

**From Challah to Chazantes:
Jewish Women's Journey from the Kitchen to the
Bimah**

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Chapter One

Challah and Kol Isha

I titled my thesis *From Challah to Chazante* because it will illustrate the path that women took to go from baking challah in the kitchen to singing *chazzanut* on the stage to finally having the ability to become ordained cantors. Women were traditionally the ones that stayed home baking challah, cleaning the house, and preparing Shabbat dinner, while the men went to pray in *shul*. Men were forbidden to listen to a woman's voice in song out of a concern that the sound of a woman's voice would distract them from prayer and lead them to having impure thoughts. To avoid this, the roles were clearly defined: the women baked challah in the kitchen and the men prayed in *shul*.

There are three primary mitzvot that are associated with women: the baking and separating of challah, the laws of purity, and the lighting of the Shabbat candles.¹ The first and third are related to women because, traditionally, women have overseen all matters of the home. In an Orthodox household, it is the woman who bakes the challah. The mitzvah, though, is not in the baking, but in the reenactment of separating a piece of the challah designated for the kohanim, the priests, during the times of the Temple and its sacrifices.² As it is said in Numbers 15:18-19, "When you

¹ Yitzchak Ginsburg, "The Mysteries of Femininity: The Secret of Challah," TheJewishWoman.org https://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/335973/jewish/The-Secret-of-Challah.htm, accessed November 22, 2021.

² "The Separation of Challah," https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/633188/jewish/The-Separation-of-Challah.htm, accessed January 1, 2022.

come to the land to which I bring you, it shall be that when you eat of the bread of the land, you shall set aside a challah for God.” Challah here means portion. Since the destruction of the Temple, this piece is burned as a symbol of that sacrifice.

Performing this mitzvah was traditionally, and is still in Orthodox homes, the job of the women.

In contrast to the expectation that women would carry out the mitzvah of the challah, there was also an understanding that women were not obligated to go to synagogue to pray. They were exempt from any time-bound mitzvot. While they were obligated to pray daily, they did not have to go to *shul*, and they did not have to pray at the required times. If they did go to services, they had to go to a separate section where they sang only with women and men could not hear their voices. These sections were led by women called *sagerin*, something I will discuss in a later chapter.

The reason that women could not sing alongside men was because of a prohibition called *kol isha*. *Kol isha* prohibits a man from listening to a woman’s voice lest he become aroused by the seductive nature of her voice. In Song of Songs 2:14, a man says to his lover, “Sweet is your voice, comely your appearance.” Shmuel, a third century Babylonian sage, noted the similarity between the word for sweet, *arev*, and the word for indecent or naked, *erva*.³ Therefore, he declared a woman’s voice is indecent. This original declaration was only that, Shmuel’s own opinion of a woman’s voice. Later sages took this statement to mean that a man

³ Natalie Berger, “Women of the Wall,” <https://www.womenofthewall.org.il/kol-isha/>, accessed November 22, 2021.

should not hear a woman sing when he is reciting the Shema, while others took it to mean that a man should never hear a woman sing, while praying or otherwise, because impure thoughts may arise. Clearly, this was not the opinion of the Torah, or Miriam would not have led the women in song, in front of the men, after the parting of the sea. In Judges, Deborah would not have been able to sing her song, at least not alongside Barak. The requirement against hearing *kol isha* was debated in both the Mishna and the Talmud. It was not until the nineteenth century that women's voices were prohibited from any and all singing by Rabbi Moshe Sofer in 1839.⁴ This coincided with the masculinization of the cantorate and the erasing of women from Jewish history, women like Julie Rosenwald and Ray Frank to name two.

This thesis begins with a chapter on women who led in prayer either by song or by sermon. It will then explore the phenomenon that created the environment that would allow women to step back into the spotlight. Finally, there is a chapter introducing the *chazantes* themselves—female “cantor impersonators,” who generally sang outside the synagogue but, in doing so, demonstrated that women could, in fact, “chant like a man.” We will now leave the kitchen where the challah is braided and baked and move forward on the next step towards the *chazantes*, into a world of hidden figures.

⁴ Ibid.

Chapter Two

Hidden Figures

This chapter will explore the hidden figures in history who were revolutionary in that they were doing what other women had to wait years to do. “Hidden figures” is a term that refers specifically to the African American female mathematicians who worked behind the scenes for NASA for many years without credit. In Jewish history, we have a parallel example with women who broke out of the stereotypical roles they were supposed to play to become leaders, and yet the male writers of history all but erased their existence. With the exception of the *sagerin*, who were prayer leaders during a time in history when this was acceptable, the other women I write about in this chapter were working as clergy during a time when women were technically “not allowed” to be doing this work. They came along long after the *sagerin* were already erased from Jewish music history and after the masculinization of the profession of the cantorate. We know little about any of these women, premodern and modern. As time passed, their stories, unfortunately, fell away. Luckily, recent historians have been able to piece together their stories and share them with the world, bringing their accomplishments to the forefront.

The earliest known female prayer leaders were called *sagerin*. Erased from history due to the masculinization of the cantorate,⁵ according to Judah M. Cohen, these women led other women in prayer as far back as the Temple times. There is an article in the *American Hebrew* from 1896 that mentions a *chazante* leading the

⁵ Judah M. Cohen, “Professionalizing the Cantorate-and Masculinizing it? The Female Prayer Leader and Her Erasure from Jewish Musical Tradition,” *The Musical Quarterly* (2019): 1-27.

female side of worship during High Holidays. This article also references a woman who served as cantor in Prague in the Alt-Neu Shul in the 1600s. Cohen notes that the casual way in which the term *chazante* is used implies that female prayer leaders were “notable, and to some extent, normalized.”⁶ It was not until the twelfth century that prayer spaces became uniformly segregated and women were used to lead the female sections all across Eastern Europe. *Sagerin* are referred to often by musicologist Francis L. Cohen in the late nineteenth century, although not favorably. In Jewish music history, all references to these women would disappear. In liberal synagogues, men and women were no longer separated, so women were not needed to lead their own section. Only men could lead the prayers, while women could only sing in the choir. Women as prayer leaders was now considered “premodern.”⁷ As the cantorate became a profession, led by trained singers as opposed to lay leaders, it became dominated by men. These men pushed the women out, as is often done when a profession becomes masculinized. Once this masculinization was complete, women were often lauded as opera singers or choir members, but they had no place as prayer leaders in the synagogue.

In the modern era, with a cantorate that was fully male dominated, along came Julie Rosewald. She born in Germany in 1847 and was the daughter and granddaughter of cantors. She was a highly trained opera singer who had a career singing abroad and in America. From her father, she also had a Jewish education, a significant knowledge of Hebrew, and she knew the liturgy very well. She and her

⁶ Ibid., 1.

