

The Main Klezmer Modes

by Josh Horowitz

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Loading

Table of Contents

Modes

[Ahava Rabbah](#)

[Mi Sheberach](#)

[Adonoy Moloch](#)

[Mogen Ovov](#)

[The Sub-Mode System of the Ahava Rabbah Mode \(Freygish\)](#)

[Modal Progressions](#)

[Modal Interchange](#)

[Sequential Progression](#)

[Questions](#)

... in 1992 I wrote an extensive 62 page article on the klezmer modes (centering on the freygish mode) which was accepted by Musica Judaica for publication of volume 13 of that journal. Lately (ahem) they have had problems, and every year I'm told the article will come out so in the past 7 years I haven't offered it to any other journals. ... I've extracted a few chapters, because I think there is such scant info out there, that maybe only this can justify the long mails I've been sending. I get a few dissertations and masters theses sent me every year, mostly from Germany of students writing about klezmer music, and found that misinformation has the curious property of multiplying. So here is a summary definition with some mechanics of the modes. Again comments appreciated... Josh

Because Klezmer music has not, to date, been fully penetrated by music theorists, the definition and nomenclature of its modes has remained unclear. Attempts to define the modes (Yidd. Shtayger, Scarbove or Gusto) in terms of their similarities to oriental modes, i.e. Turkish and Arabic Makamat, have been made. Such connections should, perhaps, remain comparative and not definitive in nature. Other attempts have been made to define the Klezmer modes on the terms of Western tonality or church modality, thereby disregarding essential differences in tonal content and behavior between the Klezmer modes and their objects of comparison. Klezmer modes are comprised of more than 7 notes - a fact which alone makes them unsuited to Western heptatonic theory. A mode, then, is more than just a scale, implying also the way the notes making it up are used. Each mode implicitly contains a mood and a set of motives which are specific to it, though the melodic contour of these motives overlaps extensively from mode to mode, whereby the intervals are the varying factor. Cantorial recitative improvisations (Yidd. Zogachts), as well as Klezmer tunes and improvisations, utilize these motives as their melodic basis. The basic content of a mode can be represented as a scale, though this can only provide a partial understanding of the mode. Therefore each mode has its own typical Scaler Form, Motivic Scheme, and Typical Cadence: Forms

Ahava Rabbah, or **Freygish** (called *Ahava Rabbah* in Yiddish Cantorial terminology and *Freygish* in Yiddish, from Phrygisch in German church mode terminology. Beregovsky suggested the term "Altered Phryian" due to the replacement of the raised 3rd degree for the lowered third). The Hebrew



form, *Ahava Rabbah*, means "Abounding Love" and refers to the text of the prayer from the *Shabbat Shacharit* service:

Ahava rabah ahavtanu...

'With abounding love hast thou loved us...'

Note that the latest stuff may not yet be indexed.

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Because of the text, it is referred to as the mode of supplication. *Ahava Rabbah* is often compared with the *Hijaz makam* of Middle Eastern music. It is frequently, but not exclusively found in Hassidic Klezmer pieces. Idelsohn points out the absence of the augmented 2nd in the biblical prayer modes and doubts, therefore, that the *Ahava Rabbah* mode is of Jewish origin. Because the communities that were living in areas which were predominantly Tartaric-Altaic showed use of this mode, Idelsohn concludes that the mode is Tartaric. He speculates that, with the expansion of the Tartars in Southern Russia into Hungary beginning with the 13th Century, the Jews found favor with the mode and eventually adopted it into the Shabbat morning ritual. He mentions that it was the same mode with which Olympus incited strong opposition when he introduced it into Greece around 800 B.C.E. on the Aulos, and points out that *Ahava Rabbah* was not used in the beginning period of the creation of *Piyyutim* from 800-1000 C.E. The Jewish composer Lazare Saminsky (1882-1959) harshly criticized the mode.

