Ofer Ben-Amots: *THE DYBBUK*
A MULTIMEDIA HEBREW CHAMBER OPERA IN THREE ACTS AND EIGHTEEN SCENES

by NEIL W. LEVIN, *Anne E. Leibowitz Visiting Professor-in-Residence in Music*

Kol ahava shehi t'luya v'davar
batel davar b'tela ahava. V'she'eina
t'luya v'davar eina b'tela l'olam.
(Whenever love depends upon some
material cause, with the passing
away of that cause, the love, too,
is gone. But if it [the love] is not
dependent on such a cause, it will
never leave and will last forever.)
—PIRKEI AVOT

The past is never dead; it's not even past.
—William Faulkner

We must believe in free will. We have no choice.
—Isaac Bashevis Singer

Horresco referens. (Telling it makes me shudder.)
—Virgil

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The works of Ofer Ben-Amots (b. 1955), one of America's and Israel's most innovative and fertile composers, have been performed throughout America, Israel, and Europe. We might think that by the early twenty-first century, the operatic possibilities inherent in An-ski's play had been exhausted, but Ben-Amots, building on a highly original and successfully experimental conception of time, and based on his own adaptation of Bialik's Hebrew version, had an ingeniously epiphanous idea of how to approach the play as an opera in a way not previously imagined. The role of Hannan, instead of being sung, is creatively confined to the clarinet—in emotional responses, interactions, sentiments, and outbursts stronger than words could convey. This choice for Hannan's role was not coincidental or arbitrary. From the beginning of the opera, Hannan is already deceased, and the clarinet represents his soul.

The Hebrew for "soul" is *n'shama*, which is related philologically to *n'shima* ("breath"). Viz., the two words share the same root formation. Inasmuch as an important element of the storyline is the eternal question of what happens to the souls of the deceased—in this case Hannan's soul returning as a *dibek*—it occurred to Ben-Amots that the clarinet, an instrument that operates through continual breathing, would be the closest instrumental representation. In addition, he intuited a similarity between the clarinet and the human voice. At some points the clarinet joins the accompanying ensemble temporarily, but always returns to its Hannan/*dibek* role.

The opera tells the story as a flashback. From a higher kabbalistic sphere in the "afterlife," the long-dead Leah (still in her white wedding gown) and Hannan—the latter wordlessly on the clarinet—relate what happened to them and why they became "merged into one." From the moment the curtain rises on the introduction to the first act, everything has already happened. Leah's and Hannan's souls have been eternally united—rising together higher and higher to kabbalistic heights from what had been the lowest depths of despair. The children they would presumably have had (and thus their children and children's children) will now never be born.

Although many of the related trappings of Hassidic life and mysticism appropriately infuse the opera musically and visually, Ben-Amots chose to focus primarily on the depths of Leah's emotions, from torment to ecstasy, dwelling on her emotional states more so than either An-ski's Yiddish or Bialik's Hebrew version of the play. And even as Leah (viz., her soul) rises higher and higher as one with Hannan's *dibek*, she never relinquishes the range of those emotions. In particular, she continues to harbor the regret that she will never have children, which, presumably, she would have had if Sender had never broken his promise of her marriage to Hannan—or, for that matter, had Hannan's *dibek* not possessed her and she had wed her father's chosen bridegroom. It is this range of her emotions that gives this opera a unique place among many of the others based on An-ski's play.

Ben-Amots was drawn to the operatic possibilities of Bialik's version of the play sometime around 2002, when he was a visiting professor at the Buchmann-Mehta School of Music at Tel Aviv University. The opera began, however, as incidental music for a version of the play by an obscure Israeli stage director who invited him to contribute a score. Upon the play's completion and production preparations, Ben-Amots found that he could not relate to the strangely reinvented context, which was saturated with theatrical traditions of Japanese Noh plays, Kabuki, and other Japanese elements and features. By that time, though, he had become irrevocably intrigued by An-ski's play, and even more so by the way in which Bialik had translated and transformed it. Encouraged by the enthusiastic response to his incidental music on its own merits, he decided to compose this opera—using his score as a basis. He completed it in 2006, and over the next two years made various adjustments and refinements—in time for the world premiere in Montreal in 2008, although the percussion was only added for the next production, in Colorado.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

LEAH, the Bride ..... SOPRANO
HANNAN, the promised Bridegroom and his "dybbuk" ..... CLARINET
NARRATOR/MESSENGER/the REBBE ..... BARITONE
TOWNSFOLK, BEGGARS, DANCERS ..... SATB Chorus
CHILDREN NEVER TO BE BORN ..... CHILDREN'S CHOIR

TIME: After the death of Leah and Hannan as "one"
PLACE: In the "afterlife," in a higher kabbalistic sphere

Hebrew libretto by the composer, adapted from Haim Nahman Bialik's Hebrew version of An-ski's Yiddish play *The Dybbuk*

