

The Passing of Ben Zion Shenker^{z"l}

The Modzitz hassidic dynasty has lost a great composer

By LAWRENCE H. SCHIFFMAN

The recent passing of Ben Zion Shenker^{z"l}, the acknowledged master composer and singer of hassidic music, has left the Jewish community with

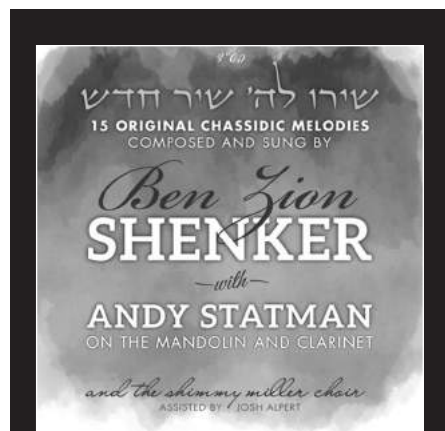
PERSPECTIVE

a great void. He passed away in Brooklyn on November 20. Ben Zion Shenker was born to hassidic immigrant parents in 1925. They raised him with a deep appreciation for Jewish music, played cantorial music for him, and gave him piano lessons. He was soon singing in choirs, made his first record at 13, and had his own 15-minute weekly radio program. He studied at Yeshiva Torah Vodaath, then in Williamsburg, where he received *semichah* (Rabbinic ordination) and Brooklyn College. When he was a 15-year-old, the Modzitzer Rebbe, Rebbe Shaul Yedidya Elazar Taub (1886-1947), of blessed memory, who had recently arrived in America as a refugee, realized that Shenker was sight singing the Rebbe's own composition from a musical score and asked him to be his musical secretary. By 1956 he had put out the first hassidic record ever. (Two years later Shlomo Carlebach released his first record.) From then until his passing just a few weeks ago, Shenker notated and recorded innumerable melodies of the Modzitzer Rebbes and composed over 500 songs of his own. In his later years he began to work with his friend and neighbor, the Klezmer musician, Andy Statman. Together they produced two CDs of Ben Zion's own compositions. A final CD is still in production.

All this and much more you could have read in a number of obituaries that related the accomplishments of this man who never earned a living from his music, not even collecting royalties for most of his recordings and compositions. He worked in the clothing and diamond businesses to support his family while serving also as the *chazzan* (cantor) of the Modzitz *shteibel* (small synagogue), first in Crown Heights and then in Flatbush. He was a man of humility and dignity as I discovered when I had the privilege of meeting him some years ago at a wedding. In fact, it is said that this great artist would perform free of charge for those who couldn't afford a singer at their wedding. But somehow or other, in all the

articles I have read, I have missed a sense of the message of his music. And so as we just passed the *sheloshim* (the completion of the first month of mourning), I thought I would try to get across some of the messages that he sought to teach through this medium.

The Modzitz hassidic dynasty is famous for its complex musical compositions set to words from the Bible and Siddur (prayer book).



Ben Zion Shenker^{z"l}, acknowledged master composer and singer of hassidic music.

This music is well known for its melodious character, its complexity, and especially for the way in which every note seems to express the meaning of the words. It has been performed by the Israel Philharmonic and because of its complexity lends itself beautifully to full orchestration. Shenker's own original compositions were animated as well by the spirit and high artistic quality of these hassidic melodies, although he absorbed the spirit of other hassidic groups during a trip to Israel with his father as a young man. Some of his own compositions have become staples in the Jewish community, sung regularly on Sabbaths and played at weddings. Each one of these melodies can be seen as a lesson in the significance of the words for which it was composed.

