

The Music of the Yamim Noraim

Cantor Sherwood Goffin

Faculty, Belz School of Jewish Music, RIETS, Yeshiva University
Cantor, Lincoln Square Synagogue, New York City

The liturgical music, or *nusach hatefillah*, of the Yamim Noraim is the most profound of the entire year and contains some of the oldest musical elements in our tradition. It requires an expert *Baal Tefilla* who intimately knows the sanctified melodies of these *tefillot*, and it is therefore inappropriate for any synagogue to choose a chazzan who is improperly trained in the intricacies of the musical *nusach*. Needless to say, this pertains all year-around, for every *tefillah*. However, the lack of competence in a *Shliach Tzibbur* is more acutely felt on the Days of Awe in every shul and shtible in every corner of the world, and is emphasized in the words of our *gedolim* throughout the millenia.

It is the intent of this article to give a “crash course” in guidelines concerning this field of musical expertise. While it is impossible to illustrate the actual music of the *tefillot* in a written article, I will try to describe to you the musical history and halachic guidelines for the sacred musical themes that have been heard in shuls in every corner of the Ashkenazic world for the last millennium.

The Maharil

To put this topic into the proper perspective, it is necessary to open to the Shulchan Aruch and the glosses of the Rama.

One may not change the custom of a community, even as to its customary prayer-melodies. (“Maharil”)

Rama 619:1

ואל ישנה אדם ממנהג העיר, אפילו בניגונים
או בפיוטים שאומרים שם (מהרי"ל).
רמ"א תרי"ט:א

The Maharil, Rabbi Yaakov HaLevi Möllin, (b. Mainz, 1356, d. Worms, 1427), the first to bear the title of “*Moreinu*,” was the Chief Rabbi of the Rhineland during the years after the Nine Crusades (1096-1272), and during the period of the Black Death which began in the 1340’s. As a result of the crusades and the Black Death, Jews from all over Europe fled to the cities of the Rhineland to join their fellow co-religionists in the largest Jewish cities in Europe for protection and consolation. These cities were Shpeyer, Worms, and Mainz, known as the “*Arei ShWM*,”

where resonated the century-old tradition of Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg whom the Maharil followed as his spiritual guide.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz writes²⁵ that, “also being one of the great prayer leaders of his time, he (Maharil) traveled from one community to another, reestablishing the traditional prayer melodies. By virtue of his great authority, the Maharil succeeded in laying the foundations for the prayer rite accepted by all Ashkenazic communities.”

The Maharil also served as a Chazzan, which was often the custom of rabbinical leaders since the time of Rabbi Yehudai Gaon of Sura in the 8th century. The Maharil was distressed by the incursion of many “foreign” melodies into the musical liturgy of the synagogues of his time. Over a period of many years he was able to hear *Baalei Tefilla* from all over Europe as he traveled from city to city in the Rhineland, and he thereby determined which melodies were the authentic traditions for each community. He then sanctified those melodies with the title “*Missinai*,” to emphasize their ancient and immutable quality.²⁶ In his *Sefer HaMaharil*, compiled by his student Eliezer Ben Yaakov, he declares categorically that one may not change the traditional melodies (*nusach*) of a community. Most poskim have opined that this declaration applies all through the calendar year.²⁷ For this article, we will confine ourselves to the High Holidays.

The Intention of the Maharil

The intention of the Maharil was two-fold. He may well have been aware that the melodies he had gathered were the only connection that we had to the music of the Bais Hamikdosh. More important, however, was his sense that the *kavannah* of the congregants depended on being enveloped in the musical atmosphere of the holy melodies they always heard in shul, and that if these melodies were changed, their *kavannah* would be affected.²⁸ Imagine coming to shul on Yom Kippur Night as the Chazzan ascends the bima to sing the Kol Nidre. It is a moment you have anticipated for many days before Yom Kippur. However, instead of singing the beloved traditional melody that has always uplifted the congregation for as long as you can remember, the Chazzan puts these sublime words to the tune of one of the latest “pop” melodies! Your *kavannah* would be ruined; the atmosphere of this holy evening would be severely compromised, perhaps totally destroyed, by your upset and consternation at this breach of tradition! The melody of Kol Nidre is no less important than any other of the sanctified *Niggunei Maharil* that we have all grown up with.

²⁵ A Guide to Jewish Prayer, Schocken, 2000

²⁶ This appellation (*Missinai*) was first coined by Rabbi Yehuda Hachasid (1150-1217) in his *Sefer Hachassidim*. It was originally used as a description of the Taamei Hamikra – the melody of the Torah.

