

Interlude B

Fragments of Continuity

Two Case Studies of Fathers and Sons in the Changing Landscape of American Orthodox Jewish Liturgy

In this book I have foregrounded a narrative about young artists working in contexts where they lack communal support for their interests and endeavors. I have used the image of *revival* to describe the relationship of musicians to an art form that falls outside the structures of biological family and community. Revival in this context has to do with the materiality of old records, the experience of listening, and the countercultural and subversive qualities of becoming an artist in a little-known genre.

Some of the singers in the Hasidic cantorial revival scene have self-conscious agendas focused on the revitalization of an old style they feel drawn to. They are doggedly committed to forging careers as cantors, going against the grain of what their social worlds apparently can allow. Several of the artists had never heard of khazones when they first stumbled on the genre through old records when they were already adolescents, and they have created identities for themselves as cantors whole cloth from mediated sources. As I have argued in previous chapters, for these singers, recordings are the central evidence of the cantorial style. Records serve both as pedagogy and object of desire, shaping the path of contemporary singers through practices of deep listening focused on an archive of classic sources.

Two of the key figures in the Hasidic cantorial scene, Yoel Kohn and Shimmy Miller, are members of intergenerational cantorial families; by definition their stories complicate a revival narrative. Instead, their musical lives can be read on a surface level as stories of linear transmission. Both singers are recipients of their fathers' prayer-leading musical knowledge and aesthetic. Although both Yoel and Shimmy stress that their fathers never directly trained them, the aural evidence from the performances of both singers attest to the influence of their families. In

this interlude, I will discuss the lineages that produced the cantorial sensibility of these two artists, and I will explore the ways in which these two very different cantorial families reveal narratives of change in the world of Jewish sacred music. Their stories outline shifts in aesthetics and the social structure of prayer within the Hasidic community and in the broader world of the American synagogue. Changes in liturgical practices have had deeply felt personal repercussions on the level of family and individual career paths for both Yoel and Shimmy.

“WE DON’T HAVE OUR NEW ORLEANS”:
YOEL KOHN AND MAYER BORUCH KOHN

Yoel Kohn once remarked about young Jewish singers seeking to master the cantorial idiom, “We don’t have our New Orleans.” His sharp quip about the sense of loss that hovers over Ashkenazi Jewish music creates an analogy between cantorial performance and Black American vernacular music, a comparison that many cantors make in conversation. The analogy to jazz and blues suggests that *khazones* is an improvisatory art form that is dependent on a body of traditional motifs, timbres, and modalities; that it is an oral culture intertwined with the life of a community. Furthermore, Yoel seems to draw a comparison between Jewish and Black Americans as marked off from the “mainstream” and dependent on a geographically and perhaps temporally distinct “homeland” from which these groups derive knowledge of self and culturally intimate forms of expression. Yoel seems to imply that unlike New Orleans, which offers jazz people a continued source of knowledge, access to Jewish musical knowledge is tainted and obscured by the discontinuities of migration and, especially, the trauma of the Holocaust and the literal destruction of the Jewish bodies that bore the oral knowledge of the musical idiom.

While this frame of post-Holocaust retrospective melancholy is completely reasonable, Yoel’s conception of discontinuity is challenged by the fact that his own family has maintained a direct line of transmission of cantorial performance knowledge. As I will discuss in this section, cantorial melancholy retrospection is focused not only on musical artifacts and the lives of artists that were destroyed, but embraces a broadly defined deficit in the culture of listening and communal reception of cantorial performance. As a recipient of a cantorial lineage, Yoel, through his perspective on the prospects of revitalization and creativity in the cantorial scene, is shaped by his perception of a decline narrative he inherited from his father. Yoel, more than almost any other of the young Hasidic cantors, is in a position to access a kind of living culture of liturgical music, a *khazones* “New Orleans,” if you will, alive and well in his very home. Nevertheless, his view of cantorial history and future hews to a narrative of uprootedness, loss, and failure.

The Satmar Hasidic community that Yoel was born and raised in presents itself as a bastion of continuity with the Eastern European past. In regard to the

maintenance of the Yiddish language as a spoken vernacular, and sartorial and ritual customs, this would appear to be a justifiable claim, although less monolithic than might be assumed on closer inspection. However, in the realm of musical culture, a more complicated picture emerges. The Hasidic and Orthodox pop musics that have arisen in the past half century have superseded older musical cultural productivity as the norm of the communal soundscape. Within the Satmar community, a Hasidic group with an extreme Right public profile, Orthodox pop music is considered somewhat suspect. While pop singers and songs are rejected at times by conservative voices in the community, pop aesthetics, styles of arrangement, and instrumentation have influenced the way older forms of devotional music, such as nigunim, are recorded and presented in public settings, such as weddings. These aesthetic shifts are pervasive even in the most conservative corners of the Hasidic community and seem to go unremarked as part of the expected norm of the community soundscape.

