



Yiddish Songs and Jewish Futures: *A Besere Velt*, Partisan Music, and Modern Performance

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A Besere Velt, the Boston Worker's Circle community chorus, performs for a modern audience the music of Yiddish-speaking Jewish partisans and ghetto resisters. Through active transmission and re-interpretation of partisan and ghetto songs, *A Besere Velt* invokes East-European Jewish tradition and creates a liminal space ripe with new possibility. In the process, the chorus gives these old songs life for contemporary Jews. The analysis situates the songs within the genre of Yiddish music and investigates through interviews ways that members build meaning through the performance of partisan music, the construction of Jewish space, and the promise of Jewish futures.

On the eve of World War II, an estimated ten to twelve million persons spoke Yiddish around the world; after 1945, fewer than one million remained. In addition to being a language of everyday use for a majority of Europe's Jewish population for hundreds of years, Yiddish functioned as a signifier of identity that buoyed many of the leftist Jewish populations that flourished prior to World War II. Most of the pockets of armed, organized Jewish resistance to the Nazi regime ("partisans") were Yiddish-speaking.

Though there is nothing *inherently* radical about the Yiddish language itself, within the world of Jewish partisans (and for many politically left Jews who came after) it functioned as kind of solidarity statement: an undeniably Jewish expression

in defiance of fascism. The legacy of Jewish resistance—in partisan units, in ghetto uprisings, and in the camps themselves—against the Nazis is often dwarfed in memory by the sheer number of atrocities the regime was able to implement. But the work of Jewish partisans was a critical component of the resistance movement. They derailed Nazi supply trains, passed messages between those trapped in ghettos and those on the outside, collaborated with Allied armed forces, and stockpiled weapons and engaged in warfare with Nazi troops and sympathizers.

Many partisans and ghetto fighters composed songs and poems in Yiddish that survived the war and have experienced a second life in politically left Jewish spaces within the United States, taking on new meanings in the process. This paper analyzes the music of Yiddish-speaking Jewish partisans and ghetto resisters, as sung for a modern audience by the Boston Worker's Circle community chorus, *A Besere Velt* ("A Better World"). The bulk of the research represented here is based on original interviews conducted with members of *A Besere Velt* from the fall of 2020 through the spring of 2021 (figure 1).

To sing the music of Yiddish-speaking partisans in contemporary America is to call upon a specific well of strength from a particular period in Jewish history.



Figure 1. Graphic used for advertising a concert of *A Besere Velt*, May 15, 2021, online concert titled "Singing for a Better World." Photograph by Derek Kouyoumjian and graphic design by Madeleine Jackman. Used by permission of Boston Workers Circle, Brookline, Massachusetts.

What makes singing these songs so poignant for these contemporary Jews, giving them a life that exists beyond their original audience through continued performance? In repeat public performance and interpretation of partisan and ghetto songs, members of *A Besere Welt* create a conduit between past and present time, a *liminal space* that fosters a promise of a Jewish future. Each time *A Besere Welt* performs, they are both expressing and strengthening their group identity, namely, that of politically engaged Jews with a connection to Eastern European Jewish tradition through the Yiddish language. They are at once inheritors and innovators of an ongoing and evolving folk tradition. Discussing the performances of this group, therefore, contributes to our understanding of modern Jewish folklore, with particular emphasis on memory, political affiliation, and liminality.

A Besere Welt, the Worker's Circle, and Jewish Identity

A Besere Welt formed in 1997 at the Worker's (formerly Workmen's) Circle Center for Jewish Culture and Social Justice in Boston. The Worker's Circle is a community space built for secular Jewish life, founded over a hundred years ago by Jewish immigrants, focused on cultural engagement, preservation, and political action (The Workers Circle 2020). *A Besere Welt* is not the only Worker's Circle-affiliated Yiddish-singing chorus in the history of the organization (or Yiddish-singing chorus in the United States, more broadly), but it was the first formed after a period of closures nationwide for many formerly thriving Worker's Circle branches. Unlike more traditional and religious synagogue spaces, Worker's Circle understands Jewish identity primarily as a cultural rather than religious inheritance. This is not to suggest Worker's Circle exists in opposition to religious Jewish spaces; on the contrary, many members also belong to synagogues. The Circle and the synagogue satisfy different (though often overlapping) needs: social, communal, and spiritual. On the issue of Yiddish, their website concludes:

Yiddish was once the primary language of our founders and the majority of our members. Today, we are widely known and respected for leading the world's largest Yiddish language program in the world, which has served

as a central force in the renaissance of fascination and creativity in Yiddish culture—including literature, music, and theater. Historically, the Workers Circle raised a crucial voice in the struggles of American labor. Today, we are a bulwark in the fight for the dignity and economic rights of immigrants, safety and fairness in labor practices, strengthening our democracy, fighting white nationalism, and acting as a partner in the fight to end centuries of systemic racism in the United States—in short, working to realize the dreams and promises that brought our organization’s founders to this nation. (The Worker’s Circle 2020)

