

(Shabbat) Angels in America: Israel Goldfarb, “Shalom Aleichem,” and the Search for Nusach America

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Abstract

Contemporary American synagogue congregations love to sing a flowing melody for the hymn “Shalom Aleichem” to welcome the Sabbath on Friday evenings. The song has entered the Jewish folk tradition, and speaks to singers of home and nostalgia. However, the song’s history and construction reveal both its genesis in an American Jewish community in the midst of a significant transformation of nation and practice and the crucial role that it played in bringing that community together and forming the basis of a truly American style of Jewish worship. I approach this song on two fronts. My primary approach is historical, delving into the immediate circumstances under which Rabbi Israel Goldfarb composed the song in May of 1918, and the broader forces affecting Jewish religious life in the United States in the early years of the twentieth century. I address changes taking place in American Jewish life, generation gaps between American Jews, and the rise of the Jewish education movement, and I demonstrate how Goldfarb’s song reached a significant audience of adults and children alike and helped to address these transitional challenges in Jewish life. My secondary approach is socio-cultural. I ask why this particular one of the many melodies that Goldfarb composed caught the American Jewish imagination and became a foundation of contemporary American synagogue song. Its mode and its structure reveal Goldfarb’s compositional skill at combining both Jewish and Western elements into a flexible song that children could learn and pass on to their children, creating a folk song through generations of use. Taken together, these approaches demonstrate how a four-stanza hymn could pave the way for the development of an American Jewish soundscape.

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Hebrew Abstract

(שבת) מלאכים באמריקה:
 ישראל גולדפרב, "שלום עליכם", והחיפוש אחר נוסח אמריקה

רהל אדלשטין

תקציר

כדי לקבל את פני השבת בימי שישי בערב. השיר נכנס למסורת העממית היהודית, וקולע לטעמיהם של למי שאוהבים שירה הנקשרת לבית ונוסטלגיה. עם זאת, ההיסטוריה והבנייה של השיר חושפים הן את תחילתו בקהילה יהודית אמריקאית שהייתה בעיצומו של שינוי משמעותי של אומה ופרקטיקה, הן את התפקיד המכריע שהשיר מילא בקירובם של בני קהילה זו, זאת תוך כדי הפיכתו לבסיס לסגנון פולחן יהודי אמריקאי אמיתי. אני בוחנת ומתייחסת לשיר הזה בשתי חזיתות. הגישה העיקרית שלי היא היסטורית, תוך התעמקות בנסיבות המיידיות של הלחנת השיר על ידי הרב ישראל גולדפרב במאי 1918, ותוך בחינת הכוחות הרחבים יותר שהשפיעו על חיי הדת של היהודים בארצות הברית בתחילת המאה העשרים. אני מתייחסת לשינויים המתרחשים בחיים היהודיים האמריקאיים, לפערי דורות בין יהודים אמריקאיים, ולצמיחתה של תנועת החינוך היהודי. כמו כן, אני מדגימה כיצד השיר של גולדפרב הגיע לקהל משמעותי של מבוגרים וילדים כאחד ועזר להתמודד עם אתגרי המעברים הללו בחיים היהודיים. הגישה המשנית שלי היא חברתית-תרבותית. אני שואלת מדוע הלחן הספציפי הזה מבין המנגינות הרבות שגולדפרב הלחין תפס את הדמיון היהודי האמריקאי והפך לבסיס לשיר שנשמע רבות בבית הכנסת האמריקאי העכשווי. האופן והמבנה של השיר חושפים את מיומנות ההלחנה של גולדפרב בשילוב אלמנטים יהודיים ומערביים כאחד לכדי שיר גמיש שילדים יכלו ללמוד ולהעביר לילדיהם, תוך יצירת שיר עם במרוצת הדורות. ביחד, גישות אלו מדגימות כיצד פיוט בן ארבעה בתים יכול לסלול את הדרך לפיתוח נוף קול (soundscape) יהודי אמריקאי.

Translation from English to Hebrew by Einat Libel Hass

Introduction

Every Friday evening, in homes, synagogues, and Hillel centers across the Anglophone world, Jewish congregants welcome *Shabbat*, the Sabbath, by singing a simple song called "*Shalom Aleichem*" together. The song's title translates from Hebrew as "Peace be unto you," as a literary form of welcome. It is a *piyyut*, a liturgical poem that has been set to music so that it can be sung, and its text addresses two angels who function as Divine messengers:

Shalom aleichem, malachei ha-shareit,
 Malachei elyon
 Mi-melech mal'chei ha-m'lachim,
 Ha-Kadosh, baruch hu.

Peace be unto you, ministering angels,
 Messengers of the Highest One,

Of the King who is King of Kings,
The Holy One, blessed be He.¹

Three more stanzas follow, substantially similar except for the opening address to the angels. Unless the leader specifies a different melody, most American and many Anglophone congregations will default to a slow, gently rocking setting that opens with a leap of a minor sixth and gently descends in a style that Tina Frühauf calls “calm in wave form” (2018: 22). A new melody for the second verse, the B tune, follows, which Frühauf describes as “similarly wavy in its melodic contour,” but “more vitalizing” (ibid.: 22) because of its higher range. An augmented second in the lower range of the melody catches the ear and gives the piece a character that the synagogue congregants who sing it would identify as “Jewish.” The song can be heard in [Audio Example 1](#) (Adelstein 2023: The A and B tunes of Israel Goldfarb’s “Shalom Aleichem,” as they are commonly sung in contemporary American synagogues. Recording by the author.).

This melody is one of the most popular songs heard in synagogues in the Anglophone world. Most Jews who have spent some time in a synagogue, a religious school, or a university Jewish organization such as Hillel, know it and can sing along when asked, without the need for text or music notation. Although the melody is printed in many collections of popular liturgical songs, few congregants learn it from these notated sources. Instead, they learn the melody by ear, possibly, but not always, using a written text, either in Hebrew or transliterated into the Roman alphabet. If they consider the origin of the melody at all, they assume that it is a centuries-old Eastern European melody or ascribe it to an imagined version of a Hasidic² community (Israel Goldfarb quoted in Kane Street Synagogue 2006; see also Schleifer 2005: 312–313).

However, despite the appealingly timeless contours of the melody and the prominent augmented second that carries so many associations with *hazzanut*, the improvisational liturgical art of the Eastern European cantor, the melody is not only thoroughly American, but also a product of the twentieth century. It was composed in 1918 by Rabbi Cantor Israel Goldfarb (1879–1967) in New York City. Born in Sieniawa, in what is now southeastern Poland, Goldfarb studied music education at Columbia, and received rabbinical ordination in 1902 from the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS; Michelman 2006: n.p.; see also Ronen 2022). His melody for “Shalom Aleichem” spread quickly across the United States after its first publication. It has also become embedded in the repertoires of Jewish communities from the United Kingdom to Israel, and from Romania to Ukraine, as well as in the repertoires of folk performers from Geor-

¹ Translation by the author.