Despite these changes in musical aesthetics, khazones may perhaps have a more robust representation in the Satmar community than among other Hasidic groups. As David Reich mentioned to me, "In the Satmar community's annual event to mark the Satmar Rebbe's escape from Auschwitz, the only performance allowed was the performance by a cantor who would typically choose a piece by [Yossele] Rosenblatt, [Zawel] Kwartin, or [Yehoshua] Wieder." Contemporary performers of khazones have a recognized function at important community events, including an annual mass celebration of Chanukah presided over by the rebbe and other communal leaders. Yoel Kohn's cousin, Yoel Pollack, a cantor and a composer of nigunim, is one such artist who has been invited to perform at the rebbe's Chanukah celebration on several occasions.

Mayer Boruch Kohn, Yoel's father, is among the "purists" within the community who reject the pop music innovations of Jewish music as being corrupted by non-Jewish culture. Mayer Boruch, born in 1962 in London, is a revered bal tefile within the Satmar community. He was born into a family with a cantorial legacy, in a home where cantorial records played "day and night." His father was also a bal tefile, although both Mayer Boruch and Yoel describe him as having had very limited vocal range and control. A more salient influence on Mayer Boruch was the internationally known Cantor Yehoshua Wieder (1906–64), and the multigenerational Wieder cantorial family. Mayer Boruch's father was a meshoyrer for Asher Wieder, Yehoshua Wieder's father, in Hungary before the Holocaust. As a result of this connection, the Kohns have "inherited" a repertoire of unique melodies from the Wieder family that apparently they alone have preserved.

Mayer Boruch also learned from Shloyme Rosen (d. 1990), a bal tefile in the Hasidic community in London from whom no known recordings have been preserved. According to Mayer Boruch, "this Shloyme Rosen was unique." Mayer Boruch claims that his nusakh is a direct transmission from Shloyme Rosen, which he learned from years of listening to his prayer leading. Although he never

had any lessons and has no recordings, Mayer Boruch was able to retain what he heard from Rosen. Yoel emphasized that because both he and Mayer Boruch grew up in homes where they listened to no other music aside from cantorial records, they had no distractions to keep them from retaining musical information. Whatever they heard “rattled around like in an empty barrel.”

Mayer Boruch praised his teacher, saying, “Shloyme Rosen had a good line and everything he sang was a *khidush*” (Hebrew/Yiddish, an innovation). According to Mayer Boruch, the correct expression of nusakh demands constant variation within a set of melodic conventions. Yoel explains his father’s style as having two primary rules that dictate his musical choices: a bal tefile must use a different pitch for every syllable of every word (i.e., not using a recitation tone), and he must use different variants on the traditional motif, never repeating the exact same idea. This approach demands that a bal tefile create a flow of improvised variations and that he be intimately familiar with the prayer texts and consistently sensitive to the meaning of the words he is saying, rather than falling into a mechanical recitation. Yoel and Mayer Boruch offered mocking imitations of typical Hasidic bal tefiles who rely on recitation tones and repeat the same melody over and over again for every phrase in a given prayer text, creating boring, unmusical phrasing.

In the Satmar community, prayer leading is looked on as a social privilege more than as a specialized musical skill. In Hasidic Brooklyn, most prestigious prayer-leading opportunities are given to the *rebishe layt*, the class of people drawn from elite rabbinic lineages. According to Mayer Boruch, this has led to a great diminishing of knowledge and musicality about *nusakh hatefilah* (Hebrew, prayer melodic forms) in the Hasidic community. Prayer-leading privileges are conferred on the basis of genealogy, not musical talent or even knowledge of the appropriate melodies for the different prayer services.

