

My Personal Practice of ‘Niggun’

HANNAH DRESNER

From an early age, singing *niggunim*, or wordless melodies, has been my spiritual practice. It began as a ritual in my family¹ as we sang our way into the dark on late Shabbat afternoons, and it has continued through my adulthood as the best expression of my life with God.

My favorite time to sing *niggunim* is during the hour of longing marked by Shabbat’s third meal. While I often sing with others, I also have a practice of singing alone in the sanctuary of my car. My voice reverberates against the walls of that sonic container and I experience the echo of my voice as my deeper self joining in, singing back to me.

The Piaseczner Rebbe, Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, a Hasidic master who perished in the Warsaw Ghetto, taught that with singing, “if, at first, you have had to make music *for* your soul, bit by bit you will feel your soul begin to sing for herself.”² In other words, at the point when my conscious will accedes to the groove of the *niggun*, I will no longer be directing it or controlling my soul’s self-revelation.

The song of my soul can arise only when I quiet the urge to think rationally and critically; it will arise only when the still, small voice of emotional truth, which is always singing deeper within, can be heard and amplified. Letting go of language quiets the analytical side of my brain, and the liberated vocalizations serve as a medium for laying myself bare before my God.

The Piaseczner teaches that once the soul begins to sing, “she breaks open a path for

ascent to the heights and to the heavens... [and] the *niggun* carries your soul in its center, to pour her forth and draw you close to God.”³ He concludes with a reminder that we don’t have to yell; God hears our quiet voices.

If I sit quietly for long enough, the *niggun* begins as an internal song, not even audible in its first phrases. Resting in a baseline of quiet, I still my conscious will to allow whatever is going to be expressed to emerge of its own accord. I sing the *niggun* as I’m able; sometimes, the *niggun* raises me to heights so that I stir the trees of paradise with my song and my breath.⁴ On any given day, my practice may be contemplative or ecstatic, a refuge or a supplication. At its best, my *niggun* will have cathartic power. Eventually, the *niggun* comes to an end and I am quiet again, heady and unaware of the car or life outside it.

Now, I put my voice to rest. As the *niggun* resonates within me, I experience glimmers of understanding that, sometime later, I might be able to articulate. Though I appear to be quiet, I’m filled with internal reverberation. Finally, my interior hushes to a quiet more calm than the quiet in which I began. This quiet is the effect of having emptied everything — even the internal song. I experience this quiet as though I am revisiting the primordial quiet before God created the world through speech. In quiet, I become aware of feeling heard, and so I sit, a few minutes longer, in requited intimacy with God, resting in God’s embrace and imagining that God is resting in me. 



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Rabbi Hannah Dresner was one of the last people Rebb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, z”l, ordained through ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal. Dresner is a visiting rabbi at Congregation B’nai Torah in Brentwood, Calif., and she leads chanting and meditation at Congregation Netivot Shalom in Berkeley. She travels widely to teach Hasidic texts and the art of prayer.

¹ My father, R. Samuel Dresner, z”l was a scholar of *hasidut* and an avid collector of old Hasidic melodies.

² Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, *Hachsharat HaAvreichim*, Chapter 9

³ Ibid

⁴ Amnon Shiloah, *Jewish Musical Traditions*, p. 146, on kabbalistic theories on song

Hearing the Planet Speak

DANIEL SIEGEL

I was born in New York and raised in a number of cities and suburbs on the East Coast. My idea of being in the country was either Central Park or summer camp, both of which required artificial lights after sunset. Silence, which I define as the absence of sounds created by human beings, was available only with tightly closed windows or in the predawn morning.

This was true until my wife, Hanna Tiferet, and I decided to “go back to the land.”

Along the way, I had a frightening experience of real darkness — and because I had never really been in the outdoor darkness of

night before, I decided to examine and make friends with the fear. After moving to the interior of British Columbia in 1971, I would walk in the woods late at night, wait for my fear to manifest itself, and then calm myself. And, once I made peace with the dark, I yearned to experience that true darkness again and again.

