

Interlude A

The Lemmer Brothers

Music and Genre in Orthodox New York Life

Yanky Lemmer and his brother Shulem Lemmer are two of the most prominent artists in the contemporary New York Hasidic music scene. Born in the Orthodox Jewish enclave of Kensington, Brooklyn, the Lemmers were raised as Belz Hasidim and continue to identify as Hasidic Jews, adhering to the ritual, linguistic, and sartorial norms of the community. In broad outline, their life trajectories have hewed to a path that is conventional in their community: both studied at Hasidic yeshivas in Brooklyn; later, each spent several years in advanced study in Israel. Despite their high-profile work as singers, both men have careers outside music: Yanky, the elder brother, as a special education therapist working with children in Orthodox Jewish schools in Brooklyn, and Shulem, the younger, working in marketing and high-end retail sales. Both men are married and have growing families, and are raising their children speaking in Yiddish, living in Orthodox neighborhoods, and attending similar parochial schools to the ones they attended.

In their unusual vocal talent and their individual choices to pursue paths as artists, however, Yanky and Shulem depart from the norm of their birth community. Yet even within their shared path as musicians, Yanky and Shulem diverge from one another. Although they share a passion for musical self-expression and frequently collaborate with each other, Yanky and Shulem have distinct musical identities: Yanky is a cantor and Shulem is a “singer”—that is, a singer in the style of pop music that constitutes the primary musical style heard in the contemporary Hasidic world. Yanky’s choice of genre places limits on his career growth and demands educational pathways that are distinct from Shulem’s musical career. In this interlude, I will clarify the differences in the musical genres the Lemmer brothers represent and explore the motivations and meaning behind Yanky’s devotion to a more obscure, less commercial, and more formally demanding musical style.

In many ways, Yanky and Shulem's musical lives have overlapped. Both grew up in the same household suffused with their father's love of khazones; both have remarkable vocal talents; and both share an unusual interest in early twentieth-century Eastern European Jewish and immigrant-era Yiddish American music. Both men are artists working in Jewish music whose careers emerged from a Hasidic cultural milieu in Brooklyn and who have expanded to broader audiences. Indeed, the Lemmers are frequently cited as two of the most promising voices in contemporary Jewish music.¹

Despite the parallels and intertwining of their musical paths, the Lemmer brothers are distinct in their musical identities. Their individual paths are representative of the stylistic line between Orthodox pop music and the niche and underground scene of khazones revival, as well as the blurring that occurs between these two musical terrains. Shulem, a star of the Orthodox pop scene, is able to keep a foot in the world of cantorial performance, appearing annually as a cantor for the High Holidays. His repertoire and cantorial knowledge are heavily shaped by his older brother. Yanky, on the other hand, has cast his lot more deeply into his identity as a cantor, although at times his work engages with the pop music scene in the Hasidic world. The division between these worlds of performance and career opportunity go deeper than a simple matter of musical interests. The choices the Lemmer brothers have each made invoke a set of aesthetic commitments that bear a distinct ethical stamp.

Although cantorial revival might appear to the uninitiated to be a conservative musical choice, within the economy of expressive culture in the Hasidic world, khazones has a distinctive outsider tinge. By contrast, Orthodox pop is almost universally embraced and forms a dominant part in the street soundscape of New York Orthodox life. My description of Orthodox pop as part of "the normal" of Orthodox Jewish life, however, is in contrast to other scholarly appraisals that consider Orthodox pop as a marker of musical rebellion against religious conformity.² There are high-profile instances of condemnation of Orthodox pop artists, notably visible in the career of Hasidic pop star Lipa Schmeltzer, who has made controversy a part of his "brand" as an internet-era sensation, and among some rabbis who fulminate against pop music as a means of bolstering their reputation as bulwarks of conservatism. I understand these cases to be exceptional. What emerged from my ethnography was a sense of pop music as unmarked, mostly uncontroversial, and omnipresent in the lived experience of committedly devout Hasidic Jews. Rather than fostering rebellion, Orthodox pop appears to bolster community solidarity through the prevalence of a shared musical vocabulary.

