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The History of Music at Temple Israel: A Reflection of Evolving Identity

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Congregations create their identities through the history and rituals of their religion, denomination, and region. The changes occurring in the identity of a congregation are reflected in its liturgical music. According to Nathan Mitchell, “music processes, organizes, stores, classifies, and remembers human experience.”¹ The music performed at Temple Israel reflects the temple’s constant attempts to address their evolving identity as a Jewish congregation in Memphis. In turn, this constantly evolving identity is built on the beginnings of Reform Judaism in Europe, the way history has shaped it in America, the unusual circumstances of the American South, and in the city of Memphis.

Mark Slobin wrote that Jewish interpretation can be expressed in different forms, one of them being music, which is always “snowballing its way through history, enlarging through gradual accretion, as well as varying from place to place at any given time.”² The analogy of Jewish liturgical music “snow balling” through time applies itself to the evolution of Temple Israel’s music over the course of its rich 155-year history. Just as it resembles a snowball with its ability to increase in size through accumulation and variation in shape and weight, liturgical music at Temple Israel can also be used as a lens to peer into changes in the identity of the congregation overtime. Liturgical music can be used as a lens through which congregants and outsiders alike can understand how the congregation’s identity has come to be and how its identity may change in the future. Changes in music are important in portraying the changing

¹ Mitchell, Nathan D. *The Amen Corner. Atlas.* 57

² Marini, Stephen A. *Sacred Song in America: Religion, Music, and Public Culture.* (University of Illinois Press, 2003) 136.

dynamics of the congregation itself over time and in the future. These changes become living examples of doctrinal and liturgical changes that have occurred over the life of a congregation.

It is possible to observe the changes that a congregation has implemented in its performance of music within its religious practices. Moreover, it can be apparent what historical significance reforms had within the congregation itself and situate the congregation within the spectrum of its denomination and religion in terms of divergence in musical performance and choice. Amnon Shiloah , an Israeli musicologist, agrees, stating that “Jewish liturgical song was inevitably shaped by the cultures in which Jews of the Diaspora have lived for nearly two millennia.”³ Jewish liturgical music has thrived in the Diaspora, and has been affected by the cultures in which it is cultivated, as well as perhaps affects the cultures in which it comes to life.

In America, freedom of religion and small, isolated Jewish communities in the South established the flexibility needed to create specific identities through music. Memphis’ identity as a city helped to create the environment needed for a Jewish community to flourish in the South. Religion and music are intertwined in the history and identity of Memphis, and it could never be the city it has become today without either one. The Evangelical Christian churches of Memphis have greatly influenced the music and identity of the city. Religion and music in Memphis have not only been influential in shaping Christian identity, but Jewish identity as well. It appears certain that when the Jews of Memphis established a synagogue in 1854 that music would play a pivotal role in conveying the congregation’s identity.

Beginnings of Reform in Europe

Before there was American Reform Judaism or even Jews in Memphis, reforms were taking place in synagogues in Germany and in Eastern Europe, and they all began with music. One reason music began to be introduced into the synagogues of Prague at the beginning of the

³ Marini 133.

eighteenth century was to welcome the Sabbath on Friday nights. This became a tradition based on Kabala, an ideology focused on the mystical facets of Rabbinic Judaism, which involved singing and instrumental music being played prior to sun down on the Sabbath. Kabala said that music assisted in welcoming the Sabbath Bride.

The newfound independence that had begun to pervade in Europe during the 1700s greatly expanded Jewish access to culture. With the ability to experience European culture and the secular plane as never before, the Jewish communities became curious about the liturgical music of their Christian neighbors. The implementation of liturgical music appears to be a demand by congregants within communities to be able to create their musical identity in the same way in which Christian communities were able to. The borrowing of Christian, specifically Protestant styles of music, is seen as assimilation, but arguably European Jews wanted to create their own style of music and needed a basis of liturgical music to begin. Due to the Enlightenment, which was occurring in Europe at this time, Jews began to assimilate to European culture, accepting more of the Protestant traditions, including that of German Protestant instrumental pieces.⁴ Organs and instrumental music indicate the influence of Christianity as Jews attempted to assimilate to the larger culture.

The reforms made by Israel Jacobson in Germany in 1810 make up the basic rubric which was adopted by Temple Israel and other Reform congregations in Europe and America. A few major reforms he instituted in ritual were the abolishment of religious poems, shortened prayers, sermons in the vernacular (German), and the introduction of music including choirs and an organ.⁵ By instituting music into ritual based on the needs of the congregation he reflected the changes of ideology that were held by the community.

⁴ Idelsohn, A. Z. Jewish Music in its Historical Development. (Henry Holt and Company, 1929) 205-207.

⁵ Idelsohn, A. Z., Jewish Liturgy and Its Development. (Henry Holt and Company, 1932) 268.