Accompanying instrumental ensemble:

cello, violin, piano, percussion, vibraphone
tubular chimes
wind chimes
bass drum (small orchestral)
tambourine
triangle (3 sizes)
small hanging bells
crotales (1–2 octaves)
tam-tam (large)
suspended cymbal
hand drum (bendir, doumbeck, etc.)
cabasa
shekere or maraca
claves

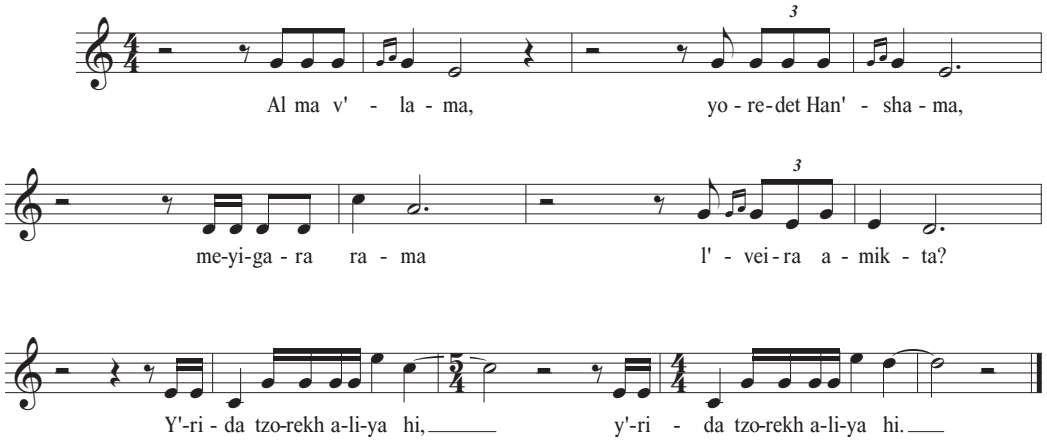
ACT I — "THE LOVE AND THE DEATH"

1. ***INTRODUCTION***

Leah, lying on the floor as if in a deep sleep, seems to be hovering between life and death. She hears Hannan's voice—in the sounds of his clarinet—but his face is hidden. He enters and "whispers" that he remembers her, that he has thought of her day and night. But now he recalls that she left him: "My candle went out, and my soul was terrified," he says, but in Leah's voice. "Like a deserted widow I was led to the marriage canopy with a stranger," Leah responds, "and then you came back to me, and once again, lively death and mournful joy blossomed in my heart." Hannan's clarinet fades out but continues to be heard offstage. "Why did you leave me again?" she asks, then echoing herself.

2. ***AL MA V'LAMA***

Leah lights a candle and begins singing the "keynote" poetry of what was originally the "*mipnei ma?*" song, which Bialik rendered in the Hebrew as "*al ma v'lama?*"—"Oh why, and wherefore does the soul descend from the highest heights to the deepest depths? From the depths it will rise even higher." Instead of quoting the now-famous melody, Ben-Amots created his own, unrelated vocal line, which mirrors each phrase of the text as a kind of tone painting in its descending and ascending motives and contours. The overall vocal line is basically pentatonic and deliberately simple in its reflections of the "highs" and "lows" of the text, as a quasi-recitative of the question and answer.



3. *THE HOLY GRAVE*

Leah relates a story of the pogrom in 1848-49, during the Khmelnitsky Rebellion, when the Cossacks' mass murder of Jews included a young couple under the marriage canopy: "This is the grave of the holy and pure . . . murdered for the sanctification of God's name." And the custom is repeated, whereby people dance around that grave after a wedding "to bring joy to the bride and bridegroom who are buried here."

4. *SONG OF SONGS*

Leah recalls Hannan's affections for her, and the words he used to sing to her from the biblical Song of Songs: "And you loved me, too, Hannan," she reminds him. Hannan approaches her while playing his clarinet, and the two stand close together.

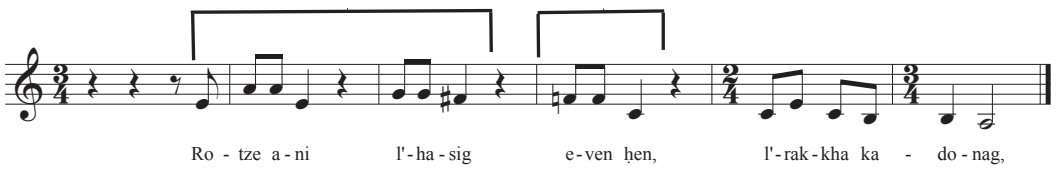
5. *THE BROKEN PLEDGE*

A mystical messenger arrives and recounts a tale of two men (Sender and Nisn ben Kreyna) who, to strengthen their friendship, pledged that when they became fathers, if a daughter was born to one and a son to the other, the two children would be betrothed. The subjects of that pledge were Leah and Hannan. But when Hannan's father died and Leah's father became very wealthy, the two having lived in different towns, Sender forgot about the pledge. "The son was given a great soul," the messenger explains, "and he rose higher and higher . . . And when he was grown, he decided to depart on a quest for his soulmate." He walked from town to town until he came back to the one where Sender lived, visited him, and dined at his table. There he found his "intended"—and his soul was drawn to her.

