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The variety of styles in the Ashkenazi liturgical service[1]

Judit Frigyesi

Bar Ilan University

In his book *The Origins and Meaning of Hasidism,* Martin Buber wrote the following lines:

The Baal-Shem belongs to those central figures of the history of religion whose effect on others has arisen through the fact that they *lived* in a certain way. These men did not proceed *from* a teaching, but moved *to* a teaching, in such a way that their life worked as a teaching not yet grasped in words . . . Within [their] community . . . arise a series of men with the same kind of life . . . In an otherwise not very productive century . . . the 'un-enlightened' Polish and Ukrainian Jewry brought forth the greatest phenomenon in the history of the spirit, greater than any individual genius in art and in thought: a society that lives by faith.[2]

This description is valid not only for Hasidism, but also for traditional Jewish life in Eastern Europe in general. The tendency to view practices of life "as a teaching not yet grasped in words" was part of Judaism already before Hasidism. It is this already existing tendency that was intensified by the movement and then re-influenced the worldview of the Jews of the region. Whatever the exact historical development might have been, the above description characterizes the religious life of the East European Jews at large until the Shoah.

Buber emphasizes here what may be the most remarkable aspect of this life, namely that it concentrates on the daily practices of the religion, so that these practices become the primary expression of religious thought. The logic of Buber's argument is significant. It is not simply that religious consciousness found expression in

the life of a great man. What Buber is suggesting is that religious consciousness was derived from a way of life. Even though this life was obviously saturated with an already existing religious tradition, it developed its particular teachings from practice.

Among the religious practices, those of the service stand out as the central ones to Judaism. In Jewish tradition, the core prayer text of the service is fixed, and the presentation of this text is the ritual *par excellence*. All texts should be read with some kind of melodic intonation; they should not be spoken in the manner of everyday speech.[3] Apart from that requirement, however, there are no rules with regard to the musical aspect of the liturgy that would be universally accepted among the East-European Jews. Unlike the core text, the music of the ritual changes from region to region, community to community and even from person to person.

Nevertheless, although the actual musical solution differs from place to place, the basic structural decisions concerning the musical form and style of the ritual show generally accepted patterns. It is my hypothesis that these structural patterns for the style of music reflect religious ideas.

Changing orientation toward time and emotion in the Ashkenazi Jewish service

When a person with Western cultural orientation enters the Ashkenazi Orthodox synagogue, his first impression is disorienting. The prayer house is filled with a noisy crowd that is moving, singing, reciting, and talking seemingly without any order. The prayer leader sings fragmentary musical lines here and there and the congregation may or may not pay attention to his performance. Occasionally, there is a congregational song, usually in a musical style incongruous with the rest of the service. The noise does not stop even during the song.

The outsider will find the heterogeneity of the music especially disturbing. At one moment, the members of the congregation recite an archaic-sounding melody heterophonically (that is, each person at a different pace without co-ordination), and at the next moment, the congregation sings a popular tune that seems to be completely out of place in the house of prayer.

The performance of the *Hallel* prayer as it is practiced all over Eastern Europe may serve as an example. The prayer is composed of a blessing and a series of psalms

(psalms 113–118). At the beginning of the prayer, the musical sectioning coincides with the beginning and ending of psalms; later however, the psalms are divided into several musically different sections. The prayer leader may recite the *Hallel* in a simple recitative style or in a more ornamental fashion. Whichever solution he chooses, we encounter a series of sharp stylistic changes during the prayer.

Let me describe a concrete performance that I heard during the Sukkoth of 1994 at the Hunyadi tér synagogue (Budapest) with cantor Márton Fóti.[4] The prayer opens with the cantor's melodious recitation of the blessing accompanied by the congregation's simpler recitation of the same text. The murmur of congregational prayer wraps the cantor's voice into a cloud of gently humming noise. The cantor then recites the first line of psalm 113 aloud (in this manner he announces the beginning of the section) and then continues to read the rest of the text silently or in a gently humming voice. In his recitation of the psalm, the cantor is one with the congregation; each individual, including him, recites the psalm in his personal manner. Some read silently, others with more audible melodious patterns – each person in his own tempo and melodic style. The effect is a kind of musical noise.

At this point the cantor begins to sing aloud the last few lines of psalm 113, in this way announcing its end (the first section of the *Hallel*). The singing of the closing lines – in reality a textual fragment – is his "performance". By way of melodic turns, ornaments, and vocal technique the cantor emphasizes the expressive meaning of the text: The cantor barely completes his expressive melody when the congregation begins to recite the next psalm. The emotional intensity of the moving last lines is still with us, but there is no time to react to it and to calm one's feelings; the noise of the dry recitation washes away the memory of the expressive music in a second.

This exchange repeats itself several times, until according to tradition, at the end of psalm 116, the cantor suddenly modulates to major mode and from then on the text (psalm 117 and sections of psalm 118) is no longer recited but applied to melodies of songs. These songs transport us to another world whose atmosphere is different from the emotional cantorial improvisation and also from the congregational recitation. The songs are mostly joyful and energetic, although each is in a somewhat different style. Some are close to the style of traditional Hasidic songs (*niggunim*), while others are Hungarian popular songs. Following one Hungarian custom, cantor Fóti chooses for a

section of Psalm 118 ('*Ono adoyshem*') a waltz that he sings with delightfully humorous sentimentality and *rubato*, as if he were accompanying the steps of a dancing couple. The congregation joins in here and there in a haphazard manner. After the "waltz," as if coming home from a long journey, the cantor returns to the simple recitative style, signaling in this way that the end of the *Hallel* is approaching.