The contemporary Orthodox pop phenomenon emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but its history can be traced back to the emergence of Jewish independent record labels a generation earlier. The gramophone era saw Jewish vocalists, especially cantors and Yiddish theater stars, recorded and promoted by major record labels. Jewish records in the earliest decades of the twentieth century sold in the hundreds of thousands. Starting in the 1930s but accelerating precipitously

after the Holocaust, Jewish records lost their mass market appeal. In the 1940s, Jewish music migrated primarily to smaller independent record labels, such as Tikvah and Menorah, which continued to release large numbers of cantorial and Yiddish-language records geared toward an increasingly secular Jewish market. Records in this period frequently embraced a more pronouncedly “American” sound, with cantors such as Moishe Oysher and Samuel Malavsky accompanied by Hollywood-style orchestrations, and Yiddish song-stylists paired with Latin-tinged Jazz rhythm sections.³

In the late 1950s, as these Yiddish American secularizing-oriented music platforms began to wane in popularity, a handful of record labels helmed by Orthodox Jews were founded, prominent among them the Greater Recording Company and the Collectors Guild. As the name of the latter implies, these labels were originally concerned with the preservation and reissue of old Jewish records, usually cantorial records that had been out of print for a generation or more. The founders of the Collectors Guild, husband and wife team Benedict and Helen Stambler next turned their eyes toward the resurgent post-World War II Hasidic community.⁴ They produced albums of Hasidic singers on albums of *nigunim*, metered devotional melodies, which are often characterized by a wordless but vocalized singing style. Many of their Hasidic *nigunim* albums—notably, the 1960 album *‘Nichoach’ Chabad Melodies*—were collaborations with musician Velvel Pasternak, a wedding band leader and arranger. Pasternak played a pivotal role in the emergence of a post-World War II American Jewish music that combined Hasidic song with contemporary wedding band sounds. Landmark record projects such as the multivolume series *Songs of the Lubavitcher Chassidim* helped frame a space in the market for new records of Orthodox Jewish music.⁵

As the 1960s wore on, wedding bands in the Orthodox world increasingly drew on sounds of rock drums, guitars, and electronic keyboards. The debut albums of singers Mordechai Ben David in 1973 and Avraham Fried in 1981 solidified the role of disco and mainstream pop as legitimate stylistic trends in the Hasidic community. The mass popularity of Ben David and Fried consolidated the stylistic elements of Orthodox pop: pop drum kit beats, the timbres of rock instruments such as the synthesizer and electric guitar, and an approach to song composition that borrowed from the Vegas stage show and the Broadway musical, with dramatic orchestrations and instrumental interludes. This orientation toward disco and Broadway-tinged orchestration is prominently on display on landmark hits such as Ben David’s 1975 “Soul.” Songwriting in Orthodox pop, although stylistically drawing from pop music models, features lyrics in Hebrew drawn from the Bible or prayer book, or Yiddish lyrics with pietistic themes.⁶ The Orthodox pop phenomenon formed the sound world in which Yanky and Shulem and other young Brooklyn Hasidic singers grew up. Hasidic cantorial revivalists often refer to Orthodox pop as “normal music,” implicitly casting their own musical interests as outsider, fringe, and perhaps transgressive.

Yanky and Shulem were somewhat unusual in that they grew up in a home with a father who loved cantorial music. Yanky describes himself as having been a maven of cantorial records at the age of seven, able to recognize and differentiate between the voices of David Roitman (1884–1943), Mordechai Hershman (1888–1940) and other golden age cantors as a small child. He recalls the experience of hearing Moshe Stern (1935–2023), an elder cantor, lead services in a Brooklyn synagogue and being intrigued and amazed by the power of the trained voices of the singers in the choir.

I remember telling this to my father. I must have been seven years old. *Es iz a sound vi a piano* [Yinglish, it sounds like a piano]. Like when the choir gave a chord it just sounded like an organ to me. I couldn't fathom it. That was like, wow! Then I started to like khazones and to understand it a little bit more. You know when I was a little older. So, I've heard khazones in my life. I used to go to Beth El. I used to go shul hopping. [Temple] Emanuel [in Borough Park] was still around . . . And by Hasidim, there's always these one or two guys who have better voices and know how to elaborate a little bit more. (Yanky Lemmer, August 9, 2015)

As Yanky indicates, cantorial prayer leading was something that existed primarily outside the Hasidic community. Live cantorial performance was something he heard at occasional special events, like Moshe Stern's guest prayer-leading services, at synagogues that were not affiliated with Hasidic communities. Experts in liturgical performance in the Hasidic community were anomalies and were heard only sporadically, with prayer leading generally being lay-led and not assigned to musical experts.

