

She Walks in Beauty Like the... Sabbath?: A Musical Message of Jewish Pride

Ironically, in the two centuries since the ubiquitous poet Lord Byron and the then well-known Jewish composer Isaac Nathan collaborated on the songbook *A Selection of Hebrew Melodies, Ancient and Modern*, widely called *Hebrew Melodies* (1815), the actual “melodies” of the pieces have all but vanished from public recognition. When it was first published in 1815, however, the combination of England’s craze for so-called “national airs,” the prevalent motif of “Oriental Exoticism” in Romantic literature,<sup>1</sup> and an arguably related growing academic interest in celebrating the artistic sophistication of the ancient Israelites-- not to mention, of course, the country’s well established fascination with Byron-- launched *Hebrew Melodies* into popular circulation.<sup>2</sup> Crowds flocked to hear acclaimed musician and Jewish cantor John Braham perform the songs at Drury Lane, and well-to-do families, eager to keep up with the trends of the times, bought copies for their piano-fortes and entertained guests at fashionable gatherings. Sales soon grew so high that Byron and Nathan published an expanded version the following year and collaborated on a second edition published in 1824.<sup>3</sup> While the songs were undoubtedly popular and generally held in favorable opinion, several reviewers criticized the project from one of two seemingly contradictory angles: some took issue with the widespread veneration of Jewish music

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<sup>1</sup> "Romantic Orientalism: Overview," The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Romantic Age. 2017. Accessed November 2017. [https://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/romantic/topic\\_4/welcome.htm](https://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/romantic/topic_4/welcome.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglas, introduction to *A Selection of Hebrew Melodies, Ancient and Modern*, Isaac Nathan and Lord George Gordon Byron, ed. by Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglas (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: Univ. of Alabama Pr., 1988. Initially published London, 1815), pg 3, 13

<sup>3</sup> Burwick and Douglass, 9, 14

in a Christian society, finding the songs “too Jewish,” while others complained that the music was not true to its ancient Israelite roots and therefore “not Jewish enough.”

Those who criticize the songs as being “too Jewish”-- that is, celebrating Jewish culture in its own right rather than appropriating it through a Christian lens<sup>4</sup>-- write with fairly obvious anti semitism and reflect the broader British anti semitism of the time. A reviewer for the *British Critic* neatly summarizes this view in the following quote:

If these latter gentlemen [meaning Jews]<sup>5</sup>, in the fervour of devotional attachment to the memory of their forefathers, and the glories of their ancient days, are desirous of proclaiming the beauties of the songs of Sion in a strange land, they are at full liberty to indulge the warmth of their affections, we respect their motives, we honor even their prejudices; if, on the other hand, profit be their object, let them reap the harvest of their industry, and enjoy the fruits of a monopoly, to which, as Jews, they are so fully entitled. But let not a peer of the realm, who is *ex professo*, at least, a Christian, enter into so close a literary union with these worthy gentlemen so as to expose himself to the unpleasant dilemma of being supposed either to entertain an attachment to the Jewish cause, which in him would be at best ridiculous, or to feign affection towards a sacred object, to which his heart is really a stranger.

Glossing over the reviewer’s blatant propagation of the popular stereotype of the “greedy Jew,” note how the reviewer does not refer to Nathan as an individual, choosing instead to align him with the broader “they,” meaning the general British Jewish population. This rhetorical strategy implicitly reinforces notions of Jews always acting as a collective “tribe” for and of themselves. That a Jewish composer could both wish to celebrate his culture and, like all composers, also hope to make a profit is impossible to this reviewer.

Exemplifying the latter criticism, reviewer William Robert writes in the *British Review*, “The music now used in synagogues is of vague and arbitrary character, without a trace of the primitive melodies. In the present day, therefore, to set up pretensions to the restoration or

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<sup>4</sup> Burwick and Douglass, 16

<sup>5</sup> Added by the author for clarification

imitation of genuine Hebrew music is trifling and irreverent.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Nathan does exhibit such “irreverence” while trying to find a poet to write verses for his melodies, writing in an advertisement that the tunes are “all of them upward of 1000 years old and some of them performed by the Antient [sic] Hebrews before the Temple.”<sup>7</sup> While the degree of exaggeration here is certainly deceitful, even laughable, Nathan is hardly the first person of a marginalized identity to attempt to use the misconceptions and stereotypes of a dominant culture for personal gain. More importantly, he softens his claims before the book’s publication, arguing instead that the music preserves the ancient “spirit” of the Jews. The book’s preface disclaims that “some” of its melodies have “been preserved by memory and tradition alone, without the existence of written characters” and, therefore, “their age and originality... must be left to conjecture.”<sup>8</sup> These disclaimers make little “pretense” of “restoring” or even “imitating” so-called “genuine,” that is, “ancient” Hebrew music, instead arguing that the melodies belong to the ancient and continuous chain of Jewish history.

