



IN GEVEB A JOURNAL OF YIDDISH STUDIES

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In geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies (April 2023)

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Kol Nidre and the Making of The Jewish Theatre Audience¹

by Ruthie Abeliovich

Abstract: This article examines the ways in which shund theatre reflected and propagated the new social orders and the changes in cultural categories that took place in Jewish culture at the turn of the twentieth century. Focusing on Abraham M. Sharkansky's 1896 play *Kol nidre, oder di geheyme yidn in madrid* (Kol Nidre, or the Secret Jews of Madrid), the article shows how "lowbrow" Yiddish theatre both reflected and fostered the blurring of boundaries between the synagogue performance of Kol Nidre and the theatre. In this theatrical performance, the Kol Nidre prayer was part of the staged fiction; however, the sounds, meanings, and affect of this prayer were familiar to its listeners from the synagogue. The Kol Nidre performed in the theatre thus transcended the illusionary threshold of the fictional realm, pointing to the current social realm of its audience.

Theatre-going was a significant activity in the daily lives of Jews at the turn of the twentieth century. Whatever subjects preoccupied Jewish communities at the time found their way to theatre stages in Europe and the United States: issues such as ideological differences vis-à-vis religion and acculturation processes, antisemitic persecutions and economic changes, migration, and uprooting.² Most of this crowd-pleasing output was, however, delegitimized as *shund* by Jewish intellectuals, journalists, and even scholars, who dismissed it as a primitive, plagiarized, vulgar,

¹ This article was written in the framework of the DYBBUK project (www.dybbuk.co), that received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program. Grant agreement No. 948150.

² For studies on the rise of the Yiddish theatre and its cultural significance in light of the Jewish mass migration movement, see, for example, *Yiddish Theatre: New Approaches*, ed. Joel Berkowitz (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2003); Ilana Bialik, "Audience Response in the Yiddish 'Shund' Theatre," *Theatre Research International* 13, no 2 (1987): 97–105; Edna Nahshon (ed.), *New York's Yiddish Theater: From the Bowery to Broadway* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Mark Slobin, *Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of The Jewish Immigrants* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Nina Warnke, "Immigrant Popular Culture as Contested Sphere: Yiddish Music Halls, the Yiddish Press, and the Processes of Americanization, 1900–1910," *Theatre Journal* 48, no. 3 (1996): 321–35.

banal, and worthless form of art, while calling for radical reform in the theatre.³ The term ‘shund’ (שוונד) entered the Yiddish language from German, whereby it was commonly used in the context of abattoirs to address the superfluous matter wasted after stripping an animal’s skin.⁴ The semantic field of the term *shund* includes words referring to dirt, filth, and trash. It infiltrated Yiddish as a derogatory literary term to describe trashy literature and theatre during the final two decades of the nineteenth century, defining artistic forms by a sense of disgust.

Dirt, filth, or trash, according to Mary Douglas, construct social and cultural spatial relations, designating a “matter out of place” positioned outside its usual surroundings. As a cultural category, “trash” or “pollution” points toward a symbolic structure of power that draws rigid social classifications and separations and is consequently linked to purity systems. Dirt, according to Douglas, is that which is kept distanced and outside. Its performance makes way for hybridity and disorder, and when it creeps into our lives, it may instill fear. Dirt signifies the subversion of a cultural order; its presence is a sign of displacement and transformation.⁵

Douglas’s definition is essential to an understanding of the aesthetics and cultural significance of Yiddish theatre performances described as ‘shund.’ Following Douglas, I wish to address “dirt” or “trash” as transgressive cultural performances that enabled the mobilization of cultural value according to their specific temporal and spatial constellations.⁶ From this point of view, trash is a convertible signifier, sinking in value to become, at some later point in time—when discovered—displaced and transfigured.⁷ Accordingly, this paper focuses on the ways in which “shund” theatre reflected and propagated the new social orders and the changes in cultural categories that took place in Jewish culture at the turn of the twentieth century.

Focusing on Abraham M. Sharkansky’s 1896 play *Kol nidre, oder di geheyme yidn in madrid* (Kol Nidre, or the Secret Jews of Madrid), this article will show how “lowbrow” Yiddish theatre both reflected and fostered the blurring of boundaries between the synagogue performance of Kol Nidre and the theatre. First, I will trace the transmutation of the heavily emotional chant of the holiest prayer in the Jewish liturgy, from its traditional entrenchment in the live religious performance of the synagogue onto the theatre stage. Then I will argue that the Kol Nidre prayer, recited prior to sundown at the opening of the Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) synagogue service, has become a theatrical epitome for current social acculturation

³ Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990); Michael C. Steinlauf, “Fear of Purim: Y. L. Peretz and the Canonization of Yiddish Theater,” *Jewish Social Studies* 1, no. 3 (1995): 44–65; Avraham Novershtern, *Kan gar ha’am hayehudi: sifrut yidish be’artsot habrit* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2015).

⁴ On the history of the term *shund*, see Khone Shmeruk, “Letoldot haSifrut ha’Shund’ beYiddish,” *Tarbiz* 52 (1983): 325–54; Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996).

⁵ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 2003).

⁶ Michael C. Steinlauf explains that when Y.L. Peretz looked at theatre he saw impurity, as evidenced by his frequent use of the pejorative Yiddish expression *kol-boynik* in relation to Yiddish theatre, in order to depict something capable of anything: an alloy of theatrical and cultural components that should not be mixed (*treyf*). See “Fear of Purim: Y.L. Peretz and the Canonization of Yiddish Theater,” *Jewish Social Studies* 1, no 3 (1995): 49–50.

⁷ Michael Thompson explains that rubbish is absorbed into our life through daily practices. According to Thompson, rubbish is crucial to social life and for creating cultural and social value systems; it is a key conduit through which objects can change their value. See Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (London: Pluto Press, 1979), 12.

processes.⁸ In its theatrical performance, Kol Nidre was part of the staged fiction; however, its sounds, meanings, and affect were familiar to its listeners from the synagogue.⁹ Hence, the Kol Nidre' performed in the theatre transcended the illusionary threshold of the fictional realm, pointing to the current social realm of its audience. When listeners were able to encode its sounds and connect to a specific religious event, they were drawn into a shared affective experience animating a public sentiment, thus transforming them into a community.

