

* Chanukah's Top Hit_*

The festival of Chanukah envelops our families with warmth and brings light into our homes. It is a holiday that celebrates the triumph of the Jewish people and is punctuated by candles, latkes, dreidels (tops), gifts (of course) and music. Though the story of the Maccabees, their victory and the miracle of the oil is known by all from childhood, the history of the songs we sing by the menorah lights may not be. Our rich musical heritage offers Hebrew, Yiddish and English songs, which include *Mi Yimalel, Oy, Hanukkah*, an East European Yiddish folk song of the 19th century and *I Have a Little Dreidel* by S.E. Goldfarb. This repertoire has continued to grow, particularly in the United States in the last few decades, with a remarkable output by noted cantors, composers and performers. *Maoz Oz Tzur* is the most well known of the Hanukkah songs (our 'top hit,' so to speak). It has a fascinating history, with unlikely origins, evolving and resonating with remarkable staying power. First, a brief look at the text. The hymn, "Maoz Tzur" ("Fortress Rock"), was believed to have been written by a 13th-century poet named Mordecai bar Yitzhak. The poem contains six stanzas, making reference to Egypt, Babylonia, Persia and Syria; from persecution and slavery to freedom. The poet spelled his name in an acrostic in the first five stanzas; *hazak* (strong) is the sixth stanza acrostic. *Maoz Tzur's* melody can be traced back to the 15th century. Though there is a slight difference of opinion amongst leading Jewish musicologists, the consensus is that the musical origins of this Hanukkah song is from German folk songs dating from the 15th and 16th centuries. Evolving in sections, the final one was linked with a popular German song, made famous in a musical setting in approximately 1560. It is interesting to note that while the music of our people has, throughout the centuries, been influenced by the music of the communities in which we lived, the same can be said for some of the Church music composed during this period. It has been documented that the same German folk songs that evolved into our *Maoz Tzur* can be found in Protestant chorales. Both Martin Luther, one of the 16th century's first Protestant reformers, and the great German Baroque composer, Johann Sebastian Bach, wrote four-part chorales based on these same tunes. The first recognizable documentation of *Maoz Tzur*, as we know it, can be found in the 1815 English collection entitled *Hebrew Melodies*. The tune to *Maoz Tzur* was set to a poem entitled "On Jordan's Banks." The evolution of this collection is fascinating, joining together the celebrated English poet Lord Byron and two distinguished Anglo-Jewish musicians from London. The first was Isaac Nathan (1791-1864), the son of a cantor from Canterbury, who was recognized as a composer and singer. The second was the tenor John Braham (1777-1856), who was the most renowned tenor of his time. Prior to *Hebrew Melodies*, Isaac Nathan had set to music a work of Lord Byron's in 1813, and provided him a printed copy the following year. Nathan subsequently wrote Lord Byron a passionate letter, dated June 30, 1814, from which the following is excerpted: I have with great trouble selected a considerable number of very beautiful Hebrew melodies of undoubted antiquity, some of which proved to have been sung by the Hebrews before the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem.... I am taking great liberty with your Lordship in even hinting that two songs written by you would give the work great celebrity.. I have since been persuaded by several Ladies of literary fame and known genius, to apply to your Lordship.... if your Lordship would permit me to wait on you with the Melodies and allow me to play them over to you, I feel certain from their great beauty, you would become interested in them, indeed, I am convinced no one but my Lord Byron could do them justice.... Lord Byron accepted Isaac Nathan's heartfelt request and gave over his copyrights to Nathan. As it turns out, Lord Byron himself had tried to set his poetry to Hebrew melodies at one time. The songs in this compilation were arranged for choir and a piano accompaniment was written for each one. Some of the tunes were what we would call traditional. Others were composed by cantors or melodies that became associated with several cantors. *Hebrew Melodies* (the *Maoz Tzur* tune included) was dedicated to Princess Charlotte of Wales, who was a patron of Isaac Nathan and one of his voice students. Alongside the evolution and documentation of what we would call the Western European melody for *Maoz Tzur*, another well-known musical setting of the hymn was documented by the Italian composer Benedetto Marcello (1686-1739). The German Jews who had settled in Italy during the 17th and 18th centuries sang this particular melody. It was known as 'Ebrei tedeschi' from Marcello's 'Estro Poetrico Armonico' (Venice, 1724-1727). This was an eight-volume collection, containing 50 settings, which included both instrumental and vocal works. Each volume contained Marcello's commentary, including discussions about the music of the Hebrews. Marcello even makes reference to the differences in the chants between the Spanish and German Jews. These comments strongly indicate that both Sephardic and Ashkenazic melodies were sung in the Venetian synagogue. Marcello notes the tune as "Intonazione Sopra Maoz Tzur. Although the *Maoz Tzur* melody that Marcello documented is

known and performed today, it is the Ashkenazic Maoz Tzur that we traditionally sing following the lighting of the menorah is the dominant musical symbol of the festival. When I was younger and sang in the Zamir chorale, I sung and heard the Marcello version of Maoz Tzur for the very time. It is most beautiful and much more musically sophisticated than the Maoz Tzur that we sing. It is exciting to think that the tunes that fused together during the 15th and 16th centuries found their way into the daily and supplementary prayers that are recited in the synagogue during the Chanukah holiday and are sung in every Jewish home. When we join together to light the candles this Hanukkah, though the history of "Maoz Tzur" may not extend back to Maccabean times, we should remember its centuries-long evolution and journey is a musical miracle of resilience.

Chag Sameach!

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