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The Power of the Hasidic *Niggun* In Eastern European Jewry

“In the highest heavens, there is a certain temple with gates that can be opened only by the power of song” (Zohar).

In 1913, the first Modzitzer Rebbe, Rav Israel Taub, made the arduous journey from his small hometown of Modzitz to Berlin for medical treatment. His doctors told him that the only way they could save his life was by amputating his leg. While they consulted outside of the room, the Rebbe peered through his hospital window and took in the magnificent architecture and colors of the buildings that filled the Berlin urban landscape. The scene reminded him of sites from his beloved Jerusalem, as well as the poem, "Ezk'ra Elohim", written about the holy city and sung during the concluding service on Yom Kippur. When the surgeons reentered the room to begin the operation, the Rebbe insisted that no form of anesthesia be used. Baffled, they started the painful procedure, while the Rebbe, conscious and alert, simply began to hum a tune. He continued singing through the entire operation, transfixed on his new composition. By the time his leg had been amputated, the Rebbe had composed a majestic *niggun* (wordless melody) comprised of 36 individual stanzas! Awed by his ability to create such a virtuosic expression of praise while in the midst of extreme physical pain, thousands of the Modzitzer Rebbe's Hasidic followers sing his *nigun* every year to mark the anniversary of his death (Pasternak).

Since its inception in early 18th century Eastern Europe, the Hasidic movement has relied on music as both a source of mystical meaning and a means of escapism. In the wake of the Chmielnicki Massacres of 1648-49, the false Messianic prophecy of Shabbatai Tzvi, and widespread poverty and persecution, Hasidism represented an opportunity for Eastern European Jews to overcome their earthly struggles and ascend to a higher spiritual plane. Its founder, the

Baal Shem Tov (or the Besht, for short), opposed the existing Jewish communal hierarchy, in which esteemed Torah scholars were placed at the head, while the unlearned were relegated to the lowest tier (Pasternak). Perceiving that this “caste system” was doing irrevocable damage by splintering the Jewish community, the Besht developed an approach to holiness that emphasized elation over grief, *kavanah* (personal intention) over rigidity and routine. Singing, alongside dance and storytelling, became the main vehicle for building this new holy community.

Martin Buber, famed Jewish philosopher and student of Hasidut, remarks that Hasidism offered “a new mode of life...a circle of men at once rejoicing in the world and striving for nearness to God” (Buber 37). Comprised mostly of ‘unenlightened’ Polish and Ukrainian Jews, Hasidism “brought forth the greatest phenomenon in the history of the spirit, greater than any individual genius in art and in thought” (Buber 27). Its leading figures, the Besht and his successor, Dov Baer of Mezritch, used their positions of leadership not for personal accolades, but to foster a sense of tight-knit community rooted in religious devotion and uninhibited joy. Their teachings grew out of non-polemical methods—silent meditation, rhythmic movement, folk tale, and most notably, music. The *niggun*, in particular, became the form of musical expression that could best demonstrate the Hasidic values of inclusiveness, devout piety, and spiritual ecstasy.

Niggunim, as a musical mode, accentuated emotion and introspection far more than lyrics or aesthetic quality. Dov Ber of Lubavich, a Chabad Hasid who lived in the early 1800s, broke niggunim into three principal categories: (1) tunes accompanied by words to facilitate understanding of a certain text; (2) wordless melodies that represented the psycho-physical nature of every human being; and (3) the “unsung song”, music that did not materialize into an actual tune, but formed symbolically in the mind of a person concentrating on the Divine

(Bayer). The second concept of niggun, a melody without words, became the prevalent model used by the Hasidic community, who maintained that expressing one's most intimate confessions and prayers before God could not be achieved through a conventional verbal statement. "Melody is the outpouring of the soul," the first Lubavitcher Rebbe once said. "Words interrupt the stream of emotions" (Pasternak). Instead, niggunim generally evolved out of a single phrase, line or meaningless syllables. Because it proved extremely difficult to carry a melody for an extended period of time when one's mouth was closed and humming, Hasidim devised a system of vocalized syllables—ranging from "bim bam" to "ya-da-di" to "oy vey"—which served as the 'text' for their niggunim (Pasternak). Over time, each of the various Hasidic sects accepted a particular group of vocalized sounds, making it possible for a listener to tell the origin and affiliation of a Hasid depending on the syllables and melody he incorporated into his singing (Rabinowicz 333).

