



# Meru Foundation eTORUS Newsletter

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Levanah and Stan Tenen

## Introduction

I want to thank both Levanah Tenen and our friend and colleague, composer Daniel Gil, for their work in creating this issue of eTORUS. We will return to our series of essays exploring the inverted-T as a representation of the golden rule in future issues; this month, I invite you to explore Gil's music on his website, [www.jewsmusic.com](http://www.jewsmusic.com), and learn more about his vision for his work in the interview below.

—Stan Tenen, Director of Research

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## Music for the Soul: An Interview with Composer Daniel Gil

This month, we offer a change of pace: an interview with composer Daniel S. Gil, and an introduction to the broad selection of music he has posted for free listening on his website, [www.jewsmusic.com](http://www.jewsmusic.com). Over ten years ago, Gil composed *The Creation Overture* for Meru Foundation—an orchestral rendering of the beginning of Genesis, letter by letter. (More on *The Creation Overture* below.) With his background in traditional Jewish learning, he is also an active colleague in Meru Foundation's research.

Daniel Gil is a graduate of Boston's [Berklee College of Music](#) whose works span many genres: from folk/world music, to orchestral, to abstract soundscapes. His special focus is the ancient tradition of Jewish song, from early sacred chants, through the *niggunim* (melodies) of the Eastern European Chassidic rabbis, to the songs of [R. Shlomo Carlebach](#); much of his own work follows in that tradition. (You can listen to Daniel's renditions of several of Reb Shlomo's melodies in the section on [jewsmusic.com](#) titled *Odds and Ends*.)

In our interview, Daniel and I discussed some of the more extensive works he's posted on [jewsmusic.com](#): *The Four Worlds*, a musical journey through the Four Worlds of Kabbalah; *Soul Calling*, a song-cycle of traditional Jewish texts leading to the holiness of the Sabbath; *The Creation Overture* (mentioned above); and *The Mystical Awakening*, an orchestration of four powerful *niggunim*—traditional Eastern European Jewish melodies—recorded at a live concert in Boston's Jordan Hall in 2004.

Stan and I find Daniel Gil's music to be an easy entry to deeper spiritual thought and feeling—it raises our vision of the world, and ultimately, leads us home.

—Levanah Tenen

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*LT: Tell us a bit about yourself, and your music.*

DG: I was born in Israel in 1972. As an infant during the Yom Kippur War, I couldn't help but feel the unrelenting tension and fear in the air, and it affected me profoundly. But one day during this crisis I heard a song, *Adir Hu*, one of the holy melodies of [Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach](#), and I felt a sudden rush of positive feelings, hope, joy, resoluteness, and above all a sense of gentle but very real strength. It is my earliest memory.

So even from childhood, this music soothed the pain in my heart—and it still does. It is the contrast between the great and awful darkness that plagues our world, and the great and Holy light of music, that moves me to bring our musical heritage forward for the world to see.

My path, which started with Reb Shlomo's incredible music, has led me to many other gardens of beauty in Jewish music. From the songs of great Rebbes long past, to my own humble melodies, I have learned and continue to learn what a truly beautiful and noble heritage Jewish music is. I strive beyond anything else to bring the truth of that heritage to life and realization in this world. To that end I dedicate my life's work to Jewish music.

*LT: Since there's such a variety of musical styles in the selections on [jewsmusic.com](#), I'd like to talk a bit about them individually.*



*The first section is your recent album titled [The Four Worlds](#), referring to the traditional Four Worlds of Kabbalah. As you put it in your liner notes for this album, they are: *Asiyah*, the world of action; *Yetzirah*, the “world of angels and souls” (usually thought of as the world of formation); *Beriyah*, the world of creativity; and *Atzilut*, the world of closeness. So this album is in four sections, each composed of several songs/musical experiences, blending into one another in a way that's reminiscent of some of the “concept albums” of the 1970s. At an hour and a half—[The Four Worlds](#) is a lot of music! What was your vision with this composition? What did you see as the goal? What did you want to bring out?*

DG: The idea just came to me one day shortly after we moved to Sharon, Massachusetts. I was just playing some music, and all of a sudden it just popped in my head: this idea of the Four Worlds, and having a musical experience where you take the music from very basic or straightforward, to very nuanced and sophisticated or ethereal—and in between—and this felt like just a neat concept for an album. Also with this album, I want to introduce into the music world—specifically the Jewish music world—the concept not only of an elevated music, but also an elevated arranging style. I've used a very sophisticated arranging style throughout this work—orchestral, beautiful, and very much non-standard.

That's what music is for: music is always elevating. It always brings things to their roots. True music, of whatever genre, is something that elevates. That's really the concept of [The Four Worlds](#)—not to denigrate this physical world, but rather to present it in an elevated way.