²⁷ Rav Gedalia Dov Schwartz writes (*Journal of Jewish Music & Liturgy* Volume 8, Belz School of Jewish Music), where there is no ‘prevailing ignorance’ and therefore no ‘bilbul daas hakahal’ “the words of the Maharil and the Mogein Avrohom (“ain L’shanos”) would apply to all services and not necessarily for the Yomim Noroim (only).”. The Mogen Avrohom (O.C.68:1), Chasam Sofer (O.C.16, 17), and Hagaot Maimuniot, say similarly that one may not change any one of the essential minhagim in prayer that is traditional with the congregation. In tandem with Ramah O.C. 619, this would include the musical nusach. Rabbi Hershel Schachter has also voiced this opinion.

²⁸ See Mishnah Brura there, “Ki al y’dei zeh misbalbel daas hakohol”- changing these melodies will confuse the congregation and severely affect their *kavannah*.

Many melodies are less well known than the Kol Nidre, but all are equally sacred and important to the atmosphere of our *tefillos* throughout the Yomim Noroim (Days of Awe) period.

The Missinai Melodies

There are approximately fifty-two *Missinai* melodies that can be identified. Many are “motifs,” musical phrases which are repeated in different texts, but almost all of which are traceable to the time of the Maharil or the Maharam of Rothenberg before him. They were often referred to by the past generations of Baalei Tefilla as “Scarbova,” from the Slavic word “skarb,” which means “(from the) treasure,” “official,” or a corruption of the Latin word “sacra,” “sacred”. Most of these melodies are for the Yomim Noroim and some are sanctified in the tefillot of the rest of the year. Until the early eighteenth century these melodies were an exclusively oral tradition because Chazzanim were not trained in the art of writing music, with rare exceptions (such as Solomon Rossi, 1587-1628 CE, who wrote his music in the tradition of the Sfardim). These melodies were a closely guarded treasure, and each Baal Tefilla carefully handed down the tradition he had learned from generation to generation with relative accuracy. Having originally gathered in *Ashkenaz* (Germany), the German Jewish population moved eastward because of persecution and pogroms. Hence, their melodies were transmitted to the East European community and became the hallmark of the *tefilla* of the entire European Jewish community.

American Jews are the inheritors of the European minhag, and we are therefore required to follow that tradition in our davening. This is our “Minhag HaMakom.”²⁹ Our Baalei Tefilla should be well-versed in the *Missinai* melodies that nurtured the souls of our fathers’ generation, our grandfathers’ generation, and the generations before them. No one has the right to discard even one of these sacred melodies of our *tefilla*.

This applies to our Shabbat and Yom Tov *tefillot* as well, although most of these *tefillot* only have rules for the musical style, or mode of each paragraph (major, minor, phreigish, etc.), rather than an actual melody. The restriction of rules to mode allows talented chazzanim to insert congregational melodies that fit into the given mode, although such additions should only be made with careful forethought. There are various *tefillot* outside of the Yomim Noroim that have fixed melodies, primarily the Kaddishim and some major *tefillot*, such as Tal/Geshem and the “concluding phrases” of many of the tefillot. The requirement to keep the traditional *nusach* applies throughout the year, for every prayer, at every service!³⁰

²⁹ This refers to the communities that descend from Eastern Europe, which includes a great majority of American Jewry. Of course, each community is obligated to follow their specific custom and practices.

³⁰ In the writings of the halachic authorities of past centuries, we often see references to the importance of davening within the traditional guidelines. One example is from the *Mateh Ephraim*, by Rabbi Ephraim Margolioth of Brody, Ukraine (1760-1828) who writes, “if he (the chazzan) thinks that his own melodies are more pleasant than the traditional melodies, he will be punished by Heaven for this!” Rabbi Gedalia Schwartz, now Av Bes Din of the Chicago Rabbinical Council, writes: “Congregations should seek the combination of piety and a mastering of traditional musical *nusach* which is part of the spiritual fabric of *tefillah*, particularly on the *Yomim Noroim*. The absence of these hallowed *niggunim* during the davening would be unthinkable to any worshipper...” There is no question that our rabbinical leaders were concerned about maintaining the hallowed musical tradition of our davening. It was unthinkable that anyone would want to change these melodies, and as an absolute, immutable,

The Kol Nidre

The Music of the *Kol Nidre* is one of the most profoundly emotional melodies of our entire liturgy. No other synagogue prayer has such an impact on the listener - arousing, uplifting, and inspiring passions that well up from the innermost depths of emotion for the entire congregation. What makes this prayer so important to the average congregant, who is drawn to the synagogue (on time!) with anticipation, trepidation, and awe?