Like other Hasidic cantorial revivalists, Yanky highlights the outsider quality of his musical obsessions and the ways in which it distinguished him: he was an intellectual and a sensitive child, and later a young man whose needs for aesthetic stimulation were not fully met by the culture of the Hasidic community. He found his aesthetic outlet in an expressive form that was Jewish but subtly outside the normative. While Yanky's father was a fan of cantorial performance, it was far from an unmarked and "normal" part of Hasidic Brooklyn life.

Khazones is a product of the Jewish Eastern European experience, coming from a context out of which Hasidism also emerged. It is a sacred music genre that sets prayer texts that are intimately familiar to Orthodox Jews from daily repetition in the statutory prayer services. The widespread popularity of cantorial records in the first half of the twentieth century renders khazones legible to contemporary Orthodox Jews, even if its current fan base has waned. On the surface it would seem that an interest in cantorial music would converge neatly with the goals of cultural preservation and Jewish separatism that are of primary importance to contemporary Hasidic communal leaders. This is not the case. Instead, khazones is looked on as a musical form with a questionable ethical valence, in part because it was created by a generation of artists whose focus was

on aesthetics and whose form of Jewish observance was lax by contemporary Orthodox standards.⁷

As was noted by Haym Soloveitchik in 1994 in his classic essay “Rupture and Reconstruction,” a turn toward textual sources, rather than orally preserved life-ways and traditions, has led to the reconstruction of Orthodoxy along lines of greater stricture and less attention to aural cultural sources.⁸ This shift is especially salient in regard to women’s lives, with areas of women’s control over domestic life increasingly litigated by male rabbinic authorities and structured by sacred texts, rather than reliance on oral traditions shared among Orthodox women, as Soloveitchik claims was the case before World War II. Contemporary Orthodoxy was built to withstand contact with secular American society and the mainstream of Jewish assimilation. Paradoxically, this has been achieved in the musical sphere through the creation of an entirely new musical genre that sounds like mainstream pop music but is perceived as representing the separatist values of the Orthodox community. The “orthodoxy” of Orthodox pop is achieved through its lyrical content and the carefully cultivated image of Orthodox pop artists as faithful and sincere members of the identity group. By contrast, the key artists in the cantorial golden age held layered identities, with one foot in the Jewish world and the other embroiled in conceptions of aesthetics indebted to Romanticism and (non-Jewish) European art music.

The conception of khazones as linked to an “irreligious” past can partly be explained through an analogy to the attitude toward pre-World War II Yiddish culture in the Hasidic community. Yiddish popular culture, with its countless love songs and musical parodies of religious life, are viewed by contemporary Hasidic Jews as inappropriate for consumption by religious Jews. Yanky and Shulem’s father discouraged them from listening to old Yiddish musicals because of their ostensibly irreligious character.⁹

Yanky developed a repertoire of cantorial pieces he learned from classic records, and later joined the choir of Benzion Miller, one of the only cantors working in the golden age style as a regularly performing prayer leader in Brooklyn, at Temple Beth El in Borough Park. Benzion’s performance style was understood as a throwback to an earlier era and was connected to non-Hasidic forms of prayer that foreground aesthetics; Yanky, however, was not the only Hasidic person attracted to the cantorial music subculture at Beth El. The Beth El scene served as a kind of incubator for Hasidic cantorial talent and a small but intense fandom in the community; I will discuss the Beth El devotional music community in interlude B. In addition to Yanky, other well-known Hasidic cantorial revivalists, including Ushi Blumenberg, have served in Benzion’s choir.

