



**COLLEGE
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OLD-WORLD JEWISH MUSIC REBORN IN THE NEW

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Skirball Campus and your host.

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JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast and a conversation with my friend and colleague from the Hebrew Union College, Dr. Gordon Dale. Dr. Gordon Dale is the inaugural Dr. Jack Gottlieb scholar in Jewish music studies and assistant professor of ethnomusicology at the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music of the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion.

JH: He has most recently conducted extensive research in the Hasidic communities of New York and Israel, and he has lectured across the United States on topics related to Israeli popular music, Jewish music in general, and mysticism. Dr. Dale is currently the executive director of the Jewish Music Forum, a project of the American society for Jewish music.

JH: His forthcoming book, *The Life and Works of Rabbi Ben Zion Shenker*, just won the 2021 Jordan Schnitzer First Book Publication Award. Dr. Gordon Dale, Gordon, welcome to the College Commons Podcast and congratulations on the Jordan Schnitzer Award.

Gordon Dale: Thank you so much. And thanks for the invitation to be here. It's really a pleasure to talk to you.

JH: I look forward to this conversation and I wanna set it up by asking you, before we launch into this remarkable story about the musicologist and composer, Ben Zion Shenker, to set the stage for us. What is the backdrop against which we need to understand this remarkable career?

GD: Rabbi Shenker lived for 91 years in Brooklyn. He was born in 1925 in Williamsburg to Polish immigrant parents, who were both from Hasidic families, and he lived until 2016. Rabbi

Shenker was a musician who came of age at the time that many Hasidim and many Jews were coming to America as they flee the Nazis in World War II.

GD: So this was really a remarkable time as Hasidic culture was uprooted from Europe and had to find a new home somewhere else, and Brooklyn came to be one of the most important hubs. So Rabbi Shenker, as a young man at that point, absorbed this music culture that he was learning both from his parents and from other immigrants, but then from this big wave of Jews who came over from Europe.

GD: He came to be a very important person in the transmission of Hasidic music, and as he absorbed those norms of the music culture, came to be a composer himself. He composed some of the most important works in the Hasidic music canon that are now known even beyond Hasidic communities.

GD: So his life is very fascinating in how he came to embody this music culture and really to take an important role in transmitting it into the future. So that'll give a little bit of a taste of who he was. And of course, what's interesting about that, in addition, is that when we place Ben Zion Shenker in the foreground, we have the opportunity to watch the background change as well. So during that 91 years of his life, the Hasidic community, and indeed the Jewish community of New York changed dramatically.

GD: And so that's kind of a part of this project as well. While I maintain my focus on Rabbi Shenker and his music, we do have the benefit of watching everything that's happening around him as well. It's a really nice opportunity to get to study this period in Jewish history by focusing on one individual.

JH: So acculturate us a bit, induct us into the distinctive role of music in general and the nigun in Hasidic culture? And even more specifically than that, the role of the nigun in Modzitzer Hasidism in particular?

GD: The Hasidic community can really trace its roots back to the Baal Shem Tov. The Baal Shem Tov came to be an important figure in creating a movement within Judaism that grew in the generations after his passing. He passed away in about 1760. So the movement, the group picked up on his messages of having an ecstatic religious experience. And by that, what I mean is that he centralized a concept that had been around in Judaism prior, but he really brought it into the foreground.

GD: And the concept is called *deveikut*. "*Deveikut*" literally means "to cling". In modern Hebrew, the word "*devek*" means "glue". So he really wanted to inspire people and encourage people to strive, to cling to God. And that was an experience that wasn't just reserved for the elite, it was for anybody.

GD: He wanted to suggest that there are numerous ways to do this. For the Baal Shem Tov an important one was prayer. And his students developed this idea by having very unusual rituals within prayer. Some of them involved things like doing somersaults and doing acrobatic kinds of moves. Dance came to be an important one. And we have evidence that one of the things that the Baal Shem Tov promoted as a means for religious service was music.

GD: Now, as Hasidism branched out in the generations after his passing, numerous, what were called "tzadikim", religious leaders who are considered to be exceptionally holy, highest, and learned, set up their Hasidic courts around Europe. One of the Hasidic courts that came to be established in a few generations later was known as the Modzitz dynasty, they're based in Poland.

GD: The Modzitz leaders, and in fact the father and the grandfather of the first Modzitzer rebbe, really ran with this idea of music as an important way to serve God. And for them, melody was paramount. This was the religious medium, the musical medium that was known as "niggunim".

GD: The word "nigun" literally means a melody. But when we say "niggunim", what we really mean are a loosely bound canon of songs. And these songs are sometimes used in prayer services, but also sometimes just used whenever, really literally whenever one wants to feel connected to God. So in Modzitz the nigun came to be an important means for serving God, in addition to prayer and Torah study of course.

