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Tzipora Weinberg
New York University

Gordon Dale
Hebrew Union College - New York

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Cover Page Footnote

The authors would like to thank Zeke Levine, Samantha Cooper, and the many members of the Hasidic community who have spoken to us about their musical experiences during the pandemic.

Shifting Paradigms, Pandemic Realities

The Reception of Ishay Ribo's Music in the American Hasidic Community

Tzipora Weinberg and Gordon Dale

It is June 2020, and I (Tzipora) am listening to the one-man band play from my seat on the women's side of the mekhitsa (wall separating genders) at a sheva brokhes (the celebratory meals in the days that follow a wedding) in Boro Park, Brooklyn. In the seat next to my own, a Hasidic woman, a member of the Gerrer Hasidic community, speaks with her friend about her experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The musician begins to play Halev Sheli (My Heart), a hit song by the Sephardi Israeli artist Ishay Ribo, and the Gerrer woman becomes noticeably excited. "This is it!" she exclaims. "This song, Halev Sheli, is my COVID song. Ishay Ribo wrote it during the coronavirus, and I really connect to it, and play it all the time. It's now the song that represents COVID for me." While the woman was incorrect about the date of the song's composition (it was released in January 2019), her words are striking in that they reflect the sudden reality of the Hasidic acceptance, and even embrace, of Ribo's music, newly situated within the musical backdrop of Hasidic celebrations. While significant differences separate Ribo's music from that of the music more typically heard in Hasidic communities, the conditions of the pandemic allowed Ribo's songs and their messages to pervade the American Hasidic soundscape.

This essay discusses the surprising musical reception of Ishay Ribo in the American Hasidic Jewish community. We examine American Hasidic listening practices in the community's most vibrant hub of Brooklyn, New York, and trace the atypical broadening of the Hasidic musical oeuvre through its embrace of the Israeli popular music composed and performed by Ribo, limning the changes in religious sensibilities that this inclusion represents. Hasidic popular music, acquired and played at home and centrally featured at public celebrations (*simkhes*) such as bar mitzvahs or weddings, is a category that is bound, for the most part, by unspoken cultural guidelines. Lyrics in Hasidic popular music are either drawn directly from biblical or liturgical texts and sung in the original Hebrew with Hasidic pronunciation, or are inspired by such

texts or concepts and rendered in Yiddish. As the above field notes describe, the music of Ishay Ribo is markedly different from typical Hasidic pop. It features innovative poetic lyrics by Ribo, and these are written and performed in modern Hebrew, a language with which the greater Hasidic community has a complex relationship, as it reflects the modern ethos of the state of Israel. Furthermore, Ribo's guitar-and-piano-driven soft rock style differs greatly from the aesthetics of the Hasidic popular musical soundscape, which is largely categorized by heavily produced synthesizer-based music.

But as this study will show, Ribo's music has gained a foothold within the Hasidic community despite these differences. As Menachem Toker, an Orthodox radio host and promoter of music in the Orthodox

community, stated, “Ishay Ribo is totally observant; every yeshivah student can listen to his music.”¹ This statement should be understood as both an endorsement and an acknowledgment that some may initially have harbored reservations about consuming Ribo’s music. Given that many Hasidic leaders have emphasized the importance of listening only to music that originates within the community, and the potential negative social consequences of publicly consuming unsanctioned music, the current phenomenon of Ribo’s acceptance is surprising. Thus, we argue that the widespread acceptance and use of Ribo’s songs in the Hasidic milieu indicates a broader phenomenon fostered by the looser boundaries at play in the era of COVID-19, and enhanced by shifts in preconceived cultural and political boundaries during this unprecedented time.

This ethnographic study has involved interviews with men and women in the Belz, Bobov, Ger, Sanz, Satmar, and Stoliner communities, as well as the authors’ own observations of Ribo’s emergence in American Hasidic communities through the presence of his music in Hasidic social spaces, and his recordings in shops in Hasidic neighborhoods. Through this study we contribute to the broader discourse regarding music consumption and production in religious communities, and the processes that modify boundaries of inclusion. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a ripe occasion for such a study. Recent analyses have noted shifts in Jewish congregational life that were induced by the pandemic, but here we look at Jewish life beyond the synagogue system to examine how the definition of one religious community has been impacted by the virus, utilizing the prism of communal musical

practices. As we explain below, a web of interconnected political, social, and religious factors must be examined to appreciate the reception history of Ishay Ribo among American Hasidic Jews. We look at both the social contexts and the musical features that have generated Hasidic acceptance of Ribo’s music. The resulting picture shows the need to closely examine these complex phenomena when considering how music has traveled through the pandemic, and the extent to which religious communal definition has changed shape during the era of social distancing.