In each of the three types of performances, the congregation relates to time differently. During the cantorial sections, time flows slowly. Every section of the text receives special attention. The slow tempo, the extended melismatic lines allow one to immerse oneself in the spiritual meaning of each textual fragment. For instance, for the first cantorial section ("He raises the needy from the dust, He lifts the destitute") Fóti uses one accepted melodic pattern that begins in the middle register and moves toward the higher notes of the minor-like scale. There is nothing unusual in this solution. Nevertheless, the exact shapes of the melodic motives, the ornaments and the vocal quality, which are Fóti's personal invention, make the performance expressive and powerful. In the first line, the gently lulling melody, the weeping quasi-recitation with short gestures that sound like unfinished fragments -- as if being a motion of the hand in despair -- capture the desperation of the needy. The rising of the following melodic line expresses the joy of being "raised from the dust". All this happens on a miniature scale; the singing of these two lines takes no more than 5-6 seconds. Yet in spite of the brevity of these and similar cantorial fragments, here we are dealing with the dimension of musical time: the same text could be said twice as fast if it were to be recited without melody.

In contrast to the cantorial fragments, the congregation recites the text in the tempo of everyday speech or even faster. Sometimes several textual lines are combined together and declaimed in one breath. The articulation of the words and phrases, though precise, is without emotion and rhetorical gestures, and the tempo is often so fast that the meaning of the text could be barely processed. Someone unfamiliar with this culture may be disturbed by this non-expressive recitation. For the outsider it may seem as if the congregation would be performing an obligatory exercise without really being with it. But a look at the faces of the believers immediately convinces, that in spite of the dryness and the non-emotional nature of

this recitation, this is also a spiritual experience for the practitioners. As I shall explain it later, here the congregation takes a completely different approach toward text, meaning and emotion than that is customary in the Western world.

The metric tunes bring again a different relation to time, to social space and to emotion. The meter, the tempo, and the melody are fixed and known to everyone; the song is a "musical piece."

The members of the congregation move between these different time-sensations with remarkable ease. They do not seem to need transition in order to adjust to the new sense of time. After the dramatic cantorial recitative or the joyful congregational singing, recitation recapitulates immediately. It often seemed to me as if the congregation would take an especial effort to avoid "empty time," silence between the different styles.

It was necessary to give a description of a segment of the service in its continuity in order to call attention to some unusual features of the music in the Ashkenazi Jewish service. Why are two types of recitations, so different from one another in their musical style and emotional content, used in the same psalm? Why are light, in fact frivolous tunes intercalated between sections of the dramatic recitative? How can the singing of popular tunes and dances, such as the waltz be considered appropriate in prayer at all? Why do contrasting styles alternate in such close succession? Why are there no transitions, stops or rests? How can the congregation move so easily between these different acoustic and time experiences and participatory roles? How can these different musical worlds (cantorial expressive singing, simple recitative, and popular song) be reconciled and brought into an integral whole? Is integrity – with regard to any aspect of the service (emotional expression, musical style, acoustic experience, performing roles) – seen as a value or not, and if not, why?

Before I attempt to tentatively answer these questions, I would like to draw attention to the basic limitation of any discussion that intellectualizes about such issues. In our attempt to search for an intellectual explanation for the meaning of the practice of music, we violate the basic intent of this practice. Religious practice is always metaphorical and it is the nature of metaphors that they resist intellectualization. It could even be said that the *raison d'être* of these practices lies

in the fact that they are not completely transparent and not possible to verbalize.

What follows here is a personal interpretation for the meaning of music as it crystallized through my participation in orthodox services and through conversations with its practitioners. The connection between religious attitudes and musical decisions became transparent in passing remarks, confrontations about musical decisions within the community, and in the observation of practices.

Yet an interpretation of the meaning of music has to be necessarily suggestive. Even when I feel close to "understanding" the underlying thought in a musical decision, it is still nearly impossible to prove it. The musical practices are as deeply ingrained in the minds of these people as are habits of speech and gestures, and thus it is impossible to argue their religious meaning with the scholarly accuracy that is possible with regard to things negotiated about in verbal–logical discourse. When I asked the members of the community about a musical decision, they were surprised that such a question would arise at all. They were astonished, as if I had asked why they walked by putting first one and then the other leg forward. The power of music lies in the fact that it is capable of expressing a worldview while bypassing words, but it is precisely this aspect that makes it difficult to argue about and prove its meaning.

A further problem is that the sacred and philosophical texts of Judaism, like the Talmud, which could provide a potential source for intellectualizing the religious attitude expressed in music, are not objective documents. Rather than offering clear-cut arguments, these texts provide basis for multiple potential interpretations and/or a starting point for meditation, and the meaning of texts that are meant for meditation cannot be explained by logic. It is difficult, indeed impossible, to point to a text of philosophical implications and say what it means exactly for the practice of music. Such an undertaking is blasphemous in the eyes of a believer, and highly problematic from a scholarly perspective. To clarify the meaning of these texts violates their intent, just as verbal interpretation of music violates the intent behind music.

So I embark on a dangerous enterprise when attempting an interpretation that connects musical–structural decisions to verbal communications and sacred-philosophical texts. The reader should keep in mind that there are not – and cannot be – hard evidence in such a discussion, and that even a seemingly convincing argument is but suggestive.

Sacred and secular times

1/3 What value is there for a man
In all the gains he makes beneath the sun?
4 One generation goes, another comes,
But the earth remains the same forever.
13 I set my mind to study and to probe with wisdom,
all that happens under the sun,
[and I saw that] it is a worthless task
that God has given to man.
2/1 So I said to myself,
'Come, I will treat you to merriment'
3 I ventured to tempt my flesh with wine
and to grasp folly,
10 And whatever my eyes desired,
I did not deny them.
11 Then I looked at all things that I had done and
it was all futile and pursuit of wind.
9/3 The same fate is in store for all . . .
5 The living know that they will die.
3/20 All go to the same place;
all came from dust and return to dust.
2/13 I found that wisdom exceeds folly,
as light exceeds darkness.
3/11 God made everything beautiful in its time.
He also put eternity in the mind
but without man ever understanding,
from beginning to end,
the things that God brings to pass.
12 Thus I realized that there is nothing else
than to rejoice and to do good in life.

So whenever a man eats and drinks
and finds satisfaction in his labour
– it is a gift of God.[5]

The 'Ecclesiastes', in Hebrew '*Kohelet*', from which the above verses were quoted, is among the deepest, the most philosophical but also the most problematic writings of Judaism. Yet it is no accident, that although very few can comprehend its philosophical depth, the *Kohelet* is among the most popular texts of the Bible throughout the Western world. The complexity of the message does not preclude that its basic idea be instantly meaningful to many, since it touches upon an existential problem – or rather feeling – that all humans experience.