Sender, however, was a wealthy man, and Hannan was poor; Sender was seeking a son-in-law of wealth and family prominence. So Hannan was seized by despair and began a quest for new paths, immersing himself in Kabbala in the hope of finding answers in the "upper spheres"—looking for hidden meanings and illusions that might fulfill his boundless passion for his beloved Leah—until he "lost his way."

6. *HANNAN'S DEATH*

Through kabbalistic attempts at magic, Hannan hopes to "turn the order of the world around and change his fate." Leah notices his pale visage, his wet earlocks, and his overall weak state, and she asks him if he is unwell. She is aware that he has prayed with (dangerous) charms and incantations, and she asks why. "I want to obtain a precious stone," she sings to him, "melt it with my purest tears, and absorb it deep into my soul. I want to draw unto me (right now!) the overflowing splendor that emanates from the 'third hall' of the holy sphere of beauty." Her vocal line is built on one of the principal leitmotifs of the opera, with various iterations throughout—for example, much later in Leah's lullaby for the children who will never be born.



But Leah notices that Hannan lies still. She tries frantically to waken him, but he is lifeless as she cries "Wake up, wake up!" "The candle has gone out," pronounces the messenger, meaning that Hannan is dead. And he follows with the traditional declaration upon learning of one's death: "*Barukh dayan ha'emet*"—Worshiped be the one true Judge!

ACT II

7. *THE GLASS PARABLE*

The messenger relates a parable about glass—about the great Hassidic master Reb Azriel. Once, a wealthy Jew came to see him, and Reb Azriel recognized immediately that the man was a miser. Taking him by the hand, Reb Azriel led him to a window and asked what he saw when he looked through it. "People," replied the wealthy Jew. Then Reb Azriel stood him in front of a mirror and asked the same question. "Now," replied the wealthy Jew, "I see nothing but myself." Yes, returned Reb Azriel, they are both glass. But the "glass of the mirror is covered with silver. Whoever glances at it doesn't see people anymore—only himself."

8. *CONVERSATION and ARIA*

What happens to those who die before their time? Where does the soul go? Performers "speak" directly to the audience. What happens to one's thoughts and deeds that were predestined for him? "And the children meant to be born to him and never came into the world—" asks one. "Where do they go?"

Leah's aria follows, in which she posits that the soul of a man who dies before his time returns to the material world "naked without form or image, accepting his fate, carrying out his mission, accomplishing all of his deeds . . . Run the course of all his sorrows and complete his life on earth."

9. *HERE COMES THE BRIDEGROOM!*

Leah's father has found what he believes is an appropriate match for her, a son of a wealthy and respectable family. But Leah has never met the young man. As joyful wedding music is heard in the background, she protests at his arrival: "I do not wish to see his face." Speaking to the Holy Grave, she invites the murdered couple to attend the wedding: "Come and stand underneath the marriage canopy to protect me."

10. *NISHMOT HAMETIM* *(The Souls of the Dead)*

The messenger explains that the souls of the dead do indeed return to earth, but not as disembodied spirits. Sometimes they wander and transmigrate through several bodies until they are purified. And sometimes there is a misplaced soul that can find no rest, and it invades a body like a *dibek*: "And thus it finds its comfort and repair."

11. *UNDER THE MARRIAGE CANOPY*

Leah recalls that she was led down the aisle to a traditional wedding tune (which is heard from the instrumental ensemble in creative echoes)—the "*Niggun* of the Seven Circles." "And they led me to the canopy like a lonely widow, with a stranger." She arises from the floor and stands calmly while Hannan, on the clarinet, circles slowly around her. The circling turns into a special dance of mutual affection.

It is an old custom for the bride, when she reaches the canopy where her bridegroom is waiting to receive her, slowly to encircle him seven times before the rituals and liturgy of the ceremony are commenced. Leah recalls now that, just as she finished her seventh encirclement, she had let out a sudden, harrowing shriek.

In the An-ski play, this moment occurs earlier, before Leah proceeds to the marriage canopy, when the bridegroom attempts to veil her in a ritual known as *bedekens* (veiling), For dramatic effect, Ben-Amots moved this moment of shocking revelation to her arrival at the canopy and the circling procedure, and thus the *bedekens* ritual is bypassed. This brings Leah's sudden realization of her predicament and her shrieking rejection of her father's chosen husband—along with the first indication of her possession by Hannan's *dibek*—even closer to the actual marriage ceremony and its liturgy, yet before its formal commencement. Had the ceremony proceeded to its conclusion, Leah

would have been married to a "stranger." We should keep in mind that she had invited the murdered couple of the Holy Grave to be with her at that actual ceremony, and she had also begged Hannan to save her from this unwanted matrimony. As a pious young Hassidic woman, she has been waiting for a miracle, which indeed happens, but only at the very last moment. So in her piercing scream she still pleads with the murdered couple to protect her, as she proclaims to the "stranger"—in a deep voice representing Hannan's—"You are not my bridegroom. Murderer!" And then to Hannan: "And now you have come back to me, I have you inside me now," after which she walks away, exhausted, as if being carried off.

