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Shamil: Concept, Practice and Reception of a *Nigun* in Habad Hasidism

Abstract: The article discusses the conception, performance and reception of *nigun* Shamil as a representative case of the social, literary and technological mechanisms that characterize music in Habad, past and present. The author argues for the centrality of non-accompanied, mostly wordless vocal tunes performed by the Hasidic masters such as the Lubavitcher Rebbe, as a main vehicle for the articulation of both the heightening of mystical experience and the teaching of Hasidism.

Keywords: Hasidism, music, *nigun*, Shamil, Habad.

A *Nigun* Is Born: The Story of Shamil[1]

On 7 October 1958, on the holiday of Simhat Torah, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh tsadik of Lubavitch [henceforth: the Rebbe] taught his devotees a *nigun*. On that occasion he delivered the following *siḥah* [lit. "an oral *exposé* of Hasidic thought"] in two separate talks a few hours apart—early in the morning (5 a.m. according to one testimony) after the traditional Hakkafot and during the day. His words were recorded

[1] *Nigun*, a vocal monophonic song mostly but not always without words, is a basic component of Hasidic practices and a crucial concept in Hasidic thought. *Nigun*, *neginah* (the performance of *nigun*) and *menagen* (the performer of *nigun*) are conceived in scholarship and popular culture as equivalents to the Western concepts of "music" and "musician," respectively. For the various connotations of these Hasidic terms, see Yaakov Mazor, Edwin Seroussi, "Towards a Hasidic Lexicon of Music," *Orbis Musicae* 10 (1990/91): 118–143. I am deeply thankful to the anonymous referee and to Yaakov Mazor for their thorough observations on the original version of this article that was written with a different goal in mind and eventually evolved into the present text.

literally for posterity.[2] I have translated these two analogous but not identical texts as accurately as possible and presented them in a table to facilitate comparison. Editorial notes appear in brackets.[3]

[p. 134] After the Hakkafot and the festive meal, early in the morning, our noble saintly Admor [our master, teacher and rabbi] shalit"a [acronym for: may he live for good long days, amen] distributed *mashke* [drinks] with his own holy hands to all those who have taken upon themselves to expand [their] Hasidic learning, and also taught a new *nigun* and said:

This *nigun* I heard from Hasidim together with the following story.

At the beginning of the expansion of the government of Russia through the conquest of vast territories, their determination was to conquer also the Caucasus Mountains, in which people that had no culture lived, etc., and they had an emperor of their own and his name was "Shamil."

In spite of the fact that the government people were the aforementioned people who inhabited in the mountains, they could not conquer them, because of the difficulties to reach them, because they dwelled in the high mountains.

Until they [the Russians] cheated them—promising them that they would make peace with them, and will provide them

[p. 170] A talk given on the day of Simhat Torah, on the year that he taught the *nigun*. Our noble saintly Admor [our master, teacher and rabbi] shalit"a [may he live for good long days, amen] ordered to sing the *nigun* that he taught at night [on the eve] of Simhat Torah and before they sang [it] he said:

This *nigun*—I heard a few years ago from Hasidim together with a story.

One hundred or one hundred and fifty years ago lived in the Caucasus semisavage tribes that were free as a flying bird, and the restrictions of the laws of the kingdom did not apply to them, and even not the limitations of cultured people.

[p. 171] When the Czar started to expand and enlarge his kingdom, he wanted to conquer also the Caucasus Mountains, but he was unable to, even though there were many soldiers with him, and on the other hand the tribes were fewer in number, and even though he possessed, of course, better weapons than them, in spite of all this, because the mountains were high, he did not succeed in conquering them.

Eventually they came up with an "invention": they made peace with those tribes and promised to the leader of the

[2] *Torat Menaḥem* 24 (1959), First part, pp. 134–135 and pp. 170–172, respectively. The original Hebrew texts can be found online: http://www.chabadlibrary.org/books/default.aspx?furl=/admur/tm/24/12/170 and following pages [retrieved: 20 Apr. 2016]. The week after the Rebbe expanded more on his teaching. However, limitations of space do not allow for its inclusion here. *Torat Menaḥem*, 184–185.

[3] I am thankful to Professor Jonathan Garb from the Hebrew University for revising the translation of this text and for his thoughtful observations.

with some concessions, etc., and eventually, they caught the governor, Shamil, and exiled him to the depths of Russia, and whether he was in prison or not, he was in exile.

And when he remembered and reflected upon his status and standing when he was in the high mountains, when he was free from government and from the shackles of culture, and now he is enslaved, etc.—he used to awaken with feelings of longing, and sang this *nigun*, whose beginning expresses the feeling of longing, and until the last *tnu'ah* [lit. "melodic movement; a musical motif or phrase"] of the *nigun* that expresses the hope that after all he shall return to his place.

When Jews listened to this *nigun*—they utilized it for worshiping Hashem in relation to the matter of the sinking of the soul downwards, from *igra ramah lebira 'amiqta* [Aramaic expression from TB, Hagiga 5b "for the high mountain to the deep well"].

When he was in the heights, his soul was free, because she [the soul] was one with the Godhead, as it is written "As surely as the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing." [2 Kings 5:16] And when he was down—he was after all aware of his status and his standing, he was imprisoned in his body and his animal soul, and particularly if he sinned and flawed and if he went astray from the road, and even after he rectified these [flaws], the totality of his worship was a "studiously acquired commandment of men" [after Isaiah 29:13: Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught, i.e. a routine observance of religious commandments without deep

tribes—whose name was "Shamil"—some concessions, and after they [the Russians] took from them their weapons, they captured Shamil and sent him to exile in the Russian heartland.

While in exile, he remembered from time to time the high mountains, where he was free as an eagle on the skies, and no limitations of imprisonment were imposed on him, and even not the restrictions of the city of settlement [Heb. *'ir moshav*, meaning probably a city where the government regulations restricted the freedom of *bona fide* citizens in the Russian Empire], and limitations and shackles of culture in general, and he used to awaken with longing for the high mountains in the depth of his soul. And then he used to sing this *nigun*, whose beginning—longing—and whose final melodic movement—hope.