These verses contemplate the contradiction between the two 'times': the infinite stands in contrast to the finite. It is necessary to elaborate here on these contrasting time sensations, since as we shall see, these form the basis of the Ashkenazi musical orientation with regard to the service.

Life, and everything we experience in life, is finite. The space and the time of existing things have a beginning and an end; in fact, the very notion of 'a thing' means concretization in space and time. In everyday thinking, something *is* when it occurs in a concrete and finite time and space.

The first experience of the sensation of the infinite is perhaps when a child wakes up at night with a fear of death, a comprehension of the nothingness of its own being. The notion of the infinite, though not sensible in the way the finite is in everyday life, is nevertheless real; it is neither only a theoretical–cosmological, nor only a religious concept. It is not the sole property of some sophisticated philosophical discourse, but basic to human consciousness. In one way or another, all cultures and individuals articulate their existence in the context of the infinite. The infinite is the 'before', the 'after', and 'the beyond' of the empirical reality of life. Thus the infinite should not be thought of as the antithesis of the finite; rather it is its context, source, and origin. However, while the finite connects to the visible–perceptible everyday reality, the infinite is a sensation, a feeling that is beyond comprehension. Finite and infinite belong to different spheres of thought and life.

In the frame of religion, the metaphor for the infinite is the 'holy' or the 'sacred' – in Hebrew the '*kadosh*', and in Judaism also: God. It is not necessary here to elaborate on the nature of the sacred, for this has been amply discussed in both religious and secular writings within and outside of Judaism.[6] There are, nevertheless, some aspects of the *kadosh* that are especially important for our discussion and that the reader should therefore be reminded of.

It is symbolic that the word *kadosh* appears first in the Torah in relation to the Shabbat: 'and the Lord blessed the seventh day and sanctified it' (*vayvarech elohim et yom hashvi'i vaykaddesh oto*). The first "thing" that is sanctified in the text of the Torah is not an object, but a period of time. The root of the word Shabbat means 'to cease' (in this case: to cease to work); *kadosh* is defined by negation. It is the time when certain things do *not* happen. It is retreat from activities that tie people to empirical reality. The rules of Shabbat are developed in this spirit: the prohibition of traveling, of making permanent changes, of leaving a trace, and so on. The idea here is to sanctify time by 'stepping out' from an existence that is imprisoned by its focus on the finite things of earthly life. By *not* doing the things of everyday life, one makes time stop, as it were.

This thought leads us to two concepts, both of which have become central to mysticism and to transcendence, and as we shall see, also to the musical practice: the concept of "separation" and that of the "nothing." In order to partake in the *kadosh*, as imperfectly as humans can partake in it at all, one has to separate the sacred from what is not sacred. A definite time and space has to be set aside for the sacred practices and objects. This sacred time and space is first and foremost those of the ritual.

The second important consideration is that the *kadosh* is achieved by negation, by getting rid of the preoccupation with empirical reality. This chain of thought leads to the idea that the *kadosh* is, in essence, the *nothing*. This idea commonly reoccurs in those religious (and secular) practices that seek transcendence. Transcendental practices focus on techniques that help individuals forget about their physical existence and the surrounding world.

In Jewish mysticism, the notion of nothing is so deep and complex that it cannot even be touched upon here. The idea of transcendental prayer dates back at least to

the time of the *Mishna*. We read in the *Berakot* tractate of the Talmud:

One should not stand up to say *Tefillah* save in a reverent frame of mind [with heaviness of head]. The pious men of old used to wait an hour before praying in order that they might concentrate their thoughts (*kavanah*) upon their Father in heaven. Even if a king greets him [while praying] he should not answer him: even if a snake is wound round his heel he should not break off [from the text].[7]

The demand of an hour of mental preparation and the description of the believer who does not notice the greeting of a king and the snake that is wound round his heel are images belonging to a person in a transcendental state of mind. This person no longer notices even the most remarkable events of everyday reality, the world around him disappears, and he enters another sphere of existence. We can read in a similar spirit in a Hasidic source: "Prior to prayer he must cast off corporeality, which is characterized by finitude and limit, and enter into the aspect of nothingness, which is without end."[8] Here "corporeality" and "finitude" are clearly defined as the antitheses of "nothingness", that is, infinite.

But although the notion of "nothingness" is central to mystical orientation, it cannot be the guiding principle of the religious outlook as a whole. In Judaism, the concepts of God and of the *kadosh* are meaningful only if these are whole and indivisible. The spirit of God dwells everywhere and in everything, permeating thus the finite with infinity. We read in a Hasidic text: "Now, although God transcends space and time, He is nevertheless also found below, within space and time." Another source teaches us: "It should not enter your mind that the heavens and their hosts, and the earth and all it contains, are separate entities in themselves."[9] As the *Kohelet* concludes "Thus I realized that there is nothing else, than to rejoice and to do good in life. So whenever a man eats and drinks and finds satisfaction in his labour – it is a gift of God."

The greatness and the popularity of the *Kohelet* lies in that it presents us with the paradox of human existence without attempting to resolve it. Each of these three concepts – the *kadosh*, nothingness, and everything – is paradoxical.

We have thus arrived at three different conceptions that contradict and yet

contain one another. The separation of the world into sacred and secular spheres stands in opposition to the concept to which the sacred is "everything", including the secular domain, and both oppose the notion that the sacred is really "nothingness."

The reconciliation of these ideas, an outlook that views them as aspects of one and the same thing, seems to be as necessary as it is impossible. Life is the creation of God and in this sense it is sacred and yet it is cut off sharply from the sphere of the sacred because of its finiteness. God is eternal, all-inclusive and unchanging, and so change, which is the essence of life, is meaningless in the face of eternity. Thus life – though it partakes in the sacred – is meaningless. Furthermore, the *kadosh* is imaginable only in its separation from what is not *kadosh*: the sacred sphere should be separated and protected from the infiltration of the profane. But if God and the universe is a coherent entity, the separation of sacred and secular is impossible, since no part of the universe may fall outside of itself. If acts have deeper meaning than what they seem to be on the surface, they have to reach beyond the earthly life. But this does not seem to be the case: humans are imprisoned within their existence of the here and now – an existence that, because of its time limitation, is secular.