² Hasidic Jews are Orthodox and follow a philosophy first developed by Rabbi Israel Ben Eliezer (1698–1760) in Ukraine. Hasidism is known for its emphasis on spirituality, and for its elevation of melody as a means to achieve spiritual ecstasy. In the modern era, wordless melodies called *niggunim*, deriving from Hasidic composers, have become popular across all Jewish movements.

gia, Austria, Iran, Spain, France, and the Republic of Türkiye, who promote it as a traditional Jewish melody.³

Building on Eliyahu Schleifer’s 2005 biographical and modal analysis of “Shalom Aleichem,” I dig more deeply into the historical context of this beloved Jewish congregational song, and I examine its role as a social phenomenon that helped to shape Jewish life in the United States in the early 20th century. This was an era of transition for the American Jewish minority. A large wave of immigration from Eastern Europe changed both the size and the ethnic makeup of the Jewish population of the United States significantly. With this change came the growth of a new style of Jewish worship, sound, and practice. The music composed for this style of worship endured over decades, and has grown into a folk tradition in its own right.

Because “Shalom Aleichem” has been handed down through several generations of American Jewish life, it also reveals something about the early life cycle of a folksong. Today, it is an indisputable part of the oral heritage of American Jews. Singing it, recording it, orchestrating it, and teaching it to children as a marker of Jewishness and Jewish heritage recalls Philip Bohlman’s observation that folk song “was particularly important to the Enlightenment and Romantic projects of musical invention for many reasons – a folk song projected a specific literary, social, religious, and national identity” (2019: 108). While Bohlman focuses on the work of folk song collections in locating a Jewish identity in Germany across the turn of the 20th century, “Shalom Aleichem” and the congregational melodies that came after it accomplish similar work in the United States, a project that continues into the present day. However, unlike many melodies that scholars and composers such as Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) or Béla Bartók (1881–1945) might have considered folksongs, the authorship of “Shalom Aleichem” is known, and indeed Goldfarb placed it under copyright upon composing it, although it has now entered the public domain. In examining the journey of a song from a new, copyrighted composition to a semi-anonymous melody transmitted orally between generations, we can observe the nuances and flexible areas within the seemingly static genre of “folksong.” The borders of this genre are more porous than early scholars believed them to be, and those flexible boundaries provide room for “tradition” to grow and adapt along with the people who practice it. “Shalom Aleichem,” along with other contemporaneous melodies that became Jewish standards, not only helped to bring disparate Jewish congregations in the United States together, but also began to define a new American Jewish sound. This new sound helped American Jews to construct their worship services and, ultimately, their own American traditions.

I begin this examination with a brief biography of “Shalom Aleichem,” in which I discuss its composition and subsequent popularity in the context of Marina Ritzarev’s theory of folksong evolution, with a comparison to a similarly popular secular Jewish song from the same era. I touch briefly on some of the musical elements that give

³ Examples of such “folk” performances are [Bethabara Boys’ Choir \(2012\)](#), [Ensemble der Salzburger Liedertafel \(2017\)](#), [Geo Folk Band \(2019\)](#), [İssever and Luvi \(2018\)](#), [Darya Music \(2016\)](#), [Mayaan Band \(2017\)](#), [My Sheet Music Transcriptions \(2017\)](#), and [Weisburd \(2019\)](#).

“Shalom Aleichem” its enduring appeal, including elements of form, melody, and mode, and then broaden my focus to describe the American Jewish world as it existed when Goldfarb began to compose. I examine developments in the organizational structures of Jewish religious life and Jewish cultural education that created the environment in which Goldfarb’s song could reach a large enough and receptive enough audience to become a cultural phenomenon. Finally, I set “Shalom Aleichem” against the backdrop of the developing modern American synagogue soundscape, *nusach America*. Placing “Shalom Aleichem” in the complicated framework of an emerging American Judaism reveals both the significant influence of thoughtfully constructed music on a receptive culture and the flexibility and resilience of the American Jewish culture that developed during the twentieth century.

A Short Biography of “Shalom Aleichem”

The text of “Shalom Aleichem” was composed around the turn of the seventeenth century CE by anonymous mystical scholars in Safed, today known as Tzfat, in northern Israel. Eliyahu Schleifer (2005: 309) notes that it was first printed in a Shabbat manual published in the Ashkenazi⁴ community of Prague in 1641, and quickly spread to Sephardic and Mizrahi communities as well. It belongs to the genre of *Z’mirot*, or “table songs,” intended to be sung in the home during the dinner to welcome the Sabbath on Friday night. The poem addresses the angels that, according to Talmudic teaching, accompany a congregant home from the synagogue on Friday evening:

Rabbi Yosei bar Yehuda says: Two ministering angels accompany a person on Shabbat evening from the synagogue to his home, one good angel and one evil angel. And when he reaches his home and finds a lamp burning and a table set and his bed made, the good angel says: May it be Your will that it shall be like this for another Shabbat. And the evil angel answers against his will: Amen. And if the person’s home is not prepared for Shabbat in that manner, the evil angel says: May it be Your will that it shall be so for another Shabbat, and the good angel answers against his will: Amen (*b.Shabbat* 119b:3, [The William Davidson Talmud](#)).

In the four stanzas used in Ashkenazi tradition, the poem wishes peace to the angels (“Shalom aleichem”), welcomes them (“Boachem l’shalom”), requests a blessing from them (“Barchu-ni l’shalom”), and wishes them farewell (“Tzeit’chem l’shalom”). In some traditions, each stanza of the poem is sung three times to emphasize the singer’s *kavanah*, or prayerful intent. [Audio Example 2](#) (Goldstein and Fogelman 2003: Chaim Fogelman sings “Shalom Aleichem”, accompanied by Zalman Goldstein. Recording by Chabad-Lubavitch Media Center.), a recording from Chabad, demonstrates how this

⁴ Ashkenazi Jews descend from the Jewish communities of Central and Eastern Europe. The majority of American Jews are of Ashkenazi descent. The Sephardi (Southern European) and Mizrahi (Middle-Eastern and North African) Jewish communities include a fifth stanza in “Shalom Aleichem” wishing peaceful rest to the angels (“Beshiv’t’chem l’shalom”); however, this stanza is not often used in the American tradition.

practice can be fitted to Goldfarb's melody. The singer sings each stanza three times, in AAB form, and finishes with a *chatimah*, or seal, that combines verses from two Psalms. Psalm 91:11 reads: "For He will instruct His angels in your behalf, to guard you in all your ways," and Psalm 121:8 reads: "The Lord will guard your going and your coming from now and for all time" (Translations: Goldstein and Fogelman 2003).

