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**Milken Archive of Jewish Music Virtual Museum
Introduces**

SING UNTO ZION! IN PRAISE OF A NATIONAL JEWISH HOME

American Jewish music that celebrates Israel culture and heritage

As inspiration goes, it's hard to beat the birth of a nation.

So proves Volume 8 from the Milken Archive of Jewish Music: The American Experience. The music presented in [Sing Unto Zion! In Praise of a National Jewish Home](#) covers a lot of ground, from original settings of traditional pioneer (*halutz*) songs to meditations on politics and religion in modern-day Israel. But all of this reflects the profound impact that Zionism and the emergence of a Jewish state have had on the American Jewish imagination.

For centuries, Jews throughout the Diaspora yearned for a homeland, their longing spilling over into songs and prayers. Yet Zionism, the political movement dedicated to establishing such a homeland, was not always a matter of faith among American Jews. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the American Jewish community was divided over the notion of a Jewish state: some opposed it on religious grounds, while others were uncomfortable with it for political reasons.

Decades of settlement in the Holy Land under Ottoman and British rule, however, helped overcome many of those concerns. When Israel declared its independence in 1948, most American Jews embraced the newborn state with a mixture of awe and pride.

The Birth of Israeli Music in America

It didn't take long for the images of the *halutz*, or early immigrant pioneer, and the *sabra*, or native-born Israeli (*sabra* is the Hebrew name for a cactus that is prickly on the outside but sweet on the inside), to find their way into the American Jewish consciousness. From there, they quickly entered the musical repertoire, where they opened a whole new world of inspiration for American Jewish composers – and precipitated the occasional artistic makeover.

[Max Helfman](#), for example, served from the mid-30s to the late-40s as conductor of New York City's largest left-wing Yiddish choir: the Frayhayts Gezang Farayn, or Jewish People's Philharmonic Chorus, an organization whose sympathies lay more with lower Manhattan sweatshop workers and the international proletariat than with Jewish farmers in Palestine. Under Helfman's baton, the group's repertoire included both *In kamf* (In Struggle), an anthem of the Jewish labor movement in Europe and America, and *The Red Army Ballad*.

Just prior to Israeli independence, however, Helfman was recruited to serve as artistic director of the Jewish Arts Committee, an organization dedicated to introducing American Jewish youth to Zionism via the arts. He was also hired to direct a summer program funded by Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis with the intention of cultivating a modern American Jewish identity linked to the freshly minted Jewish state. Handed what amounted to a radically new creative brief, Helfman quickly switched musical gears and began turning out material like [Hag Habikkurim](#) (Festival of the First Fruits) and [Israel Suite](#), both comprised of original arrangements of Hebrew songs that had been sung in Palestine by Jewish settlers. (You can go online to watch a video documentary at the Milken Archive's virtual museum about the [recording of Israel Suite by the Vienna Boys Choir](#).)

Hag Habikkurim – a sequence of brief pieces arranged with admirable clarity and a gentle Middle Eastern inflection – exemplifies the fascinating give-and-take between American Jews and their spiritual homeland.

Many of its component melodies were either written or adapted from traditional sources by European composers who immigrated to Palestine under the old British Mandate. Some of those composers, including [Marc Lavry](#) (*Sabbath Eve Sacred Service*) and [Paul Ben-Haim](#) (*Kabbalat Shabbat*), were fascinated by the melange of North African, Middle Eastern, and Near Eastern music they encountered, and went on to found what became known as the Mediterranean style of composition. ([Julius Chajes](#), a Polish émigré who spent two years in Palestine before landing in the United States, was an early conduit for this style: his *Old Jerusalem*, an original setting of Psalm 134, and *Adarim*, based on a Palestinian shepherd's song, introduced American audiences to an elegant synthesis of Arab and Jewish influences.)

Their work, in turn, influenced that of American Jewish composers like Helfman who wanted to express a new kind of Jewish identity and help foster a connection between young American Jews and an equally young Jewish state. *Hag Habikkurim* was

conceived in that spirit as a multimedia choral pageant involving dance, pantomime, and costumes, all designed to reflect a spring harvest festival celebrated on the agricultural

communes known as *kibbutzim* that became a symbol of modern Israeli society and Jewish self-reliance.

Modern American Jewish Roots

The relationship between American Jewish artists and Israel has continued to evolve, though it has hardly become less complex.

For some American Jewish composers, like the German-born [Herbert Fromm](#), Israel remained a source of new and exotic musical resources. Fromm's *Yemenite Cycle*, a diaphanous work for soprano, flute, harp, and percussion, was inspired by the composer's first trip to Israel in 1960, when he encountered not only old friends like Ben-Haim but also the music of the Arab world, and of the old North African and Middle Eastern Jewish communities.

Others, like [Leonard Bernstein](#), who visited Israel frequently – he conducted in Tel Aviv in 1947, performed through artillery fire and air raids during the war of independence in 1948, and returned often to work with the Israel Philharmonic – took more general inspiration.

Bernstein's *Four Sabras*, for example, depicts a quartet of Israeli characters through a series of jewel-like piano miniatures. His emotionally charged *Halil* (Flute) is dedicated to a young Israeli flutist who was killed during the Yom Kippur War of 1973.

And [Ruth Schonthal](#), whose family fled Germany to escape Nazi persecution, composed *A Bird over Jerusalem* in response to the clashing religious and territorial interests that have long characterized life in the Jewish state. The piece draws upon Jewish, Arabic, and Christian music; and it veers from haunting to lyrical to violent. As Schonthal explains in a [video interview](#) with Neil W. Levin, artistic director of the Milken Archive, the titular bird is one that flies over the ancient city "not quite understanding why people who believe in the same God can be so at odds."

American composers will doubtless continue to respond in myriad ways to the complicated history and politics of Israel, incorporating the sounds and symbolism of the nation into their work. With *Sing Unto Zion!*, the Milken Archive paints a vivid picture of what that process looks like in action – and what Palestine and Israel have both meant to the American Jewish community over the years.

The Milken Archive of Jewish Music was founded by philanthropist Lowell Milken in 1990 to reflect the scope and variety of Jewish life in America, revealing the universality of the Jewish experience to people of all faiths and backgrounds. The Archive's virtual museum site www.milkenarchive.org is an interactive guide to music, videos, oral histories, photos and essays chronicling over 350 years of Jewish music and culture in a land of freedom.

For information, contact media@milkenarchive.org.