

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 20 February 2019



Melodies of Change: Music and Progressive Judaism

Podcast with **Ruth Illman** (25 February 2019).

Interviewed by **Breann Fallon**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/melodies-of-change-music-and-progressive-judaism/>

Breann Fallon (BF): *Today I have with me Dr [Ruth Illman](#). She is Docent (associate professor) of Comparative Religion at Åbo Akademi University. And she's also Professor of History of Religions at Uppsala University. She is currently director of the Donner Institute for Religious and Cultural History in Turku in Finland. Together with Dr Karin Hedner Zetterholm she is the editor of the open access, peer reviewed [Journal of Scandinavian Jewish Studies](#). Dr Illman has published more than 30 peer reviewed articles in journals such as [Contemporary Jewry](#), [The Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion](#), and [Journal of Contemporary Religion](#), as well as monographs and edited volumes with Routledge, Brill and Equinox. Her most recent work is [Music and Religious Change among Progressive Jews in London: Being Liberal and Doing Traditional](#). So, thank you very much for joining us today.*

Ruth Illman (RI): Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

BF: *Great. I thought we'd just start off by talking about your most recent monograph: Music and Religious Change among Progressive Jews in London. It looks at religious change in relation to music in the context of contemporary progressive Judaism. I thought we could begin with just talking about music in Judaism. I thought you could maybe give us a bit of an insight into what role music plays in the Jewish faith, and is there any sort of difference between progressive or orthodox denominations amongst the Jewish community?*

RI: Well, thank you. That's a very huge question. I'll try to answer it the best I can from my point of view. Now I'm not an expert on all forms on all forms of Judaism in all times and all over the world, so to say. So I'll mostly speak now from the context that I have been researching and try to make some parallels from there. But as a scholar of religion and especially contemporary religion I could say that I think that music in general is relevant to religiosity, not just within Judaism but all over. And I think

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we can see, especially today, that for many people who seek forms of religious engagement today, that they can somehow side with and feel comfortable with music . . . it's playing a more and more important role, so to say. Because music somehow seems to capture many of the dimensions that people seek in a religious engagement today. Which is that it's not just an intellectual way of engaging with a religious faith, it also has emotional and embodied sides to it. It can be very individual and very sort of personal – but also something you do, tied to community. And music is not always as words . . . as clearly fixed to structures and to interpretation. But it's more open for everybody. But still it is meaningfully grounded in a tradition, just like the Jewish traditions I have been researching. So it's creative but it's also very constitutive of certain traditions. So it gives you freedom to form your own religious engagement. But it still ties you to a community and to a history. So that's the first point I'd like to say, is that music is more relevant to Religious Studies all over than we maybe think. Because I think, in our research fields we're always so preoccupied with the words and with the texts. And sort-of looking at music as a secondary aspect to it. But I wanted to produce it in the centre, here. And if we're thinking about music within Judaism, of course this is an immense topic. And the first question, of course, is what do we count as music in a religious Jewish setting? Is it just the liturgical singing? Is it the *nusah*? The *cantillation* modes? Is it the traditional chants? Is it, maybe, the cantorially-led music that we have in some congregations? In some places we have a choir – we might even have communal singing in the more progressive denominations. So it is a great variety and it is a great mix today. But I think as I have been focussing on these progressive denominations in a British context, I think what more and more of them are saying, in the interviews I have made, is that they feel that music and musical engagements, singing and music overall has been lacking from their tradition. They feel that it's been impoverished as so much has been focused on the spoken word (5:00). And on the benefit of taking away these elements that were seen maybe to be obscure and old fashioned and mystical – not in a positive sense. So I think, here, this also proves the fact that different kinds of music are more and more appreciated all over the line. And also when we speak about Jewish music in this context, which I think shows very well in my interviews, is that I think as researchers there's some . . . we don't have the possibly to really, any longer, to try to define this kind of grand narrative of Jewish music: so what is Jewish music? What is not Jewish music? And what music belongs to which part of the Jewish world? And so on. We cannot draw these clear boundaries any more. But Jewish music instead, I think we have to look at the context that we are researching. So it's a question of how we interpret the music; what associations are made; in what context it's presented; what intentions are tied to it? And there we can sort of try to circle in on what we mean with Jewish music. This was a very broad answer to your question!

BF: *That's ok. Maybe we should hone in a bit now – as you say, circle in – on your particular group you've been looking at which is progressive Judaism. My first sort of question, when you were talking*

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there, is you talked a little bit about the revival of music in progressive Judaism. What sort of timeline are we looking at in terms of this revival? Is it a relatively recent phenomenon that we're seeing?

