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It's Called Jewish Music, But Is It Really Jewish?

By Seth Yisra'el Lutnick

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A while back I was driving along the Jerusalem highway scanning the radio stations. On one frequency, a very intense dance beat was exploding out of the speakers. I was about to move the dial some more in search of a Jewish tune when the vocalist started in. Shock of shocks, he was a heavily Hassidic singer, complete with eastern European pronunciation. And what was he singing? "Kumee oy'ree ki va oy-reich.." from 16th century Rabbi Shlomo Alkavetz' classic Sabbath poem, L'cha Dodi. Before he had begun his rendition I had been expecting something like "Oh baby, the way you move with me ..."!

I had to ask the old question, "Is this good for the Jews?" And I had to give the old answer, "Does hair grow on the palm of your hand?"

Of course it's not good for the Jews, I felt. Poor, unfortunate L'cha Dodi, dragged from the fields of Tsfat on the Sabbath eve and infected with Saturday Night Fever! Lovingly done by a Hassid, no less!

Speaking of Tsfat, I recall meandering about their Klezmer festival once and hearing a contemporary setting of Psalm 126. It was to a funk rhythm, and the words did not fit. The singer had to split words in two, which rendered them more or less meaningless. Good for the Jews? Nah.

What bothered me about this so-called Jewish music? To put it briefly, besides the words, it just wasn't. It was dance, trance, shmantz. It was hip, driving, suggestive. If this music was asked where it wanted to play, the synagogue or the sin-skin club, the answer was clear. If Jewish music is to be defined as such, it must have authentic Jewish roots. And so much contemporary music simply does not. Where was the source of this tradition? Nowhere. That's what bothered me.

But, as Tevye reminds us, there's another hand. After all, go listen to classic Hassidic nigunim (melodies). Then go listen to Russian folk songs. Eerie, no? Weren't those folk songs the "dance" of their day?

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Even stronger, go watch the religious kids. They love contemporary popular music and all its villains. What these new Jewish groups do is take what's hip and put Jewish content into it. Isn't that what the original Hassidic nigunim were all about? If we don't want to lose our young people in the culture war, we have to compete. Didn't Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch bring the choral works of Lewandowsky and Japhet in to the synagogue service, even though they were completely in the style of the German composers of the age, such as Schubert and Mendelssohn (he needs an asterisk because he was halakhically Jewish)? So maybe I should not only calm down, I should applaud this phenomenon.

Hold on. We're both right, I believe. Here's how I reconcile the difference, and my earnest appeal to all who create Jewish music. The most important thing is to ask, "To be or not to be?" That is the question.

Every song has a purpose, a message. It can be joy, faith, pensiveness, determination, anything. The

message is in the melody and rhythm, which create the atmosphere. It's in the text, which gives articulation to the message. And it's in the performance, which makes the message personal between the performer and the listener. If the message is congruent, if the music and the lyrics are a perfect union that inspires the performer, then you have a great piece of music. If the message is mixed, if there's a battle going on between the rhythm and the words, then we are troubled. That was why that "kumee oy'ree" was so absolutely awful. It was a mixed message of licentious music with holy texts.

We love to set verses from the liturgy to music, and that's wonderful. Composers have a special responsibility to make sure that the music conveys the message and colors the words with deeper meanings. Do that, and I'm fascinated, I'm inspired, even if it's a contemporary style.

But be very, very careful with verses. We tend to ask, "Do you think Adon Olam goes to this?", when we would do better to ask, "What is this melody saying?". If it says Adon Olam, good. If it does not, then WRITE YOUR OWN WORDS. To keep with the idea of message, if you have a great tune that can say something worthwhile (something human and real, not negative or immodest), say it your way. That satisfies.

The foundation of Jewish music has always been expressing what's in our hearts as a prayer to God. That expression must be congruent, pure, sincere. There is room in the Jewish music world for great innovation, if it comes from our hearts, not from the charts.

Seth Yisra'el Lutnick is a singer and composer who has performed on stage and screen. His CD is called Gesharim, and he is also a trained cantor. Visit his website, <http://www.greatjewishmusic.com> for music and more.

Pitigliano : Farmhouse, Hotel, B&B Pitigliano Terme Di Pitigliano Maremma

By Giulio Detti

Located north of Rome, in Tuscany, Pitigliano is known for its Etruscan cave-tombs and fine wine.

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Noted tourist sites include the 16th century aqueduct and the narrow streets of the old Jewish ghetto.

Jews settled in Pitigliano in the 15th century. The Jewish population continued to grow as Jews sought refuge there when they were forced out of the Papal State. Protected by the Medici family, the Jewish community flourished and the city became known as "Little Jerusalem" (La Piccola Gerusalemme).

The synagogue was constructed in 1598. A school was built during this period and a plot of land was allotted for a Jewish cemetery.

When Pitigliano became part of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany in 1608, Jewish prosperity and freedom were threatened. Discussions took place on whether the Jews would have to move to the ghettos in Florence or Siena, but, instead, a ghetto was built in Pitigliano.

Similar to other Jews in Tuscany, Jews were forced to wear a specific items of clothing that marked them as a Jew, a red hat for men and a red badge worn on the shirt sleeves for women. Jews, occasionally, had to pay special taxes for various projects, such as the building of a guard house and a fountain.

Despite the restrictions, the Jewish community continued to flourish and prosper. In 1773, Pitigliano had a Jewish population of 200. Jews were involved in all sorts of trades and owned shops selling crafts, cloth and spices.

Napoleon's conquest of Italy in 1799 dramatically changed the situation of the Jews of Pitigliano. Jews felt the repercussions of the Viva Maria riots in Arezzo, when houses in the ghetto were ransacked and fourteen members of the community were arrested.

Soon after this incident, life returned to normal for the Jews of Pitigliano. In 1825, Jews owned 94 houses, 20 warehouses, 11 shops and 10 stables in the town. In 1833, a school and a charity organization were started. Friction arose between the Jewish and Christian communities over the issue of forced conversions of Jewish children. Despite the friction, the Jewish population grew and reached 359 by 1841. At this time, the Jewish community had one rabbi, two vice rabbis and several teachers.

In 1859, the 423 Jews of Pitigliano were emancipated and were granted equal rights. This marked the beginning of the decline of the Jewish population of Pitigliano. Many Jews decided to leave Pitigliano and move to larger cities in Tuscany, while others converted to Christianity.

In 1865, a huge library was built, which housed more than 600 books written in Hebrew.

By 1931, the Jewish population had declined to 70. A massive anti-Semitic campaign began in 1936. Racial laws were instituted in 1938. More Jews left Pitigliano and immigrated, while others were deported.

During the Holocaust, efforts were made to hide the Jews and thwart Nazi effort to kill them. All of the

Jews of Pitigliano survived the war.

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Today, only three members of the Jewish community are left; nevertheless, the Jewish cultural heritage has been preserved. The synagogue was restored and cultural events take place there; a kosher bakery was also reopened. A kosher version of Pitigliano's famous wine is also being manufactured.



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