Hava Nagila

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Received: 1 December 2020 • Accepted: 22 December 2020 • Published Online: 25 December 2020

Abstract

This article is about the story of a favorite Jewish song of many people around the world. Hava Nagila is one of the first modern Israeli folk songs in the Hebrew language. It went on to become a staple of band performers at Jewish weddings and bar/bat (b'nei) mitzvah celebrations. The melody is based on a Hassidic Nigun. According to sources, the melody is taken from a Ukrainian folk song from Bukovina. The text was probably the work of musicologist Abraham Zvi Idelsohn, written in 1918. The text was composed in 1918, to celebrate the Balfour Declaration and the British victory over the Turks in 1917. During World War I, Idelsohn served in the Turkish Army as a bandmaster in Gaza, returning to his research in Jerusalem at the end of the war in 1919. In 1922, he published the Hebrew song book, “Sefer Hashirim”, which includes the first publication of his arrangement of the song Hava Nagila.

Keywords: Hava Nagila, Abraham Zvi Idelsohn, Jewish song.

1. Introduction

“Let us rejoice” (Hebrew: הבה נגילה, Havah Nagilah) is probably the most famous Israeli song and loved by many people in the world. Hava Nagila is one of the most recognized symbols of Jewish life and culture. When a person hears this joyful and sunny song, immediately his spirit is brightened and one is filled with joy.

Hava Nagila was not always known as this name – in fact, it was originally simply a Nigun or “voiceless melody” that originated among the Jewish people in Eastern Europe. Like many folk songs, no one knew who originally wrote it, but it was just one of many old folk tunes while Abram Zvi Idelsohn kept it. Named the “father of Jewish musicology,” A. Idelsohn chose the tune to create a special piece celebrating Britain’s victory over the Turks in 1918. He put the words (in Hebrew) from a psalm of celebration and brotherhood that became a hit as the first ordinary people, and then pop stars started singing the song.

The song is reminiscent of sunny Israel and the friendly people of Israel. This song, its lyrics, and its music have their stories, which are just as interesting, although not well known. This article will be an attempt to make these stories more familiar to people. To begin with, let’s start by reading the lyrics of the song, which we often call “Hava Nagila”.

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2. Hava Nagila

It is one of the first modern Israeli folk songs in the Hebrew language. It went on to become a staple of band performers at Jewish weddings and bar/bat (b’nei) mitzvah celebrations. The melody is based on a Hassidic Nigun. According to sources, the melody is taken from a Ukrainian folk song from Bukovina. Originally a Hassidic Nigun collected by Idelsohn, Hava Nagila became known as a Jewish folk song that gained popularity amongst the chalutzim. During the 1920’s and 1930’s, it was published in Jewish children’s songbooks in Palestine, Germany, and the United States, and was commercially recorded by a number of cantors and Jewish folk singers. Since then, it has been performed and recorded by Jewish and non-Jewish musicians alike.

Hava Nagila is great popularity and widespread recognition is a demonstration of how the song can become a powerful marker of identity. Its earliest Idelsohn manuscript, kept by the Department of Jewish Music at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, contains a sketch of the song Hava Nagila for voice and piano. In the upper right-hand corner of the sketch, Idelsohn attributes the melody to a Hasidic Negro, later noted in his Thesaurus, collected by a descendant of the Hasidic court of Sadigora, who resided in Jerusalem. Sadigurer Hasidi took his name from the small town of Sadigura in Bukovina, now in Ukraine.

Although the exact date of the composition is not documented in any of Idelsohn’s manuscripts, he claims to have written the first sketch of Hava Nagila in 1915. “After adding lyrics, Idelsohn documented the first performance of the song by his mixed choir in 1918, noting that the implementation prompted Hava Nagila to “spread rapidly throughout the country”. These dates are noted in Idelsohn’s 1932 article “Musical Characteristics of Eastern European Folk Song,” published in The Musical Quarterly” (see Seligman.org, 2009).

