

Online: A Montage of Global Jewish Sounds

((Listening))

JASON GUBERMAN-PFEFFER

The idea behind this *Sh'ma* sound montage is to connect Jewish sounds, broadly defined, with their actual or lineal geographic origins. For our purposes, "Jewish sounds" are vocal as well as instrumental, sacred as well as secular, traditional as well as contemporary, and authored or performed by Jews as well as non-Jews. Our selections, then, are an eclectic ensemble, spanning more than 20 countries, a myriad of languages and dialects (sometimes within a single video clip), and diverse eras of composition as well as performance.

Among the selections are: "My Yiddishe Mama," by the Jewish-Algerian chanteur Salim Halali, in which the only Yiddish words uttered are in the title's refrain; "Eretz Zavot Chalav," as interpreted by Nina Simone; Jews in Manipur, India, practicing blowing the shofar; movie excerpts starring Molly Picon and Jewish-Egyptian film and recording legend Laila Mourad, respectively; a Jewish-Libyan family marking Rosh Chodesh Nissan by making *bsisa* (a traditional sweet and bejeweled food concoction); Josef Achron's "Hebrew Melody" performed by violinist Abram Shtern; and Kuwaiti performing artist Emma Shah's French and Hebrew rendition of "Hava Nagila."

These and the other clips have been digitally mapped using

technology pioneered by Diarna: Mapping Mizrahi Heritage (see: "Our Homes, Our Story" in the March issue of *Sh'ma*).

Mapping in this case is largely symbolic. While a few clips are mapped to the locations where they were actually filmed — the Ladino "Yo M'enamori D'Un Aire" at Bulgaria's State Opera in Stara Zagora and Yael Naim's "Paris" at Le Bikini, a club in Toulouse, France — most are situated according to the origins of the composition and/or its performer(s), whichever seemed most appropriate. So, for example, while Ofra Haza recorded "Im Nin'Alu" in her native Israel, the video clip is mapped to a random spot within the borders of Yemen, the provenance of her ancestors and this liturgical poem's author. Similarly, the Yefran Jews' *Hakafot* on Simchat Torah, Moditzer Chasidim chanting "Ani Ma'amin," and the Iraqi-Kurdistani Jews' wedding dance all occurred in Israel, but are mapped to their native lands of Libya, Poland, and Iraq.

View and listen to the sound montage at www.shma.com.

Jason Guberman-Pfeffer is the project coordinator of Diarna and executive director of Digital Heritage Mapping, Inc., the project's parent nonprofit agency. For additional information, see: www.diarna.org. He wishes to give a special thanks to Diarna contributors Houda and Adam for their helpful recommendations.

The Sounds of Becoming *Frum*

SARAH BUNIN BENOR

When non-observant Jews become Orthodox, or *ba'alei teshuvah* (BT), they take on the rules and prohibitions of halakhah. But they also find themselves in the midst of a whole new culture involving matchmakers, homemade brisket and farfel, and Yiddish-inflected grammar.

Language plays such an important role in how Orthodox Jews identify each other that BTs add constructions such as "staying by them" and "you want that I should help you?" to their otherwise standard grammar. One BT man recalled, in a joking way: "How is it that Harvard-educated kids can start talking like they're from the *shtetl*?" Of course, BTs don't sound quite like their immigrant great-grandparents, but many adopt enough of the features of Orthodox language to raise a few eyebrows among their family and friends.

The most salient feature of Orthodox language is the addition of hundreds of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish words into English speech and writing. This includes words in the religious

sphere (like "*tsnius*," modesty; "*chumra*," stringency; and "*blech*," the metal stove-covering that facilitates re-warming food on Shabbat) and words that might be part of any ordinary conversation (like *mamash*, really). As Jews increase their religious observance, they increase the presence of God in their language, talking regularly about "*haShem*" and responding to "How are you?" with "*Baruch haShem*," "bless God." Sometimes, Hebrew words are integrated into English following Yiddish patterns, as in "That's another way we're *mekayem* (fulfill) the mitzvah" and "Don't be *mevatel* (nullify/waste) my *z'man* (time)." Constructions like these may sound strange to non-Orthodox Jews and are sometimes hard for BTs to learn.