The current discussion of Yiddish theatre audience gravitates between the theatergoers in the United States and Eastern Europe. As Nina Warnke writes, by the 1890s New York City had become the world center of Yiddish theater, “the fountainhead that fed Yiddish theatres worldwide,” while the East European Yiddish theater scene was relegated to the status of its “cultural colony.”¹⁰ Accordingly, the audiences of the Yiddish theatre in Eastern Europe and the United States differed from one another. While in the United States the audience was comprised of Jewish immigrants, mainly from Central and Eastern Europe, the European audiences included local, often modernized Jews. This article examines how, on both sides of the Atlantic, the Kol Nidre prayer performed in the Yiddish theatre reflected profound modern and migratory cultural transgressions, between categories such as high and low, religion and entertainment, the holy and the theatrical.

“Kol Nidre or The Converted Jews of Madrid”

Abraham Michael Sharkansky (1869–1907) composed and staged the historical operetta *Kol Nidre, or the Secret Jews of Madrid* (hereafter *Kol Nidre*) in 1896, after he emigrated from the small Polish town of Lubawa to the U.S. This move followed his prior theatrical box-office success *Rabi Amnon Bal unesane toykef* (רבי אמנון בעל וינתנה תוקף), which premiered in New York in November 1895.¹¹ Both of Sharkansky's plays, as Sholem Perlmutter explains, depart from the predominantly European dramatic repertoire of the Yiddish stage, centering on Jewish themes and practices.¹² Born and raised in a religious home, Sharkansky attended a *kheyder* and also learned both Russian and German before enrolling in a yeshiva. Jewish exegesis, myth, and

⁸ On the history of the Kol Nidre ritual, see Richard C. Steiner, “Kol Nidre: Past, Present, and Future,” *Jewish Studies, an Internet Journal* 12 (2013): 1–45.

⁹ For an elaborate discussion on the Kol Nidre tune, see Abraham Zvi Idelsohn, “The Kol Nidre Tune,” in the *Hebrew Union College Annual* 8 and 9 (1931 and 1932): 493–509; and Herman Kieval, “The Curious Case of Kol Nidre,” *Commentary* 46, no. 4 (1968): 53–58.

¹⁰ Nina Warnke, “Going East: The Impact of American Yiddish Plays and Players on the Yiddish Stage in Czarist Russia, 1890–1914,” *American Jewish History* 92, no. 1 (March 2004): 1, 28.

¹¹ The title of the play pertains to a legend, originating in the eleventh century in Mainz, that describes the circumstances in which the piyyut ‘Unesane toykef’ was introduced to the Jewish prayer book. The legend tells of Rabbi Amnon of Mayence—a distinguished, learned, and wise man—who failed to unequivocally reject the ongoing proposals of apostasy made to him by a local bishop. When the latter eventually refused, he was tortured brutally. Just before dying from his wounds, during the days of Rosh Hashanah, he requested that his disciples take him to the synagogue, and there he recited the piyyut ‘Unesane toykef.’ When he finished praying, he vanished from the world. ‘Unesane toykef’ is traditionally chanted on both days of Rosh Hashanah and on Yom Kippur. For more on the piyyut, see Israel Jacob Yuval and Naomi Goldblum, “The Silence of the Historian and the Ingenuity of the Storyteller: Rabbi Amnon of Mayence and Esther Minna of Worms,” *Common Knowledge* 9, no. 2 (2003): 228–40.

¹² Sholem Perlmutter is cited in Zylbercweig's lexical entry on Abraham Sharkansky. See Zalmen Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater* (Nyu-York [New York]: Farlag “Elisheva,” 1931–1969), 4:2490.

religious practices formed the basic cultural tenets of his drama. When writing for the theatre, Sharkansky mobilized Jewish ethnography in order to address his audiences' daily currents. Accordingly, the Jewish themes dramatized in *Kol Nidre* combine Jewish ritual with a historical depiction of the reality in Spain after the mass conversion of Jews, following the Inquisition, and mass expulsion advocated by the Catholic Monarchs and the Spanish church in 1492. At the turn of the twentieth century, these themes were relevant to Jewish communities in both Europe and the United States.¹³

The play, featuring music by composer Louis Friedsell, premiered on February 28, 1896, at the Thalia Theatre in New York City. The Jewish masses of New York loved the operetta, which was a box-office hit on Yiddish stages for the first two decades of the twentieth century in both the United States and Eastern Europe. With Bertha Kalich and David Kessler premiering in the leading roles, and often staged during the Jewish high holidays, the colorful production featured highly emotional effects produced through musicality, vocal deliverance, and the bodily gestures of its performers.¹⁴ Indeed, Perlmutter compares the enthusiasm expressed by the 'common' theatregoers who attended this theatre performance to the feelings aroused in them by participation in a synagogue service.¹⁵ Yet, as I will show in the following discussion, the fiction performed in *Kol Nidre* and its religious context differ profoundly from the synagogue ritual.

The action unfolds in Madrid, fourteen years after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. At the center of the drama are the *marranos*, also known as *conversos*, or New Christians—the Jews who converted or were forced to convert to Christianity by the Spanish Inquisition beginning in the late fifteenth century.¹⁶ Interestingly, the Spanish meanings of “marrano” happen to intersect directly with the notion of “shund,” referring to swine, pork, or disgust.¹⁷ The focus on the marrano thus carries meanings of impurity and defilement, resonating with Douglas's observation of impurity as a violation of cultural separations. From this perspective, the hybridity of the marrano fits in form and theme the pejorative term “shund.”

Despite severe restrictions, some marranos secretly preserved their Jewish identity and continued to observe some of their Jewish traditions; they formed a

¹³ Throughout the nineteenth century, the Sephardic Jewish past occupied German-Jewish writers such as Heinrich Heine, Berthold Auerbach, Ludwig Philippson, and Marcus Lehmann. See studies by Jonathan Skolnik, *Jewish Pasts, German Fictions: History, Memory, and Minority Culture in Germany, 1824–1955* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014); John M. Efron, *German Jewry and the Allure of the Sephardic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Jonathan M. Hess, “Under the Sword of the Spanish Inquisition: The Sephardic Legacy and the Making of Middlebrow Classics,” in *Middlebrow Literature and the Making of German-Jewish Identity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 26–71; and Ismar Schorsch, “The Myth of Sephardic Supremacy,” in *From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994), 71–92, originally published in *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 34 (1989): 47–66.

¹⁴ Zalmen Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, 4:2490.

¹⁵ Sholem Perlmutter is cited in Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater* (Nyu-York [New York]: Farlag “Elisheva,” 1931–1969), 4:2493.

