

## Performing Black-Jewish Symbiosis: The “Hassidic Chant” of Paul Robeson

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On May 9, 1958, the African American singer and political activist Paul Robeson (1898–1976) performed “The Hassidic [*sic*] Chant of Levi Isaac,” along with a host of spirituals and folk songs, before a devoted assembly of his fans at Carnegie Hall. The “Hassidic Chant,” as Robeson entitled it, is a version of the *Kaddish* (Memorial Prayer) attributed to the Hasidic *rebbe* (master), Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev (1740–1810), a piece also known as the “Din Toyre mit Got” (“The Lawsuit with God”). According to tradition, Levi Yizhak had composed the song spontaneously on a Rosh Hashanah as he contemplated the steadfast faith of his people in the face of their ceaseless suffering. He is said to have stood in the synagogue before the open ark where the Torah scrolls reside and issued his complaint directly to God:

a gut morgn dir, riboynoy shel oylem;  
ikh, levi yitzhak ben sarah mi-barditchev,  
bin gekumen tzu dir mit a din toyre fun dayn folk yisroel.  
vos host-tu tzu dayn folk yisroel;  
un vos hos-tu zich ongezetst oyf dayn folk yisroel?

A good day to Thee, Lord of the Universe!  
I, Levi Yitzhak, son of Sarah, from Berditchev,  
Bring against you a lawsuit on behalf of your People, Israel.  
What do you have against your People, Israel?  
Why have you so oppressed your People, Israel?!

After this questioning of divine justice, Levi Yitzhak proceeded to chant the *Kaddish* in attestation to God’s sovereignty and supremacy. Not just an act of protest, his song was also an affirmation of faith.

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1. My translation is adapted from arranger Joel Engel’s version originally published in *Juwal* (Berlin, 1923) under the title “Kaddisch des Rabbi Levi-Jitzchak Barditzewer,” and reprinted as “Rabbi Levi-Yizchok’s Kadish,” in Nathan Ausubel, ed., *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore* (New York, 1948), 725–27. For further background on this and other songs attributed to Levi Yitzhak, see Chaim Kotylansky, *Folks-Gezangen* (Los Angeles, 1954), 15–43, esp. 29; Samuel Dresner, *Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev* (New York, 1974), esp. 85–90.

The son of an ex-slave and Methodist minister from Princeton, New Jersey, Robeson's biography seems far removed from this world of early Hasidism. Nevertheless, the singer embraced Levi Yitzhak's "Kaddish" as his very own. A stalwart of the left and a master interpreter of folk songs from around the world, Robeson described the "Hassidic Chant" as a "tremendous sermon-song-declaration-protest" and a "protest against age-old persecution."<sup>2</sup> Such an interpretation, it should be noted, was consistent with Levi Yitzhak's own reputation as the "poor man's rebbe," not only among Hasidim but among secular Jewish leftists. For Robeson and for many of his fans, the song, which contrasts faithful Israel to the vainglorious imperial powers (the Romans, Persians, and English), likely possessed anti-colonialist overtones.<sup>3</sup> However, its political resonance cannot entirely account for why Robeson assigned the "Chant" a special status, describing it as "a 'Kaddish' that is very close to my heart," a piece that "means much more than just another song," and one that "I sing at almost every concert that I do."<sup>4</sup> In fact, although he had been singing the "Hassidic Chant" regularly since the late 1930s, there is reason to believe that it took on added personal significance for him during the difficult decade that preceded his performance at Carnegie Hall.

Once lauded as "America's Number One Negro,"<sup>5</sup> a star on Broadway for his color-barrier-breaking performance of *Othello* in 1943, a confidant of Eleanor Roosevelt's, even a visitor to the Oval Office for a meeting with President Truman in 1946, Robeson had been effectively anathematized by the U.S. government during the 1950s. At the start of that decade, the State Department confiscated his passport as punishment for his allegedly declaring at a Paris peace rally that American Negroes would never go to war on behalf of the United States ("those who have oppressed us for generations"), against a country, the Soviet Union, "which in one generation has raised our people to the full dignity of mankind." Although evidently misquoted, his refusal to repudiate the statement cost him dearly.<sup>6</sup> He was denied permission to travel, not only

2. Howard University, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, Writings 1953–1957, transcript of telephone interview with Prague Radio, dated April 13, 1956, 4; Paul Robeson, "Bonds of Brotherhood," *Jewish Life*, November, 1954, 14.

3. Dresner, *Levi Yitzhak*, 88–89.

4. Remarks from an unreleased tape of Robeson's concert performance, accompanied on organ by Waldemar Hille, at the First Unitarian Church, Los Angeles, June 16, 1957, at Howard University, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, tapes 1 of 4 and 4 of 4.

5. Martin Bauml Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York, 1988), 281.

6. On the transcript of Robeson's statement in Paris as recorded by a witness, versus the quotation ascribed to him by the Associated Press, see *ibid.*, 342, 686, n. 15.

to destinations requiring passports, but even to ones such as Canada and Mexico for which none was then required. As his friend William Patterson remarked, “Robeson was the only living American against whom a [special] order has been issued directing immigration authorities not to permit him to leave the continental confines of the United States.”<sup>7</sup> His capacity to tour the United States was also hampered. By 1952, venues where he had once played to sellout crowds for two thousand dollars a performance were increasingly closed to him. Hotels denied him admission, though ironically for a black man, because of McCarthyism rather than Jim Crow. By the mid-1950s, Robeson often had to perform in churches and stay in private homes, and even these avenues were becoming sealed off. Some of those who put him up overnight, or even played his records in the privacy of their living rooms, were harassed and threatened.<sup>8</sup>

Alongside his isolation as a performer, a campaign of ostracism by the mainstream civil rights movement helped to undermine Robeson’s stature as a black leader. According to his biographer, Martin Duberman, Robeson felt increasingly isolated from the African American community, especially its youth, at a time when, prompted by the 1954 Supreme Court decision ending racial segregation and the 1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott, the stirrings of a civil rights revolution were becoming palpable.<sup>9</sup> Feeling left out in the cold, Robeson’s deepening identification during the 1950s with the “Hassidic Chant” can be seen as part of a psychological and artistic effort at self-affirmation. The title of Robeson’s 1958 autobiographical apologia, *Here I Stand*, echoed the famous statement from Martin Luther, “Here I stand; I can do no otherwise. God help me!” But it may also have alluded to the dramatic insistence of Levi Yitzhak’s “Kaddish” that, “I will not move from my place; from my place I will not move!” until my people’s suffering comes to an end.<sup>10</sup>

Though Robeson stood his ground politically, his return to Carnegie Hall in May 1958 did mark a shift of sorts, an effort to re-emerge from seclusion and renew his visibility as a musical performer before fans and admirers who had remained faithful to him despite his vilification. He chose to thank them with a choice selection from the extensive repertoire of songs he had built over decades of recording and live performance.

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7. Ibid., 444–45. Patterson exaggerated: Rockwell Kent, Howard Fast, W.E.B. Du Bois, and others suffered similar treatment. See David Caute, *The Great Fear: The Anticommunist Purge Under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York, 1978); W.E.B. Du Bois, *In Battle for Peace: The Story of My 83<sup>rd</sup> Birthday* (New York, 1952).

8. Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 456.

9. Ibid., 447.

10. “lo ozuz po mimkoymi! ‘chvel zich fun ort nit riren!” Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, 727.

The concert included classical pieces like Beethoven's "All Men Are Brothers," a monologue from "Othello" (pointedly emphasizing the line, "I have done the state some service, and it knows it!"), selections from nineteenth-century Romantic composers Smetana, Dvořák, and Mussorgsky, famed for their use of Slavic folk motifs, folksongs from around the world, such as the "Chinese Children's Song" and the "Mexican Lullaby," many Negro spirituals (the anchor of any Robeson concert), as well as the Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein pseudo-spiritual, "Ol' Man River," a number that Robeson had made his own through his insistent rewriting of the original's racist lyrics.<sup>11</sup> With this selection of material, Robeson sought to recapitulate the core messages he had stood for throughout his mature career: working class internationalism, the unity of East and West, the integration of "elite" and "folk" cultures, and the ideal of a politics of humanistic values mediated through art.

In addition to these familiar themes, Robeson injected a personal note into his Carnegie Hall performance through the remarks he made prefacing the "Hassidic Chant."<sup>12</sup> In his introduction (separately entitled "Patterns of the Folk Song" on the Vanguard recording of the concert), Robeson traced a musicological genealogy from the present back to the Middle Ages, an unlikely chain of connections that linked: 1) Levi Yitzhak's "Kaddish"; 2) the Czech plainchant of the Middle Ages; 3) the music of the Abyssinian Church and the Church of the Sudan; 4) the African religious festival; 5) the African chant; 6) the music of the African American church; and, finally, 7) the remembered speech-song of his father, the preacher William Robeson. Given that the "Hassidic Chant" is comprised in part of lines from the Kaddish, which, as Robeson likely knew, is preeminently a Jewish son's prayer for his deceased father, this linkage between Levi Yitzhak and Robeson's own father, who died in 1916 when Paul was eighteen, suggests that he accorded "Hassidic Chant" a highly personal significance indeed.<sup>13</sup>

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11. See the compact disc reissue, Paul Robeson, *Live at Carnegie Hall: The Historic May 9, 1958 Concert* (Vanguard 72020-2, 1987). On Robeson and the lyrics of "Ol' Man River," see Sheila Tully Boyle and Andrew Bunie, *Paul Robeson: The Years of Promise and Achievement* (Amherst, 2001), 190-91, 456, n. 11.

