

Jewish Women in Music

by Joshua Jacobson

Consort not with a female musician, lest thou be taken in by her snares.

Ben Sira, *Book of Wisdom (Ecclesiasticus)* 9:3 (c. 190 b.c.e.)

The sweet voice of a woman ... can restore a man's good spirits.

Rashi (commentary on Babylonian Talmud *Berakhot* 57b) (c. 1100 c.e.)

The two quotes cited above encapsulate the ambiguous position of women in Jewish music. On the one hand, women were reviled by male authority figures as dangerous and destabilizing. On the other hand, they were praised as a source of inspiration and aesthetic nourishment.

There is abundant evidence of performance by skilled women musicians in ancient Israel. Women organized dances and parades to celebrate military victories. After the defeat of the Egyptian army at the Sea of Reeds, Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, took up a drum and led the Israelite women in song and dance. "Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a drum in her hand, and all the women followed her, with drums and dancing. Miriam sang to them, 'Sing to the LORD, for He is highly exalted. The horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea.'" (Exodus 15:20-21)

Several hundred years later, Deborah's victory over Sisera was celebrated with a similar ballad. "On that day Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang: ... Awake; awake, O Deborah! Awake, awake, strike up the chant!" (Judges 5:1, 12)

When Jephthah returned from his battle against the Ammonites, his daugh-

ter came to greet him with the traditional festivities. "When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of hand-drums!" (Judges 11:34)

David's famous victory over Goliath was also celebrated with parades.

When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with hand-drums and lutes. The women sang as they danced, and they chanted: Saul has slain his thousands; David, his tens of thousands! (1Samuel 18:6-7)

In the ancient Middle East funeral music was also a woman's occupation. Anyone arranging for a burial was expected to hire one or more women who had been trained in the arts of wailing (*meyalelot*) and singing lamentations (*mekonenot*). Some dirges were accompanied with flutes and/or drums.

Consider now! Call for the wailing women to come; send for the most skillful of them. (Jeremiah 9:16)

A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. (Luke 23:27)

... for her burial. Rabbi Judah says: Even the poorest in Israel should hire not less than two flutes and one wailing woman. (Mishnah *Ketuvot* 4:4)

The wailing woman who mourns the deceased sits on it [the drum], since these women utilize the music of that instrument in order to eulogize and lament. And this is the present custom in Arab lands. (Mishnah *Kelim* 15:6)

Music was part of the duties of female cult prostitutes, as well. The worship of the Phoenician goddess *Asherah* was served by priestesses called *kedeshot* in the Bible, who also sang and played the *abub* (a pipe similar to the *halil*). (Sendrey, p. 55) The association of singing with female seduction, found in many societies, has prompted its censorship or regulation by male authority figures.

While music in the central Sanctuary in Jerusalem was largely in the hands of the men of the tribe of Levi, the Bible provides a few tantalizing hints about female participation in liturgical functions. Is it possible that in the patriarchal society of ancient Israel, women were allowed to participate in the sacred rituals?

In front are the singers, after them the instrumentalists; with them are the maidens playing hand-drums. (Psalm 68:25)

David and the officers of the army set apart for service the sons of Asaph, of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who prophesied to the accompaniment of lyres, harps, and cymbals. ... God gave Heman fourteen sons and three daughters; all these were under the charge of their father for the singing in the House of the LORD, to the accompaniment of cymbals, harps, and lyres, for the service of the House of God by order of the king. Asaph, Jeduthun, and Heman — their total number with their kinsmen, trained singers of the LORD — all the masters, 288. (1Chronicles 25:1-7)

There is evidence of female entertainers at the royal court. Jewish tradition attributes the following passage to King Solomon, although its redacted form may be the product of the third century b.c.e. "I further amassed silver and gold and treasures of kings and provinces; and I got myself male and female singers, as well as the luxuries of commoners — coffers and coffers of them." (Ecclesiastes 2:8) Among the servants of the wealthy Israelites returning from their exile in Babylon were 200 male and female singers. (Ezra 2:65)

Many contemporary scholars contend that the Song of Songs is the only book of the Bible betraying a uniquely feminine voice. These love songs of ancient Israel depicted monogamous love with such intensity that Rabbi Akiva was later moved to declare it the holiest book in all of scripture. (Mishnah *Yadayim* 3:5) Elsewhere Akiva warned against the sin of debasing these songs by turning them into bawdy barroom ballads. (*Tosefta Sanhedrin* 12:10 and Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 101a)

Apparently, the voices of women were heard loud and clear in at least one ancient Jewish sect. Philo, a Jew living in Alexandria, Egypt in the first decades of the Christian era, offers us a glimpse at the egalitarian musical practices of the *Therapeutae*.

