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Singing between the lines: modernity and women's voices in British synagogues  
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## Singing between the lines: modernity and women's voices in British synagogues\*

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RACHEL ADELSTEIN

At the beginning of the *Amidah*, there is a little note of uncertainty at Beth Shalom Reform Synagogue in Cambridge. Will the opening blessing of this prayer be traditional or inclusive? In its traditional form, the *Avot* is a blessing of the “God of our fathers”, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the three Jewish patriarchs. But in the *siddurim* (prayerbooks) of both the Movement for Reform Judaism and Liberal Judaism, there are a few extra lines naming the matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. The editors of *Forms of Prayer*, the Reform *siddur*, write: “The word *avot* can mean ‘fathers’ or ‘ancestors’; here we assume the former meaning so have added *immahot* [sic], ‘mothers’, as they are specifically named.”<sup>1</sup> In that moment, the presence or absence of the *imahot* tells the Cambridge congregation something about the lay congregant who is leading the service that week. Does the service leader lean towards tradition or towards modern ideals of inclusivity? Where do the women, the mothers of the Jewish people, fit into the sonic space of worship this week?

Sheila Levy, a congregant and former co-chair of Beth Shalom, recalled to me how she learned to read Torah along with her son on joining the Reform community in Cambridge. “Being brought up Orthodox, I’d never been near a Torah. I didn’t know what a Torah looked like. I’d been

1 *Forms of Prayer* (London: Movement for Reform Judaism, 2008), 223.

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up in the ladies' gallery. And so it was very exciting, this idea that you can actually get up to a Torah and read from it and sing from it."<sup>2</sup>

Ruth Bender Atik of Leeds has described the Orthodox congregation where she grew up: "The shul has separate seating, and certainly there was no equality of any sort. You know, they will be down to three men, and they will wait for two and a half hours rather than accept a woman as one of the minyan. And that remains. But interestingly, the clergy had accepted a mixed choir from some time around wartime, when a lot of men were called up. Women and small boys, I guess, did most of the singing."<sup>3</sup>

Hazan Jaclyn Chernetz of London told me about her first lessons in *hazanut*, the cantorial art, when she became a worship leader and Hebrew school teacher at Kol Nefesh Masorti congregation. "And so, in 2000, when I was to do it myself for the first time, not as leading youth services, teaching men, I sought out an Orthodox hazan who was willing to teach me. Clandestinely. Because he would lose his job if they knew he was teaching a woman."<sup>4</sup>

The experiences of these three women point to the subtle charge that the female voice carries in British synagogues today. The presence of a woman singing or praying during a worship service can be seen as a border that divides one type of Jewish religious practice from another. Much of the rhetoric that surrounds the topic of Jewish music involves borders and the different ways in which people establish, contest, or transgress those borders. There are borders within time and space, between communities of varying races and national origins and styles of religious observance, and between old worlds and new countries. This preoccupation with borders stems in part from the fraught question of what defines Jewish music and Jewish religious practice, and who might have the authority to determine what is or is not properly Jewish. Jeffrey Summit frames his discussion of the role of *nusach*, prayer chant, in an Orthodox community in Boston, Massachusetts, by establishing the role of *nusach* in creating a boundary between what this community considers to be correct tradition and the musical chaos of the outside world. Summit writes that members of this community "seek out more ways to make distinctions between Jews and non-Jews, to affirm their unique separateness in the face of the

2 Sheila Levy, personal interview, 17 April 2015, digital recording, private collection.

3 Ruth Bender Atik, personal interview, 21 June 2015, digital recording, private collection.

4 Jaclyn Chernetz, personal interview, 30 July 2010, digital recording, private collection.

challenge and appeal of the seductive non-Jewish culture".<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Benjie-Ellen Schiller sets her exploration of the American Reform Union Hymnal in the social and sacred boundary formed when Orthodox Jews from Eastern Europe emigrated to the United States and encountered the German-descended American Reform movement.<sup>6</sup>

A significant portion of the communal anxiety over locating and defining a boundary between tradition and modernity might derive from the concept of the boundary itself as a solitary, hard, dividing line. Things on this side of the border are traditional and valuable and ought to be preserved; things on that side of the border are modern and cheap and ought to be shunned. This dualistic view of tradition as opposed to modernity becomes increasingly complicated as the generations pass, and ideas and institutions that were once new and frightening grow older and become more established, and ideas and institutions that were old and traditional recede ever further into the past. As fashions change and cultures develop and adapt to new circumstances, modernity appears as an increasingly elusive object, either as a goal for which to strive or as a threat to be opposed. At any given moment, it is easy to locate the extremes of tradition and modernity but the border itself, the hard, shining line that divides one side from the other, is difficult to find. A border that is so hard to locate becomes a site to be contested and explored, a space in which communities can question their current practices and assumptions, and experiment with new ways of presenting themselves to the world in forms that they can recognize.

Summit and Schiller both describe the Jewish struggle to locate this elusive boundary between tradition and modernity in religious practice. Philip Bohlman names the space that appears when those boundaries shift and blur: "Utopia occupies the borders between traditional Jewish society and the modernity to which it increasingly aspired."<sup>7</sup> Utopia is an imaginary, often idealized, space, one that does not or cannot exist; and yet, as Bohlman has written, a great deal of musical negotiation and creative approaches to religious practice can be found in this particular

5 Jeffrey Summit, "Nusach and Identity: The Contemporary Meaning of Traditional Jewish Prayer Modes", in *Music in American Religious Experience*, ed. Philip V. Bohlman, Edith L. Blumhofer, and Maria M. Chow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 279.