Mike Katz and Linda Gritz, two of *A Besere Velt*’s several founders, recalled that they were among a sizeable group of community members who felt that the Worker’s Circle did not have enough Yiddish in its children’s programming, despite *Yidishkeit* (Yiddish culture) being a central tenet of the organization more broadly. “I was on the steering committee of our *shul* [synagogue], at our Yiddish cultural, Jewish cultural center Sunday school that we ran for kids,” Katz said. He continued:

I was in the group that felt that we weren’t meeting enough and that we didn’t have enough Yiddish in our curriculum. . . . I was looking very strongly for ways to enhance the Yiddish content and to have more contact time with both the children and the parents. And came up with this idea, having grown up in New York and having been in a chorus, we came up with this idea of having a Yiddish chorus as part of the voluntary time before *shul* started. Basically, kids and parents would come in early, sing with us. . . . And it never really worked. We did have some people who were very into it, but it wasn’t universal enough. And what we’ve discovered is there were a whole lot of parents who wanted to continue it—and less kids. So we decided to split it off from the *shul* . . . it basically came down to continuing as a mixed-generation chorus but not specifically as a young people’s chorus. (Katz & Gritz 2020)

Why a Yiddish chorus? Many members of *A Besere Velt* described song, particularly communally shared song, as a medium that felt both broadly accessible and

inherently rich. Norm Berman, a native Yiddish speaker, remembered joining *A Besere Velt* with his young daughter in the hopes of sharing the language in a way that did not feel instructional or mandatory:

I joined *A Besere Velt* one year after it was officially founded. I think I read about it in a Jewish newspaper. And there was just a little piece in the bottom that said the Yiddish Chorus Circle . . . I had been looking for a way to introduce [my daughter] to Yiddish . . . I felt that there was richness there and something of value. And, you know, it's hard to take a child and sit down and say, look, I'm going to teach you Yiddish. But the notion of this being an activity that the two of us could do together struck me as a way to make the introduction. And so I told her, I said, "Look, you and I are going to do this one thing. We're going to go join a chorus." (Berman 2020)

Nearly every member of *A Besere Velt* I interviewed made a point to suggest that the Yiddish language functions as a conduit through which to express their understanding of Jewishness. Linda Gritz said, "For us, our Yiddish, again, radical *Yiddishkeit*—it's our whole ethnic identity. We don't have a religion. Radical Yiddishkeit is our ethnic identity. Someone can say they're Italians; somebody can say they're Greek. We're Jewish, ethnically, and we have a sense of social justice rooted in that tradition of the enlightenment of the 1800s, in Europe, where the poor Jewish masses woke up, and were awakened, by great thinkers."

Similarly, Michael Felsen identified family background and heritage first when defining what being Jewish means to him—adherence to and belief in religious Judaism was not a factor: "I think being a Jew, being Jewish . . . to me is having a pretty long line of ancestors of a particular culture. While I find religious beliefs to often be problematic to the extent that they divide people, and sometimes demonize people . . . most of my identity is about just the golden rule—treating others in a humane and kind way, regardless of sectoral affiliations" (Felsen 2020).

Felsen described Yiddish as a kind of shorthand—a way to express solidarity with not only the Jews that came before him in his own *mishpoche boym* (family tree) but also those who founded the Worker's Circle. He told me, "To the extent

language represents culture, language is culture. I became very respectful of the interest in and the importance of trying to preserve Yiddish as a language, not let it die. . . . And so for me to be in a Yiddish chorus that sings predominantly Yiddish songs . . . I find it very meaningful” (Felsen 2020).

Rebecca Long, a younger (under 30) member of *A Besere Velt*, spoke of the group’s repertoire:

It feels genuinely Jewish, to want to sing in this choir, because these are songs—for example, the old labor songs—that people really sang. These are songs from the Vilna Ghetto that people really sang. . . . And it just feels like tapping into this culture in a deeper way than even going to synagogue, for me, where I’d be reciting prayers in languages I don’t fully understand, saying things I don’t fully agree with. . . . This is the language of the *shetl* and revolution; a language that was really close to being murdered, now being resurrected for a radical purpose, which is really inspiring. I see it as a language of resistance . . . I think the way I see these songs being most applicable is that they kind of suggest that there is no way to work within the system to achieve justice. (Long 2020)

Long’s comment on her singing as an expression of *genuine* Jewishness (as opposed to Judaism and Jewish religious practice) strikes at deep questions of identity: What does it mean to be “genuinely” Jewish? Long’s mention of singing with *A Besere Velt* as feeling like a way to “tap into this culture in a deeper way . . . than going to synagogue” is telling. She does not dismiss the act of going to synagogue as a lesser expression of Jewishness but rather an *established* one. This, too, can be understood as a neutral assertion; to be sure, attending synagogue is generally considered to be a Jewish act. But she crucially frames her engagement with *A Besere Velt* versus the synagogue as a way to get to the root of Jewish *culture*, rather than faith—setting up separate spheres that often, but do not always, overlap. Along similar lines, Bob Follansbee, a member of *A Besere Velt* who converted to Judaism in the early 1980s, said, “What I’ve always loved about it, even before I kind of became a little more critical of some of the mainstream Jewish stuff—I’ve

always valued the moral compass that it gives. And frankly, my moral compass—I mean, I'm definitely not a religious person at all. So the irony, of course, is that I converted to anything. But I feel really comfortable at the Worker's Circle because I feel like I can be an atheist, but an atheist who believes in all the values. And I think that that's kind of where I connect to the idea of being Jewish" (Follansbee 2020).

