Music in Haredi Jewish Life: Liquid Modernity and the Negotiation of Boundaries in Greater New York

Gordon A. Dale
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MUSIC IN HAREDI JEWISH LIFE: LIQUID MODERNITY AND THE NEGOTIATION OF BOUNDARIES IN GREATER NEW YORK

by

GORDON A. DALE

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Music in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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by

Gordon A. Dale

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Ethnomusicology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

Music in Haredi Jewish Life: Liquid Modernity and the Negotiation of Boundaries in Greater New York

by

Gordon A. Dale

Advisor: Jane C. Sugarman

In this dissertation I seek to understand tensions regarding boundary maintenance, music, and cultural continuity among the contemporary Haredi (“Ultra-Orthodox”) Jewish community of Greater New York in the context of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s theory of liquid modernity. While Bauman suggests that modernity has melted familiar institutions and created an unstable and rapidly shifting world, I argue that for Haredim, the non-liberal religious community and its cultural productions solidify social bonds. While many Haredi Jews strive to continue the musical practices of pre-WWII Europe, some Haredi musicians push or disregard the boundaries of accepted practice by experimenting with Western popular music to varying degrees. This has led to vibrant debate that often invokes rhetoric of spiritual health and danger. This dissertation examines four spheres of music making in order to better understand how these negotiations play out in contemporary cosmopolitan environments. First, I examine Hasidic niggunim, with a focus on composer Ben Zion Shenker and the Modzitz Hasidic dynasty in order to show the manner in which they are believed to encapsulate an idyllic Haredi life. Second, I study tensions over traditionalism and assimilation in the context of Haredi popular music, particularly a watershed moment involving Hasidic singer, Lipa
Schmeltzer. In this chapter I offer an example of music as a site of public reasoning in which the inherently pluralistic Haredi community continually negotiates its identity. Third, I look to Haredi boys choirs, arguing that they stage a secure future through the display of cultural continuity in the next generation of Haredi Jews. Finally, I examine music of the “Haredi periphery.” Individuals in this community have one foot in the Haredi world and the other in the larger host culture, a negotiation that they believe ultimately enhances their religiosity. Through examining these four domains of music making, I demonstrate that Haredim are adept at negotiating boundaries and that their cultural productions help them to reinforce social bonds within their community.
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I am so grateful to have completed this dissertation under the guidance of a committee of distinguished, kind, and brilliant scholars. Dr. Jane Sugarman has been an attentive and reliable advisor throughout my Ph.D. studies. I am so fortunate to benefit from the close eye and dazzling grasp of critical theory that I first saw in her scholarship, and have now seen in her countless, and brilliant, edits to this dissertation. Prior to ever studying with her, Professor Sugarman’s work was responsible for shaping many ideas in my MA thesis, and I am forever grateful for her guidance through my doctoral studies. Dr. Peter Manuel has been an inspiration to me since I first discovered the field of ethnomusicology. His ability to make profound observations, and present them in an engaging, thought-provoking, and clear manner continues to be a model for what an ethnomusicologist should do. Dr. Samuel Heilman’s work simply opened my eyes to just how fascinating the Orthodox Jewish community can be. His work spans a depth and breadth to which few can compare, and he is truly one of the most astute observers to ever contribute to the field of Jewish Studies. Finally, Dr. Mark Kligman has been an endlessly kind mentor throughout my graduate studies. His scholarship fills me with excitement about this field. I thank all four of my committee members from the bottom of my heart for their guidance and input.

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A note on Hebrew pronunciation and transliteration

Throughout this dissertation, non-English words are translated upon their first appearance. I have chosen to transliterate Hebrew words according to their Ashkenazi pronunciation, rather than the Sephardic pronunciation used in the Israeli vernacular, in order to best represent the language used by the people described in this dissertation. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.
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Chapter One: Introduction

It is a Saturday afternoon in August 2012 and my wife and I are lost. We are trying to find our way to her second cousin’s apartment in Borough Park, Brooklyn, where we have been invited to join them for Shabbos (Hebrew: Sabbath) lunch. This is our first walk to Borough Park from our apartment in Midwood—we moved to Brooklyn just a few days prior—and we’ve become confused as the grid layout of the streets has shifted directions. Despite the stress of knowing that we are keeping our hosts waiting, I can’t help but be moved by the songs that are radiating from every home. Music seems to be pouring from every window on this densely packed block. Children are singing enthusiastically in Hebrew with a heavy Yiddish accent as their fathers lead them in song. Though we are in a major metropolis, all the shops are closed and there are hardly any cars passing by, since nearly all residents of this neighborhood are Haredim, that is, strictly Orthodox Jews, and Jewish law prohibits engaging in commerce and driving on the Sabbath, known in Hebrew as Shabbos. As such, everyone is inside dining with family members, punctuating courses of their meal with songs that praise God and emphasize the beauty of Shabbos. Eventually, after circling the same area many times and hearing music with every turn, we find our destination. My wife’s cousin’s new husband, a warm and friendly Hasidic man raised in New Jersey, begins the meal with the musical prayer over wine in a beautiful tenor voice, contributing to the soundscape of the neighborhood.

Haredi Jewish life in greater New York is set to a rich and diverse soundtrack. Despite having spent nearly five years living in a Brooklyn Haredi neighborhood during the course of researching and writing this dissertation, I am still struck by the
omnipresence of music in Haredi life. On any given weekday I might emerge from the Avenue J subway station in Midwood, Brooklyn to immediately hear the newest Haredi pop hits pouring from the windows of the kosher candy shop located next to the station. As I continue west on Avenue J, the numerous Haredi-owned restaurants, bookstores, and clothing shops all have music emanating from them, and passing cars are each playing their favorite recordings, or perhaps tuning into JRoot, a radio station operated by Haredim. In my local kosher supermarket I hear keyboard arrangements of Hasidic songs as I peruse the aisles, where I always stop at the music display to see which CDs are on sale this week. The local newspapers that cater to the community frequently include album reviews, promote local Jewish music concerts, and advertise music lessons. As I leave the supermarket, every direction leads me past several Haredi synagogues, each with the musical sounds of prayer and Torah study slipping through an open window. Passing a local elementary school near my home I nearly always hear the sounds of young children singing loudly together, as song has a central role in Haredi education. Midwood, like all Haredi neighborhoods, has an “ethical soundscape” (Hirschkind 2006) that asserts the religious character of the community, linking those who share cultural ownership of this music and suggesting their belonging in this sonically framed domain.

In this dissertation I analyze the place of music in the lived religion of Haredi Jews in the greater New York area, with attention to music’s role in reinforcing social ties. As I describe below, I engage with sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of “liquid modernity,” that is, the notion that modernity has entered a liquid phase in which familiar solid institutions have melted and are no longer able to retain their shape, leading to a general aura of mutability. I argue that, in the case of the Haredim, cultural
productions such as music solidify social ties and provide resistance to the encroachment of liquid modernity.

Who are the Haredim?

Haredi Jews are one of the fastest growing religious groups in the New York metropolitan area, and because of their deep devotion to religious observance and extremely high birthrates, they have the potential to transform the locales in which they live. Haredi (plural, Haredim) is a blanket term for the right wing of Orthodox Jewry, taking its name from the Hebrew word meaning “trembling” in order to represent the deep reverence for God felt by these Jews. Orthodox Judaism is commonly divided into two camps: Modern Orthodoxy and Haredi Judaism. While both groups believe in the Divine authorship of the Torah and are thus careful to follow Jewish law, Modern Orthodox Jews embrace secular knowledge and engage in many of the same recreational activities as their non-Jewish neighbors. In contrast, Haredi Jews, in general, focus their attention on Torah scholarship and conduct their lives within a religious context to the greatest extent possible. Haredim are often referred to as “Ultra-Orthodox,” though most Haredim that I have met dislike the term because it suggests that they have passed a line of normative practice and entered the realm of fanaticism. In this dissertation I use their preferred label of “Haredi.”

The term “Orthodox Judaism” came to exist as a result of the creation of other denominations, namely Reform Judaism, from which the traditionalists sought to differentiate themselves. Historian Jonathan Sarna notes, in fact, that music was a crucial feature of this historical moment. Beginning in 1840 in Charleston, South Carolina, Reform Jews sought to include an organ in their worship:
More than previous disputes over music (disputes over the type of music to be played or disputes over choirs), the organ dispute also clearly separated Reform Jews from their opponents, who in response began to call themselves ‘Orthodox.’ The terms ‘Orthodox’ and ‘Orthodoxy,’ scarcely known in American Jewish life before 1840, turned up repeatedly thereafter. Indeed, Orthodox became the term of choice for Jews who opposed the Reform innovation of the organ. (Sarna 2003:202-203)

Though the names by which the various Orthodox groups are called were to emerge later, the origins of the contemporary Haredi community’s social taxonomy can be traced to the formation in Eastern Europe of the Hasidic movement. During the eighteenth century, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (c. 1700-1760) revolutionized Judaism by introducing a new movement that came to be known as Hasidism (Hebrew: “pious ones”). The Baal Shem Tov and his disciples emphasized ecstatic prayer over Talmudic scholarship, mysticism over the mundane, and song over study. While the movement was popular among the poor, less educated class of Eastern European Jewry, it was wildly controversial among the rabbinic elite. With origins in Poland, the Hasidic movement quickly spread throughout Europe after the Baal Shem Tov’s death through the teachings of his disciples and, as Glenn Dynner (2006) has argued, strategic relationships with wealthy Jews and the printing of Hasidic texts. An opposition movement, known as the Misnagdim (Hebrew for “opposers”), was led by Rabbi Elijah of Vilna (1720-1797), better known as “the Vilna Gaon (Hebrew: Genius).” The Vilna Gaon and his followers believed that early Hasidism was distancing the Jewish populace from Torah study, and dangerously introducing them to powerful concepts in Jewish mysticism that they were not capable of understanding correctly. The Hasidim, however, believed that they were participating in a Jewish renaissance that was reinvigorating European Jewish life. With
the growth of Hasidism came a strong ideological, though not necessarily geographic, division within European Jewry.

Among the differences that stood between Hasidim and Misnagdim was the proper approach to prayer (Nadler 1997). While Misnagdim prioritized Torah study over prayer, the Baal Shem Tov emphasized that prayer should be ecstatic. He went so far as to revise the prayer liturgy, and included in the prayer book kavanot (Hebrew: intentions, ie. short explanatory meditations) that helped the worshipper to understand the mystical ways that their prayers repaired the spiritual state of the world. Early Hasidic prayer was full of song, and “music was believed to possess theurgical potency” (Dynner 2006:222). Musical repertoires developed in the nineteenth century both through original composition and cultural borrowing. In the latter case, a melody would be extracted from its original source and made holy through a process that Ellen Koskoff, in the context of Lubavitcher Hasidim, calls “musical tikkun (Hebrew: repair)” (see Dynner 2006:223 for a description of this same process in the context of Hasidim beyond Chabad-Lubavitch). Each Hasidic sect developed its own repertoire of niggunim (Hebrew: melodies), often made up of compositions by “court composers,” but in some select cases by the charismatic Rabbis who led each Hasidic sect. Although the Vilna Gaon shared the Baal Shem Tov’s interest in music (Rosman 1996:37), the opponents of early Hasidism criticized this attention to song as frivolous behavior (Nadler 1997:29).

In the early 1800s, the gap between the Hasidim and the Misnagdim began to close as a response to the rise of the Jewish Enlightenment, or Haskalah. The Maskilim (Hebrew: Enlightened Ones) advocated for the modernization of Jewish worship and integration into European society, and was seen by both Hasidic and Misnagdic leaders as
a serious threat to Judaism. Seeing the Haskalah as the greater enemy, the Hasidim and Misnagdim came closer together to fight its spread, largely under the direction of Rabbi Moses Schreiber (1762-1839). As this unification took place, this strongly Orthodox community became highly leery of modernity, seeing how it had affected their brethren who were inspired by the Haskalah. Rabbi Schreiber’s statement, “What is new is forbidden by the Torah,” a re-contextualization of a Talmudic verse pertaining to agricultural laws, was understood as a fierce attack on modernization and has resonated, and been interpreted in numerous ways, ever since (Schreiber 2002-2003:124).

In 1654, a group of Sephardic Jews from Brazil arrived in New Amsterdam, making them the first Jews to arrive in the colonies (Zollman 2011). Ashkenazi Jews were not far behind, and came to outnumber the Sephardim by the 1730s (Angel 1973). A substantial boost to the Jewish population of the United States came at the end of the nineteenth century with a huge wave of migration from Europe. As Jerome Mintz writes, “Between the years 1890 and 1924, there was a vast outpouring of population from Europe to America, and some two and a half million Jews, most from Eastern and Central Europe, made the voyage to American shores. It was not until the mid-1920s that restrictive American legislation brought a halt to Jewish immigration” (1992:13). Many Jews settled in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and Orthodox life quickly found its footing through the establishment of synagogues, kosher butcher shops, and Jewish

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1 Sephardic Jews (in Hebrew, *Sephardim*) are Jews who trace their family origin to the Iberian Peninsula. Ashkenazi Jews (*Ashkenazim*) are from Central and Eastern Europe, as derived from the geographic region of Ashkenaz in Germany (Berlin and Grossman 2011). The term *Mizrachi* Jews is derived from the Hebrew word for “east” (*mizrah*), and refers to Jews of Middle Eastern and North African origin (Mizrachi and Herzog 2012). The expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 led to a high degree of intercultural mixing between Sephardic and Mizrachi Jews, and today many do not distinguish between Sephardic and Mizrachi Jews with precision (Thomas 2014:9).
schools. The first Hasidic leader to immigrate to the United States was Rabbi Yehoshua Sigel, the Sherpser Rebbe, who relocated from Shierpc, Poland, helping to lay the foundation for Haredi (particularly Hasidic) life in New York (Biale, et al, forthcoming). Over time, many of these Orthodox Jews moved across the Williamsburg bridge to settle in neighborhoods in northern Brooklyn. After World War II the Brooklyn neighborhood of Borough Park (commonly spelled Boro Park), increasingly became a Hasidic enclave due to the arrival of many Hasidim from Europe, and the relocation of Hasidim who desired more space than they could find in Williamsburg. Other strictly Orthodox neighborhoods were developed in the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Crown Heights, Flatbush and neighboring areas.

Similarly, many European Haredim found a home in Israel during the twentieth century. While a thorough analysis of the relationship between the Haredim and the modern state of Israel is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is valuable to note its tenuous nature. The late nineteenth century saw the rise of political Zionism. Haredim generally opposed the movement, as they believed that the creation of a Jewish state was to come about through the arrival of the Messiah. This opposition to Zionism was formalized in 1912 with the creation of the World Agudath Israel political party at a conference in Upper Silesia (Berlin and Grossman 2011). Though the Agudah, as it is commonly called, was hostile to the formal creation of a Jewish state in biblical Israel, it did not oppose Jewish settlement there (Bacon 2010). Following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, Agudath Israel became a political party with representation in the Israeli parliament. Haredim today maintain a wide range of relationships with the state of Israel. While some Haredi groups attempt to limit all acknowledgment of the Israeli
government, including refusing to accept government-issued welfare funds, other Haredi institutions proudly fly the Israeli flag even while considering themselves non-Zionists.

Haredi communities in the United States and Israel have grown rapidly since the end of World War II. Though many prominent Haredi leaders were murdered in the Holocaust, the community has managed to rebound through extraordinarily high birth rates. In the aftermath of World War II, increased contact between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews led many Orthodox Sephardim in both the United States and Israel to adopt Ashkenazi Haredi customs related to dress, punctilious adherence to Jewish law, and, to varying extents, artistic practices such as musical performance. As Haredi Jews come to constitute a higher and higher percentage of the voting population in Israel, Haredi political parties gain power in determining the future of the country, which could have tremendous influence on the character of the nation.

Today the Haredi community is essentially divided into three parts. One group, the Hasidim, are the descendants of the Baal Shem Tov’s approach to Judaism. The Hasidim are a heterogeneous group, with many sects, often referred to as “dynasties,” that each emphasize a slightly different approach to Judaism. Many of these sects bear the name of the European town in which they originated, though several, such as Bostoner and Pittsburgher, have been formed in the United States and retained the practice of naming after a geographic location. Every Hasidic sect has a leading Rabbi, known as the Rebbe, who serves as the spiritual leader for his Hasidim. It is noteworthy, however, that two of the larger Hasidic sects, Breslov and Chabad-Lubavitch, have deceased Rebbes who were never replaced. The Hasidim of these sects look to their Rebbe’s teachings for guidance, and contact more learned Hasidic Rabbis within their
dynasty when questions arise. Some Hasidic sects, such as Satmar and Skver, are known for their high degree of insularity, while others are more comfortable interacting with those outside of the Haredi community. Many in the Chabad-Lubavitch community, for example, are quite familiar with the larger world around them, in line with their Rebbe’s direction to bring holiness into the world, particularly by encouraging non-observant Jews to perform Jewish ritual actions. For this reason Chabad is a bit of an outlier in the Haredi community, and in this dissertation I am careful to specify whenever I refer to someone from this sect.

A second group in the Haredi community is often referred to as Litvish or Yeshivish. The descendants of the Misnagdim, these Jews are known for their very strong emphasis on Torah study, particularly among men, though girls often also continue their studies for a year or two after high school. While women’s Torah study decreases substantially after marriage, men are expected to “learn” every day. Among the Yeshivish, many men study Torah full-time, while women are both the primary financial providers and the homemakers.

Finally, a third group can be described as the right-wing of Sephardic and Mizrachi Jewry, many of whom have adopted the Ashkenazi Haredi practices of wearing dark suits and black hats. In the present day, the various Sephardic and Mizrachi groups often exist with a great deal of overlap, partly due to similar practices in worship that direct these Jews to the same synagogues and neighborhoods, and partly due to the formation in the Israeli government of political parties based on Jewish ethnic identity that have impacted these relationships in the diaspora.
It must be stated that each of these communities, and indeed the Haredi community as a whole, has unclear boundaries. In the course of my research I often asked myself whether or not an individual ought to be considered Haredi because of beliefs or behavior that might not be entirely consistent with the imagined ideal of the community. Despite this ambiguity, it is clear that members of this community are similar in their strict observance of Jewish law, and that key individuals are savvy community organizers and political advocates. These labels are also challenging because, in contemporary America, there is a high degree of overlap in the practices of the Hasidim and the Yeshivish. While there are styles of dress, for example, that are particular to each group, I have met some who dress in Yeshivish garb but consider themselves Hasidic, while others dress in Hasidic clothing but say that they are “Heimish” (Yiddish: “homey,” i.e. in-between Yeshivish and Hasidic). To further complicate matters, there are Sephardim who have joined Hasidic sects, others who study in Litvish schools, and ideologically Modern Orthodox Jews who adopt practices of various Haredi groups. Thus, while the titles of these groups have meaning in a broad sense, they lack precision and are not always strong indicators of one’s practices. In the following chapters I use terms such as Haredi and Hasidic carefully in order to most accurately represent the people I describe in each section.

It is difficult to know how many Haredi Jews live in the United States today. According to the 2013 Pew Study of American Jews, out of a total of 5.3 million Jews in the United States, there are roughly 330,000 Haredi Jews over the age of 18, the vast majority of whom live in the greater New York City region. The study reports that Orthodox Jews have an average of 4.2 children per married couple. However, one must
note that Haredim have more children than the Modern Orthodox, and thus the number of children per Haredi couple is higher. The Orthodox community of New York grew by 30% from 2002 to 2011 due to their extraordinarily high birthrate, leading the *New York Post* to call the Haredi stronghold of Borough Park “easily the city’s baby capital” (Campanile 2015).

The increasing size of the Haredi community has important ripple effects. Firstly, 59% of the community is poor or near poor, according to a 2011 study commissioned by the Jewish Federation of New York. This economic situation results in an increasing number of requests for government assistance. Secondly, as the Haredi community continues to grow, it has expanded both within Brooklyn and beyond, transforming the locales in which these Jews settle. Certain neighborhoods in New Jersey and in New York’s Orange and Rockland counties have become entirely Haredi, leading to clashes with non-Jewish or non-Orthodox neighbors. Finally, the quickly increasing number of Haredi Jews makes these communities very important in the eyes of politicians seeking election. Haredim generally vote in blocs, making it nearly compulsory for politicians to meet with Haredi leaders and court their vote. This puts the American Haredi community in a very strong position as it looks to continue its expansion.

Today the Haredi community continues to have a strong presence in several neighborhoods in Brooklyn, most of which are dominated by one particular subgroup. The Brooklyn neighborhoods of Midwood, Borough Park, and a portion of Williamsburg are nearly entirely populated by Haredim. A large Hasidic community can also be found in Crown Heights, where Lubavitcher Hasidim live side-by-side with non-Jews, creating a different demographic landscape. Haredi populations have also spilled over into other
Brooklyn neighborhoods such as Kensington, Marine Park, Seagate, and others. Midwood is primarily a Yeshivish community, where English is the primary language and many residents are relatively open to the “outside world,” as compared to the Hasidic neighborhoods. Midwood, which is referred to as Flatbush by the Orthodox community due to migration from the geographic neighborhood of Flatbush into what is properly called Midwood, is also home to a sizeable number of Modern Orthodox Jews. Borough Park, located just west of Midwood, is home to more Hasidic Jews than anywhere else in America. Many famous Hasidic leaders reside there, and Yiddish is the primary language seen in newspapers and flyers posted on the street, and spoken in day-to-day conversation. Williamsburg also contains a sizeable Hasidic population, primarily from the Satmar sect. Satmar is known to be one of the largest and most insular Hasidic groups, and as such they have strictly limited the access that their youths have to the non-Orthodox world. Finally, Crown Heights is the hub of the Chabad-Lubavitch sect of Hasidism. Chabad is highly engaged with the outside world, and virtually all community members speak English. Many young married Chabad couples go on to be emissaries of their late head rabbi, living in remote locations to engage less observant Jews in Orthodox Jewish practice. Their familiarity with the larger world around them is advantageous in this role. Some groups of Haredim have established villages farther away from the city (in Monroe, New York, New Square, New York, and Lakewood, New Jersey, for example) in an attempt to avoid the persistent encounter with non-Haredi cultures that is felt in the five boroughs.

This attempt to control one’s exposure to life outside of the community is one component of a complex relationship that Haredim maintain with “modernity.” While it
is true that Haredim take precautions to retain a high degree of insularity in the pursuit of a deeply religious lifestyle, their relationship with “the modern” is complex. Many Haredim work in technology sales, interact with non-Jews daily, and encounter a wide array of media as they pass through cosmopolitan urban centers. Moreover, many of the goals of Haredi life are expressed in the language of modernity, though with affirmative religious sentiments. Anthropologist Ayala Fader explains this in the context of Hasidic women, stating, “these women envision a religious way of life, which I call an ‘alternative religious modernity.’ Real freedom, progress, and self-actualization, Hasidic women tell their daughters, can only come about through the self-discipline that is learned through Jewish religious practice” (2009:3). I have found that these tropes are common among men as well, and that the modern language of self-fulfillment animates much Haredi moral discourse.

Nonetheless, Haredim frequently use the term “modern” as an other against which their identities are formed. The term “modern” has currency among Haredim because of their familiarity with Modern Orthodoxy and its embrace of non-Orthodox society. To say that something or someone is “modern” means that it is not fit for Haredi society, that it is not frum (Yiddish: religious). This dichotomy of frum vs. modern sets up a paradigm in which that which is “modern” (in the twenty-first century this includes Facebook, smart phones, and television, for example) is dangerous and to be avoided to the greatest extent possible. The frum/modern paradigm is invoked in many different aspects of Haredi life. In describing English and Yiddish speech patterns among Hasidic women, Fader discusses how these women change their language use to either “sound modern” or “sound Hasidic” depending on the circumstance. In this dissertation I borrow this
framework to describe music in the Haredi community. Though my research covers Yeshivish, as well as Hasidic Jews, I choose to retain “sounding Hasidic” at one end of the pole because Hasidim are generally seen as the most strict in their observance and insularity, and thus most “frum.”

In order to study the relationship between Haredim and modernity, it is crucial to elaborate on the theorization of modernity that I employ in this dissertation.

**Liquid Modernity**

One of the most pressing issues in late-twentieth and twenty-first century social theory has been the need to progress beyond the discourse of postmodernism. The term “postmodern” has been used to describe such a wide variety of topics that it has been rendered nearly meaningless. As Michel Foucault, one of the leading thinkers to contribute to the modernity literature, wryly joked in 1983, “What are we calling postmodernity? I’m not up to date” (Raulet 1983). Foucault continued,

> The Americans were planning a kind of seminar with Habermas and myself. Habermas had suggested the theme of modernity for the seminar. I feel troubled here because I do not grasp clearly what that might mean, though the word itself is unimportant; we can always use any arbitrary label. But neither do I grasp the kind of problems intended by this term—or how they would be common to people thought of as being ‘postmodern….’ I do not understand what kind of problem is common to the people we call postmodern or poststructuralist. (ibid)

Several alternative formulations of the contemporary social condition have been proposed by leading scholars. “Liquid modernity,” proposed by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, is among the alternative theories to gain traction. Bauman (1925-2016), who was a leading voice in postmodernity discourses, focused on the instability of contemporary social ties and institutions. In this way he differed from formulations by other leading thinkers in the modernity discourse, such as the theory of “reflexive
modernization” as proposed by Anthony Giddens (1990) and Ulrich Beck (1992), who emphasize “reconstruction rather than deconstruction as in postmodernism” (Lee 2006). Bauman’s theory of liquid modernity launches from the famous diagnosis offered by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned.” Bauman reminds us “that all this was to be done not in order to do away with the solids once and for all and make the brave new world free of them for ever, but to clear the site for *new and improved solids*, to replace the inherited set of deficient and defective solids with another set, which was much improved and preferably perfect, and for that reason no longer alterable” (2000:3). In this project, the first order of business was to “get rid of the ballast with which the old order burdened the builders” such as “traditional loyalties, customary rights and obligations” which “cramped the enterprise.”

‘Melting the solids’ meant first and foremost shedding the ‘irrelevant’ obligations standing in the way of rational calculation of effects; as Max Weber put it, liberating business enterprise from the shackles of the family-household duties and from the dense tissue of ethical obligations; or as Thomas Carlyle would have it, leaving solely the ‘cash nexus’ of the many bonds underlying human mutuality and mutual responsibilities.’ (Bauman 2000:4)

The melting of these institutions was to provide a clean slate on which stronger structures could be built through “the progressive untying of economy from its traditional political, ethical and cultural entanglements” (ibid). Bauman sees this shift from solid to liquid modernity exemplified in industry. The Fordist factory was a model of solidity, with its enormous physical size and its power to regulate time and space in the lives of its laborers in an industrial panopticon. Over time, however, technology enabled work life to become decentered, as “Nowadays capital travels light—with cabin luggage only, which
includes no more than a briefcase, a cellular phone and a portable computer” (2000:58). In this liquid state, “techniques which allow the system and free agents to remain radically disengaged,” such as “deregulation, liberalization, ‘flexibilization’, increased fluidity,” prompt today’s modern actors to “by-pass each other instead of meeting” (5). This “disembedding without re-embedding” has led to the disconnection, fluidity, and mutability of contemporary social ties (Bauman and Tester 2001:89). With this theory, Bauman focuses attention on the instability of contemporary society, and suggests that modernity has never ended but has merely transitioned from a solid to a liquid phase (Lee 2006:357).

Bauman understands “modernity” to be a complex of processes that have shaped “the human condition” (2000:8). While he also devotes chapters to shifts in contemporary conceptions of freedom, the individual, work, and community, Bauman suggests that modernity is defined by new understandings of space and time:

One feature of modern life and its modern setting stands out, however, as perhaps that ‘difference which make[s] the difference’, as the crucial attribute from which all other characteristics follow. That attribute is the changing relationship between space and time.

Modernity starts when space and time are separated from living practice and from each other and so become ready to be theorized as distinct and mutually independent categories of strategy and action, when they cease to be, as they used to be in long pre-modern centuries, the intertwined and so barely distinguishable aspects of living experience, locked in a stable and apparently invulnerable one-to-one correspondence. In modernity, time has history, it has history because of the perpetually expanding ‘carrying capacity’ of time—the lengthening of the stretches of space which units of time allow to ‘pass’, ‘cross’, ‘cover’—or conquer. (Bauman 2000:9, italics in original).

Bauman suggest that, in contemporary times, the panopticon is no longer the ultimate display of power, suggesting that “escape, slippage, elision, and avoidance” are
now superior through their “rejection of any territorial confinement” (2000:11). Similarly, nomadism is now the desired lifestyle, as the wealthy and powerful retain their status through their ability to be anywhere and everywhere quickly and with ease. As Bauman writes, “Travelling light, rather than holding tightly to things deemed attractive for the reliability and solidity—that is, for their heavy weight, substantiality and unyielding power of resistance—is now the asset of power” (13). While Ford’s factories once symbolized strength, resilience, and rootedness, today’s power-holders have no need to hold onto anything at all as they constantly replace their old property by purchasing new and improved models.

Following the Marxist tradition, Bauman focuses on power and capital, arguing that the fluidity of contemporary social ties “is as much a condition as it is the outcome of the new techniques of power, using disengagement and the art of escape as its major tools” (2000:14). Furthermore, any social bonds that still prevail are the targets of power holders, as these remnants of solidity stand in the way of their continued flow. “Global powers are bent on dismantling such networks for the sake of their continuous and growing fluidity, that principal source of their strength and warrant of their invincibility. And it is the falling apart, the friability, the brittleness, the transience, the until-further-noticeness of human bonds and networks which allow these powers to do their job in the first place” (2000:14). Thus, the continued encroachment of liquid modernity has monumental social and economic impacts.

Sociologist Raymond L.M. Lee (2011) questions the unidirectional trajectory of liquid modernity, and asks if “re-solidification” may be possible. Lee writes, “[Bauman’s] emphasis on liquidity as an irreversible condition seems plausible when we
consider borderlessness as having become a norm, and itinerancy a feature of social life everywhere. Yet if we construe disembedding as occurring within a context of continuing impermanence, then the liquidity resulting from it cannot be seen as continuing indefinitely but be subjected as well to the ongoing flux” (651). Lee concludes his article by suggesting that “Bauman’s liquid metaphor merely provides a poetic but partial sketch of desultory relations and despair without considering the likelihood of re-embedding as readily demonstrated by recent data from various research on race, class and religion” (662).

In this dissertation I take up Lee’s call, and offer ethnographic research on a contemporary non-liberal religious community through the lens of liquid modernity. I argue that liquid modern conditions do indeed threaten the deeply religious lifestyle of contemporary Haredim, but that the religious community’s cultural productions, and in particular music, have the power to re-solidify social ties when they are threatened. In the case of Haredim, threats to social ties generally take the form of potential assimilation. Haredim are well aware of the melting powers of contemporary society, and have developed strategies that enable them to live among, but in defiance of, liquid modern conditions.

Bauman wrote about his views on the place of religion in modernity in his 1997 book Postmodernity and its Discontents, prior to his introduction of the phrase “liquid modernity.” In the chapter “Postmodern Religion?” he writes:

I propose that the postmodern cultural pressures, while intensifying the search for ‘peak-experiences’, have at the same time uncoupled it [sic] from religion-prone interests and concerns, privatized it, and cast mainly non-religious institutions in the role of purveyors of relevant services. The ‘whole experience’ of revelation, ecstasy, breaking the boundaries of the self and total transcendence, once the privilege of the selected ‘aristocracy of culture’- saints, hermits, mystics, ascetic
monks, tsadiks or dervishes- and coming either as an unsolicited miracle, in no obvious fashion related to what the receiver of grace has done to earn it, or as an act of grace rewarding the life of self-immolation and denial, has been put by postmodern culture in every individual’s reach, recast as a realistic target and plausible prospect of each individual’s self-training, and relocated at the product of life devoted to the art of consumer self-indulgence. (182)

However, Bauman acknowledges that in the modern era another form of religion has thrived. “There is, though, a specifically postmodern form of religion, born of the internal contradictions of postmodern life, of the specifically postmodern form in which the insufficiency of man and the vanity of dreams to take human fate under human control are revealed. This form has come to be known under the English name of fundamentalism” (182). Bauman explains that these fundamentalists are motivated by the anxiety of freedom of choice:

The allure of fundamentalism stems from its promise to emancipate the converted from the agonies of choice. Here one finds, finally, the indubitably supreme authority, an authority to end all other authorities…. Fundamentalism is a radical remedy against that bane of postmodernmarket-led/consumer society—risk-contaminated freedom (a remedy that heals the infection by amputating the infected organ—abolishing freedom as such, in as far as there is no freedom free of risks). (184)

This alternative rationality, he explains, is no “less rational (or more) than the market-oriented logic of action” (185). He continues, “In its fundamentalist rendition, religion is not a ‘personal matter’, privatized as all other individual choices and practiced in private, but the nearest thing to a compleat mappa vitae: it legislates in no uncertain terms about every aspect of life, thereby unloading the burden of responsibility lying heavily on the individual’s shoulders.” It is important to note in the context of the present study that Bauman specifically names Lubavitcher Hasidim in his description of religious fundamentalists (184). Given that Chabad-Lubavitch is in many ways the most liberal of
Haredi groups, we can safely assume that Bauman would have included all Haredim in his understanding.

Bauman’s understanding of religion did not change significantly after he began writing about liquid modernity. One of his last works to be published was *Of God and Man* (2015; originally published in 2014 in Polish as *O Bogu I Człowieku*), an edited and translated version of a series of letters sent between Bauman and former Jesuit priest Stanisław Obirek. The letters are primarily a discussion about the concept of truth, and display the erudition of both authors in the religious thought of a number of religions’ intellectual traditions. Sociological topics underlie their conversation and we see from their exchange that Bauman’s understanding of “fundamentalism” did not change after he introduced the framework of “liquid modernity.” This can be seen, for example, when he writes:

> The world divided into communities—‘social bodies’—was a factory of solidarity. Dividing the inhabited world into ‘individuals’ burdened with the responsibility of self-determination and self-affirmation in a context of fragile social ties and a lack of norms, is on the contrary a factory of mutual suspicion and competition. It devalues all coalitions except ad hoc ones, and all shared activities except those aimed at specific short-term tasks. The result is life lived on a minefield or quicksand, generating a constant, massive nostalgia for clear maps and signposts engraved in rock; for a leash, a muzzle and shackles—as well as for a leader imbued with power to command and imputed with infallibility, thereby liberating all followers from the hateful burden of individual responsibility. This is not a new phenomenon—Erich Fromm, and soon after him Christopher Lash, have already provided colourful and detailed descriptions of the mechanism and dynamics of the ‘escape from freedom’—but the feeling of aimlessness, loneliness, and the threat of abandonment or banishment was never as strong as it is now, and the nostalgia for ‘preuncertainty’, for a less shaky world, has never been so overwhelming: the temptation of ‘voluntary servitude’ was never as hard to resist as it is today…. Secular or religious versions of fundamentalism thrive in the same soil; religious or political sects and/or market corporations prey upon the same awareness of one’s own insufficiency haunting the *Mann ohne Verwandschaften*—the man without bonds. (Bauman 2015:30-31)
In several places throughout this dissertation I revisit Bauman’s description of religious fundamentalism and examine whether or not Haredi Jews might challenge his argument. In the conclusion, I ultimately suggest that while in some ways it is true that Haredim understand their lifestyle as an alternative to the market-driven and secularist rationale of liquid modernity and at times defer decisions to religious superiors, the lived experience of Haredi Jews is far more complex. Haredim are active and knowledgeable consumers, and often do act autonomously, and perhaps making their decisions in contradiction to religious leaders. Furthermore, Bauman’s formulation dismisses the role of genuine theological belief in religious societies, thus ignoring a crucial aspect of their identities and agency. I argue throughout the following chapters that a fundamental aspect of Haredi religious belief is a concern for spiritual health, and that boundary maintenance is a crucial defense against potential dangers. By identifying and reinforcing the lines between the Haredi community and the rest of the world, these Orthodox Jews attempt to cultivate an ideal environment for spiritual growth. These ethnographic findings, I believe, demonstrate the importance of studying lived religion, as opposed to limiting one’s purview to sacred texts and the mandates of religious leaders.

I have chosen to focus attention on Bauman’s theories primarily because the description of liquid modernity that he offers is strikingly similar to the ways that Haredi Jews view the world outside of their community. Haredim, in general, discuss their own world as holy, distinct, and separate from that occupied by non-Jews and non-Haredi Jews. Despite the fact that much of Haredi society has indeed been colored by “the modern,” Haredim see the “modern world” as valueless and lacking discipline. It is a
world in which “anything goes” because its citizens do not recognize right from wrong. An example can be found in Yoel Finkelman’s book *Strictly Kosher Reading: Popular Literature and the Condition of Contemporary Orthodoxy* (2011), which begins with an analysis of a cartoon found in a Haredi children’s book meant to foster positive character traits in the young reader. In the illustration, “a mother wheels her two newborn infants out of the nursery. One turns toward the left, down a path marked ‘Olam Habah’ [the World to Come]; the other turns to the right, down a path marked ‘Olam Hazeh’ [this world].” While Olam Habah depicts an idyllic Haredi community, Olam Hazeh is a moral vacuum, depraved and full of danger. Finkelman writes, “The miserable people on the wrong side of the wall may not even be fully human, since in one drawing a dog leads a man on a leash into the psychologist’s office, and in another corner a red-haired woman dressed in a bathrobe wheels what appears to be a dog in a baby carriage. She is so out of touch with her potential as a mother that she treats her pet as a child” (14).

While Finkelman is displaying an extreme example, it is indicative of a prevalent belief among Haredim that the non-Haredi world lacks structure and values. Many believe that the non-Jewish world has lost sight of the benefits of familiar institutions such as family, and has adopted a freewheeling spirit in which everything is permitted and social ties are fluid and impermanent. In contrast, the Haredi community is grounded in Torah, complete with a proper understanding of its prescriptions for living in the world.

The fluidity of social ties and values in Olam Hazeh is a striking depiction of Bauman’s liquid modernity. In the course of my fieldwork I often heard descriptions of the non-Haredi world that echoed these sentiments, albeit generally in a less extreme
form. Even while it is clear, as I show in this dissertation, that the image of Haredim as completely separate from their neighbors is an inaccurate representation of their social situation, this discourse is ever present in Haredi life. It is thus fitting for this study to engage with Bauman’s writings on liquid modernity, and to explore how the lives of Haredim might challenge Bauman’s theory by suggesting the possibility of the re-solidification of social ties in liquid modernity. This argument runs throughout each of the following chapters, as I examine four different examples of Haredi music making.

**Research Approach: Methodology, Scope, and Positionality**

For the past five years I have immersed myself in the Haredi Jewish community of greater New York, and have dedicated myself to learning about the rich musical repertoire of this community. As noted above, my wife and I moved to New York from Boston in August 2012 so that I could begin my PhD studies. We settled in the Midwood neighborhood of Brooklyn, largely to be in close proximity to the Modzitz synagogue on Coney Island Avenue, which I expected to play a large part in my dissertation research. Modzitz was, in many ways, my portal to music in the Haredi world. I quickly befriended Rabbi Ben Zion Shenker, who, as described in this dissertation, was my primary teacher as I learned about the niggun repertoire. I frequented other synagogues as well, particularly The Flatbush Minyan, an eclectic prayer community under the guidance of the brilliant and musically skilled Rabbi Meir Fund. Here I helped to form a (short-lived) choir, gained proficiency in the musical knowledge needed to lead Sabbath prayer services, and learned about a broad array of previously unfamiliar music. I also became friends with many members of the Haredi community in Brooklyn, and was grateful to
receive warm invitations to Sabbath meals, weddings, Bar Mitzvahs, *kumzitzin* (musical sing-along gatherings, see chapter 2), and more.

Often, day-to-day life in Haredi Brooklyn was the greatest source of information about the musical world of the community. Attending Torah classes, walking through the supermarket, striking up a conversation with strangers, reading the newspaper, and other mundane activities brought me into the music culture and taught me about the latest events and new music releases, and simply how people consumed and talked about music. I followed up on these interactions and conducted interviews with professional musicians, Rabbis, and lay community members. While many individuals I interviewed were unfamiliar with PhD dissertations, my interlocutors were gracious in their willingness to speak with me. As a Modern Orthodox Jew myself, who had established many strong relationships in the Haredi community, I believe that I was seen as sufficiently a part of the community to be trusted, even if I was “more modern” than the individuals with whom I consulted.

A primary concern, then, was not one of access to the Haredi community, but rather that I could generally reach only half of its population. Haredi Jews maintain strong separations between men and women for the sake of modesty, and I quickly learned that my attempts to set up interviews with women were being seen as inappropriate. This study, then, is primarily a study of Haredi men and their music making. I include occasional discussions of women, but I recognize that this study is severely limited in this way. I take solace, however, knowing that several excellent studies have been conducted on Haredi (more specifically, Hasidic) women and their music (see Vaisman 2009, and Koskoff 1993, for example). According to Jewish law it is
prohibited for a man to listen to a woman’s singing voice, and while I recognize that I could have purchased CDs and DVDs that are marked “For Women Only,” I felt that this would be a betrayal of the trust that so many Haredim had placed in me. Nonetheless, I did speak to many Haredi women at Shabbos meals, and my wife was kind enough to report back to me about certain women-only events, such as girl’s high school musicals that are extremely popular in the community. While I do not write about women’s music making at length, my peripheral exposure to these activities has helped me to more fully understand musical life in the American Haredi community.

The Haredi community is deeply transnational. Seemingly every American Haredi Jew that I met has friends and family in Israel, and many also have loved ones in Europe or Australia. Furthermore, Haredim revere Torah scholars, referring to the most brilliant of these rabbis as gedolim (Hebrew: Great ones). The announcements of gedolim, particularly the Rebbes of Hasidic sects, are seen as quasi-legal proclamations and their words carry weight to those within their subdivision of the Haredi community, wherever one lives in the world. Haredim travel across the world to consult with their spiritual leaders on personal matters, to receive their blessings, and to pray with them on holidays. Recognizing this, I took a research trip to Israel from December 2014 to January 2015 in order to complete several specific research tasks, and to help determine the scope of this dissertation. Having spent significant time in Israel previously, including studying at a Haredi yeshiva in Jerusalem for American batei teshuva (non-Orthodox Jews who adopt Orthodox Judaism) during the course of researching my master’s thesis in 2011, I was able to accomplish much in the short time that I was there, including a trip to the Modzitz music archive, a surprise meeting with the Modzitzer Rebbe, and an interview with
Ephraim Luft, who has been active in fighting against “non-kosher” music (see Chapter Three). Most importantly, through speaking with many Israelis my trip enabled me to determine that, for this project, it was most appropriate to focus attention on American Haredim, but include dynamics taking place elsewhere, particularly in Israel, that impact the American community. To include Israeli Haredim and their music in this dissertation, I concluded, would make for too wide a scope, as the Israeli community and the American community differ in key ways.

I make this claim based on two related factors. First, in Israel there is significant tension between the Haredi community and other segments of society concerning military service. While military service is compulsory in Israel, most Haredim opt out of serving. Haredim are, in general, not Zionists and believe that a Jewish state should not exist until the coming of the messiah. Additionally Haredim argue that their Torah study is not only a more effective method of defense, but that it provides a Jewish character to the nation. Other Israelis criticize the Haredim for this, arguing that they ought to “share the burden,” especially considering the financial aid that they take from the government to support their large families. The tension between Haredim and the rest of Israeli society has led to an even higher degree of cloistering than is found in America, as the Haredim feel that their lifestyle is threatened by the ever-increasing legal push to disallow military exemptions in their community. Secondly, the Haredi community is more formally organized in Israel due to the presence of religious political parties. At the time of this writing there are two Haredi political parties represented in the Knesset, each of which currently holds seats in the Israeli Parliament: Shas, the Sephardic and Mizrachi Haredi party, and United Torah Judaism, composed of Ashkenazi Haredim. These groups
advocate for issues such as the closing of public transportation on the Sabbath, funding for their schools, and their right to abstain from military service. The presence of these political parties has helped to formalize this division of the society. Because the American community is far more nebulous and cannot identify such an obvious constitutive other along political lines, I have decided that it would be imprudent to attempt to define my scope as including the Israeli Haredi community. Similarly, there are strong Haredi communities in the United Kingdom, Amsterdam, Australia, South Africa, and other locations around the globe. Each has its idiosyncrasies that are too important to ignore, and should be studied on its own terms rather than painted with overly broad strokes. Instead, I focus on Haredim in the United States, particularly the greater New York area, as well as international dynamics that impact them.

The constraints of this dissertation’s scope are not only sociological, but also musical. The Sephardic and Mizrachi Jewish communities have extraordinarily rich musical practices that continue to be performed and developed today, even while many of the most rigorous adherents to Jewish law have adopted Ashkenazi practices related to dress and halachic stringency, and share opinions about cultural isolation with their Ashkenazi counterparts. Each Sephardic and Mizrachi community is unique and requires individual, focused studies for an accurate analysis of its music making (see Thomas 2014 and Rapport 2014 for recent studies of, respectively, the Moroccan and Bukharian Jewish communities of New York, in which the authors describe the community’s adoption of some practices of Ashkenazi Haredim). Therefore, this dissertation does not

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2 Mark Kligman’s 2009 book *Maqām and Liturgy: Ritual, Music, and Aesthetics of Syrian Jews in Brooklyn* notes that in Israel, “there is an increasing trend of Aleppo
 delve into the nuances of the Sephardic and Mizrachi Jewish communities in America. However, several musicians—most prominently the famous pop singer Yaakov Shwekey—are from these communities, and have become important figures in Haredi popular music, which is enjoyed all across the Haredi world. My analysis of Haredi popular music thus includes both Ashkenazi and Sephardic musicians, as they frequently collaborate in this medium. The niggun repertoire, however, is distinctly Ashkenazi.

This dissertation, therefore, could be accused of reproducing tropes of “ashkenormativity” (Katz 2014), that is, the assumption that Ashkenazi (male) practices represent the whole of the Jewish people. As a male Ashkenazi Orthodox Jew myself, I could be especially suspect. However, I choose to engage with these repertoires precisely because of their dominance in Haredi society, not because I do not recognize the value of other repertoires and practices. In studying light-skinned, male musicians, I am acutely aware of the cultural forces in the United States and Israel that have given Ashkenazi males the upper hand in shaping the Orthodox community. Among Haredim, male Ashkenazim are very often the face of the community. As noted earlier, Sephardic and Mizrachi Jews are increasingly taking on Ashkenazi Haredi worldviews and practices. This has musical ramifications, such as Evan Rapport’s observation that “in New York, Bukharan religious authorities have increasingly adopted international ‘ultra-Orthodox’ Jewish attitudes, with striking ramifications for female participation in the maqom sphere. Women are discouraged for example, from singing at events with significant rabbis being influenced by Ashkenazi ḥaredim” (34). During the course of my fieldwork I have seen this taking place among Brooklyn’s Syrian Jews as well.
numbers of men in attendance” (2014:28). Furthermore, as discussed in this dissertation, “Jews of color” (Fernheimer 2014) struggle to be accepted in the Haredi world, and are often asked to dismiss their racial history in order to “be just Jewish” (Shais Rishon, October 20, 2015 personal interview), meaning that they should adopt “normative” Haredi practices that are increasingly Ashkenazi and male-dominated. Therefore, this study should be read as an analysis of practices, worldviews, and repertoires that are foregrounded in Haredi culture, not as a survey of the diverse Haredi community in America. Chapter Five offers a slightly different angle, as I study the “Haredi periphery,” which attempts to reject many of the cultural dynamics of the Haredi community and make space for voices of those who have been marginalized.

Scholarly Context

This study belongs to the rapidly expanding body of literature on the lived religion of Haredi Jews, and to the study of Ashkenazi Jewish music. As such, it seeks to fill a void in the ethnomusicological literature by offering an ethnographic account of the contemporary Haredi community in greater New York. Currently the only monograph to consider a subset of these Jews is Ellen Koskoff’s Music in Lubavitcher Life. Koskoff’s account of the role of music and the discourses that surround it among Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidim in Crown Heights is the result of twenty years of research, and is richly contextualized. The Lubavitch sect, though, is an outlier in its relative openness to the world outside of its own, and Koskoff’s conclusions do not therefore necessarily apply to the Haredi community as a whole. Mark Kligman has produced several excellent articles

3 Rapport is referring to magom, a central Asian suite-based music repertoire in which Bukharian Jewish musicians have specialized.
that discuss the music of Orthodox Jews in New York. His 1996 article, “On the Creators and Consumers of Orthodox Popular Music in Brooklyn” is a helpful introduction to this genre of music, in which he offers historical context for Orthodox pop music and analyzes several representative examples. Kligman’s 2001 article, “Contemporary Jewish Music in America” in American Jewish Yearbook also discusses Orthodox music, including Haredi musicians, placing it within a broader context of the denominational spectrum of American Judaism. Similarly, Abigail Wood’s 2014 entry in the Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Jewish Cultures titled “Pop, Piety and Modernity: The Changing Spaces of Orthodox Culture” is a brief but densely packed introduction to Haredi popular music. I attempt to build upon these works in this dissertation.

As described in Chapter Two of this dissertation, the niggun genre is a key musical genre in contemporary Haredi, particularly Hasidic, life. Foundational works that have helped to inform my understanding of the niggun genre include Hanoch Avenary’s "The Hasidic Nigun; Ethos and Melos of a Folk Liturgy" (1964), and Meir Shimon Geshuri’s three volume Hebrew language Hanigun Vehariḳud Bahasidut [“The Melody and The Dance in Hasidism”] (1954), in which he describes the role of music in prominent Hasidic dynasties. Israeli scholar Yaakov Mazor has been a leading researcher of the niggun and Hasidic music in Israel, and among a number of Hebrew language publications, he has also released a double CD set, along with extensive liner notes, titled The Hasidic Niggun as Sung by the Hasidim (2004). Mazor, in collaboration with Edwin Serrousi, has also released a helpful “Lexicon of Hasidic Music” (1990-1991) that clarifies the meaning of many key terms.
Other music scholars have included descriptions of Haredi music in the context of broader studies. One example is Abigail Wood’s 2007 article, “Stepping Across the Divide: Hasidic Music in Today’s Yiddish Canon.” In this article she describes how the two groups preserving the Yiddish language today are Hasidim and “leftist, secularist” Jews. Wood explains that Klezmer musicians who identify with this left-leaning culture borrow Hasidic music as source material for performances, often framing it as “a musical symbol of Jewish authenticity” despite the fact that contemporary klezmer music differs greatly from “contemporary synthesizer-backed Hasidic recordings, and equally from the soundscape of traditional Hasidic performance practice.” Another source discussing contemporary Hasidic musical practices is Jeffrey Summit’s *The Lord’s Song in a Strange Land* (2000), which compares music performance in Sabbath prayer services in five different synagogues in the greater Boston area. Among the synagogues discussed in the study is *Beis Pinchas*, home to the Bostoner sect of Hasidism. Through a description of the music in their worship, and interviews with the Bostoner Rebbe and his sons, Summit presents an account of the importance of music in Hasidic prayer. A final exploration of Hasidic music in contemporary ethnomusicology can be seen in Judah Cohen’s article “Hip-Hop Judaica: The Politics of Representin’ Heebster Heritage” (2009), which explores the music of several Jewish rappers, including formerly Hasidic hip-hop/reggae musician Matisyahu. Cohen’s research astutely suggests that this music “instills a deep sense of identity into a population (that is, members of “the American Jewish hipster scene”) often characterised as iconoclastic, dynamic, politically inclusive and culturally mutable” (2). As these musicians offer an alternative Jewish masculinity through the medium of hip-hop, young Jewish listeners construct a proud Jewish identity.
In writing this dissertation I hope to contribute as well to a growing number of ethnographic studies of Haredi communities in America. Sociologist Samuel Heilman, who has published extensively on the Orthodox community, has laid much of the groundwork for this body of research. His book *Defenders of the Faith* (1992) was a path-breaking study of Haredi Jews in Israel, offering historical information about their development, explaining their daily lives, and exploring the many limits to their insularity. Among Heilman’s many other publications is *Sliding to the Right: The Contest for the Future of American Jewish Orthodoxy* (2006), in which he describes the forces that have led to the growth of Haredi Judaism in America, while less stringent forms of Orthodoxy decline as their members become more strict in their observance or leave Orthodoxy altogether. Heilman’s astute observations about these trends in the landscape of Orthodoxy provide an important context for this dissertation.

