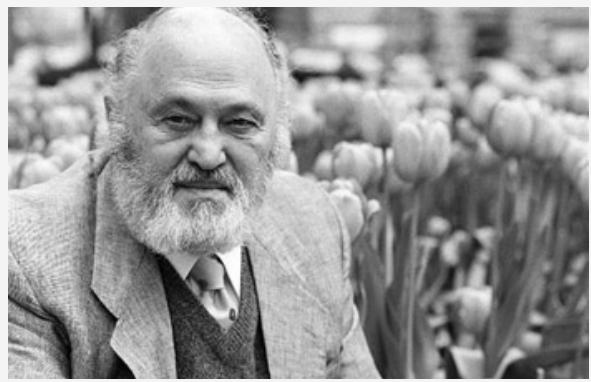


September 18, 2015

Remembering Raymond Smolover

Cantor and composer, who revived the connection between voice and spirit, passed away on September 11, 2015.



Cantor Raymond Smolover had for decades been immersed in the worlds of Jewish liturgical music, Yiddish art song, and European opera, but it was not until he heard the plaintive warble of Bob Dylan's voice on his son's record player that his intuitions about the relationship between music and worship finally crystallized. He recognized the sound and feeling of Jewish prayer in Dylan's songs.

The realization that popular music could express religious sentiments led Smolover to contemplate how the synagogue music of his generation had failed to reach the younger generation. He remembers that when he was a child, the congregants would shuckle (sway) while praying, but that now, most people in his community only davened from the "head up." Rock music, however, was a whole body experience – a corporality that Smolover felt was necessary to revitalize American Jewish worship. This awareness led him to compose two folk-rock Sabbath services, [*Edge of Freedom* \(1968\)](#) and [*Gates of Freedom* \(1970\)](#), which would become popular among the National Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY) camp communities. More importantly, his insight into Dylan's music gave him a new perspective on the gap between Jews of his generation and those like his son who were coming of age in the 1960s.

Smolover was born in Russian-controlled Ukraine in 1921. In the aftermath of that year's pogroms, his family decided to leave for the United States, settling in Pittsburgh in 1923. Smolover was immersed in both liturgical and popular music at a young age – he recalled being particularly impressed by an uncle who always sang and danced at Jewish celebrations ("a real Danny Kaye type"). After joining a local synagogue choir at the age of eight, Smolover continued to sing in shul for the rest of his life. Among Smolover's mentors was Julius Bloom, cantor at B'nai Israel in Pittsburgh, and in New York he studied individually with eminent figures of Jewish liturgical music like Adolph Katchko, Zavel Zilberts, and Max Helfman.

His association with Helfman was transformative. As music director of the Brandeis Camp Institute (BCI, now the Brandeis Collegiate Institute), which was founded by educator Shlomo Bardin, Helfman was tasked with using the arts to make Judaism more meaningful to younger generations of American Jews. With the establishment of the Brandeis Arts Institute, an arts residency program held at the Brandeis Camps, Bardin brought Smolover on board as head of children's music programs in California and North Carolina. "Max was the *ruach* (spirit) of Brandeis," said Smolover, who extends Helfman's legacy with music that proclaims a Jewish identity in line with the younger generation's values and experiences, at once parochial and cosmopolitan, sacred and secular.

Apart from Smolover's youth-oriented folk-rock Sabbath services, which draw on both popular and liturgical elements, notable compositions of this type include *Proclaim Liberty*, a work for vocal soloists, chorus, and orchestra presented at the American Bicentennial in Atlanta; and *Where the Rainbow Ends*, an interfaith cantata that links Jewish and Christian traditions.

At the age of 29, while working for BCI and pursuing his formal cantorial education and investiture at the newly organized School of Sacred Music at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Smolover began his 44-year tenure as cantor and music director of the Jewish Community Center/Congregation Kol Ami in White Plains, New York. As he tells the story, Smolover was attending a BCI fundraiser in Scarsdale when he met Rabbi Lawrence Schwartz, who asked him to audition as the men's choir director (cantors were not at that time



In a Milken Archive oral history session, [Raymond Smolover](#) recalls his formative years.

accepted as clergy). After leading a Friday night service, he was debriefed by Rabbi Schwartz, who indicated that there had been a problem. "Tell me what you did," said the rabbi. "I asked them to rise for the lighting of the candles and we went on to the service," he replied. "Did you ever tell them to sit down?" Smolover's singing was not the issue; the cantor had left the congregation on their feet for more than thirty minutes.

Throughout his career, Smolover's musical interests extended beyond the synagogue. His classical training and studies in music education at Carnegie Institute of Technology/Carnegie Mellon University (B.A.), Columbia University Teacher's College (M.A.), and Columbia University (Ed.D.) enabled him to cultivate parallel careers in opera and vocal pedagogy. He sang leading tenor roles with the New York City Opera, the New England Opera Theatre at Tanglewood, and the Berkshire Mountain Music Festival, and was founder and director of the Opera Theatre of Westchester in New York, which specialized in modern Jewish works. Smolover's vocal pedagogy, which draws insight from his own training, treats the human voice as a "living instrument" distinguished by its inseparability from the performer.

Beyond its pedagogical relevance, Smolover viewed the intimate relationship of voice and spirit as a metaphor for the ideal role of the hazzan in a congregation. "Worship is so close to the aesthetic experience," he said, "that traditionally the job of spiritual leadership was left to the hazzan." This is central to his critique of the modern Reform synagogue, in which rabbis had assumed the role once belonging to hazzan. As he learned from younger generations of American Jews who found the institutions and aesthetics of the elder generation increasingly uninspiring, the perceived sacredness of a text, teacher or space is not in itself enough to inspire religious sentiment. Rather, this must be purposefully cultivated in dialogue between clergy and their communities. For Smolover, it was the hazzan – a living instrument and curator of the spirit – who is best equipped to transform a congregation into a "spiritual community."

Learn more about [**Cantor Raymond Smolover**](#).