

**A New Song: Feminism, Music, and Voice in Partnership *Minyanim***

A Thesis

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**Abstract:**

This thesis examines the relationship between music and revolutionary changes in gender roles among “partnership *minyanim*,” an international network of Orthodox Jewish prayer groups in which women musically participate in the communal prayer service in ways which had previously been reserved exclusively for men in Orthodox worship. Women at partnership minyanim chant from the Torah and lead parts of the ritual service, accompanied by robust harmonies from the congregation. This thesis suggests that partnership minyanim function as an agent of “envoicing” for women who had previously felt that their voice- both physical and metaphorical- had previously been stifled within Orthodoxy. Additionally, the thesis presents a variety of interpretations of the Jewish legal tradition’s position on women singing, and unpacks participants’ understandings of their new role within the service. Finally, this thesis considers gender performance and the construction of an alternative Orthodox habitus for individuals in these worship settings.

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A Note on Translation and Transliteration:

Following a frequently used practice, I have italicized and defined the first instance of each Hebrew and Yiddish word used in this essay. Following that initial use, I write the words in standard print, which I believe best represents their use by partnership minyan participants, who use them casually, as if from their native language. I have chosen to transliterate Hebrew and Yiddish words in the manner that best facilitates pronunciation. A glossary of Hebrew and Yiddish terms has been included in the appendix of this thesis.

*With a new song the redeemed ones praised Your name at the seashore, all of them in unison gave thanks, acknowledged Your sovereignty, and said, 'God shall reign for all eternity.'*

*-Traditional Hebrew prayer*

### **Introduction**

In 2002, a group of Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem, Israel came together to pray on the Sabbath, just as millions of Jews around the world do every week. This prayer group, however, was different. For the first time in an Orthodox setting, men and women came together to hear a woman chant the prayers that welcome the Sabbath. This was a radical shift in Jewish practice, as male voices had exclusively led Orthodox services for thousands of years. This prayer group, called *Shira Hadasha* (A New Song<sup>1</sup>), introduced a new model of worship that would resonate in the hearts of thousands of individuals, and be replicated in the shape of approximately thirty offshoot prayer communities in the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom.

It was no accident that the group of Jerusalemites called themselves *Shira Hadasha*. Song was, from the beginning, a priority for the worshippers. They felt that if this *minyan*<sup>2</sup> was to be successful, a highly musical environment with extensive singing must be created. And indeed it was. *Shira Hadasha* has been called “the best show in town” for its song filled services with rich vocal harmonies and melodies which are repeated over and over in joyous worship. The

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<sup>1</sup> It is relevant to note that *Shira Hadasha* is in the feminine gender. The phrases *Shira Hadasha* and *Shir Hadash* (the masculine of “A New Song”) are both used in the prayer liturgy.

<sup>2</sup> *Minyan* (pl. *minyanim*) refers to the prayer quorum required to recite specific sections of the prayer service. In Orthodox worship, a minyan requires the presence of ten adult men.

community released a double disc CD of their music in response to all of the people who wanted to experience the power of Shira Hadasha's music even outside of the *Shabbat* (Sabbath) prayer service. Because of the beautiful music and radical shift in gender roles, Shira Hadasha has become a must see attraction for many tourists to Jerusalem who stop in on Friday nights for the prayer service, which frequently brings in over four hundred worshippers.

Since Shira Hadasha's inception, individuals around the world have come together to create similar traditional prayer services, in which women may lead portions of the liturgy, and chant from the Torah on Saturday mornings. The highly musical nature of the services has also been replicated in nearly all of these offshoot minyanim. These prayer groups are known as "Partnership Minyanim," a reference to the partnership between men and women which, worshippers believe, will result in a more inclusive form of Jewish Orthodoxy in which everyone is encouraged to participate in prayer leadership to the greatest extent possible within the confines of Jewish law, the set of commandments described in the Torah and the provisional measures prescribed by Rabbis to ensure that their interpretation of Jewish law is not violated.