6 Benjie-Ellen Schiller, "The Hymnal as an Index of Musical Change in Reform Synagogues", in *Sacred Sound and Social Change: Liturgical Music in Jewish and Christian Experience*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman and Janet R. Walton (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 190.

7 Philip Bohlman, *Jewish Music and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 127.

utopia between tradition and modernity. I situate the position of women in public Anglo-Jewish worship not as a boundary marker between Orthodox and Progressive practice but as the subject of one of the negotiations that occupies and fills Bohlman's utopia between varying Anglo-Jewish concepts of and desires for tradition and modernity.

### *Reform as practicality*

The British Movement for Reform Judaism is one of the three most prominent Progressive Jewish movements of the nineteenth century, along with the founding German Reform movement and its daughter movement in the United States. However, where the German and American Reform movements were driven by questions of ideology, reforming both Jewish practice and Jewish theology, the early British Reform movement concerned itself more with practicalities. The West London Synagogue of British Jews, the first Reform synagogue in the country, was founded not as a place of ideological experimentation or religious reform but as a result of a dispute between congregants of the Bevis Marks synagogue.

Bevis Marks is the oldest active synagogue in the country, descended from the Spanish and Portuguese congregation founded in 1657 on Creechurch Lane in London. As the congregation grew, it required a larger building and the current synagogue was completed in 1701. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, its congregation was primarily Sephardic, of Spanish and Portuguese descent, and growing steadily more prosperous and middle-class. By the 1820s, the Bevis Marks synagogue was a leading institution in the Sephardic community. The synagogue provided aid and advice to congregations all over the world and its decisions helped to establish standards of ritual and practice for British synagogues. During the nineteenth century, several trends in European Jewish synagogues adapted religious practice to the patterns and social standards of modern life for emancipated citizens. These trends included streamlining and simplifying the chant used in the service, reducing the repetitions of certain prayers, and encouraging quieter, more decorous behaviour from congregants at the service. Bevis Marks considered some of these ideas, rejecting many of the more radical of them, including both the introduction of instrumental music and a proposal to allow women to join in chanting the service.<sup>8</sup> In the end, the dispute that led to the

8 Todd Endelman, *The Jews of Britain, 1656 to 2000* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2002), 110.

foundation of the first Reform synagogue in Britain was over the Bevis Marks leadership's refusal to build a branch synagogue in the West End to serve a group of wealthier congregants who had moved there and found that it was too far to walk to Sabbath services at Bevis Marks. In 1840, a group of Sephardic families from Bevis Marks and Ashkenazi families from the Great Synagogue formed a new house of worship, which they called the West London Synagogue of British Jews, allowing congregants of both Sephardic and Ashkenazi origin to worship together.

The West London Synagogue did not align itself with the progressive social and religious ideology of German and American Reform Judaism. At first, it did not identify itself as a Reform synagogue at all, highlighting a change in national identification rather than in ideology or practice as its distinguishing feature. Its worship practices closely resembled those of Bevis Marks and the Great Synagogue; the West London Synagogue altered those practices only to blend Sephardic and Ashkenazi prayer customs into a hybrid practice that they designated British. Its first spiritual leader, David Woolf Marks, published the synagogue's first *siddur* in August 1841, including only the minor reforms of shortening the Sabbath morning service and eliminating the second day of the festivals.<sup>9</sup> Following the official consecration of the West London Synagogue of British Jews on 27 January 1842, Marks introduced an idiosyncratic nonconformism, concentrating on the written text of the Hebrew Bible rather than developing flexible approaches to Jewish law, as his German and American colleagues were doing. Although he introduced confirmation ceremonies for both boys and girls,<sup>10</sup> he maintained separate seating for men and women.<sup>11</sup> The Reform synagogues in Manchester and Bradford, founded in 1857 and 1873 respectively, had German-born rabbis who introduced ideas about ritual and legal flexibility to those congregations.

One of the great musical innovations in nineteenth-century European Jewish ritual was the choir. Although the organ provoked much more controversy, the choir had a more wide-ranging effect on the sound of the worship service. And in the second half of the nineteenth century,

9 Anne J. Kershen, "1840–1990: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Progressive Judaism", in *150 Years of Progressive Judaism in Britain*, ed. Anne J. Kershen (London: Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, 1990), 8.

10 Curtis Cassell, "David Woolf Marks", in *ibid.*, 20.

11 Raymond Apple, "Professor Marks and the Oral Law Controversy", paper delivered at the Australian Association of Jewish Studies Conference, Auckland, July 2008, at [www.oztorah.com/2008/10/professor-marks-the-oral-law-controversy/](http://www.oztorah.com/2008/10/professor-marks-the-oral-law-controversy/) (accessed 2 Feb. 2017).

that sound began to include women's voices. During this period of Jewish life in Britain, a synagogue choir was as likely to be mixed-voice as it was to be all-male. Both Orthodox and Progressive synagogues in this era introduced mixed choirs, and, like the birth of the Reform movement itself, their reasons for doing so were as much about practicality as about ideology. In London, the West London Synagogue hired the non-Jewish musician Charles Garland Verrinder as its first organist and choirmaster in 1859. When Verrinder arrived, West London's choir consisted of men and boys. In 1863, Verrinder introduced the idea of adding women to the choir, not because he supported any particular theological argument about the status of women in the synagogue but because of the inconvenience that working with boy singers presented. He wrote to the synagogue council: "It is however our duty to bring again under your notice the occasional deficiencies in the execution of the Choral music arising from the difficulties we experience in replacing those boys whose voices have become totally useless."<sup>12</sup>

