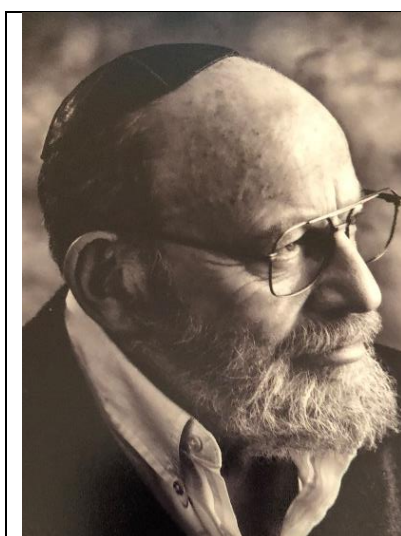


## COZ 29: February 2, 2021 Boruch Cohon / Jonathan Morgan



Rabbi Baruch Cohon  
[Blog.cantorabbi.com](http://Blog.cantorabbi.com),  
[www.cohonaward.com](http://www.cohonaward.com)

### COZ 29: Tuesday 02 February Baruch Cohon and Jonathan Morgan

#### The Fish and the Phonograph, the Life and work of AZ Idelsohn

They will give a taste of Morgan's recently published book *Nigun*, a historical fiction – biography about AZ Idelsohn

Retired Cantor and Rabbi, Baruch Cohon was AZ Idelsohn's youngest student from the age of five, will talk about his contacts with AZ Idelsohn and the Idelsohn family, and show some related publications.

Jonathan Morgan, clinical psychologist and writer in Cape Town, South Africa is the great grandson of AZ Idelsohn.



Jonathan Morgan AZ Idelsohn's  
great grandson

Listen again here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVGyUq7Hsro>

Report by Malcolm Miller

### ***What is the most famous Jewish tune in the world?***

A sparkling question to launch a really fascinating COZ, which attracted a sizeable live zoom audience in addition to the youtube multitudes on Tuesday 2 February. The event was devoted to the story of the great historic figure of A. Z. Idelsohn (1882-1938), known by many as 'the father of Jewish music history', yet told in a refreshing personal manner by his great-grandson Dr Jonathan Morgan, in conversation with someone who had been a pupil of Idelsohn in his youth, the distinguished cantor, rabbi, composer and author Baruch Cohon.

The answer to that question, offered instantly by numerous unmuted zoomers and on the chat-box, is *Hava Nagila*. The relevance? The origin of the tune, which was first performed in a choral arrangement by Idelsohn in 1918 Palestine, is the story of a new book *Nigun*, by Jonathan Magun (the original name now called Morgan), which traces the life and career of Idelsohn in his own voice, a fictionalisation of Idelsohn's own five page autobiography intermingled with oral history sources including his daughters.

Baruch Cohon began by illustrating some of Idelsohn's achievements, his books, his thesaurus and history of Jewish music, and spoke about his opera *Jeptha*, published and premiered in Palestine in 1922.

## Expansion of AZ's 5-page autobiographical sketch

Jonathan Morgan took up the story from Idelsohn's youth, explaining along the way how his new book expands on significant events which are detailed in biographical studies. Throughout the narrative, comments and questions in the chat box were deftly fielded and responded to by various scholars, including Dr Amalia Kedem, who kindly provided useful links to resources such as the Yuval Vol 5 (dedicated to Idelsohn), the NLI recordings of Idelsohn's research and other material, such as an article on The Tablet by Professor Edwin Seroussi on the topic of Hava Nagila (<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/secret-history-hava-nagila> )

We heard about Idelsohn's childhood, how a trip to buy fish in the town market introduced him to music notation – some manuscript being used as fish wrapper – and his father's consent for him to study cantorial music. As a youth he was thus apprenticed to Reb Rabinowicz, the local cantor, and they toured the shtetls, as well as a few cities, in Eastern Europe, shaping his experience of Jewish music and at times of the current Protestant/art music styles. Anecdotes of reading Yiddish versions of Sherlock Holmes raised interesting questions as to whether that famous detective might have acted as a role model for Idelsohn's later zeal for discovery into the traditions of the Jewish musical heritage.

After further experience with different teachers, Idelsohn was accepted as a chazzan in Leipzig, under the wing of Hillel Schneider, whose daughter Zilla he married. Baruch Cohon was to remark later how Zilla was also musically gifted and how Idelsohn used some of her melodies in his cantorial activities, and he reminded us of how Idelsohn's family continues to inspire: His grandson was the noted lawyer South African born Baron Joel Joffe (1932-2017), a member of Mandela's defence team who later became a member of the British House of Lords.

As imagined by Jonathan Morgan, Leipzig was a crucial time for Idelsohn: he pondered questions of Jewish music that would form the basis of his Jewish musical quests in later life; at this early stage in the history of recording, Idelsohn obtained a phonograph, enabling him to hear Sulzer recordings; and encounters at the Leipzig Academy with the Hollaender brothers, in whose opinion, there was no such thing as 'Jewish music', spurred Idelsohn to dedicate his life to the pursuit of Jewish music.