To the superficial examiner the words of the text are quite common. It is simply *Hatarat Nedarim*, a time-accepted formula of absolution from personal vows and oaths between man and G-d, written in Aramaic. It is based on the statement in the Talmud (Nedarim 23b) that one who desires to annul his vows should publicly stand up at the “beginning of the year” and declare them null and void. Rabbeinu Tam (1100-1170) changed the standard wording to vows of the future only. (In some shuls they use the formulation of the Vilna Gaon as taught by Rav Soloveitchik, incorporating both past and future vows). *Kol Nidre* probably existed in its present form in the eighth or ninth centuries, in the Geonic period. The text is recited three times to emphasize the “solemnity of the declaration” (SeMaG), or to enable the congregation to hear it, in case they missed the first two recitations. (Bach, O.C. 619)

It is primarily the haunting music of this tefillah and the mystique of its history that augment the urgency, weight, and seriousness of the day and draw attendance. Unwilling to miss the stirring words of this declaration, and – I believe, very significantly – the undisputable impact of the music, the average Jew is drawn to come on time to shul. His father did so, and his father before him, all for the same reasons. This is the strength and impact of our *Missinai* melodies, which have carried on from generation to generation.

The Music of Kol Nidre

The melody as heard today in the Ashkenazic Synagogue did not exist in its present form until the middle of the 15th or 16th century. (Sephardic Jews recite *Kol Nidre* to a completely different tune.) It is the very last *Missinai* melody incorporated into the list of the sacred *Niggunei Maharil*, even though it was finalized many years after the period of the *Maharil*³¹. We do know that the singing of this “declaration” was instituted by R. Yehudai Gaon in the 8th Century, to be sung to a (non-specific) melody by his Chazzan in the academy of Sura, Babylonia. According to the 11th Century *Machzor Vitry* of R. Simcha ben-Samuel, it was to be chanted three times: first, in a low and soft voice, then gradually increasing with each repetition to full voice. This represents the entrance of a subject into the King’s palace with trepidation and his eventual standing before his king with confidence. In the *Sefer Maharil*, the *Maharil* is described as singing the text with “various tunes”

irrevocable rule of *tefillah*, it was considered unnecessary to discuss! It was, therefore, rarely voiced as a concern in most halachic works.

³¹ Although the word “*Missinai*” initially referred only to the *niggunei HaMaharil*, it was later used in reference to other melodies that became *minhag* such as the *Kol Nidre*, which was created from *Missinai* motifs, and all the various *Yomim Noroim Kaddishim* that, over 300 years, gradually evolved from the one ancient *Tal/Geshem Missinai* melody.

over and over again until nightfall: “*yaarich bo b’niggunim*,” indicative of the fact that no fully set tune was as yet established in the Maharil’s time. The first mention of an established melody for Kol Nidre is found in the *Levush* of Rabbi Mordechai Jaffe of Prague (1530-1612), who writes of “a widely accepted tune” known to the chazzanim of his time. The earliest notation of this melody is from 1765, written down by Cantor Aaron Beer of Berlin (1738-1821).

The Component Parts of the Kol Nidre

Upon analysis, Kol Nidre appears to have been formulated from an amalgam of other *Missinai niggunim* and *Taamei HaMikra* (*Trope*) of the Torah and Haftarah. It is clear that the Jews of France and the Rhineland in the 15th century adapted the concluding phrase of the “Great Aleinu” (see below) for the *Kol Nidre*, (as well as for the first paragraph of the Yomim Noroim *Avot*). This phrase has a triumphant character, which is appropriate for “*Haboh Aleinu L’Tova*,” “May it come upon us for good,” and for use as a typical end-of-sentence motif.

The opening musical phrase of the *Kol Nidre* was likely taken from the *HaMelech* of Shacharis – one of the great *Missinai/Scarbova* melodies discussed above. It can also be heard in the melody of the opening phrase of the Kaddish before Musaf of the Yomim Noroim. Professor Abraham Z. Idelsohn (1882-1938) – our first and foremost Jewish Ethnomusicologist³² – has written that it was a chazzan in 15th/16th century Southwest Germany who “voiced the sentiments of the terror-stricken Marranos, as they recited the *Kol Nidre* in a touching tune which expresses the fear, terror, fervent pleading and stern hope for ultimate salvation.”³³ Throughout the world, the profound melody of this lofty prayer is recognized as one of Judaism’s most signature contributions to song and prayer.

