

The Music May Change, But the Four Questions Remain the Same
What the Melody of *Ma Nishtana* Can Teach Us About Jewish Tradition



***Ma Nishtana* , 14th century Sarajevo Haggadah**

Though they are neither the first nor concluding words of the Passover Haggadah, *Ma Nishtana* - "Why is this night different from all other nights?" - is arguably the most prominent and universally recognized phrase in the booklet we all use as a written guide to the Passover *seder* - as is its distinctive melody. The tradition of utilizing a formal 'users guide' for the seder dates back to medieval times, and some of the texts that constitute our Haggadah are millennia-years old. But it is the traditional melody associated with - in fact, chanted to - the *Ma Nishtana*, that, is both fascinating - and telling!

The *Ma Nishtana* questions first appear in the *Mishna*¹, and, as is often the case for Mishnaic texts, are a subject of discussion in both the Jerusalem and Babylonian *Talmud*.² Interestingly, not only are the questions themselves not the same in each of the two Talmuds, but the very number of questions in each is different as well - an intriguing subject, to be sure. More than the textual variations, though, 'tis the melody of the *Ma Nishtana* that most resonates with this writer; that, for both the what the melody conveys, and its historicity.

One need only walk into the *beit midrash* (study hall) of any traditional yeshivah and listen for but a moment to students studying the Talmud, in order to discern a distinctive melodic pattern; not so much a stand-alone song, as a quasi-melodic intonation of the texts being studied; studied that way for good reason.

Even after those texts were committed to writing, the Mishnah and Talmud continued to be referred to as the Oral Law (*Torah sheh-b'al peh*); a linguistic, but also visceral reminder that these originally unwritten texts were transmitted both orally and aurally. And there is ample textual proof thereof.

Referring to the manner of study of the Mishna, first century sage Rabbi Akiva enjoined his students to "sing it, constantly sing it."³ The Talmud itself⁴ instructs that one need study the oral law "with a tune." Actual manuscripts - some *Genizah* fragments of the Jerusalem Talmud and Mishnaic passages of the Babylonian Talmud - even include melodic accent marks.

Been a while since you've spent any time in the study hall of a traditional yeshiva or attended a traditional Talmud lesson? Don't think you would recognize that age-old melody? Consider the following:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1guRi_b_Q7BTvbwD4qYnPBem6sVk0SO-V/view

You may not be familiar with the Yiddish, but I venture to say that the melody rings true; here it is in the *s'fardi* dialect of modern Israel:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1fbJ1kUNreaRecEnhZQBajnotTx8CNZ9V/view>

Whether they be in Yiddish or Hebrew or even English, the disagreements, always dialectic in nature, that pervade the study halls of yeshivot of higher learning, often expressed in loud and animated voices and accompanied by physical gesticulations, are, without preconceived thought or intention, always intoned by way of the Ma Nishtana quasi-melody above. After all, is the Ma Nishtana itself not part of a Mishnaic text (see endnote 1)? [Interrogatory intended]

It is for that reason that, in Ashkenazic parlance, the Ma Nishtana chant is referred to as *lernsteiger* (or *lernshstayger*) - study mode. And it is not reserved for only the Ma Nishtana and the *Beit Midrash*, but often also heard when Talmudic passages appear in the prayer liturgy.⁵

But wait - is that the Ma Nishtana melody that your children, or even you, learned in Religious School? Is that the Ma Nishtana melody you're used to hearing - and singing - around your family's seder table? Fast forward (in time, if not historical accuracy) to 1936.

One of three children born to Alexander Niswizski and Feiga Solzman in Czarist Russia, Leo (1881 – 1953), the son of a cantor, was a prominent musician himself; one of the founders of The St. Petersburg Society for Jewish Folk Music. After marriage in Warsaw to Miriam (family name unascertainable), the couple moved to Vienna, where Niswizski (Nesviski) taught and composed music.