Two recent monographs on American Haredim have been recognized for their helpful contributions to Jewish Studies. *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing Up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn* (2009) by anthropologist Ayala Fader was the winner of the 2009 Jewish Book Award in Women’s Studies, and sociologist Iddo Tavory’s *Summoned: Identification and Religious Life in a Jewish Neighborhood* (2016) earned him the 2016 American Sociological Association Theory Section’s Lewis A. Coser Award for Theoretical Agenda Setting. Fader’s study examines girls in the Bobov sect of Hasidism from their early childhood through marriage. Fader offers fascinating insights into how these girls in Borough Park become Hasidic women, with a particular emphasis on the ways that Yiddish and English language use is adjusted to fit various social situations. Tavory’s book explores his experiences of “summoning” during his immersion
in an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood in Los Angeles. Tavory suggests that, in addition to being summoned to participation in communal life through invitations to events and religious requirements relating to group worship, Orthodox Jews are summoned into their very identities through their physical environment as they navigate a “moral obstacle course” through the streets of Los Angeles in their everyday lives. Both texts demonstrate thorough familiarity with the Haredi community and provide a model for conducting fieldwork in this context. I hope to offer another dimension to this recent research with this dissertation.

It is exciting to note that in 2016 The New York Working Group on Jewish Orthodoxies was formed as an opportunity for scholars from an array of disciplines who research Orthodox Judaism/Jews to come together. The working group, primarily led by Ayala Fader, has demonstrated that there is a large interest in this topic among graduate students and early career scholars. It has been a pleasure to participate in this working group, and my research has certainly benefitted from our meetings. The scholarly community can look forward to a number of fascinating studies in this field in the coming years.

This dissertation draws on diverse theoretical scholarship in order to inform my overarching argument regarding Bauman’s formulation of liquid modernity. While there are many sources that I use explicitly and at length, like all studies, this dissertation is situated in an intellectual history that has shaped the assumptions and language used in the discourse regarding religion and modernity. In this investigation I apply a theoretical approach that is situated at the intersection of contemporary scholarly conversations regarding music and lived religion, and music and modernity.
Contemporary scholarship on the study of religion has largely moved away from theorizations of so-called “popular religion” toward a concept of “lived religion.” Scholars such as David Hall (1997) and Robert Orsi (2002) have become leading advocates for this switch in terminology, arguing that the idea of “popular religion” too sharply distinguishes between an official religion and the improper practice of dogma that is most commonly found. Terminologically, too, “popular religion” is “unclear, misleading, and tendentious” (Orsi 2002:xxi). Instead, theorizations of “lived religion” sidestep claims of authenticity and their inherent power relations in order to identify the meaning of spirituality and religious practice for individuals in daily life. This body of research aims to understand the role of religion in the lives of lay people, while also acknowledging tensions between official discourse and actual practice.

I also situate my work within the anthropology of law, specifically the category of religious law. Religious law not only provides the structure for the lives of Haredim, but is also the field on which debates over the permissibility of activities such as music making play out. The work of two key scholars in this field, Saba Mahmood (2003) and John Bowen (2003), particularly informs my approach. Mahmood examines the ways that Egyptian women conceptualize Islamic ritual observance and its role in the fashioning of the self. By examining adherence to Islamic law through both pietist and nationalist approaches, she importantly notes how religious practice is an inherently political labor toward the cultivation of an ethical self that takes place within a particular discursive framework. Though Mahmood’s book is not referenced frequently in this dissertation, her work has made an indelible mark on my own thinking about ritual practice in Haredi Judaism, and this inspiration emerges in subtle ways in this study. Bowen’s examination
of Indonesian legal systems adapts John Rawls’ ideas concerning public reason, arguing that public *reasoning* is a more appropriate term. Through looking at the diverse uses, interactions, and evolutions of *shari’a* and Indonesian *adat*, as well as the religious and civil court systems, Bowen provides us with an appreciation for the place of contestation in pluralistic societies, and challenges ideas regarding how pluralistic societies ought to be structured. My dissertation draws on these two investigations into religious law to investigate the role of religious law in Haredi society.

Through this examination, I also touch on the literature on “space and place,” particularly sociological work regarding urban enclaves (Abrahamson 2006, for example). My analysis of the ways that music that is perceived to be dangerous is kept out, and the ways that Haredi music genres are variously embraced or rejected, will contribute to understandings of urban music making and consumption, and complicate understandings of boundaries in contemporary cities. Such questions again relate to geography, as I have found that many who find themselves on the fringes of Haredi society choose to live on the periphery of these enclaves and participate in music events which are often on or just outside the standard borders of their society, both geographically and musically.

Similarly, Charles Hirschkind’s concept of “the ethical soundscape” (2009) also provides a model for my research through his discussion of religious cassette sermons in the soundscape of Cairo. Ethical soundscapes are certainly cultivated in Haredi communities, as carefully selected music seeps out of shops selling religious articles, kosher food, and everyday household items, and into the crowded streets of urban Haredi communities. This music frames these neighborhoods as pious, and reinforces
expectations of behavior among those living in the area. Hirschkind’s work frequently came to mind during the course of this fieldwork as I asked myself questions about how these ethical soundscapes encourage the solidification of social ties, and how the soundscapes may be resisted.

In addition, just as individuals perform modernity (Schein 2009), it is also important to note the ways that resistance to modernity is performed. In the Haredi world, music making and listening practices, along with the semiotics of style (Hebdige 1979), are rich lenses for seeing how relationships with modernity are negotiated. My exploration of varied musicians and ensembles, ranging from Hasidic niggun singing sessions to rappers, will demonstrate the ways that musical elements are employed in the embrace of, or resistance to, modernity. While the relationship between Haredim and modernity has been of interest to many scholars, I hope to contribute an in-depth discussion of music to this conversation. The following pages demonstrate the centrality of music in contemporary Haredi life, and the manner in which music encapsulates so many of the values and tensions that face the community. I offer an inside look at a rich music culture that is rarely seen by outsiders, with guidance and quotations from many of the most important individuals who contribute to its vibrancy.

In addition to contributing to the scholarly literature described above, it is my hope that this research will be a helpful response to the growing interest in the Haredi world. Due to extraordinarily high birth rates this community is one of the fastest-growing religious populations in the world, often transforming the locales in which its members live. Their growing presence in Israel—a 2016 census found that there are approximately 910,500 Haredim in Israel—has monumental repercussions for its
political, military, and social aspects of life, as well as for the global Jewish community (Rosenberg 2016). While the Haredi population currently constitutes 11.1 percent of the country’s population, that number is expected to reach 27 percent by 2059 (ibid). In addition, the large size of New York’s Haredi population and its idiosyncrasies make it the interest of politicians, social services organizations, and curious neighbors alike. With this dissertation I hope to offer a glimpse of the diversity and richness of artistic life that is to be found in the Haredi community, a dimension that is rarely seen by those outside of the community.

Chapter Descriptions

In the following chapters I examine four different spheres of music making in the American Haredi community and offer a description of the manner in which each contributes to a more refined understanding of religion in liquid modernity. The sequence of chapters can be understood as an examination of various points on the spectrum of “sounding Hasidic” to “sounding modern” that I have borrowed from Fader.

Following this introductory first chapter, I move to Chapter Two in which I offer a study of niggunim, particularly in regard to the Hasidic composer Ben Zion Shenker and the Modzitz dynasty. I argue that niggunim are an “ideal repertoire” in that these pieces embody the Haredi community’s ideals and provide a connection to the imagined core of Haredi Judaism, thus strengthening social ties through their performance and consumption. I also offer a biographical sketch of Rabbi Ben Zion Shenker, one of the most important composers of niggunim, in order to more fully understand the history and uses of this repertoire.
In Chapter Three I turn my attention to Haredi popular music, with a focus on the ban on singer Lipa Schmeltzer’s 2008 concert at Madison Square Garden by thirty-three leading Haredi rabbis. I examine the contestation that arose as an example of “public reasoning” regarding music, as the Haredi community works out pluralism within a society that often emphasizes conformity. While much Haredi popular music is enjoyed by the mainstream Haredi community, all music is subject to scrutiny to ensure that it is sufficiently anchored in Haredi values and demonstrates cultural continuity. As I show in this chapter, those who advocate for conservative aesthetics can marginalize even musicians who many Haredim consider to be emblematic of the culture. I discuss the ways that leaders and lay people attempt to draw the lines of permissibility in music, and the ethical discourses that enter this argumentation. Through this analysis, we come to appreciate the complexity of power dynamics in Haredi life and how the community continues to adapt to constant change, while still attempting to retain its identity. With this chapter I hope to offer an example of how the Haredi community manages the encroachment of liquid modernity.

I then proceed to an analysis of a specific ensemble type, boys choirs, in Chapter Four. Boys choirs are extraordinarily popular in Haredi communities, and travel around the globe performing for their co-religionists. In this chapter I offer an exploration of the cultural work that they do, arguing that in a context in which there is great anxiety about the future of the Haredi community, Haredi boys choirs perform a secure future. I demonstrate that these young boys act as role models to other children and as an assurance to adults that the community’s values will continue with the next generation, despite the liquid modern conditions that threaten its continuation.
I devote Chapter Five to a community that I refer to as “the Haredi periphery.” These individuals have close ties to the Haredi community and many identify as Hasidic, though they reject the Haredi community’s value of insularity. Instead, these devout Jews prefer to engage with the larger society and its cultural productions in order to serve God in a way that is most meaningful to them. Music is central to this community, as musicians use genres such as rock, rap, and folk music to espouse religious beliefs and create an alternative Haredi identity. This chapter complicates Bauman’s understanding of religion in liquid modernity and offers an example of how some musicians are allowing themselves to wade in the waters of liquid modernity in order to enhance their experience of the sacred.

I close with Chapter Six, a conclusion in which I offer reflections on Haredi music and liquid modernity. I also offer thoughts on music and “spiritual health,” a theme that runs throughout the entirety of this dissertation. In this conclusion I restate my argument concerning Bauman’s understanding of religion, and argue for taking seriously music’s role among Haredim in strengthening social ties.

On Zygmunt Bauman and Ben Zion Shenker

In the final stages of writing this dissertation, two of its most central figures, Zygmunt Bauman and Ben Zion Shenker, passed away, both at the age of 91. Rabbi Shenker passed away on the morning of Sunday, November 20, 2016. I had sat with him in the Modzitz synagogue less that twenty-four hours prior, where we sang along with the prayer services. At the funeral, Cantor Yitzchak Meir Helfgot, who Rabbi Shenker had praised many times during our conversations, sang the customary “El Maleh Rachamim” (Hebrew: “God, Full of Mercy”) prayer. Those gathered at the funeral were in disbelief.
that this man, whom many considered the greatest composer of niggunim of his generation, would no longer offer new compositions.

Zygmunt Bauman passed away on January 9, 2017. Though I was never privileged to meet him, in researching and writing this dissertation I have come to greatly respect not only his exceptional brilliance, but also his deep care for vulnerable populations. As many of his obituaries noted, his quote, “When elephants fight, pity the grass” (2010:25), encapsulated his worldview. Following his passing at his home in Leeds, his wife wrote that he had now gone “to liquid eternity” (Gera 2017).

As I engage with the work of Professor Bauman and Rabbi Shenker in these pages, I hope that my deep respect for both individuals will be found in every word.
Chapter Two: Niggunim as an Ideal Repertoire in Liquid Modernity

The liquid modern condition, as Zygmunt Bauman explains, emphatically asserts the primacy of the individual. In a world in which social ties are unstable and “identity is becoming disembedded from social structures” (Elliot 2007:50), a profound self-interest has emerged that leaves little possibility of community in its historically imagined sense. Despite the challenge to group formation posed by the general fluidity of contemporary social ties, it is undeniable that the pursuit of individual goals can more readily be accomplished with the help of others who share interests. Bauman suggests that the optimal setting for such a community is the “compleat mappa mundi: a total world, supplying everything one may need to lead a meaningful and rewarding life.”

The “total world” of the Haredim does indeed offer most goods, services, and ideas that a community member requires. Haredim maintain supermarkets, emergency response organizations, neighborhood watch groups, welfare services, employment opportunities, courts of law and more, all catering to the particular needs and sensitivities of the community. Artistic life, too, is a feature of the Haredi “total world,” and various genres of Haredi music each serve unique purposes and occasions. Just as individuals plot themselves in proximity to an imagined center of the Haredi “total world,” that is, the point of being the most Haredi, music is also understood in these concentric circles. At the core is the repertoire of niggunim, that is, “monophonic folk music compositions, vocal or instrumental, with or without text, consisting of one or more sections…. (Mazor and Seroussi 1991:131). The niggun is the iconic genre of the Haredi world, understood to have a purity that is not to be found in the Top 40-inflected sounds
of the Haredi pop stars. As Ellen Koskoff writes, “Nigunim,¹ because of their position as the closest of all musics to the divine source, are so powerful that even a performance by an evil person, or perhaps for an evil purpose, can transform both the performer and the event into something of good” (2001:73). The term “niggun” translates directly from Hebrew as “melody,” and indeed this is the essence of the composition. While recordings of niggunim often include instrumental harmony accompaniments, the melody is far more important in the listening experience. Haredim sing niggunim in both liturgical contexts, such as portions of the prayer service in which the prayer leader may choose a melody to be sung communally along with the liturgy, as well as paraliturgical contexts, such as during a Shabbos meal, or at another festive gathering. The centrality of the niggun in internal Hasidic historiography has positioned it as the core musical repertoire in Haredi life. While niggunim are generally composed and recorded by men, both men and women listen to niggunim, and Haredi women sing these pieces in all-female spaces. To live out the Haredi ideal means to live a life accompanied by niggunim; to be at the heart of the Haredi community means to preference niggunim over all other musics, and to let the niggunim shape one’s very self.

In this chapter I wish to analyze the role of, and the discourses surrounding, niggunim in Haredi communal life. While Bauman speaks of the difficulty of creating or maintaining community in liquid modernity and the fragility of all social bonds, Haredim defy this assessment as they live in communities that are quite strong by any geographic, political, or economic measure. To identify the ties that bind Haredi individuals to the larger community, then, is an important task. Here I offer an analysis of the manner in which “ideal repertoires,” as I call them, provide links to the center of the community. By exploring niggunim, with a focus

¹ I have retained Koskoff’s transliteration of the Hebrew term here.
on the Modzitz Hasidic dynasty and the esteemed Modzitzer composer, Rabbi Ben Zion Shenker (1925-2016), I demonstrate the manner in which niggunim function as an ideal repertoire, embodying the values of the Haredi community, and thus articulating these values as niggunim are performed.

Bauman posits that the total world is always understood in relation to that which is outside. “That communal world is complete in so far as all the rest is irrelevant; more exactly, hostile—a wilderness full of ambushes and conspiracies and bristling with enemies wielding chaos as their main weapons. The inner harmony of the communal world shines and glitters against the background of the obscure and tangled jungle which starts on the other side of the turnpike” (2000:172). In Chapter Three I will explore in depth the manner in which many Haredim understand their community in contrast to their neighbors, and perceive external forces to be dangerous. In this chapter, though, I aim to make clear the importance of the “inner harmony” that can be found within Haredi communities. To understand Haredi life solely in relation to non-Haredim would be an inadequate representation of this community, and would propagate long-standing, problematic practices in ethnographic writing. Instead, in this dissertation I attempt to take a wide view of the Haredi community both by studying the ways that Haredim discuss their own community, and considering the broader social context in which they live.

The recognition among Haredim that the compositions of the Modzitzer Rebbes and those of Ben Zion Shenker hold an esteemed place in Haredi culture is significant in the opportunity it offers to observe how community members perform, discuss, exchange, and document this cherished repertoire. In studying the ways in which Haredim interact with the canon of Modzitz music and the experts in its performance, we learn much about the values
attached to music, and the ways in which music is implicated in Haredi identity. In the following pages I will present a thick description of Modzitz music in the twenty-first century, focusing on a biographical sketch of Ben Zion Shenker\(^2\), and concluding with an analysis of the manner in which “ideal repertoires” function in liquid modernity.

**Modzitz niggunim in Contemporary Haredi Life**

One of my first forays into the study of Hasidic life was a visit to Kiryas Joel, a municipality located within the township of Monroe, New York inhabited solely by Hasidic families. The village was established in 1974 by followers of Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, the Satmar Rebbe, in order to fulfill “the Rebbe’s dream to provide housing for the court’s expanding population in an area [sic] protected from the influences of the city” (Mintz, 91). Though I had grown up attending a Conservative synagogue that was located just a few minutes walk from Kiryas Joel, I had never explored the Hasidic enclave. In my mind the community was always a bit mysterious—an entirely foreign world of Judaism that overlapped very little with my own upbringing.

In 2008 I arranged to interview a Kiryas Joel resident and begin to learn about music in Hasidic life. After a pleasant and exceptionally informative interview, the gentleman I had met suggested that I visit a local *sefarim store*—a shop specializing in the sale of religious books that also sold Judaica items, including music recordings. Inside the tiny, dark shop, books crowded every inch, and a few men perused new editions of ancient texts. I approached the clerk, a young man with *peyos* (Hebrew: sidelocks) dangling to his shoulders, and struck up a conversation. I inquired about the ongoing war of succession within Satmar in which two sons of the recently

\(^2\) The initial draft of this chapter was written prior to Shenker’s passing. Rabbi Shenker graciously read the draft and verified that the biographical information included here is accurate.
deceased Rebbe, Aaron and Zalman Teitelbaum, were vying for leadership of the sect. I asked if each group produced music, and the clerk—along with some apparently eavesdropping Hasidim—burst out laughing. Perhaps they were amused that I, an obvious outsider, would have found this to be a significant aspect of the dispute. Or perhaps they were amused that indeed music had been released that supported the campaign of each brother. Sure enough, the clerk handed me a cassette titled *Yevarech Es Bais Aaron* (Hebrew: Bless the house of Aaron). I recognized the title from the liturgy of Hallel, a prayer service recited on certain holidays, but realized that this was also a clever pronouncement of support for the elder of the disputing brothers. I discovered later that the cassette was a collection of niggunim that were written for the occasion of the wedding of Aaron Teitelbaum’s grandson, Yoel Teitelbaum, in a wedding that Satmar Hasidim viewed as an opportunity to show allegiance to one side or the other by choosing whether or not to attend (McKenna 2002).

Ex. 2.1: Cassette cover for *Yevarech Es Bais Aaron*

I asked the clerk if he carried other recordings of Satmar music. He directed me toward a large collection of discs that were sold for only three dollars each. However, he told me, if I truly wanted to understand Hasidic music, Satmar was not the right avenue. For this I would need to explore the world of Modzitz music. He pulled a cassette off the shelf and handed it to me:
Modzitz Chai: Volume 1, Niggunei Yamim Noraim [Modzitz Lives: Volume 1, Melodies of the Days of Awe]. He explained that followers of the Modzitz dynasty are recognized as the true aficionados of Hasidic music. As I paid for the recordings and thanked him for his recommendations, he left me with one piece of advice: find Ben Zion Shenker.

I soon learned that Ben Zion Shenker [pronounced BenTZIon Shenker] was the “musical secretary and singer par excellence” of the Modzitz Hasidic dynasty (Pasternak 2013). The clerk of the sefarim store in Kiryas Joel was the first of many people who recommended that I explore the repertoire of the Modzitzer Hasidim, and seek out Rabbi Shenker. Though little research has been conducted on the repertoire, scholars have recognized the important place occupied by Modzitz in the world of Hasidic music, for example Neil Levin’s (2013) statement that Modzitz is “by far the most musically prolific group.” By those within the Haredi community, I was repeatedly told statements that resemble these words from Rabbi Meir Fund: "There's a certain depth and aesthetic beauty in Modzitzer melodies that really defies words, but that sets Modzitz apart as the pinnacle of Jewish Chasidic music" (Kalish 2013). I have taken this sentiment seriously, and have immersed myself in the Modzitz community of Brooklyn. In the course of my graduate studies over the past four years I have attended Sabbath services at their main synagogue nearly every week, frequently attended holiday worship, participated in approximately thirty yahrtzeit seudahs [gatherings that mark the anniversary of the death of one of the Modzitzer Rebbes], traveled to the Modzitz music archive in Bnei Brak, Israel, met with the present Modzitzer Rebbe, and befriended many members of the Modzitz community. I did indeed find Ben Zion Shenker and developed a very close relationship with him, learning the details of his life and music. National Public Radio’s John Kalish was not overstating the matter when in 2013 he called Shenker “the greatest living figure of Hasidic music.” Rabbi Shenker was
my primary guide to the world of Modzitz music, and it is perhaps most appropriate to describe the life of Modzitz music in contemporary times through his biography. In this presentation I include many quotes from Shenker himself in order to present his life in his own words. I also present this biographical information with limited commentary throughout, opting instead to identify and analyze themes at the end of this chapter.

Ben Zion Shenker: A Biographical Sketch

Ben Zion Shenker, legally Benjamin Shenker, was born in 1925 in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Shenker’s parents, Miriam and Mordechai, had both been raised in Poland approximately ten miles away from one another, his mother in the town of Chelm, and his father in Biskovitz. Both were raised in Hasidic families; his maternal grandfather was a follower of the Kotzker Rebbe, and his father’s family members were Trisker Hasidim. Music was present in the youth of each parent, though Shenker credited his mother for his musical abilities:

My mother happened to be very musical. I think that’s where my music comes from. Those are the genes. And actually, I don’t think she had anybody of her siblings that were the same. And her father and mother were not musical at all, so it’s really surprising. However, she did have one brother who came to America before they came, and she claimed that he sang in an opera. It could be that he sang in the chorus of the opera. She never was sure exactly what it was. He passed away at a very young age, so I never got to know him really. (Interview, July 22, 2015)

Shenker’s description of how his parent’s marriage was arranged gives us a glimpse into interactions among European Jews in the early twentieth century. He explains that after his paternal grandfather died at a young age, likely due to asthma, his grandmother became a “customer peddler,” that is, one who traveled to market towns to deliver goods ordered by those living in rural areas. As a youth, Shenker’s father, Mordechai, would also ride along on these journeys, but later he stayed behind because of his schooling. He explains:
So, they used to very often come to Chelm. In fact, that’s how the shidduch (Yiddish: match) with my mother came about. When my grandmother came to Chelm, at that time maybe my father did not come along anymore because he also used to sit and learn. He used to spend a lot of time with the Rav (Hebrew: Rabbi) of the town. He was practically, like, brought up in that house. Since his father passed away at such a young age, the Rav took over responsibility of bringing him up in the Jewish way. He learned with him, he taught him. (Interview, July 22, 2015)

The couple moved to America in 1921 in order to be closer to Ben Zion’s mother’s family who had already relocated to the United States, and like many immigrant Jews they settled in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Mordechai Shenker had learned the skill of knitting while in Europe and this enabled him to find work in factories. However, like many religious Jews of the day, he was fired weekly when he refused to work on Saturdays due to his Sabbath observance. He grew tired of looking for new work week after week, and eventually decided to start his own factory, borrowing money from his father-in-law, Yechiel Shafran, who had been in America since 1914. At his own factory he had much more flexibility in his religious life. Shenker describes how his father would open up the factory and then join a minyan, a quorum of at least ten men, for the morning prayers:

And my father, what he used to do there was, there was a Rebbe living on the same block, opposite where my father had the factory, who had a minyan over there. He was a Skver Rebbe. He was one of the Skver einichlach (Yiddish: grandchildren). He was, I think, an uncle of the Skver Rebbe now in Skver. So he had a minyan. So my father used to open up his factory in the morning. At that point he had already somebody that he had taught how to run the machines. So he didn’t have to stay there, and he would go daven (Yiddish: pray). He would open up so this guy could get started, and he would go daven by the Skver Rebbe, and then come back to work right after that. (Interview, July 22, 2015)

While living on the Lower East Side, the Shenker family had two children, Rose (b. 1922) and Avrom Tzvi (b. 1923). They later moved to Williamsburg, Brooklyn where Ben Zion (b. 1925) and his brothers Nachman Meir (b. 1929) and Chaim Baruch (b. 1936) were born. Ben

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3 That is, a Rebbe from the Skver Hasidic dynasty originating in Skvyra, Ukraine. The dynasty is now based in New Square, a village within the town of Ramapo, New York.
Zion displayed an interest in music from a very young age; he particularly loved cantorial singers.

Musically, I can say my mother had a big hand in it also because when I was a young child, around three years old, I was not interested in the normal things that children do. Playing with toys. That was not my [interest]. What she would do is she would sit me down in the living room. We had a crank-up Victrola, I think it was an RCA. They called it Victrola because it was RCA Victor, that’s right. And she put a whole pile of records, of chazzanishe (Yiddish: cantorial) records, and I would go through them. One after another. And I learned a lot. Especially [Yossele] Rosenblatt, I picked up a lot of his stuff. He became my icon, you know …? I would stand outside with my mother to get a little air during the summer, and you had all the neighbors sitting around. And she’d say, “Benele, zing Elokai Neshama” (Yiddish: “Benele [diminutive of Ben Zion], sing “My God, the soul [that you placed in me …]”). And at first I said “No, no, no.” But finally, how long can you say no? And people over there went crazy, you know? They couldn’t believe it! I was all of four or five years old, and I was able to imitate Rosenblatt already…. These were pieces that you had to have coloratura. Usually kids don’t have that. (Interview, July 22, 2015)

After the family moved from Williamsburg to the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bedford Stuyvesant, they began to attend a small synagogue full of Polish Hasidim, similar to the families in which Ben Zion’s parents were raised. Prayer services there were filled with the Hasidic melodies that the worshippers brought with them from Europe, many of which were Modzitz niggunim. Though he had heard a small number of Modzitz niggunim from his father, it was here that Shenker first became exposed to the music of Modzitz in a significant way. On one occasion, the twelve-year-old Shenker caught the ear of Joshua Weisser, a choir leader and musician, while he was singing along to “Kel Adon,” a piyyut (Hebrew: liturgical poem) from the Sabbath morning liturgy.

As soon as davening was over he came over to me and he said, “Is your father here?” So I said, “Yes.” “Could you introduce me to your father?” So I said I could and I took him over to my father…. So he said, “Mr. Shenker, I’m very interested in your son joining my choir. I happen to like his voice very much.” My father listens and he says, “A choir? That’s not for my son. He’s a yeshiva boy, you know? I don’t think it’s a good idea.” So he said, “Why don’t you think it’s a good idea?” “Well, the caliber of people in choirs today is not really what we’re looking for.” The people in choirs mostly were not really religious. They liked to sing, or they had a little job and they went along. “I don’t want
him to mix with irreligious people. He’s a young boy, and young children pick up everything in their environment and I don’t think it’s a good idea.” He tried to argue with him, but my father was very reluctant. So he asked my father his address. “Where do you live?” He wants to speak to my mother. He thinks maybe he’ll do better with her…. Sure enough, during the week he knocked on the door and he starts speaking to my mother and she said the same thing, she doesn’t want me to leave for the *Yamim Tovim* (Hebrew: holidays), for the *Shabbosim* (Yiddish: Sabbaths). You know, they had to travel. “He’s a young boy. He’s very impressionable.” So he said, “What if I promise you that wherever I go, I’ll make sure that he stays at the Rabbi’s house?” So my mother said, “It’s certainly a good point. However, he’ll be away for Rosh Hashanah, he’ll be away on Sukkos. We want him at home. We don’t want him to travel.” Anyway, he spoke so long until he actually convinced my parents. (Netsky 2013)

Throughout all his years of education Shenker attended the Torah V’Daas yeshiva in Williamsburg. The school was known for its exceptional Rabbinical faculty, though Shenker admits that he had trouble focusing on his classes: “I’ll tell you one reason I was not the best student is because I was always into music so much that if I was sitting in a *shiur* (Hebrew: class) I would get a thought. And every time I sat in shiur I got a thought, you know? [Laughs]. And I would have to write it down, and if you’ve gotta do it in the middle of shiur, it’s not easy. So that took away a lot from my studying” (Interview, July 22, 2015). Shenker’s studies were also interrupted by musical opportunities that required him to be away from school. At the age of thirteen, he began to sing every Sunday on the radio. Shenker explains how he received the initial invitation to perform on the radio show:

> My mother took me to one of these stores on the east side, Lower Broadway, they put it, to buy a suit for my Bar Mitzvah. While we were there the owner of that store was the guy who had the radio show in downtown Brooklyn on Sundays. So my mother told him as we were buying the suit that I sing very well. So he said to me, “Let me hear how you sing, let me hear how you sing.” So I said, “What for? We’re trying to buy a suit over here!” My mother said, “Sing, sing.” So I sang shortly. He says, “Would you like to sing on the radio?” So I looked at him, like, “what, are you out of your mind?” So he said, “I have a radio show. I’d like to have you there.” He’s gonna pay me, like whatever he paid me. It was like a joke, you know? (Interview, July 22, 2015)
In order to perform, Shenker had to receive permission to leave the yeshiva in the middle of the day. His teacher at the time was Rabbi Avraham Yaakov Pam (1913-2001), who would go on to lead Torah Vodaas and become one of the leading Haredi Rabbis of the twentieth century (Magid 2013: 175). Shenker explains:

When I started off, it was on a Sunday afternoon, around 12:00. So I had to get permission from the yeshiva to leave. My teacher was Rav Pam—it was his first year teaching in Mesivta Torah Vodaas—so I went over to him and told him I have a radio program and have to leave at 11. He said, “A radio program?” He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He said, “I can’t give you permission. You have to go to the principal, Rabbi [Shraga Feivel] Mendlowitz. So I went to Rabbi Mendlowitz, and he also looked at me … and had a little hard time giving me permission. But he [eventually agreed]. He said, “Number one, you have to come back to the second seder [the second of the three periods of the yeshiva school day]. Secondly, I don’t want you to hang around there. Go there, do your job, and leave. Don’t make any friends with anybody.” Those were the terms. (Resnick, 2014)

His time with the radio station was short-lived, though he later switched to another program. He explains:

It didn’t last too long. My sister decided to go along with me one day, to try to get me a raise [Laughs]. But he said, “No, I’m not giving any raises. I can’t afford it.” So she said, “Okay, then he’s not coming.” “Okay, so he’s not coming….” And that was it. But what happened was, somebody from a different radio station actually must have heard me, and got in touch with me. How he got in touch with me, I don’t know. Or maybe he got in touch with my parents, and he wanted me to come there as a steady program, at 6:00 in the evening. I sang there for quite a while, until I saw that my voice is starting to go down a little. I knew myself that I had to go already. (Interview, July 22, 2015)

In 1940, Shenker met Rabbi Shaul Yedidya Taub, the Modzitzer Rebbe of the time, and began a relationship that would forever change the course of Shenker’s life. The Rebbe had fled Europe from the Nazis, and with the assistance of a Brooklyn family, was able to gain entry into the United States. Shenker explained that a Williamsburg synagogue welcomed the Rebbe with a tisch [literally “table” in Yiddish], a gathering of song and teachings on Torah, on his first Shabbos in New York. That week’s Torah reading was parshas Noach, the portion of the Torah...
containing the story of Noah and the flood, inviting a clever pun among these multilingual Jews of Brooklyn:

At the end of the tisch the Rebbe sang a niggun he had composed in Vilna. One of the chasidim got up and danced on the table. It was a gehoibene (Yiddish: high quality) Shabbos. I didn’t go back Shabbos morning because the walk was too long. Rav Kahane [the Rabbi of the synagogue] gave a drashah (Hebrew: exegetical speech) on ‘Yonah matz’ah vo manoach’ (Hebrew: “On it the dove found rest”). The Rebbe’s last name was Taub, which [when translated from Yiddish to Hebrew] means yonah, a dove. The Rebbe responded, ‘Mir hofen az yetzt der yonah vet yah trefen a manoach- (Yiddish:) Let us hope that the dove will now find a resting place.’ It was Parshas Noach. It made a big roshem (Hebrew: impression) on me. (Frankfurter 2015:67)

Very soon after arriving, the Rebbe established a shtiebel (Yiddish: small synagogue, often in a room of a house) in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. However, he would occasionally visit other communities over Shabbos. On one such Shabbos, Ben Zion Shenker had the first of many conversations with the Modzitzer Rebbe.

About six months later the Rebbe was invited to spend Shabbos in Bedford-Stuyvesant. There was a shul there with a lot of Polishe Yidden (Yiddish: Polish Jews). That Shabbos morning after davening we went over to say good Shabbos. The Rebbe said we looked familiar because he’d seen us at his Melaveh Malkas (Saturday night gatherings). We’d never spoken but he recognized our faces. So he invited my father to come to the meal by his baalachsanya (Hebrew: host). My father instructed us to go make Kiddush (Hebrew: recite the Sabbath prayer over wine) for my mother and then come back and bentch (Yiddish: Say the grace after meals) by the Rebbe.

When I went back I sat on a little sofa behind the Rebbe and found a sefer (Hebrew: book) called Lachasidim Mizmor, written by someone name Geshuri. It was put out in 1935 and contained material on neginah (Hebrew: music). This guy was a shtikel (Yiddish: a little bit of a) musician and wrote music. The book also had a little biography of the Rebbe and other Rebbes who were menagnim (Hebrew: singers). So I started reading the Rebbe’s biography and found the music to one of his niggunim and started singing very low to myself. The Rebbe turned around and looked me over. I was 15, but didn’t even look my age. ‘You can read notes? He asked. ‘A little,’ I said. ‘Let me hear.’ So I started going through every page. (Frankfurter 2015: 67)

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4 This line is taken from the piyyut known as “Yom Shabbason” (Hebrew: The Day of Rest), which has been set to many melodies and is frequently sung during the early afternoon meal on the Sabbath.
And they were his niggunim that were in this book. And he was flabbergasted, that a kid that young could [read music]. So then he asked me to sing on my own Shir Hamaalos [Song of Ascents, Psalm 126] by the end of the meal…. I sang a niggun that I’d heard from a Lubavitcher who came from Europe. Lubavitch had a yeshiva in the same town where the Rebbe lived…. This fellow taught me a niggun that the Modzitzer Rebbe made in Poland at that time, and I sang that for Shir Hamaalos. And the Rebbe couldn’t believe that the niggun had made it to America already, because it was something that he’d made in the last couple of months, you know? At that time I was so nervous singing it that I was speeding up. I started off slow and I started speeding it up. When I finished, the Rebbe told me, “I gotta tell you something.” He said, “When you sing a niggun, you gotta sing it like a clock: Tick, tock, tick, tock. Not like a train: Choo-choo-choo-choo [quickly accelerating in tempo]. He gave me a whole lesson!” [laughs] (Netsky 2013)

Ex. 2.2: The niggun that Shenker sang to Shir Hamaalos for the Imrei Shaul in 1940.

**Niggun**
Sung by Ben Zion Shenker for Shir Hamaalos for the Imrei Shaul in 1940
Shaul Yedidya Taub of Modzitz

The relationship between Shenker and Reb Shaul, as he refers to Shaul Yedidya Taub, became very strong. Shenker became his “musical secretary,” and was thus responsible for transcribing new niggunim as the Rebbe composed them. Reb Shaul was unable to read or write notation well, composing instead by ear and relying on his exceptional memory to remember the
pieces. He composed niggunim for numerous occasions, such as the weddings of his children or prayer services for the High Holidays, or simply because he had a melodic idea. Shenker recalls one occasion on which he and a friend were summoned by the Rebbe to learn a new composition in order to accompany him when he sang it during the Rosh Hashanah prayers. The story demonstrates the manner in which the Rebbe’s music lives on today as it is sung at certain Modzitzer gatherings, and how the expectations of the frequency with which the Rebbes would compose has changed over time:

So as he got up from his table he motioned to me and to Moshe Wolfson both. And we walked over and he said, “I’d like for you to come up to my room,” which we did. And he sang a niggun that he had made for “Mechalkel Chaim” (Hebrew: Sustainer of Life) for Rosh Hashanah. We sing it by shalosh seudos (Hebrew: the third Sabbath meal, eaten late on Saturday afternoon) very often. Gavriel Greenberg sings it very often. A very nice piece. And he wanted us to learn it, actually, because he wanted us to be able to sing along during davening. I don’t think I notated it at the same time because it was Erev Rosh Hashanah and I don’t think he would have had me sit down and notate it. That I can’t remember, really. But he wanted us to be familiar with it at least. It was a very interesting piece, in fact. He had Mechalkel Chaims that he had made earlier. In fact, I have one on the recording. A very interesting one…. Most of the time he made very interesting pieces for Mechalkel Chaim. I wouldn’t say he made one every year. I don’t think he did. Although today, all the Rebbes starting from the Imrei Aish until today, they make a new niggun for Mechalkel Chaim every year. It is interesting that he didn’t go into that process of making every piece every year. For Rosh Hashanah he would come up with like two or three new pieces. And not even that, sometimes. He would use a lot of his old material actually. (Interview, August 15, 2015)

Ben Zion Shenker maintained a very close relationship with Reb Shaul until the latter’s death in 1947. Because of his close connection to the Taub family, he had already known Reb Shaul’s son, Shmuel Eliyahu Taub (b. 1905), who took over the mantle of the dynasty, for many

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5 Rabbi Moshe Wolfson and Ben Zion Shenker remained friends until Shenker’s death. Wolfson has gone on to hold a senior Rabbinical position at Yeshiva Torah Vodaas, and is recognized as one of the world’s most respected Haredi Rabbis. In February 2016 I attended a musical event led by Ben Zion Shenker and the present Modzitzer Rebbe, and Rabbi Wolfson unexpectedly came to greet the Rebbe. A Hassidic man standing next to me whispered, “Looking at Rav Moshe Wolfson, I feel like I’m looking at Moshe Rabbeinu [Moses, our teacher].”
years. The Imrei Aish, as he came to be known, had moved to Israel in 1935 and established a Modzitz synagogue in Tel Aviv. He too was a skilled composer, and according to Shenker, was the last Hasidic Rebbe in any dynasty to write long, intricate pieces that can take 15 minutes or more to perform. While the previous Modzitzer Rebbes, the Divrei Yisroel and the Imrei Shaul, were known for these compositions, other Rebbes such as Ben Zion Halberstam (1874-1941) of the Bobov sect, also wrote niggunim in this genre. These niggunim contrast greatly with the niggunim of most Rebbes whose compositions were short melodies, generally with two to three melodic ideas of four measures each. Ben Zion Shenker would go on to continue the practice of lengthy, intricate compositions, often including more complex compositional techniques such as modulations and the development of melodic themes over the course of the entire piece.

Shenker began to compose his own niggunim in 1941, and it wasn’t long before he would write pieces that had international success. Shenker explains how in 1946 he came to write his famous melody for *Mizmor L’David* (Psalm 23):

> I was in Eretz Yisrael. Right after the war my father wanted to go see his brother, whom he hadn’t seen since 1921, and decided to take me along. His brother had made *aliyah* in 1935. I actually composed ‘*Mizmor L’David*’ in my uncle’s house. One Shabbos I didn’t go to *shul* for Mincha because I felt a cold coming on, so I ate *shalosh seudos* at home. I started singing *zemiros*, and when I got to ‘*Mizmor L’David* es iz mir eingefallen’ (Yiddish: I stumbled upon) something new, and I kept on going. It was still Shabbos so I kept on repeating it and repeating it to myself. I was also able to visualize it in musical notes. (Frankfurter 2015:72)

The melody that Shenker composed for “Mizmor L’David” went on to become internationally famous and is without question the most popular setting of the text among Orthodox Jews. Psalm 23 has historically been recited during *shalosh seudos* shortly before the conclusion of the Sabbath. Today, Shenker’s composition is nearly always the melody selected

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6 In keeping with the rules of Sabbath observance, Shenker was prohibited to write until after the Sabbath ended on Saturday night.
for this recitation. It is noteworthy that the piece was performed by violin virtuoso Itzhak Perlman and Cantor Yitzchak Meir Helfgot on their 2012 album, “Eternal Echoes: Songs and Dances for the Soul.”
Ex. 2.3: “Mizmor L’David”

Mizmor L'David (Psalm 23)

Ben Zion Shenker

Mizmor l’do vid Ha-shem ro-lo ech sor bi nos
naf-shi y’sho vev naf-shi y’sho vev yan

de-she yar bi-tse-ni al me-m’nu-cho y’na-ha-le ni
che-ni b’nu-g’le tze-dek l’ma-an she-mo

Ach

lech b’ge tsal-ma ves lo i-ra-ra ki a-ta-i-
tov ach tov va che sed yir d’fu ni kol y’-

ma di shiv te cha umish an te cha
mei chai yai v’shav ti v’shav ti b’ves Ha shem

shiv te cha umish an te cha he ma y’na-ch mu ni
v’shav ti b’ves Ha shem l’o-rech ya mim

Fine

ta roch l’fa nai l’fa nai shul chan
shan ta ba she men ba she men ro shi

D.S. al Fine

ta a roch l’fa nai shul chan ne ged tso rai di
dishan ta ba she men ro shi kos si re va ya
A Psalm of David: Hashem is my shepherd, I shall not lack.

In lush meadows He lays me down, beside tranquil waters He leads me. He leads me on paths of righteousness for His Name’s sake. Though I walk in the valley overshadowed by death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me. Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in full view of my tormentors. You anointed my head with oil, my cup overflows. May only goodness and kindness pursue me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the Hour of Hashem for long days.

The next year, Shenker graduated from high school at Torah Vodaas, and like many male Haredim, continued advanced Talmudic studies in their program for post-high school young men. He continued in this program for the next three years. Soon after, in 1949, Shenker met his wife. Nearly all Haredi couples meet through a matchmaker, and this was indeed the manner in which Shenker and his soon-to-be wife, Dina, came to know each other. Shenker describes his actions when his wife’s name was first suggested to him as a possible match:

So my wife, aleha hashalom (Hebrew: peace be upon her), taught in the release hour [one hour per week when public school students would receive religious education] before she married me. So when they spoke the shidduch (Yiddish: match) for me, I didn’t know what she looked like. They told me she’s a very good looking girl. Very eidel (Yiddish: gentle, lovely). She got a beautiful reputation from the people that knew her in Beis Yaakov. But of course, people tell you—when you ask for a shidduch you’ll never know what’s the real thing! So I wanted to find out where I could see her before I made my first

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7 Translation from Artscroll Siddur, 2003
date with her. So I had a good friend who also taught in the release hour, who knew who she was…. So he said, if you want to see her, on Wednesday, this day, she teaches in Clymer Street Shul in Williamsburg…. So I went to spy on her there! So I saw that it was worthwhile to make my first date. So that’s how I met my wife. (Interview, July 22, 2015)

Dina Shenker was born Dina Lustig in Hungary and moved to Cincinnati as a child. Her father was a follower of the Hasidic Rebbe, Rabbi Chaim Tzvi Teitelbaum (1879-1926), known as the Sigheter Rebbe. Teitelbaum’s son, Moshe Teitelbaum, would go on to become the famous Satmar Rebbe, and Dina Lustig’s father became connected to Satmar as a result. Her brother, however, began to study the book *Tanya*, written by the first Rebbe of the Chabad-Lubavitch dynasty, and subsequently became a Lubavitcher. The Lustig family is now well known in Lubavitch circles, primarily because Hershel Lustig, the son of Dina’s brother, Chaim Meir, became the principal of Oholei Torah, the largest Lubavitcher yeshiva in Crown Heights.

Dina and Ben Zion Shenker were married in November 1950, and resided in the East Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn, near the intersection of E. 92nd St. and Clarkson Avenue. After two years of marriage, the Shenkers moved to Crown Heights, first to Empire Boulevard, then Craven Street. Also during the early 1950s, Ben Zion received Rabbinic ordination from Rabbi Eliezer Silver (1882-1968) of Cincinnati. In addition to validating his extensive knowledge of Jewish law, the ordination also exempted Shenker from the Korean War draft that had recently begun.

The early 1950s was also a significant time for Shenker’s musical composition. As a recently married man, Shenker composed a setting for “Eishes Chayil” (Hebrew: “Woman of Valor”) that became his most famous niggun. This text, taken from Proverbs 31:10-31, describes the traits of an honorable woman and is recited by observant Jewish men on Friday nights around the Sabbath table prior to eating the meal as a pronouncement of appreciation for the matriarch
of the family. Shenker explained to me that prior to his composition, Modzitzer Hasidim did not sing this text and instead merely recited it quickly. Nonetheless, the manner in which the Imrei Shaul read the text provided the starting point for Shenker’s composition. He explained:

I think I mentioned that in Modzitz they never sang Eishes Chayil. The Rebbe used to say it. He used to say it in a certain kind of sing-song. He had a kind of [sings, see Ex. 4]. It was like a recitative type of thing. So I picked that up and made a melody out of it (Ex. 5). That’s what I actually did. Nobody actually, I don’t think, recognized the connection. Nobody ever came to tell me, wow the melody you made is not really yours. [Laughs] (Interview, August 13, 2015)

Shenker’s melody for “Eishes Chayil” clearly draws on the “sing-song” recitation style of the Imrei Shaul. The composition, though, is certainly Shenker’s own. Brought into a steady duple meter with more precise pitches and rhythms, the piece is now performed all over the world. The final verse, beginning with the words “sheker hacheyn, v’hevel hayofi” [“grace is deceitful, and beauty is vain”], is often sung in half-time when sung around the Shabbos table. Though other melodies have been composed for this text, Shenker’s is without question the most popular among Ashkenazi Jews.

Ex. 2.4: Eishes Chayil as sung by the Modzitzer Rebbe prior to Shenker’s melody

Eishes Chayil
As recited by Rabbi Shaul Yedidya Taub

Ex. 2.4: Eishes Chayil as sung by the Modzitzer Rebbe prior to Shenker’s melody
Ex. 2.5: Eishes Chayil, composed by Ben Zion Shenker

Eishes Chayil
Proverbs 31:10-31

Ben Zion Shenker

Eishes cha-yil mi yim-tza v' ra chok nip-ni nim mich-ra las-hu tov v' lo ra ko l y' mei cha ye ha

bat ch ba lev ba la v' sha lal lo yech sar g ma
dar shat ze mer u' fishtim v' ta as b' cha petz ka peha

hai sa ka ni os so cher mi mer chak ta vi lach ma v' tak am b' od lai la v ti ten

te ref l' ve sa v' chok na a ro se cha za me ma sa deh va ti cha chei hu mi

pri cha pe ha na ta ka rem chag ra v oz ma sne ha va tametz z ro se ha

Repeat melody for remaining text.
A woman of valour who can find? for her price is far above rubies.

The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, and he hath no lack of gain.

She doeth him good and not evil all the days of her life.

She seeketh wool and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands.

She is like the merchant-ships; she bringeth her food from afar.

She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth food to her household, and a portion to her maidens.

She considereth a field, and buyeth it; with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard.

She girdeth her loins with strength, and maketh strong her arms.

She perceiveth that her merchandise is good; her lamp goeth not out by night.

She layeth her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle.

She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy.

She is not afraid of the snow for her household; for all her household are clothed with scarlet.
“Eishes Chayil” may well be Ben Zion Shenker’s most famous composition, but his most significant contribution to Hasidic music is likely his pioneering work in the Jewish recording

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8 Translation from MechonMamre.com
industry. In what Mark Kligman has called a “pivotal development” in Jewish music history (2001:98), Shenker was the first to release an album of Hasidic music. His recordings of Modzitzer niggunim, the first of which was released in 1956, were significant in two ways. Firstly, while niggunim had always been an orally transmitted music repertoire, these recordings transformed the manner in which niggunim could be heard and learned. This, of course, was especially significant in the wake of the Holocaust, which decimated the keepers of the Hasidic music canon. By recording niggunim, Shenker ensured that the music would live on and continue to be sung by future generations. The enthusiasm with which the recordings were received led to a flurry of activity among Hasidim in America. As Neil Levin writes, “[Shenker’s] example was a catalyst for preservation projects by other dynasties that had also settled in New York after the war: the Lubavitcher (Habad), Gerer, and Bobover groups in particular. Those dynasties soon began to document their musical heritages on recordings” (2013). The fact that this music preservation was taking place in America is certainly noteworthy. Long believed to be a treife medinah (Hebrew: Non-kosher country), these Hasidic music recordings were a display of the American Orthodox community’s ability to contribute to the continuity of European Jewish life. As one individual, whose family has been connected to Modzitz for nearly two hundred years, told me, through these recordings Shenker “saved” Hasidic music, particularly Modzitz, after the war: “He carried Modzitz on his shoulders for the last half century. If not for Ben Zion, Modzitz would have gone down the tubes.”

Secondly, these recordings essentially launched the Orthodox Jewish music industry. Prior to Shenker’s album, very few Orthodox musicians released recorded music; the rare exceptions were several cantorial or klezmer musicians, though most performers of these genres
were not sufficiently observant in the eyes of Hasidim. Whether due to halachic concerns or for the sake of keeping the music within the confines of the community, very few Orthodox musicians had ever seen the inside of a recording studio. As a result, Orthodox Jews had very little opportunity to hear the music of their own imagined community, let alone to learn new pieces from the recordings. Shenker’s albums thus represented a significant shift in the manner in which Orthodox Jews propagated their music.