“Idelsohn’s Hebrew texts reflect the biblical verse: “This is the day which God created. We will rejoice and be glad in it” (Psalm 118: 24). Controversy will later arise after the claim of Moshe Nathanson, a student of Idelsohn, that he wrote the lyrics for the song. The manuscripts here are part of the Idelsohn collection at the Department of Music” (see Seligman.org, 2009)
Picture 1. Hava Nagila: Idelsohn’s original manuscripts of the Sadigora niggun and his words for the song (photo, see Seligman.org, 2009)

Picture 2. Hava Nagila: Idelsohn’s original manuscripts of the Sadigora niggun and his words for the song (photo, see Seligman.org, 2009)

In 1922 Idelsohn was contracted by Polyphon Records in Berlin to release a series of records featuring Hebrew folksongs. Idelsohn selected the repertoire of thirty-nine songs. The series included the first commercial recording of Hava Nagila (photo, see Seligman.org, 2009).

The score of the song in the Thesaurus of Hebrew Oriental Melodies is noted by Idelsohn as having originated in the Sadigora Hasidic Court (photo, see Seligman.org, 2009).

3. Abraham Zvi Idelsohn

The text was probably the work of musicologist Abraham Zvi Idelsohn, written in 1918. How is Abraham Zvi Idelsohn? He was born in Felixburg (Jurkalne), Latvia, in 1882 and began his study of Jewish music in Libau where he trained as a chazan (cantor). He continued his education at the Stern Conservatory in Berlin and at the Leipzig Academy. Idelsohn served as a cantor at the Adat Yeshurun Synagogue in Leipzig, in Regensburg and Johannesburg, South Africa before finally settling in Jerusalem in 1906. In Jerusalem, he began working as a cantor and music teacher at Yellins’s Hebrew Teacher’s college. Idelsohn was impressed by the diversity of the Jewish community living in Palestine, and embarked on a project to record their unique musical and linguistic traditions” (see Seligman.org, 2009).

Idelsohn received an award for research from the Vienna Academy of Sciences, along with a phonograph to use in his fieldwork. Idelsohn published the first volume of his major ten-volume Thesaurus of Hebrew Oriental Melodies in 1914, in which he began a comprehensive study of the Yemeni community in Palestine. He had a keen interest in this community because he perceived the origins of their pronunciation in Hebrew and the musical heritage dating back to the first century. He argues that their musical and linguistic traditions are relatively uninterrupted by external influences and change due to their migratory history and secluded geographical location. In subsequent volumes of his collection “Idelsohn explores the musical traditions of Babylonian, Persian, Bukhara, Oriental Sephardim, Moroccan, German, Eastern European, and Hasidic Jewish communities in Palestine and throughout the diaspora. This vast project spans a period of 20 years with the publication of the last volume in 1932. During World War I, Idelsohn served in the Turkish army as head of an orchestra in Gaza, returning to his research in Jerusalem at the end of the 1919 war. In 1922, he published the Jewish book of songs, Sefer Hashirim, which included the first publication of his arrangement for the song Hava Nagila” (see Seligman.Org, 2009).
Idelsohn contracted to catalogue Eduard Birnbaum’s collection of Jewish music at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati in 1924. He was contracted to catalogue the Eduard Birnbaum collection of Jewish music at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. Shortly thereafter he was appointed professor of Jewish music and liturgy at HUC, a position he held until his health began to deteriorate in 1934. With access to the Birnbaum collection, Idelsohn wrote extensively on the historical development of Jewish liturgical and cantorial music. During his time at HUC, he published the last five volumes of the *Thesaurus of Hebrew Oriental Melodies* as well as two other seminal works, *Jewish Music in its Historical Development* (1929) and *Jewish Liturgy* (1932).

“Idelsohn also made important contributions in the area of comparative musicological research with his work on the connections between Jewish and Christian liturgical music. Though less well known, Idelsohn also dedicated himself to the study of Near Eastern maqam systems, which is outlined in his work “Die Maqamen der arabischen Musik” (1913). Idelsohn’s enormous literary output, as well as his field recordings (which number over 1,000), laid the foundation for the modern study of Jewish musicology. Idelsohn died in Johannesburg in 1938” (see Seligman.org, 2009).