After an online video of Yanky performing a piece in a concert produced by Miller at Beth El went “viral,” Yanky’s career as a cantor began to expand. As he told me when we first met, his career grew much faster than his knowledge, and his first years of professional life were characterized by playing catch-up with his

new persona as a star cantor. As I will discuss in chapter 2, Yanky had recourse to a variety of forms of learning in order to be able to fulfill the requirements of his prestigious cantorial position at Lincoln Square Synagogue, one of the premiere cantorial jobs in New York. Indeed, it is one of only a handful of cantorial jobs in an Orthodox synagogue in the city with the largest Jewish population in America. It goes without saying for Yanky that he can only seek employment in an Orthodox synagogue; Modern Orthodoxy represents the furthest “left” that is within the realm of possibility for a Hasidic cantorial revivalist to associate with.

Shulem’s path in music was also shaped by the experiences of their shared home life but it has led in a different direction from that of his brother. After initially rejecting his father’s tastes as out of date and oppressive, Shulem came to appreciate his father’s musical interests. He was guided by his brother in studying cantorial music and eventually took over Yanky’s High Holiday cantorial job at Congregation Ahavath Torah, a Modern Orthodox Synagogue in Englewood, New Jersey, after Yanky was hired at Lincoln Square. At the same time as he was following in Yanky’s cantorial footsteps, Shulem was also pursuing a career in the world of Orthodox choirs. In comparison to the cantorial scene, which is characterized by its marginality to contemporary musical tastes, the Orthodox choir scene is a popular and commercially vibrant musical scene, with ample opportunities for performance and a robust online presence. Shulem’s rise to success as a pop singer was initially dependent on his brother’s tutelage but it expanded steadily thanks to the varied and rich opportunities offered by the world of Orthodox pop.

When I was a teenager, fourteen, fifteen, I still had a kid’s voice. And Yanky actually knew someone that was recording an album in Borough Park. And he was like, I’m looking for this kid. Hey, you know what, my brother, maybe you can try him out. And we went to the studio that night, and we ended up recording three songs. One thing led to another . . . we did another album. When I was in Israel, I went to study [in a yeshivah] . . . I got my knowledge and professional training in Israel singing in these adult choirs, backing up the greatest singers in the Hasidic world. And then I got back to Brooklyn. I joined the highly acclaimed Shira Choir . . . One thing led to another and I’m the soloist there. And I met my producer Yochi Briskman. And he’s like, OK let’s go. You’ve got a full solo career here. Check out the things on YouTube. We covered from cantorial music all the way to today’s Hasidic pop music. And we actually released an album, [titled] Shulem . . . And yeah, since then we’ve been all over the world performing. (Shulem Lemmer, January 31, 2018)

As Shulem explains, the limitations of the Orthodox pop market are also its affordances. Shulem told me:

At the end of the day when you decide you want to become a singer, you already have twenty, thirty thousand fans right away because it’s such a closed community. And this is worldwide within the Hasidic community. So, you have in Israel, and in London and in Brooklyn, obviously. Antwerp. The whole New York State, Muncie.

Shulem's career encompasses cantorial prayer leading, working as a soloist working with Hasidic choirs, recording and performing as a singer in the Orthodox pop scene, and most recently a star turn as a crossover vocal artist signed to Decca Gold, a mainstream major record label. This final career move provoked a great deal of attention in the media. Shulem is the first Hasidic pop singer to be signed to a major label. His 2019 major label debut, *The Perfect Dream*, featured show tunes and light pop songs, mostly in English. Only three of the album tracks bear a specifically Jewish profile, the Max Janowski setting of "Avinu Malkeinu," made famous by Barbara Streisand; the old standby of mid-century Israeli music, "Jerusalem of Gold"; and the Passover song "Chad Gadyo," which was a viral video sensation for Shulem in his Hasidic choir period.

Despite its appeal to a mainstream market, there is no suggestion that the album would push in opposition to expressions of piety and communal ideals that are typical of Orthodox pop. From a musical perspective, the album is similar to his previous recorded output, but with higher production values—for example, a string orchestra is featured, instead of the more typical Orthodox pop synthesizer accompaniment. In fact, one of the show tunes Shulem sings, "Bring Him Home," from *Les Misérables*, is sometimes sung as a contrafact melody for *Mi adir*, a prayer from the wedding liturgy, in Orthodox weddings.¹⁰ The songs on the album express gentle sentiments of piety, offering nonspecific prayers for peace and harmony that are in accord with the ethical commitments of Orthodox pop.