RI: Well, both yes and no. I have made my interviews between 2014 and 2016. So, of course, that's very recent. And the persons I have been talking to, they have rather broad age spans. So they're born between the 1940s and the 1990s. So I have both rather young, and people who have grown up and come of age in the sixties. And what most of them, who use this historical language, say is that this process of change has a lot of roots in Jewish revival movement, which of course was tied, was a phenomenon of the sixties. And especially in the United States where the whole idea of reviving Judaism, of finding a more spiritually engaging way of practising Judaism arose – along with a lot of other New Age movements and the hippy movement and the whole counter-cultural milieu that we find in the late Sixties. So many would say that we saw it already here, in certain forms, these more embodied and engaging musical practices within Judaism. But I would say that, in my material, most people would talk about the change in a much shorter perspective – maybe talking about the twenty-first century, more. But I think we can see relevant ties to a process that began already in the sixties.

BF: *And what sort of function is this music having as part of this revival? What role was it playing?*

RI: I think . . . the subtitle of my book is *Being Liberal and Doing Traditional*. And I think this captures it quite well, the role of music here. Because, for the people I have interviewed, they would not be interested in trying out and exploring a more orthodox or traditional theology. They are very comfortable in their liberal progressive theological values which are very inclusive and very, sort-of, very open to liberal values. But what they want is a more traditional way of doing the Jewish stuff. I mean, how you go about the way of expressing your Jewish tradition, and what kind of things . . . in manifest ways you become Jewish. And here I think that music plays a pivotal role. Because somehow it's through the music that you can try to connect to more traditional ways of . . . especially more traditional ways of singing. Bringing in the cantillations to the services for example, not just reading the text, but chanting them in traditional Jewish ways. And then also bringing in more Hebrew besides the vernacular languages which are very broadly used in the progressive services in Britain (10:00). Trying out the sacred language, the Hebrew language, and sort of bringing all the dimensions that it can bring. My special interest was in a musical practice called *nigunim* which is means melody in Hebrew, or tune. Which is actually a tradition that derives from the Hasidic tradition where instead of singing with words you just skip the words and use onomatopoeic syllables like “lai-lai”. So that the singing itself becomes the prayer, not the words that are spoken. And this is explored in many different kind of progressive settings today. And this would not mean that the persons who are interested in adapting *nigunim* to liberal services, that they would be interested in Hasidic theology at all. But more

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the way of expressing these . . . the way of expressing and the way of using music to build a more comprehensive relationship to the liturgy. So here I think we can see the role of music as something that gives you an open space to combine and connect to tradition, but still hold on to the theological values that you want to preserve – the liberal values. So I would say that the role of music is rather big here, in this situation. It's somehow a tool that is . . . well it's not just a tool but it's a context and it's a way of being and doing Jewish that is available and useful in combining liberal values with traditional ways of practising.

BF: *It really sounds like it's trying to bridge that gap between, I suppose you phrase it as the old and the new. Which I think is quite a bit of a hot topic in Religious Studies at the moment. This sort of difference between very traditional streams of faith practice and more liberal and open, if you want to put it that way. This music seems to be a way that those two things are combined in modern Jewish practice.*

RI: Absolutely. And I think it's also a way of acknowledging that religion is not a static thing. And that it's always changing. I mean what we would call traditional today is of course always also something that is adapting and changing, with the context and with the time. And when I say that liberal Jews in London sing *nigunim* they are, of course, adapting it to their own needs and practices. We have the whole issue of men and women for example, singing together at all: [kol isha](#) is that the voice of the woman shouldn't be heard at all. And I would also say that many of them, most very consciously are not saying that they are reviving something that they're going back, you know, to tradition. It's not a move backwards. It's a move forwards. But it's a creative and free way of using tradition as a well to find inspiration in. But then to develop it to something that goes along with your own practice and your own values, and your own ethical standpoints. So it's very much not going back to tradition. And I think it's very much going forward but with inspiration from the past. But I think that's what you were also saying about here, and which I think is very relevant: where we end up is as researchers we have to question the idea of institutional engagement at this sort of . . . That it's a very clear line where we have, for example, orthodox and traditional in one end of the scale, and then we have the liberals at the other end of the scale. And then we have a clear line here of development and you can place people somewhere on this continuum. Because what these creative new combinations show is that you can actually combine a theological position which is very liberal with practices that are very traditional. And what you get is personal outlooks on how to be and do Jewish that do not fit these models that we try to squeeze people into.

BF: *I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit more about this sort-of specific community that you looked at. This sort of community in London. Is there anything specific about the reason why it has*

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popped up in London? Is this happening in other places? What's interesting about that specific landscape?