Continuity and Change in Hasidic Musical Practices

To understand how Ribo’s embrace by the Hasidic community diverges from the community’s musical norms, it is helpful to note the ways that this instance of musical change differs from others in the Hasidic musical past. Like many aspects of Hasidic life, the community’s musical practices have long been wrought by a tension between continuity and change. While aspects of the movement have evolved over time, its underlying mission has prevailed since its earliest days; to inspire Jews to structure their lives around the enthusiastic performance of biblical and rabbinic commandments. At times, the methods to foster this devotion broke from norms in the broader observant Jewish community, particularly in relation to the musical practices associated with prayer. As Edwin Seroussi notes, “echoes of this tension in Hasidism between creativity and continuity, untrained spiritual leaders of prayer and professional cantor and choirs, small *shtiblekh* and large synagogues were constant.”²

Contemporary ethnographers have documented, examined, and theorized

the numerous changes and innovations evident in Hasidic musical practices, especially since the Second World War. At this time, just as Hasidic doctrine itself shifted from the radical novelty of its founders to an emphasis on preservation, Hasidic music developed from a broad, assimilative approach to one focused on the maintenance of tradition. Recognizing the effect that the astounding number of lost lives in the Holocaust would have on the transmission of Hasidic music, preservation efforts became a priority. As Michel Klein notes, this marked a “daringly ‘modern’” change in the transmission of the nigun repertoire, which had been nearly entirely orally transmitted, but was now being documented in written notation, particularly in the Modzitz and Chabad-Lubavitch dynasties.³ Soon after, the transmission of nigunim was further adjusted as recordings of a dynasty’s nigun repertoire became commercially available for the first time.⁴ Not only was this a shift in the method of transmitting the repertoire, but it also was a recognition of the popularity of music listening as a leisure activity among American Hasidic audiences, and of a desire to provide a religious option to fill this facet of American life. Indeed, in the aftermath of the war, Hasidic Jews—particularly women—ceased listening to secular Yiddish songs and embraced repertoires more closely associated with religious piety through “the interaction . . . of nostalgia and religious stringency.”⁵

Further changes happened in the American Hasidic community’s listening practices as the conventions of American folk music combined with the music of Hasidic communities. Beginning in 1959, Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, “a charismatic and controversial figure,” began releasing

records of folk music in his efforts to inspire non-Orthodox Jews through his charismatic storytelling and his settings of liturgical texts in the style of the American folk revival.⁶ The very next year, Yom Tov Ehrlich began releasing records of ballads that vividly captured the values, dreams, and concerns of the Hasidic community in New York.⁷ Both musicians were likely inspired by the sounds of their surrounding environment, which they fused with conventions of Hasidic nigunim and practices associated with liturgical music.

As the American Orthodox music industry developed throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, Hasidic musicians continued to draw upon musical styles that were popular among American youth, such as disco, rock n’ roll, and pop. As Mark Kligman explains, “People involved in producing this music say that to create Jewish music, it is necessary to adopt ‘foreign’ musical styles, because traditional Hasidic music does not speak to the current generation the same way it did to previous generations.”⁸ These changes in musical genre marked a significant change in Hasidic musical practices, yet there was also significant continuity: the music was created by Hasidic insiders, usually using familiar sacred texts as lyrics, and sung with Hasidic pronunciation. Sonic symbols of belonging have been essential for musicians who have had to defend themselves against accusations that their music brings foreign elements into the community, thereby eroding the transmission of Hasidic culture and damaging the spiritual health of Hasidic youth. Activists pushing back against the adoption of musical practices from outside the community gained traction

in the 2000s. Changemakers have been emboldened by the context of communal grappling with the ubiquity of the internet in American society, which burst open the imagined walls of the Hasidic community.⁹

Most contemporary Hasidic musicians utilize the internet similarly to other popular musicians outside of their community, including the use of social media platforms and forums for music distribution. At the same time, Hasidic communal norms promote the ideal that Hasidim, particularly the youth, exclusively consume music that will facilitate their development into adults who embody Hasidic values and behaviors. In this way, the sense that music must include symbols that suggest belonging and insider status is generally considered essential for the music's acceptance. While hybridization and the adoption of local musical norms have long been a fixture of Hasidic music, music must still convey a sense that it is sufficiently endogenous to the community to be widely accepted.

It is for this reason that, as shown below, Ribo himself expressed surprise that his music was being accepted widely among Hasidim. Ribo's utilization of modern Israeli Hebrew, original lyrics, and vocal techniques common to Sephardi liturgical music give it a sound that is quite different than that of the Hasidic community. Given the inclusion of components that are not commonly heard in Hasidic music, along with the absence of any familiar touchpoints that would signify Hasidic belonging, the communal imprimatur accorded to Ribo is indeed noteworthy. In attempting to understand this reception among the American Hasidic community within its social context, we hope not only to shed light on these changes in

the American Hasidic community during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also to contribute to the literature on continuity and change in Hasidic music that has been discussed above. As Abigail Wood suggests, the study of Orthodoxy requires scholars to "consider the processes via which Orthodox creative culture defines its own spaces of pious sociality."¹⁰ Without the confluence of more permeable boundaries, increased technological exposure, and communal upheaval, it is doubtful that a musician foreign to Hasidism would have penetrated the numerous obstacles to widespread and enthusiastic communal popularity. It is therefore evident that the embrace of Ishay Ribo's music during the pandemic marks a striking moment of expanded opportunities for acceptance within the American Hasidic community.

