

# ‘Retaining the Tradition – but with an Open Mind’ Change and Choice in Jewish Musical Practices

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## Abstract

This article focuses on religion and change in relation to music. Its starting point is the argument that music plays a central role as a driving force for religious change, as has recently been suggested by several researchers of religion. Music is seen to comprise elements that are central to contemporary religiosity in general: participation, embodiment, experience, emotions, and creativity. This article approaches the discussion from a Jewish point of view, connecting the theoretical perspective to an ethnographic case study conducted among progressive Jews in London with special focus on music, religious practice, and change.

The article outlines the ongoing discussion on religion and change by focusing on features of individualism, personal choice, and processes of bricolage, critically assessing them from an inclusive point of view, focusing on individuals as simultaneously both personal and socially as well as culturally embedded agents. The analysis highlights a visible trend among the interviewees of wanting to combine a radically liberal theology with an increasingly traditional practice. In these accounts musical practices play a pivotal yet ambiguous role as instigators and insignia of religious change. As a conclusion, insights into more ‘sonically aware religious studies’ are suggested.

*Keywords: Judaism, Jewish music, religion and change, bricolage*

We need a kind of ... something that retains the tradition; that holds on to these precious traditions and rituals, the music and all the rest – but with an open mind and a much more questioning and open approach to Jewish law.

In these words Rebecca<sup>1</sup> expresses what she strives to achieve in her work as an innovative yet historically perceptive and liturgically informed can-

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1 The names of the persons interviewed have been anonymised, and common Jewish names are used as aliases. See the reference list for or more detailed information about the ethnographic research material and research method.

tor in a Masorti<sup>2</sup> synagogue in London. In her view music is the soul of the religious engagement: the breath of life that makes ancient texts and rituals come to life today, creating community with the people around her, with the past as well as the future. Her ideal is to create Jewish musical practices that are firmly rooted and embedded in tradition, historically relevant, and theologically substantial, yet open and flexible so that new influences are allowed to inspire and inform the practice, making the ancient rituals inclusive, egalitarian, and relevant in the twenty-first century. Consequently, she eagerly explores and incorporates aspects of traditional Jewish worship in her services – such as the ritual cantillation *nusach*,<sup>3</sup> the use of Hebrew as the language of prayer, and mystical melodic traditions such as the wordless Hasidic *niggunim*<sup>4</sup> – aspects that have long been absent in progressive Jewish services or have previously only been practised within more orthodox branches of Judaism. As these musical elements are incorporated, however, they are also modified in accordance with the liberal and egalitarian theological outlook of her community. The exploration of Jewish sources is also accompanied by an unprejudiced search for other musical stimuli, such as Sufi chants and contemporary folk and popular music. Thus, retaining the tradition goes hand in hand with exploring and developing new forms of religious expression, and music plays a vital role in this process of change, Rebecca concludes:

Music [...] has a physical effect because we're people, we're not brains only and we're not feelings only, but we are holistic creatures. And music is the language that kind of engulfs everything. ... Music is in the ether; nobody

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2 In the UK the conservative movement is called the Masorti movement. The role of the cantor in different Jewish communities varies significantly, from being the central ritual leader in many Orthodox settings to taking a backseat or being replaced by e.g. a song leader in some Reform and Liberal synagogues (see e.g. Cohen 2009).

3 *Nusach* denotes traditional Jewish prayer chant; a praxis that has not been maintained in most Reform and Liberal communities, but which is increasingly being reintroduced. Summit notes that *nusach* today is important for many Jewish worshippers in constructing their identity; contemporary conceptions of *nusach* reflect a struggle with modernity and a search for historical authority and authenticity. Today, traditional chant is dear to progressive as well as orthodox Jews, even if they define and express their *nusach* traditions in quite different ways (Summit 2000, 5; Summit 2016, 4).

4 *Niggunim* (s. *niggun*) are religious melodies with roots in the Hasidic tradition that since the turn of the millennium have found their way into all sorts of Jewish communities around the world. They are connected to the performance of repetitive melodies to plain syllables or mantra-like text fragments from the Torah or the Jewish prayer books. Most characteristic are the wordless tunes that are performed to syllables such as *lay-lay-lay* or *ya-ba-bam* (Bohlman 2008: 57).

has a right to anything! It's sounds; it's carried on waves! Why should we say: is it Jewish? I mean: music is music!

In this article the general topic of religion and change is analysed in relation to music. The starting point is the argument that music plays a central role as a driving force for religious change, which has recently been suggested by several researchers of religion (e.g. Hackett 2012; Partridge 2014; Wijnia 2016; Laack 2016). Music comprises many of the elements seen as central to contemporary religiosity in general: participation, embodiment, experience, emotions, and creativity. This article approaches the discussion from a Jewish point of view, connecting the theoretical perspective to a specific ethnographic case study conducted at Leo Baeck College in London with special focus on music, religious practice, and change.

