

Ben Zion Shenker

The Man Whose Tunes Grace Shabbos Tables Worldwide



You may not know his name, but if you sing “*Eishes Chayil*” on Friday night, you’re familiar with his music.

Ben Zion Shenker, 88, has composed roughly 500 songs in his lifetime, including “*Eishes Chayil*” (completed in 1953), “*Mizmor L’David, Hashem Ro’i*” (composed in 1946), and “*Yasis Ala’yich*” (composed in 1965). In addition, he has published several records of Modzitz music, including the very first chassidic record in the United States, “*Modzitzer Melave Malke,*” released in 1956.

Recently dubbed “the greatest living figure of chassidic music” by NPR, Shenker still composes several new pieces every year. He is currently recording an album of some of his *Haggadah* compositions, which he hopes will be out before *Pesach*.

The Jewish Press interviewed him at his home in Flatbush last week.

The Jewish Press: Where were you born?

Shenker: In Williamsburg, Brooklyn, 1925. My parents came to America in 1921. Both of them came from small towns not far from Lublin.

How did you first get involved in music?

Music is something you have to be born with. My early involvement

didn't come until I was about 12 years old when I joined a choir led by a fellow by the name of Joshua Weisser. He heard me singing one Shabbos and told my father he'd like me to join his choir. But choirs at that time weren't known for their religiosity, and my father thought I was too young to go away from home.

This was a shul choir accompanying the *chazzan*?

Yes, you don't have too many of them now, but at one time all the big shuls had *chazzanim* and choirs. It was almost a given.

In any event, my father told him he didn't think it was a good idea. But Weisser found out where I lived and went to speak to my mother. My mother told him the same thing, but he was persistent and promised that wherever we went he would put me up at the rabbi's house or the finest *baal habas*....

So I joined and became the alto soloist. He had special solos for me; he even wrote some new ones because I was able to do what they call a coloratura, which is like a *shalsheles*. Most kids couldn't do it, but I had the aptitude because I used to listen to a lot of *chazzanische* records when I was a kid. In fact, when I was three or four years old, maybe even younger, we had a Victrola player in the house, and my mother would sit me down in front of it for hours with a pack of *chazzanische* records. So I was pretty well advanced as far as my knowledge of *chazzanus*, and Weisser appreciated that.

Is it true you also had your own radio program at age 13?

I had a 15-minute feature on one of the Jewish radio stations in downtown Brooklyn. When I started off, it was on a Sunday afternoon, around 12:00, so I had to get permission from the yeshiva to leave. My teacher was Rav Pam – it was his first year teaching in Mesivta Torah Vodaath – so I went over to him and told him I have a radio program and have to leave at 11:00. He said, "A radio program?" He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

He said, "I can't give you permission. You have to go to the principal, Rabbi [Shraga Feivel] Mendlowitz. So I went to Rabbi Mendlowitz, and he also looked at me...and had a little hard time giving me permission. But he [eventually agreed]. He said, "Number one, you have to come back to the second *seider*. Secondly, I don't want you to hang around there. Go there, do your job, and leave. Don't make any friends with anybody." Those were the terms.

How did your musical association with Modzitz start?

That happened when I was 15. The Modzitzer Rebbe came here in 1941 as a refugee from Poland. He was invited for a Shabbos in Bed-Stuy, and at the Shabbos meal – to which my father and I had been invited – there was a book on the sofa behind the Rebbe called *LaChassidim Mizmor*, with little biographies of all the *rebbeim* who were known as composers and singers. The book also had a biography of the Modzitzer Rebbe, and in it were some musical notations. I was studying music at the time and knew how to read music, so I started singing to myself. The Rebbe overheard and said, "You can read notes?" I said, "A little bit, yeah." He said, "Let me hear, let me hear."

So I started reading his own *niggunim* and he became very excited. Later, he asked me to sing *Shir Hama'alos* before *bentching*, so I sang one of his own *niggunim* that I had learned from a Lubavitcher friend who had studied in yeshiva in Otwok. The Modzitzer Rebbe was [based in Otwok after WWI] and my friend heard the Rebbe singing his *niggunim* at *Sha'le Seudos*. The Rebbe was so surprised, though, because the *niggun* was made in 1938, I think, and this was 1941. How did it ever get to America so quickly?

[Anyways, to make a long story short, I soon] became his musical secretary. Any time he made a new *niggun*, I was the one who notated it.

How many pieces did you notate?

About 100, but he had many more. In fact, to the present day, they keep discovering compositions by him and his father which were never

notated. In Israel they have a *machon* that devotes itself to collecting all of Modzitzer *niggunim*, starting from the first Rebbe.

How many Modzitzer *niggunim* do you know?