Reform Judaism in America

The first Jews in America arrived as early as 1654 and came from the Sephardic tradition, meaning their rituals originated in Spain and Portugal. Many of the first synagogues were established in the Northern States like Rhode Island and New Amsterdam, but were also created in South Carolina and Georgia. Because there were no rabbis, lay leaders had control in the decision making of the congregation.⁶

According to Edelman, “The arrival of immigrants from Germany in the period 1840-1860 brought Ashkenazic Jews to American shores and dramatic change in Jewish communal and musical life”.⁷ This statement insists that German Jews immigrating to America brought with them the reforms which were becoming popular in Europe. During this time the choir and the organ became the most important aspect of the service, with the choir and choir director taking precedence over the cantor. Many choir directors began to add arias and classical pieces to the service since *piyyutim*, Hebrew poems, had been abolished by early reforms. Edward Stark, the congregational leader for Temple Emanu-El from 1856-1913 in San Francisco, hired non-Jewish singers for the choir and their performances consisted of compositions by famous German composers, and a few songs traditionally found in Protestant churches.⁸ Each congregation made its own decisions based on its general isolation from other synagogues, therefore creating a great deal of diversity in music and ritual during the nineteenth century.

On March 19, 1841 the organ and choir were played at Charleston, South Carolina’s newly erected synagogue Beth Elohim. At first these were the only reformed aspects of the service

⁶ Edelman, Marsha B. Discovering Jewish Music. (Jewish Publication Society, 2003) 125-127.

⁷ Edelman 126.

⁸ Edelman 126-127.

since the service was recited in Hebrew and retained all other Orthodox rituals. By 1843, English had been added to the services and other rituals were being abolished. This outraged the members of the congregation who wanted to remain Orthodox and created a schism between the two groups. In the end, an Orthodox synagogue was formed, Shearith Israel, and for a time, Beth Elohim was the only Reform congregation in the United States.⁹ The schism that took place within the Beth Elohim synagogue of Charleston provides a picture of what happened in other cases in America later in the history of Reform Judaism, including Temple Israel during its transition from Orthodoxy to Reform.

During the nineteenth century two men were at the forefront of the changes taking place in American Judaism. The first was Isaac Lesser (1806-1868), a German Orthodox Jew who became a *hazan* at the Sephardic congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia. Although he was Orthodox and was against the majority of reforms being implemented during his lifetime, he was in favor of having English sermons. According to Meyer, “Lesser became at times a compatriot in the common effort to unify and strengthen Jewish life in America. But, more often, and for all of them, he was the antagonist, rooted in America yet strident in his anti-Reform polemics.”¹⁰ The other man, Isaac Mayer Wise (1819-1900), was in favor of reform, unlike Lesser, and went on to become the leader that the America Reform congregations needed.¹¹ While both men differed in their denominational views, they both wanted to strengthen American Judaism, and both were looked to for guidance by Jewish congregations all across the country.

Reform Judaism in the South

⁹ Meyer, Michael A. Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism. (Oxford University Press, 1988) 234-235.

¹⁰ Meyer 235

¹¹ Meyer 238

Gary Zola presents a thought provoking question when he asks “Why did all of the historic southern synagogues eventually choose to identify with Reform Judaism, while the oldest northern synagogues remained faithful to their original traditional practice?”¹² Zola describes three Southern synagogues: Beth Elohim in Charleston, South Carolina, Richmond, Virginia’s Beth Shalome, and Savannah, Georgia’s Mickve Israel, as well as three Northern synagogues from Rhode Island, New York, and Philadelphia. The three Northern synagogues retained their adherence to traditional Jewish ritual practices, while the Southern synagogues experienced a transition from Orthodoxy to Reform. In the process Beth Elohim dealt with a schism between the Reform and Orthodox members of their congregations which resulted in a second Orthodox congregation. Richmond began the same process, but ended with two Reform congregations. Mickve Israel was the only congregation which transitioned into a Reform congregation without creating a second synagogue. Many of the reforms that were instituted in these congregations were also implemented at Temple Israel, “choirs with male and female voices, organs, the omission of prayer repetition, elimination of second day festival observance, introduction of family pews, inclusion of vernacular prayers (followed by a reduction in Hebrew recitation, and the introduction of English-language discourses).”¹³

Although Zola shows the progression of three different Southern and Northern Jewish congregations, he has a limited view, as he is only seeing what occurred in six communities. But, his description and comparison of the Northern and Southern synagogues presents a point concerning Jewish communities in the South. Jewish communities were generally quite isolated in the South, and were often only able to support one synagogue, therefore not leaving much

¹² Ferris, Marcie Cohen; Greenberg, Mark I. Zola, Gary. Jewish Roots in Southern Soil: A New History. The Ascendancy of Reform Judaism in the American South During the Nineteenth Century. (Brandeis University Press, 2006) 156

¹³ Ferris 178.

room for variance in religious practice. At the same time, many of the most important jobs within the Jewish community were lacking, including but not limited to kosher slaughterers, mikvehs (or ritual bathing houses), and other items used for rituals, rabbis and cantors. These factors meant that the Jewish communities in the South, like Memphis, could not function as others did in northern cities. Moreover, due to their status as a religious minority, the communities always had to live within the context of the very much “Christian South.”¹⁴

Idelsohn proposes that the reforms enacted pertaining to music were brought forth by the community rather than by the rabbis. The community called for music that applied to their time and place, and was influenced by their ideas and changing beliefs about what Jewish music should be. He goes further to say that the Reform movement in itself came from the pervading demand for Emancipation and freedom across Europe.¹⁵

I would argue that the full acceptance of freedom of religion as a national ideology in predominantly Christian America, and in the South, greatly affected the creation of Jewish identity in Memphis. In the day to day lives of Jews who did not live in large cities, like Memphis, there were very few if any rabbis and rarely any of the other important cultural positions needed to have a typical Jewish congregation or community. It was a matter of individual Jews creating community with each other and shaping their identity in the setting they lived in, with more freedom to create their identity in whatever way they saw fit. In forming their identity they could approve or disapprove reforms based on the demands of the congregation’s identity at the time.