Goldfarb composed the melody on May 10, 1918 as he sat in front of the library at Columbia University. He debuted it a few weeks later at a rally held in Madison Square Garden sponsored by the League for the Jewish Youth of America, an organization formed in 1917 by rabbi and educator Israel Friedlaender (Krasner 2011: 203; see also Friedmann 2019: 33). The goal of the League was to create an environment in which American Jewish youth could form a sense of pride in peoplehood and solidarity with Jews around the world. Friedlaender worked with educator Dr. Samson Benderly to shape the League to be "sympathetic to cultural Zionism" but "above partisan affiliations" (Krasner 2011: 195), although younger leaders took the organization in a much more explicitly Zionist direction. Goldfarb's daughter, Bella Goldfarb Lehrman, recalled that, at the League rally where Goldfarb introduced "Shalom Aleichem," "the kids sang it and the parents sang it, and by the time the day was over, it was a national hit" (quoted in Kane Street Synagogue 2006: n.p.). Unfortunately, no other record of that gathering remains.

Goldfarb spent much of his career focused on Jewish education. In 1905, he began working at the Kane Street Synagogue, becoming cantor, Sunday school director, and rabbi (Ronen 2022). In this comprehensive liturgical role, he combined his cantorial ordination with his degree in music education from Columbia to oversee the religious education of generations of young congregants. Israel Goldfarb also worked closely with Young Israel, a Jewish youth movement founded in 1912 that created connections between young Jews, born in the United States and brought up speaking English, and traditional Jewish practice. In that era, a generation gap had developed in American Jewish life. Regarding its history, Young Israel explains:

At the beginning of the 20th century, the principal language spoken in Orthodox synagogues was Yiddish and an Eastern European atmosphere permeated the air. American-raised Jewish youth who wandered into these synagogues typically found themselves shut out completely. It is not surprising that the Jewish youth of that era generally avoided synagogues, attending only when expected by family custom (National Council of Young Israel 2022).

As Schleifer observes, the members of Young Israel "saw in the prayer customs of the Eastern European synagogue a shameful disorder and confusion" (2005: 316; translation by the author). They determined that they wanted a service where the community itself led prayer through communal public singing, in which congregants would share melodies that they had learned from their ancestral communities (*ibid.*). In 1915, Young Israel developed their "Model Synagogue" which encouraged both participatory singing and youth activities. Goldfarb's grandson, Rabbi Henry Michelman,

recalls that, beginning around 1919, Goldfarb devoted significant time to Young Israel, in addition to his duties at Kane Street Synagogue. Michelman writes that:

After conducting services in his synagogue and presiding over his own Shabbat table, Israel Goldfarb often walked over the Brooklyn Bridge on Friday nights to the *Oneg Shabbat* at the newly formed Young Israel, housed in the Educational Alliance building on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. He brought with him his melodies (Michelman 2006: n.p).

Working with Young Israel as well as with his young congregants at the Kane Street Synagogue allowed Goldfarb to understand how young Jews addressed the cultural challenges of life in an immigrant community, and helped to shape his own ideas about the type and methods of Jewish education that would reach them.

At the request of his younger congregants at Kane Street and his friends in Young Israel, Goldfarb composed several dozen melodies appropriate for congregational singing, so that young people could participate in worship rather than simply sit and listen to a *hazzan* (cantor) praying on their behalf. Israel and Samuel published “Shalom Aleichem” in a 1918 volume entitled *Friday Evening Melodies*, under the auspices of the Bureau of Jewish Education (see Figure 1). The book contains seven arrangements of popular synagogue melodies and fourteen of Goldfarb’s original compositions. The collection traveled all over the United States, and this particular melody spread internationally as well. It has been reprinted in many other collections, sometimes transposed into different keys.⁵

Because the text is repetitive and the melody is intentionally accessible and easy to learn, one does not need to read a printed score to learn the piece, and it spread well beyond the reach of any of the books in which it was printed. Rather than learning it from a printed score, congregants now learn it by ear, from their parents, their grandparents, or from religious-school teachers. When “Shalom Aleichem” is taught this way, it is usually without attribution. Within Goldfarb’s lifetime, his name was separated from his composition, a phenomenon that music publishers such as social worker Bernard Carp noticed and attempted to correct. In his 1949 pamphlet *The Jewish Center Songster*, Carp reprinted “Shalom Aleichem” with both an attribution to Goldfarb and a prefatory note observing that the song “has become so widely known and sung that it is mistaken by many for a traditional folk song” (1949: 7). Even so, cantors and synagogue musicians as well as lay congregants came to think of it as either

⁵ Some examples include, but are not limited to, *Selected Jewish Songs for Members of the Armed Forces* (National Jewish Welfare Board 1945), Harry Coopersmith’s *Shirei Ami* (1937; [Songs of My People]) and *The New Jewish Song Book* (1965), *Union Songster: Songs and Prayers for Jewish Youth* (Central Conference of American Rabbis 1960), *Hymnal of North Shore Congregation Israel* (North Shore Congregation Israel 1966), and *Songs and Hymns* (American Conference of Cantors and the Central Conference of American Rabbis 1977). Notably, Moshe Nathanson’s *Manginoth Shireynu* (1939; [The Melodies We Sing]) omits an attribution; “Shalom Aleichem” appears anonymously on page 55, although some other melodies with known composers are attributed.

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Sholom Alechem—שְׁלוֹם אֵלֵיכֶם

mf Moderato.

Sho-lom a - le-chem mal-a-che hash-sho-res mal-a - che el - -

mf Moderato.

yon Me - lech mal'-che ham-m'lo-chim hak-ko-dosh bo-ruch-

hu; Bo - a - chem l'-sho-lom mala-che hash-sho-lom, mala - che el -

Figure 1. The tune of “Shalom Aleichem” as it appears in its 1918 debut in *Friday Evening Melodies* (public domain). The transliteration follows the rules of traditional Ashkenazi pronunciation of Hebrew rather than the Sephardic pronunciation that is commonly used in the United States today.

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yon Me - lech mal'-che ham-m'lo-chim hak-ko-dosh bo-ruch

hu; Bor'-chu - ni l'-sho - lom mal - a-che hash sho-lom

mal-a - che el - yon Me - lech mal-che ham-m'lo-chim,

Figure 1 (continued).