The Hasidic niggun typically began in a minor key, denoting an initial sense of mourning or melancholy. (This characteristic may be attributed to the notion that Hasidim in 18th-19th century Eastern Europe were starting from a basis of collective suffering and hardship.) The melody of the niggun began in a low register, then ascended gradually to a peak during the second section of the song, serving as a parallel for the symbolic elevation of the soul. Rav Shneur Zalman, the founder of Chabad Hasidism, viewed this music as a stepladder through which the singer and listener could reach spiritual heights. He contended that the swell of the music and the ascension of melody aided a person as they climbed each of three rungs on the spiritual ladder: *Hishtafkut Ha-nefesh* (outpouring of the soul), *Hitorerut* (spiritual awakening), and *Hitpaalut* (ecstasy). At the apex, the soul was stirred to a point at which it could completely abandon self-awareness and one's concern about physical, mundane matters (Rabinowicz 333).

Eventually, the melody would descend and revert to the initial section or refrain, allowing the soul to return to its corporeal counterpart and the singer to make the transition back from euphoria to grounded reality.

A Western European observer, Jiri Langer, describes his encounter with this fervent expression of Jewish prayer in the Hasidic court of Belz in the early 1910s:

“It is as though an electric spark has suddenly entered those present. The crowd which till now has been completely quiet, almost cowed, suddenly bursts forth in a wild shout...Gesticulating wildly, and throwing their whole bodies about, they shout out the words of the Psalms. They knock into each other unconcernedly...They are seized by an indescribable ecstasy” (Jacobs 355).

From this description, it is no wonder that more than two and a half million Jews embraced the spirit of Hasidism at the cross-section of modernity. Released from the shackles of strict *Halachah* (at least in regard to the ways in which Jews must pray) and the humiliation of being uneducated or illiterate, masses of people found solace in the social ‘enlightenment’ that Hasidut had to offer.

Though niggunim could be sung spontaneously and effectively as fit the mood of any given moment, Hasidic culture applied them to specific instances of communal gathering, worship and celebration. In this regard, the Hasidic niggun can again be divided into three practical categories: *rikkud* (dance), the *tish* niggun (sung at the Rebbe’s table), and *dveykut* (a slow and rapturous melody). The *rikkud*, largely derived from Polish and Slavic folk music, was played by local groups of *klezmerim* (folk musicians) at festive occasions, such as weddings and holidays (Bayer). Unlike most other niggunim, the *rikkud* was composed in a major scale to reflect the surrounding atmosphere of revelry. The *tish*, by contrast, was a long, slow, meditative melody often set to a piece of recognized text and sung at the Rebbe’s table. Even more

meditative and lengthy was the third type of niggun, *dveykut*. *Dveykut* penetrated one's emotional interior and imagination where the other two could not; it was most commonly sung by students, sitting expectantly at their study desks while waiting for the Rebbe to enter and make his weekly discourse on Torah (Pasternak).

In addition to these three forms, some Hasidic masters were influenced by the music and culture of their non-Jewish surroundings. As a result, niggunim could be heard in the style of a march or waltz, genres that had permeated European society on the battlefield and in the dance hall. Regardless of genre or style, every niggun succeeded in weaving together elements of popular folk music with a sound that was distinctly 'Jewish'. The *klezmerim*, whose repertoire ranged from stirring prayer melodies to current (non-Jewish) dance music, served as messengers of musical exchange between the Jewish communities. Even as Hasidic niggunim spread to Western Europe, they were largely appreciated as a "genuine and heartwarming manifestation of the true Jewish spirit in song" (Bayer).

