

Schoenberg's Return

*A Commemoration of the 88th Anniversary of Arnold Schoenberg's
1933 "Re-entry into the Community of Israel"*

By Michael R. Caplan

Text of the private Zoom event in the Salon of ShAkE / July 25, 2021

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bpYLO_jR8A

NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION



MICHAEL CAPLAN'S

House
of
ShAKE



INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Schoenberg's Return*, in commemoration of the great composer's "Re-entry into the Community of Israel", as he called his July 24th, 1933 reaffirmation of the Jewish faith. Like many Jews of his time, he had earlier converted to Protestantism (his baptism announcement is the first text in the following presentation), but in the face of rapidly growing antisemitism in Germany and Europe generally, he felt compelled to stand with his people. In my own humble, secular, aesthetic way, I'm both celebrating and appropriated his gesture with this little event.

I'm the furthest thing from an expert on Schoenberg. But as a theatre person and singer who loves the beauty of the human voice, when I first heard his *Sprechstimme* – "speaking-singing" – it was a revelation to me. I have long sought a way to *use* this material, because putting something into a performance or other project is always my preferred means of learning.

I'm also far more knowledgeable about antisemitism than I am about Judaism, as a patrilineal Jew who has never been "religious" according to official standards. But neither am I "anti-religious". All that is associated with monotheism and the religions emerging from the Abrahamic source fascinates me and, I believe, underlies the most important conflicts in our increasingly global culture. Schoenberg's impassioned meditations on language, images, and truth are not only eloquent, but astonishing in their frankness and intellectual courage.

I've mixed texts from different sources and time periods, forming a sort of dialogue on a series of themes. Let me tell you a bit about my sources and the relevant chronology, so you'll have some reference points in what follows ([Chronology](#)).

Finally, the short musical bits were cobbled together out of overlapping, phasing snippets of *Moses and Aaron*, sometimes from different recordings. They're the roughest of drafts of an idea I hope to develop further, but they have allowed me to immerse myself in those massed voices. Technical issues with the audio will be resolved in future presentations.

Now on to *Schoenberg's Return*. We'll have some time to chat afterwards, if anyone wants to stick around. Thank you for being here!

CHRONOLOGY

- 1874 Born in Vienna 13 September, first son of Samuel Schoenberg from Szecheny and Pauline Nachod of Prague; circumcised according to the Jewish rite eight days later
- 1879 Wilhelm Marr, originator of the term “antisemitism”, founds Austrian Antisemitic League
- 1889 Adolf Hitler born in Braunau/Austria
- 1896 Herzl’s *Judenstaat* launches Zionism as a modern political movement
- 1898 Schoenberg accepts baptism in the Protestant Dorotheer Community
- 1915 Schoenberg enters army service
- 1921 The Schoenbergs forced to leave Mattsee where Jews are considered “undesirable”
- 1931 First act of *Moses und Aron* finished; stormtroopers attack Jews attending services
- 1933 Hitler seizes power; Schoenberg and Jewish colleagues dismissed without compensation
- 1934 Schoenberg moves permanently to the US
- 1938 Austria joins Third Reich; Kristallnacht pogroms signal the end of Central European Jewry
- 1943 Germany is officially *judenrein*. Polish ghettos are liquidated
- 1944 The composer in ill health in his seventieth year retires from university teaching
- 1945 War ends and the Nuremberg trials begin
- 1946 22nd Zionist Congress demands the immediate creation of a Jewish state in Palestine
- 1947 *A Survivor from Warsaw*
- 1948 Newly proclaimed State of Israel is attacked by the surrounding Arab countries
- 1950 Op. 50b dedicated to the State of Israel; Vienna makes him an honorary citizen
- 1951 Honourary chairmanship of the Jerusalem Music Academy; passes away on 13 July

SOURCES

Major source texts by Schoenberg for *Schoenberg’s Return* include his playscript for *Der biblische Weg* (1933; the character MAX ARUNS), his libretto of *Moses and Aaron* (1932; the characters of MOSES, CHORUS, SEVENTY ELDERS, etc.), his “A Survivor from Warsaw” (1947; the words of the SURVIVOR were, Schoenberg said, “based partly upon reports which I have received directly or indirectly”), his “Four-Point Program for Jewry” (1938), letters, and occasional writings.

Schoenberg's Return

A Commemoration of the 88th Anniversary of Arnold Schoenberg's 1933 "Re-entry into the Community of Israel"

Prelude

"Arnold Franz Walter Schoenberg, Vienna 11, Leopoldgasse 9. Baptism 25 March 1898: Priest Alfred Formey, Godfather Walter Pieau, Opera singer, Vienna I, Bauernmarkt 3"

Most of all I would like to write for a magic theater. (1910)

Toward the end it got very ugly in Mattsee. The people there seemed to despise me so much, it was as though they knew my music. (1921)

THE SURVIVOR: I cannot remember everything. I must have been unconscious most of the time. I remember only the grandiose moment when they all started to sing, as if prearranged, the old prayer they had neglected for so many years – the forgotten creed! (1947)

I.