Although the mixed choir was a signal of Reform tendencies in Germany and the United States, the same was not necessarily true in Britain. Both ideologically and in ritual practice, there was much more overlap between British Reform and Orthodox synagogues well into the twentieth century. Hampstead Synagogue, founded in 1892, was the first Orthodox synagogue to have a mixed choir. Although Chief Rabbi Hermann Adler (in office 1891–1911) had refused permission for the choir at the foundation ceremony, the synagogue established the choir anyway, knowing that Adler would not actually disband it once it was formed.<sup>13</sup> This silent negotiation between official disapproval and unofficial tacit permission succeeded, and Hampstead Synagogue maintained this mixed choir until 1986, when it became the last Orthodox synagogue in Britain to switch from a mixed choir to an all-male choir.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the choir of the New West End Synagogue in Bayswater was mixed from 1895 through the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> East London Synagogue also admitted women to its choir in 1896 though, in a nod to the practice of

12 Charles Garland Verrinder, 1863, cited in Susan Wollenberg, "Charles Garland Verrinder and Music at the West London Synagogue, 1859–1914", in *Music and Performance Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Essays in Honour of Nicholas Temperley*, ed. Bennett Zon (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 67.

13 Geoffrey Alderman, *Modern British Jewry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 108.

14 Chernetz interview, 2010.

15 *Ibid.*



seating men and women separately, the female singers sang from behind a screen.<sup>16</sup> Outside London, the Liverpool Old Hebrew Congregation on Princes Road, where both Sheila Levy and Ruth Bender Atik grew up, maintained a choir from 1858. In 1941, many of the men and boys of the choir were absent due to military service or evacuation. The choirmaster, Raphael “Rafe” Dorfman, and his brother Charles, the choir librarian, decided to recruit women into the choir to replace the boys. They began with their sister, their wives, and their daughters. The mixed choir proved popular and remained even after the Second World War was over.<sup>17</sup>

During the first century in which Orthodoxy and other Progressive Jewish movements co-existed in Britain, the presence of women’s voices in the synagogue and women’s participation in the musical life of the synagogue remained limited. Women could sing in certain choirs but could not lead worship as either a rabbi or a hazan. That some Orthodox synagogues both in and outside London had mixed choirs indicates that, in this era, the presence of women’s voices did not represent a sharp border between Orthodoxy and Reform or Liberal practice. In this blurred, softened boundary, in the space of Bohlman’s utopia, the nuances and multiple motivations of this particular negotiation with modern European concepts of worship appear clearly. In the cases of West London Synagogue and the Liverpool Old Hebrew Congregation, the choirmasters decided to mix the choir for practical reasons; it was easier for Verrinder and Dorfman to find and work with women singers rather than boys at a certain point in the choir’s existence. The London Orthodox synagogues with mixed choirs had them because of the social outlook of the Chief Rabbi.

Hermann Adler, the son of the previous Chief Rabbi, Nathan Marcus Adler, took over the position in 1891. He developed a broad and relatively tolerant style of Orthodox practice for the United Synagogue, based on the community’s sense of security in its Englishness and its increasingly respectable social position.<sup>18</sup> Although Adler did not necessarily approve of mixed choirs, he did not forbid them outright. For Adler, the mixed choir was a site of negotiation with, and adaptation to, the modern social norms of English worship in the late nineteenth century, rather than an

16 Saskia Coenen Snyder, *Building a Public Judaism: Synagogues and Jewish Identity in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 301.

17 Saul Marks, “choir”, 2012, at [www.princesroad.org/choir](http://www.princesroad.org/choir) (accessed 2 Feb. 2017).

18 Office of the Chief Rabbi, “History of the Chief Rabbinate: Office of the Chief Rabbi”, 2017, at <http://chiefrabbi.org/history-chief-rabbinate/> (accessed 2 Feb. 2017).



ideological statement about the position of women in Jewish life. The community over which Adler presided was one that valued Englishness and required that some aspects of Orthodox practice be adjusted to allow for an expression of Englishness as well as Jewishness, as the historian Julius Carlebach has observed: “Englishness decreed that, as long as one adheres to principle, one is more or less absolved from practice.”<sup>19</sup> In the case of mixed choirs, Adler allowed the practice to become English, while adhering to principle in following the form, language, and content of Orthodox worship. The idea of Englishness in worship presented another blurred boundary, and another utopia within which a community could devise its own working relationship between its own traditions and the modes of the larger culture.

### *Ideological separation*

In Britain, the ideological division over women’s voices in public worship came about in the postwar era, in part as a reaction to the Holocaust. While individual Jewish theologians and scholars wrestled with the intellectual and spiritual meanings of the Holocaust and debated the presence or absence of God in the concentration camps, Jewish communities expressed their response culturally. Some communities, especially in the United States, increased their emphasis on social justice activism, building the concept of *tikkun olam*, “repair of the world”, into a guiding social-religious philosophy.<sup>20</sup> However, many Orthodox communities in Western Europe, the United States, and Israel responded by idealizing and venerating the religious practice of the murdered communities, especially those from Eastern Europe. These surviving communities shifted their own religious practice to become increasingly strict and conservative, attempting to live up to the idealized memory of the communities lost to the Holocaust.<sup>21</sup> The Orthodox side of the Anglo-Jewish community experienced this kind of survivor guilt and its response as well. Under the leadership of Chief Rabbi Israel Brodie (in office 1948–1965), the United Synagogue grew more conservative, both politically and theologically,

19 Julius Carlebach, “The Impact of German Jews on Anglo-Jewry: Orthodoxy, 1850–1950”, in *Second Chance: Two Centuries of German-Speaking Jews in the United Kingdom*, ed. Werner E. Mosse et al. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1991), 406–7.

20 Jonathan Krasner, “The Place of Tikkun Olam in American Jewish Life”, *Jewish Political Studies Review* 25, no. 3–4 (2013): 62.