When Mayer Boruch was growing up, the London Hasidic community was extremely small, and there was room for a skilled-but-otherwise-humble-in-origins-musician like Rosen to have a pulpit position. Today in London the Hasidic community has expanded. New Hasidic rabbinic courts have been established and taken over most prayer-leading opportunities. According to the Kohns, it is unlikely today that a musical expert from a nonrabbinic elite background could get the kind of prayer-leading position that Rosen had in London in the 1970s, when he led Shabbos services every week. Mayer Boruch’s current position as the High Holidays prayer leader at the Tartikov shul in Borough Park relies on a reputation he built up after years singing in a *shtibl* (Yiddish, small Hasidic prayer house). In his previous position at the Dushinsky shul in Williamsburg, Mayer Boruch benefitted from the patronage of a *rov* (Yiddish, communal leader, in this case the head of the synagogue) who had an unusual love of cantorial music and who gave him a platform to lead services.

Yoel’s practice of khazones approaches the music as a form of historically informed music-making and a creative practice. The two main outlets for khazones

are concert formats (including mediated performances in the form of internet-based videos) and prayer leading. The most important source for his khazones style is his father and the family repertoire he learned from him, with lineages that connect to the Wieders and Shloyme Rosen. The other source of Yoel's musical practice is recorded cantorial music, primarily pre-Holocaust gramophone-era cantors who recorded in New York or Europe in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Homosocial practices of debate, analysis, and imitation were part of the culture of listening in Yoel's home. Already as a young boy, Yoel was developing his repertoire of cantorial recitatives under the influence of his father's musical aesthetic and the watchful eye of his conception of cultural and spiritual purity. When Yoel began to perform professionally as a young adult in his twenties, his options were largely shaped by his father's career. Yoel was viewed as a protégé of his father who could lead prayer services in the unique style of Mayer Boruch, and he was hired for the High Holidays in Kiryas Joel and other Satmar enclaves in the suburbs of New York City. He would also occasionally lead Shabbos services closer to home, in Brooklyn. In addition to leading services, Yoel was sometimes hired to sing at wedding engagement parties and other events in the community.

While his prayer leading hewed closely to his father's style, Yoel's interpretations of classic cantorial records marked him as stylistically distinct from his father. Yoel was cultivating his voice and developing a markedly more "cantorial" sound, influenced by the *bel canto* vocal tradition preferred by gramophone era cantors, rather than the earthier timbre characteristic of Hasidic *bal tefiles*. In Hasidic music, an earthy, more rough-hewn timbre is associated with spirituality and seems to be preferred by many Hasidic connoisseurs of prayer music. Mayer Boruch's vocal approach reflects this aesthetic norm of his community. He epitomizes a style of a Hasidic *bal tefile* who is knowledgeable, formally complex, but still holds fast to communal norms of expressiveness through a "noisy" vocal quality. Yanky Lemmer, commenting on the difference between his style and that of Mayer Boruch, foregrounded the ineffable, spiritual qualities of his performance, in contrast to the presumed aesthetic orientation of his own work. "His [Yoel's] father is extremely holy," Yanky said. "He is meant to be. I'm there because of talent, not because of anything else."

Yoel can code switch into a "Hasidic" vocal quality but has spent years developing a different kind of sound from his father, shaped by the aesthetics of golden age cantors. Kwartin, Rosenblatt, and the other old masters were operatic singers in terms of their vocal training. Yoel's evinces a particularly aggressive approach to *coloratura* singing, shaped by the sound of old records but stylized into a markedly muscular sensibility. On classic records, cantors are heard singing lengthy melismatic passages, with dozens of notes slurred together in complex melodic patterns that frequently surpass an octave in range. This physically demanding and viscerally engaging kind of display of virtuosity inflicts a stunning effect on the

listener and is one of the prized qualities of cantorial performance. Yoel has made a unique approach to coloratura one of the trademarks of his performances. There is a kind of “hyped up” quality to his melismatic passages and trills, with complex figuration used in an even greater abundance in his reinterpretation of old records than on the original performances.

Yoel developed a reputation as a rising star of the Hasidic cantorial scene. However, his ability to capitalize on this reputation has been limited by several factors. He initially received invitations to perform at cantorial concerts. These concerts involved singing at events in Modern Orthodox, non-Hasidic synagogues. Concerts in the Modern Orthodox community typically have mixed audiences, with men and women in attendance, and often seated together. Yoel was aware that this kind of performance setting would be difficult for his father to accept. Mayer Boruch, like many men in his community, holds a stringent view on issues relating to gender. He will only sing at events that enforce a complete separation between the sexes; he will only sing for men, except in a synagogue where women sit in a separate section. Yoel sought and received a dispensation to sing at the cantorial concert from a Satmar authority.

