

CORINNA DA FONSECA-WOLLHEIM

Jewish Masterpiece: 'Hatikvah'

Israel's national anthem is one of the only anthems in the world to be written in a minor key. That's no accident



IN A FRIDAY EVENING in April 1945, five days after British troops first entered the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, a reporter for BBC Radio captured a group of survivors singing “Hatikvah.” They were taking part in an open-air service led by a Welsh army chaplain, the Reverend Leslie Hardman, who had spent the past days saying Kaddish over mass graves overflowing with tangled corpses. In his report, the journalist described the scene:

Forty thousand or more [bodies] had been cleared, but there were still one or two thousand around, and people were still lying down and dying in broad daylight in front of our eyes. This was the back-

ground to this open-air Jewish service. During the service, the few hundred people gathered together were sobbing openly, with joy of their liberation and with sorrow of the memory of their parents and brothers and sisters that had been taken from them and gassed and burned. These people knew they were being recorded. They wanted the world to hear their voice. They made a tremendous effort, which quite exhausted them.

In the haunting recording, now posted on YouTube, you can hear the exhaustion in the frayed first notes of the hymn that had become the as-yet unofficial anthem of the Jewish people. *As long as in the heart within, the Jewish soul yearns, and the eye gazes east toward Zion, our hope is not lost...*

The opening notes of the Bergen-Belsen chorus rise in an unsteady slur as if the tune were dragging itself up from the ground, its contours blurred from the slight differences in tempo and pitch. One woman's voice emerges as the leader, and on the words *nefesh yehudi* ("Jewish soul") she accentuates the beginning of each syllable, which has the double effect of rallying the other singers around a clear beat and asserting the survival—in a place where the evidence to the contrary could be measured in mounds of bodies and discarded shoes—of the Jewish soul.

By the time the melody shoots up on *od lo avdah tikvateinu* ("our hope is not lost"), the octave jump is clean and confident across the whole chorus. You can even hear one female voice splitting off from the group by a major third to harmonize the flourish on *tikvateinu*. She might have learned it that way at a Zionist summer camp, or maybe she had grown up in one of those parts of Eastern Europe where spontaneous harmony is just one of the skills you absorb early and then always carry in your bones.

With its hopeful lyrics based on an 1878 poem by Naftali Herz

Imber set to a melancholic tune by Samuel Cohen in 1888, “Hatikvah” seems eerily suited to the Jewish experience at that moment in history. There’s the opening shuffle up and down the minor scale that evokes the motion of wandering and the pain of exile. There’s the cadence, or harmonic homecoming, on the final mention of the ancestral Jewish land, and in the middle—on a modulation into sunny major—the radiant octave jump toward hope.

In the Diaspora, “Hatikvah” became so closely associated with the Zionist movement that it seemed to many inevitable that it should become the national anthem at the founding of the Jewish state. But in Israel, it has been controversial and was only legally adopted as the state anthem in 2014.

To some of its critics, the anthem is too Jewish to represent a population that is one-fifth Arab. One of them is the left-wing former Knesset member Uri Avneri, who in a podcast interview dismissed “Hatikvah” as a product of the Diaspora. “It is about Jews somewhere abroad, who are longing for the Land of Israel,” he said. “It has nothing to do with people in the Land of Israel. I don’t turn to the east, because I live in the middle. The east I am looking at is Jordan, or India or China. It is a completely irrelevant song.”

To religious critics, it’s a scandal that the lyrics never mention God. Wouldn’t “Shir Hama’alot,” the mystical setting of Psalm 126, be a more appropriate anthem? Or would Israelis be better off rallying around “Jerusalem of Gold”? After all, that song was not only written by a sabra but also seemed to have prophetic powers, given that its release at the cusp of the Six-Day War ushered in the recapture of the Old City.

Meanwhile, the melody of “Hatikvah” has been its own source of anxiety. The minor-scale opening matches almost pitch for pitch the theme of Bedrich Smetana’s 1879 “Moldau,” part of the symphonic poem “Ma Vlast” that was itself an expression

of Czech nationalist aspirations. The similarities are so strong that when authorities in British-occupied Palestine banned broadcasts of “Hatikvah,” Jewish radio stations would play Smetana’s work instead. But Smetana in turn had only borrowed the tune from an existing folk song. This led a slew of Jewish musicologists to hunt down the origin of the melody and — if at all possible — find a Jewish antecedent.

They seemed to strike gold with the Sephardic *piyyut* to “Lekh le shalom geshem,” a blessing over dew recited during Passover. There was that minor scale again, climbing to the sixth degree of the scale before settling back down with a couple of gracious arabesques along the way. If this tune could be traced back to pre-expulsion Spain, wasn’t it possible that all the other melodies resembling it — folk tunes from Poland and Sweden, art songs from Renaissance Italy and Elizabethan England — were actually based on a Jewish pattern? From there, it was a small step to suggest that Mozart himself had unknowingly quoted the Sephardic prayer in the eighth of his 12 piano variations on “Ah! vous dirai-je, maman” (a nursery rhyme set to the same melody as “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star”).

This game of Jewish geography works best as long as a melody is reduced to its crude outline. In the first half of “Hatikvah,” that is a simple minor scale. Yet what turns a scale into a melody are the rhythmic variations and small ornaments that shape the progression along the steps. It’s the ornaments — which do not feature in “Hatikvah” — that lend “Lekh le shalom geshem” its medieval flavor. What makes Smetana’s “Moldau” flow like a river are those lilting triplets propelling the tune downstream. You can dismiss such differences as details, but then you risk arguing for family resemblance on the basis of skeletons.

