

The Journey of a Hebrew Melody: Rabbi Israel Goldfarb's Shalom Aleichem

Rabbi Henry D. Michelman

"As songs were your statutes to me wherever I wandered."

PSALM 119:15

This is the story of a Hebrew melody for the Friday night hymn *Shalom Aleichem* sung in the home, welcoming the angels who, according to the Talmud (Shabbat 119b), accompany the head of the household home from the synagogue. For centuries the hymn itself was recited or chanted and added a dimension of formality and elegance to the Sabbath evening observance.

This melody was composed by my grandfather, Rabbi Israel Goldfarb, on a Friday afternoon in May of 1918 as he sat on the steps of his *alma mater*, Columbia University. Within a few years, it was known and sung throughout the Jewish world. The melody is known, but often not the composer. How did it proliferate?

FROM TABLE TO TABLE

Within weeks of bringing it home to share with his family and guests at the Friday evening Sabbath table, the melody began to "travel" into the homes of the extended Goldfarb family: Israel Goldfarb had five brothers and five sisters—all musical and all enamored of singing.

My uncle Joseph, Rabbi Goldfarb's son, recalls asking his father what other melody for *Shalom Aleichem* had been used previously in America or in Europe. Rabbi Goldfarb answered that, as far as he knew, there had been no

Rabbi Henry D. Michelman succeeded his grandfather as Rabbi of the Kane Street Synagogue. He then served as Assistant to the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary and later was Executive Vice-President of The Synagogue Council of America. Now a composer, he has scored films for A&E, PBS, CNBC, and ABC. His current commitments include works for synagogues and churches.

ign
to
ive
you
the
in
to
six-
ted it
may
the
itaneous
ne on
was
ated for the
travel
but
carry
sing was
by Moses.
he requests
vers to
a melody
and I

ody for "Shalom
orld -- but the

ued on page 73)

Raynot

חיינו • A Journal of Ideas

melody for *Shalom Aleichem*. Previously, it had been “half chanted” or “only recited” by the men returning home from *shul*.

I asked Cantor Jacob Lefkowitz, the father of our Cantor David Lefkowitz, how his own father had rendered *Shalom Aleichem* upon returning to his home after *shul* on Friday nights. He recalled his father chanting it, rather than singing a formal melody. Yet, David Lefkowitz sang for me a “snappy tune” to *Shalom Aleichem* composed by his grandfather Yitzhak Yehuda. It was quite beautiful. Still, it is the Goldfarb melody that became universally known and is sung to this day.

Friday at my grandfather’s country home was devoted to preparing for *Shabbat*. My grandmother presided over a large bustling kitchen and the massive Sabbath table was set in the large dining room. Late in the afternoon Grandfather bathed and dressed in white to receive his guests. In a few hours there would be as many as twenty people around that table—welcoming *Shabbat* in four-part harmony: *Shalom Aleichem*, *Eishet Chayil*, *Kol M’kadesh*, *Birchat Hamazon*, and so many *z’mirot*. No synagogue could boast a better “choir” for singing the Sabbath hymns composed or arranged by my grandfather.

The three Sabbath meals, from Friday night to late Saturday afternoon, were also grand concerts—*lich’vod haShabbat*. It was at this table in Highmount, New York, and at the Goldfarb Clinton Street table in downtown Brooklyn that for almost half a century family and guests imbibed with their *kiddush* wine Goldfarb melodies, which then graced their own Sabbath tables, and eventually those of thousands of others.

Jacob Lefkowitz recalls that as a young man studying at the Yeshiva Torah V’Daas in Brooklyn he was a regular *Shabbat* guest in the home of Nathaniel David, the father of Israel Goldfarb. “Nossonl Dovid” himself was a wonderful melody-maker. At his table Jacob Lefkowitz heard the *Shalom Aleichem* and many other melodies for the *Shabbat z’mirot*, which he carried with him to the Young Israel of Cleveland. He told me that the music traveled from Cleveland to Chicago to Denver within the Young Israel movement certainly, as it simultaneously entered the larger congregational world. Rabbi David Lincoln learned the Goldfarb *Shalom Aleichem* at the *Shabbat* table of his father, Ashe Lincoln, in London, and he recalls his grandfather Reuben singing it too. Rabbi Lincoln told me that in the course of his extensive travels around the world, the one melody he could count on hearing and, indeed, singing at any *Shabbat* table was the Goldfarb *Shalom Aleichem*.