Roberts’ criticism, then, is less a valid complaint and more an echo of the implicit anti-semitic roots of the apparent philosemitism sweeping British academia at the time. Of these scholars advocating for the academic study of ancient Judaism, eighteenth century linguist, grammarian, and champion of the rising field of “biblical criticism” Robert Lowth was among the most influential. In arguing for a literary, linguistic, and historical, rather than overtly “religious,” analysis of the Bible, Lowth sought to demonstrate the “genius” of ancient Hebrew poetry and to cultivate a widespread appreciation for the artistic sophistication of its nascent

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<sup>6</sup> William Roberts, *British Review*, August 1815 (Burwick and Douglass, 11)

<sup>7</sup> Isaac Nathan, *Gentleman’s Magazine*, May, 1813 (Burwick and Douglass, 7)

<sup>8</sup> Burwick and Douglass, 48

civilization,<sup>9</sup> whom he alternately refers to as “Hebrews,” “Israelites,” and “Jews.”<sup>10</sup> And yet, for all of Lowth’s reverence for the creative genius of these early “Jews,” he holds little but outright disdain for the so-called “modern”<sup>11</sup> Jews of his day, continually writing of the “destitute,” “fictitious,” “ignorant,” and “absurd,”<sup>12</sup> nature of their biblical interpretations, which he believes deviate too far from the ancient source material and are often “unworthy the attention of anyone with common sense” (sic).<sup>13</sup> Lowth and his direct and indirect followers, Roberts among them, so admire ancient Judaism that they dehumanize modern Jews, resenting, even loathing them, for the universal, human tendency to change over time.

Having outlined two popular criticisms of *Hebrew Melodies* and demonstrated their shared anti semitic roots, this paper will now examine the ways in which Nathan’s decision to set Byron’s poem “She Walks In Beauty” to a Portuguese Sephardic tune for “Lecha Dodi,” a prayer in which Jews welcome in the Sabbath on Friday nights, is a powerful statement on celebrating modern Jewish identity that preemptively rejects the assumptions behind these criticisms-- namely, that modern Jewish identity is inextricably linked with greed and unworthy of popular esteem and that anything deviating from ancient Israelite practices and betraying the human process of cultural exchange is somehow “less” Jewish. It will first examine the ways in which the melodic link to “Lecha Dodi” enriches Byron’s text and lends it uniquely Jewish implications that celebrate Jewish chosenness, after which it will examine the rhetorical effects of choosing a

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<sup>9</sup> John Jarick, “Sacred Conjectures: The Context and Legacy of Robert Lowth and Jean Astruc” (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 44

<sup>10</sup> Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (Translated by G. Gregory. Edited by Calvin E. Stowe. 2nd ed. Boston, MA: Crocker and Brewster, 1829. 2007. Accessed November 2017). One of many examples of each can be found on pages 127, 333, and 397

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, example on page 33

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, These adjectives contain the root words of some of the nouns Lowth uses to describe modern Jewish interpretations of the Bible, see pgs 33, 147, 192, 287, 304, 333, 338, and 412

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 415

non-stereotypically “Jewish sounding” tune from the Portuguese Jewish tradition and how this effect speaks to the Jewish right to self-definition.

As scholar Jeremy Hugh Baron notes in his book *Fifty Synagogue Seminars*, Nathan had many other choices of popular Jewish synagogue tunes that would have better fit the iambic tetrameter of Byron’s poem.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, his choice of tune forces the melisma on the stressed word “night” in the first line of the poem to fall on the unaccented second beat of the bar, thereby breaking one of the composition principles he outlines in his book *Musurgia Vocalis* which holds that stressed words should fall on accented syllables.<sup>15</sup> It could not have been, therefore, that Nathan merely chose from one of the many popular Jewish synagogue songs at the time for its agreeable affinity with the text; there must have been some deeper reasoning behind his choice.

Some scholars explain his decision through the lens of Lecha Dodi’s roots in Jewish mysticism: Written in mid-sixteenth century Tzfat, a northern Israeli city that became a center of Kabbalah, a branch of Jewish mysticism, in the middle ages, Solomon ha-Levi Alkabez’s hymn “Lecha Dodi” is an ode to the “Sabbath Bride,” the personified spirit of the Jewish Sabbath and, to Alkabez and his fellow Kabbalists, a symbol of the feminine aspect of the Divine known as the *Shekhinah*. As such, scholars have attributed the choice of tune to Nathan’s desire to equate the feminine divine, Shekhinah, with the subject of the poem.<sup>16</sup> However, while both the Shekhinah and the subject of Byron’s poem are described as beautiful females, I would argue that the parallels between the personified Jewish Sabbath and the deeper aspects of Byron’s text-- that is, beyond the more superficial theme of female veneration-- in addition to the fact that

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<sup>14</sup> Jeremy H. Baron, “Fifty Synagogue Seminars” (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2010), 314

