



The Sound of Tradition

When a Holocaust survivor recorded the unique Frankfurter *nusach*, he never dreamed that musical legacy would one day be accessed by Jews as far away as Brazil and Australia

RACHEL BACHRACH

When Michael Friedman would visit his grandparents' shul in upstate New York as a child, he heard music that he would never forget.

"They were beautiful tunes, what I thought were American tunes, because I never heard them anywhere else," says the Jerusalem-based *yungerman*, who grew up in Ramot. "When I got older, I happened to fall into a *yekkish* shul in Bnei Brak, and suddenly I heard it — there was the Kaddish I was looking for, the Ein K'Elokeinu." Rabbi Friedman so enjoyed the davening, he would "pop over there" whenever the opportunity arose.

Years later, in 2000, Rabbi Friedman heard that a *yekkish* shul — K'hal Adas Yeshurun Jerusalem (KAYJ) — was starting up in Ramot. He ended up helping manage the *kehillah*, arranging the minyanim, and serving as the *gabbai*.

"The first Shabbos, I sent someone up to the *amud*," he says. "But you know when you know a melody and you hear it done wrong and it bothers you? The second Shabbos, same thing. As the weeks passed and the shul grew, they told me, 'You just be the *chazzan*.'"

The shul modeled its davening after that of Germany's Frankfurt *kehillah*. Rabbi Friedman studied the nuances of the Frankfurt davening from Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Geiger's *Divrei Kehillos*, written in the early 1800s.

"The *sefer* starts from the Shabbos of *parshas Chukas*, from when the *shamash* goes around banging the doors, and it takes you through the davening

of every day of the year," Rabbi Friedman says. "He writes it like a real *yekkeh*: 'This week is the same as last week, but you don't *klap* on the *bimah* because you don't say *yaaleh v'yavo* because it's not Rosh Chodesh.'"

Still, Rabbi Friedman wasn't familiar enough with the regal *nusach* to mimic it. He knew he needed help.

That help came through Rabbi Binyamin S. Hamburger of Bnei Brak, the founder of Machon Moresches Ashkenaz, an institute dedicated to researching and preserving the rich heritage of pre-Holocaust-era German Jewry. The Machon actually helped found KAYJ, and Rabbi Hamburger was able to give Rabbi Friedman a valuable resource to retain the *yekkish* authenticity: the recordings of Mr. Benno Weis.

Benno Weis was a *baal korei* and *baal tefillah* from the Breuer's *kehillah* in Washington Heights who had grown up in Frankfurt. "Mr. Weis sat down and recorded page after page, starting from Adon Olam," Rabbi Friedman says. "I had no background on Yamim Noraim, the Yamim Tovim, and I learned from his tapes — he did a tremendous job."

Rachel Weis, Benno's daughter, says her father sang in the Frankfurt choir with his two brothers and, because Mr. Weis had a good ear, he quickly learned — and remembered — the *nusach* from the *chazzan*.

"You have to understand that, in those days, shul

was the highlight of their life," Rachel says. "It was a beautiful shul, made of marble." When the Nazis came to destroy it on Kristallnacht, Rachel says, they had to use dynamite to break its walls.

Benno Weis was arrested on Kristallnacht and taken to Buchenwald. He brought along his Chumash Bereishis, which for some reason the Nazis did not confiscate. He prayed that he might be out of the camp by the time Shemos came along, and, sure enough, he was released the Thursday before.

Mr. Weis fled from Germany to London in the early 1940s, where he established a *nusach Frankfurt* minyan. A year later, once his papers were in order, he landed in Washington Heights, where he got a job, married, raised a family, and continued doing what he loved best — singing, davening, and *leining*.

The venerable *baal korei* *leined* for more than 50 years and taught more than 275 boys the *yekkish trop*.

In the 1960s, Mr. Weis bought a Norelco tape recorder — with reels.