As people develop their religions, this conceptual problem often dissolves in custom. In everyday life, the separation of sacred and secular is accepted without much problem. Practices of the religion are a relief for simple people, they free them from the burden of constant attention, responsibility and judgment; they set the rules of the game, so to speak. For the simple man, the institution of the service is a relief, for it is the time and space set aside for devotion and thus alleviates the rest of life from the burden of conceptualizing it as sacred.

But precisely this is the problem – a problem that Judaism was intensely aware of throughout the ages. The religious service, an event somewhat outside of and above ordinary life, relegates the rest of life to a secondary, less sacred position, and thus disturbs the entity of life. It is not necessary to elaborate here on the variety of ways in which Judaism confronts this problem by attempting to draw daily practices into the sacred sphere on the one hand, and by designing the service as an entity of sacred and secular on the other. As we shall see, it is in this second tendency – an attempt to create a service that mirrors the whole of the real and the mystical reality – that music has a special role.

We should keep in mind that the paradoxical nature of these concepts is no longer relevant once we think of them as sensations and directions for meditation, rather than categories of logic. 'Infinity', 'nothingness' and 'everything' are not really useful concepts for logical discourse. These are merely attempts to verbalize ambiguous feelings that cannot be really expressed by words. The paradoxical nature of the sacred cannot and should not be dissolved in practice; rather practice should deepen the understanding of these ideas. Meditation on these ideas helps the believers concentrate on a *feeling,* and through it, maintain their religious–transcendental orientation.

Although my topic here is the technique through which these notions came to be expressed in Jewish musical practice, I would like to make a brief detour to illustrate that they are common to all mystical practices, even those of the secular sphere. Whenever humans seek answers to existential doubts and fears, these notions invariably emerge. It is perhaps not by chance that the mystical bent is especially strong in modern art. In this era and in this milieu, which was the most consciously secular of all sub-cultures in European history, artists found their way back to mysticism and arrived at the same notions and the same paradoxes that characterize Jewish mysticism, and in fact, mysticism in general.[10] I would like to remind the reader of the work of the turn-of-the-century Hungarian poet, Endre Ady. For Ady, "God" is the metaphor for all that is beyond comprehension, beyond "real reality". The similarity between the ideas of the religious mystics and those of Ady is striking:[11]

Somehow or other there is God:
At the bottom of every thought.

God does not come towards us
To help in our troubles
God: Me and suffering,
the plan and the kiss, God is everything.
('On God's left')

I carry my load: the heaviest Nothing,
My path: the great Nihil, the None,
My fate: to go, to go, to go,
And my dream is God.
('My dream is God')

The expression of sacred and secular in the music of the Ashkenazi service

It is my hypothesis that the awareness of the paradoxical nature of the religious service and of the *kadosh* contributed in a crucial manner to the conceptualization of music in the Ashkenazi ritual.

It is important to remember that the notions of sacred and secular are abstractions: nothing in the actual world could be truly sacred, and since the sacred essence shines on everything, nothing could be entirely secular. As in everyday life, in the music of the service as well, religious Jews negotiate their actions between these imaginary poles. Members of the congregation would rarely categorize melodies or styles by using the words "sacred" and "secular." However, they do consider certain styles "more Jewish," "truly Jewish" or "ancient" – and these categorizations mean practically also: "more sacred." Against these categories stand those of the secular world: "non-Jewish" and "modern." However, the religious meaning of musical styles is even more transparent in the musical practice, in decisions concerning when and how a certain musical style is used, what text it is correlated with, how the community behaves while performing it, whether or not it is considered obligatory for a certain text, and so on. Accordingly, each musical style has its meaning and status within the given community.

It is indeed surprising that the choice of the musical style for the service has remained until our days a matter of personal and/or communal decision. The knowledge regarding the status, the function and the meaning of the text is something the believer can and should learn: the understanding of the text is part of a network of formalized teaching, debates and arguments. However, it is largely left open by what means the believer helps himself "live through" the meaning of the text during the

service. It is true that the desired effect of the prayer, and to some extent the methods to reach such an effect are discussed in the Talmud, yet with regard to sound, these discussions are suggestive at best. For instance, we find arguments concerning whether this or that section of the prayer demands the most intense attention and at which point the believer has to concentrate his mind and recite a text with utmost devotion, but the actual auditory means that may facilitate such a devotion are never described.[12]

In order to understand the significance of this hiatus, we have to remember that in Judaism, the reading of the prayer is a ritual action in and of itself, and as such cannot be thought of as "reading" in the same way that this word is used in modern Western culture.[13] The believer does not read the text merely in order to understand it and not even for the sake of emotional inspiration. The reading of the text is the primary religious act that connects the believer to the world "above" and this connection is achieved by the *sound* of the text: "Out of his love for man God has fixed these letters in the mouth of man, in order to enable him to cleave to his Creator, by the very pronunciation of the sounds here and below, when he studies the Torah or prays, he shakes and turns up the roots above."[14]

The sound of the sacred text has unique power. Even if one does not understand the meaning of the words, he will be connected to the upper realms by means of the sounds: "[even] the prayers performed by a person who knows nothing about the things of which they are speaking…receive the influxes that descend unto them because of the existence of human voices."[15] Of course, this and similar passages do not intend to diminish the importance of the understanding of the text. However, they do insist on the fact that the sounds of the words have mystical power that is beyond intellectual understanding.

The tension between the emphasis on the fact that it is the *sound* of the prayer that connects man to the upper realms and the complete lack of codifying the character of this sound is striking. It is important to remember that sound is determined with regard to the proper pronunciation of each Hebrew letter, and that codification of musical patterns exists in the case of the reading of the Torah. But peculiarly, this system does not extend to the prayer.

