

The Ageless Music of Jewish Life

A STUDY OF HEBREW MELODIES, WITH A NOTE
ON THE WORK OF A. W. BINDER

by Dora Askowith

FROM time immemorial music has been inextricably bound up with the Jewish people and with Jewish culture. Far back towards the dawn of the race, Miriam went out "with timbrels and with dances" after the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea. Deborah sang in exultation to the Lord. In the medieval Ghettos of Europe the Jew, weighed down by oppression, found consolation in the music of his prayers. And today in Palestine, he bursts into spontaneous song as he rebuilds his ancient Homeland.

The Talmudic sages said, "If you have a sweet voice, glorify God with the gift He bestowed upon you; chant the Shema and lead the people in prayer."

One who not only accepted this challenge, but is ever seeking to teach others to do likewise, is Abraham Wolf Binder.

Resonant With Idealism

MR. BINDER sees the tonal expressions of two thousand years of the Diaspora as resonant with an idealism, adherence to the faith of the fathers, lore and pride in traditions, more effective in shaping the national character than the decrees of royal heads.

The Jewish sages, he says, did not leave us written theories of music or descriptions of the nature and characteristics of ancient Jewish song. Nevertheless we find, in the Bible itself, and in post-Biblical works such as the Mishnaic, Midrashic and Talmudic literature, as in the works of Josephus, detailed descriptions of the song and musical instruments of the Temple in Jerusalem. The descriptions of Israel's ancient music found in the mediaeval literatures, both in Hebrew and in the vernaculars, are coloured by the mysticism prevalent during that period, also the astrological conceptions which "attributed musical inspiration to the movements of the stars and planets."

The role of Hebrew music in ancient Israel, Mr. Binder has discovered, was in striking conformity to her spiritual conceptions. Ceremonial meals, marriage festivities, shearing of sheep, gathering of the tithage, coronation of a king or victorious armies were all met with song and dance. In worship, music was especially significant. The Psalter is a collection of religious songs

which were sung in the temple where priest with trumpets and choruses of music-making Levites nurtured the spiritual wants of the people. Significant references to the power of music find expression in Lamentations and in Job, who says "my harp also is turned to mourning and



A. W. Binder.

my organ into the voice of them that weeps." In the Psalm we learn of the demand of the Babylonian tyrant from the Jewish exiles that they "sing to us your beautiful songs of Zion."

After the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., and as a token of mourning, the people refrained from listening to strains of music. While in Tannaitic times no pressure seems to have been brought upon the people to have them abstain from music, during the Amoraic period the rabbis had to exert considerable effort in dissuading them from indulging in song. The Gaonim upheld the Talmudic law on the subject and tried to enforce it. Music was, however, permitted in the interpretation of the liturgy and various festive occasions. Eventually this led to a new type of music being given expression in the songs of the Ashkenazim, who created special tunes or modes for the regular daily prayers, thus giving tonal expression to the main idea of the day.

The Rise of the Chazzan

BY the sixteenth century a new spirit had found its way into the Ghetto, arousing the artistic cravings of the Chazzanim who be-

gan to devote themselves entirely to music and to give quasi-concert services.

In the earlier days of synagogal development, the chazan recited only the short and simple forms of prayers and laudations. Later, he became a most important factor in Synagogal services, supplying the rhythmical music and metrical poetry in his twofold capacity of singer and poet.

Passover, the first festival celebrated in the order of the Jewish calendar months and the one which, Mr. Binder points out, "marks the birth of Jewish music and of the Jewish national spirit in song," was celebrated in all its glorious festivity. Mr. Binder has made an interesting collection of the melodies of this occasion, under the title "Seder Melodies, The Hagaddah Set to Music," and this is widely used in America for the due celebration of the Feast of Freedom.

Two other festivals, Chanukah and Purim, the former celebrating the rededication of the Temple by the victorious Maccabees and the latter commemorating the day on which the Jews of Persia were saved from destruction, are also periods of joyous song. Mr. Binder has also collected and formally arranged ancient melodies among them including a new harmonization of the traditional hymn: "Haneros Halolu."

Folk Songs of Palestine

THE folk songs of Palestine have had a great appeal to Mr. Binder and have become for him an especial field of research and study. In 1925, when he first visited Palestine, he gathered and published the first collection ever to be made of the songs of New Palestine and its pioneer workers or Chalutzim. It was due in large measure to his influence that the Palestinian songs were introduced into this country and have become so popular here. In 1931, Mr. Binder made a second visit to Palestine bringing with him a clarinet quintet, art songs set to Hebrew texts and an overture "Ha-Chalutzim" based on previously collected folk-song material. It was the first time that a Jewish composer presented, in Palestine, the premiere of a Jewish orchestral work.

Upon further study in the field of folk-song, Mr. Binder found that it was gradually taking a definite form indicative of a combination of the old liturgical melody, Yemenite and Arabic. New songs that he collected, constituted his second volume of Palestinian songs published three years ago.

The Chassidic song which found its origin among the Jews in Poland and the Ukraine and its inspiration in Palestine through the cabbalistic movement, took on a peculiar character of its own in text and in type of melody. The Chassidim believed that salvation could best be obtained through the medium of music. "Music," they declared, "originates from the prophetic spirit and has the power to elevate one to prophetic inspiration." They created tunes that were sung for the most part without words. A melody with a text, they declared, comes to an end whereas if it is sung without words it can be repeated endlessly. Those songs having words were often a mixture of Hebrew and Yiddish.

A New Song of Hope

IN striking contrast to the songs of the "Badchonim" and "Klezmorim" have arisen, during the last few decades, a group of songs whose central theme is nationalism. These are sung for the most part in modern Hebrew. They found their origin in the Zionist movement and they seek to imbue Jews with the desire to rebuild and retain the Holy Land. Of these songs, Imber's "Hatikvah" (The Hope) became the Zionist national anthem in 1897. It may well be that these as yet immature songs of the people may inaugurate a new type of folk song for the Jewish people in Palestine.

For Your
Requirements
in Printing

Phone 22-7139

Louis Carr
Printers
60 Delvers Street
Johannesburg