¹⁶ For more on the Spanish Inquisition and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, see Cecil Roth and Herman P. Salomon, *A History of the Marranos* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1932); Norman Roth, *Conversos, Inquisition, and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002); and Yirmiyahu Yovel, *The Other Within: Split Identity and Emerging Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

¹⁷ See Cambridge Spanish-English dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/spanish-english/marrano>. I thank Talia Trainin for pointing this out to me.

crossbred religion that was Judaic in its inner objectives but Christian in many of its outward components.¹⁸ The Kol Nidre prayer, at the core of Sharkansky's drama, relates to the double identity of the marranos. Enacted on the holiest day of the Jewish year, the Kol Nidre ceremony opens with the cantor intoning a sort of preamble: "By the authority of the court on high and by the authority of the court below, with divine consent and with the consent of this congregation, we hereby declare that it is permitted to pray with those who have transgressed." This declaration was instrumental for Jews who concealed their identity or beliefs. Specifically, in the Iberian historical context at the backdrop of the operetta, whereby Jews were forced to convert to Christianity and posture religion for generations, the Kol Nidre liturgical formula offered pardon from blasphemy, enabling Jews to practice Christianity in public while retaining their true, secret identity.¹⁹

Sharkansky introduces into this historical-fictional realm a passionate love story between Elvira, the only child of the Grand Inquisitor Paulus, himself a converted Jew who is devoted to the extermination of all Jews, and Barthelo, also a converted Jew, as well as the king's favorite court singer. Barthelo's identity as a performer and a converted Jew brings together the idea of conversion not only in its meaning as the change of religion (*shmad*/שמד), but also as the basic paradigm of Jewish theatricality: namely, the idea of a divided identity—the one, secret and Jewish; the other, performative, public, and Christian.

The liminal identity of the marranos—a predicament of "to be or not to be" in a literal way—represents, I submit, the core paradigm of Jewish modern theatricality. By virtue of its inner doubling, theatre—as Steven E. Aschheim suggests—reflected the modern Jewish dynamics of assimilation and acculturation, and the remaking of the Jewish self through linguistic and gestural transformations.²⁰ Aschheim identifies the central narrative of Jewish modernization as revolving around the complex negotiations of Jewish roles and identities, and the continuous contestations as to their authenticity. In this respect, the historical figure of the marranos may be assessed as capturing an important aspect of the modern Jewish experience, articulated by Sander Gilman as becoming "differently visible," that is, being seen as a member of a group with which one wants or needs to identify.²¹

The Yiddish title of Sharkansky's operetta *Kol Nidre, oder, di geheyme yidn in madrid* (כל נדרי אָדער, די געהיימע יידן אין מאַדריד), resonates with the idea of the double

¹⁸ The theme of the play—the conversion of Jews following the Spanish Inquisition—provided the basis for a number of other plays performed on Yiddish stages, such as Avrom Goldfaden's play *Doktor Almasada oder di yudn in Palermo* (*Doctor Almasada or The Jews of Palermo*, 1882); Pinkhes Thomashefsky's *Der aynzame tsedertol* (*The Lonely Cedar Valley*, 1883); Nokhem-Meir ("Shomer") Shaykevitch's *Di shpanishe inkvizitsye* (*The Spanish Inquisition*, 1886); Moyshe Hurwitz's plays *Di Shapanishe Korbones* (*The Spanish Victims*, 1898) and *Don Yozef Abravanel* (*Don Joseph Abravanel*, 1891). The theme of the Spanish Inquisition in the Yiddish theatre is discussed in Joel Berkowitz, *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), 159–61; and in Sonia Gollance, "Brush Up on Your Yiddish History Plays," *Digital Yiddish Theatre Project*, April 2018, <https://web.uwm.edu/yiddish-stage/brush-up-on-your-yiddish-history-plays>.

¹⁹ On the "marrano" connection to Kol Nidre, see Mark Saperstein, "Sermons and History: The 'Marrano' Connection to Kol Nidre," *All These Vows: Kol Nidre*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman, Vol. 2 (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011), 31–38.

²⁰ Steven E. Aschheim, "Reflections on Theatricality, Identity and the Modern Jewish Experience," in *Jews and the Making of Modern Germany*, ed. Jeannette Malkin and Freddie Rokem (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 21–24.

²¹ Sander Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), xxi.

Jewish identity, denoting an ambivalent meaning. The word ‘geheyme’ (געײַמײע), much like the German word *Geheim*, can be understood in its double meaning, simultaneously denoting ‘secret’ and also ‘convert,’²² thus hinting at the Jewish tradition of coercively converted Jews who practiced Judaism undercover. Present within this word is also the denotation *heyim*, meaning home or refuge. This duplicity is at the core of Sigmund Freud’s well-known essay “The Uncanny,” or, in German, “Das Unheimliche” (1919). The *unheimliche*, according to Freud, describes a feeling of strangeness within one’s home: the mysterious, secret, and unknown that dwells within a person’s layered self or native environment.²³ In the same manner, the marranos—the name given to converted Jews—are displaced individuals: they simultaneously do and do not belong to a place, culture, or religion.

Sharing the secrets of their identity and language, Sharkansky depicts the marranos as a model of solidarity. Following the massive Jewish emigration from Iberia, “the age of the great Jewish merchants” began, according to French historian Fernand Braudel, in reference to the global presence of the marranos as international traders who reached, through maritime routes, Europe, America, the Levant, India, and East Asia.²⁴ Within the hazardous world of fifteenth-century maritime trade, the widespread presence of the marranos, according to Yermiyahu Yovel, formed a unique model of a networked community with in-group ties and loyalties, providing “the rarest commodity in that world—trust.”²⁵

The marranos’ condition, as Yovel maintains, anticipated many central features of modern Jewish experience and of Western modernity at large. Accordingly, in Sharkansky’s dramatic world, the social construct of the marranos points to a social condition beyond the historical fifteenth-century fictional context, prefiguring the prevalent phenomena of Jewish conversion to Christianity and the displaced reality of millions of Jewish migrants around the world.²⁶ On a meta-theatrical level, the figure of the marranos once again resonates with Douglas’s definition of trash as “misplaced.” The marranos, according to Yovel, were identified neither as Jews nor as Christians, as they integrated their new, converted identity, with some of their Jewish customs.²⁷ This inner split tapped on the mental baggage of Jewish immigrants both in Europe and the United States, rendering the marranos a social model and a theatrical metaphor for their new identities as “the other within,” to borrow Yovel’s figurative definition.²⁸

The drama in Sharkansky’s operetta begins when a local Christian nun and priest plot to reveal, to Paulus, Barthelo’s secret Jewish identity and his love affair with Elvira. Upon learning the secret of Barthelo’s identity, the inquisitor vows to kill him, but since the former is under the protection of the king, Paulus must exhibit some evidence before he can carry out the execution. Through his spies, Paulus discovers Barthelo visiting Elvira, and a furious fight ensues. Determined to get rid of Barthelo, Paulus plots to frame him by way of a letter allegedly written by other

²² See Solon Beinfeld and Harry Bochner, eds., *Comprehensive Yiddish-English Dictionary* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013), 208.