(SOUND: Schoenberg's Return 01_I-3.mp3)

MAX ARUNS: What is this festival? Is it a sports event? A parade? A party convention? A people's assembly? Is not this day like all others? No, it is not; it is one that will be commemorated for all time among Jews. Just like that day on which the youngest male asks: "Why today do we sit reclining?" But here you will have to ask instead: "Why today do we all stand up? Why did we rise? Why don't we remain seated on the floor, low, like in all those days past?" We got up, we rose and rose to a size that nobody could have foreseen. (1933)

But the Jewish body is divided in a very complex way. Primarily, the whole body is divided into three principal sections, hostile to each other, according to religion: orthodox, reformist, atheist; then each of these groups is broken according to socio-political principles into conservatives, liberals, socialists. Further, the origin of the Jews, as Western, Eastern, Oriental, again subdivides every group. And finally, each one of these geographic groups includes "nationalities" eager to preserve their respective peculiarities, proud of them, hostile toward all the others, and increasing the tendency to splinter into an almost unlimited number of "isms". This is bad enough, but in fact it is still worse. Jews are individualists. Educated during thousands of years by their teachers in exegesis of the secrets of the Bible, they are accustomed to finding individual resolutions of their problems. They are now applying the same individualism in the field of politics. Probably every Jew will apply his own way of thinking, a home-made theory, a personal attitude to every problem he faces. Nothing could be more disastrous to a people than that. (1938)

Never enter into discussion, because every Jew is superior to every other Jew, and will apply logic better than every other Jew, and he will win or at least the other will lose. At least, time will be lost. ... Never enter into discussion! (1938)

In spite of its antagonism to unanimity, one will understand that it is not by accident that we are thus constituted. It is my belief that this astonishing mentality is a divine gift, destined to protect us, to enable us to outlast the diaspora with its persecutions and its dangers to personal life and to the existence of our people. (1938)

MOSES: Law of thought irresistible forces fulfilment. (1932; I-2)

II.

CHORUS: We are his chosen folk before all others, We are the chosen ones, him alone to worship, him alone to serve. We shall be free then from toil and misery! This is his promise: He will then lead us to a land where milk and honey flow. And we shall enjoy then what he once did promise our fathers. Almighty, thou art stronger than Egyptian gods are. (1932; I-4)

MOSES: You then desired actually, physically, to tread with your feet upon an unreal land where milk and honey flowed. You then struck the rock, instead of speaking to it, as you were commanded to do in order to make water flow forth from it ... The word alone was to have struck forth refreshment from the naked rock ... (1932; III-1)

(Everywhere now wine is given out in streams. A wild drunkenness overtakes everyone. Heavy stone jars are thrown about. The people shower wine and implements upon each other during extravagant dancing, whereupon quarrelling and fighting break out here and there.) (1932; II-3)

MOSES: Inconceivable God! Inexpressible, many-sided idea, will you let it be so explained? Shall Aaron, my mouth, fashion this image? Then I have fashioned an image too, false, as an image must be. Thus am I defeated! Thus, all was but madness that I believed before, and can and must not be given voice. O word, thou word, that I lack! (1932; II-3)

III.

... I propose to move the Jewish community to its very depths by a graphic demonstration of what lies in store for the German Jews unless they receive help within the next two or three months. (1933)

Every keen and realistic observer should have known this beforehand, as I knew it almost twenty years ago. Even one who does not overrate Jewish intelligence in political affairs will admit that every Jew should have known at least that the fate of the Austrian and Hungarian Jews was sealed years ago. And can a man with foresight deny that the Jews of Rumania and Poland are in danger of a similar fate. (1938)

Once the fiend has stormed, entered the fortress and started to plunder, there is no chance of negotiation and offer to surrender. There remains either to abandon resistance in despair or to fight the fiend to the bitter end. The decision will not be sought any more in discussing right or wrong. His right is force, the other's wrong is weakness. (1938)

PRIEST: How long is this to continue? Forty days now we have awaited Moses, and still no one knows either law or command! Unperceivable command from one who's yet unperceived. (1932; II-1)

(SOUND: Schoenberg's Return 02_II-1a.mpg "Forty days ...")

IV.

THE SURVIVOR: They came out; some very slowly, the old ones, the sick ones; some with nervous agility. They fear the sergeant. They hurry as much as they can. In vain! Much too much noise, much too much commotion! And not fast enough! The Feldwebel shouts: "*Achtung!...*" The sergeant and his subordinates hit (everyone): young or old, (strong or sick), quiet, guilty or innocent ... (1947)

SEVENTY ELDERS: Blood offering! (1932; II-3)

YOUTH: As high as thought were we once upraised, present afar, future at hand! Deep as life are we degraded. (1932; II-3)

Are they condemned to doom? Will they become extinct? Famished? Butchered? (1938)

(SOUND: Schoenberg's Return 03_II-1b.mp3 "We are his chosen folk...")

V.

