

Jewish Liturgical Music for Treble Choirs

Prepared by Miriam Altman, July, 2014

A couple notes on current Jewish liturgical music

- Like the Christian liturgy, Jewish liturgical music often contains many, many settings of identical texts, varying in style over the years. Just like one can hear dozens of settings of “Gloria,” or “Kyrie eleison,” you will find a comparable amount of “Ose Shalom”s and “Mi Chamochah”s. In the past couple decades, the school music publishers have become aware of this and will sometimes have a prolific composer (e.g. John Leavitt) write a song using Jewish liturgical texts. These pieces are not performed in synagogues, nor would most Jews be familiar with them. (The same goes for almost anything published for Chanukah.) Songs in the list below are ones that would be recognizable to most American Jews, particularly in Reform and, to a lesser extent, Conservative congregations. Orthodox Jews probably would not be, keeping to much older or internally-known melodies.
- Cantors and song leaders will improvise and arrange harmonies from melodic lead sheets, both for themselves (during congregational singing) and for small group or choral performances. You should feel absolutely welcome to do the same. “Traditional” arrangements, published in octavo form, are sometimes available, but they are utilized far less commonly than the practice of learning harmonies/arrangements by ear. This is not unlike the Black gospel choral tradition (and other folk traditions, of course). Use YouTube, iTunes, or connect with a cantor at a local synagogue for ideas. Professional Jewish cantors, by the way, are ordained clergy and complete years of schooling to receive their certification. Any established synagogue will have one, right along with a rabbi or two. He (or she, in the Reform or Conservative traditions) might be willing to share arrangements they use. At the least, they can be a tremendous resource for music selection.
- Transcontinental Music Publications is the source for authentic Jewish music publishing (as in, what the American Reform Jews use). They’re really the only ones. Note: You’ll notice a lot of “URJ” on their site, which stands for “Union of Reform Judaism.” Transcontinental publishes all the official URJ prayer books and materials. Visit them at www.transcontinentalmusic.com.

A note about online listening

OK, so here’s the thing - while it’s relatively simple to find recordings of these songs on iTunes or YouTube, most of them make me cringe. I have wonderful memories of singing the songs, either in synagogue, at home, or in school with my students, and those memories are often of much higher musical quality than what I hear when I press “play.” Many of the recordings are done by a specific Cantor (hope you like his/her voice!), or are shot on a camera at a congregational sing circa 1992, or are for CDs marketed at Jewish children (if you’re a parent, you know how painful those children’s music CDs can sometimes be). Please don’t immediately judge the beauty of the music by the quality of the recording artist, but listen with a grain of salt. If possible, try to hunt for the originally-released recording by the composer. They tend to have higher standards.

Two very useful songbooks

- ***The Complete Shireinu: 350 songs from Jewish tradition*** [Shireinu = song collection], ed. Joel N. Eglash. Published by Transcontinental Music Publications.
 - Songs are alphabetical, but also indexed by liturgical purpose, composer, and text source. Hebrew text and translation provided after each song. Both of these books are fake books - melody, lyrics, and chords are provided. Occasionally harmony is written in, indicating that the composer's choir or group often performs it as such. Some of the songs are rounds.
- ***The Complete Chanukah Songbook***, ed. J. Mark Dunn and Joel N. Eglash. Published by Transcontinental Music Publications.

Song recommendations

These are some songs that most American Reform Jews would know and/or are lovely arrangements of traditional liturgical melodies. I've also personally programmed all of them at one point or another for my middle schoolers (5th-8th grade). Use the songbooks listed above and the octavos and CDs available at Transcontinental to explore your own tastes and favorites.

Songs specifically for Chanukah (in no particular order)

1) **Not By Might, Not By Power** by Debbie Friedman

Debbie Friedman transformed congregational music in the 1970s and many of her songs are still beloved and frequently sung today. Entirely in English, this song's text is based on a prayer associated with the celebration of Chanukah, though it doesn't mention the holiday by name. I couldn't find an octavo for it, but it's in many song books, including the two listed above. There is a YouTube video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJLzfrw86Ws>) of Debbie teaching the harmony of last phrase in a refrain to a congregation before performing the entire song. It's upbeat and catchy.

2) **Light One Candle** by Peter Yarrow

Peter Yarrow is known to most of us from the folk group Peter, Paul and Mary. He's Jewish, and this song has become well-known to many congregations. An SATB arrangement is available (arr. DeCormier, Alfred Publications) that can be simplified for treble groups. There is a nice YouTube performance (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1cRXgDFiSs>) of the DeCormier arrangement with Peter, Paul, and Mary backed by a children's choir. The song is entirely in English, soulful and with a refrain that builds.

