

ERNEST BLOCH'S AVODATH HA-KODESH: A SYNOPSIS AND DETAILED PROGRAM NOTE

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Ernest Bloch's *Avodath Ha-Kodesh: The Sacred Service* easily ranks among the Hebrew-language major works performed most often in North America. It is part of the repertoire of symphonies and choral organizations that rarely perform any other Hebrew choral music. Its powerful drama, devotion, and sense of sanctity and celebration speak to wide audiences, as do its calls for peace and universal brotherhood. Many of these audiences, however, and often the music directors and performers themselves, are unfamiliar with the Hebrew worship service, its elements, and how they relate to the music.

This synopsis is edited from an article published by the author in 2003,¹ informed most recently by discussions with members of the Westminster Choir of the Montview Boulevard Presbyterian Church in Denver, Colorado, and its conductor, Montview's Minister of Music Adam Waite, prior

to their performance of the Bloch *Sacred Service* in April 2023. These discussions suggested that conductors, performers, and audiences would greatly appreciate a detailed program note providing a guide to each of the *Sacred Service's* five parts, with comments on the music, explanations of the synagogue ritual, as well as biblical references in the text (since these are not given in the score).

The baritone in this performance was Arik Luck, the Cantor of Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco, which had commissioned the work almost one hundred years ago. Adam Waite and Cantor Luck reviewed the following program note; I am grateful for their edits. It is offered here in the hope that it will be useful for symphonies and choral organizations preparing this piece. The remainder of this article may be used as a program note for performance, with proper attribution of author and publication.

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Ernest Bloch's *Avodath Ha-Kodesh*: Synopsis and Program Note

Swiss-American composer Ernest Bloch (1880-1959) composed his *Avodath Ha-Kodesh: The Sacred Service* in 1930-33, for San Francisco's Congregation Emanu-El, whose Cantor, Reuben R. Rinder, arranged for the commission by Gerald Warburg (1907-1971), son of financier and Jewish leader Felix Warburg and a concert cellist. It has been called "a high-water mark of twentieth-century synagogue song." The *Sacred Service* premiered in Turin, Italy, in January 1933; it was first presented in Temple Emanu-El in March 1938.

The *Sacred Service* is based on the Sabbath Morning Service of the *Union Prayer Book, Revised Edition* (1924), the prayer book of the Reform movement within American Judaism at the time. Bloch came to envision the *Sacred Service* to be performed as an integral whole, without breaks for reading from Scripture, a sermon and so forth, as would be the norm in a synagogue service. Nevertheless, the synagogue context was very much part of the conceptualization of the piece.

The liturgy of the Union Prayer Book (and the *Avodath Ha-Kodesh*) follows the broad outline and structure of traditional Jewish prayer, but there are numerous differences in text and details, placement of passages within the service, interpretive translations, and emendations or removal of passages where the Hebrew was considered out of step with modern beliefs. Duplications were largely eliminated and English readings added. A central component of Jewish prayer services, usually called *Amida* "standing" because it is recited while standing, is traditionally recited first in silence by all in the congregation, then chanted by the Cantor; in Reform Jewish custom, the sections are recited congregationally only, with a silent meditation afterwards.

The Jewish nature of Bloch's *Avodath Ha-Kodesh*, while clearly represented in the liturgy, is not represented in most of the actual music. The traditional melodies of the synagogue are mostly non-metric modes assigned to various subsections, with a few traditional melodies for certain components. These are absent in the *Sacred Service* except for the *Tzur Yisrael* "Rock of Israel" at the end of Part I (and partially repeated in Part V), which is based on a musical notation of the passage which Cantor Rinder had sent to him, the only place the *Sa-*

cred Service includes a traditional chant and the familiar formula *Barukh Atta...* "Blessed art Thou...."

Bloch's music, however, does reflect certain qualities of the traditional music of the synagogue, using repeating motives, and establishing an effect similar to the non-metric traditional modes by frequent changes in time signature. The Cantor-Choir responsive structure also reflects a prominent feature of the Synagogue, as is the alternation between non-metric and highly rhythmic responses, and between biblical verses and non-biblical liturgical passages.