And when a Jew [read: a Hasid] heard this *nigun*—he translated it into its "letters" [or "signs," probably referring to a "narrative text" but also, more remotely, to musical notation], and used it in relation to the subject of the descending of the soul in the body.

Before it descended into the body—the soul was fixed under the Throne of Honor, and this matter itself (that the soul was fixed under the Throne of Honor) is a descending for the soul, because in fact she is even higher—cleaving with the Holy Blessed One Himself, and the origin of her being fixed [under the Throne of Honor] is "on the high mountains"—"these are the fathers" *ḥaga"t* [acronym for the emanations *ḥesed*, *gevurah* and *tif'eret*] *de'atsilut* [of the world of emanation], and even higher, up to the *ḥaga"t* before the *tsimtsum* [contraction of the Godhead]. And anyway, it is understood that she [the soul] was totally free, and there was no governor or ruler forced on her.

spiritual intention] and even if his worship is [p. 135] [founded] on liveliness and feelings of love and awe, with rejoicing and good heart, even if he was a total tsadik [saintly figure] and worships God with love and pleasure, he is still in the status of one "one who loves."

And when he reflects on this, then he awakens with feelings of longing to his status and standing when he was in the high mountains—the root of the soul, as she signifies "mountains" "these are the fathers" that from them it is attracted to all the children of Israel, i.e. as *ḥaga"t* [acronym for the emanations *ḥesed*, *gevurah* and *tif'eret*] *de'atsilut* [of the world of emanation], and also higher than *atsilut* up to the high mountains that precede the *tsimtsum* [Godhead's primeval contraction].

Those who "cheated" on the soul took her from her place and sent her down, to dwell in the body and [as] the animal soul.

And for this reason, when the soul ponders on her origin (*mekor hotsvah*)—she awakens with great thirst, "I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you" [Psalm 63, 2], that it is true that the meaning of the descending is to ascend that is achieved precisely through her devotion in the lowers, but after all for now this is a great descent. And as "a person knows his soul" [Talmudic expression] his status and his situation, etc.; even one who [p. 172] observes the Torah and precepts—it is possible that his observing of the Torah and the precepts is in the style of "studiously acquired commandment of men" [after Isaiah 29:13: Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught] and even if he has love and reverence—it is possible that he is lacking the joy. And even if he has some joy—it is possible that he is lacking the "glad heart" [after Deut. 28:27: "Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joy and a glad heart, for the abundance of all things"], the abundance of joy. And even one who has this matter [joy]—then also "a total tsadik who worships God with awe and [with] love with delights [Song of Songs 7:7] . . . is independent [of God], he fears God and he loves Him" [*Tanya*, ch. 25, 49a] "And there is someone who loves" [*Torah Or*, Va-yaqhel, additions 114, 4] because he is limited by the limitations of the body, and he cannot spread his wings as "the way of an eagle in the sky." [Prov. 30:19]

And moreover, one who is far removed from this level, and even when he fulfills

the Torah and the commandments this [fulfillment] demands from him a great effort, and he has obstacles and delays on every single step, it is clear how great is the thirst and the yearning of his soul to its origin.

And this is the content of the beginning of the *nigun*—the desire and the longing of the soul.

And in relation to the feeling of hope in the last [melodic] movement of the *nigun*—that certainly is: "a banished person does not remain banished from Him" [2 Samuel 14: 14] and at the end he will arrive to his desired destiny, i.e., to a higher level than was before his descending down, for this is the purpose of the descending that is an imperative for ascending, and therefore, when he arrives to this level he unites himself with His actual Holy Essence.

And the last section of the *nigun*—is the hope and the affirmation, that after all he will succeed to surmount from the "deep well" [TB, Hagiga 5b] and elevate himself even higher than his first place, "to nullify oneself in the essence of the King" [*Lashtaba begufa demalka*, *Zohar* 1:219b].

And after they sang the *nigun* he said:

Also at the beginning of the *nigun*, whose content is the matter of yearning—the "wildness" of the free man is evident, because the one who is free, in fact, even when they imprison him the matter of freedom is evident [in him]. And he is as the son of a king, who also when he was in prison it was evident that he was the son of a king.

And the same with the descending of the soul downwards, that also when she is down here—her freedom is evident, living in her self-space.

And this matter in itself is the providing of strength to worship without being distracted by the obstacles and the delays of this world, and thus the goal of ascending will be achieved—the ascent to the real essence.

The Musicology of Habad

Basic issues of Habad musicology emerge from the study of this *nigun*, the Rebbe's *siḥot* and the wealth of additional information to be introduced later in this essay. Let us start with the simple matters:

- A *nigun* performance is an integral part of a ritual that expands the normative liturgy (in this case, Simhat Torah). It is a "text" whose structure encodes a veiled teaching of Habad that is decoded by the intellect of the tsadik. It is linear but also circular, because a *nigun* is always repeated many times in performance until its beginning and end lose their binary difference.
- The text about the *nigun* was performed by the Rebbe extemporaneously as an extension of his musical performance. Each version of the text differs from the other.
- The *nigun* according to the Rebbe was "translated into letters (or signs)" by an anonymous Hasid in an unidentified source. One can read this statement as referring to a primary linguistic decoding of the *nigun*, prior to the Rebbe's deeper interpretation, and more hyperbolically as a musical notation.[4]
- The text was transcribed from its oral original and printed later on. And so was the *nigun* in two senses, symbolically in musical notation (a code that also needs a proper decoding) and mechanically in a recording that freezes one specific performance in time. The dangers of these techniques of capturing a *nigun* did not escape Habad Hasidim who in different times and places opposed the writing down of *nigunim* and certainly their mechanical reproduction.
- A diluted, anecdotal version of the Rebbe's text became viral, first via partially paraphrased quotations in writings about the *nigun* in Habad, and later in countless quotations online.
- The repertoire of Habad *nigunim* is an open canon. *Nigun* Shamil formally entered the repertoire of Habad in 1958, as the Rebbe made a tradition of introducing a new *nigun* on each Simhat Torah. However, this *nigun* apparently circulated among Hasidim earlier on, as is specifically mentioned by the Rebbe, who just learnt it from

[4] Much later on it was included in the third volume of the latest edition of the official platform of the musical lore of Habad, *Sefer ha-nigunim* 3 (1980), 5, no. 320. For more details on the peculiar role of musical notation in Habad, see the article by Naftali Loewenthal quoted in n. 25 below.

one or more "Jews" (i.e. from Hasidim) and found it suitable for his teaching.