Let me tell you a story about Reb Ben Zion. Sometime in 1945 he was present with the Modzitzer Rebbe and other distinguished rabbis and hassidic rebbes at a bris when Rabbi Shaul called him up to the front and read a letter to him. It was a story of how one of the rebbe's relatives, Azriel David Fastag, had been packed with other Jews in a cattle car bringing them to

their deaths in Treblinka. Fastag on the spot composed a melody for the words of Maimonides's principle, *Ani Ma'amin*, "I believe in the coming of the Messiah." He began to sing it and all the Jews in that car began to sing along. Fastag asked that if anybody should survive, he should bring the melody to his rebbe who by this time was in New York. Two men jumped off the train and one survived, eventually reach-

ing the rebbe on the way to Israel and inspired by an article he read about Naomi Shemer's *Yerushalayim shel Zahav* ("Jerusalem of Gold"). When most people think of joyous hassidic dance music, heard so often at weddings, they think of loud almost boisterous singing and sharply defined beats, much of it created by the electronic tools of today's music industry. Ben Zion and the various arrangers who

worked with him understood things differently. Joy can be expressed even in a slow song, as is the case in the melodies he composed for the Passover hymn *Chad Gadya* ("One Kid"). Even for fast melodies, loudness and heavy rhythm were not what made joy, rather a kind of light almost "prancy" tone, usually accompanied softly by brass and wind instruments. Sadness did not require the often repetitive crying sounds of East European *chazanut* (cantorial music) but could be transmitted by a slow halting tempo and by compositions that accented the most expressive words in the traditional texts.

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ing safety in Switzerland. There he found someone to write down the musical notes and brought them with his story to relatives of the composer, also named Fastag. They sent the story and the music to the Modzitzer who asked young Ben Zion to read the music. Reading the notes, he began singing *Ani Ma'amin*, and the sad song of the Holocaust, this haunting melody that we all know so well, spread to the entire Jewish world. The humble Ben Zion let years go by before he told the story of his role in bringing this *niggun* (hassidic melody) to the Jewish world.

One of the main features of the music of Modzitz is that it is always composed for the particular words in question. Yes, occasionally a melody may be moved from one set of words to another, but for that to happen it will have to pass the same test, namely the question of whether it truly expresses the meaning of those words. The great artistry of Shenker was in his ability, both in interpreting the music of the Modzitzer Rebbes and in composing his own, to express precisely the inner significance of the words. He believed that the music that he composed and recorded has a special

reason, every musical phrase, every bar, every note, had to be carefully chosen.

The music of the Modzitz Rebbes and that of Shenker could be happy or sad. On the one hand, it might express the joy of the Jew in observing the commandments or the joy of a specific occasion — one of the festivals or a family celebration, a bar mitzvah or a wedding. Famous among Ben Zion Shenker's own melodies is his *Yosis Alayich*, "Your God will rejoice over you," composed in 1965 and sung joyously at weddings. But it can also express sadness, such as the famous Modzitz melody *Habeit Mishamayim Ure'eh*, "Look from Heaven and See," calling on God, begging Him, to be cognizant of the terrible suffering of His people, composed by the Rebbe Rav Shaul right after the Holocaust. These alternating emotions that indeed make up the life of the Jew in modern times permeate this music. They express the tension that we all feel when we experience at the same time the horrible sadness of the Holocaust and the joy of having the State of Israel. Special in this context is his *Velirushalayim Ircha* ("To Jerusalem your city, return in mercy") composed in 1968 on the El Al

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Reb Ben Zion spent his entire life dedicated to the goal of preserving and spreading the music of Modzitz and composing his own beautiful music. Shenker's personal archive of recordings (over 600 90-minute cassettes, plus tens of reel-to-reel tapes) is part of the archives of the Institute for Preservation and Documentation of Modzitz Music. Some of his melodies have become so famous that many are unwilling to believe that they were composed in America, thinking that they must

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A Great Jewish Bard

Leonard Cohen's Jewish heritage in his life and art

By YVETTE ALT MILLER

Although Leonard Cohen, the influential, world-famous Canadian-Jewish musician, who died on November 7, 2016, at age 82, abandoned many aspects of

IN MEMORIAM

his Judaism, he never forgot his connection to the Jewish people and Jewish homeland.