Bloch studied the Service and its Hebrew text for a full year in preparation for this composition. He analyzed every Hebrew word and set sections in Hebrew that were not found in Hebrew in the Union Prayer Book, such as *Yihyu le-ratzon* (Part III) and *Bayom ha-hu* (Part V). He spoke and wrote passionately about the drama of the text, and gave a Hebrew name to his composition, *Avodath Ha-Kodesh* (taken, by the way, from the Hebrew of Numbers 7:9) usually found in Hebrew characters on the scores. Bloch was also influenced by the Union Prayer Book's English translations, which often re-framed the meaning of the Hebrew text. The published scores of the *Sacred Service* do not use the Union Prayer Book's elegant English version; the English in the score is somewhat more literal and is usually credited to David Stevens.

Bloch departed from the prior practice of most composers of Synagogue music, who wrote settings of individual prayers or sections of the service. In contrast, the *Sacred Service* is an entire service. (One of the relatively few other settings of a full service is Darius Milhaud's 1948 *Service Sacré*, like Bloch's *Sacred Service*, commissioned by Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco.) Bloch said the five parts "have to be played without interruption, as a unity...like the Mass of the Catholics." Indeed, with the exception of the "Silent Meditation" and *Yihyu le-ratzon* at the beginning of Part III, individual Parts or individual sections within each movement are rarely performed as stand-alone pieces. Nevertheless, when considered in the context of a worship service, the five parts of the *Sacred Service*—like the parts of most Concert Masses—are separated by elements for which a musical setting was not written. The texts of Bloch's *Sacred Service* are in some sense unique

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to the *Union Prayer Book* of its day, but most Sabbath Morning services throughout Judaism follow more or less the same format.

“**BLOCH DEPARTED FROM THE PRIOR PRACTICE OF MOST COMPOSERS OF SYNAGOGUE MUSIC, WHO WROTE SETTINGS OF INDIVIDUAL PRAYERS OR SECTIONS OF THE SERVICE. IN CONTRAST, THE SACRED SERVICE IS AN ENTIRE SERVICE.**”

Part I

Bloch called Part I the “exposition.” It takes us from an introductory text composed largely from the Psalms, to the call to prayer, the declaration of faith and God’s unity, Man’s love for God, and God’s mighty acts in history. Its conclusion is “the Lord shall reign forever,” which Bloch calls a “chorus of exaltation.” But rather than end on a note of exaltation, its conclusion is a passage which, to Bloch, speaks of “the misery of humanity,” and, when it is reprised in Part V, is called “a lamentation” and “cry for help.” The introductory meditation is *Mah Tov*, “How Goodly are Thy Tents,” consisting of Num. 24:5, and Ps. 5:8, 26:8, 95:6, 69:14.

This is followed by the *Barechu*, the Call to Prayer “Praise ye the Lord to whom all praise is due.” Nine orchestral measures follow. Next is the *Shema*, Israel’s declaration of faith “Hear O Israel, the Lord is Our God the Lord is One” (Deut. 6:4), followed by the non-biblical response *Baruch* “Blessed be the name of his glorious kingdom for ever” and *Veahavta* (continuing with Deut. 6:5-9) “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might....” This alternation of biblical verse, non-biblical line, and related biblical verse is very typical of the Jewish liturgy.

The next section of the *Sacred Service* follows the same pattern of scripture—non-scriptural line—related scripture, based in this case on the Song of the Sea (Ex. 15), recited by the Israelites who had escaped Pharaoh. *Mi Chamocha* “Who is like unto Thee” (Ex. 15:11), is

followed by *Malchutcha* “Your Kingdom,” providing an interpretive framework preparing the worshipper for the second verse quoted from this context: *Adonay Yimloch* “The Lord shall reign for ever” (Ex. 15:18). Part I of the work ends with the traditional *Tzur Yisrael*, “Rock of Israel” mentioned above, ending with traditional blessing formula “Blessed art Thou O Lord” (with the Choir singing *baruch hu u-varuch shemo* “Blessed be He and Blessed be His name”), “who has redeemed Israel.

In a congregational service using the *Union Prayer Book*, the texts in Part I of the *Sacred Service* would be followed by the first two paragraphs of the *Amida* in Hebrew and/or English.

