



KING AHAZ: THE FIRST YIDDISH OPERA

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

The research for this essay on so veiled and obscure a subject (also a self-contained chapter in my forthcoming book on “Jewish opera,” cosponsored in cooperation with the Jewish Music Foundation in Los Angeles) has depended to an uncommon degree on the kind, remotely provided aid of several colleagues and friends in England and Israel especially. This was all the more so the case inasmuch as the Coronavirus pandemic precluded continuation of my own on-site, in-person research—begun and conducted well before 2020—in archives, libraries, museums, administrative offices and personal collections that were closed to general access or to which safe travel was restricted, impractical and unwise. Dr. Michael Jolles in London, the foremost historian of the British cantorate and composers for the English Synagogue, and David Prager in Surrey (England), a devoted aficionado and collector of cantorial art, both shared unstintingly on my behalf much obscure information and detailed findings regarding Samuel Alman. Professor Vivi Lachs in London located, copied and forwarded certain rare English Yiddish periodicals for me from the British Library, which could be found nowhere else. Baruch Thaler fielded some questions about intricate halakhic and talmudic issues. Dr. Gila Flam, director, the Music Department and Sound Archives of the National Library of Israel, was extraordinarily gracious in locating the needed scores, libretto and correspondence at the NLI, having them digitized, and then forwarding them to me. And of course, the YIVO Archives, in which much valuable information was found, were indispensable for pursuit of this project from the outset.

London, Saturday evening, March 16, 1912, shortly after sunset on the city’s colorful, exotic to outsiders, and eventually fabled East End—home to England’s largest concentration of immigrant-era Yiddish-speaking Jews. Already representing more than one generation, all or most of them have roots in eastern or East Central Europe.¹ The Jewish Sabbath has just concluded. Many Judaically observant residents are now out and about in the bustling, pulsating Whitechapel district, where they join large crowds of less (if in some cases not at all) religiously inclined fellow Jews who have been congregating outdoors here for well over an hour.

For this is no ordinary or typical post-Sabbath (*motza’ei shabbat*) East End Saturday evening, and the jostling throngs are many times their usual number. There is an uncommon, distinctive buzz of raw excitement in the air. And there is a spirit of exuberant anticipation among the long queues that have formed around Commercial Road, on which now stands—on the site of what was the Teetotum Billiard Parlor—a brand-new imposing edifice in the fashionable, so-called Moorish revival style.² As the press will report on Monday, the [sidewalk] pavements and roads leading to this commanding structure—a unique, still virgin Yiddish theater and opera house—are “packed with a dense human mass” through which a path can be forced only “with the aid of a friendly policeman.”³ For a pair of unprecedented, momentous and intertwined events are about to occur in Whitechapel. One of these will be the world premiere of the first Yiddish opera ever written: *King Ahaz*⁴—the work of Samuel Alman, a still relatively obscure émigré composer from the Tsarist Empire who has been in London for less than a decade.⁵

Alman will go on to become recognized deservedly as England's foremost composer of cantorial and choral music for the Ashkenazi Synagogue, and some of his liturgical music will become standard repertoire internationally. But to the extent that he is known at all by the London Jewry of 1912—apart from some minor, tangential involvements in popular Yiddish theatrical entertainment on the East End to help with earning a living—it is as the choirmaster at the prestigious Great Synagogue, Dukes Place, a coveted position to which he was appointed four years earlier, in 1908.⁶

On this night, however, the premiere of *King Ahaz* is inextricably linked with the other long-awaited, auspicious milestone in Jewish cultural history, which is equally the object of the crowd's fascination: the opening night of the newly built, more-or-less completed 900-seat Feinman Yiddish People's Theater - Temple of Art on Commercial Road. It was envisioned and constructed with the aim of hosting and encouraging a higher, more sophisticated level of Yiddish musical-theatrical and operatic fare than much of that to which East Enders have been accustomed (apart from dramas and some touring operettas). This theater is the first of its kind anywhere in the world (and, as it will turn out, never to be duplicated in any other country). On its stage tonight, the premiere of *King Ahaz* will celebrate its inauguration.

The new theater has been named in memory of Sigmund Feinman, a beloved Yiddish dramatic actor of international fame and stature. Revered by East Enders, his sudden death in Łódź was a catalyst for the theater project as an appropriate memorial.⁷ Indeed, this is the destination of the assembled queues and surrounding crowds hoping to gain admission. Their animation and determination seem all the more heightened in anticipation of the announced elaborate dedication ceremony, over which the distinguished honorary president and chairman of the executive committee of the Zionist Federation of England (and High Sheriff of the counties of Kent and Sussex), Sir Francis Montefiore, will preside.⁸

Until now on the East End, with only one possible short-lived exception in the nineteenth century, presentation of homegrown popular Yiddish entertainment, touring operettas, and even high dramas required the rental of only moderately acceptable venues. And lowbrow diversions have had to rely on such makeshift facilities as pubs, wine gardens, beer halls, immigrant clubs, and even church halls. Feinman's has thus been promoted as the first Jewish-owned permanent venue for high- and middlebrow Yiddish productions, whether opera or legitimate theatre. And the Yiddish press has underscored that no *shund* (trash; trashy theatre or supposed "literature"), lowbrow entertainment typical of Purim plays, or cheap, tasteless comedy acts would be welcome there.⁹

Even if, through his role in the proceedings tonight, Sir Francis hopes to encourage and nourish Zionist awakenings and sensibilities on the East End, this double *simḥa* (joyous, festive occasion) is in no way a Zionist event per se—notwithstanding the generally positive if largely emotional receptivity to Zionism among much of the population (and, in smaller numbers, active involvement). For though Sir Francis is of what we might call the "Jewish aristocracy," he has always exhibited a friendly, paternalistic attitude toward the East End, and he has been a vocal supporter of the Feinman theater project all along—even laying the cornerstone at its groundbreaking ceremony.

Thus, for many, Sir Francis is possibly being perceived—albeit only wishfully—as personifying at least some new measure of Anglo-Jewish solidarity, wider communal pride, and even a sign that the older Jewish establishment in another part of London might be willing to acknowledge with approval this upscaled accomplishment.

But no such hope will become reality, given the establishment's disdain for anything Yiddish together with its entrenched, collective condescension toward the *Ostjuden* and their immigrant generations. This is a transplanted and adapted attitude of superiority, which, for many if not most of the Ashkenazim of the establishment, dates to their antecedents in Europe as German, German-speaking, and/or culturally German Jews. It is a posture now compounded by adopted, assimilated English sensibilities and fueled by nescience of the multilayered, diverse society of eastern European Jewry, tethered to ignorance of Yiddish culture, literature, and the legitimacy and sophistication of the language itself—which German Jews commonly dismiss with contempt as "the jargon." Indeed, fifty-three years from this moment, a journalist in tonight's audience will recall that the "wealthy and Anglicized in the community were unsympathetic simply because they despised Yiddish."¹⁰

Unfairly or partly not, the simplistically perceived (and for the most part typically misunderstood and exaggerated) backwardness, even uncouthness, of the eastern European immigrants and their progeny on the East End could, the establishment fears, jeopardize its hard-won respectability as “Englishmen of the Jewish faith” (or “race”). They recoil not only from the Yiddish language, but from what they see as the manners, dress, behavior, habits, etiquette(s), humor, entertainments and other unacculturated aspects of East End Jewish life. These come across as embarrassing, incompatible with their cherished desiderata and image of upper- and upper-middle class English dignity. Thus *The Star* will assume next week that Sir Francis was probably “the only patron from west of Temple Bar” (March 18, 1912).

It is only fair to keep in mind, however, that neither from its outset nor in its transplantation and perpetuation in lands of immigration where the two groups coexist, has this internal depreciation—not infrequently descending to mockery—been unidirectional; and on balance there is probably a fairly equal degree of culpability on both sides. (Nor is this intracommunal dynamic by any means exclusive to British Jewry.)

Moreover, like its counterparts elsewhere, the East End is hardly homogenous. Whatever crudeness there may be is not immune from internal castigation by other, more elevated elements here. So it is telling that only two days earlier, the management of Feinman’s placed a (presumably paid) announcement in the *Jewish Journal* urging appropriate behavior by tonight’s opera audience, warning attendees not to shout or whistle and cautioning them, among other things, not to bring food to eat during the performance . . . in other words, not to behave like typical audiences for popular Yiddish theatre, but more like those at Covent Garden. “Please do not forget that the Yiddish People’s Theatre is a temple,” it reminded, “and make sure that an atmosphere of holiness prevails.” (Never mind that what we consider proper opera or concert behavior today—sitting still and quiet while focusing on the music and in consideration of others—is a relatively recent expectation.)

For Feinman’s has been trumpeted as a true *Volkstheater* for the elevation and nurture of East End culture—a vehicle for the encouragement of an artistically heightened level of fare for the Yiddish stage. It is even being dubbed “the East End’s answer to [the Royal Opera House at] Covent Garden.” So the courageous, and even radical, prototypical headwater innovation of a four-act Yiddish opera speaks to the spirit of the new theater’s mission. *King Ahaz* is after all no common, lowbrow piece of musical-theatrical entertainment, nor a *Singspiel*, nor even a worthy operetta in the generic mold of Avrom Goldfaden’s artistic creations. And since it has been publicized as an opera, it must not be confused with the primitive, pompous Yiddish extravaganzas that have been falsely and promiscuously labeled “opera” by their composers—particularly in New York going back to the late nineteenth century, in some cases even using interchangeably the German *Oper*, whether out of ignorance or to mislead.¹¹

Rather, *King Ahaz* is what the English would call a “proper” opera in every way. So it fits with what Sir Francis has proclaimed publicly: his hope that this Temple of Art will be “an instrument for strengthening the religious and racial feelings of the local Jewish population.”

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IN RETROSPECT

The question of who initially had the idea in principle of a Yiddish opera is difficult to answer definitively. For further soldering (and complicating) the connection between *King Ahaz* and the Feinman theater’s opening night was yet another factor: the vision of Alexander Kennard, chairman of the Feinman Theatre Company beginning with its legal registration in 1910. A successful local businessman apparently known to be a serious music enthusiast, Kennard is said (if a bit too idealistically as well as impractically) to have viewed the new theater first and foremost as an East End opera house. At least until 1912, he and his supporters on the board managed to prevail over an opposing faction that saw its primary purpose and *raison d’être* as a venue for cultivated Yiddish theatre. So, as has been posited in some accounts, it might have been Kennard who approached Alman with the proposition of a Yiddish opera to be composed expressly for the Feinman opening.¹²

If so, it would have been an opportunity that Alman would have seized, even before thinking about a subject. And in that scenario, Kennard would likely have known about Alman's credentials, including his studies at the Guildhall School of Music shortly after his arrival in London and his award of an ARCM (Associate of the Royal College of Music) in 1910. On the other hand, it is just as possible that Kennard had heard that Alman was already working on a Yiddish opera and, not caring about the subject, that he offered a guaranteed premiere if it were completed in time for the cast to learn its roles, a chorus to be prepared, rehearsals to be held, staging to be devised, sets and costumes to be designed and created, and all other elements of production to be put in place. (A piano-vocal score bears a completion date of 1911, possibly before the orchestration was finished.)

