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## Cantors on Trial

Shmulik had a sackful of stories about cantors, one better than the next. He had learned these stories from their original sources. . . . But the cantors of old are not to be found nowadays. Where, for example, can you find today a cantor like Arke Fiedele, the Vitebsker? The whole world flocked to hear his voice. . . . Or, for instance, someone like the Vilner Balabeysl, as he was called? Where can you find his equal today?

—Sholem Aleichem, *Yosele Solovey* (1886)<sup>1</sup>

Cantors have long inspired talk, quite apart from the attention paid to their musicianship. In particular, they serve as key figures in discussions interrelating spirituality and art in Jewish life. The position of *hazzan* (the modern Hebrew word for cantor) has a long dynamic, with its origins in the Talmudic era, as synagogue worship was inaugurated two millennia ago. As synagogue rites developed during the Geonic period (the sixth to eleventh centuries C.E.), the role of the *hazzan* was consolidated as the official *sheli'ah zibbur* (community messenger), charged with leading communal worship during services. During the Middle Ages the *hazzan* emerged as a professional mainstay of synagogue life.<sup>2</sup> Rabbis have long discussed the qualifications for this role, which have entailed not only familiarity with liturgy and musical talent but also matters of character—the cantor's marital status, physical appearance, demeanor, and personal history have all been subject to scrutiny.<sup>3</sup> In the person of the cantor religiosity, artistry, and public comportment converged, often uneasily. Historian Israel Abrahams, writing about social morality among medieval Jews, noted, "There was one class only against which suspicion pointed its finger—the *Chazan* . . . , an official who was more musician than minister, and who shared some of the frailties apparently associated

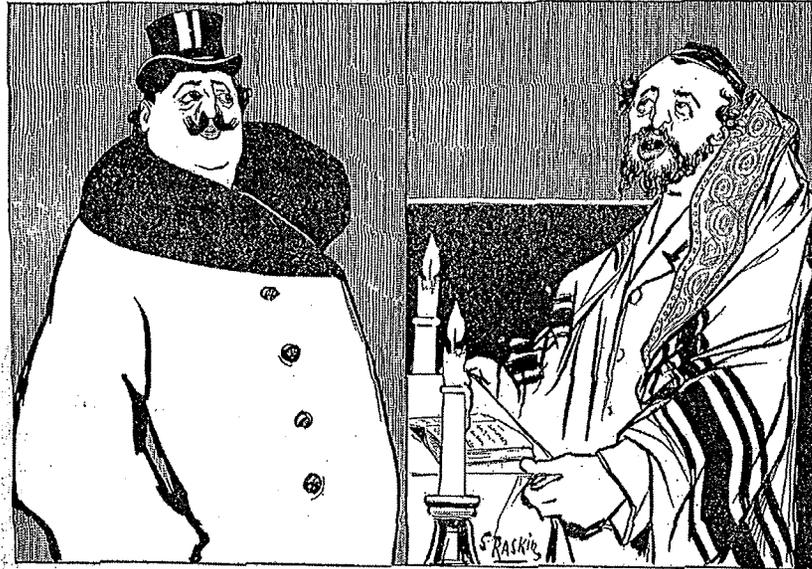
with the artistic disposition.” Abrahams felt obliged to caution that “the comparative frequency with which the chazan was suspected of unchastity must not lead us to the supposition that the whole order was tainted with the same vice.”<sup>4</sup>

In the modern era, cantors became the subject of an extended public discourse in which Jews negotiate their ideals of devotion to God in relation to the realities of daily life and the demands of the Jewish public sphere. Thus, the 1756 constitution of the Jewish community of Sugenheim, Franconia—in which the only paid communal official was the cantor (whose duties included religious instruction and kosher slaughtering, among other tasks, in addition to leading worship services)—required that a candidate for the post “be able to account for his origins and for his conduct in the past by means of the proper documents.”<sup>5</sup> As subjects of ongoing scrutiny and discussion, cantors became the protagonists of narratives.

Over time, these narratives grew more elaborate and engaged new concerns. By the late nineteenth century, cantors had become central characters in larger contests between the demands of Jews’ traditional communal worship, on one hand, and desires for modern, personal artistic expression, often engaging the aesthetics and mores of the non-Jewish world, on the other hand. These narratives appeared in cultural forms new to Jewish culture, including Yiddish novels, such as Sholem Aleichem’s *Yosele Solovey* (*Yosele the Nightingale*), and plays, such as Mark Arnshteyn’s 1902 *Der vilner balebesl* (*The Young Gentleman of Vilna*). Both works retell the story of the ill-fated cantor Yoel-Dovid Strashunsky (1815–1860), whose vocal talent attracted Christian admirers who lured him from the synagogue to the secular world, resulting in his professional and moral ruin.

In twentieth-century America, stories about cantors reflect larger concerns of the American Jewish audience, for whom they serve, in ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin’s words, as “representatives of the group’s strivings.”<sup>6</sup> As in Europe, these narratives have appeared in new cultural forms and a cascade of new media. These include print media (novels, memoirs, periodicals, sheet music, advertisements, cartoons) as well as new technologies that record performances (sound recordings, from wax cylinders to digital files, as well as film, broadcasting, video). Cantors simultaneously explored new forums for live performances, including recitals, fundraising events, and vaudeville. This unprecedented array of opportunities for performance helped transform the cantor’s public profile from communal messenger to star—that is, from a mediating figure, strategic to traditional Jewish worship, to a subject of mediation him- (and sometimes her-) self.

דער גרויסער קונדס  
מעטעמארפאזע נומער 4



אין דער היים אין יעד געווען א בעל-חפלה און דאס געהייסען זעליקאוויץ — אין אמעריקא אין יעד א איטאליענישער טענאר און הייסט — ס'ען זיך  
זעל קאניני

"In the Old World, he was a cantor named Zelikovitch; in America he is an Italian tenor named Signor Zelkonini!" This Yiddish cartoon (read from right to left) by Saul Raskin, one of a series portraying the disparities between Jewish life in Eastern Europe and in the United States as tales of "metamorphoses," appeared in the American humor magazine *Der groyser kundes* (The big prankster) in 1909.

In becoming a star, a cantor engendered what film scholar Richard Dyer has termed a *star text*—that is, an accumulation of performances and discussions of them, together with discussions of the performer, both while performing and while not, which are circulated and remediated in public relations materials and press accounts, as well as gossip. Dyer characterizes stardom as a social and ideological phenomenon with intimations of the miraculous. A synthesis of fictional representations and actual people, stars effect a "magical reconciliation" of these seemingly contradictory states.<sup>7</sup> The star texts of American cantors also engage a series of contradictions of their own, concerning religiosity and art, Americanness and Jewishness, Old World and New World sensibilities, communal concerns and individual desires. By examining narratives about cantors

created in twentieth-century America and how these stories have been mediated, this chapter considers what these practices of storytelling and mediation reveal about American Jewish religious life in ways that often extend far beyond the cantor's art.

*"Chazunes in America"*

Among the array of technologies that presented cantors to the public, early sound recordings—wax cylinders and 78 rpm discs—are especially important, being the first new media that could reproduce, albeit in a limited fashion, a cantor's vocal performance. The first published recordings of *hazzanut* (cantorial music)—or, as the great majority of American Jews at the time would have pronounced the word in Yiddish, *khazones*—date from the turn of the twentieth century. By the early 1940s, there were over one thousand recordings made by several dozen cantors in the United States, with considerable inventories produced in Europe at the same time.<sup>8</sup> Cantorial music was but one of several genres of music identified as "Jewish" (or, sometimes, "Hebrew") available on commercial recordings in the early twentieth century, along with Yiddish theater songs, instrumental dance music (what is now called *klezmer*), and spoken performances, including comic routines and dramatic monologues. Jews who had recently arrived from Eastern Europe were the primary audience for these recordings, which were one of an array of "cheap amusements"—some of which (most notably, the nickelodeon) involved new media—primarily targeting America's burgeoning, largely working-class, immigrant population. In the American Yiddish press, advertisements for phonographs vied in number with those for pianos, the epitome of domestic refinement for many immigrants, during the 1910s and '20s.<sup>9</sup>

These newspapers also ran advertisements for recordings, vaunting a wide variety of performances—"serious and comic songs, folksongs and Zionist songs, . . . as well as the best comedy and dramatic duet sketches"—all of which promised to "delight the Jewish soul." According to advertisers, the purchase of Jewish recordings not only offered the consumer "world famous singers in your home" but also constituted an act of communal loyalty: "Not a single Jew should fail to buy the following wonderful records," exhorted a 1917 promotion for Columbia Gramophone Company. In addition, recordings were marketed as transcending the geographic and cultural upheaval of immigration, offering immigrants

an emotional palliative for their homesickness. A 1918 advertisement for Columbia asserted that its recordings “will remind you of the sacred, divine hymns of praise, sweet national melodies, and joyous, genuinely Jewish dance music that you used to hear in your native land. Your troubles will disappear, you will forget your cares, and every corner of your home will become lively and happy.” Though often included with secular music in the roster of these advertisements, recordings of *khazones* were sometimes promoted separately, especially around the High Holy Days. A 1920 advertisement for Pathé Records intimated that listening at home to holiday liturgy was on par with hearing it chanted in the synagogue: “Every prayer that is sung in synagogue on the holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur can be found on our list, and our Jewish patrons will have the greatest pleasure on hearing the following records by the greatest and most famous cantors in New York.”<sup>10</sup> In these advertisements, live performances were doubly mediated; advertising copy transformed the experience of listening to recordings into an encounter charged with affect, political significance, or spiritual value.

Of course, a sound recording does not simply replicate live cantorial performances; it, too, transforms them. As historians of recording regularly note, recording technology in the acoustic era was kinder to some sounds than to others, and the capacity of the recording medium, whether wax cylinder or 78 rpm disc, limited the performance to a maximum length of three to four minutes.<sup>11</sup> Early recordings of *khazones* thus isolate from the full length of Jewish worship services, which can extend for hours in actual performance, discrete musical “numbers.” These include selections from Sabbath and weekday services, High Holiday worship (most famously, the Yom Kippur eve prayer Kol Nidre), as well as the liturgy for other holidays. In addition, cantors recorded prayers associated with mourning (El male rahamim, Kaddish) and home worship, especially for the Sabbath (Kiddush, Havdalah).

Most significantly, sound recordings are what R. Murray Schafer calls *schizophonic* phenomena, separating sound from its original source.<sup>12</sup> In the case of *khazones*, recordings remove cantorial singing from the synagogue and the specific occasion of worship. Even when these recordings feature choral accompaniment, they foreground the cantor rather than replicate the interrelation of cantor and congregation that takes place during worship. Besides the performance’s removal from sacred place and time, it is separated from its original sacred intent—addressing God within the rubric of communal worship—thereby situating cantorial music in some

other listening context. Cantors, record producers, marketers, and audiences have all demonstrated their awareness of this transformation. For example, many recordings of *khazones* feature instrumental accompaniment that would not be heard when this music is performed in those synagogues where playing instruments is forbidden on the Sabbath and holidays. The shift away from worship is also signaled on many (though not all) recordings, in which cantors substitute the words *Adoshem* and *Elokeinu* for names of God traditionally uttered only when actually praying. Thus, within the protocols of *khazones* itself, performers marked their recordings as something other than worship.