RI: Yes, thank you I think this is a very important question. Now, as you mentioned in your introduction, I'm based in Finland, and I lead a research institute in Finland. And well, first of all the practical reason: the number of Jews in Finland is so small (**15:00**), it's . . . well, officially we have 1500 persons in Finland who belong to Jewish communities. So this kind of research would not have been possible to do in Finland. But I wanted very much to do research that would focus on European Jewry, because I feel that much of the research on Judaism we have today is focussed very much on the large centres of Jewish population, so North America, and Israel. And much of what is going on in Europe or in Australia for that matter is not given as much focus as it could be. So I wanted to focus on European Jewry. And I also wanted explicitly to do research on progressive and liberal Judaism today, because also I think much of the research that we do on Judaism today is either focussed on the history, or then it is very sort of orthodox communities – of course, because they offer the most sort of controversial and specific contexts. So I wanted to focus on the liberal side. The reason that I ended up doing my research at [Leo Baeck College](#) well, it was first of all a practical reason that I had connections there. But I wanted very much to focus on a college community. It's quite a special congregation we have there, because among my interviews are students who are studying to become rabbis, both in the liberal and in the reform movements in Britain, but more largely in Europe. So I have the students, and I have the teachers, and the alumni, and other people who are connected to the college. And of course the college is quite a dynamic place. It's during your studies that you try out different ways of leading Jewish services, for example. When these people will move out into the congregations in Britain, and then as congregational rabbis, maybe, they will need more to adapt to the traditions of the specific community where they work, and all these things. But during your studies you are still quite open to try out lots of different visions that you have for how to use music in your Jewish life. So the college was really a marvellous place to do this research. And even though this Leo Baeck college, physically it's in North London and most of the students and teachers that I talked to were British in origin, some of them had been liberal Jews for four generations. Some of them had converted from Christianity. Others had an orthodox background, for example. And they also had their roots in lots of different countries: Germany, Russia, Romania, France, Canada, United States, Israel, just to mention it. So it was a very cosmopolitan and very dynamic and very interesting milieu. But still the college somehow is the connecting context for all of them. So that's how I ended up doing the research at Leo Baeck.

BF: *And what do you think was . . . Was there anything specific about London itself, apart from that college environment?*

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RI: Well, of course, London is one of the most international and multicultural places on the earth. So in that sense it was very interesting to see how these developments take place in this extremely sort-of multicultural milieu. But I still think, also, that Britain can function – and London especially now can function – as this very specified prism through which we can see developments and have a perspective, also, on different developments that we see. I think it's a good reflection of what is maybe coming to the Nordic countries, where the Jewish communities are rather small and have quite unified backgrounds. We can also We have in Europe, of course, the other large centre of Jewry is France where we have a different development going on. But then, also, the British development is very closely tied of course to what is going on in North America. But still I think many of the British Jews also had a very conscious wish to form their own interpretation of the lines of development that come from the United States. So in that sense, I think it's a good mirror for different kind of development we see in other parts of the Jewish world.

BF: *So do you think that this sort of movement could happen in perhaps less progressive areas? Perhaps somewhere like Israel? (20:00)*

RI: Well there are, of course, in Israel these kind of developments going on. I haven't specifically been studying in the Israeli context, but there are a lot of very progressive and very innovative small communities in Israel that work along these same lines. And many of the cantors and the rabbinic students that I've talked to also find great inspiration with different small communities in Israel. So I would say that it's also very central there. Yes, in different ways, I think that this is a movement that you can see all over the spectrum, so to say. And I think it was very interesting with the focus especially on the role of music here, and what it enables and how it speaks to people today. And I think that that goes over the line. But of course it has very different parameters and different enablers when you move to more traditional communities – especially when it comes to gender issues, and issues of inclusion, and so on.

BF: *I think I would like to just briefly touch on this concept of gender. Because I think what I've taken from this interview so far, is that your research is really helping to break down a lot of sort-of categories that may traditionally have been part of Religious Studies. It's breaking down the idea of orthodox and traditional, it's breaking down the idea of even more orthodox spaces and places, you know, and we can see the sort of liberal movements popping up throughout the world. It's not as though it has to be in a particular space or place. And this idea of the boundaries of gender is something that I think is particularly interesting. Is this music helping break down that barrier? Is that a role that it's taking? Or is that a separate idea altogether?*

BF: Well, yes and no, I would answer to this. At the first glance I think you might get the feeling that

