

Jewish Music and Jewish Spirituality: Niggun as Sacred Practice
MUSIC 511
Hebrew College
Fall 2010 semester

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The hasidic *niggun* is more than a tune or a melody; it is to be savored, entered into with all one's senses, with all the levels of one's being. Melodies are punctuated by thoughtful silences, providing opportunities for reflection and integration. This course will introduce the varieties of hasidic niggun, locating them in the history and theology of Jewish music. Our goal will be to develop a "sonic theology" and an understanding of sound, melody and silence as spiritual practice. We will examine the function of *niggun* in prayer, both personal and communal, and the role of the prayer leader (*shaliah tzibbur*) in fostering sacred space out of collective energies, as the entire group conspires—breathes together—in holy rhythm.

Introduction:

- What is a niggun? Music as essential component of spiritual practice. Centrality of niggun in Hasidism: "The niggun reminds us to lead with the heart that loves, rather than with the mind that compares and defines."
- The niggun is not about "achieving a goal; accomplishment"; why not simply go to the last note and just sing it?
- What is spiritual work? Intentionality—setting one's intention
- Learning niggunim as spiritual practice.
- The element of surprise—*niggun* straddling the boundary between simplicity and complexity, the naturally unfolding and the unexpected [class example—newly discovered Carlebach niggun]. The parallels to the surprising turn in hasidic tales; hasidic derashah and the moment of illumination, the apercu—defamiliarization.
--Pausing to contemplate the path traversed
- The communal aspect: Creating sacred space.
- [Natalie Simon: "My whole being needs to surrender to the niggun's contours—its ups and downs, its pauses, its silences . I cannot chant it otherwise—it must repose deep inside...."]

Part One. Biblical Sources for niggun. The spirituality of Psalms and Song of Songs. Biblical models: Abraham, Moses, Hannah, Elijah, Jeremiah. Characteristic features of prayer in the biblical period. Reading: Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer*; Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord*.

2. Rabbinic prayer. Mishnah Berakhot 5:5; Talmudic sources: 'Arakhin 11a. *Pesahim* 117a—David's divine inspiration followed by song, vs. song leading to Divine inspiration.

Midrash: Bereshit Rabbah 54:6.

Secondary reading: Shlomo Naeh, "Bore' Niv Sefatayim," *Tarbiz* 63 (1994), pp. 184-217.

3. Mystical prayer and sonic theology. Sefer Yetzirah and Zohar.
Synesthesia: *ka'asher shamanu—ken ra'inu; ve-kol ha'am ro'im et ha-kolot*. Finding the inner soul-stem of all sensation from which vision and sound emerge. *Or ha-Me'ir on ve-ha'er eyneynu be-Torahtekha ve-dabek libeynu be-mitzvotekha*.

4. Eastern European Jewish piety. *Niggun* as product of communities of religious aspiration and spiritual quest. The world of the Yeshiva.
Reading: Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Earth Is the Lord's*.
Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapira [Shapiro], *Conscious Community: A Guide to Inner Work*. Trans. Andrea Cohen-Kiener. Northvale, New Jersey and London: Jason Aronson, 1996.

Varieties of niggun. Singing individuals and communities. Rabbinical Seminary of America 1951 album 78 rpm—*Avinu ha-Av ha-Rahaman;--Le-mikdashekh tuv....*
Etti Ankri—*La-menatze'ah bi-neginot mizmor shir* (Psalm 67)

Hasidic Prayer. Brief introduction to Hasidism. Baal Shem Tov: Enoch-consciousness; *lishmah*—for the sake of the letter; *Devekut*; sublimation of extraneous thoughts.

[contours of the niggun and interaction with the words: Carlebach *Gam ki elekh...*; *Ruah*; “Return again,” “Lord get me high”]
Ryzhiner Se'adah Shelishit—*Yetzaveh Tzur hasdo...*
Ein arokh lekha ve-ein zulatekha-- “Quiet Splendor.”