And after the feast they celebrate the sacred festival during the whole night. And this nocturnal festival is celebrated in the following manner: They all stand up together, and in the middle of the entertainment two choruses are formed at first, one of men and the other of women. And for each chorus there is a leader and chief selected, who is the most honorable and most excellent of the band. Then they sing hymns which have

been composed in honor of God in many meters and tunes, at one time all singing together, and at another moving their hands and dancing in corresponding harmony, and uttering in an inspired manner songs of thanksgiving, and at another time regular odes, and performing all necessary strophes and antistrophes.

Then when each chorus of the men and each chorus of the women has feasted separately by itself, like persons in the bacchanalian revels, drinking the pure wine of the love of God, they join together and the two become one chorus, an imitation of that one which, in old time, was established by the Red Sea, on account of the wondrous works which were displayed there.... When the Israelites saw and experienced this great miracle, which was an event beyond all description, beyond all imagination, and beyond all hope, both men and women together, under the influence of divine inspiration, becoming all one chorus, sang hymns of thanksgiving to God the Savior, Moses the prophet leading the men, and Miriam the prophetess leading the women.

Now the chorus of male and female worshippers being formed, as far as possible on this model, makes a most pleasant concert, and a truly musical symphony, the treble voices of the women mingling with the deep-toned voices of the men. The ideas were beautiful, the expressions beautiful, and the chorus-singers were beautiful; and the goal of the ideas, expressions, and chorus-singers was piety....

This then is what I have to say of those who are called *therapeutae*, who have devoted themselves to the contemplation of nature.... (On the Contemplative Life XI:83-90)

But in mainstream Rabbinic Judaism, the voice of the woman was being censored. Female singers were considered to be dangerously seductive, with siren-like powers to distract men from their proper pursuits.

Our Rabbis taught: Rahav inspired lust by her name. Yael inspired lust by her voice, Avigail inspired lust by her memory, Michal daughter of Saul inspired lust by her appearance. (Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 15a)
Rabbi Joseph said: When men sing and women join in - it is licentiousness; when women sing and men join in - it is like a fire raging in flax. (Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 48a)

[What would distract a man from his prayers?] Samuel said: A woman's voice is a sexual incitement [literally, "nakedness"], as it says (Song of Songs 2:14), "For your voice is sweet and your face is comely." (Babylonian Talmud *Berakhot* 24a)

The Talmudic proscriptions were maintained for centuries. The thirteenth-century Rabbi Moses Maimonides warned, "It is forbidden to listen to the voice of a forbidden woman or to gaze upon her hair." (*Laws of Prohibited Relations*, 21:2). And according to Rabbi Joseph Karo's sixteenth-century code of law, "While [a man] is reciting the *Shema*, he should be careful to avoid listening to the voice of a woman singing." (*Shulhan Arukh: Laws of the Recitation of the Shema*, 75:3) In 1814 the Jewish community of Vienna was considering sponsoring a performance of a cantata for mixed voices composed by Ignaz Moscheles as part of a special service to celebrate the Austrian victory of Napoleon. Rabbi Moses Sofer, a leading authority, was consulted as to the propriety of men and women singing together. His response was unequivocally negative, citing the talmudic source in *Sotah* 48a.