12. Robeson followed his May 9 return with a second Carnegie Hall appearance on May 23. A record album, *Ballad for Americans! Carnegie Hall Concert*, Vol. 2 (Vanguard Records, VRS-9193, 1965), combines studio recordings with selections of live material from both the May 9 and May 23 performances. It is likely that Robeson performed "Patterns of the Folk Song" and the "Hassidic Chant" on both evenings, but I have been unable to determine which performance of "Patterns" appears on the Vanguard, Vol. 2 recording.

13. The following is my transcription of "Patterns of the Folk Song" from the record album of the live recording of the Carnegie Hall concerts (see n. 12 above): "I'm about to

Paul’s father, William Robeson, was born a slave in North Carolina in 1845. In 1860 he fled to the North, where he joined the Union army and eventually settled in Pennsylvania after the Civil War. Determined to acquire an education, he spent ten years working his way through preparatory school, college, and seminary, all at one institution, Lincoln University in Chester, Pennsylvania, where he graduated as an ordained Presbyterian minister in 1876. William embodied the creed of self-help, discipline, rigor, and refinement advocated by Booker T. Washington, and his journey up from slavery received a further boost through his marriage in 1878 to Maria Louisa Bustill, a light-skinned woman from a prominent family of Philadelphia’s black bourgeoisie. The Bustills did not approve of the marriage, and their qualms over the lowly origins of their son-in-law appeared to be borne out when, in 1900, two years after the birth of Paul, William was fired from his position as pastor of the Witherspoon Street Church in Princeton, New Jersey, for reasons that suggest a scandal, the nature of which remains unclear to this day.<sup>14</sup> What is certain is that the Bustills blamed William for reducing their daughter to a life of poverty, when, in declining health after the birth of Paul, her husband was forced to move the family to a shack on the other side of town, supplementing his living as an itinerant preacher with

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do one that comes from a great tradition, which in our own life is the tradition of the colored preacher. My father was a preacher, and when he felt very happy he’d start what you’d call, moving about. And as James Weldon Johnson says, from that has grown much of the art that we listen to in any phase of our Negro life. The Negro spirituals, for example, a preacher might have said, [singing] ‘Oh, the spirit say, I want you, for to go down dead easy [repeats] and bring my spirit home; Go down, go down, preach my glory and my mighty name; I want you to go down [repeats] and bring my servant home; oh, the spirit say, I want you.’ And you can sing it—it goes into a song. From the chanting speech of the Negro preacher, it becomes a great chant. And in searching for this and following this back, we went back in Africa and found these same forms that were in the African religious festivals [sings African chant and then segues into Czech]. One is from the, about the, between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, or the early centuries of the Czech plainchant, which preceded the Lutheran chorale and was a part of the whole Gregorian chant. And [it is] interesting to find in East African and Africa, melodies and a form which were very close to these forms of the early church of the Middle Ages. Why was this so? Because the Abyssinian church and the church of the Sudan were a part of the Eastern churches of Byzantium, and so they too had a music quite comparable to the music of the Near East and to the music of the next one I shall sing, one Hasidic Chant of Rabbi Levi Isaac [Yitzhak] of Berditchev [applause].” *Paul Robeson Sings Ballad for Americans; And, Carnegie Hall Concert*, vol. 2. (Vanguard Records, 1965).

14. See Boyle and Bunie, *Paul Robeson*, 18–20. Cf. Paul Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: An Artist’s Journey, 1898–1939* (New York, 2001), 5–6, who suggests that William Robeson lost his pulpit for protesting against Woodrow Wilson’s exclusion of blacks from Princeton University. However, Wilson, though no friend of African Americans, only became president of Princeton in 1902.

menial labor and odd jobs.<sup>15</sup> After Maria Louisa died in a fire when Paul was six, the Bustills refused to have anything more to do with William and his family. Paul grew up a motherless child, effectively disowned by his aristocratic grandparents. The youngest of four, left alone to take care of “Pop,” he remained unwaveringly devoted to his father until his dying day. He witnessed his father discarded by the white benefactors of the Princeton church, struggling to maintain the family on his own, proud but restrained in his appreciation of his youngest son, who won academic and athletic awards and eventually a scholarship to Rutgers. “It was not like him to be demonstrative in his love,” Paul later recalled, “nor was he quick to praise. Doing the right thing—well, that was something to be taken for granted in his children.”<sup>16</sup> Throughout his life, Robeson continued to test his own achievements against his father’s lofty standards: “Whatever I do, I always wonder, ‘what would Pop think?’”<sup>17</sup>

Though Robeson acquired a law degree from Columbia, he quickly gravitated to acting and performing, including in 1925 his first recital of Negro spirituals with accompanist Lawrence Brown. Blessed with great talent, magnetic appearance, commanding presence, and enormous likeability, Robeson’s rise was meteoric, and he achieved almost unheard of success for an African American of the time. Yet as Sheila Tully Boyle and Andrew Bunie document in their penetrating study of Robeson’s early years, through much of the 1920s he essentially drifted as an artist and performer, despite the superficial brilliance of his career. Possessing an instinct to survive, an inclination to thrive, but little in the way of conviction or drive, Robeson allowed others (his wife Eslanda, or “Essie,” his friend, the ubiquitous promoter of Negro talent, Carl Van Vechten, or, by the early 1930s his agent, Robert Rockmore) to guide him on a course which aimed, at times by pandering to the fantasies of white audiences, to maximize his remuneration and prestige while demanding little of him in the way of real artistic growth.<sup>18</sup>

Initially, Robeson had been promoted or sold, one might say, as a novelty act: the freakish phenomenon of a black artist/athlete/scholar/actor/singer. While the novelty could sometimes operate in the zone of lowbrow or middlebrow entertainment—witness the silly “jungle” movies Robeson made in the 1920s and his occasional forays into Tin Pan Alley—it functioned best when applied to highbrow, experimental,

15. It was not until 1907 that William Robeson obtained another pulpit in Westfield, New Jersey, and three years later in Somerville, New Jersey.

16. Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (Boston, 1988), 9.

17. Quoted in Boyle and Bunie, *Paul Robeson*, 69.

18. *Ibid.*, 135–268. My analysis of the psychological dynamic at work in Robeson’s early career owes much to Boyle’s and Bunie’s treatment.

serious, and intellectual artistic projects, such as the plays of Eugene O’Neill, art movies like *Borderline*, or Shakespearean drama like *Othello*. For this reason, in his early thirties, Robeson felt it imperative that he master operatic singing, study Italian and German, and learn the lieder of Schubert. He would thus follow in the path of other respected black singers like Roland Hayes and Marian Anderson. Robeson repeatedly boasted to the British press (he lived in London through most of the 1930s) that he would soon make his operatic debut. In fact, he found the actual mastery of classical music elusive. His friend Glenway Westcott, who had attempted to coach him when they were in Paris together in 1930, recalled the challenges Robeson faced:

His rhythm was off, his voice strained and tight. It was really awful. I knew then that Paul would have to study long and hard if he were to sing classical music really well. Once he found out how hard lieder was, he lost his enthusiasm. He was far from itching to work on it and, in fact, put it off as long as possible. In the meantime, if some other acceptable medium came along—theater, films, whatever—so much the better.”

Privately, Robeson acknowledged that classical music was alien to his experience. “I never heard the music of Mozart, Schubert, and Brahms as a child,” he confessed to a friend, “and now it is this great cliff that I cannot climb.”<sup>19</sup> By the early 1930s, his aspiration to a comfortable existence as the black exception admitted to the temple of classical art and elite society had run up against the “great cliff” of his own cultural inadequacy. The young Robeson had gotten by through assuming roles scripted for him by others: white liberals, race leaders, cultural purveyors. Realizing this, he was confronted by a choice: either become passé or strike out on his own.<sup>20</sup>

At first, it was Robeson’s defensiveness that guided him toward self-invention. He had been singing spirituals since the mid-1920s. The critics, though admiring, exhibited impatience with his limited repertoire

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19. Quoted in *ibid.*, 236. Recalling years later the pressure that had been exerted on him to perform lieder, Robeson noted that “many of the songs required special vocal techniques. When I tried to acquire these techniques, I found myself losing my naturalness and developing a certain artificiality which did not interest or appeal to me; so, after considerable experiment I rejected these ‘Art Songs.’ They were not for me.” Howard University, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, Writings 1960s, Remarks on Music and Concert Career, 3.

20. Boyle and Bunie, *Paul Robeson*, 78–134, 141; Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 53–54; Francis C. Harris, “Paul Robeson, An Athlete’s Legacy,” in Jeffrey C. Stewart, ed., *Paul Robeson, Artist and Citizen* (New Brunswick, 1998), 35–47.

and urged him to conquer the classical field.<sup>21</sup> Finding himself unequal to the task and no longer able to postpone delivery of the goods, he informed the British press that, through research and musicological investigation, he had now discovered that Negro music, i.e., the music of Africa, supplied one of the foundations of European serious music. “A well-known Polish musician,” he told the *Musical Standard*, “proved to me that the melodies of Central Africa have influenced European music.”<sup>22</sup> However convenient such a revelation may have been, its logic helped propel Robeson in a new and fruitful direction. One need not conquer opera to attain artistic stature; instead, one might achieve legitimacy by devoting one’s studies to the mastery of black vernacular musical forms, including the American Negro spirituals first taught to him by his ex-slave and preacher father.