Mi Sheberach ('He who blessed,' also called the Ukrainian, Altered Ukrainian, Doina, Altered Dorian or *Ov Horachamim* ['Father of Mercy'] mode. The raised 4th degree of this mode lends it its characteristic profile. It often forms the basis of the *Doina* (Roumanian and Jewish-Roumanian improvised lament), but is commonly found in other forms of Klezmer music as well. It has earlier been misconstrued by certain cantors as being identical to the Dorian Church mode, and understood as exhibiting the raised 4th degree only in the descending form in synagogue song. The liturgical mode is comprised of a combination of two prayers; *Mi Shebarach* and *Av Horachamim*:

Mi shebarach avoteinu Avroham Yitzchak Yaakov
'He who blessed our fathers Abraham, Isaak and Jacob'

Klezmer music tends to make use of the raised 4th degree in both, ascending and descending forms, though in pieces where the nominal mode is *Mi Shebarach*, the natural and raised 4th may often be used interchangeably, or in alternating sections. In Romanian and Ukrainian music, the raised and natural 4th degree is also interchangeable, as is the minor or major 3rd degree of the mode. Idelsohn considers these interchangeable tones as being characteristic of non-Jewish Romanian and Ukrainian music, though early recordings of Romanian and Ukrainian Jewish musicians show frequent use of it. The *Mi Shebarach* mode is related to the *Ahava Rabbah* mode in basic pitch content, if one begins *Mi Shebarach* on its 2nd degree. In the Balkan countries, the oscillation between the tonics on the 1st and 2nd degrees is common; in Jewish music it is less common, though it can be found in Jewish *Doinas*.

Adonoy Moloch ('The Lord reigns') This mode resembles the Western Mixolydian mode and is a staple of the traditional Synagogue service. Sephardic cantors call it the *Tefillah* ('prayer') mode, whereas Ashkenasi cantors simply call it *Adonoy Moloch*, after the beginning of the text, which is taken from Psalm 93 and

sung originally as the opening prayer of the Friday night Shabbat service:

Adonay Malach, geut lavesh, lavesh Adonay, oz
hit'azar, af-tikon tevel bal timot...

'The Lord reigns; he is robed in majesty; the Lord is
robed; he is girded with power; Although the world is
established, it will never be shaken.'

It occurs often in *Ahava Rabbah* or *Yishtabach* Klezmer pieces as the first sub-mode, where it provides a contrasting lighter mood. It is similar to the Arabic *Makam*, *Siga*:

Mogen Ovos (Our forebears' shield) is one of the oldest synagogue modes. It is similar to the natural minor scale of Western music, and is found in Klezmer music in pieces of greeting and farewell, but is also used in dance tunes. In liturgical music, it stems from the *Haftarah* (obligatory chanting of parts of the Prophets after the Torah reading) and begins:

Magein Avot bidvaro, mechayeh meitim
bema'amaro...
'Our forbears'schild, reviver of the dead,
incomparable Lord...'

It teaches the relevance of Shabbat observance, and is therefore referred to as the Didactic Mode. *Mogen Ovos* is related to the combination of two Middle Eastern *Makamat*, *Bayat* (emphasising the 1st degree) and *Bayat-Nava* (emphasising the 4th degree).

Yishtabach ('It shall become superb') named after the prayer beginning:

Yishtabach shimcha la'ad malkenu hael ha melech
hagadol ...
'Thine name shall become superb forever, our King,
the Lord, the great Ruler'

This mode is related to *Mogen Ovos*, which in turn often borrows the melodic cadences of *Yishtabach*. It is characterized by frequent lowering of the 2nd and 5th degrees. One of the earliest known mention of *Yishtabach* as an independent mode is by the cantor, Joseph Singer (Illinik, Hungary, 1841- Vienna, 1911), though according to Singer, the *Yishtabach* mode is identical to that which is now accepted as the *Ahava Rabbah* mode. Pinchos Minkowsky (Biela Tzerkow, 1859-Boston, 1924) notates the *Yishtabach* mode in ascending (Aeolian) and descending (Phrygian) form with no further discernment. Moshe Beregovsky describes the mode as having lowered 2nd and 5th degrees. Beregovsky's definition corresponds to mine, and can be verified as being present in this form in many Klezmer pieces. When *Yishtabach* is the nominal mode, it often progresses to the IV *Adonoy Moloch*, a fact which Beregovsky observes, although he considers this as movement to the "relative major."

The Sub-Mode System of the Ahava Rabbah Mode (Freygish)

A Sub-mode is a mode which is hierarchically secondary to the nominal mode. The suggested criteria for determining secondary status of the sub-mode are one or more of the following:

1. The sub-mode appears in a part of the tune after the nominal mode has been established. Therefore, it usually does not appear at the very beginning of the tune, but may appear in the first section.
2. It usually creates contrast to the nominal mode, and often has the character of a short detour. Often, the sub-mode uses motives which may create an opposite pole to the character of the nominal mode, i.e. static-dynamic, or make an emotional contrast.
3. It usually occupies considerably less temporal space in the piece than the nominal mode.