Audiences were likewise aware both of the distinction between *khazones* in the synagogue and on recordings and of their close interrelation. The context of listening could provoke discomfort, especially when it took place not in enclosed private venues, such as the home, but in open public spaces. At the beginning of the twentieth century, cantor Pinhas Minkowsky denounced the Victrola as a “disgraceful screaming instrument” and expressed outrage that in Odessa, cantorial recordings could be heard through the windows of prostitutes’ rooms in the city’s red-light district.<sup>13</sup> Decades later, author Judd Teller noted a comic irony in the behavior of crowds that gathered in front of phonograph stores on New York’s Lower East Side, which played amplified music outside their doors. Devoted fans of *khazones* “waited patiently for the moment when a cantorial record was put on. Then they exploded into a minor riot of heated polemics, drowning out the voice pouring through the horn [as] each coterie of fans acclaimed the records of its favorite cantor.”<sup>14</sup>

Some cantors who made recordings defended their efforts as having a moral benefit for the Jewish community. Gershon Sirota, one of the first to record *khazones*, refuted Minkowsky’s condemnation of this practice with anecdotes of Jewish soldiers, fighting in the Russo-Japanese War, who found solace listening to Sirota’s recordings on the battlefield and of a Russian aristocrat who received some of the cantor’s records as a gift from a Jewish tenor of the St. Petersburg Royal Opera. According to the singer, “This high ranking lady, who was never a friend of the Jewish people, changed her biased viewpoint thanks solely to the direct influence of [Sirota’s] voice. . . . As a consequence of her having listened to the laments in Sirota’s prayers, . . . she felt instinctively that his people suffered innocently.”<sup>15</sup> The value for Jews attributed to these recordings is distinct from the sacred purpose of the original performances that they document; instead, through an affective appeal to their listeners, these recordings

variously boosted morale and a sense of ethnic solidarity for Jews on the battlefield and, for the non-Jewish listener, prompted sympathy for Jews as victims of oppression.

As early recordings dislocated *khazones* from the synagogue, they transformed the cantorial repertoire into a selective inventory of modular performances that had to compete in the marketplace for consumers' attention both alongside other kinds of music and among different cantors' recordings. Produced like other works of popular culture, cantorial recordings straddled a tension between the expected and the novel. Cantors responded to these demands by offering multiple versions of the most popular selections from their repertoire (sometimes rerecorded by the same cantor), performing what are, in effect, "covers" of familiar repertoire distinguished by musical variants and arrangements. This pursuit of variety and innovation engendered the occasional novelty recording, such as performances by cantorial duos and quartets.

As Slobin has noted, cantors' musical sensibility is eclectic by nature.<sup>16</sup> Just as they listened to and learned from a variety of musical idioms, some cantors demonstrated their command of music beyond *khazones* on recordings, as they had already been doing in live recitals. Given their stature as public figures in the Jewish community, it is not surprising that most of the nonliturgical music that cantors recorded on 78s was some other kind of Jewish music, including songs in modern Hebrew, in particular Zionist songs (and especially the anthem "Hatikvah"), and in Yiddish. The most frequently recorded Yiddish numbers were secular works with religious subjects: "Eyli, Eyli" ("My God, My God"), an emotional avowal of faith and plea to heaven to protect Jews from persecution, written by Jacob Sandler for a Yiddish play in 1896; and "Afn pripetshik" ("On the Hearth"), Mark Warshavsky's early-twentieth-century song describing the traditional teaching of the Jewish alphabet to young children, which is celebrated as an exemplar of Jews' endurance in the face of hardship.<sup>17</sup> Some cantors' recorded repertoire included opera arias, art songs, and even Judaized versions of Tin Pan Alley numbers (Cantor David Putterman recorded "Zindelle Meins" and "Kadishil Mains," Yiddish versions of the Al Jolson tearjerkers "Sonny Boy" and "Little Pal").<sup>18</sup> Besides demonstrating individual artists' range, these recordings expanded the notion of cantorial performance generally, demonstrating a modern Jewish musicianship across languages, genres, and subjects and displaying musical virtuosity in the idioms of mainstream elite and popular culture. Offered in the same modular format as cantors' recordings of *khazones*, their

renditions of non-Jewish and secular Jewish music appeared as works of equivalent stature, at least as commodities.

Of particular interest in cantors' recorded Yiddish repertoire are a number of self-reflexive songs about cantors, which were especially popular during the interwar years. Most famous of these is "A khazndl af shabes" ("A Cantor on the Sabbath"), a folksong first published by M. Kipnis in 1918 and recorded by several cantors.<sup>19</sup> The song describes a cantor's Sabbath prayers as appreciated by three Jews in his town—a tailor, a carpenter, and a coachman—each of whom savors the cantor's skill in terms of his own trade (for example, the tailor likens the cantor's singing to a needle's stitching and an iron's pressing). "A khazndl af shabes" both celebrates *khazones* (the song allows for ample embellishment in performance) and mocks it, albeit good-naturedly, likening cantorial talents to the work of laborers. Just as a cantor singing this song both impersonates and distances himself from the provincial cantor who is the subject of the song, "A khazndl af shabes" separates *khazones* from its spiritual purpose and offers it up as an artisanal skill.

Other self-reflexive songs that cantors recorded include their own compositions, such as Pierre Pinchik's performance "Der Chazen Un Gabbe (The Cantor And The Sexton)" and Joseph Shapiro's "A Chazon Oif Probe (Cantor For A Trial)." Other vocalists also recorded Yiddish songs about cantors in the 1920s, including Michal Michaelsko's rendition of Sholem Secunda's "A Probe Oif Chazonim (Cantor's Test)" and Joseph Winogradoff's "A Chaz'n's Debut In A Klein Shtedtele" ("A Cantor's Debut in a Small Town"). And cantors were the subject of recordings by Yiddish theater star and impresario Maurice Schwartz, who performed his own composition "A Chazen A Shiker (A Drunken Cantor)"; vaudevillians Sam Silverbush and Sadie Wachtel, who recorded "A Chazan Auf Der Elter" ("A Cantor in Old Age"); and "character singer" Myra Sokolskaya, who made a recording of "Der Chasendl (The Cantor)."<sup>20</sup>

Even as some cantors demonstrated musical eclecticism in their recordings, they recorded discrete parts of their repertoire under different names. Cantor Abraham Jassen recorded *khazones* under that name and issued secular Hebrew songs as A. Jassen; similarly, Cantor Shlomo Beinhorn recorded both *khazones* and Italian song under the name Mr. S. Beinhorn, while as Cantor Shlomo Beinhorn, he issued only cantorial selections. Most remarkable is the case of Meyer Kanewsky, who recorded *khazones* under the name Rev. Meyer Kanewsky; under the name M. Mironenko, he issued Ukrainian songs; as M. Guttman (or Gutmann),

Poster advertising a Yiddish radio program starring Sheindele the Chazente (female cantor), heard on New York station WEVD in the 1930s. (Jewish Museum, New York)

he recorded Yiddish songs; as M. Kanewski, he recorded Yiddish, Russian, and Ukrainian songs; as M. Kanewsky or Meyer Kanewsky, he issued some *khazones* as well as songs in Ukrainian, Russian, Yiddish, and Hebrew; and, as M. Kanewsky-Katz, he recorded in Russian.<sup>21</sup>

Conversely, a number of vocalists who were not cantors performed *khazones* as part of their recorded repertoire, including tenors Morris Goldstein, Kalman Juvelier, Simon Paskal, and William Robyn; a boy soprano (Kamele Weitz, recording several selections for Victor in 1928); and several women: Rose Herringer, Dorothy Jardon, Delphine March, Estella Schreiner, Regina Prager, and Lady Cantor Sophie Kurtzer, who recorded three discs for Pathé in 1924–1925.<sup>22</sup> The phenomenon of “lady cantors,” or *khazntes*, as they were called in Yiddish, epitomizes the transformation of *khazones* through new media. Forbidden by rabbinic law from serving as cantors—or, among more stringently observant Jews, from singing before men generally—women could not perform this music in synagogues in the official capacity as leaders of worship (until the Reform and Conservative movements began ordaining women cantors in the 1970s and 1980s, respectively; most Orthodox Jews still prohibit women from singing in

the synagogue). But secular venues, including sound recordings and radio, provided women with opportunities to sing the cantorial repertoire. Indeed, the media used in these performances marked them as outside the bounds of devotional singing, while, conversely, the presence of *khazntes* marks these media as facilitating something other than worship.

Further complicating the distinction between music for sacred worship and other kinds of engagement, as well as between the musicianship of cantors and other singers, are recordings by both men and women of selections of *khazones* as they were performed in Yiddish theater works: Joseph Feldman and Morris Goldstein recorded “Kaddish, fun ‘Yeshiva Bocher’ [‘The Yeshiva Student’]”; Jennie Goldstein recorded “Rachem, fun ‘Der Golem’” and “Ovinu Malkeinu, fun ‘Dem Chazen’s Tochter’ [‘The Cantor’s Daughter’]”; and David Kessler recorded “Mismore Ledovid, from ‘Gott, Mensch & Taifill’ [‘God, Man, and the Devil’].”<sup>23</sup> Goldstein’s rendition of “Ovinu Malkeinu” as performed in the play *Dem Chazen’s Tochter* demonstrates how, even within the confines of a recording lasting a few minutes, *khazones* can be situated in a complexly layered performance. The recording begins with Goldstein, as the eponymous cantor’s daughter, delivering a spoken introduction in Yiddish, over orchestral accompaniment, recalling her father’s chanting of the penitential prayer “Ovinu Malkeinu” on Yom Kippur: “Dressed in his white robe, he stands before the holy ceremony of Kol Nidre and beseeches God on behalf of all sinners, all the unfortunate.” She performs a verse from the prayer, as the orchestra continues to play, then sings in Yiddish, describing the prayer’s emotional plea to God for forgiveness (“Dear God, see my tears, and remove the stain from my brow”) and concludes with an elaborate cantorial flourish. The original prayer for communal forgiveness is framed in an affective personal narrative, translated into vernacular language, and—mediated by a female singer with orchestral accompaniment—transformed into an object of nostalgia. The first 78s made of *khazones* thus played with and at times contravened the persona of the cantor and the parameters, protocols, and contexts of his repertoire, even as these recordings drew on this music’s aesthetics, authority, and sanctified affective value.

Transcriptions of cantorial selections were first published in sheet music at the turn of the twentieth century as well, thereby reinforcing some of the transformations wrought by sound recordings. Sheet music similarly separated *khazones* from its original performance context, atomized the cantorial repertoire into discrete musical “numbers,” and set it to instrumental accompaniment (usually piano) or rendered vocal melodies

for instrumental performance (for example, on the violin or mandolin). Moreover, sheet music further democratized *khazones*, making not just hearing but also performing this repertoire available to anyone able to read music. The Hebrew texts were typically romanized (which facilitated reading the words in the same left-to-right direction as musical notation), removing the obstacle of Hebrew literacy. At the same time, the professional authority and acclaim of celebrity cantors were affirmed on sheet music, which occasionally credited a well-known cantor as the source of the arrangement and reported that he had performed it "with great success." Portraits of cantors, sometimes framed in drawings of synagogue facades, frequently grace the covers of sheet music of *khazones*, and these covers occasionally cross-promoted recordings by the featured cantor.<sup>24</sup>

Sheet music of *khazones* both vaunted cantorial authority and sometimes situated cantors in competition with one another, as in the case of multiple editions of "A khazndl af shabes," variously arranged for "the Famous Cantor Rev. Joseph Hoffman," "Cantor Hershman," and "the Famous Cantor Rev. Rabinowitz."<sup>25</sup> In the case of "Eyli, Eyli," cantors vied in the public marketplace with other vocalists; besides sheet music of arrangements by the renowned cantor Josef (Yossele) Rosenblatt, there were versions arranged for actress Sophia Karp, opera singer Rosa Raisa, and popular chanteuse Belle Baker, who credited her rendition as having helped make the song "the world's most famous Hebrew melody."<sup>26</sup> In an unusual extension of cantorial authority to support another commodification of Jewish observance, the publication of one of Rosenblatt's versions of "Eyli, Eyli" was underwritten by the Loose-Wiles Biscuit Company, Bakers of Sunshine Biscuits, and the back page of this sheet music featured the cantor's endorsement of the company's kosher products. "When I am traveling, they literally save my life," Rosenblatt explained, in Yiddish. "In all the Jewish homes that I visit throughout this country they serve Sunshine Kosher Cookies."<sup>27</sup>

Sound recordings were also commodities in an open, competitive market. But whereas sheet music was often issued by Jewish publishing houses, almost all early recordings of *khazones* and other Jewish music in America were produced by major labels as one of a series of inventories of ethnic or national musics: Italian, Russian, German, Irish, and so on. In this taxonomy, recordings of *khazones* were indexed as music for a traditional constituency conceived in new terms as an audience, a niche market. At the same time, because these recordings were sold by major labels, music traditionally associated with a particular community became

potentially accessible to anyone with a phonograph. The modular nature of sound recordings enabled listeners to establish their own inventories of listening, crossing linguistic, ethnic, and generic boundaries, and to create their own listening practices. As recordings and sheet music separated *khazones* from its context of origin, they commodified and aestheticized it, thereby challenging the value of the music as well as the sacred calling of its traditional performers.