In uncovering the African roots of Western music, Robeson began to resolve a problem that lay at the heart of his own biographical predicament. For what at face value appears as his discovery of Africa really had as much to do with social class as with race or ethnicity or geopolitics. Despite the acclaim Robeson had won for his performances of spirituals, he had nevertheless regarded them with a mixture of admiration and disdain. The spirituals were simple, open, inclusive, and naïve, as opposed (presumably) to the classics, which were high, respectable, exclusive, and refined. “The group who composed these [spirituals],” he told Sulamith Ish-Kishor of the *Jewish Tribune* in 1927, “were naturally artistic, and they were able to translate the grand epics of one people into naïve terms for their own inspiration.”<sup>23</sup> A half decade later, however, with professional stagnation threatening, Robeson embraced the spirituals unreservedly, an act which enabled him to reconcile his own youthful success with his father’s “scandalized” preacher-slave legacy. In so doing, he opened the door to his own artistic and political liberation—a liberation from snobbery to humanity. As Boyle and Bunie note, in the 1920s he had sometimes added Bustill to his stage name for

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21. From the 1920s to the 1940s, Robeson’s concerts alternated his performance of spirituals with the performance of art songs by a guest artist, like Ignace Hilsberg, Justin Sandridge, or later Clara (Reisenberg) Rockmore. But the function of integrating classical music into the program shifted over the decades. Initially, the intention was to add a highbrow flavor to the concert, while later, it was to demonstrate the affinity between high and folk cultures. See the concert programs in Schomberg Library, Paul Robeson Collection, Box 4, Folder 1 (microfilm reel 3).

22. Quoted in Boyle and Bunie, *Paul Robeson*, 237.

23. In Philip S. Foner, ed. *Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches, Interviews, 1918–1974* (Secaucus, 1978), 75.



extra luster, but by 1934 he no longer needed the respectability afforded by his maternal line.<sup>24</sup> He had proudly found his place. As he stated in an interview with the *New York World-Telegram* in August 1933, “I believe that one should confine oneself to the art for which one is qualified. One can only be qualified by understanding, and this is born in one, not bred.”<sup>25</sup>

Like all acts of self-discovery, this one generated its own negative formulation. Making a virtue of necessity, Robeson now professed to find “the psychology or philosophy of the Frenchman, German or Italian” (i.e., Western man) alien to his consciousness and inaccessible to him as an artist.<sup>26</sup> As he told the *New York World-Telegram*, “Because I have been frequently asked to present something other than Negro art I may succeed in finding either a great Russian opera or play, or some great Hebrew or Chinese work, which I feel I shall be able to render with a necessary degree of understanding.” For if, as white racists and black nationalists had alike maintained, Africa was the antithesis of the West, then it must be a part of the East. By thus inverting the stereotypical hierarchy of values favoring the Occident over the Orient, Robeson could lay claim to a potentially vast body of culture that was “other than Negro” but still in some sense native to him. Meanwhile, this strategy enabled him to recover a portion of that same European high art that he had seemingly rejected. For if it could be shown that European music derived from Africa, or at least partook of some of the qualities found there, then classical music could be lowered from its pedestal and restored to its proper place as just one among many aesthetically valid elements within a great multicultural civilization.<sup>27</sup> The essential unity of high and low, white and black, and West and East might then be artistically embodied by performing “the folksongs of many lands” in an operatic style as if they were art songs or lieder, an approach that perfectly suited Robeson’s subdued yet powerful voice, as well as the

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24. Boyle and Bunie, *Paul Robeson*, 208.

25. *Ibid.*, 85.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Recognition of the folk or populist nature of high art was one of the qualities Robeson later claimed to admire about Soviet life. There, according to Robeson, “Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy, Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Prokofieff, Shostakovitch, Gershwin—all were daily bread and wine.” See Robeson’s 1941 “Foreword” to *Favorite Songs of the Red Army and Navy*, reprinted in Foner, *Paul Robeson Speaks*, 136. Later, in the 1950s, Robeson came to see Bach and Shakespeare as the last of the great Western folk artists. “For [Bach] the ancient folk modes were a part of his very being.” Howard University, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, Writings 1953–1957, Thoughts About His Music (unpublished manuscript), December 1956, chapter II, 18.

brilliant interpretive skills of his accompanist, Lawrence Brown. Such a performance, moreover, held out the possibility of integrating the political and artistic spheres through the creation of a global audience and constituency organized around Robeson's newfound identity as a champion of the *Volk*.<sup>28</sup>

These views were powerfully reinforced when in late 1934 Robeson journeyed to the Soviet Union at the behest of the revolutionary filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. The indelible impression of this visit was of a society engaged in earnest and successful struggle against racial and national prejudice. To the sympathetic outsider, Soviet nationalities policy—national in form, socialist in content—represented the antithesis of America's futile effort to resolve its obsessive race problematic through the assimilationist agency of the melting pot (let alone Jim Crow). The fact that the Soviet Union, uniquely among the world's governments, had enacted laws against racism and antisemitism deeply impressed many African Americans and American Jews, particularly after the rise of fascism in the 1930s.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the Popular Front of the mid-1930s, encouraging Communist collaboration with mainstream liberal institutions, opened the door for numerous black and white artists to a sympathetic and non-doctrinaire engagement with Soviet society and communism.<sup>30</sup> As one of the signs of its new flexibility, Soviet cultural policy had recently shifted from an exclusive emphasis on proletarian art to an endorsement of the progressive character of indigenous folk culture, including the music of the peasantry. At a critical moment in Robeson's aesthetic development, this relaxation of Marxist orthodoxy enabled him comfortably to incorporate the Soviet Union into his own emerging and eclectic anthropological approach.<sup>31</sup> Robeson came to see the Soviet Union as ratifying in practice what he had hitherto experienced only as conviction: a re-situating of African Americans

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28. See Robeson's reminiscences of his contacts with the English and American working classes in the 1930s in "The People of America are the Power," *Freedom*, April 1, 1951, reprinted in Foner, *Paul Robeson Speaks*, 270–72.

29. For a critical assessment of Soviet proscriptions of antisemitism, see Salo W. Baron, *The Russian Jew Under Tsars and Soviets* (New York, 1988), 180; on the impact of Stalin's 1936 constitutional revision outlawing discrimination on the basis of language or color, see Kate A. Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters Between Black and Red, 1922–1963* (Durham, 2002), 154–55.

30. *Ibid.*, 1–24.

31. See the perceptive essay by David Levering Lewis, "Paul Robeson and the U.S.S.R.," in Stewart, *Paul Robeson, Artist and Citizen*, 217–33. On the cultural impact of the Popular Front, see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1998), and Richard A. Reuss and JoAnne C. Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927–1957* (Lanham, 2000), 57–79.

within world politics and culture.<sup>32</sup> As the leading force of anti-Western and anti-colonialist struggle, the Soviet Union became the preeminent symbol of “the East”—a domain that for Robeson encompassed not just the Far East of China and Japan but also the Near East of the ancient Hebrews and the Eastern Europe of modern Jews.

This last point brought Robeson full circle, for, as we shall see, what makes the Negro spirituals a form of non-Western art is their derivation from that corner of the Orient—the Middle East—where black Christianity of the kind epitomized by William Robeson was born.

In documenting Robeson’s radicalization in the early and mid-1930s, biographers have tended to emphasize the political and cultural at the expense of the religious and familial. But the motive force behind Robeson’s ostensible communism reflected a fundamentally religious sensibility. “Religion, the orientation of man to God or forces greater than himself, must be the basis of all culture,” he announced shortly before his Soviet visit, “[and] this religion, this basic culture, has its roots in the Far East and *Africa*.”<sup>33</sup> Robeson had come to see the Orient as the cradle of a religious culture that had subsequently conquered the globe. But in the last several hundred years, the West, the inheritor of the spiritual culture of Africa and of the East, had lost its religious bearings. As Robeson told the London *Daily Herald* in January of 1935, “With the coming of the Renaissance something happened to Europe. Before then the art, the literature, the music were akin to Asiatic cultures.” As he explained,

With the Renaissance reason and intellect were placed above intuition and feeling. The result has been a race which conquered Nature and now rules the world. But the art of that race has paid the price. . . . Intellectualized art grows tenuous, sterile. . . . Jesus, the Eastern, was right. “What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul [?]”

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32. As Robeson would tell the Central Conference of American Rabbis in a November 25, 1945 speech, “The Soviet Union stands today as a concrete demonstration that *it is* possible to abolish completely, and in a very short time, long established habits of discrimination and oppression based upon differences of race, creed, color and nationality” (Robeson’s emphasis). In other words, the Soviet Union represented the fulfillment of the promise of American freedom. Howard University, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, Writings 1953–1957, Speech to the Central Conference of American Rabbis, November 25, 1945, 4–5.

33. Cf. Robeson’s remarks in a 1932 interview with W.R. Titterton: “I am a black man and all black men are religious. Africa has given religion to the world.” Quoted in Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, 191. Emphasis in original.