First, one may ask: what is meant by 'Jewish music' in this context? Mark Kligman suggests that the grand narratives of Jewish music as a coherent genre are currently giving way to contextualised, delimited, and detailed studies, increasingly reliant on ethnographic research and presenting views of practitioners rather than normative categorisations based on theoretical analysis (Kligman 2015, 6–7). The influence from ethnomusicology, social sciences, and cultural studies is prominent (see e.g. Summit 2000, 2016; Bohlman 2008). Melissa Raphael draws attention to intentions, contexts, situations, and cultural patterns, where artistic means are used to say something about Jews, their lives, and relationships to the divine, rather than about creeds, traditions, styles, or genealogies (Raphael 2009, 54). What is perceived as 'Jewish sounds' thus becomes manifest in relation to objects, situations, and frames of reference generally regarded as markers of Jewishness. It is the combination of personal and cultural, cognitive, bodily, and sensory components that constitutes the 'Jewish sound of things', rather than a strict musical canon or style of performance (Cohen 2007, 339–40). Issues of identity thus rise to the fore in studies of music in contemporary Jewish lives (Kligman 2015, 8). 'Jewish music [...] contains Jewishness for its potential to express selfness,' Philip Bohlman contends, pointing to the negotiations with otherness, fuzzy border zones, and complex narratives of selfness that are necessarily actualised through religious music: 'It is not by chance that we turn frequently to border regions where identities mix and ontologies are hybrid' (Bohlman 2008, xxxi–xxxii). This open-ended and inclusive perspective provides the platform upon which the current analysis is built: approaching the broader theoretical issues from the vantage point of the ethnographic material and the specific, localised, and context-bound

personal narratives describing what music means in the everyday lives of particular progressive Jews in London.

The article opens by outlining the ongoing discussion on religion and change within the study of religions. Features of individualism, personal choice, and processes of bricolage are highlighted, but also critically assessed from an inclusive point of view, focusing on individuals as simultaneously both personally and socially as well as culturally embedded agents. Thereafter, the analysis turns to the special interest of this study, namely the role of music in the processes of change, and especially the context of Jewish musical practices. Attention is then given to the ethnographic material to explore how the theoretical considerations take form in and resonate with the thoughts of the persons interviewed for the study. Finally, the argument is summarised and conclusions are drawn on the role of change and choice in contemporary progressive Jewish engagement with religiously significant music.

### **Religious change, choice, and bricolage**

Rebecca's outlook, described above, gives words to a visible trend among progressive Jews, not only in Britain but all over the Western world today: the wish to combine often radically liberal theology with an increasingly traditional practice (see Summit 2000, 2016; Graham 2012; Keysar 2014). By introducing a greater use of *niggunim* and *nusach* in the services and increasing the use of Hebrew in progressive services, while simultaneously retaining liberal values of equality and inclusive perspectives, personal ways of living Jewish lives are formed that are experienced as open and flexible yet also meaningfully grounded in tradition (Summit 2016; Papenhagen 2016). New combinations arise that do not fit the traditional scale, where orthodox and liberal are posed as mutually exclusive opposites, a 'post-denominational' trend that has also been discussed in relation to British Jewry, which serves as the ethnographic example in this article (Kahn-Harris & Gidley 2010, 102).

As mentioned above, the article is based on ethnographic research carried out at Leo Baeck College in London, a Jewish educational institution where rabbis for the Reform and Liberal movements are trained, mainly to serve in Great Britain but also within the larger European and international community. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with ap-

proximately thirty persons<sup>5</sup> connected to the college as teachers, students, or alumni during several visits between 2014 and 2016. From this vast material a smaller number of key informants, with whom the discussion could be substantially deepened over the course of several meetings, have been given special emphasis in the current article. Thus, the research material does not represent statistical validity, but can rather give a detailed insight into a specific sphere of the current research field, offering a prism through which the larger issue under examination can be illuminated. Methodologically, the current analysis rests on the premises of hermeneutical, qualitative research, where the viewpoints of the informants form the outset, core, and guiding principle of the interpretative process. Qualitative research data is by its nature subjective and complex – rich and rewarding at best, at times also confusing and vague, always open to several readings (Wyller & Heimbrock 2010, 25). Hence, the analysis of the ethnographic data has taken form as a theoretically informed close reading of the personal narratives created in the encounter between myself as researcher and the persons who have shared their thoughts and perspectives with me (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009, 2). The process of knowledge-creation is closely connected to these human encounters, and the themes and topics presented as generalised conclusions of these rich narratives have arisen from both sources: some from the theoretical framework, some from the ethnography.

Furthermore, the institutional adherence of the interviewees varies: most of them are part of either the Reform or the Liberal movement, but Masorti and Orthodox persons, as well as those who define themselves as ‘post-denominational’, are also included. Generally, they share a Jewishness that is liberal, progressive, and egalitarian but are drawn to forms of Jewish practice where traditional, non-rational elements are reintroduced. Thus, this article focuses on individual interpretations rather than official approaches of any given organisation, and the description ‘progressive’ is used as a general characterisation of their outlooks, not as an institutional label.