English grammar can also be distinctive. Orthodox Jews use the word "so" in environments where it is not generally used: "If I see someone who's using the wrong language, so I'll realize that they're just becoming *frum*." Adverbial phrases are sometimes placed before rather than after the object: "I was able to pick



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((SOUND LINKS))

Many samples of *frum* speech patterns are available online. Here are a few:

www.youtube.com/user/naalehonline#p/u/36/g45L8PbvMm0
www.kolhashiurim.com

up *pretty well* the lingo.” There are distinctive ways of pronouncing some English vowels and consonants. And, of course, there is the quasi-chanting intonation used to indicate phrase boundaries in Talmud study, which has transferred into everyday speech as rise-fall contours.

When people become Orthodox, they make decisions — conscious or not — about which words to take on and which pronunciations to use.

While words are the most prominent element of Orthodox language, pronunciations are often critical in distinguishing different groups of Orthodox Jews. As part of an online survey I conducted with sociologist Steven M. Cohen, we asked respondents how they pronounce the holiday of Tabernacles: Israeli Hebrew “Sukkot” (Soo-COAT) or Ashkenazic/Yiddish “Sukkos” (SUK-kiss). Self-identified non-Orthodox and Modern Orthodox Jews were more likely to say “Soo-COAT,” and Orthodox and Black Hat, or Haredi, Jews, were more likely to say “SUK-kiss.”

We see the same pattern with the greeting used between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: Non-Orthodox and Modern Orthodox Jews tend to say, “*Gmar cha-tee-MAH to-VAH*”; Orthodox Jews toward the middle of the continuum are more likely to say, “*Gmar cha-SEE-mah TO-*

vah”; and those toward the Black Hat pole are more likely to say, “*Gmar cha-SEE-mah TOY-vah*,” exhibiting the most influence from Ashkenazic Hebrew.

When people become Orthodox, they encounter this vast landscape of sociolinguistic variation, and they make decisions — conscious or not — about which words to take on and which pronunciations to use. Whether they say “HA-la-KHAH” or “ha-LUH-khuh” and how much they change their grammar helps others identify them not only as Orthodox but also along the continuum between Modern Orthodox and Haredi.

BTs can also use language to remind others that they were not always Orthodox. Although some BTs adopt Orthodox language as fully and quickly as they can, others never adapt completely, avoiding certain pronunciations or grammatical constructions and maintaining some of their original slang. As one BT told me, “If someone said ‘Just keepin’ it real, *mamish*,’ I would know they’re definitely BT.” Same goes for a man wearing a black hat with a T-shirt and trendy sunglasses or a woman who prepares her gefilte fish with Indian spices. Language — like other elements of culture — allows BTs to indicate not only that they are a certain type of Orthodox Jew, but also that they are *ba’alei teshuvah*. 

Accent: The Politics of Poetry and the Sound of Hebrew

MIRYAM SEGAL

In December 2001, Gene Simmons, the former lead singer of KISS, began by correcting his interviewer’s Hebrew:

Gene Simmons: *Oh, thank you so much [for the introduction] and since this is National Public Radio and it prides itself on accurate information — most of it sounded good — I stand guilty as charged and proud to say that I’m a mama’s boy. However, point one is you mispronounced my Hebrew name. It’s not Hayim, which is the sort of sniveling, please-don’t-beat-me-up Ashkenazi European way . . .*

Leonard Lopate: *Which is what I grew up in . . .*

Gene Simmons: *Which is — hey, that’s why you get beaten up. I don’t. The Sefaradit way is the correct way. It’s Hayim, emphasis on the second vowel, like the Israelis do.*

Gene Simmons, a.k.a. Chaim (or Hayim), was focused on one particular aspect of Hebrew pronunciation: the stress pattern. He was not correcting Lopate’s Ashkenazic *het* to conform to the gutturals of some Sephardic pronunciations, for example, but simply insisting that Lopate stress the final syllable “like the Israelis do.” (In fact, names are an exception to the rule; Israelis pronounce Chaim with a “sniveling” penultimate stress.)

One hundred years before this interview, the use of a terminal-stress pronunciation was almost unheard of in the poetry (and even the speech) of Ashkenazic Jews in Europe and Palestine. But poets were about to enter a period of sonic confusion.

Israeli Hebrew is the grandchild of the pedagogic organizations of pre-state Palestine. We commonly speak of a “Sephardic accent,” but in the 1900s, the language-planning teachers

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