⁷ Ibid., 3.

husband settled in San Francisco in 1884 after four years of touring America with the Emma Abbott Company. Rosewald's plans were to stop touring and to start teaching and concertizing. Soon after the couple settled in San Francisco, however, Temple Emanu-El reached out to Julie for help during a crisis. Their cantor, Max Wolff, had died three weeks before the High Holy Days.⁸ Their rabbi was also not in good health. They needed Rosewald to lead the services. With only three weeks to prepare, she agreed. Her extensive background in Hebrew, her knowledge of the liturgy, and her ability to learn large quantities of music quickly prepared her for this role. She did so well, that instead of leading the congregation in prayer for just the High Holy Days, she stayed for almost ten years. She led the choir, sang the solos, and prepared the music. She introduced contemporary arrangements and led the synagogue into a new musical era. Her title was "Cantor Soprano." Amazingly, her presence has been erased from Temple Emanu-El's history. Musicologist Judith S. Pinnolis discovered her by happening upon an article by Henrietta Szold in the *Jewish Encyclopedia* written between 1901 and 1906 that mentions Rosewald's role as the cantor of Temple Emanu-El for nearly ten years. She was also named as the former principal singer at Temple Emanu-El in *The American Jewess* in 1896.⁹

Ray Frank was another pioneering woman in the field of Jewish leadership. Born in 1861, Ray, short for Rachel, was born into an Orthodox family. She moved to Nevada after high school to teach. It was there, in the Jewish community in Eureka, that she first tried her hand at public speaking. After gaining some notoriety, she gave

⁸ Judith S. Pinnolis, "'Cantor Soprano' Julie Rosewald: The Musical Career of a Jewish American 'New Woman,'" *American Jewish Archives Journal* 62:2 (2010):25

⁹ Pinnolis, 26.

sermons in Spokane, Washington, during the High Holidays. Originally, there were no services being held for the Holy Days, so she promised to speak if services were arranged. She was quickly accommodated. Her sermons were so moving that a non-Jew promised to give land away for free to help them build a synagogue.¹⁰ Ray achieved a fair amount of celebrity by being a Jewish woman who gave lectures on the pulpit. She was a dynamic speaker who did not have to rely on notes and was often compared to Deborah. At one point, she even entered Hebrew Union College. It is not clear if she intended to become a rabbi—a student category unavailable to her—or just wanted to take a course or two, but in the end, she only lasted one semester. It was her belief that her sermons were divinely inspired, so why bother with what a seminary could offer?¹¹

Whether or not a synagogue would allow it, Frank declined having a pulpit so that she could remain beholden to a congregation. She could go where she wanted, when she wanted, and speak about whatever she wanted to address. Despite these facts and with some opposition, the press insisted on calling Frank a rabbi. Her topics were extremely wide, including Torah, art, music, and literature to name a few. In addition to lecturing, she often gave sermons and led services in synagogues.

Frank gave up her itinerate life of lecturing and sermonizing when she married at the age of forty. As progressive as she was for her time, she believed that a married woman's primary job was in the home.

¹⁰ Reva Clar and William M. Kramer, "Ray Frank: The Girl Rabbi of the Golden West: Her Adventurous Life in Nevada, California, and the Northwest." *Western States Jewish History* 18:2 (1986): 61.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

While Ray Frank gave sermons without being tied to a pulpit, Tehilla Lichtenstein (1893-1973) led an actual congregation. In 1920, Lichtenstein married Reform rabbi Morris Lichtenstein, and in 1922, they founded the Society of Jewish Science.¹² During her husband's life, she was the religious school principal. After his death, she became the spiritual leader. Lichtenstein is the first known female Jewish spiritual leader of an American congregation. She remained in that position until shortly before her death in 1973. While she lacked the title rabbi, she still paved the way for other women to become spiritual leaders.

History reports that, in 1972, Sally Priesand was the first female rabbi ordained. It would be more correct to say that she was the first ordained female rabbi in America. The first female rabbi was in fact a Berlin-born woman named Regina Jonas (1902-1944). Jonas had a passion for the rabbinate ever since she was a teenager. Orthodox rabbi Max Weyl tutored Jonas in Jewish texts, and in 1924, Jonas entered the Hochschule fur die Wissenschaft des Judentums.¹³ Women were allowed to attend the Hochschule to receive a teaching degree, but no woman had ever been ordained as a rabbi. In 1930, Jonas submitted her thesis, "May a woman hold rabbinic office?" She argued that there was not a *halachic* reason that they should not. They were being held back only by prejudice. Her advisor, Eduard Baneth, died shortly after receiving the thesis, and his successor was against women becoming rabbis. In 1935, Rabbi Max Dienemann, executive director of Germany's Conference of Liberal

¹² Ellen M. Umansky, "Tehilla Lichtenstein," *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/lichtenstein-tehillah>.

¹³ Elisa Klaphek, "Regina Jonas," *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Woman*, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/jonas-regina>.

Rabbis, ordained Jonas. During the Holocaust, she was a pastoral care counselor at a Jewish hospital. In 1942, she and her mom were sent to Theresienstadt. She counseled and preached while there. In 1944, they were sent to Auschwitz where they were killed. After that, she disappeared from history despite being well known by Victor Frankl and Rabbi Leo Baeck, both of whom never mentioned her after surviving the Holocaust. It was not until after the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 and the archives of East Germany became accessible that historians learned of her existence.¹⁴ It makes one wonder why Baeck and Frankl chose not to educate the world about the woman whose passion and dedication towards Judaism led her to become the first ordained female rabbi.

Barbara Ostfeld is recorded as the first woman to become ordained as a cantor by the Reform movement in 1975. However, there were women who served as synagogue cantors earlier in the twentieth-century. Perhaps the earliest to do so was Betty Robbins. Robbins was born in 1924 in Greece as Betty Abramson. The family moved to Poland when Betty was four. When she was not allowed to join the boys' chorus in the synagogue, she sat in the balcony opposite them and sang at the top of her lungs. The cantor relented and let her sing as long as she cut her hair. The rabbi at another synagogue who at first refused to let her into the *heder*, a Jewish children's school, also relented, but she was seated behind a curtain in the hallway. From a young age, Robbins was pushing the boundaries imposed upon her by strict gender roles.

¹⁴ Ibid.

During the Holocaust, the family escaped to Australia. While there, Robbins met and married an American soldier, and they would eventually move to Oceanside, New York, where they attended Temple Avodah. In a situation similar to Julie Rosewald, the synagogue was desperate for a cantor for the upcoming High Holidays, and the board of trustees unanimously agreed to appoint her as their new cantor. Although she never attended HUC, the School of Sacred Music recognized Betty as the first female cantor in 5,000 years of Jewish history (overlooking Rosewald and perhaps other women) and admitted that there was not a Jewish law prohibiting women from becoming cantors.¹⁵ Robbins served at Temple Avodah, Sinai Reform Temple in Long Island, around Florida, and on cruise ships.

In the next chapter, I will explore the circumstances that led to the development of the *chazantes*. The influx of Jews to America from Eastern Europe, Yiddish theater, and vaudeville all had a hand in creating the environment where women singing *chazzanut* became not only acceptable but esteemed.

¹⁵ Sandra Robbins, “Betty Robbins,” *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/robbins-betty>.

Chapter Three

From Yiddish Theater to the Chazantes:

Setting the Stage

This chapter will explore the environment that led up to the arrival of the *chazantes*. It will start with the development of Yiddish theater as a source of comfort for newly arrived Eastern European Jews to America. From Yiddish theater, Jewish performers flooded the vaudeville stages along with immigrants of all ethnicities, races, and creeds. Vaudeville was one step closer than Yiddish theater to the realization of assimilation. From there, cultures merged, and Yiddish in language and music had a moment in the spotlight. It could be heard on the stage, on the radio, and in recordings often converged with jazz and swing. The performers themselves were not always Jewish. Blacks and whites embraced this hip new language equally. Women were also welcome in each of these venues, and Jewish women took advantage of the opportunities to sing their beloved Yiddish songs as well as *chazzanut*. The time was ripe, and the audience was willing and receptive for women, who were banned from singing on the *bimah*, to sing the forbidden repertoire in new locales. This chapter will explore each of these areas: Yiddish theater, vaudeville, immigrant stereotyping as a means of assimilation, Yiddish as a trend in jazz and swing music with both Black and white artists, cross-culturalization, and the rise of radio and recordings, all of which led to the *chazantes*. These individual areas have

been studied in much greater depth by others; this chapter will reveal enough to show how each one of these areas played a part in allowing the *chazantes* to break through their restrictions and shine upon the stage singing Jewish music.