As we are about to endure the fast of *Yom Kippur*, the average Jew is acutely aware that his prayers may well have an impact on the coming year in pleas for health, prosperity, peace, and tranquility. It is with trepidation and a prayerful hope for the future that the Jew is drawn to this solemn melodic declaration at the onset of the holiest day of the year.

The Yomim Noroim Maariv Borchu

It is Ma'ariv, the first night of Rosh Hashana. The Chazzan begins to sing the familiar, beloved melody of the Yomim Noroim Bor'chu": “Ah...♪ ...♪...♪ ...♪...♪” The melody permeates the atmosphere of the shul and uplifts the hearts of all present. Where did this melody come from, and how old is it? How many generations of Jews began their New Year with this profound introduction to the liturgy of the High Holidays? There are few melodies that immerse us in an aura of holiness and sacred prayer, and which, simply by being heard, grant the listener palpable, visceral recognition

³² Professor Idelsohn (Latvia/S.Africa/Jerusalem/Cincinnati, 1882-1938) PhD in Music, Leipzig University, Chazzan and professor of Music, was the very first Jewish ethnomusicologist, who dedicated his life to collecting, identifying and analyzing the great corpus of musical minhag of every community that he was able to reach in his lifetime. He collected these and published them in his monumental 10 volume “Thesaurus of Hebrew Melodies”. He published many other books on Jewish music, including the ground-breaking, “Jewish Music in its historical development”, a history of Jewish Music from Biblical times to the present.

³³ A.Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Music in its Historical Development*, Henry Holt, 1929

that we are no longer in the mundane cycle of our year, but that we have now entered the lofty heights of the holiest days of the year - the beginning of the “Days of Awe.”

Charlemagne and the Source of the Melody

We know for certain that the Borchu melody is more than eleven centuries old, having first appeared in the 8th and 9th century in the Europe of Emperor Charlemagne (742-814). Charlemagne imported the rabbinic leaders of Italy and Babylon, R. Kalonymos and R. Machir who composed prayers and set melodies to them based on their ancient traditions that eventually were sanctified by the Maharil³⁴. One of these sanctified melodies is that of the Maariv Yomim Noroim Bor’chu. Its oldest written source is in the music collection of Charlemagne’s court musician, Paulus Diaconus (720-799 AD). This unusual source provides us with an actual date, and makes this Borchu one of the few ancient Jewish melodies whose age we can actually determine.

We can be reasonably certain that the Maariv Yomim Noroim Borchu has truly come from the Jewish community, even though its earliest written source is a book of Christian song. Until the 18th century Jews generally did not know how to write music, since writing music was exclusively reserved for the Christian clergy. Therefore, when this majestic, sacred melody of the High Holidays is sung in shul, you can sing along with confidence that not only has it been sanctified by Jewish tradition, but that it is very likely an authentic, ancient Jewish melody that is well over 1200 years old!

The grand majestic manner of this prayer causes us to wonder why we usher in the serious, serene High Holy Days with a melody of praise and exultation. After all, these are the Days of Awe, when G-d sits in judgment. How can we approach Him with a tune whose style is so uplifting and lofty? This is the essence of the question asked by my teacher, Cantor Macy Nulman.

Cantor Nulman answers that Rabbi Eliezer ben Meshullam of Mainz (12th century) initiated the general rule throughout the year of singing of Bor’chu to an extended melody, “which gives worshippers ample time to gather for the service.”³⁵ He writes that early Chassidim called the

³⁴ Desirous of fostering commerce with the nations of the Middle East, and convinced that the Jews would be the conduit to Middle East commerce with Babylonia, Persia, Egypt, Turkey, etc., Charlemagne decided to encourage the growth of the small Jewish population in Rhineland bordering France and Germany. In order to attract Jewish settlers, Charlemagne imported world-renowned rabbinic leaders and their families whom, he correctly surmised, would attract Jews who would move to this new community. He first chose the Kalonymos family of Italy, led by the foremost Italian Rabbinic scholar Rabbi Kalonymos and his son Meshullam, as well as Rabbi Machir of Babylon. He settled the Kalonymos family in Mainz, Germany, and the Machirs in Narbonne, Southern France. Each brought in their wake numerous Talmudists, poets, and theologians. Their leadership elevated and preserved the Rhineland Kehillah, which gradually became the largest in early medieval Europe, and established its customs. These rabbis were also chazzanim and poets (*paytanim*), composing poems and melodies based on the ancient traditions they had brought with them. As we mentioned before, many of these melodies were preserved as our *Missinai* melodies (primarily of the High Holidays and festivals) guided by the dictum of the Maharil, and formed the basis of our *Minhag Ashkenaz* to this day.