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music is a very inclusive space where the role of gender is sort-of toned down, or being given less of a divisive role. But on the other hand, in my interviews I can also clearly see that there is still a gender difference. For example, if you are a male rabbinic student you have much greater possibilities to just enter any Jewish space that you want to, and take part of very orthodox rituals if you want to. As a woman you still cannot do that. And especially my interviews with the women who were a bit older, who were born in the forties and the fifties: for them, many of them felt that they had to leave an orthodox Jewish background behind if they wanted to be part of . . . have an active role in the liturgy, for example. Because women were not allowed those kind of positions. But then if they . . . then they moved from an orthodox congregation to a reform congregation, they would feel very much at a loss with the whole of the liturgy and the ceremony because it was so different. And they could even today tell about how they longed for the music, and the recitation, and the liturgical form that they wanted to have, which they could not be included in the orthodox settings, because they were women. And, of course, all the chances for this is much greater today and women are being included more and more. But still I think we shouldn't . . . women are not free to experiment with their spirituality. And not all these interesting aspects of the tradition are open to them in the same way as the male students. And I think one of the teachers said that she also felt a bit of a caution against students who very actively experiment with very orthodox practices. Because somehow, when they are rooted in a theology that is non-inclusive, when it comes to women or converts or people of other kind of minority positions within the community, it's somehow hard to divorce the music from the background where it comes from. So you always need to be aware, also, that you do not import theological positions that you wouldn't like to defend when you try out the music (25:00). So, both yes and no, I would say. We might think that music is very useful in this discussion, but it's not without its problems either.

BF: *Your research seems to highlight a lot of different areas of Religious Studies that perhaps we need to maybe tweak, or look at more broadly. We've looked at the idea of different categories, orthodox or liberal, in this interview as well as the idea of space and place, and the idea of music more generally. When you wrote this monograph, did you have sort-of an idea of the broader impact of your work on Religious Studies as a field?*

RI: Yes. I mean my background in Religious Studies, I have done . . . most of my research has dealt with issues of interreligious dialogue and cultural encounters. And also of contemporary religiosity in sort of ethnographic research on religiosity today. And then the arts has been a central focus of my research. I've done a lot of research on art as an arena for both for religious identity formation but also for encounters and so on. And what I wanted to show – and which I think has a broader bearing not just on Jewish studies but on Religious Studies more generally – is the fact of what role we can allot to other dimensions of the religious engagement than just the texts, and the intellectual dogmas, and this

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part of the religious engagement. [Rosalind Hackett](#), Professor Rosalind Hackett, in the United States, she had called for a more “sonically aware” Religious Studies and I think that's a brilliant way of putting it. And that's what I hope I can also contribute with this study. That we need to realise that music, and the arts in general, are not just ornaments or illustrations of something more profoundly important to religion. But that they are aspects of the religious engagement in their own right that we need to give serious scholarly attention. So I think that we need to take it not to say that we need to have more emotional and embodied Religious Studies, which we do, but we should see this as an opposite. Not that you have an intellectual engagement which is sort of more sincere, with the tradition, and then you have all this nice music and arts that come as ornaments to make it more interesting. But to really see that these are, can be, put on the same level and they both speak about religion in ways that we as scholars also need to be able to take seriously and listen to. So it's not an anti-intellectual stance, it's more like a call for a more nuanced study, that is not just falling into these black and white boxes. And to see how we can sort-of have a more nuanced and plural idea of what religion and religiosity mean, by taking these aspects of the religious engagement more seriously.

BF: *Just before we finish up, I have a bit of a left-field question for you. I don't how familiar you are with the world of sort of Jewish pop music on YouTube, but there are some very fun I suppose you would put it, sort of [YouTube clips](#) of sort of Jewish cover bands sort-of covering pop music and sort of changing the lyrics. I just wondered if you have any thoughts on these sort-of very popular interpretations of music amongst Jewish communities.*

RI: I know some of them especially with the [chabad](#) outreach that have this really great hits of boy bands which they make into sort of information music about different Jewish holidays and so on. I think it's great fun. And, of course, music is a creative tool and I think we're wrong to say that something is more authentic than something else. Or that some way of using music is wrong and something else is right. I think it just illustrates very well what a powerful tool music is, and how much it speaks to people. And also, from my own material, if I think about this *nigunim* singing and just singing lai-lai, (30:00) so most people say, “Well this is just like using a Buddhist mantra.” And or “the Taizé tunes we have in Christianity”, which is the same idea that you sing short syllables to repetitive music in meditative way. But still, the fact is that you can point to it that it has a connection to the Jewish tradition. That the *nigunim* and lai-lai singing, it comes from part of the Jewish world. It somehow ties these traditions closer to the heart of the people, and makes them more meaningful. And I think that's just what you can see in this pop music, too. That sort of referencing to and alluding to the sources, the tradition, to something that is felt to be very authentically Jewish. It's a very powerful tool. So I would say it's just a good illustration of the power of music.

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BF: *Well thank you very much for joining us today, Dr Illman. I think this discussion of music has just opened my eyes to the amount of sort of creative energy that is out there in terms of religious practice, particularly in terms of you know, the sort of bridging the boundaries between the different worlds, different traditions maybe. And I urge everyone to go check out the world of Jewish music on YouTube!*

RI: Well, thank you very much for this interesting discussion.

BF: *Great. Thank you so much.*

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