Texts: *Sefer Baal Shem Tov, Parashat Noah, s.v. “Tzohar Ta'aseh la-Teyvah (#15):* Making the word shine, prayer and sacred sound.; #26; #88 (cf. *Nefesh ha-hayyim* 2:13); #116: Why one should not repeat the Shema (cf. *Keter Shem Tov* # 39); *Keter Shem Tov* #317—Raising the prayers of the “people of the fields.”

Succos niggunim: *Kol: penu elai ve-hivashe'u; Om ani Homah*—(conscious walking)
Ve-ata banim shiru la-Melekh

4b. The Maggid of Mezeritch: Man and God as two parts of one whole. *Likkutei Amarim (Maggid Devarav le-Ya'akov)* #33, s.v. *Asey Lekhah Shtei Hatzotzrot Kesef*.

→Sing softly, gently, with all your strength: *Likkutim Yekarim* #6 (ed. Jerusalem 1974, p. 1b)

Shabbat niggunim—General Israel Orphans Home recording of *Azamer be-Shevahin*, compared with the Zemiros Project CD version
Zemiros Project “Shalom Aleykhem”
Rabbi Aaron of Karlin—*Kah Ekhsot No'am Shabbos*—“*Lechaim Tish*”

4c. R. Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, *Kedushat Levi—Az Yashir Moshe...*

how niggunim morph: Shlomo Carlebach's *Ein Ke-Elokeinu*; The Cracow niggun

4d. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi

- Versions of the Rhyzhiner niggun—Andy Statman “Yonah”, Shlomo Carlebach—*Holy Brothers and Sisters* Album;
- --discussion of how Shlomo leaves space for people to join—beckoning
- Lubavitcher Rebbe *Tzamah Lekha Nafshi*

- Pilgrimage in Hasidism; songs just before departure from the Rebbe: *Tierer brider*—Frank London version *Nigunim CD*; Avraham Fried version

- Songs of introspection and self-analysis: *Essen est zikh*—Lubavitz—on Frank London *Nigunim CD*.

4e. Rabbi Israel Hapstein of Kozienice. *Avodat Yisrael*

Personal Spiritual Practice: “First of the Day” --Rhyziner story

Ryzhiner *Ana be-ko'ah gedulat Yeminha....* [Sung by R. Zalman Shachter-Shalomi, *Your Glory Shines*]

Cycles of Sacred Time: Shabbat compared with Rosh Hodesh. Hallel (*Pithu li; Ana Hashem hoshi'ah na—Na'anu'im* chant)

Kiddush Levanah and greeting the face of the (Divine) beloved: Shlomo Carlebach's *Shalom Aleykhem* circle

4f. Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav. *Likkutei Eitzot s.v. Tefillah* #58: prayer and gathering flowers into a bouquet; personalization and dramatization of the letters—a romantic dance with speaking parts. *Sihot ha-Ran* #52: Illuminated prayer as “God.”

[*Hitbodedut*]

→Reading: *Rabbi Nahman's AZAMRA!* Translated by Rabbi Chaim Kramer, Breslov Research Institute.

Russian: *nye bayusyah*—Theodore Bikel, *Silent No More*; compare with Habad Yiddish: Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, *A Dudele* (see Nahum Glatzer, *Language of Prayer*)

Wedding niggunim: *Mi bon siah*—reflective niggun---MBD cassette “Special Moments”

Tiberian Hasidism: *Ketem Paz* on the bonding and dovetailing of voices—angelic and human

4g. Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib of Ger, *Sefat Emet* Sefat Emet on Parashat Be-Shalah, 5631 (1871) Shira-song-and the glory of God. Our task is to see to it that all creation sings-- "shira"/ "shura" in the sense of line or alignment. What a song does is align our actions and our being, so that we trace/track our steps back to our origin in the divine vitality, the Source of all being. →Sefat Emet on Shir ha-Shirim.

Song

Sefat Emet Pesah 5635 [1875] s.v. Be-Midrash Shir ha-Shirim—Nashir le-mi She-asanu sarim ba-olam... Pesukei de-zimrah—we sing in thankfulness for the privilege of singing praises to God—this is Pesukei de-zimrah; Shir ha-Shirim—when we direct our actions to God, we awaken the song of each creature; now that we are free after the Exodus, we must use our freedom to draw all things to God!