The British Jewish environment in general – and the hyper-urban, cosmopolitan, and multicultural microcosm of London in particular – aptly symbolises the trends of change and choice. The institutional network is vast and diverse, with a long and prosperous history, including everything from highly Orthodox communities to late-modern, experimental Renewal communities, tapping into the contemporary interest in cross-over spirituality, well-being, and personal development. Thus, the Jews interviewed

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5 The gender division of the persons interviewed for the study is fairly balanced, with years of birth ranging between 1941 and 1990.

for this study live in the midst of a vibrant, secular culture emphasising individual agency and freedom of choice in matters of faith, where a vast array of religious and spiritual practices and ideas are readily available (Kahn-Harris & Gidley 2010, 2–4; Graham 2012, 97–8).

Like many other researchers of religion today, Christopher Partridge points to the fact that institutional religions and traditional forms of faith seem to be ‘experiencing a significant decline in power, popularity and prestige’ in the Western world (particularly in Europe). Nevertheless, traditional theories of secularisation predicting that religion would wither away and eventually die, as an inevitable consequence of modernity and the progress of rationality, seem equally unsuccessful in describing the contemporary religious landscape. Instead, Partridge concludes, the secular Western mind seems to be ‘haunted by the possibility of an enchanted world’ (Partridge 2014, 6). These processes of change within the Western religious landscape are often captured in descriptions such as ‘post-secular’, ‘post-rationalist’, or ‘post-Enlightenment’ (see e.g. Dillon 2010; Giordan & Pace 2012; Illman 2015). Some general trends can be observed within this spectrum of change. One of the important outsets is the rapidly increasing pluralism of Western societies, where a shared sense of religious identity, values, and practices is disappearing (Partridge 2014, 179). In this situation of increased fluidity and fragmentation individual and embodied forms of worship, which are strongly connected to experience-based and emotional dimensions of faith, seem to be gaining ground. Institutionally bound, intellectually grounded religious forms and formal authority seem to be becoming less persuasive (Nynäs, Illman & Martikainen 2015, 17–22). The logics of the market and consumption are also becoming increasingly relevant within the sphere of religion. Influences from popular culture, social media, and the digital worlds are also playing a prominent part in shaping this religious landscape (Partridge 2014, 15–6; Papenhagen 2016, 23–37).

Many researchers have drawn attention to the growing individualism of the contemporary religious landscape, outlining a ‘reflexive turn’ or a ‘trend of privatisation’ and ‘sacralisation of subjectivities’ in the Western world (Woodhead 2012, 24–27; Partridge 2014, 179–80; Hovi 2015, 89–90). In the study of religion and music a ‘turn within’ has been highlighted, where growing attention is attached to bodily experiences, sensations, and states of consciousness (Wijnia 2016, 43). Rather than simply following in the footsteps of one’s parents, adopting the religious outlook of the social and cultural milieu one has grown up in, contemporary individuals seem to value free choice and eclecticism in matters of faith to a higher degree

(Keysar 2014, 160–161). In the sociology of religion one of the established concepts capturing this development is *bricolage*. According to this argument the increasing privatisation of religion in the modern world leads to a situation where institutions lose their hold of individual believers, who hence gain the opportunity to elaborate freely on a vast range of available symbolic resources. Bricolage can be an internal process of exploring ‘exotic’ aspects of one’s own religion, or an interreligious endeavour of combining religious and secular perspectives and practices into a personal, tailor-made worldview (Altglas 2014, 5–6, 12). Bricolage can be understood as an innovative individual practice of breaking boundaries and the *bricoleur* as a playful explorer in a world of nearly unrestrained choices, driven by the neoliberal logics of consumerist culture (Illman 2015, 200–4).

In a study of contemporary yoga and Kabbalah practitioners Véronique Altglas criticises this interpretation of bricolage, as it ‘largely overestimates its eclecticism, takes for granted the availability of religious resources, and misunderstands religious individualism’ (Altglas 2014, 5–6). As a result, the social and cultural logic of bricolage, as well as the power relations and hierarchies that orchestrate it, are neglected. The focus on radical religious individualism and ‘self-authority’ omits the fact that coherence and collectively shared aspects are part even of the most innovative bricoleur’s meaning system (Obadia 2016, 105–7). Social, ethnic, gendered, and economic restraints form the context in which religious choices are made, granting the process of bricolage both a firm and a foreseeable dimension. In this perspective personal subjectivity, choice, and freedom are easily attributed too decisive a role in the processes of forming contemporary religious and spiritual positions (Altglas 2014, 326–31). These reservations are important to keep in mind in the current discussion of the field of music.