Because there had never before been a commercially available recording of Hasidic music, Shenker was initially reluctant to undertake the initiative when it was suggested to him. He told me the story of how his recording initially took form, beginning with a suggestion from Benedict Stambler, a collector of recordings of Jewish cantorial music who would later found his own record label, Collector’s Guild. Stambler and a friend would attend shalosh seudos at the Modzitz synagogue and enjoyed the singing that Shenker led. Shenker explained:

They used to come every week by shalosh seudos and they used to sit by the back of the shul. One time, after they were there for a couple of months, they come over to me and they say, “You know, we like the music. Obviously we enjoy the music because we keep coming back every week. And I just wonder if it might be a good idea to maybe record that music.” So I look at him in amazement. Record? Who me? How do you record? Where do you go? So I said, “I know nothing about it.” So he said, “You know, the people over here, they sing very well. If you got them together and rehearsed the pieces, and if you had, maybe, two part harmony. You’ve got a nice group here. You’ve got people who sing along with you. They are quite musical.” And these were all people that were busy with jobs, and every one had his own thing. I didn’t know exactly how to crack that nut. So I just told him, “You’re just talking about something that I can’t picture getting involved in.” But he got my dander up anyway, you know? I started thinking about it. (Interview, June 24, 2015)

9 In 2016 I attended a lecture at a Brooklyn synagogue in which a Sephardic Haredi rabbi discussed the halachic challenges to recording music. His central thesis, which he supported with points from classic texts in Jewish law, was that it is a halachic transgression to record liturgical music.
Though Stambler’s suggestion piqued his interest, Rabbi Shenker was unsure whether or not to proceed. Because no one had ever recorded Hasidic niggunim, Shenker felt that he would need permission from the Rebbe before moving forward. Shenker wrote letters to the Imrei Aish, who was living in Tel Aviv, asking for his blessing to move forward, though he never received a response. After sending several letters, Shenker asked a friend and fellow Hasidic singer, Akiva Besser, who was travelling to Israel, to speak to the Imrei Aish on his behalf. Shenker describes the arguments through which Besser was able to persuade the Rebbe.

So he [the Rebbe] was telling Akiva the reasons why he is hesitating. He doesn’t want to be the first one to do it. Because he knows that it is, like, a radical step. Nobody ever recorded any Hasidishe music. All of a sudden, I’m going to be the one to give my okay? Maybe it’s not the right thing to do. “I don’t know. I really don’t know,” he says. So Akiva tried to tell him from the point of view of preserving the music. For posterity, which every Rebbe would like his music to be preserved, no? And that was part of it. And we’d have an outlet for Hasidic people who don’t have any outlets. They don’t go to the movies, they don’t listen to radios. So this would be the nicest type of entertainment they could have. And sure enough, with the way he spoke to him, he said “okay, we’ll try it.” (Interview, June 24, 2015)

With the Rebbe’s permission secured, Shenker and several members of the Modzitz synagogue set about preparing to record. They would meet every Saturday night after Shabbos ended to rehearse vocal harmonies, and an orchestral arrangement was composed. The ensemble went into the studio, and in 1956 the album, titled Melave Malka Melodies was completed.

Shenker ordered five hundred copies of the record, though he initially did not intend for it to be sold in stores. Rather, the project was conceived as a fundraiser for the Modzitz dynasty. Shenker explains:

We had a list of people that Reb Shaul had while he was living in America. You had a list of people, a whole book of people with addresses. So we took that list and sent [the record] out with a letter saying that we are trying to raise funds. At the time, the Rebbe in Eretz Yisroel was living in Tel Aviv in a very bad neighborhood. And they wanted to move into the center of town. But there was no money. To do that you have to have backing. So that was one of the reasons why we put out this record. To raise money. We
didn’t think anything would ever happen with it, but sure enough people sent in donations. (Interview, June 24, 2015)

Distributing the record in this manner gave it recognition all over the country, and Rabbi Shenker began to receive overwhelmingly positive feedback. One comment that he received still stuck out to Shenker sixty years later: “I got a letter from, actually, a rav who [at one time] was a classmate of mine who [now] was a rav in Buffalo. I got a letter after he got this [record], and he said that its kemayim karim al nefesh ayefah (Hebrew: like cold water on a tired soul)” (ibid). The Rabbi in Buffalo was drawing on Proverbs 25:25 to compliment Shenker, and to emphasize how invigorating and satisfying he found the recordings of Modzitz music. As Shenker further explained, “[the record] opened up such vistas for him” (ibid).

Shenker soon began to receive requests from Jewish bookstores all over the United States asking to sell the record. Inspired by the success of Shenker’s recordings of Modzitz music, other musicians began to record and release the music of various Hasidic dynasties. Cantors David Werdyger and Yankel Talmud were among the most prolific Hasidic recording artists, focusing primarily on the music of the Ger dynasty. Werdyger also went on to record the niggunim of numerous Hasidic sects including Skulen, Bobov, and Melitz. Shenker is conscious of the manner in which these recordings shifted niggunim away from their oral tradition, but sees the popularity of the records as evidence that releasing the albums was the correct decision. “It’s a change in the whole atmosphere really. But it was a good change, I think. The fact that everybody latched on was pretty much an indication that they all thought that it was a good change” (ibid).
In addition to his Modzitz recordings, Ben Zion Shenker began to record his own niggunim.\(^\text{10}\) The record *L’kovod Shabbos: Joy of the Sabbath* (Hebrew: In honor of the Sabbath) was released in 1960, and was produced by Benedict Stambler and his wife Helen. The orchestration was composed by Vladimir Heifetz, a St. Petersburg Conservatory trained composer, conductor, and arranger. A choir was directed by Velvel Pasternak, who had studied at the Julliard School of Music, holds an M.A. from Columbia University, and is today the editor of Tara Publications, a publisher of sheet music in various genres of Jewish music. As the album’s liner notes, which were written by the Stamblers, explain, “Of the fourteen selections on this record all but one are texts of established zemiroth (*z’miros*), sacred poems traditionally sung at the Sabbath table, while the other is a passage from the Sabbath liturgy.” The record helped to spread Shenker’s niggunim, and made several of the melodies—particularly Eishes Chayil and Mizmor L’David—internationally famous.

The Stamblers were cognizant of the importance of Shenker’s American nationality. They wrote in the liner notes, “The composer, Ben Zion Shenker, though born and bred in the United States, exemplifies the continuance of the tradition of *neginah* (song) from the days of the Baal Shem Tov. Hence, the appearance of the album is especially appropriate during the year that marks the two hundredth anniversary of the death of this sage and founder of the Chassidic movement (5720-1960).”

Shenker’s musical activities drastically altered the trajectory of the niggun repertoire. Due to Shenker’s efforts, this endangered repertoire took on a new life in America as many

\(^{10}\) In addition to his 1956 “Melave Malka” record, in 1958 Ben Zion Shenker released the album “Shalosh R’galim” (Hebrew: “Three Pilgrimage Holidays”). This record contained melodies that the Modzitzer Rebbes had composed for the holidays of Sukkos, Passover, and Shavuos. During the times of the Temple in Jerusalem, Jews were required to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem on these festivals. Though this is no longer practiced, the holidays are still observed, and many melodies have been composed for the liturgy recited on these days.
Hasidic musicians began to record their niggunim. In addition to preservation efforts, as many Hasidim moved to the United States after the war, the repertoire was actually growing through the composition and spread of new niggunim. In spite of this rather revolutionary activity, Shenker’s reputation for being an authentic, knowledgeable figure in the chain of niggun transmission encouraged others to see his own compositions as simply another link in the chain. While he transformed Hasidic music, he was also enabling its continuation in a new, more fertile, context.

Ex. 2.6: Ben Zion Shenker Discography

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Album Title</th>
<th>Year of Copyright</th>
<th>Compositions of Modzitz or Ben Zion Shenker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modzitzer Melave Malka</td>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Modzitz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sholosh R’golim</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Modzitz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L’kovod Shabbos</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Ben Zion Shenker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New Modzitzer Melave Malka</td>
<td>1962</td>
<td>Modzitz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modzitzer Favorites vol. 1</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Modzitz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modzitzer Favorites vol. 2</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Modzitz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L’kovod Yontov</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Ben Zion Shenker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy of the Land</td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Ben Zion Shenker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modzitzer Favorites vol. 3</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Modzitz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sounds of Joy</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Ben Zion Shenker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modzitzer Favorites vol. 4</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Modzitz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Shabbos in Modzitz</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Modzitz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mevaser Tov</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Ben Zion Shenker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shirim M’riim</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Ben Zion Shenker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hallel V’Zimra</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Ben Zion Shenker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shiru LaShem</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Ben Zion Shenker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Shenker disliked performing on stage in concert settings but was quite at home singing in the synagogue. In addition to leading prayer services, among his most important roles is leading yahrzeit seudahs and kumzitz gatherings at the Modzitzer synagogue on Coney Island Avenue in

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11 This discography lists only new releases, and excludes reissues on new media and “greatest hits” collections.
Brooklyn. The *yahrtzeit seudah*, also known as a *seudas hilula* in Hebrew, is a gathering on the anniversary of the death of a Rebbe in which the deceased is remembered through his compositions and Torah teachings.\(^{12}\) When the Imrei Shaul was in America, he held yahrtzeit seudahs for the previous Rabbis in the Modzitz lineage. It is quite possible, Shenker told me, that earlier Modzitzer Rebbes held them as well, though he did not know for certain. Shenker explains:

> When Reb Shaul was here, he always had a tisch at the yahrtzeit of his father, his grandfather, and his great-grandfather…. Those tisches were part of Reb Shaul’s time in America... Every yahrtzeit that he himself kept here in America, we continued. With a smaller crowd probably. In the beginning it was very small. But as it developed, people got wind of it. We did it in Williamsburg. There was a small little restaurant that we always did it in, because the shul that the Rebbe lived in was sold to a different Rebbe after he passed away. The Rebbetzin (Yiddish: Rebbe’s wife) was still alive and she sold it. So we couldn’t have it there anymore. So we had it in a little restaurant, I still remember. I remember that first one. We probably had about 15 people over there. But we paid for a seudah (Hebrew: meal). Everybody contributed, you know? (Interview, June 24, 2015)

After moving the synagogue to Midwood in the mid-1970s, the Modzitzers began to hold the seudahs there. The current synagogue\(^{13}\), which congregants call a *shtiebel* [a Yiddish term for a small worship space, often in a home] is located in a small storefront on a main thoroughfare in Brooklyn. Marked only by a small sign in Hebrew that a passerby could easily miss, the synagogue is unassuming. Simple folding tables and chairs fill the main floor, where the men of the congregation pray. Upstairs there is a space for female worshippers, with windows through which women can see what is taking place in the men’s section. There is also an unfinished

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\(^{12}\) Many Sephardic communities also hold *hilula* celebrations, during which music plays a particularly important role. See Samuel Thomas’ 2014 dissertation for an analysis of music in Moroccan Jewish *hilula* celebrations in Brooklyn.

\(^{13}\) At the time of this writing there are presently two Modzitzer synagogues in Brooklyn as a result of a rift that developed out of a personal dispute between members of the community. Out of respect for the Modzitz community I avoid discussing the details of this dispute. My research has been based at Congregation Imrei Shaul Modzitz on Coney Island Avenue in Midwood.
basement that houses a refrigerator, oven, sink, and some folding tables on which to prepare food.

Ex. 2.7 (not to scale):
Congregation Imrei Shaul Modzitz
Brooklyn, NY

Modzitzers hold six yahrtzeit seudahs annually, commemorating the deaths of the Rabbinic leadership in their dynasty’s history. While the first Rabbi to be recognized as a Modzitzer Rebbe was Rabbi Yisroel Taub, his father and grandfather are also included in the lineage. The following chart displays the yahrtzeit seudahs held:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Rabbi</th>
<th>Name by which Rabbi is known</th>
<th>Date of death</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yechezkel Taub</td>
<td>Kuzmirer Rebbe</td>
<td>17th of Shvat 5616 (January 24, 1856)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shmuel Eliyahu Taub</td>
<td>Zvoliner Rebbe</td>
<td>26th of Iyar 5648 (May 8, 1888)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yisroel Taub</td>
<td>Divrei Yisroel</td>
<td>13th of Kislev 5681 (November 24, 1920)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaul Yedidya Taub</td>
<td>Imrei Shaul</td>
<td>16th of Kislev 5708 (November 29, 1947)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shmuel Eliyahu Taub</td>
<td>Imrei Aish</td>
<td>4th of Iyar 5744 (May 6, 1984)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yisroel Dan Taub</td>
<td>Nachlas Dan</td>
<td>20 Sivan 5766 (June 16, 2006)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yahrtzeit seudahs are generally held in the evening of the anniversary of the Rebbe’s passing, as according to the Jewish calendar each new day begins at sundown. The normal evening prayer service is held, after which everyone finds seats around the synagogue’s tables, which have been covered with white plastic tablecloths. The back tables closest to the bookshelves have been pushed together to form a continuous seating area, and Ben Zion Shenker would take a place toward the center of the table, with his back to the bookshelves. The synagogue’s rabbi, Dov Stein, would sit to Shenker’s left. Rabbi Zvi Eliezer Newmark, the emeritus Rabbi of the synagogue who passed away in 2016, occasionally attended the yahrtzeit seudahs, though his senior age prevented him from being as actively involved as he once was.

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14 Yahrtzeit seudahs are occasionally held in the afternoon. This may take place if, for example, the yahrtzeit begins on a Saturday night in the summer, when Shabbos ends late in the evening. In this case the yahrtzeit seudah may take place on Sunday afternoon. On a rare occasion a yahrtzeit may be commemorated on a date adjacent to the actual date of death, though this would only happen if it falls out on Shabbos, and the Sabbath beginning and ending times make it inconvenient for people to attend.

15 I was privileged to attend approximately twenty-five yahrtzeit seudahs over which Ben Zion Shenker presided. The practices described have generally been retained since Shenker’s death. Later in this chapter I discuss the adjustments that have been made since his passing.
Proximity to Rabbi Shenker and Rabbi Stein was, unofficially, a symbol of status. If a guest of some stature within the community—for example, someone with familial ties to a Hasidic Rebbe, a respected rabbi, or a respected musician—visited the yahrtzeit seudah, he was given a seat near the event leaders. Generally seated directly across from Shenker at the same table were several individuals who are very knowledgeable about Modzitz niggunim: Aaron Orlander, Dovid Bick, and Yidel Feldman. These three men are all skilled singers, and have memorized many niggunim, including the lengthy pieces in the Modzitz canon that may take twenty minutes or more to perform. Their expertise in the repertoire gives them special status within the group, even though they are not Modzitzer Hasidim themselves (Orlander is a Belzer Hasid, while Bick is from an offshoot of the Ruzhin lineage, and Feldman is from the Skver dynasty). All other attendees, both those who regularly pray in the Modzitzer shteibel as well as guests, filled in the rest of the seats in the room. Attendance numbers vary; the yahrtzeit seudahs of the Divrei Yisroel and the Imrei Shaul are generally the largest with approximately 150 participants, while the Kuzmir and Zvolin yahrtzeits generally have 40-60 people in attendance. For many of the events carpools are arranged by Haredim living in other parts of Brooklyn such as Williamsburg, or farther away neighborhoods such as Kiryas Joel or New Square. The yahrtzeits of the Divrei Yisroel and the Imrei Shaul are the only yahrtzeit seudahs at which women attend, due to the popularity of the repertoire sung at these events. Women sit upstairs, just as they would during prayer services. Though there is, strictly speaking, no halachic requirement that women and men sit separately during any time other than prayer, contemporary Hasidim go beyond the letter of the law and establish separate seating to ensure an especially high degree of modesty.
Several plastic baskets holding disposable forks, knives, and plates are on the tables, and rolls are scattered along the tables.\(^{16}\) One table holds two or three bottles of Scotch whisky, disposable plastic shot glasses, and a tray of pastries. Prior to the start of the event it is common for attendees to “make a mezonos” (eat a piece of cake, prefaced by the blessing for baked goods), and “have a l’chaim” (drink a few sips of an alcoholic beverage and toast “to life”), in honor of the deceased. As Samuel Heilman writes, the l’chaim is a “toast to and embrace of eternal life” (2001:198). On a yahrtzeit, the l’chaim is symbolic of “the essential attitude toward death: recognizing it as the sad termination of corporeal existence while denying its dominance by transforming its occasion into an affirmation of life” (ibid). Though alcohol is present, only very small amounts are consumed. I have never seen anyone become intoxicated at a Modzitzer yahrtzeit seudah.

As everyone takes their seats, casual conversation takes place amongst the attendees, primarily in Yiddish. Several members of the Modzitz synagogue bring trays of gefilte fish and horseradish up from the kitchen and distribute them to those seated in the area. Throughout the evening kugel (a potato soufflé) is brought up from the kitchen as well. Though the event is known as a *seudah*, a meal, food is not the emphasis of the event. Guests are gathered for the music and words of Torah that will be shared.

While Rabbi Shenker was alive, a wireless microphone would be set up in front of him, which would project from speakers hidden on top of the bookshelves. Many attendees brought

\(^{16}\) According to Jewish law, one must wash one’s hands in a ceremonial fashion in order to begin a meal, preferably with bread as a part of the meal. One who washes his/her hands and eats bread before the meal must recite the “grace after meals” prayers after finishing. At any meal at which three or more men eat together an added responsorial section is included in the grace after meals. At a communal meal such as a yahrtzeit seudah, one individual will be honored with leading these prayers.
digital recorders, which they would place on the table in front of Shenker. It was understood that anyone may record a yahrtzeit seudah for his own personal use.\textsuperscript{17}

After Shenker had had several bites of food, he would begin the music for the evening. Every yahrtzeit seudah begins with “Yedid Nefesh” (Hebrew: Beloved of the Soul), a piyyut composed by the sixteenth century kabbalist, Rabbi Eliezer Azikri. The Modzitzer Rebbes have composed numerous settings of the text, many of which are lengthy and require significant singing abilities. Rabbi Shenker explained to me that this is a Modzitzer practice that he learned from the Imrei Shaul, though it likely dates farther back. This introduction served to set the mood of the evening by beginning with a piece from the Modzitz repertoire that expresses an intense love of God. The skill required to sing these pieces, due to elements such as fast melodic runs, wide ranges, and their sheer length (these compositions often require ten minutes or more to perform), is also significant in the manner in which it demonstrates to the listener that Modzitz music is set apart from other Hasidic music in its complexity. Shenker would typically open with a Yedid Nefesh composed by the \textit{baal halilah} (Hebrew: the person being remembered), but would sing a different Yedid Nefesh when the baal halilah did not compose a setting for this text.

Following Yedid Nefesh, Shenker would often sing a shorter niggun, generally two to three minutes, from the Rebbe who is being commemorated. After this it was customary for the Rabbi of the synagogue to speak. Rabbi Dov Stein, who took on the pulpit in January 2014, is not from a Modzitzer family, but he is well loved by the community due to his warm personality, appreciation for Modzitz niggunim and texts, and stunning erudition in matters of Jewish thought. At the yahrtzeit seudah Rabbi Stein would present ideas from the baal halila’s texts, \begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{17} Rabbi Shenker often asked me to obtain a high quality recording of each yahrtzeit seudah, either from my own recorder or from someone with a superior digital recording device, and to edit it and make copies on CDs. Shenker would then distribute these to anyone who would like a copy.
\end{flushright}
often on the week’s Torah portion. To this day, he often supplements the Rebbe’s teachings with his own commentary in order to emphasize the profundity of the Rebbe’s ideas. In the case of a Rebbe, such as the Zvoliner, who did not author any texts, Rabbi Stein will present his own Torah teaching drawing on sources of his own choosing. In the unusual event that Rabbi Stein was unable to be present, Rabbi Shenker would arrange ahead of time for another individual to address the community. If a prominent member of the Modzitz community from Israel is visiting America, for example the present Rebbe’s assistant, he might be asked to speak as well. The speeches were nearly always given in Yiddish, although there was one occasion on which Rabbi Stein, early in his time with the Modzitz community, asked permission prior to the event to speak in English, apparently a more comfortable language for him. Before he spoke, the president of the synagogue had the microphone, and when giving a brief introduction, joked that Rabbi Stein would be speaking in “goyish” (Yiddish: gentile-ish). Since then, Stein’s speeches at yahrtzeit seudahs have always been in Yiddish, though his weekly speeches on Saturday mornings are given in English with heavy doses of Yiddish and Hebrew sprinkled throughout.

After Rabbi Stein’s speech, Rabbi Shenker would choose to either continue singing himself or hand over the microphone to another singer. As described above, several individuals regularly sing at yahrtzeit seudahs and prepare pieces prior to the event. The general practice was to sing one lengthy piece, followed by a short piece. Between singers, Shenker would often interject in order to explain the history of a piece, for example who composed it, and for what occasion. The pieces selected for the yahrtzeit seudah generally have a connection to the baal halila, even if they were not composed by the individual himself. This is especially important for the commemoration events of the Zvoliner and Kuzmirer Rebbes, whose musical compositions have largely been forgotten. Even in these cases, though, Shenker would make an effort to
enhance the memory of the deceased Rebbe by showcasing the compositions of those who were close to the Rebbe. Furthermore, in some cases this serves to honor the memory of the Modzitzer Hasidim who were killed during the Holocaust. In the following excerpt from an interview with Shenker, he explained how he selected pieces for each yahrtzeit seudah and how the Imrei Shaul chose to remember deceased Modzitzer Hasidim through their niggunim.

GD: You were saying about how you choose which niggunim you are going to do.

BZS: Right, so when it came to the Kuzmirer yahrtzeit and the Zvoliner yahrtzeit, I would choose niggunim that were composed by different composers in the dynasty that were known as court composers. In other words, like Azriel Dovid Fastag. He made a lot of niggunim. The Rebbe used to sing his niggunim. And you had Yankel Ruderman. The niggun that I use for “Yechadshehu” is Yankel Ruderman. That’s a masterpiece, that piece, you know?

GD: So it’s not just any random Modzitz niggun. It’s really…

BZS: It’s something that has a connection.

GD: So even if it’s not the Rebbe’s composition, it’s somebody who is connected with him in some way.

BZS: Yeah. And the Rebbe [the Imrei Shaul] used to sing them also. I understand what I was told, that the Rebbe in Europe, while these composers were around, he never sang their niggunim. He sang his own. And they themselves used to sing it. He would ask them to sing their own. He would appoint them to sing “Kol Mekadesh,” let’s say. And they would sing their own niggun. And he would ask them, ‘what’s that niggun?’ And they would say, ‘I just made it’ or whatever they would say. So that’s how he picked it up himself. He learned the niggunim from them. But over here in America, after the Holocaust and when things became known that all the people were decimated, so on the contrary, he tried to sing more of their niggunim. For their zikharon (Hebrew: memory). And he used to say very often that he’s singing a niggun of Fastag, Azriel Dovid Fastag.

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18 “Yechadeshehu” (Hebrew: “Renew it”) is the opening word to a portion of the blessing of the new month, recited on the Shabbos morning prior to the first day of each new month of the Hebrew calendar, with the exception of the month of Tishrei, when it is not recited.

19 Azriel Dovid Fastag (1890-1942) was a Modzitzer hassid and composer of niggunim. He is best known for his composition “Ani Maamin,” which he composed on a cattle-car as he and many other Jews were shipped from Warsaw to Treblinka. It is unclear how he managed to notate the song in the car, but nonetheless notation reached the Imrei Shaul in New York. The Imrei Shaul asked Shenker to sing the piece for him, which he did. The Modzitzer Rebbe made a
(Interview, June 24, 2015).

Ex. 2.9: Photos from Modzitzer Yahrtzeit Seudahs (Photos taken by the author)

point to sing the piece often so that it would become well-known, and in fact it has become one of the most famous pieces associated with the Holocaust.
In addition to the yahrtzeit seudas, Ben Zion Shenker also led two *kumzitz* gatherings every year, during the holidays of Passover and Sukkos. “Kumzitz” is a contraction of two Yiddish words which together mean, “come sit,” and refers to a festive musical gathering in which a group sits together and sings. While the term kumzitz has, for many, come to mean a gathering around a campfire with acoustic guitars, this association is due to musical practices among labor Zionists in Israel in the 1940s and 1950s. Sociologist Oz Almog refers to the kumzitz as “the sabra’s favorite leisure activity” (2000:186). Among Haredim, however, the kumzitz often takes place in a synagogue or private residence, rather than outdoors, and electric keyboards, rather than acoustic guitars, generally accompany the communal singing. The presence of keyboards is significant in that they bring with them the strongly electronic, synthesized sound that is present on so many Orthodox recordings. Modzitz kumzitz gatherings are a bit unusual in that they often include a mandolin. Andy Statman, a virtuoso musician on both the clarinet and mandolin, is world-renowned for his skills in both the idioms of Hasidic music and bluegrass. Statman, a Haredi Jew himself, is a member of the Modzitz synagogue and, if he is not engaged to perform elsewhere, will often accompany the singing at the kumzitz. The
presence of accompaniment is one of the primary differences between a kumzitz and a yahrtzeit seudah, at which the singing is nearly always entirely unaccompanied.  

Kumzitz events differ from yahrtzeit seudahs in several ways. Firstly, larger crowds generally assembled for the kumzitz events. The annual kumzitz on the festival of Passover frequently drew nearly three hundred guests, and the kumzitz held each year during the holiday of Sukkos fills a large sukkah to absolute capacity, with several dozen people in the overflow crowd that listens from the yard. These gatherings often attracted other well-known Haredi singers, though Shenker was always tasked with leading the event. The famous cantor Yitzchak Meir Helfgot frequently attended these gatherings, as did singer Abish Brodt, of the Orthodox ensemble Regesh [Hebrew: “Feeling,” “Emotion”]. Secondly, the vocalists at these gatherings chose from a larger repertoire of music, as there was not one specific Rabbi being honored. Selections often related to the holiday, or simply drew from anywhere in the Hasidic music canon (though it would be unusual for someone to sing a song for a different holiday, such as singing a Chanukah song on Passover). On Passover 2015, for example, Shenker led the crowd in three different settings of “B’teis Yisroel” (Hebrew: “When Israel Went Out (from Egypt)”), which takes its text from Psalm 114. He also selected many of his own compositions, alongside those of Modzitzer Rebbes, for the event. During the kumzitz of Sukkos 2016, when the event was held in the sukkah of a Hasidic philanthropist in Borough Park, Shenker decided to treat the audience to some of his best-known compositions, and was very warmly received by the audience.

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20 I have seen one Modzitz synagogue member, Avraham Spivak, perform on his violin on the yahrtzeit of the Imrei Shaul.

21 During the eight-day holiday of Sukkos, Jews build temporary huts outside in which they eat and sleep in order to recall their dwellings during the forty years in the desert after the exodus from Egypt.
A similar, though less regular, occasion for musical performance is the *Melave Malka* (Hebrew: “Escorting the Queen”, here “queen” refers to the Sabbath). A Melave Malka is a gathering of food and song on Saturday night after the end of Shabbos. Jewish law requires that one set the table and have a meal, even one as small as an olive’s volume of food, after Shabbos ends in order to ceremoniously send off the anthropomorphized Sabbath. In general, most Orthodox Jews hold a very small meal that is rather informal, but on a special occasion one may choose to host a large, formal gathering for a Melave Malka.

I attended one such gathering in February 2016, when the Modzitzer Rebbe visited Brooklyn over a Shabbos. Though the Rebbe comes to America at least once per year, it is unusual for him to spend Shabbos outside of Israel, and thus this was a special occasion. A wealthy Hasidic man who resides in Borough Park organized a Melave Malka in his home, at which many important individuals in the Haredi community were present. A long table was elegantly set in the family’s living room with chairs all around it. Folding chairs were also placed in a row set against the opposite wall, away from the table. As I arrived just a few minutes after the designated start time, guests were just beginning to arrive. Waiters from a local kosher catering company brought beautifully plated fish dishes, salads, and pastries to the table. A video camera operator was setting up his equipment in an attempt to find the perfect location; one that would be able to capture all of the guests, but also avoid the enormous chandelier that hung above the table. I recognized many of the guests who came in, the most important of whom were seated around the table, their proximity to the center, where the Modzitzer rebbe would sit, flanked on either side by one of his sons, indicative of their status. Ben Zion Shenker was given a seat immediately next to that of the Rebbe’s son, and Cantor Helfgot was seated immediately across. To Shenker’s right was seated Abish Brodt, who sat next to Rabbi David Zweibel, the
Executive Director of Agudath Israel of America, the Haredi community’s advocacy organization. Also seated nearby was Cantor Yaakov Motzen, one of the most famous Orthodox cantors alive today. Local rabbis, as well as friends and family members of the host, were also seated at the table, while other guests took the other seats in the room. A keyboard and PA system were set up in a corner, where a Hasidic man who appeared to be in his twenties was prepared to play. He was not aware of what songs were to be sung that evening, but he trusted that he would be familiar with most of them, and would figure out by ear any pieces that were new to him. His job was complicated further since singers could begin a piece in any key they chose, and his view of the singers was quite obscured by the many guests in attendance. This configuration demonstrates the primacy of melody over harmony in the performance of niggunim.

The Rebbe’s primary assistant had come to the home early in order to help prepare for his arrival. The Rebbe arrived approximately thirty minutes after the designated start time, accompanied by two of his sons, and several of his Israeli Hasidim who were assisting him on the trip. Everyone rose as the Rebbe entered the room and took his seat. He nodded to some familiar faces as he approached his seat, and after he and his sons were seated, his assistant took the microphone to welcome everyone. He thanked the host for opening his home, and made a special point to honor Ben Zion Shenker in his words. After speaking for just two minutes, he passed the microphone to Shenker who began the singing of his famous setting, composed over fifty years prior, to “Hamavdil” (Hebrew: “The One Who Separates [between Holy and Secular]”). The piece is based on a piyyut composed by the eleventh century author Yitzchak Hakatan, and refers to God as the power that separates the sacred from the mundane, a
distinction emphasized in the liturgy that ends the Sabbath. Shenker’s melody is a favorite for this text among Ashkenazi Haredim.

Ex. 2.10: “Hamavdil” by Ben Zion Shenker

Hamavdil

Text by Yitzchak HaKatan (1030-1089)  
Music by Ben Zion Shenker

\[ z = 70 \]

Am Am Am Am

Ha-mav-dil bein ko-desh l’-chol cha-to-sei-ni hi yim-chol za-
Yom pa-na k’-tzel to-mer ekra’l el a- lai go-mer

C Dm C Am E

re-ni v’chasp-sei-ni ya-ar-be cha-chol vcha- ko-chavim ba- lai-la
A- ta sho-mer a-sa vo-ker v’gam lai-la

Am Am Am E

Tzi-ka-scha k’hav ta-vor a-l cha-tai a-vor ta-vor
Cha-lfa a-vo-nos min-cha-si mi yitein mi nu-cha-si

E Am Am Am C Esus4 E Am E Am

k-yom etmol ki ya-vor v’ashnu-ra ba- lai-la a-she b-chol lai-la
ya-ga-ti ban-cha-si

[Repeat with remaining text]
Lyrics\textsuperscript{22}:

He Who separates between holy and secular, may He forgive our sins; our offspring and wealth may He increase like dust and like the nighttime stars.

The day moved on like a date-palm’s shadow— I shall cry out to the God that He fulfill for me what the Watchman said: ‘The dawn has come, and also night.’

Your righteousness is lofty as Mount Tabor. As for my sins, may you overlook them, like a bygone day that passes on, and like a watch of the night.

The time of my afternoon offering has passed— who will grant me contentment? I am wearied with my sigh, I drench with tears each night. May my voice be not withdrawn! Open the lofty gate for me! For my head is saturated as if with dew, my locks with the dewdrops of the night.

Be receptive, Awesome and Fearsome One! When I cry out, grant redemption—at night, when daylight wanes, in the darkness of night.

I called upon You, O God, help me. The way of life make known to me. To my poverty bring an end as quickly as from day to night.

Render pure the filth of my deeds, lest my tormentors ask, ‘Where is the God Who made me, Who gives cause for song at night?’

In Your hands we are but like clay, please forgive sins small and great. Day after day brings expressions of praise, and night after night.

A particularly noteworthy moment occurred that evening when Shenker requested a CD player in order to put on a track that he had recently recorded in the studio for his upcoming album. The song was a new setting for the text “Venahafoch hu” (Hebrew: “Turn it around”), which is often sung near the holiday of Purim, about a month away from that date. The host’s son, a Hasidic boy who was approximately thirteen years old, brought out a boombox, which was

\textsuperscript{22} Translation from Artscroll prayer book, Hebrew text copied from piyyut.org
placed in front of Shenker on the table. Shenker explained that this was a Purim song from his new CD, and that he would now teach everyone the new melody. Holding up the microphone to the boom-box so that the sound would come through the speakers, he played the CD that had Andy Statman’s mandolin accompaniment, along with a chorus of vocalists. The crowd was excited to hear the new piece, and though the volume of the boombox was low, he was successful in teaching everyone the new piece, which they continued to sing again, even after the recording finished.

Ex. 2.11: Ben Zion Shenker plays a CD to teach a new niggun at a Melave Malka (photo taken by the author)
Soon after, Shenker sang one of his most famous compositions, “Hatov” (Hebrew: “The Good/Beneficent One”).

Ex. 2.12: “HaTov” by Ben Zion Shenker

Hatov

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ha-tov Ha-tov</th>
<th>ki lo cha - lu ra - cha-me - cha v'ha - me-ra - chem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ki lo sa - nu - cha - sa-de - cha</td>
<td>ki mei-o - lam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ki mei-o - lam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Text:

The Beneficent One, for Your compassions were never exhausted.
And the Compassionate One, for Your kindnesses never ended-
we have always placed our hope in You.

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23 Translation is from the Artscroll prayer book.
After several rounds of joyously singing the niggun, Shenker ended the piece and, with a smile, said into the microphone (speaking primarily in English for the first time that evening), “There’s one thing that the oilam (Yiddish: crowd) misses it.” He began quickly singing through the second section of the niggun, which begins at measure ten in the above transcription. When he came to measure fourteen, he slowed down and emphasized the D#. He pointed out that many people had been singing a D natural, and stated, “it’s a sharp, no?” He jokingly admonished Abish Brodt, telling him, “You sing it wrong too!” The entire crowd began singing the B section again, pausing for Shenker’s reaction when hitting the D#. “Right,” Shenker approved, and the pianist jumped in once again so that the crowd could continue singing. While the A section of the piece is based on a harmonic minor scale, the B section (m.10-17), is based on a Ukranian Dorian scale, the primary characteristic of which is an augmented second between the minor third and the raised fourth scale degree. The D natural sung by the crowd would have fit a natural minor scale, and could easily be harmonized with a minor iv chord, but this would miss the unique flavor imparted by the Ukranian Dorian. Shenker felt it was important to correct this mistake and teach everyone the proper way to sing his composition.

Ex. 2.13: The Melave Malka in Borough Park

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24 Klara Moricz (2008:78) notes that while Idelsohn referred to this scale as “Ukranian Dorian,” Beregovski preferred to call it an “altered Dorian.”

The emphasis on proper performance of niggunim is a common theme among Modzitzers. Numerous people have expressed disappointment to me over how famous Modzitz niggunim are sung incorrectly all across the world, particularly the complex and lengthy melody often sung by Haredim to “Baruch Kel Elyon” during the Shabbos lunch meal. A Rabbi of the Chabad-Lubavitch sect once boasted to me that the Modzitzer Rebbe had personally corrected him when he sang a Modzitz niggun, and told me that he respected Modzitzers’ deep care for the precise transmission of niggunim. As Eliezer Zimmet, a young man in his mid-twenties who was raised attending the Modzitz synagogue in Brooklyn, explained to me,

Music in my opinion—it brings out something. The first Modzitzer Rebbe said, “If a niggun is not sung right, it’ll never be meorer—as they say, it’ll never uplift the neshamah (Hebrew: soul).” Which is very true. You hear the way that some niggunim are sung, and like, you’re not interested in it anymore. Like Ben Zion Shenker, his niggunim, a lot of his niggunim were botched up, messed up. Like the famous Eishes Chayil. You definitely hear the way people sing it, and the way that he sings it on the record [is different]. My father sings it the way it is sung on the record. And it makes a certain—it pierces the neshamah, in a way (Interview, October 10, 2015)

Shenker has been the primary force in the transmission of Modzitz niggunim to the greater public, and he emphasized music in his private family life as well. When I asked him about passing on the Modzitz repertoire to his family, he told me that this was “very important” but was quick to add that not only was it crucial to pass on Modzitz niggunim, but that he was also interested in transmitting his own niggunim. Shenker’s three daughters would sing songs at the Shabbos table. “I would sing by the Shabbos table…. I have only three girls but they all had good voices. They all sang very well. They sang like a choir, you know? In fact they all became choir leaders in their classes when they went through Beis Yaakov26. Every one of them became the choir leader” (Interview, July 22, 2015).

26 Beis Yaakov refers to a Haredi girl’s school system. See chapter four for more on this.
His three daughters are now all grandmothers themselves. At family gatherings Shenker was especially adamant that his grandchildren sang together so that he could be sure that they all learn his compositions as well as the Modzitz canon. Weddings and the festivities known as *sheva brachos* (Hebrew: seven blessings) that take place for seven days after the wedding were ripe occasions for Shenker to sing with his entire family. He composed niggunim for the wedding of each family member, and gave sheet music ahead of time to the wedding band hired to play at the event. In recent years, using contemporary technology Shenker was able to compose niggunim for even those family weddings that took place in Israel. For example, in 2016 I assisted by digitally recording Shenker performing a niggun that he composed for the wedding of a nephew who lives in Israel. I scanned the handwritten sheet music, and emailed both this PDF and the audio file to the groom, as well as to an Israeli Modzitzer hassid who entered the notation into a music transcription computer program in order to produce professional-looking sheet music. The digitized sheet music was then emailed back to me for Shenker’s final approval, and for Shenker to add it to his binder of completed compositions. Shenker’s family members sing these wedding niggunim when they gather together for the sheva brachos, as I saw when invited to a sheva brachos for one of his granddaughters in 2015.
Similarly, much of the family gathers together for certain holidays such as Sukkos and Passover. During these holidays I have joined the family as they conduct their own prayer services together in the home of Shenker’s daughter and son-in-law, and then eat the festive meal together. With more than twenty people gathered around the table, the male family members sing together with gusto, and it is clear that they are all familiar with a very large number of niggunim, both from the Modzitzer Rebbes and from Ben Zion Shenker. I watched, for example, two siblings jokingly argue over which of them had the better niggun composed for his wedding.

In addition, the Sukkos meal was often full of new niggunim that Shenker composed for the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services that year. Shenker began composing for the high holidays in the 1940s, and originally wrote two or three new niggunim each year. He gradually increased the number to seven new niggunim every year for the same portions of the liturgy,

Ex. 2.14: The digitized sheet music for a niggun written for Shenker’s nephew’s wedding in 2016:
though he confided to me in his final years that he was beginning to repeat musical ideas and was considering scaling back his compositional output in order to only introduce truly original music. On a Sunday morning several weeks prior to Rosh Hashanah, Shenker would teach the new compositions to approximately a dozen people who planned to pray in the Modzitz synagogue in Brooklyn over the holidays. Those who attended brought hand-held recorders so that they could capture the songs and listen to them repeatedly before the holidays. By learning the niggunim in advance, they were able to sing along during the high holiday services.

Shenker continuously composed niggunim from his teenage years to his death, but he refrained from releasing an album of new music for over twenty years prior to his 2014 album, *Hallel V’Zimrah* (Hebrew: Praise and Song). On the album, Shenker was accompanied by Andy Statman, who played both clarinet and mandolin. He told the story of how Bentzion Zeitlin, a Breslover hasid with a love of Hasidic music, suggested the collaboration with Statman. Here Shenker explained that Zeitlin would come over to his apartment with a digital recorder, and they would sit at the piano discussing music and singing niggunim.

I had composed quite a lot of stuff over the years. I had stuff from before that was never recorded. Bentzion Zeitlin was actually the one who brought the whole thing to fruition. He kept nudging me…. He used to come twice a week at least with a recorder and we would sit sometimes from 9:30 at night until maybe 10:30 or 11. They [the upstairs neighbors] never complained [laughs]. They enjoyed it actually! [Laughs]. [Zeitlin] never was satiated. He had a very big appetite…. So anyway, it was he who started talking about me getting together with Andy Statman. Because he was a big fan of Andy’s and he was a big fan of me (July 8, 2015).

Shenker and Statman had known each other through the Modzitz synagogue, but the thought of collaborating on a record had never occurred to them. “I didn’t think that he was interested in anything like this,” Shenker told me. “And I never thought of initiating a conversation that we should do something together. That never occurred to me” (ibid). When
Shenker did approach Statman about a collaboration, the response was very positive. “Andy was ecstatic about it. So that’s how that started” (ibid).

The album, released shortly before Passover 2014, contains twenty pieces. Seven of the tracks are based on the liturgy for the Passover holiday, which was used as a marketing point to drive interest in the record. The album also includes backing vocals by an ensemble known as the Yedidim Choir. Though the group at times performs as a twenty-member vocal ensemble, there are two core members who sang on this album and recorded multiple harmonies.

_Hallel V’Zimrah_ differs from Haredi pop records in its production. As described in the following chapter, much Haredi popular music is heavily produced, including digital instrumentation, many effects such as reverb, delay, and echo, and heavily emphasized percussion. One Modern Orthodox music fan with whom I spoke criticized this type of production jokingly by calling it the “_mechitzah_ of sound.” His phrase is a play on the “wall of sound” production style used by the famous producer Phil Spector, using the word _mechitzah_, the wall separating men and women in an Orthodox synagogue. On _Hallel V’Zimrah_ Shenker was deliberate in his decision to offer a simpler production style, one that highlights the melody and avoids any digital instrumentation. The following quote from a review in Yated Ne’eman (March 28, 2014), a Haredi newspaper, is telling of both the production style and the response that it evokes from Haredi listeners:

Andy Statman points out that these sessions were basically recorded as live performances in the studio. This way, the living spirit of the music would be preserved and not obscured.

To lovers of true Chassidic _neginah_ [song], this will be welcome news. Above all, these performances seek to be faithful to the spiritual intent that underlies this entire genre of music.
Shenker too believed that the genre of music in which he wrote and recorded offers a spirituality that cannot be found in Haredi pop music. After releasing the album he ensured that the album reached Haredi yeshivas so that children would be exposed to this style of music. This was met with approval from the heads of the school. In a conversation about the effects of Haredi pop music, he told me the following:

BZS: What’s happening now is that a lot of the young yeshiva boys are being exposed to this type of music [pop music], and they are going along with it. But the Rosh Yeshivos (Hebrew: Heads of Schools) are seeing a trend which is not a very good trend. Because with this type of music, you can go on the fringe, you know. If you become too inspired by it. It’s not a kosher type of [outlet].

GD: I remember you telling me, actually, that when you put out your last CD you wanted to make sure, specifically, that it got into the yeshivas.

BZS: Yeah. Well I’m getting a lot of feedback now from some of my einekhla (Yiddish: grandchildren) who go to different yeshivas in Lakewood that the Rosh Yeshiva in fact, just this past week, he said something to the effect—he knew my great-grandson who is in this class was there. And he said to the class, ‘you know, people think it’s a good idea that yeshiva boys have a proper Melave Malka after Shabbos. It’s a very good idea, I think. Even if they are doing it by themselves on their own, and they sit down and listen to a good CD of Ben Zion Shenker.’

GD: Oh yeah?!

BZS: Yeah, that’s exactly what he said! [Laughs] And I get it from a few different points. By this wedding that I said was my nephew, they had a lot of Rosh Yeshivas there. The chosson learned in Philadelphia, and here and there, so there were quite a few Rosh Yeshivas there. When I started singing “V’leYerushalayim Ircha,” I saw such a pleasant look on their faces. They were so happy to hear it. Something that inspired them a little bit, you know? So obviously it has some sort of effect. And they came to the conclusion that this is the type of stuff that they want their children to be inspired with. (Interview, July 8, 2015)

One particularly important instance of a parent instructing a child to listen to Ben Zion Shenker’s music is the case of the Rebbe of the Bobov Hasidic dynasty. The Rebbe’s father, the previous Rebbe, instructed him in his youth to specifically listen to Shenker’s music. This is highly significant, as the paternal role of a Hasidic Rebbe is largely based on the need to groom a
son to take over the leadership of the Hasidic sect. It is clear that the previous Bobover Rebbe felt that this music would help to cultivate the proper personality for the position his son was to fill later in life. We can understand this further by appreciating the importance of music in the Bobover dynasty: The Bobover Rebbe, Rabbi Ben Zion Halberstam, reportedly once stated, “Speech is the expression of the mind. Music is the expression of the soul, and by means of this it is possible to determine the level of a person at any time. The prohibitions related to speech apply also to musical expression” (Luft 2008, back cover). A more thorough analysis of spiritual health rhetoric will follow later in this dissertation. For now it is worth noting that Ben Zion Shenker’s music is very clearly associated with a spiritual benefit that one cannot acquire from Haredi pop recordings.

Following the release of Hallel V’Zimrah, Shenker and Statman returned to the studio to record another album together. It is noteworthy that these musicians decided to record with an engineer who is not an Orthodox Jew, despite the availability of many such professionals with their own community. Instead they chose to work with Michael Brorby, a jazz musician turned engineer who owns and runs a professional studio in Brooklyn. Andy Statman has recorded with Brorby extensively and is fond of his recording style and attentive ears. The absence of a Haredi engineer who is accustomed to working with pop musicians may have assisted in the achievement of the aesthetic that Shenker desired.

Shenker and Statman recorded many pieces together, and decided that rather than reject some of them, they would release a two-part record titled Shiru LaShem (Hebrew: Sing to God). The first of the discs, featuring fifteen of Shenker’s original compositions, was released on September 28, 2016, just two months before his death.
Ben Zion Shenker passed away in his home on the morning of Sunday, November 20, 2016 at the age of ninety-one.

**The Niggun in Liquid Modernity**

Ben Zion Shenker’s accomplished life and the contemporary uses of Modzitz niggunim teach us a great deal about the Haredi community and its music in America in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the following pages I analyze the biographical information above in order to draw out themes and significant moments in Shenker’s life. In thinking about his compositions, his recordings, the gatherings at which he sang, the occasions on which others sing his music, and the language used when discussing his music, Shenker’s life and music become a rich text from which we can learn much about American Haredi Judaism. In so doing, we encounter a music culture that responds to contemporary social conditions—perhaps liquid modern conditions—in ways that are often different than those described by Bauman. Using the music of Shenker and Modzitz more broadly as examples, I therefore wish to argue that among Haredi Jews religion strengthens the very social bonds that Bauman claims are melting. The niggun, I propose, acts as an “ideal repertoire,” that is, one imagined to embody the values of a society, so that its performance becomes an articulation of one’s adherence to the community. Therefore the performance of niggunim reinforces the binding of the community’s individual (generally, though not exclusively, male) members to one another, strengthening the ties of the imagined community. To make this point I turn to several themes that emerge in the preceding biographical sketch: transmission, technology, differentiation from other music genres, and the binding of past and present.
Transmission

Arguably the most important theme to emerge from the preceding description of Ben Zion Shenker’s life is his place in the transmission of Hasidic music. Given his strong relationship with the Imrei Shaul, Shenker has been seen as a key figure in the legacy of Modzitz, which itself is understood by many to be the jewel of Hasidic music. Non-Orthodox Jewish aficionados of Jewish music recognize Shenker’s importance in the Hasidic music canon: “Oh he’s authentic,” one secular Jew who is a music fan told me approvingly (personal communication, January 2013). As the American-born “musical secretary” of the Imrei Shaul, Shenker became not only the link between Europe and America, but also a crucial point of continuity between pre- and post-World War II Judaism. Recognizing the likelihood that the Hasidic repertoire would die out, Shenker was a leading force in preservation efforts, particularly with respect to the Modzitz dynasty. Largely because of his relationship with the Imrei Shaul, Shenker’s own compositions and recordings are seen as important features of the Hasidic music canon, just as central as the compositions of the Modzitzer Rebbes. As described, he was interested in ensuring that his later recordings reach children in yeshivas so that they are exposed to this genre of music, and find an alternative to Haredi pop songs that draw so explicitly from mainstream American popular music. Shenker’s concern for the transmission and continuation of Hasidic music existed not only on the global scale; it was a personal matter. As explained above, Shenker was concerned with ensuring that his family members were knowledgeable about both Modzitz music and his own compositions. My many encounters with his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren demonstrate that they are indeed well-versed in the repertoire, and have a command of a huge number of niggunim. In addition, Shenker was adamant that niggunim should be sung properly. He was careful to ensure that his own compositions, as well as those of
the Modzitz canon, are sung in the same way they were composed. The aforementioned
discussion of “Hatov” is one of numerous instances in which I witnessed Shenker instruct people
in the proper performance of a niggun. In addition, I regularly witnessed Hasidim of many
different sects approach Shenker in order to learn the proper way a particular niggun is sung.
Though he was famous for his expertise in the Modzitz canon, Shenker’s breadth of knowledge
in the huge corpus of Hasidic music was recognized among Haredim, and he was sought after for
guidance in this area.

Technology

Haredim have a complex relationship with technology. While some leaders would prefer
for their followers to eschew much of it, particularly the Internet, many Haredi Jews are
extremely tech savvy and knowledgeable about the intricacies of the newest products. In Chapter
Three I will explore these ideological conflicts in greater depth. For now, though, I wish to
highlight that Haredim have often taken advantage of the latest technology to preserve older
artifacts of their culture and perpetuate their lifestyle.

Ben Zion Shenker’s career provides an antidote to the common misconception that
Haredim are virulently opposed to all technological change. As described above, Shenker’s
desire to release recordings of Hasidic music in the 1950s was somewhat audacious, but was
ultimately reproduced by a great many Haredi musicians. The Haredi recording industry has
been so successful that today brick-and-mortar record shops such as “Mostly Music,” which has
branches in New York and Israel, exclusively sell Haredi music recordings and remain in
business. Recordings are also sold in Orthodox bookshops and grocery stores, and a huge
quantity of professionally produced music can be found online.
Shenker’s music making engaged with all the latest technologies. He recorded in a cutting-edge recording studio in Brooklyn, where he used top quality equipment. In order to communicate with other Haredi musicians who appeared on a record, Shenker, with assistance, would send audio files via email to other Haredim who composed harmonic arrangements or overlaid vocal tracks in their home studios. In addition, Shenker frequently had recordings of new music sent between Israel and Brooklyn via email. A Modzitzer Hasid living in Bnei Brak, Israel notated Shenker’s music with digital recording software, and emailed it back to New York so that it could be printed and added to Shenker’s collection of his compositions’ notation. As seen in the example of the CD player at the Melave Malka, these recordings were used to teach others new additions to the canon of niggunim. Music fans take these recordings with them everywhere they go in order learn the music through them, though they do not listen to these recordings on the Sabbath because of the prohibition of adjusting electronics on this day.

