

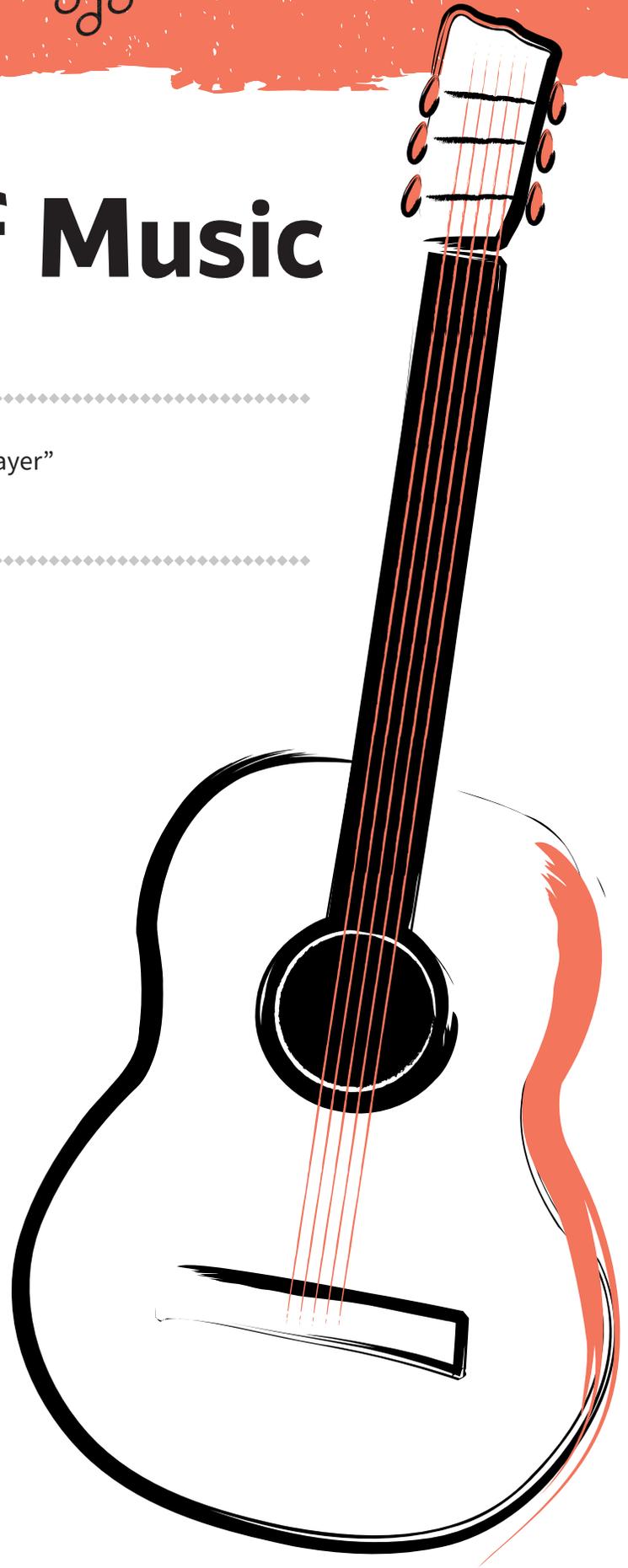
The Torah of Music

Joey Weisenberg

UNIT 1 “Where There is Song, There is Prayer”
SESSION 1 Music and Prophecy

MUSIC IS A FORM OF PRAYER, AND PRAYER IS a form of music. They are like two legs of the spiritual throne, mutually supporting each other. What is the prayer that music offers? Can music open our ears and our hearts so that we can better sense the nuance and subtleties of the world around us? If we open our mouths and sing our imperfect songs, can we connect with the divine songs of all creation? Can our prayer chants open the gates of heaven? These are the questions and hopes that animate this course.

Music has been part of the Jewish story since the beginning, both in our texts and in our lives. This first unit begins to explore this ancient connection by looking at the important role music has in prophecy, one of the most ancient ways of talking to God and of God talking through us.



“THE HAND/SPIRIT OF GOD”

Questions from Joey Weisenberg

Before jumping into the learning, spend a few minutes with your *havruta* and ask each other the following questions:

1. What is the role of music in your life? In your life as a Jew? In your spiritual life?
2. What kinds of music do you enjoy or identify with the most?

Now, as Jews we understand that we don't have prophecy anymore. But perhaps we can still learn about music by learning about prophecy.

Intro

In these first two texts from the Prophets (Nevi'im), you can see the centrality of music to prophecy, first with the prophet Elisha, and then with King Saul.

SOURCE #1  ← click icon to find source on sefaria.com!

מלכים ב ג: טו
וַעֲתָה קְחוּ־לִי מַנְגֵן
וְהָיָה כִּנְנוֹן הַמַּנְגֵן
וַתְּהִי עָלָיו יַד־יְקוֹק:

2 Kings 3:15

[Elisha said:] “But now bring me a musician.” And when the musician played, the hand of God came upon him.