Which of these two scenarios best coincides with the actual course of events is not clear from the sources presently available; in any case, we know of no other composer in England at that time whom Kennard could have approached with confidence in both his musical gifts and an adequate command of Yiddish. Either way, it seems that the offer would have been tantamount to a de facto commission. Without access to Alman's extant correspondence, however, which might provide at least some clues, it has yet to be learned whether Alman received any remuneration.¹³

From the research possible as of this writing, we cannot know just what might have attracted Alman to the subject of his opera, for which he wrote his own libretto. His surviving papers and memorabilia, such as correspondence as well as the premiere's souvenir program booklet (called a "brochure" in England), might reveal something of his rationale, if access could be had.¹⁴ For now we must be content with speculating reasonably that he may simply have wanted some biblical connection that would have resonated, albeit only vaguely, as such with his targeted audience, but nothing too obvious or shopworn—and perhaps by design a subject linked to a little-known biblical account that, at least insofar as he and his public were aware, had not been addressed previously in any opera.

The biblical Ahaz appears in II Kings and II Chronicles as a king of Judea in the eighth century BCE, during the final collapse of the Northern Kingdom (Israel), its conquest by Assyria, and the related military exploits and alliances. Ahaz is traditionally designated as one of the villainous kings who "did evil in the eyes of *adonai*" ("the Lord") or, in some renderings, "who did not that which was right in the eyes of *adonai* his God" (II Kings 16:2).¹⁵

We can imagine reasonably that the mere mention of Ahaz's name would have resonated among East Enders to some minimal extent as biblical, although probably at most as an indistinct, faint association with idolatry and pagan cult worship somewhere along the way in Jewish antiquity—perhaps also with Jewish monarchial malevolence—but not much more. Rare would have been even those with respectable Jewish education then (as would be the case today) who, without benefit of additional exposure to advanced, religiously neutral Bible scholarship on a university level, would have known anything concrete about Ahaz or those biblical accounts and their modern interpretations and explications. Traditional Jewish education, even intensive yeshiva experience, has never dwelt to any serious degree, if at all, on those later books of the Hebrew Bible.¹⁶

The prospect of experiencing a Yiddish opera, no matter the subject, may have been a sufficient attraction for many on the East End. But, ironically, those who might have expected an actual, straightforward and exclusively biblical opera might have been confused as well as disappointed, at least at first, upon learning of Alman's basis (which may have been explained in the surviving but "hidden" program booklet to which access remains blocked). The opera's title alone can be misleading. Alman did not draw his libretto directly from the *tanakh*, but rather from a complex, in many ways cryptic, and metaphorical Hebrew novel by Avraham Mapu: *Ashmat shomron* (*The Guilt of Samaria*). In that sprawling epic novel Ahaz is given an expanded fictional role only loosely based on the biblical references. Moreover, many other characters were fabricated out of whole cloth by Mapu, several of which also took on important roles in the opera.

Mapu (1808–1867) was a major figure of the Russian Empire phase of the Haskala (Jewish Enlightenment) movement and is considered its first significant modern Hebrew novelist. *Ashmat shomron*, published in two parts (1865 and 1866),

addresses the evil of ancient Jewish attraction and reversion to idolatry and other aspects of paganism, with numerous complicated plot twists and confusing subplots intermingled with challenges to deciphering and interpretation. It incorporates, as do other works by Mapu, various traditional biblical allusions, sources and references (some of them obscure except to modern Bible scholars) interwoven with elements of European literary genres and influences.

Strictly speaking, *King Ahaz* is not so much a biblically based opera per se, if at all, but in some ways a cleverly concealed Haskala expression. At the same time and on another level, it is probably possible to appreciate both the opera and the novel for their idealistic albeit ahistorical depictions of Jewish antiquity in its own land (Judea), in which presumed Judaic values and moral norms are celebrated and permitted to triumph in the end. Although the epilogue to the novel leaves us uncertain about its overall message (if in fact it has a single overriding message), the work as a whole suggests a contrast to what Mapu saw as an embittered and, in the long run, hopeless view of Jewish life and its future in exile in Imperial Russia and, by extension, throughout eastern Europe—a sentiment for which he was known. It was a conviction with which Alman would appear to have identified, inasmuch as he always claimed that the 1903 Kishinev pogrom was the ultimate deciding factor for his emigration—despite his relatively comfortable life in the Tsarist Empire until then.

It is also possible that the novel's setting in the biblical Land of Israel (*eretz yisra'el*) was an additional consideration. Alman's attraction to Zionism dates to his early years in London and most likely earlier. And he would soon become known among London Jewry for that leaning, which is reflected in much of his secular music and in various interviews. So he might have been drawn to *Ashmat shomron* not only intellectually, as a then-regarded classic of Haskala fiction and literary virtuosity, but as much for its idyllic geographical and topological depictions of the ancient, biblical Land of Israel in the context of former Jewish sovereignty—which, it was hoped, would one day apply again. And Alman could have assumed that these scenes would appeal to many among the East End audiences.

To appreciate the unadorned, skeletal biblical context in which both the novel and the opera are grounded, and to have an idea of what Alman extracted and what he created *de novo* for operatic purposes, it is worth reviewing those biblical accounts of Ahaz, his reign, and the surrounding historical period. These contain departure points upon which Mapu and then Alman seized.

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THE BIBLICAL AHAZ

As corroborated by most modern historical findings (albeit with some variations), the Ahaz of II Kings and II Chronicles reigns as the eleventh king of Judea—from 743 until 727 BCE. He is said to have engaged in, promoted and encouraged—and, in addition, according to traditional biblical commentary, even required—adherence to idolatry and other pagan cult worship. In the continuum of rabbinic explication, that regressive program extended *ipso facto* to the most hideous of all heathen abominations: human sacrifice, including burnt offerings of children—in this case to the pagan god Moloch.

Even if his involvement with paganism may have been a flirtation, stopping short of human sacrifice, in the context of the interrelated realms of domestic affairs and regional “foreign policy,” we are told that Ahaz’s evil resided in his refusal to join the anti-Assyrian alliance of the League of Aramean States in favor of an alliance with Assyria, his purported depletion of the Temple treasury, his conversion of some of its sacred vessels for tributes to Assyria as Judea’s quasi-vassal status, and his compromising the Temple’s sanctity and purity.

Modern and postmodern biblical scholarship, however, supported by archaeological revelations, has yielded a variety of critical theories, reasoned suppositions, new explanations and interpretations concerning motivations behind Ahaz’s behavior, strategies and policies. These include the suggested possibility that his pursuit of certain military-political alliances and refusal of others—for which, traditionally, he has been castigated—might have been partly in

the name of realpolitik vis-à-vis national objectives. Moreover, some relatively recent scholarly revision has brought to the table the question of whether some biblical references to Ahaz vis-à-vis paganism should be understood unambiguously as implying *actual* child sacrifice (for example, “made his son to pass through the fire,” II Kings 16:3), or perhaps some symbolic but physically harmless purification ritual.¹⁷

In any case, traditional Judaic commentary is supported by disinterested scholarship in seeing in II Kings a general condemnation of what became known as the “Samaritan form of worship,” viz., reignited paganism—suggesting that by the time II Kings was composed, there had already arisen an antagonism between the Jews (Judeans) and the Samaritans, which subsequently grew in intensity. Eventually *Shomron* (Samaria) became the ultimate symbol of pagan-heathen cultic practice. Hence, the title of Mapu’s novel.

The New Testament, in John 4:9, also disparages the population of Samaria, with the observation that “the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.” Only when Jesus of Nazareth told the story of the “good samaritan” did the term become a byword for Christian charity—in place of “Samaritan” signifying religious and moral abuse as well as abhorrence (Luke 10:30 ff.).

According to II Kings, Ahaz was buried in *ir david* (the City of David, viz., Jerusalem). In the Talmud (Pes. 56a), his son Hezekiah, who succeeds him as a “righteous king,” is commended for limiting his father’s funeral to that of a pauper, in atonement for his behavior. Strange as it may seem (for some almost tantamount to unrequested forgiveness, unwarranted benefit of doubt, or a cover-up altogether), and despite his repugnant reign, the rabbis allowed Ahaz credit as both the son and the father of righteous kings, as well as for having accepted Uzziah’s reproof. In that rabbinic interpretation, this even allowed Ahaz a place in “the world to come” (Sanhedrin 104a).

ASHMAT SHOMRON

Ashmat shomron can come across as deliberately cryptic, filled with compound layers of meaning, symbolism, confusing details, and cloaked metaphors, applicable to situations as well as characters—sometimes as if densely packed into a single sentence. The often puzzling internal plot twists, subplot complexities, possibly coded references and symbols, and perhaps now dated allusions all tend to bewilder those who attempt to tackle the work today, finding it an overwhelming challenge. For others it can appear to be a period piece, not having stood the test of time.

For one thing, as inexplicable as it may seem for a *maskil* as otherwise a proponent of the Haskala’s promotion of modern Hebrew, Mapu wrote this novel in a curious mélange of archaic biblical, immediately postbiblical and early post-talmudic Hebrew—even including some Aramaic. Resounding with interplay among language registers, it bulges with antiquated grammatical constructions, intertextual resonances and cadences, ancient vocabulary, outdated idioms and linguistic techniques, all of which may have lost their significance for the twenty-first-century reader. Some literary critics have explained Mapu’s reversion to the language of ancient Israel as a linguistic innovation whose purpose was to demonstrate its appropriateness not only for liturgical poetry of more recent vintage, but equally for prose fiction. In turn, that pursuit has also been seen as a strategy for encouraging Zionist-oriented, *aliya*-committed and Palestine-bound eastern European Jews to relinquish Yiddish in favor of the Hebrew with which they were familiar—but in whose modern guise they might not yet have become conversant.

For another thing, Mapu assumed his readers’ prior basic knowledge not only of the tenth-century BCE post-Solomon split into two polities—Judea, with Jerusalem as its capital, and the Northern Kingdom, Israel, with Samaria as its capital. And apparently he took for granted his readers’ awareness of several related factors: the Northern Kingdom’s lapse into the paganism of what is said to be the Moloch cult; the various complicated and shifting alliances and federations; invasions; tribal animosities; the Syro-Ephraimite War; and the symbolism of the *Shomron* district vis-à-vis “guilt,” which is deeply ingrained in Jewish, Zionist and Israeli narrative scripts that have taken on differing shapes and hues with the unfolding of time.