The Yahrtzeit seudahs, too, are surrounded by a great deal of technology. Attendees at yahrtzeit seudahs are welcome to bring their own recording equipment, and hand-held digital recorders litter the room’s tables and bookshelves. Cell phones are often visible at these events, with Haredim calling friends in other locations so that they can hear the music sung there. Video and audio files of yahrtzeit seudahs can often be found on the Internet within a few hours of the event’s conclusion, either on Haredi news sites such as YeshivaWorldNews.com, on Yiddish language message boards dedicated to the exchange of Haredi music, or simply on YouTube. I have met several Hasidim, including one particularly enthusiastic Satmar Hasid from Kiryas Yoel, who spend hundreds of hours editing their digital recordings of Modzitzer yahrtzeit seudahs, identifying every piece sung, and creating a personal digital archive. Recordings of all of the yahrtzeit seudahs are also emailed to the Modzitz archive in Bnei Brak, where they are
preserved and may be used on a future edition of “Min HaOtzar,” the monthly hour-long audio program of Modzitz music. Shenker’s music career, we see, was surrounded by, and perhaps even defined by, technology.

Despite the bans instituted by some Haredi leaders on technologies such as the Internet and text messaging, Haredim in New York are actually among the most knowledgeable consumers of the latest tech goods on the market. B&H Photo Video, owned by Satmar Hasid Herman Schreiber, is an enormous store in Manhattan specializing in the sale of cameras, video equipment, computer-related products, and more. The vast majority of the store’s employees are Haredi Jewish men, who are well informed about the vast line of products that they offer. A 2009 article from Inc. Magazine titled “Why Circuit City Failed, and Why B&H Thrives” explains the experience of visiting the store:

The whole operation is a crazy Willy Wonka factory. If you want to check out a product that’s not on display, a salesperson orders it by computer terminal from a vast stockroom in the basement. Moments later, as if by magic, the product arrives at the retail counter, via an elaborate system of conveyor belts and dumbwaiters. You can try out the gear, see if you like it, and, if you do, the salesperson puts it in a green plastic box and places it on another conveyor belt, which runs, above your head, to the pickup counter. There, an employee bags your purchase. Meanwhile, your salesperson gives you a ticket, which you take to a payment counter. After you have paid, you get a different ticket that you take to the pickup counter to get your merchandise.…

… The conveyor belts, the prices, the smart salespeople, the fact that they recommend cheaper products almost as a rule—none of these is actually the most amazing thing about B&H. Really, the most amazing thing is that because the owners of B&H are Orthodox Jews—Hasidim, in fact—the store closes every Friday afternoon for the Jewish Sabbath, and on Jewish holidays. Moreover, B&H’s website, which reportedly accounts for 70 percent of sales, shuts down, too. Bhphotovideo.com is, to my knowledge, the only major online retailer that closes for 25 hours every weekend. (Spolsky 2009)

Given the number of Haredi Jews employed at B&H and the numerous competing stores that are also run by Haredim, the Haredi community has a wealth of resources in the area of technology. By employing a workforce composed primarily of Haredi Jews, B&H helps to fuel the Haredi economy through the sale of technologies that are unsanctioned in Haredi
It must be acknowledged, however, that Haredim are, in general, extremely self-aware when determining how they will personally use this equipment. Even those who choose to violate their leaders’ calls to avoid certain technologies are certainly aware of communal mores, and are thus exceptionally aware of the ways that these devices.

My ethnographic experiences have shown that even the most fervent Haredim are generally quite open to using technology that encourages what they perceive to be the continuation of the Haredi lifestyle. The technologies used to document Haredi events, produce Haredi clothing, or transmit niggunim are all considered a boon to the Haredi way of life. Thus, the technology encountered in Shenker’s biography should not surprise an onlooker. As we will see in the following chapter, the ubiquity of the Internet has produced a bit of tumult in Haredi communities, but it remains true that Haredim are generally comfortable with the use of technology in ways that they believe will propagate the Haredi lifestyle.

Here we encounter a significant difference from the liquid modernity proposed by Bauman. In 44 Letters from a Liquid Modern World, Bauman reflects on the hyper-connectivity experienced by today’s youth who communicate with one another via technology nearly every waking moment. Yet, while the younger generation is always connected, these relationships are often superficial (6-9). He quotes Jonathan Zimmerman, professor of History of Education at New York University, who states that if you are never alone because of the constant stream of text messages, “you’re less likely to communicate with the real people in your immediate surroundings. Who wants to talk to family members when your friends are just a click away?” While in liquid modernity technology ultimately weakens social bonds (despite the illusion of strengthening them, according to Bauman), Haredim strive to use technology in ways that propel their lifestyle forward and bind the community closer together. This is not to say that they are
always successful. There are many instances in which individual Haredim, like other Westerners, do not live up to communal goals in this area. However, I simply wish to note that many Haredim whom I have met are particularly reflective on their use of technology and strive to use it in ways that create cultural continuity between past, present, and future. An example can be seen in the many Haredi-run websites devoted to aiding Torah study. One example is TorahAnytime.com, on which audio and video recordings of lectures by both male and female Haredi speakers are posted so that Jews all over the world can access them. The site jokes (or perhaps they are not actually joking at all) that it is “God’s reason for the Internet.”

Shenker’s 2014 recording, *Hallel V’Zimrah* is another excellent example of this. The latest technologies went into the creation of the album, but the priority was to create an album of niggunim that were composed and performed in a specific style that is associated with communal ideals. The album was deliberately given to yeshiva students so that the songs could reach the youth and be transmitted to the next generation of Haredim. Education leaders encouraged the children to listen to the album in order to better themselves.

The meaning-making surrounding events such as the yahrtzeit seudah or the release of Shenker’s album is clearly defined by the “frames” (Goffman 1977) of Haredi values and experiences. To focus on the digital recorders placed on the table during a yahrtzeit seudah, rather than the music that they record, would be a mistake. However, it is important to recognize that the recorders are present and that they play a crucial role in transmitting niggunim and the values associated with them.

**Niggunim as distinct among repertoires**

The above description of Shenker’s life and music demonstrates the manner in which many Haredim frame niggunim as being a distinct repertoire that is set apart from all others. It is
significant that many Haredim argue that the niggun repertoire differs from other Haredi musics because niggunim are less derivative of outside cultures, and thus more authentically Jewish. Because niggunim are seen as purer than other repertoires, they are more capable of spiritually benefitting the listener or performer. As explained above, the Bobover Rebbe was instructed to listen to Shenker’s music specifically, and a Rabbi in a contemporary Lakewood yeshiva instructed his class to listen to Shenker’s music during Melave Malka on Saturday nights. In another well-known incident, the present Belzer Rebbe, Yissacher Dov Rokeach, attributed the successful conception of his only son to his having listened to a Modtzitz niggun.27

When Eliezer Zimmet states that Shenker’s Eishes Chayil “penetrates the neshamah,” he is demonstrating the abilities often attributed to the niggun repertoire. This rhetoric, however, is not consistently applied to all musics created by Haredi musicians. During the same interview, Zimmet compared Shenker’s music to Haredi pop musicians. I quote him at length to make his point clear:

EZ: Ben Zion Shenker was the first one in America to put out a CD. People don’t know this. People think it was David Werdyger. It’s not true. It’s Ben Zion Shenker. Back then it was different. You are going back over 70 years ago. People just came out of the Holocaust. It was more of a slow genre. Pumpy, but not like today. Today’s generation—who I said, the gentile world got into the Jewish world. They listen to what the gentile world does, so they [the Haredi pop musicians] have to, like, jazz it up. Electronic style music. That’s what it has become today. Most CDs today, if you listen very closely, it’s not real music. It’s electronic. Dovid Gabay just came out with a CD, it’s called Hakol Letovah. It’s very electronic style. Some people like it, some people don’t like it. If you asked Ben Zion Shenker, he would not go for it at all.

GD: Do you enjoy it?

27 There are various accounts of this story. A Belzer Hasid explained to me that when the Rebbe and his wife were having trouble conceiving, the Rebbe arranged a meeting with a musician and asked him to perform a particular Modtzitz niggun, known as “Mimkomcha,” for him. This successfully enabled his wife to become pregnant. Ben Zion Shenker suggested to me that the more likely version of the story was that upon hearing the niggun, the Rebbe felt that his request to God had been answered and that his wife would indeed conceive.
EZ: It depends. Certain songs I like, certain songs I don’t. Shloimie Tausig’s CD I like very much. There are more instruments. It happens to be that a lot of the old stuff is coming back into the Jewish world. A lot of songs from the ‘80s, a lot of songs from the ‘90s are coming into weddings now. A lot of people realize that today’s music—there’s something missing. It’s just a song and it’s just rocked up. There’s no meaning to it. But if you listen to songs like Mordechai ben David, when he put out his CDs, Avraham Fried, a lot of them have meaning. If you look at “Yasis Alayich,” Ben Zion Shenker’s “Yasis Alayich.” They rocked it up, but it’s over sixty something years old and it’s still going…. The way some songs are made, it’s not just a regular song just made out of the blue. It’s a song that the composers put their time into. (Interview, October 10, 2015)

Ex. 2.15: Yasis Alayich

Yasis Alayich

Music by Ben Zion Shenker
Text from “Lecha Dodi” by Shlomo Alkabetz,
adapted from Isaiah 62:5

Ya-sis a-lai-ich el-o-ka-i-ich ki-mos chas-an al ka-lah

kim-sos cha-san al ka-lah ai ai ya-sis ya-sis-a-lai-ich ya-sis

a-laich el-o-kaich ki-mos ki-mos cha-san cha-san al ka-lah chasan al ka-lah

Text:28
Your God will rejoice over you like a groom’s rejoicing over his bride

Zimmet is explaining here his view that many contemporary compositions are inferior to older pieces because the backing tracks are entirely digital and little effort is put into their composition. Certain older pieces, marked by greater compositional rigor and acoustic

28 Translation from Artscroll Siddur, 2003
instrumentation, achieve longevity and an ability to touch people even decades after their original release.

Shenker’s music is often discussed in such a way. Rabbi Ephraim Luft who, as will be explained in depth in Chapter Three, is arguably the individual most ardently opposed to Haredi pop music, is careful to distinguish Shenker from Haredi pop musicians. Luft, in a scathing critique of Haredi pop music, includes quotes from Hasidic singers Mordechai ben David Werdyger, Avraham Fried, Gidon Levine, and Shenker, all of which explain that Haredi pop music has the potential for social and spiritual damage. However, Luft writes, “These singers (with the exception of R’ Ben Tzion [sic] Shenker) fail to mention that they are the ones who started the trend to imitate American rock and roll, and that the younger singers who they criticize are only taking an example from them to copy the new styles of popular street music” (2008:22). Both Luft and Zimmet are expressing a difference between Shenker and Haredi pop musicians, though it is noteworthy that their quotes express disagreement as to whether Mordechai ben David and Avraham Fried are to be viewed positively or as problematic. The boundaries of permissibility are in the ears of the beholder, and the two have different beliefs of what constitutes transgressive behavior. While some consider MBD and Fried to be benign, if not spiritually uplifting, hardliners like Luft take an Adornian approach and are unwilling to accept any music that seems frivolous or not sufficiently “serious.” Nonetheless, a distinction between Shenker and popular musicians exists for both Zimmet and Luft.

Shenker, too, recognized a difference between contemporary Haredi pop music and his own compositions and recordings. An anecdote that he expressed to me encapsulates his approach to navigating this distinction. Shenker accepted an invitation to attend a wedding, and when asked prior to the event if he would sing a few songs, he agreed. The wedding band that
had been hired, though, played in a pop-inflected style to which Shenker was opposed. He explained: “There’s one band that I’ve heard at two weddings now, and they are notorious for this type of music. They are not ashamed to play it by the complete wedding. And I couldn’t get over it…. I decided not to sing. I said, ‘how could I compete with this type of music. Just the tempo is so crazy. It’s just out of my league” (Interview, July 8, 2015). Another member of the Modzitz community, however, convinced Shenker to sing with the band, arguing that it would be embarrassing for the host if he refused to sing. “So I did it. But I’ll tell you. I sang first ‘V’leYerushalayim Ircha’ (Hebrew: ‘Jerusalem, Your City’) to get the oilam (Yiddish: crowd) in a mood, like a serious mood. And they had a whole [group of people]. Everybody piled up” (ibid).

Here we see that through his choice of song Shenker hoped to calibrate the mood of the event. “V’leYerushalayim Ircha” is a slow, pensive song that longs for the rebuilding of Jerusalem during the times of the Messiah. Recall the above quote (page 55) in which Shenker spoke about singing this same piece at a nephew’s wedding, and achieving his goal of shifting the energy level of the room. As noted there, he looked around to find “such a pleasant look on their faces,” and concluded that this music “inspired them.” Shenker’s music, we see, is at times framed as the antidote to a music culture too inspired by American pop music styles.
Ex. 2.16: V’leYerushalayim Ircha

V’leYerushalayim Ircha

Music by Ben Zion Shenker
Text from Shemoneh Esreh prayer

Text and Translation:

And to Jerusalem, Your city, may You return in compassion, and may You rest within it, as You have spoken. May You rebuild it soon in our days as an eternal structure, and may You speedily establish the throne of David within it.
As noted at the beginning of this chapter, Bauman suggests that the “total world” is seen in relation to a potentially harmful other. This is indeed the case with Haredi music, and thus niggunim perform a significant function in Haredi society. Niggunim that are understood to be of the most pure variety, such as those composed by Ben Zion Shenker or the Modzitzer Rebbes, become the repertoire that represents the bulwark of traditionalism, a repertoire that can reliably stand up to the seductive features of the other. Marked by longevity, spiritual strength, and an aura of antiquity and lineage, these niggunim function as an “ideal repertoire” that represents the Haredi community’s values of spiritual health, and bringing the past into the present and future. Thus, niggunim serve as an authentically Haredi cultural production in opposition to the foreign forces that infiltrate the community. This distinction, as I demonstrate in the following chapter, is an important tool in the negotiation of the boundaries that delimit the realms of permissibility in Haredi life.

The Binding of Past and Present

A key theme of Shenker’s life was the weaving together of the present with the past. Shenker, because of his role as musical secretary to the Imrei Shaul, his recording of Modzitzer niggunim, and his vast knowledge of niggunim, is associated with an older style of music that is closer to that of the Jews of pre-war Europe than the Haredi pop of the twenty-first century. The invocation of the Baal Shem Tov (above, page 29) in reference to Shenker’s work should not be dismissed; by associating Shenker with the founder of Hasidism, the author is suggesting that Shenker’s music contains the essence of Hasidism. Shenker’s musical activities, then, are a strain from the past that is thriving in the present.

The link between past and present is perhaps most clearly seen in the yahrtzeit seudah. By celebrating the memory of deceased Rebbes, and teaching their insights on Torah, Jews in
twenty-first century Brooklyn bring these holy figures of the past into the present. By reviving the words and melodies of these Rebbes, they become inscribed in the lives of contemporary Haredim. Not only do they continue to serve as inspirations for Hasidim, but their music continues to be an active part of the canon of niggunim.

Shenker’s compositions, too, have become situated in Haredi consciousness as being among the most entrenched in the “traditional” repertoire:

If you grew up in a traditional Jewish family, or if you visit a traditional Jewish family, you know Ben Zion’s music. You may even sing his compositions every week. And you probably assume his compositions are traditional; as in older-than-Moses, pre-date-chicken-soup, outlast-leftover-chulent traditional. You probably assume that the composer—whenever he was and if he ever existed—is gone and forgotten. Except that he isn’t. (Gluckin 2014)

Note, on the cover of Ami Magazine’s May 13, 2015 issue displayed below, the manner in which Shenker is portrayed. Firstly, it is significant that in a featured story about Shenker, the primary focus of the cover is a photo of the Modzitzer Rebbe surrounded by Hasidim. This slippage between Modzitz and Shenker demonstrates the close association between the two in the minds of Haredim. In addition, the graphic of a record (not a CD, mp3 player, etc), has a photo of Shenker with the word “Classics.” The caption, “Reflections on his music, the Rebbes of Modzhitz [sic], and the Williamsburg of yesteryear,” is entirely backward looking. The impression we receive of Shenker is a musician who is an emblem of an imagined idyllic past.
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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Ben Zion Shenker

AN EXHilarATING CONVERSATION WITH THE RENOWNED CHASIDIC COMPOSER

MODZHTZER REBE AND RAY MOSHE WOLFSON

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PHOTO BY SHULAMIT GOLDBERG
It is significant that Shenker’s musical life is so closely associated with the idea of the “traditional,” that is to say, older Haredi life. As the niggunim that he composed or sang reach the ears and lips of Haredim, they invoke an ethos of an ideal Haredi identity that is imagined to be of the past. This glorification of the past interrupts a common feature of modernity identified by Raymond L.M. Lee, one of the most prolific scholars in the area of liquid modernity. Lee discusses “development,” a term used by nations in the latter portion of the twentieth century that “became a code word for not wanting to be left behind in a world of rapid discoveries and changes. Practically every country in the world is compelled to seek development in order to become and stay modern” (2005:67).

Among many Haredi Jews, a different teleology persists. Rather than striving to “develop” toward an increasingly modern existence, many Haredim believe in the principle of “yeridas hadoros” (Hebrew: descent of the generations). The idea that each subsequent generation is of a lesser spiritual stature is found in Jewish writings as early as the Talmud (Shabbos 112b), but has taken on a particularly important significance in Haredi life. Yuter (1996:135), in an analysis of Haredi versus Modern Orthodox attitudes toward Daas Torah29 (Hebrew: lit. “knowledge of Torah”) writes, “The reason that Daas Torah must be accepted in modernity, according to its advocates, is because of yeridat ha-dorot30, the diminution of the generations. The Hazon Ish31 argued that the sages of our age no longer have the right to make new enactments, because they are spiritually inferior.”

29 Daas Torah refers to halachic rulings made by one’s rabbi, which a lay person is obligated to follow.
30 Yuter uses here the Sephardic pronunciation, “yeridat ha-dorot,” where as I use the Ashkenazi pronunciation as spoken by the majority of my interlocutors.
31 Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz (1874-1953) was a leading Haredi Rabbi and was known as the “Chazon Ish,” the title of his magnum opus.
As Haredim espouse an approach to historical development that emphasizes a spiritual decline, that which is considered to be a relic of an older way of being is considered to be of greater purity and holiness. This, at times, requires a significant amount of historical revisionism (see Stolow 2010, Shapiro 2015, and others), but nonetheless the result is an attitude toward the contemporary that is antithetical to the “development” process. Rather than focusing on how to develop the present into the future, the ideal repertoire of niggunim calibrates the Haredi perspective toward bringing the past into the present.

Conclusions

Ben Zion Shenker’s life was dedicated to niggunim, a musical genre that has come to represent the values of the Haredi community. Through this examination of his musical biography we not only learn about the “lived religion” of Haredim during the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, but we also uncover the manner in which the niggun repertoire strengthens communal ties in today’s context of unstable liquid conditions, and reinforces a teleology that looks backward instead of toward “development.” Modzitz niggunim, and Shenker’s place within the history of niggunim, we see, are highly significant and provide an advantageous view of the Haredi community vis-à-vis liquid modernity.

In liquid modernity, Bauman tells us, formerly solid social institutions were uprooted in order to be rebuilt, though this latter step failed to occur. However, we find among the Haredim a contemporary community that resists this initial stage of modernization, strategically striving to maintain and continually recreate a lifestyle that binds past and present, rejects “development,” and stands in opposition to trends of neighboring cultures. This effort requires a reframing of the past, and a view of contemporary practices that deemphasizes discontinuities, while focusing on
threads that reach backward through history. At times, as I will present in the following chapter, cultural productions deemed to be damaging to the ideal are explicitly banned.

The Haredim profiled here have no interest in disembedding, and take measures to link past and present in ways that create a lifestyle that frames certain technological and contextual changes as simply adding to the essence of the event and, more broadly, their lifestyle. To borrow terms from Jewish law, Haredi lived religion is the ikar, the primary, while the technologies that enable such a life are the tofel (the secondary that facilitate the ikar).32 When, in looking at Shenker’s biography, we encounter many such technologies that are aberrations from an older manner of performing and transmitting niggunim—the first recording of Hasidic music, the use of contemporary technologies, or even the use of electric keyboards at a kumzitz—we ought to understand this through identifying the perpetuation of Haredi life as the primary concern, the ikar, while these technologies are the tofel, the forces that enable the ikar. As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, to Haredim the niggun repertoire has come to represent the Haredi lifestyle itself. Thus this examination of the repertoire’s transmission becomes a useful site for understanding the ways that contemporary technologies contribute to the important task of transmitting niggunim, and the ways that these negotiations are framed in the modern context.

32 One classic example of the principles of ikar and tofel concerns the laws of Shabbos. On Shabbos it is forbidden to carry an item larger than the size of an olive from a private domain, such as one’s house, into a public domain, such as into a public thoroughfare. For example, to carry a large bowl from one’s house into the street would be forbidden by the laws of Shabbos. However, if one was carrying a large bowl only for the sake of transporting a small amount of soup, less than the volume of an olive, technically speaking, this would be permitted. The reason for this is that the small amount of soup is the ikar (the primary), while the large bowl is the tofel (the secondary). The bowl, in a sense, becomes nullified because of its insignificance in relation to the soup. It is important to note that there are Rabbinic injunctions that prohibit one from executing such a scenario, but from a close reading of the basic halacha, the laws of ikar and tofel would apply here. (Tatz)
As I have argued throughout the chapter, the performance and transmission of niggunim strengthens the social ties of the Haredi community. The performance and transmission of niggunim suggests in-group affiliation, the remembrance of important Haredi individuals, and the very values of the Haredi community. Niggunim themselves are said to have spiritual benefits for the listener and singer, reinforcing the benefits of identification with the Haredi community and the dangers of engaging with other cultures. The practices and discourses regarding niggunim, we see, are one manner in which religion strengthens social ties within the Haredi community, while liquid modern conditions melt the bonds of many other communities.

Coda:

Following Shenker’s death, the synagogue board met to discuss the future of the yahrtzeit seudahs. They decided that Aaron Orlander, a devoted student and friend of Shenker’s would take over as the leader of these events. Orlander has stepped into the role gracefully and with humility, but Rabbi Shenker’s absence is felt. In December of 2016 the yahrtzeits seudahs of the Divrei Yisroel and the Imrei Shaul were held, the first since Shenker’s passing. During the event commemorating the passing of the Imrei Shaul, Rabbi Stein gave a fiery speech, this time primarily in English. He described how in the realm of music, Shenker was the greatest of his generation. The speech wove together teachings from various Jewish texts, particularly those of Maimonides, stating that after a holy person passes away, he is still able to praise G-d through the medium of song. He charged everyone in attendance with the job of singing along with Ben Zion Shenker even after his passing, stating, “It’s pashut (Hebrew: simple) that when we sing his niggun, when we sing the niggunim that he taught us, er zingt mit mir (Yiddish: he sings with us).” Those in the room had a religious obligation, Rabbi Stein told us, to continue to bring Shenker’s music into the future of this world, while Shenker sings along in the world to come.
Rabbi Stein’s call for everyone to continue to sing niggunim in Shenker’s absence was a call to maintain the niggun repertoire, to continue this tie to the Haredi core. As a composer in the Modzitz dynasty whose music is described with such reverence, Shenker’s own niggunim and history become part of the idyllic past, in contradistinction to all that is modern, a past to which Haredim bind themselves through musical performance of the ideal repertoire of niggunim.
Chapter Three: Public Reasoning and Haredi Popular Music

An ambiguity between pluralism and uniformity is a central tension in the contemporary Haredi community. In theory, the imagined community of the Haredim is united by common values, belief systems, and concerns, and the laity receives the directives of religious leaders faithfully. Haredi Jews, however, are quite diverse, and in addition to the idiosyncrasies of each Haredi subgroup, individuals develop their own attitudes and approaches toward life in their communities and beyond. The technological hyper-connectivity of the twenty-first century touches Haredim, and those who wish to develop a unique personality that differs from others in their most immediate community have sufficient reference points from which to draw. As Haredim continue to create an increasingly pluralistic society—particularly due to their access to the Internet—notions of power relations and boundary maintenance are challenged.

The increasingly pluralistic character of the Haredi community may be understood, in Bauman’s terms, as a melting of the social bonds between its members. In a fervently religious community that so values its own perpetuation, aberrant behaviors of any magnitude can be cause for alarm. What happens, then, when the social bonds of the Haredi community are threatened? If adherence to community norms is supposed to strengthen the social bonds of the Haredim, what happens when individuals within the religious community appropriate from the outside, and are seen to be melting those very ties?

In this dissertation I have argued that non-liberal religion has the ability to reinforce the bonds that liquid modernity threatens to melt. This is not to suggest, though, that Haredim are immune to liquidity, merely that these strictly religious communities provide significant obstacles to the melting process. Indeed, the Haredi community is fraught with contestation over older ways of life encountering new realities, resulting in a wide array of responses. In this
chapter I wish to study this internal argumentation, and consider how Haredi power relations, individual agency, and pluralism interact as communal identity is continually negotiated.

While I speak often in this dissertation about the “borders” or “boundaries” of the Haredi community, I do so with an understanding of their imprecision. The Haredi community is remarkably difficult to identify with any certainty because there are a great many factors that contribute to “being Haredi.” Most of these Jews do reside in neighborhoods in which they have physical proximity to synagogues, kosher food, and one another. A basic set of beliefs regarding both theology and how one should conduct oneself in daily life is common to most Haredim. Thus, terms such as “boundary” do apply in a certain sense, but one must also recognize that others who are not Haredi, or not Jewish, live in most of these “Haredi neighborhoods” and that some who self-identify as Haredi may not share all of these convictions. Even physical markers are problematic, since in twenty-first century America many men and women who self-identify as Modern Orthodox dress in similar ways to Haredim. Furthermore, the Haredi community is far from stagnant, and they continue to move, both physically and ideologically. Even self-definition is somewhat problematic, as the term “Haredi” often carries connotations of the right-wing of Israel’s religious Jewish population who are more identifiable through affiliation with formal institutions such as political parties, school systems, and military units/objection to serving in the military. Because of the differences between American and Israeli Haredim, some in the United States hesitate to identify with this term, simply identifying as “Orthodox” instead. Thus, as discussed in Chapter One, there is a high degree of ambiguity over who ought to be considered Haredi. Despite these difficulties, scholars have managed to study Haredim and produce meaningful conclusions. It is crucial, however, that one recognize and account for this diversity.
This ambiguity regarding the boundaries of the Haredi imagined community can lead to significant consternation. For a society that so strongly emphasizes the need to keep in that which is inside, and keep out that which is outside, unclear boundaries are highly problematic. When it is unclear whether or not a practice, musical or otherwise, is drawing on internal or external sources, clashes can erupt. The need to maintain the boundaries of the imagined community, particularly in the face of diversity within the ranks, and increased contact with non-Haredim, is supremely important.

This internal diversity can result in tensions within the Haredi community, as competing ideals come into contact with one another and struggle for dominance. In order to study these disputes and their outcomes, I believe that it is helpful to consider anthropologist John Bowen’s concept of “public reasoning.” Bowen’s term is a response to “public reason,” an idea most closely associated with political philosopher John Rawls (1996). Jonathan Quong (2013) explains the central question that drives the theory of public reason: “Each of us is free in the sense of not being naturally subject to any other person's moral or political authority, and we are equally situated with respect to this freedom from the natural authority of others. How, then, can some moral or political rules be rightly imposed on all of us, particularly if we assume deep and permanent disagreement amongst persons about matters of value, morality, religion, and the good life?” Proponents of public reason suggest that the rules that regulate society and limit individual freedoms must, at their most fundamental level, be premised on an agreed upon moral code. Societal standards must thus be based only on values that are shared, and should not rely on more divisive sources of belief, such as religion or other controversial systems. Because of the agreeable premise on which these rules are based, public reason “can be presented as a
standard for assessing rules, laws, institutions, and the behavior of individual citizens and public officials” (ibid).


In this investigation I first offer a brief overview of Haredi popular music, then focus on a watershed moment concerning music in the Haredi community: the cancellation of Hasidic singer Lipa Schmeltzer’s 2008 concert at Madison Square Garden. Following Bowen’s approach, I look both horizontally and vertically across Schmeltzer’s society: horizontally at the responses from lay Haredim, and vertically at the actions of Rabbinic leaders and responses to the exercising of power. I supplement this investigation of Lipa Schmeltzer with a brief look at several other instances of public reasoning concerning the permissibility of Haredi popular music. Through these additional instances I display other ways in which musicians resist the suppression of their music, and contribute to our understanding of how lines of propriety are drawn.

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1 I consider “public reason” to be a theoretical concept that functions as an ideal, but not a sociological reality. In fact, many individuals are subject to another person’s moral or political authority, often on the grounds of gender, race, or other hegemonic power structures, and thus may not have a voice in the development of “an agreed upon moral code.” I find that Bowen’s concept of “public reasoning” is a better representation of the manner in which power is a determining factor in who participates in this agreement, and how difference is negotiated.
Haredi Popular Music

Following the first records of Modzitzer niggunim that were released in the 1950s by Ben Zion Shenker (see Chapter Two), and the many recordings of the niggunim of various Hasidic sects that followed, recordings of Haredi popular music began emerging in the 1960s. As Mark Kligman writes, “Since the 1960s, several individuals and groups have created and performed Orthodox popular music, adopting a variety of musical styles” (1996:263). Kligman notes that one of the first musicians in this genre was Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach. Born in 1925, Carlebach was born in Germany into a family of Rabbinic lineage, and his family lived in various locations in Europe before they came to New York in 1938. Carlebach attended Yeshiva Torah Vodaas in Brooklyn, where he was a classmate of Ben Zion Shenker. In the 1950s Carlebach began spending time in Greenwich Village where he met musicians such as Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger, and composed his own folk songs in their style, using text from Jewish prayers as lyrics (Goldman 1994). Carlebach went on to become “the foremost songwriter in contemporary Judaism,” and engaged in Jewish outreach to non-observant Jews, though by the end of his life he “operated outside of traditional Jewish structures” and was accused of sexual impropriety (ibid).

While Carlebach performed within the conventions of the American folk revival, other Orthodox Jewish musicians have adopted and adapted seemingly all other genres of Western popular music. Haredi musicians have released records in styles such as techno, heavy metal, hip hop, rock, and more. Many of the most popular musicians, though, perform in a somewhat unique style of music that emphasizes vocals and electric keyboard, and often includes drums, horns, and electric guitar. Timbre is particularly important in the creation of Haredi popular
music, as the electric keyboard is so commonly used that its tone is closely identified with this genre in the ears of Haredim.

While some musicians are successful enough to tour the world performing at concerts, weddings remain the primary venue for most Haredi pop musicians. At the Haredi weddings that I have attended, a range of musical practices could be found. At one Hasidic wedding that I attended in Williamsburg, the wedding conformed with rules set forth in 1991 by the Rebbe of the Satmar Hasidic dynasty. The Rebbe was concerned that weddings were becoming too ornate and costly, placing unfair demands on the families of the couple. Weddings, he feared, showcased wealth disparity among members of the Haredi community, resulting in embarrassment for the less well-to-do. According to the Satmar Rebbe’s guidelines, a couple was only permitted to hire a one-man-band, consisting of a keyboardist who sang and created percussion sounds that accompanied his piano and vocal arrangements (Kalish 1991). While other Haredi bodies such as Agudas Yisroel of America (Parnes 2002), and Hasidic sects such as Sanz, Belz, Vizhnitz, and Ger have all attempted to restrict spending on weddings (Petersburg 2012), many families hold wedding celebrations that are far more elaborate, and this is reflected in the music. I have attended weddings that included ten-piece ensembles, with singers who are household names among Haredim.

Many of the singers who perform at weddings strive to achieve the pop star status of certain musicians in their community, and indeed some are successful. Haredi pop musicians travel to Orthodox Jewish communities all over the world in order to perform. Their CDs are sold in Haredi communities in a variety of locales, including music shops in Israel and Brooklyn that exclusively sell Orthodox Jewish music. Mostly Music operates both a brick-and-mortar store in Borough Park, as well as a sleek website through which music can be purchased. Singer
Shea Rubenstein explained to me in a 2015 interview that CDs are generally not profitable, but are tools for arranging performances at weddings. “It’s a very expensive business card,” he joked.

Haredi popular music is often conceptualized based on the degree to which it draws variously on the stylistic features of contemporary “Top 40” Western pop music or the niggun repertoire. Additionally, musical features such as instrumentation, pronunciation, and vocal timbre, as well as performance practices such as dress, dance style, and physical posture, place music and musicians along a spectrum of “sounding Modern” to “sounding Hasidic,” a continuum that I borrow from anthropologist Ayala Fader who proposes this same model to discuss the conventions of spoken Yiddish and English. In my discussions with Haredim, I have often heard people describe music or musicians as sounding “modern,” which is generally (though not always) a disparaging comment. Musicians on the other end of the spectrum are generally described as “nice,” or frum (Yiddish: religious). Fader’s spectrum represents well the ways that Haredim understand music and propriety. While some Haredi individuals have no ideological problem enjoying any music at all, including music from non-Jewish sources, others will only listen to that which they identify as Jewish music, while still others draw their own line of permissibility somewhere on the spectrum of Haredi music.

The criteria by which individuals decide that a piece of music is permissible or not varies from person to person, though these considerations are often rooted in a concern for the spiritual impact that music will have on one’s soul. A woman in her late 20s who grew up in the Chabad-Lubavitch sect of Hasidism, but who now identifies as modern Orthodox, told me that as a child she was taught that non-Jewish music has a corrosive effect on the soul but that today many of her former classmates will listen to popular music. However, when they bake challah—the
special bread eaten on the Sabbath—they are careful to only listen to Jewish music so that no spiritual impurity will enter the food.

In my conversations with Haredim I have repeatedly been told that music is a powerful force that can have a strong effect on one’s spiritual health. Many point to the description found in the Babylonian Talmud of Elisha ben Avuya, the iconic heretic, that states, “Greek song never ceased from his mouth” (Chagigah 15a). Additionally, many have told me that listening to non-Jewish music may lead people down a path toward leaving Orthodoxy. As one informant told me, “A lot of Rabbonim [Rabbis] feel that once you start with something, you can’t get out of it. Once you are trapped, it just brings you more down, and more down, and more down.” This individual’s use of the word “trapped” is revealing: many Haredim view unsanctioned music as very dangerous, and believe that it presents a serious threat to their community.

This threat to the continuity of the Haredi community was often articulated to me in conversations about parenting. In the winter of 2014 I was invited to speak at a convention about the arts that was sponsored by a Haredi organization. After my presentation I received numerous questions about the permissibility of non-Jewish music, though this had nothing to do with my speech. I attempted to flip the conversation, and ask those in attendance about their own views on the subject. I was told firmly by a woman in the audience that Orthodox Jews should not take any chances with non-Jewish music as it could have profound effects on children.

Haredim consider the stakes to be very high in considering where the line of propriety ought to be placed. In the following pages I describe The Big Event, a watershed moment in the American Haredi community that brought this consternation over music into the foreground. I examine an influential Rabbinic ban as public reasoning from the top down, and then proceed to also analyze public reasoning among lay people regarding the place of music in Haredi society.
Lipa Schmeltzer (b. 1978) was raised in New Square, New York, as a member of the Skver sect of Hasidism. Schmeltzer began his career as a wedding singer, where he performed for those in the Hasidic community and developed a reputation for pushing boundaries. Schmeltzer’s song “Abi Meleibt” (Yiddish: At Least I’m Alive), is representative of the musical style and persona that he cultivated in the early part of his career. The music video for the song was created in 2005 for the annual concert benefiting the Hebrew Academy for Special Children (better known as HASC), a Brooklyn school for Orthodox Jewish children with special needs. The music video opens with Lipa Schmeltzer, dressed in Hasidic garb, at Brach’s Supermarket, a kosher grocery store in Long Island. Lipa is on the checkout line, and humorously seems unable to figure out how to swipe his credit card properly. The scene cuts to a heavyset man in a backward baseball cap and sweatshirt who is talking on his cell phone in the parking lot of the grocery store, saying “Right, right. O.J. and bread. They’re about to close. I gotta go.” He runs toward the store. The scenes alternate between Lipa finishing his transaction and the rushed man attempting to make it into the store before they close. As Lipa leaves the store, the running man rounds the corner near the entrance, and the two collide, making Schmeltzer drop his groceries. As we see the newly purchased eggs shattered on the ground, the man apologizes, “Oh Lipa, I’m sorry. I was just trying to get in there before they close! I didn’t mean to knock all your stuff over like that.” Lipa raises a finger, and replies in a thick Yiddish accent, “You know what? Baruch HaShem. Abi Meleibt! [Bless God. At Least I’m Alive!]” With a wave of the hand he dismisses the dropped groceries and shakes the man’s hand in a friendly gesture. The man in the baseball cap is no longer stressed and gives the camera a thumbs-up as he also says, Abi Meleibt,
a Yiddish phrase suggesting that one should not worry about petty problems, and instead focus on the gift of being alive.

We then see Schmeltzer with his white shirt buttoned all the way to the top in typical Hasidic fashion, with a black baseball cap on, from which his peyos emerge on either side of his bespectacled and bearded face. He is standing in front of a blue sky with white clouds passing overhead, as he faces the camera and says in English, “Hey people, my name is Lipa. Forget your worries ‘cause there’s much more important things in life.” He begins singing in falsetto the iconic vocal opening to Solomon Linda’s “Mbube,” made popular by Pete Seeger and the Weavers as “Wimoweh,” and later the Tokens as “The Lion Sleeps Tonight” (see Erlmann 2000 for a discussion of this melody). A guitar enters, soon to be followed by bass guitar, horns, and drums. “Abi Meleibt” is a contrafactum of “The Lion Sleeps Tonight,” with four verses in Yiddish, and a final fifth verse in English. In the music video Schmeltzer acts out each of the scenes described in the lyrics, including dancing in the streets with police officers, and singing in the middle of New York’s Penn Station.

Ex. 3.1: “Abi Meleibt” by Lipa Schmeltzer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Translation:</th>
<th>Yiddish Lyrics:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I want a coffee but there's no milk</td>
<td>א קאפוי יול איק — נישט א קאפ מיילר -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I found just a drop,</td>
<td>געפוקשטע קואם א טראפ —</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I taste it</td>
<td>דע איק טאדהיר — איק שפער מאר זיווער —</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It tastes sour</td>
<td>אייר א罰ך איןיעק ד. קאפ —</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I throw away the cup</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chorus: Abimelebt, Abimelebt …</td>
<td>Chorus:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A red light</td>
<td>יֵאָן מיט לועטן! יֵאָן מיט לועטן!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A shining reflector</td>
<td>ורטיווע לועטוער, עס שיינט רעפעלטיעטער —</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the mirror I see a Police,</td>
<td>אַנּ שיפעלַ אין שעו היא פאַילט —</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He tells me to stay still, He writes a ticket</td>
<td>עַר רויעט שטיטן בליעטן, אַ מיטעקט טרייבן —</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He puts on a sweet smile</td>
<td>ער מאָטך צוּר נאָר שְװַימלטן צוּם —</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abimelebt, Abimelebt …

Afterwards I'm sweating
Sitting in traffic
Driving a long way,
The Highway's busy
I'm getting dizzy
Becoming enraged

Abimelebt, Abimelebt …

You run to the line
It's already 3 o'clock
By the door of the bank I wait,
The supervisor screams in anger
"It's late, the bank is closed"

Abimelebt, Abimelebt …

[English Verse:]
In Penn Station when with frustration I missed my train tonight
They keep on beeping and I should be sleeping like the lion sleeps tonight

Abimelebt, Abimelebt …

Chorus:
Abi mút lúbbat! Abi mút lúbbat!...

Schmeltzer’s image in the music video is of a Hasidic man who is devout, but also comical. He wears Hasidic garb, sings almost entirely in Yiddish, and conveys a positive message in his music. He is a member of the Hasidic community, but is knowledgeable enough about the world beyond his community to have set new words to this popular melody.

Schmeltzer is talented, and a bit clownish, reminding many of a badchan, a jester who performs
at Hasidic weddings. The music is light and contains symbols of both sounding Hasidic and
sounding modern.

In a 2015 interview published by Gothamist.com, Schmeltzer describes how he first
encountered non-Jewish music. Here he also explains that the integration of these elements into
his own music led to criticism.

His early influences were Jewish singers, but after getting married at age 20, Schmeltzer
worked as a delivery man for a meat and fish store. It was driving around making
deliveries in a smelly little truck, hoping for a dollar tip here and there to make the rent,
that the singer first heard “Hero” by Enrique Iglesias, and “I Need to Know” by Marc
Anthony. Schmeltzer soon found himself devouring other pop standards—Michael
Jackson, Lady Gaga, Ricky Martin, Britney Spears.
“I couldn’t live without music,” he told me. “And I wanted to upgrade Jewish music.”
When he began to sing at weddings and bar mitzvahs, Schmeltzer’s talent was obvious,
and yet he was met with derision from within the Skver community; his music was too
different, too new, too challenging. Though his songs were in Hebrew and Yiddish,
mostly with words culled from religious texts, people called him “this new talent who
sings like a goy,” Schmeltzer recalled ruefully. (Ungar-Sargon 2015)

Schmeltzer’s 2001 album L’tovah (Hebrew: “[This too is] for good”) was criticized by
the Rabbis of the Skver community, and after being called before a Rabbinical court, he was
forced to issue an apology for the record in a local newspaper. Though many were suspicious of
Lipa’s music, others continued to hire him to perform at weddings and concerts, and his career
steadily grew. While Schmeltzer had already achieved minor celebrity status in 2008 when he
organized a concert at Madison Square Garden’s WaMu Theater, events surrounding the concert
made him a household name. “The Big Event,” as the concert was called, was a fundraiser, with
proceeds to be donated to orphans living in Israel who needed financial assistance to cover
wedding costs. Scheduled for March 9, 2008, The Big Event was being advertised, only half-
hyperbolically, as “the biggest event ever in Jewish music.” The concert was expected to be
similar to Schmeltzer’s comedic entertainment style. An article in Country Yossi, a Haredi
periodical, described him in the following way:
There are singers and there are singers. And then there's Lipa! A true original, Lipa is in a class all his own. JE Magazine\(^2\) met with Lipa to discuss his life, his views and his brand new album, *Keinehora*. “I sing partly for parnassah (Hebrew: livelihood) and partly for my neshamah (Hebrew: soul),” Lipa says. And that, in a nutshell, epitomizes Lipa. A cross between practicality and soulfulness, between humor and sincerity, between droll wit and genuine heart. (Zweig 2005)

With all but the final preparations in place, Schmeltzer was shocked to find the following document, a ban signed by thirty-three leading Rabbis, posted in a Haredi newspaper.\(^3\)

\(^2\) JE Magazine was a monthly periodical focusing on popular Jewish entertainment, particularly Haredi popular music.

\(^3\) The translation that follows is my own, completed with guidance from my interlocutors.
Great Warning

We heard something happening and our souls trembled because we are standing at a point that there will be a concert gathering in the city of Manhattan in the arena of Madison Square Garden.

Singers will come from out of our camp to sing and entertain in front of men and women. The outcome will be spiritual chaos [lit. light-headedness]. What this will lead to is great transgression, God forbid, and the gathering will fall prey to what is happening. What it does to the soul is to suck out the fear of heaven and it is lowering them to a free for all, God forbid. The Head Rabbis have already warned here in Israel and in the USA that they prohibit this with extreme prohibition, these gatherings of song, even if there is separation of the sexes.

Therefore we have come to reveal our views and the view of Torah

This is a tremendous prohibition to be a part of this and to get involved there

Without any leniency, there is no excuse for men, women or children to participate. Even more so is this prohibition on the producers and the singers because these producers and singers are in the category of those who sin and cause others to sin.

Do not hire these singers to sing in any happy gathering or any fundraiser. On the same note, it is prohibited for newspapers to advertise these concerts and the responsibility is on the parents and the teachers to guide and to warn old and young. They should be guided so that they should not go in the path of these sinners. On this it is said “Praiseworthy is the man who does not go [among sinners and cynics].” And the merit of the verse “And your camp will be holy, God should rest his presence among us and God should return his people and Israel shall be happy”

And for the sake of purity and holiness of Israel

Adar 1 5768.

(Signatures of Rabbis)
Schmeltzer was unaware that the ban was being organized, and its presence in the newspaper came as a surprise. He explained that while the controversy surrounding “The Big Event” had been difficult for him, the decision to cancel the concert was a relatively quick one. As he stated in an interview with Haredi radio host Yehuda Levin, “It's confused feelings. It's not an easy thing. It was not easy. Some people tell me ‘Don't show people that it wasn't easy,’ but it's not about show or not show. People know. I'm a human being. I mean, you work on a show for three months, and all of a sudden... The whole decision, between me and Hashem [God], to give this up, I don't even know if this took twenty minutes.”

Jewish authorities have, at many points in history, struggled with encountering the cultural productions of neighboring communities. As Gerald J. Blidstein points out, on two separate occasions classical Jewish legal texts prohibited the study of “outside books.” The Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds both write that Rabbi Akiva prohibited reading Ben Sira, a book that “aspired to—but was denied—Scriptural status” (Blidstein 1997:21-23). According to Rabbi Akiva, texts such as those by Homer may be read casually, but “intensive study is forbidden” (Sanhedrin 10:1 28a). The Midrash Kohelet Rabbah takes a stronger stance than Rabbi Akiva on non-Jewish books. It states, “whomever brings into his house more than twenty-four books (of the Bible) introduces confusion to his house….” Blidstein explains that “here the sages ostensibly say that any book which is not in the biblical canon is not fit to be in a Jewish home, creating a total ban, indeed, on all secular materials” (ibid.).

In the twenty-first century, the Haredi Rabbinic leadership resorts to bans frequently, with new bans announced on pashqevilin [posters on the streets of Haredi neighborhoods], or announced in speeches and disseminated by word of mouth, text message, and the Internet. On some occasions these bans are issued by a particular Rabbi and only disciples of that Rabbi are
expected to observe the ban. Other times, the ban, such as that on The Big Event, is issued by a group of Rabbis, ensuring that more people will follow the ruling. Similarly, shops that are viewed as selling technology that is not sanctioned, or clothing stores that do not conform to strict enough standards of modesty, have been boycotted at the instruction of community leaders. Past bans have mandated that smart phones, text messages, and the Internet itself are to be avoided.

While pronouncements made by Rabbis represent public reasoning from the top down, Haredi society also works through these tensions on a horizontal axis, from person to person. The ban on The Big Event and concerts in general was a moment that caused many people to reflect on the state of their community, and their feelings toward these bans. While some individuals pushed back and saw this ban as crossing a line, others believed that it was helpful to have Rabbis direct their actions. Radio talk-show host Rabbi Yehuda Levin, who is a vocal advocate for conservative political issues and has run for Congress and the Mayor of New York City, was one of the more outspoken supporters of the ban: “A lot of people, the silent majority, have been suffering for many, many years. We've been suffering. We've been put upon. And, Baruch Hashem (Thank God), now that the Rabbonim [Rabbis] took the things in hand, let's hope that they finish the job so they'll make it easier for you. If the Rabbonim will make standards on everything for all the singers, and for all the musicians … it would be a davar hashaveh l’chol nefesh [something that is agreeable to everyone].”

Schmeltzer says that he has received overwhelming support for his decision to cancel the event and change his musical style. “When the Rabbonim came out with the issur [ban], I had maybe three or four people, out of five hundred people, tell me to back out of the show... I had, like, five hundred people tell me don't back out of the show. My family [told me not to back out
of the show]. But I decided to cancel the show even though five hundred people told me not to do it. The second I backed out, I had five thousand people call me to support and to *chazak* (Hebrew: praise) me, what a great thing I did.” In addition to cancelling “The Big Event,” Schmeltzer decided to give up his practice of singing songs that are based on secular music such as “Abi Melebt.” As he stated in the interview with Levin, “What I took upon myself for now is not to convert any *goyishe* (Yiddish: non-Jewish) songs anymore.”

The cancellation of “The Big Event” was monumental, but it was the larger implications of the ban that most concerned people. As reported in a February 25, 2008 news story on YeshivaWorldNews.com titled “Exclusive: Lipa Schmeltzer Backs Out of Big Event Concert!” Lipa Schmeltzer himself said, “People should know that this *Kol Koreh* [announcement] and ban against The Big Event was not directed at me personally, but at all concerts in general. The *Rabbonim* felt the need to put their foot down and attempt to stop all future concerts in New York.”

A concerned Hasidic blogger, Chaim Rubin, wrote on LifeofRubin.com on March 3, 2008, “This is no longer about Lipa Schmeltzer or Jewish Music. This is about the future of *Frum Yidden* [Yiddish: Religious Jews] everywhere. This is not just a topic of the week it’s a battle for the next generation.”

Many fear that the ban on concerts, in combination with a series of other bans that had been released previously, has left religious Jews without a recreational outlet. In a response to the article, “Exclusive Update: Lipa Schmeltzer Backs out of Big Event Concert!” the commenter “ZeitBsimcha” wrote “We have now banned sporting events, concerts, amusement

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parks, the circus & malls among other things. Of course, I don’t argue … But what in heaven’s name do we want people to do realistically for recreation?”

Another concern is that, without a religiously safe recreational environment in which to socialize, Orthodox youth will turn to unsanctioned activities. As Yitz Jordan, who at the time was a Haredi rapper who performed by the name of Y-Love, wrote, “How many more drug addicts will be spawned for lack of a Hasidic outlet in which to socialize? How many more Hasidic girls will, unable to hang out with Rivky and Shaindy at the MBD [Mordechai ben David] show, will [sic] now meet Ruchie and Bracha at the club?” (Jordan 2008).

Bans and Haredi Popular Music

Lipa Schmeltzer was not the first or last Haredi musician to have his recordings and concerts banned. Another noteworthy ban pertained to Hasidic singer Mordechai ben David (Mordechai Werdyger), who is frequently referred to as the “King of Jewish Music” because of his immense popularity among Haredim. Mark Kligman writes, “If one person had to be chosen as the most influential figure in contemporary Orthodox music, it would be Mordechai Ben David” (2001:109). “MBD,” as his fans call him, is the son of famed cantor David Werdyger (1919-2014), who was best known for his many recordings of Hassidic niggunim, which were released beginning in 1959. Kligman describes MBD’s early albums as “1970s soft-rock ballad style in which the chorus is more energetic than the verses; when they first appeared, the upgraded arranging standards gave the songs a fresh sound, and many other artists and groups continued these innovations” (ibid).

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6 See Chapter Five for further discussion of Y-Love.
The innovations, though, have come with controversy. Beginning in the late 1990s there were attempts to ban his concerts, but because prominent Hasidic Rabbis encouraged him to move forward with the performances, they were held, MBD explained in an exclusive interview with Haredi news site “Vos iz Neias” published on March 5, 2008.\(^8\) Asked about how he responds to those who attempt to ban his music, he replied, “I don’t. I ignore it. I do what my rabbis tell me,” according to a “Vos iz Neias” article published on October 9, 2011.\(^9\) MBD’s deference to his own Rabbis situates his music within the Haredi value of “Daas Torah” (Hebrew: The Knowledge of Torah), which refers to the necessity of seeking guidance from one’s Rabbi when making any major decision. By emphasizing that he consults with his own Rabbis, he is rhetorically placing himself and his music within the boundaries of permissibility, and leaving himself at liberty to reject the voices that wish to silence him. At times, though, MBD is left powerless, such as his 2016 Passover concert in Jerusalem, when event organizers caved to pressure to cancel the event.