*LT: I always think of this kind of elevation as going inside to where it's bigger.*

DG: Yes. The main concept of [The Four Worlds](#) was that it is to be an inner journey. People are fascinated with the “outer journey”—*Star Trek*, *Dune*, whatever, and I love all those works—but it occurs to me that beautiful as it is, and the physical universe is incredibly beautiful, it must be that if we're at the lowest world, and this world has such beauty, then the higher or more inner worlds must be even more beautiful. So the concept I was shooting for was to go more and more deeply into beauty and harmony, and come to a bigger place.



LT: Now, to *Soul Calling*. This album was issued on CD in 1999, and it's one of your earlier works. What was going on in your life at the time?

DG: *Soul Calling* is a fascinating journey. We recorded the original version in Boston, right after my wife and I got married, and just before we moved to Israel. My father was helping me out with my career, so he sent out the original version of *Soul Calling* to a lot of people. One person responded: a producer from the San Francisco Bay area, who wrote back and said he liked the album—but he thought I ought to re-record all of it with a local Bay Area artist named Bruce Burger. [Bruce Burger, aka Rebbe Soul, is well known in the Jewish/World Music community ; you can explore his music at [www.rebbesoul.com](http://www.rebbesoul.com).—LT]



So my dad and I flew to San Francisco and re-recorded the album there. Bruce produced it, and he brought in some great Bay Area players—the wind player on that album plays in Tower of Power, the bass player is an unbelievable local musician—it was a lot of good stuff. The engineer said he'd never seen a project like this happen so quickly—we were finished in three or four days. So, *Soul Calling* was basically a gift from above: I just showed up and sang, and the rest just happened.



LT: Next is *The Creation Overture*. One of our original ideas for exploring the pattern in the letter-text of Genesis was to do it musically: listening for a pattern. We made a *chromatic rendering of the first 100 letters of the text*, and several composers made attempts at rendering it musically. (One successful version was by *Stephen James Taylor*; you can hear it underneath the opening and closing credits of Meru's full-length videos available on [www.meetingtent.com](http://www.meetingtent.com)).

What you did with the text, though, was a totally different approach than the many others we'd heard—and in Stan's and my opinion, it's the most successful. Could you say more about your approach to the text? Also, as I recall, this project was something you weren't terribly enthusiastic about doing when you first started—so maybe you could talk a bit about that as well.

DG: Stan kept telling me there was a pattern in the letters musically. I was doubtful—I thought, sure, there's a pattern mathematically, but musically? Music and letters? Then he played me the chromatic rendering of the first verse, and I listened to that, and I remember thinking, oh wow, that really is a pattern, how about that? So I thought, okay, fine, I'll do something.

I came up with a pretty simple system as far as text-based composing goes—a way of digging into the text as a composer. Oftentimes as a Jewish person I'll sit with a text and I'll ponder over it, and I'll meditate on it, and think about how it relates to other texts—I can kind of crawl inside the texts. So this was a way for me to connect with the text on this deep musical level.

The heart of the musical system I used was to assign each letter a consistent note, consistent both in pitch and octave. I figured that as long as every letter had a consistent note, playing the text would show a pattern. So for example, in my system, *Bet* [the first letter of Genesis—LT] was C# right above middle-C. Each note represents a letter, and it has to be exactly in its own octave; as a composer, this naturally affects the harmony and orchestration as well.

Once I had this system, I made the first decision: I decided that the universe was going to start with a major chord. How could it not? So, the first letter, *Bet*, is middle-C#—which was perfect for putting a large major chord around it. Then the text says, *Resh*—which shoots the music up to a C-natural, a few octaves higher;



perfect for a small minor chord. Then the melody shot back down to the *Alef*, middle-C-natural, which makes for a perfect large minor chord; and then it goes right back up to C#, which made for a perfect small major chord. So you have Major-Large, Minor-Small, Minor-Large, Major-Small. It's in pairs, in opposition—

*LT: That's like a chiasmus pattern—a “crossover” pattern of words that people find in Biblical texts.<sup>1</sup>*

DG: What I came to understand is that the text is about every single letter, and how the letters relate, and about the process of creation that's inherent in the text. And then, the truth is that that piece just wrote itself. I felt like I was taking dictation, to be honest. It was eerie. I literally felt like someone was standing over my shoulder—it was kind of scary, but it was so clear. All music does that, when you're composing at a certain point it starts to jell—but this experience was really off the charts. As a composer, it was one of the most fascinating experiences, because everything came out of that first decision. The initial *Bet* is the first distinction—and that's exactly what the music was; from the first distinction, everything else flowed out.