SOURCE #2 

שמואל א י:ה-ו
...וַיְהִי כְּבָאָה⁵
שָׁם הָעִיר וּפְגַעַתָּ חֶבֶל
נְבִיאִים יֹרְדִים מִהַבְּמָה
וְלִפְנֵיהֶם נָבֵל וְתוֹר וְחָלִיל
וְכִנּוֹר וְהֵמָּה מְתַנְּבְּאִים:
וְצִלְחָתָה עָלֶיךָ רוּחַ יְקוֹק⁶
וְהִתְנַבֵּיתָ עִמָּם וְנִהְפַכְתָּ
לְאִישׁ אַחֵר:

1 Samuel 10:5-6

⁵... [Samuel said:] When you [King Saul] reach the city, you will encounter a band of prophets descending from the high place, before them a harp, drum, and flute, and they will prophesy.
⁶The spirit of God will rush over you, and you will prophesy with them, transforming into a different person.

Questions from Joey Weisenberg

1. “The hand/spirit of God”  in these texts is a way of referring to prophetic inspiration. Music is always in part a performance, even if it comes along with

◇ Book of Prophets

The Prophets (Nevi'im) is the middle section of the Bible, in Hebrew Tanakh, which is an acronym תנ"ך of ת = Torah, נ = Nevi'im (Prophets), and כ = Ketuvim (Writings). The Prophets is further divided into the books of narrative (“Early Prophets”) and the books of prophecy (“Late Prophets”)—although calling them “early” or “late” has little to do with the books’ providence, just their placement in the Bible). Samuel and Kings are both found in the Early Prophets.

◇ Spirit of God

“The phrase “spirit of God”—....

sometimes a translation of Hebrew “Ruah Elohim” or “Ruah Adonai”—is a common phrase to describe prophetic inspiration (e.g. Genesis 41:38, Isaiah 11:2), or related concepts like God acting in the world (e.g. Genesis 1:2) or on a person (e.g. 1 Samuel 16:14). The phrase “hand of God, Yad Adonai” is therefore surprising and unusual in the Kings context (although see Ezekiel 37:1 where it is contrasted with “spirit of God” directly; a usual use of “hand of God” might be in the way the Israelites describe the plagues in Egypt in Exodus 16:3). This confusion led to many scholars citing this passage incorrectly and subconsciously replacing “hand of God” with “spirit of God”, e.g. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Piezetzener Rebbe, in his essay on the nigun (which we will encounter extracts of in a future session).”

something greater, like bringing a community together in song. Perhaps the same could be said about prophecy, of transmitting God’s will.

Why else might you think it is specifically music that triggers prophecy?

2. With Elisha, “the hand of God came upon him,” but with Saul there is the much more detailed, “the spirit of God will rush over you... and you will transform into a different person.”

Do you think there’s an actual difference in the experience each text describes, or do you think they are describing the same experience with different words? Have you ever experienced anything that could be described with either of these descriptions?

3. “Transforming into a different person” could be referring to Saul becoming a prophet (temporarily) or him being crowned king, which he is after this episode.

In what ways do you see music transform people?

ALL PROPHETS NEEDED MUSIC— EXCEPT MOSES

These prophetic texts above describe a world where prophets required music to hear the word of God. And on the flip side, there is an assumption that music has the potential to awaken prophecy in those that hear it—just like King Saul joining the prophetic troupe.

Meir ibn Gabbai uses these same two texts to show this point, and also clarifies that there was an exception to the rule: Moses.

SOURCE #3

**רי מאיר אבן גבאי, עבודת הקודש,
חלק ד - סתרי תורה, פרק כג**

לא הוצרך כל ימיו עליו השלום
לשום התעוררות ממיני הניגונים
להשרות עליו רוח נבואה כי לא
נסתלק מעליו כלל ותמיד היה
מוכן ועומד אין לו מונע מצד עצמו
כלל, לפי שאין בכחו למעלה שום
הסתלקות רוח ושפע אורה ולזה היה
בדוגמא ההיא, מה שאין כן

**Meir ibn Gabbai, Avodat Ha-Kodesh
Vol. 4, Sitrei Torah, ch 23**

All his days, [Moses] never required any stimulation from any kind of *nigun* (melody) to invoke the spirit of prophecy, for it never withdrew from him at all, always at the ready, from his side, never refraining at all, as, in his supernal power, there is no withdrawal of spirit or the flow of [divine] light, and this was his paradigm. This was not the case with

...source #3 continues on page 4

◇ **Meir ibn Gabbai**

was a Spanish kabbalist in the 15th-16th centuries. Little is known about his life, but we have three of his books, of which Avodat Ha-Kodesh, “The Service of the Holy One,” is the most widely known.