In theory, the music of the prayer has no religious importance. One could say

that the words – as long as they are pronounced in the proper manner – have mystical effect regardless of their melody and rhythm. But although theoretically this may be true, it is impossible to ignore the reality of the ritual. Sound is an entity whose verbal, rhythmic and melodic aspects together create an auditory context for the spiritual experience. And yet the most important aspects of this auditory context are left undefined. There is no religious rule that would determine the patterns of intonation, tempo, melody, voice-quality, and rhythm – in other words, aspects that are instrumental in creating the spiritual atmosphere for the prayer. The musical form of the service – the character and choice of styles, their correlation with texts, and the proportion and the sequence of various styles – are a matter of individual and communal decisions, customs, and negotiations.

The reflection of religious sensibilities in the choice of musical styles is a topic so delicate and complex that it is impossible to fully explain it in the framework of an article without certain schematization. In the course of the service, there are so many subtle shifts and combination of styles, and the effect of these depends so much on the actual auditory-social environment, that a global picture can be given only at the expense of simplification. In the following I attempt to describe the religious meaning of three types of styles. The reader is asked not to think of these styles in terms of fixed categories but rather as tendencies-orientations of the musical performance. In the course of the service, these tendencies occur in variations, transitions and combinations.

(a) The three styles of the service: *davenen, hazzanut*, and song

The notion of the service concentrates the paradoxical nature of the human experience of time. The service is "ritual time," a closed time period that is "cut out" from the normal flow of daily life. Life is finite and yet the circularity of days gives the illusion of infinity. The service is a framed time within the seeming infinity of our days and yet it acts as a window to the "real infinity." It is as if one were to step out of the time-flow of everyday experience in order to immerse himself, for a moment, in the infinite, the sacred.

In the Ashkenazi service, the sensation of the infinite is created by the act of the

unceasing simple recitation. Ideally, the words of the prayer should flow undisturbed, without stops, without changes, without unnecessary climaxes and tensions. The traditional name for this manner of praying is "davenen." *Davenen* cannot be defined either as speech or music, and it would also be wrong to say that it is "in between" speech and music. Its purpose is threefold: to make the letters of the text sound, to create the feeling of continuity through the flow of words, and in connection with these two, to transport the believer to a transcendental state.

The musical character of *davenen* responds to this demand. *Davenen* is always in "flowing rhythm" and has an open-ended form. By the term flowing rhythm, I mean a rhythmic style that proceeds without strong beats or clear meter but in which some slight pulsation is perceptible.[16] The rhythm of *davenen* impresses us as an unceasing sequence of somewhat irregular rhythmic units. Traditionally, the reading of the prayers is accompanied by the undulating motion of the body, and this motion underlines (or creates a counterpoint to) the musical pulsation. The melody seems to float above the bodily and musical pulsations rather freely; its rhythmic patterns do not necessarily fit any of these regular pulses. These complementary metric-rhythmic feelings are like waves: they are irregular and yet impress us as being connected by an invisible power that brings them into a unified whole.

Davenen is composed of textual–musical phrases of varying length that are connected to one another in a spontaneous manner, creating an open-ended form. The individual decides the precise length and shape of the phrases as well as the overall form. Some recite the prayer in a simple manner, connecting phrase to phrase without any elaboration. Others elaborate on certain melodic sections, occasionally change the tempo and expand the overall structure. Nevertheless, in all cases, the form remains simple: the style of *davenen* should always approximate the rhythm and intonation of speech.

This recitation is the basis of Ashkenazi liturgical music; this is the style that every member of the community is intimately familiar with. Jewish practice requires that each individual recite the text of the ritual for himself, and this is normally done in the form of simple *davenen*. The prayer leader (called *baal tefillah* = master of prayer, or *sheliach tzibbur* = delegate of the congregation) sings aloud certain textual sections, and in this way he structures the individual recitations of the members of the

congregation. Conceptually, the singing of the prayer leader is simply public *davenen*.

What makes this style "musical" is primarily not the use of pitches but rather a global attitude toward the flow of sounds. *Davenen* is a deeply musical phenomenon in that it aims at a balance between the two potentials of musical expression, the rhetorical and the acoustic-spatial. Even in the most detached manner of *davenen* the performer is dealing with a text that has grammatical shape and meaning. Like that of real speech, the style of *davenen* captures the gestures of language: the music states, questions, and argues. But *davenen* has also another potential: the words may be taken merely as a flow of sonorous events. This kind of *davenen* moves toward the opposite direction; it distances one from the world of arguments and emotions and creates a sonorous space of motionlessness. The believer finds the form that suits the best his momentary needs by navigating between these two potentials.

The musical aspect becomes extremely important in this "navigation." It is the variability of the melodic style, the voice quality, and the rhythmic shape that allow the individual to travel between the imaginary poles of devotion, the rhetorical-expressive and the detached. The totality of the individual prayers creates the auditory space of the prayer house. A traditional prayer house "sounds": the conglomeration of singing, speaking and half singing voices create a continuous sound-flow that defines space and time. This global sound is like radiation, it is always changing and yet it is always the same. To my question whether melody is necessary for prayer, members of the community answered that it is not important for anyone to actually "sing" the but the prayer house as a whole has to have a "sound."

The more melodious and articulate the *davenen* becomes the more it approximates to what is meant by "musical expression" in Western music since the Romantic era. The patterns of *davenen* may be slowed down, elaborated on, expanded, arranged in symmetrical formations with climaxes and cadences until the recitation approximates something like a "musical piece." Like each individual creates his own musical style, the final form of the service emerges from the plays with and negotiations about the ideal form of the presentation of the given text, oscillating between the more continuous/mystical and the more articulate/emotional poles.

The sections recited aloud by the prayer leader are traditionally closer to the expressive style and thus more defined also musically. In this case, the patterns of recitation are no longer completely spontaneous but fit the framework of a musical system that is called "nusah." In a few especially important sections of the ritual, the prayer leader may create a quasi-musical composition on the basis of the *nusah*, by slowing down the melody, improvising on it, adding new sections and modulations. The prayer leader who performs such artistic elaborations is normally called *hazzan* [cantor].[17] However, tradition demands that even *hazzanut* [the art of the *hazzan*] remain in the sphere of recitation. The *hazzan* should always keep in mind the style of the simple recitative, and use the melodic and rhythmic patterns of the *nusah*.

