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.



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

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.

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