Shortly afterwards, he was appointed professor of Jewish music and liturgy at HUC, a position he held until his health began to deteriorate in 1934. With access to the Birnbaum collection, Idelsohn wrote in detail about the historical development of Jewish liturgical and cantor music. During his stay at the HUC, he published the last five volumes of The Thesaurus of Jewish Oriental Melodies, as well as two other major works, Jewish Music in Its Historical Development (1929) and The Jewish Liturgy (1932). “His contribution to the field of comparative musicology with his work on the connections between Jewish and Christian liturgical music is enormous. Although less well known, Idelsohn also devoted himself to the study of Middle Eastern makam systems, which was outlined in his work Die Maqamen der arabischen Musik (1913). Idelsohn’s vast literary output, as well as his field records (numbering over 1,000), laid the foundation for the modern study of Jewish musicology” (see Seligman.org, 2009)
THESAURUS OF
HEBREW ORIENTAL MELODIES

COLLECTED, CLASSIFIED AND EDITED BY
A. Z. IDELSOHN

VOLUME IX:
THE FOLK SONG OF THE EAST EUROPEAN JEWS

1932
FRIEDRICH HOFMEISTER, LEIPZIG

Picture 6. Thesaurus of Hebrew Oriental Melodies, 1925-1933

This is the ten volumes of Idelsohn’s seminal work studies Jewish liturgical and secular music, with cultural, linguistic and theoretical analysis (photo, see Seligman.org, 2009).

Picture 7. Shir Hashirim – 1922

This is a song book published by Idelsohn for “the Kindergarten, School and Home”. It included the first publication of Hava Nagila (photo, see Seligman.org, 2009).
This represents Idelsohn's most widely known work and still a classic in the field of Jewish music (photo, see Seligman.org, 2009).

Part of the whole charm of the song is the dance steps. Learning the dance steps for Hava Nagila is not difficult and can be a lot of fun at any social event. This is also a great introduction to the fun of folk dancing in general. Over the years, starting in Israel, a special kind of dance called *Hora* is also associated with the song. Starting in kibbutz groups, it spread throughout Israel as an extremely popular Jewish dance. Although she has danced in other Eastern European countries such as Romania, Hora has become almost inextricably linked in the West with Jewish holidays and the song Hava Nagila.

4. Abraham Zvi Idelsohn about his life

Abraham Zvi Idelsohn in his biographical book *My life: A sketch* writes (see Idelsohn, 1986):

I was born in the fisher-hamlet Felixburg (Jurkalne), on the Baltic Sea, between Windau (Ventspils) and Sackenhausen (Saka), Latvia. My father was Schochet (Butcher) and Baal-tefillah (Prayer guide) in the district. When I was less than six months old, my parents moved to Libau, where, due to the efforts of Dr. Philip Klein, then Rabbi in Libau (later in New York), my father was appointed overseer of kosher meat in a non-Jewish butchery. In my early childhood my parents lived next to the "Chor-schul" and my father used to take me over to that cold, unheated house of worship. The chazzan was Abraham Mordechai Rabinovitz. His strong tenor-voice used to chill me; he had no sweetness in his voice. I remember the Congregation preferred to hear Zalman Schochet, though very old, or Orkin of the Zamet Synagogue. Little did I realize that Rabinovitz will later become my teacher. The above mentioned cantors had less voice than he, but much sweeter, and their singing was with more Jewish feeling.

From my father, I learned to love the synagogal modes and “Zemiroth” as well as Jewish Folk-Songs. At home, I received an orthodox education and appreciation for everything Jewish. I visited old-fashioned “Chadorim,” although there were many modern ones in Libau (Liepaja); my father wanted to implant within me the genuine Jewish piety. At the age of 12 years, I was sent to Lithuanian yeshivas, where I
remained for five years. During that period, I acquired a knowledge of Jewish life. Upon my return home, I decided to take an examination at the Gymnasium and prepare for an intelligent profession. I secured a tutor and started studying.

Suddenly I felt an inner call for music and went to the above-mentioned Rabinovitz, who accepted me in his choir. There I remained for a half year, despite my father’s protest that I shall become a “chor-chazan.” His uncle never entered the Choral-shul because of the ban the ultra-orthodox Rabbis laid upon it when it was built.

Due to my brother-in-law, who came to visit us, but had to stop in Prussia, because he had no legal right to enter Russia, we journeyed there to see him. While in Memel (Klaipeda) (then Prussia), the idea came to me to go to Koenigsberg, to Edward Birnbaum. He accepted me and recommended me to the director of the Conservatory.