Ishay Ribo's Path to an American Hasidic Audience

In a 2019 interview with the popular Haredi magazine *Mishpacha*, Ishay Ribo told the reporter, "If I, Ishay Ribo, with my songs, had come onto the scene ten, fifteen years ago, it is possible that we would not be speaking. There would be no conversation. Because there was no place for [my music]."¹¹ Be that as it may, the changes that have taken place in Israeli society and Orthodox Judaism across the world have not only created a space for Ribo's music, but have supported his climb to stardom. Today, Ribo's audience is diverse; his concerts in Israel are one of the few places in which Haredi and secular Jews will stand side by side with respect and, quite literally, harmony.¹² This in itself is remarkable, yet his embrace by the American Hasidic community may be even more noteworthy, as evidenced by the surprise felt by Ribo himself: Speaking to

a reporter for the *Times of Israel* about his fans in the Haredi community, he stated, “It wouldn’t have happened ten years ago. They’re exposed to my songs and they come to a performance, something that used to be *muktzeh* [a Hebrew word that means set aside or off-limits].”¹³

Ribo’s words invite us to consider what, precisely, has changed in recent years to facilitate his popularity. While Ribo’s excellent songwriting and musicianship have surely driven his success, it is valuable to understand his wider acceptance in the context of the changes that have taken place in Israeli society and world Jewry in recent decades, and to closely track the path by which he entered the American Hasidic community.

Ishay Ribo was born in France in 1989 to Sephardi parents from Morocco and Algeria. Ribo’s upbringing was “traditional,” but his father began adherence to a more scrupulous religious (Orthodox) practice when Ribo was young. At eight years old, Ribo and his family moved to Israel, where they settled into an Orthodox community in Kfar Adumim. Ribo attended Haredi schools as a youth, though he explains that he was “always a strange bird,” largely due to his interest in music.¹⁴ Ribo began composing songs at age twelve, and began teaching himself to play the guitar at age seventeen. While much of his musical experience had been in the realm of the Hasidic popular music that dominates Haredi society in Israel, he later connected deeply with the music of Sephardi singer-songwriter Amir Benayoun, which became a source of inspiration.

Like most Israelis, Ribo entered the military at age eighteen, but served primarily in musical roles as a singer in the army band. He was married while still

serving in the military, and, with his new wife’s blessing, invested the monetary gifts that they had been given for the wedding into his first album. The record was slow to gain traction, but ultimately gained airplay on Israeli radio stations specializing in religious music. In 2014, the famed Israeli musician Idan Raichel invited Ribo on stage at a concert, which led to Ribo’s song *Tocho Ratzuf Ahava* (He Is Full of Love) becoming a hit across Israel. The song is emblematic of Ribo’s style: his clever lyrics adapt and weave together verses from across the Hebrew Bible to create something entirely new. More than just a musical setting of biblical text, the piece is original, reflective, and speaks to contemporary audiences.

Among the many artists with whom Ribo began to collaborate was the Israeli Hasidic singer Motti Steinmetz. Steinmetz, born into a family affiliated with the Vizhnitz Hasidic sect in Bnei Brak, is among the most famous singers in the right wing of the Hasidic community. Steinmetz is strict in his commitment to performing only according to his community’s standards, such as gender-segregated seating, and always wearing Hasidic garb in public. While both Ribo and Steinmetz are Orthodox Jews, their family backgrounds, clothing, and musical style are significantly different. While other Hasidic pop stars who are affiliated with the more conservative sectors of Hasidic society have released music that is rooted in the sounds of contemporary American pop and dance music genres (at times resulting in controversy), Steinmetz has been fastidious in his commitment to staying within, rather than challenging, his community’s sonic boundaries. Thus, the collaboration was unusual, and this

was not lost on Haredi audiences. As the Jewish music retail website Mostly Music stated, “It’s time to get excited: here is one of the most surprising things in the world of Jewish music. Singers Ishay Ribo and Motty Steinmetz are releasing a hit single called *Nafshi*.” While Ribo typically performs his own original compositions, *Nafshi* (My Soul) was written by another Israeli Haredi composer, Shmuel Yefet, and arranged by David Ichilovitz, who is the leader of Ribo’s backing band.