Another prominent figure in Haredi popular music, Eli Gerstner, has also faced opposition to his music, and is thoughtful in his response to his critics. While Gerstner began his career as a wedding singer, he has become famous in the Orthodox community for his skill as a singer and songwriter, and he is also the producer behind groups such as Yeshiva Boys Choir, Tek-ney (a Yiddish-sounding mispronunciation of the word “techno”), Menucha, and The Chevra. Gerstner formed The Chevra in response to the popularity of “boy bands” such as The

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\(^8\) The Vos Iz Neias article reports: “Ten years ago, before a major concert in Israel for the Zichron Menachem organization, two askanim tried to stop it, even meeting with the Amshinover Rebbe trying to get him to convince MBD not to appear. Nevertheless, the Rebbe told MBD not to stop, and even gave him chizuk to do the concert.” http://www.vosizneias.com/14551/2008/03/05/brooklyn-ny-exclusive-interview-with/. Accessed on May 11, 2017.

Backstreet Boys and N-Sync beginning in the late 1990s. The Chevra is composed of four Orthodox male singers who perform in standard “Yeshivish” garb of black suits, white shirts, and black velvet yarmulkes. Gerstner creates backing tracks for the songs that sound much like the popular songs of their non-Jewish boy band counterparts, with a heavy emphasis on digital keyboard, bass that is raised in the mix, and digital percussion, all designed to be dance-inducing.

The most famous song from the record is surely “Y’hey.” The piece takes its lyrics, which are in Aramaic, from a prayer known as the Kaddish.

Ex. 3.3: “Y’hey” lyrics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Transliteration</th>
<th>Aramaic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May there be a great peace from heaven</td>
<td>Y’hei shlama raba min sh’maya</td>
<td>יהוה שלמה רבה:min שמי亚</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following transcription of the song’s refrain demonstrates the melody and digital accompaniment, which includes electric keyboard, an electronic bass line played by a synthesizer, and electric drums. The arrangement is closely modeled after the timbres and stylistic features of popular “boy bands.” The percussion line in the transcription includes four parts which, from low to high, are bass drum, snare, handclap, and bell. One should note that the recording also includes occasional “slap bass” percussive noises, as well as drum fills, which contribute to the pop aesthetic of the recording.
In a 2016 interview, Gerstner described to me the response to the first Chevra record, which he refers to as “Chevra 1.” “When Chevra 1 came out in 2001 almost every Jewish school
banned the album, and I was getting, like, hate mail.” Nonetheless, the record was purchased widely by Orthodox youth. Gerstner told me about the day that the album was released:

> At the time we had answering machines that were on tape. I remember that I had a Bas Mitzvah to go to with my wife on the day that it came out. We did very little advertising, and I’m telling you, I was more embarrassed of the whole idea, because I wanted to reach people but at the same time I didn’t want it to hurt my [career as a wedding singer]. But okay, let’s see what happens. We went out and we come back after the Bas Mitzvah. We released it at 12:00 in the afternoon. It was a beautiful sunny day. And I remember we came back from the Bas Mitzvah at 7 PM, 8 PM. And I go to my answering machine, my business answering machine, and I see ‘Full.’ Okay, that’s interesting. It must be that someone must have left a message and left his phone on. It went on for 20 minutes and now the tape’s full. And I remember it was craziness. I pressed play and you just hear these girls. These teenage, high-pitched girls just screaming their heads off. That was the message. Every message. Every message you hear Chevra playing in the background and you hear ‘Ahhh!’ And like, no message. Just ‘beep’ next, ‘Ahhh!’ So I pulled my wife in, ‘you gotta hear this! This is crazy!’ So I started feeling that there was something that happened. I’m telling you, it was just insane. (ibid.)

The Haredi schools were not the only opposition to The Chevra. Gerstner has often encountered individuals who criticize his music, and claim that it is not Jewish. At times the critiques are quite harsh, such as during a performance at a Bar Mitzvah celebration when the class teacher started screaming at him for playing “non-Jewish music.” Gerstner described his response, which is now well-composed because of the frequency with which he responds to these critiques:

> ‘You know the ‘Yehei Yehei’ from Chevra 1?’ ‘Oh, that sounds not Jewish.’ And I’d be like, [Sings the melody with vocables instead of words (see below)]. It’s a niggun. And people would be like, ‘Oh, what is that?’ And I’m like [Sings it again, this time with the words]. The reason why people [disagree with it] is just because of the pop rhythm, and this and that. And that’s what automatically translates in a person’s head to ‘Oh, that must be not Jewish’ or whatever. But the niggun, the song you are actually singing, that’s where it came from. It was a niggun. (ibid.)
Ex. 3.5: “Y’hey” niggun version transcription

Y'hey (niggun version)

By claiming that the piece is actually a niggun, Gerstner frames his music as “sounding Hasidic” as opposed to “sounding Modern.” He states that the elements to which people object are merely “the dressing,” rather than a substantive component of the music, and thus the elements that are objectionable are such an insignificant piece of the whole that these complaints can be dismissed. If the arrangement continues to present a problem to the listener, it is thus merely a matter of taste and this should not present any major issue. Gerstner explained to me:

[I] say this to whoever had something against this particular song or this particular genre. I tell them, ‘just say really what bothers you. What bothers you is that you don’t like the arrangement. You don’t like that style of arrangement. The music production behind it. I’m not insulted by that, or by anything about music. You can’t be insulted. It’s really just a taste. You don’t like that. And that’s fine. But screaming a false thing, ‘This is not Jewish!’ or ‘This is taken from a non-Jewish song!’ Chill, you know? That’s not the case. So I don’t get offended by that stuff. (ibid.)

While Gerstner has this well-composed response to those who oppose his music, he acknowledges that contestation will likely continue to have a role in the creation of new genres of Jewish music. We spoke about how, despite the attempts of several musicians, Jewish rap has thus far failed to catch on in any significant way among Haredim.

EG: You’ll hear a rap album every once in a while, but they just don’t reach. And the reason for that is that still people are not comfortable with it. So when they listen to it, is it that maybe it’s just something that people aren’t used to yet, and when they get used to it, it’ll [be successful]? I don’t know. It’s definitely possible. I definitely wouldn’t be
surprised if one day Rabbi so-and-so puts out a rap album and all of a sudden it’s the new thing. I wouldn’t be surprised at all.

GD: But I wonder if before Rabbi so-and-so puts out his successful rap album, I wonder if somebody else is going to put one out and its going to get banned, just like The Chevra album.

EG: And it will. And it will. (ibid.)

We see that even musicians who are widely considered to be a part of the Haredi mainstream, such as Gerstner and Mordechai ben David, are vulnerable to claims of musical assimilation. Because the stakes are so high—many believe that the existence of the Haredi community depends on this cultural continuity—all music must be evaluated to ensure that youth will not be led astray through consuming new releases. Determining whether or not a musician is sufficiently continuing Haredi musical practices is highly subjective. As a result, some individuals, such as Ephraim Luft, have taken it upon themselves to standardize the boundaries of permissibility and become the gatekeeper for music in the Haredi community.

Ephraim Luft

Many of the attempts to ban certain Haredi musics can be traced back to Rabbi Ephraim Luft. Luft was born and raised in Manchester, UK, but now resides in Bnei Brak, Israel, a Haredi stronghold. Luft considers himself to be an expert on music, and enjoys arranging Hasidic niggunim for classical music ensembles in his free time. Luft has been among the most outspoken critics of Haredi popular music, and has traveled to Haredi communities around the world to speak about the dangers of this genre. I interviewed Luft in his home in December 2014, and he explained how he initially became involved with the effort to counteract the proliferation of Haredi pop:
When I got married … you could bring people to a Bnei Brak wedding and get them to do *teshuvah* [to repent and come closer to G-d] just by seeing a nice [Haredi] wedding…. [When my own kids were getting married] I had to plan to make a wedding that I could actually participate in, and not have to stand outside like a lot of people have had to do. So I worked on getting a band that I could trust who would play in a normal manner. At the same time I wanted to send articles to the papers, just to give my opinion on the subject…. I went around to all the Rabbis asking what should be done to try and fix up the music. They all had the same opinion that the music today is a very negative type of music, that it has very bad influences. But somebody who doesn’t have a background in music can’t put his finger on it, and figure out just what was the cause of it. And they gave me the job to explain this. I was asked to write a book to explain all the problems of what is actually done to the music, how it has changed over the last thirty five years or so, to make it that today it is basically American rock & roll. So I came out with my first book *Dor SheBen David Ba* (Hebrew: “In the generation that the son of David (ie. the Messiah) comes.”)

The title of this Hebrew book is a quote from the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 97a), which reads, “Rabbi Nehorai said: in the generation when *ben David* [the Messiah] comes, young men will insult the old, and old men will stand before the young [to give them honour]; daughters will rise up against their mothers, and daughters-in-law against their mothers-in-law. The people shall be dog-faced, and a son will not be abashed in his father’s presence.” The title can also be read as a reference to Mordechai ben David, whom the text criticizes at length. In this reading, the title suggests that in the generation that Mordechai ben David comes, the youth will engage in shameful behavior.

Luft’s most successful publication is his book *The Torah is not Hefker* (Hebrew: Ownerless) in which he seeks to explain to the Haredi public why Haredi popular music is unacceptable and dangerous to the soul. Luft reported to me that he has sold at least 50,000 copies, many of which were ordered by leading Haredi Rabbis, particularly the Yemenite Rabbi and popular speaker, Amnon Yitzchak. During our conversation, Luft summarized the book’s main argument:

The basic question is, ‘what do you define as Jewish music?’ The answer is that there really isn’t something they can say is *Jewish* music. The music of Jewish people has
always been influenced by the surroundings. It is always influenced by the music of the
time and place that they are in, and there’s nothing really wrong with that as long as the
contemporary style—the style of the place at that time—is something respectable…. And
we find that there have always been non-Jewish niggunim that have been taken in and
used by Hasidim…. So what we have today is that the music coming out of America is
American music, and the people think there is no difference. If you are living in Hungary
make Hungarian music, and if you live in America make American music. What’s
wrong? The difference is that the purpose of music has changed completely. The whole
purpose of music over the last hundred years in America, in the whole world, has
changed. Music until the end of the nineteenth century, the beginning of the twentieth
century, was music with some kind of intellectual content, with spiritual content. The
people wrote for the highest ideals, not for the lowest. Not to bring out the animal in
people. Whereas modern music is just starting at cheap entertainment and going until
immorality... The whole idea of rock idols is something completely opposite to the Torah.
And so what does this type of music have to do with us? And the answer is it doesn’t
have anything to do with us. However, the people in the business see that you can make a
lot of money out of it. And so that’s the main thing about these people. They understand
that it has negative effects. They see very clearly what it does to the non-Jewish public
over the whole world. But they don’t care because this type of junk music that appeals to
children, or people with a mentality of children, sells very easily. (ibid.)

Luft’s words draw on an intellectual tradition similar to that of Theodor Adorno, who
famously argued for the superiority of “serious music” over popular music. Luft bemoans the
lack of rigor in composition, the conditions that have left music simple and uninspired. In our
conversation, Luft told me an anecdote to explain his qualms with pop music compositions:

There’s no problem with somebody making new songs. But they should be respectful. I’ll
give you an example: There’s a guy in Bnei Brak who writes songs for most of the big
Sephardi pop singers. He is a busy a guy, he runs the catering for one of the big wedding
halls in Bnei Brak. Somebody told me that they asked him, ‘You are such a busy guy.
When do you have time to write all of these songs?’ He said, ‘I write them when I am in
the bathroom.’ That’s the style of music that is coming out. Music from the bathroom.
That’s the kind of garbage that we are being given. And we don’t have to say that’s what
going today, that’s what people are doing today. We have to stand up and say, take your
garbage and don’t play it for us. Go play for people who want to hear music written in the
bathroom, not for people who want to hear respectable music, especially whether it is at a
wedding, or whether you are playing at any kind of a simcha, a simchas beis hashoeva
[Hebrew: Water drawing ceremony, ie. a festive party on the holiday of Sukkos].
Especially if they are playing inside a shul [Yiddish: synagogue]. You have to treat the
music with respect…. Respectable people are supposed to be listening to respectable
music. If you think that we should be listening to all sorts of disrespectful music, there’s
something wrong with you. (Interview, 31 December 2014)
Like Luft, Adorno too was concerned with the listener base created by popular music, and popular culture more generally. As Adorno writes, “The frame of mind to which popular music originally appealed, on which it feeds, and which it perpetually reinforces, is simultaneously one of distraction and inattention. Listeners are distracted from the demands of reality by entertainment which does not demand attention either.” (1941 [1990]:310). It is, perhaps, ironic that Luft, who advocates strongly for Jewish musicians not to draw on outside sources, is so closely in line with Adorno’s words and the intellectual lineage from which he emerged.

For Luft, there are two types of “serious music”: Western classical music and niggunim that “sound Hasidic.” His argument is in some ways compelling, as he acknowledges that the phrase “Jewish music” is problematic because of the history of hybridity and cultural contact among Jewish musicians. However, he ignores the fact that Jewish musicians have long engaged in a wide variety of musical practices, some of which Luft would likely find objectionable. Luft’s Manichean approach does not fit the history of Jewish music, which is characterized by intercultural borrowing, and folk music genres. Furthermore, Luft’s historical narrative suggests that Jews of prewar Europe primarily borrowed from lofty, “serious” sources, and not those that Adorno would label “popular.”

Ellen Koskoff notes that stories of “musical tikkun” (Hebrew: repair) are common among Hasidim (2001:74-79). While conducting research among Lubavitcher Hasidim, Koskoff encountered numerous stories in which a holy person discovers a melody from a non-Jewish source and manages to “redeem” that melody and turn it into a Hasidic niggun. She identifies four stages in this process: 1) a holy person perceives a “holy spark” in a piece of music performed by a non-Jew, 2) ownership of the song is transferred to the holy person either through purchase or trickery, 3) the song is “opened up,” generally by removing the lyrics, so
that the holy spark can be released, and 4) the spark can be returned to its proper, holy place through the performance of the niggun by Hasidim. Koskoff notes that step four can involve a manipulation of the music, “that is, the music is made to sound more Hasidic.”

I have heard individuals who wish to defend the use of non-Jewish melodies invoke the ideas that Koskoff presents here. Luft, however, does not feel the need to go this far; he simply mentioned to me that “The meforshim (Hebrew: commentators) say there is nothing wrong with it [the use of non-Jewish melodies], even to sing it for Kaddish or Kedusha [two prayers considered to be of a high level of holiness].” Luft stresses, though, that the melodies that Haredi pop singers are borrowing today are on a far lower spiritual plane than those of the past.

The stakes in this battle, according to Luft, are quite high. In The Torah is Not Hefker he writes that the rock music on which Haredi singers are basing their style “has the power to influence immoral feelings.” Luft’s argument in the book is multi-pronged, as he first presents his understanding of the history of Haredi pop music, then suggests that rock music is dangerous to both the body and soul. Luft’s history is centered on the centrality of African-American musicians in twentieth-century American music:

We all know that rock music was born in America, but can it rightly be called American music? There is nearly no connection between rock and roll to the American music of the nineteenth century, which does have a continuation in contemporary American folk music, which is music with a certain amount of feeling and spiritual content. But the wild noisy music that is heard everywhere has no connection to traditional American music. The main source of rock music comes from black American music, mainly from jazz and the blues, and accordingly we find that modern Jewish music—whose creators admit that it is also rock music—is also basically Negro music—with a bit of Jewish flavour here and there….

… At a time when the majority of non-Jewish music was a respectable art, there was nothing wrong with copying those styles, and therefore the Rabbis of previous generations allowed to use their music even for Kaddish and Kedushah.

The same cannot be said about the music of Africa. It has no intellectual content, and is also not made to give respect or honour. It does contain feeling—but not the type of feeling that can be used for divrei she’b’kedusha (Hebrew: holy words), but rather impure
feelings from a type of primitive music that was used for *avodah zarah* (Hebrew: idol worship) and the occult art of voodoo. (Luft 2008:26-28)

Scholarly readers will surely find his words to be offensive and racist, and this has not been lost on some in the Orthodox community. Binyomin Ginsburgh, who runs the Jewish music website “Blog in Dm,” has used his blog as a platform to carefully deconstruct Luft’s arguments and argue against them. He writes of Luft, “He is a racist. (This is relevant because he builds his music criticism on racial theories.) From quoting the KKK publication The Southerner, to making race-based arguments against rock music, to making common cause with, and quoting favorably, such apparent racists as the reverend David Noebel, to citing ‘white citizens councils’ approvingly, it is clear that Rabbi Luft is comfortable advocating racist views.”

After introducing his reading of American popular music history, Luft proceeds to biological proofs of the dangers of popular music. He refers to the words of Bob Larson, a Christian preacher who publishes on the topic of rock music and Satanism, as well as studies in which rock music reportedly killed growing flowers and led mice to kill one another. This section of the book segues to a chapter on “Music and the Soul.” It is noteworthy that the book’s exposition on the soul is the climax of the text, as the soul is presented here as being of primary concern to Haredi audiences. He writes:

Of course, the main motive of all singers is to make money, but there lies more behind the evil music of rock and roll. The English pop star Mick Jagger, in an interview during the 1960’s spelled it out absolutely clearly: ‘We are moving after the minds, and so are most of the new groups….’ Let us not fool ourselves that some frum musicians and singers do not have the same intentions…. These are the intentions of the corrupt people among us—to force modern ideas into the Yeshivos, and influence young people to rebel against their Roshei Yeshivos and parents through their wild music that is made to incite rebellion! (Luft 2008:42, bold font in the original)

Luft continues, “There have been several occasions when the boys threw their shirts at

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the singer, and at a concert in Tel Aviv the night after Purim 5764, it was reported that the girls did the same thing. In addition to this, the way the young people react when the singers appear on stage or in public is very disturbing. The girls scream and the boys go wild just like the goyim do when they see their idols, and they try to tell us that these singers are holy people with holy songs!” (44)

In an effort to provide very specific guidelines for playing appropriate music, Luft has drafted and published “Ten Rules for Playing Kosher Music” (see below). One will notice that Luft’s aversion to African-American music genres is evident in this document as well.
Ex. 3.6: Ephraim Luft’s Ten Rules for Playing Kosher Music

RULES FOR PLAYING KOSHER MUSIC

1. When dealing with words from holy sources, it is necessary to sing them in a respectful manner fitting to the meaning of the words and not in a frivolous or disrespectful way. Care should also be taken in the pronunciation of the words not to express them in a loose or disrespectful manner as is done by most singers of popular music.

2. Instrumentation should be made in a respectable way to suit the meaning of the words. Sounds that give a disrespectful or indecent feeling must not be played. This includes electronic effects, distortion and "bending" the notes.

3. A misbalance between rhythm and melody creates negative feelings in the music. Therefore care should be taken to ensure that the melody is dominant over the rhythm and not to over-emphasize the bass accompaniment. The use of "swing" both in the singing and instrumental accompaniment is not allowed.

4. Percussion should be used with taste in the appropriate places, and sparingly. The percussion accompaniment should be secondary to the melody. The use of percussion accompaniment in slow, quiet music is generally ridiculous. "2-4" beats and other rock and disco beats in the percussion must not be used. The modern drum set was created specifically for disrespectful music and other percussion instruments should preferably be used.

5. The electric guitar and the bass guitar have no place in the performance of Jewish music. The saxophone should also not be used.

6. Musicians who do not understand these points can not be used. The use of rock musicians is forbidden. Singers who sing at mixed concerts have been banned by Gedolei Yisroel from being used at any event or simchah.

7. All forms of modern popular music such as rock, pop, rap, reggae and trance are forbidden. Non-Jewish songs even without the words must not be played.

8. Loud amplification is dangerous to hearing and health, and can even cause danger to life in certain cases. Therefore it is forbidden to over-amplify the music at all times.

9. When playing at simchos only the person who pays the musicians has the right to tell them what and how to play.

10. Songs of the chareidi rock idols should not be heard at simchos. Also songs that have no relevance to the simchah should not be played. The music should be presented in a way befitting to a simchah shel mitzvah and must not create an atmosphere resembling a show of popular music. Singers should not be allowed to dance in front of the guests.

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1 Rock musicians have adopted a trend to distort the natural tones especially with the electric guitar and bass guitar. Also the saxophone has replaced the clarinet in chareidi rock music because it produces similar indecent sounds.

2 These are also standard features of rock music.

3 The Malbim [in Yeshayahu Ch. 24, 8] comments that the place of the drum is only in dance music.

4 When the saxophone was adopted for use in jazz bands in the 1920's it received the name "the Devil's Flute" because of its indecent seductive tones.

5 Even though it is possible to play these instruments in a respectable way, their use in modern chareidi music is intended to provide indecent effects.
In my interview with Luft I pushed him on his ten rules, particularly identification of certain musical instruments that he forbids. I asked him specifically about the saxophone:

GD: For me, some of these things have a different … you know, I hear the saxophone and I don’t immediately think of it as a bad thing because I listened to a lot of saxophone music all my life.

EL: It depends how you play it.

GD: Is that with all instruments?

EL: For sure. You could play electric guitar in a normal way as well. I mentioned in the footnote. But the reason they bring these things in is to give the negative effects of it. To make the music wild. I’ll tell you a story. There was a guy who was around, it’s already 20 years ago. He was named Yonasan Goldberg11 from [the town of] Beis Shemesh. He was the number one clarinet player at weddings in that time. Just after that he decided to give up the whole thing, he went off to learn to be an electrician. So a few years later I heard about it, I phoned him up and I asked him, ‘Why did you give it up?’ He said, first he couldn’t stand watching the ways they danced at the weddings. They told him to close his eyes. They told him, we don’t want you to play the clarinet, leave the clarinet behind. We only want you to play the saxophone. Which means, they were telling him, ‘you’re not playing modern enough for us. The sound of the clarinet sounds too Jewish, sounds too straight. We want to hear that crooked sound of the saxophone.’ And that’s why I bring here that in the 1920s they called it the devil’s flute. Because it has a type of seductive sound, it is fitting for immoral type of music. And that’s where it found its place. The saxophone was made in the middle of the nineteenth century and I think the first, well, the only nineteenth century piece that I know that did use it was George Bizet used in “L’Arlésienne.” And there it was used as a straight instrument, like a clarinet, in a very nice way. But when it came to the 1920s it was taken as a basic instrument for jazz bands. It was used in the 1950s for rock bands, and they weren’t interested in it and they stopped using it. But the religious rock bands, they needed it to replace the clarinet, which was, even until now, was the leading instrument. They need something to replace that. And it works out convenient, because the people who play the clarinet can also play the saxophone. It’s the same type of thing. It’s the type of sound that it gives, is not a positive sound. But like I said, you can play it straight, like a normal instrument if you want. But it’s brought there for something else.

Luft is stressing here that the musical instruments to which he objects could indeed be used in an acceptable way, but their presence in Haredi pop recordings is generally to create precisely the sounds that Luft finds offensive. His ten rules aim to prevent any possible

11 I have a used a pseudonym here.
problems, but he acknowledges that there is a bit of subjectivity present in making the distinction between positive and negative music. Therefore, he has created the Committee for Jewish Music, and encourages Haredi schools and summer camps to send him music for him to vet prior to it being played for children. Luft will personally listen to a recording and decide whether or not it is acceptable for Haredi children to hear.

The Committee for Jewish Music also seeks to put kosher certification stickers on new recordings, similar to the kosher certifications that are found on food. Luft told me that “only a few” people have asked for their CD to be reviewed in order to receive his certification. It is unclear how many people are members of the Committee for Jewish Music, though Luft does indeed have colleagues in America and Israel who share his beliefs about music.

Ex. 3.7: The Kosher Certification Stamp:

![Kosher Certification Stamp](image)

(Hebrew: With the Approval and Supervision of the Rabbinical Council for Jewish Music)

In 2010, Luft released his own album titled Hamavdil. The term “Hamavdil” is a name of God that means “He who separates,” and is invoked at the conclusion of the Sabbath, when Jews recite the “Havdalah” ceremony. The liturgy for this brief ceremony contains the line, “Blessed are you, God, He who separates [Hamavdil] between the holy and the profane.” Luft’s decision to name his record “Hamavdil” is telling, as he is marking his own music as holy, and setting it
apart from other music that is profane. The pieces on the recording are original arrangements of commonly sung Shabbos songs, as well as two of Luft’s original compositions. Luft arranged half of the pieces himself, while the remainder were arranged by Uri Brener, a Russian-Israeli Haredi pianist, composer, and arranger who holds a Ph.D in music composition. The pieces are arranged for strings, piano, winds, and voice, and are performed by members of the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra. Luft conducted the instrumentalists and the choir. The timbres of the ensemble index both a general classical music aesthetic, as well as the early recordings of niggunim from the 1950s and early 1960s, which had similar arrangements.

The cover art for Hamavdil is also revealing:

Ex. 3.8: Cover art for Hamavdil by Ephraim Luft

The cover has faint photos of famous Haredi Rabbis, several of whom had connections to music, such as two Modzitzer Rebbes. All text is written both in Hebrew and English characters, displaying that although the album was recorded and released in Israel, Luft is hoping for a wider audience so that he can provide an example of proper music to an English-speaking audience.
The top of the cover reads “Hashir Vehashevach” (Hebrew: “The Song and The Praise”) with the number one, indicating that this is the first in a series of records that are to be released. Many of the words are transliterated rather than translated because the Hebrew phrases will be familiar to an American Haredi audience. The front cover also includes the kosher certification label.

The liner notes for the record include English, Hebrew, and Yiddish translations of the “Ten Rules for Playing Kosher Music,” as well as a Hebrew approbation signed by four known Haredi Rabbis. Luft also includes an introductory note that describes his belief that most contemporary Haredi popular music is “indecent,” and explains that leading rabbis have expressed support for kosher certification of music “to keep the music at a high moral standard.” The liner notes continue, “This disc, the first of a continuing series, has been made by public demand to return to authentic styles that stay within the boundaries of decency and good taste which is a basic requirement in songs with words from holy sources.” In the following paragraph he writes, “The instrumentation and vocal arrangements have been made to suit the words and give honour to Hashem [God], which is the real purpose of Jewish music.”

It is difficult to determine the extent to which Luft’s beliefs are representative of others in the community, or if others have been swayed by his arguments. Only a few people with whom I spoke were familiar with Luft by name, though many were familiar with his efforts. It is clear that his writings have reached Jews in New York, as several people with whom I spoke were familiar with his work. I also stumbled upon a copy of The Torah is Not Hefker for sale at a used bookstore in Brooklyn. I spoke to one teenager who had heard Luft speak about music at a Haredi yeshiva in Brooklyn, who stated that Luft was “too extreme for me.” Others appreciate Luft’s message, as is seen in a post on the website “WomenInKiruv.org,” for Orthodox women who participate in kiruv, that is, outreach to Jews who are not Orthodox. The author writes:
Rabbi Ephraim Luft has written an impressive booklet combining secular and Jewish sources which reveal some of the best kept musical secrets in our generation. He calls it “The Torah is not Hefker” and it is a nightmare for the entertainment industry. In this booklet, he exposes some of the great powers of music and how it can be used and abused for the personal agendas of the performers and music businessmen…. Instead of only using rock music as a tool for kiruv, lets be brave enough to open up dialogue with our students about the spiritual dangers that lie therein. Furthermore, let us take every opportunity we have to expose them to more authentic Jewish music. By teaching niggunim, organizing kumzitzim and educating about the power of music. (Verbov 2014)

Though many people with whom I spoke find Luft to be too radical, he is clearly not alone in his beliefs. Many Haredim with whom I spoke do indeed think that much Haredi popular music is “too modern,” though there is disagreement over whether or not censoring activities should take place on the Rabbinic or the individual/familial level. Clearly, though, there is widespread concern over the power of music to lead children away from Haredi Jewish life.

The Aftermath of The Big Event

The banning of The Big Event spurred heated conversation, the divisiveness of which demonstrated that the debate over Lipa Schmeltzer’s music was representative of a much larger anxiety over the very identity of the Haredi community. Schmeltzer, to many, stood for porous cultural boundaries between the Haredi community and its neighbors. In the minds of Schmeltzer’s detractors, a lax approach to boundary maintenance would leave the community vulnerable to the melting powers of a liquid modern world, and this had the potential to lead to the end of the perceived purity of Haredim. For others, Schmeltzer was a talented singer whose borrowing from popular American Top 40 music was innocuous, and his suppression was an inappropriate assertion of power that set a dangerous precedent. New York State Assemblyman Dov Hikind, whose Brooklyn district is home to many Haredi Jews, commented on the anxiety that was uncovered and unleashed by The Big Event’s cancellation: “In all my twenty-six years
of representing this community, I can't remember anything that has so shaken the people” (Levin 2008).

In the months following the cancellation of The Big Event, Schmeltzer met with some of the individuals who signed the ban. According to a June 6, 2008 article on Vos Iz Neias he stated, “Many gedolei haTorah (Hebrew: “Greats of Torah,” i.e. respected rabbis) have told me that people came to them with false information regarding my concert: they said it would have mixed dancing or mixed seating. But they weren’t satisfied with that—they brought photos of women dancing so as to ‘prove’ that that’s what would happen.”

On March 1, 2009, approximately one year after the cancelled concert, Schmeltzer put on a concert in Manhattan, again at Madison Square Garden’s WaMu Theater. This time the concert was simply titled “The Event,” and tickets were completely sold out. Though a new ban was released just days before the concert, it was ignored and Schmeltzer performed as scheduled. I attended the concert and observed that special considerations were made to demonstrate that this was a religious event, in line with Haredi practices. The concert had separate entrances for men and women, and a large partition separated the sexes for the duration of the show. During the concert, Schmeltzer finished studying Maseches Megillah, the tractate of Talmud pertaining to the holiday of Purim, which was just over one week away. The conclusion of a tractate is often accompanied by a celebration known as a siyum, and by finishing studying the tractate on stage, Lipa Schmeltzer was turning “The Event” into a siyum, rather than a standard concert. This act transformed the performance into a holy event, a symbolic act that was made to distinguish it from secular, possibly objectionable, concerts.

I spoke with many people during the concert who greatly enjoyed the performance, and shared the opinion of writer Suri Aron, who wrote an article titled “Lipa Schmeltzer’s Big Event
a Big Success” (Aron 2009). Others disagreed, and found the existence of a second ban to be
evidence of the error of Lipa’s way, despite the fact that it failed to cancel the concert. The
author of the aforementioned Blog in Dm received an open letter to Lipa Schmeltzer that stated:

   Its time we all woke up and smelled the coffee. After reading the new ban regarding your
   performance it seems that in Shomayim [Heaven] they are NOT happy enough with the
   Derech [path], [sic] you have chosen. I believe that this is only the beginning stages of
   the Kol Korah [ban]. It's a clear and strong message from Hashem and the Rabonim who
   are the leaders of our times that something smells terribly wrong over here. Never in the
   past decade has there been a gathering of Rabonim to condemn an indivi-
   dual in such a
   strong way!!! I am not out to hurt you Lipa, I am simply suggesting that you should
   examine your performance closely, could we believe it's done 100% Al Taharas
   HaKodesh [for the sake of pure holiness]?

   The controversy surrounding “The Big Event” has had a profound impact on Schmeltzer,
and in the years since, he has been exploring the world beyond Haredi culture, though he
continues to identify as Hasidic and wear a yarmulke and peyos. Schmeltzer graduated from
Rockland Community College in 2014 with an associate’s degree, and is currently enrolled at
Columbia University as he works toward a bachelor’s degree. Schmeltzer’s decision to pursue a
college education is unusual for Hasidic Jews, and would be unthinkable for most Skver
Hasidim. Studying at the university level has enabled him to reflect on structures of authority in
Haredi culture. He stated, “The desire for control is a disease, it’s not Judaism. It took me years

   to realize I didn’t need anybody’s approval, only to listen to my inner voice” (Lehman 2015). In
a 2013 interview he controversially stated, “The most difficult time in my life was when thirty
three so-called rabbis signed a petition against me. Five or six called to apologize, and a few I
recorded on paper saying that they were fooled…. Today, if 500 rabbis come out against me,
perhaps it will be uncomfortable, but that is where it will end. I will go on the radio to talk about
it, I’ll write about it in the newspaper and on blogs, but I won’t run and hide in a hole the way I
did back then.”
Schmeltzer has since moved to Airmont, a town in Rockland County, New York, that is home to many Hasidim but has a reputation for being a less strict environment than the nearby towns of New Square and Monsey. There he has built his own synagogue that attracts those who feel like they are outsiders in the Orthodox community. Similarly, his music now unapologetically “sounds modern” and contains more English lyrics than in the past. Schmeltzer’s new style can be observed in his 2012 song and music video “Hang up the Phone,” a bilingual (Yiddish/English) call for Haredim to disengage from their technology in order to be more present in their daily lives.

Ex. 3.9: “Hang Up the Phone” by Lipa Schmeltzer

The family gets dizzy  
The father seems so busy  
My phone is going crazy  
My hands are numb and frizzy  
The gadgets make us lazy  
We gotta take it easy  

Whoa-o-o-o, can you hang up the phone?

I didn’t see you in ages  
It seems to me contagious  
You’re going through some stages  
The phone makes you outrageous  
It locks you up in cages  
Unlike our sages

Whoa-o-o-o, can you hang up the phone?

All the hocus-pocus  
Forever tries to choke us  
It’s making such a ruckus  
We can barely focus  
Davening and driving  
Eating working sleeping

Why keep on replying
To all the rings and beeping

Whoa, can you hang up the phone?

[Translation from Yiddish:
Oy- What's my father missing?
He doesn't have a computer
Today, every little whistle-blower (Every Kid)
He bathes in new toys (gadgets)

There's no more peace
How do we get rid of it?
Oy vey- Gevalt, (Oh, goodness)
Hang up the phone already]

I am going to a wedding,
The entire hall is squawking
Everyone is phoning
To the wall I’m talking
My friend is with his Bluetooth
When together we are walking
Hey hello please can you hang up that phone?

All the hocus-pocus
Forever tries to choke us
It’s making such a ruckus
We can barely focus
Davening, Davening and driving,
Eating, working, sleeping
Why keep on replying
To all the rings and beeping

Whoa-o-o-o, can you hang up the phone?

Instead of searching Google,
I’m busy making Kugel
Instead of checking email

[Translation from Yiddish:
I hold my hand to himel (heaven)

I don’t need this for this book
I only use an Aleph-Beis book
Lai, lai, lai, lai,
I have a Kosher telephone

Ipod, iphone, ipad
Aii, why does it come into my house/shul
I still remember when an "I" [an egg] only meant egg with onion
I still remember when Blackberries
Didn’t used to grow in Manhattan
And only those who had a headache
Would make use of tablets]

Whoa-o-o-o, can you hang up the phone?

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13 Aleph-Beis are the first two letters of the Hebrew/Yiddish alphabet. The phrase “Aleph-Beis book” is a play on Facebook.
14 “Ai” is the Yiddish word for “egg”
The music video begins with scenes of Haredim shopping at the Borough Park branch of The Buzz, a Haredi-owned electronics store. One wall of the shop displays a new product: robots. These robots are Haredi men and boys wearing futuristic looking clothes, with silver paint covering their skin. The video moves forward in time, and we see an employee closing the shop for the night. As soon as he leaves, the robots come to life and we begin to hear percussion. The robots begin a synchronized dance as a synthesizer enters with a melody and timbre that sound strikingly similar to Lady Gaga’s hit song, “Poker Face.” Lipa Schmeltzer is one of the robots, and he begins to sing as the other robots move around the store using mechanical motions. The other robots are fascinated by the electronic gadgets on display, and examine each item with interest. When the song reaches the chorus, we see Lipa and the other robots engage in a choreographed dance, with flashing lights, and one yarmulke-wearing robot with headphones runs a DJ booth. Lipa seems to be the only robot who is suspicious of the technology, and he takes a tablet computer away from a young boy robot. The video cuts to the outside of the shop where an Orthodox man and his son are walking by the shop. The boy notices the dancing robots inside and tries to get his father’s attention. The father, however, is too distracted by his phone call to acknowledge the boy, and merely waves him away. Later in the video the robots exit the shop, and a new melody is set to vocables. The new melody is clearly a niggun, as opposed to the pop song that surrounds it.
Ex. 3.10: “Hang Up the Phone” by Lipa Schmeltzer niggun portion

Hang Up the Phone  
(Niggun Portion)  
Lipa Schmeltzer

As the niggun is sung, Hasidim dance in circles in a manner commonly found at Haredi weddings. In contrast, one of the robots is breakdancing. The piece creates a dichotomy between the robots who are obsessed with gadgets and the niggun-loving Hasidim who dance arm in arm. Even while Lipa Schmeltzer is singing in this pop-inspired style, he is reinforcing the Haredi narrative that one should not be washed away into the sea of liquid modernity and should instead connect with peers in the community. Lipa, though a robot in the video, seems to be able to balance the two worlds and encourages the other robots to step away from technology and toward more meaningful human interactions.

Schmeltzer has earned the appellation “The Jewish Lady Gaga” for the striking similarity that his new music bears to the pop diva’s famous recordings. Schmeltzer has embraced the title, and even introduced himself to President Barack Obama in this way when Schmeltzer was invited to the annual White House Hanukkah party in 2015. The controversy surrounding Schmeltzer’s music has catapulted him to new heights of fame, though his devotion to his studies at Columbia has slightly slowed his musical output. Nonetheless, he continues to record and perform for Orthodox audiences around the world.
Conclusion: Public Reasoning, Spiritual Health and Modernity

At the 2015 Agudath Yisroel of America conference, a participatory concert known as a *kumzitz* was held on Saturday night after the conclusion of the Sabbath. Beginning at midnight, the large ballroom of the Connecticut hotel was divided so that men sat around tables configured in a U shape, while women sat in rows of chairs behind a short wall that separated the sexes for the sake of modesty. Two singers held microphones, and were accompanied by three instrumentalists, playing acoustic guitar, electric keyboard, and violin. As the evening progressed, the songs became increasingly energetic, and the men rose to their feet to dance in circles with both enthusiasm and restraint. One piece in particular was played for an extended period of time, a setting of the text from the high-holiday liturgy “*Yeiasu chulam agudah echas laasos retzoncha belaivav shalem*” (“Let them all become a single society, to do your will wholeheartedly”). The connection to the conference was obvious to all present, as the *agudah*, the society, mentioned in the lyrics was taking shape in the dancing at the Agudah conference.

The desire to create a unified Jewish community is commonly expressed in Haredi presentations, and images such as this advertisement for the *siyum hashas*—a celebration marking the completion of a seven-year regimen of Talmud study—are commonly seen in Haredi periodicals:
Here we see Jewish men of several different affiliations embracing in front of MetLife stadium, where the siyum was to take place. In the background appears to be Mount Sinai, where the commandments are being given once again. While these romantic, eschatologically driven images are directed toward the future, the Haredi community often delights in perceiving itself as already united by a common belief system and way of life. While this self-perception can withstand the various subgroups within the taxonomy of Haredi culture such as Hasidic, Litvish, and Mizrahi, ideological pluralism presents a much greater challenge. If shared beliefs and values constitute the social ties of Haredi society, then ideological pluralism is a direct challenge to this perceived unity. I have argued in this chapter that the conversations and actions that emerge from these pluralistic encounters, the public reasoning, should be studied closely in order to understand how communities continually redefine communal identity.

In this chapter I have offered an examination of public reasoning concerning music, with a focus on Lipa Schmeltzer and Ephraim Luft, as well as discussion of Mordechai ben David and Eli Gerstner. As described above, Mordechai ben David, when faced with criticism, simply ignores those who dislike his music and defers to his own rabbis who help guide his musical decisions. Eli Gerstner frames his music as “sounding Hasidic” by asserting that his melodies
are, at their core, niggunim, and that the elements that are objectionable are simply “the
dressing.” Lipa Schmeltzer initially followed the wishes of rabbis who criticized his music and
shut down his performances. However, today he is more conscious of power structures in Haredi
society and feels empowered to stand up to them and assert his personal agency. He, like other
individuals I have met, describes himself as “modern Hasidic,” a title that references his self-
determination, as shown in his decision to dress in clothing other than standard Haredi garb, to
use the internet freely, and to engage in other practices that he decides are acceptable, even if
they go against the proclamations of Haredi Rabbinic leaders.

Ephraim Luft is determined to stop the infiltration of popular music from outside of
Haredi culture, and to model how acceptable music should sound. For Luft and like-minded
Haredim, the stakes are high. The presence of elements that “sound modern” indicates porous
boundaries between the inside and outside of Haredi culture. As these foreign musical elements
enter Haredi repertoires and challenge the very nature of what it means to be Haredi, they
threaten the social ties of the society. Thus, in the eyes of those who are suspicious of Haredi
musicians’ contemporary uses of Western popular music idioms, the Haredi community is falling
victim to liquid modern conditions. The ultimate fear here is that these musics will lure children
away from Haredi life. Luft himself told me, “There’s one organization that looked into the
subject that says that 70% of the people who leave the Torah way are the result of religious rock
concerts.” He showed me the article in which this is mentioned, though the author does not state
how he came to this conclusion. We see that to Luft and those who agree with him, it is of great
consequence whether music sounds Hasidic or sounds modern.

Another pressing concern in this debate is spiritual health. The ban on The Big Event
states about the concert that “what it does to the soul is to suck out the fear of heaven and it is
lowering them to a free for all.” Luft’s book *The Torah is Not Hefker* has an entire chapter dedicated to “the influence on the soul” in which he discusses an instance in which Haredi musicians played in a way that “aroused the yetzer hora (Hebrew: Evil inclination).” He continues, “They all know how to play in that way, but they are still waiting to see if that one degenerate can succeed to get more orders [for performances], then they will follow his example, because their parnossah (Hebrew: livelihood) is more important than Yiddishkeit (Yiddish: Judaism).”

Sociologist Bryan Turner (2003) suggests that “disturbances in society are reflected in the metaphors by which we understand our mental and physical health…. Body metaphors illustrate the fact that we use the body as a convenient way for talking or thinking about the moral and political problems of society.” I believe that concern for spiritual health in contemporary Haredi society is an example of a similar phenomenon to that observed by Turner. In the contemporary Haredi community, social anxieties are projected onto the soul. The soul is, of course, a rhetorically useful canvas on which to argue, due to both the seemingly urgent nature of having a healthy soul, and the impossibility of ever measuring the status of one’s spiritual health. Since raising one’s “spiritual level” is a high priority to Haredi Jews, damage to one’s spiritual wellbeing is of immediate concern.

Anxiety regarding music and spiritual health is widespread. An Orthodox Jewish psychologist relayed to me a story of a client who was a young Haredi girl with a difficult family life. One of the girl’s friends had told her that the reason for her troubles was that she had been listening to non-Jewish music on the radio. Another example can be seen in the form of a post written in 2013 on an online Internet forum of a Haredi news website. A teenage girl, who writes under the name ThePurpleOne, posted the following request for advice on what to do about her
unwelcome interactions with non-Jewish music on the school bus.

need some good ideas. i have non jewish music in my head all day and need to get it out. i really try not to listen at home, on my own but when im with other people who are playing it theres not much i can do besides for try to block it out. i travel for 2 hours a day w this music and its in my head all day then.. know how bad it is for me to listen to it but i cant block it out.. ideas pleaseee?\textsuperscript{15}

The responses, presumably from Haredi adults, praised the original poster for her goal of avoiding non-Jewish music, and offered suggestions such as listening to culturally sanctioned music on headphones, asking the parents of her community to require that the school bus drivers only play Jewish music, and praying that she has the strength to block out the harmful music, which one poster characterizes as “soul pollution.”

On the same forum one individual began a thread simply titled “Music and ‘Spiritual Health’” and asked, “What are the sources for music being dangerous to the neshomo (Hebrew: soul)?”\textsuperscript{16} Several people provided the aforementioned description of Elisha ben Avuya’s affinity for Greek songs, and one commenter posted: “On a personal note... I feel that non jewish music as a rule has a negative affect on a person i have seen it on many occasions, one of the first things that a boy/girl does on their way to leaving the derech is listen to non jewish music thats a fact that i have noticed whilst dealing with these types of boys.” The thread later turned into a discussion of the permissibility of classical music, and whether or not it is proper for music to be banned or if this should be left to an individual’s personal discretion. As one post stated, “Ah, but would you ban it for everyone else? I don't like tomatoes and won't eat them... but I'm not about to say that no one should.”

In addition to highlighting the prominence of spiritual health discourses in the Haredi


community’s public reasoning regarding music, these conversations also shed light on the complexity of power and authority in Haredi life. Esteemed Rabbis, such as heads of Hasidic dynasties and leaders of important Jewish educational institutions (Roshei Yeshivah, Roshei Kollel), are the most revered figures in Haredi culture. However, much of their power to enact their will is reliant on the cooperation of lay people and the laity’s desire to stay strictly within the Haredi social system. In the case of Lipa Schmeltzer, his concert was only cancelled because he himself decided to cancel the show. The strongest threat that the Rabbinic leadership could make would be a formal act of social excommunication called *cherem*, which translates from Hebrew as “boycott, or censure.” To be “put in cherem” means that an individual is unwelcome in synagogues, and others are instructed not to interact with him/her. While Michael Meyer (1989:153) writes that in the late 1700s to early 1800s “the most effective instrument of social control had been the *cherem,*” today, it is exceedingly rare for someone to be put in cherem. Nonetheless, the threat exists and is enough to compel many to respect the Rabbinical leadership’s authority, even at times of disagreement. However, cherem is only a threat when an individual chooses to remain firmly within the Haredi community. Lipa Schmeltzer’s decision to leave New Square and establish his own synagogue in the neighboring town of Airmont was an assertion of autonomy.

We can appreciate the profundity of Schmeltzer’s actions by placing them in the context of Bandak and Boylston’s argument regarding deferral in orthodox religion.\(^{17}\) They write, “the ‘orthodoxy’ of Orthodoxy … lies less in the idea of the individual or the text as a holder of divine truth than in the community of deferral. The individual and the collective may feel assured of the correctness of their practice, belief, and traditions even if many aspects are unclear. The

\(^{17}\) In this article Bandak and Boylston use ethnographic research on Orthodox Christian communities to make observations about orthodox religious communities more broadly.
answers are still believed to be there: just go ask the priest or the bishop.” They note that there is “an intricate relationship between deferral, submission, and obedience…. In such a religious world, authority is critical. The institution as such is seen as ordained and not to be questioned. The individual is expected to submit to the authority of priests and the institution and to remain an obedient subject in personal and communal life.” Schmeltzer’s newfound confidence to listen to his “inner voice,” and his claim that today he would not “hide in a hole” if his music is challenged, are bold statements of autonomy in a culture that values deferral. Furthermore, in the eyes of his critics, he may be contributing to a melting of the powers of the institution of Rabbinic leadership. For others, Schmeltzer is a model of a Hasidic Jew who is both free-thinking and devoted to his religion.

This examination of Haredi popular music reveals that the anxiety surrounding the propriety of certain musics is really a struggle over boundary maintenance and the degree to which Haredim should interact with those around them. The discourses of spiritual health and instances of debate, dissention, and competing assertions of power described in this chapter are examples of public reasoning that continue to work out Haredi communal identity. By studying public reasoning concerning music, rather than public reason, we develop an appreciation for the complexity of the Haredi community’s social structure, its responses to challenges, and the ways that individuals within it contribute to its continuous evolution.
Chapter Four: Haredi Youth, Boys Choirs, and Music in Liquid Modernity

The 2015 Conference of Agudath Israel of America, the advocacy organization of the American Haredi community, was nearing its end, but the final speech was much anticipated by the packed crowd. The hotel ballroom was filled to capacity for the closing keynote panel, titled “OTD: Why Is It Happening and What Can We Do about It.” OTD, an abbreviation so commonly used by Haredim that all attendees understood its meaning, stands for “Off the Derech (Hebrew: Path),” a reference to those who choose to leave Orthodox Judaism. Though this closing panel was the only one formally dedicated to the topic, it was a theme that was pervasive throughout the four-day conference. In fact, nearly every panel that I attended seemed to touch on the issue, demonstrating the extent of the community’s anxiety over those who opt out of the Haredi lifestyle.

As the final speaker, Rabbi Moshe Tuvia Lieff, approached the microphone to begin his address, he quietly whispered to himself “Hashem Sefasai Tiftach, U’fi Yagi Tehilasecha,” a Hebrew phrase meaning, “God, open my lips so that my mouth may declare Your praise.” Rabbi Lieff, the widely respected Rabbi of a synagogue in the Midwood neighborhood of Brooklyn, began his speech by weaving together biblical exegesis and stories of leading Haredi Rabbis of past generations. At the core of his presentation was a teaching that Rabbi Lieff attributed to his own rabbi, Shmuel Berenbaum, the esteemed founder of the Mir Yeshiva in Brooklyn. In this lesson Berenbaum sought to explain the apparently superfluous words found in Genesis 45:28, in which the biblical Jacob learns that his son Joseph is alive and exclaims, “I shall go and see him before I die.” The words “before I die” seem to be unnecessary here, and because Orthodox Judaism teaches that every single word of the Torah is deliberate, they must be explained. Rabbi Lieff addressed the crowd in typical Haredi polyglot style:
Yaakov Avinu (Hebrew: Jacob our father) was the Ish Taam Yoshvei Haolah (Hebrew: perfect man sitting in his tent), he’s sitting and learning Torah every day. But Yosef HaTzadik (Hebrew: Joseph the righteous)? Yosef Hatzadik was called tzadik (Hebrew: righteous). He was a righteous fellow because he was omed b’nisayon (Hebrew: tested). The most difficult tests of the day. You think the yetzer hara (Hebrew: Evil Inclination) blinks? Says Reb Yankev Avinu (Yiddish: Rabbi Jacob our father), Elecha V’Re’enu B’terem Amus (Hebrew: I shall go and see him before I die). Let me go see him before I die. Because in Yener Velt, (Yiddish: the world to come) in the world to come, where they understand what withstanding a test is all about, I may not even get to see him [because he will reside in a high Heavenly realm which I may not merit to reach]. Who am I compared—Rav Shmuel Berenbaum said this—to Yosef Hatzadik? Do you know how our children today are assaulted?!

Today’s youth, Rabbi Lieff was explaining, face tests of their religious resolve more difficult than those of any other generation. Furthermore, the tests are always changing. He makes his point with an anecdote about Rabbi Berenbaum who was struggling with the realization that he could no longer run his school in the style of the yeshivas of Europe.