To say that the tune to “Hatikvah” is built on an archetype rather than on a Jewish invention does not detract from its power. In fact, today’s anthem derives much of its emotional impact from the jux-

taposition of the humble opening phrase with the one that follows. This second part can be traced more confidently to a Romanian peasant song about driving an ox cart, an upbeat number in a major key. In the ox-and-cart version, that octave jump sounds like a cue for some exuberant dance move.

When Samuel Cohen set it to a verse from Imber’s poem “Tikvateinu,” he slowed the Balkan peasant dance down to a reverential tempo. Suddenly, the rustic tune takes on the worshipful gait of an anthem. Now the melancholic shuffle of the exiles gives way to radiance as the melody soars up an octave right as the lyrics invoke the hope of a return to the Holy Land. A note transposed up an octave is the same note — the same degree of the scale — just vibrating at a higher frequency. It’s an almost literal rendering of the concept of aliyah.

The beginning of “Hatikvah” is written in D minor, the “heart-break key” often used in classical music to convey grief and brokenness. Even the 1984 rock-’n’roll mockumentary *This Is Spinal Tap* defines it as “the saddest of all keys,” one that makes people “weep instantly when you play it.” Mozart used it in his Requiem and to depict Don Giovanni’s descent into hell. Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony begins in tortured D minor before finding redemption in the D-major “Ode to Joy.” As “Hatikvah” moves into the slowed-down Romanian dance on the words evoking hope, it modulates into F major, a contemplative key often associated with pastoral settings in Western music. On the final words, the music settles back into D minor, the familiar melancholy now endowed with new dignity, the final steps paced like a ceremonial march.

The elegiac character of “Hatikvah,” with its chiaroscuro shift from suffering to hope, is one reason it stands out among national anthems. The few other minor-key anthems tend to be marches, where the dark harmonies conjure a sense of tragic courage. Other slow hymns, like

the British “God Save the King” and the German anthem it inspired, project political stability with all-is-well harmonies. But as a rule, anthems are victory parades or calls to arms. The most triumphant ones are often the least singable, such as “La Marseillaise,” which sounds like one elaborate trumpet signal, or “The Star-Spangled Banner,” which features such treacherous jumps that it can humble the most seasoned vocalist.

“Hatikvah” leaves no room for the kind of melismatic runs and other personal touches that American pop stars pile on top of their anthem at sports events. Humble and egalitarian, it reflects an ideal of bottom-up social cohesion that is ultimately very Israeli. The D minor–F major-and-back modulation befits the anthem of a minority people striving for autonomy in their own land.

It almost ended differently. In 1947, four days before the United Nations voted on the establishment of the State of Israel, “Hatikvah” underwent a cosmetic intervention to give it a happy ending. The surgeon in question was Kurt Weill, the composer whose *Threepenny Opera* captured the gallows humor of the Weimar Republic and who had since fled the Nazis and landed in America. His orchestration of “Hatikvah,” commissioned for a New York fundraiser for the nascent Weizmann Institute, is brash, edgy, and triumphant. Chirpy woodwinds flit about the melancholic tune, which proceeds in an uncomfortably light-footed, dotted rhythm. The central octave jump is smothered in dense chromatic chords before a snare drum rallies its troops, the brass cuts through decisively, and the whole thing ends in technicolor major.

Weill’s instrumental setting received its premiere on November 25 at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel by the Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by Serge Koussevitzky. Chaim Weizmann, who would go on to become the first president of Israel, liked the arrangement so much that he expressed his hope that it would become the official anthem of the Jewish state. In fact, the orchestration most com-

monly used these days bears the imprint of an Italian conductor and orchestrator, Bernardino Molinari, who, following a vision of the Virgin Mary, moved to Israel in 1948 and went on to lead the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra for three years. (He was later outed as a Fascist.) This orchestral version of “Hatikvah” beautifully dramatizes the anthem’s pathos. The conductor Zubin Mehta once told me about an emotionally charged concert in Berlin in 1971, part of the Israel Philharmonic’s hotly debated first tour to Germany, which ended with a rousing encore of “Hatikvah.” The German audience went wild, he said, and there was not a dry eye in the house. “Of course,” Mehta added with a wink, “half of them thought we were playing the ‘Moldau.’”

While few renditions of “Hatikvah” have been as haunting as the one captured for the BBC that Kabbalat Shabbat in Bergen-Belsen, the anthem continues to cast a spell. The handful of YouTube videos showing it being played in various Gulf States in recent years, for instance at a medal ceremony honoring a victorious Israeli athlete in Abu Dhabi, or during an official ceremony at the royal palace in Bahrain, may soon seem as quaint as Weill’s forced Hollywood ending. A decade before the attacks of October 7, Hamas put out a video with crude graphics depicting humiliated Jews over the sounds of a rewritten “Hatikvah” that celebrated the failure of the Zionist project—all sung in Arabic-inflected modern Hebrew. For now, though, the version that Jewish students intone at campus demonstrations and that IDF soldiers sing whenever they enter Gaza is the one sung by that spectral chorus of survivors: a hymn rooted in heartbreak minor that keeps its heart wide open to the possibility of hope. *