³⁵ Concepts of Jewish Music and Prayer, Cantorial Council of America, Yeshiva University

first night of Rosh Hashanah “Coronation Night”. “It proclaims that the kingdom of G-d is one of the major themes of the Rosh Hashanah service. It is no wonder that Ashkenazic Jewry throughout the world joins together with the Chazzan in this exultant theme. It is also possible that this musical theme *lessens* our fear as we approach the Yom Hadin (Day of Judgment) and gives us hope and courage to continue (praying) for a new year.”

The History of the “Great” Aleinu

The text of Aleinu was originally composed for Musaf of Yomim Noroim in the third century C.E., in Babylonia³⁶. The hauntingly powerful musical setting of the text was already known during the years of the third Crusade (1187-1192 C.E.) led by King Richard the Lionheart, having developed in the centuries prior to that. During the period of the nine Crusades (1096-1272 C.E.), many of the communities of the Rhineland were attacked by the marauding Christian army and forced to convert to Christianity. Those Jews who refused were murdered or burnt at the stake. In *Emek Habacha*, Yosef HaKohen (1496-1528) quotes a letter to the last of the *Gaonim*, Rabbi Jacob of Orleans (d. 1189), where an eyewitness describes a mass murder in the town of Blois, France in 1171 C.E. As the Christians began to burn many of the town’s Jewish population at the stake, the Christian knights listened in awe as the dying martyrs sang a “mysterious song.” When asked, the remaining Jews told them that this was the song of their “Aleinu.” The knight executors and their French collaborators were so impressed, that they incorporated this melody into the melodies of their own religion³⁷, which can be heard to this very day. This disturbing historical fact verifies the ancientness of this melody.

The “electric” power of this sanctified melody, one of the oldest of our *Missinai* tunes, introduces and prepares the listener for the most important and sublime prayer of the Amida, the central paragraphs of the *Kedushas Hayom* section. Its impact is so great that this theme is heard again and again throughout the Yomim Noroim in tefillot such as the *Kol Nidre*, the first section of the repetition of the *Amida* (*Avot and Gevurot*), and elsewhere throughout the Machzor. The sublime magnetism of this ancient *tefillah* stands in stark contrast to the simplistic opening and closing phrases of the contemporary tune for Aleinu sung in our shuls every Shabbat. No example better illustrates the chasm separating our *Missinai* tradition from the corpus of mundane melodies chosen by many of today’s congregations.

A Sampling of Other Missinai Melodies

Hamelech: The melody of Hamelech was first set by Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg (1215-1293) and finalized by the Maharil.

Avot: This melody was also established by R’Meir, and it contains many *Missinai* elements and motifs.

³⁶ According to a mesorah, found in Shaarei Teshuva, 43 and Kol Bo, 16, some hold that Aleinu may have been originally written by Yehoshua after the battle of Jericho.

³⁷ Eric Werner, “A Voice Still Heard”, Penn.StateU.Press, 1978

Musaf Yomim Noraim Kaddish: The Mussaf Kaddish was originally similar to *Tal/Geshem* prayer, as were most of the Kaddish *tefillot* of the Yomim Noraim at the time of the Maharam of Rothenberg. By the 16/17th century, this Kaddish melody had become differentiated to provide a specialized musical theme for each service of the High Holiday *Machzor*. They each have elements of the original and are considered *Missinai* as well.

V'Hakohanim: This melody is intended to replicate the service in the Holy Temple. It is heard again in the Musaf Kedusha (*Kvodo, etc.*) and in various other settings.

Motifs: “*Hashem Melech*” somewhat similar to Neilah; “*S'lach lanu,*” also heard at “*Sh'vikin Sh'visin,*” and others.

The Krovos mode: The Krovos mode is heard in *Ochilo LoKeil; Asisi; Misod; Yoreisi: Eimecho Nososi,* and elsewhere.

Missinai melodies are also used in piyyutim such as *Aapid: Eder Vohod; Esa Dei;* ancient texts such as *Ato Hu Elokeinu* and *L'Keil Orech Din;* Yotzros; the Avodah of Yomim Noraim; Selichos; V'nislach; Vidui, and many others

There are few melodies anywhere in the world that can compare with the lofty serenity and holiness of these sanctified, time-honored *Missinai* themes. The soul of the Jew responds to them, and the melodies, in turn, enter the hearts of their listeners and have a profound effect upon them. It is that very impact that the Maharil recognized and endeavored so mightily to preserve, so that each year and throughout the year the Jew could be brought closer to the ideals of Teshuva, Tefilla, and Tzedaka, the formula that can overturn the negative decree and grant us all a good and blessed New Year. V'chein Y'hi Ratson!