21 Roberta Rosenthal Kwall, *The Myth of the Cultural Jew: Culture and Law in Jewish Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 102–3.

turning away from modernity and the liberal idea of worship integrated into the local style.

While the United Synagogue did not go so far as to become an ultra-Orthodox organization, it did call for increasing strictness in ritual practice in its member congregations. Brodie and his successor, Lord Immanuel Jakobovits (in office 1967–91), called for Orthodox synagogues in Britain to give up their mixed choirs if they wished to remain part of the United Synagogue.<sup>22</sup> Between the 1950s and 1986, most Orthodox synagogues did as instructed. The Liverpool Old Hebrew Congregation chose its choir over membership in the United Synagogue. Today, it is an independent Orthodox congregation whose mixed choir still sings at Sabbath services and it believes itself to be the only Orthodox synagogue in the country with a mixed choir.<sup>23</sup>

The practice of mixed-choir singing remained in Reform and Liberal congregations and was instituted at some Masorti synagogues as well. Cantor Jason Green led a choir called the New London Singers at the New London Synagogue in St John's Wood, a member of the Masorti movement, until his departure in 2018. Although Green formed this incarnation of the choir in 2013, the New London Synagogue had mixed choirs since its founding in 1964.<sup>24</sup> Its founder and first rabbi, Dr Louis Jacobs, intended the synagogue to be a return to the prewar practice of the United Synagogue, offering what the historian Geoffrey Alderman calls "tradition without fundamentalism", and a respite for congregants who do not approve of the United Synagogue's ongoing movement towards religious conservatism.<sup>25</sup> The independent and non-denominational Belsize Square Synagogue employs an adult professional choir, an adult volunteer choir, and a children's choir. These choirs are all mixed and sing classic German and British liturgical settings of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This music situates Belsize Square Synagogue at the intersections of two variations on Jewish modernity, enacting and sounding the cultural negotiation of a congregation founded in 1939 by German Liberal refugees and initially supported by Lily Montagu, one of the founders of Liberal Judaism. Although Belsize Square does not identify with Liberal Judaism, Montagu's influence on what the synagogue calls

22 Chernet interview, 2010.

23 Marks, "choir", 2012.

24 Teresa Kosmin, "The New London Singers, 2013–2018: Masorti Judaism", 2018, at <https://masorti.org.uk/the-new-london-singers-2013-2018/> (accessed 11 Dec. 2018).

25 Alderman, *Modern British Jewry*, 364.

the “Woman’s Issue” remains considerable, and the synagogue continues its negotiation of the balance between traditional practice and progressive ideals into the present day.<sup>26</sup>

*Leader of prayer, leader of music*

One significant factor that affects the role of a woman’s voice in British synagogues is the presence or absence of a hazan, or cantor, in worship. The exact role of the hazan has been notoriously flexible over the centuries of Jewish practice, especially in Europe and the United States, but it is broadly true that a hazan is a religious officiant who chants the prayers of the liturgy beautifully on behalf of the congregation. Orthodox Judaism does not allow women to lead prayers at a service at which men are present. Prior to Chief Rabbi Brodie’s tenure, women could sing in choirs, because choirs represent the congregation; they are not in a position of religious leadership. The hazan is in the position of prayer leader and Orthodox women do not officially perform this duty. Beginning in 2002, a new style of Orthodox worship called a “partnership minyan” has developed. A partnership minyan is a small worship group that allows women to participate in worship to a limited extent, usually being called to the Torah, reading the Torah, and leading certain parts of the service. Men and women may sit together, although some partnership minyanim maintain gender segregation. The UK branch of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) lists five active partnership minyanim in London.<sup>27</sup> The United Synagogue does not support these worship groups and Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis declared in 2016 that partnership minyanim violated Jewish law and “should not take place under the auspices of any of our United Hebrew Congregations.”<sup>28</sup>

Progressive Jewish congregations are less stringent about excluding women from leading public prayer. Since the 1970s, Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist women in the United States have flocked to the cantorate, from which they have had a significant effect on Progressive Jewish practice in that country. However, the nature of the cantorate in

26 Antony Godfrey, *Three Rabbis in a Vicarage: The Story of Belsize Square Synagogue* (London: Larsen Grove Press, 2005), 85.

27 “Partnership Minyanim: JOFA UK”, 2016, at [www.ukjofa.org/participate/prayer/partnership-minyanim/](http://www.ukjofa.org/participate/prayer/partnership-minyanim/) (accessed 14 Dec. 2018).

28 Daniel Sugarman, “Chief Rabbi Mirvis stands Firm on Partnership Minyanim”, *Jewish Chronicle*, 24 Nov. 2016, at [www.thejc.com/news/world/chief-rabbi-mirvis-stands-firm-on-partnership-minyanim-1.147872](http://www.thejc.com/news/world/chief-rabbi-mirvis-stands-firm-on-partnership-minyanim-1.147872) (accessed 14 Dec. 2018).

Britain is different, both in its presence in the various movements and in its proportion of women to men. The vast majority of religious officiants called *hazan* in Britain are Orthodox men. This points less towards Progressive Anglo-Jewry's conception of women than it does to the community's conception of the position of *hazan*.

