritual guidance, which is the way of the Lord, he will receive from his friend.[48]

The victory of confession is also described in a saying of the Baal Shem Tov: "The charlady who cleanses the dirt floors of the king's palace, sings sweetly

46. Heller, *What to Listen for In Jewish Music*, 234.
47. Louis Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology* (New York: Behrman House, 1973), 243.
48. Louis Jacobs, *The Jewish Religion: A Companion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 91.

as she works."[49] Confession is an act of inner cleansing: through self–assessment and disclosure, one eliminates spiritual refuse from one's soul. The individual is reinvigorated and God, "the king," is pleased. According to the Baal Shem Tov, this process should be scored with "sweet" tones—a notion that justifies further the relationship between the *Shirah* melody and *Ashamnu*.

SUMMARY

If it is true that the sound of the *Shirah* is always and indelibly connected with triumph, its use in singing *Ashamnu* must be intended to illustrate the victorious nature of confession. The Hasidim did not develop this custom arbitrarily: they understood confession to be an act of triumph over the evil inclination and an embrace of one's inner–godliness. Utilizing the symbolic power of this melody, they infused the confessional *Ashamnu* prayer with an overwhelming sense of elation, gratitude, and the awesome presence of the redemptive hand of God.

Viewed as an example of emotionally potent musical symbolism, the *Shirah* melody gives justification for the broader and pervasive relationship of music, emotions, and religion. In the poetic words of E. Janes: "Delightful music, companion of solitude, alleviation of sorrow, which gives expression to our joys, accompanies and assists our worship, shall [ever] be our recreation and a worthy attendant upon our festivities and religious services."[50]

49. Jacobs, *The Jewish Religion*, 91.
50. Janes, "The Emotions in Music," 98.