3) **Ocho Kandelikas** by Flory Jagoda ("Eight little candles")

This Chanukah song is in Ladino, the secular language created by Sephardic Jews. Ladino is a cousin to Spanish, the way Yiddish is related to German. This is a peppy little tune with an extremely simple text and sounds great with a guitar and tambourine. Flory Jagoda is a prolific composer; you might know Nick Page's arrangement of her song, "Hamisha Asar." I found two arrangements of "Ocho" on J.W. Pepper. The first is by Joshua Jacobson, a respected leader in Jewish choral music and artistic director of the Zamir Chorale. It's available in two-part and SATB. The second is a unison arrangement by Alicia Shumate (who I'm unfamiliar with, I'm afraid).

4) **Another Year, Another Chanukah** by Jeff Klepper and Dan Frelander

Jeff Klepper is a very well-known composer of modern liturgical music, though this is one is not liturgical. He writes on his own and with his musical partner, Dan, with whom he comprises the

group "Kol B'Seder." Entirely in English, it's essentially a midtempo pop song - easy-going and reflective. I couldn't find octavos available, though the leadsheet is in the Chanukah songbook listed above.

5) **Judah Maccabee** by Rabbi Joe Black

"In the window, shining so bright, I can see the Chanukah lights. And they give me such a warm, friendly glow..." Entirely in English, this song tells the story of Chanukah. It's a beautiful, poignant, simple song. There's a downloadable PDF leadsheet at Transcontinental Press for \$4.00, and it's also in the Chanukah songbook listed above.

General liturgical music (in no particular order)

(Note: My students have performed many of these pieces at our All-School Holiday Concert as "Chanukah" representations. While they come from (generally) the Shabbat liturgy, they are also used as "general purpose" workhorses in the synagogue (for moments of silent meditation, at a variety of religious ceremonies, as opening or closing songs, etc.), and would be appropriate in most any setting. I would avoid, however, programming songs that have a very distinct liturgical purpose - that are very much connected to a specific time and place - as "Chanukah" music. That would seem a bit strange to me. They are marked with an asterisk (*) and, in my opinion, would be better served in a concert outside of December.)

1) **Oseh Shalom**

I have four settings that are my favorites. This text works well, secularly speaking, because there's not a lot of Hebrew and it's about peace. Translation: "May the One who causes peace to reign in the high heavens let peace descend on us and on all Israel, and let us say: Amen." (It's worth noting that "Israel" in this case refers to the people - the sons and daughters of Jacob - not the country.) The Hirsch and Steinberg settings are in the Shireinu listed above; I've specified where octavos are also available. You can find the songs on iTunes, too - search with title and the composer's last name.

- by Nurit Hirsh. Simple and graceful, with a hopeful conclusion. There's an arrangement by William Sharlin for 3 or 4-part choir (flexible voicing, I'm assuming) available at Transcontinental Press.
- by Ben Steinberg. Haunting and melodic. There's an SSA arrangement in octavo form available at Transcontinental Press. Search for "Oseh Shalom Steinberg." It's titled "Meditation - Oseh Shalom."
- by the group Geshher. This is the most contemporary setting of the four, with a pop/gospel feel (though it begins delicately). You can buy sheet music of the song at their website for \$5.00. (<http://www.geshhermusic.com/sheetmusic/>)
- by Noam (also sometimes written as Noah) Katz. This is a sweet, simple partner song, using both the Hebrew and the English translation. Free PDF of the melody and chords available at his website:
http://www.noamkatz.com/Noam_Katz/Mirembe_files/OSEH_SHALOM.pdf

2) **Hashivenu** - Traditional round

Translation: Help us to return to You, O God: then truly shall we return. Renew our days as in the past. [Note: this text, as well as the song below, "L'dor Vador," uses one of the Hebrew names for God, Adonai. There are many names for God in the Jewish tradition, some more formal than others. More observant Jews might be uncomfortable with the singing of "Adonai" in a non-liturgical setting. You can show respect to this belief by changing "Adonai" to

“Adoshem,” (rhymes with “them”) which means, more or less, “the Name.” It’s a more informal means of address, and thus more appropriate for a secular setting.] “Hashivenu” is a gorgeous, melodic lament and sounds especially moving, in my opinion, when sung by young voices. It can be found in the Shireinu above, in many collections of rounds, as well as in octavo form, edited by Doreen Rao for unison voices, published by Boosey & Hawkes/Hal Leonard.