Prior to the moments of Reform in the nineteenth century, the practice of European Jewish worship developed under minimal local outside cultural influence. In 1662, a few years after Cromwell readmitted Jews to Britain in 1656, a London man named Joseph Greenhalgh became curious about how Jews worshipped. A Jewish friend of his named Samuel Levi arranged for him to visit a Sabbath service at the Creechurch Lane synagogue. Greenhalgh later wrote to a friend: "The Priest's Son, a comely youth, standing at the Table or Altar alone, sung all the former part of the Service which was a full hour long, all the rest singing with him, with a great and barbarous noise; this consisted mostly of the Psalms of David, with some prayers intermixed, which they sung standing up looking East, and with a lower noise and in tune not unlike to that when the reading Psalms are sung in our quires, but their reading Psalms they sung much what like as we do sing ballads".<sup>29</sup> Just over two hundred years later, George Eliot wrote of her character Daniel Deronda's first visit to a synagogue: "The Hebrew liturgy, like others, has its transitions of litany, lyric, proclamation, dry statement and blessing; but this evening all were one for Deronda: the chant of the Chazan's or Reader's grand wide-ranging voice with its passage from monotony to sudden cries, the outburst of sweet boys' voices from the little quire, the devotional swaying of men's bodies backwards and forwards, the very commonness of the building and shabbiness of the scene where a national faith, which had penetrated the thinking of half the world, and moulded the splendid forms of that world's religion, was finding a remote, obscure echo".<sup>30</sup>

Although these descriptions vary in their sympathy towards the Jewish service of worship, both emphasize a foreign quality that the observers notice. Attentive to the larger culture in which they lived, Jewish reformers developed similar feelings about their own style of worship. They considered that the liturgy led by a *hazan*, with the congregation chanting along in noisy heterophony, sounded too old-fashioned and too foreign for a community that intended to integrate into the modernity of European

29 Joseph Greenhalgh, 1662 (grammar original), cited in Henry Ellis, *Original Letters Illustrative of English History*, 2nd series, vol. 4 (London: Harding and Lepard, 1827), 14.

30 George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (1876; London: Penguin Books, repr. 2002), 367–8.

society; they moved instead to institute a new style of worship that would be polite and decorous and would not sound too foreign to the ears of any potential Christian visitors. Establishing four-part synagogue choirs, whether all-male or mixed-voice, was part of this new form of worship. Another part was the attempt to eliminate the hazan, a religious officiant who has no real counterpart in Christian worship. In Germany and the United States, this attempt failed, as congregants proved themselves firmly attached to the position. Instead, the hazan sang as a soloist with the backing and response of the choir. However, in Britain, where the leading Reform synagogue was led by Reverend Marks and his Bible-based ideas of worship, many Reform synagogues did begin their institutional lives with no hazan. Those synagogues that maintained the position were Orthodox.

While the Orthodox side of Anglo-Jewry accepts the hazan but does not permit women to take the position, the Reform and Liberal sides have welcomed women's voices for many decades but have only recently become open to the idea of a hazan. The Movement for Reform Judaism grew extensively between the 1930s and 50s and many currently active synagogues were founded during this time. These congregations valued music, often the German and British choral classics of the nineteenth century, and required musical directors and choirmasters, as well as singers in choral trios and quartets. Many of these positions went to women.

Mary Raikin Bonin, a professional soprano and occasional composer, served two London synagogues during the middle of the twentieth century. In 1954, she directed the choir at the consecration of the West Central Jewish Synagogue, now called the West Central Liberal Synagogue.<sup>31</sup> In the 1960s, Bonin was also one of the three original members of the choir of the Edgware and District Reform Synagogue (EDRS), which soon expanded to include Norma Roth singing alto to Bonin's soprano. Several years later, EDRS established a children's choir under the direction of Linda Addison, another professional soprano. This choir evolved into EDRS's current adult choir, directed for many years by Alan Kutner. In 1981, the choir came under the direction of another woman, Ann Sadan. Philip Roth, son of Norma, and a lifelong member of the EDRS choir, recalled that EDRS wished to include more traditional

31 William D. Rubinstein, Michael A. Jolles, and Hilary L. Rubinstein, *The Palgrave Dictionary of Anglo-Jewish History* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 113.

chant in its worship service: “And so we suggested that actually it might be an idea if they tried out having a hazan. So Alan Kutner, who was the choirmaster at the time, said he’d have a go at it. . . . And Ann took over as choirmaster, under his direction as Director of Music.”<sup>32</sup> Sadan has since assumed the position of Director of Music at EDRS, which she holds today.

In Golders Green, the North West Reform Synagogue at Alyth Gardens, known as Alyth, employed Vivienne Bellos as its Director of Music from 1980 until her retirement from the position in 2015. In her capacity as Director of Music, Bellos revived the adult choir and founded a children’s choir and a young adults’ choir called Pandemonium, as well as a synagogue drama group. Under her direction, the Alyth Choral Society and the Alyth Youth Singers sang at Sabbath services as well as at concerts both at Alyth and on tours to Europe and Israel. Between 1986 and 1998, Bellos served as a music consultant to the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain, the organization now known as the Movement for Reform Judaism. In 1998, the adult choir at Alyth made a recording of music used in their services. Bellos acted as both the choir director and the soprano soloist on this recording.<sup>33</sup>

In Cambridge, a small Reform worship group was started in October 1976 and in 1981 this became Beth Shalom Reform Synagogue. From the beginning, Beth Shalom has been interested in the music of the liturgy and its approach to that music has been shaped by two women, May Daniels and Diana Lipton. Daniels was a member of Beth Shalom until her death in the early 1990s and worked on the ritual committee during the 1980s to collect and formalize music at Beth Shalom and to teach the congregation to sing it. In reports from the early 1980s, Daniels describes how she visited other Reform and Liberal congregations in the London area to get a sense of what they were singing and how they were singing it. Beth Shalom decided early in its existence that it would be entirely lay-led, not employing a rabbi, cantor, or choir, in order to encourage full congregational participation in worship. Daniels did not serve as a choirmaster but she did serve as the musical leader during the High Holy Day services for many years, as the congregant who knew the music for those services the best. Congregant Michael Gait also recalls that Daniels had collected cassettes of music published by the Reform Synagogues of

32 Philip Roth, personal interview, 21 Dec. 2016, digital recording, private collection.

33 Viv Bellos and Raymond Goldman, “Music at Alyth: Synagogue Music from the Reform Tradition”, disc recording and booklet, ALYTHCDor (London, 1998).