Clearly, Robeson's socialism had little to do with historical materialism. It aimed, rather, to restore spiritual health to a Western culture afflicted by positivism, elitism, and hubris. "Is there no one to bring art back to its former level? This, I think, is where the Negroes and the great Eastern races come in." Negro spirituality, rather than class struggle, would prove the restorative elixir to Western art.<sup>34</sup> Such a presumption, of course, fit into a modernist discourse that since the turn of the century had assigned a healing function to "primal" African art and Negro jazz.<sup>35</sup> What distinguished Robeson's from the more typical racist constructs of the day, however, was that in his formula the revitalizing spirit of American Negroes would be activated not through an act of cultural miscegenation with an excessively cerebral Nordic civilization, but rather through blacks' own reconnection to the ancient wisdom of the East. "The Negro will remain sterile until he recognizes his cultural affinity with the East. . . . Instead of coming to the Sorbonne and Oxford, I would like to see Negro students of culture go to Palestine and Peking."<sup>36</sup>

The reference to Palestine, like the one above to Jesus, is instructive. What Robeson believed linked Africa to the Soviet Union ethnographically, blacks to socialism politically, and spirituals to Mussorgsky musicologically, was the religion of the Bible. Robeson had speculated on black-Jewish musicological connections as early as 1927, when an interviewer for the *Jewish Tribune*, Sulamith Ish-Kishor, claimed to notice a similarity between his rendition of "Rock Me, Rock Me" and "Jewish synagogue music."<sup>37</sup> While diplomatically sidestepping Ish-Kishor's fanciful speculation that Negroes had learned to sing spirituals by overhearing the Jewish cantorial music of antebellum New Orleans, Robeson seized the opportunity to dilate upon the influence exerted on blacks by the Hebrew Bible. "The Bible was the only form of literature that captive negroes could get at, even those who could read," he noted. "You'll notice," Robeson continued, "that comparatively few of the spirituals are based on the New Testament. . . [since] the stories of the earlier part were closer to [the slaves'] own lives. . . ." Slave Christianity was Hebraic. The language of the Old Testament, its rhythm and cadence, thus became incorporated into the cultural inheritance of African Americans. "It's a curious thing that these songs were largely

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34. Foner, *Paul Robeson Speaks*, 93.

35. See Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York, 1995).

36. Foner, *Paul Robeson Speaks*, 93.

37. *Ibid.*, 74

written not in the Negro dialect, but in a language caught from the Bible itself. The Negro preachers mostly got their language from the Bible. . . . There's the force and swing of the Bible in all they wrote."<sup>38</sup> What Robeson meant was that the music embedded in biblical phraseology had transmitted itself to black preachers such as his father. And as a scholar with a classical education (not unusual for Presbyterian ministers of his day), William Robeson was privy not only to the exalted language of the King James version but also to its original Hebrew model. As Robeson later recollected, "He knew Hebrew and Greek, and I remember one day he said: 'Now, these are the first words of the Bible. . . *bereshit bara elohim et hashamayim ve et ha'aretz*,' and since then I've learned to read at least in the [Hebrew] language."<sup>39</sup>

Robeson's affinity for the Hebrew language and for Jews was certainly linked in his own mind with the memory of his father. He recalled that, after his father's removal as pastor of Witherspoon Street Church and exile to the poor, mostly black side of town, their Jewish neighbor, Samuel Woldin, became one of the few whites to treat him with respect.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, throughout Robeson's life he felt that Jews had uniquely stuck by him, even when his own cohort of black leaders later fed him to the McCarthyite wolves. During a press conference in the aftermath of the infamous Peekskill, New York, riots of late August 1949, in which members of the mostly Jewish labor union audience had been attacked by racist and antisemitic thugs, Robeson insisted that "Negroes owe a debt of gratitude to the Jewish people, who stood there by the hundreds to defend me and all of us yesterday."<sup>41</sup> The fact that Robeson's biography demonstrates a wide array of personal, professional, and political links to individual Jews may be sufficient in itself to account for what he once described as his "almost mystical connection" to them.<sup>42</sup> Such links included his roommate at Rutgers (the school enrolled no other blacks, and so housed Robeson with a Jew), his early benefactor, Rutgers trustee and Metropolitan Opera Chairman Otto Kahn, and, since the early 1930s, his agent and attorney, Robert

38. Ibid.

39. "Robeson/Menuhin," *National Guardian*, February 15, 1960, 12.

40. Boyle and Bunie, *Paul Robeson*, 31.

41. Quoted in Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 370. Robeson introduced a medley of Hebrew and Israeli songs at an October 2, 1949 concert in Los Angeles by noting that the Jewish people had "stood together and suffered and fought with the Negro people." See Helen Taylor, "Robeson's L.A. Triumph," in the *Daily People's World*, October 2, 1949, 2. On contemporary perceptions of the antisemitic character of the riots, see Arch Parsons, Jr., "Peekskill Riots Laid to Rise in Anti-Semitism," *New York Herald Tribune*, December 8, 1949.

42. Quoted in Boyle and Bunie, *Paul Robeson*, 356.

Rockmore. Even Robeson's light-skinned wife, Eslanda Cardozo Goode, or "Essie," traced her descent from the union of a mulatto woman, Lydia Williams, and a member of the Sephardic Jewish Cardozo family of Charleston, South Carolina.<sup>43</sup> On one occasion early in their marriage, Paul asked the tightfisted Essie to hand him cab fare to return home from a concert. When she gave him only a dollar, he snapped: "For once be a Nigger and not a Jew and give me a five!"<sup>44</sup> Their marriage, although it endured a lifetime, quickly resolved into an "understanding," one that allowed Paul ample leeway to pursue his many affairs. Some of these went beyond mere dalliances to become lifelong intimate friendships, particularly in the cases of Freda Diamond, Clara Reisenberg (Rockmore's wife and "famous" as the world's greatest theremin player), and later Helen Rosen, a leftist activist and philanthropist. Given his sense of a Jewish mystique, it seems likely that these women's religious origins comprised at least part of their attraction for Robeson.<sup>45</sup>

But there were other Jewish connections, ones that may have helped condition Robeson's aesthetic and political transformations during the 1930s. Biographers have properly emphasized that Robeson's politicization occurred while he resided in London, where he encountered some of the youthful future leaders of fledgling anti-colonialist struggles, including the West-Indian intellectuals C.L.R. James and George Padmore, the Kenyan student Jomo Kenyatta, and, slightly later in the decade, Jawaharlal Nehru. In 1933, Essie Robeson began studying African culture and politics in the Anthropology department at the London School of Economics. Paul, then emerging from a failed love affair with the British aristocrat Yolande Jackson, reconciled with Essie during the period when her own interest in Africa had taken a serious and scholarly

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43. Sources differ as to whether Eslanda's maternal grandfather, the black educator and South Carolina politician, Francis Lewis Cardozo, was the son of Isaac Nunez Cardozo (1792–1855) or of his brother, the economist and editor, Jacob Newton Cardozo (1786–1873). See Jacob Rader Marcus, *Early American Jewry*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1953), 2:218; Charles Reznikoff and Uriah Z. Engelman, *The Jews of Charleston: A History of an American Jewish Community* (Philadelphia, 1950), 160–61; Andrew L. Kaufman, *Cardozo* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 6–7, and the source cited in n. 5 at 584. Jacob Newton Cardozo was a vigorous advocate of free trade and an opponent of John C. Calhoun's doctrine of state "nullification," but a defender of slavery. See Joseph Dorfman, *The Economic Mind in American Civilization*, 5 vols. (New York, 1946), 2:852–62, and Alexander Brody, "Jacob Newton Cardozo, American Economist," *Historia Judaica*, XV (1953), 135–66.

44. Boyle and Bunie, *Paul Robeson*, 158.

45. On sexual relationships between blacks and whites, including blacks and Jews, in the contemporary American left, see Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (New York, 1983), 136–37.

turn. It was also around this time that Robeson renewed his acquaintance with Melville Herskovits, the pioneering anthropologist whom he had known for a time at Columbia. Herskovits became one of the first scholars to argue in a systematic fashion for the retention of Africanisms in American Negro culture, a claim that Robeson may have anticipated and certainly endorsed.<sup>46</sup>

Yet in addition to African and Asian students, scholars and activists, London was also the center of a dynamic community of Jewish leftists, many with strong ties to the British communist party. Robeson came to know this constituency in part through the director (not to be confused with the British film star) Herbert Marshall. He had met Marshall in the Soviet Union in 1934, where the latter served as an assistant to the Russian auteur Sergei Eisenstein. Marshall spoke fluent Russian and had published numerous translations of Russian poetry. He was thus ideally suited to provide Robeson with an entrée into Russian culture.<sup>47</sup> Back in London, Marshall introduced his friend to the Unity Theatre, which he had helped establish. Unity was a leftist drama collective overwhelmingly if not exclusively comprised of London Jews, mostly the sons and daughters of East European immigrants. The actors and workers at Unity, in whose 1938 production of the Ben Bengal play *Plant in the Sun* Robeson had performed, along with many of the artists and performers who passed through its circle, comprised a repository of populist Yiddish culture from which Robeson could readily draw.<sup>48</sup> Yet Robeson, it should be noted, consistently generalized from his experience of a secular, leftist Jewish culture by idealizing Jews and Judaism as a whole. Indeed, according to Marshall, Robeson even performed a number of Jewish religious customs: "He wore a yarmulke when he studied and asked me to teach him the Kaddish."<sup>49</sup>

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46. On Robeson's relationship with Herskovits, see Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, 228. Herskovits's gradual shift from an apologetic emphasis on African American assimilation to a view stressing the retention of Africanisms began in the early 1930s, but did not emerge in his published writings until the middle of that decade. See George Eaton Simpson, *Melville J. Herskovits* (New York, 1973), 12–14, and the bibliography of his writings at 189–200, esp. 199. Of course, as early as 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois had suggested that African American religion and music retained West African cultural features, a point amplified during the late 1920s and early 1930s by writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance, notably Claude McKay, Alain Locke, and the folklorist and novelist, Zora Neale Hurston. See W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, 1997), 151–52, 189; Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York, 1990), 183–246; Alain Leroy Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (New York, 1936).