GD: But the Modzitzer rebbes, the leaders, tzadikim, were composers. So their compositions have gone down in history as some of the most important works in the canon of niggunim, and Modzitz has kind of become known as the masters of Hasidic music. So to bring it forward just a little bit, in the era of World War II, the Modzitzer rebbe at the time, Rabbi Shaul Yedidya Taub, he had a circuitous route fleeing from the Nazis, but he ended up in Brooklyn, which is where he met Rabbi Shenker. So Rabbi Shenker came to become a musical secretary to Rabbi Taub and absorb the Modzitzer musical canon.

JH: When we speak of Shenker's role as a transcriber and preserver of the nigun and the Modzitzer niggunim in general, are we talking, just so we understand the work, are we talking about transcribing from a strictly oral tradition, or transcribing from another form of musical notation?

GD: The nigun repertoire had really been an oral tradition. It was passed down through people hearing the music. And as important as it was within the Hasidic culture, specifically in the Modzitz culture, it wasn't written down. When World War II started, and when Rabbi Shaul Yedidya Taub, the rebbe, saw what was happening to Hasidim, he recognized that this wasn't only a threat to the lives of these Jews. Of course, that was extremely concerning.

GD: But it was also a threat to the oral traditions of these Jews and these practices, and he recognized that it was important to make every attempt to preserve this music culture. So while

he was still in Europe, he was able to identify a few people who are willing to risk their lives to help notate some of this music, and Rabbi Taub would sing the pieces for these people who would write it down in Western music notation because Rabbi Taub did not have experience with music notation, he didn't know how to do it himself.

GD: But as the rebbe he was the holder of the repertoire, and he had an incredible memory and was able to sing these pieces from memory, and would sing them to musicians who could transcribe them. So he was able to get out of Europe. He spent some time in Shanghai, and eventually he was able to secure a visa to come to America.

GD: When he did, he came to Brooklyn, and Rabbi Shenker and he met, and Rabbi Shenker had learned how to read and write music notation at that point, he was about 15 years old at the time, and he was asked by the rebbe to become what they called his "musical secretary", which meant to transcribe this repertoire. So he continued this project that the rebbe had begun while he was in Europe at the time.

JH: As you've indicated, Shenker's life seems to highlight a number of major historical themes in Jewish and Hasidic life of the 20th century. At least two things in particular caught my attention that I want to build on, and you referred to the first of them yourself, which is the relationship that Shenker had to the rebbe, the leader of the Modzitzer sect, and it highlights a bigger theme of religious leadership in Hasidim in general.

JH: Give us a little understanding of the role of the rebbe, and what the significance of Shenker is insofar as he was a secretary of sorts and a delegate to the rebbe, to understand the relationship as a window into Hasidim?

GD: The rebbe is of paramount importance in Hasidim. The rebbah, which is the other way to pronounce the name that the Hasidim will often say, the rebbe is the person who the Hasidim look to, to understand the ideals and the ideal of how to be a Jew. So a Hasidic rebbe is more than just a figurehead for the Hasidim, the rebbe is also the person that they look to when they need to know how to behave, how to act, and who they can go to ask questions about what to do in a given situation.

GD: Everything from what to do about a business venture, to what to do if they are suffering in some way. So when the rebbe came to America, he was bringing the dynasty with him. And I don't mean that in terms of the people, I mean that he came and as the figurehead for Modzitz, he was finding a new home for the Modzitz Dynasty and the musical repertoire that was part of the Modzitz Dynasty's history and their Yerusha, their inheritance that each of the Hasidim absorbed and saw as their own.

GD: So when Ben Zion Shenker at age 15 meets the rebbe, he taps into this music culture, this repertoire, this inheritance that was so profoundly exciting. These melodies are beautiful. When we think of niggunim, we often think of short little ditties that are repeated over and over and

over again. And indeed there are many pieces of music that are like that. But in Modzitz the profundity of the music can't be overstated.

GD: These are pieces that in some cases take 25 minutes to perform from beginning to end, have many different movements within them, and many different musical ideas that are developed over time and often require significant vocal skill to perform correctly. So I can imagine that the young Ben Zion Shenker, who had already had some experience singing in choirs, had accompanied many great Hasidim, when he heard this music, it must have been very, very exciting for him to understand that there's this treasury of Hasidic music that he could tap into and that he could learn and absorb.

GD: And ultimately, that he could be the next link in this chain, not as the rebbe, but he did end up having a very significant musical role within the dynasty. So in that way, I think that his meeting with the Modzitzer rebbe was really, really life changing.