Follansbee's status as a convert is particularly illuminating. In a sense, he has chosen his Jewish identity twice over: both in joining the Jewish people through a religious journey and then as an active, politically engaged member of the Worker's Circle, participating in *A Besere Velt* and expressing his identity and relationship to Judaism through song. Sonya Taaffe identified Jewishness as something so intrinsic to her sense of self that she could not imagine being who she is without it:

It is one of the things that I can't imagine about myself being different, which is how I know it's meaningful. If I am asked to define myself, I tend to talk about the things that I'm interested in, the things that I do, more than the things that I am. The two exceptions to that are—that I do say in as unambiguous as possible terms are—I am Jewish and I am queer. And those things are core enough, because I can't imagine them being different. I think I would be an entirely different person. . . . But being Jewish is one of the things that I cannot imagine what I would look like without that, because it is important to me. (Taaffe 2020)

The idea of an intangible sense of self—*inherent, immovable, and in many cases, indivisible from personal identity*—cropped up, in one way or another, in almost every interview. Mae Tupa, a celebrated artist and one of *A Besere Velt*'s octogenarian members, simply responded in the affirmative when asked what being Jewish means to her: "Well, I *am*" (Tupa 2020).

To put the choir members' responses in context, *A Besere Velt* currently has around fifty active members, with ages ranging from mid-twenties to mid-eighties. A majority of the chorus members identify as white and of Ashkenazi background and descent. Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the group averaged three rehearsals a month, with some coordinated social opportunity

generally centered around community engagement (i.e., member-led organizing to be a presence at a protest; potlucks). It is relevant here to make note of the general demographics of *A Besere Velt*, primarily regarding age, Yiddish skills, engagement with other Jewish-affiliated organizations, and membership in synagogues. I asked participants to speak to their relationship to Yiddish, the ways in which their interest in the language had (or had not) changed since joining *A Besere Velt*, if they were active in other Jewish-affiliated groups of any kind, and what age range they fell into (20s, 30s, 40s, etc.).

Nearly 81 percent of respondents were over 50 years of age and a similar proportion considered membership in the Worker's Circle to be their primary form of engagement with a Jewish organization—though many mentioned their connections to organizations beyond the Worker's Circle to be circumstantial (e.g., when they had school-aged children, they sent them to Yiddish-based summer camps like Kinder Ring and Kinderland, or they themselves attended such camps as children). A sizeable minority were active members of synagogues of various denominations; most leaned Reform or Reconstructionist. And many identified affiliations with social justice minded groups such as Bend the Arc: Jewish Action.

As for Yiddish skills and Yiddish connections, most had at least some familial ties to the language. A few respondents attested to being native Yiddish speakers, and most respondents judged Yiddish to be a heritage language; that is, regardless of how many generations removed they might be from a fluent, native speaker, they felt compelled to engage with the language in some shape or form.

It is vital to remember that Yiddish has had an unbroken and distinctive presence in the United States since the earliest Jewish immigrants arrived on its shores. Yiddish in the United States has existed in tandem with Europe from the beginning. “As specific as its history might be,” Stavans and Lambert write in *How Yiddish Changed America and America Changed Yiddish*, “like any language, Yiddish is, for all intents and purposes, infinitely capacious; you can say anything in Yiddish that you want. And, of course, in America, all kinds of people have done so: factory owners and Communists, Hasidic Jews and Christian missionaries, anarchists and political fixers, scientists and quacks” (Stavans & Lambert 2020, xix). The partisan music that *A Besere Velt* sings came from Europe, composed in

moments of astounding violence. It is sung by people whose relatives saw this violence first-hand *and* by those whose families were speaking Yiddish in the United States an ocean apart from the partisans fighting for their lives. The language is the same, and yet transformed by political and geographic context.

Sonya Taaffe summarized some of the tensions of engaging with Yiddish in a modern American left context thusly:

I do think of it as a political language. I do tend to associate it with the left wing. I know that “Yiddish speakers” and “socialists” are not actually a perfect overlap—there’s like a million Hassidim who also speak Yiddish who would probably have very negative feelings about me personally for just about every reason in my life.