Great Britain, which she used to teach the congregation of Beth Shalom.<sup>34</sup> Following Daniels's death, Diana Lipton, another congregant, provided informal musical leadership at Beth Shalom for several years during the 1990s. Today, Beth Shalom remains lay-led, with full participation by women both in leading worship and in congregational song.

This egalitarian approach to worship did not arrive fully formed and uncontested. Individual synagogues and institutions carried out their own debates and negotiations about the presence of women in worship services. These negotiations grew particularly intense between the 1960s and 1980s, when women's social roles expanded even as some Progressive synagogues sought to return to more traditional practices. Rabbi Michael Leigh, who led EDRS from 1963 until his retirement in 1993, supervised that congregation's shift towards traditional practice, including increasing the use of Hebrew in services. In the 1970s, when most Progressive synagogues allowed women to take part in all *mitsvot* (ritual tasks, also religious duties), Rabbi Leigh reserved the honour of carrying the Torah scrolls at Simchat Torah for men. It was not until the 1990s that Rabbi Leigh's successor, Rabbi Daniel Smith, brought full gender equality to EDRS, allowing women to carry the Torah scrolls on Simchat Torah and on Shabbat, and to wear *kippah* and *tallit* if they so desired. EDRS did not achieve full gender equality until 2005, when a woman performed *hagbahah* (elevating the scroll to display the text) and another was appointed as the Senior Warden.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the question of whether women could be admitted to candidacy for rabbinic ordination at Leo Baeck College, the London-based training institution for Reform and Liberal rabbis, occupied the academic committee there for many years. The College did not reach a formal decision until 1967, when they agreed that women could be admitted but that the College would not help women find a position after ordination.<sup>36</sup> The College ordained Jackie Tabick as Britain's first female rabbi in 1975.

While the position of women in Anglo-Jewish worship has certainly been contested, the negotiations have taken place primarily in non-

34 Michael Gait, personal interview, 12 March, 2015, digital recording, private collection. I thank Michael Gait for permission to consult Beth Shalom's records from the 1980s; private collection.

35 Sidney Budd, "Our History: Edgware and District Reform Synagogue, 1935–2017", at [www.edrs.org.uk](http://www.edrs.org.uk) (accessed 7 May 2017).

36 Jacqueline Tabick, "I never really wanted to be first", in *Hear Our Voice: Women Rabbis tell their Stories*, ed. Sybil Sheridan (London: SCM Press, 1994), 16–20.



musical aspects of worship. The majority of leadership roles in Progressive synagogues of the late twentieth century were not musical. Song belonged primarily to the congregation and to the choir, if there was one. Congregational engagement with modernity had secured women's position in the public sonic space of Progressive worship in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; at the end of the twentieth century, the site of negotiation moved to include individual religious leadership. This is one of the hallmarks of modernity, showing the mutability of borders and boundaries, and the shifts in cultural understandings of what is acceptable and what should be avoided. Such shifts demonstrate both the scale of the utopia that Bohlman locates between Jewish tradition and Jewish modernity and the extent to which negotiation and creative adaptation to changing circumstances can shape the ritual practices that occupy this utopia. As one negotiation concludes, it opens up new areas and new spaces to be explored and contested. By negotiating the position of women in the collective congregational voice, Progressive synagogues opened the possibility of a new space for women's public religious vocality.

#### *Sweet singers of Britain*

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the soundscape of the modern British synagogue included prayers spoken or chanted by a rabbi and spoken or chanted readings from the Torah, as well as prayers sung communally either by the congregation or a choir. However, congregational taste in music and congregants' conception of what was modern and fashionable continued to evolve and change through the twentieth century. During the middle of the twentieth century, relatively little new repertoire for Jewish choirs appeared and synagogue choirs continued to sing the pieces that they had sung for decades. By the 1980s, many congregations had begun to grow tired of their choirs and the nineteenth-century music that they sang and the choirs themselves had lost membership. Where Progressive synagogues in the nineteenth century had considered choirs to be a sign of modernity and integration in the contemporary style of English worship, congregations at the end of the twentieth century thought of them as dated, no longer speaking to congregants' sense of themselves as part of modern British culture.

During the search for a new way of sounding Progressive Anglo-Jewish worship, EDRS, and Alyth, among other congregations, decided

to bring back the hazan and the old-fashioned chanted liturgy. Because many Reform synagogues had been founded during the period when the British Reform movement did not employ hazanim, this choice brought a new sound into Progressive synagogues, introducing congregants to a style of worship that they might not have heard before. As previously noted, EDRS's first hazan was the choir director, Alan Kutner. On Kutner's retirement, around 2006, Mark Finer and Robert Davis stepped in to share the position.<sup>37</sup> At Alyth, Henry Danciger and Arnold Chazen both served briefly in the position.<sup>38</sup> The men who took up the position of hazan were self-taught, because there is currently no formal cantorial training institute in Britain. Jews' College, founded in 1855 and now known as the London School of Jewish Studies, offered training in hazanut from the Second World War through the 1960s.<sup>39</sup> The College trained many successful Orthodox hazanim but no longer offered this training at the time when the Progressive movements became interested in hazanut. Leo Baeck College does not offer any training in hazanut.