²³ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin, 2003).

²⁴ Fernand Braudel is cited in Yirmiyahu Yovel’s *The Other Within: Split Identity and Emerging Modernity*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 288.

²⁵ Yovel, *The Other Within*, 295.

²⁶ On Jewish conversion during the late nineteenth century, see Ellie Schainker, *Confessions of the Shtetl* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

²⁷ Yovel, *The Other Within*.

²⁸ Yovel, *The Other Within*, 337.

secret Jews. He then dictates a letter, interlaced with Hebrew biblical phrases, to his assistant in “the language of the Jews.” Following Paulus’s commands, his assistant repeats the content of the letter.

The operetta’s language presents yet another dimension of the hybridity presented in the play, demonstrating the multilingual alloy that characterized the Yiddish stage. As Jacob Mestel points out, the lead roles were delivered in heavily Germanized Yiddish (*daytshmerish*). However, the other lines, especially those of the characters who are “simple people,” were uttered in plain *mame-loshn* (native Yiddish).²⁹ To these elements we can add the Kol Nidre prayer that is traditionally sung in Aramaic. The multilingual elements in the play catered to this operetta’s audience. Staged on multiple continents, the play’s integration of Yiddish, German, and *leshon-ha-kodesh* bound together audiences of different origins along the same linguistic landscape, enabling them to comprehend the performed drama and thus also partake in the social event. Furthermore, the heavily Germanized Yiddish dialect—*daytshmerish*—performed in the play, often referred to as a diluted or eviscerated Yiddish due to its amalgamation with German, was regarded as a language in disguise.³⁰ This perception further corresponds to the notion of the “hidden language” of Jews, a term coined by Sander Gilman to denote the cultural ambiguity of assimilated Jews at the turn of the century, which also manifested in the theme of Sharkansky’s operetta through the duality of the marranos’ hidden identity.³¹

The drama of the operetta reaches its climax when Paulus, by way of slick cunning, discovers the secret hideout of the Jews—in a church that had been converted into a synagogue for the Yom Kippur service. There, on Yom Kippur eve, he finds the secret congregation gathered around the holy Ark, reading from the Jewish prayer book. The conversion of the religious space resonates with contemporaneous loci converted for the Yom Kippur prayer. Judith Thissen explains that because of a shortage of synagogue space in turn-of-the-century New York City, each year, around the high holidays, Yiddish playhouses and movie theatres would turn into provisional synagogues to accommodate “Yom Kippur Jews,” referring to those Jews not affiliated with a congregation, who sought to attend the service on the high holy day.³² For many modern Jews, Yom Kippur was the only day that they

²⁹ Jacob Mestel is cited in Zylbercweig 3:1637.

³⁰ The heavily Germanized Yiddish dialect—*daytshmerish*—was a common convention on the Yiddish stage, not an idiosyncratic approach taken by Sharkansky. For more on *daytshmerish*, see Marc Miller, “The Artificiality of German in Modern Yiddish Poetry,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 4, no. 2 (2005): 123–35; Leon Kobrin, *Fun daytshmerish tsu yidish in Amerike* (New York: IKUF, 1944); Joseph Landis, “Yiddish Dreams in America,” in *Handbook of American-Jewish Literature: An Analytical Guide to Topics, Themes, and Sources*, ed. L. Fried, G.Y. Brown, and L. Harap (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988), 143–65; Max Weinreich, “Daytshmerish toyg nit,” *Yidish far ale* (June 1938) 4:101.

³¹ On Jewish duplicity as a cultural modernist trope, see Sander Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

³² According to Judith Thissen, a 1917 survey counted 343 temporary synagogues, with a total seating capacity of 163,638. A total of 59 moving-picture theatres and 9 playhouses were turned into synagogues. Most of the services in these temporary synagogues were profit-oriented, and participants had to buy tickets in advance. See Judith Thissen, “Something Special for the High Holidays,” *Digital Yiddish Theatre Project*, September 2017, <https://web.uwm.edu/yiddish-stage/kol-nidre-on-broadway-a-cantor-with-a-voice-that-sounds-like-fifty-canaries-and-other-high-holiday-gigs-in-turn-of-the-century-new-york-city>.

attended the synagogue. They were familiar with the prayers and were deeply moved by the Kol Nidre. The marranos' gathering in the converted church featured in Sharkansky's drama parallels the theatre-goers attending his operetta to witness a fictional Yom Kippur service.

In the operetta, the Kol Nidre prayer is performed in the synagogue when Paulus uncovers Barthelo's Jewish identity. Inside a churchly space, the congregation of converts performs the annulment of their prior vows and oaths. How does the relationship between the Jewish sound and the converted Christian space activate the performed drama? The Kol Nidre prayer frames the circumstances of Paulus' infiltration into the secret meeting place of the converted Jewish community. Performed in a church that was transformed into a synagogue, the prayer is designed, through the drama, to have the resonance of its sound amplified through the acoustics of the church. Thus, the dynamics of the Kol Nidre sound and the space in which it reverberated within the fictional world attributed different aural qualities than the ones familiar to the audience. Furthermore, what is considered in its religious setting to be the epicenter of the Yom Kippur contemplative service retreats in this scene to the background, designed as a melody geared to enhance the emotional intensity of the drama. The Kol Nidre is traditionally structured as the central focus of the congregational gathering; it is heeded attentively, in full concentration, thus enabling an immersive experience. However, when framed in a theatrical setting, it departs from its devotional assignment, infusing the space with the emotional load associated with its religious enactment. Within the theatrical setting, the Kol Nidre prayer was converted into popular music, performed to provide the ambience for the enacted dramatic interactions.³³

Following the enactment of the Kol Nidre, Paulus reveals Barthelo to be a Jew. A witness to the scene, his beloved Elvira, enters, affirms her love for Barthelo, and declares her everlasting commitment to Judaism; she then curses her father and stabs herself with a scalpel. In line with a good melodrama, she is only wounded, and Barthelo is jailed. In his prison cell, Barthelo is forced by Paulus to write a false confession admitting his guilt in seducing Elvira to Judaism, in order to save her from being burned at the stake—the customary punishment for Jews under the Spanish Inquisition.

