

Chanting: A *Mishkan* for Healing

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Chanting, the repetition of a sacred phrase, transforms the words of liturgy into a doorway that becomes an entrance into an expanded state of consciousness. From those expanded states, we have access to the fullness of our power to bless and to heal both ourselves and others. The sacred words light up our inner treasures; the unique medicine that we each carry may be revealed. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, “It is only after we kindle a light in the words that we are able to behold the riches they contain.” We kindle a light in the words through careful and loving attention to breath, intention, meaning, sound, melody, harmony, tone, rhythm, and the will to repeat a phrase long enough to allow a shift in consciousness to occur. Energy that is generated in the chant can then be focused and refined for healing.


The art of chanting in community requires a double focus — on the ever-deepening center of one’s being and on the group energy that is emerging. With each repetition of the phrase, the chanter has an opportunity to strengthen and refine both these points of focus. By opening the heart, the chanter finds within herself more to give the group. And by becoming a servant to the group, the chanter is given access to the deeper realms of her own heart.

When the sound of a chant has ended, the most subtle, transformative, powerful part of the practice can begin. By entering into the silence after a chant, we can receive both the divine influx and the gifts that bubble up from the soul. The silence after a chant is a completely different yet complementary practice to the chant itself. At the end of a chant, the silence allows us to focus attention on the breath moving gently in and out of the heart. One surrenders to the power that the chant has generated, letting it do its work within. In the silence, the chanter notices everything possible, knowing that a heightened attention is necessary in order to enter in through whatever doors have been opened by the power of the chant. Awareness of a state magnifies its benefit.

The healing power of a chant depends on the ability to create a vehicle for energy. That vehicle is like the *mishkan*, the movable sanctuary that housed the holy ark during our wandering in the wilderness. Into that *mishkan*, we

invite the presence of the divine to dwell. It becomes the nexus point between the infinite and finite realms. The stronger, more spacious, and clearer the *mishkan* is, the more energy it can receive and transmit.

When we chant, we are building a *mishkan* at four distinct yet interconnecting levels: at the level of the group, in relationship, in the body, and in the heart. During a chant for the purpose of healing, we call on the fullness of our passion and generosity to build and strengthen the *mishkan* at all levels.

In Kabbalah, four worlds exist: the physical world of action; the emotional world of expression, feeling and creativity; the world of knowing; and the spiritual world of being and interconnection. A chant becomes a healing force when all four worlds within the chanter are engaged. The chant vibrates through the body, opening up and enlivening the physical world. The emotions are engaged through the building of intention. The world of knowing is engaged through learning about the content and context of the sacred phrase. And the spiritual world is activated as our sense of separateness dissolves and we open up to God through expanded states of consciousness. Through the practice of chanting, we can activate all of our disparate parts at once and become the vehicle for God’s healing power. 



Rabbi Shefa Gold, a leader in ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal, received *smikha* from both the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, foremost founder of the Jewish Renewal movement. She is the director of C-DEEP, The Center for Devotional Energy and Ecstatic Practice in Jemez Springs, N.M. A composer and performer of spiritual music, Gold has produced ten albums, and her liturgies have been published in several new prayer books. She is the author of *In the Fever of Love: An Illumination of the Song of Songs* and *Torah Journeys: The Inner Path to the Promised Land*. Gold trains rabbis, cantors, and lay leaders in the art of chanting. To listen to her chanting, visit shma.com or rabbishefagold.com.

Discussion Guide

Bringing together a myriad of voices and experiences provides Sh'ma readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of these ideas, we offer the following questions:

1. Are there connections between belief, spirituality, physical health and mental health, and, if so, what are they?
2. What is your vision for a community-based multifaceted program in healing and health? That is, how might our institutions — both teaching and communal membership organizations — be transformed to offer healthier, more vibrant opportunities to address illness, suffering, health, death, etc.?
3. Are healing circles helpful? How so? What role does the Misheberach prayer serve? Does it add to the healing of the individual? Is it recited for the benefit of the person praying?
4. What are the legitimate expectations of our communal leaders who serve people facing illness and loss?
5. What roles do the cultural and expressive arts — music, painting, dance, etc. — play in the process of health and healing?