This collaboration was initiated when Steinmetz and Ribo met at an event in Jerusalem, at which Ribo was impressed by Steinmetz’s emotive singing. The two were interested in collaborating, but found difficulty in combining the folk-rock sound of Ribo’s music with the longing Hasidic style that was Steinmetz’s trademark. Steinmetz’s manager contacted Yefet, who had previously composed for Steinmetz, and presented the challenge to him. The song, based on the *piyyut* (liturgical poem) *Shir Hakavod* (also known as *Anim Zemirov* and believed to have been composed by Yehuda HaHasid in twelfth-century Germany), came to Yefet quickly, and showcases both musicians’ unique musical identities. The fact that these musicians had to turn to a third party to compose a song that would facilitate their collaboration is evidence of the musical gap between them, which is itself emblematic of significant cultural difference. The piece was released in 2018, and was promoted by the singers on Israeli radio and television.

Through this piece, Steinmetz, who was among the most popular Hasidic musicians at this time, introduced Ishay Ribo to many in the Hasidic community who had not previously encountered Ribo’s music. While the stylistic features of Ribo’s music are

different from the sounds of Hasidic popular music, his association with Steinmetz may have made him acceptable in the eyes and ears of Hasidic audiences. Indeed, *Nafshi* conforms to the sonic norms of Hasidic pop music much more than Ribo’s solo music. The text of *Nafshi* is made up of just two eight-word lines from the *piyyut*, which contrasts greatly with Ribo’s intertextual poetry in modern Hebrew. Steinmetz sings with a thick Ashkenazi accent, and his voice is inflected with the vocal cries and interjection of “oy” that are characteristic of liturgical cantorial singing. Like much Haredi popular music in this style, the recording is highly produced and dramatic, clearly designed to tug at the heartstrings. While Ribo’s vocal performance is true to his personal musical style, and thus different than most Haredi pop, *Nafshi* is within the soundscape of normative practice in the Haredi community.

With this introduction, Ishay Ribo soon went on to perform the song in concerts with American Hasidic singers such as Lipa Schmeltzer and Avraham Fried. These collaborations set the stage for Ribo’s hit *Halev Sheli* (My Heart), released in January 2019, to be consumed by those in the American Hasidic community, even if Ribo was still a peripheral figure within this community at the time. The piece features modern Hebrew lyrics that speak of God’s ability to heal one’s inner pain, weaving together biblical verses and a midrash of the Ibn Ezra to create a contemporary song of devotion. The arrangement of the piece features *kamancheh* and *bağlama*, played by Mark Eliyahu, a Dagestani-Israeli musician who studied music in Azerbaijan. The timbre of the instruments is complemented by Ribo’s singing, which occasionally showcases melismatic runs that clearly draw on his comfort with

performing Sephardi vocal music. *Halev Sheli* also features uneven meters within the piece, alternating between 4/4 and 3/4 time signatures, a feature that is far more common in Middle Eastern music systems than in European folk music. While the sounds of Sephardi and Mizrahi Judaism are common in Israeli popular music, these timbres and structural features are quite different for American Hasidim. Despite this reality, and despite a complex relationship with the state of Israel and the community's ambivalence toward modern Hebrew, the song was embraced. *Halev Sheli* also bred creativity in the Hasidic community to the extent that in March 2020, a Yiddish version of Ribo's song was released by American Hasidic musicians Moishy Schwartz and Motty Ilowitz.

The Yiddish translation of *Halev Sheli*, entitled *Mein Hartz*, showcases acoustic and electric guitars rather than kamancheh and bağlama, and Ribo's Sephardi vocal techniques are replaced with Ashkenazi cantorial vocal cries, similar to those employed by Motti Steinmetz in *Nafshi*. A distorted electric guitar solo, which does not have a corollary in Ribo's original recording, is heard in the Yiddish version and can be understood as a feature of Hasidic wedding music that is being imported to this performance (Schwartz is a prominent guitarist in the Hasidic wedding musician scene in New York). Thus, the cultural work of *Mein Hartz* goes deeper than just linguistic conversion; Schwartz and Ilowitz are also translating *Halev Sheli* into the musical vocabulary of the American Hasidic community. While some features of the piece are altered, the Hasidic musicians do retain the song's metric juxtapositions, thus bringing this feature of the original into their community. *Mein Hartz*, which at

the time of this writing has over 100,000 views on YouTube, helped to bridge the divide between Ribo and American Hasidic audiences. The Yiddish cover song increased Ribo's popularity and set the stage for his embrace during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was just beginning to impact Hasidic Brooklyn at the time that Ilowitz and Schwartz released *Mein Hartz*.