But in the summer of 1972, a deeper yearning for living Jewishly pulled me from rural living back into a city, where our children could attend day schools and my wife and I could work on birthing a new kind of Jewish spiritual community. Finally, in 2005, with our children grown and *continued on next page*

Rabbi Daniel Siegel is the first person ordained by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, z”l. He teaches in the ordination program of ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal. Siegel is also the editor of *Sidur Kol Koreh*, and the rabbinic director of ALEPH Canada. He and his life partner, Rabbi Hanna Tiferet, live on Homby Island, off the west coast of Canada. He can be reached at rabbidanielsiegel.com.



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in this issue

the Jewish Renewal movement grown stronger, we took the opportunity to move our home to a small island in British Columbia, about 100 miles northwest of Vancouver. Here, I write, teach, and counsel. Here, also, I can garden, be still, and listen to the silence.

Silence

There is nothing quite like stepping out onto my deck to daven *shacharit* as the sun rises and shines through the trees. Then, I recite: “Who forms light, creates darkness, makes peace and creates all.” One magical Shabbat moment stands out: I was just chanting, “Were our arms stretched out like eagles’ wings,” when two eagles circled over my head. In the evening, I practice Tai Chi outdoors, savoring the last of the bird-songs or the croaking sounds of mating frogs. Often, there is no sound at all beyond the rustling of the wind in the tall cedar and fir trees.

Sometimes, as I lie in bed waiting for sleep, I listen to the wind, to the sound of the ocean, to the rain, or to the stillness itself. In these moments, I melt into an experience of wholeness, a reality so vast that my self-importance shrinks to insignificance, if only for a few moments.

I experience this more often when I pause and restrain myself from bending nature for my benefit. Those moments allow the wisdom in God’s creation to speak. The sights and sounds of God’s creation — deer grazing in my yard or stars dancing on a moonless night — bring the psalms and prayers of our tradition to life: “How great are your works, O God! You have made them all with wisdom; the earth is full of your possessions.” (Psalm 104:24)

Rupture

I wrote much of this essay while staying in a Boston suburb, where I returned this year to co-lead High Holiday services. I am acutely aware of how early the gardeners arrive in the

neighborhood with their gas-powered mowers and weed whackers. Each day, a different crew arrives to attend to a different house. I’m struck by the contrast between the mechanical nature of their work, designed for a quick arrival and departure, and my own gardening — most often slow and solitary, with my own hands. I’m aware that the homeowners are too busy to do their own gardening. The noise and fumes of the gas-fuelled engines disturb me — especially in this time of concern for climate change. But mostly, I’m troubled by the hurry everyone seems to be in, the quick visits, the traffic, the need to get things done because there is so much to do and so much time spent driving from one chore to the next. And, more than that, I’m troubled by the unquestioned normality of this way of living. Only ten years ago, I saw this pace as normal. As the Jewish chaplain at Dartmouth College and then as rabbinic director of ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal, I worked seven days a week, often twelve hours a day. I accomplished much during those years, but my only quiet consisted of occasional walks in the woods behind our house in New Hampshire and long bike rides. The chronic stress led to a heart attack six months after we had relocated to this island. Now, the slower pace to which I have grown accustomed allows for an inner quiet. So many of my ideas come to me in that quiet, in the mental space opened by working slowly, with little distracting noise.

I appreciate how richly I live with less stuff — away from any metropolis and center of Jewish life. I am satisfied eating simple food because it is local. I enjoy working with others to keep our little community healthy and conflict free. I seek, along with my friends and neighbors, to respect the other life forms with whom we share this space — and I cherish having the inner quiet to hear the planet speaking to me. 

Shaping the Future of Torah Study

BARBARA PENZNER

A Partner in Holiness: Deepening Mindfulness, Practicing Compassion and Enriching Our Lives through the Wisdom of R. Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev’s Kedushat Levi, Volumes 1 & 2 by Jonathan Slater, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2014, \$35 per volume

Why do contemporary Jews study Torah? While Torah study can be a stimulating intellectual experience and an opportunity to explore the history and

ideas of the Jewish people, it should also, as the Talmud teaches, lead to action. Adults who study Torah often connect the Torah text to the text of their own lives, as the Torah

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