The Mir yeshiva was at its heyday. The beis medrash (Hebrew: study hall) was packed. There were three sets of chevrusas (Hebrew: study partners) that studied on the bima (Hebrew: platform) of the aron kodesh (Hebrew: Ark containing the Torah scrolls). Six chairs and shtenders (Yiddish: lecterns) up there [because the main area of the study hall was too crowded to accommodate more students]. He [Rav Birnbaum] grabbed my hand and I can still feel it. He said, ‘Moshe Tuvia, do you think there’s one person I can give mussar (Hebrew: discipline) to? That I can admonish? Everything is round and about.’ He squeezed my hand, he said, ‘Itz an andere velt. Ken zayn zetz a brochene velt’ (Yiddish: It’s a different world. It could be that it is a broken world). He told me this story five years ago. It could be that it’s a broken-hearted world. So we have to realize … it’s a different world. It’s a totally different world. Rav Henoch Liebowitz used to say that generationally, normally a dor (Hebrew: generation) was 10 years. Recently, it’s every six months there’s a new generation!

The rapid pace of change, Rabbi Lieff suggested, presents a tremendous challenge to Haredi youth. The Internet and the latest trends in popular Western culture are enticing to the younger generation, and many young men and women are leaving the Haredi community because of these pulls. Rabbi Lieff’s explanation for children “going off the derech” then, is
based in a concern for the ever-changing conditions of his community’s environment and the tests implicit in such change.¹

Lieff is articulating well the rapid pace of generational division in “liquid modernity” as proposed by Zygmunt Bauman. Bauman writes, “The radical acceleration of the pace of change characteristic of modern times, in stark opposition to centuries of interminable reiteration and sluggish change, allowed the fact of ‘things changing’ and ‘things being no longer as they used to be’ to be experienced personally and personally noted, in the course of a single human life. Such awareness implied an association (or even a causal link) between changes in the human condition and the departure of older generations and the arrival of newer ones” (2010, 11). The repercussions of these swift shifts are far-reaching and significant. With each generation raised and groomed in a dramatically different context, the older generation is forced to question how today’s youth will fare when they become tomorrow’s adult population. As Bauman suggests, “Nowadays, youngsters are not hoped or supposed to be ‘on the way to becoming adult like us’ but viewed as a rather different kind of people, bound to remain different ‘from us’ throughout their lives” (ibid, 12).

Despite facing the challenges of rapid societal change, childrearing in the Haredi community operates with different assumptions and expectations than those proposed by

¹ It is difficult to know how many Orthodox Jews have left Orthodoxy. In Off the Derech: Why Observant Jews Leave Judaism (2005), a book written for an Orthodox audience, Faranak Margolese suggests that this calculation is difficult because of ambiguity in what it means to “go off the derech.” She writes, “If we use halachic Shabbat observance as our guide, approximately 3% to 11% have gone off the derech. If we use kashrut as our guide, the numbers are far higher, between 12%-33%” (23). The trend, she argues, has larger significance than is originally apparent. “If the 90% of nonobservant Jews today came from observant ancestors, then the off the derech phenomenon has far more staggering consequences than we ever imagined” (24). Margolese bases her data on a 1994 study conducted by Yeshiva University on day school students. The age and scope of the study suggests that the numbers may not apply to Haredim in the greater New York region, but they do help us to appreciate the difficulty of determining precise numbers, and the degree of anxiety over the issue.
Bauman. Haredi parents and community leaders do indeed intend for their children to go on to lead similar lives to their own. In this non-liberal religious society, the perpetuation of the community is envisioned as the intergenerational reproduction of social life and ritual practice. In the context of cultural change that takes place at a breakneck pace, strategies must be employed in order to ensure this continuity. In most cases, the labor of boundary maintenance is the first line of defense against the winds of change. However, within the imagined boundaries of Haredi communities, there is a rich life that Haredim believe has sufficient value to maintain the interest of each new generation. The heart of this lifestyle is, of course, to be located in prayer, Torah study, holiday celebration, and observance of religious law. Ancillary to religious practice is an artistic life that reinforces communal values through media such as fictional literature, periodicals, and popular music. In this chapter I suggest that one exceedingly popular genre of Haredi popular music, boys choirs, should be understood as the staging of a secure future for Haredi Judaism. I then describe the manner in which Haredi culture is positioned in opposition to liquid modern consumer culture. First, though, a brief introduction to the rearing of Haredi youth, Haredi education, and some of the significant ways that educators employ music will serve as context.

Music in Haredi Youth and Education

The childhood years of contemporary Haredi youth are strikingly different than those of most other sectors of American society. Haredi children virtually always attend private schools and have very limited access to popular media in the home, thereby engaging in very different recreational activities. Television, films, and social media are all generally not allowed in the home, and Haredi leaders strongly encourage parents to ensure that children are unable to access these potential portals to unsanctioned media content. Though efforts are made to keep this
content out of the home, contemporary Haredim are still likely to encounter various media when leaving their enclaves. Travel presents unique challenges, even when these excursions take place within a Haredi context. For example, the program for the 2015 Agudah Convention included these words of warning about the televisions found in the hotel rooms of attendees:

Though it is an inappropriate accessory in any Jewish residence, the presence of a working television where Yidden [Jews] have gathered for the sake of Torah is particularly unbecoming. Although it was not possible to physically remove the television sets from all guest rooms, the Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah [Council of Torah Sages] and Nesius [managing board] have requested that our guests NOT turn these sets on during your stay at the hotel. We appreciate your cooperation in assuring a higher degree of sanctity for the duration of our convention.

Several scholars have studied the identity formation and education of Haredi youth, with significant attention devoted to the methods by which children are sheltered and shielded. Sociologist Samuel Heilman (1992) suggests that children are considered to be the heart of the Haredi community. Heilman points to the biblical verse scrawled upon many walls in Haredi neighborhoods of Jerusalem which reads, “Do not touch my Messiahs,” a warning to non-Haredi culture to stay away from the Orthodox youth, who are considered pure and holy. The insularity of the Haredi lifestyle is a direct effort to shield the youth from outside ideologies that are seen to be dangerous. As the Polish Haredi leader Alexander Friedman stated in 1935, “Spiritual isolation will protect our sons and daughters from the sickness of heresy, license, and secularity” (Heilman 1992:170).

Anthropologist Ayala Fader’s monograph Mitzvah Girls: Bringing Up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn (2009) is a “look across the Hasidic female life cycle, from infancy to girls on the threshold of marriage, to understand how Hasidic women teach girls to discipline their desires and their bodies as they redeem Jewish meaning from North American secular and Gentile life” (31). Using linguistic analysis, Fader argues that through deliberate uses
of Yiddish and English, adult Hasidic women “teach girls, through everyday talk, to use their autonomy to ‘fit in’ with communal expectations” (2).

Stephanie Wellen Levine’s monograph, Mystics, Mavericks, and Merrymakers: An Intimate Journey Among Hasidic Girls (2004), is a study of Chabad-Lubavitch girls. In her year of living in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, which is the epicenter of Lubavitch culture, she interviewed young women about their “daily lives and inner worlds … their thoughts, habits, dreams, struggles, and triumphs” (2). She highlights the heterogeneity of these young women and takes pains to dispel stereotypes of Lubavitch girls as being meek and voiceless.

Several scholars have noted the centrality of music in the childhood of Haredim. Ester Basya Vaisman’s dissertation, “Being Heard: The Singing Voices of Contemporary Hasidic Women” (2009) examines the role of Yiddish song across the span of women’s lives. Though she expected to find simple folk songs and lullabies, she uncovered, “a treasure trove of complex, original compositions created by women and girls in the community over the past 50 years, a cultural wealth completely inaccessible to the greater outside world, and even to the male members of the Hasidic community” (30). Vaisman focuses on girls’ performances held in the context of school or camp, noting that the girls who are considered to have the superior singing talent are generally those who are able to project their voices the loudest. She suggests that volume may be understood to correlate to kavone, which literally translates as “intent” but implies a degree of religious fervor inherent in one’s actions. She also notes that girls are trained from an early age to be especially careful regarding the rules of Kol Isha to ensure that a man does not hear them sing (101). However, Vaisman explains, girls do sing in all-female spaces, and often create their own songs—generally in the form of contrafacta that sets new words to commonly known Hasidic songs—for camp or school functions.
Music is indeed a fixture of Haredi education, where schooling is always gender segregated. Boys attend yeshivas, many of which are affiliated with a particular Hasidic sect or have a unique hashkafah (Hebrew: outlook or, in the case of schooling, an educational philosophy). In both Hasidic and Litvish yeshivos, boys spend much of their early years learning to read and write Hebrew, then progress to Chumash (Hebrew: the five books of the Torah), basic halacha, and then eventually to studying Talmud, an endeavor that will be central to the rest of their lives. Great fanfare accompanies the first day of studying Talmud. Many yeshivas hold a celebration called a haschalas gemara, at which boys perform skits or sing songs about the importance of studying Talmud. At a 2014 haschalas gemara at a Haredi yeshiva in Long Island, New York, the fifth grade class sang a song titled “Lulei Sorascha” (Hebrew: “Had Your Torah not been my preoccupation”), a phrase taken from Psalm 119. The song, composed by Abie Rotenberg of the Orthodox Jewish band Journeys, tells of a boy watching an elderly man, perhaps his grandfather, who is immersed in studying the Talmud. The song has lyrics in English, biblical Hebrew, Ancient Aramaic, and Yiddish. The young boy’s thoughts are in English but he tunes in to hear the elderly Torah scholar deciphering the Aramaic text by asking himself questions in Yiddish. At the end of the piece, we hear the boy sing several lines from Psalm 119. The piece is a rich text that illustrates the attitude toward the Talmud that is fostered among young Haredi boys. I present here a chart with the lyrics to “Lulei Soiroscho,” which includes transliteration of non-English text, as well as my own translations and commentary.
### Ex. 4.1: “Lulei Soiroscho” by Abie Rotenberg of Journeys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Lyrics</strong></th>
<th><strong>Translation and Commentary</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He sits late at night in the soft candlelight As it cast its warm glow on the pages And the words that he sees, are the secret the key That has kept us alive through the ages</td>
<td>Haredi Jews frequently invoke the notion that the study of Torah is, itself, a locus of tremendous power. Haredim believe that the entire reason for man’s existence is to obtain closeness to God, particularly through Torah study. Most contemporary yeshivas emphasize Talmud, the oral Torah, over other Jewish texts, and most Haredi males continue to devote the majority of their study time to the Talmud throughout their entire lives. When Haredim claim that the words of the Torah “have kept us alive through the ages” they are implying both a spiritual and physical existence. Torah not only provides spiritual nourishment (see next verse), but also is the purpose for which God has chosen to keep them alive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why does he cherish the wisdom of old And delight in its study each day? He knows only Torah can nourish his soul Come listen and hear what he says</td>
<td>The elderly man in the narrative is engaged in the study of Talmud “each day.” Haredi men are encouraged to set aside time for Torah study daily, and many participate in learning “daf yomi” (Hebrew: “page of the day”), a regimen by which one studies one page of Talmud, front and back, every day. The daf yomi program was initiated in 1923 by Rabbi Meir Shapiro, the head of an esteemed yeshiva in Lublin, Poland. The program was not only designed to increase Torah study among Jews, but was also seen as a way to promote Jewish unity by having thousands of men around the world study the same folio every day. The twelfth cycle of daf yomi was completed on August 2, 2012. Celebrations were held around the world, including one for the greater New York area, in which Haredi men filled New Jersey’s MetLife Stadium to capacity (82,566 seats, plus seats on the field) for the celebration.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Beis Hillel and Beis Shamai were two yeshiva schools, named for their founders Hillel and Shammai, that existed from the end of the first century BCE until the end of the second century CE (Safrai 2007:530). The two schools frequently issued differing rulings in matters of Jewish law, and many such disagreements are recorded in the Talmud.

Rava (d. 352 C.E.) and Abaye (d. 338 C.E.) were two Rabbinical sages who were study partners (Beer 2007:118).

“Lulei Soiroscho, Sha'ashuay” is Hebrew text taken directly from Psalm 119.

Ravina (d. 422 C.E.) and Rav Ashi (d. 427 C.E.) were Rabbinical sages and study partners (Beer and Gilat 2007:122, Hidary 2007:565).
**Pshat** refers to one of four levels of biblical exegesis. The four levels are **Pshat** ("simple" explanation), **Remez** (a “hint” or allusion to another concept in Jewish though, particularly *halacha*), **Drash** (“homiletic” explanation that presents a moral or philosophical explanation), and **Sod** (“secret,” or Kabbalistic explanation).

Rashi (1040-1105 C.E.) was a leading commentator on both the oral and written Torah. His commentary is printed on the inside column of the page in contemporary settings of the Talmud.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>As a nation in flight, we endured the world’s spite And the sight of our precious books burning We ignored our grief, to the world's disbelief And never, no never stopped learning</th>
<th>The narrator frames Torah study and Jewish Orthodoxy as contrasting with the rest of the world. While others burned “our precious books,” Haredi Jews continued to study Torah. The defiance implicit in the verse is not only fuel that not propels the culture forward, but also serves to draw distinctions between Haredim and everyone else.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why does he cherish the wisdom of old And delight in its study each day He knows only Torah can nourish his soul Come listen and hear what he says</td>
<td>[See above]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Yiddish:**

_A rishoin’s a kasha,_  
_An acharoin’s a svore_  
_Chochmas haboiray, vos ligjt in gemoro_

Torah you've given my spirit to me

**Hebrew:**

_**Ki vom, ki vom, chiyisoni**_

Torah you've given my spirit to me

---

Rishoin and Acharoin refer to different historical periods of Rabbinic leadership. In placing the two groups in conversation with one another, the text is demonstrating a continuity of Talmudic study across millennia.
And now we remain, with our faith yet sustained
By our passion and love for this treasure
It's our link with Sinai and our Father on high
So we'll keep on learning forever, forever, forever

Sinai refers to Mount Sinai where, according to the biblical narrative, God gave the Torah to the ancient Israelites.

Torah is presented as the very link between God and man. Through its study man can reach God directly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hebrew:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Had not your Torah been my preoccupation Then I would have perished in my</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>affliction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never will I forget your precepts, For through them you have preserved me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This verse is a direct quotation taken from Psalm 119.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the multilingualism of the text will be noteworthy to most readers, it should be understood that Haredi Jews speak in a fluid mix of these languages that is often referred to as “Yeshivish.” These lyrics, though, are distinctly masculine because of the inclusion of Aramaic, a language that is generally unfamiliar to women because, in Haredi Judaism, women do not study the Talmud. It is also significant that the elderly man speaks in Yiddish during his study, while the young male narrator’s default tongue is English. Indeed, many American youth, particularly in the Litvish community, are much more comfortable speaking in English than in Yiddish. This is to the dismay of some older Haredi Jews for whom Yiddish is their first language, and in recent years, Litvish yeshivas have made an effort to bring Yiddish-speaking teachers into the classrooms so that the boys will grow up with greater fluency in the language. Most Hasidic yeshivas use Yiddish as a primary language and as a result most Hasidic males speak Yiddish fluently. We see in “Lulei Soirascha” that while multilingual conversation is exceedingly common in the daily life of Haredim, code switching is employed to include
meanings beyond the simple understanding of words, and linguistically distinguish between in-group and out-group (see Fader 2000 for more on Hasidic code switching). As the fifth-grade boys in Long Island sang “Lulei Soirascha” at their haschalis gemara ceremony, they performed their understanding of the value of Talmudic study, and that they were entering a chain of Jewish scholarship that reaches back to Mt. Sinai.

Most Haredi girls attend a school in the Bais Yaakov (Hebrew: House of Jacob) system or based on the Bais Yaakov model. In his 2015 essay, “What Do We Know About the Establishment of Beit Yaakov?” Yoel Finkelman writes that the founding of this school system “certainly qualifies as one of the most significant changes in Jewish education in recent memory.” The progenitor of the Bais Yaakov system, Sara Schneirer, was born to a family of Belzer Hasidism in Cracow, Poland. During World War I she fled to Vienna where she first encountered Central European Neo-Orthodoxy, a movement based on the teachings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, whose relative openness to European culture set him apart from the Rabbinic leadership of Eastern Europe. Unlike Eastern European Jewish girls who generally did not receive a formal education, young girls in Vienna were educated in Jewish schools. Though some girls’ schools had existed in Eastern Europe, for example the Havatzelet Gymnasium in Warsaw (mentioned in Isaac Bashevis Singer’s Yiddish novel Meshugah), right-wing Orthodox leaders did not approve of their proliferation and thus they did not grow widely. After moving back to Cracow in 1918, Schneirer opened her first school. Though she began with just 25 students, within twenty years there were 35,000 students enrolled in Bais Yaakov schools, and in 1931 the movement opened its first teachers’ seminary. Finkelman notes that the Rabbinic

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2 “Beit Yaakov” is a transliteration of Sephardic pronunciation. Finkelman, an Israeli scholar, is using the pronunciation of Israeli society’s speech conventions, while I choose to present the pronunciation used by American Haredim.
leadership largely came to support Bais Yaakov only after it had become accepted by the populace. Nonetheless, the leadership’s endorsement was vibrant, as displayed by the 1933 words of Israel Meir HaKohen Kagan (popularly known as The Chofetz Chaim):

To the honorable heroes, who love and appreciate Torah, who are fearful of the word of God, in the city of Pristik.
When I heard that people who are fearful and tremble before the word of God have volunteered to establish in their city a "Bais Ya'akov" school to teach Torah and fear of Heaven, good character and the proper behavior that is Torah, to the daughters of our brothers, the Children of Israel, I said regarding their good works, may God strengthen their efforts and establish their handiwork. For it is a great thing and necessary in these days, where the stream of heresy, God forbid, is mighty and powerful and the secular of all kinds are ambushing and hunting our brothers, the People of Israel. Anybody who has the fear of God in his heart has a mitzvah to send his daughter to study in this school. Regarding those who are worried and concerned about the prohibition of teaching his daughter Torah, there is no such concern for this at these times, and this is not the place for lengthy explanations. For the current generation is not like [the generation of the early Rabbis]. In the earlier generations, each family in Israel had a tradition of fathers and mothers to follow the path of Torah and religion and to read the book Tze'ena UR'e'ena on each holy Shabbat. But, in our great sins, that is not the case today, and for that reason we must try with all our strength and effort to increase such schools and save whatever we can save.

Writing for the sake of the honor of Torah and religion,
Israel Meir HaKohen

Pearl Benisch, a student of Sarah Schenirer and author of *Carry Me in Your Heart: The Life and Legacy of Sarah Schenirer, Founder and Visionary of the Bais Yaakov Movement* (2003; published by Feldheim Publishers, a Haredi press), records in her book the “Bais Yaakov

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3 Tzena U’Re’ena (Hebrew: “Come and see”) is a Yiddish-language book written by Rabbi Yaakov ben Yitzchak Ashkenazi and published at the end of the sixteenth century in Poland. The book includes summaries of each of the 54 Torah portions read each week, written in simple language in order to be understood by anyone. As noted in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, the text became a book for women who did not understand Hebrew, however this was not the intent of the author, as the introduction states that "this work is designed to enable men and women … to understand the word of God in simple language."

4 This translation is taken from http://www.atid.org/resources/survey/column5a.asp. The bracketed text is my own correction of a translation error.
Anthem.” Written by Eliezer Schindler in Lodz, Poland, the Yiddish speaks of sisterly love and devotion to Torah.

**Ex. 4.2: “Bais Yaakov Anthem” lyrics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stylized, Rhyming English Translation (from Benisch 1991):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We are like free little birds,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like flowers we spread a lovely scent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of devoted love to each other,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We children of Yaakov’s tent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We sing and study together,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In friendship and joy we unite.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hate has no place among us;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Torah, she is our light.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are loyal to our Creator,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fulfilling every word of His Law;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We swear to uphold the Torah,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To serve God in joy and in awe.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yiddish:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>מיר טענונ קרא העם ירמיע</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>מיר טענונ קרא ביבלאליאן לא עבדל</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>מיר טענונ תברון גשראיה</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>מיר קודדיון פוניקס נימעל</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>מיר לנדון און שפיל נויסמעת</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>מיר לנדון זפורידן בינאימ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>הקט שטאה ביב אונוו נושס פראנאמט</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>יד תורדה רח און אתרוה באנד</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>מיר טענונ נדבר נודארה באה</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>מיר החקר יין חלך בראט</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>מיר שטוארה רח הוט דא תורדה</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>זי טענונ קרא הילוקט ג-ין</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literal English translation:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We are like free little birds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are like flowers in a field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are devoted friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are children of Jacob’s tent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We study and play together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We live happily together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Among us hatred is not heard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Torah is our bond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are loyal to our creator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We observe His holy precepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We swear to observe the Torah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To serve holy God</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Bais Yaakov system continues to thrive today in the United States and Israel, with a loose network of dozens of schools educating the next generation of Haredi women. Other Haredi school systems have also been developed for girls, many of which are associated with particular Hasidic sects. Bais Rivka, for example, is associated with Chabad-Lubavitch, and Bais
Rochel is the girl’s school system in Satmar. Each Haredi school system is based on the Bais Yaakov model, though they may differ from one another in their degree of stringency related to issues such as dress code and acceptable activities outside of school. First-hand accounts of these schools, and the summer camps that are run as branches of the schools, frequently mention musical activities, hinting at the ubiquity of singing in Haredi schools (Goldberger 2014, Mandel 1999). Ester Vaisman confirms the frequent abundant presence of song in Hasidic girls’ education. She specifically identifies three specific “kinds of singing events at schools—singing used as an educational tool in the classroom, practicing singing at graduation rehearsals, and singing at school performances” (67). Relevant to the argument I make in this chapter, Vaisman notes that many of these songs aim to educate girls about the dangers of life outside of the Hasidic community. In an analysis of musical theater productions, she writes, “By high school, girls are exposed to what lies outside the community and are taught acceptable ways of understanding both the dangerous non-Jewish world and the potentially redeemable non-Hasidic Jewish world…. By participating in and watching these plays, Hasidic girls learn the values of their society and are cemented in their world” (143-144).

In addition to the music and theater activities run in Haredi schools, many girls participate in extra-curricular musical activities as well. One of the central figures in the music education of young Haredi girls is Malky Giniger. Giniger writes that her “singing roots goes [sic] back for generations being a great granddaughter [sic] of the Modzitzer Rebbe.” Alongside her prolific career as a recording artist—she has released more than a dozen albums that are marketed to Haredi women and girls—Giniger also leads “Malky Giniger’s Ratzon Program,” a “talent program that enables women and girls to enjoy a healthy outlet while expressing themselves, with a focus on developing their inner strengths.” The program, which has ten
branches in various Haredi neighborhoods along the east coast of the United States, as well as Jerusalem, offers instruction in voice, dance, instruments, and theater, in addition to sewing and arts and crafts. Ratzon’s primary focus is the production of musical theater performances with an all-female cast and audience. Most productions are adaptations of popular Broadway shows in which the plot has been re-written in order to include an emphasis on Jewish characters and miraculous events that transpire. Recent examples include Alexandra, an adaptation of the Anastasia story, and Changed, which is based on the Broadway hit Wicked. Performances are recorded, and DVDs and CDs are sold in Haredi shops, often in a “Women Only” section of bookstores, since a man listening to these recordings would violate the precept of Kol Isha.

Giniger is one of the few Haredi women who makes her living as a professional musician. While girls who participate in these programs know that they will likely not pursue music or theater professionally, most people in the Haredi world appreciate that these artistic opportunities are available to women. By opening up spaces for women’s musical life within the boundaries of Jewish law (Ratzon’s advertisements note that their programs are run “under Rabbinical guidance”), Giniger actively creates a public women’s musical life in a manner that extends beyond a cloistered existence. While it is true that these performances only include women, the rhetoric frequently employed suggests that men are the ones who are excluded, not the opposite. Thus women’s musical life is, for many women with whom I spoke, an empowering force.

For Haredi women, this does not contradict the responsibilities generally held by women in the domestic sphere. For example, Giniger’s short biography in the playbill for Alexandra boasts of her international success and concludes, “With that, Malky’s main job and love is being a wife and Mommy to a home full of boys and a girl.” Most Haredi women with whom I speak explain that they are proud of their family life, and do not perceive a contradiction between
aspiring for professional success while also considering their primary responsibility to be running their household. Other Haredi women find gender roles in their communities to be problematic and some, particularly in Israel, challenge these conventions by pursuing careers that are male-dominated. A full exploration of Haredi gender relations is beyond the scope of this study; however, I wish to stress here that Malky Giniger’s Ratzon music program is significant in its efforts to create new spaces within Haredi life for girls to study and perform music by operating within the boundaries of acceptable behavior.

This brief overview of music in Haredi childhood and education demonstrates not only that Haredi youth have a vibrant musical life, but also that through song, young boys and girls perform communal values. I now turn to the genre of Haredi boys choirs to argue that these ensembles perform a secure future for Haredi Judaism. In a liquid modern world, these choirs serve an important function as they assure Haredim that the community can withstand the melting process of modernity.

Haredi Boys Choirs

Boys choirs, generally composed of singers approximately between the ages of five and thirteen, are a fixture in contemporary Haredi musical life. While ensembles can be plotted along the spectrum of “sounding modern” to “sounding Hasidic” (see Chapter Three), all of these groups perform music with religious themes, with many songs that derive lyrics directly from religious texts. It is significant to note that not all of the singers in these choirs come from Haredi families; some are Modern Orthodox. In my conversations with alumni from these choirs, several individuals mentioned that their families are “more modern,” but that choir leaders chose to pronounce their names in a Yiddish inflected manner, characteristic of Haredi naming practices. In this way, Modern Orthodox choir members are acculturated into the Haredi-
identified ensemble. The normative performance practices of the choir are determined by Haredi values and conventions such as speech, fashion, and gender dynamics. Therefore, although not all of the singers come from Haredi families, as members of the choir they will sing with Ashkenazi Hebrew pronunciation, and dress in Haredi garb. Significantly, girls are not permitted to sing in the choirs—while the Modern Orthodox are generally comfortable with mixed gender social settings, especially for children, the Haredi community generally prefers for boys and girls to socialize in single gender environments. Through practices of this sort, boys choirs display their rootedness in the Haredi world.

Choirs range in size; the smallest ensemble I have seen perform had twelve singers, while the largest had forty-nine. It is difficult to know precisely how many choirs exist since many simply function as a recreational activity for Haredi boys. Several choirs, though, are very popular among Haredi audiences, performing widely and selling professionally produced CDs. In this chapter I analyze music videos from three of the most popular choirs: Yeshiva Boys Choir, The Miami Boys Choir, and Shira Chadasha.

Boys choirs have a long history in Jewish music. In *Medieval Jewish Chronicles and Chronological Notes, Vol. II* (1895), Neubauer analyzes the narrative of the second-century Talmudic sage Rabbi Nathan the Babylonian. Rabbi Nathan recorded the installation service for a new Jewish king, which took place on a Sabbath morning. For the ceremony, a special wooden platform was constructed and draped in fine cloths. Hidden under the platform was a boys choir, which remained hidden while the king read from the Torah (Neubauer 83-84, Langer 1998:49, Jacobson 2007:659): “Then a choir of boys assembled under the platform: boys who had been chosen from the elite of the community, experienced boys with beautiful voices, experts in the melodies, proficient in all matters of the prayers…. The *ḥazzan* began the prayers at *barukh she-
amar, and the boys responded antiphonally to each line.” Joshua Jacobson reports that we find evidence of formal choirs composed of men and boys in European synagogues as early as the sixteenth century (2007:660). The great Austrian composer of Jewish liturgical music, Solomon Sulzer (1804-1890), may have composed some works for a boys choir, as indicated in this quote from composer and music critic Joseph Mainzer: “The Synagogue was the only place where a stranger could find, artistically speaking, a source of enjoyment that was as solid as it was dignified…. Never, except for the Sistine Chapel, has art given me higher joy than in the synagogue … surely no one who has heard this unique boys' choir could miss the castratos” (ibid). Boys choirs were also very popular in twentieth-century American synagogues. As Mark Slobin explains in *Chosen Voices: The Story of the American Cantorate* (1989), these choirs were not only seen as a recreational activity for Jewish youth, but some cantors also found them easier and less expensive to manage than adult singers. As one cantor told Slobin, “I’ve developed a certain rapport with the kids and I have a waiting list to get into the choir…. They come from all the shuls” (181). Even with high demand to enter the ensemble, choir directors actively sought out children with pleasant singing voices. The boys were not only paid, but had the opportunity to accompany famous Golden Age cantors who would be hired to lead Sabbath services. Slobin reports the words of a cantor who explained: “At that time choir leaders were like talent scouts, you see. They used to go to the various yeshivot looking for talented yeshiva bocherim (boys). If they found one, they would train them … to become alto soloists. We needed the money. It had an economic effect. The fifty cents that I received for singing ‘Vimale’ or ‘I Love You Truly’ at a wedding was important…. At the same time, we were hearing the greats. I sang with Pinchik, Kapov-Kagan, Ganchoff’” (73).
While boys choirs were common in synagogue life in the first half of the twentieth century, in the 1960s Orthodox Jewish boys choirs in diverse locations began to record albums of songs in a popular music format and detached themselves from the synagogue. No longer bound by the strictures of liturgy, these ensembles now had the flexibility to expand their repertoire, performing music drawing lyrics from other sources. Early choirs in this style included The London School of Jewish Song (also known as the London Boys Choir) in the United Kingdom, and Toronto Pirchei Choir. The phenomenon has spread, and today there are dozens of Haredi boys choirs.

Three Haredi Boys Choirs

The Miami Boys Choir was founded in 1977 by Yerachmiel Begun, a Haredi singer and composer. The year before, Begun, who had been directing a choir in Toronto in his spare time while he studied in a kollel (a Torah study program for married men), took a ten-day trip to Miami at the suggestion of his doctor. Begun had contracted pneumonia and his doctor suggested that a warmer climate would promote faster healing. While in Miami, he attended a synagogue and it was requested that he coach some of the local Orthodox boys in their singing abilities, which he did on one occasion. Begun returned to Canada but was soon asked to return several times to Florida to help the boys choir perform at functions arranged by the local Jewish community. Begun later relocated to New York, where he decided to organize a boys choir in the style of the one he had coached in Miami. He called his choir in New York “The Miami Boys Choir” as a tribute to the boys he had coached in Florida. Today The Miami Boys Choir is based in Brooklyn, New York and travels around America and the rest of the world performing
concerts. In 2012, Begun estimated that the group had released twenty-five albums over the course of their more than thirty-five year existence.⁵

Nachman Seltzer, a Haredi Rabbi who was raised in America but now lives in Israel, started The Shira Chadasha Boys Choir in 2005 when a Jerusalem family with several boys urged him to organize a boys choir. As Seltzer explained in a 2011 interview with JewishMusicReport.com, interest in the group grew, with Haredi boys from all over Israel wanting to join, and Seltzer eventually split the group in two based on where they live in Israel.⁶ One group is based in Jerusalem, while another is based in Ramat Beit Shemesh, a Haredi community composed primarily of American immigrants to Israel, located in the center of the country. The Ramat Beit Shemesh ensemble, composed of approximately fifty boys, is the main ensemble, which travels internationally for concerts. Both groups perform around Israel, with Seltzer conducting the performances.

Yeshiva Boys Choir began in 2003 when Eli Gerstner, an accomplished New York-based Haredi singer, partnered with his friend Yossi Newman to organize a boys choir. Gerstner, who was just twenty-three at the time, had already made a name for himself in the Jewish music industry with two successful solo albums and as the front man for a four-part vocal group called The Chevra (Hebrew: literally, “The Friend Group” but colloquially used to mean “The Crew” or “The Gang,” see Chapter Two). Gerstner believed that a boys choir would give him the opportunity to explore new areas of Jewish music. The success of the first Yeshiva Boys Choir album made them a household name among Haredi communities, and the group has remained

popular every since. Based in New York, the group practices weekly and has released six studio albums, and four live concert DVDs/CDs.

Each of these boys choirs has a slightly different musical style. While Yeshiva Boys Choir is known for their contemporary pop sound, Shira Chadasha and The Miami Boys Choir have a more conservative aesthetic. All three groups use electronic instrumentation: MIDI-derived instruments such as horns, drums, and synthesizers generally make up the backing tracks over which the boys sing, though all three choirs also use live instrumentation. Nearly all songs have a vocal soloist, whom the other singers answer in a call and response format or support with vocal harmonies. In performances, both on stage and in music videos, all three choirs present the boys as ideal Orthodox Jews. They dress in Haredi attire, sing lyrics that are either taken directly from religious texts or that extol Orthodox Jewish values, and always act politely and in accordance with Jewish law. I now turn to an example of a music video from each of these three boys choirs to demonstrate the ways that they provide reassurance of a bright future for the Haredi youth.

Staging Security: Three Examples

“Jerusalem” by The Shira Chadasha Boys Choir

The music video for “Jerusalem” by The Shira Chadasha Boys Choir opens with a young boy, approximately twelve years old, sitting in his home studying Talmud. He has clearly chosen to learn the ancient Jewish text on his own, as there are no adults present pressuring him to study. The boy’s thoughts drift away from the page to the holy city of Jerusalem, and iconic images of the city fade in and out of the video. The boy gets up from his chair and retrieves English-
language books filled with photos of Israel to quench his craving for the Holy Land. We then see the boy’s grandfather who is sitting and studying a Hebrew book in another room. The grandfather thinks for a moment then nods his head and retrieves an envelope from a desk drawer. He enters the room where the young boy is looking at pictures of Israel and takes a seat next to him. The boy is very happy to see his grandfather and hugs him as soon as he sits down. The boy enthusiastically shows the book to his grandfather and points out his favorite photos of Israel. The grandfather is pleased with the boy’s interest in these photos, and places the small blue envelope in front of him. The boy motions as if to say, “What’s this?” and the grandfather instructs him to open it. Inside are plane tickets to Israel. The boy cannot believe this generous gift and turns to hug his grandfather so quickly and vigorously that his black velvet yarmulke, or head covering, falls off in slow motion.

While this video plays, the choir enters and sings in unison over a backing track composed of synthesized flute, piano, and drums. The boys sing a contemplative melody in F minor, with lyrics in Hebrew. Although the boys live in Israel, they sing in a Hebrew that is affected with a strongly Ashkenazi pronunciation, rather than the Sephardic pronunciation used by Israelis in day-to-day speech. These boys are likely all the children of Americans, and their practices, including Hebrew pronunciation of sacred texts, closely model the American Haredi community. Furthermore, this type of accent is often seen as more authentically Haredi, hearkening back to the Jewish ghettos of Europe. The lyrics are directly from Psalm 125:

8 Additionally, the choir is clearly representing itself in this video as American through the protagonist’s longing to visit Israel, and the subsequent pilgrimage made by the boy and his grandfather. The strong “Anglo” identity evident here distinguishes these Jews from most of Israeli society, and for these reasons I have permitted myself to include Shira Chadasha in this study of American Haredim.
Ex. 4.3: Lyrics to “Jerusalem” by The Shira Chadasha Boys Choir:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transliteration</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HaBotchim BaShem Ke-Har Tzion Lo</td>
<td>Those who have faith in God are like Mount Zion, which never sways but remains forever.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yimot Le’Olam Yeshev</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yerushalayim, Harim Sevivov Lah,</td>
<td>Jerusalem, her mountains surround her, and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VaHashem Siviv Le’Amo Meata Vead Olam</td>
<td>God surrounds His people.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several boys, singing in strong alto voices, have solos. The video shifts between images of the group singing in the recording studio and the young boy and his grandfather traveling through Israel together, visiting holy sites around the country. Four minutes, thirty-seven seconds into the video, we see the Shira Chadasha boys choir in Jerusalem, first performing at a concert, then singing on a rooftop overlooking the Western Wall. The young boy is following in his grandfather’s footsteps as he displays a passionate interest in the Jewish holy sites. Similarly, the boys in the choir are enacting community values as they sing sacred text and proclaim the importance of having faith in God.

“When the Siyum Calls” by The Miami Boys Choir

Similar themes can be seen in the music video for “When the Siyum Calls” by The Miami Boys Choir.⁹ In this usage, the term siyum refers to the siyum hashas, a celebration in honor of the completion of Talmud. As noted above, in August 2012, approximately 90,000 Jewish men came together at MetLife stadium in Queens, New York to celebrate the completion of a seven-year daf yomi (Hebrew: page of the day) study regimen. As Heilman has noted, daf yomi has been seen by many as a symbol of Orthodox resistance to assimilation after WWII. He writes,

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“Perhaps nothing so epitomized religious continuity after the Holocaust as the emphasis on universal daily study symbolically captured by the day yomi idea. Jewish People who continued to review their Talmud demonstrated that they had not been chased away from their cultural core and religious treasures by the events of the twentieth century; the more who did this, the more dramatic their cultural resistance” (Heilman 1995).

“When the Siyum Calls” was written to celebrate the 2012 event. The video opens with the members of The Miami Boys Choir studying in their yeshiva with Yerachmiel Begun playing the role of their teacher. They are studying Talmud, and Begun explains to the boys the value of Torah study, and that the completion of the text is not really a completion at all. Tomorrow they will return to the beginning and continue to learn from the endless wisdom of the Talmud. The boys are wrapped up in Begun’s every word. “Imagine what it’s going to be like,” Begun says “with all of klal yisroel [the Jewish people] together at the siyum hashas. Over 100,000 people …” His voice trails off as the boys’ thoughts drift to the magnificence of the coming event. The video then transitions to Begun, dressed in his black suit and black fedora, playing piano dramatically in a room lit by only a single candle, with a volume of the Talmud resting on top of the piano. A member of the choir, a young boy approximately twelve-years old, stands in front of moving images of the New York City skyline and MetLife stadium, where the siyum took place. He sings, “When the siyum calls, thousands standing tall, gathered in one special place, can hardly contain it, a perfect mosaic, a united cry.” The song continues to speak of the magnificence of Jews of all affiliations coming together for this monumental occasion, and their task of filling the world with “knowledge of God.” Approximately two minutes into the song, the piece moves into double time, with a driving beat as the drums enter and the piano plays chords in straight eighth notes. As we hear the boys sing of their mission to study and fill the world with
holy knowledge, we see the children of the Miami Boys Choir back in the yeshiva studying Talmud with vigor. They sway back and forth as they learn, and their hand gestures show that they comprehend the arguments of the complex text. The lyrics go on to request that adults bring their male children to the siyum to inspire the youth to study Talmud. In the final stanza they compare this massive gathering of Jews to Har Sinai, Mount Sinai, where, according to the biblical narrative, the entire Jewish people stood before God and received the Torah.

**Ex. 4.4: Lyrics to “When the Siyum Calls” by the Miami Boys Choir**

When the Siyum calls/ Thousands standing tall
Gathered in one special place
Can hardly contain it/ A perfect mosaic/
A united cry

To say Amen in multitude/ The joy and amazing mood/
Of glorification/ High expectation
Be uplifted high
No matter of one's path or affiliation/ 'Cause this is our common station

[CHORUS:]
This Is Not The End/ Only A Beginning
To Start Our Nation Yet Anew/ Come Together With Every Jew

We're here to defend/ the Torah's way of living
Let us ride to victory/For all the world to see
*U'muluh hu'uretz deyah es Hashem* (Hebrew: And fill the land with knowledge of God)

In every shul it's heard/ Intoning Torah's word
Every heart and mind will shine/
That rush of emotion/ A fervent devotion/
What we're living for

Now take a child in hand/ With everyone he'll stand
In glory on this wondrous day/
This hope for our nation/ The next generation
As *Har* (Hebrew: Mount) Sinai once more

Passing on the dream/ Of our ambition
Instilling pride in/ Our noble mission

Will you be there/ In the evening air
In body and spirit joining them/
Can this be a sign/ Of Moshiach's (Hebrew: Messiah’s) time?
*U’muluh hu’uretz deyah es Hashem*

“Daddy Come Home” by Yeshiva Boys Choir

“Daddy Come Home” by Yeshiva Boys Choir touches on themes of prayer, belief in God, and the sensitive issue of Orthodox men joining the military. The depictions of men in military uniforms in this music video show the Israeli Army, despite the fact that this is an American ensemble and the lyrics are entirely in English. Gerstner explained to me that the song was written with the American military in mind, but when conflict between Israel and Lebanon erupted, he decided to depict an Israeli soldier in the music video “for chizuk” (Hebrew: strength/encouragement, ie. to psychologically fortify those impacted by the war). The lyrics present a first-person narrative in which the lead singer tells of his father, a soldier, who was expected to return home in time for the Chanukah holiday. The eight-day festival has already begun, and the boy’s family has not heard from the father. The boy’s mother cries frequently and the young children are terrified as they wonder about their father’s whereabouts. In the chorus, the boy sings, “Daddy come home, stay with me, let me hold your hand, let me sit upon your knee.”

As the audience feels the desperation of the narrator, the boy turns his thoughts to God as the music switches to the bridge. As in many popular songs, the bridge introduces new musical ideas (we hear the choir lay a harmonic foundation for the new lead melody), and lyrical topics. Rather than the boy expressing fear over his father’s absence, he is taking action by praying. The boy sings:

“Where has he gone?
How will I carry on?
Tell me what can I say?
I need to pray….
...Please hear my plea
Send my Daddy home to…”

As the bridge ends, the band returns triumphantly to the chorus, in which they sing the same melody with new lyrics. The volume is louder and the driving beat of the drums and eighth-note piano chords suggests a higher level of intensity. The vocal harmonies continue as the song reaches a climax. The boy sees his father approaching the home; his prayers have been answered. The family is able to light the Chanukah candles together on this final night of the holiday, remembering both the miracle that happened in the days of the Maccabees and today as the boy’s prayers for his father’s return have been successful.

The song places a strong emphasis on the Haredi value of prayer. Gerstner’s arrangement of the song is skillful in its transition from the boy’s contemplation on the difficulty of his missing father to his prayer to God to help with the situation. The boy’s prayers are, according to Haredi belief, the appropriate response to such a situation, and because he prays with such intense sincerity, the prayers are answered and his father is sent home. By turning to prayer in a time of distress, the narrator demonstrates his devotion to God and his absorption of Haredi values. The effectiveness of the prayers, as seen in the father’s safe return from war, validates Haredi beliefs, and thus the accompanying lifestyle.

Ex. 4.5: Lyrics to “Daddy Come Home” by Yeshiva Boys Choir

Daddy's been gone
Gone for so long
For him I pray
He joined the Corps
Fighting a war
Somewhere far away

He promised me he'd return
When the Chanukah candles burn
So here I wait
The blessings I recite
By the candlelight
But it's getting late

[CHORUS:]
Daddy come home
Stay with me
Let me hold your hand
Let me sit upon your knee
I see fear
In Mommy's eyes
Every time she cries
And tries to comfort me

It's scary here at home
My mind begins to roam
Have I lost you?
I hear the phone
Mommy's mournful moan
It can't be true!

[CHORUS]

Where has he gone?
How will I carry on?
Tell me what can I say?
I need to pray...
Please hear my plea
Send my Daddy home to...

Who's that I hear
Calling my name?
I run into his arms
Yes, my Daddy came
Home to me
He's on his knees
Now he's holding me
For all eternity

Now, as night falls
We stand tall
Eight candles burning bright
And they're lighting up the night
Home at last
Eyes aglow
I hug my Daddy tight
And I'm not letting go!

The Performance of a Secure Future

In the songs and music videos described above, specific values are promoted and performed by the children in the choirs. The choirs express love for Jewish heritage, an appreciation for Torah study, and an understanding of the power of prayer. The boys are all dressed in standard Litvish Haredi garb of black suits, white shirts, black velvet yarmulkes, and most have their tzitzis showing. In showcasing these values while outwardly displaying their Haredi identity, these children are proving their devotion to the Haredi lifestyle and, it is implied, their intention to continue living this way in the future.

For the contemporary Haredi community, this devotion is highly significant. As described earlier, anxiety over youth going “off the derech” is palpable, and many families have fled New York City in order to find a more sheltered Haredi community characterized by less interaction with non-Haredim (Finkelman 2002). Haredim are highly concerned that through contact with non-Haredi or non-Jewish neighbors, youth will mistakenly be attracted to an alternative lifestyle and will choose to leave the Haredi community. Intercultural interactions, they believe, have the ability to melt the social ties connecting Haredi youth not only to their families, but also to God. In such a volatile context, the relief provided by seeing young children behaving in accordance with community values is tremendously valuable. In the case of boys choirs, not only do the children demonstrate their intention to remain in the Haredi community, but they also actively commend the lifestyle and announce its greatness to other children. It is
significant that in the music videos described above, the choirs are not simply praising God, they are honoring social practices that carry weight for the Haredi viewership. By reinforcing these social ties, they are resisting the melting process of modernity and performing a secure future for the Haredi community.

As boys choirs perform a bright Haredi future, they also suggest a spiritually healthy society. As Finkelman (2011) writes in his exploration of the manner in which Haredi popular literature addresses the issue of children going off the derech, “Delinquent youth represent a powerful and compelling ‘other’ against which to define normalcy and health. In this discussion, Haredi observance becomes associated with health and satisfaction, while leaving Haredi Jewry becomes associated with illness and pathology. Lack of observance itself constitutes illness.” Thus, the staging of a spiritually healthful youth population is an attractive symbol for the Haredi public, and may help to explain the cultural work done by these musical ensembles.

We find further evidence for this hypothesis in a common venue for boys choir concerts. These ensembles frequently perform at fundraisers for Orthodox Jewish organizations, especially those raising money for youth activities. Note the language in this online advertisement for three different fundraisers at which boys choirs will perform:

Atlantic Seaboard NCSY: presents The 37th Annual Isaac H. Taylor Jewish Music Festival featuring the Chevra and Yeshiva Boys Choir on Sunday January 8, 2012 at the Lyric at 7pm. Enjoy an entertaining evening while ensuring the continuity of the Jewish Future.\(^\text{11}\)

Thank you for being an integral part in Inspiring the Jewish Future!\(^\text{12}\)

We invite you to join us in celebrating our success and in reaffirming our commitment to helping ensure a proud Jewish future here in Calgary.\(^\text{13}\)


The choirs recognize their role as symbols of the future. Yeshiva Boys Choir’s song “In A Song” is a tribute to the residents of Gush Katif, who were forcibly removed from their homes in 2005 as a part of Israel’s disengagement from the Gaza Strip. The song frames the event as a lack of “achdus,” brotherhood, in which Jewish soldiers acted poorly toward the Jews of Gush Katif. The lyrics use an ambiguous “we,” which could be understood to mean Orthodox Jews writ large, or more specifically Orthodox children. In either case, it is clear that the children of Yeshiva Boys Choir are part of this “we” and are instrumental in mobilizing the collective. The refrain of the piece states:

In a song we'll sing  
We'll hear achdus (Hebrew: brotherhood) ring  
We'll walk together hand in hand  
Until we reach our promised land  
So that this is the year  
Mashiach (Hebrew: The Messiah) will appear  
Bimherah b’yameinu, amen (Hebrew: Quickly in our days, Amen)

We're a family  
Bound by history  
We are travelers hand in hand  
Destined for this promised land  
We must be the light  
To make our future bright  
Bimherah b’yameinu, amen (Hebrew: Quickly in our days, Amen)

Though I argue that we should understand Haredi boys choirs as symbols of a secure Haredi future, I recognize that this is not the sole reason for their popularity. During an interview with Eli Gerstner, the director of Yeshiva Boys Choir and the force behind several Haredi popular music ensembles, I asked him why boys choirs are as popular as they are. He replied: “I think that there’s something about kids singing that is just very innocent and very pure. They sing a song like nobody else can. There’s just a certain innocence, I guess is what it is really.

There’s just a certain purity when a kid sings a song.” This innocence is appealing to an audience beyond Orthodox Jews. He continues, “You can tell just by the millions of [Youtube] hits that you see on Yeshiva Boys Choir videos and you know that only like 50,000 of them are religious Jews, so where are the other few million people? It’s just all over the world, non-Jewish people…. So that means that this is not even about a connection to religion, it’s not because it’s talking about God and they might be able to connect to it. This is just about, we love the music, we love the song, we love the voices, we love everything about it, and ‘like’ [click the ‘like’ button on Youtube] and view it again” (Interview, February 2016).

Gerstner’s emphasis on “purity” and “innocence” helps to describe the immediate experience of watching and listening to boys choirs. I suggest that these traits are so powerful precisely because the spiritual health of these children is understood to be the opposite of the “off the derech” phenomenon. In the following quote, Rabbi Eli Teitelbaum, a former singer in Pirchei Agudas Yisroel, a Haredi boys choir, discusses how the “kosher” activity of listening to boys choirs has often been used to help ensure that children do not leave Orthodox Judaism.

Many years ago, Pirchei Agudas Yisroel used to organize trips to Washington, Baltimore, and Toronto. Motzoei Shabbos (Hebrew: Saturday night after the conclusion of the Sabbath) there was learning along with game nights, and concerts. There was the famous Pirchei Choir that put out beautiful records and tapes that brought countless hours of delightful Jewish entertainment into thousands of homes. This was all done in order to keep children busy during their free time so they shouldn't have to go looking elsewhere. It was important to show children at a very early age that the Torah is not just restrictions, but that Shabbos as well as the rest of the week can be a time of constructive joy and pleasure. Happy laughter and family voices in the home will keep more kids off the streets at night than the strictest curfew.

I still remember when the Pirchei Agudas Yisrael put on a play and concert more than forty years ago in Montauk Junior High School. (The play was based on the book Family Aguilar.) There were some who tried to convince the rabbonim to put a ban on it. Since I was the president of Pirchei at the time, Rabbi Moshe Sherer z.l.14 asked me to go down to the venerable gaon hador (Hebrew: genius of the generation), Rabbi Moshe Fienstien

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14 Zecher l’bracha (Hebrew: May his memory be for a blessing)
z.t.l.\textsuperscript{15}, to get his halachic opinion. Not only did he not ban it, but he gave it his blessings. He understood only too well the importance of giving the boys a kosher alternative; otherwise they would soon find their pleasures elsewhere. (Teitelbaum 2007)

Teitelbaum’s quote is significant in how it positions boys choirs and off the derech youth as opposite one another, displaying the role that these choirs play in Haredi society. In an interview, one former member of a popular choir agreed with my suggestion that boys choirs display a secure future, and was quick to add that the choirs are seen as positive role models. He explained that certain boys in the choirs even become culturally sanctioned heartthrobs. Indeed these boys take on a safe celebrity persona, as seen clearly in the novel written for children and teens, \textit{The Chaverim Boys Choir Live!} The fictional novel tells of the adventures of an imaginary Haredi boys choir as they travel from New York to Israel to perform for admiring fans, displaying positive character traits through all obstacles. Nachman Seltzer, the director of Shirah Chadasha Boys Choir, offers an approbation of the book in its opening pages, stating, “A more than accurate portrayal of the problems and pleasures that kids this age face every day, this book presents a picture of normal boys who love life, who love to perform, who are vibrant, alive, and easy to befriend.” The phrase “normal boys” is significant here; as Ayala Fader describes, in Haredi parlance, the term “normal” refers to child who conforms to normative, acceptable behavior (2007:58). A “normal” child is one who is not considered to be at risk of going off the derech. Media such as this book, as well as the choirs’ CDs and DVDs provide Haredi youth with positive role models who exemplify proper behavior in the liquid modern world.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Zecher tzadik l’bracha} (Hebrew: May the memory of the righteous be for a blessing)
Eli Gerstner explained to me that fans frequently approach him with stories about the impact of his music. Tales of how the choir has led a person to halachic observance are particularly poignant. Here he offers an anecdote from an occasion on which he was invited to put on the annual parade in Brooklyn for the Chabad-Lubavitch sect of Hasidism. Though Gerster is not a Lubavitcher, but rather in the “Yeshivish” camp, his popularity and musical expertise qualified him to produce the event.