Keter Melucha

While the Hasidic introduction to Ribo occurred with the musical collaboration of Ribo and Steinmetz, the April 2020 release of *Mein Hartz* demonstrated a new level of engagement with his music, though still mediated through Hasidic musicians. With these events in place, Hasidim were already primed to receive the release of Ribo's musical take on the pandemic, *Keter Melucha* (Royal Crown), in the same month. To understand Ribo's compositional style, and the features of the music that made it attractive to Hasidic listeners, a close look at the piece is valuable. The song's religious framing of the pandemic, alongside co-occurring social and political changes, brought Ribo fully into the American Hasidic soundscape.

The song's name, *Keter Melucha*, alludes to *Keter Malchut*, the title of one of the most famous Hebrew poems of the medieval era by Solomon Ibn Gabirol of Spain, today recited as part of the liturgy on Rosh Hashana. However, it also references the Hebrew translation of the word *corona*, literally, a crown (*keter*). Like many of Ribo's other pieces, *Keter Melucha* weaves together multiple Jewish sacred texts with Ribo's original poetry to embed themes of contemporary society into a familiar religious framework. The piece begins with a soft, arpeggiated B♭min6 chord

played on a piano. The inclusion of the G-flat is barely perceptible, but contributes to an ambiance of slight disorientation and unresolvedness. Throughout this verse, the arpeggio will continue, with new bass notes arriving on the downbeat of each measure to change the harmony. Rather than utilizing the common pop song convention in which a four-measure harmonic pattern is established and repeated throughout the verse, here each four-measure unit is different. While the piano accompaniment is consonant and does not stretch harmonic practices of popular music, the lack of repetition is an effective way of creating the piece's ambiance of instability.

The lyrics begin by placing the narrative in the calendar of the Jewish year using the names of the weekly Torah portions recited in the synagogue, as Ribo sings "Between [the Torah portions of] Terumah and Tetzaveh," which was the season during which the impact of the coronavirus began to be felt in Israel. At this point the effects of the pandemic were relatively minor, as he describes "a slightly different birthday." He notes that "everything is normal here, seemingly," and alludes to life existing as usual, with the presence of "*bima* [podium/stage], congregation/audience, and love." The text here could be understood as referring to normative synagogue life or his career performing in concerts. As time progresses to the following week's portion, Ki Tisa, the holiday of Purim arrives. While the fixtures of the holiday are in place, a question arises: "Who will stay, and who will travel, and who will experience the consequences?" This line is an allusion to the High Holiday liturgy, which asks about the fate of the community in the coming year. Through this technique, it is as if

Ribo asks the liturgy's ultimate question, "Who will live, and who will die?" without ever articulating it. As the piece continues, the narrator describes the ever-increasing isolation, though it is experienced on a global scale, as referenced by his invocation of "Israel, Edom, and Ishmael," using nations of the Bible to indicate contemporary universality. The lyrics proceed to describe the ever-increasing severity of the pandemic. Again using biblical language, he states that "there is no one in the city or in the field." His final line in the verse powerfully expresses the disorientation felt by many: "The tower of Babel is again confused."

As we reach the chorus, Ribo's voice jumps to a higher octave as he calls out, "What do you want us to learn from this? How will we know how to unify in this separation until we give You the royal crown [*keter melucha*]?" Here Ribo is invoking language from the aforementioned Ibn Gabirol poem, and the multivalent word *keter* (*corona* = crown = *keter*). Like Ribo's piece, this piyyut looks forward to a day when people will accept upon themselves the yoke of heaven and reject false ideologies. Ribo's piece, however, includes theological questions, continuing in the Jewish tradition of asking hard questions of God when challenging situations arise. Thus, the piyyut and the song contrast: while the piyyut unquestioningly portrays certainty in the future acknowledgment of God's kingship, *Keter Melucha* boldly asks about God's motivations, but ultimately takes a stance of trust and piety.

Following the chorus, we return to another verse in which Ribo describes the optimism felt in the transition from winter to spring, and the hope for redemption from this plague during the Passover

season. Though the lyrics here place us in Passover, he continues to use the language of the High Holiday liturgy, praying that God will “tear up the severity of the decree,” as well as the Shabbat liturgy “Come my beloved to greet the bride,” referring to the multilayered mystical union of the Sabbath. Here Ribo may be once again longing for a connection to God during this time of social distance. However, the optimism felt at the beginning of the verse is not realized. Instead, the verse concludes, “We no longer have any more strength to cope, to fight.” After another chorus that is sung in the higher octave and with full energy, the music drops in intensity and Ribo begins to sing the chorus, but this time in the lower octave. Here, though, he changes the lyrics slightly. Instead of the line “How do we distance ourselves and draw near in this pain” (*Eich mitrachkim u'mitkarvim b'ke'ev hazeh*), he sings, “How to disconnect and reconnect to this heart” (*Eich mitnatkim u'mitchavrim el halev hazeh*). The substituted line sounds very similar to the original, but uses the language of technology—a fixture of the pandemic—to describe the despondency of the era. He continues by jumping up to the higher octave, but this time still with the lighter piano accompaniment, rather than the full band. He sings the expected line “How will we know how to unite in this separation?” but, once again, the next line changes. Rather than singing, “Until we give you the royal crown,” he proclaims, “*Shema Yisrael Hashem echad u'shmo echad*” (Hear, Israel, God is One and His name is One). The liturgical line evocatively functions as the actual deliverance of the royal crown (*kabalat ol malkhut*). By reciting this statement, Ribo is actualizing this declaration of God’s sovereignty

that he had previously anticipated as an eschatologically momentous occasion. The song ends with a repetition of the last three words, “*echad u'shmo echad*” (is one and His name is one).