Jewish law, or *Halacha*, is a crucial determinant in the formation and continuation of these prayer settings. Traditionally, Orthodox Jews have understood the legal texts in such a way that prayer services must be completely led by men. Partnership minyanim consider themselves to be fully Orthodox prayer settings, which, by definition, means strict adherence to Jewish law. They commonly cite essays by Rabbi Mendel Shapiro and Rabbi Daniel Sperber, two

Modern Orthodox rabbis, which advocate for increased participation by women in communal worship, and argue for the legitimacy of women's leadership in the Jewish legal system. While it is true that in more liberal branches of Judaism, such as the Reform and Conservative movements, women have participated in communal worship for decades, partnership minyanim are unique in that they adhere strictly to their interpretation of Jewish law. The Conservative movement, too, considers itself to be bound by Jewish law, but believes that the dignity of individuals trumps the possible objections to women fully participating in the prayer service. Thus, men or women may lead any part of the prayer service, and their roles are identical in the synagogue. Conversations regarding the relationship between traditional halacha and the Conservative movement continue to take place. Partnership minyanim differ from the Conservative movement, having interpreted Jewish law to mean that women may lead only the sections of the prayer service which are not completely mandatory according to the law. All of the mandatory sections must be led by men, as Jewish law requires that men pray three times per day. As explained below, a woman's requirement to pray is far more relaxed. Therefore, even though there is a greater egalitarianism to be found in partnership minyanim than in any other place in the Orthodox world, the gender roles are not identical as they would be in a completely egalitarian service.<sup>3</sup> The concept of egalitarianism in the context of partnership minyanim will be explored further throughout this thesis. Partnership minyanim also have a

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<sup>3</sup> Conversations regarding egalitarianism emerged in Jewish thought as a result of the values of the European enlightenment, and the subsequent Jewish enlightenment, known as the *Haskalah*. In Jewish discourse, the term "egalitarianism" is used almost exclusively to refer to the equality of gender roles in the worship service. Following this well established precedent, I use the term in the same manner in this thesis.

*mechitzah* (a physical barrier) between men and women during worship. Services outside of Orthodoxy do not have a mechitzah.

### Partnership Minyanim and Orthodoxy

Partnership minyanim occupy a precarious space within the spectrum of Jewish religious practice. Samuel Heilman's book *Sliding to the Right: The Contest for the Future of American Jewish Orthodoxy* (2006) describes how Jewish Orthodoxy has gradually undergone a shift toward stricter practice. This has resulted in a growth in *Haredi* Orthodoxy, a lifestyle characterized by unwavering adherence to Jewish law, education which heavily favors religious topics over secular ones, and the rejection of media and technology which may be viewed as a negative influence on the youth of the community. Haredi Jews tend to have many children and thus represent an increasingly large percentage of the Orthodox world. Heilman argues that Modern Orthodoxy, an ideology which espouses a strong commitment to Jewish law while also interacting fully with the secular world, is slowly fading away. Modern Orthodox Jews are being forced to choose between a lifestyle that is closer in style to Haredi Orthodoxy, or a small but growing left wing Orthodoxy. One leader in the left-wing Orthodox camp is Rabbi Avi Weiss of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale in New York, who ordained the first-ever female Orthodox Rabbi, Sara Hurwitz. He has also established Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, a Rabbinical school which trains students in the style of "Open Orthodoxy" taught by Rabbi Weiss. Weiss has also founded Yeshivat Maharat, a school which trains women to be spiritual leaders in Orthodox synagogues. Partnership minyanim exist within this left-wing of Orthodoxy, as

they seek to combine adherence to Jewish law with contemporary values of egalitarianism.

