

Jewish rock: music for a new generation

Daniel Freeland and Jeff Klepper

Every culture that has been host to the Jewish people has exerted a strong influence on our internal traditions and culture. Jewish music has been particularly susceptible to these changes, as seen in the many disparate styles which have been accepted as "traditional" Jewish music. Since the rise of the Beatles, almost fifteen years ago, American rock and pop music have exerted a major influence on the music composed and performed by young American Jews.

Those who grew up during the folk music revival of the 1960's were already familiar with American popular music, or rock, as a personal idiom of expression. Many young American Jews had emulated the styles of the popular performers of the last decade: learning to play guitar, forming their own rock and roll bands, writing their own rock music, and so on. The music of Simon and Garfunkle, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, and the numerous popular rock groups of that period, established forms of expression innovative both in musical style and social comment.

These Jewish musicians have retained the musical forms they came to admire, but their personal reasons for performing and writing new music have changed. Once the social content of the songs, along with the popularity that accompanied playing in a rock 'n roll band, served as a motivating factor for composing new melodies and lyrics. These motivations have been replaced by a view of music as a means of personal religious expression and even Jewish education. As ethnic pride replaced American universalism, rock music also became particularized.

Meeting Jewish Musical Needs in an American Way
A number of Jewish rock groups have emerged during the past few years, influenced by the current pop scene, but living outside it. These groups cut across Jewish denominational lines, representing the full spectrum of religious life. Most of the members of these groups retain strong ties to the established organizations of American Jewry. Many are young rabbis and cantors. Encouraged by camps and day schools where the need for new, motivating Jewish music became obvious, a Jewish rock scene has emerged, unwilling to accept the notion that only Israel can produce Jewish popular music.

The precursor of this new Jewish rock scene was Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach whose melodies owed as much to American folk music as to the Hassidic heritage into which he was born. His numerous settings of

liturgical texts for popular use challenged the prevailing notion that the secular and the sacred should remain separate worlds in Jewish music. Carlebach popularized his music both in the United States and Israel, and seems to have had a major influence on the creation of the Hassidic Song Festivals beginning in 1969. His prize winning song, "VeHa'er Eineinu," became an overnight hit in Israel, surprising those who predicted that a religious text would never be accepted by the Israel public as a popular song in the late 1960's.

Shared Music of America and Israel

The Hassidic Song Festival has now become a major creative force in popular and religious Jewish music. All songs entered in the festival must be based on traditional Jewish texts, either liturgical, biblical or rabbinic. It is ironic that this music, accepted by Israelis as popular secular music has come to be used by the American Jewish community primarily in a liturgical setting. Israeli religious authorities have not been able to see their way clear to the acceptance and use of these popularized melodies in worship settings. Yet songs such as "Oseh Shalom," "Yedid Nefesh," "Al Shloshe D'varim," and "Shehechyanu" have found their way into American Jewish worship services, not only in our camps and day schools, but also in our more establishment congregations. Carlebach and the Hassidic Festivals have set the stage for Israelis to be able to accept rabbinic texts as popular song, and for American Jews to start singing again in their synagogues.

The Jewish rock bands picked up their lead from the Festivals. Recognizing the popularity and viability of the American pop/rock idiom, young Jewish musicians have begun to write their own Jewish melodies, undeniably influenced by American music, but textually rooted in Jewish tradition. In 1968 *Arba Kolot*, the *Voices Four*, students at Yeshiva University and Stern College, began performing their blend of traditional and original Jewish music in a contemporary style. They won widespread acceptance from all branches of the American Jewish community. Other groups, such as *The Rabbi's Sons* (composers of "Mi Halsh") and *Tayku* (students at the Jewish Theological Seminary) experimented with sophisticated jazz-like arrangements. *Dveykus*, *Shma Koleinu*, *Kinneret*, and *Kol B'seder* continue this new found tradition, blending the words of ancient Jewish texts with melodies as akin to James Taylor as to traditional *nusach*. Prolific solo composers and performers such as Cantor Sherwood Goffin and Debbie Friedman have added dozens of new melodies to the repertoire of the American Jewish rock scene.

Give our Youth What They Like – with Jewish Flavor
Besides composing American Jewish music, these rock groups perform and record extensively. They perform widely on campuses and in synagogues, solving a serious problem that Hillel foundations and youth organizations often face: sponsoring a popular social event while retaining major Jewish content in the program. Their concerts are most often a blend of popular Israeli and newly composed American Jewish melodies, all performed in the style of – and on the instruments of – American rock. The language of the music is almost exclusively Hebrew. Electric guitars and bass, drums, and sophisticated sound systems are symbols of the American rock scene which are fully exploited by the Jewish rock scene as well. The musical arrangements are far more sophisticated than one would hear from the typical wedding or *bar mitzvah* band. The Jewish rock band's music establishes a quick rapport with the audience, for the "sound" is clearly American and therefore familiar and non-threatening. Audiences often will sing or dance along, and the dancing too takes its cue from the American rock scene. Disco and rock dancing fits the rock sound.

Although most of the composers and performers of American Jewish rock affiliate themselves with the organizations of American Jewish life, few, if any, receive any kind of official support from the major movements. Their records and printed compositions are hard to come by, distributed only through the authors, small Jewish book shops, and word of mouth. These rock groups may in the future become useful in the fight against the various cult groups that use American music so well in their recruitment techni-

ques, and provide a Jewish alternative to the popular "Jesus-rock" music so often heard on top-forty radio.

Finally, these rock groups may come to serve as a cultural bridge between the American and Israeli Jewish communities. Recognizing the Israeli preoccupation with American rock music, perhaps these groups could co-opt this disposition and show Israelis the possibility of true religious meaning in American sounding Hebrew rock. All the trappings of American rock are present, but a new dimension has been added. Texts are not just meaningless words, but expressions of religious commitment. American Jewish rock is entertainment with important implications for both Jewish communities. It is today's reminder that our traditions change, but the message remains eternal. As much as their style borrows from American rock, don't let the electric instruments fool you – these performers are the "Klezmerim" of the 1970's.

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