– Online resources can dramatically refine, as never before, the research on *nigun* Shamil as will be profusely shown below.

Let us start with another inner Habad testimony about the moment of inception of *nigun* Shamil into the musical canon of this Hasidic dynasty. This testimony appears in a long conversation about this *nigun* in the important blog *chabadtalk.com*. In it, it is related that on the early morning of Simhat Torah of 1958, the Rebbe asked Chazan Moshe Teleshevsky (also known as "the Rebbe's Chazn," 1927–2012) to rehearse a *nigun* he was about to introduce to the Hasidim. After giving out a *mashke* (drink) to everyone, the Rebbe asked Teleshevsky to stand close to him, and he started to sing *Shamil*. Teleshevsky's account of the event is telling:

> In a singer's voice, *Nigun* Shamil requires two, maybe two and a half octaves. Here it was five a.m. after a very long night, without sleep, and when the Rebbe started to sing the *nigun* in *mezza voce*, half voice, I had never heard anyone until then sing so beautifully, with such control of his voice, as if we were all in the perfumed chambers of the *kodesh ha-kodoshim* [Holy of Holies].

Teleshevsky, hypnotized by the Rebbe's accomplished performance, is caught off guard when the Rebbe turns to him and asks him to repeat the *nigun*. He is dumbfounded, and the Rebbe sings the *nigun* once again, "not exactly like the first time." Finally, the Chazan understands that his turn to sing the *nigun* has inevitably arrived, with the Hasidim

> expecting to learn the *nigun* through my lips and carry it on to greater heights in song and dance and prayer. As I stood there frozen for that moment, I'm sure that even Shamil—or his kindred spirit—was waiting for me to open my lips and be forever freed from his prison—and I from mine. For a moment my lips wouldn't open and suddenly I felt the import of Shamil, his imprisonment, his yearning to be free.

When Teleshevsky finished singing, the Rebbe leaned towards him and said, "You sing it like a *chazn* [cantor]." Rather than being disappointed by the Rebbe's seemingly reproving remark, Teleshevsky "felt great *simcha* for having been chosen by the Rebbe for this singular honor."[5]

This vivid ethnographic snippet, that needs to be read in the framework of Habad's profuse hagiography of its last Rebbe, reveals the musical pedagogy of this spiritual leader as well as his unique, almost magical,

[5] http://chabadtalk.com/forum/showthread.php3?t=2587 [retrieved: 11 Feb. 2018].

capacity of delivery. First, the Rebbe introduces the new *nigun* to "his" cantor, who will serve as a mediator between him and the community in the process of internalizing the melody. Eventually he "teases" the cantor for his learned performance, suggesting that something of the *nigun* may have been lost in the cantor's "professional" performance. This critique reveals the ambivalent attitude of Habad, and of many other Hasidic communities, to cantorial music, a stance rooted in the very beginnings of the Hasidic movement.[6] Second, from a phenomenological viewpoint it is not the *nigun* itself, as a musical structure, what transforms the listeners' experience but the *voice* of the Rebbe, his unique vocal qualities and performing capabilities. Third, as it happened with the two renderings of the Rebbe's *siḥah* about *nigun* Shamil, his performance of the tune also changed in each rendition. Fourth, the experience of the *nigun* links its performers (or listeners as we shall see later) and the figure of Shamil himself in a bond that crosses time and space through sound.

This precious piece of information, even if profoundly hagiographical and admiring the Rebbe's musicality, contrasts with other versions of the *nigun* Shamil story that are stripped from the esoteric ruminations of the Rebbe into kabbalistic themes drawn from an array of sources, such as the *Zohar*, Lurianic Kabbalah, and the chain of Habad masters. An oft-quoted example of this digested text appears in print for the first time in the liner notes of the long-play record that included the first commercial recording of *nigun* Shamil, performed by none other than Chazan Moshe Teleshevsky, issued in 1963 and reproduced in Habad's official website:[7]

> A story is told of a man named Shamil, a leader of assorted tribes that lived in Russia's Caucasian Mountains over a century ago. The Russian army attacked these tribes, intending to deprive them of their freedom. Unable to vanquish the valiant warriors in battle, the Russian army leaders proposed a false peace treaty, and thus succeeded in getting them to lay down their arms. Immediately afterwards, the Russians lured the Caucasian leader, Shamil, away from his stronghold and imprisoned him.
>
> Staring out of the window of his small narrow cell, Shamil reflected on his days of liberty in the past. In his current exile and helplessness, he bewailed his plight

[6] For example, in his *Toldot Yaakov Yosef*, Yaacov Yosef Katz of Polnoye (1710–1784), a direct disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, criticizes late eighteenth century Ashkenazi cantors who enhanced their musical performances as an end in itself. See Avraham Kahana, *Sefer ha-ḥasidut: min Rabi Yisrael Besht ad Rabi Naḥman mi-Braslav* (Warsaw, [1922]), 138–139.

[7] *Chabad nigunim*, vol. 4, with the Joe King Orchestra, Seymour Silbermintz producer, issued by Nichoach (N5723) in 1963. Nichoach stands for Nigunei Hasidut Habad and is the official record label of the movement.

and yearned for his previous position of freedom and fortune. He consoled himself, however, with the knowledge that he would eventually be released from his imprisonment and return to his previous position with even more power and glory. It is the above thought that he expressed in this melancholy, yearning melody.