Similar restrictions were instituted in Christian churches. Paul of Tarsus instructed, "Women are to remain quiet at meetings...it does not seem right for a woman to raise her voice." (1Corinthians, 34-35). In the fifth century the Bishop Hippolytus wrote, "A woman who attracts people with her beautiful but deluding sweetness of voice (which is full of seduction to sin) must give up her trade and wait forty days if she is to receive communion." (Drinker, p. 179) Until recently, choirs in Catholic churches were comprised exclusively of men and/or boys. Note that the designations for treble voices are all male-gender nouns: *soprano*, *canto*, *cantus*, *alto*. Pope Pius X reaffirmed this principle in his *Motu Proprio* of November 22, 1903, "women ... cannot be admitted to form part of the choir." But the rabbinic restrictions did not silence the Jewish woman. If women could not sing in the presence of men, they would sing to themselves, to their children and to one another. In the Rhineland, in the town of Worms, a group of women had their own chapel, adjoining the men's synagogue. The tombstone of a woman who died in the thirteenth century, reads as follows: "This headstone commemorates the eminent and excellent lady Uranya bat harav Avraham who was the master of the syna-

gogue singers. She also officiated and sang hymns with sweet melodies before the female worshippers. In devout service may her memory be preserved." (Abrahams, p. 26.)

Since folk song arises in association with the activities of daily life, it is not surprising that in societies where men's and women's occupations are segregated, we find a segregation of musical repertoires, as well. Songs of hunting and war are performed by men. If women are excluded from serving in liturgical leadership, the sacred song will be an all-male domain as well. Women's songs revolve around home-bound tasks such as child-rearing. However, musicologist Ellen Koskoff notes that a society's gender structure is based not only the obvious biological differences which allow women and not men to bear and nurture children; equally important are culturally conceived notions of masculine and feminine activities. (Koskoff, "An Introduction," p. 5)

Group singing by women was confined to gatherings from which men were excluded. In various Jewish communities, when a young woman was about to be married the women of her town convened special ritual celebrations, which served the function of educating the bride and relieving some of the pre-nuptial jitters. Professional singers (called *mughanniyat* in Yemen and *daqqaqat* in Iraq), accompanied by various drums, performed the traditional repertoire. In Sephardic communities there was a tradition of performing "songs of the bride" (*cantigas di novia*): each song accompanied a specific activity, such as displaying the dowry, the bride's ritual bath, or the first encounter with the future mother-in-law. In Yemen "henna songs" were sung as the bride-to-be was painted with a brightly colored paste and dressed in a lavish costume. In some contemporary ultra-orthodox communities, women will gather for a *forshpil*, to dance and sing for the bride-to-be on the Saturday night before her wedding. In these communities, women even hold their own *farbrengen*—evenings of Torah, *mashkeh*, music and dancing. (Koskoff, *Music in Lubavitcher Life*, p. 125)

Home alone, women sang to relieve boredom and to express pent-up emotions. Songs were a means by which women could express ideas that were culturally taboo. Among the women of Eastern Europe there is a repertoire of lamentations: the complaints of the disappointed bride and the abandoned wife.

He comes to me with his cane in his hand,
He goes off to another, and I am so ashamed!
He comes to me and whispers in my ear.
He goes off to another, digging a grave for me.
(*Er kumt tsu mir tsugeyn*)

Not all songs were so bitter. In this song, the young woman, concerned about her impending marriage to a man not of her choosing, pines for her true love.

There are many lovely jewels,
But when you look at them closely, they are cheap.
My jewel is the only one of its kind in all the world.
Wherever I go, wherever I am, he is on my mind.
(*S'iz farhanen brilliantn*)

Mothers, singing to their babies, would express their aspirations for the child's future.

Good health is the best reward.
My child will learn Torah.
Torah he will learn.
He will write books.
A good and pious person
He will remain, God willing.
(*Unter dem kinds vigele*)

Romancers were popular among the Jewish women of medieval Spain. Many of these songs expressed a fantasy about running away to a more exciting life.

They call me Morenica, the little dark girl.
I was born fair, but I became like this from the summer sun.
Morenica, the little dark girl.
Graceful, with dark blazing eyes.
The sailors call me: Morenica.
If they call me again I'll go away with them.
Morenica, the little dark girl.
Graceful, with dark blazing eyes.