THE NOVEL AND THE LIBRETTO

Comparing the novel with the opera, it quickly becomes clear that Alman only very loosely, even superficially, drew on elements of *Ashmat shomron* in creating the basic story line of his libretto. Much of what unfolds as the opera progresses is contained in the novel's opening chapters, almost as a kind of flashback or backstory—but with numerous details, coincidences, ancestries and intertwined relationships as well as characters that Alman bypassed and are irrelevant to the libretto. By the time frame of those opening chapters of the novel, “the people” (viz., the “Hebrews” in the overall region) had already turned en masse to idolatry and pagan cult worship as the prevailing religious practice (“strayed from God’s ways,” in Mapu’s description), including child sacrifice to the pagan god Moloch. But apart from allusions to Moloch, there is no real emphasis on that pagan god—as there is in the opera, cleverly exploited for operatic effect.

At the same time, Mapu assures us that there are those who have remained faithful to *adonai*, as the exclusive and only true God, and to His mandates. Going further than what we read or what is suggested in II Kings or in modern academic commentary, Mapu portrays an openly autocratic, dictatorial Ahaz who requires Moloch worship by all Judeans as the “law of the land”—including its tortuous, murderous forms. Most come to obey, whether with feigned or genuine enthusiasm, so long as he remains king. Those who refuse—parents, for example, who would shield their children from legally ordered sacrifice—become subjects of a moral-ethical jurisprudential inversion. In that scenario, the designated victims—of what by any modern civilized standard would be considered state-imposed but morally unacceptable, abominable crime against humanity—become themselves the lawbreakers without respect for the so-called rule of law.

Whereas Alman emphasized and even exaggerated the element of unalloyed, sustained romantic marital love and devotion, giving it a thematic centrality that would have appealed to a modern-era audience, for Mapu, that love story—revealing a degree of modern European literary influence—is only one (and not overriding) component within the larger framework of shrewd machinations, infidelities, crafty stratagems, betrayals and, most important, embrace of falsity. All these are connected one way or another to the abandonment of the Sinaitic Covenant and its basis for moral and ethical norms. This might be read as a literary framing device for what became known as the “Samaritan guilt,” with all its ramifications and connotations. Indeed, *Ashmat shomron* has been interpreted as a condemnation of *all* falseness and a call for truth’s ultimate victory.

In the novel’s opening chapters, the Judaically faithful, fearing the consequences of violating the law by refusing the required pagan rituals, have taken refuge in “the wilds of Lebanon.” Only much later in the story line does that situation enter the opera.

A number of characters (but by no means all) are derived from their appearance—or in some cases only passing mention—in the biblical accounts. Many of these are marginal for Mapu, while others are significant, even if only because of the association of their names with particular actions, behaviors, incidents and roles played in the geopolitical strategies of statecraft. In some cases Mapu breathes life into these names, fleshing them out as fictional albeit plausible three-dimensional personalities. They are given ranges of human emotions, desires, flaws, interpersonal dynamics, and worthy as well as opportunistic motivations—multilayered character development Alman found it unnecessary to retain.

At the same time—with or without rickety biblical pegs—the novel abounds (as does the libretto, though in simplistic and sometimes amateurish ways) in mythical, figmental, chimerical, preposterous and other unrealistic situations and turns of events. These can be difficult to distinguish from the author’s intended concurrent, intersecting planes of fictional reality. Lest such coexisting but seemingly conflicting planes come across as irreconcilable, however, we

might find a bit of comfort in Lionel Trilling's observation that in all novels one must disentangle "the mythical from the actual"—a difficult task, "for in the mythical there is usually, of course, a little of what is true."

On the other hand, several of Mapu's principal characters who do not appear at all in the biblical accounts were assigned major roles by Alman. These are inventions of Mapu's literary imagination, portrayed to varying degrees as larger than life, so that Alman found them ripe for operatic treatment. Transcending the time period of both the novel and the opera, some are invested with timeless, perhaps even universal personal struggles and dilemmas. Mapu went further to furnish some with complicated ancestries and lineages, earlier phases of their lives, family relationships, ambivalences and tangential situations, all of which Alman wisely considered to be beyond what was relevant or applicable to his appropriately streamlined libretto.

Prominent among such fictional characters is Uziel, a wealthy, quasi-aristocratic and Judaically faithful Judean who resists enforcement of prevailing cult rituals and flees to Lebanon—who has been read as a symbolic, translucent Haskala embodiment; his beloved wife, Miriam, who, in Mapu's (bypassed in Alman's) version, inherited wealth from her prematurely deceased mother and, before her eventual union with Uziel, at least twice dodged attempts at arranged marriages for the sake of political-military alliances; their baby son Elifelet; and Yehoshuva, the wife (or widow?) of the Judean viceroy Elkanan—who, rejected by Uziel upon her advances for a love affair, seeks vengeance.

Alman exercised artistic license in creating some additional roles of his own—in some cases based at most on passing reference in the novel. Chief among these is the lead baritone role, Naftali, presented as Miriam and Uziel's longtime loyal Jewish servant, who saves Elifelet from burnt sacrifice at his own peril. In the novel there is only brief mention of an unnamed loyal servant. Could Alman have created the role for a particular singer?

For the premiere of *King Ahaz*, Naftali was sung by the most widely recognized celebrity in the cast, Joseph Winogradoff, who also directed the production. An operatic baritone with an international reputation, Winogradoff was a star at the Imperial Opera Society in Russia who had acquired a following in London when the company toured there. It seems that Kennard approached him from the outset of the Feinman theater project to invite his participation.¹⁸

Kennard is reported to have written to Winogradoff in German, whereupon Vilna-born Winogradoff replied in Yiddish that he would accept the invitation to sing and direct and that he would like all future correspondence to be in Yiddish.¹⁹

Could Alman have had Winogradoff in mind when he developed the lead baritone role? If Winogradoff requested, or even demanded, a major role as a condition for participating, and if Alman acceded with arias geared expressly to his voice—perhaps even creating the role of Naftali for him—it would hardly have been the first time in operatic history that a composer so accommodated a particular singer.

Alternatively, it is also possible that once Alman knew he would have the benefit of Winogradoff in the cast, he decided on his own, wisely, to take advantage of the artistic opportunity. That too would in no way have been unprecedented. But without access to Alman's correspondence, we cannot know if either scenario (or neither) might have applied.²⁰ In any case, Alman obviously intuited operatic possibilities in the role of Naftali.

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THE OPERA

KING AHAZ — An Opera In Four Acts And Nine Scenes²¹

AHAZ, King of Judea [bass or bass-baritone]
HEZEKIAH, his son and successor
UZIEL, a wealthy “citizen” [tenor]
MIRIAM, his wife – soprano
ELIFELET, their son [tenor]
NAFTALI, their servant – baritone
ELKANAN, the Viceroy
YEHOSHUVA, his wife – contralto / mezzo-soprano
ZIKHRI, leader of the “Sons of Efraim”
Choruses of Judeans, *Kohanim* (priests) and Levites
Orchestra: fl., ob., cl. in B-flat, bn.,
hn. in F, tbn. in B-flat,
timp., drums, strings

SYNOPSIS

The Time: 8th century BCE

The Place: Jerusalem and Lebanon

Uziel and Miriam have refused to worship false gods, despite Ahaz’s demand for all Judeans to do so. They are denounced by Yehoshuva, out of revenge for having been rejected by Uziel when she made overtures for an extramarital love affair. Uziel is sentenced to death, and Miriam is ordered to sacrifice their baby son Elifelet to the pagan god Moloch. Uziel flees, and the child is saved by Naftali, who, undetected, substitutes a doll for the sacrifice. After fifteen or sixteen years, Ahaz dies. Under the reign of his son and successor Hezekiah, the exclusive worship of *adonai*—the only true God—and the rule of Judaic mandates are restored. Uziel is found in Lebanon by a search party and brought back to Jerusalem, where he is reunited with Miriam. Yehoshuva is forgiven. In the finale, Uziel, his family, and all Jerusalemites are blest by the *kohanim*.

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THE ACTION

ACT I

Preceded by an orchestral overture, the curtain rises on a terrace outside the royal palace in Jerusalem, Judea’s capital, against a backdrop showing the city, Ahaz, and the local populace. A statue of the pagan god Moloch is onstage.

A chorus of “the people” greets King Ahaz and sings praises to him and to their new pagan gods. The people proclaim joyously that the “ancient God” (viz., *adonai* of the Torah) has ceased to exist and that their new gods will answer their prayers favorably. Ahaz thanks them for their loyalty and announces that Moloch urgently demands a child sacrifice.

Yehoshuva enters to ask for a volunteer to surrender his child. Naftali enters publicly to accuse Ahaz of evil. He is declared therefore a law violator, and the crowd demands his child. Since he has none, Yehoshuva—still smarting from and infuriated by Uziel’s rejection of her—proclaims that *he* (Uziel) is an eligible traitor, with a child for sacrifice. Because of him, she warns, the Efraimites no longer come to Jerusalem to join their pagan worship. Ahaz decrees not only that Uziel’s child shall be sacrificed, but that Miriam shall hold the knife; and Uziel is sentenced to execution. Yehoshuva then gleefully exhorts the people to search for and produce Uziel and his child.

With the scene changed to Uziel and Miriam's garden, Naftali tells them of Ahaz's orders as a result of Yehoshuva's denunciation. Urging Uziel to flee, he assures him of the true God's protection. In a well-crafted trio, which reveals Alman's contrapuntal skills, Naftali, Uziel and Miriam pray that they will soon be reunited. In a poignant farewell, Miriam and Uziel express their passionate love for each other, and Naftali assures them that he will find a way to save their child.

ACT II

Alone in Uzriel and Miriam's vacated garden, apparently off to the side, Yehoshuva sings what might be called her signature aria. She calls forth vengeance upon Uziel and muses that her love has now become hatred so vicious that she will delight in the ritual slaying of his baby son.

Upon her exit, Miriam enters with Naftali, who explains his scheme. He will organize the substitution of a doll he has carved, which resembles the baby Elifelet, and no one will be the wiser. By now Uziel has fled to Lebanon, as it will only later be revealed.

The scene changes to a street in Jerusalem at sundown, where a crowd has gathered together with Ahaz to bemoan the delay in finding Uziel and his child. Moloch's yearning for the sacrifice, they emphasize, is growing to wrath at being made to wait. With typical mob frenzy, the crowd decides on stoning as the most appropriately tortuous means of executing Uziel; and Ahaz promises to cast the first stone. In an extended choral number, they envision Moloch weeping and yearning impatiently for the sacrifice.

