Concert with Cantor Rachel Weston

איר יידן זאָלט זיין הייליג

Ir Yidn Zolt Zayn Heylik

Music and translation by Rabbi Noam Lerman
Words: אַ תחינה ביים וואַשן די הענט (tkhine before handwashing)
from רב פנינים –ש"ס תחינה published in 1916 in NYC by the Hebrew Publishing Company

An opening *tkhine.* From Hebrew *teḥinnot* meaning "supplications," tkhines are private devotions and paraliturgical prayers in Yiddish, recited primarily by women. According to Michael Meyer they "originated in the world of pre-modern Ashkenazic Jewry and represent one of the richest and least known printed forms of religious Jewish literature." Tkhines first appeared in print in the sixteenth century and became much more popular during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For examples of some of these tkhines, see *The Merit of Our Mothers: A Bilingual Anthology of Jewish Women's Prayer.* Tkhines are generally conversational in tone and rhythm, often concerning deeply troubling themes of human experiences, for example plague, death, memory, infertility. In the past decade, there has been a resurgence of interest in tkhines within the Yiddish cultural and musical world, along with the rituals of female spiritual workers at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the Pale of Settlement which accompanied their recitation (for more information, please see the research of Yiddishist historian Annabelle Gottfried-Cohen www.pullingatthreads.com). To learn more from contemporary scholar and composer of tkhines Rabbi Noam Lerman, including how tkhines challenged gender boundaries, see www.spontaneousprayer.com.

As You write in your holy Torah
"..and you shall be holy"
You Jews should be holy

Our sages used to say,
people should wash their hands,
because all that is unholy lies within the hands.

With hands a person can do plenty of damage,
and therefore one should maintain their holiness,
and cleanse them of all negativity.

דער הייליקער בּעל שֵׁם טוב

Der Heyliker Baalshemtov
Poem: Zishe Landau
Music: Polina Shepherd
Translation: Rachel Weston

This poem by modernist U.S. Yiddish poet Zishe Landau (1889–1937), who was born in Plotsk (Poland) into a distinguished rabbinical family, depicts the duality of the sensory experience of the divine. The Baal Shem Tov ('Master of the Good Name,' the eighteenth-century rabbi credited with founding the Chasidic movement) is walking through the field at dawn. The freezing north wind begins to blow, and his limbs begin to freeze. And with freezing limbs, he sings a praise to the Eternal: "Blessed is the one who has the honour of freezing from your wind. Blessed am I who have the honour of being plunged into your frozen depths." And thirstily he drinks the frozen air, and sinks deeper into meditation. And little by little a mighty, flaming sun begins to rise, a sun as hot as the depths of hell, and sweat starts to run from the face of the Baal Shem Tov, and no more wind blows in the burning field. And suddenly, within the flaming heat, the voice of the Baal Shem Tov spreads, as he sings himself into fragments: "For the heat and the cold, for the sun and the rain, for day and for night, I praise you. For everything you send into the human realm, I offer you the deepest praise. Blessed am I who am now consumed in your fire, and if you have decreed that I should succumb and fall from thirst upon your earth, I shall do so with joy and humility." Polina Shepherd is a composer, performer, educator and activist originally from Siberia, now living in Brighton, UK.

דאָס בּיסעלע שׁפּייז

Dos Bisele Shpayz
Lyrics: Meir Haratz
Music: Efim Chorny

A song of the beauty of simplicity, sufficiency, and the communality of food. "This little bowl of borscht with cabbage, this little piece of herring and bread, this little plate of radishes with salt, this little pot of kasha (buckwheat) with shmaltz (fat). This little plate of noodles with chicken soup, and this little bit of sweet carrot stew, just this short menu, grant for us, God. Give us sugar for our tea, and latkes with an egg, and for the lovely fish, grant us a guest to our table. Efim Chorny, a native of his hometown of Kishinev, is one of the most important protagonists in the contemporary revival of Jewish culture in Eastern Europe.

איך בענק אהיים

Ikh Benk Aheym

Rumshinsky / Malavsky

Arrangement and translation: Rachel Weston

A piece from Joseph Rumshinsky's 1919 Yiddish operetta *Dem Rebns Nign*, made famous by the seminal khazante Goldie Malavsky. The khazantes were women performers of khazones / cantorial music, who were popular artists in the New York Jewish music scene of the early decades of the twentieth century. Malavsky's unique re-interpretation of this piece is an almost complete revision of the original Rumshinsky aria, heard on her only solo record from the late 1950s, and is one of the great classics of mid-century Jewish American music.