At the time I knew nothing of Birnbaum’s work, all I knew was that he was the successor to the famous Weintraub. I found him steeped in German music, his voice insignificant, his chazanuth unappealing and not Jewish. I visited him only a few times; he never instructed me and never showed me his collection.

After a few months, I decided to proceed to London, according to my brother-in-law’s advice. Reaching London, I was advised to enter the Jews College, but I had nobody to guarantee my upkeep during my stay there, so my meeting with Dr. M. Friedlaender was of no consequence. My parents wrote to me, that Rabinovitz was willing to take me back, but I had no means to return. In my distress, I turned to Israel Zangwill for help. He recommended me to the Board of Deputies and secured my passage home. Upon Zangwill’s question, how can I return to Russia, where Jews were so maltreated, I answered that I prefer to be with my brothers even in a place like Russian than to live in a free country like England and assimilate.

Rabinovitz promised to instruct me in Chazanuth and in European music, and he kept his promise. During that year I again sang in his choir. He taught me a lot of things, such as sight-singing, theory, voice-training, and the beginning of harmony. He acquainted me with the Chazanic literature of Weintraub, Sulzer, Lewandowski, and others. He implanted within me an appreciation for good Jewish melodic taste and he gave me also an idea of classic music from the works of Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, etc. At the same time, I was an ardent reader of Modern Hebrew literature, from Moshe Chaim Luzzatto’s poetry to the “Hashiloach” and the “Hador.” I became an admirer of the style and articles of Achad Ha’am, who became my guide and pathfinder in my confusion—the perplexity of a modern Jew.

My father, regarding me as a hopeless case, stopped interfering with my vocation. Considering that I learned everything possible from Rabinovitz, I left Libau in the spring of 1901 for Berlin to continue my musical education.

The day I arrived in Berlin I was accepted in the Stern’sches Conservatorium in the opera-class of Siedmann. The Director of the institution was Gustav Hollaender, a converted Jew who developed in me Germanistic, chauvinistic ideas. His brother, Victor H., who was also present, engaged me in the choir of the Charlottenburg Synagogue, of which he was the leader.

My first participation in the opera, however, ended badly; disgusted with the immoral conduct of the players, I gave up my studies and, influenced by Tolstoy’s ideas, I became a follower of them. I abandoned music, the Conservatorium, and modern luxury and decided to become a farmer in Palestine. For this purpose, I visited S. Bernfeld, who laughed at my fantasies and told me of the struggle of the poor colonists in Palestine. On the other hand, R. Brainin treated me differently; he wrote to a Baron Manteufel in Greece, who maintained a farm school, to accept me. Unfortunately, his reply came too late. The whole summer I lived as a Tolstoian until my meager resources were at an end. At that time there came to Berlin Cantor Boruch
Schorr, who looked for singers. My colleagues who accepted Schorr’s invitation induced me to do likewise in order to earn something. Schorr was already old and he had no voice at all; nevertheless, his Jewish admirers clung to him enthusiastically. The compositions he gave us to sing were of very mediocre musical value, although some expressed the Jewish sentiment.

Soon the High-Holiday season arrived and I was confronted with the question of my existence. My friends recommended me to Frommermann, who maintained a school for cantors. He gave me a place in a Bavarian community. Brainin approved my action in becoming untrue to Tolstoianism. My preparation in a Weintraub-Sulzer-Lewandowski repertoire was of no avail, there in Augsburg, I had to learn the South-German chazanuth, which is German, consisting of German melodies of the 17th and 18th centuries. On my way to Berlin, I learned from Emanuel Kirschner, chazzan in Munich, that in Leipzig a chazzan was sought. I stopped there and was accepted; one of the Board was a disciple of Weintraub in Koenigsberg. There I would sing real Chazonus.

An old dream of mine was to study in the Leipzig Conservatorium, which I could now realize. I went to Prof. Jadassohn, a sincere Jew, born in Breslau from pious parentage. He was very friendly to me until his death in 1902.

While in Leipzig I studied harmony with Jadassohn, counterpoint with S. Krehl, composition with H. Zellner, and history of music with Kretzschmar, besides voice-training and piano. There I was able to attend the Gewandhaus concerts under A. Nikisch.

