Nusaḥ as a Spiritual Practice

Carl H. Sayres
MA Thesis
Academy for Jewish Religion
December 31, 2024

Why?

This project begins with a burning question — *Why*?

From an early age, even before my Bar Mitzvah, I was on the bimah at the East Midwood Jewish Center involved in leading services. And then I went to Camp Ramah and USY, where I learned all sorts of melodies and songs and ways of davening. But when I brought those back to my synagogue, I was told that those weren't correct. I needed to use specific chants or melodies in only specific places. And I asked *why*? The only answer I received was *this is how it is done*.

I've never been satisfied with that answer. At first I wanted to rebel against it. After all, if there is no good reason for it, then we might as well daven with any music we like. But the more I studied nusaḥ, the more I fell in love with it, the more I wanted to know every detail about it, and the more I wanted to make sure that I was davening each part of the service accurately.

However, the question of *why* didn't go away. In many ways this question is what led me to want to go to cantorial school. And, honestly, I was disappointed that cantorial school didn't answer this question! But it did provide me with tools and experiences that helped me find answers for myself.

Those answers are in the realm of spirituality. Nusaḥ is a musical language of spirituality. Within nusaḥ, are pathways for deep exploration of Jewish Liturgy. Within nusaḥ, are clues to secrets hiding within our prayers. Within nusaḥ, are gateways for connecting and communicating with the Divine.

The pathway for making these discoveries for oneself is to make nusaḥ into a spiritual practice.

What is a Spiritual Practice?

In its simplest form, a practice is simply something you do regularly. “We are what we practice … If we become angry a lot, then essentially we are practicing anger. And we get quite good at it. Conversely, if we practice being joyful, then a joyful person is what we become.”[1]

But a Spiritual Practice has the added element of intentionality. We are making a commitment to approach life through a particular lens. And we recognize that the goal is the journey itself, not the destination. By regularly engaging in our practice, even in very small doses, over time we will glean insights, and we will develop our own self.

Unlike a secular practice (e.g. going to gym), the intentional commitment we’re making by engaging in a Spiritual Practice is the development of our relationship with the Divine. We have the goal of deepening our understanding of God, God’s role in our lives and in the world, and how we can improve and transform our lives through this development. “If you are happy just the way you are; if you are afraid of what might happen if you were transformed, then spiritual practices are not for you. One enters regular, intentional spiritual practices in order so

[1] Avram Davis, via https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/about/what-are-spiritual-practices

that the God one discovers in relationship might gradually transform us into who we are called to be."[2]

From this, we can isolate four criteria for a Spiritual Practice[3]:

1. It is regular.
2. It is intentional.
3. It establishes, develops and nourishes a personal relationship with the Divine.
4. One engages in spiritual practices in order to be transformed.

In establishing a Spiritual Practice of nusaḥ, we start with the idea that nusaḥ contains something — information, meaning, context. And through regular practice (ie. davening), we are searching for that meaning. We are searching to understand why this is relevant for us, and to use that knowledge to aid our own development.

What does music *mean*?

So often, I've heard people ask about the meaning of music — does music have meaning in the same way that words have meaning. Words, at a surface level, appear to have an obvious meaning, and a typical person is skilled enough in spoken language to understand that surface meaning. But music seems abstract, unspecific, compared to words. That is only true, however, if one is judging according to the problem that words were designed to solve. If one wants to write a shopping list — *go to the store, buy milk and a dozen eggs* — words are a very effective tool for doing this, and music would be an extremely inefficient way of communicating this information to someone. However, if one wants to describe an experience, an emotion, a feeling — the day your son was born, your first kiss, missing a friend, the loss of a parent, your concern

[2] https://spiritualpractice.ca/what/what-2/
[3] ibid.

for someone who is ill — words turn out to be a challenging medium. And only our greatest writers have succeeded in capturing such abstract ideas. There is a reason for the phrase *a picture is worth a thousand words.* Words are too specific, too limited, too focused, and it takes too many of them to describe a complex thought. But music excels at this. With just a few notes, a person can communicate complex ideas that would take thousands of words to describe and still be insufficient.

Now consider trying to describe our relationship with God, and how God manifests in the world and in our lives. If we're being very careful about how we use words, there is very little we can honestly say. Human language doesn't have the words we would need. Of course in Jewish tradition, there are words we use in place of not having the words. We refer to God as צור ישראל (Rock of Israel), מגן אברהם (Shield of Abraham), אב הרחמים (Source of Compassion). We say that God is הגדול הגיבור והנורא (the Great, the Strong, the Awesome), and God took us out of Egypt ביד חזקה ובזרוע נטויה (with a strong hand and an outstretched arm). But these are all metaphors. These are human words used to describe something beyond human experience or understanding. They serve a purpose, but they are very limited in their ability to express our understanding of how God manifests in the world.

Listen to this niggun (wordless melody) known as The Poltava Niggun, a Chassidic melody attributed to Reb Yakov Mordecai Pespalov, the Rabbi from the city of Poltava in Ukraine.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hxbKjI4lRyM

Listening to this recording, I imagine the Jews of Poltava sitting around a table on Shabbos afternoon as the sun is setting. I hear them singing about their lives in Ukraine. Expressing their hopes and their dreams, as well as their fears, and they are singing this to God.

In this melody, I hear their complete faith and devotion to God, despite the hardships they endure. And singing together, they are expressing a common understanding of their lives and their relationships with each other and with God. In this case, I feel words are not only unnecessary, they would only get in the way of the pure emotion being expressed.

How does a people with a common experience achieve a common understanding of music? It is learned by listening and participating. This learning can happen at a very early age, even before one is ready to develop language skills. It can even happen in-utero.

Just like words, a melodic shape, a motif, or a harmony's meaning is grounded in cultural context. We have shared experiences, and we have a common musical vocabulary that has applied to those experiences in the past. And without doubt, training and study can refine a person's abilities to understand and expand this vocabulary. But even people from different cultures, who may not even speak the same verbal language, can listen to each other's music and understand so much about each other through this universal medium.

In the case of nusaḥ, we are applying a musical vocabulary on top of a set liturgy. The words of the liturgy have meaning by themselves (which, of course, can be explored at multiple levels of sophistication). When we add music to these words, we are adding additional information to the text. This information can help us interpret the text, but even more interestingly, it can *change* the meaning of the text. It can uncover interpretations of the text that would not be evident without the nusaḥ. In fact, for a given text, when one changes the nusaḥ, the interpretation of the text can completely change. (See *Different Nusḥaot For The Same Liturgy*, below.)

What is this? What is this not?

My goal for *Nusaḥ as a Spiritual Practice* is to show how the nusaḥ that traditional Ashkenazi Jews chant while davening provides a framework for deep exploration of Jewish liturgy, and how that depth can help us develop our understanding of, and relationship with, God. While I will briefly describe some Ashkenazi nusaḥ for specific services, this thesis is not intended to describe completely the *nusaḥ hatefillah* for the entire liturgical year. For that I recommend books by Cantor Charles Davidson (*Immunim l: Exploring the Jewish Musical Modes, A Manual for Self Study; Immunim III: Sefer Hadrakhah,* 3rd Ed.) and Cantor Andrew Bernard (*The Sound of Sacred Time*). This thesis is assuming that the reader is at least somewhat familiar with nusaḥ, as well as understands some basis music theory (ie. understanding of musical modes, scales, intervals, etc. …) and has the ability to read music.

The examples that I will describe will also be limited to the Eastern European Ashkenazi tradition. There are many other traditions, including Western European, Sephardi, Mizrahi, and others, which have variations or even completely different musical traditions. The type of analysis that I will present, and that I am encouraging practitioners to explore, could equally apply to those traditions as well, and I encourage the reader who grew up in those traditions to apply the methods and ideas that I present to those traditions.

I also want to emphasize that the ideas and creative interpretations that are presented here are simply my own. One might agree or disagree with them. For myself, they have been very useful for exploring and understanding our liturgy, and as Sol Zim likes to say, "*live the nusaḥ.*" One doesn't have to agree with my interpretations to find the methods useful, however. My concern is much more that a davener learns to listen to the nusaḥ, so that they may find their own interpretations.

The Problem That I'm Trying To Solve

If you ask knowledgeable synagogue-going Jews, *Why is studying Torah important?,* you'll get many meaningful answers. Similarly, if you ask, *Why is learning Talmud important?* or *Why is studying Rabbinic literature and Halachah important?* — these are questions that will evoke thoughtful answers, passionate debate, and discussion.

Now ask a knowledgeable synagogue-going Jew: *Why is davening with nusaḥ important?* There are very few who could supply a meaningful answer to this question. Sadly, most rabbis cannot answer it. Tragically, most cantors can't answer it either.

And for those that can answer, the answer is usually some variant of *this is how it has always been done* or *this is how I remember hearing it in my grandparents' shul*. Those might have been sufficient answers in past generations, but for modern liberal Jews—who listen to folk and pop and rock music in every other aspect of their lives—they've never been given a reason to prioritize nusaḥ over those musical genres when they daven.

This problem is well documented by Charles Heller in an essay subtitled "The day the music died."[4] He quotes Shalom Kalib as saying "the gradual attrition of the older congregants from eastern Europe, succeeding American generations with little and often no Jewish education lacked the background and knowledge to fully participate, and in many cases to even follow a traditional Hebrew service ... The artist-hazzan, the central figure within the musical tradition of the eastern European synagogue for over three centuries, has in essence ceased to exist in today's orthodox as well as liberal synagogues … Today's bleak status of synagogue music … is at its lowest ebb in a number of essential aspects since the Middle Ages." He quotes Cantor Robert Kieval as saying "Davening is an alien function to most of our congregants today … we don't

[4] Heller, Charles. "A Friday Afternoon in Detroit, 1970: The day the music died." *SHUL GOING, 2,500 Years of Impressions and Reflections on Visits to the Synagogue.* 2019. P.114-116. (Included as Appendix B.)

hear at the daily minyan any more … that hum of people davening, murmuray [murmuring]. All you hear is silence."

Michael Isaacson identifies what is missing today in our synagogues:

> During the first half of the twentieth century, a Golden Age for the Hazzan, the congregation was encouraged to listen to both the rabbi and even more to the cantor, as much as participate. The great Hazzanim taught us midrashic musical lessons on a weekly basis. We were less in a hurry for instant gratification. One or two cantorial solos (Hazzanut) were always object lessons in midrashic text settings as we patiently and actively listened to the cantor's artful improvisation. Unfortunately, cantorial excesses and a lack of Hazzanic in-service growth forced the pendulum to swing in the opposite direction. Active listening was replaced with passive participation.[5]

The Cantorate needs to teach their congregations about nusaḥ. Teach them to daven. And most important, they need to provide a reason why a congregant should care about nusaḥ. Just like Torah, *why is studying nusaḥ important in your life*? *Why should Jews care deeply about nusaḥ*? The point of this thesis is to provide answers to those questions. I want to show the typical synagogue-going Jew how valuable nusaḥ could be in their lives, and how much it would enhance their experience in synagogue. I want to start a movement of daveners who study nusaḥ the way Jews study Torah and Talmud, who can listen and analyze and imagine, and can also improvise and expand and create. I want every bar- and bat-mitzvah student to be learning nusaḥ, long before they learn trope for their haftarah. I want to take nusaḥ out of the seminaries and academic classrooms and put it where it belongs - in the hands (and mouths) of Jews.

Understanding Nusaḥ

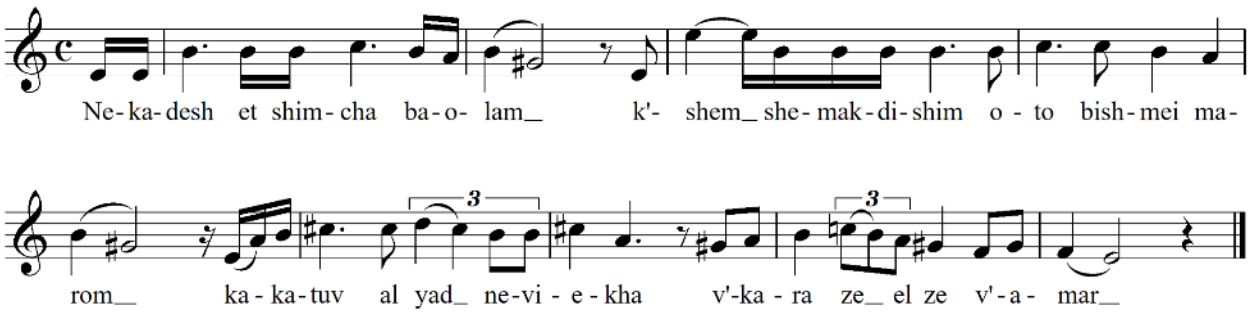
Nusaḥ is a term which is challenging to define, and is often misunderstood. At its core, it is the traditional manner in which we chant Jewish liturgy. Joey Weisenberg calls nusaḥ "the

[5] Isaacson, Michael. *Jewish Music as Midrash: What Makes Music Jewish?* 2007. p.186.

free-flowing musical pattern that is sung solo by the *ba'al tefilah*, that changes in different sections of the service. As you learn the nusaḥ, pay attention to how the nusaḥ changes for different services; thanks to nusaḥ, Jewish prayer has the power to—quite literally—tell time with song; Learn the proper nusaḥ, sing it with confidence with the text, and you will give the congregation an immediate snapshot of the time of year, time of week, all the way down to the time of day. For example, by just listening to the way the chazan chants the half-kaddish, we are reminded that it is Rosh Hashanah morning, or Sukkot evening, or *shabbat* afternoon, or many other times of the Jewish year."[6]

Dr. Lawrence Hoffman calls nusaḥ "the record of musical syntax—the association of certain sounds with certain events and seasons in the sacred calendar."[7] For each service (or section of a service), there are characteristic motifs (short melodic phrases) which are used to open or close a text (known as פתיחה and חתימה), additional common motifs used to develop the text or reserved for certain words of a text, and a general manner (known as a musical mode) in which the text is chanted. This can be done in a simple way, or expanded by a skilled practitioner into elaborate recitatives.

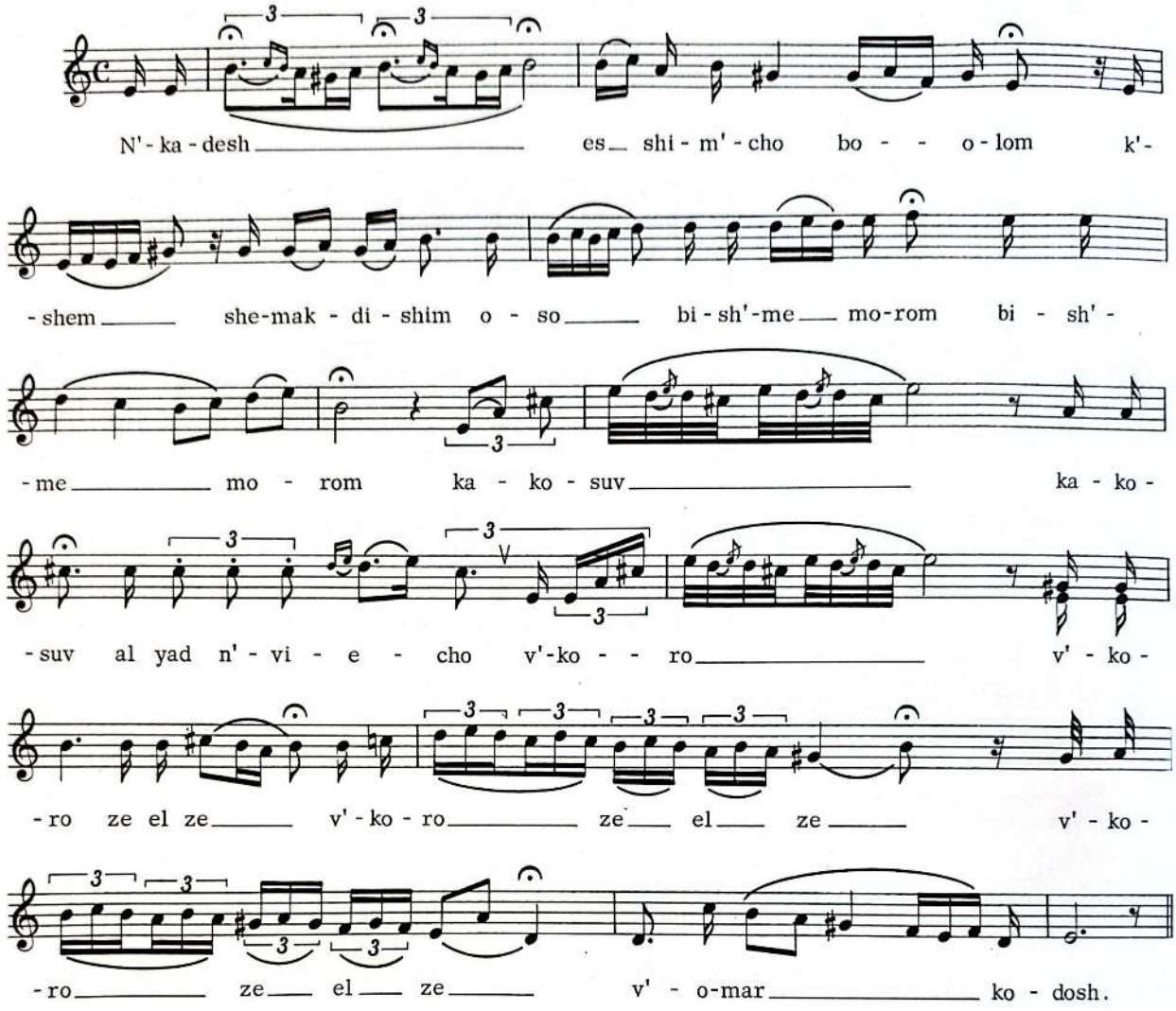
For example, the opening of the קדשה on Shabbat morning can be sung using a simple chant, familiar to regular synagogue attendees:



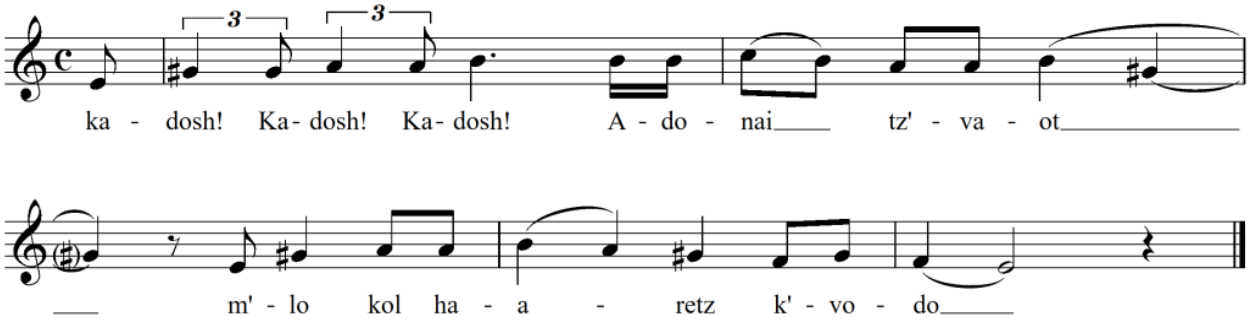
[6] Weisenberg, Joey. *Building Singing Communities.* Mechon Hadar. 2011. p. 48.
[7] Hoffman, Larry, The Art of Public Prayer, p. 262.