The advent of sound recordings coincided with the peak of mass immigration of East European Jews to the United States, during which other cultural forces contributed to the transformation of *khazones*. As Slobin notes, the start of this wave of immigration was marked by the “cantorial craze” of the 1880s and ’90s, when newly arrived American Jews elevated cantors into local and, occasionally, national celebrities.<sup>28</sup> Historian Jonathan Sarna argues that, for these immigrants, the celebrity cantor represented “the ultimate synthesis of the Old World and New . . . : observant yet rich, traditional yet modern. . . . He personified the great heritage of a European world-gone-by, yet succeeded equally well in Columbus’s land of the future. In short, a cantorial performance simultaneously served both as an exercise in nostalgia and as living proof that in America the talented could succeed handsomely.” Significantly, Sarna notes, this was “a synthesis most immigrants sought to achieve but few succeeded” in realizing.<sup>29</sup>

The disparity between this synthetic ideal and the complex, often unresolved realities of immigrant life is reflected in the consequences of mediating *khazones* on recordings. Significantly, both immigration and sound recordings separated cantors and their music from a context regarded as sacred and indigenous. Separating *khazones* from its traditional milieu disrupted an established understanding of the signifying power of this music and, at the same time, opened it up to new symbolic possibilities. This development also informed early-twentieth-century cantorial narratives in America, which project the particular challenges that immigrant cantors confronted onto larger trials that immigrant Jews in America faced as individuals, as families, and as an entire people. These narratives center on conflicts that are defining for immigrants, articulated through cantors in terms of competing modes of expressive culture.

The cantor’s status as the embodiment of American Jews’ relocated past grew more complex with the end of mass immigration from Europe in the early 1920s. What American Jews regarded as “native” (that is, Old World) music practice was increasingly understood as having been transformed

by multiple phenomena of modern life: immigration, commodification, mediation, and professionalization. By the mid-1920s some complained that *khazones* had become overly standardized, its sound reduced to what one critic termed a “phonographic character.”<sup>30</sup> At the same time, members of the profession showed growing interest in artistic standards as defined by Western art music: “While in former days the natural qualities of the chazan’s voice have been sufficient for his cantorial tasks, the cantor of today needs more voice culture and more understanding of the general vocal art in order to keep up honorably his position as a leading factor in the musical life of his community,” wrote Bernard Kwartin, a voice teacher at the New York College of Music (and brother of renowned cantor Zavel Kwartin) in “The Cantor and the Vocal Art,” an essay in the 1937 anniversary journal of the Jewish Ministers Cantors’ Association of America. There follows an overview of principles derived from Kwartin’s “Prinzipien fuer Stimmbildung und Gesang,” including an anatomical diagram of the vocal apparatus and a musical passage from the tenor aria “Il mio tesoro” from Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*. “It can not be urgently enough suggested to every cantor to pay the utmost attention to the proper training of his voice and of the culture of his singing,” Kwartin concludes. “It would help materially to create higher standards in the cantorial profession and accordingly to raise the prestige of the cantor as *the* leader of the musical activities of the community.”<sup>31</sup>

Further complicating the public profile of cantors in interwar America is the most famous cantorial narrative of the period—indeed, of the twentieth century: the 1927 Warner Bros. film *The Jazz Singer*, based on the 1922 story (“Day of Atonement”) and 1925 play (*The Jazz Singer*) by Samson Raphaelson. These works were in turn inspired by the life of entertainer Al Jolson (né Asa Yoelson), who starred in the film as Jack Robin (né Jakie Rabinowitz). The film centers on an elaborate symbolic struggle—between Old World and New World, parent and child, tradition and modernity, religious devotion and secular entertainment, communal obligations and individual desires—enacted in the person of this Jewish musician, an immigrant cantor’s son, who is asked to make the (improbable) choice between his Broadway debut as a jazz singer and replacing his dying father on the eve of Yom Kippur in a Lower East Side synagogue. In *The Jazz Singer*, Slobin notes, music making is not merely a vehicle but is the self-reflexive subject of the work: “The entertainer, the actual transmitter of the musical style that characterizes the group . . . , reflects the concerns that make the entertainment important to its audience.”<sup>32</sup>

Critics and scholars have long regarded *The Jazz Singer* as a complex exercise in American Jewish self-portraiture, reenacting not only Al Jolson's personal history but also American Jews' communal struggles with the challenges of assimilation and the prickly dilemmas of race in American cultural politics.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, film critic J. Hoberman argues, the film's producers "were uneasily aware that the story of *The Jazz Singer* was not only that of Jolson or many of their employees, but also of themselves." The film offers both an oblique retelling of the Warners' journey from immigrant Jewish origins to successful American entertainers and an ambivalent homage to their father.<sup>34</sup> The souvenir program from the premiere of *The Jazz Singer* explains that the film's "faithful portrayal of Jewish home-life is largely due to the unobtrusive assistance of Mr. Benjamin Warner, father of the producers and ardent admirer of *The Jazz Singer*."<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, Hoberman notes, *The Jazz Singer* has endured as an "American Jewish myth," projecting forward to future generations via a series of remakes, adaptations, and parodies that run throughout the twentieth century.<sup>36</sup> But *The Jazz Singer* and its various versions relate only one such cantorial narrative. Other twentieth-century stories present cantors who did not choose the path taken by Jolson (or Robin). Indeed, these cantorial stories can be read as counternarratives to *The Jazz Singer*, even when having occasion to intersect with it.

### *The Dream of My People*

The career of Yossele Rosenblatt constitutes one of the most elaborate of these counternarratives. Born in Belaia Tserkov, Russia, in 1882, Rosenblatt came to America in 1912, having already achieved acclaim as a cantor in Munkács, Pressburg, and Hamburg (where he made his first sound recordings). Rosenblatt was soon the most celebrated cantor in the United States, renowned among not only Jews but also the general public. Rosenblatt made dozens of recordings, published sheet music of his vocal arrangements, and appeared in concerts, vaudeville, and films. His face was widely reproduced in advertisements, news reports, and cartoons in the Yiddish, Anglo-Jewish, and mainstream American press. The cantor's celebrity status persisted beyond his death in 1933. In 1947, for example, the *Jewish Daily Forward* ran an advertisement for Yuban coffee featuring a portrait and capsule biography of Rosenblatt; the ad's copy begins, "When Yossele Rosenblatt used to pray, Jews would happily pay the price. When

it comes to enjoying the good things in life, people will always gladly pay the price for the best. This explains why so many housewives are ready to pay a few more cents for the rich quality and flavor of Yuban coffee.”<sup>37</sup> His reputation continues to be invoked in the twenty-first century, for example, in “Shirei Yosef: The Songs of Yossele,” a concert tribute “dedicated to the memory of Yossele Rosenblatt”—hailed as “a Legend”—on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of his death. The concert, held in New York City on December 2003 at Lincoln Center’s Alice Tully Hall, featured performances by six contemporary cantors.<sup>38</sup>

Through an extensive array of live, notated, and recorded performances, Rosenblatt established his renditions of the traditional repertoire as a (if not *the*) standard against which other cantors would be measured. Like his published sheet music, his recordings of *khazones*, mostly for Victor and Columbia, frequently identify Rosenblatt as the arranger. His recordings also included Jewish art music (such as an aria from Horowitz’s opera *Yzias Mezrajum [Exodus from Egypt]*), Zionist anthems (I. B. Arnstein’s “Soldiers of Zion”), Yiddish songs (“Pastuchel” [“Little Shepherd”]), and Tin Pan Alley Judaica (“My Yiddishe Momme”), as well as vocal recital standards in English (“The Last Rose of Summer”) and Russian (“Song of the Volga Boatman”). Several of Rosenblatt’s recordings were issued to mark special occasions, such as a version of the memorial prayer “El Male Rachamim” for victims of the *Titanic*, released in 1913; Massenet’s “Elegy” in 1917 for victims of World War I; and “Onward, Jewish Legion” in 1919, honoring Jewish soldiers who fought in the British army during World War I.<sup>39</sup> Rosenblatt’s recordings sold well and steadily during his lifetime; in the early 1920s he earned “at least \$8,000” in royalties annually.<sup>40</sup> Posthumous reissues of his recordings have continued to appear on long-playing records, cassette tapes, CDs, and as MP3 files, providing ongoing opportunities for future generations to hear his *khazones*.

Like other celebrities, Rosenblatt cultivated public attention to his life outside the synagogue and other performance venues. Among the most significant episodes in his star text was a performance he chose *not* to give: In 1918, Cleofonte Campanini, general director of the Chicago Opera, invited Rosenblatt to sing the lead role of Eléazar, a beleaguered Jewish goldsmith, in Jacques Fromental Halévy’s *La Juive* for one thousand dollars per performance. Rosenblatt’s eventual refusal—despite assurances that he would not have to perform on the Sabbath or cut his beard—received national attention. The *New York Times* even reprinted the full text of Campanini’s letter to the president of New York Congregation Ohab

Zedek, which then employed Rosenblatt as its cantor, in which the impresario stated that Rosenblatt had agreed to sing in *La Juive* only if the congregation would permit it.<sup>41</sup> While the story proved more of a passing curiosity in the mainstream American press, in Jewish newspapers it occasioned a more extensive discussion, addressing larger issues of Jewish artistry and its place in the modern world.<sup>42</sup>

Rosenblatt took a proactive role in this public discussion, especially in the Jewish press. Responding to a reporter from the *Yidishes Tageblatt*, who questioned the cantor's decision, Rosenblatt invoked the story of Yoel-Dovid Strashunsky: "When he was the cantor in Vilna's Great Synagogue, he had his voice, his honor, his greatness. There was nothing that he lacked. But then he left to sing for *them*—sang for a countess—and what happened? He sang 'Kol Nidre' for her . . . without covering his head! And what was the result? He lost his voice, went mad, and died a stranger, without his voice, without honor, without a Jewish community." As for the offer to sing at the Chicago Opera, Rosenblatt admitted, "For a moment I was taken aback by the proposal. For a moment the proposal enticed me. But a voice inside me said: 'Yossele, don't go! It's a dangerous path!'"<sup>43</sup> Thus, Rosenblatt used the Jewish press as a forum for articulating his own narrative as a counterexample to Strashunsky's, while exploiting the same elements of temptation and tension straddling Jewish tradition and modern Western culture. The Jewish press, in turn, offered its own commentary on Rosenblatt's career, notably in cartoons, which occasionally poked fun at the cantor's much publicized performance of piety outside the synagogue. For example, Rosenblatt's struggle with the temptation to perform in the opera was limned provocatively in a cartoon by Lola (Leon Israel), which ran in the Yiddish satirical weekly *Der groyser kundes* (*The Big Prankster*) in May 1918. The cantor is shown, dressed in top hat and tails and gripping a prayer book, fleeing a scantily clad woman, labeled "Grand Opera," who beckons with outstretched arms: "Come, Yossele, a thousand dollars a night!" to which the cantor replies by praying: "Shma Yisroel [Hear, O Israel]!!!"<sup>44</sup>