### **Music as an instigator of religious change**

Within the discourse on contemporary religiosity growing attention is attached to music as a dynamic medium for shaping rational responses, social identification, and emotional attachment to religious contexts, narratives, and worldviews (Partridge 2014, 37). According to Isabel Laack music and sound are emblematic of contemporary religiosity for several reasons: they highlight the interest in personal experience, the body, and holistic well-being; they blur the boundaries between sacred and secular; and they bring popular cultural elements into the religious scene. Thus, musical practices provide a religious language that is perceived as border-crossing:

transcending previously categorical distinctions between the intellectual and the emotional, and facilitating innovative, cross-denominational, and interreligious explorations (Laack 2015, 242). Because such boundaries are becoming more fluid and harder to define in contemporary societies, music can provide a context in which to transcend them, Partridge argues. Music has the 'power to extend the natural abilities of the body and the mind', which makes it an apt arena for contemporary religious meaning-making (Partridge 2014, 65, 51). Music also allows for perspectives focused on individual emotions and experience connected to the religious, moving away from 'grand institutional claims'; Lieke Wijnia stresses: 'New forms are found to express the experiential and transforming character of sacred claims,' and such forms are increasingly connected to making, listening to, or participating in music (Wijnia 2016, 40).

Subsequently, many researchers today have highlighted the observation that music seems to play an increasingly important role in contemporary discourses on religion and change, both in general (Hackett 2012; Laack 2015) and in relation to Judaism in particular (Summit 2000, 2016; Bohlman 2008; Kligman 2015; Papenhagen 2016). Relating to this topic, the musicologist Tia DeNora (2000; 2013) offers valuable insights into the power of music in everyday life and its role in structuring emotions, action, and agency in contemporary Western societies. Basing her claims on ethnographic research conducted in Great Britain, she proposes that music has the power to influence people in far more comprehensive ways than merely conveying meanings non-verbally. Indeed, music can influence how people relate to themselves as well as to the surrounding society, to their bodies and emotions, to profound existential issues, and trivial everyday activities and the like (DeNora 2000, 17). Hence, music can offer concrete structures, patterns, and meanings for individuals seeking to orient themselves in the contemporary, changing religious landscape: a tangible point of anchorage relating them to a certain tradition and community but also to their own inner and embodied emotional landscapes (DeNora 2013, 4).

To form the theoretical basis for this kind of in-depth analysis of the role of music in processes of religious change, Rosalind Hackett (2012, 11) calls for 'more sonically aware religious studies'. She emphasises that aesthetic factors, practices, and the sensorium at large are gaining ground in contemporary research on religion – stepping out of the shadows of texts and beliefs, which have traditionally formed the core of academic research. To acknowledge the vast and varying field of sound 'as it is variously perceived and conceptualised' in religious contexts, she suggests the

concept of 'soundscape', which goes beyond the narrower focus on music, spanning the physical environment of sounds as well as how they are perceived. Both sound production and sound perception can be regarded as omnipresent, localised, and embodied in relation to the religious context and experience, she claims (Hackett 2012, 18). Similarly, Laack contends that the 'soundscapes of our world are strongly shaped by religious groups and behaviour, thereby influencing identity negotiations and political conflicts' (Laack 2015, 221). Even if sound and music often lie at the heart of people's religious identities, the field has been understudied because of the intellectual bias of the discipline.

The fields of lived religion and materiality have contributed to the growing interest in sound and music as aspects of religious life in their own right, not merely as ornaments or accompaniment to intellectual contents (Cohen 2007; Hackett 2012, 11). These approaches focus on religion as it is interpreted and practised in everyday life, interlacing aspects of private and public, historical and cultural context, embodiment, social class, and power into a comprehensive image. A central question within the field concerns how theologically unsystematic life-views take form through everyday practices related to institutional religion, which parallels the focus of the current article in important ways (Frisk 2011; Bowman & Valk 2012). From this point of view understanding the meaning of sound is seen as a complex task that involves physical and psychological processes, material objects, and the environment, as well as socially and culturally constructed patterns of interpretation and value. The role of sound in religion is thus a question of interplay and contextualisation, directing attention to the relationship or the space *between* objects and beliefs where sounds function as mediators invested with significance. This interplay also reveals the power of sound in religion: 'Studying sound implies a theory of religion that is inherently communal and intersubjective' (Weiner 2011, 110).

Such insights have opened broader perspectives on how people relate to and use sounds in their religious contexts. People respond to music and sound and use them in a variety of ways as part of their religious practices. Music is a highly personal medium for meaning-creation and dialogue – with the inner self as well as with the larger community – and does not support any absolute hierarchy of values (Wijnia 2016, 43; DeNora 2000, 99). Therefore, understanding such processes in relation to personal narratives of how the thematic triad of music, religion, and change can be experienced and expressed is significant for a deepened understanding of contemporary religiosity at large (Laack 2015, 241). Furthermore, I argue, this is significant

if the processes of change where traditional musical practices are invested with new meanings and developed for new contexts are to be grasped.