The Moral: The soul descends to this world from the heavens above, clothed in the earthly body of a human being. The soul's physical vestments here are really its prison cell, for it constantly longs for spiritual, heavenly fulfillments. The soul strives to free itself from the "exile" of the human body and its earthly pleasures by directing its physical being into the illuminated and living paths of Torah and *Mitsvot*.[8]

A slightly more refined rendition of the story of *nigun* Shamil, one that shows a sound understanding of the basic Hasidic concept of *nigun*, is found in an article by Srolic Barber, of Sydney, Australia, a young rabbinical student, journalist and novelist, published at the Habad website. Barber starts by arguing that a *nigun* "is a stirring melody without words" and that words limit the subject to their signified. Therefore, the message of a song with words "could be only as deep as its words indicate." The purpose of the wordless *nigun* is therefore "to break the boundaries of definitive meaning." Such a *nigun* allows the singer "to embrace the tune as he understands, his intuition coloring his comprehension." It follows that in *nigun* Shamil, "the sequence of beats and the acceleration and slowing of the tempo speak of yearning and cruel depression, but then of eventual hope and anticipation of freedom." Barber stresses in his account that the Rebbe certified that this melody is "the very same one sung by the marauder Shamil as he sat by the small, narrow window in his prison cell." As he languished in Russian captivity, the strength of Shamil only grew, and he became the symbol of his people and his song, their anthem. The Rebbe, argues Barber, introduced the analogue "wherein the tale of captivity reflects the soul-in-body phenomenon." Hasidic thought teaches that the soul is "a spark of Godliness sourced in His absoluteness." Thus, her descent to a corporeal body is "a free fall in spiritual stature." The melodic progression of the *nigun* follows the soul's struggle and its challenges to resist the temptations of the material world in favor of her delight in holiness. "Culminating in high tones, the song expresses hope of freedom: the soul anticipates a better tomorrow, firm in the belief that she may yet inspire an increasingly Godless world to answer a higher calling."

[8] http://www.chabad.org/multimedia/media_cdo/aid/140724/jewish/Shamil.htm [retrieved: 28 Jan. 2018].

Barber then adds to his theoretical exposition of *nigun* a highly poetically-elaborated interpretation, and a much more musicological one—of the cosmic drama embedded in the Rebbe's talk about *nigun* Shamil. "Remembering the conquests and relishing in his triumphs," Shamil's voice picks up in tempo as the drama unfolds. "Emphatic like a victory march, his melody climbs and ascends, the memories of an ageless warrior streaming forth in song." The beat then slows down to a haunting tune. The crescendo deftly descends. The tune turns into a melancholy tale, "the story of a man brought to his knees, reduced to lonely days in forsaken monotony." The melody then screeches to a halt. "A cloudy tension seeps into the cell as he fights despair, vowing to hold faith. The moments pass in rigid stillness before he lifts his eyes heavenward. Gazing toward the soft sunlight spilling through his window, he begins to envision his redemption." Gradually, Shamil's tune finds voice "as the afternoon sunshine colors his shallow face. He can almost taste the sweet waters of liberation, his eyes wide with promise." In Hasidic terms, adds Barber, there is hope that someday God will respond to what he terms as "the melody of the waiting."[9]

This last and highly exalted text shows the deep repercussions that Habad's musicology has on the followers of the Rebbe. However, these texts need to be read with a critical eye. Research has shown that, contrary to Habad's narratives, the Russians did not hold the historical Imam Shamil (1797–1871) under such precarious conditions. The Czarist authorities had some respect for and even Orientalist fascination with him. Moreover, Shamil's place of imprisonment did not have a "small narrow window" (his years were spent in a rather luxurious villa in Kiev), a trope that persistently appears in most online Habad versions of the story, but not in the Rebbe's *siḥot*.[10] Such excursions on Shamil's story in Habad are not extraordinary. They disclose mechanisms of oral literary creativity in Habad and perhaps even a residual of imperial Russian Orientalism in the Rebbe's own inner circle.[11] What stands out however in this text is the

[9] Srolic Barber, "Shamil's *Nigun*: Melody of the Waiting," http://www.chabad.org/multimedia/media_cdo/aid/1692239/jewish/Melody-of-the-Waiting.htm [retrieved: 28 Jan. 2018].

[10] For the different narratives about the historical Imam Shamil, see Thomas Sanders, Ernest Tucker, Gary M. Hamburg (eds.), *Russian-Muslim Confrontation in the Caucasus: Alternative Visions of the Conflict between Imam Shamil and the Russians, 1830–1859* (London–New York, 2004).

[11] The literature on Russian Orientalism is vast. See the more recent studies by David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration* (New Haven, 2011); Vera Tolz, *Russia's Own Orient: The Politics of Identity and Oriental Studies in the Late Imperial and Early Soviet Periods* (Oxford, 2011).

attempt to specify in more musicological details the teaching of the Rebbe as to how the particular melodic movement of the *nigun* recreates the cosmic drama of the soul. As we shall see below, academic musicological writings about *nigun* Shamil will show a rather unanticipated affinity to this type of insiders' texts stemming from the circles of Habad.