It is a fairly common practice for Hasidic rabbis to issue “leniencies” to members of the community in areas relating to making a living. A cantor singing at a concert is generally seen as a category that should be granted leeway so that he can make money. It is generally understood that Hasidic cantors will be required to sing for communities other than their own in order to work, usually in the Modern Orthodox community. Opportunities for cantors to make money in the Hasidic community are extremely scarce. For Mayer Boruch, a rabbinic ordinance was not enough to assuage his discomfort. He told Yoel that he would prefer for him not to sing in a concert with a mixed audience. Yoel accepted his father’s request, reasoning that as a bearer of his father’s *nusakh*, he has an obligation to respect his wishes. Yoel came to be known as a singer who would only work in the Satmar world; invitations to sing at prestigious or well-paying cantorial events dried up.

Concurrent with the development of his musical sensibility, Yoel was moving further away from his identity as a Hasidic Jew. Like most men in his community, Yoel married young and started a family. In his telling of his life story, he had already begun to doubt the strict faith of his Hasidic upbringing as an adolescent. By the time he was married, Yoel says he “believed nothing.” Although he had a strong desire to leave the strictures of the Hasidic community, a variety of forces predicated against this goal, perhaps most importantly his young children.

Music also played an important part in the choices he made about the shifting shape of his future. He told me, “Without being a *khazn*, I would have left much earlier. I didn’t want to lose that. That was very important to me.” After making a clean break with his community, Yoel’s talent as a singer and interpreter of classic cantorial recordings continues to make him attractive as a performer in the small community of serious fans of *khazones*, both in the Hasidic community

and the broader world of Jewish music. His performance venues today include parties and private prayer services on the fringe of the Hasidic community, internet videos, and occasional concerts in “secular” settings, including a major concert in Israel in 2018.

Yoel sees the cantorial world through the lens of a decline narrative, shaped in part by his father’s pessimistic view of the prospects of cantorial music. According to Yoel, the current scene of young Hasidic cantorial revivalists does not offer a realistic picture of the historic trajectory of the music and its future. Rather, he sees the cantorial “revival” as an anomalous product of a moment of transition in the Hasidic community during the 1980s and 1990s, when he and the other cantors profiled in this study were adolescents. As Yoel sees it, his generational cohort of singers who became obsessed with golden age cantorial records was a product of a specific pre-internet moment.

We were pre-internet. We all had very restrictive fathers. We had *isurim* [Hebrew, religious proclamations, sometimes in the form of public posters] on these [street-light] poles, [putting a] ban on the music of Avraham Fried because they were too pop-y . . . First of all, there’s no silence [today]. In general, no one is bored. No one is introspective. No one just sits down for a second and looks at the ceiling and hums a song . . . And that’s also part of what made us. We were all sort of artistic. We were deprived. We had no outlets. We had to focus inside. We had to become introspective in order to achieve any sort of artistic or creative outlet, any sort of creative climax. And that doesn’t exist anymore. I look at my brothers. Yeah, they’re sort of, by right, into khazones because this is the sort of family where you couldn’t avoid it if they tried. But they’re not in it. They don’t have the need for it that we did . . . The interest for khazones was never very strong in the Hasidic community and it’s getting even less strong because again the audience needs to not have choice. There’s no need for that because you have everything else. (Interview, April 12, 2021)

Yoel is intensely devoted to khazones as an artistic style and a performance practice that connects him to his birth community. Yet his musical desires and expertise seem to be incompatible with a career path that follow norms of economic return and public affirmation. His own experience confirms for Yoel the story his father and many other elder cantors tell about the art form as residing in a state of permanent and irreparable rupture and decay.

THE BETH EL HERITAGE: SHIMMY MILLER AND BENZION MILLER

Benzion Miller was born in 1946 in a displaced persons camp in Germany in the aftermath of the Holocaust, into a family of Bobov Hasidic Jews with a multi-generational cantorial legacy. Miller is an elder star of the cantorial music world. He has performed internationally on major stages and held some of the most prestigious pulpit positions. His son Shimmy Miller, who was born in Canada but

raised in Borough Park, Brooklyn, is one of the key voices among the younger generation of cantors. In his vocal talent and style, Shimmy closely resembles his father. But unlike his father and grandfather, and other family members stretching back generations, Shimmy is consistently underemployed as a cantor.