Indeed, the Goldfarbs and their friends helped to strengthen the then fledgling Young Israel movement’s commitment to congregational singing, a practice not popular in the 19th century or in the early part of the 20th century.

FROM CONGREGATION TO CONGREGATION

Baith Israel Anshei Emes, “the Kane Street *shul*,” was founded in 1856 by European immigrants who debarked on Brooklyn’s South Shore and settled in Red Hook and Gowanus, known today as the very fashionable Brooklyn Heights, Cobble Hill, and Carroll Gardens. It is still a thriving and growing congregation. Israel Goldfarb was ordained in 1902 by Solomon Schechter at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. From 1904 to 1956 he served as rabbi and cantor and introduced his music as he composed it for liturgical services—Sabbath, festivals and High Holy Days. So many of his melodies have become such standard parts of our liturgical services that they are considered “traditional;” he has been called “the father of congregational singing in America,” and the Goldfarb family has often been referred to as “the first family of American synagogue music.” His congregation was called the “mother synagogue of Brooklyn” because generations of members went forth from Kane Street to create congregations like Union Temple, the East Midwood Jewish Center, the Flatbush Jewish Center, and other Jewish communities in Brooklyn. They brought with them the Goldfarb music and the traditions of congregational singing. Rabbi Goldfarb brought his congregation into the Conservative movement, and it became one of the founding members of the United Synagogue of America.

The Goldfarb *Shalom Aleichem* melody was first published in *Friday Evening Melodies* (1918), *The Jewish Songster* (1919), and *Song and Praise for Sabbath Eve* (1920). Tens of thousands of these books were used in synagogues and schools throughout the country. They contained melodic songs, which were easy to sing and appealed to a new generation of American Jews. Here is how one was described in the publisher’s catalogue:

“*Kol Teruat Israel*, by Israel Goldfarb: a New and Original *Rosh Hashanah* Evening Service. Arranged in four parts, based on traditional motives, retaining the stirring spirit of the ‘days of awe,’ modern in its musical arrangement, melodic and easy to learn and sing.”

“BACK TO MOUNT SINAI”

The *Shalom Aleichem* melody traveled in three different directions. First, it “journeyed” back to “Mount Sinai,” as it were: it became so universally sung that Jews in the United States were sure their grandparents and great-grand-

Rayonot

תורת אדם A Journal of Ideas

parents brought the melody to this country from ancient and distant places. Though it was copyrighted and recorded at the Library of Congress in 1918, many publishers—some in Israel—not knowing the origin of the melody, simply wrote “traditional” or “Hassidic.”

Almost fifty years ago Rabbi Morris Kertzer wrote that while visiting in India he heard an Indian Jew singing the Goldfarb *Shalom Aleichem*. When he asked him where he had learned that melody, the Indian Jew told him that it “came down by tradition from his ancestors.” Family members traveling to Rhodesia, Palestine, and other distant places heard our grandfather’s *Shalom Aleichem* and brought back similar reports.

Goldfarb wrote that this music was printed for the first time in his *Friday Evening Melodies*, which was published in 1918: “The popularity of the melody,” he said, “traveled not only throughout this country but throughout the world, so that many came to believe that the song was handed down from Mount Sinai by Moses.”

Cantor Pinchas Spiro of Tifereth Israel Synagogue in Des Moines, writes: “The terms ‘traditional’ and ‘folk-song’ are frequently abused in musical anthologies and song collections. In a great many instances the use of these terms merely indicates that the names of the composers were unknown to the compiler or editor. A classic case in point is Rabbi Israel Goldfarb’s *Shalom Alechem* [sic], which most song collections list as ‘traditional.’

“During the years 1961–1966 I served as cantor of Temple Beth Am in Los Angeles,” notes Spiro. “I was fortunate to study with the great Max Helfman. One day during 1963 he showed me his *Sabbath Chants and Zmirot*, a collection he had compiled and harmonized for Brandeis Camp Institute of Santa Susanna. I was surprised to see Goldfarb’s *Shalom Aleichem* described there as a ‘melody of Hassidic origin.’ I told him I was fairly certain that the composer was Israel Goldfarb. Max Helfman challenged me to prove it. And that prompted my letter of inquiry to Rabbi Goldfarb. I have a hand-written letter from Rabbi Goldfarb in which he tells in great detail how and when he composed that melody. It is dated May 10, 1963. Unfortunately, I never had a chance to show it to Max Helfman. He died rather suddenly on August 9, 1963.”