"The way he shlepped it around, it was crazy," Rachel Weis says. "It weighed at least 50 pounds."

Mr. Weis decided to tape the *nusach*, to preserve what he'd learned in Frankfurt long ago, so future *chazzanim* could learn the *mesorah*. Recording all the *tefillos* — it came out to around 60 tapes in all — took a long time. He did a lot of the work in Tannersville, New York, where he spent some of his summers.

"My father was so proud of his heritage," Rachel says. "Maybe he wanted to record these melodies so when Mashiach comes, we'll be all ready for the Beis Hamikdash. He always loved the *nusach* — it was in his blood."

The Frankfurt *nusach* is unique because there is a special tune for every Yom Tov and every special Shabbos. There are perhaps 60 different melodies for Kaddish alone. When Rabbi Friedman set out to learn the davening, he wanted to master it all.



Rabbi Michael Friedman (L) used Benno Weis's extensive recordings to preserve an ancient *nusach*

But *nusach* isn't just about fitting words to tunes, Rabbi Friedman explains, it's the musical setting of the entire davening. "*Chazaras hashatz* on Shabbos sounds entirely different from the weekday. That's what we call the fixed *nusach*, you can't ever change that, and I wanted to get it right," he says. "The part of the *nusach* that you can play around with is the different tunes for specific *tefillos* — Tzaddik Katamar, Kel Adon. So we have two tunes for one, five tunes for the other, and you can choose which one you want to sing that Shabbos."

In 2007, KAYJ member Alexander Weil approached Rabbi Friedman with a request. Mr. Weil was planning to move his family from Israel to Baltimore and he wanted to start an Ashkenaz minyan there.

"When you think about a shul, you think about the davening itself, the *nusach* — that makes the shul what it is," Mr. Weil says. "But I wasn't a *chazzan*, I didn't have experience leading the *tefillos*. So I went out and bought a simple recording device and asked our *chazzan* to create a database of Frankfurt *nusach* and melodies, like we used in KAYJ."

KAYJ had started fundraising at the time — they had a plot of land from the municipality but they needed to cover construction costs — and they went to England to secure donations. A member of the Golders Green Beth Hamedrash, also known as Munk's, approached KAYJ with the offer to construct a website.

Mr. Weil, now a financial analyst and the

director of American Friends of KAYJ, liked the idea of combining the two nascent projects and uploading the melodies to the web.

"We decided once we're recording anyway, let's make it available, with an eye on other cities interested in starting this type of minyan," he remembers. "We're not trying to make an ossuary, recording only to preserve it, although that is a large part of it. We're trying to grow."

The resulting KAYJ.net *nusach* database is based on choir recordings from congregations all over — Washington Heights, the United Kingdom, France, Switzerland, and Holland — and even 150-year-old sheet music. While the database is geared toward new shuls that are starting up — the recently launched minyan in the Sanhedria neighborhood in Jerusalem, for example — Rabbi Friedman says that *chazzanim* in established shuls view it as a resource.

"They'll use the website if they have a hole here or there and they need to fill it," he explains. Rabbi Ezra Lasdun, the *chazzan* of K'hal Adath Jeshurun in Washington Heights, told Rabbi Friedman he's listened to the Kinnos on the site. A documentarian who is working on a piece about a German city is using one of the Lecha Dodis from the site as a background melody. KAYJ.net is accessed regularly by users across the United States, Israel, Brazil, and Australia, to name a few.

"The Maharil has several *psakim* about singing when we take out the Torah, about not changing the *nusach* or tunes in a community. These *psakim* testify to the centrality of singing and *nusach* in our liturgical tradition," says Mr. Weil. "Davening is in our genes. Speech is the *koach* we have as *bnei Adam*, and as Jews we take it one step further, 'Hakol kol Yaakov.' The *nusach* — that's the way we beautify the davening. Our *mahalach*, the German approach, is 'Zeh Keili va'anveihu.'" 