Despite rejecting opera, Rosenblatt gave recitals in concert halls and even performed in vaudeville in the 1920s, in order to wipe out debts from bad investments he had made in a Yiddish newspaper and a ritual bath, projects intended to enhance Orthodox Jewish life in New York. In Rosenblatt's 1954 biography, written by his son Samuel, the cantor's concert and vaudeville appearances are characterized not as compromising his commitment to *khazones* but rather as an extension of his values as a

pious Jew and a Jewish artist.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the cantor's son championed his father's touring the vaudeville circuit as an opportunity to perform religious ideals quite apart from his musicianship:

His very conduct on the variety stage and the demands he made from the managers to satisfy his religious scruples were an ideal medium for teaching the non-Jewish masses of America something of the tenets of the Jewish faith while acquainting them with Jewish music. The announcements on the billboards that Josef Rosenblatt would not be heard on Friday evening or Saturday matinee, because he was observing his Sabbath, constituted a real *Kiddush Hashem*, a glorification of the Jewish religion.<sup>46</sup>

Samuel Rosenblatt claimed that press coverage of his father's vaudeville performances offered more opportunities to explain to the American public such Jewish religious practices as not uttering divine names in profane settings, keeping kosher, and not traveling on the Sabbath. The press also provided the cantor with a public forum in which he could bracket his onstage performances of "The Last Rose of Summer" and "Eyli, Eyli" (which he pronounced "Keyli, Keyli," to avoid pronouncing a sacred name of God on stage) within a public enactment of Jewish piety, reverence, and modesty. But other observers of Rosenblatt's vaudeville appearances seem to have witnessed another performance entirely, plotted on a different narrative trajectory. Teller wrote of the cantor's variety appearances, "The regular customers were mystified by the diminutive Yossele alone in the spotlight, and his large personal following had no desire to see their Yossele in his degradation, a Samson shorn of his locks parading before the Philistines in their temple. Nor could Yossele bear this very long. His heart gave out."<sup>47</sup>

Rosenblatt's variety performances may well have inspired his first participation in a film: a cameo appearance as himself in *The Jazz Singer*. At a strategic moment in the film, Jack Robin attends a recital by Rosenblatt while on tour in Chicago. As described in the film's novelization, Jack thinks to himself as the cantor sings:

How fitting it seemed that he should be sitting here now. He had never told his associates in the theater of his home or his parents. He had never talked of the years of training given him by his father that he might be a Cantor. He had felt that he was a part of the theater—that the old years had been completely lost to him. He had even felt a little queer about

coming into the concert. . . . And yet now, as he sat there, he could feel all the old impulses rising; all the old sentiments stirring. This belonged to him.<sup>48</sup>

This encounter with Rosenblatt foreshadows later scenes in the film, in which Jack's devotion to the theater reveals both its tension with and its indebtedness to *khazones*.

In the screenplay for *The Jazz Singer* drafted by Alfred A. Cohn in the spring of 1927, Rosenblatt is described as performing "Eyli, Eyli" at the recital that Jack Robin attends. (In the film itself, Rosenblatt sings "Yohrzeit," a Yiddish song by Rhea Silberta about reciting the Kaddish on the anniversary of a relative's death.) Jack sits and watches Rosenblatt, transfixed. "It is a fairly close shot of the singer alone as Jack would see him from a seat well in front of the house. The figure slowly dissolves into the figure of Jack's aged father, Cantor Rabinowitz," singing in the synagogue, and then dissolves back to Rosenblatt performing on stage.<sup>49</sup> (This transformation prefigures the more famous dissolve, later in the film, when Jack looks in his dressing-room mirror and sees first a reflection of himself in blackface and then a vision of his father singing in the synagogue.)

The screenplay both elaborated and ironized the symbolic value of Rosenblatt's performance as bridging the stage and the pulpit in the next scene (which does not figure in the final film), set in Cantor Rabinowitz's home. The cantor's choirboys gather around the piano, waiting for their lesson with him. One boy plays and sings "Yes Sir, She's My Baby" (a Tin Pan Alley song made popular by Jolson). As soon as the cantor enters, the boy, "with hardly a change in tempo, starts playing and singing 'Eli, Eli,' with a very sanctimonious expression on his face," and the other boys join in. The cantor looks perplexed. "He is sure that the music he heard from outside was not 'Eli, Eli.' Yet, he is getting old and perhaps his ears are failing."<sup>50</sup>

Rosenblatt's biography describes his participation in the film differently than what appears to have been the case, claiming that the cantor did not agree to appear in the film but only agreed to record several "non-liturgical Jewish melodies" for its soundtrack. (He is only heard performing "Yohrzeit" in the film, and he is seen singing it on a stage.) Moreover, the biography claims that Warner Bros. originally approached Rosenblatt to cast him as Cantor Rabinowitz (eventually played by Warner Oland). The studio reportedly offered to pay Rosenblatt "\$100,000 and appealed to him: 'Think of what it would mean for raising the prestige of the Jew

and his faith if a man like you were to be held up as its representative to the non-Jewish public.” Rosenblatt is said to have rejected the offer and a request to record sacred music for the soundtrack, including Kol Nidre, which figures as a musical and dramatic motif in *The Jazz Singer*: “Under no circumstances would I permit that to pass my mouth anywhere except in a house of God.”<sup>51</sup> (He did, of course, record Kol Nidre for both Victor and Columbia.) In this story of rejecting the studio’s proposals, Rosenblatt once more affirmed his commitment to his calling by discussing a role he chose not to perform—while, at the same time, identifying himself as that role’s ideal performer.

Complicating the biography’s claims of what Rosenblatt did or did not do in relation to *The Jazz Singer* is an article in *Moving Picture World*, which announced that the cantor had agreed to appear in the film in late May 1927. Hailed as “the greatest Cantor in America, if not the world,” Rosenblatt is reported to have been participating in the film “as a singer, not as an actor. . . . Rosenblatt will appear as a singer and teacher of Cantors. He will take no part in the dramatic action of the production. He has already made two songs in New York on the Vitaphone” for use in *The Jazz Singer*.<sup>52</sup> A recording of Rosenblatt singing both “Yahrzeit” and Kol Nidre, identified as being from the film’s soundtrack, was issued in the summer of 1927.<sup>53</sup> (Joseph Diskay sang Cantor Rabinowitz’s performance of Kol Nidre as heard in the film; Jolson, as Jack Robin, sings Kol Nidre at the film’s denouement.)<sup>54</sup>

This confusion about Rosenblatt’s participation in *The Jazz Singer* may reflect not only the dynamics of negotiations with the cantor as the film was being produced but also some discomfort with his appearance in the film—especially in light of the cantor’s own narrative, in which rejecting the film parallels his earlier rejection of opera and, in a way, also addresses his appearances in variety. Rosenblatt’s biography characterizes his involvement in the film as “helping reduce the importance of vaudeville as the most popular form of amusement . . . of the American masses.”<sup>55</sup> In his own *Jazz Singer* narrative, Rosenblatt both refuses the role of the Old World cantor—who fails to find his way in America and, at the film’s end, dies an honored but defeated figure—and enacts the role of the successful New World cantor, who is able to stir the conscience of the wayward Jack Robin. Moreover, Rosenblatt does so from the stage, the same locus that tempts Jack to stray from his responsibility to the Jewish community. Thus, embedded within the *Jazz Singer* narrative is a counternarrative, in which the autobiographical exemplar is not Jolson but Rosenblatt.

In what proved to be the final journey of his life, Rosenblatt traveled to Palestine in 1933 to appear in another film, *The Dream of My People*. Produced by the Palestine American Film Company, the hour-long film brings “present day Palestine before your eyes,” together with performances by Rosenblatt, hailed in the opening credits as “The Greatest Omed [pulpit] Singer in His Last Song.” *The Dream of My People* is primarily a Zionist travelogue, taking viewers on a tour of sites in Palestine that reveal “the romance of the modern Jewish Renaissance.” Typical of Zionist propaganda films of the interwar period, Jewish agricultural colonies and new civic institutions (Hadassah Hospital, the Technion) are contrasted with ancient landmarks evoking the biblical era and with Arabs, who embody an Orientalized past.<sup>56</sup>

Rosenblatt appears in the film at selected moments to perform six solos. At the opening, the cantor stands, dressed in a top hat and morning coat, with a small group of people atop Mt. Zion, overlooking Jerusalem. As the camera pans the landscape, Rosenblatt is heard singing a selection from his cantorial repertoire with organ accompaniment. He reappears over the course of the travelogue at different sacred sites, including the “Wailing Wall” in the Old City of Jerusalem and Rachel’s Tomb. At each location Rosenblatt sings a selection from his repertoire, including “Ovinu Malkeinu” at the Cave of Machpelah, “B’tzes Yisroel” (“When Israel Went Forth”), his own setting of Psalm 114, sung while standing in a small rowboat on the Jordan River, and finally “Aheym, aheym” (“Homeward, Homeward”), a Yiddish Zionist song, back atop Mt. Zion. The musical performances are from earlier recordings, and there is no effort made to synchronize Rosenblatt’s on-camera singing with the soundtrack, emphasizing the overall incongruity of his presence in the film.

Indeed, Rosenblatt’s role in *The Dream of My People* is somewhat uncanny. His formal attire is strikingly out of place, compared with the appearance of both young Zionist pioneers and elderly religious Jews. Similarly, his stentorian performances contrast with livelier, less formally rendered modern Hebrew songs and Arab tunes heard elsewhere on the soundtrack. Rosenblatt is positioned as a tourist, yet one who engages the environment selectively (he is never seen at modern, secular sites), delivering performances in formal postures that seem disengaged from the surroundings that are ostensibly inspiring his singing (at the Wailing Wall, for instance, old pious Jews who have gathered there to pray seem oblivious to his presence).



Cantor Yossele Rosenblatt, singing at the “Wailing Wall” in Jerusalem, from the 1933 film *The Dream of My People*. (Center for Advanced Jewish Studies)

During filming, Rosenblatt died suddenly of a heart attack while at the Dead Sea. News of his death is incorporated into the film’s penultimate sequence, making his role in *The Dream of My People* that much more complicated and strange. After Rosenblatt sings “Aheym, aheym,” the narrator intones, “Saw the land and died,” as a collage of notices of Rosenblatt’s death appears on screen, followed by footage of the crowds attending his funeral in Jerusalem. The film continues with a sequence on Tel Aviv, the “city of youth and gaiety,” and concludes with the sun setting on the city’s shore and a Zionist flag fluttering in the breeze, as a lively Hebrew chorus is heard on the soundtrack.

*The Dream of My People* positions Rosenblatt at the juncture of two contrasting narratives. In the film’s tourist narrative of Palestine, the cantor seems the embodiment of the diaspora Jew, who has come to venerate the old and admire the new, but who is ultimately unable to disencumber himself from an exilic sensibility and engage with the Zionist project. Thus, after his interment, the tour proceeds to Tel Aviv, the modern Jewish city of the future. At the same time, *The Dream of My People* offers a narrative that centers on the sacred, more so than on the secular, and on Rosenblatt, rather than on Palestine, in which the cantor figures as a modern-day Moses, a venerated Jewish leader who comes to see the “promised land” and then to die. Read this way, the film—another problematic commercial venture of Rosenblatt’s, which, like his sound recordings and stage appearances, tested the protocols of traditional *khazones*—becomes a vehicle that successfully relates the final chapter of the cantor’s life as

the culmination of a sacred journey. Samuel Rosenblatt's biography of his father seems to confirm this second narrative, explaining that the cantor had long wished that "his last pulpit might be in the Land of Israel."<sup>57</sup>

Cantorial films became a popular genre in the decade following the advent of "talking" pictures. Between *The Jazz Singer* and *The Dream of My People*, Rosenblatt also performed in two short films for Vitaphone, *Omar Rabbi Elosar (Rabbi Elosar Said)* and *Hallelujah*, and he appeared as one of nine soloists in *The Voice of Israel*, a 1931 compilation by Judea Films of cantorial performances. Among the earliest Yiddish "talkies" were one-reelers featuring cantors, the novelty of the medium coinciding with the high profile of star cantors in America. Leibele Waldman, a young American-born cantor, appeared in several of these shorts and in feature-length films. Some of Waldman's one-reelers offer performances of *khazones* in stories tailored to showcase the singer's virtuosity, positioning the cantor and his artistry at the center of narratives that engage the challenges that modernity posed to contemporary Jewish life.