The above nusaḥ is easily learned, and is used by lay leaders, *ba'alei tefilah*, and even b'nei mitzvah students. We can identify several characteristics in this example. It is sung using a musical mode called Ahavah Rabbah (described in detail in the next section). It opens to the 5th scale degree (a common reciting tone for Ahavah Rabbah), and rests on the 3rd. It momentarily pivots on the 4th into a major tonality, and then returns to Ahavah Rabbah, resolving with its most notable feature—the augmented 2nd between the 2nd and 3rd scale degrees—and ends with a strongly resolving cadence from the lower 2nd to the tonic.

Here is the same prayer, as composed by Cantor Noah Schall:



To the untrained ear, the above two examples might appear entirely different, and melodically they are. But the nusaḥ is the same. Just like in the earlier example, Schall opens to the 5th, chants in the Ahavah Rabbah mode, and uses the 5th and 3rd as places of temporary rest, resolving strongly back to the tonic. He does the same pivot on the 4th into major, however his version is far more elaborate and intended to be sung only by someone with advanced vocal technique. And after an extended recitative, he resolves strongly back to the tonic, leading into the next word, *Kadosh*, indicating to the congregation that it is time for them to respond with the *Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh* phrase that they know well:



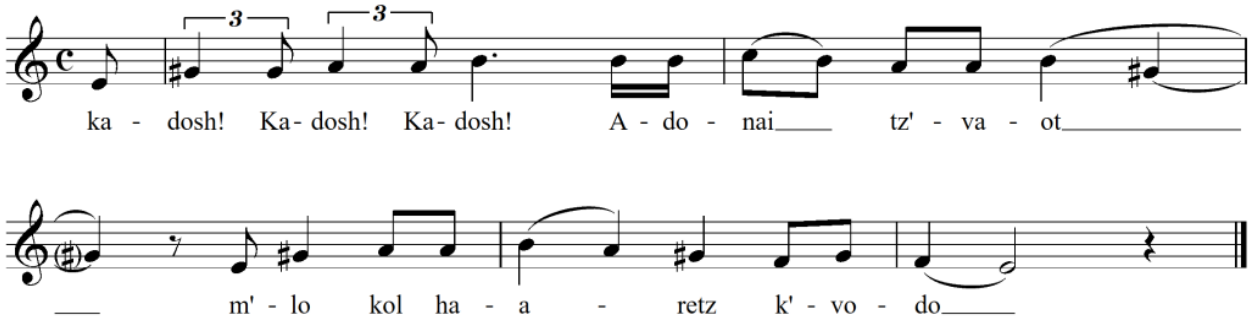
Appendix A contains more examples of the same text for the Shabbat שחרית service. Again, they are all melodically different. However, they all share these same features. They are all examples of the nusaḥ for the קדשה of שחרית on Shabbat. I have included so many examples to demonstrate the incredible variety of ways one could sing this text, and still be singing correct nusaḥ.

The typical explanation for how cantors have come to sing this text with these common features is just to say *this is how it was done*. One can also point to groups of cantors coming from the same parts of the world, who have heard and learned from each other, and especially the formation of cantorial schools, where the teaching of nusaḥ was formalized into a curriculum, and student cantors were taught to sing from manuscripts, rather than by listening.

However, I believe these ethnomusicalogical arguments miss something important. These cantors, who are each composing for the text in musically different ways, are all arriving at the same conclusions. I believe that these cantors know something. They are trying to tell us something. The challenge for us is to learn to hear what they are saying.

The קדשה text (which varies in different services and on different days of the year), takes the davener on a fantastic journey into a spiritual realm of angels, calling to each other in a heavenly choir. The פתיחה, on the word, נקדש, meaning *we will sanctify*, invites the davener to join the journeys of Isaiah and Ezekiel, leaving our earthly realm and entering a holy one. We sing this using a musical leap from the tonic, the "home note," our starting point here on earth, all the way to the 5th, as we shall discover, a place of holiness. From there we explore the realm of the angels, exploring the lowered 6th, the octave, and pathways to the major 3rd. These musical filaments re-imagine the sights and sounds that Ezekiel experienced. The pivot on the 4th to major gives us the opportunity to hear the heavenly choir that Isaiah heard. And all of this is our invitation to share in these experiences.

The sealing, the חתימה, strongly resolves back to the tonic. The cantor, who has just embarked on this journey, doesn't stay in the heavenly realm. He comes back to earth for an important reason—to get the congregation and bring them with him. The cantor resolves to the tonic so that we can sing with him:



Having heard the cantor's example of how to musically ascend into God's heavenly domain, the congregation gets their chance to join in the same journey, ascending in upwards leaps. The congregational response is simpler, designed to be singable in unison by all Jews, regardless of singing ability.

Thus, nusaḥ is many things, including:

- A traditional form of Jewish liturgical chant
- An art form
- A type of vocal performance
- A method of leading a congregation
- A way to interpret liturgical texts
- A way to distinguish the time of day and day of the year

And my purpose in this these is to add another option to this list:

- A spiritual practice, enabling the practitioner to make deep discoveries about their relationship with God.

How can Nusaḥ be a Spiritual Practice?

Understanding nusaḥ first requires learning each of the motifs and musical modes that are used in our services, and how they apply to the text of the liturgy. How those combinations vary at different times of the day (מעריב, מנחה and שחרית, and also מוסף and נעילה). And how they vary on different days of the year (חול, שבת, שלש רגלים, ימים נוראים). Once a person has learned this, they know the mechanics of *how to daven*.

But this is only a starting point. As a listener, we need to become sensitive to what the cantor is telling us. We need to hear the subtle phrases that inform us about the meaning of the text. We need to become open to how nusaḥ can transform the meaning of the text.

We can apply the criterion for a Spiritual Practice to this process.

- **Regular** - As nusaḥ is a manner of chanting the daily prayers, it is naturally a regular practice. Through davening the same text with the same nusaḥ three times each day, every day, we have the opportunity to visit over and over again the same phrases and the same motifs. Through that repetition we notice things over time. How do things change in the morning and evening? Certain phrases might seem repetitive, but then something subtle surprises us. It is only through the regular practice of davening with nusaḥ that we have the opportunity to make these discoveries. And over time, that regular practice further develops our nusaḥ as well. As we discover insights in the text, the emphasis we place on a word might change. We might add a musical element to a phrase that we wish to emphasise. These musical improvisations aren't just for aesthetic purposes. They are an embellishment of the meaning of the text. They have the power to transform the text.
- **Intentional** - The rabbis of the Talmud knew that it was not enough to just read the words of our *tefilot*.[8] One only fulfills the obligation by having כוונה (intention) at the proper times. Nusaḥ is a pathway for developing one's כוונה. For the beginner, it lays out a frame work for כוונה, giving the davener a set of phrases and melodic fragments intended to spiritually lift the davener, to point out what is important. For the experienced davener, nusaḥ is a reference point, a way of centering and being grounded in tradition, and then allowing one to springboard from that state into realms of discovery. This is the lifelong process of developing כוונה.
- **Develops relationship with Divine** - I believe the real purpose of nusaḥ is to be a vehicle for the chazzan to bring the congregation closer to God. The Talmud describes prayer as replacing sacrifice[9], and in its essence, the text of our prayers contains so much richness

[8] Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 13a.
[9] Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 26a.

and depth that if we were all so learned and always had intense כוונה when davening, that might be enough. But given that we don't always arrive at shul ready to enter into that כוונה, we need a vehicle for getting there. The job of the chazzan is to get us there, and nusaḥ is the toolset for doing this. The בשר (meat) of the sacrifice might be nutritious by itself, but nusaḥ is the ריח ניחח (soothing aroma) that draws God close to us.

- **Transformational** - Whether you are a service leader or a congregant, davening with nusaḥ is a lifelong process of learning to listen, learning to hear what our tradition is telling us, and learning to be open to being changed by that tradition. For example, as I daven the ברכת (blessings) of the weekday Amidah, there are times that I see myself or some part of my life in one of the בקשת (petitions). When that happens, it leads me to ask questions about myself about my relationship with God. Nusaḥ is a lubricant that allows the spiritual movement necessary for transformation to happen.

The *Spiritual Practice of Nusaḥ* asks us to be a listener first. So often we rush to sing. So many of us want to sing as individuals and in groups, and singing can be so fun and enjoyable. But I believe nusaḥ is begging us to listen. To use our ears and our imaginations to probe the depths of Jewish liturgical tradition. To search for meaning and connection with our people, and with God.

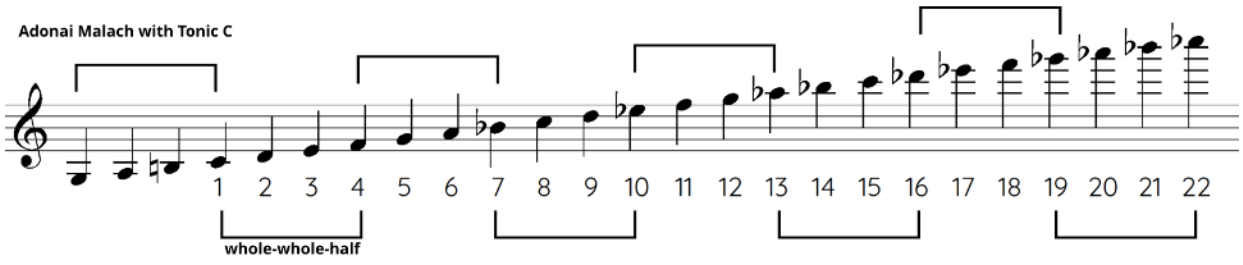
The Three Primary Modes (for Shabbat)

The traditional Ashkenazi liturgical chants used on Shabbat are classified using three primary modes: Adonai Malakh, Magen Avot, and Ahavah Rabbah. There are many features of these modes, including their technical construction, the motifs that are characteristic of each service on Shabbat, and the manner in which a cantor navigates through the inner cadences that

each contains. A deep understanding of each of these elements is critical for a cantor or any practitioner of nusaḥ, and even more so for someone to be able to find spiritual meaning within these modes. However, the feature of each mode that I am particularly interested in for this purpose is the connotation or meaning that the mode imparts onto a liturgical text when a text is chanted using that mode. As Boaz Tarsi writes, nusaḥ "may even affect our perception of the meaning of the words, or give them additional depth by creating cross-references, connotative links, additional layers of meaning, and what will be explained later on as 'ethos.' In this sense, as well as in the shaping and articulating power it possesses, music renders the liturgical experience a complex, multidimensional occurrence and provides additional levels of perception, understanding, and coherence."[10]

Adonai Malakh

The Adonai Malakh mode, named after the first words of Psalm 97, is based on the Major tetrachord (two whole steps followed by a half step), and this pattern of four notes repeats indefinitely both up and down the scale. This pattern results in an interesting phenomenon, that the notes contained in the Adonai Malakh mode are different in each octave.

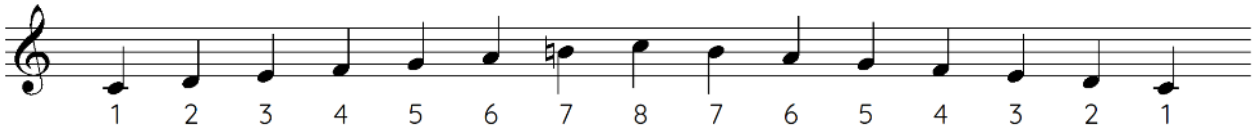


[10] Tarsi, Boaz, HOW MUSIC ARTICULATES LITURGICAL STRUCTURE, MEANING, AND PERCEPTION: THE KADDISH. published in *The Experience of Jewish Liturgy*. Edited by Debra Reed Blank. 2011. p. 311.

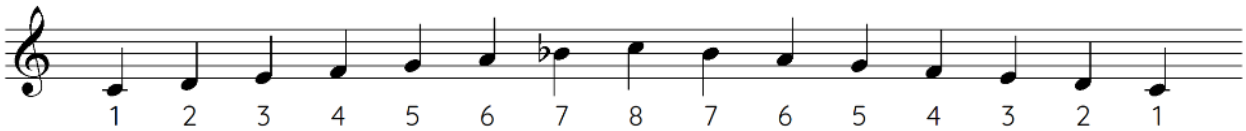
In the above example with a tonic of C, we have a B♮ below the tonic and a B ♭ above the tonic. Similarly, we have an E♮ in the first octave and an E ♭ in the second octave. Continuing the pattern of whole-whole-half tetrachords, we get an A ♭ in the following tetrachord, then a D ♭ , G ♭ , C ♭ , F ♭ , etc. … (We're going counter-clockwise around the circle of fifths, adding an additional flat with each tetrachord.)

The above theoretical description of Adonai Malakh is very interesting, but in practice, it is much more useful to think of Adonai Malakh as a modified major scale (i.e. major with a lowered 7th [mixolydian mode] and lowered 10th). These modifications create a *blue note* when we are chanting in Adonai Malakh, which gives the mode its characteristic sound. It also changes the quality of how the scale resolves back to its tonic note.

To hear this, sing a major scale with a raised 7th (aka. the leading tone), up through one octave, and back down:



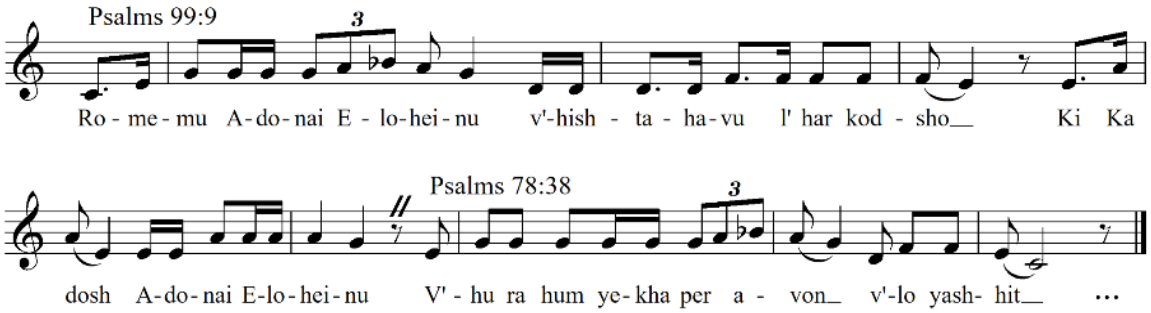
Now sing the same scale with the lowered 7th:



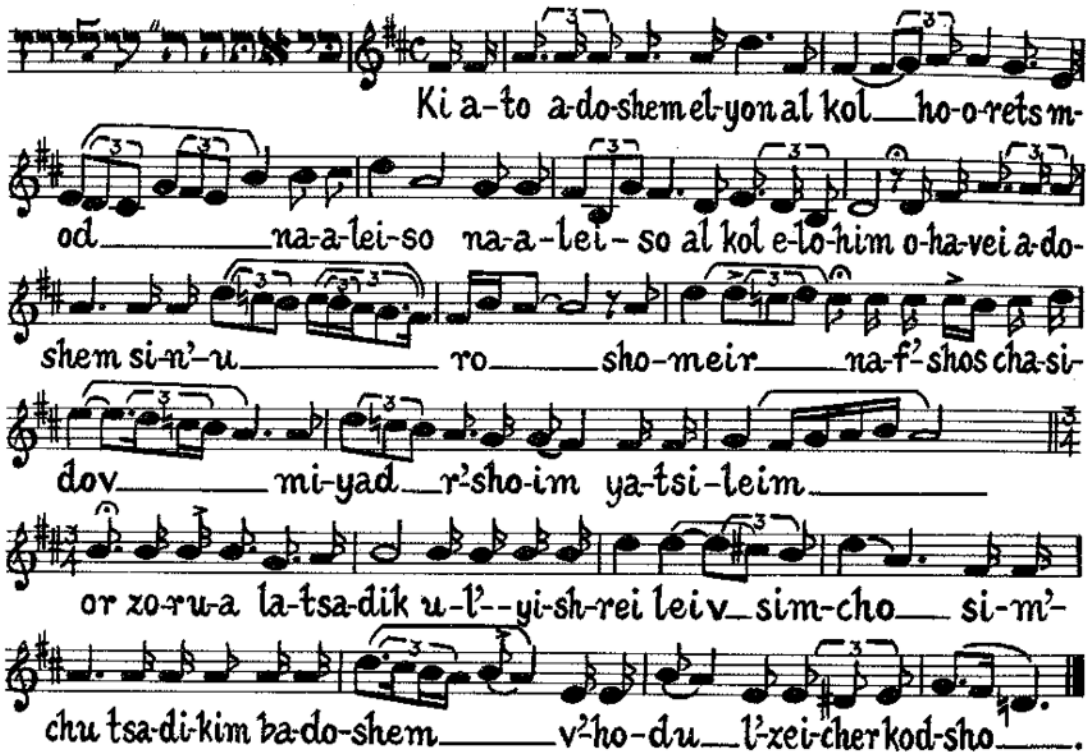
The leading tone in the first example causes the scale to resolve very strongly to the octave, and we hear that especially when returning to the tonic. But in the case of Adonai Malakh, that strong resolution is dissipated. When we return to the octave in the scale with the lowered 7th, we don't have the same sense of completion found in the major scale.

This feeling of non-resolution turns out to be really important in the contexts where we use Adonai Malakh. Adonai Malakh is used for chanting Psalms on Shabbat in P'seukei D'zimra, and also in Kabbalat Shabbat. The sense of non-resolution helps propel us from one Psalm to the next, without feeling like we're finished davening at the end of each Psalm.

