



Hatikvah – The real story behind Israel’s anthem

“WHEREVER YOU look at Hatikvah, there is a story. Peel off the layers and you will see that not only is there an endless history, there is also a yearning for an eternal future.”

This is what concert pianist and musicologist Astrith Baltzan told Ilan Evyatar, writing in *The Jerusalem Post*, in 2010. Baltzan wrote a book, “Hatikvah – Past, Present, Future,” and performs a fascinating one-person show, “Hatikvah – A Hymn is Born,” while at her piano. I was privileged to see and hear it some years ago.

Here are some of the stories surrounding Israel’s national anthem. In addition to Evyatar’s account, I found material in an Israel Story podcast on Hatikvah; it can be found at www.israelstory.org. It turns out that what most of us believe about Hatikvah is simply untrue.

The Poet: Naftali Herz Imber wrote a nine-stanza poem, *Tikvateinu*; the first stanza is what we sing as Hatikvah. Imber was born in Galicia (now, Ukraine) in 1856. When he was 25, he set out for Palestine. He carried a notebook in his pocket, with half-finished poems, including “Tikvateinu.” In the Israel Story podcast, staffer Zev Levi recounts that “at night Imber performed his poetry for the locals and, during the day, while they worked in the fields, Imber would raid their wine cellars.”

Imber was an alcoholic. In 1887, he was broke and unhappy. Baltzan recounts that Imber left Palestine for New York, married a Christian woman who had converted, divorced her and died there penniless from alcohol-induced liver disease. He was 53.

The Words: The original Imber poem read: “hatikva hanoshana, lashuv l’eretz avoteinu, la’ir ba David k’hanah” (the ancient hope, to return to the land of our fathers, the city where David encamped). In 1895, ed-

ucator David Yellin, who founded the Hebrew language committee, and later Leib Matmon Cohen, headmaster of the Rishon Hebrew School, changed those words to the ones we sing today. The words of Hatikvah are actually a single complex sentence with two clauses.

The Music: It is not true that the Hatikvah melody came from Smetana’s 1874 piece, *Die Moldau*, played frequently on the radio and in concert halls. The Hatikvah melody has travelled the world for centuries, almost like the Diaspora Jewry.

Baltzan discovered that the Hatikvah melody goes back 600 years to a Sefardi prayer for dew, *Birkat Ha’tal*. After the Inquisition, as Jews scattered through Europe, the melody found its way to Italy, where it became a popular love song, “Fugi, Fugi, Amore Mio” (Flee, flee, my love!). It evolved into a Romanian gypsy folk song, “Cart and Oxen;” then, a 17-year-old immigrant to Palestine from Romania, Shmuel Cohen, used the “Cart and Oxen” tune for the poem, Hatikvah. And it quickly caught on.

What is the connection with *Die Moldau*? 12-year-old Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart heard the original folk tune in Italy, where he had been sent to study, and incorporated it into one of his compositions. Mozart took the music to Vienna, then to Prague. There, Smetana picked it up.

Smetana’s *Die Moldau*, like Hatikvah, was part of a nationalist uprising. The Czech composer thought, a national movement is like a river, you can’t stop water, just as you can’t extinguish hope. Smetana’s symphonic poem, *My Country*, including *Die Moldau* (the German name for the Vltava River, the longest Czech river), became a sort of Czech anthem without words, Baltzan said.

The British Ban: During the British Mandate in Palestine, the Jewish radio station was forbidden to play Hatikvah. So instead the radio played Smetana’s *Die Moldau*. The British could not blacklist a work of classical music.

Official Adoption: Not until November 10, 2004 was Hatikvah adopted officially as Israel’s national anthem, in the Flag, Coat of Arms and National Anthem Law. The decisive vote in favor was cast by the Druze Knesset Member Ayoub Kara, who hails from Daliat al-Carmel, now the Likud Minister of Communications. Why would a Druze citizen vote for Hatikvah?

Link with the Druze: It turns out that Imber met a British parliamentarian named Laurence Oliphant in 1882, in Constantinople (now Istanbul). Oliphant made Imber his personal secretary and together they left for Palestine, settling in the Druze village of Daliat al-Carmel. Imber became romantically involved with Oliphant’s wife and was fired. Kara’s grandfather had worked as an assistant to Oliphant. Hence Kara’s decisive vote in favor.

The Shoah: At the end of World War II, a British Jewish chaplain named Leslie Hardman led Bergen-Belsen survivors in a *Kabalat Shabat*, in the open, in the midst of the camp, on April 20 1945. The “choir of human skeletons”, Baltzan wrote, “sang Hatikvah in haunting voices.” It was recorded by a BBC reporter and was discovered later in the library of the Smithsonian Institute. This is perhaps one of the most moving and memorable of all early Hatikvah recordings.

Link with Herzl: Herzl absolutely detested Hatikvah, perhaps because he knew Imber

was a drunk. Herzl even organized a contest, in 1903, for an anthem but the entrants were awful.

Israel Story co-founder Mishy Harmon interviewed veteran journalist and former MK Uri Avneri. Like Herzl, Avneri virulently hates Hatikvah. “It has nothing to do with Israel,” he told Harmon. “It is about Jews abroad...and has nothing to do with people in the Land of Israel. It is irrelevant to a state in which we have two different populations, Jewish and Arab. [We] need to get rid of this anthem and have a real Israeli anthem.”