47. Boyle and Bunie, *Paul Robeson*, 311–12.

48. Colin Chambers, *The Story of the Unity Theatre* (New York, 1989), 37–39.

49. Quoted in Boyle and Bunie, *Paul Robeson*, 311.

Increasingly during the 1930s and 1940s, this identification played itself out through musical performances. In 1934, Robeson and Lawrence Brown incorporated a Hebrew number into their concert repertoire, the folksong, "Shir Shomrim." A report from the following year has Robeson learning Jewish liturgy, including the prayer "Avinu Malkenu" ("Our Father, Our King").<sup>50</sup> In the late 1940s, coinciding with the birth of the Jewish state and Soviet support for Israel, he sang a number of Hebrew songs associated with Israeli pioneer life, as well as the Yiddish "Shlof Mein Kind," "Vie Azoy Lebt der Keyser" and, by the end of the decade, "The Partisan Song" ("Zog Nit Keynmol"). And it was in 1938, the year he made his Unity Theatre debut, that Robeson gave his first public performance of the "Hassidic Chant."<sup>51</sup>

Jewish audiences reciprocated the approval. This was certainly true of the subculture of the Jewish left, at whose summer camps and folk-song festivals a Robeson appearance took on the aura of a theophany.<sup>52</sup> But it almost equally applied to the secular Jewish community at large, especially during the 1930s, when the Negro Robeson constituted an attractive marker of Americanization for many Jews.<sup>53</sup> Not only did Jews attend his concerts in large numbers, but the Jewish press persistently lauded his artistry. More than any other black cultural figure, Robeson was lionized in the Jewish press of the 1920s and 1930s. "What a voice, what a physique, what an actor!" one reader exulted. As Hasia Diner has suggested, Robeson came to embody the idealized image held by many Jews of the naturally talented and preternaturally humanistic and

50. Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, 227. For Robeson's later musicological analysis of "Avinu Malkenu," see Howard University, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, Writings 1953-1957, Thoughts About His Music (unpublished manuscript), Chapter I, Part vi, 8-9.

51. The earliest record I have found of Robeson's performance of the "Hassidic Chant" is an April 17, 1938 concert program at the Empire Cinema in Neath, Wales. See Schomberg Library, Lawrence Brown Collection, Music (microfilm reel 5). Robeson performed the "Chant" throughout the late 1930s and early '40s, after which it seems to have dropped out of his repertoire to return ubiquitously after 1952. The song's title, as listed in concerts programs, varied over the years, including "Kaddish," "Hassidic Chant," "Chassidic Chant," and "The Prayer," though the latter is not to be confused with Mussorgsky's "The (Evening) Prayer," or "My Prayer" by Alexandre Gambis, both of which Robeson performed at this time. See the concert programs in Schomberg Library, Paul Robeson Collection, Box 4, Folder 1 (microfilm Reel 3). See also Mary Seton, *Paul Robeson* (London, 1958), 135.

52. Paul Mishler, *Raising Reds: The Young Pioneers, Radical Summer Camps, and Communist Political Culture in the United States* (New York, 1999), 92, 97.

53. A point Mishler makes about the Jewish immigrant left, but one that has wider application. See *ibid.*, 92.



spiritual black. The appeal became almost overwhelming when, in the early and mid-1930s, Robeson increasingly touted his special relationship with Jews and Jewish culture. In a 1933 interview with the *Morgen Journal-Tageblatt*, he indicated that he was shopping around for a Yiddish opera in which to perform, since, as he now liked to insist, he felt no affinity with the operatic music of France, Germany, and Italy. “I do not understand the psychology of these people, their history has no parallels with the history of my forbearers who were slaves. The Jewish sigh and tear are close to me. I understand. . . them. . . [and] feel that these people are closer to the traditions of my race.”<sup>54</sup>

One need not question the sincerity of such professions, though they should be evaluated in light of Robeson’s canny showmanship and mounting political commitments. With Africa as his touchstone, he said much the same thing about Russian music as he had about Yiddish, claiming to find in the songs of the Russian serfs the “same note of melancholy, touched with mysticism” that was indigenous to the Negro spiritual. “I have occasionally found whole phrases that could be matched in Negro melodies,” he observed.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, on a tour of Wales in 1939, he told the residents of Cambria that, “Welsh hymns [are] the closest thing to Negro spirituals.” He flattered his audience during a tour of Ireland three years earlier by telling them precisely the same thing. In Egypt, the only part of Africa he ever actually visited, he informed his auditors of the unique cultural and linguistic relationship that existed between Egyptians and American blacks.<sup>56</sup>

This combination of ethnic flattery and ethnic two-timing was perfectly consistent with Robeson’s romanticizing of the *Volk*—any *Volk*. He sought to legitimize all indigenous cultures by relating them genetically to an imagined Mother Africa. Robeson thus helped to invent a new conception of folk music as world music, “a musical united nations,” as one American magazine in the 1940s labeled it, or, in his

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54. Hasia Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915–1935* (Baltimore, 1995), 59–60, 68.

55. Quoted in Boyle and Bunie, *Paul Robeson*, 303. The analogy between African American slaves or ex-slaves, on the one hand, and Russian serfs and peasants, on the other, dates back at least to Dostoyevsky, though in his case what they also share is a common victimization at the hands of rapacious Jews. See Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Diary of a Writer* (New York, 1954), 642. Nikolai Cherneshevsky, among many others, also developed the analogy of Russian serfs and American Negro slaves. See Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line*, 26, 100, 224–25.

56. Boyle and Bunie, *Paul Robeson*, 371, 416.

own description, a “wonderful world bank of music.”<sup>57</sup> At the same time, such claims served to promote Robeson’s singular status as a folk artist, for while there were other singers of the 1930s and 1940s who performed the “songs of many lands,” few possessed both the musical-logical empathy and the technical linguistic mastery to perform with equal devotion music in Welsh, Finnish, Yiddish, Yoruba, Chinese, Spanish, Russian, and English.<sup>58</sup> In that light, Robeson’s predicament in the 1950s was of a musical ambassador or singing citizen of the world placed under house arrest. Given the centrality of his internationalism to his sense of himself, the State Department’s confiscation of his passport proved a cruel punishment, indeed.

Robeson responded by using his forced confinement during the 1950s to engage in extensive ethnomusicological research. This interest soon evolved into an all-consuming effort to prove that folk music based on the pentatonic scale “is the common mode of expression of all the peoples of the earth.”<sup>59</sup> As he informed his Czech listeners in a 1956 telephone interview, “In this long period when I have been prevented from singing on the regular concert platform. . . I have turned to the study of music, research in music [and] particularly to. . . the singing music of the people, which I find to be based on the pentatonic scale.”<sup>60</sup>

Robeson’s biographers, perhaps echoing the opinion of his intimate friends who had been subjected to long hours of tedious monologues on the universality of the pentatonic scale, have tended to interpret these musicological excursions as early intimations of the mental instability that would afflict him in his later years. Yet Robeson’s fixation on the five-tone scale was less an aberrant byproduct of persecution by the

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57. Howard University, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, Writings 1953–1957, Thoughts About His Music (unpublished manuscript), December 1956, Chapter I, Part i, 8.

58. In the 1930s, most of the other performers exploring the “songs of many lands” were folklorists rather than singers, like Engel Lund, or else classical performers like Grace Castagnetta, whose versatility was mostly confined to folk songs in the European languages. The Trapp Family Singers may have been an exception. By the 1950s, of course, the “songs of many lands” had become a popular genre, represented in albums by Josef Marais, the Weavers, Hillel and Aviva, Martha Schlamme, and Theodore Bikel, among others.

59. Howard University, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, Writings 1953–1957, Thoughts About His Music (unpublished manuscript), December 1956, Chapter IV, 3.

60. Howard University, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, Writings 1953–1957, transcript of telephone interview with Prague Radio, dated April 13, 1956, 2.

government than a perfectly logical extension of his life and thought since the early 1930s. At that time, Robeson had cast his lot with the idea of an international of folk cultures, and he never looked back. The many notebooks, journals, correspondence, and jottings that he accumulated during the long years of his internal exile can be understood best as attempts to prove academically what for decades he had already been performing professionally: the unity of world culture through song. And while certainly simplistic and obsessive, Robeson's theorizing was hardly incoherent. He made rich, albeit selective, use of the contemporary scholarship of a veritable phalanx of musicologists: Curt Sachs, Joseph Yasser, Egon Wellesz, Francis W. Galpin, Marius Schneider, Hugo Leichtentritt, J. Rosamund Johnson, and Marion Bauer, among others.<sup>61</sup> Although he may have lacked the technical apparatus or theoretical sophistication to build a serious case on his own, it is plain that what Robeson was aiming at was a conception of folk music as indicative of a precultural, tonal deep structure embedded in human nature and manifested in a primal form of undifferentiated music/speech.