Just weeks after *Keter Melucha* was originally released, Ribo rereleased the song, this time with a new ending. In the new final verse, he continues his references to the calendar and the timeline of the pandemic. He looks back to the beginning of the pandemic and links it to the holiday of Purim, which translates to “lots” and refers to the lots that were cast to determine the date on which the story’s villain would attempt to carry out his extermination of the Jews. He brings this lens to the pandemic, hoping that here too people will persist and make it through the life-threatening situation: “Between [the months of] Adar and Nisan a lot was cast / that is fate. / It is said that this is an auspicious time / to defeat fortune.” Rather than ending with crowning God, the edited piece ends with a sense of human agency and responsibility that is to be aided by God, which is a theme of the Purim story. This religious framing of the pandemic proved to be very popular with Jewish communities around the world, including an enthusiastic reception among American Hasidim.

COVID-19 and the Reframing of Hasidic Community Boundaries

Keter Melucha was widely circulated and popularized throughout the Hasidic community, and soon after its release Ribo’s CDs could be found in Judaica stores in Hasidic neighborhoods in Brooklyn. The piece’s popularity, combined with that of *Halev Sheli* (spurred by the Yiddish cover, *Mein Hartz*), seemed to have a

compounding effect, as interest in one led to interest in the other. The result was a high degree of popularity in the American Hasidic community, but this time the music gained acceptance directly as Ribo's composition, without the Hasidic musicians acting as intermediaries. As one female member of the Bobov community reported, "I used to be the only one who listened to Ribo. He was my guy! But now so many of my friends and [former] classmates are talking about his music, and I don't know how that happened!"

While the religious framing of contemporary life found in Ishay Ribo's songs may help explain the American Hasidic community's attraction to his music, understanding their full embrace is yet another matter. The extent to which Hasidim evaluate whether or not cultural productions belong within their own community cannot be overstated. This degree of scrutiny is far from arbitrary, as the stakes are high: there are far-reaching and detrimental implications to not "fitting in," and the consumption of cultural collateral ostensibly produced within Hasidic society is an important component of social belonging.¹⁵ While the parameters of these rules differ from community to community, negligence in the realm of appropriate cultural consumption is a social infraction that can result in ostracization. How, then, are we to understand the high degree to which Hasidic listeners identified with the music of a Sephardi rock musician who sings in modern Hebrew and dresses in a manner that stands in stark contrast to Hasidic communal practice? Put differently, how would a Hasidic listener's semiotic analysis result in an assessment of sameness, given differences that have been historically significant for community definition?

To understand this phenomenon, we argue, one must interrogate changing lines of communal belonging in the context of the political and social moment of the COVID-19 pandemic. As Shaul Magid writes, "The transformation of COVID from a health crisis to a political movement in the Hasidic world is a phenomenon that merits deeper study."¹⁶ Departing from this point, we suggest that the political significance of this moment has had ramifications for communal self-perception, and has shifted lines of belonging and acceptability. Within these loosened boundaries, music videos, such as that of *Mein Hartz*, were more easily shared and discussed. Ishay Ribo's music was a part of this openness, in which songs sung in modern Hebrew and with different sonic qualities than those normally found in Hasidic popular music were suddenly normalized within the American Hasidic milieu.

These changes within American Hasidic society must be understood in the context of Hasidic experience of the pandemic. The American Hasidic community was hit hard by the virus. As early as April 2020, Liam Stack of the *New York Times* reported on the high death rates caused by the pandemic within the Hasidic community, quoting "community leaders" as pointing to particular tendencies among the social fabric of Hasidim that exposed them to danger. Among these factors, Stack listed the history of mistrust toward official government leadership and the insular nature of the Hasidic community as significant contributors to the spread of the virus. But this insularity, promoted to safeguard the community's values by shutting out cultural influences that stand counter to them, also fell victim to the virus,

as community members began to access internet platforms such as Zoom in larger numbers. While many Hasidic leaders are opposed to their followers having internet access in their homes, the necessity of online funerals and celebrations left those who wanted to participate with no choice but to do so online. Internet usage is greatly discouraged within Hasidic institutions; in most schools, parents sign a statement attesting to the absence of internet access in their homes as a condition for their children's acceptance. However, COVID-19 upended the status quo in terms of technology, in both access and frequency.¹⁷ Although no public proclamations to permit internet use were issued, families distanced by the requisite pandemic protocols turned to online platforms to remain connected with one another.