The king's son calls me: Morenica.
If he calls me again I'll go with him!
(*Morenica*)

There were also periods in which Jews achieved wealth and status, allowing leisure time for indulging in the arts of the surrounding superculture. There are numerous accounts of Jewish women entering the field of secular music during the Renaissance. Madama Europa, sister of the renowned composer Salamone Rossi Hebreo, was an accomplished soprano who performed in Monteverdi's operas at the court of the Gonzagas in Mantua in the first decade of the seventeenth century. In 1645 Rabbi Nathaniel Trabotto wrote of his late wife that she was "learned and skilled in playing the lute and viol and in singing the *kedushah*." (Harran, p. 24)

In seventeenth-century Antwerp, Leonora Duarte, a viol player descendant of Portuguese Jews, composed a set of six 'Symphonies.' Harriett Abrams, a late eighteenth-century English composer and soprano, was a featured soloist at fashionable London concerts and provincial festivals. When she appeared in the Handel Commemoration concerts in 1784, Charles Burney praised the sweetness and taste of her singing. Fanny Zippora Mendelssohn, granddaughter of the great Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, while overshadowed by the dazzling virtuosity of her brother, Felix, still managed to achieve a significant reputation in early nineteenth-century Germany for her talent as pianist and composer.

After the emancipation more and more Jews in Western Europe began to live a life-style barely distinguishable from that of their Christian neighbors. While some abandoned their ancestral faith in an attempt to be fully integrated into Christian society, others sought to modernize Jewish practice. In the nineteenth century some synagogues introduced the innovation of men and women singing together in choirs. These innovations, considered shocking by traditional Jews, did not pass unopposed. In 1819 the Hamburg rabbinical court decreed, "...they continue to do evil. At the dedication of their house of prayer men and women sang together at the opening of the ark, in contradiction to the law set out in the Talmud and in the codes, "a woman's voice is indecent." [Berakhot 24a] Such an abomination is not done in our house of prayer..." (Mendes-Flohr, p. 152.)

In 1899 the first Jewish secular choral society, Hazomit, a mixed ensemble,

was founded in Lodz, Poland. Their first conductor, Joseph Rumshinsky, recalled in his memoirs the strong opposition faced by the fledgling ensemble. "... the Hassidic Jews condemned us in principle, saying, 'Gevald! Young men and women singing together!'" (Rumshinsky, p. 194)

In the 1870s Abraham Goldfaden created what he claimed was the first Jewish theater company. His troupe of actor-singers, which included women, was received enthusiastically as it toured throughout Europe, and eventually in the United States. One of Goldfaden's singer-actors, Sophie Carp (1861-1906) became a well known stage personality; in 1896 she introduced Peretz Sandler's aria, *Eyli, Eyli*. In 1918 Boris Thomashefsky produced a new comedy called *Di Khazinte* (The Lady Cantor) starring Regina Prager, another of Goldfaden's protégés.

In Thomashefsky's production the idea of a lady cantor was a spoof. But in another six decades it would become a reality. In 1976 Reform Judaism's School of Sacred Music ordained its first female cantor, and eleven years later the Conservative movement's Cantor's Institute followed suit.

By the twentieth century Jewish women musicians were no longer a novelty. The synagogue repertory has been enriched by the efforts of Debbie Friedman, Miriam Gideon, and Linda Hirschhorn, to name but a few. The list of world-famous female performers and composers includes: Gisèle Ben-Dor, Fanny Brice (Fannie Borach), Mama Cass Elliott (Ellen Cohen), Jacqueline du Pré, Georgia Gibbs (Fredda Lipson), Ronnie Gilbert (of The Weavers), Lesley Gore, Eydie Gorme, Ofra Haza, Myra Hess, Janis Ian (Janis Fink), Dana International (Sharon Cohen), Carole King (Carole Klein), Wanda Landowska, Lotte Lenya, Melissa Manchester, Bette Midler, Ahinoam Nini, Laura Nyro, Roberta Peters, Flora Purim, Helen Reddy, Regina Resnik, Ann Ronell (composer of "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf"), Dinah Shore, Beverly Sills, Carly Simon, Phoebe Snow (Phoebe Laub), Rise Stevens, Barbra Streisand, Elizabeth Swados, Jennie Tourel, and Sophie Tucker (Sophie Kalish).

And yet, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, we still face perplexing gender-related questions.

- In a society where music is considered to be an "effeminate" pursuit, why are there so few published compositions by women?
- Why are women still excluded from the domain of some sacred musics?

- Is there an identifiable woman's voice in musical composition and performance?
- Should the female cantor simply parrot the repertoire of her male colleagues in the upper octave, or will there emerge a unique body of music developed specifically for the soprano and alto voices?

Stay tuned. These are questions with which we all will grapple in the years to come.

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