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Singing Through *Teshuvah*: A High Holiday Sonic Journey

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SESSION 1 Singing in Intention: Personal Song

♦ Linked

As the Talmud (Berakhot 6a) says: “בְּמָקוֹם רִנָּה – שָׁם תְּהֵא תַפִּלָּה” / where there is song, let there be prayer.” □ This text is #40 in the collection of sources found in Joey Weisenberg, *The Torah of Music* (ToM). Throughout this course, if a text appears in *The Torah of Music*, its number there will also appear.

♦ Study

See Babylonian Talmud Megillah 32a (ToM #51). □

COURSE INTRODUCTION

Song and prayer are truly inextricably linked. ♦ Song can allow us to express our innermost prayers, but connect those prayers to those of our surrounding community. In this course, we will probe one layer further, exploring the ways in which music and melody themselves deepen and complicate, unlock and crack open, the texts of our liturgy.

Our Sages understood melody to be a foundational tool in Torah study. ♦ By heeding this call and putting melodies in conversation with one another, we will tease open several core pieces of Yamim Nora'im (High Holiday) liturgy, allowing the song itself to take up space and pull its weight as a central piece of Torah.

This section includes links to the music and learning that involves writing. Study and listen to these recordings before Yom Tov!

I. LISTENING BEST PRACTICES

As part of the sonic journey of this course, we will be treating melodies as a text to be learned. Each time you come to a melody, make sure you bear in mind these guidelines:

1. **Listen in real time with your *havruta*.** On Zoom or other video apps, one person should share their audio in order that you can both listen together. If in person, play the music on good speakers if possible to hear the depths of the music.
2. **Have a way to take notes** to jot down thoughts as they come up. You will find it helpful to include a rough **timestamp** (e.g. “1min 11sec”) of what you were referring to.
3. **Dig deep into the material.** Like when you go over something you found interesting in a text study, you may need to go back and listen multiple times, or rewind to specific spots.
4. **Look at the guiding questions** accompanying the recordings. Like a text-based course, each session will include guiding questions for listening that span comprehension, analysis, and reflection. Allow yourselves the spaciousness to move from comprehension to reflection—and back again.

◆ **Vayikra Rabbah**

is a collection of *midrash* from 5th century Eretz Yisrael. It is organized based on the book of Leviticus.

◆ **Majority opinion**

This majority opinion (called by the name “Our Rabbis”) contrasts an individual opinion just quoted.

◆ **Malbim**

R. Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Mikhel Wisser, the masterful commentator on the Tanakh, lived in 19th century Eastern Europe. In his comments, he often teases apart words in the verses that sound like synonyms.

II. A PSALM FOR THE HIGH HOLIDAY PERIOD

The Yamim Nora'im season begins in earnest on Rosh Hodesh Elul, when our hearts begin to turn towards introspection, reflection, and *teshuvah* (repentance). One of the first special seasonal texts we encounter is Psalm 27, whose fourth verse has become one of the most widely sung verses of the season (see section III below).

The tradition is to include Psalm 27 daily from Elul through Shemini Atzeret-Simhat Torah. Let's begin by unpacking two interpretations of this psalm's first verse that ask us to consider its integration into this season.

SOURCE #1

תהלים כז:א	Psalm 27:1
לְדָוִד וְה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׁעִי מִמִּי אֵיךָ ה' מַעֲזֹרִי מִמִּי אֶפְתָּח:	For David. God, my light and my savior— from whom will I fear? God, the stronghold of my life—from whom will I dread?

SOURCE #2

ויקרא רבה כא:ד	Vayikra Rabbah 21:4
רַבֵּנָן פְּתִירִין קָרָא בְּרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים, אֱלֹהֵי בְּרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה וְיִשְׁעִי בְּיוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים.	The majority opinion interpreted the verse regarding Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: [God] is my light on Rosh Hashanah and my salvation on Yom Kippur.

SOURCE #3

מלבי"ם על תהלים כז:א	Malbim on Psalm 27:1
הִירָאָה הוּא מְדַבֵּר יְדוּעַ וְהַפְחָד הוּא מְדַבֵּר בְּלֹתִי יְדוּעַ, וְאִשָּׁר יִתִּירָא אָדָם מֵאוֹיְבָיִם גְּלוּיִם הַלּוֹחֲמִים אִתּוֹ נִקְרָא יִרָאָה.	“Fear” (<i>yirah</i>) is from something that is known, but “dread” (<i>pahad</i>) is from something unknown. When a person is fearful from revealed enemies who battle with them, that is called <i>yirah</i> .



Questions from R. Deborah Sacks Mintz:

1. Vayikra Rabbah interprets the word “light” explicitly, but the Malbim’s interpretation also (subtly) relies on an understanding of “light.” How does each text interpret this word “light”? In what way is this light “**my** light”?
2. What role does this “light” play in understanding the journey through the Yamim Nora’im season?
3. Focusing on Vayikra Rabbah: in what ways do you feel invitations into lightness at the beginning of this season?
4. Focusing on the Malbim: do you resonate with the contrasting definitions of “fear” and “dread”? Do either of them feel live for you at the beginning of this season?

III. AHAT SHA’ALTI

The fourth verse of this psalm is by far its most widely utilized in composition: one can find dozens of melodies for this verse across musical communities and genres, that include—but also go far beyond—the melody by Israel Katz◆ so often found in Ashkenazi communities. Today, we’ll listen and analyze two particular melodies, contextualizing them in the texts from section II.

Here is the text of the verse:

SOURCE #4 □

תהלים כז:	Psalm 27:4
אֶחָד וְשָׁאַלְתִּי מֵאֵת־ה'	One thing I ask from God, this I will request.
אוֹתָהּ אֶבְקֶשׁ שְׁבִתִּי	Let me rest in the house of God all the days of
בְּבֵית־ה' כָּל־יְמֵי חַיִּי לַחַיּוֹת	my life to see the pleasantness of God and to
בְּנַעֲם־ה' וּלְבַקֵּר בְּהִיכָלוֹ:	visit God’s sanctuary.

SOURCE #5 Ahat Sha’alti (Vizhnitz)



SOURCE #6 Ahat Sha’alti (Aly Halpert)



◆ **Shem Tov Katan**

R. Beinish may have been the first person to explicitly connect the High Holiday period to Psalm 27 in this book, published in 1706.

Questions from R. Deborah Sacks Mintz:

For each recording, ask the following questions:

1. Have you heard this before? If so, where and in what contexts?
2. Do any images, memories, or visions come up for you while listening to this melody?
3. What sounds do you hear in the recording? Do these resonate for you while reading the text of Psalm 27:4?

Then, explore the following questions. Feel free to go back and listen to any sections of these songs as needed.

1. Do any of these melodies feel most aligned with Source #2 (this psalm's representation of a journey from light to salvation)?
2. Do any of these melodies feel most aligned with Source #3 (this psalm's invitation into teasing out the awe of the known vs. the fear of the unknown)?
3. Do you read your own story of the journey through Elul into any of these melodies in particular? Do any feel less resonant or more challenging to connect to?

◆ **Take a step back:** ◆

In the Shem Tov Katan, ◆ R. Benjamin Beinish ha-Kohen writes: “concerning anyone who recites this psalm from Rosh Hodesh Elul until after Simḥat Torah, even if there is an evil decree from heaven against that person, it may be annulled.” This is a bold statement!

- Can we map this statement onto not only the recitation of this psalm itself, but the power of song?
- Have you experienced moments of song in your own life as powerful enough to activate this sort of transformation?