Thus although there is difference in the musical form between the simple recitative, the music of the prayer reader, and *hazzanut*, all these styles form a continuum whose root is in *davenen.* All of them are in 'flowing rhythm'; they are structurally open-ended, improvisatory, and have a recitative character. Yet they bring out different spiritual/emotional potentials of the text. Simple davenen concentrates on the meaning beyond the concrete meaning of fragments of the text. *Hazzanut* takes the opposite approach: it creates cathartic moments precisely by penetrating into the smallest aspect of the text and descending to the depth of one thought."

In the view of members of traditional communities, simple *davenen* is thought to be closer to the *kadosh* than *hazzanut*. This does not mean that the emotional expression and the unique artistic interpretation that finds its place only in *hazzanut* would not be appreciated. But cantorial elaboration is meaningful precisely in its power to bring forth a side of religious devotion that is, if one may say, more human in that it connects to the everyday world through the exploration of feelings.

Davenen, however, chooses a different road. Its flowing rhythm, unceasing mild pulsation, circular return of phrases of similar length, and open-ended form evoke the infinite. But it is not just this outer form that evokes the infinite but also the state of mind that it demands and creates. Detachment creates a sensation beyond emotions, a transcendental state of mind by silencing everyday emotions. Davenen unites those basic concepts that are central to the *kadosh* and to practices that attempt to achieve a transcendental state (which I discussed in the second part of this article): the concept

of "separation" and that of "nothing." Davenen "separates" from the daily life in various ways. It stresses the difference between everyday speech and ritual speech, since even the most simple and speech-like recitation is markedly ritualized.

The attempt to silence the emotions and divert attention from one's desires and feelings correspond to the thought of the *kadosh.* This is a gesture of negation, an attempt to rid one of the preoccupations with empirical reality. At its best, davenen is a transcendental practice: it diverts the attention from one's physical existence and the surrounding world. The believer "allows" the text to pour freely from his mouth and take shape at its own will. As if the believer would step into the eternal river of the sound of the prayer that flows without beginning or end, and let its current overtake him and carry him away.

This world of recitation is opposed by the world of the songs. The songs are emphatically *not* reading; they step out, so to speak, from recitation into the world of "music." The structural and rhythmic aspects of the songs – self-contained musical form, dance-like character, and symmetrical structure – evoke the idea of the finite and of worldliness.

Of course, there are various internal divisions within the sphere of song. A melody that is similar to the recitative – that is, a song that is the metricised version of the traditional recitative – is thought to be more sacred/ancient/Jewish. Songs that have been used within the community for a long time are closer to the sacred sphere, and some Hassidic songs are thought to have great spiritual power. Songs that are obviously taken from a secular source, as for instance popular music or operetta, stand on the extreme edge of the secular.

Yet subtle differentiations notwithstanding, the mere appearance of clear beat, metricity, closed form and congregations singing in the midst of flowing davenen brings a completely different atmosphere. In davenen, the individual is alone in his effort to enter the transcendental realm. In the song, the accent is on the togetherness of the community. The songs bring a relief from the heavy demand on each individual to face the text alone bringing his personality into it. Here one simply "joins in" with a given mood, sound, tempo, and melody. The mood of the music is generally lighter, but it is not primarily the lightness of mood that brings relief, but the

fact that these sections are predetermined: the songs have a precise and fixed structure and length. The self-contained, symmetrical musical form of the songs cuts out a "framed time" from the imaginary infinity of *davenen*.

(b) Interaction of styles: heterogeneity, and conceptual polyphony

It would be logical to suppose that traditional congregations would not use songs that they regard to be secular. Indeed, there are communities that insist on the exclusive use of the *nusah*, sometimes nothing other than simple recitative. But this is not the general pattern of the Ashkenazi tradition. On the contrary: it appears that the heterogeneity of the music, which I described at the beginning of this article, is basic to the concept of the service. I often felt as if the congregation took an especial delight in introducing, from time to time, something shockingly out of place, even musically vulgar, yet such a "digression" only highlighted the importance of *davenen*.

I would like to illustrate this with an example of one of the songs that occur in the middle of the *Hallel*. Cantor László Herczog of the Dessewffy Street synagogue (Budapest) chose a popular Hungarian song that is a dance-tune for the *czardas*, the Hungarian national dance. (Musical example: the first part presents the tune as recorded from cantor Herczog in 1977, and the second part gives the *czardas* melody that might have served as its model.)[18] The Hebrew text to which he applied this *czardas* means: "We received these from the Almighty, it is wondrous in our eyes. This is the day the Almighty has given us, let us rejoice in it" -- indeed a perfect passage for the expression of joy. But why did he choose a piece with such extremely secular associations? Should not the joyfulness celebrating the miracle of God be something more dignified than the pair-dance of banquets and restaurants?

One could say that the orthodox Jews of Eastern Europe have no taste or that such findings exemplify that, after the Second World War, these communities lost their culture. There can be no doubt that traditional Ashkenazi culture has gradually disintegrated in the course of the past fifty years. Yet the musical heterogeneity of the service appears to be an older phenomenon. The strikingly secular songs that I found in the service come from popular music from the first half of the twentieth century and the nineteenth century – there is almost no example of more recent borrowing.

Moreover, such borrowings are less common among the communities that were formed after the Second World War in Israel and the United States. Today there is a tendency, within the orthodox Ashkenazi world, to make the service more coherent and more constrained to recitative and to the *nusah* – a rather modern development whose reasons I cannot explain here.

I believe that the heterogeneity of the traditional service reflects, in the sphere of music, the inherent problem of the 'ritual as a sacred entity' – a problem that I discussed in the first half of this article. As we have seen, the service should be a time and a space that allow the individual to enter another world, the world of spirit, and yet the service should embrace the totality of life. These two desires are contradictory and the contradiction cannot be resolved by regulations. "Balance" and "middle ground" are useless concepts in this case. There cannot be a balance between the sacred and the secular aspects of the service because, ideally, the service should be totally sacred and yet contain all that is secular.