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hak-ko - dosh bo - ruch hu; Tses' - chem l' - sho - lom

mala - che hash-sho - lom mala - che el - - yon

Me - lech mal' - che ham-m'lo-chim hak-ko-dosh bo-ruch hu.

rit.

rit.

3

3

Figure 1 (continued).

an old Hasidic melody or as an entirely anonymous folk tune. As Goldfarb wrote to Hazzan Pinchas Spiro in May of 1963, “many people came to believe that the song was handed down from M’t Sinai by Moses” (quoted in Kane Street Synagogue 2006: n.p.).

In the 45 years between its 1918 debut and Goldfarb’s 1963 letter, “Shalom Aleichem” shifted between two categories of vernacular music that Israeli musicologist Marina Ritzarev describes as onto-vernacular and phylo-vernacular. Phylo-vernacular music is that which is inherited from previous generations, while onto-vernacular refers to music acquired during the lifetime of a particular generation (Ritzarev 2005: 50–51). The starkest understandings of these terms call to mind Béla Bartók’s definition of folk music as “all the melodies which endure within the peasant class of any nation, in a more or less wide area for a more or less long period, and which constitute a spontaneous expression of the musical feeling of that class,” a definition from which he pointedly excluded “urban folk” melodies with known, named composers (Bartók [1931] 1976: 6). However, Ritzarev recognizes that music acquired by one generation can indeed be passed on to subsequent generations, largely by becoming attached to extant cultural rituals. She observes that “when a native or even a foreign song or melody acquires a ritualistic connection for two or three generations, it is considered *phylo-vernacular*” (Ritzarev 2005: 55, italics in the original). A substantial number of Jewish melodies from the early twentieth century made this transition from onto-vernacular to phylo-vernacular song, helping to solidify American Jewishness as a stable minority identity, and becoming sounded markers of that minority to the surrounding majority culture.

The development of “Hava Nagila” demonstrates how a song can shift between the two categories of onto-vernacular and phylo-vernacular. It is almost exactly contemporaneous with “Shalom Aleichem,” and in many ways, it represents a secular version of the rise of “Shalom Aleichem” in religious culture. Like “Shalom Aleichem,” “Hava Nagila” traces its melodic roots to Jewish communities in Eastern Europe; the melody that would become “Hava Nagila” began as a *nigun*, or wordless melody, sung by the Jews of Sadigora, a town in the province of Bukovina, in what is now Ukraine. Edwin Seroussi and James Loeffler (2019) credit Abraham Zvi Idelsohn (1882–1938), the first modern Jewish musicologist, with transcribing the Sadigora melody in 1915 and using it as the basis for a new song that premiered in Jerusalem in 1918 at a celebration of a Zionist political victory. The authorship of the text, based on Psalm 118, is disputed. Idelsohn is traditionally credited as the author, but some authors, including Cantor Sheldon Feinberg (1988) and historian Gerard Wolfe (2013: 145), argue that it was Moshe Nathanson (1899–1981), at the time a student of Idelsohn, who actually composed the text. Thanks to Idelsohn’s early recording of “Hava Nagila” in 1922 and his energetic marketing of it in a songster printed that same year, it quickly became a favorite of Zionist youth groups in Europe and North America. Non-Jewish American performers including Harry Belafonte, Machito and his Afro-Cuban Orchestra, and Connie Francis recorded the song, and it has become a sonic symbol of Jewishness in the United States, often listed as either a Jewish or an Israeli folk song.

The complicated, disputed history of “Hava Nagila” strongly resembles the cultural route that “Shalom Aleichem” took in shifting from an onto-vernacular composition into a phylo-vernacular song. Like “Hava Nagila,” “Shalom Aleichem” is a song firmly rooted in the Jewish religious and sound world of Eastern Europe. A Jewish composer brought particular cultural elements together to create a new song intentionally connected to the ritual of welcoming the Sabbath. To the first generation of Jews who learned it from *Friday Evening Melodies*, it was a new, onto-vernacular song. However, as that first generation taught it to subsequent generations in connection with the Sabbath ritual, it became inescapably phylo-vernacular. When we approach a song like “Hava Nagila” or “Shalom Aleichem” in these terms, we come to see the category of “folksong” as a living, porous idea, open to ongoing musical creativity, marked by adoption, collaboration, and the desires of the “folk” themselves as they absorb and adjust songs to meet their needs. In the case of “Shalom Aleichem,” Goldfarb’s particular artistry in combining Western and Jewish elements made his song attractive to a people in need of sounds that spoke to multiple aspects of their identities.

Form, Mode, and Musical Jewishness

I suggest that Goldfarb’s targeted combination of elements of Jewish tonality and musical structure with a decidedly westernized form helped his melody to become popular enough to make this shift from an onto-vernacular to a phylo-vernacular melody. As Eliyahu Schleifer (2005: 322–323) has demonstrated, “Shalom Aleichem” is written in the *Ahava Rabba* (“With Great Love”) synagogue mode, also known as *Freygish* in Yiddish. The sound of *Ahava Rabba* represents deep, cross-cultural elements of the sacred in the Jewish world. Many scholars, including Baruch Cohon (1950) and Klára Móricz (2008), have noted that this mode strikes the Jewish public as the “most Jewish mode.” Móricz (2008: 26) identifies the augmented second that appears between the second and third degrees when the mode is placed in scale form as the most striking feature of the *Freygish* mode. It appears in the A tune of “Shalom Aleichem” in the second measure, on the text “malachei ha-shareit,” in the sixth measure, on the text “mal’chei ha-m’lachim,” and in the seventh measure, on the text “ha-Kadosh, baruch hu” (Goldfarb and Goldfarb 1918: 83). *Freygish* appears in the weekday and Shabbat morning services and in popular Jewish songs including “Hava Nagila,” and “Cuando el rey Nimrod,” as well as in klezmer dance repertoire. It is a mode that speaks to the world of Jewish liturgy and to the world of Jewish culture, providing what Bohlman describes as “an affirmation also of the selfness” (Herder and Bohlman 2017: 25) of the Jewish people, following Herder’s reflections on the ability of folk song to establish both similarity and distinction between cultures. There is, of course, much more to the *Freygish* mode than a single augmented second. However, the augmented second is the mode marker that catches the ear of even the least musically trained congregant.