Yiddish Theater

Jewish immigrants arriving in America from Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were escaping the anti-Semitism, violent pogroms, and economic hardship of the Pale of Settlement. America, the new world, was their sanctuary. As Polish-born Jewish author Anzia Yezierska recounts in her 1923 short story, “America and I”: “Choked for ages in the airless oppression of Russia, the Promised Land rose up—wings for my stifled spirit—sunlight burning through my darkness—freedom singing to me in my prison....I arrived in America.”¹⁶ Upon arriving, they sought out others who spoke their language and shared their culture in order to ease their transition. In 1907, for example, most of the 316 permanent congregations in the “mega-shtetl” of New York City’s Lower East Side were *landsmanshaft*, or “countrymen,” synagogues.¹⁷ According to Daniel Soyer:

In 1872 some 29 Jewish congregations worshipped in New York. By 1914 there were as many as 800, the growth attributable almost entirely to Eastern European Jewish immigrants, and in great part to the establishment of *landsmanshaft* congregations. The hundreds of religious societies on the Lower East Side and in other immigrant neighborhoods occupied a variety of spaces, with *landsmanshaft* synagogues concentrated in the districts where their compatriots predominated.¹⁸

¹⁶ Anzia Yezierska, “America and I,” in *America and I: Short Stories by American Jewish Women Writers*, ed. Joyce Antler (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 72.

¹⁷ Ivan Light, *Cities in World Perspective* (New York: MacMillan, 1983), 297.

¹⁸ Daniel Soyer, *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880-1939* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 56-57.

This gave them a place to pray with others who spoke their language. By congregating with people who were from the same area, they re-created the shtetls they were accustomed to in America. In a letter written in 1909 to the editor of *The Jewish Daily Forward*, a man who emigrated from Russia writes about feeling homesick during the High Holidays every year until he joins a *landsmanshaft* synagogue. “Sitting in the synagogue among *landsleit* and listening to the good cantor, I forgot my unhappy weekday life, the dirty shop, my boss, the bloodsucker, and my pale, sick wife and my children. All of my America with its hurry-up life was forgotten.”¹⁹

Another source of comfort and familiarity was Yiddish theater. Yiddish theater, already popular in Eastern Europe, had been banned in Russia in 1883.²⁰ A number of the performers of Yiddish theater made their way to America. Actors Clara Young and Molly Picon, writer Abraham Goldfaden, and impresarios Bessie and Boris Thomashefsky are just a few of the Jewish immigrants who came from Eastern Europe and made their way to America and the Yiddish theater. With the influx of these personalities and the Eastern European immigrants who populated the audiences, Yiddish theater flourished in America. There were two hundred Yiddish theaters or touring troupes in the United States between 1890 and 1940.²¹ As Yiddish theaters grew in quantity, their content grew in quality. It was from the Yiddish stage

¹⁹Isaac Metzker, ed., *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 101.

²⁰ Barbara Henry and Alyssa Quint, “Breaking News: Yiddish Theater Makes Money,” *Digital Yiddish Theater Project*, August 3, 2016, <https://web.uwm.edu/yiddish-stage/breaking-news-yiddish-theatre-makes-money>.

²¹ Todd London, *Founding Visions for a New American Art* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2013), 88.

that Eastern European Jews could hear their beloved and familiar Yiddish as well as Hebrew.

Vaudeville

While Yiddish theater provided a way for Eastern Europeans to adjust to life in America by maintaining their European identity, vaudeville helped them to become more American. Vaudeville was growing in popularity as a vehicle for displaying novelty acts and almost anyone with any talent whatsoever was welcome to perform. It provided a place for immigrants to express themselves and be accepted. It also allowed them to express and resolve racial and other social tensions. On the vaudeville stage, it didn't matter where you came from or what race, creed, or ethnicity you were. It was a place for singers, musicians, comedians, jugglers, dancers, animal acts, and anyone else with a gimmick. Vaudeville was so popular that theaters started popping up everywhere. At the height of its popularity, there were 1,000 theaters all over the United States.²² All of those theaters needed acts to fill up space and time. According to George Burns, as long as you had a headshot, you had a chance.²³ This allowed people of all different races, religions, and ethnicities to perform together, in turn creating a more accurate representation of the growing diversity of America. Italians, Jews, Irish, and Blacks all performed on the stage together. This blending of cultures on the stage led to the blending of cultures in music and art.

²² James Ciment, ed. *Encyclopedia of the Jazz Age: From the End of World War I to the Great Crash, Volumes 1-2* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 3.

²³ George Burns, *All My Best Friends* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1989), 22.

The vaudeville stage was also a place where the diverse groups were lampooned. There was not just blackface, there was also yellowface, redface, Irish face, Polish face, and Jewface. Every race and ethnicity was made fun of and stereotyped. These caricatures were called the “stage Irish” or “stage Jew,” etc., and they exaggerated the worst qualities associated with each ethnicity, race, or religion. The Jews were money grubbing and the Irish were drunkards. With the Jewface phenomenon, the Jewish people decided to take ownership of their own disparagement. At first, non-Jewish actors were doing the mocking, but eventually, the Jewish people took back their power by mocking themselves. These actors would wear fake beards and artificial noses while singing in a stereotypical Yiddish accent. The songs they sang, with titles like “When Moses with His Nose Leads the Band” (1906) and “Cohen Owes Me Ninety-Seven Dollars” by Irving Berlin (1915), were full of Jewish stereotypes. According to Alex Marshall:

As well as a shortcut for making sense of the world or simplifying human difference, ethnic stereotypes provide color and entertainment, a pleasurable way to look at the racial or cultural Other, without focusing so long or so deeply that it becomes unpleasant. Jewface not only mocks, it allows a listener to build an idea of what a Jew (or Native American, or Irishman...) is like....Ethnic parody cuts out these personal and individual nuances, streamlining the complex multicultural world of turn-of-the-century America into something that seemed, once upon a time, simple, entertaining, and easily disseminated.²⁴

Unfortunately, Black people were on the bottom of the social ladder, so while it was usually the Irish making fun of the Irish, and the Jew making fun of the Jew, Black people were fair game. All other races and ethnicities wore blackface and sang

²⁴ Alex Marshall, “Jewface: Comic Songs, Vaudeville Stereotypes – Mock Yiddish and Ethnic Parody in the Vaudeville Melting-Pot,” Zeteo (2016): 3-4.

minstrel songs thus whitewashing their own ethnicity. For immigrants, especially Jews, singing minstrel songs in blackface was one way to become more American. Blackface became popular after an Irish man named Thomas D. Rice first started the trend. He had heard a song called “Jump Jim Crow” sung by a group of Black men on the streets in 1831.²⁵ He loved the song so much that he rubbed his face with cork and created an act which he eventually performed all over the world. The popularity of his act led many other white performers to don blackface and take it to the vaudeville stage. Jews understood that one way to fit in and be successful on stage was to wear blackface and sing songs that sounded like the music of the Black culture.

One of the most famous Jews to sing in blackface was Al Jolson. He was such a popular performer on vaudeville at the time that he eventually went on to star in a movie called *The Jazz Singer*, in which he played a Jewish man torn between being a cantor and singing on vaudeville in blackface. While the wearing of blackface is controversial and viewed as racist by today’s standards, for Jolson, it was a means of expressing sympathy for the pain and suffering of the African Americans. Jolson had a large Black fan base.²⁶ According to Michael Rogin, “Audiences at Harlem’s Lafayette Theater cried during *The Jazz Singer*, and the Black press greeted the film with enthusiasm.”²⁷ Jolson was known as a champion of Black entertainers. He was instrumental in getting Black playwright Garland Porter’s play produced with an all-

²⁵ Jennifer Mooney, *Irish Stereotypes in Vaudeville, 1865-1905* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 32.

²⁶ M. Allison Kibler, *Censoring Racial Ridicule* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 203.

²⁷ Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 196.

