**Carole King: Famous, yet ‘haimische’**

By Robert Gluck/JNS.org

Singer-songwriter Carole King is best known for numerous hits and four Grammy awards, but what is perhaps not as widely recognized is the Jewish familial backdrop for her life and work. Part of that can be traced back to her grandmother, Sarah Besmogin.

“When 12-year old Sarah looked through a grand parlor window and saw a girl her own age playing a piano, that image became a symbol of the wealth and accomplishment to which she could never aspire,” King writes in *A Natural Woman*, her new memoir which came out this year. “She resolved instead to become an aishes chail. Loosely translated, an aishes chail is ‘a woman of worth, a virtuous woman.’”

Born Carol Klein to Jewish parents in Manhattan, King is a member of the Songwriters Hall of Fame. Many continue to pay her tribute for her influence on music and songwriting. One of them is Jimmy Webb.

In 2011, Webb replaced the late Hal David (who passed away last month in Los Angeles) as the chairman of the Songwriters Hall of Fame. The Songwriters Hall of Fame is an arm of the National Academy of Popular Music and was founded in 1969 by songwriter Johnny Mercer and music publishers Abe Olman and Howie Richmond. The Hall of Fame holds workshops and showcases and provides scholarships to promising songwriters.

“As a young writer I was a follower of Carole,” Webb told *JNS.org*. “She is phenomenally talented and unique. Her songs are serenely beautiful expressions of the positive side of the human spirit. Her song ‘Up on the Roof’ is transcendent. I was very much influenced by her. Her songs have a clear, logical path to them. She’s a master storyteller.”

In a recent interview with Tavis Smiley for his show on public television, King talked about family influences on her life and work.

“The first piece of furniture in my parents’ home was a piano,” she told Smiley. “So it was there, and I evidently have some sort of gift with it, so that was an opportunity. My parents were both supportive, exposed me to the arts, to music. I lived in New York City. I technically lived in Brooklyn with access to New York City, and my mother brought me to shows, Broadway shows. So I think living in New York was a world of opportunity that maybe is not as readily available to others who grow up in more rural communities. That is not to say that that stops them. They just have to travel farther.”

Webb said King’s songs changed American music.

“She helped to create another hallmark in the history of American music when she put out the album Tapestry,” Webb told JNS.org. “She sang her songs in her own voice, and it was striking because no one had ever done that before in the songwriting world.”

In her book *Girls Like Us: Carole King, Joni Mitchell, Carly Simon and the Journey of a Generation*, author Sheila Weller counts “haimische” (homey) among King’s attributes.

“Carole was haimische,” writes Weller. “A sincere, homey person who does the right thing, who you felt you’d known all your life.”

An award-winning songwriter in his own right, Webb—who wrote “Up, Up and Away” and “Wichita Lineman,” which Glen Campbell made into a hit—told JNS.org that King was innovative in her choice of subjects.

“She also was one to, early on, tap into sociological issues like in the song she wrote, ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow,’” he said. “She went past the obvious themes of love and sex. She was way ahead of her time.”

King was a proficient pianist by the age of four, according to the Songwriters Hall of Fame website. As a teenager, she recorded demos, sang backup, helped arrange recording sessions, and wrote and recorded a few singles that went nowhere. Then, while a student at Queens College, she met her future writing partner and husband, Gerry Goffin. King’s 1960 single “Oh! Neil,” which she recorded, was a riposte to her friend Neil Sedaka’s song “Oh! Carol.” It was not a hit, but it impressed Don Kirshner, who signed the King/Goffin team to his Aldon Music Empire.

Their first success arrived in 1960, when the Shirelles recorded “Will You Love Me Tomorrow?” This began a seven-year string of chart-toppers, including “Take Good Care Of My Baby” (Bobby Vee), “Up On the Roof” (The Drifters), “The Loco-Motion” (Little Eva), “One Fine Day” (The Chiffons), “Go Away Little Girl” (Steve Lawrence), “Don’t Bring Me Down” (The Animals), “I’m Into Something Good” (Herman’s Hermits), “Pleasant Valley Sunday” (The Monkees), and “(You Make Me Feel Like) a Natural Woman” (Aretha Franklin).

In 1970, King released her first solo album, “Writer.” She followed that in 1971 with “Tapestry,” which included “You’ve Got a Friend” (also recorded by James Taylor), “It’s Too Late,” “I Feel the Earth Move,” “So Far Away,” and her renditions of “Will You Love Me Tomorrow?” and “(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman.” The album stayed in Billboard’s Hot 100 for six years and sold 24 million copies.

In 1988 King starred in the off-Broadway production “A Minor Incident,” and in 1994 she portrayed Mrs. Johnstone on Broadway in “Blood Brothers.” Today, King lives on a ranch in Idaho, and largely restricts her live appearances to environmental fundraisers.

Jewish traditions, however, remain a part of her life. In her memoir, King wrote that in the late 20th century the melodies of many traditional Jewish prayers were being modernized.

“I was not a fan of the major key version of the Chanukah prayer,” she writes. “In 2011, at the suggestion of my daughter Louise I recorded the traditional Chanukah prayer with its traditional melody. Louise arranged the prayer into song form, then she and her son sang it with me. The last vocal we hear on the track is then-eight-year old Hayden singing, ‘L’hadlik neir shel Chanukah.’ Tears come to my eyes every time I hear the prayer of our ancestors marching forward to future generations through my grandson, my daughter and me.”