

Sermon by

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The Operatic Genius of Wagner, and His Destructive Anti-Semitic Writing

This sermon is part one of a series on Wagner operas. How do we approach this composer who is closely identified with Hitler's ideal in music, yet recognizing that Wagner died in 1883, and was never a Nazi? How should Israel's orchestras treat this composer whose music stirs controversy over his prejudiced essays on the Jews in Music? Should you see the Ring Cycle?

I want to begin by saying that as a student in a Brooklyn Yeshiva, and later as a High School Student in the High School of Music and Art in NYC, I thought nothing of listening to the music of Wagner. I remember that I discovered his work from early childhood onward, when my mother would bring home LP albums sold for \$1 at the local supermarket and which eventually gave you a fantastic collection of classical recordings.

The 'Ride of the Valkyries' was featured on an LP, and I remember listening to it, with the lights turned off in the evening, sitting near a window and watching the branches of trees move as the music developed into a complex background for its famous brass theme. Very impressive!

Later I had the habit on a weekly basis of visiting the Donnell Library, Lincoln Center library and the Grand Army Plaza Branch of the Brooklyn Public Library. These all had LP lending collections of classical music and opera. Naturally I took out Wagner, along with everything else I could listen to, and I could also take home orchestral scores.

I liked the music of Wagner so much that I opened the windows to my room and played the music as loud as possible. Now you would expect that from Rock or Rap fan, but I did that with classical music. In reading about Wagner, it has always impressed me that he wrote his own libretti. In addition he invented and extended the range of several instruments, enlarged the orchestra to its modern size, and created his own Opera Festival House known as Bayreuth.

Wagner is considered one of the greatest geniuses in human history, writing enough to fill 1000 words for every day of his life even if we count the years of his childhood.

So what is our dilemma for the man who wrote The Ring, Die Meistersinger, The Flying Dutchman, Lohengrin, Tristan und Isolde and Parsifal? Can we go and just listen to his works? Well for some this is not difficult for they do not know about his anti-semitic writing. A new generation of opera goers do not care about that, and are only interested in the evenings entertainment.

Yet, it is difficult to separate the man and his music, just as you cannot separate his music and drama. To begin with he was born in 1813 and died in 1883, long before the rise of Nazism. Yet, if you go onto you-tube, you will see Wilhelm Furtwangler conducting the overture to Die Meistersinger on a stage with Nazi Flags, with Nazi supporters, officers and Hitler Youth in the audience. Some of you may know that Wagner was played by groups in Teresienstadt as they were marched off, or greeted by recorded Wagnerian music blaring as they arrived at Aushwitz.

Was Wagner a Nazi? No. Yet, something about his xenophobia and split personality appealed to the worst in Germany's deep rooted hatreds. It may be questionable to hold him entirely accountable for the Nazi embrace his music received. He was dead before Hitler was born. Yet, it is entirely understandable for Jews who live in Israel who are survivors or the next generation to demand that this music not be played in Israel.

I would like to draw a parallel with the greatest writer of the English language - William Shakespeare. Shakespeare did not write any essays on anti-semitism, yet he wrote 'The Merchant of Venice', whose leading character is the stereotypical Jewish money lender. Shakespeare perpetuates several lies in his characterization. The character, Shylock, has become synonymous with Jew, as someone who is only interested in money. Worse he makes an agreement that on default of payment he will demand 'a pound of flesh'. I think we all hear that phrase used constantly.

This whole idea is ridiculous and goes to the very heart of blood libels against Jews. What is worse is that there was an actual case that came

before a Pope prior to the writing of this play, in which it was a Christian who made a demand for a pound of flesh from a Jewish merchant. Fortunately the Pope ruled against this and supported the Jewish man. In the 20th century Shakespeare was given a trial in absentia on a Kibbutz, and found guilty of anti-semitism.

However, this will not stop anyone from going to see the greatest of all playwrights. 'The Merchant of Venice' may be the most popular of all Shakespeare plays in the most languages, and therefore, we can say it is very damaging even with a disclaimer.

So as Rabbi, I find Wagner's writing about the Jews absurd and hateful, just as the writing of Martin Luther on the Jews is dangerous and hateful. The Lutheran Church finally disavowed the works of 'Luther on the Jews'. When? In the 1990s.

The Wagner family has since expressed their regret for the hostile writing of their ancestor.

Yet, we have our question: Should we, or can we attend the performance of Wagner's music? Of course we can, but some of us will have to take anti-nausea medication. Others will say, it is no loss to not hear Wagner or to be part of his world. It would be no loss at all for many. I will in fact attend the performances, listening to the music, trying to understand the art, and music drama, yet always wondering how an educated society can be hoodwinked by the personal hatreds of dangerous narcissists.

You only need to know that Wagner attacked Mendelssohn as a soulless composer in order to begin to comprehend what an insanely jealous composer he was. He accused Mendelssohn of being incapable of having a German soul because, he was of Jewish origin. How many of you would prefer to listen to Mendelssohn over to listening to Wagner?

What Wagner missed most was the fact the Jewish Music goes back to the Temple in ancient times and further. The Gregorian chants in large part are borrowed for the Levitical music. With multiple sets of tropes for Torah and Prophets, music for the Book of Esther and Song of Songs, Lamentations, chanting of Psalms, Folk music and synagogue chant, a vast source of musical themes are available for composers which is as great as any

culture. Our creators lagged behind in Western Music for one reason only, anti-semitism prevented them from attending conservatories or monasteries where the art of Western music was taught. When this changed, Mendelsohnn was one among many who brought about the anti-Wagnerian answer to authentic Jewish Music and German music. Mendelsohnn's Italian Symphony, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Elijah, his piano music and chamber music are at the level of Mozart and Beethoven.

When I write about the Ring, it will be about the music and drama, the singers and production. It will also be to let another generation know of the terrible injury we have suffered being the scapegoat for those who think they are great by reducing other members of the human family.

Shabbat Shalom!