GARCIA MEETS GOLDFARB

In the secular music world, the Goldfarb melody currently enjoys a popular reception, although without appropriate attribution. Instrumental versions of

Rayonot

רעיונות A Journal of Ideas

the Goldfarb *Shalom Aleichem* are popping up all over the place. For instance, Andy Statman and David Grisman popularized it in their album *Songs of Our Fathers*; the melody was played last year at the memorial service for Jerry Garcia, the founder of the rock group The Grateful Dead; the Argentinean guitarist Enrique Coria has included it in his repertoire, though he is unaware of its Jewish liturgical roots, or that it was composed and published long ago.

Perhaps the oddest or the most unlikely recording of the Goldfarb *Shalom Aleichem* is the one by the Celtic guitarist Tony McManus, who plays it on his album of predominantly Celtic music, *Ceol More*. His instrumental version is richly harmonized with overdubs of mandolin, guitar and string bass. Not too long ago Itzhak Perlman recorded *Shalom Aleichem* on his album *At the Fiddler's House*. He, too, was apparently not aware of its origin. And, as in the above cases, the Goldfarb melody was simply called "traditional."

It is hard to believe that there was a time when congregational singing, as we know it today, was not popular nor was it accepted in many traditional synagogues. In the past in Europe, composers of synagogue music wrote for choir and organ; Jews "*darvened*"—chanted and improvised on traditional *niggunim* or musical motives from Hassidic and, sometimes, secular sources. But, as a congregation in its collectivity, they basically did not sing as we do today.

Hazzanim did not (or dared not, as we shall see) create and introduce melodies into the liturgical service for congregants to learn and then to sing regularly. Macy Nulman (in his *Concise Encyclopedia of Jewish Music*) reports that, as a *hazzan* at a large Brooklyn congregation years ago, he attempted to introduce congregational singing into the service, and subsequently was called to a board meeting. The chairman, speaking for the board, scolded him: "We pay you a salary, and you ask us to help in the singing?" Contrast this with Goldfarb's congregation, where by 1907 there was a choir of professionals and lay members helping to lead congregants in song.

The Young Israel Movement is often credited with initiating congregational singing during the synagogue service as a means of overcoming "passive listening." Mr. Nulman tells us that "the musical service of Young Israel became known as 'Young Israel *nusach*.' A person who included these tunes as he led the (otherwise traditional) service in a synagogue other than Young Israel was sometimes reprimanded with 'Do you want to make this *shul* into a Young Israel—a church?'"

Still, melodies that people enjoyed singing flowed into Young Israel and flowed out, and the Goldfarb family had a lot to do with this process. As early as 1919 and throughout the 1920's, after conducting services in his synagogue and presiding over his own Shabbat table, Israel Goldfarb often walked over the

Rayonot

רַיִוֹטֹת A Journal of Ideas

Brooklyn Bridge on Friday nights to the *Oneg Shabbat* at the newly formed Young Israel, housed in the Educational Alliance building on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. He brought with him his melodies. And then he walked back to Brooklyn, so that on *Shabbat* morning he would be back in his own *shul*. His brothers—Joseph, Saul, Benjamin, and Samuel—also were very active in the Young Israel movement in those early years. They, too, were extremely musical and served often as lay cantors in synagogues, where they infused Young Israel and other congregations with the kinds of melody-making and singing that were to become models for subsequent generations. Goldfarb first cousins—the Speros, the Hoenigs, the Rhines—legendary families in the Young Israel Movement, also were musical and accomplished singers who loved to sing Hebrew songs. Goldfarb family seniors tell of regular musical gatherings Saturday nights after *Havdalah* where cousins came together to make Jewish music.