During a brief breather between Acts II and III, with the houselights remaining down, the youth choir assembles quietly onstage to sing the parable of "The Heart and the Fountain," "*Halev v'hama'ayan*":

There is a mountain at the end of the world,
With a large rock on the top,
And from the rock flows
A spring, clear and pure.

And at the other end of the world
Sits the Heart of the World,
And the heart gazes steadily,
From afar at the spring,
And craves, and desires and longs for it,
But cannot get any closer.

And the spring has no time of its own.
The Heart of the World gives it Time.
And when the evening falls, the spring
Begins singing to the Heart of the World.

And the Heart of the World also begins
Singing to the spring,
And their melody spreads all over the world.
And rays of light emanate from it,
And are drawn to every heart
Of every thing in the world.

And a man, loyal and merciful,
Wanders all over the world.
He collects the sparks from the light of the
Hearts and weaves them into Time.
And once he has woven a full day
He hands the day to the Heart of the World,
And the Heart gives it to the spring,
And the spring lives one more day . . .

ACT III — BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

12. ***INTERLUDE — The Heart and the Fountain***

This mystical poetic tale has described the mechanism that moves the world and keeps the universe alive.

After singing the parable, the youth choir quietly goes offstage while the action of ACT III begins without pause.

13. ***AT THE REBBE'S CHAMBER***

Reb Azriel of Miropol summons Leah to his chamber. At first she is afraid to enter, until he commands her. He orders the *dibek* in her to identify himself. "You know quite well who I am," Hannan's *dibek* replies through Leah's mouth, but he refuses to reveal his name. Upon Reb Azriel's repeated demands, the *dibek* says that he is "but a smoking firebrand":

> In my heart the fire is burning; and it
> dies spark by spark, and my hidden
> heart is smoking. Covered in powdery
> cinders and dried-up blood, my fountain
> is like an open wound, at times just
> bleeding and dripping and the sand
> is soaked with tears.

"Why did you enter this young woman's body?" Reb Azriel asks. "I am her mate," comes the *dibek*'s reply, "in and through her." When Reb Azriel admonishes that the dead are forbidden from living among the living, Hannan's *dibek* protests that he is not dead. But, insists Reb Azriel, he did depart to another world and so must stay there until the messianic era comes for the waking of the dead. He therefore orders the *dibek* to depart from Leah and return to his "eternal rest."

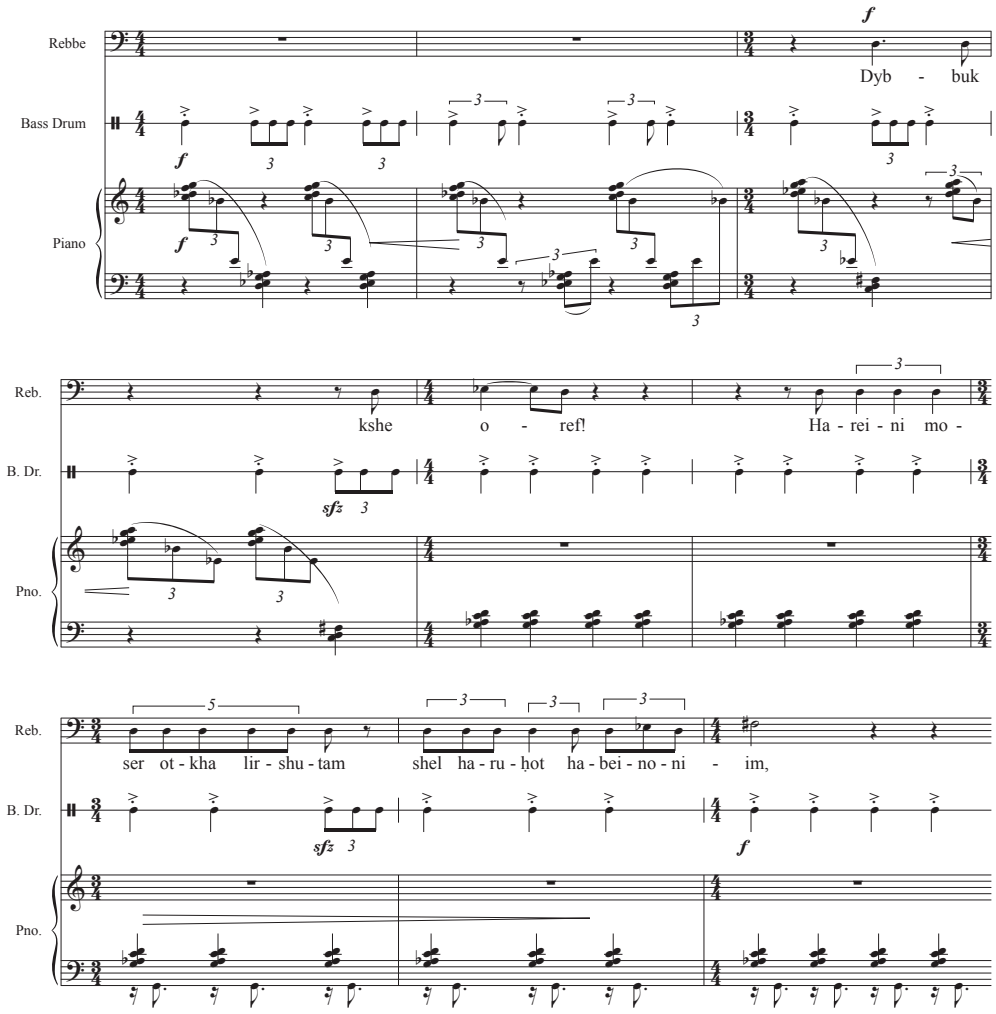
Acknowledging the *rebbe*'s usual power, Hannan's *dibek* admits that he knows that even the angels listen to the *rebbe* and obey his commands. "But *I* will not obey you . . ." Hannan responds. "I can find no other place of rest." Only the "horrible abyss" awaits him outside, "hosts of spirits and devils wait to surround and devour me. Therefore I will not leave. I cannot!"