Given this, the first British women to become cantors received their training in the United States. Jaclyn Chernett helped to establish the Masorti movement in the 1980s, importing many ideas and philosophies from the American Conservative Movement. After leaving her Orthodox synagogue, Chernett had briefly attended a Reform synagogue in London but was not satisfied with the formal liturgy and lack of traditional chanted prayer. "There was no davening [Yiddish term for traditional chanting of prayers], you know, there was no buzz. It was all too decorous. And it didn't speak to my soul."<sup>40</sup> In 1984, Chernett and several male colleagues founded the first purpose-made Masorti synagogue in Britain. At the time, it was called the Conservative Synagogue of Northwest London and is now the Edgware Masorti Synagogue. Chernett led services at this synagogue for reasons of practicality, saying, "You know, we did everything. Because I was probably one of the only people who could leyn [traditional chanting of the Torah] at that time, I happened to be a woman, so I read Torah. Nobody batted an eyelid."<sup>41</sup> By 2000, she was leading services and had discovered a vocation as a hazan.

37 Roth interview, 2016.

38 Bellos and Goldman, "Music at Alyth".

39 "About LSJS: London School of Jewish Studies", 2018, at [www.lsjs.ac.uk/about-lsjs.php](http://www.lsjs.ac.uk/about-lsjs.php) (accessed 14 Dec. 2018).

40 Chernett interview, 2010.

41 Ibid.

In 2003, Chernett decided to seek formal cantorial training and enrolled in the Academy for Jewish Religion, a trans-denominational seminary in Riverdale, New York. She was ordained in 2006 and continues to serve as hazan and service leader at Kol Nefesh Masorti Synagogue in London. Shortly after her ordination, she founded the European Academy for Jewish Liturgy (EAJL). A largely online training programme for individuals who wish to learn to chant and lead services, EAJL performs its own negotiation between past and present practice, fitting itself into the space between traditional, individual approaches to training hazanim and a contemporary technological approach to communication. EAJL matches potential students and teachers who conduct lessons via Skype. Many of the teachers are based in the United States but some are European. EAJL is explicitly welcoming to women, as the “FAQ” page of its website shows. “Is it OK for women to learn as well as men? Yes, and you can specify a male or female teacher, should you wish.”<sup>42</sup>

While Chernett and EAJL work to combine aspects of traditional Jewish practice with a gender-inclusive and technologically oriented modernity, Cantor Zöe Jacobs and the music team at Finchley Reform Synagogue are blending two different Reform Jewish approaches to music in the synagogue. Like Chernett, Jacobs received formal cantorial training in the United States. She is a 2009 graduate of what is now the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the seminary for the American Reform movement.

Founded in 1948, the seminary’s cantorial school offers a thorough and comprehensive course of study that has been modified over the years to accommodate the cantorial needs of American Reform synagogues. In the postwar era, the American Reform movement has taken a notably different approach to modernity from that of either the British Movement for Reform Judaism or British Liberal Judaism. Where the British Progressive movements focused on a Bible-based liturgy and the choral sound of nineteenth-century modernity, the American Progressive movements in the 1970s experimented with the more individualistic and personalized sounds of the postwar youth movements, in particular the rise of folk and rock music. American congregations expected to have a cantor but also expected to be able to sing along with the cantor, as many of them had sung with songleaders at summer camps as children. Increasingly, American cantors took to using the instrument of the summer camps, the

42 “EAJL: FAQs”, 2007, at [www.eajl.org/faq.html](http://www.eajl.org/faq.html) (accessed 2 Feb. 2017).

guitar, to lead services. They sing a variety of music, often combining short bursts of liturgy from composers associated with German Reform, such as Salomon Sulzer and Louis Lewandowski, with late twentieth-century and contemporary folk-style liturgical compositions by composers such as Debbie Friedman, Jeff Klepper, and Craig Taubman.

This is the sound of the contemporary American Progressive synagogue but it is not necessarily the sound of the contemporary British Progressive synagogue. Jacobs's work at Finchley Reform Synagogue (FRS) has been to combine these two sonic responses to modernity. Along with Rabbi Miriam Berger and the choir director Mich Sampson, Jacobs draws on elements from both types of service to create a hybrid style of worship. She uses a guitar but teaches students to chant Torah using the Western European melodies common in Britain, instead of the Eastern European melodies used in the United States. She incorporates both newer worship melodies by contemporary American composers and familiar repertoire from the British Reform tradition. Jacobs compares relying on only one style of worship to eating a dinner consisting only of salmon: "I want salmon and broccoli and potatoes and whatever. So I'd like to think that we give that full plate. I think there are people who would say, oh, FRS, they're happy-clappy. That's a word that's been used around FRS a lot. And it's certainly true to say we have a stronger folk tradition than West London, or Hendon. Or Alyth, I think. We are the community that it wouldn't be surprising to find more guitars here, more people singing all the time, less listening. But we use a certain amount of *nusach* . . . We use some of the British classical Reform repertoire. Mombach, as an example."<sup>43</sup>

A few other British synagogues have or have had women as leaders of liturgy and music. For a brief time between 2014 and 2015, Cantor Cheryl Wunch served at Alyth and Cantor Jacobs has occasionally been assisted by Sarah Grabiner, currently a cantorial student at Hebrew Union College, and singer-songwriter Judith Silver. Silver also leads the monthly musical Friday night service at Westminster Synagogue in London, as well as weekend residential visits to other synagogues in and around London. Other synagogues have employed women under the title of rabbi who have worked in many ways much like a *hazan*, as is the case with Rabbi Esther Hugenholtz of Sinai Synagogue in Leeds. Although a woman cantor, or *hazanit*, is still rare in Britain, a small but slowly growing number of women do take on this musical and leadership role in both