For the past four decades, Benzion Miller has presided at the pulpit of Young Israel Beth El Synagogue in Borough Park. Constructed in 1902, Beth El is a monumental Moorish-style synagogue designed as an ideal acoustic environment for cantorial vocal performance. From the time of its founding, Beth El has boasted a succession of prestigious “star” cantors, including luminaries of the gramophone-era recording industry like Berele Chagy, Mordechai Hershman, Moshe Koussevitzky, and, somewhat more recently, Moshe Stern.¹ According to cantorial gossip, Hershman paid a \$1,000 kickback to Jacob Rappaport, the president of the *khazonim farbund* (Yiddish, cantors union) to finalize his contract at Beth El, so coveted was the pulpit position there.² Beth El was built to accommodate a congregation of a thousand, but today it rarely attracts more than a few hundred, and often far fewer worshippers.

In the present day, Beth El is the last synagogue in New York City that boasts a cantor and choir regularly performing in the partly improvised, soloist-focused style associated with gramophone-era cantors. Beth El is able to maintain this musical identity in part because of its position in the religious ecosystem of Borough Park. Beth El is associated with the Young Israel movement, a modernizing strand of Orthodoxy founded around the year 1912 with support from Conservative-aligned leaders such as Mordecai Kaplan but that ultimately declared itself Orthodox.³ Young Israel is a product of an American Judaism that seeks to integrate Orthodoxy with the cultural norms of American non-Jewish society. The Young Israel movement is distinct from Hasidic sects that in general cultivate a separatist philosophy and encourage adherents to maintain a lifestyle of linguistic, sartorial, and ritual difference from the “mainstream.”

Hasidic sects predominate today in Brough Park, and “liberal” Modern Orthodoxy is somewhat fringe. Paradoxically, because Beth El is “modern,” meaning not dogmatically separatist in its religious orientation, it is able to maintain a form of musical traditionalism that is not typical of worship in contemporary separatist Orthodox Jewish enclaves. Facilitated by the combination of its prestigious musical history, its unusual “modern” religious profile, and the material presence of the building itself, Beth El has taken on the reputation as a living relic, cited regularly by cantorial aficionados as the last of its kind.

Benzion’s monthly Sabbath service, held on *Shabbos Mevarchim* (Hebrew, the Sabbath of blessing; the Sabbath on which the ritual blessing of the new month is observed), is a kind of sacred concert with its own following among Jewish music lovers. Benzion is accompanied by a choir made up of up to a half dozen men. The choir has a rotating cast of regulars; some of the choir singers are Hasidic Jews. The services at Beth El that Benzion leads are completely focused on cantorial

creativity, knowledge and artistic authority. Everyone who is present has self-selected to attend based on their investment in the experience of cantorial davening as an art experience and a form of spiritual practice. Borough Park is a largely Hasidic area, but the people in attendance are notably more diverse in their Jewish self-presentation than in the neighborhood in general; many or most of those in attendance are non-Hasidic Jews.

It is notable that a large proportion of the attendees at Benzion's services are women. On any given Shabbos Mevarachim morning at Beth El, the upstairs women's balcony is likely to be fuller than the men's section on the main floor. This is unusual in Borough Park, as in other separatist Orthodox enclaves, where the cultural norm is that women are not expected to attend Sabbath services. Because women are not required to attend the same synagogues as their husbands, especially in the Hasidic community, going to listen to a cantor perform serves as a form of religious self-determination, expressed in aesthetic terms. As Shimmy explained to me:

You see, the women, they don't have to daven in the shul their husband davens in. And they'd rather come somewhere where they enjoy the davening. So, they love it over there. Their husbands on the other hand, they sit in shul every day . . . They wanna daven with their friends. So, they daven in the *shtibelakh* [small Hasidic synagogues] where they daven, or the shuls they daven in. (Interview July 15, 2019)

Women have been important consumers of cantorial music in the United States throughout the twentieth century, and their fandom of cantors at times was a driver for more inclusive synagogue policies. In the 1950s, female fans of Richard Tucker at the Austro-Galician Congregation synagogue in Chicago demanded their shul adopt mixed gender seating because their ability to hear Cantor Tucker was compromised by sitting in the balcony women's section.⁴ It is increasingly understood that women were important performers of cantorial music during the golden age gramophone era, despite normative prohibitions on the female voice in the synagogue based on a strict interpretation of Jewish religious law.⁵ The *kha-zentes*, female cantorial singers usually working as concert performers but not in synagogues, were popular enough to inspire fear in communal power brokers. They were cited by conservative critic B. Shelvin of the Yiddish-language newspaper *Morgn zhurnal* as an existential threat to the "future of cantorial music."⁶ Less explored has been the role that women played as taste makers and impresarios of cantorial music. For example, Helen Stambler, the cofounder, with her husband Benedict Stambler, of the Collectors Guild record label, was a key figure in the release of reissue collections of cantorial records of the early twentieth century that helped establish the canon of cantorial classics that continue to shape the conception of the genre.⁷