Part II

Part II is titled *Kedusha* “Sanctification,” which, in the traditional service, is the highlight of the Cantor’s repetition of the *Amida*. The *Kedushah* represents Israel joining in angelic singing as noted in its introduction, *Nekadesh*: “We will sanctify your Name in the world just as it is sanctified in the highest heavens.” These praises take the form of two verses describing the angelic praises of God: *Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh* “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts” (Isaiah 6:3) and *Baruch* “Blessed is the Presence of the Lord, from His Place” (Ezekiel 3:12).

Bloch compares this section with the *Sanctus* of the Mass, which indeed uses *Sanctus* “Holy,” Isaiah 6:3, and a *Benedictus* “Blessed,” albeit a different verse, Ps. 138:26. *Adir Adirenu* (mostly from Psalms 8:10) follows, sung by the Cantor. Then, *Ehad hu Eloheinu* “One is our God” turns toward a future revelation and redemption, highlighting God as “our Father, our King, our Redeemer and He [God] will cause us to hear (*yashmi’enu*) in His mercy, again, in the sight of all living beings.” In the traditional *Kedusha*, this is followed by what all will hear: “I am the Lord thy God” (Num. 16:41)” but here the Hebrew *yashmi’enu* is re-translated as “answer us” and the line from Numbers is omitted. Unlike typical synagogue practice, this line is sung once by the cantor responsively with the choir, then the entire line sung again by the choir, with alto and soprano soloists highlighting *moshi’enu* “Our Redeemer.”

Having asserted the certainty of Divine response, Bloch concludes the *Kedusha* with a stirring choral

rendition of Ps. 146:10: *Yimloch* “The Lord shall reign for ever; thy God, O Zion from generation to generation, Halleluiah.” In the first two congregational verses of the Kedusha, the worshippers had joined in singing praises heard in heaven, according to prophetic visions. This third congregational verse is earthly praise, recognizing God’s eternal kingship and mentioning Zion—Jerusalem. In the context of the traditional Kedusha, this too is a reference to future redemption.

In the 1924 Union Prayer Book, the final line of Part II was followed by *Le-dor va-dor* “From generation to generation,” the congregation would be seated and versions of the remaining traditional paragraphs of the Amida read in Hebrew or English, with different English readings for each Sabbath of the month and for special Sabbaths.

Part III

The Union Prayer Book did not call for a silent recitation of the Amida, but rather a Silent Devotion immediately following its completion. Part III of the Sacred Service begins with “Silent devotion (and response)”: orchestral music for the silent devotion, with the choir’s response sung *a capella*—in Hebrew: *Yihyu le-ratzon* “May the Words of my Mouth” (Ps. 19:15). The next section of the service is called the “Reading of Scripture” and is the ceremony of taking the Torah from the Ark and bringing it to the Reader’s Desk where it is to be read.

In the Union Prayer Book, the Minister reads Psalm 24:3-6 in English, and the choir sings *Seu Shearim* “Lift up your heads, O ye gates” (Ps. 24:9-10). Bloch wrote vividly of the “deep symbolic meaning” of this section, revealed to him one dark day in the Swiss mountains, as the sun triumphed over clouds and fog, and trees, rocks and mountains became clear, the sky a deep blue, and darkness had disappeared.

Then the cantor intones the *Seu shearim*. I interpret this as clouds rising—high in the sky—darkness receding out of man’s heart—that the light may enter into it. Immense symbol, which poor fettered humanity, bound to its miseries, fetishisms of all kinds, is still awaiting! I wanted to express the wish that man may liberate him-

self from hate, prejudice, dark instincts, regression, all that lowers him and prevents him from seeing the truth, from going forward, from rising above himself.

After these introductory verses, in congregational practice, the congregation rises for “Taking the Scroll from the Ark.” Bloch provides a “symphonic interlude” to allow for the time needed to remove the Torah scroll and sets the verses given in the Union Prayer Book for Cantor-Choir renditions: *Torah tziva lanu* (Deut. 33:4) and *Beit Yaakov* (Isaiah 2:5). “The Torah which God gave through Moses is the heritage of the congregation of Jacob. Come ye and let us walk in the light of the Lord.” The Cantor, holding the Torah, reprises *Shema Yisrael*, with choral reiteration, followed immediately—as in the Union Prayer Book—by the traditional processional of the Torah from the Ark to the Reader’s Desk, *Lecha Adonay ha-gedulah* “Thine, O Lord, is the greatness and the power” (I Chron. 29:11), with which this Part ends. Bloch characterizes this part as “liturgic, woven around the Torah and the Laws of Moses, with its organization, discipline and symbolism.”