It was precisely this singular syntactical pattern, one that unified melody, singing, and speech, that he professed to find in the "sermon-song" of African American churches like his father's and, analogously, in other musical cultures, particularly that of the Jews. Indeed, what he called "speaking-singing" comprised the very nexus between the Pentecostal and Pentateuchal. "From these songs, sung, preached or spoken by Negroes in their religious life, and in their deep trouble under slavery, it is only a step to the beautiful songs of the Jewish People which are sung or intoned [or] chanted in their synagogues, [and] which have attracted me so greatly, and some of which—like the tremendous sermon-song-declaration-protest, the 'Kaddish' by Engel—. . . I love to sing."<sup>62</sup>

Robeson's reference to "the 'Kaddish' of Engel," rather than of Levi Yitzhak, underscores the fact that folk music rarely comes to us unmediated from the anonymous *Volk*. Rather, folk songs tend to bear the stamp of folklorists and collectors, who frequently seek to refine and interpret them along modern ideological (usually nationalist and/or

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61. On Robeson as scholar and bibliophile, if not musicologist, see Charles L. Blockson, "Paul Robeson, A Bibliophile in Spite of Himself," in Stewart, *Paul Robeson, Artist and Citizen*, 235–50.

62. Howard University, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, Writings 1953–1957, transcript of telephone interview with Prague Radio, dated April 13, 1956, 4.

socialist) lines.<sup>63</sup> Such was the case with Joel Engel (1867–1927), to whom Robeson referred. A pioneering Russian Jewish folklorist, Engel's 1912 and 1913 expeditions through the old Hasidic centers of Volhynia and Podolia had yielded a massive haul of Jewish folksong. But this act of collection was merely the first stage in a complex process that Engel hoped would lead to the creation of a new secular-nationalist Jewish music based on, but transcending, its original folk model. In 1908, the Russified and conservatory-trained Engel, who learned Yiddish as a consequence of his interest in Jewish folk songs, helped to found the Society for Jewish Folk Music in St. Petersburg, together with the folklorists S. Anski (1863–1920) and Zinovii (Susman) Kisselgoff (1878–1939) and the musicologist Joseph Yasser, whose later study of the “Pentatonic Basis of Hebrew Music” became one of the sources of Robeson's pentatonic theories.<sup>64</sup> In 1914, Kisselgoff made the first recording of the “Hassidic Chant” (entitled, “Dem Berditshever Rovs Kadish”),<sup>65</sup> while Engel's 1923 arrangement of the piece became a standard one in professional performances throughout the twentieth century.<sup>66</sup> As it happened, its elevated art song style, reflective of Engel's own folkloric and nationalist aims, beautifully suited the high-low, art-folk synthesis that Robeson and Lawrence Brown had fashioned for aesthetic and ideological reasons of their own.<sup>67</sup>

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63. The 1997 compact disc reissue of Robeson's 1940s 78s under the title *Songs of Free Men* (MHK 63223) incorrectly attributes the “Chassidic Chant” (a variant of what Robeson more typically spelled the “Hassidic Chant”) to the Broadway arranger and conductor, Lehman Engel. Robeson had worked with Lehman Engel in the fall of 1941 on the soundtrack of the documentary *Native Land*, with a score by Marc Blitzstein, but Lehman Engel had nothing to do with the “Hassidic Chant.” See Eric A. Gordon, *Mark the Music: The Life and Work of Marc Blitzstein* (New York, 1989), 213.

64. On Engel and the Society for Jewish Folk Music, see Menashe Ravina, *Yo'el Engel veba-Musikah ha-Yehudit* (Tel Aviv, 1947), 61–63; Jehoash Hirshberg, *Music in the Jewish Community of Palestine, 1880–1948* (Oxford, 1995), 78–92. I would like to thank Ezra Mendelsohn for the latter reference.

65. Liner notes to the compact disc, *Treasure of Jewish Culture in Ukraine Reproduced From Phono Cylinders Recorded in 1912–1945*. Natsional'na biblioteka Ukraïny im. V.I. Vernads'koho (Kiev, 1997).

66. The Robert and Molly Freedman Archives at the University of Pennsylvania lists ninety-two recordings of the *Din Toyre*; <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/webbin/freedman/>. While Engel's was the most influential arrangement, mention should also be made of an important earlier one in 1921 by Leo Low, a member the Yiddish writer I.L. Peretz's circle in Warsaw and the arranger for the famous cantor, Gerson Sirota. See Sholem Perlmutter, *Yiddishe Dramaturgn un Teater-Compositors* (New York, 1952), 372–77.

67. Paul Robeson, Jr., believes his father may have known of the “Chant” as early as the late 1920s, citing as evidence the 1927 interview with Sulamith Ish-Kishor in the *Jewish Tribune*. But while Robeson spoke there of his interest in Hebrew, it was not until the 1930s that he expressed an affinity for and desire to perform Yiddish song. Author's telephone interview with Paul Robeson, Jr., June 6, 2003.

Robeson expressed his special regard for "the Kaddish of Engel" in a number of ways. First, when he sang the "Chant," he inverted his usual performance strategy. Ordinarily, he sought either to demonstrate to white listeners the spiritual and humanistic authority of African American religious song or else to charm them through his virtuoso capacity to mimic their own ethnic particularity (be it Russian, Welsh, Finnish, or whatever). In contrast, Robeson indicated that the "Hassidic Chant" was not to be considered as a case of Africa influencing another culture, but rather the reverse: a Jewish song exerting "a profound impact on the Negro listener." Moreover, the song's attraction to blacks, he claimed, lay not merely in its "protest," but also in its "phrasing and rhythm" that possess "counterparts in traditional Negro sermon-song."<sup>68</sup>

In addition, more than any other piece in Robeson's performance repertoire, the "Hassidic Chant" became the occasion for lengthy spoken introductions by the singer. These introductions, a number of which are recorded, functioned as performed enactments of Robeson's thesis regarding the seamless nature of primal speech-into-song.

Such introductions to the "Hassidic Chant" appear, for instance, on two unreleased recordings of concerts that Robeson gave at the First Unitarian Church in Los Angeles, one dated March 17, 1955, the other June 16, 1957. In the latter, Robeson made explicit the personal identification he believed existed between the "Chant" and his father, William Robeson. As he explained, "I often heard my father minister preach, reminding me so much of one Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, so much of the Hasidim. . . ." To illustrate the point that preaching "forms the basis of all of our [Negro] art," Robeson then recited the opening lines from the spiritual "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," generating a rhythmic effect through spoken repetition of the lyrics before gliding into the familiar melody of the song. "And it just becomes a song where speech becomes—and Mussorgsky does it so much and so here I can imagine—'uh, uh, uh, *a gut morgen reboynoy shel'oylem, ich levi yitzhak [ben sarah] mi-barditchev, bin zu dir gekummen [mit a din toyre fun]. . . dayn volk yisroel.*'" Robeson then repeated the opening Yiddish of the "Hassidic Chant" in the same preaching style that he had earlier employed for "Swing Low."<sup>69</sup>

A performance like this aimed to demonstrate that both black and Jewish music depend ultimately on what the Marxist aesthetician

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68. Robeson, "Bonds of Brotherhood," 14 (my emphasis).

69. Unreleased tape of Robeson's concert performance at the First Unitarian Church, Los Angeles, June 16, 1957, Howard University, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, tape 4 of 4.

Theodore Adorno has called “the gestures of speech,” that is to say, a musical emulation of speech and its affects.<sup>70</sup> In Robeson’s terms, black song-preaching and Jewish cantorial recitative were both essentially bardic in nature, in the Jewish case resulting perhaps from the ancient prohibition on using musical instruments in the synagogue, and in the black from the slave-owners’ proscription of the use of drums and traditional African instruments.<sup>71</sup> “Today one may hear in any Negro church or in any Jewish synagogue the preacher or cantor speaking-singing his sermon-song and song-sermon, either or both.”<sup>72</sup> For this reason, he claimed, “when I sing [the “Hassidic Chant”] it means much more than just another song, another people; it’s one just like my own.” It is this same bardic character that accounts, according to Robeson, for why the gospel singer Mahalia Jackson could “walk into any of the Temples” and feel at home: “She’s like one of the Hasidim.”<sup>73</sup>

In fact, Robeson’s presumption of an ancient musical affinity between blacks and Jews depended upon the same kind of hoary mythologies and contrived genealogies that have inspired Western philosemitism for centuries. Within Protestant traditions, this “love of the Jews” has manifested itself in the effort to restore the “authentic” form of Judaism as practiced by Jesus and his early followers. Likewise, black philosemitism, at least in its Christian variety, views Christians of African descent as those who are spiritually and lineally closest to Christ and his Jewish apostles. Robeson, via his Afro-Christian upbringing and his adopted folkloric creed, formulated a musicological version of this idea. In a “pulpit editorial” delivered to the same Los Angeles congregation in October of 1957, he explained how it came about that Africa had derived its religious music from Judea:

Who were the first Christians? They were the Hebrews. . . . I remember once talking to my brother [Benjamin Robeson, Pastor of the Mother A.M.E. Zion Church in Manhattan]; he went back and found it. . . where the Rabbis called

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70. Quoted in Eric Werner, *A Voice Still Heard: The Sacred Songs of the Ashkenazi Jews* (University Park, 1976), 240.