To conclude, researching music, sound, and religious change requires a transdisciplinary approach, where music is perceived as a medium created by humans in a historical, social, and cultural context, fulfilling certain functions and offering individuals and groups ways of expressing existential ideas in an embodied fashion. Rather than certain kinds of music being religious *per se*, meaning is experienced in and attributed to music by humans, who interpret sounds and melodies in certain ways (Hoondert 2015, 125). Such an approach acknowledges the 'cognitive, emotional, sensory, bodily and biological aspects of acoustic perception and creation within religions' while remaining sensitive to 'historical, cultural, religious and individual particularities' (Laack 2015, 223). Thus, not only does traditional, institutionally sanctioned religious music become interesting, but also the entire endeavour of producing and perceiving sound in the everyday lives of individuals, who creatively adopt and combine religious motifs and practices as they develop musical practices that correspond to their personal situations, needs, and beliefs. This article strives to outline such a perspective by exploring the ethnographic material and illustrating these claims in relation to the specific Jewish context of the interviews. Understanding the special relationship individuals have to performing, listening to, and taking part in music requires ethnography, Partridge claims (2014, 51). It is therefore time to turn to the interview accounts to further illuminate the issues under consideration.

### **'The wish to have a broader sort of thing'**

Most interviewees affirm that they recognise the discourse on religion and change presented above in their everyday life: either in their own practice, or as an aspect affecting their local Jewish community or Jewry at large. The wish to combine an inclusive creed with an increasingly traditional practice seemed to be the most common way of formulating one's personal position in the changing religious landscape. 'This is a very typical development,' David contends: a longing for the archaic form combined with a thoroughly modern content. He considers that the changes in practice are 'part of a wider liturgical question about the status of the words and the status of the text'. In his view progressive Judaism 'is heading back towards tradition while trying to hang on to a very radical politics'.

Many informants speak of a wish to find a more distinct way of being Jewish, as a reaction against secularisation and assimilation but also against the strivings of previous generations of Jews to tone down aspects of their faith that could be interpreted as 'striking' or 'uncomfortable' by the surrounding British society. In contemporary multi-ethnic British society many of them feel that such caution and fear of standing out is unwarranted. Many feel their Jewish faith has lost its distinctiveness, as much of the practice has been streamlined within the rationalist ideals of modernity. Hence, they express an interest in incorporating elements felt to be more traditional and specific to the Jewish faith: the chanting, the Hebrew language, music, and embodied ritual actions (such as bowing, moving, standing up) as well as mystical traits. Some of the interviewees describe their own Reform and Liberal traditions as intellectually and theologically compelling but somewhat 'liturgically impoverished', offering too few nuances and ways of practice that engage persons as emotional, embodied beings. What is sought is a compromise that allows for a greater exploration of diverse Jewish practices but still holds on to liberal theology: 'We appreciate musical traditions but we also appreciate the rational, intellectual heritage of progressive Judaism,' Miriam contends. Hence, it may be too strong to claim that the interviewees are attracted to traditional or orthodox liturgy *per se*; it is rather the concrete practice, the 'doing' part of expressing one's Jewishness that appeals to them. It is important to make a distinction between using a traditional liturgy and praying in a traditional way, Dinah emphasises:

I think that's important: I wouldn't want to use an orthodox liturgy, for example. But some of the practices, particularly the embodied practices, [...] the moving back and forth, and the bowing here and there, the use of more traditional melodies sometimes – interspersed, they can be adjusted to fit to a progressive liturgy. Or, you know, laying *tefillin*<sup>6</sup> as I did this morning, these are sort of traditional modes of praying but not using an orthodox liturgy. So I think that distinction needs to be [made], it is very much the practice part and not the liturgy part.

David finds a reason for the ongoing change in the deep insecurity he believes is felt by many progressive Jews today about their way of being Jewish:

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<sup>6</sup> *Tefillin* consist of two small boxes attached to leather straps, containing the scrolls inscribed with portions of the Torah. Traditionally, they are worn by men at the weekday morning prayers. Today, they are increasingly being used in progressive liturgies by women and men alike (Summit 2016, 152).

'they look over their shoulder' at Orthodox and Haredi Jews, whose practice is stricter and who carry visible signs of their faith in their everyday life, and feel, perhaps unconsciously, that these are the 'real Jews'. They would never hold this opinion intellectually but still cannot avoid it: at times 'I feel that myself,' he concludes. Even if the interpretations of what exactly is changing and why differ between the interviewees, the overall view that concrete forms of practice are gaining ground in progressive circles is affirmed across the interviews.

The role of music in this ongoing change is also widely addressed among the interviewees. 'Music is in the frontline of change', 'music is pushing the issue', and music 'is in the vanguard in some ways' are claims put forward by the interviewees in relation to the broader topic of a changing religious landscape within the progressive Jewish context. This change is understood to be 'happening in theology as well', not just in the context of music, but it is generally understood to be driven by the congregations, their song leaders, and cantors rather than by theologians. For example, Micah, who is a Liberal rabbi, says that the change has come about because the congregants want to incorporate more traditional elements in their practice, even though they are very committed to liberal theology:

I think it's becoming more and more so all the time, that's definitely an ongoing trend at the moment. I notice it in my own practice and I'm doing it because it seems to be responding to what congregations like. Whether they have consciously formulated what they want is another question, but it's pretty clear what they like: lots of singing, lots of especially participatory singing.