"I yearn for belonging, for the years of my youth, for the sabbath evenings gathered around my father's table eating gefilte fish. And he would utter:

"All who sanctify the Sabbath as it deserves. All who protect the Sabbath from its breakers; their reward is very great, correspondent to his act, each according to their camp, and each according their flag" *

I yearn for belonging,
When we walked to shul together,
When my grandfather the cantor sang from his soul:

"God's glory fills the world, God's ministering angels ask one another "Where is the place of God's glory?" They say to one another: "Blessed." **

I yearn for belonging
When we nourished ourselves at the end of the sabbath, and my mother whispered holy words:

God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Protect and shield us, your dear people who struggle to know you, who praise you. Now that the holy Sabbath is leaving, may the sweet and precious week come to us and bring good health, life, peace, livelihood, and good news...Door and Gate are thus open for you, God of mercy, into the seventh heaven we all hope for this...a good week! A healthy week! A blessed week! A sweet week! A week of Beauty!" ***

*Extract from *Kiddush,* Friday evening blessing over wine and bread to sanctify the Sabbath

**Extract from *Kedusha,* recited during the *Amidah,* the standing prayer, which is the centrepiece of Jewish liturgy. The *Kedusha's* verses come from prophetic visions in which angels sing praises to God

***extract from *Gott Fun Avram,* thkine recited by women at the conclusion of the Sabbath

ועל ידי עבדיך

V'al ydei avodecha

Words: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur afternoon liturgy
Music: Cantor Zavel Kwartin

"And by the hand of Your servants, the Prophets it is written: "thus said Adonai our redeemer: "I am the first and I am the last; and beside Me, there is no God." And it is said: "And deliverers will go up to Mount Tzion to judge the mount of Esau, and the kingdom will be Adonai's." And it is said: "And Adonai will be King over the whole earth; on that day Adonai will be One and His Name One."

כי הנה כחמר

Ki Hine Kachomer

Words: Yom Kippur evening liturgy
Music: trad. Chabad

Ki hinei kaḥomer is an alphabetical acrostic piyyut of unknown authorship, thought to date approximately from 12th-century France. The poem comprises various metaphorical images representing God's relationship to humanity and its future, both of which God fashions according to God's will and design. Each stanza refers to a master craftsman of some particular craft as a metaphor for God, and to the craftsman's product or handiwork as a metaphor for humanity, whose destiny is dependent on divine creativity.

If we are the clay in the potter's hand,
may we mould of ourselves a vessel
in which to hold Your love.

If we are the stone in the mason's hand,
may we build of ourselves a sanctuary
that You may dwell within.

If we are the iron in the blacksmith's hand,
may we forge of ourselves a foundation
upholding truth and peace.

If we are the tiller in the helmsman's hand,
may we steer the ship to safety
across tempestuous seas.

If we are the glass in the glazier's hand,
may we make of ourselves a mirror,
to reflect Your boundless light.

If we are the cloth in the weaver's hand,
may we make of ourselves a tapestry
to beautify Your world.

If we are the silver in the silversmith's hand,
may we shed our dross in the crucible,
yet our purest essence retain.

The Story of Isaac

Words and Music by Leonard Cohen

This song is contemporary Midrash (commentary) on the Akeydah (the binding of Isaac in the book of Genesis) released on Cohen's second album 'Songs from a Room' in 1969. Cohen writes the first two verses from the perspective of Isaac, whose voice we don't hear in the biblical passages. Textually, what we do know about Isaac is that to Abraham he is 'את־בנך את־יחדך אשר־אהבת את־יצחק,' 'your son, your favoured one, the one whom you love.' This is the first time the word 'love' appears in the Torah. From a literary perspective, it is being used here for dramatic effect; despite the fact that offering up a child sacrifice was not unusual in the ancient world, the prospect of potential infanticide for the contemporary scholar is made all the more heinous by the nascent use of the word 'love'. The binary nature of the first creation narrative (light and dark, sea and land, woman and man, goodness and sin, innocence and [corporeal] self-awareness) is perpetuated here – love and death: the prospect of murder is made stark, not just by the Torah's mention of parental love, but the first citing of love full-stop. And Cohen, in the voice of Isaac, tells us that this love is reciprocal, as is Isaac's beautiful and innocent respect and honour of his father's holiness: '*He stood so tall above me, his blue eyes they were shining ... he put his hand on mine ... he knew I would not hide ... when I lay upon a mountain and my father's hand was trembling with the beauty of the Word'*. In this narrative voice of Isaac, there is no fear. There is no questioning of his father's actions. There is instead innocent faith (he is only nine in the song) and calm stoicism: he knows from the outset what his father is going to do but it isn't seen fit to be mentioned in the lyrics. He is, in a sense, replicating the relationship that Abraham has with God: recreating the inevitable subordination of unquestioning faith and piety. *Hineni*, God. Here I am to sacrifice my son for you. *Hineni*, Father. Here I am to be offered up as a sacrifice. This story therefore, and the song lyrics which depict it are a homage to Isaac's beautiful and innocent trust in his father, and the trauma of that trust being broken, posing the question – does contact with the divine, or an encounter with a truth which transcends the human invariably involve sacrifice or fracturing? Cohen presents Isaac being nine years old – Jewish tradition places him as older. We do know that when Cohen was nine, his father, the son of a long line of rabbis died; in this we can see a connection – we may see, if we choose to, a parallel traumatic breach in the father-son relationship through an autobiographical experience of death, which is simultaneously a moment of contact with the divine.