Nigun Shamil and *Teshuvah* in Habad

The transformative power of *nigun* Shamil spread quickly through Habad's lore in various permutations. Because the *nigun* is deeply associated with the *voice* of the Rebbe, it comes to sense that its sustained power relies on its original transformative utterance by him in 1958. A telling text exemplifying this aspect of the *nigun* is a remarkable one titled "Leonard Bernstein Unbound" included in *Niggun* by the Habad Hasid R. Mordechai ben Shaul Staiman.[12] This collection of stories about Habad *nigunim* and individuals associated with them is a veritable musical hagiography based on diverse oral and written sources, including "external" ones such as the noted musicologist, Abraham Z. Idelsohn.[13]

This story, told in utmost vivid details, takes place at the house of a certain "Professor Bloch" in Portland, Oregon. The main characters are two "black-hatters" (per Staiman) named Shmuel Spritzer, who became a rabbi and a major force behind the national prison outreach program of the Lubavitch Youth Organization, and Chaim Jacobs, who became the Rebbe's emissary in Glasgow, Scotland. They were among the earliest emissaries of Habad's "Jewish Peace Corps" (an euphemism for Habad's organized mass of messengers) and their three-week mission in the summer of 1969 in Portland was to spread the message of Habad through the distribution of materials, talks, organization of *farbrengens* (get-together in Habad) and the laying of tefillin to increase "in any manner Jews' observances of Judaism." As we know now, the events took place in the summer of 1970 and the companion of Rabbi Spritzer was not Rabbi Jacobs.[14] Staiman's narrative clearly shows that he interviewed

[12] Mordechai Staiman, *Niggun: Stories behind the Chasidic Songs that Inspire Jews* (Northvale, 1994), 107–111.

[13] Staiman quotes from Abraham Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Music in Its Historical Development* (New York, 1929).

[14] Inconsistencies in the narrative led me to contact by email first Rabbi Chaim Jacobs in Glasgow, Scotland, who wrote to me that he was never in Portland and that Rabbi Spritzer's companion was rather Rabbi Shmuel Langsam. He courteously provided me

Rabbi Spritzer and the latter confirmed to me the events as they occurred, stressing that the story became known to the "secretary of the Rebbe" (i.e. Rabbi Staiman).

Hereby follows an abridged version of the story as it appears in Staiman's book.[15] The story is told by Staiman as the narrator, and through him in the voice of Rabbi Spritzer in the first person. Due to its centrality to my argument in this article, it is worth quoting it in spite of its length.

> Professor Bloch had promised . . . a big surprise—"a dear old friend," as he had put it—although the name mentioned, Leonard Bernstein, meant nothing to two men dressed in black suits and black hats [the two Hasidic emissaries, Rabbi Spritzer and Rabbi Shmuel Langsam] as far as they were concerned, if this "friend" did not show within the next 15 minutes, before sundown, it would be too late for him to participate in the religious activities, including putting on tefillin. Undeniably, one of the so-called black-hatters, Shmuel Spritzer, couldn't help noticing that all the men—and women—had one eye on the tefillin and one eye on the door. If this were "770," his shul back home . . . in Brooklyn, New York, he was certain that all eyes would be on the [Lubavitcher] Rebbe [whose headquarters are in 770 Eastern Parkway, Crown Heights, Brooklyn]. But it wasn't "770" . . . In the wealthy split-level house of a well-known music professor and composer of the area, who, himself recently turned on to Jewish music through the records of Shlomo Carlebach, had invited them there to hold a *farbrengen* for Jewish people from his college . . . "To help us," said Spritzer, "we brought along Jewish reading materials . . . my favorite record album of *nigunim* to enchant people like Professor Bloch, whom I was scheduled to meet…"
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> As Spritzer and Jacobs were elaborating on the joys of Yiddishkeit [Jewishness], in "walks a guy, and the whole room becomes quiet," Spritzer said, in recalling the incident: "all eyes go toward the direction of the door, towards the guy coming in, and I look at my watch and I realize we have about 15 minutes left before sunset. So now I geared my mind in only one direction, to get this guy [Bernstein] to put on tefillin. I introduced myself: "Shalom, I am Shmuel Spritzer and this is Chaim Jacobs, and you are…?" "I am Leonard Bernstein." . . . "To me [said Spritzer] Leonard Bernstein meant nothing out of the ordinary. I said to him, 'It's nice meeting you. We would like to put on tefillin with you. We only got 15 minutes left [until the Sabbath starts].' [Bernstein who was raised in Reform Judaism] said, 'I don't want to put on tefillin.' So [Spritzer] said to himself, 'If a guy doesn't want to put on tefillin, and everybody else did it already, you go to the next step and try to draw close to him through understanding where he was coming from.' So I asked him what he does for a living." "I'm a conductor," [Bernstein] responded. "Maybe," Spritzer thought to himself, "this man is like a conductor on the IRT

Rabbi Spritzer's address and in a very generous email to me of 6 May 2016 Rabbi Spritzer confirmed the story, providing me further information that is incorporated in this article.

[15] See Staiman, *Niggun: Stories behind the Chasidic Songs*, n. 12 above.

subway in New York. But of course I won't say anything…" Instead he said to Bernstein, "Very nice. What kind of conductor are you, Mr. Bernstein?" "I conduct music."

Almost in the same breath, Bernstein asked the two black-hatters if they knew how to sing, and both said, "Sure." "Hasidics know how to sing?" Bernstein was pleased to hear. "Then sing something." Spritzer turned to Professor Bloch. "I'm not going to sing a solo here, but maybe we should put on a record of mine." The professor agreed, and Spritzer asked him to put on the fourth song . . . in the album he had brought with him. In looking back at that time, Rabbi Spritzer said, "The reason I asked to put on 'Shamil's *Nigun*' was [that] when I was a young bachur (student in the Yeshiva) I had heard that when 'Shamil's *Nigun*' was recorded on record in 1962 the man who played the violin at the recording [session] was a gentile.[16] "In those days there weren't too many Jews playing music." As the gentile played his violin, at the recording, something astonishing happened to him. He began to sweat to the point that his whole body was bathed through and through, so deeply was he affected by the music. Not even taking time to wipe his brow or dry his eyes and hands, he played as he had never played a violin before. Later he admitted that he had experienced the full power of the *Nigun Shamil*. "So [Spritzer] said . . . as [he] stood before Mr. Leonard Bernstein, if it touched a gentile to the core, then maybe it'll touch this Jew . . . And it proved to be the case."