I think that, listen, music is very powerful and maybe seeing Yeshiva Boys Choir and Chevra—I’ve heard so many stories—I could go on and on about these types of things. I produced The Great Parade for Chabad a couple years ago. I did it two years in a row. And somebody backstage comes up to me, ‘Eli, I want you to meet somebody.’ It was an older Chabad guy, and he’s like, ‘I want you to come backstage and meet somebody….’ … In between songs I run backstage and this kid who’s like maybe eleven, twelve years old…. And I shook his hand and I’m like, ‘Hey, how are you doing?’ And he [the older
man] was like, ‘Okay, tell Eli your story….’ The kid just looks at me and [tells me that] he’s from a non-religious family, his parent’s aren’t frum, and one day he’s online, and he’s watching a music video, not mine. And for some reason ‘Ashrei’—you know, my ‘Ah Ah Ah’ video—popped up on the side. So he saw a Jewish kid with a yarmulke, and I don’t remember if he said he knew he was Jewish or not—but he clicked on it. And he liked it. And he clicked on my channel and he started listening to more stuff, and he started listening to Jewish music…. He went on from that and he started listening to other Jewish music. And within just a few weeks he was so interested and invested. Anyway, at this point he’s frum, he got his parents to start eating kosher, they were not frum yet at the time, maybe they are now…. ‘Ashrei?’ ‘Ashrei’ was, like, it was a hook. It was just a cute song that I wrote.’ So we don’t know the power of music. It’s such a responsibility. (Interview, February 2016)

Though the music can now be accessed by anyone because of the Internet, the primary audience of Haredi boys choirs is, of course, Haredi Jews. Gerstner provided the following account of the reception that Yeshiva Boys Choir received from its very start:

We did a live broadcast. At the time [Orthodox radio show host] Nachum Seagel was doing evening shows. Now he doesn’t do it anymore. He did a live broadcast in Borough Park, 13th Avenue…. The kids were all in Cleveland. The only person who was in the choir and was in New York was my little brother. At the time he was like five. So I called him on the phone and I was like okay we’re gonna have him come to the thing and we’ll have at least one kid representing the choir. And we’ll talk about it, we’ll do the interview. And I’ll have The Chevra come, because, you know, part of the family. And Nachum announced it the night before, ‘Okay, we’re gonna debut on the radio this Yeshiva Boys Choir.’ It’s already been out, let’s say, two or three days. And I remember showing up early to get to the store. We put out a little speaker in front of the [shop]. Within a half hour, I remember, the store was just jammed. I mean, you couldn’t even move. And a guy said to me, ‘Eli, do you see what’s going on outside?’ I go outside, and the police had shut down the full avenue. All the way to the left, all the way to the right, everybody was just there trying to hear. I was like, ‘what is going on? This doesn’t even make sense!’ (Interview, February 2016)

From Gerstner’s words we learn just how attractive the perceived “purity” and “innocence” of boys choirs can be to a very diverse audience, including some who adopt a Haredi lifestyle after hearing the music. While Gerstner explains the tremendous popularity of Yeshiva Boys Choir as being based in the positivity associated with children’s voices, understanding these choirs as the staging of a secure future contextualizes the choirs within a modernity that is liquid and hostile to the solid institution of religion. Placed in context, we come
to understand why these “pure” voices are so very significant to Haredim and non-Jewish audiences alike.

Liquid Modernity and Haredi Youth

As discussed above, Haredim take pains to insulate themselves from liquid conditions in order to guard the social bonds of their society. Well aware of the allure of “secular” Western society, Haredim seek to create an alternative that is sufficiently engaging to younger members of the community, and that continuously perpetuates and praises the Haredi lifestyle. While it is true that any member of society might find non-Haredi or non-Orthodox life to be more appealing, younger people are understood to be particularly vulnerable to being led astray, especially because of their propensity to want to own the latest technology or other fashionable product. A March 2015 post on Imamother.com, an online forum for Haredi women, demonstrates this phenomenon as a mother asks:

DD [Dear Daughter], 11, insists that "everyone has an iPhone". She feels like a real neb (Yiddish: uncool person) because her phone only does calls, pictures, and texts.

I don't think she's ready for one, and I don't like her having such easy access to the internet. She's already getting into a lot of video games and wasting time she should be spending studying.

She has plenty of access to the home computer when I'm around and can supervise her, so it's not like she's being deprived of screen time. Right now, I think it's more that she wants to look cool in front of her friends.16

Another forum member replies:

Yeah, sure.

And in 5 years, everyone will have a Ferrari, too.

16http://www.imamother.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=267157&postdays=0&postorder=asc&start=0
My line to outrageous demands: "You're not 'everyone else', you're my beloved and precious child, and this is something I do not permit (or, depending on the demand, cannot afford)."

On some level, she already gets the concept. You posted elsewhere that she is willing to dress in a tzanua (Hebrew: modest) enough way. She keeps kosher and Shabbos. She gets that certain things that her public school friends have or do are gonna be off limits. This is one of them. The end. (ibid)

Another forum member responds:

Nobody in my house has an iphone.

I even know a teenager who recently got an iphone as a birthday gift, and she was very nervous about accepting it and all the responsibility that comes along with it. I was happy that she was mature enough to see the dangers.

Basically, I see the internet as a Yetzer Hara [evil inclination]. Yes, there is the potential to use it for good or neutral things, which is why I have it on my computer. Anything good or useful I need to do on the internet can be done while I am at my computer. However, the Yetzer Hara is always there telling me to use it to waste time. It often tells people to turn on things that are inappropriate. I have no desire to take that Yetzer Hara and stick it in my pocket so it can follow me everywhere I go. (ibid)

It is significant that the first respondent evaluates the daughter based on her adherence to Haredi codes of dress, and her observance of Shabbos and kashrus. This responder has decided that the child in question is not “at risk” of going “off the derech.” Because of this, it is assumed that she will understand that she must live in a measured way. Her observance of Jewish law translates to an ability to cope with restriction and not obtaining each product that she would like. The second responder cites the case of a teenager who is particularly pious and was frightened that her new iPhone would lead her to behave in an inappropriate matter, such as wasting time with pointless activities on the internet or perhaps looking at content that is deemed immodest. The post refers to the iPhone as a “danger” because it could, theoretically, lead one away from a Haredi lifestyle. Though the iPhone is a particularly dangerous product because it provides Internet access, the poster and first respondent are essentially discussing the appropriate
response to consumerism.

The Haredi community frequently positions itself against a cultural other referred to as “secular” or “modern” that is consumption-crazed. The theoretical lens of liquid modernity helps to explain this binary, and the dilemma faced by the author of the Imamother.com post. As Bauman writes:

The forces driving the gradual transformation of the concept of ‘culture’ into its liquid modern embodiment are the same forces which favour the freeing of markets from their non-economic limitations: mainly social, political and ethnic. A liquid modern, consumer-oriented economy relies on a surplus of its offerings, their rapid ageing and an untimely withering of their seductive powers…. The merchants of the goods and the authors of the advertisements depend on a marriage of the art of seduction with the impulse of potential clients to court the admiration of their peers and enjoy a sense of their own superiority. (2011, 15-16)

The framing of Haredi life as a contrast with consumer culture is a strategic, but ultimately problematic, construct. As Haym Soloveitchik explains, through “a sustained exposure to modernity … large (though not all) segments of the haredi enclave, not to speak of modern Orthodoxy, increasingly adopted the consumer culture …” (1994:74). As discussed in the introduction to this study, Haredi communities contain bustling commercial districts, equipped with chic clothing shops, kosher grocery stores that import products from all across the globe, restaurant that feature every imaginable cuisine, and Judaica shops featuring an enormous selection of religious texts, literature, and ritual items. In addition, of course, CDs of the latest Haredi musical releases are available in many retail locations.

Even as musical ensembles such as boys choirs present an idyllic lifestyle that is pure and unencumbered by the concerns that face others, Haredim create and participate in a well-developed economy in which many businesses modeled after popular American companies. However, the Haredi economy frames itself as contributing to, rather than detracting from, one’s ability to be truly pious. Leading up to the holiday of Purim, Gourmet Glatt, a kosher grocery
store, uses the slogan, “Because Purim Should Be Freilich (Yiddish: festive), Not Frenzied.” Advertisements for French crystal dishes have “Sabbath observant” written in Hebrew next to a photo of the Eiffel Tower. A wedding singer advertises “the highest level of sincere, leibedig (Yiddish: lively), and PURE Jewish music.” An elegant Passover retreat at a hotel in New Jersey boasts a multi-million dollar renovation next to flowing letters that read, “Pesach is all about friends, family & ambiance.” Furthermore, not every business is required to frame its advertisements ethically: their benefits are implied by their presence in Haredi neighborhoods, or their advertisement’s appearance in Orthodox periodicals. When the advertisement for “Abraham Roofing Company” is positioned next to a story with photos of prominent Haredi Rabbis, it is understood that Abraham’s business is a part of the Haredi network and should therefore be patronized rather than hiring a roofer from outside the community. It is important to note that the businesses within the community’s economic network do not only serve Haredi Jews. For example, several major Haredi-owned electronics stores in New York are patronized by a wide array of people. The financial success of these businesses provides jobs within the Haredi economic network for many Haredim, thus fueling the Haredi economy through the consumerism of others outside the community.

The ethical framing of the Haredi economic network also encompasses the Haredi music industry. Music sold in Haredi bookshops and supermarkets is deemed to be of the community. Musicians record in Haredi-run recording studios, cultivating certain aesthetic qualities. Similarly, many music videos are produced within the community, and often include images that signify belonging. The aesthetics and economics of Haredi music are thus intensely intertwined.

Economic ties within this religious structure, therefore, strengthen the social bonds of society rather than weaken them. In constructing a consumerism that is imagined to be in
opposition to capitalist America, Haredim build the walls of their enclaves, differentiating between inside and outside, us and them. The inner sanctum within the inside, that which is to be protected at all costs, is the realm of the youth. When Rabbi Lieff addresses the Agudah convention in his keynote speech and states that the rapid pace of change of liquid modernity is assaulting Haredi youth with a barrage of challenges, he is acknowledging that the walls of Haredi enclaves are simply not tall enough to entirely keep out trespassing Western culture. It is an acknowledgement that even Haredi youth are wading through the waters of liquid modernity.

Lieff’s assessment is, of course, not novel in its claims. Haredim are well acquainted with the challenges facing their youth, and the resolve that it would take for a young person to choose the “traditional” over the “modern,” the “kosher” version rather than the “treif” version, the spiritually beneficial and not the spiritually dangerous, at every step of the way. For this reason, reassurance is sought.

When youth perform a secure Haredi future, it is a demonstration of their absorption of values that will enable them to perpetuate their religion in the face of a modernity determined to melt all solids in its path. I have argued in this chapter that contemporary Haredi boys choirs should be understood in the context of this struggle with liquid modernity. Through musical performance, these young singers come to embody the Haredi future and thus must position themselves in contrast to the spiritual danger that Haredim strive to resist. Boys choirs offer hope as they suggest success in maintaining the social ties that are threatened by liquid modernity. I close this chapter with a passage from the Miami Boys Choir song, “Sunshine,” in which this projection for the future is clear:

With the odds defied  
We have stood against the tide  
As the trials of life enclose us
Is it now His plan
To revel in our task at hand
Knowing why Hashem just chose us

Can we be a light unto the nation
Carrying out the purpose of creation
Though we number just a few
We can radiate the truth
Through the darkness shines our faith for all times.
Chapter Five: The Haredi Periphery

In November of 2013, Elad Nehorai, the author of the blog PopChassid.com, posted an essay titled “I Don’t Want Your Culture! I Want G-d!” In the post, he explains that as a baal teshuva, someone who did not grow up as an Orthodox Jew but later adopted Orthodoxy, he has embraced Hasidic theology but does not feel compelled to join the associated culture. He writes:

There’s this story about the Alter Rebbe, the first rebbe of Chabad.

In a state of passion he yelled out, “I don’t want your Garden of Eden! I don’t want your Next World! All I want is you!”

I don’t know if it’s possible to realize how big of a statement that is, especially coming from a holy man. He was saying, basically, that even the biggest reward of a good life … he didn’t want it. Even the whole reason the world was created, he didn’t want it. He just wanted a total and a true connection with G-d, with Hashem….

…I’ve realized that not feeling like I fit into a culture doesn’t mean I’m any more or less religious. At the end of the day, it’s all about wanting to connect with G-d and helping others do the same.

And the funny thing is that as [sic] the more I’ve embraced this outsider role, the more I’ve felt comfortable, ironically, being a part of this frum culture. Because the culture exists, but it is not nearly as important as the core of Judaism and living that core.

In the blog post he refers to himself and other likeminded Jews as “explorers.” For many of these Jews, some of whom were raised in Haredi families while others chose this identity later, exploration of their Jewish identities is more than a hobby: it is a lifestyle. These individuals have found community with one another, primarily through the Internet, but increasingly also in live, in-person events.

The arts, particularly music, are a crucial part of this exploration and feature prominently in both the online and live spaces in which these individuals congregate. Musicians readily and adeptly perform in popular musical genres that are generally eschewed by Haredim, such as

various styles of rap and rock. Unlike mainstream Haredi culture that perceives these genres as profane and antithetical to holiness, those on the Haredi periphery believe that these genres, like all media, can be used for holy purposes if the musician has the right intention.

While Elad Nehorai uses the term “explorers” in his PopChassid post to describe this group of people, I have also heard him and others use phrases such as “out-of-the-box Jews” and, affectionately, “weird Jews,” in order to characterize their social orientation. In this chapter I refer to this loosely defined community as “the Haredi periphery.” The people I describe in this chapter are devoutly religious, and many are punctilious in their adherence to Jewish law. Many self-identify as Hasidic, others Yeshivish, while still others resist labels while practicing a form of Judaism that clearly draws on the practices of the Haredi mainstream. Most of these individuals attend Haredi synagogues, have attended Haredi schools, and study Haredi religious texts. Many live in, or on the outskirts of, Haredi neighborhoods. And yet—or perhaps precisely because of this—they define themselves as not conforming to the social practices of Haredi Jews. This self-identification of maintaining both an insider and outsider status is a key component of identity for these Jews. My term “Haredi periphery” attempts to account for the complexity of these Jews’ relationship with the Haredi community.

The Haredi periphery presents a challenge to Bauman’s theory of liquid modernity. Embracing both strict Orthodoxy and the modern world, those on the Haredi periphery do not fit the description of religious fundamentalism that Bauman offers, in which religion “is a radical remedy against that bane of postmodern/ market-led/consumer society—risk-contaminated freedom (a remedy that heals the infection by amputating the infected organ—abolishing freedom as such, in as far as there is no freedom free of risks)” (1997:184).
Bauman might argue, then, that in his schema the Haredi periphery ought to be considered not truly Haredi, but rather as participants in a religious expression that is simply another melting institution. This, however, would be problematic. Bauman specifically names Lubavitcher Hasidim in his description of “fundamentalist” religion, and, as described in this chapter, many of the Jews on the Haredi periphery are Lubavitchers themselves. Many of those who are not Lubavitchers are equally careful in their observance of Jewish law, look to Haredi leaders for guidance, and are just as devout in their theological beliefs. Thus, Bauman would have to consider them to be participating in this form of religion that he considers to be directly an outcome of the postmodern/liquid modern condition. Similarly, Bauman might choose to argue that their relative embrace of contemporary media and their rejection of isolationism make the Haredi periphery participants in a religious orthodoxy that is simply melting and giving way to American consumerist culture. However, this too would be inaccurate, as the devoutly religious worldview of those on the Haredi periphery enables them to push back against this melting and reject the consumerism of the Western world. To use Bauman’s terms, these Jews, like the Haredi mainstream, are guided by an alternative rationality, no “less rational (or more irrational) than the market-oriented logic of action” (1997:185).

The Haredi periphery wishes to use and enjoy Western popular cultural productions such as popular music in order to serve their religious goals. Even while maintaining significant ties to the Haredi community, they stand in the liquid world, but are defiant of its current. The Haredi periphery’s double ascription is based on an insistence that religious sensibilities can be served by modernity. This sentiment provides an important intervention into Bauman’s theory.
A Counterculture within a Counterculture

The religious identity of those on the Haredi periphery positions them as a counterculture within a counterculture. They view Orthodox Judaism as a radical turn away from key features of contemporary Western society that they perceive as superficial and counterproductive to spiritual growth. Yet, their unwillingness to conform to Haredi social practices keeps them from being full insiders, despite their commitment to Haredi interpretations of Jewish law and biblical exegesis.

It is likely that there have always been individuals whose participation in strictly religious Jewish social circles has been only partial. Jerome Mintz notes that at times the worldly experiences of those raised with only loose connections to Haredi Judaism have been helpful to Rabbinic leaders, such as the case of the Satmar dynasty in the 1960s:

Some of the new young leaders were American born. A few had been raised on the periphery of the Hasidic community and followed the Rebbe as adults or married into the community. Their advice would be sought on practical matters such as employment, housing, discrimination, and voting. The Rebbe often consulted with such ‘culture brokers’ for their knowledge of hospitals and doctors, so that he could offer more astute counseling to his followers. As a result of their experiences, both inside and outside the community, the new leaders were able to integrate new information into the community. Under their direction the Satmar court organized complex community programs. (Mintz 1992:34-35)

The social position of today’s Haredi periphery that I examine in this chapter can largely be traced back to Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach (1925-1994). As discussed in Chapter Two, Carlebach was one of the first Orthodox musicians to perform in a popular music style for non-Orthodox audiences. Carlebach’s music was a form of outreach to Jewish hippies of the 1960s in order to introduce them to Jewish ritual and philosophy, and encourage participation in Jewish life. While Carlebach had studied under the most respected Haredi Litvish Rabbis of the twentieth century, he later became a disciple of Chabad Hasidism, and was one of the first
emissaries of Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe. Carlebach travelled the world performing his unique blend of niggunim and folk music, attracting a large cadre of followers among the hippies, who saw in him a kindred spirit. After a successful performance at the Berkeley Folk Festival in 1966, Carlebach established “The House of Love and Prayer” in San Francisco in order to provide a spiritual home for “lost Jewish souls.” Historian Dana Evan Kaplan notes that the center was “criticized within the Lubavitch movement for being too tolerant toward countercultural lifestyles. Nevertheless the House was wildly successful, drawing on the model of the commune, which was then in vogue” (2009:280). While Carlebach argued that his methods were in line with Chabad’s philosophy, he acknowledged that he was not in the mainstream of Haredi society and openly criticized Orthodoxy. “I said to the Jewish establishment, ‘We have to do teshuvah [repentance], We must have done so much wrong that these kids left us.’ They are the real tzadikim [righteous ones]” (ibid.).

Carlebach’s life and music have inspired many Jews to reconsider what Orthodox Judaism can be, including numerous musicians who have experimented with expressing their religiosity through popular music styles. An early example was the Diaspora Yeshiva Band, an ensemble of baalei teshuva who, from 1975 to 1983, sang Jewish texts set to rock-bluegrass fusion music. In 1967, following their father’s death, Shlomo Carlebach and his twin brother Eli became the leaders of Congregation Kehilath Jacob in Manhattan. The synagogue thus became a hub for those drawn to Carlebach’s approach to Judaism, and has continued to function in this way in the years since Shlomo Carlebach’s death in 1994. However, for those who did not live within close proximity of the synagogue it could be challenging to find other likeminded Jews. This all changed with the widespread availability of the Internet.
The Internet and Community on the Periphery

While the twenty-first century mainstream Haredi community is struggling with questions of the degree to which the Internet must be banned, the Haredi periphery openly embraces it. With no desire to insulate itself from the outside world in the manner prescribed by many Haredi leaders, those on the Haredi periphery take the opposite approach as they use the Internet to find similar individuals to learn about their lives, and often, their art.

In 2002 a group called “WeirdJews” was formed on LiveJournal, an early social media site. Theresa Senft, Professor of Liberal Studies at New York University, notes that by the spring of 2006 the online community had over one thousand members, and identified themselves with the following introduction:

A community for Jews outside the mainstream. All “Weird Jews” are welcome here whether they be Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, born-Jews, Jews by Choice, or anyone considering conversion.…. We usually let almost everyone join unless given a good reason not to. (ex: neo-Nazi’s, proselytizing Christians, banned ex-members under different names). Once you’ve joined go ahead and introduce yourself. Most of us have made friends from this community both on LJ and in real life. You’ll be glad you did so. (Senft 2008:102)

Matthue Roth, a baal teshuva who has become a key figure among those on the Haredi periphery, has written about the profound impact that the WeirdJews community had on him:

I was a member of a group blog called WeirdJews. This was around the time I was becoming Orthodox. I was living in DC, didn’t have many friends, was living one life six days a week and another life on Shabbos. Not everyone on WeirdJews was Orthodox—some were, some were open to anything, some were ambivalent, and some were downright anti-. But it was where I felt most Jewish, because these were people who, as much as they treasured their Yiddishkeit (Yiddish: Judaism), they also treasured their individuality. And it wasn’t an either/or proposition, and it wasn’t a contest between the two. Rather, being Jewish, and the way they were being Jewish, was the way they expressed their individuality, their singularity, and their weirdness. And if that’s not taking the mitzvos and making them your own, I don’t think anything is. (Roth 2015)18

In addition to opening up further opportunities for dialogue with other “Jews outside the mainstream,” the Internet provided a platform for people to learn about exciting initiatives that were taking place, such as musical ensembles created by those on the Haredi periphery. Roth explained to me the experience that he had when he discovered “White Shabbos,” a band of Hasidim that describe their music as having “the melodic velocity of NOFX with the swagger of Johnny Cash, the rudeboy shuffle of Desmond Dekker and Irish two-step of Flogging Molly. At the heart of it all is a relentless optimism inspired by the teachings of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov.”

Roth explained, “When I heard about White Shabbos … it was like, it was unbelievable. I can’t underline that enough times. I really thought I was the only person who was frum and liked punk rock. And all of a sudden there was a band that fit me entirely” (Interview, 10 January 2017).

Several organizations with a strong online presence emerged in the early 2000s that similarly catered to these young Jews who felt disenfranchised from the institutional framework of the American Jewish community. Websites Jewcy.com, Jewschool.com and Jewlicious.com all posted edgy responses to current events in the Jewish community, accompanied by hip graphics. In 2002 JDub Records, a non-profit record label, was founded to “forge vibrant connections to Judaism through music, media and cultural events,” according to its mission statement (Gensler 2011). The label’s biggest success was the Lubavitcher musician Matisyahu, who became known as the “Hassidic Reggae Superstar.” Matisyahu’s song “King Without a Crown” became a hit, reaching number 28 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart on March 25, 2006. Matisyahu’s mainstream success, and his music video that was available on YouTube (a site that

had just been founded a year prior) introduced many to the possibility of Haredi Judaism blending with non-Jewish culture, and the exciting results that this could have.

As blogging caught on, some writers focused on issues important to those on the Haredi periphery. Elad Nehorai explained to me that PopChassid.com developed a niche audience after several of his posts “went viral.” This new audience was composed of individuals who shared Nehorai’s growing sense that Jewish life, and more specifically right-wing Orthodox Jewish life, ought to include more space for individuality and creativity. Nehorai explained to me that, for him, this sentiment grew out of his own experiences entering the Chabad-Lubavitch community.

I also realized that there was this other, more specific audience, which was creative Jews, or Jews who didn’t fit into the box. And more and more as I moved forward, I fit less and less in the box. Like, when you start off as a baal teshuva you tend to just want to fit into the box. That’s the beginning stage, because you don’t know anything and they know everything and you have to learn from them. And then there comes—not for everyone, but for a lot of people, and I think it’s unfortunate that it doesn’t happen for everyone—but for a lot of people they come to a realization that, like, ‘okay, they still know more than me, but I need to build my own identity and figure out who I am in this context. And I have to know who I actually agree with, who I don’t agree with.’ You have to be more discerning and more specific about what you believe. So one of the things that I realized was that there was this community of Jews who were struggling with this stuff, and trying to find their own identity and trying to break outside of the box. And this is becoming a growing movement, I think, within Judaism itself. People who are actively Jewish at least. So that’s when I started Hevria. (Interview, 30 October 2015)

“Hevria” refers to Hevria.com, a website whose name is a portmanteau of the Hebrew words *Hevra* (a group of friends) and *Bria* (creativity). Like Nehorai’s PopChasid, Hevria similarly caters to Jews who are “trying to find their own identity and trying to break outside of the box,” however Hevria features several writers, instead of just one, allowing them to offer new content every day. Nehorai and Matthue Roth, who co-founded the site, have been careful not to promote Hevria as an Orthodox website, and have stressed that individuals all across the spectrum of Judaism should have a voice on the site. While their writers and articles are vetted and edited to ensure a high quality, all posts include a comments section in which the post’s
author and any reader can communicate. With Hevria, Matthue and Elad aimed to assemble a roster of writers “that we believe shared our vision of what Judaism was to us, and that we felt like didn’t have a place in quote-unquote mainstream Judaism. And I mean that within the mainstream of almost every Jewish stream” (Elad Nehorai, Interview, 30 October 2015). The Hevria authors respond to nearly every comment in a friendly and engaging manner in order to encourage conversation. Rarely do the threads become argumentative, but cordial disagreements are common as the posts frequently include opinions that run contrary to the actions and words of Haredi leaders, and Hevria seeks to foster conversations that could not take place in mainstream Orthodox establishments. These exchanges between authors and audience are central to Hevria’s identity, Nehorai explained, and address a problem in the Jewish community that the authors have identified:

I think that the problem that exists right now for Jewish culture is that you have a lot of, almost, artificially constructed identities. In the past, what happened was that a lot of it was determined based on where you lived, for example. If you lived in Eastern Europe you had a certain way of looking at the world. And if you didn’t agree, you’d either do that or you’d become Reform or whatever. Like, there weren’t many places in between. Or you grew up in a shtetl and that was what there was. Or you grew up in America and there were just limited options. And the Internet changed so much. And Israel. Those two things, I think, changed so much about the dynamics of the ways that Jews live and are living. Before, you never had to confront someone else’s opinion. Or if you did, you could just dismiss it. You would just go back to your world, and that would be that. And now, if I post an article, for example, about something controversial, I’ll get different opinions. And I have to, like, be faced with that. Or if someone comments on it, they have to look at all the other comments. So all of a sudden you have a Chabadnik, and a secular Jew, and an atheist. And its interesting because its sort of chaotic, but actually it’s created an opportunity that has never existed before, which is for people to start to build their Jewish identity based off of what’s inside of them as opposed to what’s outside of them. (Interview, 30 October 2015).

The development of this internally derived identity, and the opportunities for other “outside-the-box” Jews to communicate on the site, has enabled Hevria to begin building a community that meets in person, in addition to online interactions. These in-person meetings
began in Nehorai’s home, under the title “creative farbrengens.” The name “farbrengen” refers to a Hasidic gathering, particularly in the Chabad-Lubavitch sect, in which people share teachings on the Torah and sing niggunim. Nehorai’s twist on this emphasizes creativity, and asks everyone who attends to bring an artistic creation with them, for example, a short story, a poem, visual art, or music.

Music indeed features prominently in Hevria’s community. In November 2015 Hevria introduced a section of the website called “Hevria Sessions.” Professional videographers tape a performance of musicians who fit Hevria’s worldview. These musicians perform in musical styles unlike those of the Haredi pop stars. Folk musicians such as Levi Robbin, “Bible-gum Pop” band Stereo Sinai, Rap ensemble Darshan, and alternative rock group Bulletproof Stockings have all been featured, and all perform lyrics with Jewish themes, but in styles that resemble American popular music. The videos are accessible on both YouTube and the Hevria website. Though these posts do not receive even close to the same number of visits as the site’s written content, Nehorai believes that these components are central to the site’s mission.

I think music is incredibly powerful. I think that Matisyahu will always be the classic example. No matter what you think of him\textsuperscript{20} … he’s always the classic example of what a person can do with music when someone accesses music in a unique and beautiful way while also accessing tradition. There’s something incredibly powerful about that. And you can argue that it changed the Jewish world in a lot of ways. It made a lot of people realize—I think it made people access a whole different part of themselves, a creative part of themselves. It made them realize that not only do we not have to listen to Avraham Fried, but we also don’t have to do everything that we do the exact same way. A book doesn’t have to be the same. And music classically in Judaism is considered one of the most powerful forces in the world. That’s why at a fabrengen you sing a niggun. Because it’s accessing something much deeper in yourself. That’s why a lot, a lot of Jewish sects, and even within Chabad, a lot of people don’t listen to secular music, because people believe that it has such a power that it could negatively effect you. Which I actually think is very valid because music is incredibly powerful. I wouldn’t agree with their interpretation of all secular music, but I do agree that music has an impression on the soul. And what Matisyahu did was, he affected a lot of people’s souls. And now what

\textsuperscript{20} Nehorai is referring here to Matisyahu’s heavily publicized exit from Hasidic Judaism in 2011.
you see happening in the Jewish world, is that you see more and more people who are out-of-the-box, who are creating very unique music. In my opinion, writers will change your brain. A musician will change your heart. And that’s why on Hevria, even though we get no money, and maybe not even enough views for our music videos that we’ve been doing, I consider it very important because I see them as the world changers. I really do. (Interview, 30 October 2015).

Hevria extends this philosophy to their in-person events, at which musicians always perform. These in-person gatherings, such as creative fabrengens and readings from Hevria authors, can at times be occasions for the clashing of their liberal and religious values. I witnessed this during a fundraising event for Hevria, titled “The Ultimate Creative Fabrengen.” One of the performers that evening was Perl Wolfe, best known as the pianist and lead singer of Bulletproof Stockings, a rock group made up entirely of Lubavitcher women. After the band broke up early in 2016, Perl and two of the members, cellist Elisheva Meister and violinist Dana Pestun, came together to form a new group, simply titled “Perl.” Perl, like Bulletproof Stockings, is dedicated to only performing in front of women due to the prohibition in Jewish law against men listening to a woman sing. Their adherence to this law has ultimately been advantageous to their popularity, as they have succeeded in creating all-women’s concerts that are attended by women even beyond the Orthodox community. This was well publicized when they persuaded Arlene’s Grocery, a rock club in Manhattan, to only open their doors to women for a sold-out Bulletproof Stockings show in 2014.

While the band’s policy to perform only in front of women had generally worked smoothly, Perl was in a difficult situation at the Hevria fundraiser. The audience was roughly an evenly split between men and women, with mixed-gender seating, and Perl Wolfe’s brief conversation with Elad Nehorai prior to the event about how to handle this issue was inconclusive. When it was their turn to perform, Wolfe went to the front of the room, and after some introductory words she admitted that she did not know what to do at this point. She
discussed the dilemma with the crowd of approximately forty people, and the responses were passionate, leading to a tense environment. One woman was very assertive in her belief that all men should leave the room so that Perl could sing. A non-observant Jewish man who was visibly intoxicated exclaimed that she should sing even in front of the men, and that as a true feminist he had to teach the Hasidim in the room a lesson. Ultimately Wolfe decided that a female spoken-word artist in the room would performatively read the lyrics to the song aloud, and then the band would play the song without any singing. The discussion encapsulated well the tensions among those who ascribe to Haredi interpretations of Jewish law and have liberal leanings in the area of gender dynamics.

At times the Internet can help mediate these tensions. Hevria had encountered this issue with Bulletproof Stockings in the past, when they agreed to do a performance for “Hevria Sessions,” their online collection of musical performances. The individuals who run Hevria determined that in an online format people could simply choose not to click on the performance and thus they avoided any problems. A similar, but slightly more complex question emerged around the group Darshan. Nehorai explained to me the problem they encountered, and how it was considered:

We had also a band called Darshan. They have a woman singer, and that was a little controversial because it’s guys singing with women so there’s definitely something going on if you’re Orthodox or whatever…. And it’s controversial. But I think that’s what Hevria is about, though. We want those people to have a voice too. Literally. I think that’s really important, that people feel safe to do that. (Interview, 30 October 2015).

Hevria has been successful in creating an online community and transforming it into one that gathers in person as well. Unlike much of the Haredi mainstream, Hevria embraces the Internet and its potential for change. As a community that is invested in finding a way to exist “out-of-the-box” while remaining committed to religious practice, they find the Internet to be an
effective medium for their communication and community formation. In our conversation, Nehorai stressed that the Internet is a tool to bring people together in ways that extend beyond websites:

So is it just the Internet? It’s not! The Internet is just the access way to the quote-unquote real world. It’s just an avenue. Just like a newspaper used to be. Like TV. I mean how did Martin Luther King get his message out? It was through writing, through speeches. You could argue that that was the same thing as the Internet. He was on the radio. He was on whatever existed at the time for him to be heard. And then, because he got so much exposure, because he was able to create this feeling in other people to rise up, and they also had all of these feelings pent up—black people and sympathetic white people, or people from other races who were sympathetic—they were able to rise up and change the world. So it’s just communication. It’s just an avenue of communication that happens to be extremely effective. It also happens to work extremely fast. And it’s not just communication, its community. Before it used to be that communication was one-sided. It was one person talking through a screen, or through a radio, or on paper. And you read. And if you wanted to respond, you would write a letter to the editor or something like that. Now it’s, like, instant communication.... For people who get sucked into movements on the Internet, what happens is they want to bring it into their day-to-day lives.... I really believe in it as a movement, and not just as a website or a blog.

(Interview, 30 October 2015)

Punk Jews

In 2012, a documentary titled Punk Jews was released. The film opens with Hasidic singer Yishai Romanoff standing on top of a roof in front of an urban landscape. With peyos (Hebrew: sidelocks) and tzitzis (Hebrew: fringes attached to a ritual undergarment) blowing in the wind, he tells the camera, “Here’s how you bring light into the world. You get up in the morning and you scream: God!” Romanoff is indeed screaming as loud as he can, just as he does as the vocalist for his punk rock band “Moshiach Oi!” A narrator’s voice is then heard over a montage of images that show a wide array of Jews, with images illustrating each sentence of the monologue. The klezmer-rock fusion ensemble “Breslov Bar Band” can be heard under the narration.
Like many religions and cultures, Judaism struggles to bridge the gap between tradition and the modern world. Everyone seems to have a different, and often contradicting interpretation of Judaism’s ancient traditions. Does being Jewish mean eating bagels and lox, or lighting the menorah on Chanukah? Is it necessary to make a pilgrimage all the way to Jerusalem, or is it enough to just walk over to the kosher deli? Do you need to belong to a synagogue? How about if you are a Hebrew school dropout? And what is the meaning behind the long beards and black hats? The challahs, shofars, Bar Mitzvahs, the horah? We were raised in Jewish families and even we wrestle with these questions. So we decided to go on a mission to gain insight into what it means to be Jewish. Instead of speaking to rabbis, scholars, and academics, we asked punk rockers, hip-hop MCs, artists, and activists what Judaism means to them and how they choose to express it. (http://www.punkjews.com/watch/)

The documentary explores the lives, beliefs, and art of these “provocateurs and committed Jews who are asking, each in his or her own way, what it means to be Jewish in the twenty-first century” (Punkjews.com/about/). The term “punk” in the film’s title is intended to connote a rejection of propriety and a valorization of independence. The director explained this further in an article in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz: “The title, says Zook Mann, made sense. ‘Punk is a rock and roll movement with a do-it-yourself philosophy. In punk rock, artists don’t work with corporations or recognized institutions,’ he says. ‘They simply make their art in their backyard, in a garage, in their homes. The idea of the Jews in the film is similar and focuses on the feeling of rebellion and spiritual independence” (Zer Aviv 2012).

While not all of the individuals profiled in the film are religiously observant, many are either Haredi or were at one time. In addition to Moshiach Oi!, the film follows a number of “punk Jews,” including rapper Y-Love (aka Yitz Jordan), an African American convert to Judaism who was formerly a follower of the Bostoner sect of Hasidism before he left Orthodoxy; as well as blogger Shais Rishon, an African American, Orthodox Jewish writer who was raised in the Chabad-Lubavitch sect of Hasidism. The film also profiles “Chulent,” “the informal weekly gatherings for Orthodox Jews on the margins of their close-knit society” (Bleyer 2007).
The segment of the film profiling Moshiach Oi! exemplifies the manner in which those on the Haredi periphery strive to use, for religious purposes, popular music styles not associated with Orthodox Judaism. Romanoff, still on the building’s roof, tells the camera, “I would describe my music as a punch in the face, of Godliness.” The band’s distorted power-chord riffs, loud drums, and screaming vocals are firmly in the style of punk rock, and the band frequently uses the word “Oi” to index its use in 1970s punk music (Brown 2004). In Punk Jews, Romanoff explains, “Moshiach means the redeemer, and oi is like an exclamation point. Jews are like, you know, ‘we want Moshiach. Yeah, every day we pray three times a day. Moshiach, moshiach, moshiach.’ And we’re like ‘No, we want moshiach oi! Like, we want moshiach oi! Like, we want moshiach now! In your face moshiach!’”

The band’s lyrics are simple, but their force is in their repetition and sheer volume. The song “Baruch Hashem” (Hebrew: Praise God) simply repeats the song’s title over and over, interspersing “oi, oi, oi.” In other pieces the band repeats the phrase “na nach nachma Nachman me’Uman.” This phrase is recited frequently by followers of the “Na Nach” sect of the Breslov Hasidic dynasty, who believe that its repetition will have cosmic ramifications that will induce the messianic era. The band members of Moshiach Oi! are members of this sect.

The documentary shows an incident at a performance that illustrates the band’s belief that the raw energy of their music is enough to bring the messiah. A performance was taking place at Congregation Kehilath Jacob, the aforementioned synagogue in Manhattan that had formerly been run by three Rabbis of the Carlebach family. Moshiach Oi! guitarist Mike Wagner explains, “Here in New York, the Carlebach shul is also a Mecca for people who wouldn’t fit in otherwise in a shul. It’s entirely appropriate for us to be here, because we don’t necessarily fit in with Jewish programming, and to play here is an honor and a pleasure…. This is a place where the
roots are about being alive. Dancing, singing, you know? We got that here. I wasn’t disappointed.”

Wagner explains what happened midway through Moshiach Oi’s allotted time: “We got through half our set, and then we were told by the rabbi, who was sitting behind me, ‘Yo, you guys gotta turn it down….’ See, people think there’s a half-mosh-iah-volume. No. We don’t have a half-way.” The documentary cuts to Romanoff, who explains, “People complained that it was too loud for them. What can I say? I guess the Upper West Side isn’t ready for moshiach.”

The band’s lyrics place great emphasis on their belief that their religious identity requires them to be spiritually separate from much of the world, and that their punk rock style is consistent with this disconnection. Their song “Avraham Was a Punk Rocker” explains this philosophy through a reading of the biblical Abraham, emphasizing his resistance to the world around him in pursuit of his service to God:

Ex. 5.1: “Avraham Was a Punk Rocker” by Moshiach Oi!

Oi, oi, oi!
Born into a society of lies
As a young man he came to realize
That everything around him was deceptive vanity
Avraham was the first one to break free

Avraham was a punk rocker
Smashing all the idols, yeah, he never could be conquered
Thrown into the fire for daring to resist
Giving us a reason to exist

Terach came home to find his idols in pieces
Took Avram\(^2\) to the king in chains with no releases
Nimrod said to Avram "bow to me or meet your death"
He said "no, this is my G-d, He is my breath"

Avraham was a punk rocker

\(^2\) In the Bible, Avram has an additional letter added to his name, at which point it becomes Avraham. This song’s lyrics use both names for this Biblical character.
Smashing all the idols, yea, he never could be conquered
Thrown into the fire for daring to resist
Giving us a reason to exist

Avraham, Avraham, marching on it's a battle cry
Avraham, Avraham, we are his children we will never die
Avraham, Avraham, smash liars, breathe fires, resist
Avraham, Avraham, jumping into the deepest pits

Never gave in, lived for the sake of his Creator
Never backed down, he knew that nothing was greater
Lived for the truth, he fought for the highest love
Giving it to us so we could rise above

We see in Moshiach Oi! similarities with the mainstream Haredi community, but also profound differences. While both stress that one should not be swept away in the greater host society, Moshiach Oi! is not advocating for social insularity. Instead Moshiach Oi! is singing about their belief that “this world is nothing,” as their 2011 album’s title proclaims, and by which they mean that the world is a façade that should be dismissed in the pursuit of spirituality rather than physicality. The choice of punk rock is appropriate for punk’s anti-establishment ethos: “Rude and unconventional, punks tended to view established social conventions as hypocritical obfuscations obscuring the brutality of real life” (Dunn 2008:195). So too, Moshaich Oi! and the so-called “Punk Jews” criticize the spiritual emptiness of the dominant society, and understand “real life” to be a metaphysical existence.

The theme of resistance through art emerges repeatedly in the Punk Jews documentary. A segment on “Jews of Color” featuring writer Manishtana (Shais Rishon) and rapper Y-Love (Yitz Jordan) showcases the racial dynamics that have made both of them outsiders to the mainstream Haredi community. Yitz Jordan converted to Judaism under the auspices of an Orthodox Rabbinical council. He began rapping while studying in yeshiva in Israel in order to memorize long passages of Talmud, though he explains that “people in the yeshiva didn’t take
too kindly to it. It was obviously racist.” When attempting to find an apartment in the Haredi neighborhoods of Brooklyn, he also encountered xenophobia, despite the fact that he was living life fully as a Hasidic Jew.

One apartment that I called, the woman asked me straight up over the phone, ‘Are you white?’ And I said, ‘no.’ And she was like ‘No? Well that’s a little bit not good. This is my house we’re talking about,’ and hangs up. Moses himself couldn’t get an apartment in Borough Park. Not with his black wife, who was from the Sudan. Nah, he wouldn’t get an apartment in Borough Park. (http://www.punkjews.com/watch/)

Y-Love’s music often includes messages of resistance to Western culture. His 2008 EP is titled “This is Babylon,” a name that is meant to criticize the Western world for its corruption and immorality. The first track, also titled This is Babylon, exemplifies this further. The second verse states:

Temporary resident
Enslaved ghetto settlements
No freedom when Nebuchadnezzar be the president
Untruths are self-evident
Irrelevant
Fist, gun, or blade, freed man or slave
These streets are paved with blood of ancient days
Brain waves encaged
Sometimes I think the ones that you raise are the ones you betray
Regardless of sex or age
Innocent lives end silently asleep inside shallow, unmarked graves
They try and say that our race started inside caves
Our minds are intertwined on high by divine rays
Can you bring the end of days with a phrase?
I stand and await the day the dead will be raised
Gonna keep on speaking Aramaic ‘cuz this is Babylon
Babylon, land of the law, the crime pays

The album frequently criticizes then President George W. Bush, and invokes leftist politics and biblical references to speak out against the government. He sees the secular world as hostile to religious practice, such as in the song “6000,” in which he states:

You keep your head covered and they’re calling you names
Trying to read your holy books, they search your bag on the train …
Revolution the solution, the religious direction
Why am I angry? They killed my family. You ask me the question?
Economic superpower with a corrupt leader
A country that won’t feed its hungry, I won’t be
The only voice of urban, uninsured, anger, dysphoria
I’ve no one else left to believe in but the Lord.

Throughout the album, Y-Love also performs a delicate balance of being within the Haredi community, but set apart from it. He frequently includes lines in Aramaic, Hebrew, and Yiddish, demonstrating his place inside the Haredi world. In “State of the Nation” he raps through statistics about the Jewish community, lamenting low rates of participation in religious practice. And yet his openly left-wing politics set him aside considerably from the politically conservative Haredi community. As he states in the song “New Disease,” “When did observant begin to mean fervent conservative? Those people violate the words faster than I can learn them.”

While Y-Love received many rave reviews from both Jewish and non-Jewish rap fans, including write-ups in widely read publications such as URB magazine and on National Public Radio, some raised questions about the music’s impact on the soul. One Brooklyn Rabbi who was instrumental in Jordan’s conversion told the New York Daily News, “I’m proud of Yitz Jordan’s efforts, but music of this type will not benefit the listener spiritually.” On the spectrum of “sounding modern” to “sounding Hasidic,” Y-Love’s music is at the far end of the modern pole, despite the fact that he strongly identified as a Hasidic Jew at the time.

Shais Rishon, who writers under the name MaNishtana (Hebrew: “Why is this different?”), is a fifth-generation black Jew, and is frequently interrogated about his Jewishness. Rishon is the author of two books: Fine, Thanks. How are You, Jewish? and Thoughts From a Unicorn. Both titles showcase the frequent disbelief among other Jews that he was born Jewish, and the constant questioning that he receives from curious acquaintances.
Rishon explained to me in an interview that many people in the American Orthodox community believe there to be a contradiction between blackness and Orthodoxy. Speaking about African-American Jews in the more insular sects of Haredi Judaism, he told me, “The feeling that I get, at least, is that their acceptance [in the Haredi community] is predicated on denying everything that makes them different. And so, that’s not really acceptance” (Interview, 20 October 2015). He spoke about the struggle that African-American converts to Judaism may face in gaining acceptance among Jews, saying, “A lot of people purchase their admission [to the Jewish community] by getting rid of this difference [ie. their identity as African-Americans]” (ibid.). Rishon, in contrast, frequently writes that he is “100% Black. 100% Jewish.” in order to emphasize that this is not a contradiction.

He continued by explaining his belief that this perceived contradiction between Judaism and blackness ought to change. “That’s really antithetical to the entire peoplehood of Jews. Were we all one nation? Sure, but we were made up of twelve different distinct tribal manifestations and expressions of that same Judaism. And that’s really what people need to understand today” (ibid). He explained that many Haredim are comfortable with distinctions in the various Hasidic sects, and between Yeshivish and Hasidic communities, yet “when it comes to one’s race, it’s one of those things [to which people say] ‘put it over there. Be just Jewish” (ibid.).

For African American Jews like Yitz Jordan and Shais Rishon, racial dynamics have pushed them to the periphery of the Orthodox community. Though Rishon was raised in the Chabad-Lubavitch sect of Hasidism, he now identifies simply as Orthodox and avoids further designation, though he has retained certain Lubavitcher idiosyncrasies. Jordan was a follower of the Bostoner sect of Hasidism, but has now left Orthodoxy altogether. His move away from Orthodoxy was gradual and fluid, and was linked to his decision to embrace and publicly
announce his homosexuality in 2012. Their profiles in *Punk Jews* showcase that while both have
created art that explores the artistic possibilities of this periphery, their interactions with others
based on race contributed greatly to their identity on the margins.

“Weird Jews” and “Fitting In”: The Haredi Periphery and Jewish Social Taxonomies

In *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing Up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn*,
anthropologist Ayala Fader offers an account of childrearing among Bobover Hasidim in
Brooklyn, with a focus on “how the Hasidic women I spent time with teach girls, through
everyday talk, to use their autonomy to ‘fit in’ with communal expectations …” (2009:2). She
explains that Hasidic mothers engage modern American ideas about identity construction, and
often use the language of these parenting guides:

In practices of *kninekh* ‘moral education’, Hasidic women engage the modern notion of
the self as a project but with a key difference: the modern Hasidic child realizes
fulfillment by independently conforming to a religiously communitarian society rather
than to one that promotes pride in individualism. When Hasidic children learn to use their
individual autonomy to ‘fit in’ (a local English term) and fulfill their responsibilities to
other Jews and God, they are ultimately participating in the Jewish moral narrative of
redemption … one never knows which Jew’s pious actions might just ‘tip the scale’ and
bring the Messiah. (ibid.:35)

The importance of “fitting in” in Haredi society persists through one’s childhood years
and into adulthood. The extent to which one has managed to “fit in” has enormous implications,
particularly when it comes time to meet with a *shadchan*, a matchmaker. Dating in all Haredi
communities is entirely oriented toward the goal of marriage, though the specifics of the dating
practices vary among subgroups. For example, in some Hasidic sects people are expected to be
married by age eighteen, while in the Litvish community and among other, more liberal Hasidim,
it is generally accepted for young men and women to wait until their early twenties, after several
years of post-high school Torah study. The decision to begin dating generally involves input
from one’s parents, as well as Rabbis and Rebbetzins (Rabbi’s wives) with whom the young person has developed a relationship. Before meeting with a shadchan, young men and women prepare a “shidduch resumé,” a document that encapsulates a person’s traits that are relevant for meeting his/her marriage partner, and includes information such as what schools and summer camps they have attended, the locations to which they are willing to relocate, a description of their personality, and a profile of their ideal husband or wife. Resumés often also include information about one’s siblings’ marital status and careers, and contact information for friends and Rabbis who will serve as references. In some communities it is expected that one provide a recent photograph, while in others that is deemed superficial. A shadchan will send the shidduch resumé to potential matches, or their parents, in order to determine if an in-person date should be arranged.

The shidduch resumé is more than a description of one’s personality and accomplishments; it is an indication of how well one has “fit in” to a particular Haredi subset. Information about the schools and summer camps that one has attended are seen as indications of the stream of Orthodoxy to which the person belongs. Those who attend desirable institutions, list respected Rabbis as references, and display consistency in hashkafah (Hebrew: world-view) are understood to be “normal.” As Fader describes (2009:58), “‘Normal’ implies a familiar way of being, a known and recognizable set of behaviors…. Being ‘interesting’ was far from a compliment; an ‘interesting’ child was one whose behavior called attention to itself because it was different and unexpected in a negative way.”

Thus, to be “normal” is, in Haredi society, often a prerequisite to receiving attention from a shadchan. Dating outside of this system is, for many, simply not an option, making conformity a tremendously important value. As Fader succinctly frames the issue, “The very reproduction
and growth of the Jewish nation rests on fitting in” (2009:59). The issue extends beyond marriage, as fitting in can also determine one’s job prospects, the schools to which one’s children are admitted, the neighborhoods into which one is welcomed, and simply how one is viewed in the community.

The Haredi periphery rejects the idea of being “normal,” embracing terms such as “weird” and striving to create opportunities for difference. This excerpt from a 2015 post on Hevria.com titled “Because We are Weird Jews” by Matthue Roth captures the sentiment well:

> Every time I see someone on the subway reading, I get a surge of friendship. It doesn’t matter what they’re reading, or if I’ve got a book in my hand at that moment or not—I get this instant recognition, *This is one of my people.*

> I’ve been doing that since I was a kid, finding holes in the world I can stuff myself into. I am weird. Most of the rest of the world is not. And when you’re a frum Jew, the feeling only intensifies—*Here, says G-d, are 613 ways in which you should act EXACTLY like everybody else.*

> Someone told me that the Lubavitcher Rebbe said that the 613 mitzvos, the rules we follow, are like the meter of a sonnet. Lines A and C had to rhyme, so did B and D, there had to be five iambs in every line, a soft syllable followed by an accent. But within those hard rules, you could use any words you wanted.

