Singing a New Song
Joshua Jacobson

Zamiru ‘ahim zamiru! U sa’izmrah ne’er u’im. Sing, brethren, sing! Then with song we will rouse the people.

(David Frischman)

Towards the end of my senior year in college I received a phone call from Stanley Sperber. Stanley had been my music counselor at Camp Vavnon in the early 1960s, and was responsible for my transition from a guitar-playing folkie to a student of classical music and an aspiring choral conductor. A few years earlier Stanley had started a youth chorus in Manhattan, dedicated to the performance of Israeli and Jewish music. Eventually they gave their chorus a name: Zamir.

Stanley was phoning to invite me to start a Zamir Chorale in Boston. And so, with naive enthusiasm and youthful determination, I accepted and dived right in. In October of 1969 some forty students gathered for what would be the first of thousands of rehearsals of the Zamir Chorale of Boston.

Neither Stanley nor I was aware that we were actually carrying on a choral tradition. We had assumed that we were bold innovators, creating a new form of expression for our generation—Jewish cultural identification independent of the Jewish establishment. But we were wrong. A few years later I discovered that we were not the first Zamirs.

In 1894 a Polish attorney, N. Shapiro, petitioned the governor of Lodz for permission to establish a Jewish choral organization. Anticipating the hostile reaction with which government officials greeted any gathering that smacked of political sedition, Shapiro asserted that his organization would serve patriotic aims by keeping the young people of Lodz away from the revolutionary and antigovernment assemblies that were poisoning their minds. He ended his petition with the words, “Let us awaken the hearts of the nation and to change their lives for the better.” And the Zamir movement was born.

The song is no longer directed to God, the Heavenly King; Now it is a call to social action—it is a song that will awaken the Jewish people from its “dark ages” and into the enlightenment. The appeal to “brothers” evokes the ideals of the European Enlightenment, echoing the well-known egalitarian and communal sentiments of the French Revolution, “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité,” and of Schiller’s Ode to Joy, made famous by Beethoven. “Alle Menschen werden Brüder.” These musical maskilim were dedicated to the idea that music had the power to inspire people, to create a sense of community and to change their lives for the better.

The mystical sixteenth-century rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz picked up on this idea in his beautiful poem Lecha Dodi (itself inspired by Isaiah 61:1 and 51:9):

“Kami’i’ri kai zvrah
Heyo le ha-beyri, ha-zamir.
Arise, shine for your light as dawned!
Awake, awake, sing a song!”

But while Alkabetz was singing to the God of Israel, Frischman’s sentiments were directed to the resurrection of the Jews as a modern nation.

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