Here is an example of a chant typically used in P'seukei D'zimra of Shabbat for the חתימה of one Psalm and how it flows without resolution into the פתיחה of the one the follows it. The resolution only comes after the first line of the next Psalm, musically connecting them into a seemingly endless flow.



These feelings of non-resolution can be even more pronounced in the first Psalms of Kabbalat Shabbat, where Cantorial recitatives are often very elaborate. Consider the following recitative by Israel Alter for the חתימה of Psalm 97:



There are three musical phrases in this composition. The first, starting on כי־אתה יהוה עליון, uses a major scale including the leading tone C#, and it resolves strongly to D on על־כל־אלהים. But the next part, starting at אהבי יי, lowers the 7th degree. The melody seems to float on שמר נפשות חסידיו (Guardian of faithful souls), and our ears lose track of the tonic and even of time, as if to say that God's guardianship of his people is never-ending. Alter continues in this liminal space until the word יצילם (delivering us!), where he triumphantly modulates back into major for אור זרע לצדיק (Light is sown for the righteous).

But now that we know all of these technical and structural details about Adonai Malakh, the important question we need to ask ourselves is, *what does this mean?* What meaning do we impart onto a text when we chant that text with Adonai Malakh?

The Adonai Malakh mode is said to connote God's majesty and the grandeur of God's Creation. Charles Davidson, in his introduction to Adonai Malakh in his workbook on the Cantorial Modes, writes that Adonai Malakh "generally conveys an ethos of grandeur and

majesty"[11] (also[12]). Macy Nulman further describes Adonai Malakh as majestic, signifying "praise and glorification."[13]

This makes Adonai Malakh the perfect mode for davening Kabbalat Shabbat. Kabbalat Shabbat is a kabbalistic re-enactment of Creation.[14] It begins with six Psalms (Psalm 95 through 99, plus Psalm 29) representing the six days of Creation. It is then followed by Lecha Dodi, the Kabbalisic transition to Shabbat. It concludes with two additional psalms (Psalm 92 & 93), representing the double portion of Manna for Shabbat. The first five psalms are chanted in Adonai Malakh, musically connoting the glory of God's creation. The sixth and last two psalms are chanted in Magen Avot, which as we will discuss in the next section, connotes the tranquility of Shabbat. Macy Nulman explains this musical structure:

> Musical tradition has assigned the majestic mode Adoshem Malakh, which signifies praise and glorification, to the Kabbalat Shabbat. The first six psalms, according to rabbinic tradition symbolize the six working days of the week, the six days of creation, or the six shofar blasts that were sounded on Friday afternoon to announce the ushering in of the Sabbath. They proclaim that God is King and call upon all nature and all nations to join in adoration of the holy and righteous ruler of the universe. If the six psalms are regarded as one unit having the same intention, why then does the Sheliah Tzibbur chant the first five psalms in the Adoshem Malakh mode and the sixth psalm (29) in the Magen Avot mode? A possible explanation is that the first five psalms are a culmination of creation: "But the Lord made the heavens" (ps. 96), "the world also is fixed that it be not moved" (ps. 96), and "It is Thou who hast established equity (ps. 99)". To indicate this Hassidim often join each of the five psalms by ending on the third and not on the tonic. The Magen Avot mode whose style of singing is in a relaxed and peaceful manner, expressing faith, hope, and thanksgiving is a fitting introduction to the Sabbath since the climax of psalm 29 is, "The Lord will bless His people with peace." Furthermore, psalm 29 is closely associated with the Sabbath, especially Friday evening.[15]

Looked at in this way, the nusaḥ for Kabbalat Shabbat tells a story. And once we are aware of this story, entire new worlds of theological exploration become possible, as we dig into the Psalms and explore their meaning as they relate to each day of Creation, and to Shabbat. The

---

[11] Davidson, Charles. *Immunim Benusach Hatefilah I.* Ashbourne Music Pub. 1996. p.7.

[12] Davidson notes that Hanoch Avenary comments "the majesty ethos is not always associated with Adonai Malach". It's important to remember that these interpretations are not fixed prescriptions. They are descriptions of what the listener has experienced.

[13] Nulman, Macy. *Concepts of Jewish Music and Prayer.* Yeshiva University. 1985. p.12.

[14] Zion, Noam. Shalom Hartman Institute. https://www.hartman.org.il/lcha-dodi-and-the-kabbalist-background-to-kabbalat-shabbat/

[15] Nulman, Macy. Concepts of Jewish Music and Prayer. Yeshiva University. 1985. p.12-13.

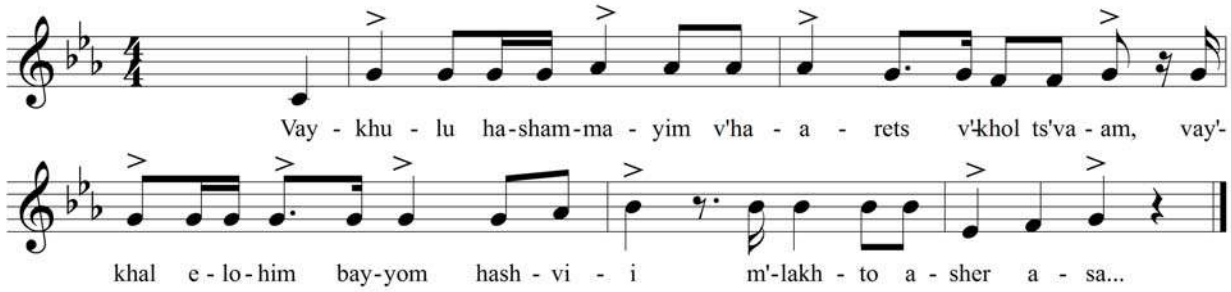
first five psalms are chanted in Adonai Malach, with its non-resolving feeling propelling us from psalm to psalm, from day to day of Creation. Lecha Dodi exists in a liminal space between Hol and Shabbat, surrounded by the final three psalms, sung in Magen Avot (minor), which introduce the feeling of the tranquility of Shabbat and set up our ears to be ready for מעריב. But these chants are not a strict formula. The cantor has tremendous latitude to divert and come back, and take the congregation on a mystical journey. When the cantor sings a blue note—the lowered 7th, or even more exciting, the lowered 10th or even the 13th if he can—it is a moment that we should ask ourselves: *What is the Cantor trying to tell us? What does he know about this text that he wants to share with us?*

Magen Avot

The Magen Avot mode is named for the מעין שבע prayer of the Friday evening מעריב service. Magen Avot is sung in the Aeolean (Natural) Minor scale. It said to *open to the 5th*, meaning that it is characteristic for the cantor to begin a Magen Avot פתיחה with a 1-5 motif. The 5th (the dominant) is used as a reciting tone, and the melody will explore the upper part of the octave as it ascends toward the 7th. From there, the 7th becomes a new dominant, as the melody modulates to the relative major on the 3rd of the scale, redefining the tonic on the 3rd, and establishing a new modality.

For example, here is Louis Lewandowski's ויכלו.[16]

[16] Louis Lewandowski, *Kol Rinnah U' T'fillah* (Berlin: Bote & Beck, 1882), "Wajchulu," No. 26, pp. 19-20. Reprinted as Volume 9 in the Out-of-Print Classics series (New York: Sacred Music Press), 1954.



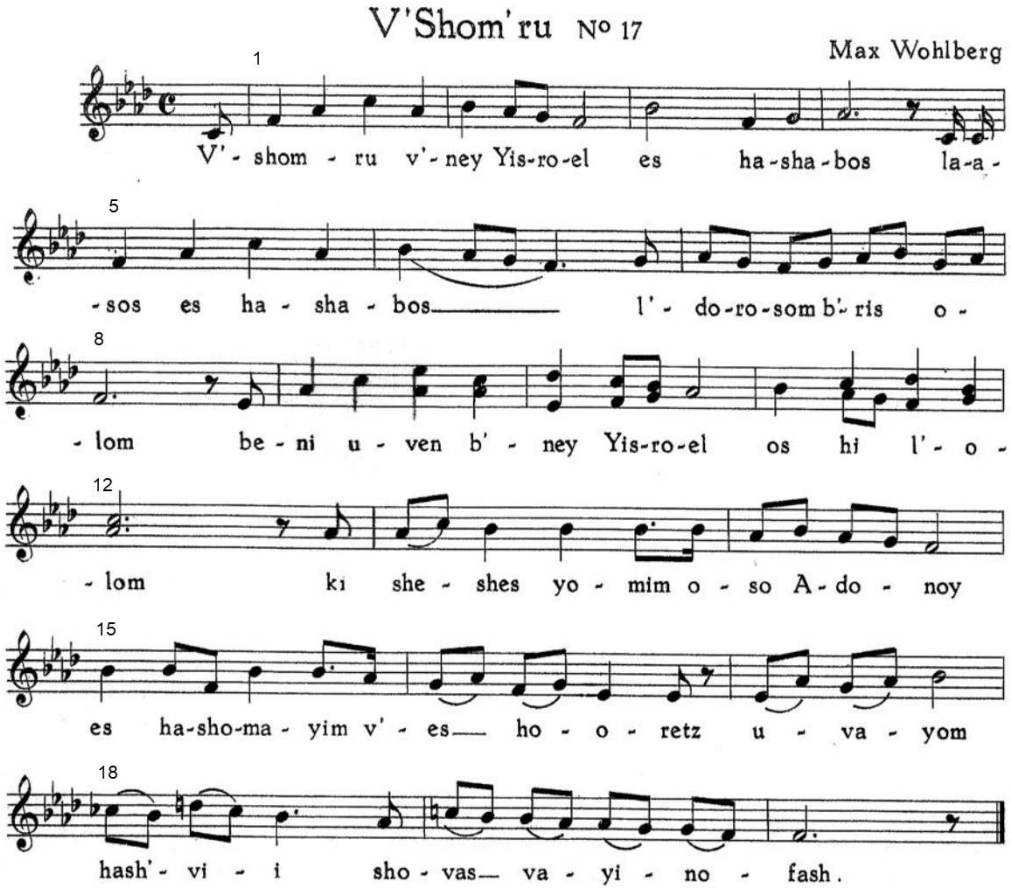
This is a perfect example of Magen Avot chanting, where the cantor opens to the 5th immediately on the first word, ויכלו. And it modulates to the major with a tonic of the 3rd on השביעי, as if to say that on the seventh day everything changed. Creation was finished, and we are musically in a new world.

Just like with Adonai Malach mode, we need to ask ourselves—*what does this mean*? When we hear a text chanted in Magen Avot, what meaning is imparted onto that text?

A.W. Binder describes that a text chanted in Magen Avot takes on a connotation of "sweet peace and rest." He imagines the Jew of hundreds of years ago living in a world surrounded by conflict throughout the work week, and yearning for all that Shabbat represented for him. He writes, "Was not the synagogue on the Sabbath the only haven of refuge where the Jew could come and feel that he was among his own? That feeling of relaxation certainly could not have been attained by chanting these prayers in a stiff and commanding tone, but rather from … a mode which gives the sacred feeling of the Sabbath day—the mode of 'sweet peace and rest'."[17]

Let's look at another Magen Avot example - a congregational melody for ושמרו by Max Wohlberg:

[17] Collected Writings of A.W. Binder, edited by. Irene Heskes. p.53.

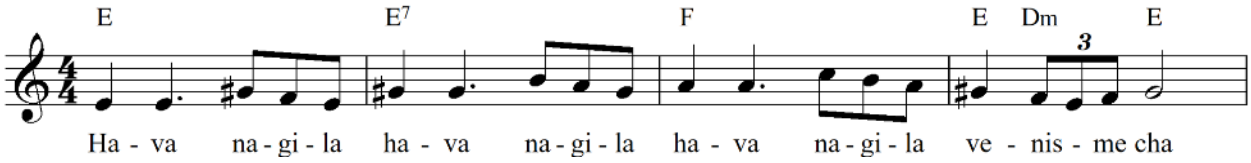


In this melody, we see the same structure found in the earlier ויכלו example. The melody, written in F minor, opens to the 5th (C) through an arpeggio on the word ושמרו. At measure 8, Wohlberg modulates to the relative major on the 3rd by dropping down one step at ביני ובין establishing the new dominant, and leaping up a fourth to the new tonic on A ♭ major. Wohlberg makes it especially clear that we are now in A ♭ major by writing two-part harmonies that emphasize the new tonic and dominant.

A series of modulations occur to bring the piece back to conclude in F minor. The most interesting of those happens at measure 18, where we hear a distinct modal change. Something magical happens in this measure, but to understand that, we first need to introduce the Ahavah Rabbah mode.

Ahavah Rabbah

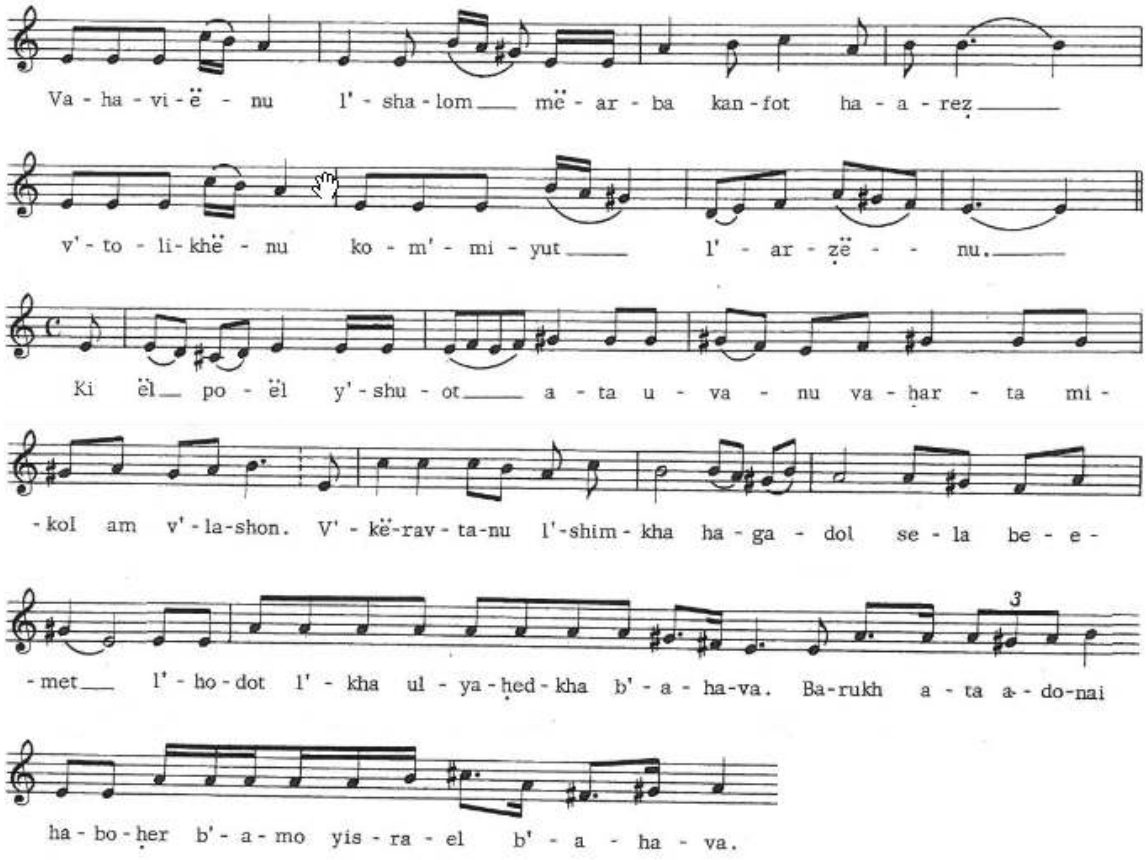
The Ahavah Rabbah mode is the quintessential Ashkenazi musical sound. Western music is primarily based on the major and minor (diatonic) scales, and the Cantorial modes of Adonai Malakh and Magen Avot provide equivalents for nusaḥ. But if a Western composer wants to make a piece of music sound "Jewish," from *Fiddler On The Roof* to Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Ahavah Rabbah will be the mode they use. Perhaps the most well known example of Ahavah Rabbah in popular music is *Havah Nagila.*



The technical name for Ahavah Rabbah is Dominant Phrygian. (Phyrigian being a minor scale with a lowered 2nd, and the Dominant referring to raising the 3rd degree). The most notable features of Ahavah Rabbah are the minor 2nd between the 1st and 2nd scale degrees, and the augmented 2nd between the 2nd and 3rd scale degrees. The mode contains the major 3rd of the Major scale, but the lowered 6th and 7th of Natural Minor. We see all of these features in the Hava Nagilah example above, with a tonic of E.

As its name implies, whenever a liturgical text is chanted in Ahavah Rabbah, it is said that it takes on the connotation of God's *Great Love* of his people. This makes Ahavah Rabbah the perfect mode for the ברכת surrounding the שמע—a text about loving God. And, in fact, those ברכת will be chanted using Ahavah Rabbah on every day of the liturgical year, even though the specific Ahavah Rabbah motifs that will be used on weekdays, Shabbat, and Yamim Noraim will be very different.