Congregants experience the augmented second of the *Freygish* mode as meaningful and as Jewish because of that modal marker’s long existence in what rabbi and

synagogue musician Bob Gluck describes as a cultural “sonic library.” Gluck observes that the sonic library consists of more than simply an array of sounds commonly used in a culture, especially as these sounds can easily be shared between several different neighboring cultures. He further describes “the development of a musical vocabulary – musical gestures, melodies and textures – which, when shaped within musical forms, are expressive of the emotions and perceptions of members of the culture” (Gluck 1997: 35). Gluck locates “Shalom Aleichem’s” Jewishness specifically in the “melodic shape” created by the augmented second in “malachei hashareit” (ibid.: 37). Mark Kligman (2015: 91) further observes that there is no Western equivalent to Freyghish, strengthening its association with Jewish culture as a way of life that is separate from the European and North American cultures in which the Jewish people have lived for centuries. The association is cultural and nostalgic rather than strictly correct in a liturgical sense; Freyghish is the mode for Shabbat morning, not Friday night. However, “Shalom Aleichem” is a piyyut, intended to be sung outside of a formal Shabbat service. It is not liturgy, and the use of the mode on Friday evening is less important for Goldfarb than the act of evoking traditional prayer in the modern era.

In composing his melody, Goldfarb drew on classic Eastern European synagogue motives as well as markers of the Freyghish mode. Schleifer connects Goldfarb’s melody to an anonymous tune for a different Shabbat *Z’mirah*, called “Yom Shabbat Kodesh Hu” (“The Sabbath day is holy”). Goldfarb left no written evidence that he took inspiration from “Yom Shabbat Kodesh Hu” for “Shalom Aleichem,” but Schleifer believes that Goldfarb would have been familiar with the melody. The two songs reveal similar incipits and regular structure; however, as Schleifer (2005: 324–325) observes, “Shalom Aleichem” is a more complex and developed melody than “Yom Shabbat Kodesh Hu,” even as it remains equally accessible. The shared incipit is striking enough that it appears in at least one later composition. Joseph Levine identifies it as one of the “ready-made melodicles” (1982–1983: 37) that appear in Hazzan Abba Yosef Weisgal’s setting of Jeremiah 31:19 for Rosh Hashana, published in 1950. It is not clear whether Weisgal took the motif from Goldfarb or returned to Goldfarb’s own source. However, the migrations of this melodic figure reveal composers who are sensitive and judicious in weaving classic Jewish sound into more modern music, giving congregants a bridge between the sound world of their European ancestors and their American contemporaries.

In their introduction to *Friday Evening Melodies*, the Goldfarb brothers write that their goal is “the presentation of Jewish traditional ‘Prayer motive’ draped in a modern musical garb” (Goldfarb and Goldfarb 1918: n.p.). Israel Goldfarb’s use of the most noticeable Freyghish modal marker in an easily accessible westernized melody appears to achieve this goal, especially considering the enduring popularity of the melody. Its accessibility offered congregants both a sense of religious agency and a tool that would prove vital to the cultural project of transforming the diverse experiences of Jews in the United States into a new, recognizable Jewish community.

Creating a Jewish Community in the United States

Friday Evening Melodies appeared at a moment of significant cultural shift and uncertainty for the Jewish population of the United States. A series of pogroms ordered by Alexander III of Russia in 1881 prompted a wave of migration, bringing a large population of Orthodox Eastern European Jews to Western Europe and to the United States. Their arrival complicated already-existing debates about Jewish practice in the United States. Questions over how Judaism ought to be practiced in a country that expressly allowed for freedom of religion led to the establishment of multiple competing synagogues in major American cities by the 1850s. However, as historian Jonathan Sarna observes, the diversity of this new American Judaism was the result of ethnic divisions rather than a true syncretic practice:

During this period, synagogue diversity more commonly reflected communal diversity: immigrant Jews sought to re-create in the new world the same religious practices and customs that they recalled from their old home towns. In Europe, each local and regional Jewish community jealously guarded its own traditions as the embodiment of its distinctive religious identity, and infused its particular rite, or *minhag*, with a high degree of sanctity. By re-establishing these old-world rites in America, immigrants both underscored their devotion to their hometown practices, and sought to create for themselves an island of familiarity within a sea of change (Sarna 2004: 72).

At this point, although Jews did live in the United States, there was no one identifiable American Jewish community. American Jewish leaders, especially those coming from a Reform background, did attempt to create rites and rituals that they hoped would create a united American Jewish practice. In 1857, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise published a prayer book called *Minhag America*, expressly intended to create an American style of prayer comparable to *minhag Ashkenaz*, *minhag Sefard*, and *minhag Polen*, referring to the German, Spanish, and Polish rites that were common in the United States at the time. In 1919, Rabbi David Philipson wrote that “Wise doubtless wished to serve notice of his conviction that just as there was speech of German Judaism, Spanish Judaism, Polish Judaism, so also was there an American Judaism. I believe he was the first to use this term” (1919: 25). Wise’s *Minhag America* had some success, especially in Southern and Western Jewish communities, but it was eventually superseded by the *Union Prayer Book*, first published by the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1892 and then in a revised edition in 1895.

At the same time, Reform leaders were also working to elevate and unify American Jewish practice through music. Leading rabbis, cantors, musicians, and synagogue officials considered how best to balance the growing tensions between cantors, choirs, and congregations that wanted to sing. Both Judah Cohen and Tina Frühauf describe the various methods, ideas, and paths of thought that Reform leaders devoted to this problem. Cohen observes that leaders framed the push toward congregational singing in the 1880s as a means of returning Jewish authenticity to the congregation, even though both Reform and Orthodox writers “admitted that untrained voices complicat-

ed the idealism of congregational singing” (2019: 223). Still, Jewish leaders from multiple communities found themselves increasingly drawn to the concept of congregational singing, approaching it in a way that historian Jenna Weissman Joselit describes as a “rebuke of as well as a corrective to modernization” (2020). In service of this idea, the Reform movement produced two publications, both guided by Alois Kaiser (1840–1908), cantor at Congregation Oheib Shalom in Baltimore and founder of the Society of American Cantors. The first was the four-volume anthology *Zimrath Yah – Liturgic Songs, Consisting of Hebrew, English and German Psalms and Hymns, Systematically Arranged for the Jewish Rite with Organ Accompaniment*, published between 1873 and 1886. In 1897, working with the Central Conference of American Rabbis, Kaiser released the *Union Hymnal*, which would go through three revisions, with its final form appearing in 1932 (Frühauf 2015: 197–198).