Miriam is brought forward forcibly and ordered to turn over Elifelet and to reveal Uziel's whereabouts. She pretends to relinquish Elifelet, knowing that she is giving up the look-alike doll, but she insists that Uziel is now safe in one of the (biblical) cities of refuge.²²

As the sacrificial ritual proceeds with mass dancing, Yehoshuva accepts that Uziel has avoided one of the consequences of her deadly spite. But she is satisfied with the "sweet vengeance" she is reaping with the "sacrifice of his fruit." Ahaz assures the mob that the sacrifice has guaranteed all of them forgiveness for their sins.

ACT III

Alone in Miriam and Uziel's garden, Naftali sings the opera's most substantial baritone aria, in which he imagines how good life had been for the Israelites in the days of King Solomon's reign over a united Jewish polity. He conjures up a utopian past in which "truth, justice, peace and righteousness prevailed and wickedness and falseness were unknown." Presumably referring to Yehoshuva, he assumes that in Solomon's time, jealousy would not have been permitted to threaten any family's "peaceful homelife"—citing as a remedy a biblically based treatment (which, however, is not applicable vis-à-vis Yehoshuva's jealousy; Alman might well not have understood this arcane, antiquated provision).²³

While this sung soliloquy does not further the action (hardly uncommon in the operatic canon), it is a splendid vehicle for expression of vocal richness and range of sonorities—exploiting the full baritone register in soaring lines whose words confirm Naftali's Judaic commitment.

In what may or may not be intended as a flashback (the libretto is not clear), the scene changes to the land of Efraim, where a crowd celebrates the military victory over Judea and the conquest of Jerusalem in Judea's war with the Northern Kingdom (Israel). The people sing praises to Zichri (Zacharai), their military leader. The people credit him in particular for the killing of Ahaz's eldest son Matisyahu, who would have succeeded Ahaz; Ahaz's administrator Azrikim; and the Judean viceroy, Elkanan. Zichri urges his warriors to fight on for what he calls final and complete victory over Solomon's armies. In a rousing chorus, the assemblage disparages Solomon, his Temple, and even Moses for having given them only one God, whereas they now have three. And they mock the Israelites' former compliance

with the mandate for pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem. “We have much finer temples in Efraim,” they sing, delighting in the fact that Jereboam ben Naboth has freed them from “Zion’s yoke.”

In the final scene of ACT III, it is early morning in Miriam and Uziel’s garden, about fifteen or sixteen years since Uziel’s flight. Ahaz is no more. His eldest son has been killed by Zichri, so that the next in line—the just ruler Hezekiah—is now king of Judea. The long national nightmare of tyranny and paganism is over. Monotheistic worship of *adonai*, the sanctity of the Temple and its proper rituals have been restored. Miriam, however, knows none of this yet as reality, only that it has all appeared to her in a dream. In a poignant, passionate aria she asks if what she has dreamt is “a sign from above” that it is true, or only her own fantasy. She pours out her heart in undiminished love for Uziel: “My husband, my dear Uziel, who has suffered so much in exile for so long, returns to me. I see his face, his smile; I seem to feel his breath. My heart is singing.”

Naftali and Elifelet enter to tell her that what she has dreamt has actually come to pass. She asks Naftali to go north immediately to find Uziel and bring him home, and she allows Elifelet to go with him. In a parting trio that concludes ACT III, they pray with hope and confidence in the Almighty—quoting from the Book of Lamentations a verse that would have been familiar to synagogue worshippers in 1912 but could not have been known in the eighth century BCE, long before Lamentations was composed: *hashivenu adonai elekha, hadesh yameinu k’kedem* (Turn us back to You, *adonai*, and we will return; renew our days as in former times).²⁴

ACT IV

Somewhere in a forest in Lebanon at twilight, Uziel muses on his life without Miriam for the past fifteen years, and on how in other ways as well a whole part of life has bypassed him. He is of course unaware of Naftali’s ruse with the doll and thus does not know that Elifelet is alive; and he is unaware of the recent turn of events in Judea. His solitude is mediated only by friendly animals in the forest, “more to be trusted than men.” Ruminating on his undiluted love for Miriam as a prelude to his stirring aria—“O still alone I stand . . .”—he calls for just retribution for the murder of his child, whom he has seen and heard calling to him in his dreams.

Meanwhile, Naftali and Elifelet arrive in the vicinity. Elifelet has no hope that his father is alive, but Naftali is certain that he has survived. When they hear his voice without seeing him, they assume that it is the voice of a wanted dangerous criminal of whom they have heard (nicknamed “the lion cub” by Mapu) and they prepare to kill him. But they recognize Uziel in time. Overjoyed to learn that Miriam is well and “lovely as ever,” Uziel joins in an ecstatic reunion as all three embark on their homeward journey with gratitude to God.

Having returned to Jerusalem, the three men are joined at the Temple gates by Miriam, Yehoshuva and King Hezekiah—in the presence of a gathering of the *kohanim*, Levites and a large representation of the populace as they all proclaim the words of Psalm 118: *pitkhu li sha’arei tzedek ovo va odem ya* (Open for me the gates of righteousness that I may enter and give thanks to God). A sincerely remorseful Yehoshuva acknowledges publicly that she has sinned gravely against God. She asks forgiveness from Him and from all assembled, including Miriam, who, if implausibly, asks that God hear Yehoshuva’s prayer and confession. Hezekiah assures everyone that all, including Yehoshuva, have been forgiven their transgressions under Ahaz’s reign.

Hezekiah proposes that Uziel not only protect Yehoshuva but that he take her as a permitted second, concurrent wife—to whom, he urges, Miriam should relate as a sister.²⁵ Both Uziel and Miriam agree, strange as that may seem to modern sensibilities. In return, and rejecting the offered reward, Uziel asks only that he may hear the *birkat kohanim* (priestly blessings) and the Levitical Temple choir, which he has painfully missed hearing all those years. The finale is thus a resounding chorus, with the priestly blessing punctuated as well as overlapped by repeated prayers and expressions of gratitude by all the principals, who ask God to help all keep the teachings of His Torah and to grant peace and gladness. The curtain lowers as all onstage acknowledge fervently that *adonai* in His oneness is the only true God in and of the universe.

* * * * *

For the most part, *King Ahaz* could be characterized musically as conservative, yet not lacking in artistic originality and imagination. It broke no new ground in terms of the genre—neither dramatically, vocally, nor orchestrally. Indeed, Alman made a point of observing many of the usual established operatic conventions: arias; richly accompanied recitatives, some of which employ contrapuntally two, three or more voices; duets, trios and other “set number” ensembles; orchestral interludes; and choruses—all of which flow into and out of one another seamlessly, sometimes overlapping without final cadences.

Alman demonstrated transparently his familiarity with the operatic canon of his day, whether Italian, French, German, Russian, or other traditions, and even with some Wagnerian influences in vocal lines as well as orchestral textures. In some respects *King Ahaz* is an amalgam of these. More than one aria, for example, reflects the dramatic impact of Verdi. The elaborate choruses and choral scenes, some of them accompanied by dance, recall the lavish indulgences in vogue at the Paris opera in the mid-nineteenth century and beyond—the more so in the extravagant, obviously costly staging (including the sets, lighting, costumes, and other production components), of which photographs have been preserved. In terms of later influences, some orchestral passages offer hints of the composer’s attraction to Debussy.

Nonetheless, Alman’s ingenuity shines through in his mastery of melodic invention—a gift that would subsequently become one of the signature attributes of his liturgical settings. And in some arias he shows himself adept at spinning out the long vocal line, exploiting the full range of the applicable register within a carefully conceived arch. As busy as the orchestral writing can be at times, it is never allowed to eclipse those vocal lines.

* * * * *

Although there was nothing radically innovative, progressively experimental or modernistic about *King Ahaz* from purely musical or theatrical vantage points (notwithstanding some mildly adventurous harmonic language in certain sections), it was indisputably a watershed, “first ever” gambit, even a courageous alpha, on another, extramusical plane altogether in operatic history. It merits that distinction not only by virtue of its Yiddish language, but—and perhaps of wider, less parochial significance—because of its fundamentally Judaic perspectives and sensibilities that had never previously informed an opera of biblical connection.²⁶ And of course its incorporation of Hebrew liturgy was entirely unprecedented, as were quotations in Hebrew of passages from the *tanakh* in confirmation of Judaism’s theological, moral and ethical norms and traditions.

Still, for those reasonably familiar with the later books of the *tanakh*—especially with their corresponding historical evidence and up-to-date research—the promiscuously manipulated, spuriously dramatized biblical situations, together with the fictitiously, superficially bloated regional-historical backdrops against which the libretto was conceived, require what is known in the opera world as “willing suspension of disbelief.” Nonetheless, inasmuch as the libretto was minimally anchored in the *tanakh*, Alman refracted those moorings—as tenuous and fragile as they are—through a manifestly Jewish prism.

* * * * *

Altogether, no fewer than twenty-one reviews in the Yiddish, Anglo-Jewish and general press combined appeared in during the week following the premiere. Reviewers or critics for Jewish periodicals being assigned to cover the event was automatic. But, at that time, it was remarkable that the general press (even outside London) had an interest in so narrowly parochial an occasion, even though it held the lure of the exotic.

Before commenting on the opera, some of the reviewers reported on the majesty of the theater's dedication, which included, in addition to Sir Francis's remarks, the reading of telegrams of congratulations and support from such iconic personalities of the Jewish theatre and literary worlds as Sholem Asch and Israel Zangwill—along with an effusive one from Feinman's widow, who was unwell in Baltimore. Telegrams were received in Russian, German, Yiddish, English and French.²⁷

When it came to the opera itself, for the most part the reviews were favorable if not laudable—although more than one emphasized (with good reason) the weakness of the libretto while praising the music. The writer for the *Daily Mail*, for example, opined that Alman had “proved himself an abler musician than a dramatist.” What he called the “Robinson Crusoe-like life of the persecuted here [presumably Lebanon]” offered what he thought was “scope for dramatic treatment,” but he felt that the opera developed as “a series of detached episodes rather than as a drama.” Nonetheless, the same reviewer allowed that a Jewish audience would be “enthralled by the representation of scenes from their national history”—a reaction on which Alman probably had counted. In that case, he went on, the “dramatic shortcoming and diffuseness of the libretto” could be overlooked as negligible faults. *The Jewish World* agreed about the structural weakness of the libretto and the episodic nature of the opera overall—whose central theme it adjudged “not sufficiently strong for emotional interest”—while still acknowledging the power of many scenes. And it took note of the “highly colored scenery and costumes,” which “realistically” represented what it called the “bizarre and somewhat savagely barbarian Orient.”