> That’s what being frum is to me.22

Roth refers here to the 613 mitzvos (Hebrew: commandments), and argues for an opportunity for individuality within their fulfillment. The post goes on to suggest that “weird Jews” (a term he borrows from the LiveJournal group described above) should be a positive example in times following a negative act by another Orthodox Jew:

> If we hear of a Palestinian toddler killed by Jewish extremists, if what being Hasidic means to some mentally screwed-up guy is that he needs to stab a young girl in the heart because she’s gay, there needs to be someone saying, *That’s not all of us.*

> Or, screw that.

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We don’t need to say it. We need to say other things—better things—things that we do believe in, things we think are awesome and powerful and spiritual and things that we need to fill the world with. Stabbing a 16-year-old girl is not what I think G-d thought of when we got the 613 mitzvos. But writing about the inherent holiness of pizza, or sex ed in yeshivas, or Hasidus in an apocalyptic world … that’s exactly the strictness and the bendiness that I think are inherent in mitzvos.

By asserting the existence of a category of “weird Jews” (or “Punk Jews” or “out-of-the-box Jews”), Roth and others make space for the individuality that they wish to find in their religious observance. Others who are turned off by the Haredi mainstream but still wish to be strictly religiously observant are attracted to this expression of Judaism, as seen in the following quote, which is an excerpt from a response to Roth’s article by an anonymous reader:

I’ve been feeling exceptionally down about questioning myself and my beliefs based on the actions and beliefs of Hasidic extremists. I feel so torn between defensiveness of Chassidic people, or making a clean break. (In fact if I had to list the number one most depressing thoughts of mine this year, it's those ones.)

But this article, starting with "Oh, screw that," filled me with this totally unexpected, inexplicable surge of relief and excitement. (You know chills down the spine? This was like that, but it went to my heart, plus it was warm and fuzzy.)

For some in the Haredi mainstream, it can be difficult to categorize these non-conforming Jews. Many belong to Hasidic sects, but simply do not fit the standard identity model, while others dress as though they appear within a recognizable stream but differ greatly in their opinions, preferences, and experiences. Many of the individuals I have met who participate in Hevria and/or express these attitudes have had significant exposure to Chabad, and indeed many (though certainly not all) of them identify as Lubavitcher Hasidim. Hevria’s events, and many similar gatherings, often take place in the Lubavitcher stronghold of Crown Heights.

The connection between the Haredi periphery and Chabad is based on at least two factors. Firstly, Chabad’s outreach efforts to non-Orthodox Jews have brought many individuals into its ranks from the outside. These baalei teshuva bring with them a wide array of experiences
and beliefs that are not necessarily dismissed after adopting orthopraxy. While many baalei teshuva strive to “fit in” among life-long Lubavitchers, others prefer to cultivate their own Jewish identity, using the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s teachings and Lubavitcher customs as a guide. Secondly, Chabad is far more open to non-Haredi society than other Haredi groups. Ellen Koskoff writes, “Indeed, the modernization of the community has been a conscious goal of the Rebbe; his relatively radical ideas (from the Hasidic point of view) concerning recruitment, education for women, and the protection of women’s and children’s rights have distinguished him as having pulled his community into the twentieth century” (2001: 65). Some have argued that the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s death in 1994 has opened the door to even more freedom of expression, and less restriction on how one must behave. M. Avrum Ehrlich writes, “Over the years, many talented people had been attracted to the movement. With the death of Schneerson, some of them felt free to ‘find themselves….’ Some are following careers in business, but many are playing music, writing books and poetry, film scripts, and research dissertations, and some have even entered upon academic careers” (2004:271).

An intense messianic fervor surrounded Schneerson as early as the 1980s (Heilman and Friedman 2010:219), and this contributed to the creation of space for non-conformity within Chabad’s ranks. The “Moshiach campaign” launched by Schneerson and undertaken by his followers was seen as highly transgressive by the broader Jewish world, and encouraged broad affiliation with the Lubavitcher movement as it democratized this formerly elite and erudite community. Other Haredim, suspicious of this valorization of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, distanced themselves from Chabad. Following Schneerson’s death in 1994 speculation regarding his candidacy for fulfilling the role of the messiah has only grown. Chabad’s identity as an outlier, particularly one without a living leader to keep the Hasidim in line, has enabled those who wish
to push the boundaries of Hasidic behaviors to do so, including the many baalei teshuva who retain behaviors from their lives prior to adopting Orthodoxy.

Even while Chabad offers greater latitude in identity and behavior, I have met many individuals who feel that they are on the periphery of Lubavitcher society. They walk, or perhaps cross, the lines of social permissibility, though they generally remain committed to religious requirements related to prayer, diet, Sabbath observance, and other facets of Orthodoxy. For those individuals, the Haredi periphery offers a sense of community that may otherwise be lacking.

Another important connection in Jewish social and intellectual taxonomy is between the Haredi periphery and Modern Orthodoxy. Saul Berman explains the differences between the two:

The Haredi experiment starts with the assumption that the two worlds are so radically opposed that the only way to safeguard the Orthodox worldview is to maximize separateness. This required the development of a vision in which the ideal life is led entirely within the confines of the Orthodox community—men in kollelim, women at home, children in schools that reflect the desired uniformity of religious behavior. When economic conditions require adult departure from safe ground, the deviant experience should be minimized in time, in degree of intersection with the external world, and should not be granted any value for itself....

… The Modern Orthodox experiment begins with the assumption that Orthodoxy can preserve its integrity and passion, and even be enriched, by its intersection with modernity, and that the interaction will allow Orthodoxy to bring to the broader world a clearer vision of the grandeur of Torah. (Berman 2001)

Modern Orthodoxy takes as its motto the phrase “Torah U’Maddah,” Torah and (Secular) Knowledge. Berman explains the philosophy in the following way:

While the Torah is entirely true, human reason applied to the study of all of reality can also produce truth. We are required to engage with and study both Torah and other knowledge in order to properly achieve love and fear of God. We are permitted to study any aspect of human culture that enriches our intellectual, spiritual, or aesthetic identities. However, where the application of these studies might lead to behavior that conflicts with Torah, we must submit to the authority of Torah. Engagement in this struggle is positive
and results in a responsible learning, thinking, and spiritually vibrant community. (ibid.)

Modern Orthodoxy, then, is quite compatible with the worldview of many on the Haredi periphery. Indeed, some prominent members of the Hevria community such as Elad Nehorai identify with Modern Orthodoxy, though that relationship is also tenuous. In December 2014, Nehorai posted an essay on Hevria describing his recent decision to stop dressing in Lubavitcher garb on Shabbos. He explained that he had experienced discomfort regarding Chabad’s
dismissive attitude toward science, and found great meaning in Norman Lamm’s book Torah
U’Maddah (1990), a key text on Modern Orthodoxy that encourages Jews to engage with science and find compatibility in these two systems of thought. After reading writings about the
Lubavitcher Rebbe by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, a Modern Orthodox Rabbi who served as the Chief
Rabbi of the United Kingdom, Nehorai felt that he could blend Modern Orthodoxy and Chabad Hasidism. He felt that to express this fully meant shedding the Hasidic garb, but not his relationship with the Rebbe and Lubavitcher mystical teachings.

While Nehorai has moved from Chabad Hasidism to embracing aspects of Modern
Orthodoxy, others have moved from Modern Orthodoxy to Hasidism and blended these two expressions of Judaism. This is the case for the folk ensemble Zusha. All three of the band members were raised in Modern Orthodox communities, and attended Modern Orthodox schools. While percussionist Elisha Mlotek would fit into any Modern Orthodox setting with his short cropped beard and contemporary clothing, lead singer Shlomo Gaisin wears Hasidic garb, a long beard, and peyos past his shoulders. Guitarist Zecharia Goldschmeidt has the look of a Hasidic hippie, with long peyos and an eclectic array of earthy clothes. The band has been dubbed “neo-Hasidic” for their contemporary spin on the niggun genre, adding folk and rock elements, as well as blues-inspired note bends and jazzy instrumental solos. Their album Kavana
(Hebrew: Intention) reached number two on the Billboard “World Albums” chart in January 2016. The band’s name works on several levels, as it references an early Hasidic sage whose name happens to be made up of the first Hebrew letter of each of the band member’s names.

Zusha’s music generally foregrounds a vocal melody, sung either with vocables or a short Hebrew phrase from the Torah or prayer liturgy with the accompaniment of vocal harmonies. Some songs have a full drum set and dense instrumentation, while others have sparse percussion, or none at all. After several repetitions of the two- or three-part melody, the musicians generally trade improvised solos, which ensures that performances of a piece are never the same. The improvisatory nature of their music reflects their worldview. As Zecharia Goldschmeidt stated in an interview with the Times of Israel, “This new younger generation of Jews is not looking just to survive. It is looking to thrive. You find a lot of people who are creating music, making art, writing, giving tzedakah (Hebrew: charity)…. We find ourselves riding on the wave of this movement. People are really looking to have color in their lives” (Palmer 2016).

Elisha Mlotek elaborates on how this is found in their music:

The idea is improvising that which is always structured, but to hold onto the structure. We are trying religiously to hold onto something that is old and true, and also to let it apply today. Musically, the way that manifests itself is that we play nignunim—wordless melodies—that have structures, but they are fluid and improvised and in the moment. When we play the same nignunim with different musicians, every time it becomes something different. (ibid.)

Shlomo Gaisin sees improvisation as an opportunity to leave some of the music making up to God: “We hold onto the structure, and we know it very well, and then at certain moments there is a chance to let go and let HaShem do it” (ibid.). The blend of Hasidic nignunim, representing adherence to Orthodoxy, and an improvisatory structure in which one must creatively find ways to express Godliness, even in environments that do not exude spirituality, is the hallmark of Zusha’s worldview.
Zusha’s musical style is exemplified in “East Shtetl,” the first piece on their 2016 album.23

23 “East Shtetl” is performed in the key of D minor on Kavana. I have transcribed it here in A minor for ease of reading.
Ex. 5.2: “East Shtetl” by Zusha

The recording begins with Gaisin’s solo voice singing the melody for four measures. The other two vocalists then enter and sing harmonies, generally forming simple, but impactful,
major and minor triads. The piece continues with a B section (measures 9-16); on this first performance of it, it is sung with vocal harmonies but without instruments. At the end of measure 16, the melody descends chromatically and Gaisin’s vocal timbre changes slightly from the smooth and introspective tone he has had throughout to a slightly more rough and nasal sound that highlights this melodic chromaticism and hints at the coming change, as the instruments enter and the piece returns to the top. Guitar, horns, drum set, keyboard, strings, accordion, and bass guitar can be heard in the recording, strongly emphasizing the off-beat in a manner that resembles common conventions in reggae music. On this second performance of the A and B melodies, the vocal harmonies are consistent throughout, and do not rest for the first four bars as they did at the beginning of the piece. Upon reaching the end of measure 16 for the second time, the piece continues with a new four measure melody (section C, m.17-20), the first two bars of which are unaccompanied, marking a striking difference in the music, though the instruments return with full energy for the second half of the section. After a repetition of section C, the band returns to the now familiar B section (m. 21-25, marked B’ in this transcription), again performing it twice. This concludes the composition, but much like a jazz piece, the niggun is to be performed as many times as desired, and with variations that fall within the accepted performance practices of the genre. On the album version of “East Shtetl” the band performs the full structure three times, with the third as a platform for improvisation. A saxophone solo, playing in a style that clearly draws on jazz idioms, takes place through the A and B sections of the piece (two cycles of measures 1-16). At measure 17 the instruments drop out, as they do during the “head,” and vocalist Shlomo Gaisin begins a scat singing solo during the eight bars of the C section, again with instrumental accompaniment in measures 19 and 20. The band comes
together at measure 21 to perform this final B section in a more straightforward manner, and concludes after this third run through the piece.

In “East Shtetl” Zusha plays with the similarities between jazz and niggun idioms to provide a unique twist on a repertoire traditionally associated with Hasidic Judaism. We see here a form that looks much like a typical jazz “lead sheet” in its inclusion of several sections marked by different melodies, with the understanding that the piece is to be performed with as many repetitions as the musicians desire. Similarly, the harmonic foundation provides sufficient guidance for soloists to improvise over the form and retain the structure of the piece. The repetition of each section is a common performance practice in the singing of niggunim.

According to Rabbi Tzvi Freeman, a writer for Chabad.org who studied music composition at the University of British Columbia:

> The parts of the nigun are called “gates”—entrances from one spiritual world to a higher one. Each demands not only new breath, but a new state of consciousness. The fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Sholom DovBer, taught, “Each gate must be repeated twice. The first time only traces a form; the second time carves deep into the soul.”

> Touching the soul is indeed a priority for Zusha. In an interview Zacharia Goldschmeidt stated, “Our music is about revealing your inner light. Discovering what animates your life and your neshama (soul). The niggun allows us to unite under a common melody” (Potek 2016). In a 2015 post that Shlomo Gaisin wrote for Hevria, titled “I’m Shlomo and I’m a Soul,” he embedded a recording of a new melody he had composed for the Jewish liturgical phrase, *Ana Hashem hoshia na, Ana Hashem hatzlicha na* (Hebrew: Please God save me now, Please God help me be successful now). In the concluding paragraph of the Hevria post, Gaisin explained his understanding of the prayer (the bolded font is retained from the original post), and refers to

Planet Gashmi, his own playful term to refer to gashnius (Hebrew: physicality, as opposed to spirituality [ruchnius]):

It’s one of the little big prayers, short but so infinitely poignant and deep. “Please Hashem save me now”—from getting caught up on the shell of who I am, aka. plain old body + “Please Hashem help me be successful now”—in connecting directly to my essence, to my core, to the real me. Help me connect to my soul not just once a week, or even everyday, but rather help me connect to my soul now and in every moment and experience on planet Gashmi. (http://hevrion/shlomo/im-shlomo-and-im-a-soul/)

Zusha’s intense striving for spirituality is a characteristic of a movement that some have called “Neo-Chasidism.” In December 2014, Gaisin’s photo graced the cover of Jewish Action, a publication of the Orthodox Union, along with the words “The Rise of Neo-Chassidus.” An article in the issue titled, “Rekindling the Flame: Neo-Chassidus Brings the Inner Light of Torah to Modern Orthodoxy,” explains that a growing number of young adults in the Modern Orthodox community are turning to Hasidism to enhance their spirituality. In 2013 Yeshiva University, the flagship institution of Modern Orthodoxy, hired Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, a Hasidic Rabbi, in the role of mashpia, a spiritual guide. The article notes that “Rabbi Weinberger’s appointment as mashpia at YU last year indicates just how deeply the neo-Chassidus movement has impacted the Modern Orthodox world.” This is a dramatic shift, since Yeshiva University has “traditionally embraced a more intellectual or Litvish approach to Torah study. Now YU offers weekly shiurim in Chassidic thought, monthly farbrengen with Rabbi Weinberger as well as a Rosh Chodesh musical minyan, all of which represent a dramatic shift for YU.” The presence of music in their prayer and at their farbrengens, and the decision to put Shlomo Gaisin on the cover of the issue, all point to the centrality of music in this movement. The article also notes Shlomo Carlebach’s role as “the first to bring Chassidic-style song and tefillah to the Modern Orthodox world.”
While one could argue that Zusha exemplifies “neo-Hasidism,” the band hesitates to identify with this term, or any other label. As Goldschmiedt states, “I think it’s wrong to be 100% Hasidic or 100% of anything for that matter, because it’s too closed minded. Nowadays, it’s important to be able to see the good in the other’s thinking” (Wojno 2014). Nonetheless, their connections to Hasidism are clear, even while they reject the insularity and uniformity of the Hasidic community. Their embrace of both Jewish law and contemporary society certainly resembles the Modern Orthodoxy in which they were raised, but the band’s embrace of aspects of Hasidism also holds great meaning for them.

For Nehorai, and others in the Hevria community, connections to Hasidism or other Haredi institutions remain strong, even while they find meaning in Modern Orthodox philosophy. These Jews, by and large, attend Haredi synagogues and schools, study Haredi texts, and observe Haredi interpretations of Jewish law. Thus, to call them Modern Orthodox would be inaccurate, and would dismiss their many points of connection to Haredi Judaism.

Nonetheless, Nehorai acknowledges problems with saying that his community is “out-of-the-box.” “Really, it’s not like we’re out of the box. We’re just creating a new box…. What’s our box? Our box is something that came from the inside-out. It came from people who had a certain vibration inside their neshama and they are connecting with others who feel the same way” (Interview, 30 October 2015).

The creation of a new box is an important concept for the Haredi periphery, and may be crucial for their vision of Judaism. Their non-conformity may make it difficult for them to function in Haredi society in fundamental ways, for example, their children likely would not be admitted to many mainstream Haredi schools. Likeminded individuals have actualized their vision with the creation of new institutions, for example, Lamplighters Yeshiva. This elementary
school in Crown Heights is a Chabad Montessori school, run by Yocheved Sidoff, a frequent contributor to Hevria. Matthue Roth explained to me that the creation of Lamplighters was a very deliberate attempt to establish the Haredi periphery of Crown Heights as a sustainable community. Acknowledging that the options available to them for educating their children were simply not going to work, they needed another option.

If you were regular Chabad you sent your kids to Beis Rivkah. If you were really frum you sent your kids to Bnos Menachem. And if you were us, you didn’t have a place…. It was us saying, okay, we’ve had our fun. We’ve run around and put on shows and gone crazy and done our art. And we’re still doing that, but now we need to talk tachlis (Hebrew: specifics, “brass tacks”). We’ve lived our lives our way, but now we need to form a community and make our way of living something more stable, something with continuity. (Interview, 10 January 2017)

While the periphery of Chabad has found a way to work around existing institutions, others who do not have ties to Chabad, or do not live close to Crown Heights, are forced to make decisions about how to handle these situations. Some individuals have told me that they plan to home-school their children, while others have compromised and sent their children to more mainstream Haredi schools. Other Haredim who are more comfortable in the established ways of being within the Haredi community have expressed to me that the group I refer to as the Haredi periphery is merely a quickly passing fad, and with time they will all either find their place within the established taxonomy of Orthodoxy or leave it altogether. “At the end of the day, everyone wants to fit in,” one Haredi Brooklyn resident told me.

The constant tension between conformity and self-directed religious fulfillment makes those on the periphery hyperaware of boundary negotiation. These individuals neatly fit Robert Park’s description (1928:892) of the “marginal man,” who is a “cultural hybrid, a man living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples….” Put differently, the marginal man was “one whom fate has condemned to live in two societies and in two, not
merely different but antagonistic cultures” (Stonequist [1937] 1965:xiv). Park was particularly interested in individuals who were raised in one culture but later adopted another. While Park was primarily thinking of the outcomes of migration (Goldberg 2012:201), the baalei teshuva involved with the Haredi periphery bare a striking resemblance in their refusal to completely abandon the world from which they come in order to assimilate into the community into which they have entered. Indeed, Park saw emancipated European Jews as the classic example of the marginal man, as articulated by his student Louis Wirth, who wrote that Jews “lived on the periphery of two worlds, and not fully in either” (Wirth [1928] 1956:73). Situated in such a way, one is always conscious of the boundary between these two worlds. The concept of the marginal man was further developed by Milton Goldberg, who suggested that in order to avoid the discomfort and instability of this existence, a strategically beneficial option was the development of a “marginal culture,” a community of those in the same position in which the marginal man could be “at home and at ease” (Goldberg 1941:57). This is precisely the motivation for those who participate in Hevria’s nascent community. The Jews on the Haredi periphery are always aware of their place in both societies and are extremely sensitive to the manner in which they straddle these lines. By standing with one foot on either side of the boundary, they are both acknowledging these lines and opposing them. This makes the Haredi periphery quite problematic in contemporary internal Haredi discourses of boundary negotiation, thus providing a ripe opportunity for the periphery to form its own community on the margins.

25 The concept of the marginal man bares similarities to W.E.B. DuBois’ concept of “double consciousness,” which was an inspiration to Park (Goldberg 2012:202).
Nehorai acknowledges that some people are suspicious of their position on the periphery and “think it’s a gateway drug to going off the derech or something” (Interview, 30 October 2015). When I asked him if this is true, he paused for an extended time, then replied:

I think it’s a gateway to how people really want to live their lives. And I think that because I know people who have become much more frum because of it, and say ‘I finally feel like I have a place in Judaism.’ They were going to ditch it, and they find ‘okay, there are people who are like me.’ I’ve gotten much more feedback like that. I don’t know anyone who has gone off the derech directly because of Hevria, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it happens. But I actually think that’s the beauty of Hevria. We’re not afraid of that happening. Because what we care about more is someone accessing their neshama, and being true to who they are. Not in a way of selfishness, or narcissism, but in a way of ‘what am I meant to be doing in this world? Why am I really here? What’s my mission? Who am I?’ So many people don’t spend their time thinking about such things. (ibid.)

Just as mainstream Haredim have accused Hevria of being a portal to going off the derech, some might view the music of the Haredi periphery as being similarly dangerous. Consistent with the ideology that Nehorai expresses in the above quote, those on the Haredi periphery do not place boundaries of sonic permissibility on their compositions, instead focusing on “accessing their neshama” in the music genre that they believe is best suited for the task. This can be seen in the following quote Elisha Mlotek of Zusha, as he discusses the band’s use of many different music genres: “You will often hear a little bit of reggae, some Latin percussive rhythms, as well as some jazz. But what you ultimately experience is the music resonating with the soul” (Benedek 2016). While those in the Haredi mainstream are deeply concerned with situating their music within the range of accepted practices—for example, one Haredi popular musician who is known for “sounding modern” told me that despite his willingness to push some boundaries, he would not incorporate rap music—the periphery is not concerned with these limitations. Like other areas in which the Haredi periphery rejects elements of Haredi culture,
while also maintaining ties to Haredi interpretations of ritual practice, the periphery takes these liberties in the sonic domain as well.

Hevria has thus become an important site for identity negotiation for those on the Haredi periphery, who often speak in a language of modernity that emphasizes self-actualization and the formation of an ethical self, and also emphasizes fluidity of identity. These Jews simply do not lament the breakdown of older institutions. While they seek to build “a new box” within Orthodoxy’s taxonomy, it is one that has flexibility and can withstand the conditions of liquid modernity.

**The Haredi Periphery in Liquid Modernity**

The characterizations of religion offered by Bauman fail to accurately conceptualize the lives of the strictly religious Jews described in this chapter. His suggestion that religious “fundamentalism” is a rejection of the omnipresence of choices in favor of an all-encompassing framework for approaching the world simply would not apply to the Haredi periphery. These individuals are, to a very high degree, engaged with the world even while they see themselves, to borrow a phrase from Christian theology, “in, but not of” the modern world. Alternatively, Bauman might claim that they are indeed a “melting” religious community, as evidenced by their inability to avoid participation in the host culture. This too would be problematic, as the group’s very identity is premised on the deliberate engagement with the modern world in order to best serve their spiritual lives, and have created a community around this very goal. In fact, liquid conditions are, in some ways, ideal terrain for these Jews, as many are comfortable with fluidity in religious identity. Bauman’s work does not sufficiently account for those who thrive in the flow of liquidity while living out ideals that run counter to a “market-oriented logic of action” (Bauman 1997:185).
The experience of embracing liquid conditions has led to an outpouring of creativity. Musicians express and live out religion through the media of the host society—the very same media shunned by the Haredi mainstream. Moshiach Oi! uses punk’s values of separateness and rejection of the mainstream to assert a religious identity that is markedly different and oppositional. Y-Love uses rap music’s historical ties to advocacy for marginalized groups in order to speak out against injustice and the maligning of religious people. Simultaneously, he sets himself apart from the Haredi mainstream by calling attention to aspects of the Haredi community with which he disagrees, and distancing himself from those Haredi Jews. Zusha uses the overlapping conventions of the niggun, jazz, and folk idioms to express an Orthodox spirituality that draws on the modern world, rather than rejecting it. The Jews described in this chapter see this religious orientation as more than a belief system. For them, it is a movement.

The Haredi periphery’s determination to participate in the modern world while remaining distinct from it requires constant self-reflection and attention to boundaries. As they negotiate their lives in relation to both the Haredi community and contemporary America more broadly, they make decisions about how to negotiate their religious convictions, ritual practice, and participation in the larger community around them. While those who exist within the mainstream core of Haredi life can rely on their upbringing to provide a roadmap through life (even if one chooses to dismiss it and act on their own), those on the periphery take the matter into their own hands in a much greater way as they navigate the world beyond the Orthodox community. Like mainstream Haredim, those on the periphery are concerned about Orthodox continuity into the future, and want to ensure that their children are strong enough in their religious beliefs to withstand any forces that could challenge their resolve. The creation of a community in which these Jews can discuss how to best handle these challenges strengthens the very social ties that
Bauman claims are threatened by liquid modernity. Furthermore, the cultural productions of these individuals, such as the music described here, reinforces the belief that one can successfully use these media to enhance their spiritual lives and create a strong religious identity on the periphery of the Haredi community.
Chapter Six: Conclusions

It was the holiday of Sukkos in 2014, and I was crammed, along with approximately 100 Haredi men, into a small wooden hut in Borough Park. Ben Zion Shenker had been asked to perform at this private *sukkah*, a temporary dwelling in which Orthodox Jews eat and sleep for the duration of the eight-day holiday,¹ and word spread among local music fans that he would be holding a kumzitz there. The sukkah was packed far beyond its intended capacity, and those who were unable to fit listened from the yard. Several young children had climbed onto the roof to watch, and they peered in through the holes in the sukkah’s bamboo mat covering. All around me Haredi men wore their finest clothes and sang along to the niggunim as they rocked back and forth, fully immersed in the music. Wanting to capture Rabbi Shenker’s masterful command of the gathering, I set my cell phone to its video recording function and held it above the sea of *shtreimels* (cylindrical fur hats worn by many married Hasidic men) in the hope of getting a clear view of Shenker. Just as I was allowing myself to get lost in the music, a friendly Hasid standing just to my left turned to me and asked, “Hey, is that the iPhone 5 or the 6? I’m thinking of getting the 6, but it just came out last week and I’m waiting for reviews. I hear it has a better camera, which is great because I hate the camera on my 5. On the other hand, I was thinking of getting an Android. What do you think I should do?”

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This interaction at the kumzitz encapsulated much of my experience researching Haredim in the greater New York region. As described in this dissertation, music plays an important role in the reinforcement of social ties among these deeply religious Jews across both space and the

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¹ The practice of dwelling in a *sukkah* is based on the commandment in Leviticus 24:42-43: “You shall live in booths seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths, in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I the Lord your God.”
generations. The niggunim sung in the sukkah that evening highlighted the beauty of the Sukkos holiday, while emphasizing historical connections to important Rabbis of the past and linking those in attendance to the imagined core of Haredi life. Simultaneously, the Haredi Jews gathered there were negotiating their relationship with liquid modernity and its market-driven current.

In this dissertation, I have taken seriously Bauman’s description of the melting of contemporary social institutions and have sought to refine his theory by arguing for the possibility of the solidification of social ties. I have suggested that Bauman’s metaphor of liquidity has many similarities to the ways that the Haredi community sees the outside world, but that my ethnographic findings of this “lived religion” suggest that his understanding of religion—particularly its relation to capitalism—could benefit from revision. In the following concluding thoughts I attempt to tie together threads that run throughout the preceding chapters.

Bowling Alone, Praying Together, and Musical Summoning

Robert Putnam’s book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000) suggests that by the end of the twentieth century Americans were less inclined to join social organizations such as sewing clubs, NAACP chapters, marching bands, and bowling leagues than they had been since the baby boomers reached adulthood in the late 1960s. Putnam tracks communal engagement across the second half of the twentieth century and ultimately argues that this weakening of social ties can be attributed to 1) pressures of time and money, 2) urban sprawl and the physical distance between people, 3) the prevalence of television and its privatizing of leisure activity, and 4) generational replacement from an unusually high rate of engagement among mid-century young adults (Putnam 2000:283-284). Using a wide array of statistical metrics, Putnam’s research concludes that “In short, Americans have been
dropping out in droves, not merely from political life, but from organized community life more generally” (64). One of the most intriguing sections of the text, though, points to a group that may trend in a different direction. In a chapter concerning religious involvement and its correlation to social engagement, Putnam writes, “Religious involvement is an especially strong predictor of volunteering and philanthropy…. The social ties embodied in religious communities are at least as important as religious beliefs per se in accounting for volunteerism and philanthropy. Connectedness, not merely faith, is responsible for the beneficence of church people” (67). In fact, “regular church attendees reported talking with 40 percent more people in the course of the day” (ibid).

Iddo Tavory’s book *Summoned: Identification and Religious Life in a Jewish Neighborhood* (2016) helps us to understand this reinforcement of social ties in a religious community. Tavory notes that, during his ethnographic research in an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood in Los Angeles, he and his interlocutors were constantly being “summoned, brought into interaction and existence as inhabiting a specific identification category” through frequent invitations to classes on religious texts and requests to attend services to ensure a quorum, as well as situations in which one is “summoned into being” (6) by having to navigate one’s neighborhoods and conversations to adhere to Jewish law and enact one’s religious identity. As a result of this constant summoning, Tavory “found something thick, almost palpable, in the quality of neighborhood life…. Trying to explain the texture of everyday life to friends outside the neighborhood, I often resorted to metaphors of thickness, of viscosity—living an Orthodox life in the Beverly-La Brea neighborhood was like swimming in honey” (3).

Tavory’s quote clearly explains the difference between Haredi social ties and those of the liquid modern world that I have studied in this dissertation, and also encapsulates the actions
through which one comes to inhabit the identity category of Orthodox Jew. I suggest that cultural productions such as music summon people in similar ways, and that this can help explain why those who are deeply engaged in religious communities are less likely to be found “bowling alone.” Music helps to summon people into various relationships with their social categories. While niggunim summon people to the imagined core of the Haredi community, Haredi popular music and the music of the Haredi periphery call people into complex and diverse relationships with the imagined Haredi ideal, depending on both the music’s features and one’s own perspectives. This form of summoning reinforces ties between individuals and others in their communities through the musical articulation of group identification. These identity politics are negotiated within a context of dense social ties that are reinforced as one is summoned into Haredi life, or its outskirts, through music-listening choices. When Haredi Jews accept these summonses, the social terrain becomes more viscous than the melted world outside the religious community.

Tavory’s concept of “summoning” relates to an underlying theme of this dissertation: “fitting in.” When one is summoned, or summons oneself, into a particular Haredi identity category, this should be understood as an effort toward fitting in. “Fitting in” involves a multidirectional gaze directed both inward and outward. One distinguishes him/herself from the non-Haredi world, while also attempting to justify one’s own behaviors and ideals that are incongruous with the imagined Haredi ideal. Music composition choices and listening habits are indicative of one’s identity category, and at times individuals must find ways to argue that particular musics are sufficiently “pure,” that is, connected to the past. Music must “sound Hasidic” and technology must be directed toward the continuity of the Haredi community. Performance practices, too, are helpful in this musical summoning. Communal singing, and the
highly repetitious nature of niggunim summon individuals into their community. Much like the repetition of ritual acts that discipline ethical selves, with each repeat of a stanza, a communally sung niggun has the potential to bring an individual deeper into the fold.

When one is “summoned” into the Haredi community, one is taking his/her place in a teleology that valorizes the past and attempts to bring it into the future. According to the Haredim, the world becomes further desacralized with each passing day, and thus the new is always suspicious. Individuals like Luft attempt to be gatekeepers who determine whether or not new music is sufficiently rooted in the past, or is dangerously bringing in outside material that could upset the continuity of Haredi Judaism. It is no surprise, then, that children and elderly community members are seen as symbols of viable cultural continuity. This helps us to understand the popularity of boys choirs and the respect given to Ben Zion Shenker. The adults who are in between the young and the elderly must negotiate these boundaries and perform the labor of protecting themselves and their families from the outside. They are most often tasked with orchestrating this collapsing of past and present, and creating the cultural productions that suggest a healthy future. To many Haredim, even music that includes features of mainstream Western pop music can be seen as continuing the idyllic lifestyle of the past if its lyrical content and performance practices sufficiently demonstrate devotion to the past.

While in this dissertation I have demonstrated the manner in which music’s ability to reinforce social ties among Haredim counters the unidirectional melting of modernity presented by Bauman, it is important to suggest that these conclusions point to other avenues through which solidification may be possible. While Putnam’s research has demonstrated that Americans are largely opting out of religious observance, those who do attend “church”—a term that he uses not only to mean Christian worship venues but those of all religions—are far more likely to have
more solid social ties. Scholars interested in the solidification of social ties might further investigate the activities of various “churchgoers” and their participation in volunteer activities and charity giving. Furthermore, it would be valuable to compare the musical experiences of Haredim with other religious communities, both maximalist and minimalist, in connection with their social engagement.

Moreover, the re-solidification of contemporary social ties must be studied beyond the context of religious communities. Additional work will need to be done to identify communities that are resisting the melting powers of modernity, and the tools through which they do so. Advocacy organizations, for example, have been successful in holding large rallies, gathering signatures, and persuading people to leave their homes and attend events. If scholars can identify organizations that are similarly successful we can develop a richer account of the ways in which actors autonomously resist liquid modernity. Similarly, we must also take account of the specific collectives that have succumbed to the melting powers of liquid modernity and note how and why this occurred. Such accounts would contribute a much-needed ethnographic component to Bauman’s highly theoretical work.

Finally, further consideration of the Internet as tool of social unification must be conducted. If Hevria’s model, in which internet-based communities lead to substantive in-person communities, proliferates, we must rethink exactly what one means by social ties, and if online social networks may be stronger than previously considered. Additionally, the Internet creates new situations in which one is forced to identify and navigate the boundaries of the Haredi community, and to encounter that which is beyond the border.
Religion and the Market

While the discourse around “liquid modernity” has foregrounded Marx and Engel’s claim that “all that is solid melts into air,” their statement that “all that is holy is profaned” is an important component of Bauman’s work, even if not often discussed explicitly. In Of God and Man, Stanislaw Obirek reminisces that in 2002 he persuaded Bauman to write an article titled “What Do Non-Believers Believe In (And Are There Any?).” In it, Bauman quipped, “The point is not that people are losing faith in eternal values, stepping beyond the horizon of the passing moment. The issue is, rather, that eternity, for a normal citizen of the market-consumerist world, has ceased to be a value” (Bauman and Obirek 2015:112).

As described in Chapter One, Bauman sees an alternative to this melting form of religion, one that he identifies by the English term “fundamentalism.” This form of religion is maximalist and offers an alternative logic by which to make decisions. These fundamentalist devotees are less compelled by the market and instead are driven by religious leaders and their texts. In some cases, Bauman’s analysis fits the contemporary Haredi community very well. It is appropriate to cite a story that Lipa Schmeltzer has told in several interviews when describing his upbringing in the Skver Hasidic community:

I grew up thinking that the Rebbe would be my lawyer to Hakadosh Barush Hu [God] on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur,” Lipa said. “One day, my father wanted to buy a car. So he went to the Rebbe to ask permission—he would never make any decision before consulting with the Rebbe. The Rebbe responded, ‘Why would you possibly want that?’ My father took that as a hint and just didn’t buy the car. This is just one story that shows the deep fear and admiration that my father and everyone in New Square has for the Rebbe. (Hirt 2015)

Lipa Schmeltzer’s description of the reverence and deference that his father showed toward the Rebbe illustrates well the difference in logics between Haredim and market-driven modern subjects. The Rebbe’s words trumped the individual’s purchasing autonomy. Moreover,
it is significant that Schmeltzer chooses this anecdote when he seeks to describe life in the Skver Hasidic dynasty. When Bandak and Boylston write that “the ‘orthodoxy’ of Orthodoxy … lies less in the idea of the individual or the text as holder of divine truth, than in the community of deferral,” (2014:26) this is precisely the decision making process that they have in mind. Similarly, it is significant that many Haredim imagine their lifestyle as a turn away from the endless consumerism of the so-called “secular world.” Consider the lyrics to the song “The Process” by The Living Wells, a rap group made up of American baalei teshuva who are now Litvish Haredim.

Ex. 6.1: “The Process” by The Living Wells

In the not-too-distant history I lived ignorant blissfully,
A citizen indifferent to the mystery, so typically,
College and career, cash, friends, and beer,
And enough New Age to satisfy me mystically.
At least superficially, I thought I had my purpose,
Until a tiny itch made me scratch the surface,
That exposed a black hole, showed my path was worthless,
Man, I was trapped inside a blackened furnace.
The questions burned in me like a fever,
Why do we escape reality at the movie theater?
Is there more to life than buying out the clothes rack?
Why’s the wealthiest country got everyone on Prozac?
What’s the answer? Started digging for roots,
Realized the real roots don’t begin at my boots,
Traveled up to my mind’s eye, rose to the sky,
Let it settle in my brain and I was never the same.

[Chorus:] Just begin, throw caution to the wind,
Before you’ve got the answers gotta start with a question.
Life’s a test, you won’t pass if you guess,
Everybody’s got a destination and a process.

After I had seen enough went back to readjust,
“The truth is easy stuff, my life I’ll clean it up,”
But I couldn’t keep it up, I couldn’t heal the cut,
It couldn’t get worse, chest hurt like I was breathing dust.
When I’d try to grow there’d be something to tempt me,

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2 Lyrics available at http://www.thelivingwells.com/the_process1/
Shared my thoughts with friends, their stares were empty.
I forgot my new career, things had gotten nuclear,
The world got lonely, reality was too clear.
I asked a wise man, what should I do here?
He said truth can change you, but there’s nothing to fear,
Out with the old, kick it into new gear,
Cuz you just heard the call that only few hear
And even fewer follow, then he peered into my soul,
And spoke these nineteen words that made me whole:
The path is not all good, but I’d rather
Be a slave to truth than a king over falsehood.
I tried to fake it, I couldn’t take it,
I could fool my own mom but inside was naked.
I ran to escape it with no direction,
Tripped by a pond, saw myself in the reflection.
I begged him to leave and he laughed in my face, he said,
You’d rather be a rat in the race? Start acting your age!
You just saw the blast of the rays,
You can’t close your eyes and step back in the cave.
The last puzzle piece snapped into place,
Truth is not an option, it’s a matter of fate,
Ignorant bliss isn’t freedom, it’s nonsense,
You’re either ruled by society or subconscious.
That’s when I hit the point of no return,
The clarity so bright that my shoulders burned,
The only option now is to go and learn,
My body had a chance, now I’ll give my soul a turn.

“The Process” describes the narrator’s disillusionment with American consumer
mentality, and a desire to reject the endless and ultimately unfulfilling pursuit of career
advancement. The lyrics frame mainstream Western, particularly American, society as
consumption-addicted, shallow, depressed, and physical, placing it directly in contrast with
Haredi life, which is presented as truthful, light, clear, and spiritual. By rejecting his body and
focusing on his soul, the narrator turns to the rhetoric of spiritual health, which, as described in
this dissertation, is a primary concern of contemporary Haredim.

Sentiments like those expressed by Schmeltzer’s father and The Living Wells fit
Bauman’s formulation well, and it is for this reason that I employ his work in this dissertation.
However, as described in Chapter Three, the lived experiences of Haredim differ greatly from the imagined existence in which they defer to religious leaders for every decision rather than participate in the uncertainty of liquid modernity and its economy. Rabbis do indeed provide counsel on a great many personal issues but, like the iPhone owner I met in the sukkah, many Haredim are largely autonomous in their decision-making and purchasing habits, and are often knowledgeable consumers. Haredim are heterogeneous, differing in their degrees of intercultural contact, deference to leaders, and purchasing habits. Despite the directions provided by religious leaders, Haredim frequently negotiate the boundaries of inside and outside in their own way.

This differs significantly from the *compleat mappa vitae* imagined by Bauman (1997:185).

Bauman’s description of the religious subject who rejects the market-driven ontology of liquid modernity in favor of a life free of decisions through the mechanism of deference is simply not the reality for the vast majority of Haredim that I have encountered. These Haredim are actually far more engaged in the liquid modern world than might at first be apparent, and autonomy is indeed asserted in ways similar to other Americans, even if in a more limited range. Within this range, though, the choices that one makes are extremely significant for one’s identity performance and social orientation. It is thus important that we understand the manner in which individual decisions are made, how public reasoning helps to establish community standards, and how social ties are reinforced. In this ethnographic account I have contributed an examination of the lived experiences of contemporary Haredi Jews in order to emphasize the importance of these features of Haredi life, and to demonstrate the manner in which their cultural productions reinforce ties within the society.
In an audio recording for Chabad.org, Rabbi J. Immanuel Schochet, a Lubavitcher who holds a PhD in Philosophy, offers an interpretation of the biblical verse, “Jacob left Be’er Sheva and went to Haran,” (Genesis 28:10) using a Hasidic tale. He seeks to explain why the Torah mentions the place from which Jacob departed, while the text has already established that he lived in the city of Be’er Sheva. Furthermore, it seems that the important component of the sentence is the location to which he travelled, and the verse could have just been written, “Jacob went to Haran.” Schochet explains:

Yaakov was on his way to Haran. Haran was a wicked place, a city of evil people. In fact, Lavan, Yaakov’s uncle and later his father-in-law, was one of the worst people, and probably the very worst in that city…. As Yaakov had to go there anyway, he had a serious problem. How would he be able to stand up to the immorality of Lavan and the city of Haran without being corrupted by that evil environment? The Torah thus tells us that Yaakov left Be’er Sheva. This suggests that Yaakov deeply imprinted upon his mind and heart a reminder of his roots…. In fact, our sages find that the chronological sequence in the Torah proves that Yaakov did not go straight from Be’er Sheva to Haran. There is a lapse of fourteen years between his leaving Beer Sheva and his coming to Haran. Where was he during that time? We are told he spent those years studying Torah, reinforcing and enhancing the teachings he had received from his parents and grandfather, Avraham. There is a story about a famous Hasidic sage, Rav Meir’l of Premishlan. Every day he immersed himself in the mikveh (Hebrew: Ritual Bath), and the way to the mikveh involved going down a quite steep hill. Rav Meir’l went down the hill every day, in summer and in winter, even when it was covered by snow and ice. People could not understand how he was able to navigate that ice-covered hill without slipping, and his Hasidim looked at this feat as a miracle. Reb Meir’l himself, however, discounted anything miraculous about it. He explained his unusual ability by saying, ‘When you are tied solidly to above, you will not fall below.’ This may be the meaning of ‘Yaakov left Be’er Sheva.’ Yaakov tied himself solidly to above—to his roots, to his spiritual identity, to the heritage of his parents and grandparents, to his heavenly source and mission to make sure that he would not fall below when exposed to the evil and corruption of Haran. A rational person will not willingly expose himself to danger. We will not and must not endanger our life and health. Sometimes, however, we cannot help but be exposed, and thus we take every possible precaution to guard ourselves. We may have to take guards, weapons, special food, special medication, inoculations for immunization, and so forth. These precautions however, must be taken not only when there is a threat to our physical wellbeing. All this applies no less when there is, or may be, any threat to our spiritual health and well-being. If circumstances compel us to be in an environment of spiritual disease or danger, we must make every effort to protect and immunize ourselves against
the infected. And that is what the Torah instructs us, Yaakov’s descendants, to keep in mind and follow.\(^3\)

Schochet’s article articulates well the concern for “spiritual health” that I have found to be pervasive during the course of my fieldwork. This message is conveyed through numerous channels. Torah exegesis, such as this lecture, is a common avenue, and because it is presented as a message emerging directly from the Torah, this is the most authoritative manner for the spiritual health discourse to be disseminated. The notion is linked both to the cultivation of an ethical self, with similarities to that described by Saba Mahmood, but also to social and political distinction. This is illustrated by Steven Mazie’s discussion of Haredi objection to military service in Israel, in which he reports the words of a Haredi interlocutor who stated:

> The worst thing that could be for the People of Israel is for us to send our youth at the age of eighteen, at the age of ‘stupid teens’ [ti peshesray], and you can’t understand this, because you aren’t capable of understanding how we educate our children. We raise them in a kind of spiritual greenhouse. I cannot describe it to you because you aren’t capable of understanding it. You have to get to know it from up-close. And to take the youth when he’s growing up in a greenhouse and expose him to the atmosphere of the army is, quite simply, certain to damage his spiritual health. And so to send this youth at that age to this army—it’s not just that it won’t contribute anything to the People of Israel, but that it will damage it, God forbid. Some people say there is no kosher food in the army, but there is no kosher atmosphere in the army! (Mazie 2006:195)

This presentation of spiritual health as reliant on one’s social surroundings is a common theme in Haredi moral discourse, as seen also in the presentation of boys choirs’ “purity” in Chapter Four. As demonstrated in each chapter of this dissertation, music is often linked to one’s spiritual health, not only on the basis of aesthetics but also based on the types of social interaction involved with the music’s consumption. In Chapter Two, I argue that the niggun functions as an “ideal repertoire” through its constant pull toward the imagined core of Haredi society. The niggun is seen as having a positive impact on the soul, and tales abound attesting to

\(^3\) Audio class available at http://www.chabad.org/multimedia/media_cdo/aid/469314/jewish/Parshah-Insight-Vayei.htm
the spiritual power of niggunim. In Chapter Three, I examine public reasoning over the acceptability of various genres of music, demonstrating the manner in which lay individuals and leaders draw the lines of permissibility. Spiritual health is frequently the battleground on which questions of permissibility and legitimacy are fought. In Chapter Four, I focus my attention on the prominence of boys choirs in Haredi society, and show how these young children stage a secure future for the Haredi community. This future is not premised on numbers or demography, rather it is a presentation of the spiritual life of the community and the youth’s commitment to Torah study, prayer, and the performance of mitzvos. Finally, in Chapter Five I analyze the Haredi periphery and demonstrate that even while they engage music genres that some have dubbed profane, these musicians are deeply concerned with cultivating a spiritually beneficial experience through their music. In creating an identity category on the periphery of the Haredi community, these individuals assert that spiritual health is found through exploration and non-conformity. To others in the Haredi mainstream this may seem more punk than frum, and they may see these “out-of-the-box Jews” as varying degrees of “Off the derech,” and certainly not spiritually healthy.

The importance placed on the social interactions brought about by the various genres of music described in these chapters demonstrates internal tensions in the Haredi community. The community’s anxiety over the crossing of imprecise boundaries. There is no consensus over who or what is authentically Haredi, despite the attempts of some to create standards. For many Haredim, the threat of the outside world is always looming, but when the threats come from within—when those who are within the ranks of the Haredim expose others to these outside
elements—the situation is the most dangerous. At times like this, hardliners such as Luft may feel compelled to insist upon increased boundary maintenance, building walls around the community that are higher and higher, despite the porous nature of the walls themselves. One of the wall building tools is the discourse of spiritual health.

As described in this dissertation, the Haredi popular musicians who, even in their respect for the community’s values choose to incorporate “modern” sounds, are not embraced by all members of the community. Differing musical choices can be read as differing visions for the Haredi community. While Eli Gerstner, Ben Zion Shenker, and Zusha all state that they are performing niggunim, their music indicates to the Haredi listener a difference in their place in the Haredi world. Despite their claims to authenticity through the use of the niggun, not all of these compositions “sound Hasidic.” All of the musicians profiled in this dissertation wish to see the Haredi community retain elements from the past, but their culture war against “the modern” has, in some ways, divided the community. This diversity of Haredi ontologies is cause for concern to some, resulting in public reasoning that can, at times, be tumultuous.

The spectrum of “sounding modern” to “sounding Hasidic” can be understood as a measure by which to classify a music’s proximity to the imagined Haredi social core, and thus to an optimal environment for the cultivation of a healthy soul and spiritual life. Sociologist Bryan Turner has written, “The dominant concerns and anxieties of society tend to be translated into disturbed images of the body” (2003:1). As described in Chapter Two, I suggest that these concerns are also mapped onto the soul. The Haredi community’s anxiety regarding assimilation and the continuation of their religious and social practices is seen in this discourse of music and spiritual health.
The soul, of course, is a convenient rubric for those who wish to argue against a particular type of music. The soul’s health can never be accurately measured, and there is no yardstick or vocabulary for having to prove one’s claims. Instead disputes over the spiritual impact of a particular music genre, or other cultural production, are decided either by individuals, or by leading Rabbis. Even when respected rabbis make these proclamations, however, individuals choose whether or not to heed their words. Thus power dynamics in the Haredi community are more complex than they first appear.

While prominent Rabbis, particularly Hasidic Rebbes, often make statements regarding proper conduct, these statements are often not enforced. Power is consolidated with these men due to their perceived holiness, but they do not often concern themselves with ensuring that their followers heed their words. As described in Chapter Three, rabbis do have the authority, through convening a Rabbinic court, to put someone in cherem (a form of excommunication), though they rarely avail themselves of this extreme form of censure. We see that for Haredi Jews, Rabbinic social power is largely in the realm of ideas rather than practice. It is only valid insofar as lay Haredim choose to honor it, but, as seen in the case of Lipa Schmeltzer, people can be creative in finding ways around this power hierarchy.

Liquid Modernity: A Useful Framework?

This dissertation has reconsidered the unidirectionality of Bauman’s liquid modernity framework in an attempt to demonstrate an important function of music in American Haredi society, as well as to refine Bauman’s work. As noted in Chapter One, the sentiments that Bauman expresses are strikingly similar to those expressed by Haredim themselves. As Haredi leaders attempt to turn their community away from all that is modern, tropes of the instability, mutability, and value-less character of the “modern world” are rampant. As the lyrics of “The
Process” above describe, many in the Haredi community see those outside of their community as consumer-crazed, always pining for the next status symbol, but never reaching satisfaction. Bauman too saw this feature of contemporary society and was concerned by its predominance. His works on liquid modernity read like a eulogy, longing for stability and interpersonal connection. The Haredim fear this liquidity, and many attempt to protect their community from being washed away.

The framework of liquid modernity is, I believe, a useful metaphor in discussing the path to structural instability that Bauman describes. However, it is crucial that in any use of the liquid modernity framework one includes the possibility of re-solidifying social ties. Today, many people are recognizing the disconnections that liquid modernity has brought with it, and finding ways to connect with those around them. “Fasting” from technology such as cell phones and the Internet has become a popular remedy for those feeling overly attached to them. Websites such as MeetUp.com are facilitating interactions between people with similar interests, with the philosophy that “when we get together and do the things that matter to us, we’re at our best.”

It is clear that those living in the liquid modern world are becoming increasingly aware of it, and are seeking ways to strengthen social ties in ways that they find meaningful. This resistance to liquid modernity is a feature of social life that cannot be overlooked when considering the relationships that people form in the twenty-first century, and its importance will likely only grow in years to come.
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