I met and married there a daughter of Cantor H. Schnieder. From Schnieder, I learned the real Jewish sentiment in Chazanuth and the melodic line. As a disciple of Achad Haam, I detested the constant chase after Germanism, which I continuously heard in the synagogue song; even Lewandowski seemed Germanized. The life of the Jews in Germany, too, was Germanized. This was not only true of the Liberals, but also of the Orthodox.

At that time, the South-German Chazanuth was considered genuine Jewish. I, therefore, took a position in a Bavarian community, Regensburg, as Chazan and Shochet, but after two years I received a call from my relatives to come to Johannesburg, Africa, to become a chazzan there, which I accepted. I hoped to be able to live there a genuine Jewish life and to sing the Jewish song, but I soon realized my disappointment.

About the time the idea dawned upon me to devote my strength to the research of the Jewish song. This idea ruled my life to such an extent, that I could find no rest. I, therefore, gave up my position and traveled to Jerusalem, without knowing what was in store for me. In Jerusalem, I found about 300 synagogues and some young men eager to study Chazanuth. The various synagogues were conducted according to the customs of the respective countries, and their traditional song varied greatly from one to another. I started collecting traditional songs. In the course of time, the Phonogram-Archives of Vienna and of Berlin came to my help. After a considerable time at the Institution in Vienna invited me to come and present the results of my studies.

As results of my collection and studies the following convictions became crystallized:

- The Jewish song is an amalgamation of non-Jewish and Jewish elements, and despite the former, the Jewish elements are found in all traditions, and only these are of interest to the scholars;
- The Jewish song is a folk-art, created by the people. It has no art-song and no individual composers;
Composers of Jewish origin have in their creations nothing of Jewish spirit; they are renegades or assimilates, and detest all Jewish cultural values;

The few composers who remained within the fold have mostly corrupted the Jewish tradition with their attempts to modernize it, and have added very little toward genuine Jewish song.

I agreed to go to Vienna, where I was given two rooms by Prof. Exner to work out my records. I applied also for a subsidy from the Academy for the publication of my collection, which I called “Thesaurus of Hebrew Melodies” and prepared six volumes. For this purpose, I had to visit the well-known anti-Semite, Prof. Warabazeck, who received me cordially, and due to his influence, the Academy granted me a subsidy for my work. On the other hand, the relation of the Vienna Chazanim was very unfriendly, almost hostile.

At the same time (1913) there took place the Zionist Congress in Vienna, and I met there Chaim Nachman Bialik, who induced me to write some Hebrew essays for his magazine R’shumoth which he intended to bring out, a request which I fulfilled.

The men friendly to me were Dr. M. Guedemann, Dr. M. Grunewald, Dr. Feuchtwanger — all Rabbis, also Dr. A Kaminka and A Stern (President of the Jewish Community). Very friendly was Prof. G. Adler of the University, who invited me to attend his classes in Gregorian chant and to deliver some lectures. My work on the recorded songs and pronunciations I finished and submitted to Prof. Exner. It was published in the Academy Proceedings No. 175.

At that time a fight between the Hebraists and the “Hilfsverein” schools in Palestine was going on. I, though an employee of the “Hilfsverein”, decided for the Hebraists, although the double salary was promised to my wife by Eph. Cohen. After eight months of stay in Vienna, I returned to Jerusalem and started my work in the Hebrew Schools.

From my “Thesaurus” only the first volume could be printed, for soon the world-war broke out and all cultural activities had to stop. I was enlisted in the Turkish army, first as a clerk in the hospital, later as bandmaster in the trenches in Gaza, from which I emerged after the armistice.

In 1919 I returned to my teaching and research work. The Zionist Commission freed me partly from my work as a teacher and I devoted this time for work on the “Thesaurus,” to write the Hebrew introductions, the first of which became very bulky, and I had to separate from it the Yemenite Poetry, which was late published separately under the title “Shire Teman.”

In 1921 I decided to go to Europe to publish my works. I took my family with me. I arrived for the Zionist Congress in Carlsbad, where Dr. V. Jacobsohn, then head of the “Juedischer Verlag,” bought my manuscripts of “Sepher Hashirim,” and Bialik encouraged me to write a history of Jewish Music, the first volume of which he published in the “D’vir,” the other four volumes remained in Manuscript. Up to date. Upon sending the second volume, Bialik wrote to me... “Your first volume is still lying in our store, only a few copies are sold ... we have no courage to print the second one.”