¹⁴ Ferris 180-181.

¹⁵ Idelsohn 232-233.

Phillipson goes on to explain that along with the development of doctrine for Reform Judaism, the ceremonial reforms that were instituted were established based on specific communities and congregations rather than through CCAR (Central Conference of American Rabbis) mandates. He goes on to say that most of the ceremonial reforms that were implemented began with opposition, sometimes secession, and either an acceptance or rejection of the proposed reform. He lists the reforms as “reading prayers in the vernacular..., the introduction of the organ with mixed choirs, the abolition of the women’s gallery and the introduction of family pews, the worship with uncovered heads, the substitution of the confirmation ceremony for boys and girls in the place of the *Bar Mitzvah* for boys alone, the abolition of the calling of the Torah, the selling of *Mitzvot* and like practices that had become abuses, the abolition of the second day holidays.”¹⁶ This further supports the idea that with or without rabbinical support in a regional or congregational setting or on a national level, congregations were insistent on implementing reforms, but did so with the evolution of their identity as a Reform congregation.

Judaism in Memphis

Temple Israel: Orthodoxy to Reform

The musical and ritual reforms implemented by Temple Israel from its creation to the turn of the century fit the description of the creation of the Reform movement in America. However, they also show that the Ashkenazic Jews who came to America, and specifically to South, brought with them ideas of reform. These ideas were to be transplanted from their home countries to grow and prosper in America and in the cities in which they settled. The success of these reforms was based on the congregational needs and identities of Jewish communities.

¹⁶ Phillipson, David. The Reform Movement in Judaism. (The Macmillan Company, 1931) 377.

Music from the creation of Temple Israel in 1854 through 1900 reflects the transition from Orthodoxy to Reform.

During the mid 1800s, Memphis was a growing city, a city in which not only people in rural areas were migrating to, but immigrants as well. German and Irish immigrants were coming to Memphis, and among them were a few German Jews. Many of the Jews arriving in Memphis at this time were traveling from New Orleans, Cincinnati, and St. Louis. Many began their lives in Memphis as peddlers and eventually opened successful businesses.¹⁷ The first Jew to arrive in Memphis was David Hart. He arrived in 1838 from Germany and opened an inn and saloon in town. But, for unknown reasons he left Memphis around the 1850s.

Joseph I. Andrews, from South Carolina, was the first Jew in Memphis who remained in Memphis. In 1846, following his brother's death, he established the first Jewish cemetery. This was a turning point for the Jews of Memphis. By creating a Jewish cemetery, Andrews was able to begin to unite the Jewish community of Memphis. And with the creation of a Jewish charity in addition to the cemetery, the Jewish community was given structure. Soon after, the first synagogue was in the process of being formed. Although there is no documentation of when the Jews of Memphis began to hold worship services, Ringel suggests it is likely that services were held in homes beginning in 1853.¹⁸

With at least thirty-six families, they decided to establish a synagogue. The Congregation of the Children of Israel (B'nai Israel)¹⁹ was chartered on March 2, 1854 by the State of Tennessee.²⁰ Once it was created, decisions had to be made pertaining to the way in which the

¹⁷Goldring-Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities. 2006. <<http://www.msje.org/history/archive/tn/memphis.html>>.

¹⁸ Ringel 2.

¹⁹ At its establishment, Temple Israel was known as the Congregation of Children of Israel (1854-1944), and was also referred to as B'nai Israel. In 1944, the congregation changed its name to Temple Israel.

²⁰ Ringel, Judy G. Children of Israel: The Story of Temple Israel Memphis, TN: 1854-2004. (Temple Israel Books, 2004) 2.

synagogue would run. The first few of these decisions show that the congregation was Orthodox at its creation, but this seems to gradually diminish and become clear that the congregation interested in Reform with their invitation of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise to dedicate the first synagogue on March 26, 1858.²¹ It was well known at this time that Wise was a supporter of the new reforms taking place in Judaism, and it is peculiar that an Orthodox congregation would have invited him to be the rabbi at the dedication ceremony of their first synagogue if the tendencies towards reform had not previously existed.

In 1857, Temple Israel hired Christopher Phillip Winkler as its first organist. This shows that there was an organ in use at this time, most likely portable since they were renting meeting space, but as the congregation was still affiliated with Orthodoxy based on American Judaism at the time, the organ and choir most likely only performed prior to sunset to welcome the Sabbath, but did not perform during the Sabbath. Up until 1858, the congregation was without a rabbi and depended upon part-time cantors, Jonas Levy, H. Judah, and J. Sternheimer to lead services.

By 1858, the congregation had raised enough money to hire a rabbi. They advertised in both Reform and Orthodox newspapers, the *Israelite* and the *Occident*, and the advertisement stated that the congregation wanted a “Lecturer, Reader and Teacher to lecture in English and German and to lead a choir...”²² This shows the tension within the congregation over whether its identity should be Orthodox or Reform, but shows that the congregation wanted music within their identity. They decided to take the advice of Rabbi Lesser and hired Rabbi Jacob Peres on December 6, 1858.²³ Despite advertising in the *Israelite* publications as well as a previous connection with Rabbi Wise, Temple Israel proves its identity is still very much connected to

²¹ Ringel 3.