דער יאָך

Der Yokh

Music and Original Catalan text: Lluis Llach
Translation into Yiddish: Yuri Vedenyapin

Der Yokh is a Yiddish variant of the Catalan song *L'estaca*, meaning 'the stake' or 'the yoke,' or figuratively, 'without liberty.' Written in 1968 under the dictatorship of General Franco, it has been translated into multiple languages and has crossed myriad borders of resistance, culture, and nationality. Certain translations of the song are so popular that they are inaccurately believed to be local. Placing these assumptions in the context of the original song, L'estaca, which is comparing Catalonian independence from Spain to pulling off a yoke from an animal, complicates the song's already itinerant character. L'estaca has a powerfully nationalist narrative, and it is interesting that this thematic national pride is so linguistically and culturally transferable. It is also worth noting that at the time of the song's writing, Catalan was banned in many public cultural spheres. As well as being a popular song of the Polish Trade Union movement during the 1980s, L'Estaca was sung during the Belarusian anti-government protests in 2020, in Russia during during both the Manezhnaya Square riots in 2010 and the 2020 campaign rallies of presidential candidate Sviatlana Tsikanouskaya. It was translated into Arabic, becoming an anthem of the first Arab Spring in Tunisia in 2011 and into Hebrew in 2020 whereupon it was widely sung during the protest movement against Benjamin Netanyahu's government. Memphis based Yiddishist and Klezmer Max Friedman argues that "not only is Der Yokh an identifiably Yiddishised setting of Lluis Llach's L'Estaca, it is also representative of the socio-political consciousness of the secular Yiddishist movement more broadly ... the song is rich in Jewish resonances, from Yiddish political and artistic histories, to generational shifts and identity building." This is now one of many songs in the Yiddish canon which characteristically centre an intergenerational conversation between a grandparent and a grandchild, where the grandchild seeks to recreate in the present the cultural world of the grandparent. The lead singer of the Klezmatics (who popularised the 'Der Yokh'), himself a gay Yiddishist advocate Lorin Sklamberg corroborates:

> It's about fighting for your right to exist as a people, as the transmitters of culture through your songs and your language ... we thought it would make a really great Yiddish song, so we had it adapted for us ... Just last week we performed the song in Spain for the first time, right in the middle of Catalonia, and the audience just went berserk. It was just such a fantastic thing to bring 'L'Estaca' back to the place where it was created, and basically say 'Thank you for giving us the gift of this song.'

I sing this song in hope and trust that the yoke of genocide, starvation, cultural repression, colonial decimation of entire societies, and ethno-nationalism will be replaced with equity, artistry, cooperation, scholarship, and beauty.

We stood together
It was not yet day,
A horse and a wagon passed by,
and my grandfather said to me:
Can you not see on our backs
That heavy iron yoke
We can't go, can't fly,
We get a bite and a sting.

Together we escape
Be it an hour, a day, a week,
Soon it will fall, fall, fall-
That rotten old yoke.
If I pull from the middle,
And you pull from the side,
Soon it will fall, fall, fall,
And we will all be free.

We've stood by for many years
Worn down by the fissure.
My strength is reduced.
The yoke becomes still heavier.
Although its rotten and rusty
And it grips us like pliers.
But when I'm ready to fall
I hear my grandfather's song:

My grandfather is long gone
His voice can no longer be heard.
He was carried away by the wind,
And I remain here as before.
As new youngsters pass by,
I reach out my hand to them
And sing my grandfather's song,
The same one he taught to me.