The focal point of the service at Beth El is the *Rosh Chodesh bentshn* [Hebrew/Yiddish, the blessing of the new moon]. There is a special theatrical shift for this

part of the service. Instead of remaining at the lectern at the front by the ark where Benzion begins the service, after the Torah service he moves to the raised *bima* (Hebrew, platform) in the center of the congregation where the Torah had just been read. Many of the men in the synagogue press in a tight circle around the bima. The choir stands on the floor facing toward Benzion, like a ceremonial court of witnesses. Benzion treats the *Yehi Rotzon* (Hebrew, May it be your will; the first words of the special blessing for the new month) prayer as a virtuosic improvisation. While he sings, physical responses are evoked from the listeners. Bodies sway; hands are held out with palms upturned. I once observed a middle-aged Hasidic man standing by Benzion doing a kind of interpretive dance to the recitative, gesticulating with his fists at the end of phrases or when Benzion hit high notes. The man's eyes were shut; then he would open them, turning his face upward and outstretching his arms, waving his hands in a thrice-repeated gesture.

It is remarkable to see a congregation responding to cantorial performance with such a degree of visceral intensity. This kind of adulation of cantorial performance is supposed to no longer exist, according to the oft-repeated hand-wringing of fans of the genre. The community of listeners at Beth El resonates with the history of cantorial performance as a popular art form, deeply loved and understood by the Jewish listening public. The congregation at Beth El responds to the music as an incitement to physically engage with prayer. The bodies of the congregation resonate sympathetically to the voice of the singer, reinforcing the power of the sound and urging Benzion on in his labor. The attention and emotional response of the congregation affirms the power of listening as a sacred act, ratifying the cantor's ritual function by allowing his voice to act on their bodies as a call to prayer.

Having Benzion as a signifier of continuity of a historic cantorial performance style has had a powerful influence on young cantors in New York, in part through the institution of the choir. The Beth El choir is relatively new. It was started by Shimmy. The choir has its origins in the period when Aaron Miller, Benzion's father, took ill and could no longer come to shul. Aaron Miller was known as the "Bobover khazn," because of the family's ties to Bobov Hasidism. Aaron brought a style of cantorial prayer leading with him from Galicia, Poland that he taught to his son and grandsons. In his last years, a group gathered every Shabbos to hold services in the elder cantor's home. There, Shimmy and his brother and cousins got their first opportunity to practice leading services, and their close friends and neighbors were exposed to Aaron Miller's melodies and had their first opportunities to experiment with the music of prayer leading. The group that formed to pray with the elder cantor formed the initial cohort of the choir.

The Beth El choir, conducted first by his son Shimmy Miller and now by his older son Eli Miller, features a rotating cast of singers. The choir is an important point of entry into cantorial performance for young Hasidic cantorial revivalists who are seeking training and opportunity for performance. Shimmy described to me a community of singers from a variety of walks of Jewish New York life,

including fans of the music whose religious affiliations differ widely from his own, some of whom are not Hasidic and possibly not even Orthodox. Out of this scene of singers united by a love of cantorial music, a number of important cantorial “stars” have emerged. These include Yanky Lemmer, Ushi Blumenberg, and Berel Zucker, all of whom share Hasidic familial backgrounds. In this scene, we have evidence of the ways in which cantorial music draws together people from across divisions of identity. The choir is grounded in the multigenerational Miller family, whose knowledge shapes the experience of acolytes.

While opposition to khazones as overly worldly in its musical outlook plays a role in current Hasidic critique of cantors, contemporary Hasidic cantorial revivalists suffer far more from indifference than overt opposition. Shimmy Miller has stressed in our conversations that the main problem in the cantorial scene is the lack of audience. Having been brought up in a well-known cantorial family, Shimmy’s vision of the potential for cantorial music in the future is subdued by the decline in institutional support that has directly affected his family. There are many individual cantorial fans, even in the Hasidic community, but they do not constitute a reliable fan base or drive the hiring practices of large synagogues. In order to forge a path as a cantor, Hasidic singers must engage in the same kinds of entrepreneurship as pop musicians; they need to promote themselves using the tools of the internet and hustle for performance opportunities. But unlike pop singers, cantors are limited by their style from reaching a mass audience.