*LT: Now, to [The Mystical Awakening](#). As I understand it, these four orchestral pieces came from a project of recovering niggunim from Mezbuz.<sup>3</sup> Why those particular melodies? What drew you to them?*

DG: I can remember the moment the idea came to me. I was at a yeshiva in Sfat<sup>2</sup>, and I decided that in addition to learning Torah I decided to start playing the violin again. So I was standing there, playing a piece by some classical composer—and then I started playing one of Reb Shlomo's niggunim, and realized that the niggunim—traditionally, they are unaccompanied melodies—have aspects that lend themselves in a very immediate and good way to orchestral music.

This is a whole conversation, about the concept of Jewish melody. In a nutshell, Jewish music is defined by melody; I think Jewish music has the most developed sense of melody of any type of music on the planet. In Western music, the real focus is on harmony (this is of course a very big generality), and the melodies that are generated are derived from a harmonic sequence. In Jewish history there are some time periods where we had some access to harmonic considerations, but for the most part, we didn't. So what we ended up doing is developing melody to a heightened degree.

So my original idea was to try to introduce harmony to these traditional melodies—not to try to usurp the Jewish tradition of songs, but rather, to try to take Jewish songs and expose their harmony, much in the way [Ralph Vaughan Williams](#) did with Welsh folk music. He never changed the melodies; instead, what he did is very cleverly expose what was inside them: he kind of unpacked them, to show their inner beauty. So that's what I'm trying to do with these pieces (both in [The Mystical Awakening](#), and other samples of orchestrated *niggunim* on the website).

In my research I came across some niggunim associated with the Chassidic community of Mezbuz that I found to be very profound, so I chose to work with them. These niggunim—they are just a person singing to God. There's no other motivation: they're not trying to sell anything, they're not trying to impress anyone. So in a sense, I think that niggunim represent pure music, because there's no other consideration in the mind of the person who comes up with them. In that way, I feel that they can be inspiring to other artists too: they can give other artists the strength to stretch beyond any sort of commercial considerations, and do what they consider to be pure music. That's my hope, anyway.

*LT: I want to thank Daniel Gil for taking the time to introduce us to his music. I invite eTORUS readers to listen, and share [jewsmusic.com](#) widely—it's for everyone, no matter their background. You can contact Daniel by email: [dgilmusic@gmail.com](mailto:dgilmusic@gmail.com).*



Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Arthur Young's model of process, an important source in Meru Foundation's work, is diagrammed in a "V" format, as shown in *The Alphabet That Changed the World*, Figure 5.15. This is another form of "crossover" pattern.

<sup>2</sup>The town of Sfat (or Tzfat), located in northern Israel, has been a center of Kabbalistic learning since the 15th Century CE.

<sup>3</sup>Mezbuz, a town in the western part of Ukraine, was the home of the Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760), the founder of the Chassidic movement.

Informational links in this text:

Daniel Gil's website, <http://www.jewsmusic.com>



*Berklee School of Music*: <http://www.berklee.edu>



Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shlomo\\_Carlebach\\_\(musician\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shlomo_Carlebach_(musician))



100-note chromatic rendering of the Genesis text: <http://www.meru.org/Newsletter/Genesis-100-notes.mp3>



Stephen James Taylor: [http://www.stephenjamestaylor.com/sjt/home\\_page.html](http://www.stephenjamestaylor.com/sjt/home_page.html)



Ralph Vaughan Williams: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ralph\\_Vaughan\\_Williams](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ralph_Vaughan_Williams)





**Meru Foundation on the Web**

**www.meru.org** Meru’s original website was created in 1996, and has a large selection of essays and posters on many different aspects of this work. This is a site for leisurely exploration; the home page also includes a PayPal button for contributions.

Our eTORUS Newsletters include the most recent essays and graphics; all issues are archived at **www.meru.org/Newsletter/journalindex.html**.

A basic introductory packet on Meru Foundation, including a research summary, endorsements, a sample eTORUS, and biographical information, is posted at **www.meru.org/MeruIntroPacket.2013.pdf**.

**www.meetingtent.com** Meru’s secure-server website for ordering our lecture DVD’s, books, and other materials, and for making contributions via credit card. This site also includes a Meru FAQ, sample videos, and contact information for the media.

**www.tatctw.com** Website focused on Stan Tenen’s 2011 book, *The Alphabet That Changed the World: How Genesis Preserves a Science of Consciousness in Geometry and Gesture*. Includes professional and reader reviews, and a portal for ordering from Amazon.

**www.youtube.com/user/filmguy2121** Bill Haber’s YouTube channel, featuring our introductory video *First Light*, animations, and video excerpts from live lectures by Stan Tenen.



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