Of course, songs evoking the secular world cannot be inserted at any point of the service; they usually appear with texts whose content or form can be associated with a more light-hearted mood. But the truth is that nothing in the sacred text demands overtly secular interpretation. Let us remember that the *czardas* melody was applied to verses of a psalm (psalm 118) that speaks of how God answers those who cry out to him in time of distress. The tension between secular and sacred cannot be played out in the liturgy by matching "happy texts" with "happy melodies", because sacred texts cannot be associated with moods and emotions of everyday life – they are never joyful in the sense of secular amusement. Indeed, no one in the orthodox community would take the *czardas* quotation at face value, that is, as a suggestion that God's miracle should be celebrated with a popular dance. Such association would be indeed vulgar. What matters, however, is the overall pattern, the fact that there are, somewhere in the service, elements which relate even to the most secular aspect of the non-Jewish environment.

We tend to view music in its linear appearance as series of successive events, as narrative. If we consider the musical form of the Ashkenazi service in its linearity, it appears as a series of disjunctive events, following one another with inexplicably sudden changes of style and mood. But it would perhaps be better to conceptualize

this music as an ongoing polyphony in the mind. Throughout the service, we stand in a sphere where sacred and secular are both partly and potentially present at almost all times; there is an intense feeling of the existence of two worlds. Such a concept of music is more spatial than temporal. The space of the synagogue may serve as a parallel: we are inside the prayer room with our mind and eyes turned toward the text of the prayer book, and nevertheless, at certain moments we are aware of the windows looking out to the world. Metaphorically speaking, the insertion of popular songs is a kind of "looking out at the world" from the transcendental, inward-turning concentration of prayer.

But it is of great importance to realize, that conceptually, davenen never ends. The recitative never ceases to flow; it seems to disappear only in the auditory sphere but is always present in the mind, even during the singing of secular songs.

Our example shows this conceptual polyphony remarkably. The cantor does not use the *czardas* melody in its entirety, but rather combines elements of its first and third melodic lines into one line. He uses even this melody fully only once for the first line of his song (see the first line of the notated example). In the middle of the second line, he slips back to recitative, as if he was unable to hold on to the spirit of the dance. The third line then is entirely in the recitative style although with symmetrical arrangement of metric units – a structure that falls in between the spirit of dance and *davenen*. The fourth line is intended as a recapitulation. However, its first measure is still half-recitative, and only in the second measure do the metric style and the melody of the *czardas* recapitulate – as if the prayer leader had forgotten that he was in the middle of a song and then suddenly remembered its melody and the tempo.

What appears to be an amorphous musical performance oscillating between styles is but the linear appearance of the conceptual polyphony in the mind. The recitation is present all the time in the minds of the people, it is something one can always return to. The performance of Herczog, which hesitantly oscillates between recitative and song, reflects this polyphonic consciousness. Whatever music is actually performed, the believer is continuously aware of the continuity of eternal time that reflects itself in the flow of the recitation of the prayer.

Conclusion

For a long time, I was hesitant to relate this rather unappealing aspect of liturgical music, its heterogeneity, to such deep thoughts in Judaism. But the more I reflected upon the problem, the more I saw the centrality of this question to the East Ashkenazi Jews. The characteristics I found in the music – heterogeneity, seemingly disorganized sequence of forms, constant oscillation between performing styles – are similar in essence to patterns of behavior. The behavior of the congregation during the service is similarly disorganized and seemingly without structure. There are individuals who recite their prayers with fervent devotion and concentration. Others sit and read the prayers in a relaxed, almost careless manner, again others sing with the prayer leader. There are some who talk with their neighbors, get into arguments about things completely unrelated to religion, stand up to meet friends, or even walk outside. There is a deliberate effort to express, through the behavior of the individuals, the tension between sacred and secular attitudes. What regulates the congregation as a whole, so that each individual acts on his own initiative and yet without disturbing the subtle balance that creates the total impression of the service, is a secret for the outsider. The participants instinctively feel their place at any given moment.[19]

The contradictions observed in the music and in patterns of behavior during the service can be placed in a broader context. The Ashkenazi community on the whole had a much more confused and troublesome relationship with its non-Jewish environment than did the communities in Muslim territories. At certain historical moments in certain territories, the Ashkenazi Jews lived in a relatively harmonious relationship with their neighbors; at other times their situation was difficult and often unbearable. In Eastern Europe, more than in the territories of the Middle East, the lot of the Jews changed frequently and abruptly, differing from place to place. The basic Ashkenazi Jewish experience with the environment was a feeling of insecurity and instability, and as a result, their attitude toward the culture of the host country ranged from devoted love to total rejection.

The Ashkenazi Jews understood their situation not simply in terms of history and social relations, but as the reflection of a deeper, existential problem. The surrounding secular world that seemed senseless in its arbitrary changes toward the Jews exemplified the ‘earthly life’ whose meaninglessness the *Kohelet* described. The

Ashkenazi Jews lived through the tension between the sacred and the secular world in their everyday experiences.

It was perhaps their unique historical circumstances, the fact that they were deprived of the normalcy of secular life, that forced Ashkenazi Jews to focus more deeply on the problem of existence and transfer it to religious practice. But the problem itself is basic to Judaism. In Jewish thought, the idea that the world is one entity and therefore everything is equally sacred is constantly opposed to the idea that there should be times and places set apart in order to transport the individual to a purely spiritual world, in other words: to reach the state of transcendence. This problem accompanied Jewish thinkers of all eras, hence the many efforts to draw everyday life into the sacred world by means of special blessings and rules, and eating habits. The dual ideal of heightened moments of transcendence and the spirituality of everyday life appears especially sharply in the teachings of Hasidism that advocates both at the same time.[20] This thought is at the center of the concept of Shabbat, that is, 'time set apart' from everyday life for the sake of spirituality but at the same time an occasion to enjoy the most earthly delights such as good food and rest. And it is largely because of the contradiction of sacred and secular that Jewish religious practice had so many varieties in the East Ashkenazi world – a system of infinite possibilities of religious expression.