The place of women within Orthodox society is one of the fundamental points of contention between those in the right-wing and left-wing camps.<sup>4</sup> The far right-wing has increasingly stressed that a woman's place is in the home. Women have been literally erased from images that show them in prominent public positions. Far right-wing Orthodox parties believe that it is immodest for a woman to be displayed in public any more than she needs to be, and seeing her may lead a man to sexually impure thoughts. A famous example was the May 2011 reprint in a Hasidic newspaper of a photograph of the White House situation room during the Navy Seals raid on the Osama Bin Laden compound. The Hasidic newspaper had altered the photograph to remove Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Another, less publicized instance, is a photo of the great Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, also known as the Chofetz Chaim. The original version of the photograph shows Rabbi Kagan's wife standing next to him. However, the version which is commonly sold and hung in people's homes has been altered to remove Mrs. Kagan from the photograph.

Just as women's appearances are absent from the public (male) eye, so too are women's voices. A woman's voice has long been recognized in traditional Judaism as a threat to a man's purity of mind. Music scholarship by Ellen Koskoff

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<sup>4</sup> Though many scholars, journalists, and social critics do divide the Orthodox world into these sharp distinctions between right and left wing, it is important to acknowledge that there is a spectrum of different practices, and individuals within these camps differ in their practice and outlook.

and Kay Kaufman Shelemay has described the law of *Kol B'Isha Erva*, literally, “A Woman’s Voice is Licentiousness/Nakedness.” As is described in depth in this thesis, this law prohibits men from hearing women sing, as it may lead to lewd thoughts. In practice, this means that women may not sing if a man is present. Partnership minyanim are unique in that they are the only Orthodox prayer setting in which women are not only permitted, but encouraged, to sing in front of men. The values of feminism and song are deeply engrained in the fabric of partnership minyanim, and the lay leadership of these minyanim do not consider it to be a transgression for a woman to sing in front of a man in the context of prayer. Prayer, they believe, is of a purer nature than other musical genres, and the musical performance could not be interpreted as sexual in any way. The literal sounding of voice is highly significant, as Orthodox women in partnership minyanim want to be heard as they stand up for their place in society. In this thesis I explore the ways in which musical performance envoices their feminist goals.

### Thesis Organization

I divide my thesis into four chapters. In the first chapter, “Legal Matters: A Woman’s Voice and Cantillation in Jewish Law” I examine several of the key issues in *halacha* (Jewish law) which had to be overcome in order for partnership minyanim to operate in their current form. The heart of this chapter is an analysis of *Kol B'Isha Erva*, in which I show that this law is far more nuanced than many realize to be the case. This legal principle has been understood in dramatically different ways by rabbis over the millennia. By describing the approach taken by

partnership minyanim, as well as showing the interpretations of other rabbis who provide alternative readings, I hope to deepen the understanding of this law. I also explain two other *halachic* (legalistic) concepts, *Kavod HaTibur* (dignity of the congregation) and *Kavod HaBriot* (dignity of the individual), which are highly relevant to the construction of egalitarianism and egalitarian worship in the context of partnership minyanim.

The second chapter, “Partnership Minyanim: The Envoicing of Orthodox Jewish Women” focuses on the experiences of women at three different partnership minyanim in the Boston area.<sup>5</sup> I consider how these women have found these worship communities to be a long desired home within the Orthodox world. Many of the women I interviewed have had difficulty balancing values of tradition and feminism in Jewish contexts. For these women, partnership minyanim represent a worship site where they can reconcile conflicting forces and feel at peace with these competing values. For those women who had previously felt marginalized and silenced within the Orthodox community, partnership minyanim provide an opportunity to have a voice. I borrow the term “envoicing” from musicologist Carolyn Abbate, as I believe it describes well the experience of women who have, for the first time, the opportunity to chant from the Torah and lead the full community in worship.

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<sup>5</sup> A high degree of cultural fluidity allows individuals to comfortably participate in partnership minyanim across the globe. Though the partnership minyanim studied here are influenced by factors which are specific to their location, these prayer settings are founded on the same principles and struggle with similar issues, regardless of their setting. Because of these extensive commonalities, I often speak about partnership minyanim in Israel and the diaspora in close proximity to each other in this thesis.