The last scene of the operetta takes place before the large, ominous stake erected for the purpose of immolating the lovers. Paulus addresses the crowd gathered to witness the lovers' burning, explaining that on this day it is *his* duty to judge his own child; he begs the people not to believe Elvira's declarations about her enduring loyalty to her converted lover and to Judaism. Elvira, however, refuses to recant her confession, and although Paulus tries in vain to prove her innocence by showing Barthelo's letter, the people demand her immediate death. The drama concludes with Elvira jumping into the fire, repeating the Jewish initial verse of the "*Shema Yisrael*" (Hebrew for "Hear, O Israel") prayer—the centerpiece of the daily Jewish morning and evening prayer, also recited during the Yom Kippur service and intended to constitute a Jew's last words before death. Barthelo follows her into the fire, completing the prayer: "The Lord is our God, the Lord is One." The final scene of

³³ On the aesthetics of auditory-spatial relations, see Brandon Labelle, *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (New York: Continuum Press, 2006); on modes of listening to popular music, see Daniel Morat, "Music in the Air—Listening in the Streets," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Listening in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, ed. Christian Thorau and Hansjakob Ziemer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 336.

the play shows a tableau of Elvira and Barthelo among winged angels, below them the congregated crowd. On the stage, Paulus is seen during his last moments on his deathbed, clinging to his final breath and struggling with his approaching death.

Sharkansky's drama ends with the "Shema Israel" (שמע ישראל) prayer. While this prayer denotes the lovers' last declaration, it also resonated beyond the imaginary borderlines of the fictional drama, calling for its audience, around the globe, to listen.³⁴ How did this call for God to *listen* reverberate among the various Jewish audiences during the period under discussion? This inquiry is premised on the idea that at the turn of the century, along with the invention of sound recording technology, the uses of hearing, the meaning invested in sound, modes of aural attention—all evolved accordingly. This is what Sophia Rosenfeld terms "regimes of listening," depicting this act of attention as a cultural effect that depends not only upon the sounds themselves, but also on the specific interpreters and their settings. Listening, as Rosenfeld explains, depends not only on physiology, but also on incidental and deliberate alterations in technology, environment, aesthetics, and social relations, and is also a product of those changes.³⁵ Here is where we need to turn our attention to questions of reception and consumption in addition to production.

Accordingly, rather than focus on the production of sound and voices in the theatre, I wish to investigate the shaping of shared listening in the theatre as a performative act. While listening is often thought of as a passive, inner mode of consumption of knowledge, I wish to explore how it binds the audience together, and how, in doing so, it draws people into a network of various media, artistic manifestations, and institutions, all engaging in processes of cultural transformation.

"Yesterday With The Jews"

Much of the music performed in the Yiddish popular theatre was created from an admixture of heavily adapted Western canonical music, as well as melodies, chants, and liturgies performed in the synagogue.³⁶ Its theatre troupes often included composers, conductors, and performers who were trained as synagogue choirboys and cantors. The theatregoers attending these performances listened to the combination of these very different musical legacies, discerning the different nuances and connotations. This hybrid aesthetics became a sensuous way of knowing, an epistemic tool for negotiating the socio-cultural changes brought by modernity.³⁷

³⁴ Among the actors performing in the operetta are Ben Zion Palipade, who played the inquisitor in Lemberg, and Maurice Schwartz in the role of Cardinal Paulus.

³⁵ Sophia Rosenfeld, "On Being Heard: A Case for Paying Attention to the Historical Ear," *American Historical Review* 116, no. 2 (2011): 318.

³⁶ The music for the early Yiddish theatre was often written by composers with musical training as *meshoyrerim*, and several would later also write for both the theatre and the synagogue. See Mark Slobin, "Music in the Yiddish Theater and Cinema, 1880–1950," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish Music*, ed. Joshua S. Walden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Nina Warnke, "Yiddish Theatre History, Its Composers and Operettas: A Narrative without Music," *Pismo Muzykalia* 7 (2009): 1–11. In his article "Muzik in yidishn teater un in shul," *Forverts*, December 24, 1913, Rumshinsky comments at length on the mutual influence of synagogal and theatre music.

³⁷ On the hybridity of the Yiddish theatre, see François Guesnet, "A Tuml in the Shtetl: Khayim Betsalel Grinberg's Di Khevre-Kedishe Sude," in *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry Volume 16: Focusing on Jewish Popular Culture and Its Afterlife*, ed. Michael C. Steinlauf and Antony Polonsky (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2003), 93–106; Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999).

One of the most remarkable accounts of listening to Sharkansky's *Kol Nidre* is provided by Franz Kafka—an enthusiastic theatregoer in the Prague Yiddish theatre scene of 1911. Kafka became acquainted with the Yiddish theatre when a small itinerant Yiddish theatre company from Lemberg (now Lviv, located in Western Ukraine), came to Prague and performed at the Café Savoy. One of the shows Kafka attended was Sharkansky's operetta.³⁸ On October 22, 1911, he recorded his impressions of this show in his diary:

Yesterday with the Jews. *Kol Nidre* by Sharkansky, pretty bad play with a good, witty letter-writing scene, a prayer by the lovers standing up beside each other with hands clasped, the converted Grand Inquisitor pressing himself against the curtain of the Ark of the Covenant, he mounts the stairs and remains standing there, his head bowed, his lips against the curtain, holds the prayer book before his chattering teeth. For the first time on this fourth evening my distinct inability to get a clear impression (*einen reinen Eindruck*).³⁹

Although Kafka describes the play as “pretty bad,” it was evidently appealing enough for him to warrant recording in his diary. In his account, Kafka mentions a few scenes that grabbed his attention: the letter-writing scene in which Hebrew (*leshon ha-kodesh*) phrases are cited aloud and reiterated by the Inquisitor, a converted Jew himself; the interweaving of distinct Jewish symbols and ritual props within the drama of intrigue; the melodramatic love story and the theatrical image of the Inquisitor's body pressed against the holy Ark; the gesture of hiding and eavesdropping of the Christian invading the holiest ritual of Judaism. Yet despite these reflections, Kafka concludes his account with the thought, “I could not get a clear impression.” In another diary entry, dated October 26, 1911, Kafka further discusses Sharkansky's drama, depicting it as inferior to Jacob Gordin's dramatic works due to its lack of detail and logical sequence.⁴⁰ By way of comparison, Kafka perceives Gordin's work as “lacking the immediate Jewishness that is always being improvised in other plays.”⁴¹ Yet the distinct Jewishness of Sharkansky's operetta does not leave Kafka with a clear impression. Why does Kafka find it difficult to describe his feelings from this performance? Why was he left without words upon observing a spectacle he was at least partially familiar with?