In a Synagogue service, the Reading from the Torah and the Prophets would occur at this point.

Part IV

Part IV sets the portion of the service titled “Returning the Scroll to the Ark.” In synagogue practice, the Cantor takes the Torah in his arms and invites the congregation to join in praise. In this ritual, the text is *Gadlu* “Declare the greatness of the Lord with me and let us exalt His name forever” (Ps 34:4). This passage is followed by the traditional recessional *Hodo* “His Glory covers Heaven and Earth. He has exalted the strength of his people” (Psalm 148:13-14) as the Torah is taken back to the Ark. *Torat Adonay Temimah*, “The Torah of the Lord is perfect,” portions of Ps. 19:8-10, and *ki lekah tov* (Prov. 4:2) “I give you good advice: do not neglect the Torah” are chanted to allow enough time for the Torah to be replaced in the Ark.

As the congregation is seated, this section ends with *Etz Hayyim* (Proverbs 3:18,17), traditionally sung as the Ark’s doors are closed, and styled by Bloch as “a peace song.” This setting describes the Torah as a Tree

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of Life, whose supporters are happy, whose ways are paths of pleasantness, and all of whose paths are *shalom* “peace”—a word repeated several times to conclude Part IV. Bloch summarizes this section: “Then put the Law away now that you have understood it. It must be a living thing, the rejoicing, happiness, the exaltation of all mankind, ending with the Tree of Life, and that all those who are supporters of it are happy.”

In the synagogue, as indicated by the Union Prayer Book, this section would be followed by the Sermon.

Part V

Part V resumes the chanted part of the Service, after the Sermon. It is nearly entirely non-biblical, except for a few cited biblical snippets and the Priestly Benediction at its end. Yet—with its ringing declaration of brotherhood, final communal recognition of Divine sovereignty, confrontation with death and mourning, and intensely personal understanding of the final hymn—this section, and not the Kedushah or the Torah Reading, becomes the culmination of the service.

In a synagogue following the Union Prayer Book, there would be a few readings in English after the Sermon, including the first part of the “Adoration,” based on the traditional *Alenu* prayer. Part V begins with the first part that would be sung, in Hebrew, *va-anahnu* “and as for us, we bend the knee and bow before the King of the Kings of Kings, the Holy Blessed One” with cantor and choir alternating. The *Sacred Service* provides a musical accompaniment as the minister recites two English texts. The first is an English version of the final paragraph of the *Alenu*; the last line, *bayom ha-hu*, “On that day” (Zech. 14:9) is sung in Hebrew, stressing the hope for universal brotherhood. Bloch made a few changes in this English text, including the replacement of “idolatry” by “fetichisms.”

The Mourner's Prayer

The English recitation continues with the introduction to the Mourner's Prayer, composed by Gustav Gottheil at the end of the nineteenth century. Although the English text is often simply read, Bloch provided music for it to be sung as a kind of *recitative*. Bloch intended these two passages always to be in the vernacular language of the country in which the piece is being

presented. The Mourner's Prayer itself (The Kaddish) is usually not included in concert presentations of the *Sacred Service*, although the score directs that it may be recited, in Hebrew, in the congregational setting.

Suzanne Bloch, the composer's daughter, noted Leonard Bernstein's recording of the *Sacred Service* departed from her father's intentions for this section of the piece, which were reflected in the London recording in which Bloch himself conducted. Bernstein replaced the Kaddish chosen from the Union Prayer Book with the traditional one, and had the memorial service intoned in spoken voice rather than sung in Bloch's setting.