The third chapter, “Gender and the Aesthetics of Torah Cantillation” examines the performance of Torah cantillation and the degree to which it can be considered an improvisatory musical genre. In addition, I ask individuals who chant from the Torah at partnership minyanim to reflect on their personal aesthetic style, and the musical decisions they make when chanting. I also unpack some of the differences in language used to describe the musical aesthetic of male and female chanters. As I discuss in the chapter, an examination of word choice may provide insight into the reception of gendered voices in the context of cantillation. I also speculate that terms used to describe male and female voices may be more descriptive of a gendered “imagined voice,” rather than the actual performance of Torah chant.

Finally, the fourth chapter, called “Engendering Song, Engendering Singers: The Reconstruction of Gender in Partnership Minyanim” is an exploration of the ways that the Orthodox habitus is shifting. I describe the change in the role of Orthodox men, as they transition from being the outward projecting voice and gaze to the inward receiving, and enabling, ear as they listen to women lead the synagogue service. I also explore the ways that Orthodox women perform their femininity, their religiosity, and their progressivism in the context of partnership minyanim. I finish the chapter by asking about the nature of egalitarianism in partnership minyanim, and suggesting a new way to consider the concept in this setting.

### Research Methodology

This project began through the Fieldwork seminar for ethnomusicology students in Tufts University's Masters Degree program. Throughout the semester I attended services and social events held by the three partnership minyanim in the greater Boston area, Minyan Tehillah in Cambridge, MA, Kol Rinah in Brookline, MA, and Yedid Nefesh in Newton, MA. I met lay leaders, organizers, and attendees of these minyanim, and was able to interview many of them later, and record some of them singing prayer melodies outside of the original context. This project resulted in the chapter of my thesis entitled "Partnership Minyanim: The Envoicing of Orthodox Women."

Following that semester, I went to Jerusalem, Israel for approximately three months of research. While there I attended Shira Hadasha nearly every week for Shabbat and holiday services, and was invited into the homes of many Shira Hadasha members for festive Shabbat meals. These individuals generously shared stories about their backgrounds and how they found their way to Shira Hadasha. Because traditional Jews do not turn on and off electronic devices or write during the Sabbath, I was unable to record these conversations. However, I took detailed notes as soon as the Sabbath ended on Saturday night. I also met with many of these individuals during the week, when I was able to write and record interviews.

As part of my fieldwork, I also enrolled in a Haredi *yeshiva* (religious school) in Jerusalem. There were numerous benefits to doing so. First, my status as a student allowed me to stay in the school's dormitories, take advantage of their dining facilities, and immerse myself more fully in the culture of the Ultra-Orthodox. More, though, this experience allowed me to better understand the

manner in which partnership minyanim fit into the greater Orthodox world. This school was particularly well-suited to my research questions, as the student body was comprised primarily of men between eighteen and thirty who were not raised in Orthodox backgrounds. These students had chosen an Orthodox lifestyle and attended the school to become enculturated and gain the skills expected of an Orthodox man. Surrounded by individuals who were deeply engaged in the difficult task of constructing an Orthodox identity while negotiating competing values, I had fascinating conversations with my teachers and fellow students about their opinions of the state of Orthodoxy and the place of partnership minyanim within it. The yeshiva also offered Hebrew language classes, and provided a tutor in the evenings who helped me to study halachic sources related to partnership minyanim. Though most of the individuals I met at the yeshiva were opposed to partnership minyanim, they offered thoughtful reasons for their objections, and appreciated the research questions I was asking.

### Personal Positioning

Like many researchers, I found myself asking how the focus of my study related to my own life. My fieldwork experience in Jerusalem was an especially powerful reminder of the sharp differences between the liberal outlook of Shira Hadasha and the devotion to tradition to be found in the yeshiva. As a Modern Orthodox Jew with deep appreciation for traditional practice, I was able to participate in both cultures, although I was seen as being on the margins by each group. When I spoke about my research to my teachers at the yeshiva, some of them joked about how blindly liberal one must be to engage in such a topic.