3) **L’dor Vador** by Finkelstein

Translation: “From generation to generation, we will make known Your greatness, and to all eternity proclaim Your holiness. Your praise shall never depart from our lips. Blessed is Adonai, the holy one.” This musical setting is very well known in synagogues and sung in many different types of services/events, probably because the prayer expresses an essential tenet of many faiths, including Judaism: the importance of carrying on good works and faithful beliefs to your children and your children’s children. Traditionally, the synagogue choir and/or congregation would sing the opening theme (with its one sentence of Hebrew), the Cantor would sing the central section (lots more Hebrew), using an ornamented, recitative style, and then the choir/congregation would join back in for the reprise of the first melody. You can replicate this by having a solo or small group sing the middle section (essentially, less Hebrew for everyone else to learn). The melody is gentle and hopeful with a graceful contour. There are a number of arrangements available on J.W. Pepper, mostly two-part, including a well-crafted new one by Rebecca Thompson (Two-part, published by Hal Leonard) that I’ve used more than once.

4) **Eiliyahu Hanavi*** - Traditional melody

Translation: “Elijah the prophet, Elijah the Tishbite, Elijah of Gilead. Soon, in our days, Elijah will come with the Messiah, the son of David.” This prayer is sung at the conclusion of Havdalah, the service that marks the ending of Shabbat. It demonstrates a hope that, one day, the sweetness and joy of Shabbat will linger on, as brought by the Messiah. It’s minor, in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, and has a wistful quality you might expect from the text. Lee Kesselman, well-known treble choir composer/arranger (and who is also Jewish) created an arrangement that combines the song with an upbeat niggun, a wordless melody of a sect of Orthodox Jews, so there’s a welcome juxtaposition of sweet and sorrowful. It’s published by Lorenz Corporation for SA. Instrumental parts are also available.

5) **Torah Orah* (Yisraeil V’oraita)** - Traditional melody

Translation: “Israel! The Torah is light, hallelujah! Israel and the Torah and the Blessed are one.” [Note: “Israel,” like in “Oseh Shalom,” refers to people, not the country.] Each Shabbat service is made up of smaller segments, just like a Catholic mass or other types of worship. At the beginning of one of these segments, called the Torah service, the ark (some type of cabinet on the altar, or bima, as Jews call it) is opened, the Torah is carried around the congregation in joyful procession, then placed on the amud (prayer desk), blessed, opened, and read from. The procession of the Torah - or Torahs, if the congregation owns more than one - is accompanied by strong, upbeat, festive congregational singing, led by the cantor. “Torah Orah” is often one of the songs sung at that time. So while the text is rather general, the song’s liturgical use is specific. Brant Adams created an SA arrangement (Santa Barbara Music Press) with piano and clarinet in a Klezmer style, appropriate for this rollicking, energetic melody.

6) **Bashana Haba’ah*** - Text by Ehud Manor, Music by Nurit Hirsh

Translation: “Next year we will sit on the porch and count migrating birds. Children on vacation will play catch between the house and the fields. You will see how good it will be next year.”

Nurit Hirsh, well-known contemporary Israeli composer, wrote this non-liturgical song in the 1960s/1970s (sorry that I'm not able to get more precise; I researched for a while but wasn't able to find an exact date), and it is now sung in most congregations during the Jewish new year (typically in September). There are several more verses to this song that are rarely included in arrangements for the school market, which is a shame, because I find the third verse especially moving. It's about the hope that children bring amongst the terror of war. Several arrangements are available on J.W. Pepper. My favorite is the one by Henry Leck, published by Hal Leonard in two-part voicing.

I'll end with two songs that I enjoy, but haven't actually performed with my students - though I hope to soon!

7) **Tree of Life*** by Richard Silverman ("Eitz Chayim Hi")

Translation: "It [Torah] is a tree of life to those who hold it fast and all who support it find happiness. Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace." Another song used at the opening of the Torah service as the Torahs are carried around, this lively and fun, almost blues-y, song is mostly in English. I'm unable to find either octavos or lead sheets online, although it is in the Shireinu listed above. A quick online search will reveal many versions of the lyrics with chord symbols, which is unhelpful until you know the song. Luckily it's easily found on iTunes and YouTube.

8) **Ki Eilecha** by Shirona

Translation: "I shall weave melodies and sweeten songs, because my soul longs to You. My soul desires the shade of Your hand, to know each wrinkle of Your secret. As I speak of Your glory, my heart wishes for Your love. Thus I shall speak of glories to You and Your name shall I honor in songs." This song has a lot of Hebrew to learn, probably the most of all the recommendations here, but it's particularly beautiful to me because the subject matter is that of singing and music. The text comes from the An'im Zemirot ("I shall sing sweet songs") generally sung at the end of Shabbat, though Reform Cantors use it for all types of settings, including closing moments of quiet meditation at services or ceremonies. You can listen to audio here: <http://shirona.com/music/jls/KeEilecha.mp3>. Contact the artist directly for sheet music: <http://shirona.com/store.html>.