Sefat Emet Pesah 5634 [1874] Shir ha-Shirim –when we speak words of Torah appropriately, they rise sublimely and they sing of their own accord....

Sefat Emet Pesah 5631[1871] “the last days of Pesach” s.v. Be-Rashi Shar Miba’ei Lei... The Song at the Sea is above time—the entire point of the Song is to find one’s deepest Root in Divine vitality.....

Sefat Emet Pesah 5643 [1883] s.v. Be-Midrash Shir ha-Shirim Ani Havatzelet ha-Sharon.... [play on shirah/Yeshurun/Sharon] Shira—song is the expression of our finding the way out of the twisted places to the straight path—Yeshurun....

Sefat Emet Pesah 5655 [1895] s.v. Bi-yetzi’at Mitzrayim... Yisra’el=Shir El [the song of God!!]

Sefat Emet Pesah 5659 [1899] s.v. Ita be-Rashi Kol ha-Shirah Kefulah... The Song is the ability to align the Lower and the Upper worlds.....

Sefat Emet Ba-Midbar, Shelah 5648 [1888] s.v. Be-Parashat Tzitzit Al Kanfei bigdeihem... Song comes from unification; we have the ability to gather in and unite all the corners....

Sefat Emet Ba-Midbar, Hukat 5652 [1892] s.v. Be-Inyan Shirat ha-be’er... The song at the well is the song of absorbing Torah into the self.....

Sefat Emet Ba-Midbar, Hukat 5659 [1899] s.v. Be-Pasuk Az Yashir... The song at the well is the song of maturity after 40 years; they no longer needed Moshe to lead them in the Song....

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, “A Fourfold Song”, trans. Ben Zion Bokser (New York: Paulist, 1978), pp. 228-9.

4h. Rabbi Mordecai Yosef Leiner of Izbica, *Mei ha-Shiloah*. The holiness of prayers that are not answered.

4i. Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapiro of Piaseczna.

- *Derekh ha-Melekh Shemini Atzeret* (c. 1930?), pp. 266-268. Meeting God at prayer; discovering what we really want.
- Prayer together with the sun and moon: *Tzav ve-Ziruz s.v. Im lo ta’amta* (p. 13, # 18);
- *Hashkatakah*: Quietening the mind.

- *Derekh haMelekh Rosh Hashanah* 5686 [1925]--Bringing sacred mindfulness to experience to create a new sacred self
- *Derekh ha-Melekh Rosh HaShanah* 5690 Shir Ha-Shirim Ani Havatzelet Ha-Sharon: song, niggun and praise
- →Children as spiritual beings. Awakening young people's spirituality through niggun and silence, movement and dance.

Galei kevod malkhutkha; Eliyahu ha_Navi [The Mountain Sings] (Rabbi Moshe Shur)
Keratikha Kah...; *Ve-tehezenah eineinu* (Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach)
Perok yat anakh mi-pum aryevatz- →Tzur Yisrael kumah be-ezrat yisrael

“...ve-nizkeh lir'ot banim u-vene'i banim oskim ba-Torah u-va-mitzot...” (Satmar)

4j. The Eloquence of Silence. Steven Schwarzschild, “Speech and Silence before God,” in *Understanding Jewish Prayer*, edited by Jakob J. Petuchowski, pp. 84-99. Andre Neher, *The Exile of the Word*, translated from the French by Daivid Maisel, (JPS, 5741/1981), pp. 3-127. The delicate, fragile, yet robust and healing power of silence.

Musar *niggunim*: R. Leib Malin's niggun (Dov Berkowitz). Musar self-restraint vs. Hasidic expansiveness, boldness and confidence.

4k. The triad of *Ruah-Kol-Dibbur* (Breath-Voice-Speech).
 Required text: Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer*.

Niggun as embodiment of process theology—the niggun is not “the last note” but the total contour and flow of all notes unfolding through time; there is no shortcut to the “end.”

- Four worlds theology. Going beyond the personal self without privileging any level.
- Niggun quieting the separating mind/ego consciousness to foster connection and openness of heart and mind

Sharing niggunim with others—sharing the context—how, where, and from whom did I learn this niggun?

