

Historical Background of HaTikva

Naftali Hertz Imbar, the attributed composer of *HaTikva*, was born in 1865 in the city of Zloczew in Galicia. The nine-stanza poem "*Tikvatenu*," whose first two stanzas became the national anthem "*HaTikva*," was written in 1878 and has undergone many changes over the years as a result of the dispute surrounding choosing a national anthem. The key line of the poem seemingly comes from the prophet *Yehezkel*, in his vision of the dry bones: "And God said to me: O mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone."

The inspiration of the poem "*Tikvatenu*" is said to have been the founding of the city of *Petach Tikva*. The themes of "*Tikvatenu*" were possibly influenced by Polish patriot songs. The Polish song, "Poland is not yet lost, while we still live" became the Polish national anthem with the birth of the republic between the two world wars. Although the source of the melody is not clear, there have been many conjectures as to its origin: an ancient Italian song, a Russian-Slavic song, a Polish tune, and others. It does appear that Samuel Cohen, who immigrated to Israel in 1888, is the one who adapted the text of *HaTikva* to the Romanian folk melody "The Wagon and the Oxen" by G. Popovitz.

The wording went through a series of changes over the years, reflecting shifts in nationalistic ideas and customs. The words "Where David once lived" were exchanged for "Zion and Jerusalem" in the chorus. The poem was later cut to two verses and the chorus. Another important textual change was the call to be "a free nation in our land" and not just to "live in the land of our fathers." The melody was also changed to fit the cadence and syllable stress of the new version. These changes can be traced through the various printed editions of the work, such as the 1909 version from the Hebrew Publishing Company.

The first competition for the national anthem was announced in *Die Welt*, a German newspaper, in 1898. The Fourth Zionist Congress announced another competition in the year 1900, but no song was officially chosen. In 1901, one of the sessions of the Fifth Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, ended with the singing of *HaTikva*, which was still then called *Tikvatenu*. It was not until 1905 that the entire *HaTikva* was sung by all the delegates present at the Seventh Zionist Congress. *HaTikva* was not officially adopted until the 18th Zionist Conference in 1933, the same year that Adolf Hitler rose to power.

During the pre-state era it was sung in Palestine as a way of identifying with the Zionist movement and was often played on the underground radio during the British Mandate. In Europe it was adopted by Jewish partisans and even by Orthodox Jewish families, who used its melody for the singing of *Shir ha'Maalot* at the Sabbath dinner table. While *HaTikvah* was sung at the ceremony marking Israel's Declaration of Independence and is played at all Israeli state functions, it has never, in part because of religious objections to its secular nature, been formally adopted by the *Knesset* as Israel's national anthem.

Contemporary criticisms voiced against *HaTikvah* are numerous:

1. A non-native Hebrew speaker wrote it, so the language is archaic and does not resemble the living language of the land of Israel.
2. It was written in *Ashkenazi* syntax, again not the way modern Hebrew is spoken, and so the rhythm and the accent on the syllables are off. It is also in a minor key, representing the plaintive wail of

the Eastern European Diaspora, not the rejoicing of the ingathering of the exiles, and certainly not representative of the experience of more than half of Israel's Jewish citizens that originate from Sephardic or Arabic lands.

3. The music of *HaTikvah* is not authentically Jewish music; it was consciously borrowed from a foreign song.
4. There is no mention of God within *HaTikva*.

Some critics have gone so far as to recommend replacing *HaTikvah* with Naomi Shemer's very popular "Jerusalem of Gold", a song identified with the Six Day War and the recapture of Jerusalem. It was written in Israel by a native Hebrew speaker, and is easy to sing. Those arguing in favor of the song's adoption, approve of the implicit message the song would send the world concerning the ultimate status of Jerusalem.

Imber died in 1909 in New York and his remains were re-interred at the Mt. Herzl cemetery in Jerusalem in 1953.

One of the other considerations for the Zionist National Anthem was *Shir HaMa'alot* (Psalm 126), which is the Psalm typically, recited as a prelude to *Birkat HaMazon* on *Shabbat* and *Chagim*. In 1979 when Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin signed a peace treaty with Egypt on the White House lawn, he read aloud the complete *Shir HaMa'alot* in Hebrew.