The 1931 short *The Feast of Passover* contrasts a seder celebrated in decorous English by wealthy American Jews in formal evening dress with the traditional piety of a parallel celebration, conducted in Yiddish and Hebrew by an Old World family in their much humbler home. An extended performance of the Kiddush (blessing over wine) by Waldman (with off-screen orchestral accompaniment) is the cantorial centerpiece of the latter ritual, which elicits engaged devotion of both young and old, as seen in reaction shots. This seder culminates with a ghostly vision of the prophet Elijah entering and blessing the family when the ritual calls for the door to be opened to welcome his symbolic arrival. Returning to the American seder, its leader (who has conjured up the Old World celebration as a childhood memory) asks his son to open the door to their home for Elijah. A policeman enters instead, having come to search the home for a bottle of (illegal) liquor. The host reassures the officer that they only have sacramental wine, permissible under the Volstead Act, and offers him a glass. The policeman quickly recites the Hebrew blessing over wine, drinks, and the film ends. Waldman, a cantor popular with American audiences on records as well as films, here enacts the traditional Jewish art of fulfilling religious obligations elaborately and artfully, which the film associates with Eastern Europe. By contrast, Jewish prosperity and universalism in America, where Passover is characterized as "a feast of freedom embracing liberty to all mankind," appears spiritually tepid and

passive. In *The Feast of Passover* a beat cop's spontaneous blessing over wine (contrasted with Waldman's extended, bravura recitation) serves as both a comic surprise and an emblem of tradition's diminished tenacity among American Jews.<sup>58</sup>

Waldman also starred that year in the one-reeler *A khazn af probe* (*A Cantor on Trial*), a satirical look at the cantorial profession in America. In this short, a bumbling, argumentative committee auditions potential cantors to lead High Holy Day services in their synagogue. Waldman impersonates a series of cantorial types applying for the position: an Old World East European cantor in a long coat, broad hat, and full beard, who delivers a traditionally ornamented solo; a German cantor with trimmed beard and top hat, who performs in the decorous style of oratorio; and finally an Americanized cantor, preceded by his manager, who promises the committee a cantor who has "personality," "pep," and can sing "Kol Nidre with a two-step melody." A clean-shaven Waldman enters, in a fashionable light suit and fedora, and performs a syncopated version of the prayer Yismakh Moshe, ending with a refrain of "boob-boop-a-doop." Enthralled, the committee members proclaim this candidate their choice and join in his jazzy dance around the room as the film ends. Waldman's series of impersonations is framed by him singing, in top hat and tails, a Yiddish song that ridicules this annual rite of auditioning cantors: "Cantorial tryouts are an endless affair. / They gargle and screech, hoping to please. / Many prayer leaders come in, / Even jazz singers acclaim the [Rosh Hashanah prayer] El Orech Din."<sup>59</sup> *A khazn af probe* puts both America's cantors and the congregations who engage them on (mock) trial, finding them guilty of frivolity. Waldman's performance in the context of this playful satire is complex, displaying his virtuosity as a musician and actor while reducing *khazones* to an act of mimicry.

### *The Cantor's Son*

By the end of the 1930s, cantors appeared in feature-length Yiddish films as characters that contribute dramatically as well as musically to more elaborate plots. In *Hayntike mames* (*Mothers of Today*), a 1939 melodrama about the struggle between traditional virtues and modern vices, Solomon, a young cantor (played by Max Rosenblatt), enacts the ideal pious American Jew by singing the Kiddush in an extended sequence. More complex are the cantors played by tenor Moishe Oysher in *Dem khazns*

*zindl* (*The Cantor's Son*, 1937) and *Der vilner shtot-khazn* (*The Cantor of Vilna*, also known in English as *Overture to Glory*, 1940), in no small measure due to the resonance of the films' stories with Oysher's star text. As Hoberman notes, both films offer narratives that run counter to that of *The Jazz Singer*, and both resonate with Oysher's own struggles to negotiate between careers as a cantor and as a performer on stage and radio.<sup>60</sup>

Whereas Yossele Rosenblatt's public persona exemplified a stalwart commitment to piety—reinforced by public demonstrations of his refusing to abandon the synagogue for other venues—Oysher was known as a transgressive figure whose career provocatively straddled the stage and the pulpit and whose personal life similarly flouted and embraced piety. The descendant of generations of cantors, Oysher began his professional career in the theater, shortly after emigrating from his native Bessarabia, where he was born in 1907, to Canada at the age of fourteen. He subsequently turned to *khazones*—most famously, by accepting the post of cantor at the First Roumanian-American Congregation, one of the oldest and largest of East European Jewish congregations on the Lower East Side, in 1935.

Controversies over whether Oysher was morally acceptable as a cantor (sparked not only by his secular performances but also by a reputation for being a womanizer and lax in religious observance) repeatedly provoked public demonstrations and press coverage.<sup>61</sup> Even promotional material for Oysher's performances characterized his career in terms of conflict between the sacred and the profane. In a pamphlet issued by the Second Avenue Theatre for its 1935 season, a biography of the singer states that "in spite of all his glories, [Oysher's] immediate family remained indifferent to his triumphs. They felt hurt that their son should snap the traditional golden chain of Cantors in their family for the lure of the footlights."<sup>62</sup> Interest in Oysher's public persona extended beyond the Jewish community; his dilemma was the subject of an item in *Variety*, which reported, "Moishe Oysher is in trouble because he couldn't make up his mind whether he wants to be a Yiddish actor or a cantor. Now, he seems to be caught between the two, with no jobs at either."<sup>63</sup> Beyond a matter of gainful employment, Oysher had come to exist, in the public eye, in a constant state of suspension between transgression and penance.

Oysher's performances in films contributed to this public image by staging his dilemma through dramas in which cantors confront the lure of the secular stage. In *Dem khazns zindl*, Oysher both enacts and undoes the journey of the wayward son, first abandoning his shtetl and the

pursuit of his father's calling as cantor to become a popular performer in New York, then renouncing the stage for the pulpit and quitting America for Europe. Audiences can savor the range of Oysher's musical talents, from sentimental theater songs to bravura displays of *khazones*, in a series of set pieces performed throughout the film. At the same time, the film mocks the American cantorial craze, poking fun at synagogue committees and artistic managers, much like Waldman's short *A khazn af probe*.

After appearing as a shtetl playboy who mends his ways in *Der zingendiker shmud* (*The Singing Blacksmith*, 1938), Oysher played the quintessential penitent cantor in *Der vilner shtot-khazn*, based on Arnshteyn's dramatization of the life of Yoel-Dovid Strashunsky. Oysher's performance in this film situates his personal narrative in relation to a historical trajectory dating back to Strashunsky's experiences in Vilna and Warsaw in the early nineteenth century. Released during the first months of World War II, Strashunsky's (and Oysher's) attraction to Western culture becomes emblematic of larger questions about the limits of Jewish-Christian relations, which had acquired a new urgency as Jews in Europe experienced unprecedented levels of persecution. Music figures in *Der vilner shtot-khazn* as a powerful cultural force with the potential for promoting amity as well as strife between Jews and Christians. When Strashunsky tells his family and congregants that he has been invited by the Polish composer Stanisław Moniuszko to sing in the opera in Warsaw, they express indignation and remind the cantor of his communal obligation and sacred calling: "Your voice is ours, you hear? Ours! . . . Who will speak for us to God?" After his enraged father-in-law tears up the sheet music that Moniuszko had given to Strashunsky, the cantor replies, "You inflict your hate on something that is full of love for all people. People kill each other, fight each other. . . . But not in this music. This speaks to the soul of all peoples. No hatred is in it. I want my voice to reach everyone. In every language they will feel my Jewish sorrow." The rabbi warns Strashunsky that if he leaves the cantorate for the opera, he will be "left between two worlds, in neither of which will you really be."<sup>64</sup>

In the course of his performance, Oysher enacts music's potential to transcend boundaries of cultural mistrust by singing *khazones* and opera with equal vocal skill and emotional fervor, demonstrating how Strashunsky enchanted the Polish aristocracy as readily as he inspired his Vilna congregants. In *Der vilner shtot-khazn* the notion of music as a universal language exists in a performative tension with the spoken word. Like other Yiddish films of the prewar era, the language is uttered not only by



Moishe Oysher (right), as cantor Yoel-Dovid Strashunsky, performs for Polish composer Stanisław Moniuszko, in the 1940 Yiddish film *Der vilner shtot-khazn* (*The Cantor of Vilna*).

Jewish characters but also, as the language of the film's audience, by Polish characters, even when conversing among themselves. Ultimately, Jewish particularism trumps musical universalism in the film's narrative. The tragic ending of *Der vilner shtot-khazn*—following news that his young son has died, Strashunsky abandons the opera and returns to Vilna, where, after singing Kol Nidre in the synagogue, he dies a broken man—belies its early optimistic voicing of the possibility of accord between Jews and their neighbors.

In these films Oysher enacts tales of a prodigal cantor that resonate with his own career narrative as they strive to countervail against it. They enable—indeed, they require—him to demonstrate his talents as cantor and showman. The films' narratives tell of renouncing secular musicianship for the cantorate, but Oysher's career narrative moves back and forth, relativizing these two opposing callings with a musicianship that bridges ideological divides through aesthetic virtuosity. If anything, the secular

trumps the sacred in these films, as these stories of returning to *khazones* are enacted in the medium of movie musicals.

### *Singing in the Dark*

The devastating upheavals wrought by World War II had their impact on the American cantorate no less than any other segment of the American community. As devotional representatives of Jewish communities before God, cantors faced unprecedented cultural and, for some, theological challenges. Slobin notes that American cantors responded to the war—in particular, its destruction of what had been the “European cradle” of *khazones*—by taking “giant steps toward professionalization.” They established training programs and professional organizations as part of a larger expansion of American Jewry’s corporate religious movements, especially Reform and Conservative Judaism. At the same time, Slobin notes, Orthodox Jews, who had been “staunch supporters of the cantorate in the immigrant era,” grew “less interested in the institution” after the war.<sup>65</sup>

Both new cultural challenges and new media have contributed to innovations in American Jews’ cantorial narratives in the postwar period. Whereas immigration figured as modern Jewry’s ultimate challenge in most prewar narratives, it was replaced in postwar narratives by the aftermath of the Holocaust, though the Holocaust’s presence is often oblique. In postwar cantorial narratives, America is no longer viewed as central to the problems that Jews face; on the contrary, it is often explicitly characterized as Jewry’s salvation. Similarly, opera no longer appears as the pernicious seducer of cantors but comes to be portrayed as compatible with *khazones*. Notwithstanding all these changes, postwar cantorial narratives revisit personalities, plots, and works familiar from before the war, reconfiguring them in new symbolic stories.

Sometimes, new media play a defining role in how cantors present themselves to the American public during the postwar era. Consider the case of Bela Herskovits, who had been a prominent cantor in Budapest before the war. Surviving as a member of the Hungarian underground, he immigrated to the United States in 1947, where he became the cantor of the Ocean Parkway Jewish Center in Brooklyn. Herskovits was dubbed the “Cantor of the Ghetto,” as an early postwar recording explained in its liner notes: “During the War Cantor Herskovits lifted the morale of his stricken brothers in bombed areas, shelters and subterfuges, bringing comfort and

consolation to thousands of Ghetto dwellers.”<sup>66</sup> Later, Herskovits acquired the sobriquet “The ‘This Is Your Life’ Cantor” on recordings made after his appearance in 1956 on the eponymous popular television program, on which he was one of several Holocaust survivors and rescuers of Jews from Nazi persecution whom the series honored.<sup>67</sup> In 1956 Herskovits also made his New York recital debut at Carnegie Hall, thanks to the efforts of comedian Eddie Cantor, who had heard Herskovits perform in Brooklyn. This recital was recorded and issued on a long-playing record titled *Two Cantors at Carnegie Hall*. The recording features introductory remarks by the comedian (who characterizes Herskovits as offering “a great human interest story” in addition to being “a very fine singer”) and performances by the cantor demonstrating the range of his artistry: selections of *khazones*, Hungarian folksongs, a Russian lullaby, “Eyli, Eyli,” and several opera arias, including “Rachel, quand du Seigneur,” from *La Juive*.