Born in Montreal in 1934, Cohen was the grandson, on his father's side, of Lyon Cohen, founding president of the Canadian Jewish Congress. His mother's father, Rabbi Solomon Klonitsky-Kline, was a Talmudic scholar with whom Leonard often studied growing up.

He began playing folk guitar when he was 15, and became part of Canada's avant-garde musical scene. As a young man, he wrote novels and poetry before devoting himself to music in the 1960s.

Many of his beautifully crafted songs directly reflect his Jewish heritage. Cohen himself explained that "Who by Fire," recorded in 1974, was inspired by the powerful Yom Kippur prayer, *U'Nesaneh Tokef*. "Hallelujah," one of Cohen's most famous songs, references King David, traditional author of the Book of Psalms: "Now I've heard there was a secret chord / That David played, and it pleased the Lord."

In the 1980s, when the singer was living in Europe, he wrote "First We Take Manhattan," in which he suggests that while he appreciates and understands the allure of the continent, he remains

keenly aware of the millions of Jews murdered there during World War II: "I love your body and your spirit and your clothes / But you see that line there moving through the station? / I told you, I told you, I told you, I was one of those."



The late Leonard Cohen.

Cohen was living in Greece when, in 1973, Israel was attacked by Arab armies on Yom Kippur. Cohen immediately booked a flight to Tel Aviv. His plans were vague; he thought he might volunteer on a kibbutz to help Israel deal with the labor shortage there as its young men were called to the front.

Shortly after Cohen's arrival in Tel Aviv, he was spotted in a cafe by Israeli singer Oshik Levi, who informed him that he was about to go to the Sinai Peninsula to entertain the troops; would Cohen join him? Cohen agreed and spent several months traveling around Israel, performing for members of the IDF.

During that time, Cohen wrote the words to one of his most moving songs, "Lover Come Back to Me,"

in which he frankly discusses his battle with self-hatred but features a powerful chorus in which he asks God to protect the soldiers fighting for Israel: "And may the spirit of this song, / may it rise up pure and free. / May it be a shield for you/ a shield against the enemy." At a concert in Tel Aviv, in 1980, Cohen explained that the song was inspired "by the grace and the bravery of many Israeli soldiers at the front".

The following years were at times spiritually chaotic for Leonard Cohen. He experimented with Buddhism, and in the 1990s even became a Buddhist monk though, at the time, he insisted, "I'm not looking for a new religion. I'm quite happy with the old one, with Judaism."

His professional life was also in turmoil during this time: his long-time manager, Kelley Lynch, stole millions from the singer-songwriter, leaving Cohen almost broke. (Lynch was eventually sentenced to 18 months in prison, in 2012.)

In the midst of these troubles, in 2009, after Cohen announced that he would be appearing in Israel in 2009, he was targeted by pro-Palestinian activists who insisted that he refrain from performing in the Jewish state. Anti-Zionists picketed his concerts, shouting at attendees as they entered the venues. At first, Cohen tried to negotiate with his critics, taking their complaints at face value. If those who hounded him and disrupted his concerts wanted him to help the Palestinians, he was more than willing to do so.

He arranged for a concert to be held in Ramallah and asked Amnesty International to help him donate the proceeds of his performances to peace groups.

Instead of welcoming these gestures, Amnesty International refused to work with him. The Ramallah Cultural Palace, which was to host Cohen's performances, canceled, explaining that he would not be welcome if he performed in Israel, too.