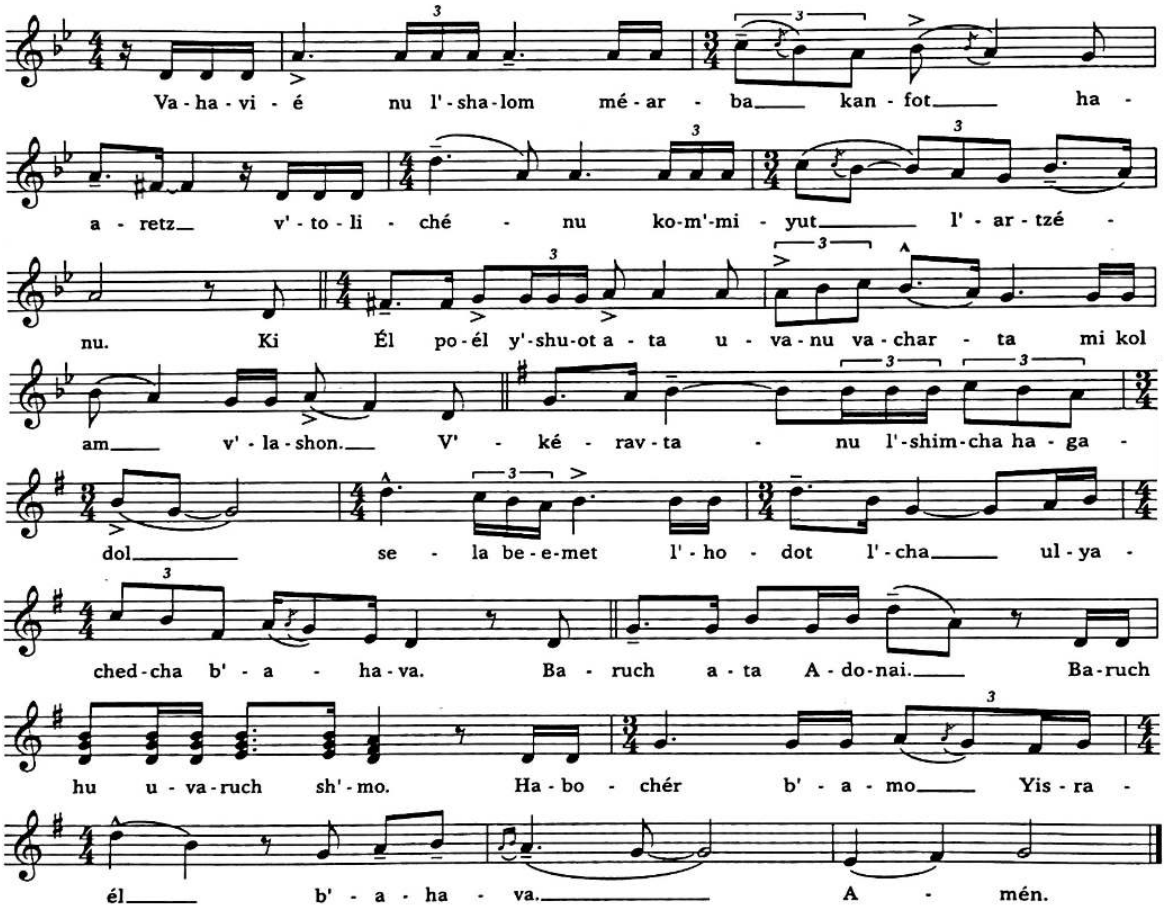
For example, on חול (weekdays), the חתימה of the ברכה immediately preceding the שמע for which the mode is named is:



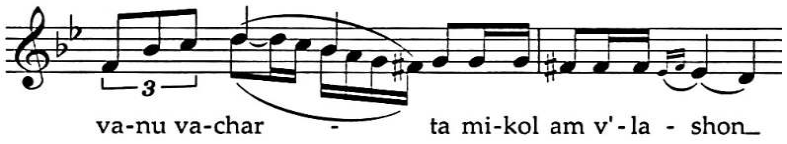
The weekday example above[18] focuses mostly on the lower part of the octave. However, on Shabbat, the same חתימה is chanted using Ahavah Rabbah, focusing on the upper part of the octave, signifying the higher spiritual place we are in on Shabbat[19]:

[18] Wohlberg, Max. *Shahar Avakeshkha. A Weekday Morning Service.* Transcontinental Music Co. 1974. p. 29-30

[19] Zim, Sol. *Musical Siddur Shabbat.* Cantors Assembly. 2002. p.148.

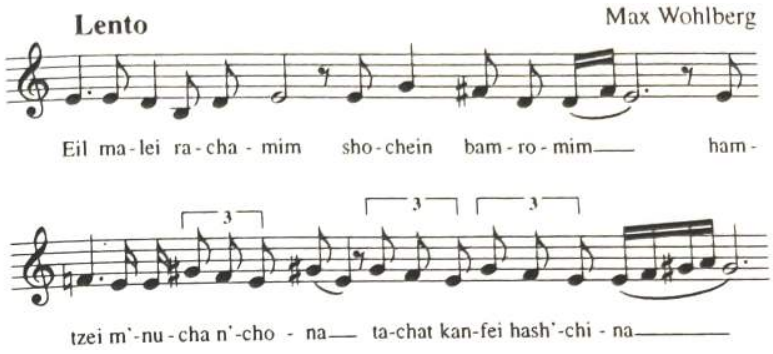


On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, there is an altogether different manner in which these prayers are chanted. However, an Ahavah Rabbah motif used throughout the Yamim Noraim appears on the words ובנו בחרת מכל־עם ולשון (You have chosen us from among all peoples and tongues), signifying God's great love in making this choice.

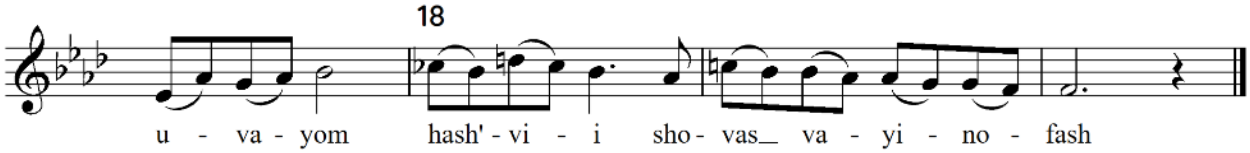


Perhaps it is not too surprising that we would chant the ברכת surrounding שמע, and especially the ברכה named אהבה רבה, using Ahavah Rabbah mode! But what may be surprising is the unexpected places that Ahavah Rabbah appears. One of my favorite examples is the אל מלא רחמים (God, filled with Compassion)—the Memorial prayer. If one were to compose a melody

for this memorial prayer using Western sensibilities, you might do so in minor, as Western music uses minor to signify sadness. But our nusaḥ has a completely different idea. At the moment of our greatest sadness, we recall and acknowledge God's great love for us!



In the previous section on Magen Avot, I introduced a gorgeous ושמרו by Max Wohlberg, and pointed out a curious measure, but left us waiting to explain what is happening. With the introduction of the Ahavah Rabbah mode, we can now understand what Wohlberg is doing.



At measure 18, Wohberg briefly teases us with the Ahavah Rabbah sound on a temporary tonic of B. This isn't just a musical flourish. Wohlberg is a master of *turning a phrase* using nusaḥ. By switching into the mode that connotes God's great love of his people on the words *and on the seventh day God ceased work and rested*, Wohlberg is adding a new idea to ושמרו—*and on the seventh day (out of great love) God ceased work and rested*.

How can we dig deeper into the *meaning* of the Nusaḥ?

My goal is to reframe *Nusaḥ Hatefilah* as a Spiritual Path. So far, I've described many technical aspects of the modes, which are vitally important to understand for this purpose, and also the connotations that are understood to be imparted onto a text chanted in that mode.

Now, I want to go much deeper, and demonstrate how using our creativity combined with opening our hearts to the divine inspiration contained in our liturgy, we can discover new meaning and depth. This is the process at the heart of seeing nusaḥ as a spiritual path.

Most of the insights in this section are my own. But they are not intended to be definitive, or that anyone else has to agree with them. They are descriptions of some of the spiritual work that I have done, and the insights and כוונה that I have discovered for myself.

Expand our understanding of the three primary modes

We've already discussed how each of the three primary modes imparts a unique connotation onto a text, and how that connotation can transform the literal meaning of the words. To summarize:

Cantorial Mode	**Connotation**
Adonai Malakh (major)	God's majesty and the glory of God's creation
Ahavah Rabbah (dominant phrygian)	God's *great love* of God's people
Magen Avot (minor)	The tranquility of Shabbat, "sweet peace and rest"

One can develop beautiful insights into our liturgy just from these three connotations, as I've discussed. But I realized as I applied the same connotation to text after text in a section of the service, I felt a monotony. For example, Ahavah Rabbah imparts the connotation of God's great love. Individually looking at a text this way is very beautiful,

but as I would daven the ברכת surrounding the שמע, or the חזרת הש"ץ (reader's repetition of the Amidah) on Shabbat, I would wind up with the same interpretation over and over again, and I began searching for deeper connotations.

I started wondering if I could find a pattern that would unify these three connotations into a single framework, and which would allow me to unlock new meanings. And I found one such interpretation by focusing on the fact that there are three primary modes, and looking for other triplets that they could correspond to.

The first mode, Adonai Malakh, we have seen connotes themes of Creation; the second, Ahavah Rabbah, imparts the idea of God's great love onto a text. I'm extending this idea to infer that showing us love is the way that God reveals God-self to us. And the third, Magen Avot, we have seen is about us experiencing the tranquility of Shabbat. It connotes the peace and freedom that God has delivered for us, now that we are no longer slaves in Egypt. Shabbat becomes an expression of God redeeming us, since we are only able to observe Shabbat because we have been redeemed. If we had not been redeemed, if we were still slaves unto Pharaoh, then we would be unable to observe the mitzvot of Shabbat. Put these three themes together with the corresponding modes that I've identified, and we have re-discovered the three primary themes of the ברכת surrounding the שמע:

Cantorial Mode	Connotation	Theme
Adonai Malakh	The glory of God's creation	Creation
Ahavah Rabbah	God's *great love*	Revelation
Magen Avot	The tranquility of Shabbat	Redemption

Reuven Kimelman points out that each of these themes are an aspect of Divine Sovereignty. He writes, "As the unifying theme of the Shema and its blessings, the realization of divine sovereignty is refracted through the motifs of creation, revelation, and redemption." He further points out the first and third ברכת (creation and redemption) contain musical ideas, referencing "the testimony of celestial and terrestrial choirs. Through the orchestration of these heavenly and earthly realms, divine sovereignty is attested to throughout the universe. By including references to past as well as present, to heaven as well as earth, the liturgy presents the whole from the perspective of an omniscient narrator."[20]

In the first ברכה, We find the link Kimelman is referencing between the theme of Creation and a musical heavenly choir, וכלם פותחים אֶת־פיהם בקדשה ובטהרה בשירה ובזמרה, ([the angels] all open their mouths in holiness and purity, with song and music). Similarly in the third, we find the link of Redemption to an earthly choir in משה ובני ישראל לך ענו שירה בשמחה רבה (Moses and the Children of Israel sang a song to You with great joy) and also שירה חדשה שבחו גאולים לשמך על־שפת הים (With a new song the redeemed people praised Your Name at the seashore).

Our interpretive palette of connotations has been expanded. We started with a linear three connotations - Creation, Great Love, and Tranquility. We added an additional dimension of Creation, Revelation, and Redemption. Kimelman further shows that all three are aspects of

[20]Kimelman, Reuven. The Shema` Liturgy: From Covenant Ceremony to Coronation. published in Kenishta: Studies of the Synagogue World. Bar-Ilan University Press. 2001. p. 25.

Divine Sovereignty. And he points out the temporal nature of these themes (past and present), and the parallels between heaven and earth. We can now further expand our chart of connotations:

Mode	Connotation	Theme		Time	Space
Adonai Malakh	The glory of God's creation	Creation	Divine Sovereignty	Past	Heaven
Ahavah Rabbah	God's *great love*	Revelation			
Magen Avot	The tranquility of Shabbat	Redemption		Present	Earth

There are two empty boxes in our chart. Perhaps we can deduce that Revelation and God's love represents a *link* in time and space. God's love is the *link* between our past and our present, and also the *link* between heaven and earth.

I also observed that these same three themes are found in the 4th ברכה (the קדשת היום, Sanctifying the Day) of the first three out of four Amidot of Shabbat. The קדשת היום of מעריב לשבת recalls Creation. In שחרית, it describes the giving of the ten commandments, i.e. revelation. And in מוסף, it describes our relationship with God (through קרבנות—coming close to God).

But what about the fourth Amidah for Shabbat—מנחה! The theme of קדשת היום of מנחה is the One-ness of God. It looks forward to a future where all people will know the tranquility of Shabbat, and will sanctify God's name. We can add a theme of God's One-ness, leaving us with the question of what Cantorial Mode would correspond to the idea of a future looking theme.

Mode	Connotation	Theme		Time	Space
Adonai Malakh	The glory of God's creation	Creation	Divine Sovereignty	Past	Heaven
Ahavah Rabbah	God's *great love*	Revelation		*link* ↕	*link* ↕
Magen Avot	The tranquility of Shabbat	Redemption		Present	Earth
??		**God's One-ness**		**Future**	**The World to Come**

The next most-frequently used mode is Ukrainian Dorian, also known in different contexts as Mi Shebeirakh mode or Seliḥah mode. And the themes in our chart line up well with the intention of those modes. A Mi Shebeirakh is asking God to bless us in the future, as God blessed our ancestors. It is looking to the future. And Seliḥah mode is about discovering תשובה within our liturgy and returning to God. It points to a future where we rediscover sanctity and holiness in ourselves and in our relationship with God.

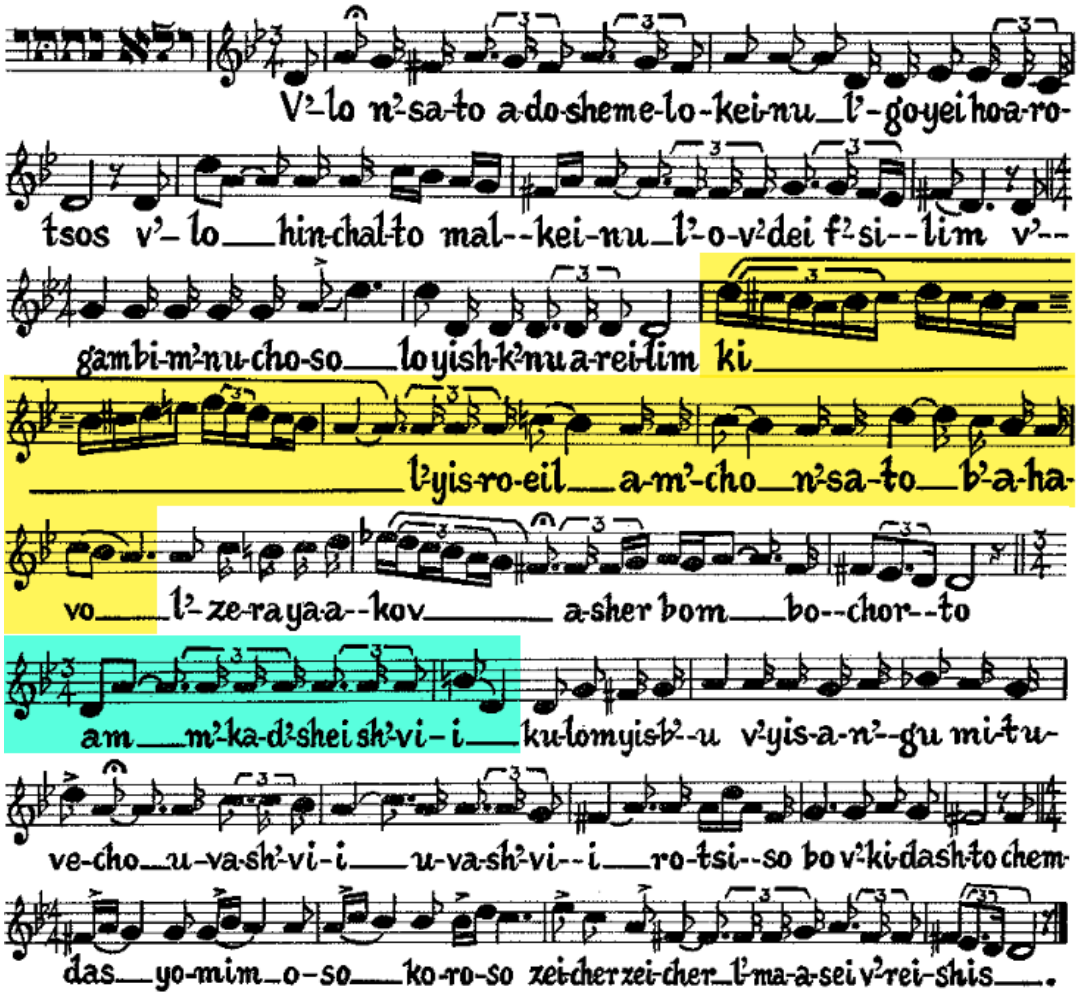
The addition of this fourth mode gives us a complete theory of interpreting the modes:

Mode	Connotation	Theme		Time	Space
Adonai Malakh	The glory of God's creation	Creation	Divine Sovereignty	Past	Heaven
Ahavah Rabbah	God's *great love*	Revelation		*link* ↕	*link* ↕
Magen Avot	The tranquility of Shabbat	Redemption		Present	Earth
Seliḥah Mi Shebeirakh Ukranian Dorian	Teshuvah	God's One-ness		Future	The World to Come

Having constructed this theory, we can now use the theory to do new analysis. Let's consider Israel Alter's recitative for ולא נתתו from קדושת היום of שבת שחרית. Here is the text, with my own translation:

ולא נתתו יי אלהינו לגויי הארצות.	And You did not give it, Lord, our God, to the nations of the lands.
ולא הנחלתו מלכנו לעובדי פסילים.	And You did not bequeath it, our King, to the worshipers of idols.
וגם במנוחתו לא ישכנו ערלים.	And in its rest the uncircumcised will not dwell.
כי לישראל עמך נתתו באהבה.	For Israel, Your people, You gave it in love.
לזרע יעקב אשר בם בחרת:	to the seed of Jacob, that You have chosen:
עם מקדשי שביעי.	The people of sanctification of the seventh.
כלם ישבעו ויתענגו מטובך.	All will be satiated and will enjoy from Your goodness.
ובשביעי רצית בו וקדשתו.	And in the seventh You found favor in it and sanctified it.
חמדת ימים אותו קראת.	Coveted of days, You called it,
זכר למעשה בראשית:	In remembrance of creation.

This text describes the gift of Shabbat, given to the Chosen People. On Shabbat morning, the Amidah is chanted in the Ahavah Rabbah mode, connoting God's great love of His people. And as we would expect, Alter composes his Recitative in Ahavah Rabbah in D:



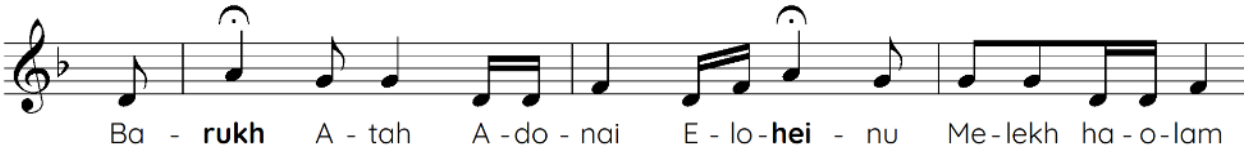
As an interpretation, Ahavah Rabbah is the obvious mode for this text - the text literally says “For Israel, Your people, You gave it in love.” But on the first word כי of that most important line (in yellow, above), Alter diverts from Ahavah Rabbah into Ukrainian Dorian in G and then relaxes into Magen Avot (G minor) for the rest of the phrase. This isn’t a mere flourish. Alter has something really important to tell us. And my proposed theory contains the answer—that line is really about the World to Come. When chanted in this manner, the text is saying, “(As a taste of the World to Come) for Israel, Your people, You will give us eternal tranquility in love.” And you can hear in the extended melismatic phrase the intense emotion of

what it might be like to experience that world. On the words לישראל עמך נתתו באהבה we briefly get to experience the tranquility of that World to Come, the Shabbat that will never end.