Memutza [cf. *Me'or Eynayim*]—the person in the middle—bringing opposites together;
Hazan—applying one's vision.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, “The Vocation of the Cantor,” in *The Insecurity of Freedom*, pp. 242-253. “There are no proofs for God's existence, but there are witnesses.” *Ba'al tefillah* as the one who can unite the two ‘witnesses’ to God's existence—the words of the Bible and music.

Hanukkah—dedication [to applying the vision]; *Hen*—grace; Enoch-consciousness [Hanokh] as dedication to channeling grace.

Reflections on our journey: the search for *niggun* is the search for our own inner selves,

spiritual centers, souls. The question we ask is, What is my song; what is my verse? What kind of spiritual being do I want to be, to cultivate and grow for my self, my community?

What niggun, what verse, is now emerging from the wellspring of my soul? What niggun, what verse, would best anchor the spiritual insight that has now arisen?

Kedushat Levi , Be-Shalah, Az Yashir Moshe —singing to extend and intensify the joy and pleasure

Some characteristic features of hasidic prayer include:

- Embodiment--sonic and breath theology, fervor, enthusiasm, trembling and dance
- Personification of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet; romantic dance and dialogue with the letters
- *Devekut* and surrender of ego into *Ayin*
- Return to biblical models while still embracing philosophical and kabbalistic theology
- Dialogical prayer with the real Divine Presence in a personal encounter with God
- The role of the zaddik, the *shaliah tzibbur* and the power of community in channeling blessing and *shefa* (divine abundance);
- The importance of melody, (wordless) niggun, and silence.
- Imagination, guided imagery and meditation.

Recent and contemporary practitioners of the art of niggun and chant: David Zeller, Michael Shapiro, Debbie Friedman, Shefa Gold.....

CLASS REQUIREMENTS AND GRADES

Class participation. Part of the work of the course is preparation for each week's class, in particular by locating and studying primary sources in their original setting. Classes are interactive and dialogical, and each student has a direct impact on the shape and direction of the class with his/her comments, questions and observations. More than being responsible "for" the material, the student is responsible "to" the other students for their learning experience (as well as her/his own), and for the growth of the discipline itself.

Niggun Havruta: You will be asked to form a havruta to sing and reflect upon a niggun each week; participants will share their work with the class. We will try to allot some class time to havruta-text work as well..

In addition, each student will present a niggun of her/his choosing to the class. This may be a favorite niggun; one recently learned; one found particularly instructive or challenging, or interesting for some other reason. The presenter will be asked to discuss the history, meaning, and spiritual significance of the niggun.

→Towards the end of each class, a specific niggun will be taught/shared for niggun-work during the coming week. We will sing the niggun at the start of the next week's class.

Final Paper: Characteristics of an "A" paper: A solid grasp of primary sources and the methodological issues involved in using them. Clear writing and coherent logical structure. Adherence to established research techniques and standard forms of citation in footnotes and bibliography. Awareness of the course's basic conceptual matrix and the developmental unfolding of its themes. Knowledge of specific basic facts, as well as sensitivity to broad areas of meaning and significance. Ability to articulate one's thoughts with clarity, stylistic grace, and creative insight.

You should consult with me early in the semester regarding your paper topic.

Suggested texts: Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meaning of Performing and Listening* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press/ Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998)
 DovBer Pinson, *Inner Rhythms: The Kabbalah of Music* (Jason Aronson, 2000).
 Nehemia Polen and Lawrence Kushner, *Filling Words with Light: Hasidic and Mystical Reflections on Jewish Prayer* Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2004.

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Moshe Idel, "Music in Sixteenth-Century Kabbalah in Northern Africa," *Yuval* 4, pp. 154-167.

Elliot Wolfson, "Biblical Accentuation in a Mystical Key: Kabbalistic Interpretations of the *Te'amim*." *Journal of Jewish Music and Liturgy*, vol. 11 (1988-9), pp. 1-16; vol. 12 (1989-90), pp. 1-13.

Niggun:

Mordechai Staiman, *Niggun: Stories behind the Chasidic Songs that Inspire Jews* (Jason Aronson, 1994)

Velvel Pasternak, *Beyond Hava Nagilah: a Symphony of Hasidic Music in 3 Movements* (Tara Publications, 1999).