Halévy’s opera, perhaps best known in the prewar discourse of *khazones* as a work not performed by America’s most illustrious cantor, has continued to figure in postwar cantorial narratives. The opera’s signature aria, sung by Eléazar at the conclusion of Act IV, was a favorite of cantors, performed in recital and on records, sometimes in Yiddish translation.<sup>68</sup> In the postwar era, such a performance imbues the aria with new symbolic value, as evinced in a live recording of a recital in the United States by Moshe Koussevitzky, a cantor who had an accomplished career in interwar Poland and came to America after surviving the Holocaust. The recording, probably made in the 1950s, begins with him announcing in English that he will sing the aria from *La Juive*. “In Yiddish,” Koussevitzky adds, after a pause, and the audience responds with laughter, followed by applause.<sup>69</sup> Singing this aria in Yiddish is a provocative act; it ostensibly “restores” the aria to the “original” language of its Jewish protagonist (the opera is set in fifteenth-century Constance), thereby underscoring the tension between the milieu of French grand opera and this work’s historical subject of European anti-Semitism. Moreover, a Holocaust survivor’s performance of what was perhaps the most famous nineteenth-century work of European theater about anti-Semitism in the language of the majority of European Jews murdered during World War II transforms Eléazar’s aria of agonizing over his daughter’s fate at the hands of Christian anti-Semites into a moving statement of cultural tenacity.

Oysher never recorded “Rachel, quand du Seigneur,” but the Chicago Opera is reported to have engaged him to perform the role of Eléazar (and Canio in *I Pagliacci*); the singer had begun to study these parts, but a heart

attack ended his pursuit of an opera career.<sup>70</sup> Instead of expanding his repertoire to include opera, Oysher employed the new medium of the long-playing record during the last years before his death in 1958 to create three innovative works, each centered on the celebration of a Jewish holiday: *The Moishe Oysher Seder*, *Kol Nidre Night with Moishe Oysher*, and *The Moishe Oysher Chanuka Party*. This series exploits the medium's capacity to record up to twenty-five minutes on each side of a disc to present a synthetic performance combining narration, orchestral accompaniment, and singing, both choral and solo. The series's producers conceived it as forging a novel approach to Jewish tradition: "These albums assume a brand new flavor as they delve into the musical background of these ancient religious rites."<sup>71</sup> More than a compilation of excerpts from each holiday's musical repertoire, each album is conceived in dramatic terms, not unlike a radio drama (and, in fact, they were produced with broadcast in mind).<sup>72</sup>

*The Moishe Oysher Seder*, the first of the series, follows the order of the Passover ritual but does not simulate it. Rather, it most resembles a cantata, in which Passover's liberating possibilities are celebrated in multiple languages and musical idioms—ranging from traditional melodies, such as the Ashkenazic trope for chanting the Four Questions (which are sung in English translation), to Oysher's Yiddish scat-style performance of the Aramaic song "Had Gadya" ("One Goat") at the album's conclusion—unified by the performer whose eclectic musical sensibility brands the ritual.<sup>73</sup> *Kol Nidre Night with Moishe Oysher* elaborates the series's approach to mediating a Jewish holiday by rendering the spiritual power of the service that inaugurates Yom Kippur in the affective idiom of music drama. Listeners are offered an account of Jewish ritual that is not only solemn and dignified but also rich in emotional suspense and compelling spectacle. Cantorial performance, the service's centerpiece, is presented in an elaborate frame of sound effects, chorus, orchestra, and narration, rendered in the decorous style of the ecumenical radio dramas of the period heard on *The Eternal Light* (see chapter 2).

*The Moishe Oysher Chanuka Party* is also not a recording of a worship service, as its liner notes explain: "It is rather a collection of highlights of the Moishe Oysher repertoire, used during the years for Chanuka Festivals in Synagogues and Jewish Centers."<sup>74</sup> Traditional blessings and hymns sung when lighting the Hanukkah menorah are joined by Oysher's original holiday composition "Drei Dreidele" ("Spin, Little Top"), as well as songs that variously recall his Bessarabian roots, memorialize the victims of Nazi persecution, and celebrate the establishment of the State of Israel.

This sequence relates Hanukkah's ancient rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem with a contemporary narrative, then embraced by growing numbers of American Jews, in which the destruction of European Jewry during the Holocaust is redeemed with the establishment of the State of Israel. Linking this wide-ranging selection is narration delivered by Oysher's eleven-year-old daughter, Shoshanna, described in the liner notes as "a student at the Westchester Day School, (Yeshiva), in Mamaroneck, New York." Like her father, "Shoshana has a flair for Dramatics, and intends to concentrate her studies on Drama, Dance, and Music."<sup>75</sup> Far from being configured as moral compromise or cultural confusion, as was often the case in prewar descriptions of Oysher's musicianship, his merging of Jewish devotion with entertainment here becomes a heritage maintained by the next generation.

The liner notes to all three albums feature a biography of Oysher that centers on his dual career as cantor and secular entertainer, capped by his work in film. The notes argue that the career of "Moishe of the movies" may seem to be "a far cry" from his Bessarabian origins, "but the change is merely environmental, not spiritual"; indeed, "the journey was inevitable." Although the biography admits that "Hollywood" may be "an odd field in which to sow the flower of Jewish culture," Oysher's divided interests—"his soul in the synagogue and his heart in the theatre"—are characterized as "inseparable, unbreakable fibres of his consciousness." Oysher is quoted championing film as "the most potent instrument with which to combat religious prejudice and to reveal the light, the beauty, and the truth of Jewish life." At the same time, the liner notes assert that Oysher continues to perform as a cantor and is "a worthy successor to the late Rosenblatt. . . . Like Rosenblatt, he also concertizes and acts in the movies. He has never played on Broadway because he will not break the Sabbath."<sup>76</sup>

In 1954, Oysher returned to film, this time an English-language feature, in which he plays another errant cantor's son. In *Singing in the Dark* (based on an original story by Oysher and director Max Nosseck), the singer plays a Holocaust survivor who has no memory of his prewar life; he cannot remember his name and so is called Leo by fellow survivors. Leo comes to America and his musical talent is discovered while working as a hotel clerk. When a friend gets Leo drunk, alcohol liberates him, and he begins singing, to the delight of the hotel's nightclub clientele. Leo is an overnight success but, haunted by his inability to remember his past, seeks psychiatric treatment. Under hypnosis, he recalls that his father

was a cantor who, with the rest of Leo's relatives, died during the war. Later, when struck on the head during a fight, Leo remembers that his real name is David, and in a hallucinatory sequence he is seen alone inside a ruined synagogue in Europe. He mounts the abandoned pulpit and sings, in English translation, "El male rahamim," mourning the murdered Jews of Europe. In the film's final scene, Oysher, as Cantor David, sings the Kiddush in a synagogue, as adoring congregants look on. A reprise of Oysher's penitent cantor films of the prewar era, *Singing in the Dark* is distinguished as a response to the Holocaust. Unlike *Dem khazns zindl*, America is the site not of the cantor's demise but of his recovery; here, he takes up his father's calling and, in doing so, restores the sacred music of a vanquished culture to a living Jewish community.

At the same time that Oysher filmed the last of what Hoberman has termed the singer's "anti-Jazz Singer" dramas, that landmark Hollywood film was itself remade by Warner Bros.<sup>77</sup> Both the 1952 remake of *The Jazz Singer*, starring Danny Thomas, and a second remake in 1980, starring Neil Diamond, situate the narrative of a cantor's son's struggles in different dilemmas emblematic for contemporary generations of American Jews. The 1952 remake removes immigration as the defining matrix for the conflict between the cantor and his son. Instead, the cantor's family, who live not on the Lower East Side but in Philadelphia, is rooted in American heritage. Thomas plays Jerry Golding, a college graduate and recently returned war veteran who longs to become a popular entertainer—but he is also the descendant of generations of American cantors, who have served the same congregation since the late eighteenth century, and Jerry is expected to follow in their footsteps. The modest tenement home of Cantor Rabinowitz is replaced by the Goldings' respectable, bourgeois domesticity. Rather than situating cantors at the center of a family drama that epitomized an intergenerational conflict between Old World mores and New World ambitions, as in the original film, the 1952 remake places its protagonists in a hyperbolic performance of Jews' Americanness. Coming at the height of the Cold War, this version of *The Jazz Singer* resonates with other undertakings—including plans by organized American Jewry to celebrate the 1954 tercentenary of Jews' settlement in America as a demonstration of their longstanding patriotism—intended in part to allay Americans' fears of Jewish sedition in the wake of highly publicized cases of Jewish "atom spies" and accusations of support for communism among Jews in the entertainment industry.

In the 1980 remake, *The Jazz Singer* returns to the theme of immigration as a sociocultural frame for its story of intergenerational tension. The film's setting likewise returns to the Lower East Side, portrayed in the title sequence with a vibrant montage of the neighborhood's many immigrant cultures, accompanied by Diamond's song "Coming to America." Adapting the story to a contemporary setting, the 1980 film offers yet another configuration of the cantorial family. Here, the paternal cantor (played by Laurence Olivier) is a Holocaust survivor and a widower, thereby removing from the drama the emotional triangulation of rebellious son, stern father, and sympathetic mother that animates the two previous versions. This transformation not only situates Jews as recent immigrants in the film's late-twentieth-century setting but also reframes the dilemma that *The Jazz Singer* poses to its protagonist in terms that are meaningful in the post-World War II era: Will the son of a cantor who survived the Holocaust betray a commitment not only to the continuity of Judaism but also to the survival of Jewry?

### *Finding Eléazar*

Another longstanding contest in cantorial narratives—between *khazones* and opera—is transformed in the star text of the singer who was arguably the most famous cantor in post-World War II America. In the career of tenor Richard Tucker, this conflict gives way to a different kind of cantor's story, in which these two musical and cultural idioms generally complement each other. Because of Tucker's renown as one of the most accomplished American opera singers of his generation, his personal history appears in a wealth of popular media, including music reviews in leading newspapers, liner notes to recordings on major labels, interviews published in popular magazines (such as a 1952 feature in *Life*, which proclaimed, "Met's Top Italian Tenor Is a Jewish Cantor")<sup>78</sup> and aired on national television. Tucker's high visibility in the public sphere continues after his death; posthumous tributes include a square near New York's Lincoln Center named after him and a U.S. postage stamp featuring him in a series honoring American opera singers. And Tucker's biography is usually presented with a general audience in mind, as opposed to the narratives of other cantors, which are primarily told by and for other Jews.