Issuing a warning that if the *dibek* does not obey, Reb Azriel threatens to curse and punish Hannan in all sorts of ways, assuring him that if he does as ordered and vacates Leah, he will try to cure him and dispel all the demons and devils that surround him. Unafraid of Reb Azriel's threats and not confident in these promises of protection, Hannan's *dibek* still refuses, begging not to be expelled, since all other paths and places are closed to him. Even upon Reb Azriel's warning that he will have to banish him and deliver him to the forces of destruction, the *dibek* declares that he will never be separated from Leah.

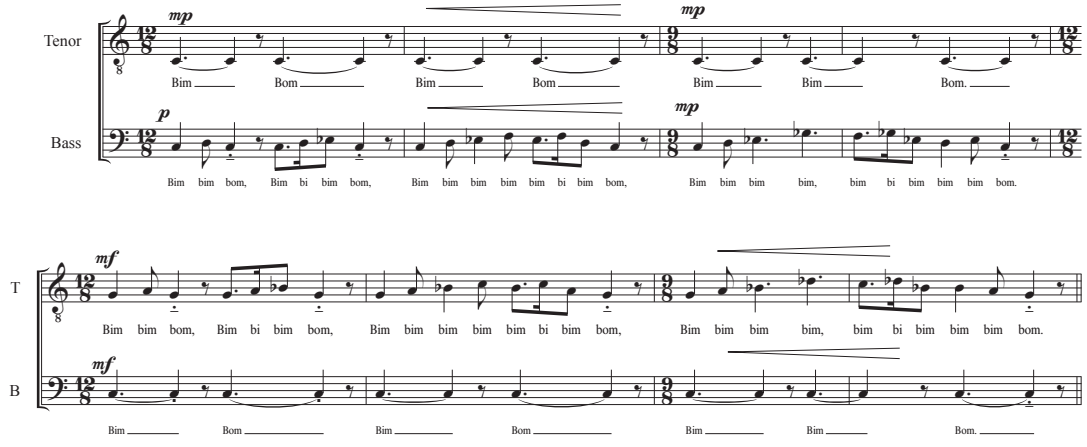
14. ***TOCCATA EXORCISTA***

In both musical and dramatic aspects this part of the opera is the climax. There are two musical elements key to the entire section: 1) the meter signatures throughout, and 2) the use of the clarinet to represent the shofar in the actual exorcism process.

The rhythm is 4/4, 4/4, 3/4, 3/4—which otherwise can be described as 8/4 + 6/4. Ben-Amots employed this scheme of two 3/4 measures to follow the more "regular" 4/4 measures in order to create a sense of "missing beats," which in turn brings a feeling of an intense driving force that establishes rhythmic tension. Five years before embarking upon this opera, he'd visited South Korea, where he joined a street folk theatre group. One of the rhythms they employed in one of their epic plays was the 4-4-3-3, which they called "shamanic rhythm." Ben-Amots notated it then, knowing that one day he would find a use for it in his own music. When seeking an appropriate framework for this famous *dibek* scene, it occurred to him that there is a "shamanic nature" to the exorcism process, and he decided to use this rhythmic scheme, which seemed to work quite well in its Jewish context.