Many other interviewees also single out practices related to music, singing, and the body as both instigators and insignia of this change: particularly the use of *nusach* (see footnote 3) and introducing new types of communal singing, often with roots in the mystical, Hasidic, traditions such as the wordless *niggunim* (see footnote 4) and other forms of mantra-like, meditative songs. Music is egalitarian rather than elitist, Dinah suggests in response to the question of music's importance in the process of religious change: 'For the majority of people, it's the ... not in a pejorative way, the lowest common denominator. You don't need a vast level of knowledge to participate in singing, particularly not in a *niggun*. A *niggun*, you don't even need to know Hebrew. It gives more people more access to participation.'

In addition to *nusach* and *niggunim*, Micah points to several small, embodied elements of ritual that have found their way into the progressive services

in recent years: standing up, bowing, covering your eyes, stepping forward at certain moments in the liturgy, and both men and women laying *tefillin*.

I think the idea of physical bits of ritual, which was once a little bit anathema in [progressive] Judaism, there's been a big shift, qualitatively, towards the idea of doing little things. [...] I can't say when [we] ditched all these things originally and emphasised the intellectual and the spiritually rational and de-emphasised anything bodily ... But it's all very well for us and I'm doing it, I'm part of this trend to bring back these little rituals because they're fun, because they give you something else to do rather than just reading, it's physical and so forth.

'Bringing back' elements of ritual is not, however, an entirely correct description, many of the interviewees contend: mostly it is not a question of returning to practices that were previously part of the movements' liturgy, but rather to explore other Jewish traditions ('internal bricolage') and to create new rituals inspired by older ones. 'I really enjoy *nusach*,' David exclaims as an example: 'the *nusach* is a new kind of hip, really.' Nevertheless, he points out, the *nusach* developed for progressive settings is 'not the *nusach* you would have in most Orthodox communities, it's a particular version of it that is appropriate for the context, which is fine; it *sounds* traditional'. Similarly, Miriam, who is an academic expert on Jewish liturgy and who has a profound knowledge of the *nusach* tradition, points out that it is positive that the progressive movements have also started to realise that 'they don't have to read everything' but can use tunes to chant the texts instead. However, she says, when bricolage is built on the basis of feeling rather than knowledge, it ends up in 'chaos'. Thus, the interviewees seem to appreciate the freedom to bring in new musical elements and experiment with them that characterises the current liberal atmosphere, but simultaneously stress the importance of doing this in an informed, grounded, and meaningful way.

In speaking of traditional practice, the interviewees are conscious of the fact that many of the elements added to progressive Jewish practice today may not be that traditional after all. 'I think there is an important caveat,' David says, 'which is that a lot of things that are seen as traditional are not quite as traditional as people think. [...] It's more things that are *understood* to be traditional, [...] there's a feeling of nostalgia, or an association with the 'old world', there's a kind of romanticism about it.' Furthermore, some are cautious about the conservative connotations that many of the imported musical practices might carry with them, such as 'Hasidic styles

of authority' which are at odds with their liberal convictions. Dinah, who is a faculty member at Leo Baeck College, often feels the need to discuss these issues with her students, who are 'flirting with that centre ground and then experimenting with their own spirituality and practice in situating themselves', not necessarily giving enough consideration to the theological implications that certain practices that attract them on an aesthetic or emotional level may contain. 'I wouldn't ever want to go back to something that wasn't totally egalitarian,' Rachel says, but she still admits that she at times finds herself longing for the very professional, cantor-centred, and male-dominated musical landscape in which she grew up. Her thoughts tie into another reservation voiced by many informants in relation to the new forms of practice adapted to the progressive setting: that instead of being diversified it merely becomes simplified – a 'dittyfication of the liturgy', as Adam describes it, 'the problem of good-quality music being replaced by very simplistic music' to meet the needs of being approachable and participatory.

To summarise the discussion based on the ethnographic material so far, we may conclude that the interviewees largely affirm and advance the discourse of change. Naturally, this does not translate into any certain assessments of whether such changes are actually underway in the communities, but it indicates at least that the narrative resonates with their personal positions and perspectives on contemporary Jewish practice. Furthermore, the role of music is placed at the forefront of this process of change, together with other forms of embodied and tangible ways of practising one's Jewishness – melodies, styles of performance, and pieces of ritual that are incorporated into progressive prayers and liturgies. However, it is important to underline the extent to which these developments represent new combinations, not a wish to revert to a more traditional or conservative theology but a wish to broaden and deepen the ways of expressing and 'doing' Judaism in a liberal and progressive form. As David formulates it: 'It's not that I'm reclaiming my Judaism, but it's the wish to have a broader sort of thing.'

### **'A backlash against rationality'**

As presented in the previous section, there is a widespread readiness among the interviewees to recognise the discourse of religious change and to pinpoint the central role played by music in this process. Furthermore, this discourse is often made sense of in the light of a more overarching and deep-reaching epistemological change. The growing interest in elements

of Jewish practice that feel 'genuine' and 'traditional' is, to use Micah's words, part of the 'postmodern rejection of rationality'. Dinah offers a similar explanation, contending that she believes 'we are in an era of backlash against rationality':

We are all into our technology, that kind of stuff, but there is a craving for something that feels more mystical, more spiritual, less rational. The equation of scientific and rationalist as values above everything else has lost some of its grip because people are finding [...] they can programme a computer, but it doesn't fill other sorts of needs. [...] We know that in the Enlightenment and then in the Jewish Enlightenment, the Haskalah, there was this sense that eventually science would explain everything; rationality would explain everything. And we've moved well beyond that to a space where we know that there are limitations to that. And then, what do we do with the rest of our stuff? And that's part of why I pray.