In Shimmy Miller’s view, the current interest in khazones among young Hasidic singers is not a mark of revival, but rather:

It’s called *gesise* in Aramaic, which is a petering out. Meaning it’s the last. You have, unfortunately, when somebody dies, they get a little strength back right before they go. So, this is like it’s getting its strength back before it goes. I don’t see khazones in five years from now, barring a miracle. (Interview, July 15, 2019)

In response to the uncertainty of the market, Shimmy has expanded his career by focusing on the world of choirs, a prominent subsection of the Orthodox pop music scene. Hasidic choirs emerged as a media phenomenon on records made in the 1960s with renditions of nineteenth-century Eastern European Hasidic nigunim. Choir culture in the Hasidic world is influenced by Orthodox pop but has its own aesthetic norms and repertoires that overlap with pop, older Hasidic devotional music, and, to some extent, khazones.

Hasidic choirs are a transnational phenomenon, with major choirs having emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in Israel, England, and the United States. Today, there is a thriving scene of men’s and boys’ choirs that are a ubiquitous part of weddings and other Orthodox Jewish celebrations. Ensembles such as Shira Choir and Yedidim Choir have become popular through frequent performance and high-production value videos that are popular on social media. Unlike Orthodox pop music, Hasidic choirs draw prominently on older forms of Eastern

European Jewish sound, especially Hasidic nigunim. Choirs also sometimes perform arrangements of gramophone-era cantorial pieces, often drawing from the most popular figures such as Yossele Rosenblatt or Samuel Malavsky.⁸ When the choirs are accompanied by instrumental ensembles, they frequently work with orchestral ensembles, reflecting the status of choirs as markers of prestige for public festive occasions. The overall sonic aesthetic of Hasidic choirs tends to be less focused on sounds appropriated from commercial pop music genres, and more inclusive of older Jewish repertoires. But, like Orthodox pop, it is given a unique sonic stamp by the digital processing that is used on the voices, the use of pop drum beats and synthesizers, and arrangements that favor vocal harmonies heavy on the accessible “prettiness” of parallel thirds.

Several of the Hasidic cantors (especially the Lemmer brothers) who participated in this study have, at one time or another, sung in choirs, either as a cantorial guest soloist, or as members of the choir group itself. The world of Hasidic choirs is a musical scene where Shimmy Miller can utilize his years of experience working as choir director for his father. Shimmy has started his own choir, the *Zingers*. He is now so busy with work at weddings and other *simchas* (Hebrew, festive occasions such as weddings) that he no longer has time to sing with his father at his monthly Shabbos davening.

Despite the important symbolism of Benzion Miller’s presence, and the practical significance of the Beth El cantorial choir as a training ground, these phenomena are understood by their primary participants as tenuous and endangered. A sense of decline from the period of the music’s heyday is pervasive in the way cantorial performers and fans talk about the music. As any fan of cantorial music will tell you, the main limitation in the current scene is that there is no longer a solid base of supporters who are interested in virtuoso cantorial prayer-leading services. Change in synagogue listening habits is the structural reason invoked by cantors for the move away from a virtuoso soloistic presentational style of synagogue music and the pivot toward participatory music influenced by American pop music.⁹ Cantorial revivalists are keenly aware of the shifts in musical tastes among congregants and are aware that their work in synagogues requires compromise and dialogue. This dynamic pushes the best voices in contemporary cantorial music away from the classic style of prayer leading, as represented by Benzion. For Shimmy, the decline of the genre is a given.

REVIVAL TOWARDS WHAT?

Shimmy Miller and Yoel Kohn have the most reason, among their cohort of younger Hasidic cantors, to view the cantorial tradition as a chain of transmission. In their families traditional knowledge has successfully resisted the loss of memory and meaning. Yet their musical lives are characterized by a melancholy retrospection that places cantorial aesthetic achievement firmly in the past. While

both singers are uniquely capable of “creative davening,” employing improvisation and compositional techniques in the styles they learned from their revered fathers, they are curtailed by the marketplace from being able to perform to the fullest capacity of their knowledge and talents.

Of all the singers who participated in this study, Shimmy and Yoel were the most skeptical about my use of “revival” to describe the activities of young Hasidic cantors. This did not seem to be because of a feeling of enthusiasm for transmission and continuity as the framework for understanding their musical practices, although their musical biographies certainly lend credence to a continuity narrative. Rather, they opposed the term *revival* because it implies a living field of activity. Revival, to their ears, intimates a sense of life returning where once there had been silence and, perhaps, the formation of new communities through the mechanism of heritage reenactment.