Black cast.²⁸ It also highlighted, however, the ability for a Jewish man to rise in social status at the expense of Blacks by appropriating their culture, an opportunity that African Americans were not afforded. Ultimately, the minstrel show, featuring white people with corked faces singing the music of African Americans, was so popular that it became a way for Jewish people to erase their own heritage and become more American. In other words, Jewish immigrant entertainers became Black in order to become whiter by comparison. *The Jazz Singer* represented this struggle by depicting a Jewish man choosing to sing in blackface on vaudeville over singing the liturgy of his people. It was the first feature length movie with sound, making it very popular, along with the fact that it reflected the common struggle of immigrants in their new country trying to balance the old world with the new.

The Jazz Singer was monumental also in that it essentially marked the end of Jewish themed movies for the time being. In the beginning of the film era, Jewish actors could be onscreen playing Jews in stories about Jewish experiences. These movies and actors resonated with the mainstream. Once studios took over, actors like Max Davidson were suddenly “too Jewish.” Davidson starred in silent movies as well as movies with sound as an unmistakable Jew. Over time, however, he lost his appeal as studios no longer wanted actors or movies to be what they considered to be stereotypically Jewish. Jews like Adolph Zucker, Louis B. Mayer, and the Warner brothers were running the movie business, and they wanted to erase every trace of their own Jewishness along with that of their movies. They wanted to assimilate into

²⁸ Robert Cherry, *Jewish and Christian Views on Bodily Pleasure* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 194.

the larger culture and escape what they or their parents experienced in Europe. In other words, they wanted to create their version of the American dream, and Jews acting like Jews was not a part of that.²⁹

During the vaudeville period, the major commercial outlet for private music consumption was published music. Composers, many of them Jewish, would churn out music from Tin Pan Alley to be showcased on the vaudeville stage. These performances were ultimately commercials for the printed music. As pianos became less costly to produce in the 1880s, piano ownership became widespread. Everyone who had a piano at home wanted sheet music to play on it.³⁰ Sheet music was a means to disseminate on a wider scale the music that became popular on vaudeville including what was sung in blackface and Jewface. In fact, Jewface sheet music cover art is notable for its beautiful artwork, some of which is innocuous, while others don the faces of stereotypical Jews that resemble what might be plastered on Nazi propaganda.³¹ Sheet music remained the main way to distribute music to the larger population until the rise of radio, recordings, and advances in talking films. In fact, in 1910, sales of sheet music reached thirty million copies.³² Eventually, new technologies won out, and sheet music sales declined, especially after World War II.

²⁹ Kenneth Turan, "Letting Jews Be Jews: Ethnicity and Hollywood, Its Fall and Rise," in *Jews in the Los Angeles Mosaic*, ed. Karen S. Wilson, (Los Angeles: Autry National Center of the American West, University of California Press, 2013), 46-47.

³⁰ Jonathan Friedmann, *A City Haphazard: Jewish Musicians in Los Angeles, 1887-1927* (Washington, DC: Academia, 2017), 59.

³¹ Jody Rosen, "'Cohen Owes Me Ninety-Seven Dollars': Images of Jews from the Jewish Sheet-Music Trade," in *The Song is Not the Same: Jews and American Popular Music*, ed. Bruce Zuckerman, Josh Kun, and Lisa Ansell (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2011), 10-11.

³² Friedmann, *A City Haphazard*, 60.

While Black culture resonated with Jews who were trying to seem more American, Jewish culture resonated with many Blacks, with its echoes of slavery and oppression. In the early 1900s, African Americans began to move north into the Jewish populated Harlem to escape the Jim Crow laws of the south. Inspired by the Jewish traditions, some Blacks began to create synagogues that combined these traditions with their own worldview. Many of the Blacks who founded synagogues were not born in America but came from the Caribbean, among other places. The services in these synagogues were led in Hebrew and Yiddish, and the congregants were separated by gender, kept kosher, and had lifecycle events. One notable Hebrew cantor was musician Willie “The Lion” Smith. Smith had a Jewish father and was supported by the Rothschilds in his Jewish education. He was fluent in Yiddish and his business card read, “The Hebrew Cantor.”³³ With the rise in popularity of cantorial singing on the Yiddish and vaudeville stages as well in recordings, Black cantors had an audience outside of their own synagogues.

One Black cantor, named Thomas La Rue, had the stage name of Reb Toyve Ha’Cohen. He was billed as “*der shvartzer khazn*,” the Black Cantor in Yiddish. He was raised in Newark, New Jersey at a time when it was, like Harlem, a center for Jewish and Black cultures. His single mother loved the tenets of Judaism and had found kindness among Jewish women. La Rue claimed that he had had a Jewish education, and as legend has it, when his cantor fell ill, he jumped in to take his place. At first the congregation was ready to drag him out, but after listening to his soulful

³³ Henry Sapoznik, “How a Century-Old Recording Revealed the Lost World of African American Cantors,” July 9, 2020, <https://www.henrysapoznik.com>.

voice, they changed their minds and began to pray.³⁴ During his career, he toured on the Yiddish vaudeville circuit, starred in Yiddish theater, and sang Yiddish, cantorial, and Russian hymns on the radio as the “Colored Cantor.” He even made it to the mainstream vaudeville stage.

Other Black singers, who were not cantors, were also drawn to Yiddish music and the Yiddish language in general. They incorporated Yiddish and faux-Yiddish into their slang as a way to show both their respect to the culture with whom they lived side by side, as well as a way of subtly mocking it.³⁵ This dual purpose represented the complicated relationship between Blacks and Jews. They had close partnerships with each other, but there were also tensions. Their kinship came from both being the “other” in society, but their tensions rose from subtle acts of discrimination from the Jews. For example, Jewish store owners were not hiring Black people to work in their stores located in the now predominately Black neighborhood of Harlem. When Johnny and George, a Black vaudeville duo, sang the Yiddish song “Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn” (1932) in the Catskills, it is not known if they were glorifying or mocking the Yiddish song they sang. Louis Armstrong emulated the sounds of davening in his scat singing on “Heebie Jeebies” (1926) as an homage to the Jewish family who helped to provide for him and, legend has it, helped him buy his first horn. Cab Calloway, introduced to Yiddish music by his manager and close

³⁴ Henry Sapoznik, “Thomas La Rue Jones: King of the Colored Cantors,” <https://www.henrysapoznik.com>, July 21, 2020.

³⁵ Jonathan Z. S. Pollack, “Ovoutie Slanguage is Absolutely Kosher: Yiddish in Scat-Singing, Jazz Jargon, and Black Music,” in *The Song is Not the Same: Jews and American Popular Music*, ed. Bruce Zuckerman, Josh Kun, and Lisa Ansell (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2011), 72.

friend, Irving Mills, sang many Yiddish-inspired songs, and became one of the best-known Afro-Yiddishists. These songs included “Tzotskele” (1958), “A Bee Gezindt” (1939), and “Utt Da Zay” (1939). Calloway takes these old-world Yiddish tunes and makes them his own with his signature swing sound. Reb Toyve, mentioned above, sang “Eili Eili” on the Yiddish stage. In fact, many Black singers sang “Eili Eili” because its theme of suffering resonated as much with the Blacks as it did with the Jews. Black performers sang not only Jewish music in Yiddish but also from the liturgy in Hebrew. For example, in 1958 Johnny Mathis recorded a version of “Kol Nidre” styled after none other than Perry Como.³⁶ As popular as it was for Jewish people to sing songs from the African American culture with their faces covered in cork, it was also popular for Black people to sing the music of the Jews, albeit with less regularity.