In their own ways, these publications were created with the intent to provide a unified sound for American Jewish congregations. However, the highly performative style of music that *Zimrath Yah* and the *Union Hymnal* promoted had limited appeal even to the Reform movement for which they were created, and almost no appeal to Orthodox congregations or the new Conservative movement that began to institutionalize in the United States in 1886 with the founding of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. Some Reform leaders criticized the suppression of congregational participation in the first edition and the re-introduction of traditional Ashkenazi melodies in the 1914 second edition (Schiller 1992: 192–195; see also J. Cohen 2019: 254–256). Orthodox and Conservative congregations did not approve of instrumental accompaniment to worship, especially using the organ suggested in *Zimrath Yah*, which they considered to be too closely associated with Christian worship. In addition, the majority of the hymns were in English rather than Hebrew. Although early Conservative leaders acknowledged that English would be the vernacular language of American Jews, and that sermons could be delivered in English, both Conservative and Orthodox synagogues wished to maintain Hebrew as the primary language of worship (Gillman 1993: 56).

As Orthodox synagogues grew richer and more established and their congregations became more upwardly mobile, the style of worship became more formal and majestic. Some congregations, largely in New York, began to hire European-trained “star” hazzanim. Mishkan Israel Anshe Suwalk was the first, hiring Cantor Chaim Weinshel in 1885 (Polland 2009: 51). Other congregations followed suit, competing to hire the most famous cantors they could afford (Slobin 1989: 52–54; see also Goldberg 2019: 36). They spent thousands of dollars on bringing cantors from Europe to the United States, the money coming from ticket sales as congregants flocked to hear the services that these cantors led. The services were grand and formal, and the cantors in their robes and mitres, accompanied by male-voice choirs, easily matched the majesty of the organ-led Reform congregations. And, as Jonathan Sarna observes, the effect on Orthodox congregations strongly resembled the effect of the organ on Reform congregants. “The star cantors, often accompanied by male choirs, ‘performed’ the service. Congregants were expected to be quietly moved by all that they heard, but to join in

only for the occasional refrains” (Sarna 2004: 177). In Orthodox as well as in Reform synagogues, congregational participation was highly regulated, and the atmosphere of worship could easily become exclusionary to those not already deeply invested in the ritual of prayer.

Rabbis, musicians, and educators built Jewish religious and philosophical institutions that would help American Jews to participate in modern life while maintaining a reverence for Jewish law, language, and tradition that the Reform movement did not necessarily emphasize. The institution at the forefront of this new form of American Judaism was Goldfarb’s alma mater, JTS. Following a change in leadership and an official reorganization and re-endowment on April 14, 1902, JTS invited Moldavian-born British rabbi Solomon Schechter (1847–1915) to leave his post at University College London and become president of JTS (Karp 1986: 14; see also M. Cohen 2012: 20). Schechter led a group of his devoted students in a quest to create a unified community of American Jews that was both recognizably traditional and inclusive of differing national and generational perspectives. He taught his students his vision of what he called “Catholic Israel,” a Jewish community “unified behind traditional Judaism infused with English, decorum, and modern education” (M. Cohen 2012: 45). Schechter’s disciples carried his vision forward, and in February of 1913, they formed the United Synagogue of America, electing Schechter to be its first president (Karp 1986: 20–21). This organization solidified the Conservative movement in the United States, and is now known as the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism.

Goldfarb was not among Schechter’s disciples, as he belonged to the last class that graduated from JTS before Schechter’s era, one of what historian Jeffrey Gurock describes as “the list of so-described ‘full-hearted (American Orthodox) rabbis’” (1983: 168). However, he came to Schechter’s philosophy of Conservative Judaism later, through extensive practical experience, and taught *hazzanut*, the cantorial art, at JTS between 1921 and 1942. There, as Judah Cohen observes, he was able to “devise and disseminate a philosophy of musical practice within the Conservative movement of Judaism” (2008: 37). True to Schechter’s Conservative compromise between traditional practice and modern inclusivity and scholarship, this philosophy combined the sound of the Eastern European synagogue with the inclusivity of participatory congregational song.

While Solomon Schechter’s broad concept of Catholic Israel created a space in which Goldfarb’s practice of accessible congregational song could thrive, his wife Mathilde Schechter (1857–1924) helped to create a space for this specific musical expression of Jewish worship. In addition to being Solomon’s hostess and the founder of the Women’s League for Conservative Judaism, Mathilde Schechter was devoted to art, literature, and language. After the move to New York, Mathilde developed an interest in synagogue music, studying its history and encouraging congregations to sing (Sculd 1987: 15). In 1909, she organized a Jewish singing society called the Choral Society for Ancient Hebrew Melodies, and in 1910, she collaborated with Lewis Isaacs to publish *Kol Rinah: Hebrew Hymnal for School and Home*. In their introduction, Schechter and Isaacs express their hope that the songs in their collection will stimu-

late the interest of congregants, observing that “traditional melodies by constant association with the ritual in many lands, under varying historical conditions, have become a most expressive note of the Jewish soul” (Isaacs and Schechter 1910: 3). The twenty-four songs in the book do not have attributions. They are printed in grand staff notation with transliterated Hebrew lyrics, followed by translation into English and the text printed in Hebrew. The melodies are not original or new compositions; rather, they represent standard melodies sung in German and British synagogues and in homes for holidays.

Where Mathilde Schechter championed the act of congregational singing, Israel Goldfarb used his practical experience of working with American Jewish young people to create a repertoire that captured their interest and their imagination. This repertoire also fit well with a separate educational movement that was growing in the United States at the same time. While Solomon Schechter and his disciples were working on a unified, inclusive religious practice for American Jews, a coalition of educators and rabbis was developing an institutional approach to Jewish education that reached across movements and between individual synagogues to create a new, modern concept of community for American Jews. The community would connect with its members intellectually through lectures and discussions, and support them spiritually and emotionally through song. It was through this educational community that Goldfarb’s composition would find its path into the phylo-vernacular folk tradition.

Teaching American Judaism through Song

The crisis in Jewish life caused by the combination of cultural division and the generational language barrier prompted American Jewish leaders to focus intensely on establishing large-scale institutions for Jewish education in the early twentieth century. As discussed briefly above, Dr. Samson Benderly established the New York Bureau of Jewish Education in 1910 in response to a report issued in 1909 by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan and Bernard Cronson criticizing the state of Jewish youth education in New York City. Kaplan and Cronson suggested that the Talmud Torah model of communally sponsored Jewish after-school religious education might be a vehicle for the kind of educational institutions that the Jewish children of New York needed (Kaufman 1999: 148). The Bureau of Jewish Education focused its efforts on children’s education, making sure that both girls and boys had opportunities to learn about Jewish history, language, religion, and culture.