But I do . . . I do associate it more with the Worker’s Circle than with the Hasidic movement. And I tend to think of it oddly in some ways. It is a ghost language. You know, Yiddish cinema hit a wall at about 1937. So, when you watch Yiddish films from that time, you’re watching a double haunting. You’re not just watching what’s playing on the screen, you’re watching the way of life that a very hard bar was going to fall across. And so . . . it’s about dead voices coming back to claim the living and about the living turning back from life to hold onto the dead voices, because sometimes those are more important than anything that could be offered. But nonetheless, I don’t think of it as a backwards-looking language. I don’t think of it as a reactionary movement. I seem to have come out personally thinking of it as a very contemporary language. And part of this is, you know, self-selecting the people I know who engage with it. I do it both as an act of remembrance and an act carried forward. (Taaffe 2020)

Taaffe’s comments underscore the contradictions inherent in trying to neatly categorize the Yiddish language. There is danger in universalizing nostalgia; though there is nothing wrong or contradictory with members of *A Besere Welt* identifying and engaging with components of *Yiddishkeit* that overlap with their political

beliefs, it is inaccurate to portray *A Besere Velt* as representative of the entire Yiddish-speaking world of the twenty-first century. Lily Weitzman, a younger (under 30) member of the chorus, mused:

I think there is an aspect of it, for me, that is about connecting to the past while simultaneously being in the present and looking forward . . . I think I'm fairly anti-nostalgia, both because we can paint an inaccurate picture of the past, but also . . . I don't know if I'm seeing this, partly because I didn't grow up with family members literally singing this music or speaking Yiddish, it's not like, oh, I remember my grandmother telling me this song . . . But I think it's more of a broader cultural connection to look to our community that has been in this fight for a long time. It's important to know where you came from so that you can move forward. . . . Even though I think there can be a danger to certain kinds of mythologizing among our own community, it's important that we continue to study and learn more about it. (Weitzman 2020)

Partisan and Ghetto Songs

The repertoire of *A Besere Velt* has been flexible since its inception. Derek David (the current musical director and third in *A Besere Velt*'s history) and several founding members of the chorus described the process for rotating songs in and out of their performance lineup as being largely organic. Several partisan songs, such as "Zog nit Keynmol" (Never Say), have not left the rotation since the beginning of the group. Even if "Zog nit Keynmol" is not sung at *A Besere Velt*'s yearly concert, for example, it is inevitably sung for an appearance at a protest rally, Holocaust memorialization event, or Warsaw Ghetto Uprising commemoration. The selection process is not, however, democratic: it is the role of the music director to shape each season's catalog. According to Mike Katz and Linda Gritz, members can make suggestions of songs they would like to see the group perform, but it is often a years-long process from suggestion to integration. Both Katz and Gritz emphasized, however, that *A Besere Velt* is much closer to a democratically assembled

chorus that others. “In most choruses,” Katz laughed, “the director usually has every say. So, this framework of ours is somewhat unique” (Katz & Gritz 2020).

What is most important about *A Besere Velt*’s song repertoire is that each choice reflects their broader mission and focus: Yiddish, *Yiddishkeit*, and social justice. Mike Katz and Linda Gritz summarized:

[MK] Well, you know, a lot of our music . . . we’ve certainly done ghetto-centric or Holocaust-centric programs. That’s certainly part of where we are. But a lot of our most beloved music goes back long before. The partisans to the labor movement, to the sweatshop poets, etc. So, a lot of the music that we build on is quite a bit older than the Holocaust music. But as a Yiddish chorus, we certainly can’t ignore the Holocaust. But we also don’t make it our only focus.

[LG] Right. And when we commemorate the Holocaust, we focus on the resistance. We mourn the six million, deeply. Many were my family members; many were my ancestors. But when we do a program, you can go to many places for a Holocaust program of mourning. We certainly mourn, but when we sing music from the Holocaust, we try to tell the whole story. We give context.

[MK] Which is all of our concerts, by the way. All of our concerts have significant history. Because we’re evangelists, of a sort.

[LG] We also have to translate our songs because most of our audience don’t speak Yiddish. But we feel it’s very important to give that context. But we’ve done several major Warsaw Ghetto Uprising commemoration concerts. And we start with before the war. We sing “Es Brent,” which was written in 1938, to tell the story before the war’s starting. Concentration camps, Holocaust resistance, ghettos, culminating in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. And then the aftermath. . . . (Katz & Gritz 2020)

For members of *A Besere Velt*, drawing boundaries around their repertoire provides meaning and outlines the possibilities of their performance. Derek David, for example, summarized his role and goal as music director:

I'm there on this sort of personal artistic mission, to promote an art that has been lost. And so in my eyes, for a chorus that very much defines itself as a radical left wing, Yiddish, social justice chorus, I try to provide real arrangements . . . to legitimize and to honor the Jewish world of music, which has been so cut down. (David 2020)

In her landmark exploration of the music produced by Jews imprisoned under the Nazi regime, *Music in the Holocaust: Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps*, Shirli Gilbert hypothesizes that many of the songs composed and sung by Jewish partisans were purposefully broad in their lyricism. The aforementioned “Zog nit Keynmol,” written by Hirsh Glik while imprisoned in the Vilna Ghetto, is the most famous of all the partisan songs. According to Gilbert, it is “less a battle cry than a defiant affirmation of Jewish endurance” (2005, 72). Though the song contains a few passing references to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (the news of which served as the direct catalyst for Glik’s writing), Gilbert observes that the words were “directed far more forcefully towards a larger context of Jewish suffering and existence” (2005, 72). This context, Gilbert argues, is key. She explains that “the secret to Glik’s optimism lay in its function of collective rather than individual survival. The song’s ‘we’ . . . did not refer only to the partisans. . . . Rather, it was the all-encompassing ‘we’ of the Jewish people, who had wandered among foreign lands” (2005, 72).