A second diversion from Ahavah Rabbah is found on the words עם מקדשי שביעי (The people of sanctification of the seventh), where Alter briefly pivots to major on the 4th (as we've discussed one frequently does in Ahavah Rabbah). This pivot to major (Adonai Malakh) is an obvious reference to Creation.

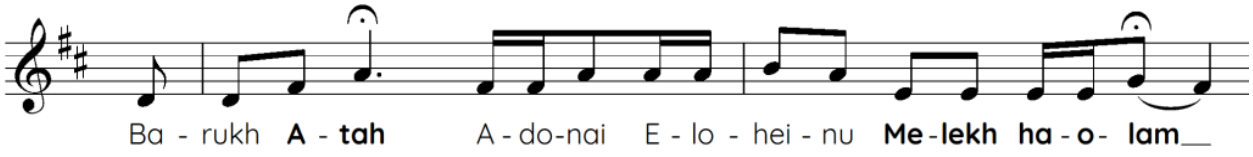
Different Nusḥaot For The Same Liturgy.

One morning, while davening ברכת השחר, I noticed that the typical weekday nusaḥ put emphasis on specific words:



The emphasis is on ברוך and אלהינו. And this makes sense in the context of what we are aiming to achieve in the morning prayers on a weekday. The Amidah for a weekday is all about בקשת, petitions. It is transactional. We're blessing God (ברוך) because we will be asking for things we need, and we're demonstrating our devotion to our God in return (אלהינו).

But on Shabbat, the same text is chanted with a different nusaḥ:



Notice the emphasis is now on the word אתה, and מלך העולם. These are not transactional words. They are words of relationship with God. On Shabbat, we are not making petitions. On

Shabbat we want to be close to אתה, to You (God). On Shabbat, we focus on God being the creator of the universe, מלך העולם.

I love finding examples of the same text chanted in different ways. These examples show that there is tremendous flexibility in our understanding and interpretation of liturgy, even when the text of the liturgy is entirely fixed. And it shows how much the nusaḥ affects our understanding of the text. The text no longer stands alone. The nusaḥ becomes critical to interpreting the liturgy, and the same liturgy may have different meanings depending on context.

One of my favorite examples of this is ושמרו. The text of ושמרו is a command, *The Children of Israel shall guard the Sabbath*, found in *Parashat Ki Tisa*. As a command, one might imagine it would be chanted like a fanfare, with trumpets blazing.[21] However, our tradition does something very different.

On Shabbat, we daven the ושמרו in two places. On Friday evening in the מעריב service, and on Saturday morning in the Amidah of שחרית.

On Friday evening, the מעריב service is chanted in the Magen Avot mode, which connotes tranquility. So when we daven ושמרו on Friday night, we are not just reciting the command, we are re-interpreting it to mean that God has commanded us to keep Shabbat because God wants us to experience this tranquility.

However, on Shabbat morning, during the repetition of the Amidah, we recite ושמרו using the Ahavah Rabbah mode, the mode that connotes God's great love of His people. The same text takes on a completely different meaning—that God has commanded us to keep Shabbat because God loves us!

Two entirely different interpretations of the same text. And both of them are quite different from the Torah context in *Parashat Ki Tisa,* where we are commanded to keep Shabbat

[21] Collected Writings of A.W. Binder, edited by. Irene Heskes. p.52.

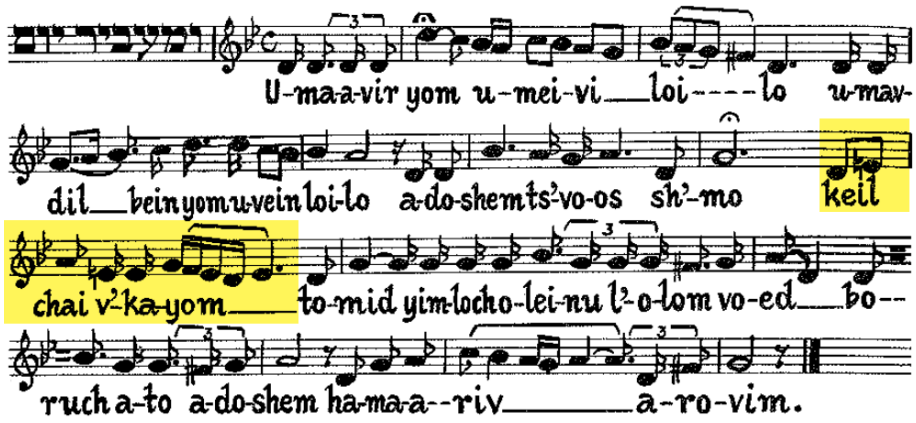
under penalty of death! (We conveniently don't sing that part.) Two entirely different interpretations of the same text—created by and informed by the nusaḥ that we apply to the text.

Use of Leitmotifs (meaning via melodic reference)

There are many places within standard Ashkenaz nusaḥ that we find musical references (known as leitmotifs) to liturgical, biblical, or other musical sources. Some of the most well-known of these is the melody used for מי כמכה on the three festivals. Each festival has a characteristic melody associated with it (Pesach—Adir Hu; Shavuot—Akdamut; Sukkot—Na'anuim). These melodies are used for מי כמכה in both מעריב and שחרית, and also used in certain parts of הלל. The melodies are sung with these corresponding tunes as a way of clueing the listener into the day of the year. The Akdamut theme also is used in a variety of liturgical contexts, in particular the kiddush for festivals.

These are well known, however cantors have used more subtle musical references to create connections between texts, which impart deeper meaning onto the liturgy. For example, in the nusaḥ for מעריב לשבת, there is a special music phrase used for אל חי וקים. Joseph Levine suggests that this musical phrase is a reference to מסוד חכמים from the High Holidays.[22] Here is the composition, according to Israel Alter:

[22] Davidson, Charles. Sefer Hadrakhah. 3rd Edition. 2013. p. 16.



The text of this חתימה translates to:

> He causes day to pass and brings night
> and separates between day and night
> Adonoy of Hosts is His Name.
> The Almighty, [Who is] living and enduring
> will always reign over us forever and ever.
> Blessed are You, Adonoy, Who brings on evening.

The מסוד חכמים from the High Holidays translates to:

> Invoking the doctrines of our wise and understanding Sages
> and with the teachings [acquired] from their perceptive intuition,
> I open my mouth in prayer and supplication
> to plead and seek favor before the presence of the King,
> the King of kings—the Master of masters.

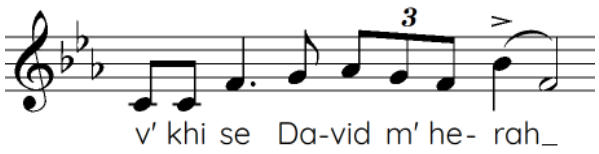
As interpreters of nusaḥ, we now must ask ourselves how the ideas from מסוד חכמים are imparted onto אל חי וקים to influence its meaning? The first ברכה of מעריב proclaims that God is the one who maintains the daily cycle of light and darkness—day and night. By itself, it is a prayer acknowledging God's supreme authority over creation and the rhythms of the universe. However, notice that this prayer is entirely impersonal. There is no mention of humankind anywhere. This text would still be accurate, even if God had never created people. But now superimpose מסוד חכמים. What does it mean to plead and seek favor from אל חי וקים, The Living Enduring God? Suddenly, we're focused on how the daily rhythms of the universe affect our

lives. We're pleading with God to give us another day. We're trembling with the thought of knowing that the Earth will continue to orbit the Sun, even if we're not on it.

Another method of inserting leimottifs into liturgy is using trope systems (Torah, Haftarah, or Megilah trope). There is a beautiful example of this in Sol Zim's nusaḥ for the weekday Amidah, in the blessing to rebuild Jerusalem.

ולירושלים עירך ברחמים תשוב ותשכון בתוכה כאשר דברת
ובנה אותה בקרוב בימינו בנין עולם
וכסא דוד מהרה לתוכה תכין:
ברוך אתה יי בונה ירושלים:

This text is typically chanted using a pentatonic scale, characteristic of the entire weekday Amidah. However, on the words וכסא דוד מהרה (speedily establish the throne of David), Zim composes this phrase to sound like haftarah trope, using a *qadma v'azla*.



This is a beautiful musical reference to I Kings 2:45, and a way of intensely davening the desire for the fulfilment of the promise of this verse.

וְהַמֶּלֶךְ שְׁלֹמֹה בָּרוּךְ וְכִסֵּא דָוִד יִהְיֶה
נָכוֹן לִפְנֵי יְהוָה עַד־עוֹלָם׃

45 But King Solomon shall be blessed,
and the throne of David shall be
established before GOD forever."

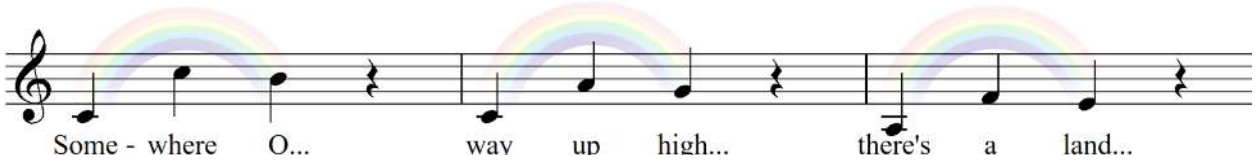
Text Painting (meaning via melodic shape)

The term "text painting" is also referred to as "word painting" or "tone painting." For my purpose, I am interested in how the musical shape of a motif can inform us about the meaning of

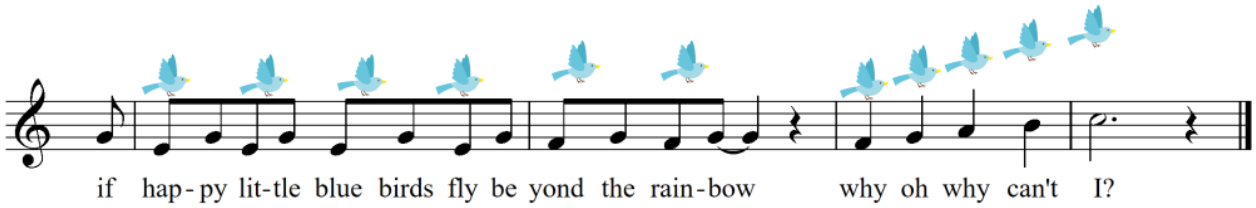
a text. Text painting gives the composer tools to express emotions and theological ideas using the geometry of the notes themselves.

For example, the song *Somewhere Over the Rainbow,* is commonly known as a secular song, featured in the 1939 movie *The Wizard of Oz*. However, the song has very Jewish origins. "Written by two Jewish men, sons of immigrants to the USA: Hyman Arluck (composer) and Isidore Hochberg (lyricist), better known as Harold Arlen and E.Y. ('Yip') Harburg. The song captures the mood of the Jewish people, on the eve of the Holocaust, yearning for a land they could call home, where the 'clouds' of war and persecution would be 'far behind', where 'troubles melt,' away from the 'chimney tops' of the gas chambers and incinerators of the Nazis."[23]

This song is an excellent example of the type of text painting I am interested in. The opening motif musically depicts the shape of a rainbow.



This motif is used over and over again in the song. And the song ends with a bird musically flapping its wings, and flying away!

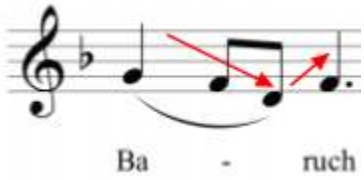


This is one way in which composers take an idea and interpret it using a melody. Here are some examples of text painting which I have discovered with our nusaḥ.

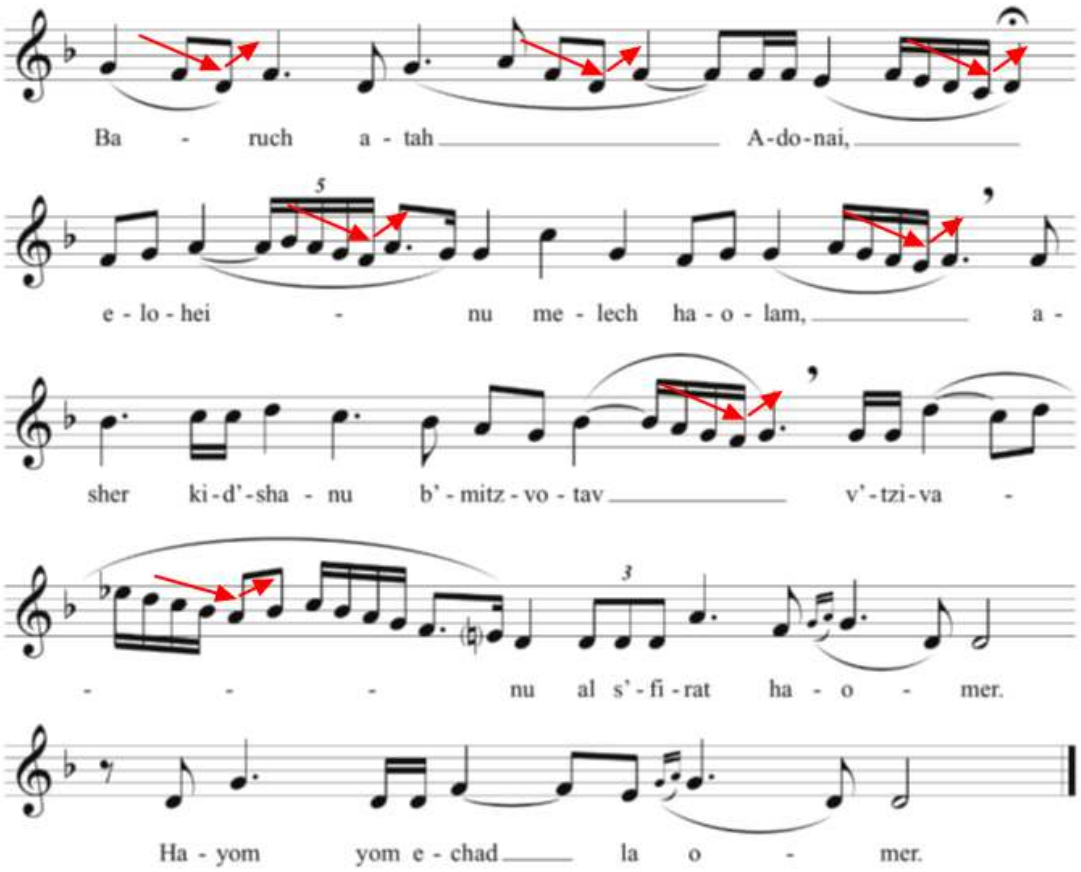
[23] https://www.oxfordsinginglessons.co.uk/over-the-rainbow/

From the second day of Passover until Shavuot, we count the Omer, recalling the journey of the Israelites after crossing the Red Sea on their way to Mount Sinai. That journey took them southeast along the west side of the Sinai desert, and then they turned north toward Mount Sinai.

The nusaḥ for the ברכה before counting each day of the Omer uses a motif whose shape is identical to the shape of the journey.