Indeed, technological platforms came to replace many of the usual avenues for social connection in Hasidic communal life. With most public religious and educational spaces closed, new and undocumented access to technology prevailed. Families who previously owned only one cellular phone began to equip their families with additional phones, and these were also used to text friends and neighbors. Shopping for clothing, a major pastime in Hasidic Brooklyn, became an exclusively online affair. Hasidim, particularly women who were employed in larger firms, were compelled to utilize Zoom to conform with workplace norms. All of these circumstances, products of COVID-19, brought new levels of access to social platforms and internet networks that were previously kept under tight limits, and Hasidic families contended with these new realities in various ways.

Amid the devastating loss of the pandemic, Hasidic society was further

shaken by what they perceived to be an attack from the city and state governments, as well as the media. While most synagogues and shops complied with all of the government regulations, some synagogues and schools chose to remain open in a clandestine manner, believing that communal prayer and Torah study would facilitate, rather than forestall, relief from the pandemic. The tension that resulted between Hasidim and the government was significant, and Hasidim found themselves under the microscope as camera crews flocked to Boro Park and Williamsburg to film Hasidim violating social distancing protocols. While their distrust of American power holders was nothing new, this iteration coinciding with the 2020 American presidential election brought about a significant shift in self-perception. One component of this shift concerns a populist politicization on both the national and local levels, as many Hasidim enthusiastically supported Donald Trump and rallied around local Orthodox Jewish politicians who brashly promised to stand up to unfair treatment leveled against the Hasidic community.

Feeling singled out by Mayor Bill de Blasio, who enforced closures of businesses and schools based on postal codes and homed in on areas populated primarily by Hasidic Jews, members of the Brooklyn Hasidic community took to the streets in an unprecedented manner. They conducted rallies in support of Trump in Boro Park and Midwood, and raised Trump flags aloft as they burned face masks in protest of what they perceived to be measures unduly targeting their neighborhoods. Magid refers to this Hasidic political activity as a novelty within the development of American Hasidism, calling it "a new kind of political populism seldom seen in

communities that often prefer to stay out of the spotlight.”¹⁸ Political activism of this sort pointed to the desire of Hasidic groups to be heard beyond their own community, even as it came at the expense of their relative insularity.

Hasidic support for Trump should be understood not only in the context of overarching trends in American politics, but also in the details of Hasidic experience during the pandemic. First, concerns articulated by the New York Hasidic community – distrust of the media, suspicion over whether health regulations would actually slow the spread of the virus, and unfair impingement on personal and communal autonomy – were also constant talking points coming from the White House, leading to sympathy for the president and a sense of joint victimhood. Additionally, during the pandemic, Hasidic social media networks circulated videos in which a Hasidic doctor who had treated many Hasidic residents of Kiryas Yoel for the coronavirus praised Donald Trump and advised using a combination of zinc and hydroxychloroquine to cure patients. A short time later, Trump publicly advocated for this treatment, leading Hasidim to believe that he was placing his trust in the Hasidic doctor, thereby deepening Hasidic support for Trump. A third area of perceived relatability concerned Ivanka Trump’s 2009 Orthodox conversion and Jared Kushner’s Orthodox upbringing. There was a sense that Orthodoxy had penetrated the White House, as evidenced by Trump’s support for Israel and his moving the American embassy to Jerusalem. Despite the fact that most Hasidim do not identify as Zionists, many read the president’s actions as pro-Jewish. Relatedly, an interlocutor raised in the

Satmar community has also suggested that Hasidic support of Trump, and the close relationship between Trump and former Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, eased Hasidic anxieties about engagement with Israel and its cultural productions.

Thus, the Hasidic community’s embrace of Trump marked a new chapter in their American identity. The impact of this changing relationship that resulted in alliance with non-Hasidim was not limited to the 2020 presidential election. Rather, the polarized dynamic of the political realm led to new exposures, causing a rethinking of the lines of belonging. Communal acceptance was reconstrued both within the shared experience of the pandemic and through opposition to a discursive “other” that led Hasidic groups to feel demonized. As a result, new space emerged for an expanded understanding of who and what belonged within the community.

It is within this moment of changing conceptions of community identity and affiliation that Ishay Ribo’s music came to be embraced. In *Keter Melucha*, his framing of the pandemic within the familiar language of religious texts and his use of phrases that are extremely evocative to Orthodox listeners, all within this very particular historical moment, caused Hasidic audiences to see him as sufficiently “one of us,” and his music was therefore socially sanctioned. While other musicians have been seen as highly controversial, and rejected from much of mainstream Hasidic culture, Ribo’s music does not remain on the fringes of society. He has never been publicly moved to the margins in the United States (though it is noteworthy that at least one prominent Haredi girls’ high school in Jerusalem has banned his music, which should be

understood as evidence of his popularity there). Thus, the embrace of Ribo was not merely the result of his powerful music and its religious messages. It was also the result of a polarized political system that caused the American Hasidic community to create new paradigms for determining the lines of belonging during the pandemic.