Rabbi Avraham Isaac Kook, the chief rabbi before the State of Israel was founded, actually wrote an alternative anthem to Hatikvah, called The Faith. Here are the first two verses: “Eternally there lives in our hearts, The steadfast faith that we will return to our holy land, The city in which David settled. There we shall fulfill our destiny, [which the] Father of many [nations] acquired, There we shall live our life, The life of the nation of multitudes.”

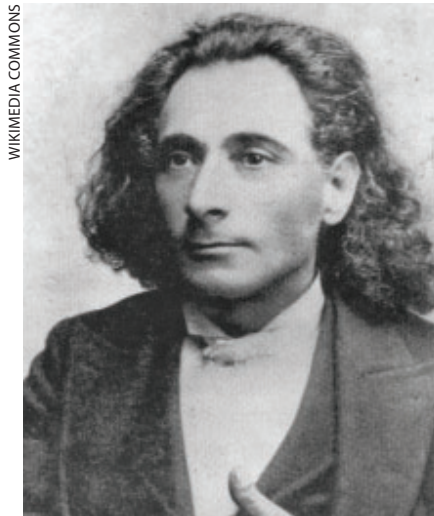
Link with Israeli Arabs: Levi recounts that Rifat Turk, the first Israeli Arab to play for Israel’s national soccer team, stood silently in his first international game, in 1976, when Hatikvah was sung.

“I am not a Jewish soul,” he said. “I am an Arab soul. If the anthem’s lyrics were about love and consideration of people like me, I’d happily sing it.”

Turk was reviled by Jewish fans for his silence –especially fanatical Beitar Jerusalem supporters when Turk’s team Hapoel Tel Aviv played Beitar. “I will kill you. Go play in Syria. Go play with Arafat!” they yelled.

Abbas Suan, an Israeli Arab from Sakhnin, became a national hero in 2006 when he scored the game-tying goal for Israel in the 90th minute of a World Cup qualifying match against Ireland. But soon after, in Jerusalem for a league game, he was (like Turk) fiercely and profanely reviled for not singing Hatikvah.

Strangely, a not dissimilar controversy has arisen in the United States. When an African-American National Football League quarterback named Colin Kaepernick knelt in protest when the Stars and



Naftali Herz Imber

Stripes was sung, and other black players joined the protest against police killing of blacks, President Donald Trump reviled them as disloyal. Recently, the NFL has ruled that players must stand for the anthem, but can if they wish remain in the locker room until it is over, a ruling that has been widely mocked.

Link with Uganda: Levi recounts that at the Sixth Zionist Congress, in Basel, in August 1903, the Uganda Proposal to create a temporary Jewish State in East Africa was discussed. The proposal passed, 295 in favor, 178 against.

Its opponents then got up and sang Hatikvah – “the eye looks toward Zion.” Thus, Levi observed, “a Hebrew poem penned by a misfit and stuck to a random Romanian tune, became the unlikely political anthem of a country that did not yet exist”.

Minor Key: The melody for Hatikva is morose, written in a minor key. Of over 200 national anthems, only about a dozen or so are similarly in a minor key. Among them: anthems of Pakistan, Turkey and Iraq. Most anthems are upbeat and many are martial, march-like.

A Fascist Orchestrates Hatikvah: Long-

time Israel Philharmonic conductor and musical director Zubin Mehta has said that the orchestration of Hatikvah by Bernardino Molinari, the version now used almost exclusively by orchestras, “was the most beautiful national anthem of them all”.

Molinari was an Italian orchestra conductor. In October 1948, he arrived in Palestine on a British bomber, claiming the Virgin Mary had appeared to him in dream and ordered him to help the Jews. Molinari spent three years with the Palestine Orchestra, and one of his first endeavors was to orchestrate Hatikvah. It was he who conducted the performance of the national anthem when David Ben Gurion declared independence in Tel Aviv in May 1948.

Then, as Israel began to hunt down Nazi collaborators, Molinari disappeared. It emerged that he was put on trial in Italy as a Fascist sympathizer who had corresponded with Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels. As head of an orchestra, he had betrayed Jews to the Fascists. His flight to Palestine was a failed attempt to evade punishment, or perhaps to pay penance. He was found guilty and died isolated, in a monastery.

Link with Hamas: In the Israel Story podcast, Zev Levi recounts that there is a Hamas parody of Hatikvah on YouTube, released in May 2014, around Israel’s Independence Day. It is titled “The End of Hope” and says, among other things, “The Zionist army is made of wax and already it is melting and has no hope; the vile Jews who were here before, someone tell me what is left of them!”

Hebrew University musicologist Prof. Edwin Seroussi, winner of the 2018 Israel Prize, told Levi, “when protesters burn the flag, they burn the State. And—you can ‘burn’ the anthem too!”

The real story of Hatikvah is like the story of the Jewish people – complex, controversial, polarizing, emotional, a blend of myth and fact. Despite everything, we will be singing it for many decades to come. ■

The writer heads the Zvi Griliches Research Data Center at the S. Neaman Institute, Technion and blogs at www.timnovate.wordpress.com