... there is no conceivable reason why people should hate us. We know we are not as our enemies describe us. On the contrary, if it were for our qualities we should be liked and admired. We are generous, good-natured, faithful, honest at least in the same degree as other people. In our minds is anchored the obligation to help the poor, which has been an especial part of our religious law for five thousand years. (1938)

Considered a minor kind of human being, suppressed, outlawed, suspected, shown and hostility, we scarcely dared ask to be treated lawfully and avoided as much as possible the irritation of our enemies so as not to become exposed to their anger. How could it happen that men who even did not ask for equality could be called arrogant? Nevertheless, the arrogance of Jews is the very cause of anti-semitism. Only this term does not refer to the behavior or attitude of the single person, but to the whole of us, to the entire Jewry. Every non-Jew believes, consciously or subconsciously, that in every Jew is alive the feeling that he is different from all other peoples by his belonging to God's elected people. This is what they antagonizingly call great presumption, and to that they react with contempt and hatred. (1938)

But we possess one quality which seems remarkable if not unique – whilst other peoples have been converted, it has been impossible to convert Israel. It is our devotion to an idea, to an ideal, and it springs from our deep devotion to our inherited faith. (1938)

MAX ARUNS: We are an old people. What would a God mean to us whom we could understand, of whom we could form an image, on whom we might prevail? We don't need miracles: persecution and contempt have made us strong, have multiplied our tenacity and resilience, generated and improved organs that enhance our ability to resist. We are an old people. (1933)

VI.

What I have been compelled to learn this last year, I have now finally understood and shall never forget: I am neither a German, nor a European, nor even a man (the vilest of Europeans throws his race in my face). I am a Jew. I am quite content! Today I hope for no exception with regard to myself; I do not object to being tarred with the same brush as the others. For I have seen that the other side (which is no longer in any way exemplary for me) are also all to be tarred with the same brush. Someone whom I had thought to be on the same level as myself I have seen associating himself with this band. I have heard that even Kandinsky only saw those actions of the Jews which were despicable and only those despicable actions which were committed by the Jews, and consequently I lose any hope of reaching an understanding. It was a dream. There are two humanities – definitely! ... (1923)

I now call myself a Jew with pride; but I know how difficult it is to really be one. (1932)

The Messiah of inner equilibrium! (1933)

Today you bring your people the sacrifice of all your former striving after those intellectual goods that served the Diaspora. And today you affirm with all your strength that you are ready to serve a knowledge higher than all human wisdom: That you want to make it possible for your people to live out its God-idea, to dream it to the very end. (1933)

The learned Philistine abhors mysteries, Because they reveal that which can never be proven. (1951)

(SOUND: Schoenberg's Return 05_II-5.mp3 "O, Wort ...")

VII.

CHORUS: But I see him not! Where is he? Has he gentle or angry mien? Are we then to love him or to fear him? Where is he? Point him out! We want to kneel down. We want to bring beasts forth to him, and gold, wheat and barley, and wine! All will go to your God almighty, if we're his people, if he is our god now and if he guards us well! But then where is he? Point him out! (1932; I-4)

... I must conclude ... that I have made a very great moral and tactical mistake. I have accepted the discussion, I have entered into a polemic, I have defended myself. In doing so, I have forgotten that it is a matter neither of law nor of absence of law, nor of truth, nor of falsehood, nor of knowledge, nor of ignorance, but of power relationships ... I forgot that the discussion had no sense since in any case I shall not be heard, that there is no wish to understand, if it is not that of not hearing what the other says ... (1923)

Could not Kandinsky foresee all that, could he not sense what was going to happen? (1923)

MOSES: But in the wasteland you shall be invincible and shall achieve the goal: unity with God. (1932; III-1)

VIII.

THE SURVIVOR: I must have been unconscious. The next thing I heard was a soldier saying: "They are all dead!" Whereupon the sergeant ordered to do away with us. There I lay aside half conscious. I had become very still – fear and pain. Then I heard the sergeant shouting: "Abzählen!" They start slowly and irregularly: one, two, three, four – "Achtung!" ... They began again, first slowly: one, two, three, four, became faster and faster, so fast that it finally sounded like a stampede of wild horses, and (all) of a sudden, in the middle of it, they began singing the *Shema Yisroel* (Hear, O Israel). (1947)

Harmony. (1951; Schoenberg's last whispered word, according to his wife Gertrud)

Epilogue

"On the twenty-fourth of July 1933, M. Arnold Schoenberg, born in Vienna on September 13, 1874, presented himself before us (Louis-Germain Lévy, Rabbi of the *Union libérale Israélite*, 24 rue Copernic in Paris), in order to express his formal desire to return to the community of

Israel. After having been given this present declaration to read, M. Arnold Schoenberg stated that it truly expressed his thought and intentions. Written in Paris in my study, 24 rue Copernic, the twenty-fourth of July 1933. Read and approved: Arnold Schoenberg, Louis-Germain Levy, Rabbi. Witnesses: Dr. Marianoff, Marc Chagall"