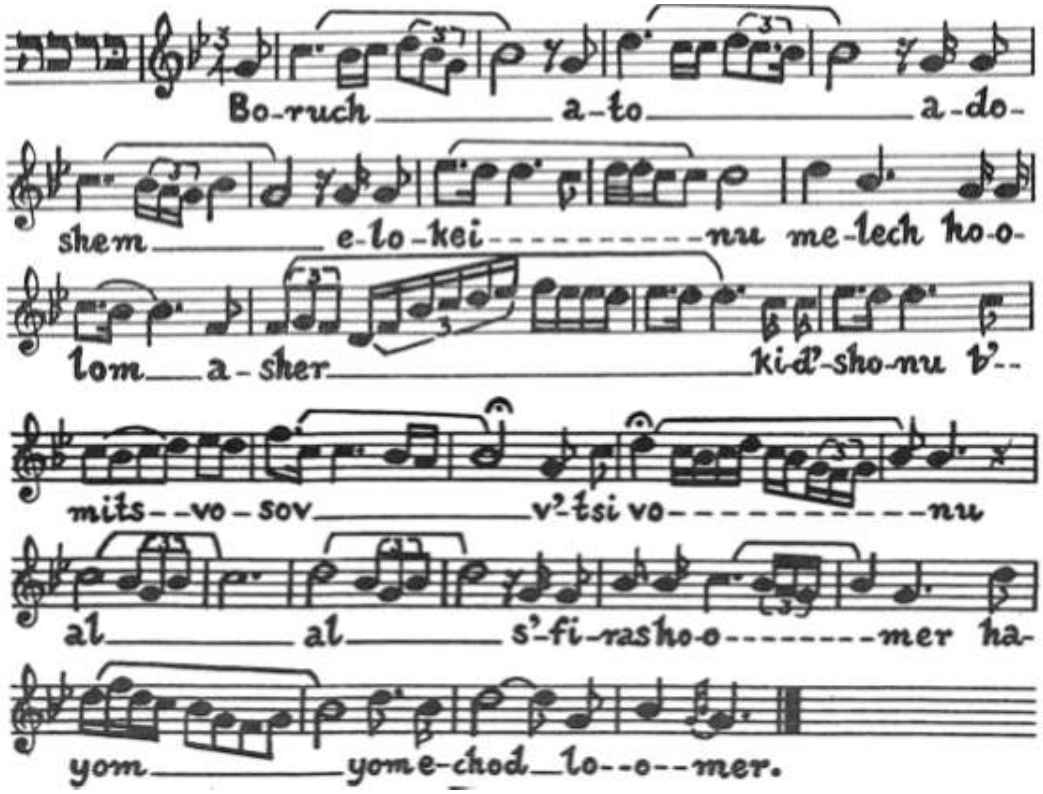


Here is the complete ברכה, according to Pinchas Spiro:

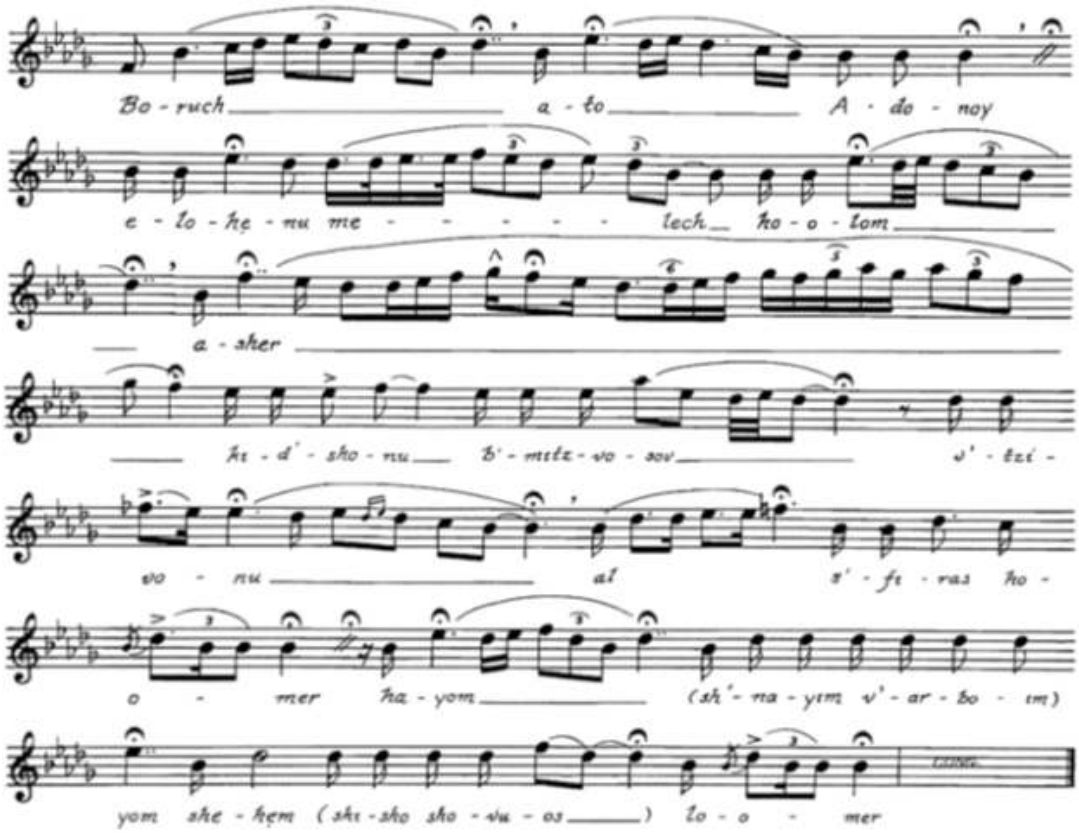


The above example, by Pinchas Spiro, is designed to be easily sung, and it clearly uses a motif that descends southward, and then turns northward, mimicking the journey of the Israelites. Even more interesting is that this motif appears exactly seven times, the number of weeks of the Omer, and the number of days of the week!

Here is a more elaborate example by Israel Alter. This example, while much more difficult to sing, has the same motif, sung the same seven times.

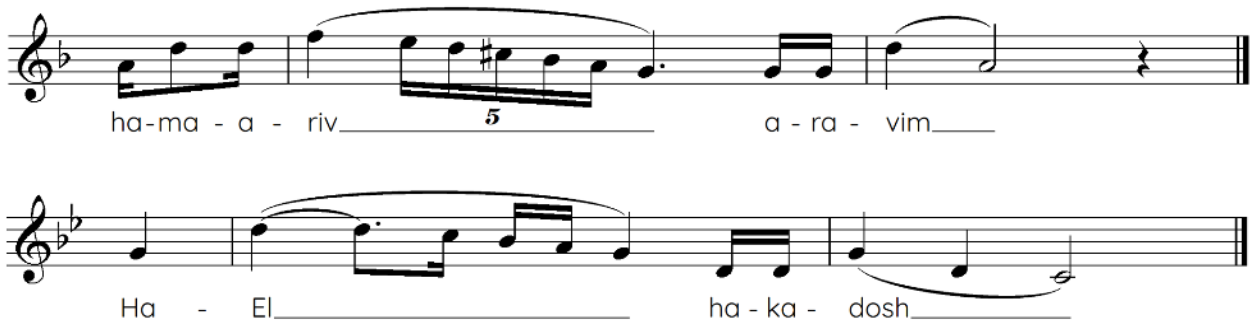


And the same ברכה, by Katcho:



Another great example of text painting can be found in the nusaḥ for Geshem and Tal. These services ask God to send rain and dew from the heavens, in the appropriate amounts, at the right time of year. The nusaḥ for the services, used for both the Hatzi Kaddish before מוסף and the Avot prayer of the Amidah, begins with opening to the 5th (the scale degree I've found repeatedly to represent God's domain). From the 5th, the melody descends in turns and swirls, mimicking the way the rain falls. We can hear the water trickling down the grassy hillside in small creeks and streams.

In fact, we can find musical examples of the rain falling and flowing through streams and brooks throughout the festival nusaḥ:



Key Scale Degrees and Finding Meaning in Intervals

I have already suggested several times the idea of the dominant of a scale being the sounds of holiness or in some way representing God's domain, and the tonic representing our earthly realm. And I've shown how the primary modes very often jump from the tonic to the 5th, as if to take the listener on a heavenly journey to experience God's holiness.

There are many physical features of music theory which support these concepts. At the core of music theory is vibration. Given any fundamental frequency (the tonic), one can divide that vibration's wavelength by any integer to create the harmonics of that frequency. Each of these harmonics create the intervals that we use to construct a scale. For example, the first and second harmonics are the octave (tonic), the third is the perfect 5th (dominant) above the tonic, the fourth is the octave again above the dominant, which in turn provides the perfect 4th (subdominant), etc. … (Note that these frequencies do not line up with an equal-tempered scale the way a modern piano is tuned, but rather form the basis for a pure major or minor scale, such as could be played on a non-fretted instrument like a violin.) Western music builds the concept of tonal music using this harmonic series by using the dominant and tonic, dissonance and consonance to create a sense of movement via stress and relaxation. Theologically, I like to think

of this as an expression of dualism. Dominant and tonic become metaphors for the interplay between God and human, between heaven and earth.

Michael Isaacson, in his book *Jewish Music as Midrash* addresses the role that overtones of a tonic play in interpreting what is referred to as musical midrash:

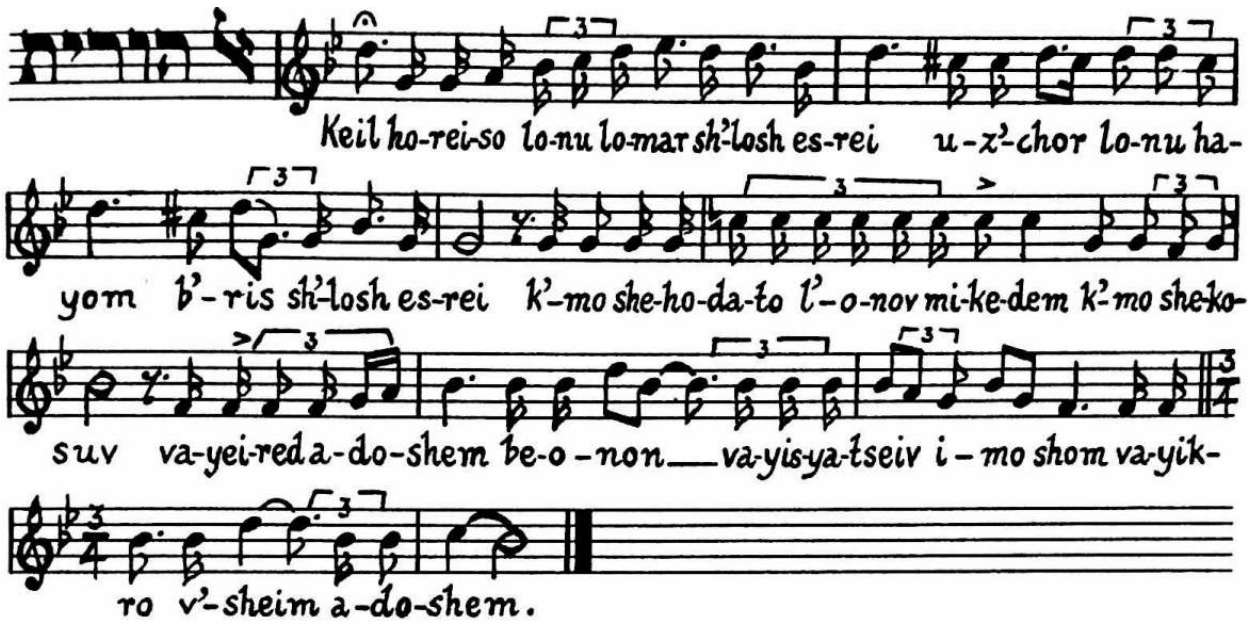
> When the valid life force of a tone is gratefully understood as a vibrant phenomenon, its marriage to a word takes on a much greater role. Instead of one being subservient to the other, they work synergistically to elevate the meaning of each component to greater intellectual and emotional heights. Carrying this idea a step further, when the musical relationship with a scriptural or prayer text setting is appreciated as a tripartite system made up of the text, the music, and its synergy, the levels of multiple meanings derived from this setting overwhelmingly increase both the value of the music and the significance of the text.[24]

Another scale degree that I have found deep significance in is the augmented 4th, also known as the tritone. This interval has the peculiar location of being exactly at the center of the octave, and also directly in between the dominant and the subdominant. The dominant and subdominant are harmonically balanced and resolve easily to the tonic, the tritone is a place of sonic instability. Singing an augmented 4th is not only challenging, but sounds eerie, perhaps even "evil." For this reason, the Catholic church named the augmented 4th the *diobolus in musica*, and at times banned its use in church music because they thought the sound would summon the devil.

I see the Jewish equivalent of the *diobolus in musica* being the *Yetzer Harah in musica*. And I've noticed that nusaḥ uses the interplay between the raised 4th and the perfect 5th to musically illustrate the relationship between the יצר הרע (the inclination to do evil) and the יצר הטוב (the inclination to do good). This relationship is particularly evident in the Seliḥah mode.

[24] Isaacson, Michael. *Jewish Music as Midrash: What Makes Music Jewish?* 2007. p.103.

Let's look at an example from Seliḥot, the אל הראת, one of the introductory paragraphs to the שלש עשרה מדות הרחמים (The Thirteen Attributes of Divine Mercy). Below is Israel Alter's composition:



Translation:

God, You taught us how to say thirteen.
Remember us today for the covenant of thirteen.
As You made known to Moses, as it is written,
"And Adonai descended in the cloud,
and stood with him there,
and proclaimed the Name, Adonai"

This is an excellent example of a Seliḥot composition. It is mostly composed in minor, the foundation for most Yamim Noraim davening. But on a single phrase (זכור לנו היום—remember us today), it diverges from minor, adding a raised 4th. And then toward the end it modulates, ending in a triumphant major.

To really understand what is happening in this text, as well as what Cantor Alter is trying to tell us, we need to know a midrash. After the sin of the Golden Calf, Moshe was so scared that God was going to destroy the Israelites. God appeared to Moshe as a *prayer leader* wrapped in a

white *tallit*, and taught Moshe the Thirteen Attributes of Divine Mercy and told him that whenever the Israelites would recite these Thirteen Attributes in order, all of their sins would be forgiven.[25]

With this story in mind, the text (and nusaḥ!) start to make sense. "God, You taught us how to say Thirteen" (God taught this to Moshe), "Remember us today for thirteen" (Please remember the promise that You made to Moshe to forgive all of our sins). The action word is Remember! We are asking God to take us from a place of יצר הרע and move us to a place of יצר הטוב. And Alter illustrates this musically with movement on this word from the raised 4th to the perfect 5th, musically moving us from dissonance to consonance, from sin to holiness.

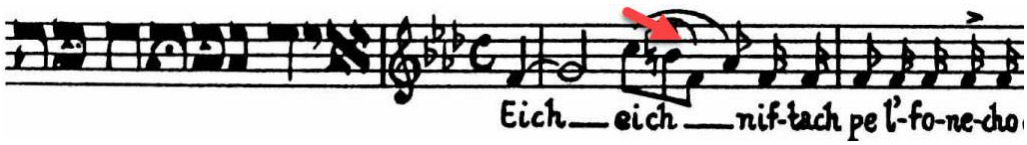
Alter is helping us to do musical תשובה (repentance). And there's an important feature of nusaḥ that we learn from this - that when we hear the raised 4th resolve to the perfect 5th, we can apply this lesson and look to see how the cantor or composer has selected a word or phrase that they want us to focus on, and to find תשובה in that phrase. And for doing that work of תשובה, where do we wind up? That paragraph ends in major, Adonai Malakh—the mode of God's majesty. In other words, for doing the work of תשובה, we are drawn closer to God—the reward for doing תשובה is experiencing God's glory. And we see this pattern again and again in the Seliḥot service: a text is chanted in minor, there is a key phrase that contains a raised 4th, resolving to the perfect 5th, and for doing that work of תשובה we arrive in God's glory.

I call the pattern of a raised 4th resolving to a perfect 5th, the Penitence Motive. And once I identified this, I made all sorts of amazing discoveries.

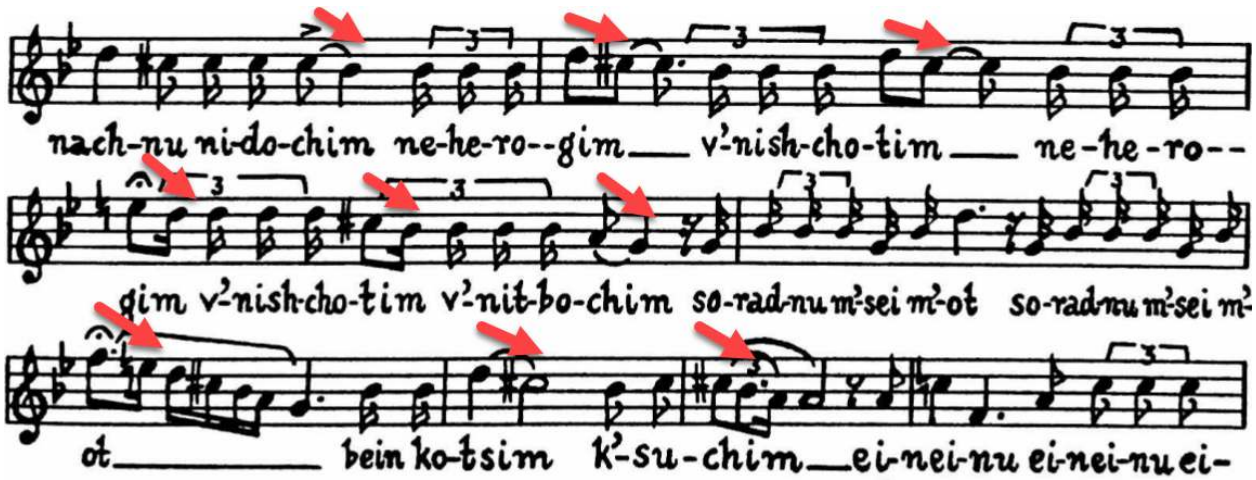
For example, there is a piyyut called איך נפתח פה לפניך (How can I open my mouth before You), which is also found in the Seliḥot service. This piyyut describes a firsthand account of the

[25] Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 17b

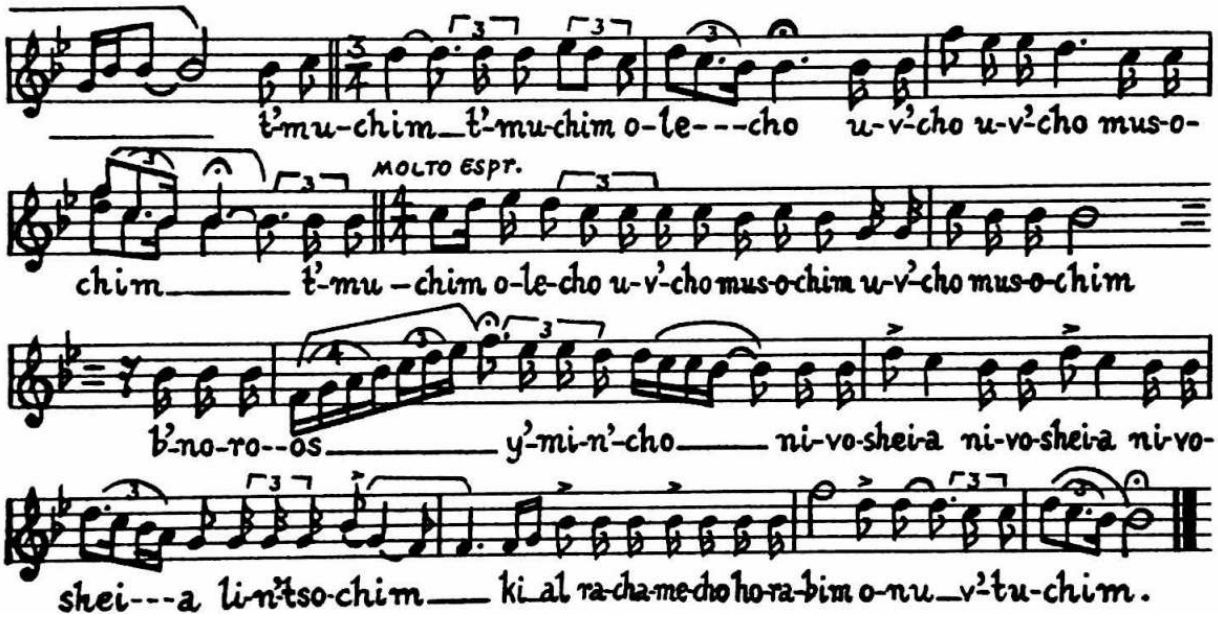
destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. It is a devastating text lamenting what has been lost. Israel Alter begins his composition for this text with the penitence motive—upside down! Instead of the raised 4th resolving upward to the perfect 5th, he flips it upside down. As Alter laments, *How can we open our mouths before you*, on the repetition of the first word איך, he opens on the 5th and descends to the raised 4th, as if to say, *Look how we've fallen*?