Undaunted, Cohen refused to back down. His September 24, 2009 concert near Tel Aviv sold out within hours, and he played to a

Cohen's final album, "You Want It Darker," released three weeks before he died, is a somber album in which, in decidedly Jewish terms, he contemplates his mortality. The title track begins with Cohen singing the English translation of the first words to the *kaddish*: "Magnified, sanctified, be thy holy name." And the Hebrew word in the song's chorus — in which Cohen expresses his readiness to die — frequently appears in the Torah: "*Hineni, Hineni*; Here I am my Lord." One iteration of that chorus is sung by Gideon Zelermyer, cantor of Montreal's Shaar



Leonard Cohen sings for Israeli troops during the Yom Kippur War. To his immediate right is then-General Ariel Sharon.

packed audience of about 55,000 Israelis. "May your life be as sweet as apples dipped in honey," Cohen told his fans, and recited blessings over the crowd. He wound up donating the receipts to a group established in conjunction with the event, the Fund for Reconciliation, Tolerance and Peace, dedicated to supporting Israelis and Palestinians who'd lost loved ones in terror attacks and in times of war.

Hashomayim Synagogue.

After Cohen passed away, the synagogue released a statement which described Cohen as "a beloved and revered member" and reported that "[his] wish was to be laid to rest in a traditional Jewish rite beside his parents, grandparents and great-grandparents."

Reprinted from the *Aish Hatorah* website.

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be part of the European Jewish heritage. It is perhaps the greatest of all tributes to him that so many traditional Jews begin and end the Shabbat with two of his most famous tunes. At the onset of the Sabbath, right after *Shalom Aleichem*, they intone Proverbs 31, "A woman of valor who can find?" This practice was initiated by 16th-century Kabbalists for whom the Divine Presence, the *Shechinah*, understood as representing the feminine "aspect" of God, was welcomed into the home. For many, this hymn came to be understood as praise for the Jewish woman, which of course was the original intent of

its author. In fact, Ben Zion is said to have composed this melody in honor of his wife in 1953, taking weeks to compose it. It was traditional, especially in hassidic homes, to chant these words. Various hassidic rebbes had developed beautiful recitative chants for these words and Ben Zion based his beautiful melody on the chant customary among the Modzitzer Rebbes. Anyone who has heard a hassidic rebbe recite this prayer will recognize strains of that chant in the beautiful melody of Shenker, now the standard throughout the Jewish community all over the world.

As the Sabbath is ready to go out, at *Seudah Shelishit*, the final (third) Sabbath meal usually conducted very close to sunset, it was always traditional to recite, even to sing, the words of Psalm 23,

Mizmor LeDavid, "A Psalm of David: The Lord is my shepherd..." In this context, this psalm, which unfortunately is so well known from its recital at funerals, is meant to express the peacefulness that Shabbat had brought and to offer a prayer at this particular time of divine favor for peace and blessing in the future week. A similar tone was meant to be set by the beautiful cantillation of the central paragraph of the Shabbat afternoon *Amidah* (silent devotion), *Atah Echad* ("You are One and Your name is One"). Ben Zion must have been motivated by the traditional tune for this paragraph, reaching way back into the Middle Ages and chanted in Ashkenazic synagogues all over the world, as the tone of his well-known composition reflects some of the phrases of the tradi-

tional cantillation and certainly reflects its mood as a whole.

This song also has a beautiful story to it. In 1946 Ben Zion journeyed to pre-State of Israel (then called Palestine) with his father who wanted to see his brother in Haifa whom he hadn't seen since 1921 when he left Europe. One Shabbat, Ben Zion didn't feel well so he stayed home and sat down to eat *Seudah Shelishit*. He just started to sing this beautiful melody and, fearing he would forget it, sang it over and over until Shabbat ended. He starting singing it in shul in the following weeks, and by the time he returned to America after his three-month stay in Israel, it had already become popular in the U.S.

Every one of his compositions and the style of his singing of the

Modzitz "favorites," as some of the recordings were labeled, showed his deep understanding of the inner meaning of Jewish life as a whole and most especially of our sacred texts. I had the privilege of meeting him only once. If there was anything that impressed me in that short meeting, it was that his music and the quiet way in which he went about contributing so much to Jewish life was indeed reflective of the humility and dignity of this special man. May his memory and the memory of his beautiful music be blessed!

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