One teacher strongly encouraged me to stop studying partnership minyanim, believing that I was transgressing Jewish law by attending Shira Hadasha's services, and that, because of the liberalism of the university, I would be unable to critique partnership minyanim. The Shira Hadasha members I met were equally surprised at my decision to study at this particular yeshiva, as they viewed it as being far too right-wing. The partnership minyan participants were stunned that someone could split their time between a Haredi institution and Shira Hadasha. One Shira Hadasha member suggested that I write a blog reflecting on my experiences in these two very different Jewish worlds. I came to realize the significant division within the world of Jewish Orthodoxy. Though both communities considered themselves to be "Orthodox," they stayed as far away from one another as they could manage.

In truth, I have found beauty in both the partnership minyan community and the Haredi community. Both offer joy, song, and a devotion to Jewish practice and values. I find inspiration in the Haredi community's commitment to scholarship, to personal growth, and to the family. Likewise, I am moved by partnership minyan participants' inclusivity and desire to provide a home for those who have previously felt marginalized. I have grown tremendously from my fieldwork in America and Israel, and am deeply grateful to the individuals who shared their experiences with me.

Throughout this paper, my goals have been to draw on feminist critique and relevant topics in ethnomusicology to understand and analyze partnership minyanim. I am not interested in advocating for or against the decisions made by

partnership minyan participants. Rather, I recognize these prayer environments as rich sites of gender role negotiation in which multiple factors are at play as they struggle to gain recognition from mainstream Orthodox institutions. I hope that by exploring these prayer communities and their exceptional music I will contribute to the discourse surrounding the struggle between evolving modernity and long standing practices and beliefs.

### Scholarly Positioning

As I have thought through the complex issues surrounding music and partnership minyanim I have been guided by a large number of texts, both in ethnomusicology and other disciplines, which have shaped my understanding. I position my research at the crossroads of ethnomusicological inquiry into issues of voice, liturgical hermeneutics, and gender, and the broad field of feminist scholarship within Jewish Studies. Highly relevant to my research are the edited collections on women and music by Jane Bernstein and Ellen Koskoff.

Bernstein's *Women's Voices across Musical Worlds* contains a number of relevant essays, most notably those by Margot Fassler and Craig Monson in the section entitled "Cloistered Voices." Monson's work, which is continued in the book *Disembodied Voices: Music and Culture in an Early Modern Italian Convent*, reveals a surprising number of similarities to my own. He examines the music of nuns in seventeenth century Bologna, Italy and the ways in which the music of their "disembodied voices" attracted throngs of worshippers, much like Shira Hadasha. I was also influenced by Koskoff's *Women and Music in Cross Cultural Perspective*, too, especially her own essay, "Gender and Music in a New

York Hasidic Community.” This essay, like her book *Music in Lubavitcher Life*, describes the law of *Kol Isha*, and the ways in which Hasidic women of the Chabad-Lubavitch sect are generally proud of the power of seduction attributed to the female voice. Also relevant is Anne K. Rasmussen’s *Women, the Recited Qur’an and Islamic Music in Indonesia*, in which she explores the cultural forces which permit the chanting of religious text by Muslim women, despite the long established practice that this task is generally performed only by men. In addition, I find ethnomusicologist Jane Sugarman’s book, *Engendering Song: Singing and Subjectivity at Prespa Albanian Weddings* to be helpful in conceptualizing the ways in which Jewish liturgy, and thus its accompanying music, has become gendered at partnership *minyanim*. Sugarman, in the context of Prespa weddings, examines the ways that this engendering of song affects a person’s habitus, and thus the formation of their identity.