²² Ringel 4.

²³ Ringel 4.

Orthodoxy in hiring Peres. The congregation looked to both Wise and Lesser for assistance in guiding their community as there were not rabbis or even full time cantors in Memphis at the time. In all likelihood, there could have been uneasiness from both Reformers and Orthodox alike in Memphis on which denomination to follow because the community would remain insular and protected through Orthodox traditions and would prevent a division among the Jews of Memphis into multiple synagogues. At the same time, a congregation of a small congregation was most likely trying to unify the congregation despite differences in ideology, as the only Jewish congregation in a largely Christian area. Moreover, with such a small community, supporting two synagogues would be nearly impossible. Under Peres, the congregation continued to implement Orthodox bylaws including one that stated, “no person should be called to the Sepher [Torah] on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur [who] violates the Sabbath day.”²⁴ This bylaw and others instituted during this time show Temple Israel to be an Orthodox congregation.

This would soon change. After sixteen months as the Rabbi at Temple Israel, the congregation charged Peres with working on the Sabbath and ended his employment.²⁵ By deciding to end Peres’ employment as the leader of the congregation, Temple Israel was making a statement that even in Memphis, where it was very difficult to keep the Sabbath, the Rabbi was required to. This shows the attachment the congregation had to their views on the Sabbath, and that the congregation expected their rabbi to observe the Sabbath. This seems to be an important issue for the congregation, and shows that there were many members who retained their Orthodox beliefs and practices.

²⁴ Ringel 5

²⁵ Ringel 5.

Although this action reflects their identity as an Orthodox creation, their later measures to hire a second rabbi are reflective of the conflicted identity of the congregation. They wanted a rabbi who would observe the Sabbath, but some members wanted a rabbi who would implement reforms, and others wanted to retain tradition and continue as an Orthodox congregation. At this point, the members of Temple Israel who were in favor of Reform seem to have garnered their chance to see if a Reform rabbi was a good fit for the congregation. Very soon after Temple Israel let go of Rabbi Peres, the congregation advertised for a new Rabbi, but this time only in *The Israelite*, Rabbi Wise's Reform publication. In this advertisement, the Temple Israel self-identified "as a congregation 'in favor of Moderate Reform.'"²⁶ It seems to be an indication that the congregation was moving from Orthodoxy to Reform that within three months of firing their Orthodox rabbi, Temple Israel hired a Reform Rabbi. By recommendation from Rabbi Wise, Rabbi Simon Tuska was installed into the position of rabbi on July 1, 1860.²⁷

Simon Tuska became the first leader of Temple Israel to institute reforms. He began by getting rid of almost all of the *piyyuttem*, poems, as well as picking and choosing which parts of the service he wished to keep and which to get rid of in order to make the service more applicable to life in americanized nineteenth century. It is important to note that the congregation never voted unanimously for any of his Tuska's reforms, but reforms were still being implemented despite the Civil War's disastrous effects on Memphis and on the congregation.

In 1862, the congregation voted to create a choir to be led by Cantor Ritterman. There was a committee created to solicit "ladies and gentlemen of the Jewish faith from the ages of nine years and upward."²⁸ The first choir consisted of four men and ten women and began performing at services in May of 1863 for the first confirmation class. The congregation came to

²⁶ Ringel 6.

²⁷ Ringel 7

²⁸ Ringel 7.

rely and expect the choir to perform at every service. By deciding to create a choir, Temple Israel solidified the effect music would come to have on the congregation. Although the congregation had become accustomed to the organ being played at Shabbat, Sabbath, services, first prior to sun-down to welcome the Sabbath Bride, and later to play during services, it was not until the April of 1864 that the organ was played at Passover services. This was requested by the choir and shows how important music was becoming to the congregation. Moreover, as the choir requested this change, it shows the respect that music was receiving during this time from the congregation. From these events it seems that music had become such a pivotal part of services, and this shows the change in the identity of the congregation that was occurring at this time from Orthodox to Reform.

The year 1864 seems to have been a turning point in the congregation's transition from Orthodoxy to Reform. In April of 1864, Isaac Mayer Wise's prayer book, *Minhag America* was introduced to Reform congregations.²⁹ This prayer-book greatly affected the ritual that was being performed at Temple Israel because it would have provided Rabbi Tuska with a general guideline for how a Reform service was supposed to be structured. This would be one of the first major and lasting effects that a book produced by the National Reform movement would have on the congregation. Prior to this year, although reforms were being enacted, the community seemed to be able to unify despite their differences in ideology. Due to the ritual reforms which were instituted during this year, the increasing congregational demand for the organ to be played during services, as well as the fact that vernacular songs were no longer prohibited, the Orthodox members of the congregation decided to break with Temple Israel and join Rabbi Peres in the creation of the synagogue of Anshei Sphard.³⁰ This greatly affected the identity of the Jewish

²⁹ Ringel 8.