Sub-modes constitute complete modes in and of themselves. It is merely their position in the hierarchy of the piece which relegates them to the status of sub-modes.

The following shows the nominal mode, *Ahava Rabbah*, with its family of sub-modes.

AHAVA RABBOH in D (Nominal Mode): (B C) D Eb F# G A Bb C D

SUB-MODES:
 VII ADONAY MOLOCH:
 VII MI SHEBARACH:
 VII MOGEN OVOS:
 *II YISHTABACH:
 *III ADONAY MOLOCH:
 IV ADONAY MOLOCH:
 IV MOGEN OVOS:
 IV AHAVA RABBOH:
 IV MI SHEBARACH:
 V AHAVA RABBOH:
 VI ADONAY MOLOCH:

Modal Progressions

The movement of one mode to another or to a sub mode can be called modal progression, and is analagous to modulation in western theory. Those tones of a tone group which change when a modal progression occurs, i.e. when a new pitch group or sub-mode is achieved, can be termed convertible tones. The converted tone often changes function in its new context.

There are:

Simple Modal Progression

Simple modal progression is a modal progression in which only one new sub-mode is arrived at before the return to the nominal mode.

Type I: I Ahavah Rabbah- VII Adonoy Moloch- I Ahavah Rabbah

Complex Modal Progression

Complex modal progression refers to a modal progression in which more than one new sub-mode is arrived at before the return to the nominal mode.

Type XII: I Ahava Rabbah- IV Adonoy Moloch- V Ahava Rabbah-

Modal Interchange

Modal interchange is the movement of one mode to another, whereby the tonalis remains the same. This means that the pitch content changes, but not the Tonalis. The sub-mode being interchanged need not be temporally adjacent to the nominal mode; it is sufficient if it is found in the same piece, even if separated by other sections. A sub-mode which is used only at the point of cadence (usually the last 2 bars of a section) is called cadential modal interchange. Often, however, a cadence in the sub-mode occurs in the middle of a section, in which case it is simply called modal interchange. Most of the cases of modal interchange involve an exchange of *Ahava Rabbah* and *Mogen Ovov*. When the nominal mode is *Mogen Ovov*, *Ahava Rabbah* can, in turn, function as a common mode of interchange.

Sequential Progression

Although sequential progression does not necessarily result in a change of pitch content, and therefore cannot always be considered as movement to a sub-mode, it can provide a shifting of the orienting, or central note of a mode or sub-mode within the confines of it. Melodic sequences exist in oriental, as well as in Western music. The sequence in Klezmer music is more a melodic phenomenon than a contrasting device, though the emphasis of the changing central note may be fortified through the underpinning of an accompanying bass part. There need not necessarily even be a shifting of the central note, but rather merely a sequentially repeating melodic figure which gives the impression of changing emphasis without establishing any secondary areas. Sequences can be found in sections where progression to a sub-mode or modes occur, and also in sections where modal interchange occurs (in short, all of the aspects of modal progression under observation here can be implemented concurrently). The sequence usually uses 3 or more tonal or modal areas, or at least 2 repetitions of a melodic unit. Sequences can also occur within a sub-mode; therefore, the analyses of the following examples display the sequence as it relates to the mode in which it is found, and not necessarily to the nominal mode.

Type XXV: I Ahava Rabbah- IV Mogen Ovov (iv-vii)- I Ahava Rabbah

Some questions which arise during a perusal of the problem of "*Shtaygerology*" are:

1. Can the temporal and geographic origins of a particular piece be ascertained through its modal mechanics?
2. Are there regional differences between the modes and their mechanisms (i.e. a klezmer *nussach*?)
3. What is the relationship of Klezmer modes to Cantorial (*Chazzanut*) modes? To those of neighboring or host peoples?
4. What are the similarities and differences to Greek, Turkish and Arabic *Makamat* or Persian *Dastgah*?
5. What are the limiting parameters of improvisation in modal Klezmer music?

6. Are there differences between the modal mechanics of vocal music (i.e., *Niggunim*) and instrumental music?

Posted by [Josh Horowitz](#) to the Jewish-Music mailing list, 24 Jul, 1999.

 [To the top of this page](#)

 [To top of page](#)



to [About the Jewish-music mailing list](#)
to [The Klezmer Shack main page](#)
to [Ari Davidow's home page](#)

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