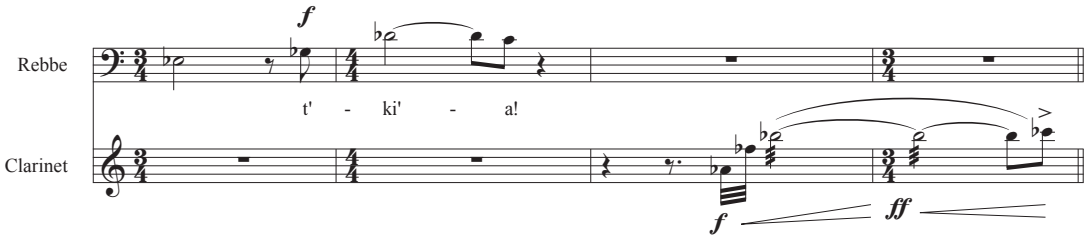


As a precursor to the exorcism scene, Ben-Amots had used the same rhythmic device in the choral section, "The Heart of the Mountain," just before the third act. It appears there, however, as 12/8 + 12/8 + 9/8 + 9/8, in a much slower tempo.

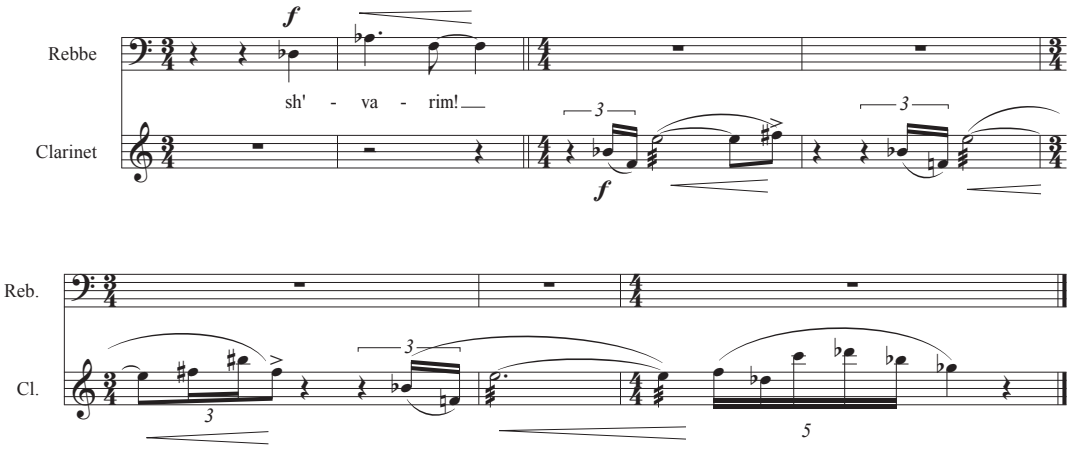


When it is clear that, despite the pleas and warnings, Hannan will not budge, Reb Azriel proceeds with the exorcism. Each of its three stages is tied to a concluding sounding of a shofar (represented creatively by the clarinet), each according to one of the established shofar "calls," comprising altogether seven articulations. This corresponds to the seven repetitions of the pronouncement that concludes Yom Kippur: *Adonai hu ha'elohim—Adonai* is [the only] God.

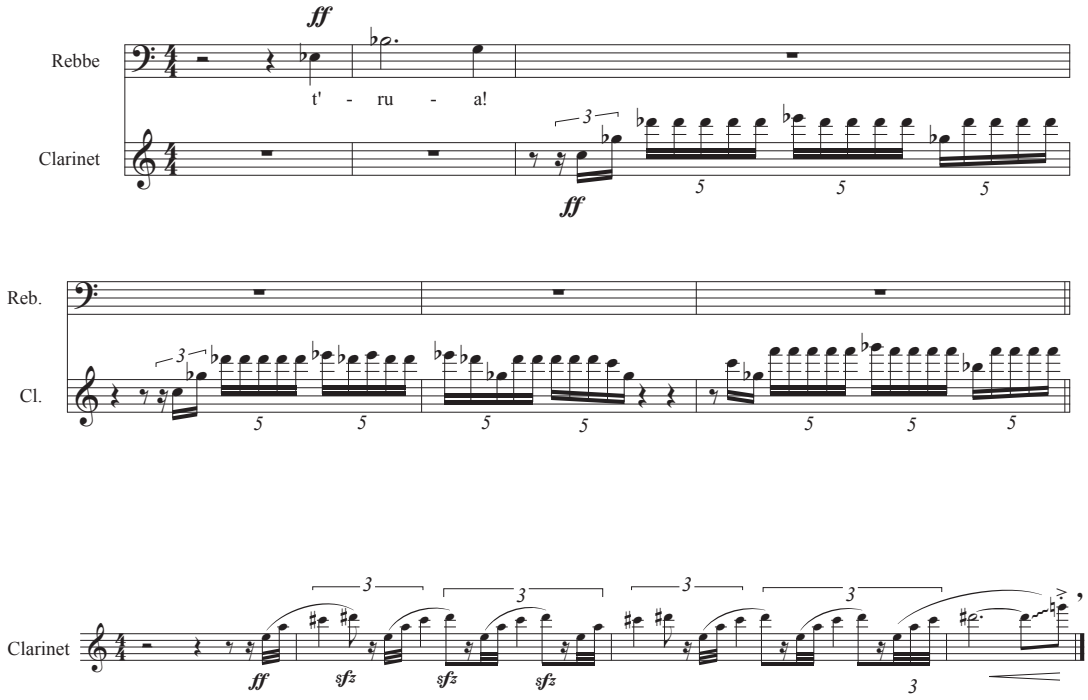
The traditional, expected motives and articulations of these shofar calls are not merely imitated, but freely and artistically developed, extended, and expanded for dramatic emphasis unique to the capabilities of the clarinet, and accompanied by clusters in the piano and pulsating percussion.