³⁰ Becker, Babette M. "Chronicle of the Congregation"(Temple Israel, 1929) 12.

community in Memphis as well as Temple Israel. This schism signifies that there were enough financially stable Jews in Memphis to support two synagogues. In addition, this signified that Temple Israel could continue implementing reforms without as much hindrance as they had experienced in the past from their Orthodox members. Although this would separate the Jewish community into two denominations, it would allow each synagogue to grow and evolve in their identities as congregations.

In their book, *Our First Century*, Rabbi Wax and his wife Helen report, “In 1868, the recommendation was made that the Congregation dispense with the services of the cantor, an important office in traditional worship, but this motion was defeated.”³¹ This shows that despite pushes towards more reforms the identity of the congregation stayed for the time being as moderately Reform. In the end, Reform won out, and Jewish liturgical music began to flourish in Memphis. It is certain that by the time of Tuska’s death in 1870, Temple Israel had made the transition from Orthodoxy to Reform.³²

Winkler became the choir director in addition to organist, although he had served as choir director at other points in time. He acted as choir director in 1889 and 1891. And, in 1891 the choir performed a complete musical liturgy for the Sabbath.³³ By 1894, Winkler had composed over 850 pieces of music for Temple Israel and by 1896 he had composed twenty-two individual services and over thirty ballads. With the help of Leon Leopold, Winkler provided Temple Israel with compositions that accurately represented Jewish liturgical music.³⁴ Through Winkler’s music, the congregation began forming their own musical identity just as their identity as a Reform Jewish congregation began to materialize. In a way, the fact that the congregation lacked

³¹Wax, James A., and Helen G. Wax. *Our First Century:1854-1954*. (Temple Israel, 1954) 19-20.

³² Ringel 16.

³³ Wax, James A., and Helen G. Wax. *Our First Century:1854-1954*. (Temple Israel, 1954) 27.

³⁴ Anglin, David. The “Dean of Memphis Musicians”: The Life and Work of Christopher Philip Winkler, 1824-1913. *The Rhodes Journal of Regional Studies* 1 (2004): 9-37. 5.

music specific to the Reform movement assisted them in retaining their self proclaimed identity as a “Moderate Reform congregation.”³⁵ They were able to create their own music based on both Reform and what the congregation wanted through a specific person who composed music for them for an extended period of time.

In the few compositions that Winkler’s great-great grandson (David Stuart Winkler) has been able to collect pertaining to Temple Israel, the verses and refrains are in English. They contain Jewish themes, but reflect the Reform movement by replicating many of the hymns of the Protestant tradition. This may also be due to the fact that Winkler himself was Protestant. But, it seems that the congregation’s music, with the introduction of the vernacular in 1864 and the liturgical music influences that the congregation experienced from its Protestant neighbors, helped Temple Israel’s music to gradually resemble liturgical music from that tradition. *The Sabbath Musings* were compositions performed at Temple Israel and included two sections of instrumental music and another for vocal music. The compositions were to be played or accompanied by either organ or piano. In addition to Temple Israel, Winkler performed at St. Peter’s Catholic, St. Lazarus Episcopal, and Second Presbyterian Churches.³⁶ Based on the occasional Latin parenthetical titles, Winkler used some of his tunes for both Christian and Jewish services. This would make it easier for him as a composer and performer, but shows the connections that Temple Israel had to the Christian world directly through Winkler beginning in 1857 with his employment.³⁷

Christopher Winkler was one of the most important musical figures in Temple Israel’s history. Unlike many of the composers of Reform liturgical music which was performed at

³⁵ Ringel 6.

³⁶ Anglin 9.

³⁷ Winkler, David S., ed. Collected Musical Works of Christopher Phillip Winkler. 3rd v. 2008.

Temple Israel in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Winkler was performing his own music. In this case, Winkler had full control over his compositions and performance, and with the assistance of Leon Leopold he could create music which reflected their identity growing and evolving into Reform Judaism from Orthodoxy.

Temple Israel has been Reform for so long that no one looks back to see the significance of the change from Orthodoxy to reform and how music sparks it and creates a permanent change in the Jewish community in Memphis. As Edelman notes, “musical practices like the introduction of the organ were often the ‘lightening rod’ that precipitated a split in the community.”³⁸ If viewed more closely the change is not so cut and dry, but does look as if the ideas of reform were in the minds of the congregants from the very beginning. One thing is certain; from the creation of Temple Israel, the congregation wanted music.

Temple Israel’s Identity as a Classical Reform Jewish Congregation

The beginning of the twentieth century began the era of what is known as Classical Reform Judaism. The music from this period in Temple Israel’s history reflects the congregation’s drift away from their initial self-identification as “Moderate Reform” into “Classical Reform.” The music in this period from 1900-1945 portrays a closer relationship with National Reform Judaism than at any time previously in Temple Israel’s history.

According to Meyer, twentieth century Reform was “drift[ing] to radicalism” as it “tested the outer limits of Jewish identity.”³⁹ Over time, both symbol and ritual were being minimized in Reform congregations. Congregations, including Temple Israel, at one time or another no longer used the Shofar, ram’s horn, opting instead for a trumpet or an organ to mimic the sound. Although Hebrew did continue in a few congregations, a census taken in 1906 showed that over

³⁸ Edelman 127.

³⁹ Meyer 264.

a hundred congregations had eliminated the language from services.⁴⁰ Reform Judaism at this time was getting farther away from Orthodoxy and Jewish ritual and symbol.