“Zog nit Keynmol” is set to a marching beat; Glik set his poetry to a Soviet melody well known in Eastern Europe and among leftist groups at the time, originally featured in a film called *I, Son of Working People* (Gutman 1990). The original song was composed by the Pokrass brothers, well-known Soviet composers of Jewish origin, though the song as utilized in *I, Son of Working People* is not explicitly Jewish in any discernable way (Gutman 1990). This is no matter; Glik’s poetic contributions transformed the music into something Jewish by virtue of the context in which his lyrics were composed and his intention that the song become a rallying cry for Jewish resisters. “Zog nit Keynmol” is the kind of anthem that is stamped onto generations of people’s hearts and souls; Norm Berman told me that his mother continued to sing it throughout her struggle with dementia:

People sang it, and she sang it, and there was such defiance and pride and hope that came with that. You know, she died about 10 years ago, and she had lost a lot of her memory. She had a rare form of dementia in her last years. But one of the things that she remembered was every word and every verse of that song. And when she was uncomfortable in her nursing home, she would begin to sing the song, and the nurses called it “Bluma’s song.” And it was her saying, you know, “I’m not ready to leave yet.” (Berman 2020)

“Yugnt Himen” (Youth Hymn) is another popular Vilna composition. Lyricist Shmerke Kaczerginski, a poet and later a partisan, dedicated the composition to the youth club in the ghetto, where it was performed at meetings and gatherings within the ghetto. Fellow inmate Basye Rubin composed the melody. The song mirrors the many so-called official partisan songs composed by Vilna songwriters; the tempo is upbeat, and the lyrics are brash, proud, and encouraging. Linda Gritz, when asked what kind of Jewish future she imagines, referenced “Yugnt Himen” explicitly:

As I said, our daughter was the first kid who stayed in the chorus. But my guess is that with my son, we had about 10 kids in the chorus. And we would have them sing “Yugnt Himen”. . . . That’s not a partisan song, but it was written by someone who became a part of the resistance. It certainly is a resistance song. And when we had 10 kids singing those verses, I could barely sing the chorus. . . . It was just, ah . . . I feel pride thinking about the continuity. From generation to generation and the meaning, there’s just such rich meanings in the songs. (Katz & Gritz 2020)

Gritz’s reference to the tone, lyrics, and context indicates that partisan and partisan-adjacent ghetto songs are, first and foremost, calls to action for the people who originally sang and heard them, certainly, but also for generations yet to be born. *A Besere Welt*’s catalog does many things at once: interpretation, re-interpretation, faithful re-creation, modern adaptation. It preserves, it imagines, it commands, and it responds—all owing to the imagination and commitment of its members,

and the relationship each of them bring individually to Jewish identity, group affiliation, and the legacy of those who fought back. If there is a sentiment that can sum up the whole of diverse beliefs about singing partisan and ghetto music as Jews in the twenty-first century, it is this: *mir zaynen do.*

The Creation of New Jewish Tradition

While plenty of folk tales, songs, beliefs, and recipes are grounded in the common religious texts of the Jewish faith, equally as important to the broader Jewish folk canon are the recipes passed down from parent to child, legends of the *dybbuk*, colorful curses, jokes, and clippings from radical newspapers printed in Yiddish. All of these pieces constitute parts of a larger whole: Jewish tradition, still in motion. Tradition is frequently misunderstood and misrepresented in a colloquial sense as static, rote, and unchangeable. But tradition is based on and indeed sustained by *both* innovation and repetition (Bronner 1998).

Members of *A Besere Velt* express their Jewishness and engage with Jewish traditions in different individual ways. Even operating from the same script (be it sheet music they use, the Torah scroll at Saturday services, or a *siddur*) guarantees subtle variations in execution. It is not humanly possible to produce perfectly synchronous sound while singing as a group, nor to chant from the Torah with the exact same inflection and pitch and breath every single time, nor move through the prayers in a *siddur* at precisely the same speed each week. For members of *A Besere Velt*, the nature of the group achieves harmony through individual expression: as a chorus, there are defined, unique roles for singers of varying voice roles (e.g., alto, soprano, baritone). When *A Besere Velt* performs “Zog nit Keynmol,” they produce a coherent expression of Jewish resistance, assembled from the voices of dozens of unique Jewish individuals who produce sound with minute variations from moment to moment. Mike Katz spoke of his approach to tradition, ritual, and observance:

In order to stay Jewish, and we clearly have made a decision to stay Jewish, we are not assimilated . . . in order to stay Jewish without having to be a

member of the synagogue, being a “card carrying” Jew, it was a choice we made. You have to think a lot, and consciously make choices about what parts you accept and what parts you don’t accept, and what parts you use and what parts you don’t use. . . . (Katz & Gritz 2020)

Katz’s framework of choice suggests that Jewish tradition is not something that exists outside of time and space. Jews have long grappled with the degree to which their lives ought to be dictated by Jewish texts and community heritage; the Reform movement in Judaism grew explicitly from German rabbi Abraham Geiger arguing that individual choice with regards to engagement with *mitzvot* (while upholding what he considered to be “eternal rational truths”) would ensure the preservation and continuation of Jews as modern members of society (Meyer 1995). Even taking literally the narrative of the Torah being handed down at Mount Sinai by God to Moses requires the decision to accept the Torah as law *and* the continued decision to uphold, honor, and engage with those laws. Within tradition, there are choices—ones that are often made over and over and over again, by a great number of people—but choices nonetheless.

In this vein, Gritz’s observation that ritual within *A Besere Velt* and the Worker’s Circle more broadly is not performed “without thought” provides insight into the ways in which many secular Jews understand religiously motivated adherences. Katz and Gritz drew a line between acceptance of traditions *for tradition’s sake* and practices that are actively sought out because they speak to values and ideas held dear by the participants. In this way, they treat tradition as an active, rather than passive, component of Jewish life.

Many members of *A Besere Velt* identified political relationships to and with Yiddish as a motivation to engage with the chorus. The language is a means of enacting and espousing their values and engaging with tradition and ritual in a way that felt “true” to their political compass. Norm Berman, when asked what political associations Yiddish brought to mind for him, said:

I think given the Jewish experience in general, I think the art of the expression went straight to our striving for something better, which is, I think by

definition, progressive. And, you know, perhaps radical . . . it reflects the thinking of many of the creative people who tapped into what the culture at the time was feeling and lent expression to that. So, I think politically radical, surely progressive, feeling hopeful. (Berman 2020)

Musical director Derek David added:

I know that for a lot of people in the chorus it's very much an affirmation of their history, identity, and their values. In other words, what we do is very much so a declaration of what we believe. It is both a representation of our personal history and a way of expressing leftism and Jewishness in the same breath. For me personally, I also see what we do as taking part in a historical act, as we recreate the past to sing for a more just and equitable world, and to sing for voices that have been silenced or suppressed in our world today.

For example, when we sing “Zog nit Keynmol,” I feel that it has far more to do with the past than it does have to do with the present, mainly because we aren’t living anywhere near the same material conditions in which the Jews of Eastern Europe lived. What we’re mainly wrestling with is our contemporary political landscape through the past. We sing in support of the world we want to live in, and our allyship to those who need us through our own shared history. (David 2020)

David’s perception of how *A Besere Welt*’s members may understand their politics in relation to and in conversation with Yiddish music provides a valuable lens to the concept of Jewish folk tradition. His mention of “discovery, rediscovery, honoring the past and potentially keeping it alive” underscore the same general sentiment that all the chorus members I interviewed expressed: that there is something worth preserving in the words and melodies of Yiddish music, whether they are sung in memoriam, in hopefulness, or just for the present.

Political radicalism is not inherent to Judaism nor the Yiddish language, but as Katz eloquently notes, the music of ghettos and Jewish partisans that *A Besere*

Velt performs showcase radical Jews who were writing about their circumstances, their experiences, their politics, and their dreams:

For us, and this gets much more philosophical, but part of the reason Yiddish is important to us is as people . . . you may notice neither one of us said we went to Hebrew school. The traditional religion is not part of either of our families. I'm at least a third generation secularist. And how do you keep a culture alive? To me, it's Yiddish and *Yiddishkeit*. To me, it's indivisibly connected to progressivism, to being a progressive. You know, Yiddish was the language of the women. Yiddish was the language of social protest in Europe. It was the language that created the unions in America. So, yes, I choose what I use, and I ignore other things that Yiddish is involved with. (Katz & Gritz 2020)

Their mode of expression, songwriting and singing, was both a nod to a broader folk tradition of transmitting information, history, and emotion through music, and also a vehicle to express their Jewish identity, worldview, and pride. For the members of *A Besere Velt* who share the same political outlooks and desire for justice, performing the music of Jewish partisans and ghetto music becomes a ritual that is part of an evolving Jewish tradition.

Performance, Meaning, and the Creation of Jewish Space

A Besere Velt is not just sharing the music of partisan and ghetto resisters with an audience but also with themselves. In this sense, each performance is an act of creating memory, and of space. On the topic of space, cultural historian Joachim Schlör writes, “Life conditions in the Diaspora—among the nations—have brought about a specific poetics of space as a result of this in-between-ness and of the physical and mental confrontation between these two worlds. Jewish topographies emerge from and can be discussed in the framework of such—cultural activities: to inhabit, to imagine, to depict, to give meaning to, to transgress. To be in a place” (Schlör 2015, 9).