While the Orthodox pop music industry has room for a talent and a career path such as Shulem's, Yanky's musical identity fits more jaggedly into this world. As Yanky explains

There's an industry out there, a Jewish music industry. For me, it's not that much. It's very different for me than it is for Shulem. Shulem has a producer. Shulem's doing a lot of new music. His album is almost completely new music. He does weddings, he does a lot of musical stuff. I do a lot of *hazzanut*.¹¹ But the stuff I do, personally, is mostly either just *davennings* [Yinglish, prayer-leading services]; I lead the services a lot, and I get called around the world mostly to do cultural events . . . For me this is the trajectory. I don't see any huge spikes or anything. I'm just gonna be doing my thing. But I am working. The stuff I'm working on is much more for personal artistic gratification than anything else . . . I think for Shulem the future is a lot more exciting. For me it's exciting that I'm preserving something old and I feel very good about that. And hopefully I can inspire others. For Shulem it's a lot more exciting . . .
(Yanky Lemmer)

The decisions the Lemmer brothers have made that have led to their distinct career paths involve questions of aesthetics, commerce, the maintenance of reputation, and issues of piety. Yanky believes in the unique aesthetic powers of khazones. He believes that khazones has a unique ability to act on the bodies of listeners to elicit experiences of prayerful feeling. This belief is not abstract; it is based in his own experience of being transported by the sound of hearing elder cantors

perform or by listening to old records. Yanky specifically compares the capacities of khazones to act on the body of the listener to the pop sounds of “normal music” in his community, as well as to the musical choices his brother Shulem has made:

I can almost guarantee you he doesn't get goose bumps from the stuff he sings now. But I can tell you when we work on certain things in concerts, he does. It's the same with me. I also enjoy singing certain things [i.e., pop songs]. I'm moving away from it simply because there comes a point when you have to define what you do. I enjoy singing regular stuff as well. But the stuff that moves me, that really moves me, is khazones. (Yanky Lemmer, July 16, 2019)

From a commercial perspective, Yanky is one of the most successful Hasidic cantorial revivalists. He is one of a few for whom the pursuit of excellence in khazones is profitable. In addition to his prestigious pulpit position, he regularly performs on international concert stages, especially in Poland and Israel, the two largest markets for Jewish music outside the United States. Despite these enviable markers of success, Yanky is keenly aware of the commercial limitations of his career. He has chosen khazones, and despite occasional gestures in the direction of pop music,¹² his lot is cast, a decision that he is proud of but at times expresses melancholy over. He described his feelings:

You have to be willing to be a martyr. Because you may be successful, you may not be, because the market is so small. Especially I'm talking from an Orthodox perspective only. From the Orthodox perspective there's a tiny market. Not many concerts. Handful a year . . . And it's not easy. Look at my brother Shulem. He kind of tinkered with both. And he's being sucked into this singing thing. Probably rightfully so. It's just economically so much more rewarding. (Yanky Lemmer)

Yanky is an energetic and charismatic performer; yet in moments of reflection on the limitations of his career and his chosen musical field, he strikes a somber note, inflected by a century of cantorial discourse that has steadily prophesied imminent doom. Already in 1924, critics foretold a bleak future for khazones, in part because of what conservative voices in the community considered to be the lack of consistent piety and ethical comportment by cantors.¹³ In the decades after World War II the American cantorate remade itself as a unionized workforce with new cantors trained in seminary-based conservatories.¹⁴ Despite unparalleled economic resources, cantors told themselves a story dominated by a decline narrative centered on the changing tastes of Jews and their lack of comprehension of cantorial art.¹⁵ Yanky's sense of scarcity and the commercial limitations of cantorial music is shaped by his own experience but is reinforced by the lachrymose narrative propounded by professional cantors—and it withstands evidence from his own career that suggest broader audiences for his work might in fact exist.