From their perspective, cantorial performance is a form of communication. Their conception of meaning-making in khazones resonates with the definition of communication offered by linguist Roman Jakobson. Jakobson asserted that communication is dependent on a complete circuit of sender and receiver in order for a message to be completed. According to Jakobson, the message of communication is dependent on the conative, or receptive, element that provides deciphering knowledge and responsive cultural context in order for language to function as a meaning-making code.¹⁰ Shimmy and Yoel have seen khazones in action as a living language, with the communicative musical gestures of cantors, their fathers, being received and acting on their listeners to create a mutually desired experience of Jewish prayer. By placing the language of khazones in the past tense, Yoel and Shimmy are asserting that the musical communication they have studied and mastered is in fact a dead language and that it no longer can function in its intended manner.

When a message is sent but not received, its meaning is obscured. In the absence of a meaningful social context, the terms of the message, no matter how potentially eloquent, result in what linguist J. L. Austin calls a “misfire,” a breach of the rules of language that blunt the possibility of speech acting in in its intended manner.¹¹ A performance that is illegible to its audience is exposed in its theatricality and its potential for meaning making is blunted, becoming opened to ridicule or rejection. Rather than being a meaningful message, given power by mutual intelligibility to sender and recipient and lent efficacy by the deciphering power of the listener, khazones is blunted by the absence of a comprehending public. In Shimmy’s view, the cohort of young Hasidic cantors are a *gesise*, a last gasp, which are misconstrued as a sign of sustainable vitality.

The “truth” about khazones, according to both Yoel and Shimmy, can be read in the historical trajectory of the art form and by the situation in the synagogues where cantors work today. According to this narrative, after a century of aesthetic development, cantors reached their aesthetic and popular peak in the first decades

of the twentieth century. Khazones then withered after the Holocaust under the complimentary pressures of assimilation, Zionism, and the retrenchment of new forms of Orthodoxy that were radically altered in their aural culture. Contemporary synagogues offer evidence of the impact of this history. Cantors across denominations uniformly attest that khazones must be limited or purged from prayer leading in synagogues where they are employed (as I discussed in chapter 3).

Shimmy and Yoel describe contemporary performance in terms that resemble what sociologist Erving Goffman called “response cries,” the exclamations made in response to stimuli when alone, such as yelling after stubbing one’s toe. Goffman describes response cries as “a natural overflowing, a flooding up of previously contained feeling, a bursting of normal restraints.”¹² Khazones gives voice to an irrepressible need for young Hasidic men to express themselves, using tools of the ambient Jewish culture. Yet the response cry is intrinsically dysfunctional as a form of meaning-making. It exists in a vacuum and cannot register as a form of social interaction or speech act.

Although Yoel and Shimmy would likely disagree with me, I might offer a different interpretation of the work of “cantorial revivalists.” By performing khazones, Hasidic singers are creating a heterotopia, a kind of countercultural space that Foucault describes as offering commentary on and a social alternative to the limitations and disappointments of the normative culture.¹³ Through musical training and performance, Hasidic cantorial revivalists create an alternative, imaginative space, employing tools of Jewish heritage toward a set of personal and idiosyncratic ends.

As Yoel highlighted in our conversations, khazones offered an outlet for a sensitive, artistically oriented young person. Most of the Hasidic cantorial revivalists I spoke to reported a similar emotional dynamic. Khazones was a generic form that provided the vocabulary with which to articulate a sense of otherness that could not otherwise be formulated. In the spaces where these young men “stared at the ceiling” while thinking, listening to records, singing, imagining themselves inhabiting the role of the star cantor of the golden age, they developed a sense of themselves through recourse to the sensuality and dramatic sentiment of the music. They frame their work as oppositional to the aesthetic impoverishment of their community, and as celebratory of a world of fantasy associated with old records and experiences of transportive prayer leading by elder cantors. The future of the music is less clear, and perhaps less important, than the uses the music is put to by the small cohort of artists for whom it plays a central role in constituting a world of aesthetics and counterculture. The music’s future is created by its life in the moment.

Despite the gloomy prognostications of some of the key artists in the field, as we will see in the next chapter, khazones does in fact have a life in the present day. However, the life of the music may in fact be strongest outside the synagogue, its historic setting and the “natural” environment for Jewish liturgical performance.