The inclination towards more radical reforms is evident in changes at Temple Israel beginning at the turn of the century. In the year 1899, the position of cantor was eliminated and the congregation would therefore rely solely on the choir with the accompaniment of the organ. Following this change, the subject of having Sunday services was debated.⁴¹ Although Rabbi Samfield did hold a discussion on the issue, it was never voted upon, and Sunday services never occurred.⁴²

Through the beginning of the twentieth century, reforms continued and the congregation became gradually more liberal when it came to religious custom.⁴³ By 1925, when Rabbi Ettleson arrived at Temple Israel, Bar and Bat mitzvahs were no longer observed, and liturgical music was performed by the choir and organ. With the exceptions of the Shema, Barechu, the Vaanachnu (known as the Adoration), and Mourner's Kaddish, most other songs were sung in English. On occasion, Ein Keilohenu was sung at the end of services, but the classic Hebrew songs had been replaced by English hymns such as "We Meet Again in Gladness" and "God is in His Holy Temple."⁴⁴

The liturgical music presented in services at Temple Israel during the Classical Reform years were almost devoid of Hebrew and used a great deal of Christianized hymns. According to Cantor Kaplan, the current cantor at Temple Israel, "music [at Temple Israel] instead of being congregationally oriented was for solo and solo and choir. And I say that on purpose, because

⁴⁰ Meyer 280.

⁴¹ Ringel 31.

⁴² Ringel 32

⁴³ Ringel 44

⁴⁴ Ringel 51.

many reform congregations did not have a cantor, and it was certainly the case until the mid 60s when the first cantor, Tom Schwartz, came along. The solo parts were sung but it was not uncommon for it to be someone who wasn't Jewish and who had an operatic trained voice who could sing the more dramatic pieces as it were."⁴⁵ This shows that the music at Temple Israel was reflecting the Classical Reform identity of the congregation. The music of the Reform movement in its classical phase included hymns, sung responses in the liturgy, and performances of synagogue art compositions. "The style of service was one in which [...] the rabbi would speak and the congregation would either have a responsive reading or sit quietly. The soloist, whether it was cantor or solo voice that was to be singing, the congregation would many times sit silent. Maybe they would join in on the sh'ma."⁴⁶ This style of service began early in the Reform tradition at Temple Israel and was a beautiful performative event, which defined their identity as a Reform congregation in the Classical sense for many decades. This statement pertains to the Classical Style of the service that began at the turn of the century and continued until cantors were re-established at Temple Israel.

The music at Temple Israel at this time shows that the community's identity had drastically changed from its original self proclaimed identity as moderate. This identity fully accepted Classical Reform Judaism and most of its music came from the *Union Hymnal* created by the CCAR (Central Conference of American Rabbis). And, instead of implementing reforms based on congregational demands, there was a movement to follow the lead of Reform Judaism as a whole. During this period, especially in comparison to the transition from Orthodoxy to Reform, there was an established connection with Reform Judaism on a national front, and communication was faster and easier, with telephones and quicker mail. After the realization was

⁴⁵ Kaplan, John. Interview. 16 June 2010.

⁴⁶ Kaplan, John. Interview. 16 June 2010.

made that a point of “semi-radicalism” was reached in the attempts to modernize Judaism, it seems Reform had strayed so far away from its roots that it was in danger of losing the heart of Judaism altogether. But, at the edge of that precipice, there was a push, this time from the CCAR, towards conservation within Reform due to World War II.

Modern Reform Judaism: Temple Israel’s Identity Today

In 1930 a huge issue arose during the revision of the *Union Hymnal* at the CCAR. This issue became a turning point and a third major transition for Temple Israel. It was proposed that a Hebrew version of a song sung for a High Holy Days service be introduced into the edition. This became a conflict-ridden issue, which ended in 177 English hymns being removed from the hymnal and replaced by 200 Hebrew compositions written by Jewish poets and musicians. Although these decisions were made in 1930, the hymnal did not reach Reform congregations until 1940.⁴⁷ This means that although the push for more Hebrew in services and a greater attachment to ritual and symbol had occurred on a national level through the CCAR in 1930, the revised *Union Hymnal* would have to reach congregations and the communities had to accept the new reforms, which were more or less a return to tradition rather than reforms, in order to make yet another transition.

With Hebrew established as the main language in the Reform Jewish staple, the *Union Hymnal*, it gradually began to catch on at Temple Israel and other congregations. It appears that like the institution of the organ, the re-establishment of Hebrew as the primary language in services may have been used to propel Reform Jewish congregations, and Temple Israel, towards yet another transition in their history. This time, the transition was made from Classical Reform to what will be referred to here as Modern Reform.

⁴⁷ Meyer 321.

In the wake of World War II, a revival of Jewish symbolism, ritual, and tradition began not only on a national level, but within the Temple Israel community as well. After WWII the revival really began. The music of the time represented a stronger connection with Hebrew and Judaism in a more traditional sense and shows a great deal of separation from the music of Classical Reform Judaism.