The accusation of improper personal comportment and attacks on the reputations of cantors in the golden age of gramophone record stars continues to

resonate in the life of Hasidic cantorial revivalists today. Yanky's remarkable vocal talent has led to opportunities for performance outside the synagogue. These opportunities have been criticized and, in some cases, stymied by conservative voices in his community. Sometimes critiques of the appropriateness of the outlets of his career have stemmed from members of his own family; sometimes they come from Yanky himself.

Opportunities to perform within the Belz Hasidic community are almost non-existent. Yanky has said that he believes the Belz rebbe is aware of his talent and career. He imagines the rebbe's attitude toward him as "a love-hate relationship. He can't approve of what I do. Singing for mixed crowds. That kind of thing." Yanky's performance career is focused outside the community, and it frequently extends to audiences of secular Jews (and sometimes non-Jews) in venues that embrace standard concert practices of mixed gender audiences, as opposed to the gender segregation that is normative at public events in the Hasidic community. Yanky's imagined relationship to the Belz rebbe may in part be based on his actual relationship with his father. From the conservative standpoint of his father, even Yanky's position at the Lincoln Square Synagogue is problematic.

Lincoln Square is a Modern Orthodox congregation, and while its leadership is drawn from elite Orthodox yeshivahs, the synagogue's members are "modern" in their style of Judaism, as represented by their integration into American middle-class lifestyles. The most troubling aspect of the congregation, from a conservative contemporary Hasidic perspective, are the steps the synagogue is taking to achieve gender parity, mostly in the form of all-women prayer groups in which women play a leadership role. Maintaining traditional gender roles and male authority in the area of religious practice is a pressing concern for rabbinic leaders and conservative voices in the Hasidic world. Yanky's performance career in contexts of less stringent approaches to gender separation has led to criticism. Members of the Hasidic community have publicly criticized him in internet chat rooms, exacerbating tensions in his family around issues of appropriate public behavior that have arisen from his career.

In 2018 Yanky received an offer to appear in a major Hollywood film, *The Song of Names*, a Holocaust period drama. In the film Yanky was to make an appearance playing a cantor, singing a song of great importance to the plot that gives the film its title.¹⁶ With this project, Yanky would have an opportunity to reach a mass audience while working on a project memorializing European Jewry, a theme of pivotal importance to his career and musical orientation. Embracing this opportunity would have created a deep challenge for Yanky's identity as a Hasidic Jew. The film was to be the product of the "free-thinking" world, not bounded by the norms of comportment and the limits on behavior and public expression that prevail in the Hasidic community. It even was to include a sex scene, perhaps the most closely guarded boundary to cross into the perceived excesses of the nonreligious world. Ultimately, Yanky rejected the offer, reasoning that "So much can go

wrong if I *do* do it. And if I don't do it; OK, it's a missed opportunity. I'm still not 100 percent whole with that decision. But it's the decision."

Yanky's soul searching echoes the issues faced by Yossele Rosenblatt about whether or not to appear on the opera stage and on the silver screen. Yanky faces what is in some ways a more conservative and more powerful Jewish Orthodoxy than Rosenblatt did in the 1920s. For Yanky to step outside the norms of his community could have lasting repercussions for his reputation and his family. In contrast, Shulem seems to have faced no special approbation for his forays into the secular music business. This would appear to stem from a sense that the pop music field that Shulem works in is less problematic than the khazones legacy that Yanky has made his own.

Yanky's personal sense of piety, focused on his connection to khazones and the aesthetics of prayer, is in tension with Hasidic Orthodoxy, which seeks conformity in matters of religious life and public behaviors. Cantorial performance almost inevitably involves communities outside the Hasidic world. Despite (or perhaps because of?) these ruptures of identity boundaries, Yanky imagines khazones as a uniquely powerful means of bridging aesthetic impulses to the experience of Jewish prayer, a music he has referred to as "the most pure form." As a sacrifice toward extending this form of sacred music into the future, he appears to be willing to offer himself as "a martyr." He faces a market characterized by uncertainty and a public that vacillates between indifference, condemnation, and occasional crescendos of accolade. Khazones may fail as a commodity, but its function as an icon of the history of Jewish prayer and as an art form with unique affecting powers is palpable for Yanky and his peers in the scene of Hasidic cantorial revivalists.