Moreover, some non-Jewish reviewers from the general press were understandably fascinated by the colorful aura, where things seemed to them as if from another world altogether—so foreign to typical English social conventions, ways, manners and mores. They didn't know quite what to make of an opera audience the likes of which they could hardly have imagined: “Russian Jews, Polish Jews, Jews from Germany and Austria [so it was assumed], men and women babbling in a dozen varieties of Yiddish,” wrote the correspondent for the Manchester periodical the *Daily Sketch*. “It is probably the first time in the history of the world that the occupants of the stalls at grand opera wore cloth caps [clearly referring to yarmulkes, or kippot—in England called ‘kepels’] and drank beer,” which appeared to be the East Enders’ counterpart to the champagne at Covent Garden.

And yet the scene was evaluated from other perspectives as well. “People do not know London who do not know the East End,” stated the review in *News of the World*. And the review in *The Standard* proclaimed that *King Ahaz* had made it “apparent that Yiddish is an excellent operatic medium in that it is both vocal and declamatory.” *The Jewish Chronicle* quoted an unidentified contemporary source who, perhaps in exaggerated enthusiasm of the moment, was said to have gone so far as to remark that “*King Ahaz* shows a grasp of operatic ways and means possessed, it is feared, by few, if any, English composers . . . only can Mr Alman write melodies of an extended sensuous character—there is one in the overture that is quite as good as anything Massenet has given us . . .” More down-to-earth was the (unfulfilled) prediction in *The Star*: “Until Saturday he [Alman] was unknown; now it would not be surprising if he ultimately made a considerable reputation for himself beyond the limits of the community to which he belongs, for his opera *King Ahaz* is a work of remarkable ability.” Of course that overly optimistic prediction went unfulfilled; the enviable reputation that Alman came eventually to enjoy did not extend beyond the boundaries of Jewish musical and synagogue circles.

Referring to the period and locales of the opera, more than one reviewer (including a critic for *The Pall Mall Gazette*) innocently cited Thomas Paine's 1793 *The Age of Reason*, in which he describes the five centuries prior to 588 BCE in the experience of the Israelites in the biblical Near East as “little more than a history of assassinations, treachery and wars.” Some might have thought it a bit odd for such patently English periodicals even to acknowledge the most extreme, radical intellectual associated with England's loss of its American colonies (and a promoter of regicide as well). But apart from that, those reviewers must have been unaware of Paine's avowed, specific loathing of Christianity, which went well beyond what his apologists typically claim was simply his condemnation of *all* established religion per se. Moreover, his fervid, unmitigated anti-Jewish stance is undisguised in his writings.²⁸

One thing no reviewer appears to have noticed, not even those from Jewish periodicals, was the inconsistency of the Yiddish in its various regional dialects. This was probably due not only to singers who spoke or knew differing dialects (and perhaps to faulty coaching), but also to the confusing, careless text underlay in the score. Moreover, there are numerous interspersed instances in the score of what is known as *Daytshmerish*—basically a nineteenth-century Germanized Yiddish in which German is superimposed artificially onto certain Yiddish words, phrases, expressions or idioms out of a misguided notion that the affectation would raise the level of Yiddish to a more “high class,” “highfalutin” rendition. The fad pertained especially, though not exclusively, to dramas. So, for example, the Yiddish *keyver* (grave), derived from the Hebrew, becomes the Germanic *rue plats*. And some words or expressions in the text underlay are German altogether.

In the event, despite the euphoria and optimism that surrounded the opening of Feinman’s and the *King Ahaz* production, both were destined soon to be only an intertwined, fast-fading memory. By the end of the twentieth century, only a tiny handful of Jews in England knew even vaguely, or had heard, that Alman was the composer of the first Yiddish opera, but they knew nothing much more about it.

Financial woes (including inadequate capitalization, debt obligations that weren’t or couldn’t be met, unpaid pledges, and general mismanagement), competition from another new theater company, and a tailors’ strike, among other factors, all apparently contributed to the demise of Feinman’s in a matter of months, and eventually the parent company declared bankruptcy. When the building was sold, it became the Palaseum cinema house, which, after closing briefly to become another, similar cinema venue, reopened as the Palaseum in the 1970s and then closed “for good” in 1985. By then crumbling and dilapidated, the structure was demolished two years later.²⁹

The *King Ahaz* production outlasted Feinman’s, but only by about a year or a year and a half. According to announcements in *The Jewish Chronicle*, it received at least four performances in full during April and May 1912 at Feinman’s and then another (just before the theater closed) in June, albeit only abridged and paired with the third act of *Rigoletto*. Quite a number of performances followed at one or more other venues, including one at the Pavilion Theatre in April 1913. In an article published in *The Jewish Chronicle* in March 1957, one H. C. Stevens claimed that *King Ahaz* had been performed some forty times during the year or so following the premiere, although that number seems inflated.³⁰

Meanwhile, rounding out the spring 1912 “opera season” on the East End were also some favorites among the standard repertoire in Yiddish translations or versions—whether single acts or scenes or entire works, in any case a testament to a lingering hunger there for opera in Yiddish. In addition to *Rigoletto* (in Alman’s translation), there were stagings of *Cavalleria Rusticana* and, curiously enough, Anton Rubinstein’s *The Maccabees* (originally in German), whose patently Christian message obviously escaped everyone. The latter opera is not about the legendary “Hanukkah story” as understood by Jews and Judaism, as the uninformed might easily but mistakenly assume from the title. To the contrary, it portrays the successful Maccabean revolt against the Greco-Syrians as paving the way for the Second Coming of the Christian Savior and the eventual arrival of the messianic era in Christian terms. Nevertheless, we can imagine that East End audiences—for the most part unaware of the meaning of Christianity’s theological doctrines and teachings and therefore oblivious to the libretto’s subtext and, especially, the significance of the opera’s conclusion—could naively have related to or enjoyed *The Maccabees* as no less a “Jewish opera” than *King Ahaz*.

THE HISTORIAN James Loeffler (*The Most Musical Nation*) tells us that in 1913 the Gesellschaft für jüdische Volksmusik (Society for Jewish Folk Music) in St. Petersburg—then the principal (and the original) institutional arm of the New Jewish National School in music—announced a 3,000-ruble prize for “the best Jewish opera” and that Alman

wrote to them boasting of the success of *King Ahaz*, saying that he might consider permitting the society to publish it. Jascha Nemtsov, however, who has published extensively on the New Jewish National School and its composers, for which he has scoured the relevant archives in the former Soviet Union, has found no evidence whatsoever of any communication between Alman and the Gesellschaft. So it would appear that, although not documented, Loeffler may have made additional, subsequent discoveries from more recent archival research. In any case, his and Nemtsov's accounts of the whole episode differ markedly in other ways as well.³¹ But common to both is that *King Ahaz* was never published.

Insofar as we know, Alman never wrote another opera. (If, among his surviving papers, there is any evidence of unfulfilled plans or ideas for another opera, such as sketches or mention in correspondence, obviously we cannot know this without unfettered access to the *entirety* of these papers. This would include, especially, those items that apparently were withheld from the transfer to the Jewish Music Institute without its knowledge and are likely still in the “secret” possession of a private individual.)³²

After the run of the *King Ahaz* production, with no serious interest emerging on the part of any producer or sponsoring organization, it seems that Alman put the episode behind him and redirected his primary focus to liturgical composition and to a post he held from 1916 as choirmaster of the Hampstead Synagogue—where he remained until his death, in 1947. In addition, he directed the community-wide Halevi Choral Society, a roughly fifty-voice concert chorus with a mixed repertoire of secular Hebrew and Yiddish pieces as well as liturgical settings. And in the secular realm he devoted his gifts to instrumental chamber music, Hebrew and Yiddish lieder and some choral pieces.

IN 1976, another of Alman's nieces, Gertrude Hardie, approached the Guildhall School of Music in London to suggest mounting a revival of *King Ahaz*. According to her, that idea was rejected. In the view of the school, the opera “did not provide any virtuosity opportunities” and “participation in a virtually unknown opera” would not benefit students “in their careers.”

That same year, in advance of a conference on Yiddish culture planned in Jerusalem, she attempted to interest the conference organizers in a revival in Israel—to no avail. And in that same time frame she also wrote with the proposition to the Tel Aviv Opera, the director of the Ceasarea Festival, and Kol Yisra'el radio broadcasting company. None of those approaches bore fruit, and we have no records of any replies.³³ It would seem that Mrs. Hardie was unaware of the famously negative, condescending, even scornful general attitude in Israel toward Yiddish—a mindset that still prevailed in the mid-1970s (though it would later soften). An academic conference on Yiddish culture was one thing, involving a relatively small number of participants, probably for the most part from abroad. A Yiddish opera (or play, oratorio, or any such presentation) geared to the Israeli public was quite another matter; it would most likely have been shunned, if not openly protested.

For all its success in London, the two-season run of the *King Ahaz* production was what the English (in particular) call a one-off. Not only was it not fated to have a second run or a revival in a new production, it was dislocated from any operatic continuum. It did not ignite any composer's interest in pursuing original opera in Yiddish, so that Alman cannot be credited with having launched any development. With one possible but unlikely exception, which has still to be investigated more fully, those who wrote the few subsequent Yiddish operas over the ensuing century had never heard of *King Ahaz*. Nor did they know who Alman was, or anything about him.

We can point with certainty only to four Yiddish operas that (thus far) followed Alman's: Moses Milner's *Di himlen brenen*, written in Russia and premiered there in 1923; Henoch Kon's *Dovid un bas sheva*, composed and premiered in

interwar Poland in 1924; David Schiff's *Gimpel the Fool*, composed in the 1970s in New York and premiered there in 1979 at the 92nd Street Y [YMHA]; and Ofer Ben-Amots's *Gan eydn far a nar* (Fool's Paradise), written between 1986 and 1993 mostly in Colorado and premiered in Vienna in the year of its completion—but only in a required German translation as *Ein Narrenparadies*. It has yet to be performed in its original Yiddish.

The fact that each of these composers was motivated on his own to write a Yiddish opera, independently of Alman's achievement as an example, in no way diminishes the importance of *King Ahaz*—not only from the standpoint of its place in Jewish cultural and general operatic history, but also in terms of its musical quality. While preserving some of the basic, even universal principles and convictions expressed in the story line, the libretto could still be a justified candidate for overhaul as part of a reconstruction project with a view toward revival. Such reworking might even go beyond simply smoothing out obvious weaknesses to include—though not necessarily—a transfer of time, place and specific events, providing more realistic or at least more plausible resonance while at the same time preserving the opera's artistic integrity.