_____. *The Hasidic Anthology*. Tara Publications, 2001. "Hasidic Music: An Overview," pp. 10-20.

Yitzhak Buxbaum, *Jewish Spiritual Practices*, ch. 24: "Song and Dance—The Service of Joy," pp.480-491.

Niggun, Teaching and Story.

Yitta Halberstam Mandelbaum, *Holy Brother*; Susan Yael Mesinai, *Shlomo's Stories*; Kalman Serkez, *The Holy Beggars' Banquet*; Tzlotana Midlo, *Thirty-Six Tzaddikim*; Shmuel Zivan, *Lev ha-Shamayim: Sihot ve-Sippurim—HaRav Shlomo Carlebach* (Jerusalem: Kol Mevaser, 2004)

Prayer and Spirituality

- Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous*. Vintage, 1997.
- Brody, Seth L. "Human Hands Dwell in Heavenly Heights: Contemplative Ascent and Theurgic Power in Thirteenth Century Kabbalah", in R. A. Herrera, ed., *Mystics of the Book*, Peter Lang, 1993, pp. 123-158.
- _____. "Open to Me the Gates of Righteousness: The Pursuit of Holiness and Non-Duality in Early Hasidic Teachings." *Jewish Quarterly Review* 89:1-2, pp. 3-44.
- Dan, Joseph. "The Emergence of Mystical Prayer", in Joseph Dan and Frank Talmage, eds., *Studies in Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge, MA, 1982), pp. 85-127. [Reprinted in Joseph Dan, *Jewish Mysticism II: The Middle Ages* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998), pp. 221-257.]
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- Greenberg, Moshe. *Biblical Prose Prayer*. Berkeley: University of California, 1983.
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- _____. "Perceptions of Kabbalah in the second half of the 18th Century." *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, vol. 1, pp. 55-114.
- _____. *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale, 1988), pp. 35-73; pp.74-111. [The Contributions of Abraham Abulafia and the Ecstatic School.]
- _____. "Hitbodedut as Concentration in Ecstatic Kabbalah", in Green, ed., *Jewish Spirituality I*, pp. 405-438.
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- _____. *Hasidic Prayer* (London & Washington, 1993), "Introduction to the Paperback Edition", pp. ix-xxi: the *kvittel* of a Kotsker-Gerer hasid. [Cf. Abraham Mordecai Alter, *Rosh Golat Ariel* (Jerusalem, 1990), pp. 477-487.]
- Marcus, Ivan G. "The Devotional Ideals of Ashkenazic Pietism", in Arthur Green, ed., *Jewish Spirituality I* (New York: Crossroads, 1986), pp. 356-365.
- Matt, Daniel C. "Ayin: The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism", in Robert K. C. Forman, ed., *The Problem of Pure Consciousness* (New York: Oxford, 1990), pp. 121-159.
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- and Ch. Wirszubski. Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967.
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Added 2 Shvat 5767, January 20, 2007

Or ha-Me'ir on Parashat Tetzaveh, s.v. "Ve-Atah Tetzaveh" →the role of the Sheliah Tzibbur and the co-ordination that needs to happen between the Hazan and the kahal; the significance of all life's events as teachings; that is, one must be open to every event in life, every episode and story, for the lessons it holds.

basic rubric is "embodied spirituality/sonic theology.....".

→the co-ordination of levels within the self (physical, emotional, cognitive, spiritual) does not stop at the borders of the self, but continues beyond the self to the community. The issues are largely the same—how do I give honor, focus, and voice to the integrity of each level, while co-ordinating with higher/wider/more inclusive levels? If one succeeds in doing this skillfully, that is what leads to delight=ta'anug, which is often given as the goal of hasidic praxis as a whole.

the praxis of co-ordination of individual—community ="finding our voices/leading from within."

→co-ordination and alignment of levels—levels within and beyond the self. And there is no reason why the levels need to stop at the walls of the particular synagogue in which one is praying—the larger goal is expansion of the circles of co-ordination and alignment without end.....