Rebecca taps into the same discussion by arguing: 'We've come through all the Enlightenments and our intellectualisation about everything and yet people are still killing each other.' In her view drawing inspiration from traditional musical and liturgical sources gives a 'sanction from the old times' and shows that there is 'an openness now to accepting a broader range of practices' and not rejecting them simply because they are not felt to be 'intellectual'. We have no need to live up to those kinds of ideals any longer, she contends: 'We don't have to prove anything anymore to anybody.' Historically, the interviewees stress, there has been a greater emphasis on rationality in the progressive Jewish contexts, where, to a large extent, they are active; 'music was not focused on before,' Miriam clarifies. Compared to more orthodox settings, 'in the progressive world the idea of the words is much more important, the emphasis on meaning above all else,' David explains. Today, however, 'that idea of pure, rational religion is a very dated one'. Hence, the door is gradually opened towards the emotional and experiential as a reaction against one-sided intellectualism. 'It's a wave now,' Miriam contends, the climax of a development that started with the countercultural movement, neo-Hasidism, and Renewal Judaism in the 1960s.

The fact that traditional forms of religious practice are increasingly adapted to progressive contexts is welcomed by most of the interviewees, who regard it as a vital and timely development, a sign of the times. Some of them belong to a younger generation, who say they feel 'less doctrinal about these sorts of things' than their parents and grandparents. However,

informants born in the 1940s and 1950s are also sympathetic to the development where choirs and organs in the services are replaced by alternative prayer groups exploring *nusach*, *niggunim*, and the use of Hebrew – ‘the new traditional’, as Daniel says. Nevertheless, it is often pointed out in the interviews that the development is not simple and straightforward: people are both rational and post-rational in their Jewish engagement, depending on the situation. Adam contends: ‘There’s no one direction of this sort of stuff, it’s a set of tensions that are played out differently in different contexts.’ The notion of personal choice is, however, an important aspect of the contemporary narrative on religious identity and religious change. In Dinah’s words: ‘We are in this funny post-*halakhic*<sup>7</sup> world, where everybody, whatever that may say, is freely choosing to do what they do and to make the choices that they make. And some people define that much more within the structure of obligation and *mitzvot*<sup>8</sup> and some people define it much more within the structure of personal meaning and spiritual reward.’ Personal choice, but also personal responsibility for how one chooses to live one’s Jewish life, is hence seen as an inseparable aspect of the rejection of rationality and the availability of alternatives to be explored.

Nevertheless, the interviewees are also critical of discourses that focus too heavily on individualism, choice, and self-realisation. Rather than individualism, the current focus on personally meaningful ways of realising one’s religious practice is largely understood as a ‘potential for hybridisation’ that has arisen in the globalised world of instant online communication. As a concrete example several interviewees point out that the traditional musical forms of expression and ritual practices that are explored and adapted to the progressive services are, in their very essence, collective and community-building. Even if personal choice and self-determination in issues relating to religious practice are important, the interviewees emphasise that belonging to a community means settling for a ‘vast series of compromises’ rather than ferociously furthering one’s own view of the ideal service. Choice depends on where you live and religious individualism on who you are, most of them contend. This includes your personal assets, connections, available resources, and entrepreneurial capacity. Ours is a time, several interviewees argue, when, rather than being overtly individualistic and obsessed with free choice, people are tired of constantly having to take a stand and form an opinion on what to believe and how to tailor one’s own personal religious outlook.

7 From *halakha*, Jewish religious laws.

8 The plural form of *mitzvah* (Hebr.), commandment (by God).

Eventually, these experiences give rise to a counter-reaction, where music also plays an important part. As Rachel formulates it: 'The world's a bit overwhelming at the moment, you want something perhaps slightly simpler.' In her view it is often through music and ritual that such a comforting and restful space can be found today. As Wijnia (2016, 171) observes, many people today seek an 'extraordinary experience to rely on' in their engagement with religious music: 'There is a longing for the perceived sense of security, homeliness, or understanding that these kinds of messages convey.' In her view the musical context is often appreciated for its ability to embrace the vagueness and intangible character of religious experiences and sentiments that are difficult to put into words (Wijnia 2016, 44; see also DeNora 2000). Rebecca's thoughts about music as 'the soul of the religious engagement' is one example illustrating this argument; another is given by Hannah when she talks about the lure of the wordless, meditative songs called *niggunim*. She suggests these melodies liberate you from the restraints of having to choose and having to be opinionated about the intellectual formulations contained in religious language:

I think we get very confused by the notions of God, religion, rabbinic authority, and what they represent. All of that, to people who live in the modern world ... you know: Where is God in all of this? All these questions. So I think, yes, music has a way of connecting us to the more transcendent experience, without the words getting in the way. I think we give too much weight to words and ideas and they become a bit fossilised in our heads, and then we are bound by them. I think that the wordless *niggun* both cuts through all of that and reaches not only the heart of every individual, but it also connects people. I think people come to synagogue very often to be in a community as much as to be with God, which they don't know what it is and what they mean by it and they get really muddled.