About 1,000 at least, including from the Rebbe's father and son. The son was a very prolific composer also.... Some of his *niggunim* became very popular, like the one for *Lecha Dodi*: "Dum di di dum dum, dum di di dum dum, *lo seivoshi*..."

Who wrote the Modzitzer "*Ezkara*" which famously takes almost a half hour to sing?

That was the Rebbe's father, Reb Yisrael. He had a very bad case of diabetes, and he developed sores on his leg until it became gangrenous. So he went to the doctors in Warsaw, and they said, "Something has to be done because you might *chalilah* die." So they advised him to go to Berlin where there was a surgeon who was very well known at that time.

When he was in Berlin, he looked at how beautiful the city was, and the words "*Ezkara Elokim v'ehemaya bir'osi kol ir al tila benuyah*... – I remember you, God, and I tremble when I see every city on its pedestal, but the city of God, Yerushalayim, is down in the depth" came to him. It's a *tefillah* we say in *Ne'ilah*.

The story is told that he asked the doctor not to have anesthesia because at that time anesthesia was still in the early stages, and there was a rumor that it could have an effect on your mind. So he had the surgery without anesthesia, and [he is said to have composed this piece during the surgery].

Did you feel out of place at that first Shabbos meal with the Modzitzer Rebbe? After all, you weren't a Modzitzer *chassid*.

My father was not a Modzitzer *chassid* either, but we were all *chassidim*. My father was a Trisker *chassid*, which comes from Chernobyl *Chassidus*. Trisk and about seven other *chassidusim* – Skver, Tolna, Rachmistrivka... – are all *einiklach* of Chernobyl.

You have to remember that Torah Vodaath was also considered more or less a very chassidic yeshiva because Rav Shraga Feivel was a chassidishe guy.

Your two most famous compositions are probably “Eishes Chayil” and “Mizmor L’David.” How did you come up with these two pieces?

You never know how these things come to your head. I composed “Mizmor L’David” in Palestine in 1946. It came to me while sitting in my uncle’s house for *Sha’le Seudos*.

“Eishes Chayil” I composed later on when I was married already. I can’t say it came to me in one sitting. It was something I worked on. Every Friday night I had thoughts about it until finally I finalized it in 1953.

Your “Eishes Chayil” is sung almost everywhere. What tune did people sing before yours?

In my parents’ house, we never sang “Eishes Chayil.” There are tunes for “Eishes Chayil” from the *talmidim* of the Baal Shem Tov, but I don’t know them. There is also one from Rav Nachman Breslover, which I once saw notated some place.

What other songs of yours are famous?

Well, there’s one that’s becoming very popular in Israel now at all the chassidishe weddings. It’s called “*Hatov, hatov*.” In fact, about four weeks ago, I got a call from Avraham Fried. He was searching the Internet and heard me singing “*Hatov, hatov*” at a gathering with the present Modzitzer Rebbe this past Chanukah. “I got to have that song,” he told me, “I love it.” So I invited him over to the house, he recorded it for himself, and he’ll get back to me probably.

You’ve composed something like 500 pieces of music. Do you remember them all?

Well, if you don’t sing them, you forget them. In fact, we have a *kumzitz* every *Chol HaMoed* and, beside myself, I usually ask two of my friends to sing something because I want to take a little rest. [This year] one

of them started singing a song that was familiar to me, but I wasn't sure what it was. He went through the whole thing, and I said, "What's that song?" It turns out it was one of my own.

If someone wanted to listen to your music, where could he hear it?

Twice a year we have a *kumzitz*, and we also have gatherings in the Modzitz *shtiebel* on Coney Island Ave. on the *yahrzeit* of each of [the Modzitz Rebbes]. And then there are 12 CDs that are being sold now in Judaica stores. Out of the 12, I would say about seven are Modzitz and five are mine.

What's your opinion of the current state of Jewish music?

I'm not a big *chassid* of contemporary Jewish music because what they're trying to do is imitate goyishe music. Sometimes they latch a song onto holy words that have no *shaichus* whatsoever with the *niggun*, and that bothers me a little bit.

Wasn't Eastern European Jewish music also influenced by its environs?

That's true, there were influences, but the songs sounded Jewish – put it that way – whereas some of the songs you hear coming out now don't. There's all these different kinds of styles that they use now – even rap. It's hard to go along with that kind of situation.

You're 88 years old and still composing. Some people your age would retire and take it easy.

Believe me, sometimes I wonder why I'm not doing that. But in a way, it keeps me alive; it keeps me a little young also.

— originally published January 29, 2014

Postscript: Ben Zion Shenker passed away at age 91 on November 20, 2016. Weeks earlier, he released his last album, "*Shiru LaShem Shir Chadash*," containing 15 original compositions.