<sup>15</sup> Burwick and Douglass, 13

<sup>16</sup> Baron, 314 and Sheila A. Spector, “The Liturgical Context of the Byron-Nathan “Hebrew Melodies”.” (*Studies in Romanticism* 47, no. 3 (2008)). Pg 405

the concept of the Sabbath bride was far more well known amongst 19th century Jews than the comparatively esoteric tenets of Kabbalah<sup>17</sup> combine to establish the Sabbath itself, or herself, as a more likely parallel to the woman in Byron's poem. For example, lines that describe the particular metaphorical blend of day and night, of light and dark, that define the woman's countenance such as "And all that's best of dark and bright/ Meet in her aspect and her eyes" (lines 3-4), "Thus mellowed to that tender light/ Which heaven to gaudy day denies." (lines 5-6), and "One shade the more, one ray the less, had half impair'd her nameless grace" (7-8) evoke twilight and the degree of specificity to which the Talmudic rabbis deferred as they argued over a precise definition of Shkia, or the sunset, the start of the Sabbath.<sup>18</sup> Lines such as "...o'er her face/ Where thoughts serenely sweet express/ How pure, how dear their dwelling place" (lines 9-12), "And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,/ So soft, so calm, yet eloquent" (lines 13-14), and "A mind at peace with all below,/ A heart whose love is innocent!" that emphasize the sense of peacefulness and serenity that are so central to this woman's charms further strengthen the connection between the woman in the poem and the Sabbath Bride. Another potentially significant reason for choosing a tune for a Sabbath song for the opening poem in the volume could be that in melodically referencing the Jewish practice of venerating a day in which working and gaining profit are forbidden, Nathan is indirectly rejecting the popular stereotype of the greedy Jew.

Having demonstrated how applying one of Lecha Dodi's many tunes to Byron's text suggests an implicit celebration of Jewish particularity in the musicalized product, the paper will

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<sup>17</sup> Noam Zion, "L'cha Dodi and the Kabbalist Background to Kabbalat Shabbat" (Hartman.org.il. July 30, 2014. Accessed November 2017. [https://hartman.org.il/Blogs\\_View.asp?Article\\_Id=1431&Cat\\_Id=275&Cat\\_Type=](https://hartman.org.il/Blogs_View.asp?Article_Id=1431&Cat_Id=275&Cat_Type=))

<sup>18</sup> For just one of literally hundred of examples throughout the Talmud and its related commentary, see Berakhot 2b (English translation available via the William Davidson Talmud on Sefaria.org)

now briefly examine how the specific chosen tune, which comes from the Sephardic Portuguese tradition,<sup>19</sup> speaks to a Jewish right to self-definition. As scholars Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglass write in their introduction to the *Hebrew Melodies*, favorable reviewers were more enthusiastic about the songs that catered to a “musical stereotype” of the “Gypsy Jew standing beside Babel’s waters, dancing in the desert, appealing to Jehovah for deliverance.”<sup>20</sup> These songs, such as “In That High World” and “Weep For Those,” make extensive use of the harmonic minor scale to imitate Middle Eastern scales that emphasize half steps and, in melodically harkening to Judaism’s “semitic” roots, thereby reflect the “wildness and pathos” that so many believed characterized “authentic” Jewish music.<sup>21</sup> Burwick and Douglass continue, “It is important to note that a song making use of synagogue material does not automatically fall into this final category. “She Walks in Beauty,” for example, though it is in waltz time, though it employs a synagogue tune, is not such a one as “Weep For Those.” First of all, it is in a major key.”<sup>22</sup> Not only is it in a major key, its melismas and tendency to retroactively fill larger contrapuntal melodic intervals with stepwise motions follow traditional European rules of species counterpoint and reflect the cultural exchange between the Portuguese Jewish community--a community that, upon settling in Amsterdam during a mass migration from the Iberian Peninsula in the seventeenth century, enjoyed comparatively great political and economic freedom--and the broader Christian world. In choosing a tune that simultaneously defied melodic stereotypes of Jewish music and was still undeniably “Jewish” by virtue of its melodic

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<sup>19</sup> Rabbi Abraham Lopes Cardozo, "Lecha dodi - Western Sephardic לך דודי." (Youtube . May 31, 2015, accessed November 2017, from the audio cassette "Sephardic Songs of Praise : the Spanish and Portuguese tradition in the Synagogue and the home", 1987)

<sup>20</sup> Burwick and Douglass, 35

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

connection with the celebration of one of the oldest continuous Jewish practices and markers of Jewish chosenness,<sup>23</sup> Nathan, consciously or not, argues the need to acknowledge and respect a people's right to change over time.

Unlike most of the songs in the 1816 expanded edition of *Hebrew Melodies*, Byron did not write "She Walks in Beauty" with any sort of Jewish intent in mind; indeed, he wrote it upon seeing Anne Wilmot, his cousin by marriage, at a party.<sup>24</sup> Its Jewish implications are instead entirely the result of Nathan's musicalization. It is a reflection of Nathan's overlooked genius that he was able to take a secular love poem, find a tune that so deeply enriched Byron's text, and transform the song into a powerful celebration of Jewish identity, especially amidst such prevalent anti semitism.

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<sup>23</sup> Dr. Jeffrey Tigay, "Shabbat in the Bible," (My Jewish Learning. Accessed November 2017. <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/shabbat-in-the-bible/>)

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Greenblatt and Julia Reidhead, eds. *Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Romantic Period* (Vol. D. NYC: W.W. Norton and Company, 2012), 617



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