In Carlsbad I met also the head of the K’lal-Verlag in Berlin, who published my “Z’lile Haaretz” and “Z’lile Aviv”; there I met also B. Cahan (the owner of “Yalkut”) who brought out my “Sepher Hashirim” and “Shire T’filloth”, 2nd edition. In Berlin I met Benjamin Harz with whom I arranged to publish my “Thesaurus” in Hebrew, German and English, and by the end of 1922 four volumes came out. During the year I was in Berlin, I materialized an old dream, I found a publisher to put out my JEFTAHand, of which I wrote both the words and music and which was the first Hebrew opera ever written. Negotiations with the Oxford Press and other publishing companies were unsuccessful. After more than a year’s stay in Berlin, my friends
advised me to go to America on a lecture tour, which I did. Before that, I lectured already in Vienna, Berlin, Breslau, Posen, Leipzig, London, Oxford, Amsterdam, and in other places.

Upon my arrival in the U.S., I found Dr. and Mrs. De Sola Pool, Prof. and Mrs. Samuel S. Cohen, then in Chicago. It was due to their efforts that I was invited to catalog the Birnbaum collection in the Hebrew Union College Library in Cincinnati and later was asked to teach at that college. They furthered my cause in various ways.

In 1924 I settled down in Cincinnati as a Professor of Hebrew and Liturgy, as well as Jewish Music, but before that, I toured the country lecturing, from coast to coast.

During my stay in Cincinnati, I added four more volumes to my “Thesaurus,” making it ten volumes. The President of the College, Dr. Morgenstein, secured funds for the 5th and partly for the 6th volume, but the American Council of Learned Societies decided to grant me a subsidy for all the remaining volumes, and thus I was enabled to publish my “Thesaurus” in ten volumes in German and English, the first five volumes also in Hebrew.

From this work grew out several others: research in Liturgy, which I published in the “Thesaurus,” Vol. 3 and 4; research into the Poetry, which I published in the “Hator” and “Hashiloah” and separately in book form under the title “Shire Teman”; pronunciation of Hebrew, published in the “Hashiloah” and in the “Monatschrift” 1913, which was put out separately as a reprint; a Manual, published in 1926 by the Hebrew Union College - an extract of the four volumes of the History of Liturgy which Holt published in 1932. The Brotherhood ordered from me the “Ceremonies of Judaism,” and these were put out in book form in 1929, a second enlarged edition in 1930, and the third edition in 1932.

My activity as a teacher of singing and Chazan gave me ample opportunity to create along these lines. Already in 1908, I published in Jerusalem under my supervision two volumes “Shire Zion” for choir and solo, also a theory of music in Hebrew, “Torath Han’gina” (1910), and “Sepher Hashirim,” vol. 1, likewise several essays in various periodicals, and “Shire T’filla”. While in America, considering the situation in which Judaism placed, I composed and published two Friday-evening Services and one Sabbath-morning Service for four-part choir with organ accompaniment, according to the Reform ritual; “Jewish Song-Book,” two editions, the third edition is being delayed due to my illness. I also put out a Friday-evening Service for one voice with accompaniment.

In 1929 I was taken sick with a coronary-vessel disease and was laid up for six months. But in 1931 I had a paralytic stroke on my left side. This repeated several times, so that I could not teach any more, nor write, nor move about, nor read much. The Board of the College granted me a pension, for the rest of my life. I can do nothing, but waste my time in reflection.

In 1938 he died in Johannesburg.

5. Conclusion

Hava Nagila is a demonstration of how the song can become a powerful marker of identity, it is also a sign of the whole culture of the Jewish people. Along with the song, its author came to the following main conclusion from the research he does on the overall musical creativity of the Jewish people. The conclusion can be summarized as follows:

The Jewish song is an amalgamation of non-Jewish and Jewish elements, and despite the former, the Jewish elements are found in all traditions. This tradition is a kind of Jewish cultural code that unites the Jewish settlements scattered around the world. Although Jewish
music is largely influenced by the local traditions of non-Jews, it largely preserves the Jewish worldview, cultural framework, and description of the world.

Acknowledgements
This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.
The authors declare no competing interests.

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