A few weeks before attending Sharkansky's operetta, Kafka attended the Yom Kippur service in the Altneu Synagogue in Prague.⁴² He subsequently wrote in his diary, on October 1, 1911:

³⁸ For further reading on the impact of the Yiddish popular theatre on Kafka's writings, see Evelyn Torton Beck, *Kafka and the Yiddish Theatre: Its Impact on His Work* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979) and Iris Bruce and Richard March, *Kafka and Cultural Zionism: Dates in Palestine* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007).

³⁹ Franz Kafka, diary entry dated October 22, 1911, in *The Diaries of Franz Kafka 1910–1913*, ed. Max Brod (Redditch, Worcestershire, UK: Read Books Ltd., 2013).

⁴⁰ Jakob Gordin (1852–1909) was a Yiddish playwright born in Ukraine. Following his emigration to the United States in 1892, he established himself as the reformer of the Yiddish stage. See Barbara J. Henry, *Rewriting Russia: Jacob Gordin's Yiddish Drama* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011).

⁴¹ Franz Kafka, diary entry dated October 26, 1911.

⁴² The Gothic *Altneuschul*, in Prague, the oldest synagogue in Europe, where Kafka was a frequent visitor, is also the setting for the legend of the Maharal and his man-made Golem.

Kol Nidre. Suppressed murmur of the stock market. In the entry, boxes with the inscription: “Merciful gifts secretly left assuage the wrath of the bereft.” Churchly inside. Three pious, apparently Eastern Jews. In socks. Bowed over their prayer books, their prayer shawls drawn over their heads, become as small as they possibly can. Two are crying, moved only by the holy day. One of them may only have sore eyes, perhaps, to which he fleetingly applies his still folded handkerchief, at once to lower his face to the text again. The words are not really, or chiefly, sung, but behind them arabesque-like melodies are heard that spin the words as fine as hairs. The little boy without the slightest conception of it all and without any possibility of understanding, who, with the clamor in his ears, pushes himself among the thronging people and is pushed. The clerk (apparently) who shakes himself rapidly while he prays, which is to be understood only as an attempt at putting the strongest possible—even if possibly incomprehensible—emphasis on each word, by means of which the voice, which in any case could not attain a large, clear emphasis in the clamor, is spared. The family of a brothel owner. I was stirred immeasurably more deeply by Judaism in the Pinkas synagogue.⁴³

Kafka details the reactions of the congregation to what are considered to be the holiest and most intense moments in the Jewish liturgy. He describes the absentminded congregation attending the prayer as he highlights the strong theatricality embedded in the prayer, and the overdone, excessive performance of the motions by the congregation. The dramatic quality of the ritual is enhanced by Kafka’s description of the inside of the synagogue as “churchly,” strikingly resonating with the spatial design of Sharkansky’s operetta.

Despite the similarities between his observations of Sharkansky’s operetta and the Altneu Synagogue service, after attending the operetta, Kafka felt perplexed. The key to deciphering his impressions resides, I submit, in his use of the German term *‘reinen,’* translated as ‘purity’ or ‘clarity.’ These terms, once again, surface at the opposite pole of the cultural category of *shund* as a hybrid, transgressive cultural iteration, echoing Douglas’s definition of dirt as a performance of displacement. Perhaps, then, the trouble he experienced in defining his impression was an outcome of the cultural hybridity of the sonic and visual references juxtaposed in the performance. Therefore, this was by no means a performance that mobilized the familiar Yom Kippur synagogue ritual onto the theatre stage. In what ways, then, did the theatre performance of Kol Nidre diverge from the religious synagogue performance? And what sort of hybridity did this performance introduce?

Religious Transgressions and Theatrical Homecomings

Sharkansky’s operetta marks the beginning of a surge in musical and theatrical adaptations of Kol Nidre performed on popular stages and secular settings at the turn of the century. There are a number of possible reasons for the rise in popularity of this liturgical text. First, Kol Nidre is a unique prayer in terms of its inherent performative structure; the Kol Nidre marks the grand overture of the public ceremony. The congregants come to listen to the cantor performing this prayer, and

⁴³ Franz Kafka, diary entry dated October 1, 1911.

since it opens the Yom Kippur service, they do so without having to be committed to participating in a prolonged preceding prayer.

A second reason for the popularization of the Kol Nidre relates to its social context. At the turn of the century, amid massive immigration, there was a rise in the popularity of the cantor. Jeffrey Shandler finds the root of this phenomenon in the emotional power of the cantors' performances, which "not only carried the congregants to heaven, but also bore the affective charge of immigrant longing and uncertainties."⁴⁴ Indeed, many Yiddish thespians performed in religious settings—in synagogue choirs, as cantors, or as entertainers in Jewish festivities—before crossing over to the theatre stage. As this popular Yiddish theatre industry evolved, it also produced commercial sound recordings of highlights of theatricalized liturgical vocal practices. Consequently, Jewish rituals and liturgical enactment traversed their traditional religious settings and permeated, through the mediation of the gramophone and phonograph, the secular public sphere as fragments from theatrical sensations.

The most famous dramatization of the transition from the synagogue to the popular theatre stage is depicted in *The Jazz Singer*, a 1927 film based on a 1922 story ("Day of Atonement") and a 1925 play of the same name by Samson Raphaelson. *The Jazz Singer* tells the story of Jakie Rabinowitz, the son of an acclaimed cantor on Manhattan's Lower East Side.⁴⁵ Young Rabinowitz dreams of becoming a jazz performer, despite his father's rage against the son's "debas[ing] the voice God gave him." Choosing to break off from his cantorial legacy, and refusing to perform beside his father in the synagogue prayer, he leaves his home on the eve of Yom Kippur, against the backdrop of his mother's sobbing and his father singing the Kol Nidre prayer.