Tzur Yisrael

Bloch's Kaddish is set in counterpoint to a choral reprise of the Tzur Yisrael “Rock of Israel,” from the end of Part I. *Tzur Yisrael* is a plea for God to arise for the help of Israel, but this prayer is seen by the composer also to be universal, writing:

Chorus and Cantor must sing all the following [the *Tzur Yisrael*]... as a *far distant lamentation* of all mankind—The Answer to this lamentation,—this cry for help,—is then the Adon Olom—

Adon Olam

The *Sacred Service* continues with *Adon Olam* “Lord of the World,” a poem often but most likely incorrectly ascribed to Ibn Gabirol (Spain, eleventh century) and indicated in the 1924 Union Prayer Book as the closing hymn for the Evening service. It provides a text at once universalistic and personal, referring both to unbounded Divine rule, and the courage faith offers in all parts of life; perhaps, in the final stanza, *be-et ishan* “when I sleep”—in facing mortality as well. The first verses refer to God's universal suzerainty and power, predating and surviving Creation. Bloch then provides an eight-measure interlude before continuing with the hymn as it turns to the individual's personal reliance upon God in times of need. The text is now voiced in the first person, singular: *ve-hu Eli* “He is my God.” The score directs the Cantor to resume singing “again, as an expression of Humanity.” The final stanza, adapted

in part from Ps. 31:6, *be-yado* “Into His hand do I commend my spirit...and with it my body” is sung “with supreme resignation,” and concludes with a solid statement of hope and courage: *ve-lo ira* “I shall not fear.”


In many synagogues and temples, the Adon Olam is sung to a lively melody, sometimes led by a youngster, or made to fit to popular tunes. Bloch saw the *Adon Olam* as the culmination of the piece, the answer to the questions raised by the rest of the service, and in particular the universal cry and lamentation and the Mourners' Prayer. He reported that he consulted with the Orthodox Rabbi Alessandro da Fano (d. 1935) in Milan about his understanding of this poem. The *Sacred Service* ends with the Priestly Benediction (Num. 6:24-26). Bloch: “After the orchestra and chorus give this message of faith, hope and courage, we must send people back to their routine of living, cooking, laundry and so on. Thus the priest gives a Benediction, the chorus answers, ‘Amen’ and they leave.”

Conclusion

Bloch found his musical expression inspired in some ways by traditional Jewish music but using its melodies only sparingly, for dramatic effect. He found his own meaning in the words and the service itself, studying the words intensively in Hebrew, and coming to know the text in great detail. While he was committed to a vernacular component, he also set Hebrew texts that were not included in the Union Prayer Book. He tried to capture the text of the service, with its drama, its interplay of themes from Torah, Prophets, ancient Israelite Kings, and generations of liturgical poetry.

I do not propose or desire to attempt a reconstruction of the music of the Jews... It is rather the Hebrew spirit that interests me—the complex, ardent, agitated soul that vibrates for me in the Bible; the vigor and ingenuousness of the Patriarchs, the violence that finds expression in the books of the Prophets, the burning love of justice, the desperation of the preachers of Jerusalem, the sorrow and grandeur of the book of Job, the sensuality of the Song of Songs. All this is in us, all this is in me, and is

the better part of me. This it is which I seek to feel within me and to translate in my music—the sacred race emotion that lies dormant in our souls.

The *Sacred Service* stresses universal brotherhood and is permeated by the hope that Mankind will transcend idolatry and fetishisms of all kinds. Written in Europe in the early 1930s against the backdrop of the rising importance of Fascism and the Nazi party, the work has a timeliness that still resonates today. 

NOTES

- ¹ Seth Ward, “The Liturgy of Bloch’s *Avodath Ha-Kodesh*” *Modern Judaism, A Journal of Jewish Ideas and Experience* 23:3 (October 2003): 243-263. See this article for detailed references. Note that Bloch’s statements in this article come from two sources: Robert Strassburg, *Ernest Bloch: Voice in the Wilderness* (Los Angeles: Trident Shop, California State University, 1977): 136ff., who gives the text of Bloch’s speech about the piece at Congregation Emanuel; and Bloch, letter of 1944, in *Collected Writings of A.W. Binder* p. 32-33, ed. Irene Heskes (New York, Bloch Publishing, 1971): 33.

FOR MORE ON ERNEST BLOCH'S SACRED SERVICE, VISIT THE ARCHIVES:

“UNIVERSALISM AND PARTICULARISM IN ERNEST BLOCH’S SACRED SERVICE,” BY JOSHUA R. JACOBSON. CHORAL JOURNAL, NOVEMBER 2009.

“ERNEST BLOCH’S SACRED SERVICE (AVODATH HAKODESH) IN CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT: A PERSONAL COMMENTARY ON THE MUSIC AND ITS LEGACY,” BY NICK STRIMPLE. CHORAL JOURNAL, NOVEMBER 2018.