My research also drew from the field of Judaic Studies, including *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism* by Shira Hadasha’s founder, Tova Hartman. Hartman’s work provides an inside view into the construction of Shira Hadasha and the motivation behind its founding. Rachel Adler’s *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* is a useful counter to essentialist views of gender within Judaism, as she replies one-by-one to common objections to partnership *minyanim*. Judith Plaskow’s seminal work *Standing Again at Sinai* was especially helpful in understanding Orthodox Judaism’s evolution as women gain a greater role in the infrastructure of the synagogue. Plaskow was influential in helping Orthodox women to understand that an empowered approach to

feminism was not contrary to religious law. I found Shira Zeliger's Master's Thesis "Educating an Orthodox Feminist: Male and Female" to be valuable in understanding the evolution of Modern Orthodox Jews who become involved in partnership minyanim, as they make decisions regarding their desired home spectrum of Jewish practices. I also looked to those on the right wing of Orthodoxy, such as Rabbi Ari Wasserman, to explain legalistic objections to women chanting from the Torah, as he does in a segment of his Hebrew text, *HaGiyunei HaParsha*.

Like many researchers in the field of gender studies, I draw from Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, as I consider the performance of gender in partnership minyanim. Her influence can be especially seen in my consideration of women's clothing choices in chapter four of this thesis.

### Complicating Binaries

Partnership minyan participants frequently describe their ritual decisions based on binaries that, though widely accepted by contemporary Jews, may overly simplify the processes by which decisions regarding worship are made. One such dichotomy concerns the tension between religious and secular influences. The adjustments to the worship service implemented by partnership minyanim are religious in nature, but are described by many as deriving from secular sources. Similarly, some individuals I have interviewed position egalitarian worship as being opposed to tradition. Such binaries are constructed as a result of the evolution of Jewish practice since the Jewish Enlightenment, known as the

*Haskalah*, of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as the contemporary cultural/religious landscape.

Inspired by the European Enlightenment, Jewish intellectuals such as Moses Mendelssohn and Baruch Spinoza advocated for a new Jewish identity that encouraged assimilation and participation in secular discourse. This influential movement led many individuals to reconsider their religious practice and theological beliefs. The Reform movement was built out of this spirit of change and progress in 1873, and eventually the Conservative movement, too, would emerge as a response.<sup>6</sup> During the twentieth century other paths of Jewish practice and belief have emerged, such as the Reconstructionist movement, and the Jewish Renewal movement. Orthodox Jews view themselves as a continuation of the practice that was prevalent prior to the *Haskalah*, though there are many subsections of Orthodoxy which all vary slightly in their customs and continue to evolve, both on the group and individual level. Orthodoxy itself is often seen as a spectrum, with groups such as partnership minyanim occupying the left-wing, and Haredi communities situated further to the right. Even within a subgroup of Orthodoxy, such as Modern Orthodoxy, individuals vary greatly in their practice and beliefs.

Many contemporary Jews understand these movements as plots along a continuum of religious practice, with “secular” at one pole, and “religious” at the

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<sup>6</sup> The Jewish Theological Seminary, the rabbinical school of the Conservative Movement was founded in 1886 as a more traditional approach to Judaism than the Reform movement offered. The Conservative Movement has gradually shifted away from their early approach to Judaism, which was very similar to Orthodoxy, and has since constructed their own unique identity which it positions between Reform and Orthodox Judaism.

other. This model views Haredi Jews as “the most religious” while other movements would be viewed as “more secular” or “less religious.” This dichotomy is reinforced by tension in contemporary Israeli social and political affairs between individuals who self-identify as “religious” or “secular.” The Israeli public is deeply divided on issues related to the relationship between religion and the state, and citizens face complex interactions between these competing forces daily.

