

Mah Nishtanah

By Cantor Sam Weiss

The Four Questions were taught to practically everyone in the European Cheder, and reviewed by younger students every year before Pesach. As with almost everything learned in the Cheder, it was chanted in one of the "study modes," in this case the question-and-answer talmudic chant marked by reciting tones on the open 5th (a 5th without the intervening notes sounded or implied, so that the interval can be heard as [n-]either major [n-]or minor) and octaves. This was particularly appropriate to the Mah-Nishtanah, which, like many of the core texts of the Haggadah, are citations from the Talmud. (The last question, about reclining, is a later substitution for the original Mishnaic question about eating only roasted [sacrificial] meat.) This chant was carried over to the home, and became traditionally associated with Mah-Nishtanah.

A related "study mode" marked by the falling motive from the minor third to reciting tones on the tonic followed by a leap to the 5th (cf. Yiddish question-and-answer songs like "Vos Vet Zayn Az Meshiakh Vet Kumen") was also sometimes used for the Four Questions, but was more typically used for the "Answer", i.e. the rest of the Haggadah. The "Israeli" Mah-Nishtanah melody taught in most Hebrew schools today is essentially a rhythmicization of this chant. A posting several years ago sent by Professor Eliyahu Schleifer of Jerusalem refers to the genesis of this melody:

<< ... Ephraim Abileah was among the founders of the Society for Jewish Folk Music in St. Petersburg in 1901... he was the composer of the melody of Mah Nishtanah that we all sing at the Seder. In the year 1936, Ephraim Abileah composed an oratorio "Chag Ha-Cherut" Festival of Freedom which included many pieces on texts from the Haggadah, among them the Mah-Nishtanah. The oratorio was performed only once in Haifa and was forgotten. But the melody became part and parcel of the Seder celebration in many families around the world. As usual, the melody soon won the status of "Trad." and no one remembered the composer. >>

Home
Biographies
Rozumni
Abraham Katz
Nusach Recorded
Rosenblatt
Max Bruch
Englander
Nusach Notated
Heymann
Discography
Chanukah
Media Archive
Forum
Online Archives
Articles
Persons
Misc Links
About

[Reactions to our forum](#)

[Receive free news bulletin](#)

Last update
22 February 2004

Editor
i.oppenheim@xs4all.nl



BTW here is one traditional East-European version of the Four Questions (Fir Kashes). Note that in the Hebrew segments I used the Sephardic pronunciation, but of course in Eastern Europe the Ashkenazic pronunciation was normally used.

[child:]

Tate lebn, ikh vil dir fir kashes fregn:

Ma nishtana halayla hazeh mikol haleylot.

Farvos iz di nakht fun peysekh andersh fun ale nekht fun a gants yor?

Di ershte kashe iz,

Sheb'khol haleylot anu okhlin khameytz umatzah,

Halayla hazeh kulo matzah.

Ale nekht fun a gants yor esn mir say khomets un say matseh,

Ober di nakht fun peysekh, esn mir nor matseh.

Di tsveyte kashe iz,

Sheb'khol haleylot anu okhlin sh'ar yerakot,

Halayla hazeh maror.

Ale nekht fun a gants yor esn mir alerlay grintsn,

Ober di nakht fun peysekh, esn mir nor morer.

Di drite kashe iz,

Sheb'khol haleylot eyn anu matbilin afilu pa'am ekhat,

Halayla hazeh sh'tey p'amim.

Ale nekht fun a gants yor tinken mir nisht ayn afileh eyn mol,

Ober di nakht fun peysekh, tinken mir ayn tsvey mol.

Di ferte kashe iz,

Sheb'khol haleylot onu okhlin beyn yoshvin uveyn m'subin,

Halayla hazeh kulanu m'subin.

Ale nekht fun a gants yor esn mir say zitsndik un say ongeleynt,

Ober di nakht fun peysekh, esn mir nor ongeleynt.

Tate lebn, entfer mir di fir kashes.

[father:]

Der terets iz,

Avadim hayinu l'far'o b'mitzrayim...

Knekht zenen mir geven bay paren in mitsrayim...

Sam Weiss is Cantor of the Jewish Community Center of Paramus, NJ.
This article appeared originally on the Shamash Jewish music e-mail list.



Keywords: Mah Nishtanah, Ma Nishtana, Pesach, Seider.