The rest of this very painful composition is filled with consonances resolving downward to dissonance. Examine this musical phrase on the words נהרגים ונשחטים ונטבחים —*Slain, Slaughtered, and Butchered!* Each of these use the reverse penitence motive to create the excruciating musical experience of reliving the destruction of the temple.



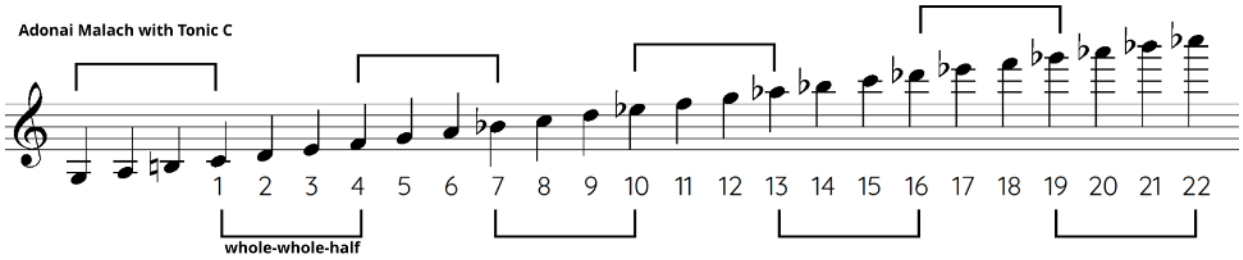
The piyyut eventually resolves to a more tranquil place, and we finally have the musical resolution our ears seek after so much torment. And in true form to the Seliḥot pattern described earlier, Alter ends the piyyut in Adonai Malakh.



Taking a mode apart

In an earlier section, I described the Adonai Malakh mode and its technical construction. It is built from a series of whole-whole-half tetrachords, resulting in an unusual mode that adds a flat to the key signature every four notes, ascending the scale.

From this pattern, we can construct the theoretical Adonai Malakh mode:



Now, no single human voice could sing this, but from this analysis could we find spiritual insight into the Adonai Malakh mode?

As we ascend the scale from the tonic C we arrive at the perfect 4th on F. From the F we could continue going up a major scale, but when we reach the B♮ we discover a problem. Adonai

Malakh is the mode of God's majesty and the glory of God's creation. If there is a B♮ present in the ascending scale, we would create a Tritone from F to B♮. Wait, we've said that the Tritone represents the יצר הרע! We can't allow a Tritone, the *diobolus in musica,* in the Adonai Malakh mode! So we lower the B♮ to a B ♭ , thus creating a perfect 4th instead. But wait, from the B ♭ ascending upward, we would have another Tritone from B ♭ to E♮. So we lower the E♮ to a E ♭ , resolving it to another perfect 4th. But wait, from the E ♭ ascending upward, we would have another Tritone from E ♭ to A♮. So we lower the A♮ to a A ♭ , resolving it to another perfect 4th. And on, and on, forever.

From this, we find a spiritual definition of Adonai Malakh, the mode used to connote God's majesty and the glory of God's creation. It is a major mode with all Tritones removed!

Getting Personal

How would one make nusaḥ their spiritual practice?

All of the musical insights and gleanings about nusaḥ that I've shared are my own discoveries. I'm happy to share them, and it's wonderful if others find them useful in their own spiritual work. But my real point is to talk about a process. What I really want to convey is that nusaḥ is more than *this is how we sing it*—it is *here's the framework and the process by which we interpret it*. I want to offer a new way to think about nusaḥ, such that cantors and congregants alike can find new meaning in it and a new purpose for it.

Without question, being able to discover one's own insights requires a deep knowledge of the nusaḥ itself. Being able to listen to a cantor, to hear how they modulate from mode to mode

within a text, and to learn to hear the connotations prescribed by each mode applied to the text, is what gives the listener the ability to understand what the cantor is actually saying.

Here are some ideas for how a listener or practitioner can turn nusaḥ into a personal spiritual practice:

- **Develop a deep knowledge of nusaḥ**. Like with any practice, having a deep understanding of the source material opens doors.
- **Slow things down**. Instead of looking at a composition as a whole, pick a phrase that interests you. What modes can you identify? What are the important intervals? Can you identify patterns or relationships with other parts of the text?
- **Develop a personal toolbox**. I've offered many of my own patterns—the "penitence motive," movement through the primary modes reflecting the core themes of creation, revelation and redemption, musical text painting. Over time, you will develop your own—and once you have these in your toolbox, you can look for new places to apply them and discover new liturgical and theological insights from them.
- **Develop your ear.** With practice, you can learn to identify modal changes, important intervals, modulation, the use of motifs in their place and also in unexpected places. With each of these, ask yourself what the cantor or composer is trying to tell you. What secret do they know that they are trying to share with you?
- **Study multiple compositions for the same liturgical text**. What is different? What is similar? What insights can you glean from those patterns?

- **Learn to Listen**. So many of us want to sing. But the revelations come from listening.

Like any spiritual practice, it requires repetition and consistency. For people who daven regularly, this is already built into their lives. If this is not already your practice, set aside a small amount of time on a regular basis to begin davening. Listen to the nusaḥ over and over, each time you daven. Focus on a single text—it's too easy to become overwhelmed by the sheer length of the davening. By focusing on a single text, you will give yourself time to see patterns and make discoveries. (The examples I've shared are insights that I've developed over two decades of doing this process.)

For the Teacher

For cantors, teachers, and synagogue leaders, I encourage the creation of classes that teach the mechanical details of nusaḥ, the performance practices associated with them, and most important, encourage students to begin thinking about how the nusaḥ helps us understand not only the liturgical text, but also the interpretive layers that a cantor can impart onto the text.

Several years ago, I created a semester-long adult education class titled How to Listen to the Cantorial Modes. The focus wasn't on singing, though we did plenty of that. The focus was on listening. I taught students to listen to a recitative and notice the modal changes that would occur from phrase to phrase

Personal Reflections

Perhaps the most important point of all of this is to transform קבע (rote) into כוונה (intention). Each time we attend a service, we hear the same text sung the exact same way. The

music that had been composed with the intention of creating כוונה became a new source of קבע. We allowed nusaḥ to become fixed and stale. We did it the same way every time.

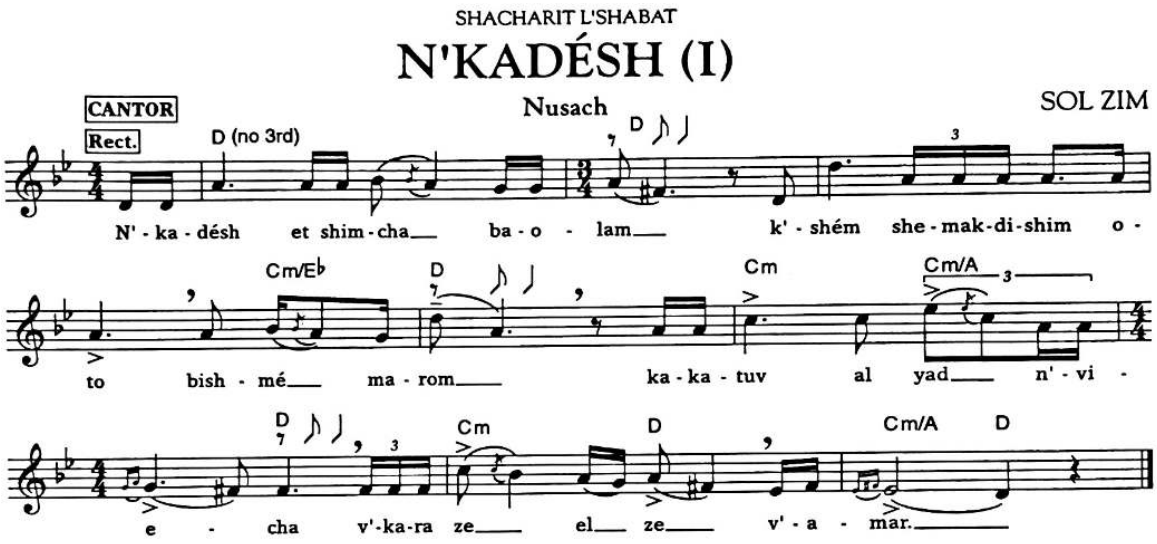
But looking at nusaḥ as a Spiritual Practice opens worlds of exploration and depth. It doesn't require changing the nusaḥ or adding new music. The nusaḥ we have sung for hundreds of years contains so much spiritual depth, though most congregants (and even cantors) are unaware it is there.

Thousands of years ago, our ancestors stood at Mount Sinai and received revelation. But that was not the end of revelation. Every time a rabbi or scholar gleaned a gem of Torah, revelation continued. Every time the *Amoraim* made a connection to Torah, every time a *midrash* was explained, every time a *halakhah* was derived, revelation continued. And today, every time someone delivers a *d'var Torah*, every time a rabbi writes a *t'shuvah*, and every time a cantor gives us new music to interpret our liturgy, revelation is continuing.

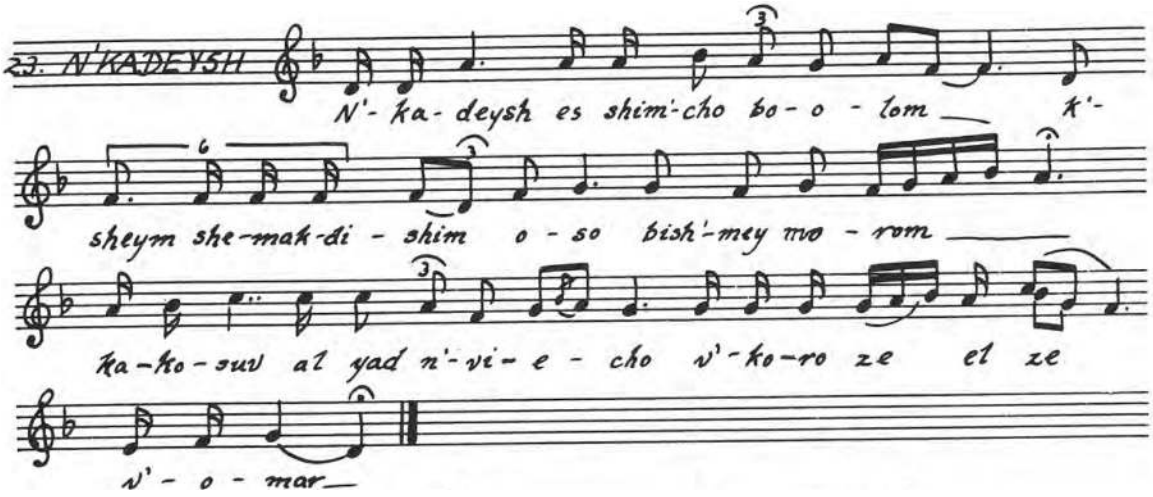
When cantorial masters composed and wrote down the nusaḥ, revelation was happening. And when we use that foundation as a source of new interpretation, we are conduits through which revelation continues.

Appendix A. Examples of nusaḥ for the קדשה of שחרית on Shabbat.

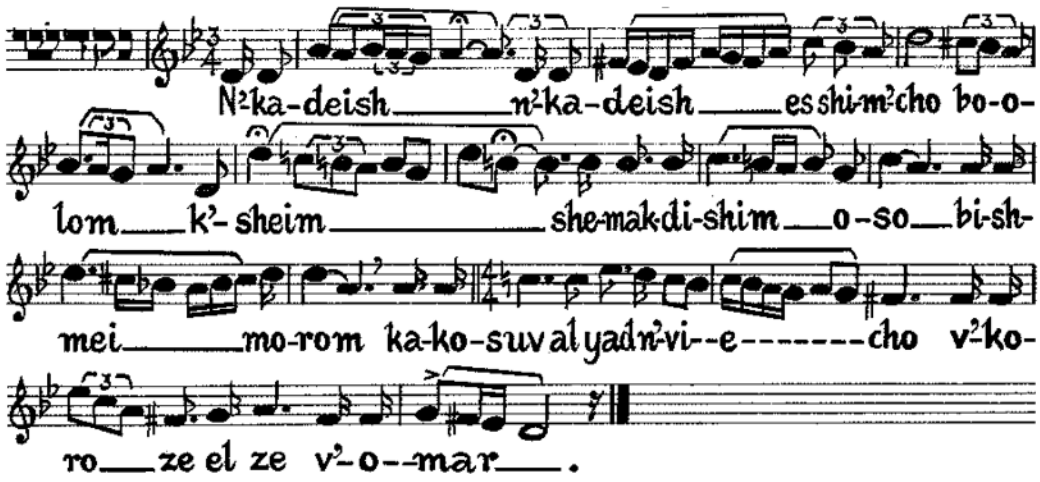
Example 1. Sol Zim.



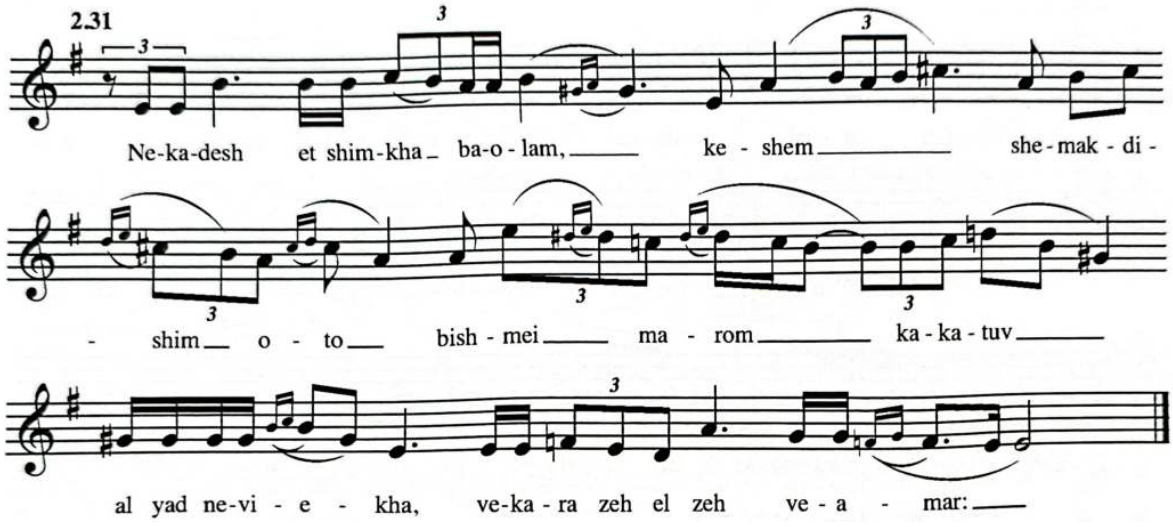
Example 2. Adolph Katcho.



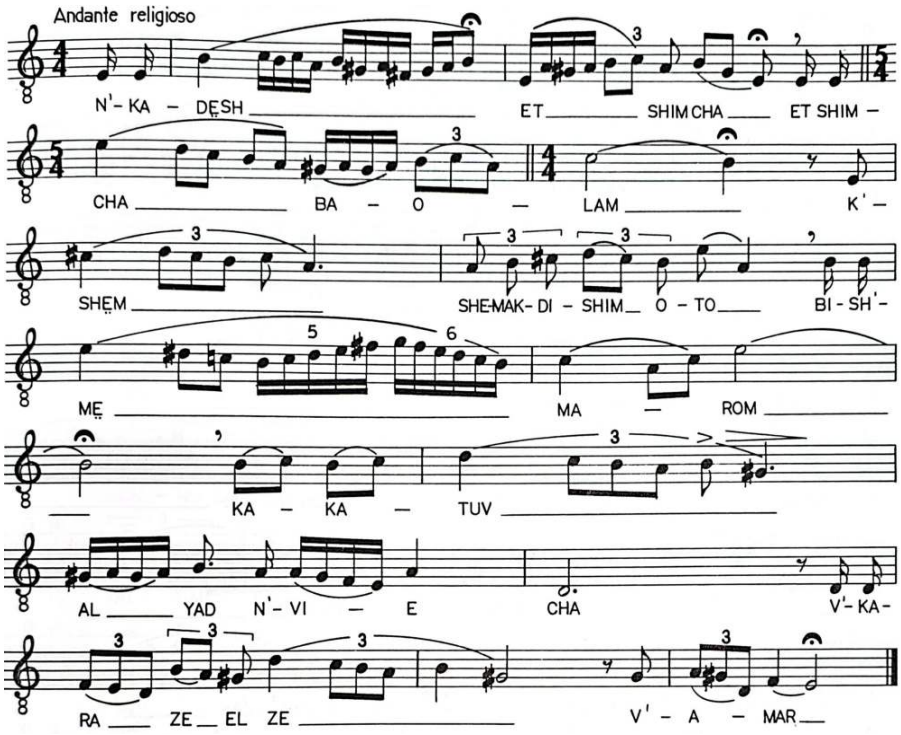
Example 3. Israel Alter.