To conclude, this second section dealing with the points of view presented in the ethnographic material shows a more complex and at times contradictory way of relating to the narrative of religious change identified in the theoretical discussion. While the time of rational religion is largely looked on as having come to an end and seen as an ideal of the past, the interviewees are also reluctant to wholeheartedly buy into the idea of bricolage – exalting individualism, personal agency, and choice. The longing for more archaic forms of practice to accompany one's inclusive and liberal theological engagement seems to be spurred by a wish to find more embodied, emotion-

ally engaging, and 'distinctly Jewish' ways of practising one's faith. But this endeavour is generally understood as a process with collective components, not simply a project of finding or enhancing the self.

### **Conclusion: Religious soundscapes**

In this article the broad topic of religion and change has been analysed in relation to music and sound: singing and reciting, wordless chants and ancient sacred texts, listening to music, as well as creating it oneself. The argument that music plays a central role as an expression of – or even driving force for – religious change, put forward by several contemporary scholars in the field, has been taken as the point of departure for the analysis, which has sought to connect theoretical perspectives from both religious studies and Jewish studies with an in-depth ethnographic analysis of the current theme: interviews conducted at Leo Baeck College in London with a special focus on music, religious practice, and change.

The personal narratives shared by the interviewees both confirm and contest the theoretical assumptions put forward in the article. On the one hand the discourse of religious change, highlighting subjectivities, emotions, fluidity, and bodily experiences, has been affirmed as relevant in the interviews. In this specific Jewish context these processes seemed to amount to a generally observed aspiration to combine a radically liberal theology with increasingly more traditional, embodied, and 'post-rational' ways of practice. Thus, the role of music was pivotal to the narratives of change, offering an apt space in which to realise such strivings. On the other hand, the informants were also critical of the processes of bricolage of which they were themselves part, pointing to the risks of 'chaos', loss of meaningfulness, and trivialisation if taken too far. Furthermore, individualism was generally deemed too simple and one-sided an explanation for the processes underway. These findings correspond with Altglas's claims that bricolage must be understood as a culturally and historically situated process formed by collective frames of reference, implicit power balances, and political, economic, and gendered restraints (Altglas 2014, 23, 327, 329). Hence, even if the innovative practices of combining Jewish doctrines and ways of 'doing Jewish' expressively break with previous customs, they are often less free, playful, individual, and eclectic than is assumed.

In relation to the perceived backlash against rationality, Martin Hoondert's idea that musical experiences point to the interconnectedness of the material and the immaterial worlds seems relevant. Such experiences, he

claims, reveal that ‘there is more to the world than meets the eye’ (Hoondert 2015, 129). Hence, reason and emotion, rationality and experience permeate each other in music and present themselves as two sides of the same coin, separated by a porous, fluctuating line (Cohen 2007, 339). The interviewees focus on embodiment and experiences in discussing musical practices that appeal to them, but simultaneously emphasise the importance of balancing the rational and the emotional in their religious practice. Interconnectedness, both–and, and in-between seem to be key concepts instead of sharp distinctions and dichotomies, as Weiner contended above: understanding sound as part of religion requires that attention be directed toward relationships and interconnections – the space *between*.

The broad perspective suggested by studies of sound and lived religion – where physical and psychological dimensions are combined with objects, environments, cultural patterns, and personal experiences – seems able to bring about a ‘sonically aware religious studies’, to return to Hackett’s call. The intricate ways in which the relationships between tradition and innovation and music and practice are described in the interview material can be understood to point in the same direction. Thus, I conclude, the notion of soundscape, with its bodily, material, emotional, and localised parameters, aptly catches the spirit of this context. Furthermore, the dimensions of identity construction and maintenance, brought to the fore by Kligman and Cohen, seem relevant in concluding the analysis. Along these lines the analysis supports the view that the relationship between bodies and beliefs, and places and perceptions are central aspects of understanding contemporary religious change, crystallised by Rebecca’s wish to ‘retain tradition – with an open mind’.

\* \* \*

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Twenty-one interviews conducted in London between July 2014 and June 2016 by the author. (Some persons were interviewed twice or thrice, some interviews were group interviews; in all approximately thirty persons were interviewed.) All interviews were recorded as mp3 files and transcribed into text documents by the current researcher. Coding was conducted manually using both inductive and deductive strategies, relying on concepts and themes arising from the theoretical framework as well as paying attention to topics of concern expressed by the interviewees. Recordings and transcripts are stored at the Cultura Archive, Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland. Archive codes: IF mgt 2014/028, IF mgt 2014/032-040 and IF mgt 2016/009-019.

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