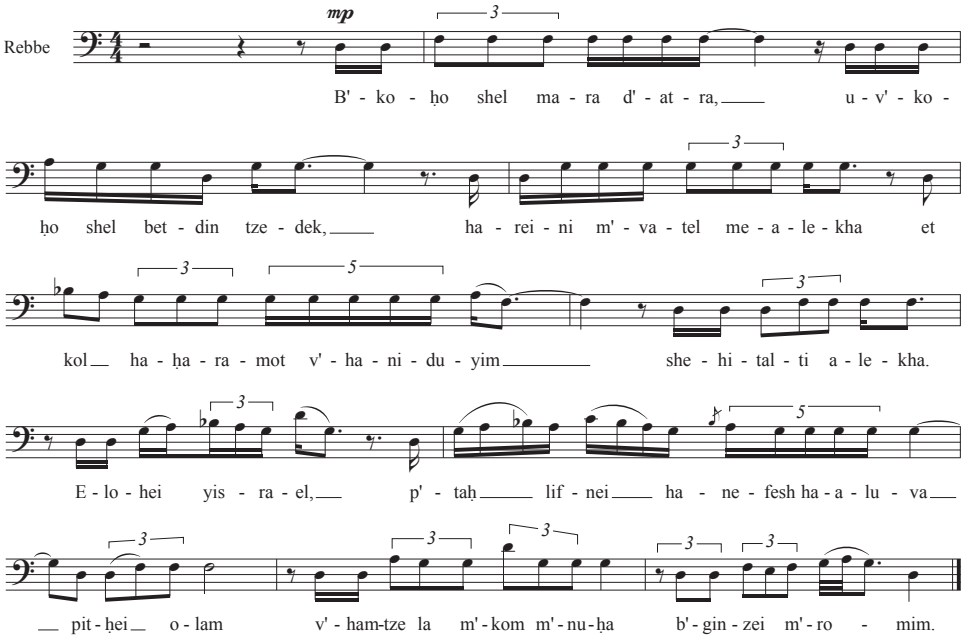
Since Hannan remains adamant, next to be invoked are the "Middle Spirits," which will drag him out—this time with cruelty—to the shofar call of *sh'varim*. R. Azriel, beginning with *dibek k'she oref*! (*dibek*, how stubborn you are), shows growing impatience and anger leading to the *sh'varim*, with ominous bass drum repetitions underneath in addition to the dissonant pianistic clusters. Simultaneously, we hear singing of the emblematic Hassidic wordless syllables.



Finally, concluding with the shofar call *t'ru'a*, comes the most severe and most frightening consequence of the exorcism: excommunication from the Jewish people. At that, Hannan reverses himself. He agrees to vacate Leah's body and soul, solemnly promising never to return. After his extended *t'ru'a* call, his virtuoso passage on the clarinet is particularly striking.



Thus, in keeping with his previous assurances, R. Azriel now annuls the forced expulsion and excommunication, asking God to find a place in heaven for Hannan's soul, which will bring an end to his wandering. His vocal line here is based on biblical (*haftara*) cantillation motives, sung over a drone.



R. Azriel instructs Leah to wait there while all go to welcome the bridegroom, who is on his way for the marriage ceremony.

