


the law that can separate halakhah from the conditions of daily life, this approach demands that one see values and ethics as a conscious part of interpreting texts. This pushes one to consider human issues.

Second, one must clarify if *kol isha* is essentialist or nonessentialist in nature. Is it prohibited for a man to hear the voice of a woman regardless of whether it is arousing at the time because it might, on some other occasion, be arousing (essentialist), or is it prohibited when it is arousing but is otherwise not problematic (non-essentialist)? Several authorities take the latter position regarding related issues,* which allows the focus to shift from a woman singing to a man's self-discipline on hearing a woman's

voice. A school must then set clear guidelines about what is and is not acceptable while also teaching both boys and girls to self-monitor.

Kol isha presents a significant challenge to the personal development and growth of many girls and women. However, it is possible to seriously engage the issue in a manner that maintains one's commitment to halakhah. This shift sets three demands: that a school carefully teach the texts with their varied interpretations; that it balance its commitments to halakhah and to the growth of its students; and that it acknowledge the importance of responsible thinking and decision making on the part of the student body. Though this approach necessitates hard work, it is well worth the effort. 

Verses of Song

EBN LEADER

I have been a daily practitioner of *tefillah* (prayer) for quite a few years. As for many others, a large part of my struggles and work with the practice has focused on liturgy, on the words of prayer. What do they mean? Do I believe in them? Should I introduce new words? Am I using them in the right way? What experiences do they evoke? While not minimizing the importance of these struggles, over the past

of singing as relating to *zemer aritzim*, cutting down tyrants.

What “tyrants” does my singing cut down? Because I understand God as the fullness of being, to be in God's presence is to be totally exposed. The extent to which I distance myself from parts of the world or myself is the extent to which I am distant from God. The process of shedding the various defenses and hiding places I have constructed is the process of coming before God. Some of the “tyrants” that do not allow me into the expansive consciousness, which I understand to be the presence of God, can be identified as arrogance, laziness, defensiveness, and other such qualities. Others are more subtle habits and modes of thought. But giving myself to music — not just listening, but allowing my body to participate — helps me to be open to aspects of myself that I do not otherwise access. Even when I do sing with words, the music allows many emotional states to break through the protective walls that words and intellect often erect.

In his famous essay “*Gilui V'kisui B'lashon*” (“Revealing and Concealing in Language”), Haim Nachman Bialik discusses the function of language as a coat of armor that we use to protect ourselves from the abyss of existential insecurity; language obscures fear and doubt forever just beneath the surface of daily life.

There are, however, as Bialik tells us, three wordless languages that do not block the experience of the abyss; music, laughter, and tears. “They come not to block but to open. They


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few years, the dynamics of sound in *tefillah* have taken precedence as one of the most significant elements of my practice. At the heart of my prayer is an aspiration toward internal and external silence, a longing to stand in the presence of God, to experience divinity that is not limited by the boundaries created by my own thoughts, words, and sounds. Yet the paths to and from this silent center go through various realms of sound. *Shacharit*, the morning prayer, takes me through song with and without words, chanting, the spoken word, the sound of breath, and, on lucky occasions, moments of silence. I will devote the following paragraphs to one of the preparatory elements of *tefillah* — song.

My *tefillah* begins with song. The first part of *Shacharit* is traditionally known as *Pesukei D'zimrah*, literally, verses of song. Yet early Kabbalists were quick to point out that the Hebrew root “ZMR” also carries the meaning of pruning; hence, they described this practice

Ebn Leader, a student of Rabbi Arthur Green, teaches at the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College, Boston. It is his practice to *daven* every day.

bubble up from within the abyss; they are of the abyss itself, which is why they sweep us away in overpowering waves, lifting man out of his conscious self and his everyday world.” (translation by Judy Montague)

I begin my *tefillah* with song, because it helps me open myself to what daily life has concealed. Pruning is a good metaphor for the practice to the extent that it describes cutting at the tips and edges rather than uprooting. It is rare that I am totally “swept away by the overpowering waves” of the music or that the tyrants of self I have constructed are totally cut down. Still, on any given day, those “tyrants” may be cut back a bit; small pathways may be opened through the thicket that was earlier impenetrable. As I spend time with a *niggun* (wordless melody), the ebb and flow of the music softens my defenses and the boundaries of my ego are made more porous. Though I often use words in this part of *tefillah*, the particular words I use are actually less significant than the fact that they are sung. This is the practice and the expectation I bring to *Pesukei D’zimrah*. 

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. What are the sounds you associate with “Jewish” — and why?
2. What makes music Jewish — the singer/songwriter, lyrics, impulses, context?
3. Why is so much of Jewish music in a minor key?
4. What is the relationship between listening and hearing?

Sounds of Learning: In a Beit Midrash and Senior Facility


SUZANNE OFFIT

A *beit midrash* is lively, sounding something like a middle school lunchroom. It holds a cacophony of voices: some low, deep, and contemplative; others livelier, perhaps staccato with incredulity. Occasionally, one hears a shrill rejection, an emphatic guffaw, a frustrated gasp, a sigh of rejection, a storm of inquisition. The *beit midrash* is robust with the passionate articulation of Talmud Torah learning. The voices are strong with confidence and vigorous intention. This is no place for the meek.

A new *chevrutah* struggles to find its paired rhythm of learning as the two study partners wrestle to understand “*plag hamincha*.” Another, more experienced twosome rallies Rashi translations from the frame of the page of the talmudic tractate *Nezikin*. And yet another duo delves deeply into the holy space of “*ki shakhan alav ha’anon, u’khvod haShem maleh et ha’mishkan*.” (“because the cloud had settled upon it and the presence of God filled the *mishkan*...”) During an early morning session, the low hum of dedicated learners is sometimes shattered by a howl of laughter and,

like a contagion, it ripples throughout the room. An observer might hear the beauty of a psalm chanted in three-part harmony bubbling up from the hearts of studiers, or shrieks of “*mazal tov*” as a wedding is announced, or sad, deep wails for a lost beloved.

I left that crowded, loud, animated *beit midrash* life of a student when I became a rabbi and chaplain at a senior facility. Alongside my new teaching and pulpit responsibilities, I sit, once again, face-to-face, eye-to-eye with individuals. I wait patiently in a thick silence as an older woman formulates and then softly, gently, exhales a response in my direction. Her words are heavy with years of experience, drenched with life’s disappointments. Each word clearly punctuates a lesson learned. So much pain pierces the air. I dwell here, deeply, in this holy space.

Sometimes, there are no sounds. Hugs have no sound. A hand held has no perceivable sound. I can hear only the blood pulsating in my ears. Then, I hear the labored sigh, the muffled tears, the gasp of a breath: the *Vidui*, the *Sh’ma*, silence. 

Suzanne Offit was ordained at the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College in Boston and she presently serves as rabbi and chaplain at Hebrew SeniorLife, a multi-site institution for housing, healthcare, and medical research for the elderly throughout the Greater Boston area. She lives in Newton, Mass., with her husband, Andy, and their three boys.