The story continues with Bernstein revealing the Jewish roots of some of his own "universal" music, hoping that "it would be nice to hear someone accidentally whistle something of mine…" Rabbi Spritzer reassures the maestro that even his sigh has been recorded in Heavens, just as God heard the sighs of Shamil. Bernstein, puzzled, asks, "Who's Shamil?" To which Spritzer answered, "You'll know him from his song . . . You and he have a lot in common." "Was he too a conductor?" Bernstein asked. "In a way, Mr. Bernstein." Spritzer said no more and let the music speak (of course from his recording). For Spritzer, Bernstein too was a leader of his people, and cried aloud for God to release him from his bondage.

Staiman inserts in his narrative the entire story of *nigun* Shamil as related by the Rebbe and adds that Bernstein heard every note of it as he "never saw anybody listen to music like that; it was like Bernstein and Shamil were bound up as one." Moved almost to tears after hearing the *nigun*, Bernstein expressed his admiration for it and his inability to explain the sense of release that he felt upon listening to it. Spritzer seized the opportunity and volunteered to explain what had just happened if Bernstein puts on the tefillin. Noticing that from all the songs in the long-play

[16] The recording was in fact issued in 1963.

Spritzer played *Shamil*, a track from the middle of the record, Bernstein asked why he had chosen it, and Spritzer, as he prepared the tefillin, said, "Because . . . I felt you had to hear it." "You have a feeling for music" Bernstein responded. "If you promise me that you will take up music for your future, I will put on tefillin right now." "It's a deal," Spritzer said.

Later on, Spritzer confessed that he made that promise because every Lubavitcher takes on music as part of "his Yiddishkeit." Leonard Bernstein put on tefillin, arguably "for the first time in his life," and "that too was recorded in Heaven." Spritzer explained the special significance of Shamil to Bernstein… and Bernstein "took it all in and recorded it in his prison—and his heaven." As a corollary of this encounter, Bernstein invited Rabbi Spritzer to meet him at the Radio City Theater in New York City, and Spritzer agreed to the invitation, "not knowing in the least where Radio City was." Eventually, realizing who Leonard Bernstein really was, Spritzer relates that "people said, 'Leonard Bernstein put on tefillin—wow!'" Back in New York City, Spritzer started checking about Radio City. When he asked how he could get there, he was told he had to buy tickets. "The night Leonard Bernstein was supposed to perform I found out I could get a ticket for $20. Twenty dollars? Forget it. That was the end of Radio City for me." Spritzer consoled himself with the thought that if "Leonard Bernstein wants to see me he'll let me in for free." The two never met again.

Staiman's hagiographic account does not end at this point because, in his own words, "Bernstein and Shamil, Bernstein and his Jewish rabbi friend were tied forever through the cords of Heaven." Many years later, a traveling Lubavitcher rabbi approached Bernstein in Boston to put on tefillin.[17] Bernstein, this time, readily agreed. As the rabbi helped wrap the tefillin around Bernstein's arm, he said to him, "This is probably a first for you, eh?" "No," Bernstein said solemnly, "this is not the first time. I did it once before in Portland." With his voice cracking, Bernstein confessed to the emissary, "somebody finally accidentally whistled something of mine, somewhere, just once." At this point, the narrative turns into a classical Habad story centered around the teachings of the Rebbe, the Habad *farbrengen* as an ecstatic spiritual experience and the transformative power of laying on tefillin. Bernstein heard "the deep calling [of the *farbrengen* in which Shamil was taught by the Rebbe, even though Bernstein was not

[17] Rabbi Spritzer confirmed to me that this is a reference to Rabbi Chaim Ciment, an emissary of Habad to Boston.

physically present in the event that took place more than a decade before] . . . I heard Shamil. I heard myself . . . when I put on tefillin for the first time in my life." This spiritual transformation, one in which the physical dimensions of time and space collapse, is grounded, per Staiman, in the teaching of the Rebbe that if a person performs one small act, God will lift him above all materiality. The *farbrengen*, argues Staiman, "as revealed in the note which descended from Heaven—can achieve more than the influence of the angel Michoel." And he concludes this long parable: "Don't ever say that Leonard Bernstein died in 1991 [in fact he died in 1990]. Not true at all. In the end, Bernstein became Shamil unbound! Bernstein's Jewish soul lives, in the flesh and blood of God's song."

This remarkable and intricate musical story—as all Habad texts on this subject—needs to be read in context as another exemplum stressing the power of *nigun* in Habad's "musicology." Humorous overtones surround the ostensible detachment of the Hasidim from the "worldly" musical reality deployed by this story as on those days Bernstein was a major public figure in New York City who could hardly have gone unnoticed. Indeed, the narrative itself exalts the *teshuvah* of Bernstein as a great public achievement of Habad, stemming from the Rebbe himself. Moreover, "in those days there weren't too many Jews playing music" sounds farfetched, and only makes sense if by "Jews" one reads "Hasidim." In addition, even with all the amendments provided by Rabbi Spritzer, the story still presents problematic historical facts.[18] However, historical accuracy or hagiographical fiction aside, this story unleashes another set of themes related to the power of *nigun* Shamil that can be discussed as if it was a folk tale, regardless of its precise circumstances.

First, there is the use of a recording instead of the living voice as a manner of transmitting *nigun* Shamil. As we already know, Chazan Teleshevsky who received the *nigun* privately from the Rebbe performed it in the 1963 recording played by Rabbi Spritzer in Portland. This recorded version shows Habad's early recruitment of modern technology to spread its credo through music (see more below). Second, the *nigun* has a quasi-magical spell on the psyche of Bernstein as it had, per Rabbi Staiman, on

[18] Bernstein's "beloved Professor Bloch" of Portland obviously recalls composer Ernest Bloch. But Bloch passed away in Portland in July of 1959, and his house was sold to a church in 1963. Rabbi Spritzer confirmed that this "Professor Bloch" or "Block" taught music at the University of Oregon in Portland. However, in all my inquiries I could not find a faculty member of this name active in 1970 at this institution. This fact remains unclear for the moment.

the non-Jewish violinist who performed it in the recording that appears as a story within the main story. Moved by the power of the *nigun*, Bernstein surrenders to the unsolicited wearing of the tefillin. Third, the inner voice of Shamil's anguish in exile resonates with Bernstein's own exiled soul. Space and time collapse again in the experience of *nigun* Shamil, as we have seen in the case of Chazan Teleshevsky. Finally, Bernstein obtains eternity through the act of *teshuvah* caused by the exposure to the *nigun*, the wearing of tefillin, and in fact by the message of the Rebbe ("one *mitsvah* can save your soul") embedded in both actions.