With the influence of jazz and swing, Yiddish music evolved from what might have been heard in the *shtetl* into something that was played on the radio. Take, for example, the road traveled by “Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn,” mentioned above. It was originally written by Sholom Secunda and Jacob Jacobs for a Yiddish theater show in 1932. It was a highlight of the show, but when the show closed, it all but disappeared. Jennie Grossinger of the Catskills Grossinger Hotel heard and loved the tune. She taught it to Black duo Johnny and George who performed it in Yiddish at the Apollo, where Sammy Cahn and Saul Chaplin were in attendance. They liked it so much that

³⁶ Josh Kun, liner notes to *Black Sabbath* (New York: The Idelsohn Society for Musical Preservation, 2010), 6.

they wrote an English version.³⁷ In 1937, Jack and Joe Kammen approached Secunda about purchasing the rights to the song. His songs had just been rejected by Warner Brothers as being “too Jewish” during the period of time, mentioned above, when Hollywood was attempting to mask its Jewishness. Despondent, Secunda took the \$30 and split it with Jacobs.³⁸ T.B. Harms, a subsidiary of Warner Brothers, bought the song, and one can assume that the Kammen brothers made a tidy profit. Harms changed the title to “Bei Mir Bist Du Schon,” a more Germanic, less Jewish name, and Cahn and Chaplin released their English version.³⁹ The Andrews sisters recorded it in 1937, and Benny Goodman covered it. Ironically, Warner Brothers, who had originally turned down the too Jewish song, saw its success and made a movie around it. This time, the song, while still containing some Yiddish, was presented in a less “Jewish” and more “American” package with English words and non-Jewish sisters singing in harmony. The Jewishness of “Bei Mir Bist Du Schon” was no longer threatening to the Jewish movie heads. Unfortunately, the only memorable thing about the movie they made was the song.

With the popularity of “Bei Mir Bist Du Schon,” musicians hoped to strike gold again with other Yiddish songs. Dave Tarras, a clarinetist, was rising to fame while playing in the Yiddish theater. He was discovered by Yiddish theater composer and violinist Alexander Olshanetsky. After Yiddish theater collapsed with the stock

³⁷ “The Story of a Song: Bei Mir Bist Du Shon Now Heads Best Sellers,” *Life Magazine*, January 31, 1938.

³⁸ Ben Sidran, *There Was a Fire: Jews, Music and the American Dream*, 3rd ed. (N.p.: Nardis Books: 2016), 100.

³⁹ “The Story of a Song: Bei Mir Bist Du Shon Now Heads Best Sellers,” *Life Magazine*, January 31, 1938.

market in 1929, the artists turned to recordings and then, eventually, to radio. Listeners were yearning to hear their beloved Yiddish and Jewish melodies now that they couldn't go to the theater. Tarras, an expert in klezmer, became a sensation playing Yiddish music on the radio. When the Catskills became a major draw for entertainers, and for those who played Yiddish music in particular, Tarras went there as well. "Bei Mir Bist Du Schon," which became a number one song in America, was a turning point combining Jewish and jazz into a new Jewish-jazz genre. For musicians like Tarras, who were not adept at playing in the new American style, the arrangements accommodated klezmer musicians by using an ABA form: the A section being the American style, and the B section being the klezmer section highlighting musicians like Tarras.

Looking to capitalize on this new popular hybrid, Ziggy Elman, a trumpeter in Benny Goodman's band, arranged his own song, "Der Shtiler Bulgar," in this manner. It had been recorded earlier by Abe Schwartz. Elman re-recorded it as a klezmer/jazz piece re-named "Freilach in Swing (And the Angels Sing)" in 1938. Goodman saw another opportunity for a hit and created the swing version with lyrics by Johnny Mercer.⁴⁰ It was around this time that Cab Calloway began recording his own Yiddish tunes in a swing style.

Unfortunately, the Yiddish swing era did not last long. Jewish Americans were assimilating and wanting to listen more and more to jazz and swing without the Jewish flavor. In 1955, Tarras made a beautiful klezmer recording with his son-in-

⁴⁰ Kip Lornell and Anne K. Rasmussen, eds. *The Music of Multicultural America: Performance, Identity, and Community in the United States* (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi: 2016), 98.

law, Sam Musiker, called *Tanz!* By this time, however, klezmer had declined in popularity, and despite the brilliant playing of Musiker and Tarras, the album flopped. Tarras, ironically nicknamed “the Jewish Benny Goodman,” had fewer opportunities as Benny Goodman, also Jewish but unable to play in the klezmer style, rose in the ranks. When hired to play in this klezmer-jazz hybrid style, Goodman was featured in the A sections, while better klezmer musicians like Tarras, were featured in the B section. When klezmer declined, Goodman did not lose his standing. Goodman, having arranged many Jewish themed songs, is considered the bridge that linked Jewish music to jazz.⁴¹

Cross-culturalization was not limited to Jews and African Americans. It was also happening between Jews and Latino/as. Jewish people lived in close proximity to both Blacks and Latino/as in Harlem absorbing both their music and their culture. Eventually, a craze for Latin music developed. Latin musicians were in high demand in the hotels in the Catskills. La Playa Sextet, a fixture on the Catskill circuit, paid tribute to their Jewish fans by recording “The Catskill Cha-Cha” (1961). Johnny Conquet, a Puerto Rican band leader, released a full album entitled *Raisins and Almonds Cha Cha Cha and Merengues* (1958) that was made to sound as if recorded live in a Catskill hotel. The music combined Yiddish and Hebrew texts and/or themes with Latin rhythms and had titles like “Matzah Ball Merengue” and “Roumania Roumania.”

⁴¹ Harry Sapoznik, *Klezmer! Jewish Music From Old World to Our World* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1999), 141.

Yiddish and Jewish themed music were at the height of their popularity in the early to mid-twentieth century. This trend was fueled by the success of records being released by cantors like Yosele Rosenblatt. These cantors had an audience on the vaudeville stage along with Jewish singers who, like Al Jolson, sang in blackface while others donned Jewface, as well as Black cantors like Thomas La Rue, and musicians from the Yiddish theater like Dave Tarras. Rosenblatt, a renowned cantor from Ukraine, came to America for a position as the cantor in the New York City synagogue, Ohab Tzedek. His fame grew in America with the release of his recordings demonstrating his Caruso-like voice. Eventually, bad business dealings left him broke, and he turned to vaudeville and movies to make money. The most famous film he was in was *The Jazz Singer* in which actor Warner Oland lip-synced to Rosenblatt's *Kol Nidre*, and in another scene, Rosenblatt is seen singing "Yortsayt" on the vaudeville stage.⁴²

Another cantor who straddled the stage, film, and pulpit was Moishe Oysher. He was a sixth-generation cantor who was drawn to the Yiddish stage. He toured with Yiddish theater while also working at various pulpits throughout his career. When his stage opportunities dwindled, he found success on the screen starring in three Yiddish films. In the film *Yankel der Shmid*, Oysher can be heard taking a cue from the scat singing that was all the rage at the time thanks to musicians like Louis Armstrong. He can be heard with his then wife, Florence Weiss, blending the sounds of Hassidic

⁴² Avram Mednick, *Copasetic* (New York: iUniverse, 2004), 43.

chant with scat in the song, “Hassidic in America” (1934).⁴³ Armstrong is credited with inventing scat, which he supposedly styled after Jews “rockin,” by which he meant *davening*.⁴⁴ Through recordings, film, and radio performances, cantors like Oysler and Rosenblatt gave Jewish music a wider audience than it could have achieved on the stage alone, making the sounds of cantorial music widely accessible, and eventually opening the door for women to follow in their footsteps.

Women

With the door open on the vaudeville stage to immigrants who may not have otherwise had many doors open to them, the time was ripe for women to step into the spotlight. In 1906, Sophie Tucker, a Ukrainian-born Jewish woman, began her career on vaudeville singing in blackface. Like her male counterpart, Al Jolson, also born in 1886, Tucker would use a black dialect and sing minstrel songs. For Tucker, blackface was only a way to break into show biz. She was happy to leave it behind once she became well known, but she continued to enjoy singing music that originated in the African American culture, such as jazz and blues. Tucker was popular during a time when being multicultural on the vaudeville stage, if not on the streets, was being celebrated. She sang not only in a Black dialect, but in Yiddish and in the style of a Jewish cantor. She worked with Black and Jewish musicians and dancers during a time when racial and ethnic tensions between Blacks and whites

⁴³ Hankus Netsky, “Secular Jewish Musical Expression—Is Noting Sacred?” in David M. Gordis, Zachary I. Heller, eds., *Jewish Secularity: The Search for Roots and the Challenges of Relevant Meaning* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2012), 82.