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JH: The Hasidic leadership had to decide to either embrace or reject modernity, and in particular technology, which was burgeoning as we know in the 20th century. How should we understand Shenker's groundbreaking foray into the world of vinyl from the point of view of his community's evolution?

GD: To give some background, in 1956, Ben Zion Shenker released the first recording of a Hasidic dynasty's music. He put out a record called Modzitz Melave Malka. "Melave Malka" refers to escorting the Shabbat bride on Saturday night. So Melave Malka is a meal that's held after sundown on Saturday night at which certain melodies are traditionally sung, and Modzitz has many beautiful melodies for those songs.

GD: So he put out an album that he called Modzitz Melave Malka, and this was the first time that this had happened. He did seek permission from the rebbe at the time, and though the

rebbe was hesitant to give it and said, "I really don't know if I should permit this or not," ultimately he did give his blessing to the album, and it was only then that Shenker commenced work on it.

GD: This was a very significant moment because the Hasidic community was in the 1950s, still reeling from the immense trauma of World War II and was trying to figure out how to maintain their lifestyle, how to protect themselves from external threats, while also continuing to exist and continuing to adapt to the circumstances in which they've found themselves.

GD: Now, this is not unlike the internet, which would happen decades later, of course. When the internet was first entering the homes of the average person in the United States, this was a major question for the Hasidic community. What's the proper way to respond to this? And it continues to be a question even now in 2022. And people have taken different approaches to this, both on the individual level, the family level, the business level, and then in terms of the institution of the Hasidists as a whole.

GD: So it's something that has been really fundamentally important within the history of Hasidism, how to adapt to continually changing situations, many of which can be seen as threatening to the culture, while also recognizing that there are opportunities in this technology to spread the riches that the Hasidic life had to offer to its members, to its adherents.

JH: And beyond as well.

GD: And beyond as well. Absolutely. So for example, in the Chabad-Lubavitch community, it's well known that they're interested in spreading Hasidism beyond just their community, and they've embraced technology and used it, often in very innovative ways, to spread their message. Most of the rest of the Hasidic community has taken a different approach, which is to try to remain a bit more contained.

GD: So the idea of this record in 1956 was really quite profound, but it started a whole bunch of different activities that happened. So many Hasidic groups at that point started to produce records that showcased their musical repertoires as well. So it was partly preservationist and partly a recognition that entertainment had become a very important part of Jewish life in the United States. So the idea that you could have this glatt kosher entertainment of Hasidic niggunim was a way to address the circumstances.

JH: I'd like to ask you to take a step back from this remarkable niche of Jewish life, and to ask a bigger question about art, legacy and preservation. What does it mean when an artist, as Shenker appears to have done, curates his own legacy in life in an ongoing and self-conscious manner, as opposed to allowing the external forces of the artistic marketplace and connoisseurship to do that work?

GD: I think that Rabbi Shenker's career pulled in both directions. On the one hand, he was shaped by his religious community and his music was very much a response to the needs of that community, and to his own experiences as he went through everyday life. Many of the niggunim that he wrote were for specific occasions, such as weddings within his family, or a bar mitzvah within his family, or a request that came from someone within his community. And in that way, we could say that he was really staying within the bounds of the normative music culture.

GD: Now, on the other side, we see that he really did recognize that some of his pieces became hits. And the idea that one could have a hit song within the Hasidic community might sound really funny, but this was sort of the outcome of having recording technology. So I suppose that there are several ways that we could look at this.

GD: You could see it as a commodification, or you could see it as a continuation of what was happening before. Because even without the recording technology, there were certain pieces prior to this that became hits, we could say. People liked them and they used them in different ways. So I don't know that we can ever say that an artist is completely being shaped or is shaping. I think that the arts have a way of existing somewhere within both of those spaces.

GD: People create for all sorts of reasons and they're often jumbled together. So I think in the case of Shenker, it's clear that he both walked through his life with a constant attention to how to compose for the moments and for the circumstance. But he was also aware that to continue his musical career, people had to like his music and he had to continually put out songs that were appealing to people on each of his records. So it was really a combination of the two, and I expect that this is often the case for artists.

JH: Your book which we are discussing today, *The Life and Works of Rabbi Ben Zion Shenker*, is not only a biography of Rabbi Shenker's life, but also a definitive addition and compilation of his oeuvre, but it's of the oeuvre that the repertoire that he himself curated in life, the 446, I think, works.

JH: And it excludes those works that he himself excluded in that act of self-curation or as you have re-casted, at least partial self-curation. Is there another book coming out? Is there something maybe revelatory or challenging that we might learn if we were to dig into those works that Shenker himself excluded from his self-curated oeuvre?