Habad and the Music Mass Media

Mechanical reproductions of *nigun* Shamil proliferated since its 1958 inauguration by the Rebbe. At least two more recordings, in addition to the 1963 one, were issued by Nichoach in the course of time, adapting it to new media as time progressed: long-plays, cassettes, CDs and finally MP3 files posted online together with the story of the song and its musical notation.

The *nigun* was reissued as a video-clip in 2015 by the Habad vocal ensemble called *Kapelye* with the soloist Chony Tzuker as part of the Tsavos Hashem (The Armies of God) Project.[19] The lyrics of this rendition are similar to the poem quoted by the young Hasid, Srolic Barber (see above), but with some noticeable additions. Moreover, the visualization of the song adds a new phenomenological dimension to the *nigun* and an additional level of interpretation. According to the video script (that includes cuts from a Russian film about the Caucasus Wars), the lowest point in the descent of the soul that the Rebbe was referring to in his talk about Shamil is located now in the bodies of young children who are shown in the clip playing video games and bowling instead of absorbing Hasidism. The clip ends in a strong messianic chord, seemingly unrelated to the original story of the *nigun*, whereas the expectation for the return of the Rebbe after his disappearance is expressed as a strong yearning not unlike Shamil's and the soul's longing for freedom.

Nigun Shamil made then a staggering journey in Habad since the morning of 7 October 1958 when the Rebbe sang or, more accurately, instilled it for the first time to his Hasidim. A sonic text without words

[19] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYlLzNWOMjQ [retrieved: 29 Jan. 2018].

delivered extemporaneously by the Rebbe as an elaborate metaphor of the dramatic wanderings of the soul eventually transfigured into a catchy ballad produced by the technologies of mass media. This is not a value judgment claiming a "descending" in the quality of Habad spirituality but rather a description of the high degree of malleability with which the same *nigun* can be reinterpreted under radically different circumstances.

Nigun Shamil in Non-Habadic Texts: A Critical Reading

Not only Habad Hasidim have copiously referred to *nigun* Shamil in their folk tales and hagiographic stories. "Outsiders," i.e. musicologists and Jewish Studies scholars, did too, a testimony of the centrality that this piece of music and its narratives have in the musicology of Habad. A brief examination of some of these scholarly analyses shows the interaction between the interpretative strategies of the scholars of Habad *nigun* vis-à-vis Habad's own texts.

In *Music in Lubavitcher Life*, ethnomusicologist Ellen Koskoff chose *nigun* Shamil as one of her main case studies of how a *nigun* enters into the repertoire of Habad.[20] Koskoff's ethnographic study is the only research of music in a contemporary Hasidic community based on intensive fieldwork carried among Habad Hasidim in the USA. Her discussion of *nigun* Shamil however relies mostly on the abridged version of the story as it appears *verbatim* in Habad's *Sefer ha-nigunim* rather than on the elaborated *siḥot* of the Rebbe.

Raffi Ben-Moshe has attempted to bridge the gap between the creed embedded in Habad texts and musical structure in his study of the concept of "ebb and flow" (*ratso va-shov*) in *nigunei hitva'adut* (meditative tunes) of Habad. In this context, Ben-Moshe discusses *nigun* Shamil in detail.[21] Based on an ethnographic research of a group of Habad Hasidim in Israel, Ben-Moshe attempts to tie the oral lore of his informants, both their musical performances and speeches about music (who basically reproduce the "simple" narrative of *nigun* Shamil), with the writings of the Habad masters and a detailed, almost note by note, analysis of the *nigun*. The analysis attempts to show how the melodic movements of ascent and

[20] Ellen Koskoff, *Music in Lubavitcher Life* (Urbana, 2001), 11–12, 75–76, 98, and example 10 transcription adapted from *Sefer ha-nigunim*.

[21] Raffi Ben-Moshe, *Experiencing Devekut: The Contemplative Niggun of Habad in Israel* (Jerusalem, 2015), *nigun* 16.

descent mirror the allegory of the agony of the soul that descends from the most elevated spheres to the material world against its will. Following the script about the *nigun* in *Sefer ha-nigunim* Ben-Moshe adds:

> Once there [in the material world], [the soul] yearns to return to the sphere of God. In other words, at the basis of the legend lies the idea of ebb and flow. The spiritual interpretation [of the *nigun*] brought in [*Sefer ha-nigunim*] refers to the struggle of an average ("beinoni") hasid, who is "not completely righteous, and even though he reads the Torah and observes its precepts, he does it with heaviness and weariness." This analysis corresponds to the *nigun*'s flow and ebb motions. Its false ebb motions may represent the humbleness and irresolution of its object, Shamil. They stand in contrast to the outstanding flow motion represented by the unexpected leap to the upper octave at the beginning of section C, and the upward octave leap in mm. 26–27. The *nigun* ends with a typical ebb cadence, on which it was said that "he [the Hasid] finally rises from an abyss and reaches his goal" (*Sefer ha-nigunim*, vol. 3, pp. 61–62). Are the surprising leaps ("rising from the abyss") indications that the Shamil legend had an unconscious influence on the *nigun*'s composer or reviver?[22]

Ben-Moshe leaves open the question whether adapting an existing melody or composing a new *nigun*, at least in the case of the specific genre of *nigunei devekut* (yearning tunes) of Habad, generates a Hasidic teaching or if the *nigun* is a pedagogical tool, a metaphor for a spiritual doctrine.