⁴⁴ Laurence Bergreen, *Louis Armstrong: An Extravagant Life* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997), 267.

were high. She was able to do this because, as a Jew, she was considered neither Black nor white. She was also able to capitalize on the popularity of both Black and Jewish stereotypes on the vaudeville stage. This was an era where an Irish immigrant could play both as himself, dressed elegantly, or as an overtly stereotypical drunk stage Irish with a red nose, and a Jew could sing a ragtime song in blackface, as well as a denigrating song about Jews while wearing the characteristic Jewface putty nose.⁴⁵ Audiences, made up largely of immigrants, appreciated these performances that, by laughing at the eccentricities of the other and their own cultures, made themselves feel more white and more American. While Tucker eventually was able to come out from behind the cork, she kept her program full of racial and ethnic characterizations.

In line with the Black cantors of the era, there was another pioneering woman named Goldye Di Schwartz Khaznte—literally, “Goldye, the Black Female Cantor.” In the *Tribune* from Scranton, Pennsylvania, April 18, 1925, there was an advertisement calling her *Chazante* and “The Sensation of Sensations...The Only Colored Woman ‘Cantor’ in the World.”⁴⁶ She was to perform on a radio program with Miss Rosetta Yager. In the *Morning Call Newspaper*, there is an article detailing this upcoming performance. Rosetta Yager is listed as one of the performers; she was a singer in the Yiddish Star Company. Much more is written about Goldye. According to this article, she was from Abyssinia, Africa, and was said to be able to speak six languages, “Jewish, German, French, Italian, Abbyssinian [sic], and

⁴⁵ Maria De Simone, “Sophie Tucker, Racial Hybridity and Interracial Relations in American Vaudeville,” *Theater Research International* 44:2 (2019), 5.

⁴⁶ *The Tribune*, Scranton, Pennsylvania, April 18, 1925, 13.

English.”⁴⁷ One can only assume that by Jewish, the author meant Hebrew and/or Yiddish. The article goes on to say that she was educated in Europe and that she found her niche as a cantor. Another article about her in *The Jewish Criterion* of Pittsburgh adds that she was sent to Italy to study singing by a tribal chief who heard her sing. It claims that she was from the Jewish tribe called “Sheba of Gza.” As Goldye Di Shvartze Khaznte, she gave concerts and sang on the radio. She also appeared in non-Jewish productions as Goldye M. Steiner. After a disastrous production of a show called “*him*” by e.e. cummings, where only Goldye’s performance was praised, she showed up again as the Black canter in a musical based on her alleged life, called “The Daughter of a Lost Tribe.” Then from 1933-1938, she appeared as a Jewish regular on a Christian radio broadcast. After this, she disappears.⁴⁸

Another Jewish female performer, with roots in Eastern Europe, was Molly Picon. Picon got her start on vaudeville when she was just a child and occasionally performed in blackface, not only on vaudeville, but in the theater as well. There is a promotional photo of Picon in blackface for a production of *Some Girls* taken in 1927. At the age of twenty, Picon left vaudeville when she became a part of a Yiddish theater troupe in 1919. Unlike Sophie Tucker, Picon was born in America with Eastern European grandparents. On the recommendation of her new husband, she left America for Europe to learn Yiddish as well to understand the characters she was

⁴⁷ *Morning Call Newspaper*, Sunday April 12, 1925, 2.

⁴⁸ Henry Sapoznik, “Goldye, Di Shvartze Khaznte/The Black Woman Cantor,” August 20, 2020, <http://www.henrysapoznik.com/blog>.

embodying.⁴⁹ After this period of immersion, she returned to America and became very successful in Yiddish theater, vaudeville, movies, and recordings. Picon had a very long career on both the European and American stage and screen. When Yiddish entertainment ceased to be in vogue, Picon made a successful transition to mainstream American entertainment.

Yiddish theater was revolutionary in its inclusion of women on the stage.⁵⁰ Up until its rise, female roles were typically played by men. As far back as 1629, women acting in a French touring troupe were booed off the stage in England.⁵¹ Yiddish theater had the benefit of being an insular community that could function separately from the surrounding theaters in Europe. They had the freedom to be innovative in their casting and began to cast actual women in the female roles. This paved the way for Jewish women like Molly Picon, Freydele Oysher, and many others to shine on the stage. Yiddish theater was a step many Jewish women took towards other American stages, like vaudeville and Broadway.⁵² Vaudeville, in particular, thrived on novelty, and women were a novelty.

Once women had been playing themselves for some time, the roles were reversed. Now women on the Yiddish theater stages were cast in pants roles: male

⁴⁹ Edna Nahshon, ed., *New York's Yiddish Theater: From Bowery to Broadway* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 130. See also Donald McNeilly, Florence Hackman, and Frank Cullen, *Vaudeville, Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America, vol. 1* (London: Routledge, 2017), 883.

⁵⁰ Alyssa Quint, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Theater* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 140.

⁵¹ Hayley Kobilinsky Poserow, "Kol Ishah: An Analysis of the 'Khazntes' Phenomenon," *Journal of Synagogue Music* 32 (2007), 87.

⁵² Jack R. Fischel and Susan M. Ortmann, eds., *Encyclopedia of Jewish American Popular Culture* (Westport, CT: AB-CLIO, 2008), 216.

parts played by women. The atmosphere was ripe for this because many productions were comedic, and the audiences were up for anything.⁵³ This gender-bending can be seen in the Yiddish films *Ost und West* and *Yidl Mitn Fidl* starring Molly Picon.⁵⁴ Dressing up as men who were really women in both of these films probably made their cross-dressing more acceptable. Another example is Freydele Oysher, Moshe's sister, who would dress up as a bar mitzvah student or cantor, only to reveal herself as a woman at the end of the show. This gave her the leeway to sing something only men were allowed to sing up to that point: *chazzanut*. The fact that she was Moshe Oysher's sister, famous Yiddish theater actor and celebrated *chazzan*, also gave her license to sing "his" music. She was able to utilize this accepting attitude and sing *chazzanut*, not only on the stage, but also on the radio. This led to an even greater acceptance of hearing a woman's voice sing what was normally only allowed on the *bimah* by a male cantor.

When the great depression hit, Yiddish theater became cost prohibitive. Immigrants missing their homeland who could no longer afford the theater, could turn on a recording of Yosele Rosenblatt or Moshe Oysher and feel at home. Even more affordable was the radio. On the radio, they could listen to their beloved cantors or hear the new trend of Jewish jazz with musicians like Tarras and Musiker. As noted, they were also increasingly receptive in their new homeland to hearing women like Freydele Oysher sing the repertoire of her brother. She was, after all, their beloved Moshe's sister. She learned everything she knew from him, and she made a name for

⁵³ Poserow, "Kol Ishah," 94.

⁵⁴ Rebecca Rossen, *Dancing Jewish: Jewish Identity in American Modern and Postmodern Dance*, (New York:Oxford University Press, 2014), 39.

herself on radio. In doing this, her audience grew, and doors were opened for other women to sing *chazzanut*. Radio was a venue for pioneers like Goldye DeSchwartz, Oysher, and other up and coming *chazantes*.