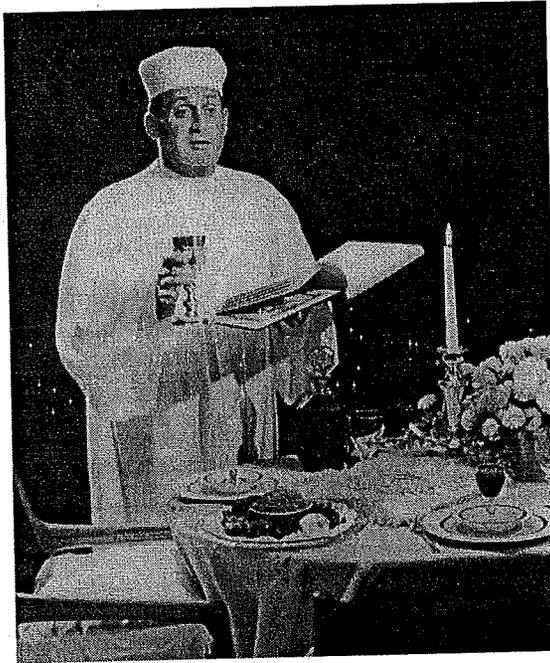
Tucker (né Reuben Ticker), the American-born son of East European Jewish immigrants, began his musical career as a cantor before turning

to opera. From the early 1940s until his death in 1975, he achieved international renown for his performances in lead tenor roles in the most popular operas of Mozart, Verdi, Bizet, and Italian verismo composers. While devoting the lion's share of his career to opera during these years, Tucker continued to perform and record *khazones* and other Jewish music. His recordings include the liturgy of the Friday evening Sabbath service and Kol Nidre service, Yiddish theater songs by Abraham Goldfaden, "Hatikvah" and other modern Hebrew songs, and an album memorializing victims of the Holocaust.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, Tucker was forthrightly visible as a Jewish performer in the American (and international) public sphere, raising funds for Jewish causes and readily acknowledging in interviews the role that Jewishness played in his professional as well as personal life. For example, when Edward R. Murrow interviewed Tucker on the CBS series *Person to Person* in 1952, the telecast included a visit to the dining room in the Tuckers' home in Great Neck, Long Island, where the table was set for celebrating the beginning of the Sabbath.<sup>80</sup> In this regard, Tucker's public persona as an opera star parallels that of another luminary of American opera in the decades following World War II, Leontyne Price. The soprano's solo recitals of arias and art songs regularly concluded with spirituals or excerpts from George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, and her visibility as an African American in the world of opera was a subject of considerable public discussion and scrutiny during the early postwar decades.<sup>81</sup>

Price regularly acknowledged the foundational role that singing in the black church in her native Mississippi played in her musical career; similarly, Tucker frequently reflected in public on the interrelation of his minority identity, with its attendant religious musical culture, and his vocal artistry, sometimes doing so by invoking earlier performers' lives. Just as Yossele Rosenblatt contrasted the story of Strashunsky with his own career narrative, Tucker invoked Rosenblatt to tell his own story, for instance, recalling in a 1970 television interview rumors that Rosenblatt was going to shave his beard in order to sing in the opera. "I was the first cantor to make this transition," Tucker claimed, implicitly characterizing his career shift from cantor to leading tenor at the Metropolitan Opera as the fulfillment of others' ambitions as well as his own. In his descriptions of his career, Tucker sometimes stressed the common ground of the synagogue and the opera house, recalling, for example, looking out from the opera stage and seeing "Orthodox people with yarmulkes [skull caps]. I didn't know if I was in the Met or a synagogue."<sup>82</sup>

These stories obscured professional and cultural tensions that arose when Tucker began his operatic career. A letter sent by Rabbi Louis Ginzberg of the Jewish Theological Seminary to the Brooklyn Jewish Center, where Tucker served as cantor when he was invited to make his Metropolitan Opera debut in 1944, cautioned, "People would find it quite strange to see their Cantor one day recite the Neilah prayer [which concludes Yom Kippur worship] and the following day sing a love duet with some lady. My advice is therefore that you try your utmost to prevent your cantor from accepting the offer made to him by the Metropolitan."<sup>83</sup> Tucker, by contrast, recalls the invitation to sing at the Metropolitan as being, if anything, the fulfillment of Jewish devotional musicianship for both artist and audience: "Edward Johnson [a former opera singer, then the Metropolitan Opera's general manager] . . . came to the synagogue to hear me, . . . to convince me and my wife that 'If you can sing for two thousand Jews at the Brooklyn Jewish Center, I have no fear for you at the Metropolitan Opera.' See, he had a Jewish heart. . . . Very few people know, Edward Johnson sang in a temple choir in Newark."<sup>84</sup>

Reflecting on his career, Tucker invoked one singer more than any other: Enrico Caruso. Tucker frequently identified Caruso as his role model and was regularly compared to the Neapolitan tenor by music critics and fans. Indeed, Tucker's public persona as an American and as a Jew was complicated by regular mention of his Italianate sound and sensibility. Winthrop Sargeant's profile of the tenor for *Life* notes that Tucker "can sing Italian with a faultless accent. Though he has been in Italy only once, he sings Italian opera with a native passion and a garlic-scented abandon that gives the illusion of many generations of Neapolitan ancestors. He not only sounds like an Italian: he looks like one."<sup>85</sup> Tucker's biography includes accounts of how vocal coach Angelo Canarutto and conductor Tullio Serafin, as well as numerous critics, both were impressed with Tucker's "Italianate singing style" and "the purity of his Italian" diction and were bemused at how the tenor came by these skills that were so closely associated with national character. Tucker clearly enjoyed these accolades as well as the puzzlement. When Serafin, complimenting the tenor on his command of Italian, asked him where he learned the language, Tucker replied, smiling, "In Brooklyn."<sup>86</sup> In Tucker's narrative, his ability to assimilate an "alien" ethnic style is regarded with admiration, rather than the suspicion or ridicule that this skill would more likely have engendered during the early decades of the twentieth century. Alongside Tucker's agility in negotiating ethnic boundaries, he demonstrated an ecumenical



Promotional photograph of Richard Tucker for his album *Passover Seder Festival*, issued by Columbia Records in 1962. (Forward Association)

public spirit. He recorded "The Lord's Prayer" for Christmas albums,<sup>87</sup> made occasional appearances at fundraising events for Catholic charities, and enjoyed friendships with Francis Cardinal Spellman and Terence Cardinal Cooke, among other prelates. At an ecumenical memorial service for Tucker held at the Metropolitan Opera, Cooke remarked that the singer "was always ready to share that tremendous talent because he had a generosity founded on faith."<sup>88</sup>

At the same time, Tucker's star text repeatedly affirms Jewish pride, whether noting that a young Elvis Presley was a fan of the tenor's 1949 recording *Cantorial Jewels* or relating Tucker's refusal to make an opera recording with conductor Herbert von Karajan, because of his wartime association with Nazi Germany. (On this occasion, Tucker reportedly told record producer Dario Soria, "My Jewish people would never forgive me.")<sup>89</sup> In a profile of American Jewish opera singers who came to prominence in the middle decades of the twentieth century, Leonard Leff characterizes Tucker as the most demonstrative of his Jewishness among this cohort. "He would neither hide his faith nor allow himself to believe that the public would hold his faith against him. His was an almost aggressive

assertion of his religion.” Consequently, “what some listeners expected to hear from this *chazzan* . . . , they heard,” with critics and fans arguing over whether Tucker’s vocal production, technique, or histrionic sensibility was indebted to his cantorial training—a debate “that continues in internet chat rooms.”<sup>90</sup>

Tucker’s own understanding of the interrelation of his Jewishness, his cantorial training, and his opera career was complex, as revealed in interviews with him and reports by people close to him. He reportedly considered “the site of the greatest single performance of his entire career” to be a synagogue in Vienna where, in 1958, he led services one Sabbath morning before making his debut at the Staatsoper. Recollections of this episode—by Tucker’s wife, Sara, and John Gualiani, the tenor’s European representative, who both attended the service—characterize it as a powerful memorial to victims of Nazi persecution and a demonstration of Tucker’s masterful musicianship. (Indeed, Gualiani, who “as a Gentile, . . . couldn’t follow what [Tucker] was singing the way the congregation could, . . . just listened to the beauty of his voice.”)<sup>91</sup> Tucker biographer James Drake roots the tenor’s operatic career in personal convictions that conflate theology and art, arguing that Tucker owed his success as a singer to his sense of “a special mission—a calling almost religious in nature, perhaps a personalized extension of his identity as a Jew, one of the Chosen People. He believed that God had given him a wondrous gift—the gift of song, the gift of the biblical David—and had chosen him for an extraordinary life.”<sup>92</sup> Yet Tucker seems to have understood the interrelation of his Jewishness and his operatic career differently. In an interview conducted by the American Jewish Committee in 1973, he remarked that he and his wife “used to say, ‘Well, can you imagine, if I were not Jewish . . . , how much higher I would have gone?’”<sup>93</sup>

Jewishness and opera were conjoined most complexly in Tucker’s quest to sing Eléazar in *La Juive*. The tenor long campaigned to perform the role, and although he recorded excerpts from the opera, sang it in concert in New York and London, and appeared in staged productions in Barcelona and New Orleans, he never succeeded in convincing Rudolph Bing, general manager of the Metropolitan Opera during most of Tucker’s career, to stage the opera for him there. (This matter has sometimes been characterized as a conflict between Tucker’s public forthrightness as a Jew versus Bing’s silence on the subject of his own Jewishness; in an interview, Tucker dismissed the suggestion that Bing’s resistance to producing *La Juive* had anything to do with anti-Semitism but explained that

the impresario found the opera "boring.")<sup>94</sup> Plans to stage the opera for the tenor at the Metropolitan under the management of Schuyler Chapin were finally under way at the time of Tucker's sudden death.<sup>95</sup>

Discussions of Tucker's quest to perform Eléazar regularly mention that the role held special appeal for him both as one of Caruso's most admired performances and as a Jewish operatic hero. Tucker's unrealized goal of singing in *La Juive* at the opera house where his career was made is often described as a lost opportunity for both the tenor and his audiences. At the same time, Leff writes that, "paradoxically, had Tucker become even more closely associated with Eléazar, he might have reinforced the 'Jewish singer' stereotype that denied him, he believed, a greater reputation at the Metropolitan."<sup>96</sup> Yet when Tucker first approached Bing about staging *La Juive* for him, the singer argued that he could give a definitive performance of Eléazar not only because of his vocal capabilities but also because he was a cantor.<sup>97</sup> As an unrealized project, Tucker's plan to sing Eléazar at the Metropolitan remains an open-ended subject of discussion, inviting speculations about both why the project was never realized and what it might have demonstrated had it happened. Beyond musical questions about the opera or its star, this speculative exercise considers the implications for Tucker as a Jewish celebrity, in which the relation of opera and *khazones* that ran throughout his career would have somehow found its ultimate synthesis.

When the Metropolitan eventually revived *La Juive* in 2003 (having last performed it in 1936), public discussions of the work repeatedly invoked the association of Eléazar with both Caruso and Tucker.<sup>98</sup> The company promoted the tenor starring in the new production, Neil Shicoff, as giving a performance that both "honors the tradition of his great predecessors" and manifests a "passionate, deeply personal identification with Eléazar."<sup>99</sup> The insert accompanying Shicoff's video recording of *La Juive*, issued the following year, touts Eléazar as "the role that Neil Shicoff was born to sing," noting that, "like Tucker, Shicoff comes from a Jewish family and, again like Tucker, he sang as a child in a Jewish synagogue, where his father was the cantor."<sup>100</sup> In his own discussion of the role, Shicoff similarly honors the longstanding association of the role with *khazones* (though it should be noted that Eléazar sings no cantorial music or even traditional blessings in the opera). Of the aria "Rachel, quand du Seigneur," the tenor comments that "this piece sounds, in this modal kind of way, very cantorial, very religious, and that's a sound I know very well, as my father was a cantor."<sup>101</sup>

In conjunction with his performance of Eléazar, Shicoff participated in the making of a documentary film, *Finding Eléazar*, which profiles his preparation for the role, and a music video, directed by Sidney Lumet, featuring the tenor's performance of "Rachel, quand du Seigneur." This short video follows a bearded Shicoff, wearing a skullcap and vaguely old-fashioned clothing (a black frock coat and tall leather boots), from a dressing room to the interior of an old synagogue on the Lower East Side—actually, the Angel Orensanz Foundation for the Arts, an arts center housed in a former synagogue, built in 1849. In the video, the interior of the building, which bears the weathered traces of its erstwhile role as a house of worship, has been set up as a synagogue, with an ark, rows of pews, and a lectern in the center. As the aria's orchestral introduction is heard, Shicoff takes a scroll from the ark, removes its cloth mantle, and unrolls it on the lectern. He takes up a *yad* (the pointer used for reading from a Torah scroll) but, instead of chanting from the Torah, begins the aria. After singing the opening section, Shicoff puts on a prayer shawl, then looks up to see a young woman in old-fashioned dress—presumably Eléazar's daughter, Rachel—standing in the balcony (the traditional women's section) of the otherwise empty synagogue. He continues to sing, addressing the aria to her. When the aria reaches its climax, Shicoff returns to the lectern, grasps the scroll, and tears it. As the aria concludes, he collapses, face down, on the synagogue floor, and the video ends. In this staging, Eléazar becomes, in effect, a cantor, albeit a sacrilegious one—befitting, perhaps, this fusion of theater and synagogue, operatic histrionics and the fervor of religious devotion, Old World music and New World setting.<sup>102</sup>