◇ **Context**

Think of this question in the context of Deuteronomy 34:10, “Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses—whom God singled out, face to face...”

...source #3 continued

בשאר הנביאים ע"ה
שיצטרכו למיני הניגון לעורר
עליהם הרוח ולהשרות עליהם
הנבואה וכמו שכתוב "ופגעת חבל
נביאים ירדים מהבמה ולפניהם נבל
ותף והליל וכנור והמה מתנבאים",
וכתיב "ועתה קחו לי מנגן והיה
כנגן המנגן ותהי עליו יד יי":

the rest of the prophets, peace be upon them, who needed *nigunim* (melodies) to awaken the spirit and invoke prophecy upon them, as it is written, “you will encounter a band of prophets descending from the high place, before them a harp, drum, and flute, and they will prophesy,” and, “Now, get me a musician, and as he plays his melody, the hand of God will be on him.”

Questions from Joey Weisenberg

1. Ibn Gabbai contrasts Moses’ higher prophetic ability to that of all other prophets: other prophets needed music to hear the word of God, except for Moses. It seems like in the background of this is that the Torah describes Moses as talking with God “face-to-face” (e.g. Exodus 33:11), but he didn’t quote this explicitly.

How does he use the texts he quotes from Samuel and Kings to bolster his point?

2. The “mechanical” reason Moses is the exception to the normal rules of prophecy is because, in ibn Gabbai’s understanding, the spirit of prophecy “never withdrew from him at all” such that he never needed to get it back through music. The other prophets lived most of their life without the spirit and could only access it when they needed it through music.

What about Moses’ character or place in tradition makes him unique in this regard? ◇

3. Based on this text, we could construct two models of tiered access to God. It could be that there are three such tiers:
 - a. Moses, at the top, who always had the access to the spirit;
 - b. other prophets, who needed music to access the spirit;
 - c. us, who have no access to it at all.

Alternatively, you could instead use Moses’ exceptional status and instead have two tiers:

- a. Moses, who always had access to the spirit;
- b. everyone else, including the prophets, who can have access to the spirit through music.

What do you think about these two models? Which is more attractive to your worldview? Why? (In what ways) do you feel that you can access or connect to God through music?

4. Taking music as a metaphor for prophecy, God is to the prophet as the musician is to the instrument—the prophet allows themselves to be “played” by God and be the “instrument” of God’s will, to “awaken the spirit.”

How might you extend this idea to us non-prophets today?

THE HARP AWAKENS THE KING

Someone who was not a prophet but whose heart was awakened through music was King David, the mythical author of the psalms and renowned warrior. The Talmud narrates his nightly routine:

SOURCE #4

| תלמוד בבלי ברכות דף ג עמוד ב | Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 3b |
|---|---|
| <p>1) כנור היה תלוי למעלה ממטתו של דוד, וכיון שהגיע חצות לילה בא רוח צפונית ונושבת בו ומנגן מאליו,</p> | <p>1) A harp was hung above the bed of David, and once midnight arrived, a northern wind would blow on it, making its own melody.</p> |
| <p>2) מיד היה עומד ועוסק בתורה עד שעלה עמוד השחר.</p> | <p>2) David awoke at once and delved into Torah until dawn broke.</p> |
| <p>3) כיון שעלה עמוד השחר נכנסו חכמי ישראל אצלו, אמרו לו: אדונינו המלך, עמך ישראל צריכין פרנסה. אמר להם: לכו והתפרנסו זה מזה. אמרו לו: אין הקומץ משביע את הארי ואין הבור מתמלא מחוליתו.</p> | <p>3) After the break of dawn, the wise ones of Israel entered, saying to him, “Our lord, the king, your people Israel need sustenance.” He said to them, “They should go and sustain each other.” They said to him, “A handful cannot satisfy a lion, and a pit cannot be filled with clumps of dirt.”</p> |
| <p>4) מר להם: לכו ופשטו ידיכם בגדוד.</p> | <p>4) He said to them, “Go out and take plunder [i.e. make war].”</p> |

Questions from Joey Weisenberg

- Take each section of the text separately. After each one:
 - What is your picture of King David?
 - What is he thinking?
 - What kind of person is he?
 - What are his interests and passions?
- One reading of section 3 is that he is very reluctant to do anything for his kingdom, but only to listen to the music of his harp and to study. And yet, he is tethered to his role in life, that he has to find resources to feed and sustain his people, which he decides to do, in section 4, through war.

Why do you think he comes to this ultimate decision? What does this say about his character?

3. *How does music help you come to terms with your struggles?*
4. In a time before alarm clocks, David was woken every night by the wind playing his harp.
What are the things that wake you up?

◇ **To close out your discussion of these sources, ask yourselves:** ◇
What ways could the paradigms of Moses, the prophets, and King David be useful of thinking about the role of music in our spiritual life today?