## Idelsohn in South Africa

A period in South Africa, where his parents were living at that time, led to Idelsohn's veer towards Reform Judaism, shaving his beard and sidelocks and removing his 'yarmulke'. Soon after, inspired by Zionist activism (including Christian Zionists in South Africa), he travelled to Jerusalem, where he would nurture his life's work. He aimed to forge the 'old-new song', perhaps inspired by Herzl's vision of a 'old-new land' and founded a mixed choir.

## Idelsohn's ethnographic Thesaurus

Already in 1910 Idelsohn imagined a 'Songs of Israel Institute' to teach music and chazzanut with what appears to have been a 'unified vision' of Jewish music as one great choir, that vision seeming oddly contradictory to his eventual scholarly achievement. For, equipped with his phonograph, he embarked on his most famous ethnographic project, collecting the songs of diverse Jewish ethnic groups, resulting in the well documented, seminal ten-volume Thesaurus, which emphasised diversity,

with the aim of preserving and expressing the 'authentic spirit' of each community. We heard here about his preparation of posters to publicise the project, and his avoidance of recording on Shabbat, though Jonathan Morgan focused mainly on the story of just one of the collected melodies, 'Hava Nagila'.

## Hava Nagila

The music of 'Hava Nagila' had derived from a Bukovenian tune credited to the 18<sup>th</sup> century Hasidic cantor Avraham Yaakov Friedman. Idelsohn chose it to form an inspiring finale for a concert by his choir in 1918, soon after the Balfour declaration. The borrowed tune was adorned with uplifting lyrics, partly suggested by his students, with Idelsohn credited with the overall authorship.

## Idelsohn in the USA

Idelsohn finally came to the USA in 1922, where Baruch Cohon took up the story, recalling how his own earliest music teaching had been inspired by Idelsohn, as too was Cohon's mother, A. Irma Cohon, who had already published her lectures on Jewish Music as early as 1923. Cohon recalled learning biblical cantillation with Idelsohn, where his teacher would characterize each note, for instance, the "munach" 'had little personality' since it would take on attributes of the note to which it was attached. He was "an imposing man, with a Van Dyke beard, stormy and impulsive at times", sometimes happy as a Spring day, and sometimes brooding in volcanic rage (Cohon recalled how, during the 1932 Presidential elections, Idelsohn would be annoyed at how both candidates, Roosevelt and Hoover, would behave to each other). He worked tirelessly to finish articles, books and music yet had time for children. Baruch Cohon's 'A century of Idelsohn' was published as a tribute in the Centenary year, 1982 (*Journal of Synagogue Music*, Volume XII/1).

Of course there were many questions, yet most sensed that this was a unique event – **one felt close in a special way to a personality about whom much is still awaiting discovery**. Immediate questions addressed issues such as Idelsohn's time as bandmaster in the Ottoman Turkish army during WW1, and what repertoire he played, or why Idelsohn did not record 'organum styles' in his collection of Yemenite music in Vol 1 since, as Dr Alex Knapp, pointed out, organum was one of the distinctive features of Yemenite performance. Much of the history is available, Idelsohn's writings, his daughters' in interview and various secondary sources. Yet there is clearly much more to learn, and much credit is due to the speakers Dr Jonathan Morgan and Baruch Cohon, for pointing the way forward, in an accessible, informative and uplifting way.

Malcolm Miller © 2021

## Publications

### Jonathan's Book:

*Nigun – the story behind Hava Nagila* - by Jonathan Magun – find it on Amazon

### Idelsohn publications –

**Thesaurus 10 volumes, 1931** – printed in Germany (just 2 volumes to be shown)

**Sefer haShirim – 1922** - Hebrew songs with music printed right to left

**Jewish Music** college textbook in English, Tudor Publ. 1929

**Jewish Liturgy** college textbook in English Holt Publ. 1932

**Jewish Song Book** 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (edited by B.Cohon)

Publ.for Judaism, 1950

**Jephthah** opera – 1922 Jerusalem

**The Kol Nidre Tune** – offprint from HUC Annual 1931-2

**The Mogen-Ovos Mode**”- offprint from HUC Annual 1939

**YUVAL: A.Z.Idelsohn Memorial Volume** – Heb. Univ., Jerusalem 1986

**YUVAL: A.Z Idelsohn Archives Catalogue** – Heb. Univ. Jerusalem 1976

Amalia kedem listed links to Publications on Idelsohn and his archive at the National Library, published by the HU Jewish Music Research Centre

<https://jewish-music.huji.ac.il/content/z-idelsohn-archives-jewish-national-and-university-library-catalogue>

<https://jewish-music.huji.ac.il/content/yuval-studies-jewish-music-research-center-vol-5-abraham-zvi-idelsohn-memorial-volume>

## **Baruch Cohon's publications**

**The Structure of the Synagogue Prayer-Chant** in American Musicological Society Journal – Spring 1950

**Songs for my People** – Tara Publ. 2007

**Avodas Simchah** – Publ. for Judaism 1961

**A Century of Idelsohn** - in Cantors Assembly Bulletin 1980

**Making Sense of My Century** (chapter on AZI titled “Mr. Jewish Music”)-Amazon 2018

**Learning Torah – All over again?** -the newest look at the oldest book" – Amazon 2020