In pursuit of his dream of becoming a famous jazz singer, Jakie travels across America. His success brings him back to New York, this time as a performer in a Broadway play—a professional opportunity he has long been awaiting. The opening night of his show is scheduled for the eve of Yom Kippur. Unfortunately, Jakie's father falls ill, and the synagogue is left without a cantor to lead the evening prayer of the holy day. As Yom Kippur Eve approaches, Jakie decides to comply with his mother's plea to assume his father's position on the synagogue bimah as cantor and lead the Kol Nidre prayer. As Jakie sings the prayer, his father passes away and his spirit is seen to hover above him.

While in the fictional cinematic world Jakie Rabinowitz is forced to choose between the synagogue and the Broadway stage, in real life, Kol Nidre became an exemplar of "Jewish music" resonating on Yiddish musical stages, in popular theatre halls, taverns, concert halls, commercial sound recordings, and film. In the face of modernist transformation processes, sacred Jewish sounds were converted into secular entertainment. The attempts to export sacred chants and liturgical tunes onto such popular stages and venues were met with harsh opposition. As James Loeffler

⁴⁴ Jeffrey Shandler, *Jews, God, and Videotape: Religion and Media in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 24.

⁴⁵ *The Jazz Singer* is not only a fascinating manifestation of a modernist adaptation to the Kol Nidre prayer; it is also an example of a modernist encounter between Jewish tradition and sound technology. Although it was not the first talkie, it is considered a landmark in the development of sound cinema, since it included pre-recorded sound segments synchronized into the actors' singing on screen. For an annotated bibliography on *The Jazz Singer*, see: <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199791286/obo-9780199791286-o069.xml>.

points out, cantors across the Russian Empire were profoundly suspicious of the newly emerging performing medium of cantorial and liturgical songs conveyed through the gramophone.⁴⁶ One example was Pinchas Minkovsky, a prominent Russian composer and chief cantor of the choral synagogue in Kishinev, who performed across Europe and the United States.⁴⁷ A critical opponent of the growing industry of commercial sound recordings of cantors, Minkovsky explained what he found problematic about cantors singing outside the synagogue: “For those of us who are truly religiously and nationally disposed, Jewish synagogue song possessed a double holiness: the holiness of place (*kdushes hamokem*) and the holiness of time (*kdushes hazman*)—where and when they are sung.”⁴⁸ According to Loeffler, Minkovsky’s fear stems from the physical act of displacement of sound and the perceived contamination that took place when liturgy left its natural habitus within the synagogue.⁴⁹ From this perspective, the public performances of Jewish synagogue music outside the sacred precinct amounted to an act of profanation.

There was, however, another side to this phenomenon: many Jewish commentators perceived popular liturgical music concerts held in entertainment venues as a bridge between the increasingly secular urban modern public and traditional modes of communal gatherings. Indeed, the Jewish masses flocked to the theatre to experience the Kol Nidre not only on Yom Kippur. In the secularized, urbanized atmosphere of Jewish communities at the turn of the century, why was the Kol Nidre prayer popular? Further, what sort of allure did the popular or secular versions of the liturgy attribute to the chant?

Theodor Reik engages with this query in his essay on the psychoanalytical meanings embedded in the Kol Nidre prayer.⁵⁰ Reik opens his investigation with a personal anecdote describing the strong impression he received from listening to *Kol Nidrei*, Opus 47 (also known as *All Vows*), a cello composition written by the German composer Max Bruch⁵¹: “A particularly solemn and impressive minor passage occurred three times and awakened a feeling of pre-acquaintance in me that mingled curiously with the somber emotions the melody itself had aroused.” When these feelings were aroused, Reik was not aware that he was listening to a “modern free setting of the ancient melody which is sung in all the synagogues of the world before the service on the Jewish Day of Atonement.” As the tune clung to his mind, associations intensified with the recurrence of the melody. In poignant juxtaposition to Kafka’s experience, Reik recalls his childhood impressions of the Kol Nidre liturgy:

⁴⁶ James Loeffler, “The Lust Machine: Commerce, Sound and Nationhood in Jewish Eastern Europe,” *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 32 (2018): 257–78.

⁴⁷ For further reading on Pinchas Minkovsky, see Jeffrey Shandler, “A Tale of Two Cantors: Pinchas Minkowski and Yosele Rosenblatt,” in *Academic Angles* (New York: Museum at Eldridge Street, 2008), 24–28; Jeffrey Shandler, “Cantors on Trial,” in *Jews, God, and Videotape: Religion and Media in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 13–55.

⁴⁸ Minkovskii, *Moderne liturgye*, 4. Cited in Loeffler, “The Lust Machine,” 18.

⁴⁹ Loeffler, “The Lust Machine,” 18.

⁵⁰ Theodor Reik, *Ritual: Psycho-Analytic Studies*, trans. Douglas Bryan (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1931). For further discussion on Reik’s analysis of the Kol Nidre prayer, see Ruth HaCohen, *The Music Libel Against the Jews* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 330–39.

⁵¹ For an overview of Max Bruch’s Kol Nidre, see Christopher Fifield, “Max Bruch: The Christian Composer of Kol Nidrei,” *Jewish Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1987): 39–41.

During my visits to the little town I had often heard the ancient melody of the Kol Nidre, and there grew into my mind a picture of the primitive synagogue; of long-bearded men in white robes, moving their bodies rhythmically in prayer; and of my grandfather at my side. I remembered the mysterious trembling that possessed the congregation when the cantor began the Kol Nidre. I remembered the visible signs of deep contrition exhibited by all these serious men, and their emotional participation in the text, and how I, child as I was, had been carried away by that specific wrongdoing that might have called for contrition, and moreover, was certainly incapable of understanding the full meaning of the words. Needless to say, my grandfather, a taciturn and fanatically pious man, had never explained to me the meaning of the Kol Nidre.⁵²

Reik describes how Bruch's music stimulated memories from his faraway childhood. The melodious tropes from the Kol Nidre service, interlaced within a modern musical piece, encoded a sonic memory that reminded him of those significant sentimental moments experienced at his grandfather's home, whereby he felt the attachment between the congregants within that traditional setting at that "primitive" synagogue.⁵³ The Kol Nidre adaptation that Reik listens to—transferred from the religious setting—on his home gramophone brings back his grandfather's physical, however ghostly, presence into his reality.

According to Reik, the emotional power of the prayer derives from the tension between compassion and distress—the 'unheimlich' feeling of the familiar converted and displaced from its natural environment. In a similar manner, the theatre converted the synagogue ritual into a related yet altered experience—perhaps even uncanny—rather than the familiar one. Its intense emotional melody operates as a sort of sonorous magnet, pulling converted or assimilated Jews back into the community.