Yiddish theater was also a way for Eastern European Jews, both women and men, to express their Jewishness through secular means while in America. For immigrants yearning for their home, it was nostalgic, as in listening to Sophie Tucker singing “Yiddishe Momma” (1928), the popular song that contributed to and reinforced the Jewish mother stereotype. Finally, Yiddish melodies were heard in mainstream entertainment side by side with other types of American entertainment, as when Yosele Rosenblatt sang Yiddish songs on vaudeville and Fraydele Oysher sang them on the radio. With the advent and success of the new 78 RPM recordings, which had become standard around 1925, Yiddish music could be heard in anyone’s living room helping to bring the old country right to their doorsteps. Later, recordings allowed singers who were not Jewish to experiment with the new fad of Yiddish and cantorial music, as when Harry Belafonte sang “Hava Nagila” (1959) or Johnny Mathis recorded “Kol Nidre”⁵⁵ (1958).

Yiddish theater’s accepting attitude towards women paved the way for them to star on vaudeville and Broadway, enter recording studios, and sing on the radio. The music that they brought with them had already found its niche within each of these venues thanks to Jewish performers like Jolson, Black cantors and performers like Thomas La Rue and Cab Calloway, and klezmer artists like Dave Tarras. Women

⁵⁵ David M. Gordis, Zachary I. Heller, eds., *Jewish Secularity: The Search for Roots and the Challenges of Relevant Meaning*, (University Press of America, INC., 2012), 82.

like Sophie Tucker and Molly Picon continued to open the door for more women to come through, and by the time Freydele Oysher, Sheindele di Chazante, Bas Sheva, and others came to the forefront as *chazantes*, the world was ready for them. The convergence of American and Jewish cultures, as well as the success of radio and recordings, all set the stage for the entrance of the *chazantes*. In the following chapter, I will discuss several *chazantes* in greater depth.

Chapter Four

The Chazantes

Now that women were performing on stage, Jewish women took this opportunity to begin singing the forbidden music of the synagogue. These women were called *chazantes*, a Yiddish declension of the word for cantor, *chazzan*. Many of these women began in Yiddish Theater, dressing as men and singing *chazzanut*. As they gained acceptance, they took their talents to the vaudeville stage and eventually beyond. According to Arianne Brown, the *chazantes* had four common qualities. First, they all grew up listening to *chazzanut* with cantors and/or musicians in their families, and they were immersed in the Jewish culture. Second, they were all able to sing in a register low enough to sound like men. Audiences would have felt comforted by this. Hearing this holy music sung not only by women, but in a range higher than they were used to hearing it, may have been jolting. Third, all the *chazantes* were bold women, pioneers, who were able to blaze their own trails. Finally, they were all passionate about *chazzanut*.⁵⁶

The earliest of the *chazantes* was Sophie Kurtzer (1896-1974). She was billed as “Lady Cantor Madam Sophie Kurtzer, the first female cantor.” We do not know a lot about her, but we can hear her exceptional voice on recordings she made in 1924-25. Evident in the recordings is her tenor voice that sounds very much like a man, but with deviations up into her soprano range that suggest that the singer is, in fact, a

⁵⁶ Arianne Brown, “The *Khazntes*: The Life Stories of Sophie Kurtzer, Bas Sheva, Sheindele the Khaznte, Perele Feig, Goldie Malavsky, and Fraydele Oysher,” *Journal of Synagogue Music* 23 (2007): 51-79.

woman. As one of the first to break the *kol isha* decree, it probably helped that her voice was in a range that was familiar to the audiences with only gentle reminders that she was actually a woman.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Moishe Oysher, the cantor who sang both on the pulpit and the stage, had a younger sister named Fraydele (1913-2003). At a young age, it was apparent that she was a very talented singer. She started off singing on the radio and with her father in his choir at the synagogue. When she was fifteen years old, she tagged along with her brother when he moved to New York City so that they could pursue their dreams of finding fame and fortune through their singing. Fraydele continued singing on the radio and then made her way to Yiddish theater. In time, her fame outshone her brother's. He was well known in a profession dominated by men. She was a novelty, because she was a woman in a man's world singing music that was once only sung by men. In the theater, she often played a boy singing *chazzanut*. Near the end of the show, it would be revealed that she was a woman. This gender-bending made the singing of *chazzanut* more palatable for the audience: it was acceptable to hear this music coming from a person appearing as male, even if they knew it probably wasn't really a man. Fraydele then started playing women who sang *chazzanut*. Fraydele branched out from Yiddish theater to stages all over America and occasionally abroad in the late 1940s. Throughout her career, she continued to sing on the radio. Unfortunately, she did not make many recordings out of fear that people would not come to hear her in person or listen to her on the radio if they could simply hear her at home.⁵⁷ Ultimately, Fraydele's success was made

⁵⁷ Ibid., 72-76.

possible because she came at the right time and was in the right place. Yiddish theater was accepting of women, novelty acts were gaining acceptance, and audiences outside of the synagogue were open to hearing and seeing new things. Freydele took the opportunity to sing *chazzanut* outside of the synagogue walls, and it was accepted.

Samuel Malavsky, a cantor in Philadelphia, sang in synagogue, as well as on tour, with his talented children. His daughter, Goldie, was particularly talented and began singing *chazzanut* at a young age. Goldie and her sister, Gittie, formed a group called the Marlin Sisters. They sang in many diverse genres and were popular enough to be asked to sing on a radio show in New York. The family often sang together for services and became so successful that the patriarch moved them all to New York permanently. They sang for entertainment in concerts and on the radio as well as to lead services.⁵⁸ After attempts to sing in synagogue proved dangerous, due to the objections of yeshiva students to women singing in the sacred space, they moved their services to hotels.⁵⁹ While Goldie was not technically a *chazante*, her story does show the lengths that Jewish women, who were not allowed to sing in synagogues, would go to sing what they loved and find acceptance.

Jean Gornish, from Philadelphia, would also make her mark as a *chazante*. At the start of her career, she was referred to “Jean Gornish, Alto.” Her name popped up starting in 1936, but it was in 1938 that her billing changed to “Sheindele the Khaznt – the world’s only woman cantor.” She had a rich alto voice that sounded much like a

⁵⁸ Brown, 68-72

⁵⁹ Jeremiah Lockwood, “Conversations: The Malavskys, a Family Portrait,” Herb Alpert School of Music, August 30, 2021, <https://schoolofmusic.ucla.edu/conversations-the-malavskys-a-family-portrait/>.

male tenor's, perfect for singing *chazzanut*. She sang on radio programs as well as in the Catskills, among other places. In the 1940s, her fame rose to the point of her sharing the stage with famous male cantors—men who would never have let her sing with them in the synagogue. Sheindele also led Passover *seders*, but only in hotels, never in synagogues. She led other services for the military and in hospitals as well. By the 1960s, the synagogue doors were open to her as a performer, but not as a cantor.⁶⁰ However, her presence helped normalize the presence and sound of women in the synagogue, paving the way for future female cantors.

A *chazante* who came to her calling later in life was Perele Feig. Her low alto voice was very conducive to the keys of *chazzanut*, but having grown up in an Orthodox community, it had never occurred to her sing this music. By a chance encounter on vacation in the Catskills, a hotel owner who heard her humming encouraged her to start singing professionally. She rose to fame quickly, getting her start on the radio. Perele's middle register was strong, so she generally stayed in that range. She often sang music by Chazzan Zavel Kwartin, a cantor whose sound she easily replicated. From the 1950s to 1970s, Perele concertized in hotels around the country and later within the walls of the synagogue.⁶¹

A *chazante* who crossed over into pop and experimental music was Bas Sheva, the niece of Sophie Kurtzer. Her real name was Bernice Kanefsky, and she was the daughter of a cantor. She performed with her husband Al Hausman's band in the Catskills. Her style was versatile, her rich alto voice easily switching between

⁶⁰ Ibid., 60-65.