NOTES

1

. This article is based on musical materials and interviews I have collected in Hungary, Paris, Czechoslovakia, the USA and Israel in the course of more then twenty years of fieldwork. The first version of this paper '"Sacred and secular" – the power of musical practice when law and negotiation collapse' was presented at the conference 'Modes of Law: Music and Legal Theory – an Interdisciplinary Workshop' (New York, 1998). This version was based on my lecture given at the Central European University, Budapest, 2001. I would like to thank the Fulbright and IREX fellowships, the Soros Foundation, and Collegium Budapest, Institute for Advanced Study for their generous support of my research of Ashkenazi music in the past few years.

2 . Martin Buber, *The Origins and Meaning of Hasidism*, ed. and trans. Maurice Friedman (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1988), pp. 35–37. It is also interesting to consider Scholem's explanation of the popular appeal of mystical thought in Hasidism. See Gershom S. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 6/1972), pp. 36–37, and 'Ninth lecture: Hasidism: The Latest Phase', pp. 325–50.

3 . A notable exception is the text of the two central prayers, the *Shema* and the *Shemonei Esrei* (*Amidah*), which should be recited without melody, silently in a barely audible voice.

4

. Although the performance I analyse in the following had not yet been published in transcription, the reader may find transcriptions of similar performances in Judit Frigyesi and Peter Laki, "Free-Form Recitative and Strophic Structure in the Hallel Psalms", *Orbis Musicae* vol. VII (1979-80), 43-80.

5 . This translation is a compilation of various existing translations with my changes and editions. I would like to thank Andre Hajdu for his insightful analysis of this text.

6

. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1965); Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harper, 1961), and *Ordeal by Labyrinth. Conversations with Claude-Henri Roquet* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1982); L. Jacobs, *Tract on Ecstasy* (London, 1963); W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London, 1905); Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London, 1957); Marshall G. S. Hodgson, 'Muslim Personal Piety: Confrontations with History and with Selfhood, c. 750–945', in *The Venture of Islam. Conscience and History in a World Civilisation*, Vol. 1: *The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 359–409. Moshe Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1988), *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 1988), and *Hasidism: Between*

Ecstasy and Magic (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); Rifka Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism: Quietistic Elements in Eighteenth-Century Hasidic Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Gershom S. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 6/1972).

7

. Talmud: B. Berakot, 30b. Translation from *The Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud* (London: The Soncino Press, 1990).

8

. Dov Baer of Mezhirech (Maggid), *Shemuah Tovah*, 79b–80a, in Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, p. 76.

9

. Shneur Zalman of Lyady, *Liqqutei Amarim: Tanya*, 82a–b, 81a–b, in Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, pp. 266, 267.

10

. György Lukács elaborated on this idea: 'Mysticism today exists only as a form of feeling everywhere and scattered all around. Because of that, today every real poet is more or less a mystic, much more and much more strongly than in the Middle Ages, perhaps because today most mystics become poets out of necessity.' In 'Ady Endre', in György Lukács, *Magyar irodalom, magyar kultúra: Válogatott tanulmányok* [Hungarian literature, Hungarian culture: selected essays], ed. Ferenc Fehér and Zoltán Kenyeres (Budapest: Gondolat, 1970), p. 48.

11

. The following poems ('Ádám, hol vagy?' 'Az Isten balján,' and 'Álmom: az Isten') are from the volume *Az Illés szekerén* [On Elijah's Chariot (1908)], published in the critical edition *Ady Endre összes versei* (Budapest: Osiris–Századvég, 1994). The English translation is mine. I elaborated on the connection between Hungarian modernism and Jewish ideas with special attention to Ady's mysticism in chapter 6 of my *Béla Bartók and Turn-of-the-Century Budapest* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1998, 2/2000).

12

. There are numerous sections in the. Berakot tractate of the Talmud that elaborates on this issues.

13

. I elaborated on this topic in my study 'The Practice of Music as an Expression of Religious Philosophy among the East-Ashkenazi Jews', *Shofar* 18, no. 4 (summer 2000), pp. 3–24.

14 . R. Elijah de Vidas, Quoted in Moshe Idel, *Hasidism Between Extasy and Magic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), Idel, 161.

15

. From Alemanno's Collectanea, quoted in *Ibid.*, 157. It should be noted that although the most

enlightening texts regarding this matter come from mystical and Hasidic sources, this understanding forms the basis of the Orthodox practice of prayer in general and explained regularly in introductions of modern prayer books.

16 . See my 'Preliminary Thoughts towards the Study of Music without Clear Beat: the Example of 'Flowing Rhythm' in Jewish *Nusah*', *Asian Music* 24, no. 2 (spring–summer 1993), pp. 59–88; and 'Transcription de la pulsation, de la métrique et du 'rythme libre'', *Cahiers de musiques traditionelles: Noter la musique* 12, Genève: Ateliers d'ethnomusicologie (1999), pp. 55–73.

17 . There is a complex set of religious–social considerations according to which communities use these terms and distinguish among *baal tefillah* [prayer leader], *sheliach tzibbur* [delegate of the congregation], *hazzan*, and cantor. These differences cannot be discussed here. At the beginning of this article, I followed the usage of the Hunyadi tér community when I referred to Márton Fóti as a cantor.

18 . Whereas the melodic outline of the recitative sections remains the same throughout the *Hallel* and with every prayer leader, in the middle section only the idea of "song" is constant. This means that these texts should be performed as songs but there is no constraint as to what kind of song to use. The prayer leader chooses whatever song he likes and can change the songs from time to time. The recording that serves as the basis of this transcription was made by David Polnauer in 1977. The transcription was first published in the article 'Free-Form Recitative', however, without the analysis that follows here. The source for the *czardas* tune: *Volkstümliche Lieder*, ed. György Kerényi (Budapest, 1964), p. 82.

19 . This social interaction in the synagogue is described insightfully in Samuel C. Heilman, *The People of the Book. Drama Fellowship and Religion* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), and *Synagogue Life: A Study in Symbolic Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.)

20 . Emmanuel Levinas, 'La pensé de Martin Buber et le judaisme contemporaine', in *Hors sujet* (Paris: Fata Morgana, Le livre de poche – Biblio – Essays, 1987), pp. 15–32.