GD: Well, the truth is it would be hard to find them. Anything that he composed that he considered to be worthwhile went into a binder. He put together seven binders throughout the course of his life. And so anything that didn't make it into the binder has probably been lost to history.

GD: It certainly is possible, and I hope that this is the case, that one day someone will do the work of going through all of the recordings on which his voice can be found and find other

niggunim that he said that he wrote but didn't make it into the binders. And this would be an enormous project because he sang on so many recordings.

GD: And I don't mean professional recordings, I mean handheld recorders that people used in the synagogue on times when it was permissible to record. Or on his porch, or in his living room. He was very, very generous in letting people record him performing music, and people would often come to him and ask him to sing some old pieces so that they could get the correct version of it down.

GD: So it's possible that there are recordings out there that are in somebody's personal collection, on which he'll say, "This is a piece that I wrote," and we don't have it in the binders, and I hope that one day we'll get a collection of those pieces as well.

JH: Over the years, anthropologists have, as I understand it, grown to appreciate the consistency and constancy, counterintuitively, of oral traditions, which we might tend to think are unreliable and ever changing. But it turns out that they're actually quite reliable. And so I wonder, is it possible that the preservationist impulse to commit these things to writing also comes at a cost, and that we lose not just the vibrancy of the oral tradition, but even its conservatism?

GD: Yeah, I absolutely think that that's true. When it comes to music, we can see this very, very clearly, because there's much that Western music notation does not convey. I've had the experience of hearing someone sing a Hasidic nigun who doesn't know anything of the idiomatic ornamentations that go along with the music.

GD: When it's sung based purely on the written notation, it really, really loses something. And this isn't just the case for Hasidic music, what I'm describing can be transferred into a lot of different music cultures. So we absolutely lose something by just writing it down, it needs to be accompanied by that audio component.

GD: My long-term hope for the project that we're discussing now would be to link his written notation to a recording of him singing the piece whenever possible. A great deal of recordings from the Modzitz Hasidic Community in America have been given to Dartmouth University, and Dartmouth is in the process of digitizing those recordings and making them available for free on their website.

GD: So it would be a big project but a worthwhile one, to whenever possible, give a link to the recordings of Rabbi Shenker singing his pieces. But that's a very modern thing to be able to do. What you're asking about, the writing down of niggunim, we do have a potential problem including some things and losing others from the repertoire, and we have to just hope help that this can be supplemented in whatever ways is possible by people who know the repertoires very well and engage in their own preservation efforts.

GD: So it's a very tricky thing to try to preserve a music culture, but through a combination of writing down and recording whatever we can, and having people within the community who continue to keep this music alive and use it in its original contexts, then we can do the best we can to keep it going. This really speaks to the importance of ethnography, of going to the places where the music is breathing and alive, and trying to observe it in those contexts.

JH: Traditionally, Hasidism seeks to emphasize joy, joy in God, joy in fulfilling God's commandments, joy in Shabbat and in holidays, joy in living. Among the arts, is there something unique about music's capacity to communicate and actually generate emotion, joy included? Is music more replicable, more portable, more readily participatory than other human arts? Does it touch a chord, forgive the pun, [chuckle] that other arts cannot do? Or not? Is it not unique in that way?

GD: That's a great question. As an ethnomusicologist, I suppose I'm bit biased towards music, and I spend so much time focusing on the ability of music to bring in the people who are in the music's reach. So we'd have to really do a study on this and speak to people who study other art forms to really get at your question. What I can say though, is that there are certain forms of music with a very low bar to entry, and the nigun really excels at this.

GD: As I mentioned, there are pieces within the repertoire, specifically in the Modzitz repertoire, that require a great deal of skill to perform and to perform correctly, but there are many pieces that can be performed by anybody who has the ability to sing, and not even to sing well but just to create sounds with their mouths. And I understand that that's not everyone, but it is a lot of people.

GD: So the nigun is, in some ways, kind of a perfect vehicle for what you're talking about, Josh, which is to the ability to delight in God's presence. The music is certainly a fantastic tool for expressing this Hasidic ideal. Whether it's better equipped than any other art form, I certainly can't really say, but I can tell you that it is very good at what it's supposed to do, and there have been plenty of Hasidic texts as well that emphasize that point.

JH: Are you able and willing to illustrate the point with a Modzitz nigun for us to end the interview?

GD: Well, rather than having me sing some of his music, let's hear Ben Zion himself sing some of his most famous pieces. Here it is there's a little mashup that I put together for us.

[music]

JH: That was wonderful, Gordon. Thank you so much for sharing this incredible story and taking the time to have this really wonderful conversation.

GD: Thank you, Joshua. I really appreciate the invitation and the chance to talk about the project.

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