

The Importance of Music at Holy Blossom

By: Camille Lisser

For my confirmation project, I researched Jewish Music. Music has always been an important part of life, and a central part of my experience at Holy Blossom. In fact, my clearest memories from when I was younger at Holy Blossom involve music, from getting shakers, or a drum from the wooden box at family services to going to Judy and David concerts. When I was preparing for my Bat Mitzvah, I was so lucky to learn from Suzanne Hersch, who really inspired, and got me interested in Jewish Music. Music is all around us at Holy Blossom, and everyone can participate, and is involved. This is something I find very special. To complete this project, I had the privilege of learning from four people who are very knowledgeable about the history of music in the Jewish culture, the history of music at Holy Blossom, and the current role music has here.

Through talking to Lindi, Cantor Maissner, Sheila and Rabbi Helfman, I realized that a main theme was, how modern melodies are woven in with traditional ones at Holy Blossom. So, the first half of this presentation there is more traditional music in the background, it might sound familiar to you because we hear this music on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur at Holy Blossom. The second half features more modern melodies that you may hear on a Shabbat service here. Both types of music are important and meaningful to Holy Blossom, and play a significant role in services. See if you can notice when the music changes from traditional to more modern music.

Rabbi Helfman

From Rabbi Helfman, I learned about the earliest forms of Jewish music, and the different melodies we hear in Synagogues today. The earliest form of Jewish music was the music sang in the temples in Jerusalem during animal sacrifice. These songs had no meter; however, it is believed that instruments were used. An example of this prayer is the Ashrei prayer, which is still a prayer that is commonly said in services today. The next form was the Torah trope. Today, around the world, there are many different forms of Torah Trope. Even at Holy Blossom, we have the opportunity to hear these different tropes. Lastly, I learned about the different Shabbat, weekly, and High Holiday melodies that are used in services. Even though the words, and prayers are the same, the melodies are different.

From the information from Rabbi Helfman, What stood out to me was that there are different Torah tropes used around the world. Even though this of course makes sense, I had never thought about it before. This information made me wonder how services vary throughout Israel and the diaspora, as they take place in different languages, and use different melodies. When we last visited Temple Emanu-el in Montreal where my dad was a member growing up, we loved how there were not just two, but three languages in the service (Hebrew, English, and French)! More broadly, in Toronto, we are so fortunate to have such a diverse city. A few weeks ago, I went on a food tour of Kensington Market with many teens from Holy Blossom. We tasted food from 6 different restaurants, and each time, it was food from a different culture or region of the world. This was a great experience because it proved that even in a small area, there is always room for diversity and culture. Overall, the different tropes around the world show me that it is important to appreciate are differences because everyone has something to offer.

Lindi

Next, I had the opportunity to learn from Lindi Rivers. Firstly, I learned that Holy Blossom began more classical reform. However, services took on a different style with the Reform Movement, and became more communal. Overtime, modern melodies have been woven with more traditional aspects in service, through the 18th century all the way to the present day. In fact, Cantor Maissner has been very good at integrating the two together and teaches this to cantors around the world. As well, services have become more intertwined with music and speaking, instead

of a block of speaking, followed by music. Therefore, the role of cantors has significantly increased overtime. Lastly, I learned more about the history of Concert Series. In the 8th and 19th century in Europe, when Jews weren't permitted in music halls, music in synagogues became extremely popular. In fact, this time period is known as the "Golden Age" of Jewish Music

Firstly, what stood out to me from this information was how modern melodies have been woven in with a more traditional service. This shows the importance of keeping meaningful traditions that have been celebrated for years and acknowledging and accepting change at the same time. For example, the new addition to the building at Holy Blossom shows change and renewal, but the important traditions of both Holy Blossom and the Jewish religion stay. Secondly what stood out to me was learning about the Concert Series, and how they started. Even though Jews weren't permitted in music halls, they still found an opportunity to enjoy beautiful music. This is meaningful to me because it shows that despite the history of Anti-Semitism in Europe, Jews were able to create something beautiful that had lasting positive impacts, as the Concert Series is a big part of Holy Blossom today. In summary, the information shows the importance of keeping tradition, while accepting change, and creating something beautiful in the midst of hate.

Sheila Smolkin

Through this project, I had the opportunity to learn from Sheila Smolkin, an archivist here at Holy Blossom. I learned that originally, musical instruments such as the organ were not allowed at Holy Blossom . In 1876, Holy Blossom was the only synagogue in Toronto, and the congregation wanted a dedication service for the building on Richmond. Many people wanted an organ to be used at this service, but it was made clear that the organ would only be used for that, and not for regular services. This caused a divide between traditionalists and people who were leaning more on the reform side, and wanted instruments in service. In 1880, the first musically trained cantor comes to Toronto. At this time, Cantors had to also work in various positions as teachers, treasurer etc. In the same year, Ms. Michael Morris formed the ladies choir. In 1890, Holy Blossom got their own organ to be used during Passover. This increased tension within the congregation. As well, during this time period, there was a tension building because people had different opinions on men and women singing together at Richmond Street location of Holy Blossom. In 1920, the move was made to reform. Rabbi Brookner was the first reform Rabbi at Holy Blossom. After this, it becomes routine to have an organ, and have men and women sit and sing together.

Reflecting on this information I realized how important it is that we have archivists here at Holy Blossom. This is because they ensure that the important stories from the history of Holy Blossom, are remembered, in order to be passed on to future generations. I really appreciated the opportunity to learn more our history, especially as it relates to music.

Cantor Maissner

I had the opportunity to learn from Cantor Maissner. 40 years ago, when Cantor Maissner began at Holy Blossom the music was very formal. In the beginning, the Rabbi would stand on one side of the Bimah, the cantor on the other, and the choir on the balcony. As well, the music was more challenging for the congregation to sing along too. As well, the main service took place on Friday instead of Saturday. Eventually, the Friday service was shifted from 8:00 to 6:00, and more communal music was implemented into the Saturday service. As well, I learned more about the Temple Singers. They are a volunteer choir and now at every Bar/Bat Mitzvah and festivals the Temple Singers and choir always sing together. Overtime, the music in services has become more accessible to the congregation.

Even if there is music that is more challenging for the congregation to participate in, there is always a chorus where the congregation can join in.

From Cantor Maissner, what really stood out to me was how communal music overtime has become. And reflecting on this, I can really tell that it is true. So many people are involved in music, from Bar/Bat Mitzvah tutors who teach and inspire students about Torah and Haftarah trope to Cantors and Rabbis to the choir, to the temple singers and so many more. Really the whole congregation is involved. As I mentioned earlier, music truly surrounds us at Holy Blossom which is something that is extremely special.

Conclusion

After researching the history of Jewish music, my question was what's the future of Jewish music? And the answer is that Jewish music is continually evolving as we integrate modern melodies with tradition so we can't know for sure what to expect. So, this question remains unanswered, but I am very excited to see where Jewish music goes in the future!