43 Zöe Jacobs, personal interview, 1 May 2015, digital recording, private collection.

formal and informal capacities. Most recently, Cantor Tamara Wolfson, a 2018 graduate of Hebrew Union College, has accepted a joint position serving both Kehillah North London and Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue.<sup>44</sup>

### *Women carry the song*

Beyond the synagogue, British women are a key force in organizing the music of Progressive worship. Women compose and teach new songs and settings for the liturgy; women organize centralized events to teach clergy, choir directors, and interested congregants about the musical intricacies of the Jewish liturgy; and in 2012, women produced the first compilation of Anglo-Jewish music since 1938. Whether Orthodox or Progressive, the musical side of Anglo-Jewish worship has suffered from the lack of an efficient distribution network or institution that can introduce leaders of musical worship to a large variety of repertoire in a systematic way. Although the European Cantors' Association (ECA) provides a professional forum for hazanim to exchange ideas and critique each other's work, it primarily addresses Orthodox hazanim. Women from other movements are welcome to attend meetings of the ECA, although the degree to which they may participate in those meetings varies. Both male and female leaders of Progressive worship participate much more actively in Central and Eastern European ECA meetings than they do in Britain, where some meetings restrict women to the role of observer. During the late twentieth century, the Reform movement relied on cassette tapes that had to be purchased and shared internally within congregations. Until 2012, the only printed compilation of liturgical music was the Blue Book, a collection of nineteenth-century classics published by the United Synagogue in 1899, last revised in 1938. Congregations acquired new music when new members moved in from other regions of the country, bringing with them music that they had sung at their former synagogues.

In 2011, Cantor Jacobs held the first biennial Movement for Reform Judaism Music Conference, now officially renamed Shirei Chagigah, "Songs of Celebration" and occasionally known informally as "Zöe's music thing". Based on the model of the Hava Nashira song-leading

44 "Kehillah and NPLS appoint Cantor Tamara Wolfson", 2018, at [www.liberaljudaism.org/2018/03/cantor-tamara-wolfson-appointed-to-kehillah-and-npls-roles/](http://www.liberaljudaism.org/2018/03/cantor-tamara-wolfson-appointed-to-kehillah-and-npls-roles/) (accessed 11 Dec. 2018).

workshop sponsored by the Olin-Sang-Ruby Union Institute in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin,<sup>45</sup> *Shirei Chagigah* draws teachers and learners from both Britain and the United States to London for a day of workshops on liturgical music. At the first workshop, Judith Silver and the musician David Hoffman had the idea of forming *Shira Britannia*, a loose collective of British composers of liturgical music, to promote and perform new, home-grown compositions. *Shira Britannia* members have taught at subsequent *Shirei Chagigah* events and also at local and national *Limmud* conferences.

Following the 2008 revision of its *siddur*, *Forms of Prayer*, the Movement for Reform Judaism recognized the need for a broader and more diverse selection of service music and published *Shirei Ha-T'fillot*, "Songs of Prayer", in 2012. The primary organizers of this project were women. Rabbi Sybil Sheridan, Cantor Zöe Jacobs, and Janet Berenson all wrote introductory essays and the book committee located and solicited compositions by both male and female composers. The committee wished to allow Reform congregations a wide variety of choice in their music, offering options to appeal to many different concepts of modernity and tradition in Jewish worship. Each prayer appears in an average of three different settings, with options for traditional chant, mixed-voice choral song, or a contemporary melody for either solo voice or congregational unison. *Shirei Ha-T'fillot* presents its selections in a gender-neutral style. Except in the case of choral settings where parts are listed as "Soprano", "Alto", "Tenor", and "Bass", the book offers settings for "voice" and accompaniment, for "Solo" and "Choir", for a "Cantor" of unspecified gender, or duets scored for "Voice 1" and "Voice 2". *Shirei Ha-T'fillot* is a book that welcomes women's voices, both explicitly in its introductory essays and choice of composers and implicitly through its gender-neutral presentation. Although the book is rarely used in regular worship, it stands as a record of the musical intentions of the Movement for Reform Judaism at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

### Conclusion

From the founding of the West London Synagogue of British Jews, Anglo-Jewry has constantly negotiated relationships with the changing concept of modernity in British culture. Neither Jewish practice nor Western cultural and social norms are static, unchanging entities and what was

45 Ibid.

once the cutting edge of social fashion can quickly become ubiquitous and then outmoded. The concept of the proper role of a woman's voice in the British synagogue has changed as both ideas of Jewish practice and the position of women in British society have changed. In the nineteenth century, some Orthodox and Progressive congregations in Britain saw mixed-voice choirs as a desirable sign of Englishness and a marker of successful Jewish engagement with British cultural practices. Over the course of the twentieth century, both Orthodox and Progressive synagogues changed their views about these choirs. The United Synagogue rejected them as it reconsidered and revised its relationship with British modernity, while some Progressive synagogues came to see choirs as a symbol of worship practices that were no longer modern.

At each point of change, Jewish communities engage with the borders between tradition and modernity. Bohlman's utopia, the space between these borders, proves to be elusive precisely because they are always shifting. It is perhaps more accurate to conceive of modernity not as a shining goal to be either achieved or rejected but as a process of cultural self-examination and evolution. The ongoing existence of this utopia and the continuing creativity and debate that it engenders speak to the continual process of cultural change. As the position of women in British public life has changed over the course of the modern era, the presence or absence of women's voices in synagogues has given Anglo-Jewish movements and individual communities a path by which to incorporate aspects of modernity into religious ritual while keeping that ritual accessible and recognizably Jewish to those who practise it.