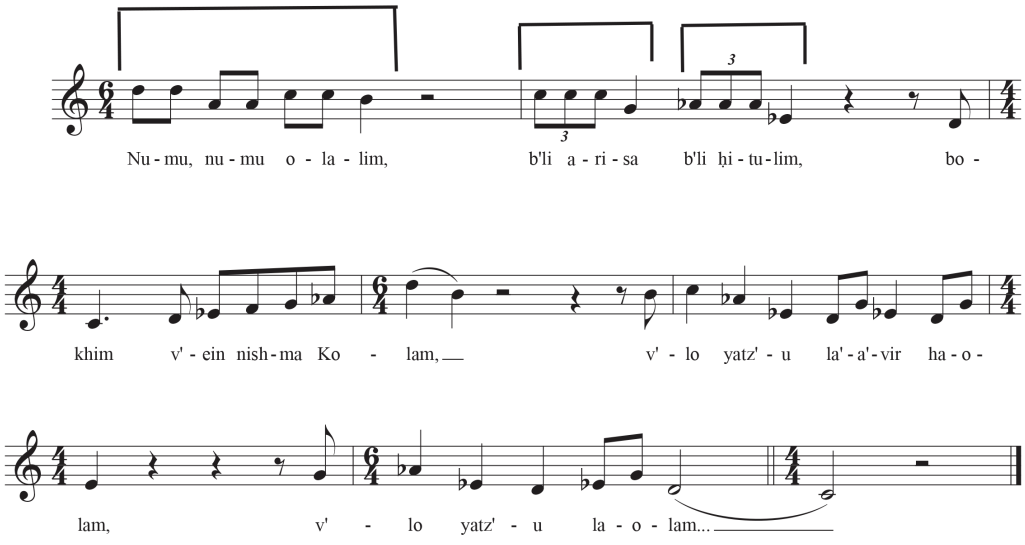
15. ***EPILOGUE CODA***

Lying on the floor as if deep in sleep, Leah appears to be hanging somewhere between life and death. She could come back to life and marry "the stranger," or she could leave and live with Hannan inside her if he abrogated his solemn promise to Reb Azriel (which, in the event, he cannot stop himself from doing). In the latter case, she would go to a place of eternal peace with her true love. She hears Hannan singing on his clarinet, but wonders from where it is coming. "Your sweet voice sounds like a weeping violin in the still night. Who are you?"

Hannan enters to ask if Leah was the one "revealed" to him. She recalls yet again how she was led to the marriage canopy to marry a stranger, but then Hannan came back to her, and "living death and mournful joy blossomed in my heart again." We must keep in mind all along that in a sense they are speaking with a single voice that is both Leah's and Hannan's *dibek* from within and through her.

Hannan exits, still playing his clarinet offstage, its sound fading out. "Why did you leave me again?" Leah calls after him. Because, Hannan replies—viz., as Leah now remembers him saying—he had broken all the barriers, passed through the valley of death, transgressed all the laws of nature, and defied universal decrees, and with his last bit of strength, he left her in order to come back to her once more.

"Therefore, come to me, my bridegroom, my husband; I will carry you lifeless inside me," Leah sings. "And in our dreams we will play with the children never born to us . . . They cry, but their voices can't be heard, because they never came out into the world." Her lullaby to their never-to-be-born children (and thus to countless succeeding generations in perpetuity)—*numu numu olalim*—an a cappella aria that marks a seminal moment in the opera—contains within it short, compacted fragments of some of the main leitmotifs of the entire work.



Hearing the sounds of wedding band musicians outside in her flashback, Leah emphasizes that Hannan must come to her straightaway, as the forced marriage to the stranger under the canopy is imminent. "Here I am, coming to you" is her recollection, now reenacted.

[Optional: Voices from outside, "Lead the bride to the canopy"]

16. ***I BROKE THROUGH ALL THESE BARRIERS***

Two arias sung by Leah describe the tragedy and the plight of their union—"I broke through all the barriers"—and Leah's lullaby, in which she repeats even more urgently her plea to Hannan to come to her before it is too late. "Here I am," is Hannan's response, "coming to you."

17. ***WE ARE SOARING AND CLIMBING***

The final duet confirms the profound, unbreakable bond between Leah and Hannan and their decision to stay together whatever the consequences—despite Hannan's promise to Reb Azriel, albeit made in good faith at the moment.

Meanwhile, during Leah's lullaby, the children of the youth choir have quietly begun a procession down the aisle(s) of the hall toward the stage, each carrying a lighted candle. They represent the children and their continuing generations, who will now never be born to Leah and Hannan, about whom she sings with intense emotion. The youth choir assembles unobtrusively onstage, still holding their candles and waiting to sing the final words of the opera. "I will cling to you forever," Leah continues as the children ascend the stage one by one or a few at a time. And she adds, together with the clarinet in its most poignant and heartrending yet ecstatic passages, "We are soaring higher and higher, the two of us, to the Upper Spheres—climbing higher and higher."

18. ***AL MA V'LAMA***

The youth choir reprises the eternal question that Leah posed at the beginning of the opera, now in a three-voice canon with Leah and with Hannan's clarinet:

Al ma v'lama
yoredet han'shama
mey'igara rama
1'veira amikta?

Why, oh why and wherefore
Does the soul descend
From the highest heights
To the deepest depths below?

From the depths it will rise higher.

CURTAIN

* * * * *

So much of the opera is a matter of Leah and Hannan both finding their voices. And whereas in the play Hannan's *dibek* and his voice speaks through Leah's mouth as a frightening and unmistakably male voice, Ben-Amots deliberately has both voices coming from Leah—with Hannan's voice exploring her lower register, further representing their union. With regard to voices, we can say without doubt that Ben-Amots exhibits in this opera—though not for the first time in his oeuvre—his own distinct voice as a composer. The vocal lines can come across as angular at times, with interesting chromatic cadences, but still within a pantonal framework—and crisscrossing moments of tonality seep through chromaticism with intervallic leaps both descending and ascending. All this

provides a gripping experience in an overall arch from beginning to end. The contrapuntal writing—Leah with Hannan on clarinet and the three-part canon at the end—intensifies both freshness and the ever-increasing soaring to new heights of ecstasy, combining the tragedy with the everlasting union of Leah's and Hannan's souls. We can only imagine that An-ski and Bialik would have delighted in this operatic interpretation of the play.