ENDNOTES

1 The East End, which comprises such districts or neighborhoods as Whitechapel, Stepney, Spitalfields and Mile End, is generally defined as the area within the boundaries of the London borough of Tower Hamlets—although some maintain that it is even wider, extending to Hackney, Shoreditch, Hoxton, and even parts of Newham. The “East End” designation dates to the mid-nineteenth century. It denoted the gradual expansion and fusion of earlier, individual hamlets that, centuries earlier, had emerged on the outer edge of the eastern boundary of the City of London and were now collectively considered one area. This was the first point of settlement for Jewish immigrants from the mid-seventeenth century on. At its peak, around 1920, the “Jewish East End” is believed to have had more than 100,000 inhabitants and businesses, by most estimates. By 1945 that number had dwindled to around 50,000, and to 25,000 by the last few years of the 1940s. Tony Kushner, “Doing the East End Walk, Oy,” in Colin Holmes and Anne J. Kershen, eds., *An East End Legacy: Essays in Memory of William J. Fishman* (London and NY, 2018). See also Alan Gilbey, *East End Backpassages* (London, 2012), in which the East End Jewish population as of 1880 is given as 46,000 and by 1900, 135,000—but by 1970 roughly only 13,000.

Based on the various but reliably estimated figures and time frames, we can determine the Yiddish-speaking East End immigrant or other Jewish population in 1912 at roughly 135,000 or more, including not only residents but also Jewish-owned businesses and numerous synagogues of various stripes. By the close of the nineteenth century, an increasing number of eastern European Jewish immigrants were arriving monthly, so that the East End was nicknamed by some as “Little Jerusalem.” (See Harry Lewis and George Arkell, *The Jew in London* [London, 1901].) By 1912 the East End had become so colorful that a columnist for *News of the World* observed, “People do not know London who do not know the East End.” David Mazower, “Whitechapel’s Yiddish Opera House: The Rise and Fall of the Feinman Yiddish People’s Theatre,” in Holmes and Kershen, op. cit.

Analogy are frequently drawn between the East End and New York’s Lower East Side (sometimes called the “Delancey Street area” after its main thoroughfare), inasmuch as the latter, too, was once home to a large, tightly packed concentration of eastern European Jewish immigrant generations—together with kosher (and not quite kosher) restaurants and food outlets, Jewish booksellers and publishers, pushcarts, synagogues, etc. But the comparison only goes so far. Unlike the East End, the Lower East Side is more or less a single area contained within relatively narrow boundaries. And the Yiddish theatre venues of the bygone era flourished in a separate although adjacent area then known as Lower Second Avenue (sometimes, especially early on, together with the Bowery area). Only since the 1960s has it come to be called the East Village.

2 Photographs of Feinman's show two minarets flanking a central dome above the entrance, with smaller domes at the corners, all reminding one at first glance of a vintage mosque. Oddly enough, that pseudo-Moorish revival style (in some views, garish) had been adopted in the latter half of the nineteenth century for a number of new, grand synagogues in Germany. With reference to synagogue architecture, that attraction among certain circles of middle- and upper-middle-class nineteenth-century German Jewry has been interpreted by some as an echo of the Jewish experience in Moslem Spain—the purported if oversimplified so-called Golden Age of Spanish [Iberian] Jewry, even if it was not always so golden. In that sense, so goes that line of reasoning, the fashion could have been a statement of Jewish sociological status in Germany. Perhaps that style was chosen for Feinman's to suggest the standout prestige befitting a Temple of Art, in obvious contrast to the typically humble East End structures of the day.

3 *The Standard*, March 18, 1912, "Opera in Yiddish: Remarkable Enterprise in East London."

4 Around the beginning of the 1920s, Moses Milner, one of the seminal composers of the New Jewish National School and one of the original members of the Gesellschaft für jüdische Volksmusik in St. Petersburg (Society for Jewish Folk Music), began writing a Yiddish opera, *Di himlen brenen* (The Heavens Are Ablaze). He wrote his own libretto, for which he drew on elements of Jewish (or Russian Jewish) folklore, largely around the characters Asmodeus and Lilith. The opera was premiered in Petrograd in 1923 but banned after only a few performances on grounds of Jewish nationalism and violations of revolutionary ideals. James Loeffler (*The Most Musical Nation: Jews and Culture in the Late Russian Empire*; New Haven and London, 2010), however, mistakenly refers to it as "purportedly the first full-length Yiddish-language opera" and cites as his source an article/Russian book chapter by Galina Kopytova, Archivist and Head of Official Manuscripts at the Russian Institute of Art History: "M. A. Milner's *Di himlen Brenen*" (2001). I am grateful to Ma'ila Kaumeheiwa for her meticulous translation of the Russian.

Nowhere in that essay does Kopytova limit the opera or her reference to the Russian sphere, simply identifying it as "the first Jewish opera in terms of plot, language, and music," so that she clearly meant "anywhere." Of course she was completely wrong—and on all three counts to boot. Unless or until any evidence emerges to the contrary, Alman's *King Ahaz* was without question the first Yiddish opera.

5 Alman's birth year is generally accepted as 1877, although there has always been some question. Such confusion was not unusual in that era—whether due to mistakes by immigration clerks, birth dates that had already been "adjusted" in the "old country" for one reason or another, or birth dates remembered (if at all) according to either the Hebrew calendar or—in Russia until after the Bolshevik coup—the old Julian calendar, neither of which, of course, coincides with the Gregorian calendar.

For example, throughout his London years Alman always gave his birth year as 1877. The 1911 census, however, listed his age then as thirty-three, which would suggest a birth year of 1878. P.c., Dr. Michael Jolles, December 16, 2020, although he questions the reliability of an official British document in which "cigarette" is spelt "sigarat"! See also in his *Encyclopaedia of British Jewish Cantors, Chazanim, Ministers and Synagogue Musicians: Their History and Culture* (London, 2021).

The year of Alman's immigration to England also remains uncertain. Given years range between 1904 and 1906. The latter was maintained by the journalist H. C. Stevens (*The Jewish Chronicle*, March 15, 1957). Jolles, however, is convinced that the correct year is 1904 (p.c., *ibid.*).

In interviews throughout his London years, Alman always gave his birthplace as Sobolevka, which he identified simply as "a village near Odessa"—viz., in the Odessa *oblast* (region, or district). No such town or village, however, is found on any pre-World War I maps available in England or the United States; nor does it appear

in the authoritative *Columbia Lippincott Gazetteer of the World*. The nearest town or village of similar name in the Odessa *oblast* now is called Sobolivka—about one hundred miles north northwest of the city of Odessa, about seventy miles north-northeast of Kishinev, about seventy miles north of Tiraspol, and about five miles south of Podilsk in the Ukraine—south of Balta in the Odessa *oblast*. Further confusing the matter is the fact that Alman's 1912 British naturalization documents record that he was born in “Sobolovka in the province of Podolsk.” Podolsk, however, is a city near Moscow, whereas Sobolivka is in the southern part of what was the historic region of Podolia, now in the Ukraine. Podolia and Podolsk are not geographically related (p.c. Michael Jolles, December 24, 2020). It is possible that the clerk or whoever notated the naturalization papers was confused by the similarity of sound between the two—a not uncommon type of mistake in that time frame. In any case, Alman's birthplace came to be accepted as the village that is *now* Sobolivka in the Ukrainian language.

- 6 The Ashkenazi community in London was formalized as the Great Synagogue, Duke's Place with its inauguration in 1690. It was rebuilt in 1722, enlarged in 1790, and destroyed on May 11, 1941, by German bombers during one of the raids on civilian London during the Battle of Britain (the Blitz). It was never rebuilt; there is only a commemorative plaque at the site. See in Cecil Roth, *The Great Synagogue London 1690–1940* (London, 1950). During Alman's tenure there, from 1908 until 1916—when he became choirmaster and organist at the Hampstead Synagogue (a post he held until his death in 1947)—and until its destruction by the Germans, the Great Synagogue, Duke's Place was considered the most exalted, prestigious Ashkenazi house of worship in London; and for a long time it was the preferred synagogue of many among the culturally Anglicized Jewish establishment. Apparently Alman was also the organist there, *viz.*, as at the Hampstead Synagogue, for weddings and other weekday celebrations when instrumental music is permitted in orthodox synagogues. Prior to his appointment at Duke's Place he served as choirmaster at the Dalston Synagogue (a.k.a. Poets Road Synagogue).
- 7 Born in Bessarabia (then part of the Tsarist Empire), Sigmund [Osher-Zelig] Feinman made his name as a dramatic Yiddish actor not only in Europe but in America as well, where he became a citizen in 1896. His wife, Dina, was an accomplished actress in her own right and bore the sobriquet “the Yiddish Sarah Bernhardt.” (She was married previously to the Yiddish theatre luminary Jacob Adler; their daughter Celia, whom Feinman adopted, also became a major star of the Yiddish theatre.) Sigmund and Dina returned to London in 1906 for a first full season of performances, having already appeared there earlier to great acclaim. They were planning a six-month season in London when, in 1909, Sigmund died suddenly while in Łódź with Dina.
Feinman's repertoire at the Pavilion Theater on the East End included not only original Yiddish plays but also Yiddish translations of such classics as Shakespeare (*Othello* and *Merchant of Venice*) and works by Gorky and Strindberg. He was also a playwright, authoring about twenty plays. Upon news of his death, there was an outpouring of public tributes on the East End. A local tobacconist and amateur cantor who had performed with Feinman at the Pavilion proposed the new theater project in his memory, and in a matter of weeks the Feinman Yiddish Theatre Society was formed. Mazower, *op. cit.* See also in Zalmen Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater* (NY, Warsaw and Mexico City, 1931–1969), and Bernard Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater: Tsvey toyznt yor teater bay yidn* (NY, 1918).
- 8 For Anglo-Jewry in general, significant cachet was attached (and still is) to the Montefiore family name, which resonated with pride from its primary association with Sir Francis's more famous great uncle, Sir Moses Montefiore (1784–1885). Sir Moses served for nearly forty years as president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, championed the cause of Jews' political rights, and, in 1837, became Sheriff of London and was knighted—the first Jew since 1700 to be given that honor. He was even proposed for a life peerage, although in the event Prime Minister Gladstone stood in the way. Although naïvely, East Enders of 1912 might thus have imagined Sir Francis's endorsement of the new theater and the opera as a sign of the Jewish establishment's recognition, if

only in small measure. That was, of course, not the case. And it is doubtful that more than a tiny handful (if that) of committed opera aficionados among establishment circles would have attended anything in Yiddish, even if only out of operatic curiosity.