Among the Bureau’s most dedicated employees was Israel Goldfarb’s younger brother Samuel Goldfarb (1891–1978). Working for the Bureau’s Music Department almost from the moment it was formed, Samuel Goldfarb focused his energies on teaching children Hebrew, liturgy, and religious stories through song. He naturally gravitated towards collaboration with Israel Goldfarb, who had been interested in encouraging learning and participation in liturgy through choral music as far back as his days as a student at JTS. While still a rabbinical student, Israel Goldfarb worked

closely with Rabbi Bernard Drachman at the Jewish Endeavor Society (JES). Drachman had founded JES in 1900 as an independent institution that would offer religious and cultural education to young people who could not find a home in formal synagogue life. As Geoffrey Goldberg recounts, Israel Goldfarb formed a choir to lead the JES congregants in song, and added choral and congregational singing to services that did not traditionally employ sung liturgy (Goldberg 2019: 39–40).

Several years later, Israel Goldfarb instituted a children’s choir at Kane Street Synagogue. His son Joseph recalled in an oral history interview conducted by Carol Levin for the synagogue that the choir evolved from being only for boys to including girls, and eventually inspired an adult choir as well (J. Goldfarb 2006: n.p.). Israel composed and arranged simple two-part liturgical pieces for the children’s choir. With his experience in leading choral singing for young people, and with the close relationship between Israel and Samuel Goldfarb, it is not hard to understand why, in 1918, Samuel reached out to Israel to ask for help with a large children’s rally that would be sponsored by the Bureau of Jewish Education. Bella Goldfarb Lehrman, Joseph’s sister, recalled to Carol Levin:

One day he [Samuel] called my father and he said there was going to be a wide, mass meeting of all the kids. All the Jewish children that they could get hold of who would come together at Madison Square Garden and participate in some kind of a program . . . He told my father that he wanted something new to teach. Something catchy and melodic that they would learn easily and that they would be able to sing in unison when they got to this mass rally. He didn’t give him any guidelines, as far as I know, just something appropriate for a Jewish school. My father was at Columbia at that time . . . he was there having his lunch, brown-bagging his lunch, and sitting on the campus during lunchtime. He was looking for something to write on, and all he could find was a letter in his pocket. So he took the letter out and opened up the envelope and began to pencil in the musical scale and began to hum to himself. And that’s how he hummed through Shalom Aleichem (quoted in Kane Street Synagogue 2006: n.p.).

The recollections of Israel Goldfarb’s children offer the full background to Goldfarb’s 1963 letter to Pinchas Spiro. “Shalom Aleichem” is a product of the American movement for community- and institution-based Jewish education designed to give the American-born, English-speaking children of Eastern European Jews an accessible path into their own religious and cultural traditions.

The choice of “Shalom Aleichem” as a text allowed Goldfarb to make his own mark on Jewish tradition as well. Schleifer (2005: 310–312) notes that in Eastern Europe the text was more often chanted than sung, though some simple melodies had been catalogued. However, Jonathan Friedmann (2012: 116) suggests that it was mostly recited by men on their way home from the synagogue, and their children might not have known it. This potential gap in children’s understanding of their religious tradition allowed Goldfarb to step in as an educator and composer. The melody that caught the children’s ears and their imaginations, and which they passed on to their children, first appeared in *Friday Evening Melodies* in 1918, a volume published by the Bureau of Jewish Education. Indeed, Goldfarb’s compositional talents seem especially well

suited for the purposes of Jewish education. Over a century after the publication of *Friday Evening Melodies*, Rabbi Elliot Gertel wrote that “Goldfarb’s melodies are pedagogically effective. They are engaging enough to teach people painlessly, almost subliminally, entire Hebrew prayers,” further noting that these melodies “committed entire parts of the service to the minds and hearts of many Jews, beginning in childhood” (Gertel 2020: 10).

As an educational tool, “Shalom Aleichem” succeeded admirably. However, it is also true that it succeeded far better than any other composition in *Friday Evening Melodies*. Some of those melodies had been taught in Jewish religious schools, but none have achieved the runaway popularity that led Spiro to write to Goldfarb to confirm his authorship forty-five years after *Friday Evening Melodies* was published. In order to understand the full impact of “Shalom Aleichem” on the American Jewish musical imagination, we must revisit the concept of nusach. In doing so, we may begin to see the shape of an emergent American musical *minhag*, a style and aesthetic of worship that does not quite match Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise’s conception, but that may fulfill his expectations far more effectively.

Nusach America

“Shalom Aleichem” was one of the first American congregational melodies to be composed in an accessible, melodic style. It embodied the ethos of the developing American institution of the “synagogue center” that, as Geoffrey Goldberg notes, “catered to all the needs, religious, social and educational, of American Jews,” and in which, following Mordecai Kaplan’s theories of Judaism as a civilization, “congregational song embodied both esthetic and social togetherness. The community, not the *hazzan* alone, should also be a source of song in the synagogue” (Goldberg 2019: 42). Goldfarb became involved in this community-centered style of worship through the Brooklyn Jewish Center, founded in 1919. Its rabbi, Israel Levinthal, designed a weekly Friday-night Shabbat program that combined a prayer service with a social hour and a sermon or a lecture for people unable to attend Shabbat services at a more conventional synagogue. Levinthal enlisted Goldfarb’s help in designing the prayer service and providing music that the whole community could sing, and Goldfarb produced a small publication entitled *Song and Praise for Sabbath Eve* that included “Shalom Aleichem” (Goldberg 2019: 46). As Deborah Dash Moore observes, this “late Friday night lecture and musical service” propelled the “shift to a public place of the previously private, familial celebration of the Sabbath” (1987: 312). The association between accessible congregational melodies like “Shalom Aleichem” and a community-centered American style of Jewish worship deepened.

As American Jewish worship developed its participatory style, with events increasingly held in synagogues that functioned as cultural and social centers as well as houses of worship, other composers created accessible congregational melodies with the enthusiastic support of American Jewish religious and educational institutions.

Jacob Beigel and Abraham Binder composed for the Jewish Center on 86th Street in Manhattan. Both Abraham Zvi Idelsohn and his student Moshe Nathanson worked for Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan's Society for the Advancement of Judaism, the institution that would later become the founding center of the Reconstructionist movement. Young Israel employed several composers whose names were never recorded in order to continue Goldfarb's legacy of composition (Goldberg 2019: 42–45). These melodies spread aurally, learned by generations of American Jews in synagogues and in religious-school classrooms. Many of them lost their attributions in the process, much as "Shalom Aleichem" did. Today, congregational melodies form the backbone of American Jewish worship shared between synagogues and between movements. Congregants will say that these melodies are "traditional," that they have always existed, and that this is simply what a synagogue service sounds like.