71. This recitative quality in Levi Yitzhak’s *Kaddish* was partly what so attracted Joel Engel to it, according to his biographer, Menashe Ravina. It was also one of the complaints made by Engel’s former colleague, Lazare Saminsky, against Engel’s use of Hasidic tunes as a basis for a new Jewish national music. See Ravina, *Yo’el Engel, 109–13*; Lazare Saminsky, *Music of the Ghetto and the Bible* (New York, 1934), 244–45.

72. Howard University, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, Writings 1953–1957, Thoughts About His Music (unpublished manuscript), December 1956, Chapter III, 11.

73. Unreleased performance at the First Unitarian Church, Los Angeles, June 16, 1957, tape 1 of 4.

for Paul to come to Antioch to convince the Hebrews to let some goys be Christians. . . .<sup>74</sup> That’s right; that’s a fact! They had to fight to keep the Jewish people from becoming Christians for a long time. And some of this has been lost.

According to Robeson, once recovered, these “lost” traditions would reveal that the first Christians (Jewish followers of Jesus) were “much darker than I am, or just as dark.” These black Jews had conveyed, along with the Ark of the Covenant, ancient bardic liturgical music from the synagogues of Jerusalem and Babylonia to the young churches of Antioch and then Abyssinia. This genealogy, in Robeson’s estimation, accounts for why the religious and folk music of many lands finds its common origins in the pentatonic chants of ancient blacks and Jews.<sup>75</sup> Blacks and Jews were thus together from the start, not of mankind, but of the New Dispensation. If Robeson’s father had learned the cadences of speech from the Hebrew Bible, the Jews themselves comprised one of the cultural and genetic sources of the Afro-Christian community and its music. Robeson’s investigation of Hasidic melody was therefore an affirmation of his father’s heritage as well a recovery of the deepest sources of his own spiritual identity.

Supplementing the religious sources of Robeson’s philosemitism was an equally powerful political faith that accorded Jews prominence, if not centrality, in a secular redemptive schema. In other words, Robeson’s “almost mystical connection” to Jews went hand-in-hand with his quasi-religious belief in Soviet Russia. In a 1954 article published in the Communist-affiliated journal *Jewish Life*, he made a promise, alas unfulfilled, to “some day soon. . . write at length, in the context of my life story, about the meaningful experiences I have had with the Jewish people.” What Robeson indicated by this prospectus was, above all else, his conviction that it was Jews who had first given him his distinctive direction in life, who had liberated him from internalized racism and self-hatred, by introducing him to the concept of folk culture back at that crucial turning point in the early and mid-1930s. This, in turn, led

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74. Robeson is likely referring to Acts 11:19–30.

75. Howard University, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, Writings by, 1953–1957: “Integration,” typed transcript of a sermon delivered by Paul Robeson at the First Unitarian Church of Los Angeles, October 27, 1957, 6. Elsewhere, Robeson noted that the religious music of Ethiopians and Jews bore a resemblance because “the first Bishop of Ethiopia was a Phoenician, that is a neighbor of Palestinian Jews. . . .” Howard University, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, Writings 1953–1957, Thoughts About His Music (unpublished manuscript), December 1956, Chapter II, 4.

directly to his awareness of Soviet Russia as the world-historical avatar of the anti-racist struggle. “In the early days of my singing career,” wrote Robeson,

The Jewish artists I came to know not only introduced me to the world of Sholem Aleichem through the Yiddish language and folksong; but since many of these friends were Russian Jews, I also came to know the language of Pushkin and the songs of Mussorgsky. And so it happened that, before I had any knowledge of the economic and political nature of the Soviet Union, I developed an abiding love for the culture of the Russian people.<sup>76</sup>

According to this particular narrative, Robeson discovered Russia, the Soviet Union, and socialism through the Jewish and Yiddish left. In this light, it is tempting to speculate whether a source of the mental unease that friends discerned during the 1950s lay in the dissonance to which Robeson was increasingly exposed by the collision of two of his lifelong commitments, his loyalty to the Soviet Union and to the Jews. These loyalties were to be severely strained when in June of 1958, a month after his Carnegie Hall concert, the United States Supreme Court finally restored Robeson’s passport, and Essie quickly made plans for a pilgrimage to Moscow. Already on his prior visit to Russia in 1949, Robeson had been forced to contemplate the recent brutal murder of his friend Solomon Mikhoels, Yiddish actor and impresario, co-chairman of the Jewish Antifascist Committee, and a leader of Soviet Jewry. During this earlier visit, Robeson became likewise disturbed at his inability to locate Mikhoels’s colleague, the Yiddish poet Itzik Feffer. After repeated urgings (Robeson’s connections with the higher ups were impeccable),

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76. Robeson, “Bonds of Brotherhood,” 14. Elsewhere, however, and probably with equal accuracy, Robeson linked his acquaintance with Mussorgsky, Dvořák, Janáček, and the folk music of Scotland, Ireland, Armenia, Rumania, Poland, the North American Indians, and “ancient Africa” to the influence of Lawrence Brown. See Foner, *Paul Robeson Speaks*, 445. Writing in the early 1960s, Robeson recalled that, under pressure to expand their repertoire but reflecting what he described as the artificiality of art songs, “Lawrence brought me song after folk song after folksong from his inexhaustible collection of treasures.” Howard University, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Paul and Eslanda Robeson Collection, Writings, 1960s, Remarks on Music and Concert Career, 3. Curiously, according to a report by the music critic Carl Van Vechten, Brown himself attributed his own devotion to African American music to a 1919 concert he attended of Ernst Bloch’s “Hebraic” music for the 114<sup>th</sup> and 137<sup>th</sup> Psalms. According to Van Vechten, Brown “read the statement of the composer in the program notes: ‘In my music I have tried to express the soul of the Jewish people as I feel it.’ On that day race pride was born in the young Negro’s breast. Himself a musician, he determined never again to compose, play, or sing anything but the music of his own people.” Brown could hardly keep such a vow and maintain his collaboration with Robeson. See Carl Van Vechten, *Keep A-mchin’ Along: Selected Writings of Carl Van Vechten about Black Art and Letters*, ed. Bruce Kellner (Westport, 1979), 155.



Feffer was brought to him at last. Through hand signals and coded messages in Robeson's apparently bugged hotel room, Feffer indicated that Mikhoels had been murdered by Stalin and that the country was experiencing a great purge of Yiddish culture. To his dying day, Robeson would never publicly criticize the Soviet Union. But shortly after the encounter with Feffer, he gave a concert in Moscow attended by leading figures in the party as well as by many Moscow Jews. Introducing the encore, Robeson spoke of the "deep emotional ties between American and Soviet Jews, a tradition continued [by] the present generation of Jewish writers and artists." He then performed "The Partisan Song" ("Zog Nit Keynmol"), a stirring tribute to the Jews who had perished in heroic resistance to the Nazi liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto, to an audience whose initial stunned silence was shattered by thunderous applause and cries of Robeson's Russian patronymic, "Pavel Vasilovitch!"<sup>77</sup>

This episode, stirring and significant though it is, tells only a part of the story, however. Upon his return to the United States, Robeson emphatically denied any awareness of Soviet antisemitism.<sup>78</sup> The significance of his selective silence is heightened by the fact that, unlike many other leftist supporters of the Soviet Union, Robeson possessed definitive knowledge of an anti-Yiddish if not an antisemitic campaign, since he had learned of it directly from Feffer. Moreover, this rapid succession of protest and denial was itself soon followed by the Peekskill riots of August 1949, which, as Robeson noted, had dramatically reinforced his feeling of solidarity with Jews. On the one hand, Robeson likely reasoned that the anti-Yiddish policy was an unfortunate aberration; on the other, that whatever its faults the Soviet Union remained indispensable to the global struggle against colonialism. Nevertheless, we can speculate that the disjunctive sequence of events just described supplied part of the immediate psychic backdrop to the singer's intensified preoccupation with Jewish culture and the "Hassidic Chant" during the period when his travel and performance were severely restricted.

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77. See the somewhat conflicting accounts in Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 352–53; Lewis, "Paul Robeson and the U.S.S.R.," 224–26; and Paul Robeson, Jr., "Paul Robeson's Censored Moscow Concert," *Paul Robeson, The Legendary Moscow Concert*, Fenix, 1995 (cd).

78. Yiddish literature and culture had been suppressed at least as early as 1948, though some historians would date the repression to the late 1930s. As Robeson was in a position to know, by 1949 Michoels had been murdered and Feffer, along with numerous other Yiddish writers, imprisoned. The worst of the violence, however, would only come with the murder of a number of prominent Jewish writers on August 12, 1952. For a recent, thoughtful treatment of leftist reactions to these events, see Annette Aronowicz, "Haim Sloves, the Jewish People, and a Jewish Communist's Allegiances," *Jewish Social Studies* 9:1 (Fall 2002), 95–142.