- 9 As a backdrop to the innovation of Alman's opera, Mazower, op. cit., offers a rich summary description of the East End and its entertainment life during the immigrant era.
- 10 A. B. Levi, "King Ahaz and the Apaches," *The Jewish Chronicle*, June 4, 1965.
- 11 For example, one Yakov Ter (1850–1935) labeled his 1899 pretentious musical extravaganza with the German *Oper* while inconsistently using "opera" in its transliterated title: *Di yidische melukhe—Historische Opera in 4 Acten un 10 Bilder fin der Tsayt fin Goles Bovel*. Suggesting that it purported to tell a panorama of Jewish history from the time of the Babylonian Captivity or Exile on, this is in no way an opera as we understand the genre within classical music, and perhaps the designation "opera" was meant primarily to signify its intended seriousness as opposed to Second Avenue Yiddish musical theatre of the time. Interspersed spoken dialogue does not in itself, of course, disqualify it as opera (think, for example, *The Magic Flute*, even though it is technically a Singspiel that is now properly considered full-fledged opera for several reasons; or *Carmen*, which Bizet wrote originally with spoken dialogue that was only later altered to become sung, orchestrally accompanied recitative).

But Ter's vocal writing and overall musical approach are not operatic. Moreover, the crudeness is suggested even in the carelessly transliterated title, sprinkled inconsistently as it is with German and regional Yiddish dialect pronunciations. The work is best characterized — and not necessarily with opprobrium — as an elaborate musical spectacle.

- 12 Mazower, op. cit.
- 13 This is only one of many matters on which Alman's extant correspondence and other papers (contracts, memoranda, etc.) might shed some light. Under normal circumstances their examination would be required by responsible research. Although a trove of these items is known to exist somewhere in London, as of this writing, it cannot be found where it was supposed to have been deposited nearly two decades ago.

In 2004, an internationally circulated newsletter of the Jewish Music Institute (JMI) at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London (SOAS) announced that Alman's niece, Clara Alman, had donated to JMI the entirety of her uncle's surviving (saved) papers, memorabilia, scores, recordings, etc. The donation, it was emphasized, was for the establishment of a publicly accessible Alman Archive. (And the newsletter underscored that the archive included "personal documents and letters.") Not only had the *entire* collection been deposited at the JMI library at SOAS, as the newsletter (wrongly) stated, but the Alman Archive had already been set up and was open for visitation and research.

In fact, although the complete archival collection was indeed fetched from Clara Alman's home in 2004, it was not taken directly to SOAS and was not there when the newsletter was published later that year. Instead, it was apparently diverted to private premises, where it sat in a garage for a few years or more until a new JMI administration had it transferred to an off-site commercial storage facility. There it remains (or remained as of 2021).

When in 2021 I requested as a favor photocopies of certain items needed for this project, the current director of JMI was kind enough to have one or more assistants search through the entire contents of Alman materials in storage for this purpose; and indeed I was sent copies of those requested items that could be found. After that thorough search, however, it was discovered that neither the correspondence nor the related papers, nor

the printed souvenir program booklets from the premiere were anywhere to be found among what had been transferred to JMI's jurisdiction.

We can only suppose that these particular items of the collection—which I saw in Clara Alman's home a number of years prior to 2004 and which I know for a fact were included as part of her donation—were somehow not included in what was turned over for transfer from a private home to SOAS. One can draw his own conclusions as to where they might be. But in any case, there is no access to them.

14 See note 13.

15 *Adonai* is used here without hesitation inasmuch as it is *not* God's holy name, but rather an arbitrarily devised substitution (usually signified by a meaningless, nonphonetic combination of Hebrew letters) for the sacred but proscribed tetragram or tetragrammaton that is God's actual, proper name—whose utterance or even attempted pronunciation is strictly forbidden. In antiquity, the only exception was on Yom Kippur, and only by the High Priest (the *kohen gadol*) in the inner sanctum of the Temple. (Even then, we are told, it could deliberately be mumbled with a degree of unclear audibility in case anyone within hearing might discover its precise vocalization—which remains unknown, or at least uncertain—and thus inadvertently pronounce it in future.) The common rendering as “Lord” is without meaning vis-à-vis God's proper name, nor is it a translation of the tetragram, nor of *any* name. Moreover, the word has so many different meanings and connotations in the English language. In his landmark Judaic translation of the Hebrew Bible into German, contrary to Luther's from Christian perspectives, Moses Mendelssohn substituted the German equivalent of “The Eternal” for God's name, which is only slightly less evasive. And the supposedly righteous “substitution for the substitution” as *hashem* (generically and simply “the name”)—ubiquitous in certain circles for reference outside prayer, Psalm quotations (but only in full) or synagogal biblical readings—is even more obfuscating, diverting, and, from rational standpoints, silly. We do not, after all, worship “the name,” but God himself; nor do we proclaim in the *sh'ma* that the “the name” is the only God, but that the only God is *adonai*.

16 A renewed interest in the later books of the Christian Old Testament emerged within the Church of England during the latter decades of the nineteenth century. But it is highly doubtful that interest would have spilled over to British Jewry.

17 See especially in Robert Alter's philologically driven and anthropologically as well as historically informed *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, Vol. 2 (NY and London, 2019). Alter rejects the common graphic rendering of II Kings 16:3 as “He [Ahaz] even consigned his son to the fire,” which is found, for example, in the fairly recent JPS *Hebrew-English Tanakah: The Traditional Hebrew Text and the New JPS [Jewish Publication Society] Translation* (Philadelphia, 1999). He reverts mainly to earlier translations by rendering the beginning of that verse as “and even his son he [Ahaz] passed through the fire”—with the subtle but perhaps not insignificant difference from previous renderings such as “made his son to pass through the fire” in A. Cohen, ed., *M'lakhim/Kings: Hebrew Text and English Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (London and NY, 1950, 12th Impression, 1983; Soncino Series). In his commentary Alter explains this deliberate retention of what he views as ambiguity of the Hebrew, which, he maintains, could just as legitimately be read as referring to a symbolic act—for example, “passing over” rather than “through.”

Alter does, however, render II Chronicles 28:3 as “burned sons in fire.” But he cautions us to be wary in general of the reliability of Chronicles, which he holds is “at least from a modern perspective, the most peculiar book of the Hebrew Bible.”

18 By the time Joseph Solomonovich Winogradoff [Weinstein] (1864 [?1866]–1936) began his path to a stunning operatic and concert career, he was already the beneficiary of a typical basic Jewish education in Vilna. And he'd had exposure to cantorial tradition from early childhood, first as a boy chorister assisting his father—a furrier by trade but also a lay cantor (*ba'al t'fila*)—and then as a pupil of a few cantors. While pursuing serious music studies in Odessa, he also studied cantorial art privately and even conducted a cantorial choir for a time.

His first operatic break came in Moscow, where he stood in for the ailing baritone in the role of Ferrando in *Il Trovatore*. Later he was engaged as a second baritone with the Russian Imperial Opera Society for its tour, during which he made his London debut. Eventually he sang for about three months at Covent Garden, soon becoming well known to the London opera world. When Kennard invited him to sing in and direct a Yiddish opera at the new theater, he had already returned to sing within the Russian imperial sphere. (Joseph W[V] inogradoff, autobiographical reminiscences contained in various undated and unpaginated press clippings among the Winogradoff papers reposing at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York, *passim*; also in the Esther-Rachel Kaminska Theater Museum Collection [RG 8].) Although most sources give 1864 as his birth year, in his declaration of intention to become a U.S. citizen it is given as 1866.

The very notion of a Yiddish opera and a Yiddish opera house intrigued Winogradoff immeasurably, as Kennard most certainly must have hoped. It struck an internal, tonally enriched yet in no way dissonant chord that resonated for him as a head-on but smooth, unobstructed convergence of artistic aspirations and Jewish national sensibilities that were not at all mutually exclusive.

A Yiddish opera house that opened with a Yiddish opera could even bring the Jewish people musically to a level of equipollence with all other nations or peoples. He had dreamt of this and even run it by Christian friends as well as those of mixed parentage, all of whom were certain that nothing of the sort could ever happen—Yiddish was simply not suited to opera. Joseph Winogradoff, *Di ershten proben tsu shafen a yidishe opere* (The First Attempt to Create a Yiddish Opera) in *Der Moment* [Warsaw], January 7, 1925; clipping in Winogradoff Archive at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, in New York. Winogradoff published a serialized memoir in *Der Moment*, beginning in 1919–20 and then in subsequent issues. A translation of the actual wording of Winogradoff's reaction to the notion of a Yiddish opera is quoted in Mazower, *op. cit.*

In addition to *King Ahaz*, Winogradoff sang on the East End that season in Yiddish translations/adaptations of well-known operas. He then toured Poland with mixed programs of operatic arias and Jewish folk songs, and in 1920 he embarked on a concert tour of America, where he also served on occasion as a cantor before returning to eastern Europe. In 1934, although he had become an American citizen, he and his wife made *aliya*—settling in what was then Palestine, where he died two years later in Tel Aviv.

While in the United States, Winogradoff made a number of recordings on the Victor label—mostly Yiddish songs, but also a Yiddish “version” of a famous aria from *The Barber of Seville*. Oddly enough, listening to those recordings today, one hears a distinctly Slavic, lyrical and even liquid tenor voice. Yet he was obviously known throughout his career as a rich baritone.

19 See M. Mayer, *Yiddish Theatre in London* (London, 1942). Also cited in Mazower, *op. cit.*

20 See n. 13.

21 The type draft of the libretto in the collections of the National Library of Israel lists the roles in this order. Whether they were listed in order of appearance onstage in the souvenir program booklets or brochures for the performances cannot be known until a copy “emerges.” See n. 13. Similarly, not all voice types are specified on either that libretto draft or the score residing at the NLI. For our purposes here, until all other extant scores

can be examined, I have furnished tentatively some of the unspecified voice types within brackets according to vocal lines, ranges, tessitura, etc.

22 The biblically ordained provisions for the “cities of refuge”—applicable to a sovereign, undivided Jewish/Israeli Land of Israel—are found in the Torah in *Bamidbar* (the Book of Numbers) 35:6 and 9–34, and in *D’varim* (Deuteronomy) 4:41–43 and 19:1–13; and are discussed and construed in the Talmud (Tractate *Makos*). These special cities or towns were to be set aside for anyone who had killed someone accidentally, unintentionally, or in error. Therein the killer would take refuge from retribution by the victim’s family, pending “judgment by the congregation” (viz., the organized community)—in some respects a forerunner of the concept of fair and impartial courts of law. Even if found guiltless, the accidental perpetrator was still required to remain in the “city of refuge” until the death of the high priest. The rationales behind this are complicated and open to various interpretations.