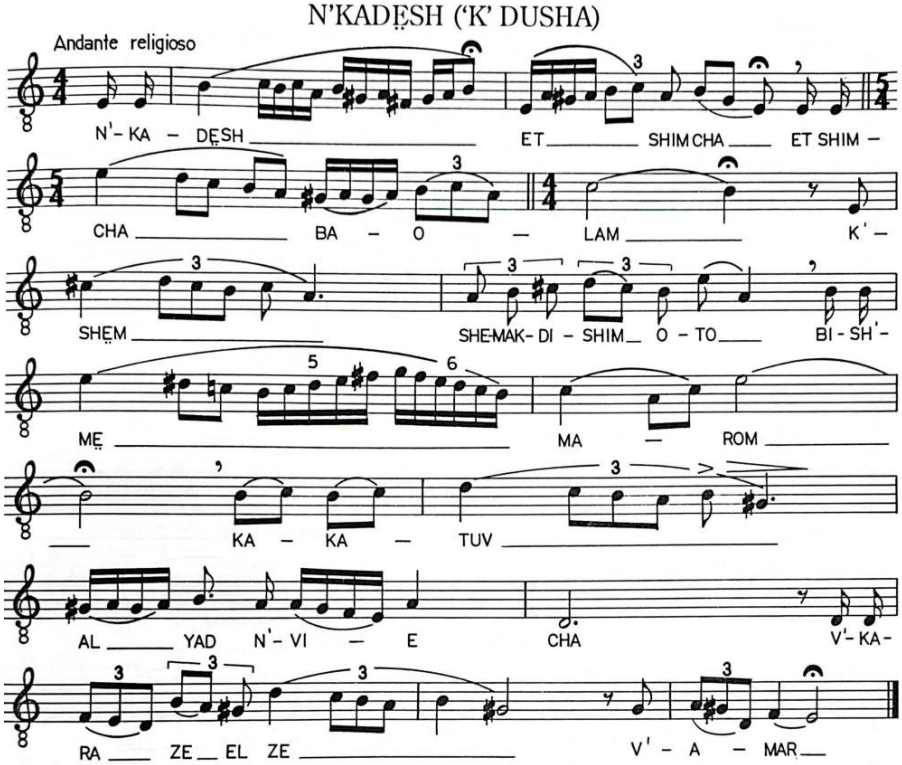
Example 4. Max Wohlberg



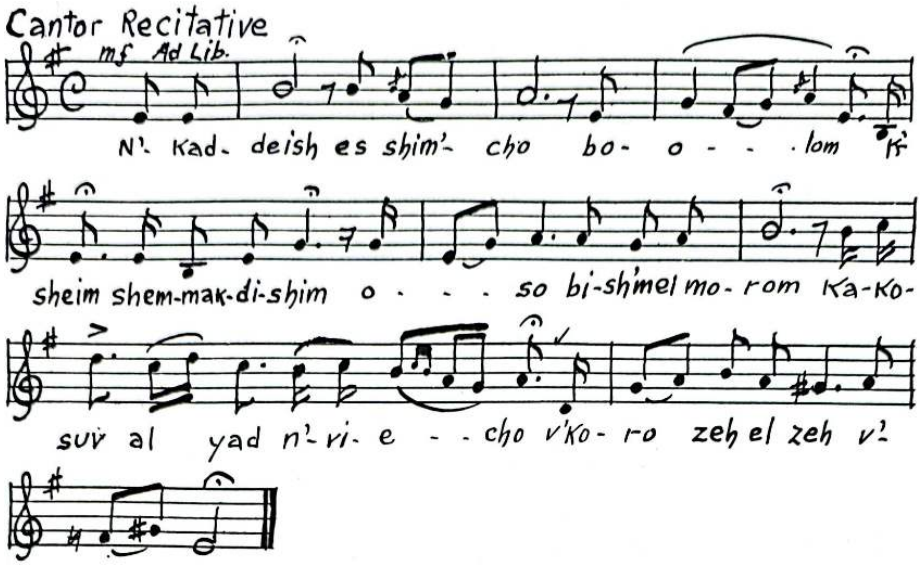
Example 5. Israel Fuchs



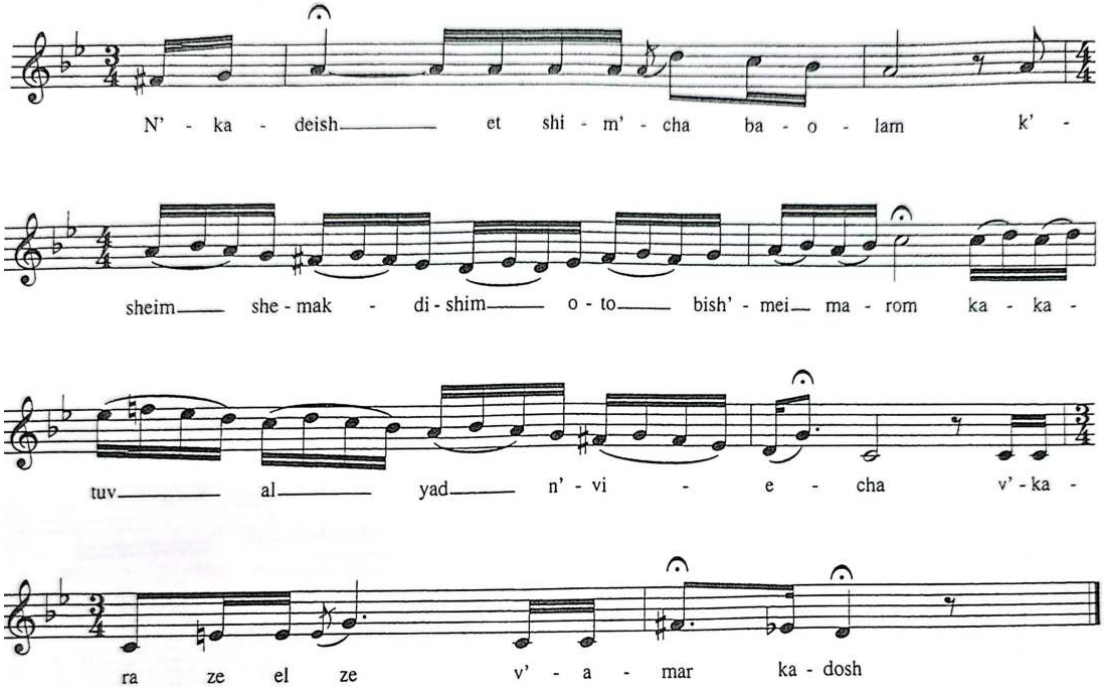
Example 6. Abba Yosef Wesigal (transcribed and edited by Joseph Levine)



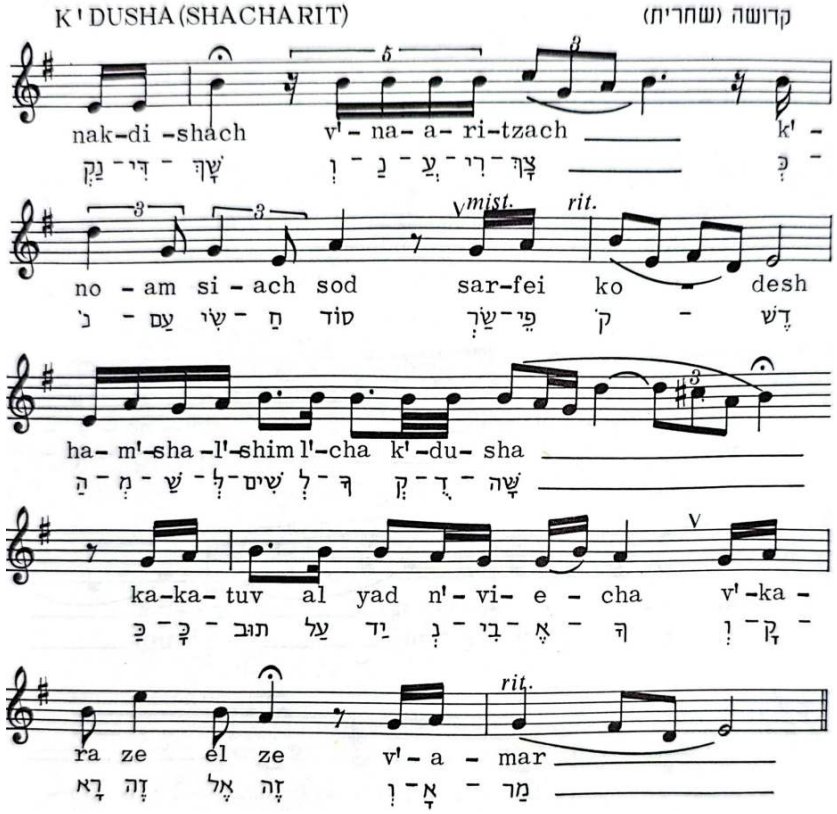
Example 7. Israel Goldfarb



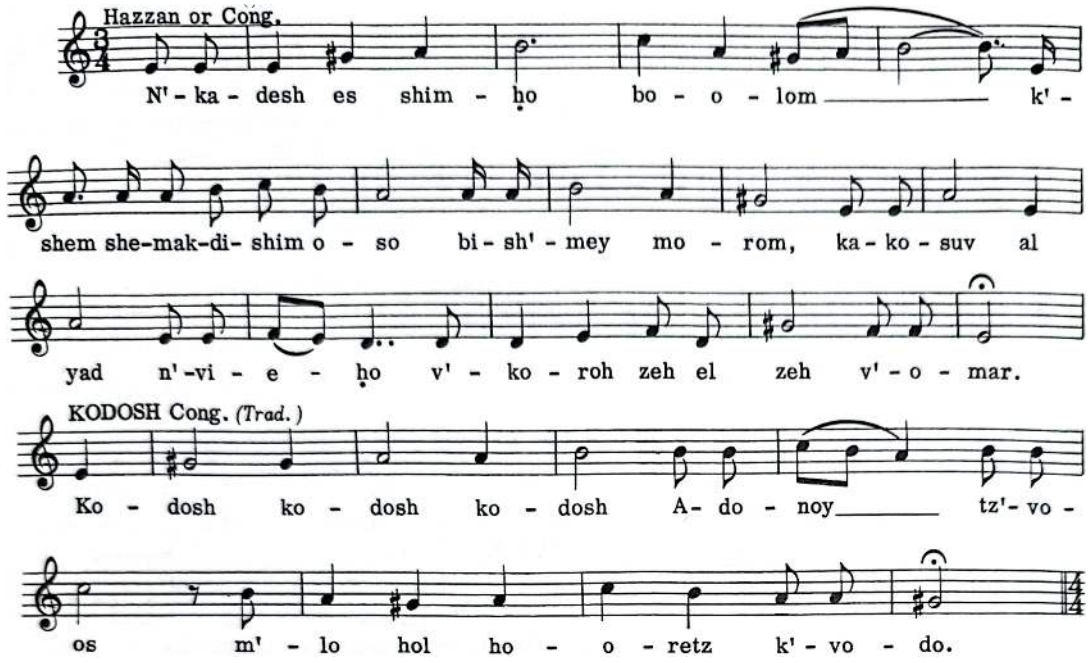
Example 8. Jacob Ben-Zion "Jackie" Mendelssohn (Edited by Noah Schall)



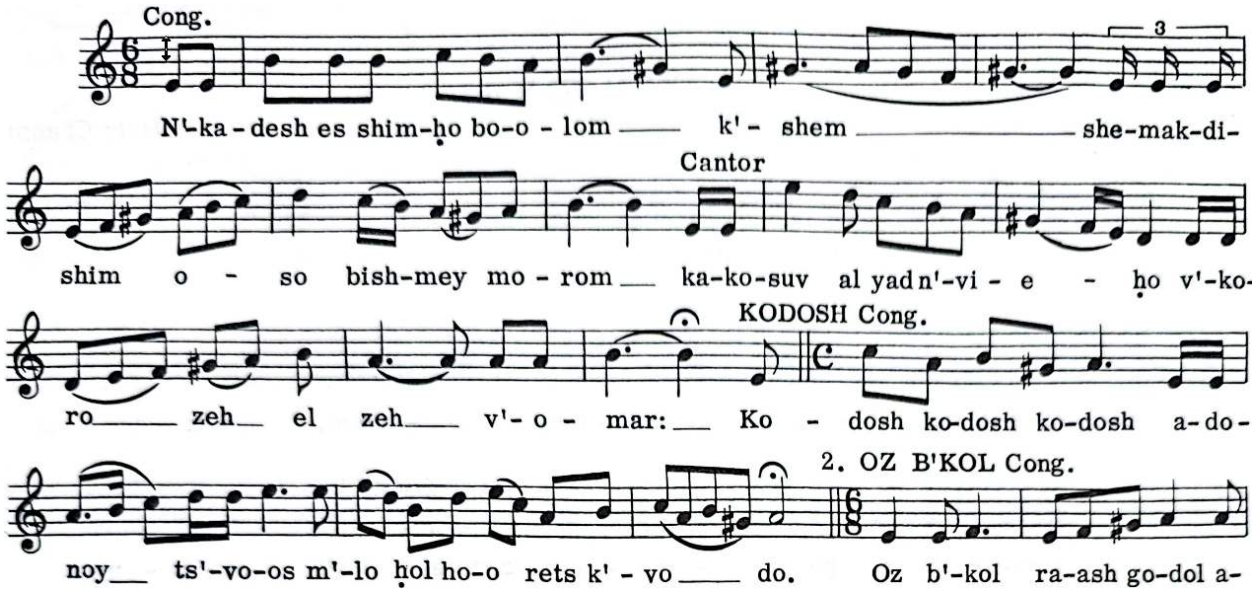
Example 9. Leib Glanz



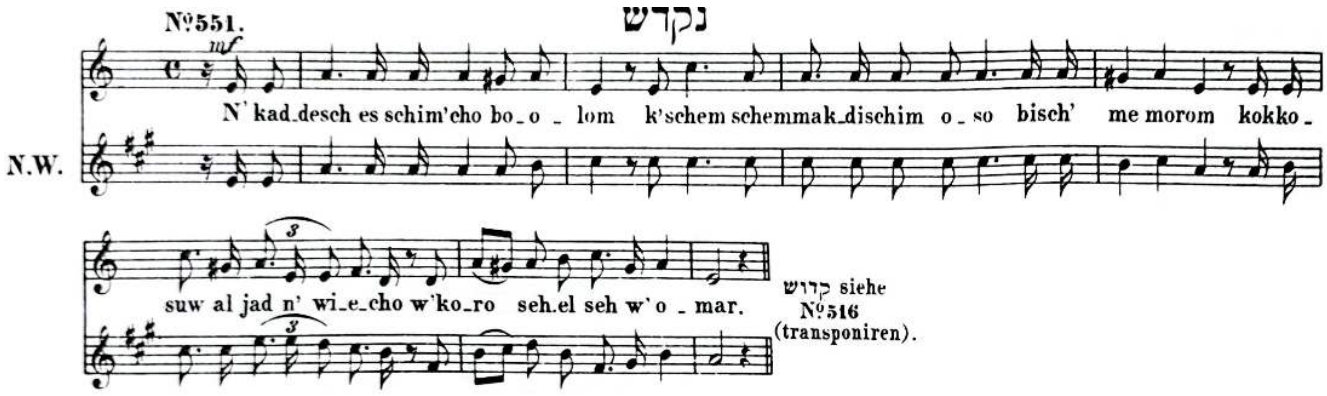
Example 10. David Chasman



Example 11. Emanuel J. Barkan



Example 12. Abraham Baer. Ba'al Tefilah. (Note that these are a Western European tradition which is entirely different from all of the other examples given here.)



Appendix B. Excerpt from Heller, Charles. A Friday Afternoon in Detroit, 1970: The day the music died. SHUL GOING, 2,500 Years of Impressions and Reflections on Visits to the Synagogue. 2019. P.114-116.

A Friday Afternoon in Detroit, 1970: The day the music died

PROFESSOR SHOLOM KALIB IS the author of a monumental thesaurus, The Musical Tradition of the Eastern European Synagogue. These are extracts from the introduction to Volume 1.

Kalib grew up in Chicago and then became a cantor in Detroit. Here he describes an incident in his synagogue where he was due to lead the Friday evening service. This service is typically preceded by the short afternoon service (minhah), chanted by a competent layman.

> The musical tradition of the eastern European synagogue represents one of the great sacred traditions of the world. During the period it flourished, from c.1675 to c. 1960, it rendered musical expression to the liturgy of the group which constituted the largest community within world Jewry...
>
> With the gradual attrition of the older congregants from eastern Europe, succeeding American generations with little and often no Jewish education lacked the background and knowledge to fully participate, and in many cases to even follow a traditional Hebrew service ... The artist-hazzan, the central figure within the musical tradition of the eastern European synagogue for over three centuries, has in essence ceased to exist in today's orthodox as well as liberal synagogues… Today's bleak status of synagogue music universally, which is at its lowest ebb in a number of essential aspects since the Middle Ages, makes the present work [the thesaurus] so compelling a necessity...
>
> On Chicago's west side, through the decade of the 1940s, there was little evidence of the effect of acculturation in the synagogue and its traditional music. In the early 1950s, however, when Jewish people moved en masse to new neighborhoods, it became apparent that an ominous change was taking place... I began to ponder how seriously and quickly the obvious level of acculturation would encroach further ...
>
> It was not until the year 1970 that I witnessed the answers to those questions. The occasion was a Friday evening service in a synagogue in Detroit . . . when a layman ascended the pulpit to lead the minhah (afternoon) service. Though knowledgeable in the ritual and the Hebrew text, he had no apparent awareness of the existence of an appropriate nusaḥ (traditional chant) ... There was no evidence throughout the congregation that anyone else had. The thought instantly struck me: this is the inevitability I had begun to fear since the mid-1950s
>
> ... Awareness by the community as a whole of the existence of nusaḥ ... had died. Then what understanding or appreciation could there be for hazzanut [cantorial art], which embellishes upon it? ... The knowledgeable kahal [congregation] ... had vanished into history.

Other cantors have similarly reflected on these historic changes. Here Cantors Samuel Rosenbaum and Saul Meisels, officers of the Cantors Assembly of New York, introduce a volume of synagogue congregational melodies (1974):

> In days now gone by, the congregation participated in the best way, it davened, it prayed, listened, and appreciated the inspiration of the hazzan and allowed his music to inspire them to further prayer.
>
> As the literacy of Jewish congregations decreased, a new means had to be found to interest and to involve congregants ... Congregational singing is one such means.
>
> Congregational singing is, however, more than a collection of tunes with which we hope to amuse the congregation. Congregational melodies, like the nusaḥ of the hazzan, must be founded on tradition... A prayer service dare not become a mindless community sing...

Twenty-one years later, Cantor Rosenbaum reported to the Cantors Assembly on what his colleagues had told him in their appraisal of "the state of our faith... our unhappiness with our shrinking liturgy together with its appropriate chant, which go to make up the act we know as prayer."

> We covered our major fears and misgivings ... the shrinking service, the death of the choir and the concomitant burial or banishment to the hazzans dead file of so many choral treasures. The almost total disregard of the age-old discipline of nusaḥ which constitutes the heart and soul of our prayer traditions. The seeming inability of the congregation to understand that to sit and to listen, in an ambience of sanctity, is participation ... That to mumble, or to articulate the Hebrew text clearly, is to participate ...

The sound of silence: in 1997 Cantor Robert Kieval reported to the Cantors Assembly Convention:

> Davening is an alien function to most of our congregants today I said to my hazzan sheni [deputy] this morning at davening [at the Convention], "This is something that we don't hear at the daily minyan any more, that hum of people davening, murmuray [murmuring]. All you hear is silence."