Transitions in the music of the Reform tradition began to take place in the 1930s and into the 1950s. This was due to the opening of Hebrew Union College's School of Sacred Music, as well as an influx of European-trained cantors and rabbis who would become professors at the school. During this time, there seemed to be a disconnect between what the congregations wanted and what the cantors and professors at the College wished to teach. As Edelman notes, "The 'high church' style of practice continued to dominate the training of Reform cantors and the role of the cantor as not just soloist, but also sole purveyor- and conservator-of synagogue music."⁴⁸

Immediately following Rabbi Ettleson's retirement in 1954, Rabbi Wax made few changes at Temple Israel.⁴⁹ But, after a few months, he began to reinstitute religious customs which had not been practiced in many years. Two of these practices included the use of an actual shofar rather than a trumpet, during the High Holy Days, and continuing the tradition of having Bar Mitzvahs following the re-establishment of the tradition in 1951, during his time as Associate Rabbi.⁵⁰ Although, Rabbi Wax was in favor of Classical Reform, he did like some of the more "old-fashioned" rituals that had been phased out at Temple Israel since its establishment.

According to Meyer, "The Reform movement as it emerged from World War II was fundamentally different from what it had been after World War I. Its best-known rabbis were

⁴⁸ Edelman 135.

⁴⁹ Ringel 75

⁵⁰ Ringel 75-76.

among the foremost leader of American Jewry; step by step it was reintegrating traditions it had once cast aside; and it was educating its young people to see themselves as part of an entire people.”⁵¹ Despite Wax’s more “old-fashioned” approach to Classical Reform, he was opposed to hiring a cantor. With pressure from the Choir Committee, Rabbi Wax relented and supported the hiring of a cantor. At this point the congregation invited three candidates for the position. “Cantors are a part of Reform Judaism, and some of the most distinctive Reform temples have cantors,” Rabbi Wax said, and even more so, he emphasized that a cantor would “benefit our children.”⁵² At this point, the congregation’s identity had changed and they demanded a cantor. This shows, yet again, how the identity of the congregation had begun to change, and how the congregation itself propelled this change.

In 1971, after over fifty years without one, Temple Israel hired Cantor Thomas Schwartz. Cantor Schwartz worked as the cantor at Temple Israel from 1972-1977, where his job was to begin transitioning the congregation into a more interactive service rather than passive, and to introduce more Hebrew songs into the service. As the current cantor, John Kaplan, states:

The transition was already made by my predecessors moving into more Hebrew in the service as in the mid 60s on into the 70s part of the national trend... That was really pretty much the shift, the dynamic shift when I came here. It was that pattern of breaking that mold of the cantor leading the service, and my predecessors tried to do it as well, but the congregation was very firmly and comfortably entrenched in that style of the worship service in classical reform in the sense, it’s not that they weren’t willing to participate. They weren’t interested. They wanted the style of the grand service; it’s just not where we are today. ⁵³

The 1970s drastically changed the way Reform music was created and performed, seeing as it emphasized participation and informality rather than the formality and performance-based

⁵¹ Meyer 334.

⁵² Ringel 88.

⁵³ Kaplan, John. Interview. 16 June 2010.

music of the past. Additionally, with the creation of Israel as a state, Israeli folk and popular music became increasingly popular with Reform congregations. Choirs were being phased out, so choir directors were no longer needed. A cantor was more useful as he could act as a choir director when a choir was needed. Overall, he was needed to keep the congregation in tune and on beat during services. As participatory music became more accepted, a cantor was needed to lead the community in the songs. From the 1960s on, the role of the cantor began to reappear in Reform congregations, and it also became common for a cantor to play guitar to accompany the congregation instead of using the organ.⁵⁴ The younger generation, who had taken part in summer camps, were no longer willing to just sit and listen, but wanted to become active in the service instead of letting the choir and cantor dominate the service.⁵⁵ Cantor Kaplan applies this national trend to Temple Israel when he states:

My role was to use the guitar and begin bringing in a less formal structure to the service, to in-formalize it a little bit. And, therefore [...] instead of using Steinberg's Shalom Rav, which is an absolutely beautiful piece, but the congregation can't sing that, no way. Instead I'll do the Jeff Klepper/Dan Freeland piece with the guitar. Ironically that has now become so integral within the worship service that if I were to sing the other one it wouldn't be identified as nearly as frequently as whereas even ten years ago the Klepper/Freeland wouldn't have been as familiar.⁵⁶

Rabbi Danzinger,⁵⁷ following Rabbi Wax's retirement in 1978, continued to utilize music and cantors as well as symbolism to bring about Temple Israel's modern identity. The rabbis and cantor picked music which was beginning to be representative of new thought within the congregation as it began to accept the National Reform movement's inclusion of ritual into Modern Reform Judaism. This move on the part of the community represented the changes that were taking place not only on the national level but in their identity as well. The rabbis at the

⁵⁴ Summit 54

⁵⁵ Edelman 135-136.

⁵⁶ Kaplan, John. Interview. 16 June 2010.