A Besere Velt revels in the “in-between-ness” related to the liminal space as described by both Victor Turner and chorus members themselves. “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. . . . As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions” (V. Turner 1974, 95). A *Besere Velt* creates spaces that are not only Jewish but purposefully transitional: the members are at once contending with their own memories, relationship to Jewishness, and political aspirations *and also* collective cultural memories. Gila Flam, in her expansive study of the music of the Łódź ghetto, hypothesizes that survivors of that ghetto (and survivors of the Holocaust more broadly) are not a community in the “common sense of the word,” but rather: “They are communities in the same sense described by Victor Turner . . . a group of people who share particular experiences and memories, and as such they redefine themselves” (1992, 3).

Liminality allows *A Besere Velt* members to consider themselves in community with the people who composed the music they sing and the Jewish community *on the whole*. They are both in possession of their own memories and experiences that create kinship between themselves and the original composers and performers of partisan music, and able to create community-building memories and experiences as they learn, perform, and preserve their repertoire. This puts chorus members somewhere neither here nor there; *A Besere Velt* is constantly toggling between the past, present, and the future. And in the era of Zoom, Facebook Live, and the ability to record moments to be watched a later date, *A Besere Velt* members can exist both in the moment of live production and whenever and wherever an observer encounters *A Besere Velt*’s music.

What does *A Besere Velt* communicate and build in the space created through performance in rehearsals, practicing solo as individuals, standing in front of a crowd, or taping music for a Zoom-assisted concert? Norm Berman described what happens in the room when *A Besere Velt* sings:

In performance, there are those moments when you suddenly feel, “Oh, my God. We’ve made this connection.” We’ve succeeded in creating this space.

And it's not that we are suddenly in the camp or in the words or in the shtetl. But we're in that that emotional space, where we can connect with what our ancestors experienced, and we can actually bring the experience of others to ourselves, but also to the people who are listening to us. . . . I think with a good performance, especially when, you know, the harmonies work and the timing is working and you're really paying attention to the conductor . . . you just you walk into it, and it happens. And I've been told by members of audience—"Oh, my God, in this particular song at this particular moment, something happened." (Berman 2020)

Here, *A Besere Velt* succeeds in creating the most ordinary and extraordinary of places: liminal space. The boundaries of time get a little fuzzy. It is not quite time travel but almost a way to "zoom out," to see Jewish experiences on a long continuum, with no real beginning or end. Edith Turner, writing on collective joy, summarized music's possibilities for the creation of liminal space by writing:

Music is no ordinary aspect of human experience. Our bodies have boundaries—skins—so we cannot merge all of our body with all of the others. But by intimately sharing precise time, owing to the transformative power of rhythm, we can merge, and we find we are not separate. In music, you join your voices completely, you are joined, you are in the same place, because you have gone altogether into the sound, and the sound is one sound with all the other people in it: on, in the same space. (E. Turner 2012, 48)

Although there is no set number of participants in an endeavor required to beget *space* as an act of community creation and resistance, in the case of *A Besere Velt*, the presence of an audience during performances ensures that the ritual is being witnessed. That is, people watching the performance of Jewish partisan and ghetto music begets certainty that important themes and messages are being transmitted. In this way, too, other members of *A Besere Velt* are they themselves a kind of audience. It is this transmission—both internally, within *A Besere Velt*, and externally,

with “outside” audiences of any size and composition—that sustains and defines *A Besere Velt*’s tradition. To this point, Sonya Taaffe related:

Partisan songs right now do have a particular resonance to me. And singing them feels like an act of tribute to the people who wrote to them and sang them the first time and who, for one reason or another, are generally now no longer alive. . . . Partisan music does actually feel like a living act of resistance. It doesn’t just feel like paying tribute to something in the past that is safely dead and gone and we can look back on them and go, oh, that’s wonderful, you know, we don’t have to worry about it nowadays. For me, it does feel like the phrase I would use, which is partly gotten out of a book like many things in my life—I don’t like the phrase “keeping faith” because that isn’t particularly how I think about it, it’s keeping *continuity*. It does feel like it’s part of a tradition, and that I’m singing it in a context where it isn’t safely dead. . . . (Taaffe 2020)

Taaffe’s conception of partisan and ghetto music as existing in a “context where it isn’t safely dead” is striking on two levels: one, it considers that many Jews feel connected to ghetto and partisan music because Jewish people continue to face antisemitism, alienation, fear, and a desire for a justice; and two, that in singing the music, members of *A Besere Velt* prevent the music from “dying,” that is, being lost to history. Here, too, Taaffe speaks to the idea of choice in tradition. She describes singing in Yiddish as an avenue through which her Jewishness is affirmed and asserted, while simultaneously acknowledging the weight of personal ancestral and broader community obligation and history. Michael Felsen, for instance, offered:

I am very, very moved by the music that we sing. Maybe not every single song. But a lot of it is a very emotional experience. . . . We’ve done, as you’ve probably heard, performances that are thematic. We’ve sung music of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising or like, you know, bread and roses/striking/labor music . . . I get extremely emotional singing that stuff. I think the music is

quite beautiful, I think the melodies are quite beautiful. . . . It feels like a direct connection, an emotional connection . . . not just an intellectual connection. And we're a community of . . . kindred spirits, we have this common sense of needing to confront injustice. So it all kind of melds together into something that is very satisfying and very meaningful and very uniting. . . . It's funny, because I've heard the term liminal space, but I actually never knew exactly what it meant. In thinking about some of our performances, it's a transporting experience. It transcends the moment you're in; it takes you to another space. It's beautiful. (Felsen 2020)

Felsen articulates a relationship between the history of both the music *A Besere Welt* sings and the history of the Jewish people more broadly while experiencing a transformation and creation of a “third” space inhabited by the members of the chorus. Likewise, Bob Follansbee mentioned:

You know, when I'm singing some of the songs, because I don't speak Yiddish, I'm not always completely aware of what I'm saying. We do a pretty good job of reviewing lyrics and what they mean, but on a word-by-word basis, I don't always know what every single line means.

But my headspace is definitely . . . well, it's interesting. I would say that in some ways, while I do have some of the harking back to the past or kind of honoring the past, what I'm emotive about is doing this in the present. The fact that we're in this particular time, singing this music. And once again, the fact that it's Yiddish music, and what that means, as a way to honor the music itself, not just the words. But then also honoring what the words mean, and they resonate obviously in different ways to things in the past verses the future. But I just have this sense of—wow, this is pretty cool that we're doing this right now. (Follansbee 2020)

Follansbee views a connection between the past and the present in *A Besere Welt* performances but approaches that connection primarily from a place of reverence and excitement that the music is being performed in the present at the outset.

A Besere Velt's liminal spaces in performance are not just grounded in remembrance of the past and creation of a Jewish present, but also in the promise of a Jewish future. For Linda Gritz, this promise is made most visible by the involvement of young children: "I cry, especially when the kids sing. . . . It's expressing my heritage, my ethnic identity, my aspirations for a better world" (Katz & Gritz 2020). Similarly, Rebecca Long said:

There is an eerie familiarity about Yiddish. It feels like mine. And so I think in deepening my understanding of Yiddishkeit by singing that I have found meaning and have also gained understanding of things I never would have expected Yiddish to apply to . . . it's cool to understand just how modern this language is in so many ways. Like how applicable it is . . . how I can imagine a world in which the Holocaust never happened and people were still speaking Yiddish in huge numbers. I'm in this choir with mostly 60 plus year olds and to learn from them and sing with them feels very meaningful. And part of that is just like the familial feeling that I was describing before. And there is a sense that in the time that I've been in the choir, more and more young people have joined it. . . . And so just to see the younger people . . . there's a hope that I feel that, you know, when this generation is no longer here, this fire still exists. . . . (Long 2020)

Both Weitzman and Long are several generations removed from the direct trauma of the Holocaust and are careful to avoid idealizing Yiddish, Yiddish speakers, and the politics of Jewish people more broadly. But both see *A Besere Velt* as a way to keep a "fire lit," in Long's words—a way to involve themselves firsthand in the creation of Jewish space for a future, not just an exercise in nostalgia or a wish to rearrange the past. The oldest member of the chorus, Mae Tupa, expressed her sense of Jewish futures through the performance of Yiddish music quite straightforwardly:

When we're performing, I feel all kinds of different things . . . I wish my Daddy was sitting in the audience. I wish my Mommy was, too, but Daddy

especially because he would take me to the Yiddish theater. I feel a connection to people like that. It does feel like it's the present. I'd like it to contribute to the future. (Tupa 2020)

Of all the members I spoke to, perhaps Norm Berman puts it most clearly:

For me . . . when I fully understand the song, and there's something that resonates and echoes, and I feel like I'm making a connection with another time in another place, something in your connection with people who maybe envisioned me in America somewhere, I do feel that I'm looking back at them in Europe. I envision the campfire. I envision the *shtetl*. I envision, you know, if it's a liturgical song and it's the high holidays and there's some melodies that I know were sung in Europe . . . I'm right there with them wrapped in the prayer shawls. And I'm saying, "Oh, my God, I can hear the echo." (Berman 2020)

It is particularly poignant to contrast the emotional involvement and sense of place and belonging between the oldest and youngest generations performing with *A Besere Velt*. Both have a sense of the future as something neither will ever truly reach. Members of *A Besere Velt* are existing in suspension, calling upon memories (some personal, and some communal) to continually construct a Jewish space. They are buoyed by the strength of the partisans, the strength of Jewish community, and the promise of Jewish continuity.

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