This case study reveals the ways that the consumption of music in religious communities is the result of political, social, and technological factors that intertwine with theology as applied to the present moment. The era of COVID-19 has caused tectonic changes in the preexisting structures of cultural production and political activism in the Hasidic community of Brooklyn. While these changes seem to be imperceptible, they are certainly measurable in the different attitudes and activities that were manifest in the community at the time and still prevail, creating pathways to new

experiences and phenomena in Hasidic homes, at communal celebrations, and on public thoroughfares. Ishay Ribo's music and its normalization within Hasidic circles serve to reflect these widening parameters, and speak of a new reality effected paradoxically by the closures and quarantine of the pandemic. Thus, the culture of Hasidic insularity was breached, rather than reinforced, by the lived experience of mandatory segregation. The increased permeability of sociocultural boundaries, as evident in the intentionally insular Hasidic community of Brooklyn during the pandemic, is revelatory. It serves to broaden sociological and anthropological understandings of societal shifts as predicated and fostered by crisis, since governmentally enforced isolation produced opposite results to those informed by impulses toward ghettoization that many Hasidic community members believe fortify and nourish their society.

NOTES

1 Gershon Burstyn, “The Great Harmonizer,” *Mishpacha Magazine*, Dec. 25, 2019; <https://mishpacha.com/the-great-harmonizer/>.

2 Edwin Seroussi, “Music,” in *Studying Hasidism: Sources, Methods, Perspectives*, ed. Marcin Wodzinski (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 215.

3 Michel Klein, “Spiritual Narrative in Sound and Structure of Chabad Nigunim” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2019), 7–9. See also Gordon Dale, “Music in Haredi Jewish Life: Liquid Modernity and the Negotiation of Boundaries in Greater New York” (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 2017), 53–54; Ellen Koskoff, *Music in Lubavitcher Life* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 79–80.

4 Dale, “Music in Haredi Jewish Life.”

5 Ester-Basya Vaisman Shulman, “Being Heard: The Singing Voices of Contemporary Hasidic Women” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2009), 151.

6 Mark Kligman, “Contemporary Jewish Music in America,” *American Jewish Year Book* 101 (2001): 100.

7 Tzipora Weinberg, “Different Folks: The Coming of Age of Hasidic Folk Music in the Wake of the Holocaust,” American Musicological Society Annual Conference, Nov. 11, 2021.

8 Mark Kligman, “On the Creators and Consumers of Orthodox Popular Music in Brooklyn,” *YIVO Annual* 23 (1996): 266.

9 Abigail Wood, “Pop, Piety and Modernity: The Changing Spaces of Orthodox Culture,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Jewish Cultures*, ed. Laurence Roth and Nadia Valman (New York: Routledge, 2014), 300–310; Dale, “Music in Haredi Jewish Life,” 53–54.

10 Wood, “Pop, Piety and Modernity.”

11 Ibid.

12 Ben Shelo, “Mah HaSod shel Ishay Ribo, Kochav-Ha’al She’matzliah b’kerev Haredim, Serugim, v’Hilonim?” (What Is the Secret of Ishay Ribo, a Superstar Who Is Successful among the Ultra-Orthodox, Religious Zionist, and Secular?), *Haaretz*, July 3, 2019; <https://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/music/.premium-MAGAZINE-1.7433553>.

13 Jessica Steinberg, “Penitence in Melody from Ishay Ribo, Israel’s Favorite Kippah-Wearing Singer,” *Times of Israel*, Oct. 8, 2019; <https://www.timesofisrael.com/ishay-ribo-israels-favorite-kippah-wearing-singer-channels-yom-kippur-liturgiy/>.

14 Nadav Gedalia, “Sikha Ishit Me’od im Ishay Ribo” (A Very Personal Conversation with Ishay Ribo), Sept. 1, 2018, http://nadavg.blogspot.com/2018/09/blog-post_50.html.

15 Ayala Fader, *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing Up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 34–61.

16 Shaul Magid, “How Did Hasidic Jewry Become a Stronghold of Trumpism?” Religion Dispatches, Dec. 1, 2020, <https://religiondispatches.org/how-did-hasidic-jewry-become-a-stronghold-of-trumpism/>.

17 See, for example, Mark L. Trencher, “The Orthodox Jewish Community and the Coronavirus: Halacha Grapples with the Pandemic,” *Contemporary Jewry* 41(2021): 123–39.

18 Ibid.