After emigrating to Israel with his brother Ari in 1922, and later sending for his wife, Leo, now Ephraim Abileah, continued to teach and compose music.⁶ In 1940, some of his compositions were performed by the Jewish National Workers' Alliance choir.⁷

But it was in 1936 that, though relative obscurity continued to be his professional fate, Abileah composed a melody that became universally known and performed. As part of an oratorio that he titled *Chag*

haCherut (Festival of Freedom), Abileah composed

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1g8sdo62LoVdtsJmNbgQbCDtJRSyQvzxM/view>

The oratorio was publicly performed but once; that in Abileah's hometown of Haifa. But his melody for Ma Nishtana caught on fire.

In a MyJewishLearning.com posting dated March 30, 2016, Rabbi Ruth Abusch-Magder, Education Director of San Francisco-based *B'chol Lashon*, whose mission is "strengthen[ing] Jewish identity by raising awareness about the ethnic, racial and cultural diversity of Jewish people and experience around the globe,"⁸ writes as follows:

"The tune that today is nearly universal, is a modern invention and speaks to the Zionist vision to create a new Jewish culture.

Understanding the power of music in culture, Abileah became part of a movement that composed music that like his new name, would move away from the culture of Diaspora and create a new sound for a new vision of Judaism.

In many ways this short simple melody harnessed the power of folk music and achieved what Abileah set out to do. He created a new version of the Four Questions that is today sung by Jews in all parts of the world. This Israeli version has supplanted the Yiddish version nearly completely."

Of course, the traditional Ma Nishtana *lernshtayger* intonation neither is, nor ever was, as Rabbi Abusch-Magder posits, the "Yiddish version" - not any more than, recited in another language, it would be a French, German, or, for that matter, English version. In fact, in this writer's home, when the youngest of the siblings, for whom Yiddish was a challenge, intoned the Ma Nishtana, it was just that; in English.

But no matter the language, it was the *lernshtayger* chant -

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1fbJ1kUNreaRecEnhZQbajnotTx8CNZ9V/view> - that accurately reflected the historicity of the Mishnaic text of the Ma Nishtana.

Traditionalists, Yiddish speaking or not, remain mindful of the instruction of codifier Rabbi Jacob b. Moses ha-Levi (1360 – 1427), the most authoritative source on Ashkenazi musical custom, that Ma Nishtana ought be sung with a traditional *niggun yafeh* (pleasant tune).⁹

It is also difficult to overlook that which Ephraim Abileah's granddaughter, Dafna, posted online:

*“In the book ‘History of Haifa,’ there is a story that when the synagogue could not get a cantor for the high-holidays, my grandfather (whose father was a well-known cantor in Russia) was obliged to sing and it was the first time that they heard Aida music for Yom-Kippur.”*¹⁰

With that in mind, can <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gvlldasjcX75c7tpSe9Xj5RrKR5s6-nt/view> be far behind?

¹ The oldest postbiblical collection of Jewish laws, the *Mishna* was compiled over a period of approximately two centuries, with final codification in the early 3rd century CE. Structurally, the Mishnah is divided into six ‘orders’ (or sections), each ‘order’ consisting of a number of tractates (or treatises), with each tractate further divided into chapters, and each chapter containing several paragraphs of laws. The Ma Nishtana appears in the third tractate of the second ‘order,’ chapter 10, paragraph 4.

² The *Talmud* is a record of rabbinic debates, discussions, and teachings that are based on the Torah and Mishnah, all of which took place in the 2nd through 6th centuries. Inasmuch as two major centers of Jewish scholarship existed at this time, one in Israel and one in Babylonia, two works of Talmud developed: the Jerusalem Talmud (most often called *Talmud Yerushalmi*) and the Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*).

³ see *Tosefta, Oholot*, 16:8

⁴ see *Megillah* 32b.

⁵ This writer often utilizes it in the Friday evening recitation of *Ba-Meh Madlikin*.

⁶ <https://ilania-ivil.tripod.com/family/id21.html>

⁷ New York Times, May 19, 1940

<http://www.abileah.com/A&WFriends&Family/FamilyInTheNews/Ephraim/Ephraim%20Abileah%20%20performed%20in%20NY%201940.pdf>

⁸ <https://globaljews.org/about/mission/>

⁹ see *Sefer Maharil*, Jerusalem 1978, *Hilkhot seder Pesach*, fol. 15a).

¹⁰ <https://ilania-ivil.tripod.com/family/id21.html>