Obviously, none of this could have had anything to do with Uziel, who was not being accused of any killing—accidental or other—and whose “crime” was refusal to comply with pagan worship. Moreover, the biblical Land of Israel had long ago been split into two polities. One might go so far, therefore, to view Alman’s invocation of the “cities of refuge” as an abuse of artistic license, unless he was simply ignorant concerning the matter. The latter is difficult to reconcile with Alman’s synagogue experience, however, since references to the “cities of refuge” are included in the annual cycle of Torah readings during two Sabbath services: in *parshat* (weekly portion) *Masey* and later each year in *Va’ethanan*. Alman would thus have been exposed twice annually to this mandated provision since childhood.

23 This admittedly strange (to say the least) instruction involving the *mayim hamarim ham’or’rim* (bitter waters; lit., the bitter waters that curse) is found in the Torah as a procedure for determining the guilt or innocence of a woman suspected (accused?) of adultery—in the absence of the required witnesses for conviction. (*Bamidbar* [Numbers] 5:18–19, 24, and 27.) Out of its ancient historical context, however, and of course when isolated from the continuum of rabbinic explanation and commentary, this provision will undoubtedly find little if any resonance in postbiblical sensibilities.

Naftali’s reference in his aria to this provision as a cure for the consequences of jealousy is of course completely misplaced and irrelevant. While Yehoshuva’s revengeful jealousy of Miriam—and of Uziel’s steadfast devotion to her—has indeed broken their happy homelife with Uziel’s flight, and while her vicious scheming for the murder of their child is born out of jealous rage, Yehoshuva has not been suspected or charged with adultery. So the provision of *mayim hamarim* has no application to this situation. Either Alman was insufficiently familiar with this biblical provision—or he allowed himself an overreach of license stretched paper thin.

24 Even more so than a recognizable echo of a phrase from the annual cantillation or reading of *Eikha* (the Book of Lamentations) on *Tisha ba’av* (the ninth of the Hebrew month of *av*, which commemorates the destruction of the First and Second Temples), these words would have resonated with all in the *King Ahaz* audiences who were regular synagogue worshippers—as would be the case today. For they form the final plea of the concluding text of the Torah service, as the scrolls have been returned to the ark. But of course this liturgy, with its quotation from *Eikha*, was put together well more than a millennium after the time frame of the opera. Apart from the liberal, and in this case not inappropriate exercise of license, Alman might also have seized the moment as an opportunity to demonstrate his gift for liturgical composition.

25 Hezekiah’s advice would no doubt appear strange as well as implausible to most among *King Ahaz* audiences, despite the opera’s setting in antiquity. Although having more than one wife concurrently has never been the accepted Judaic norm, neither promoted nor encouraged under most circumstances, the practice is not

specifically forbidden in the [written] Torah. But it has not been exempt from rabbinic regulation. And even in biblical times, male polygamy—although technically permitted *in principle*—was generally limited to men of relatively patrician status who could thus afford to support more than one wife. Beginning in the Mishnaic period, there were already some rabbis who tried to discourage it. But this was of course many centuries after the time frame of the opera.

In ca. 1000, Rabbeinu Gershom of Ashkenaz (960–1028) issued an inclusive, unequivocal ban (*herem*) on polygamy in the form of a *takana*—a remedial regulation or ruling. It was accepted by most Ashkenazi authorities, probably not least because he legislated this not autocratically, but apparently in concert with the approval of representatives of many Ashkenazi communities. Eventually his dictum came to be accepted in principal by Sephardi and other non-Ashkenazi rabbinic authorities.

It is established, fundamental doctrine, however, that one is not allowed to add permanently to the Torah something *de novo* that has no basis or grounding in it, let alone anything contrary: in this case, a new, perpetual prohibition against something clearly permitted. So as a reasoned, rabbinic regulation, Rabbi Gershom's *herem* would therefore have to have a termination date, at least in theory. And indeed, the expiration has generally been held to be in “the fifth millennium,” which has been the subject of various misunderstandings and confusions.

Of equal legal force nonetheless is the injunction to follow the findings and instructions of recognized rabbinic authority, which eventually extended the ban indefinitely. As early as the thirteenth century, for example, R. Asher (“the Rosh”) proposed that the *takanot* of Rabbi Gershom are to be considered “as if given on Mount Sinai.” Over time—with only certain circumstantial exceptions involving fairness coupled with compassion, but deliberately made difficult albeit not impossible to apply—R. Gershom's *herem* came to be recognized by a consensus of responsible, mainstream rabbinic authorities as permanent.

Uziel's taking Yehoshuva as a second wife in the eighth century BCE would, of course, have violated no injunction. Moreover, Hezekiah's counsel that the two wives relate to each other as sisters has about it what was likely one of the rationales behind R. Gershom's dictum: namely, the danger of acrimony and tension between two concurrent wives that could disrupt, if not destroy, a peaceful home (*shalom bayit*).

26 A few opera buffs might be tempted to challenge this observation by citing Giacomo Meyerbeer's now quite obscure first opera, *Jephtas Gelübde* (*Jephtha's Vow*; 1812). Written in Germany (in German)—before Meyerbeer became Francophied as a Parisian and one of the reigning composers at the Paris Opera—this one-act opera is based on that biblical incident in *Shoftim* (the Book of Judges). But any such challenge would be misinformed.

It is no revelation, of course, that Meyerbeer was Jewish [Jacob Lipmann Beer], although his librettist for this opera (Alois Schreiber) was not. In fact, the future Meyerbeer's father, Jacob Herz Beer, a well-to-do banker and sugar merchant, lent his home as a private synagogue in which he is also said to have officiated as a lay cantor. A Judaically informed perusal of the score, however, reveals nothing of Jewish sensibilities, Judaic perspectives, or rabbinic tradition. In a way, we are only reminded once again that, like all books of the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Judges is, in its raw state and without Judaic elaboration, as much a part of the Christian Old Testament as of the *tanakh*.

(For a discussion of the various suppositions and commentaries on the Jephta incident, and regarding its inspiration of more than one hundred musical works from the medieval period through the twentieth century, see my essay in the accompanying booklet to the Milken Archive of Jewish Music/NAXOS CD, *Ernst Toch: Cantata of the Bitter Herbs: Jephta, Rhapsodic Poem*; NAXOS American Classics 8.559417.)

27 Gertrude Hardie, p.c., November 2, 1988, and Clara Alman, p.c., February 19, 1990; also mentioned in Mazower, op. cit.

28 More than ten generations of American grammar and high school students have been taught uncritically and superficially to revere Thomas Paine as a pamphleteer and political philosopher behind the success of the Revolutionary War. That simplistically perpetuated and misguided image, however, has been based on a few sentences extracted from *The Crisis*, No. 1 ("These are the times that try men's souls"), which are said to have encouraged and lifted the morale of the fighting patriots. Yet students are told nothing about Paine's hate-filled writings concerning Jews, let alone his support for the savage Reign of Terror of the French Revolution. And it is doubtful that most of their teachers have ever bothered to learn about this.

It is true that Paine despised Christianity as what he held was a "false religion," for which, he insisted, "the Jews" were responsible because that new faith had been palmed off on gullible, vulnerable non-Jews in the first place by a cult or sect of Jewish disciples of (Jewish) Jesus of Nazareth. But, whereas he allowed that, in theory, the doctrines of Christianity could be overcome and shed intellectually in favor of a system that would worship a "God of reason," Jews and Judaism were, for him, another matter altogether. Genetic Jews—and, historically, the more so those who adhered to Judaism—were eternal inheritors and thus in effect practitioners of the ancient Israelites' sordid, tainted collective character, which could pose a dangerous liability to "enlightened societies." "The Jews," after all, "calumniate and blacken the character of all other nations." Referring to Moses as "that chief assassin and imposter," Paine condemned the ancient Israelites for their wars against human-sacrificing heathens and pagans, who were, in his bizarre revisionist convictions, "a just and moral people, not addicted, like the Jews, to cruelty and revenge." The Hebrew Bible was thus nothing but a "history of wickedness [on the part of Jews], that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind" (*The Age of Reason*).

29 Mazower, op. cit.

30 Michael Jolles, p. c. December 20, 2021, and his *Encyclopaedia*, op. cit. See also n. 13.

31 Nemtsov, p.c. January 16, 2023. According to his account, the Gesellschaft apparently "intended to create a fund for an award for a Jewish *national* opera," without specifying 3,000 rubles or any other amount. Rather, society members were asked to donate what they could to the fund, and Gesellschaft composers in particular were invited to write such an opera for the prize. (This diverges from Loeffler's account, in which submissions could include already completed operas and were not restricted to Gesellschaft member-composers, but were invited from all composers in principle.) Among the surviving documents that Nemtsov has found, this appeared in a 1914 Gesellschaft report, along with a list of donations that year that amounted in total to 143 rubles.

In support of his different account, Loeffler provides only a single citation: Alman's brief autobiographical sketch in *Tatzlil* 5 (1966), translated into Hebrew and reprinted from Alman's 1936 letter in Yiddish to Moshe Gorali, the future editor of *Tatzlil*. This handwritten autobiographical letter, however, which was found in the A. Friedman-Lvov Archives of Jewish Music at the Museum and Library of Music in Haifa, contains no mention whatsoever of any communication with or to the Gesellschaft, nor any reference to an announced opera prize. So it is not clear why it is cited in connection with either. It is of course possible that Loeffler found some new, i.e., additional, related and revealing documents in archives or among other sources visited or checked subsequently to Nemtsov's research in them a number of years previously. In that case, however, the relevant citation is missing. (As brief as Alman's letter was, it contained some surprising misrepresentations, such as his having studied at the Royal Academy of Music. In fact, he had not. Nor had he studied at the Royal College of Music—a separate, unrelated school in London—which nonetheless had bestowed on him the honorary Associate of the Royal College. His only formal studies in London had been at the Guildhall School.)

In Loeffler's account, Alman is identified erroneously as a "British cantor" who, by 1913, had achieved "fame as a composer for the Yiddish theater and the synagogue." Alman, however, was never a cantor and never known as such; nor was he known as a Yiddish theater composer. His only theater involvement was some unadvertised occasional participation in lowbrow Yiddish comedy acts in the first few years after his arrival in London—something of which he was not proud and which, by the time of the *King Ahaz* premiere, he underplayed as much as possible. And by 1913 he had yet to achieve any recognition as a synagogue composer. The mystery of the source for this mistaken information remains.

32 See n. 13.

33 Correspondence between Gertrude Hardie and the Library of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem—initially with Bathya Bayer and then with Israel Adler. I am grateful to Dr. Gila Flam, director of the Music Department and Sound Archive of the National Library of Israel, for furnishing me copies of the entire file of this correspondence.