⁵⁷ Ringel 103.

time were attempting to get back to ritual and unknowingly began a return to their first self-identification “as a congregation in favor of ‘Moderate Reform.’”⁵⁸

A key indication of Temple Israel’s movement toward more traditional practice was the adoption of *The Gates of Prayer*, in 1979, which was a revised prayer-book for Reform congregations created by the CCAR in response to the radical shift that had taken place during the Classical period. The CCAR intended the new prayer-book to pair with the *Union Hymnal* in attempts to revitalize Jewish ritual and prayer in Reform Judaism. The implementation of the *Gates of Prayer*, used for services for the Sabbath and weekday services, represented the more traditional direction in which Reform Judaism was venturing, as it included blessings to wearing specific Jewish garments, and the reintroduction of specific elements of the liturgy that had been previously abandoned.⁵⁹ *The Gates of Prayer* reflected what Rabbi Wax had already begun to implement by beginning with symbols of Judaism that had been lost, and working up to re-instituting Bar Mitzvahs.

Although nationally the identity of Reform Judaism was taking on more of the ritual and symbols of the past, congregations were not always willing to transition from Classical Reform to Modern. It took time for Temple Israel to accept the changes in ritual and symbol that were being instituted. This reluctance is reflected in the time it took for the congregation to transition out of Classical Reform. As Judy Ringel states, “Not everyone reacted positively. More than a few longtime members, having been schooled by Rabbis Ettleson and Wax in Classical Reform style of worship, were dismayed by the growing amount of Hebrew in the service and by the

⁵⁸ Ringel 6.

⁵⁹ Meyer 375.

trappings of traditional Judaism that the rabbis and some members of the congregation eventually began to wear.”⁶⁰

When the identity of the congregation is viewed today, there are differences in musical tastes based on different factors within the community. However, these differences are not necessarily generational based on the transition from Classical Reform to Modern. Cantor Kaplan explained this best when he said, “It’s ironic when you look at it. Some of the young kids want the more formal music, because they have classical training in music, because it takes some sophistication to appreciate opera. But, having said that, to stereotype the senior citizens, saying that all they want is the serious opera part of it, would fly in the face of who you see at Rabbi Greenstein’s *Ruach* service of all contemporary rock music, and you see it is multigenerational.”

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Today, the music at Temple Israel shows an identity that has been created through many transitions. The music at each service is different especially if there is a Bar or Bat Mitzvah or a wedding. These services reflect the personal identity of the congregant and their experience with music throughout their lives at Temple Israel and within the Jewish community. Cantor Kaplan expressed this when he said, “Every time I have a Bar Mitzvah, it’s a challenge for me. The parents might come from an orthodox background, but their kids went to summer camp and all they want are guitar and summer camp music for the service, and some families who come from a classic reform background and they go, ‘Why can’t we use the organ?’ It is an eclectic blend as far as those kinds of services are concerned.”⁶² The music that a congregant requests reflects how music at Temple Israel has changed, and how their identity has evolved as a congregation over time.

⁶⁰ Ringel 107.

⁶¹ Kaplan, John. Interview. 16 June 2010.

⁶² Kaplan, John Interview. 16 June 2010.

Although the music at services for Bar and Bat Mitzvahs reflect the identity of the person involved, regular Shabbat services reflect Temple Israel's congregational identity. As Cantor Kaplan explains, "With the Friday night service ...since that service is often a cappella, I'll bring my guitar and so will Rabbi Katie but that very nature of the service requires it to be more congregational. And so there are certain melodies that members of that 6:15 service have learned a certain repertoire we vary within that repertoire. And, having said that, we also try to add something new sometimes and sometimes it catches on and sometimes it doesn't and that's okay."⁶³ The repertoire that the congregation who regularly attend services knows reflects Temple Israel's identity as a Modern Reform congregation. This particular repertoire reflects their Modern Reform identity, as it involves the active participation of the congregation, tunes that were composed in response to World War II, the establishment of the State of Israel, and the Hasidic movement, as well as the push by the leadership of Temple Israel and the Reform movement to return to tradition. During the Classical period, the songs that were sung generally came from the *Union Hymnal*. Following the Classical period, more songs were taken from composers who had been affected by what was taking place around the world after the war as well as the need of Temple Israel and Reform Judaism to return to ritual. This return to ritual was reflected in the music which no longer involved the organ or the choir and had become a capella with accompaniment by the guitar.

The moment the congregation demanded a cantor, Temple Israel made the largest step away from the music of the Classical Reform period. By taking that step, they took control of their identity and began to form it into what it is today, which is radically different from the music of the early twentieth century. In doing this, the congregation showed the evolving identity of the

⁶³ Kaplan, John Interview. 16 June 2010.

community. The music that began to be performed was more congregational and involved more Hebrew and Jewish traditional music. By demanding a cantor, the music and services at Temple Israel would change and reflect their identity as a congregation moving towards Modern Reform Judaism.

Temple Israel's identity has evolved over time, and its music has changed to reflect it. Its music has been able to reflect the congregation's transitions in identity from Orthodoxy to Reform, to Classical Reform, and into Modern Reform. Temple Israel's identity is based on the history of Reform Judaism and the effects it had on the Jews of Memphis in the American South. Temple Israel's identity was not dictated by its rabbis but by calls from the congregation for change. At times, during the Classical Reform period, the congregation accepted the leadership of the rabbis in matters of their identity. But, each reform or return to ritual was either accepted or rejected by the congregation itself. The rabbis and the CCAR may have suggested reforms or a return to ritual, but it was up to Temple Israel as a whole to decide when the reforms or rituals could be applied to their identity. Overall, despite a strong connection with Reform Judaism as a movement, Temple Israel has chosen their own path in terms of what music they have decided to perform and in the ways in which music was performed.