Evelyn Mehlman in her article “A Tradition That Grew in Brooklyn,” (*Pioneer Women*, May-June, 1970) writes: “In 1907 choral music was introduced into Rabbi Goldfarb’s synagogue with Meyer Machtenberg, the well-known synagogue choral conductor, leading the choir until 1909. Machtenberg told this writer that Rabbi Goldfarb was familiar with the difficulties posed by the choirs of the day, and he was equally aware of the increased demands made by the new school of professionally trained musicians writing music. While he favored choral music, as a conservative *rabbi-hazzan*, he felt also very strongly about the desirability of added congregational participation in the services from the musical and devotional point of view. He said it was extremely important to compose simple melodic songs that untrained congregational members could learn easily and quickly and enjoy singing as part of the services and at home.”

My Uncle Joseph, who sang for many years in his father’s synagogue choir of mixed voices (in those days!), confirms this, adding that Rabbi Goldfarb was formally trained in music, having studied at Columbia University with one of its foremost musicologists and at The Institute of Musical Arts, which became The Juilliard School. Before coming to Kane Street, Rabbi Goldfarb conducted the choirs for major cantors in the Lower East Side synagogues. Years later he was appointed instructor of *hazzanut* in the Rabbinical School and in the Teachers Institute at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he taught for decades.

Israel Goldfarb was born in Sieniewa (Shinyeva), Galicia, Poland, in 1879, the oldest son and second of a family of eleven children. He came to the United States at the age of 14. In Evelyn Mehlman’s article, his son Joseph offers this reflection on his father’s music, especially the *Shalom Aleichem* melody: “Since the transmigration of a melody is often strange and mysterious, perhaps the *Shalom Aleichem* is a memorial, in its own way, to the

Rayonot

תורת דעות A Journal of Ideas

memory of Sieniewa where Israel Goldfarb first acquired his love for Judaism and music; for the melody through Israel Goldfarb keeps alive the name of the little village of Sieniewa, a village that was completely exterminated by the Nazis and no longer exists." ■

was liberal enough to grant such permission. Some were generous enough to acknowledge the authorship. A great many publishers, some in Israel, not knowing the origin of the melody, simply wrote "Traditional or Hassidic." But the fact remains that I am the composer, and the melody has been copyrighted by me and recorded at the Library of Congress in 1978.

I went to this length in writing to you in order to please you and for all the many claims to the contrary.

With all good wishes in your sacred work, believe me to be

very sincerely yours

Israel Goldfarb

Rev. Pinchas Spiro,
Katzman Temple Beth Am
Los Angeles, Calif

P.S. Rabbi Morris Kertov wrote in his book that while visiting in India he heard an Indian Jew singing Shalom Aleichem. When he asked the Jew where he learned that melody, the Indian Jew told him that it came down by tradition from his ancestors. This merely proves that the strains of this melody truly express the soul of the Jew in the time of Sabbath spirit.

Rabbi Israel Goldfarb's letter describing how his melody for "Shalom Aleichem" made its way to India.

RABBI ISRAEL GOLDFARB - D.H.L.
 200 NO. VILLAGE AVENUE
 ROCKVILLE CENTRE, N. Y.
 NO. 5-7085

RABBI EMERTUS
 CONGREGATION BAITH ISRAEL AVRAHAM ENOS
 MOTHER SYNAGOGUE OF BROOKLYN
 KANE & COURT STREETS
 BROOKLYN 23, N. Y.

May 10, 1963

Dear Hazzan Pinchas Spiro:-

I have your inquiry about the origin of the melody of "שלוש אלהים".

Please be assured that the melody originated with me and me alone.

I composed the melody forty-five years ago. This month, while sitting on a bench near the Alma Mater statue, in front of the Library at Columbia University, N. Y. I began to hum to myself. I fished out a sheet of music-paper from my briefcase and jotted it down. It was on a Friday which may be the reason why the melody and the words came to my mind simultaneously.

Besides, I was working at that time on my "Friday Evening Melodies" which was published in 1918, in which it was printed for the first time. The popularity of the melody traveled not only throughout this country but throughout the world, so that many people came to believe that the Song was handed down from Mt. Sinai by Moses.

I have received innumerable requests from Rabbis, Cantors and Composers to give them permission to use the melody in their musical collections, and I

Rabbi Israel Goldfarb's letter describing how he had composed the melody for "Shalom Aleichem" in 1918. This melody quickly spread around the Jewish world — but the identity of its composer was often unknown.

(continued on page 73)

The

"As son

This household or chanted evening of This n Friday after bia Univer world. Th

Within w Friday ev the exten ters—all I My t other me Europe.

Rabbi He gogue. He and later poser, he include w