### *Faith First*

After flourishing for several generations, stories in which cantors figure as protagonists emblematic of the American Jewish community may have become obsolete, or at least vestigial. Tellingly, the last adaptations of *The Jazz Singer* made for mainstream American audiences in the twentieth century were parodies. In 1981, the comedy series *SCTV Television Network* spoofed Neil Diamond's remake of *The Jazz Singer* with a sketch about a Jewish recording executive who opposes the ambitions of his adopted African American son to become a cantor instead of a jazz singer.<sup>103</sup> A decade later, an episode of the animated comedy series *The Simpsons*

parodied the 1927 version of the film, especially its stature as an icon of immigrant Jewish culture, rather than reconfiguring its plot to address, even in mock form, contemporary concerns. Moreover, the story's protagonist (Krusty the Clown, a children's television personality, whose troubled past occasions the *Jazz Singer* parody), is the descendant of generations of rabbis, not cantors.<sup>104</sup>

Cantors' life histories continue to be told at the turn of the millennium, but within different rubrics, reflecting changes in the cantorate as a profession as well as in definitional practices of American Jews. The intensely histrionic cantorial performances prized by immigrants and their children earlier in the century often fail to engage younger generations. Thus, in liner notes to *Invocations*, Frank London's 2000 recording of instrumental settings of "classic hazonos," Sarah Gershman writes, "Like many Jews, I have felt a sense of alienation from operatic, showy cantorial music. It is difficult to daven [pray] in an environment that feels more like a performance than a prayer service." (Although the recording evokes "the passionate, imploring voices of the great cantorial virtuosos" of the past, it does so in performances "scored for trumpet solo, harmoniums, glass harmonica and bass"—and no vocalists.)<sup>105</sup> Similarly, the cantor no longer serves as an emblematic figure for the larger community in dramas of American Jewish life; instead, cantorial narratives appear in the genre of documentary. Rather than obliquely referencing the experiences of actual cantors in fictional plots, as was done in feature films involving Jolson, Waldman, and Oysher, documentaries call on cantors to perform their life stories before the camera as themselves. Consequently, these films offer stories about professional clergy rather than epitomizing members of their community.

The 2002 documentary *Faith First: Second Career Clergy*, aired on WABC in New York City as part of local public-affairs programming devoted to religion, offers personal narratives of several Jews training to be cantors or rabbis at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) who have chosen to do so after pursuing other careers, including, among the cantorial students profiled, an opera singer, an engineer, and a pastry chef. Each individual offers a narrative organized around the decision to become a cleric. Typically, these are stories of a personal quest, following frustration with earlier careers or a larger sense of dissatisfaction with the state of the subject's life. Told in the manner of conversion narratives, some of these profiles are, in fact, the personal histories of individuals whose path to studying at JTS included an earlier decision to convert to Judaism.

These stories are quite different from the cantors' narratives offered in twentieth-century American Jewish popular culture. No longer tied to larger tales of Jews' collectively confronting some disruption on a grand scale, whether mass immigration or the Holocaust, these are narratives that remain personal exercises—indeed, the individual scale of these stories is reinforced by there being a series of them, each having its own narrative integrity while resonating with the others' stories. The quest to become a cantor or rabbi is told as a journey of self-realization, linking concerns for spiritual fulfillment (interviewees speak of seeking an “inner connection,” finding one’s “moral compass”) with bourgeois concerns for professional satisfaction, including the luxury of being willing to “trade financial stability for happiness.” (As one rabbinical student explains, “If I’m not going to live forever, why do I go every day to a job I don’t like?”) Even when the interviewees speak of the importance of ministering to the Jewish community, the discourse is sometimes self-reflexive; one JTS student explains that, in the wake of the attacks of 11 September 2001, “helping others was just what I needed.”<sup>106</sup> Framed as the pursuit of a personal calling within the rubric of American religious broadcasting, the decision to become a cantor is largely removed from Jewish communal concerns, whether religious or ethnic.

The 2005 documentary *A Cantor's Tale* considers the American cantorate's future by revisiting its recent past through the story of Jack Mendelson, who teaches cantorial students at the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College in New York City and serves as cantor of a Conservative congregation in the nearby city of White Plains. Mendelson grew up in Boro Park in the early post-World War II years, when the Brooklyn neighborhood boasted an extraordinary concentration of prominent cantors (among those he mentions are Mordecai Hershman and Moshe Koussevitzky), many of them Holocaust survivors. The film follows Mendelson as he revisits his childhood haunts, noting that, when he was growing up there, “*khazones* was in the air,” heard not only in synagogues but also on Yiddish radio (where the occasional commercial was set to cantorial modes) and even sung by waiters in delicatessens. Mendelson, along with other cantors and aficionados of *khazones* profiled in the documentary, waxes nostalgic for the cantors of the mid-twentieth century and, moreover, for the culture in which they were celebrities. Describing his mission as working “to keep *khazones* alive,” Mendelson bemoans the current generation of cantorial students who have no “style” and need to be taught the idiomatic ornaments of traditional *khazones*; Mendelson calls these, in

Yiddish, *kheyndelexh*—that is, grace notes—which he translates, tellingly, as “ethnicities.” Over the course of the documentary Mendelson narrates his personal history (from high-school dropout to president of Conservative Judaism’s Cantors Assembly of America) not as an exemplary tale but as testimony to the cultural continuity inherent in his musicianship, which he maintains in the face of extensive rupture and innovation. With an outsize vocal and physical presence and boundless energy, Mendelson demonstrates his pedagogical skills with cantorial students and young children, and he exhorts Jews whom he encounters in Brooklyn shops and on Tel Aviv beaches to sing *khazones* with him—all part of a ceaseless performance of self that strives to reanimate a “lost” Jewish sacred musical culture among both performers and listeners.<sup>107</sup>

As a consequence of these many mediations of cantors, their music, and their personal histories, community messengers become celebrities, their sacred performances become entertainments, their private lives become popular narratives, their coreligionists become fans, and their performance venues become sites not of affirming Jewish devotional tradition but of interrogating it. In this complex of cultural transformations, new media, like the cantors whose music and stories they present, are not merely vehicles of transmission. Rather, they figure as proving grounds, catalysts, and forums for the fashioning of narratives in which cantors’ careers epitomize the Jewish encounter with modernity.

The attention to cantors’ lives is itself not new in Jewish culture, but presenting a cantor’s life story as an exemplary or cautionary tale for Jews as a whole is a modernist innovation, for this approach situates the “project of the self,” a paradigm of modern, secular Western culture, as being central to Jewish life.<sup>108</sup> In these stories, the cantor performs not only devotional music but also the quest for a career, and God is no longer the ultimate recipient of cantorial performances; rather, the cantor’s fellow Jews are. Endowing cantors with celebrity is another novelty of the modern age, elevating them from figures of occasional suspicion and even ridicule in traditional Jewish culture (according to a Yiddish proverb, *khazonim zaynen naronim*—cantors are fools) to a stature in which cantors embody the contradictory sense of intimate familiarity and awe that distinguishes the relationship of audiences with stars.

Positioning cantors as leading protagonists in Jewish dramas of personal—and, implicitly, communal—striving brings *khazones* into new contexts that challenge established, facile notions of the interrelation of

sacred and secular. Attributes of twentieth-century new media figure strategically in this transformation of cantors and their music, none more so than the earliest of these technologies. Evan Eisenberg suggests that sound recordings can facilitate a new kind of ritual behavior by enabling the repetition of a performance. Indeed, given recordings' ability to repeat endlessly and completely, they appear to be the fulfillment of ritual's aspiration toward "exact repetition." At the same time, Eisenberg argues, "most . . . phonographic ritual is secular," and recordings can facilitate new kinds of listening rituals inimical to the religious rites that they ostensibly reproduce.<sup>109</sup> In the case of *khazones*, recordings of sacred music intended for performance on the Sabbath or holidays can be listened to on those occasions, but doing so violates traditional prohibitions against playing recordings as a form of work. Thus, sound recordings produced in recent decades for Orthodox Jews typically bear labels warning consumers not to play the recording on the Sabbath or holidays.<sup>110</sup> A recording thus has the potential not only to document and disseminate sacred music but also to undermine the original intent of its performance.

Early listeners were apparently either horrified or delighted to discover how this new medium enabled *khazones* to be heard in all manner of contexts outside the synagogue and perceived the consequence as either defiling the spiritual intent of this music or, conversely, freeing it to acquire new signifying powers. The salient transformation wrought by sound recordings and then other new media took place not in the music or the musicians but in their listeners, who came to be defined as an audience rather than a congregation. Audiences are constituted not according to religious protocols but by individual desires in relation to market forces and consumer practices. Therefore, even when an audience and a congregation comprise the same individuals, the nature of their engagement with a performance of sacred music is different. This development complicates the signifying potential of cantorial performance. As artistry is foregrounded, spirituality may be marginalized or ironized, and music's meaning may be defined by individual interests in relation to public discourses rather than by religious authorities.

All this would seem to suggest that new media at best attenuate (and at worst undo) conventional notions of religiosity, especially the sanctity of devotional performance. But it is also possible to see these mediations of cantorial music as proving grounds for exploring new possibilities for engaging with sanctity. Cantors from Josef Rosenblatt to Jack Mendelson have ventured into unconventional modes of performing their music and

personal histories in efforts to enhance Jewish religious life, taking an expansive approach to the notion of being a communal messenger. Cantors who have straddled conventional boundaries between sacred and secular performance, such as Moishe Oysher and Richard Tucker, repeatedly insist on their performances as extending, rather than compromising, the significance of the sacred music that they claim as their artistic inspiration.

Essential to all these efforts is the imbricating of mediating musical performances with mediating life stories. These efforts enable a larger concern for transmitting not only a musical repertoire but also a sense of its place in a Jewish way of life understood as authentic, traditional, communitarian, and comprehensive, a way of life that has been roiled by geographic dislocation, by modern social, economic, and technological phenomena, and ultimately by genocide. Through these new media practices, American cantors and their audiences have engaged in an array of efforts to reconfigure this imagined past in terms of an expressive culture that is readily accessible, thanks to various recording technologies, even as it invokes a bygone way of life.

Ultimately, mediating cantors and their music has effected new conceptions of art in relation to religiosity. The cantor has become a signifier of the quest for an understanding of spirituality. Because *khazones* is perceived as something displaced (by immigration, the Holocaust, and, for some, new media), listeners' engagement with it becomes a process, an interrogation, a struggle. An organic, inevitable, immediate (and unmediated?) relationship with spirituality through this music is projected away from the here and now to a chronotope—the Old World—that only grows further away from the American present with the passing of time, and in the wake of the Holocaust this separation becomes an abyss. The processual, interrogative nature of this relationship is key—for engaging the numinous is not understood as inherent or as the ultimate goal of this quest. Because the New World problematizes spiritual engagement through *khazones*, its spirituality is not inevitable. Instead, cantors and their art are constantly put on trial in the American marketplace. In this forum it is possible for each listener to assign meaning to the cantor's life and art in response to personal aspirations. The cantor's life narrative models for the listener a project of one's own—investigating what this traditional expression of Jewish spirituality might mean in the unfolding life of the listener.