Not everyone was captivated, however, by the infiltration of Hasidic music into their local communities. From the 1700s on, Western European *chazzanim* engaged in fiery debates about the music that should be sung in the synagogue. Many argued that although the Hasidic niggun provided a sense of "Old World" nostalgia, its lack of musical complexity did not serve the deep mystical intentions of the liturgy. In 1696, Judah Leib Zelichover wrote a text entitled *Shirei Yehudah*, in which he begrudges cantors of his day that were applauded for neglecting traditional modes of *chazzanut* and replaced it with original melodies that borrowed heavily from dance bands, cabarets, and street singers (Bayer). The tension of musical validity became further exacerbated by the statements of cantor Solomon Lipschitz in his 1718 book, *Te'udat Shlomo*. Lipschitz chided his colleagues for presenting the simplest forms of music (many of them had no

formal training), while implying that arrangements from Eastern Europe were repetitive, basic, and derived from the “lower strata of the music of the gentile environment” (Bayer).

Although this divergence of musical taste may seem trivial or insignificant on the surface, it echoes the widening gap between Ashkenazim of Eastern and Western Europe at the time. In all aspects of life, cultural or religious, political or intellectual, a sharp division distinguished the Jews that lived in either region. While Hasidim drew closer to their communal nucleus within the Pale, thousands of Western European Jews assimilated or adapted their religious and everyday customs through a process of Westernization. Lipschitz exemplifies this juxtaposition in his book, prioritizing high-brow, sophisticated melodies over the simplicity and accessibility of niggunim,: “Making music without knowing the rules of *musica* is like a prayer without true intention” (Bayer).

Hasidic leaders, in seeming contrast, taught that God accepted all prayer as long it was sincere, whether adorned with musical ornamentation or warbled awkwardly by a Jew unfamiliar with the liturgy. Rabbi Elimelech of Lezajsk recalled that even some of the most educated *tzaddikim* sang the sweetest spontaneous melodies as they prayed, though their voices were “far from tuneful” (Jacobs 358). One tale of the Baal Shem Tov recounts how there was once a severe drought in his village. The people fasted and cried out to God, but to no avail. One day, the Besht noticed a person “belonging to the ignorant and simple folk” chanting the Shema. But when the man recited the verse “and God shut up the heaven so that there shall be no rain” (Deut.11:17), he misunderstood the verse to mean “God shall squeeze out the heavens, so that there will be no rain [left there].” Despite his error in understanding, God was touched by the devout quality of the man’s prayer, and before long, rains descended from the heavens once more (Jacobs 345). The story illustrates a core principle of Hasidut—to welcome what Buber

calls “uneducated country people” into the prayer community, thereby propagating a “revolution of values...in which it is not the man who ‘knows’ the Torah, but the man who lives in it” that will earn respect and status from his neighbors (Buber 60). Reb Nachman of Bratzlav arrives at a similar conclusion, using music as the means of revolution: “Every Israelite has a portion in the world to come, and the main delight in the world to come will be derived from melody... through song and praise” (Rabinowicz 333).

The vibrant singing of Hasidic niggunim still captures the collective Jewish imagination today. They can be heard in synagogues of every denomination and have greatly influenced the music of contemporary Israeli artists. The recent revival of Hasidic song festivals in Israel and North America stands as testament to their timelessness and universal appeal (Rabinowicz 334). Most importantly, the niggun continues to be a spiritual gateway for Jews that seek fulfillment in times of profound loss or utter confusion. The Maggid of Miedzyrzecz elucidates the transcendent power of music in II Kings 3:15 : “As the musician played, the hand of the Lord came upon him.” This verse could be read as if the Holy Spirit dwells in humans only when they are passive, vessels for divine influence. The Maggid, however, offers a different interpretation: “As the musician *was* played,” that is, the musician must become an instrument himself, so as to allow God’s music to come upon him and through him (Dubnow 274).

The Hasidic attitude toward song and prayer is no different. Music has the capacity to bring unbounded joy to the human spirit and elevate it to an otherworldly state of religious ecstasy. Like the Modzitzer Rebbe, one only needs to open their mouth and express the niggun of their soul as they climb up the first step of their spiritual ladder.

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