Boaz Tarsi observes that the concept of nusach implies "style" and a "way of doing things" (2002: 176) as well as strictly musical ideas of mode. Calling it a "living tradition," Tarsi observes that nusach "has always reflected the community in which it was practiced" (ibid.: 209) and that congregational melodies are undeniably a component of the nusach practiced in the United States. In the American tradition, this love of congregational melodies helped "Shalom Aleichem" to move from the home Shabbat table into the more public realm of the Friday night service itself. The addition of congregational melodies composed by American Jewish composers to the liturgical music inherited from German, British, Polish, Spanish, Portuguese, and many other sources provided a new layer of tradition that not only served a needed purpose for American-born Jews, but also connected these parent elements into a unified, if patchwork, whole.

Although the impetus to create an American nusach, a particularly American way of being Jewish, had existed since the middle of the 19th century, no effort really succeeded until the Jewish education movement of the early 20th century addressed the problem of the alienation of young people from the synagogue. Previous efforts showed a grand and detailed vision of a Judaism that was radically modern. However, the music that supported this vision did not have a broad enough appeal to be called an American nusach. Neither Israel nor Samuel Goldfarb began their careers in liturgy and education with the intent to create a unifying American Jewish sound. Instead, they responded to a need that they saw around them. "Shalom Aleichem" represents the skill with which Israel Goldfarb responded to that need, and its construction reveals the precise balance of tradition and modernity that caught the imagination of American Jews.

At the moment when Goldfarb presented "Shalom Aleichem," the American Jewish landscape offered multiple different ways of sounding Jewish in the United States. Goldfarb chose to follow his own interpretation of Schechter's Conservative approach to Judaism in sound. Rather than promoting either the classical, organ-led choral music of Reform worship or the passionate performances of Orthodox hazzanim, Goldfarb found flaws in both of these styles and sought a middle ground, writing:

Too often have the makers of our liturgic music gone to one extreme or the other. The ones disregarding every rudiment of rhythm, melodic scheme and harmonic structure in their eagerness to express freely and unreservedly the anguish of Jewish suffering; the others sacrificing much of the Jewish spirit for the sake of external beauty and harmonic form (I. Goldfarb and S. Goldfarb 1918: n.p.).

With “Shalom Aleichem,” Goldfarb created a congregational melody that recalled the sound of a hazzan, and that combined a metrical, strophic Western form with a marker of the Jewish Freygish mode. The melody was flexible, and communities could adapt it to suit their needs in the moment. It could be embellished with accompaniment by a choir and an organ to lend a touch of grandeur to a Friday evening service, as heard in [Video Example 1](#) (Feldman 2018: Cantor Marcus Feldman sings an arrangement of “Shalom Aleichem” at Temple Sinai in Los Angeles, accompanied by the organist Aryell Cohen and the Los Angeles Zimriyah Chorale, directed by Nicholas Strimple. Recording by Temple Sinai.). It could also be sung simply and directly, as part of a congregation’s video offerings that could comfort and connect a community isolated by the Covid-19 pandemic, as heard in [Video Example 2](#) (Smilowitz 2021: Cantorial Soloist Talya Smilowitz sings “Shalom Aleichem” as part of a series of videos created in February of 2021 by Congregation L’Dor V’Dor of Oyster Bay, New York. Recording by Congregation L’Dor V’Dor.). Above all else, it was a melody accessible to Jews of all levels of education and vocal ability. Congregants could sing it themselves, internalizing the Talmudic story of two angels visiting one’s home on Shabbat while claiming a certain amount of their own religious agency as American Jews.

Conclusion

Goldfarb identified a need among young American-born Jews and set out to meet that need. Young people needed a form of Jewish education and melodies and methods of prayer that spoke to them and gave them a way to connect with the liturgy on an emotional level. What gave Goldfarb’s innovation its powerful effect and extended influence was his skill at blending musical elements that struck congregants as Jewish with other elements that appealed to them as Americans. He understood that English, not Yiddish or German or Hebrew, was the native language of American Jews. “Shalom Aleichem” is in Hebrew, but it appears transliterated in a way that English-speakers can comprehend. Its prominent augmented second supplies a distinct Freygish tonality even when the piece is sung to end on the minor-mode B tune. Such little details produce a piece with an appealing cantorial flavor that is simple enough for children and adult congregants without musical training to sing, allowing them to bring their physical and emotional selves to the services where the song often appears.

The near-instant popularity of “Shalom Aleichem” gave it onto-vernacular status within only a few years of its composition. The first generation who encountered the piece learned it well enough to sing it without consulting the printed score in *Friday Evening Melodies* – and Goldfarb’s careful reprinting and republication of “Shalom

Aleichem” in further songbooks only ensured that more people would be able to learn it and take it into their hearts. However, the real legacy of “Shalom Aleichem” came when that first generation of singing congregants passed it on to their children, whether at home around the Shabbat dinner table or in the educational setting of a community-sponsored religious school. When the children of the children for whom Goldfarb had composed “Shalom Aleichem” began to sing it, it made the transition from onto-vernacular to phylo-vernacular music, entering the American Jewish folk tradition.

Crucially for this transition, the song gave a distinct impression of timelessness; to American Jewish ears, it sounded as though it could have migrated on a ship from Eastern Europe along with some anonymous hazzan. It sounded like nusach because, in a way, it had *become* nusach. “Shalom Aleichem” is not part of the traditional corpus of Eastern European liturgical music sung by a hazzan after years of apprenticeship with an older colleague; instead, it helps to form the stylistic basis for *nusach America*, a mode or style or practice of prayer that represents a distinctly American form of Judaism. It has not completely unified American Jewish practice, of course – the American Jewish population is large and rather famously diverse, and it is highly unlikely that any one song, no matter how cleverly constructed, could bridge all of the fractures and divisions in the community. But “Shalom Aleichem,” and the genre of congregational melodies that followed its publication, have crossed the boundaries between Jewish movements in the United States, and have formed the basis of a shared musical language for American Jews.

Much of the flexibility and adaptive nature of nusach America comes from its roots in educational music made by Jewish musicians who were adept at understanding European Jewish musical styles and also at the separate art of translating them to a new, culturally distinct audience. Goldfarb’s “Shalom Aleichem” stands as a prime example of this kind of cultural translation. In distilling the evocative sound of the Freyghish mode to a single prominent marker within a melody that blended both Jewish and Western influences, Goldfarb offers the precise taste of Yiddishkeit – of Jewishness – that allows traditions to form, evolve, and grow over generations.

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