Eugene Matanky treats these issues in depth in another recent study of *nigun* Shamil.[23] To explicate the conceptualization of melody in Habad thinking, Matanky follows Elliot R. Wolfson's analysis of Menachem Mendel Schneerson's thought, specifically its relation to the meontological ("being-not; a conception which transcends all binaries, including the duality between duality and non-duality") Infinite, time-consciousness, and postmessianic messianism.[24] Matanky analyzes key texts from Habad masters regarding melody, showing that *nigun* is to be identified with the most transcendental strata of being and even with the Infinite itself.

[22] Ibid., 104–105.

[23] Eugene Matanky, "*Nigun* Shamil: The Soul Endlessly Yearning for What It Has Always Never Been," a seminar paper written at the Herzog College (Alon Shvut) under the guidance of Dr. Ron Wacks and submitted in September 2015. The paper came to my attention as this essay was completed. Due to its importance, I incorporate it here. I am thankful to Mr. Matanky for providing me with the information about his excellent paper. The paper can be read at: https://www.academia.edu/10011516/Nigun_Shamil_The_Soul_Endlessly_Yearning_for_What_It_Has_Always_Never_Been [retrieved: 29 Jan. 2018].

[24] As summarized in Elliot R. Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (New York, 2009).

Analyzing in detail the Rebbe's teachings on *nigun* Shamil that opens the present essay, Matanky argues that the linear-circular nature of melodic time interacts in the case of *nigun* Shamil with a melody focused around exile and redemption and the performative function of this melody in Habad. His conclusion (compare with Ben-Moshe) is that the melody leads us away from thinking in the binary terms of exile and redemption. The flowing and intertwining of the melodic movements leads the performer to experience a sense of time beyond the tripartite division of past, present, future. It is time that stands outside of time. The Hasid experiences redemption when he understands that to be truly redeemed one has to go beyond all binary thinking. Exile and redemption are two halves of the song that define each other. He thus realizes that true redemption occurs at that precise moment that cannot be calculated chronologically. Through Shamil, argues Matanky, "we learn to experience the advent of the nonevent, that which lies beyond sound and silence." The detailed genealogy of the ideas posed by the Rebbe in his *siḥot* about *nigun* Shamil brought into discussion by Matanky adds an historical and ideological depth that is missing in the more ethnomusicologically-oriented studies.

Concluding Observations

The conception, performance and reception of *nigun* Shamil introduced us to the social, literary and technological mechanisms that characterize music in Habad, past and present. Oral, written and electronic transmission are intertwined, and sometimes in conflict, in the making of a *nigun*. The *nigun* can be a "text" in its own right, a metaphor for a Hasidic teaching that is deployed as a "language text," or a vessel that generates or changes a state of mind at the level of the individual or the community. It can operate at a psychological level by enlightening the spiritually blind with a power reminiscent of magic. At the level of *communitas*, the *nigun* can produce, through its public performance in a *farbrengen*, at the Habad Rebbe's *tish* or on holy days (such as Simhat Torah in the case of *nigun* Shamil), an experience of religious solidarity, mutual *hitḥazkut* (communal spiritual strengthening) between the Hasidim and their communion with the sacredness of the singing tsadik.

Torat ha-nigun (my preferred term for Hasidic "music theory" or "musicology") of Habad is unique in its elaborations. The masters of Habad in all generations expressed themselves prolifically on *nigun* and recruited

it as a strategic centerpiece of their outreach activities. However, the social, technological and spiritual processes described here in relation to Habad's *nigun* Shamil are also exemplary of the musical cultures of other Hasidim.[25] There are indeed Hasidic dynasties, most notably Modzitz and Karlin, whose musical creativity is known as being exceptionally rich, well documented and amply disseminated in the printing and mass media. Moreover, there are outstanding Hasidic masters, such as Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, whose compositions and performances became legendary and are a source of inspiration until the present.[26]

An important issue raised by the present study applies to all Hasidic dynasties and masters: *nigunim* can be recruited from the "outside" world or composed by Hasidim at any given time and circumstances provided that their musical structure satisfies the spiritual goals of Hasidic worship. The centrality of non-accompanied, mostly wordless vocal tunes performed by the Hasidic masters such as the Lubavitcher Rebbe, as a main vehicle for the articulation of both the heightening of mystical experience and the teaching of *hasidut* have been central to Hasidism ever since its inception. Second in line is the deployment of *nigun* during normative prayers as a vessel of the individual's path to *devekut*. Eventually the *nigun* accompanied by dance became a vehicle for the enhancement of the communitarian experience among Hasidim through the rejoicing induced by collective performances, especially around the Rebbe's *tish* and at weddings.[27]

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[25] For a succinct and yet enlightening exposition of *nigun* in Habad and on the historical background of Habad's engagement in auto-documenting its musical lore, see Naftali Loewenthal, "Spirituality, Melody and Modernity in Habad Hasidism," in Steve Stanton (ed.), *Proceedings of the First International Conference on Jewish Music [April 1994]* (London, 1997), 62–78. Yaacov Mazor provides a succinct dissection of the musical history of Habad in his essay, see Yaacov Mazor, "Ha-shushalot ha-ḥasidiyot ve-ha-tekstim she-be-fihen" [The Hasidic Dynasties and Their Texts (on Music)], http://www.piyut.org.il/articles/910.html#habad [retrieved: 27 Jan. 2018].

[26] On the *nigunim* of the Berditchever, see Michael Lukin, Matan Wygoda, "Darei ma'alah 'im darei matah: Nigunei R. Levi Yitzḥak mi-Berditchev be-perspektivah historit," in Zvi Mark, Roi Horn (eds.), *Rabbi Levi Yitchak of Berdichev: History, Thought, Literature and Melody* (Rishon Le-tziyon, 2017), 426–581.

[27] Yaacov Mazor elaborates on these issues in his important study, see Yaacov Mazor, "Koḥo shel ha-nigun ba-hagut ha-ḥasidit ve-tafkidav ba-havai ha-dati veha-ḥevrati," *Yuval* 7 (2002), 23–53.