And now, just two years after the 1956 revelations of Stalin's crimes by the Twentieth Party Congress, Robeson was again in Russia. There are reports, albeit murky and conflicting ones, that he repeated his earlier gesture of criticism, or sympathy, or confusion. But this time the Soviet audience did not hear "Zog Nit Keynmol," but rather, in the words of Robert Robinson, a black American and Robeson acquaintance living in Russia, "a mournful song out of the Jewish tradition that decried their persecutions through the centuries," sung by Robeson in Yiddish with "a cry in his voice," a "plea to end the beating, berating and killing of Jews." This was the "Hassidic Chant" of Levi Yitzhak, the *melitz yosher*, or defender and advocate of the Jewish people before God, in whose "Kaddish" Robeson heard the fervent denunciation of national hubris and colonialist tyranny.<sup>79</sup> "The Germans, what boast they? 'Our King is above all kings!' The English, what boast they? 'Our kingdom is above all kingdoms.' But I, Levi Yitzhak, son of Sarah, declare: 'Magnified and Sanctified is the Name of God!'"<sup>80</sup>

In the early 1960s, rumors of Robeson's criticisms of Soviet policy circulated within the Moscow Jewish community, as well as along the

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79. Robert Robinson, *Black on Red: My 44 Years Inside the Soviet Union* (Washington, D.C., 1988), 318. Robinson's account, especially his dating of this episode in July or possibly March of 1961, has been questioned by Duberman, who interviewed him and found that "his memory, though inconsistent, seemed vivid and detailed." See the long note in Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 735–36, n. 44. A powerful account of the same event is provided by Samuel Dresner, the scholar of Hasidism and author of an English-language biographical study of Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev. Unlike Robinson, who situates the performance in 1961 in a ball-bearing plant outside of Moscow, Dresner places the event in the city during 1958, in a packed house filled with high officials as well as many Jews. Robeson received a note requesting that he not sing in Yiddish, since the audience would not understand it. Deep into the concert, Robeson announced that he would sing an "anti-imperialist song which you may not have heard in some time. It was written more than one hundred and fifty years ago by a Russian as a protest against the Czar. The name of the author is Levi Yitzhak, and he lived in the city of Berditchev." According to Dresner, "the song became a rallying cry among the frightened Jews of Moscow for weeks to come." See Dresner, *Levi Yitzhak*, 88–89. Professor Dresner provides no source, and his widow, Ruth Dresner, could find no reference to this episode in his notes. Author's telephone interview with Ruth Dresner, June 18, 2003.

Paul Robeson, Jr., confirms that Robeson sang both the "Hassidic Chant" and "Shlof Mein Kind" at his 1958 Moscow concert, but he rejects the idea that that this performance created a stir. "There may have been a couple of conservative nationalist writers present who might have had their collars ruffled, but no one said anything—they wouldn't have dared with [the powerful official of the Soviet Writers' Union Boris] Polevoy on the podium." Author's telephone interview with Paul Robeson, Jr., June 6, 2003.

80. "di daytshlender, vos zogn zey? 'unzer kenig iz a kenig!' di englander, vos zog'n zey? 'unzer malkhus iz a malkhus!'; un ikh, levi yitzhak ben sarah mi-barditchev, zog, 'yisadal ve'yishkadash, shemey roboh!'" Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, 726–27.

small African American expatriate grapevine. They included reports of a heated argument between Robeson and Khrushchev over the treatment of Jews and of a “dispute Paul had with the Soviet Minister of Culture, Ekaterina Furtseva, who tried to forbid him from singing Jewish songs.”<sup>81</sup> The notion that the Soviet government tried to repress or downplay Robeson’s identification with Yiddish and Jewish culture is supported by the evidence of the recording of the 1958 Moscow concert, which includes only a segment of his introduction to the “Chant,” and crudely excises all references to Jews or Hasidim—not to mention the song itself.<sup>82</sup> On the other hand, it is important to keep in mind that these were the years when Khrushchev’s thaw permitted an opening toward and even a degree of official, if superficial, rehabilitation of Yiddish. Nehama Lifshitz, for instance, the Lithuanian Jewish folksinger, performed a May 1958 Moscow concert of Yiddish songs that was attended by leading survivors of Stalin’s anti-Jewish purges, including Mikhoels’s daughter and Feffer’s widow. The following year, Lifshitz and Robeson performed together in Moscow to commemorate the centennial of the birth of Sholem Aleichem, as part of “a relatively large number of Yiddish concerts” the government sponsored that year.<sup>83</sup>

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81. From the memoir of Lily Golden, *My Long Journey Home* (Chicago, 2002), 89. Golden was the Soviet daughter of an African American and a Polish Jew.

82. *Paul Robeson in Moscow, 1958* (Moscow, 1958). I wish to express my gratitude to Ilya Lerner for translating the Russian materials from this record.

83. Yaacov Ro’i, “Nehama Lifshitz: Symbol of the Jewish National Awakening,” in Yaacov Ro’i and Avi Becker, eds., *Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union* (New York, 1991), 168–88. In a memoir published under the pseudonym Ben Ami, Arie Lova Eliav, the Israeli first consul in Moscow from 1958 to 1960, describes a January 1959 Sholem Aleichem tribute concert featuring Robeson and Lifshitz, in which Robeson spoke of the affinities between blacks and Jews and paid tribute to the murdered Solomon Mikhoels, to American Jewry for its abiding love of Yiddish culture, and to “the Jewish heroes of the [Warsaw] ghetto [who had] fought a battle which was probably the most desperate and courageous of all peoples’ wars for independence and honor.” According to Eliav, Robeson then gave a powerful rendition of “The Partisan Song” (“Zog Nit Keynmol”), creating a cathartic experience for the Jewish audience, whose ecstatic and sustained applause irked Soviet Writers Union official Boris Polevoy, sitting on the podium. Like the ones described in n. 73 supra, this account contains a number of questionable claims. For example, Eliav asserts that remarks made by Robeson, who, he claims, “does not speak Russian,” embarrassed his translator. In fact, Robeson spoke Russian well and, as various recordings attest, introduced his own songs in that language when performing in Russia. It is also unlikely that Polevoy displayed irritation publicly toward his friend Robeson. Though far from a principled champion of Yiddish culture, Polevoy’s tactical and propagandistic support for the restoration of Soviet Yiddish institutions also hardly jibes with Eliav’s depiction. See Ben Ami, *Between Hammer and Sickle* (Philadelphia, 1967), 40–45, and on Polevoy, Nora Levin, *The Jews in the Soviet Union*, 2 vols. (New York, 1990), 2:631–32.

Accounts of Robeson's deployment of the "Hassidic Chant" as an anti-government protest song are further complicated by an autobiographical anecdote told by the American opera singer, Jan Peerce, that seems almost exactly to duplicate (or anticipate) Robeson's own reputed gesture. In his recollection of his 1956 performance at Moscow's Tchaikovsky Hall, Peerce describes how, at the behest of the Israeli ambassador, he had rushed back to his hotel room during the intermission to retrieve some Yiddish music for an encore. "When I finished the "Plea with God" [i.e., the "Hassidic Chant"], there were tears and cheers," he reports. According to his wife, Alice, "it was both frightening and heart-rending. You suddenly became aware of the Jews in the audience just as they, too, were being reminded of who they were."<sup>84</sup> This multiplication of curiously similar reports suggests that, by the 1950s and 1960s, Levi Yizhak's song had become part of a mythic motif in which Soviet Jews are reported to find their cultural identity restored through the unexpected utterance of Yiddish by virtuoso performers from abroad. As an exotic import back into the land from whence it derived, a chance for Americans to remind Russian Jews of their roots, the career of the "Hassidic Chant," which had seen former incarnations as both an affirmation of Jewish cultural nationalism (Engel's arrangement) and a communist denunciation of imperialism (Robeson's earlier renditions), here achieved its penultimate expression.

Its ultimate one, at least in terms of Robeson's story, must remain conjectural, though the "Hassidic Chant's" overall significance to his life and art seems clear enough. Stretching from 1938 until his retirement in 1961, his renditions comprised a continuous effort to reconcile through musical performance his disparate allegiances and identities: black, Christian and Jewish, ethnic and internationalist, paternal and filial. As a mechanism of harmonization, the "Hassidic Chant" epitomized the convoluted chain of associations, analogous to Robeson's musicological constructs, in which the specific order of influences mattered less than the sheer fact of their powerful connection. In the formulation emphasized in this essay, Judaism (or Jewishness or Jews), eliciting the memory of his preacher father's Hebrew recitations, led Robeson to the *Volk* and to Africa, Africa to Russia and the East, the East to the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Union to the global struggle against colonialism, racism, and antisemitism. But the inevitable tension between these elements—largely unacknowledged by Robeson—finally caused the chain to snap. In late March of 1961, around the time of his reported dramatic performances

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84. Jan Peerce and Alan Levy, *The Bluebird of Happiness: The Memoirs of Jan Peerce* (New York, 1976), 237–39.

of the “Chant” in Soviet Russia, Robeson attempted suicide in his Moscow hotel room. The reason should not be attributed to either persecution or politics alone, but rather to a crisis that was somehow more indefinite and profound. Robeson’s “disillusion,” as Martin Duberman explained it, “was not with the U.S.S.R. per se, but with the way the world worked, its refusal to adhere to a historical process that had seemed predetermined.”<sup>85</sup> And in such a circumstance of isolation and despair, when the seamless progression of folkloric fantasies at last broke down, who knows if Levi Yitzhak’s “Kaddish” did not even now provide a measure of consolation, if not as a manifesto, then at least as a prayer?

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85. Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 499.