Mark Slobin demonstrates this returning home gesture, embedded in the aural imagination of the Kol Nidre, in an anecdote he narrates about a successful group of Romanian choirboys—among whom was also Sigmund Mogulesco—that toured Romania under the name *Chore Israelit* (Jewish Chorus), performing secular European vocal roles during the Sunday services of Romanian Orthodox churches. At some point, Slobin writes, the group was offered a prestigious scholarship to study voice development in Italy, under one condition: that they convert to Christianity. They had already given their consent when they decided to think things over and attend the Kol Nidre service. For Mogulesco and his peers, Kol Nidre, the prayer of annulling vows and setting free prior commitments, paradoxically served here as a performance of a re-commitment.⁵⁴ Something happened to these actors during the Kol Nidre service on a September eve at the synagogue—they experienced some kind of transformation emanating from the vibrant Jewish congregation engaged in the liturgical ceremony. Extrapolating from this depiction, we can perhaps also understand the proliferation of popular theatrical performances of Kol Nidre as the epitome of a specific cultural moment wherein the familiar synagogue melodies transcended the geographic and cultural upheaval of immigration, providing

⁵² Reik, *Ritual: Psycho-Analytic Studies*, 167–68.

⁵³ Reik, *Ritual: Psycho-Analytic Studies*, 206.

⁵⁴ Mark Slobin, *Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants*, Vol. 1 (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 35.

immigrants a sort of emotional medicine for their homesickness. In the turn-of-the-century migratory Jewish realm, Kol Nidre became a religious practice harnessed to conversion, in its deep meaning of bringing one back home.

Becoming an Audience

In Hebrew, the homophonic word ‘kol’ both signifies “voice” (קול) and is pronounced like the word “every” (כל). This phonetic relationship is symbolic of the central function of the collective within this synagogal religious, personal experience and its ramifications throughout the community.⁵⁵ As I conclude this paper, I would like to examine the specific communal experience of the Kol Nidre when converted to the theatrical secular setting.

The drama of the marranos in Sharkansky’s *Kol Nidre* provided a theatrical arena for processing current issues regarding the character and role of modern Jewish transformation processes—among them, the dynamics of assimilation and integration, questions regarding the commitments of Jews to their communities, and the remaking and representation of the Jewish self. In addition, the Kol Nidre prayer, with its controversial text and poignant traditional tune, suffused the drama with an experience that points, beyond its theatrical setting, to Jewish displacement and acculturation processes. Within its modern secular performance setting, the Kol Nidre prayer represented a different kind of religious commitment, one that does not stand in contradiction to the advent of modernity, the contingencies of displacement and migration, and does not cherish the clear binary opposition between assimilation and acculturation on the one hand, and Jewish religious and cultural belonging on the other.

Kol Nidre in the Yiddish theatre not only stood for the familiar synagogue ritual; it also played an active role in introducing the East European Jewish immigrants to non-Jewish European and American culture, thus enhancing migratory integration. Nina Warnke explains that Jewish theatres in the United States provided an artistic framework that enabled the “education” or “domestication” of the audience regarding conventions of comportment and public appearance in their new cultural environments.⁵⁶ The Yiddish theatre was known as a venue in which the audience would demonstrate participatory spectatorship, as quoted in a 1897 review: “I am ashamed to admit that on our Yiddish stage...when the actors sing the chorus of an aria or a couplet the entire gallery sings along.”⁵⁷ In his book on etiquette, Tashrak (pseudonym for Y.Y. Zevin) opens his chapter on theatre and opera by describing the behavior of a Jewish audience at the theatre.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ On the togetherness formed in the Kol Nidre ceremony, see Ruth HaCohen, “Communities of Voice at Times of Twilight: Real and Imagined Spaces of Sound among Central European Jews at the Opening and Closing of the Gates,” in *The Interpretive Imagination: Religion, and Art in Jewish Culture in Its Context*, ed. Ruth HaCohen, Galit Hasan-Rokem, Yerachmiel Cohen, and Ilana Pardes (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2016), 116–53.

⁵⁶ On the Yiddish theatre as an arena for immigrant education and acculturation, see Nina Warnke, “Theater as Educational Institution: Jewish Immigrant Intellectuals and Yiddish Theater Reform,” in *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times*, ed. by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jonathan Karp (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 23–41.

⁵⁷ Seiffert, “Di yidishe bine un ir tsukunft,” *Di yidishe bihne*, as quoted in Warnke’s “Reforming the New York Yiddish Theatre,” 143.

⁵⁸ Tashrak (Yoysef Zevin), *Etikete: a veg vayzer fun laytische oyffihung, helflikhkayt un shehne manieren far mener un froyen: tsuzamengeshtelt loyt di beste oytoriteten* (New York: Hebrew

When Jews enter the theatre, Tashrak writes, they talk, stretch in their seats, eat peanuts, chew gum, and constantly interrupt other people in their surroundings.⁵⁹ Against this sort of behavior, music, according to Warnke, had the power to discipline and focus the audience's attention. As Warnke explains, "even more so than listening, it was the freedom to sing along that was a crucial element in building the communal feeling within the theatres."⁶⁰ Within this environment, the Kol Nidre prayer, heard against the backdrop of a highly dramatic moment, functioned in the popular theatre as a sound that—albeit furnishing a secular theatrical setting—encircled the audience around a familiar feeling reminiscent of the synagogue. It served as a melodic frame to bond the audience through behavioral norms of listening that they were well acquainted with, as practiced on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar.

The mobilization of the Kol Nidre liturgical sound-bite into the popular theatre is characteristic of the frequent, fluid crossover between religious performances and commercial, mass-appeal theatre and vaudeville shows at the turn of the twentieth century. This hybrid, transgressive theatre mixed sacred and secular classifications, coupling lowbrow with highbrow categories. Yet for the Jewish audience, these amalgamations tapped into some of their fundamental daily ritualistic experiences, accessed, paradoxically, through the Jewish modern experience.

Publishing Co., 1912), 87. Nina Warnke also discusses this anecdote in "Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater: The Cultural Politics of Immigrant Intellectuals and the Yiddish Press, 1887–1910" (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2001), 136–37.

⁵⁹ Tashrak, *Etikete*, 87.

⁶⁰ Nina Warnke, "Yiddish Theatre History, Its Composers and Operettas: A Narrative without Music," *Pismo Muzykalia* 7 (2009): 1–11.