⁶¹ Ibid., 66-68

pop, *chazzanut*, and even opera. In the movie *Catskill Honeymoon*, she sings *Sheyiboneh Beis HaMikdash*, segueing into the tenor aria “Vesti La Giubba” from *I Pagliacci*. The audiences, often with Holocaust survivors in their midst, were especially moved by her *chazzanut*. However, Bas Sheva was not without controversy. She made two appearances on the Ed Sullivan Show, both of which were followed by angry letters from the Orthodox Union due to her singing of *chazzanut*. Because of these letters and objections from the Cantors Assembly, Sullivan did not ask her to return a third time. She stretched out even further when she recorded *The Passion* for bandleader Les Baxter in 1954. It was an experimental album where she was recorded moaning, groaning, and grunting. Bas Sheva was constantly touring and performing, even shortly after giving birth. A diabetic, she unfortunately died at the very young age of thirty-four after being given sea sickness medicine while working on a cruise ship. The medicine had an adverse reaction with her insulin injection, and she died instantly.⁶²

Finally, the era of the *chazantes* ended with one singer who found success by singing the songs of Moishe Oysher. Her name was Mimi Sloane, and her start came just as the other *chazante* stars were fading or already faded. Sloane also starred in *Catskill Honeymoon* with Bas Sheva, as well as in Yiddish theater. However, she did not start singing *chazzanut* until the 1970s. Because of her uncanny way of imitating Oysher, she became successful at a time when audiences were not as interested in *chazzanut*. “She became a brand-new novelty within the *Khazntes*’ novelty.”⁶³

⁶² Ibid., 54-60.

⁶³ Poserow, “Kol Ishah,” 95-96.

During the height of their fame, none of these women had the ability to become cantors. While many led services, these were not in synagogues, but in hotels, often with male cantors beside them to legitimize what they were doing. Some of the *chazntes*, like Freydele Oysher, claimed that they were not feminists and did not want to become cantors. Whatever their intentions, however, these women normalized the possibility of women singing what only men could sing in the synagogue. At first, women singing chazzanut was a novelty, so they wore men's garb and sang in men's keys to ease the transition. The audience was aware that they were women and, for the most part, accepted them wholeheartedly. The next step was singing sacred music dressed in their own clothes. When that was accepted and normalized, it was only a matter of time before women would enter the cantorate themselves and be fully embraced as women in their own right, wearing their own clothes, and singing in their own keys.

Chapter Five

From the Kitchen to the Bimah

Women were always part of the prayer service from ancient times until now. In the New Testament, in the Book of Acts, women are mentioned as being a part of the congregation and their reactions to Paul's sermons were recorded.⁶⁴ Women and children are discussed throughout the Talmud in terms of their attending synagogue, but nothing is mentioned regarding them being seated separately. Evidence shows that women probably came up to chant Torah and recite the blessings in the early Temple, but later this practice became prohibited by our sages.⁶⁵ There is nothing written about whether women led prayers in ancient times, but we do have the example in the Book of Samuel of Hannah praying in public. In fact, we base the order of our prayer on her prayers as well as the structure of the Amidah: praise, petitions, thanksgiving.⁶⁶ In the Middle Ages, we have the establishment of our sages of *kol isha*, first for reciting the *Shema*, and then for all prayers, because of Shmuel's interpretation of the verse from Songs of Songs that a woman's voice is indecent. Sometime after this, in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, men and women were separated in the synagogue.

For women to be able to recite the blessings out loud, they would need their own space, and their own leaders. We have examples of these women from thirteenth century Europe. In the Rhineland, there was a woman named Urania, in Nuremberg, a

⁶⁴ Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut, eds., *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1992), 39.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 43.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 47.

woman named Richenza. Rebecca Tiktiner, a prayer leader in Prague, was titled “rebetzin-preacher.”⁶⁷ This trend continued East to Russia and Poland. These educated women, the *sagerin*, were a necessary part of the worship in order to help the other women, who were largely uneducated and could not read Hebrew, pray. By guiding them, the *sagerin*, usually daughters and granddaughters of rabbis, were able to give them the spiritual connection they needed.

When not praying in their separate sections, women fulfilled traditional roles. They took care of the children and ran the house so that the men could pray and study. They cooked all day Friday so that when the men came home from shul, their Shabbat dinner was ready. They fulfilled the mitzvah of baking and separating the challah. They were allowed to pray if they wanted to, but they were not expected to pray or fulfill any time bound mitzvot. Other than leading the women in prayer, there was no outlet for women who wanted to lead congregations and sing the *chazzanut* that they heard their fathers and grandfathers sing. This would change when Eastern European Jews emigrated to America to escape persecution.

In America, Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe settled into communities that resembled their own villages living near people who spoke the same language. They brought with them their culture and traditions. One of these was Yiddish Theater. It grew in popularity as these new immigrants found comfort in its familiarity as it reminded them of home. On the Yiddish stage, women took on roles, first dressed as men, and eventually as women themselves. Audiences in America started to acclimate to the presence of women on stage, singing no less. Once they felt

⁶⁷ Ibid, 66.

settled, it was time to assimilate. Vaudeville, the true melting pot, offered all immigrants a place to do that. Vaudeville was all about novelty. The newer and more different, the better. Immigrants took the stage as themselves, often exaggerating the stereotypes made about them, as in Jew face or Irish face, or they corked their faces and took on the stereotypes of the African Americans who had been in America much longer. They donned blackface to erase their own idiosyncrasies and seem more American. Jews and Blacks, both facing prejudice, found solace in borrowing from each other's cultures. Jewish musicians incorporated swing while Black singers incorporated Yiddish. There were also Black cantors singing Yiddish and *chazzanut* in synagogues on the east coast. There was simultaneously a cross culturalization between the Jewish immigrants and the Latinx community resulting in music that combined references to matzah ball soup with the merengue. This acceptance and mixing of cultures was permissible on the stage, which bled into the recording studios and on the radio. America as a whole was being exposed to this novelty, and they were also accepting of it. Women singing on stage had once been a novelty. Now Jewish women like Sophie Tucker were singing in blackface, or others like Molly Picon, were singing *chazzanut* while dressed like male cantors. After a time, the need to hide behind costumes fell away. Jewish women could now sing as Jewish women the songs of their fathers and grandfathers. Their popularity grew until they could move from the vaudeville stages to other stages. They also performed on radio and made recordings. These women made a name for themselves as *chazantes*.

The environment of assimilation and acceptance of novelty allowed the *chazantes* to grow in popularity. They bent the rules of *kol isha*, if only outside of the

synagogue with few exceptions. In combination with those who blazed new trails, like Julie Rosewald and Ray Frank, they helped open the door for future female clergy. This may not have been their intent, but the outcome of being on the stage, the radio, and the phonograph is that a large number Jewish people became accustomed to hearing women sing cantorial repertoire, and it became less taboo. They became desensitized to it. Shortly after the era of the *chazantes* ended in 1970, Barbara Ostfeld was accepted into Hebrew Union College, and she became the first ordained cantor of the Reform movement in 1975. It does not seem to be a stretch to say that as the environment of novelty and the mixing of cultures allowed for the *chazantes* to flourish, so too the phenomenon of the *chazantes* opened a door that allowed female cantors to flourish, whether or not that was their intention.

When Barbara Ostfeld entered Hebrew Union College in 1970, America was primed and ready for a female cantor. While her voice was certainly different from the voices of the men who came before her, it was no longer out of the question for women to be singing the liturgy. The Reform Movement, always ahead of the Conservative Movement by about a decade, was prepared to take steps to allow women into the cantorate. There was already a female in their Rabbinic school; this was the logical next step. The progression of women in Yiddish theater, then vaudeville, then on stages all over America, on radio, and on phonograph led the way for women to finally be on the *bimah*. As of 2019, according to the URJ, sixty percent

of all Reform cantors are women.⁶⁸ From Sophie Tucker to now, we have come a long way.

⁶⁸ “Cantor Barbara Ostfeld: The Nachson, the Miriam, the Devorah of the American Cantorate,” *Union for Reform Judaism*, December 11, 2019, <https://urj.org/blog/cantor-barbara-ostfeld-nachson-miriam-devorah-american-cantorate>.

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