This perceived binary is troublesome to the leadership of Jewish movements which are outside of normative Orthodox practice, who believe their worship decisions to be highly religious in nature, even if the motivations for adjustments to the prayer service come from non-Jewish sources. For example, the desire of partnership minyanim to increase women’s participation in the service is a response to an inequality between their roles in the synagogue and in their day to day interactions in secular environments such as the workplace. Their reconsideration of Jewish law comes from a desire to correct this problem, but also a desire to increase their participation in religious worship. The “secular” values that partnership minyanim (and other non-Orthodox groups) hold are directly related to the creation of a worship experience that is more meaningful for participants. The secular-religious paradigm is problematic, as it is reductive and leads many individuals to view mainstream Orthodox worship as more authentic than other branches of Judaism. Yet, this perception remains, as reflected in the many quotes in this thesis which describe partnership minyanim in these terms. As described in chapter two, individuals vary in their understanding

of partnership minyanim, with some worshippers describing these prayer settings as “not very religious” while others believe them to be fully Orthodox, and therefore authentic, settings. Similar dichotomous paradigms position modernity and egalitarianism against traditionalism. Negotiating these perceived binaries will be important for partnership minyanim as they struggle to gain acceptance from the Orthodox community.

### Larger Questions

The present exploration of partnership minyanim is relevant to far more than the progressive wing of Jewish Orthodoxy. The attempt to meld adherence to religious law with contemporary values of women’s rights is a struggle that is being negotiated in much of the world. This challenge is just now entering the political realm in Israel, but other countries have faced these issues for many years. By studying the example of partnership minyanim, a setting where women have gained a voice, we may learn lessons about how other marginalized groups can find their own voice.

Throughout this thesis, I consider the relationship between music and gender role negotiation in the context of partnership minyanim. Why are these settings such musical spaces? How does music function as a feminist tool? What is the significance of chanting sacred texts to women who do so in these settings? How do men experience these musical performances? By answering these questions, I hope to contribute to our understanding of the values of these

communities and the processes they employ as they compose and sing “a new song.”

## **Chapter 1: Legal Matters: A Woman's Voice and Cantillation in Jewish Law**

Our Rabbis taught: All may be included among the seven [called to the Torah on Shabbat], even a minor and a woman, but the Sages said that a woman should not read in the Torah because of the dignity of the congregation (*Kavod HaTsibur*).

-The Talmud, Tractate *Megillah*, Page 23a

The Jewish legal tradition is the backbone of Judaism. *Halacha*, the laws given in the Torah and interpreted in the Talmud, as well as later rabbinic codes, govern how traditional Jews are required to live, regardless of the time and place in which he or she resides. Halachic issues, such as the Talmud's question (written above) of whether or not women may chant from the Torah, have been debated for millennia, and continue to be studied in religious schools all over the world. It is important to note that the various denominations of Judaism have each adopted an official understanding of halacha. The Reform movement, which began in Germany in the mid-1800s, views individual autonomy as the ultimate decider of proper behavior. Leadership of the Reform movement have stated, "[Halacha] may no longer be the singular authority in determining personal practice, but it is invaluable as one tool in establishing guiding principles for Jewish living."<sup>7</sup> The Conservative Movement (or *Masorti* [lit. Traditional] movement, as it is known in Israel), believes halacha to still be binding today, though adjustments may be made when there is a conflict between the law and the contemporary world. Rabbi Reuven Hammer of the Conservative Movement's

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<sup>7</sup> Deborah Barnes, Mark Washofsky, and Wendy Grinberg, *Living Ethics: An Investigation of Reform Halacha Through Case Studies* (Union for Reform Judaism), accessed March 14, 2012, [http://urj.org/kd/\\_temp/AB5D25D8-CC7B-F8D5-0FBF454B6EAC15E8/ALL\\_Module3\\_LivingEthics\\_final.pdf](http://urj.org/kd/_temp/AB5D25D8-CC7B-F8D5-0FBF454B6EAC15E8/ALL_Module3_LivingEthics_final.pdf).

Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, states that “The Conservative Movement is still based upon the attempt to preserve the essence of Jewish belief and practice – that is why it is called ‘Conservative’ – while attempting to make Judaism meaningful and relevant for the times in which we live.”<sup>8</sup> Orthodox Judaism, which is somewhat fractured, believes that Jewish law is completely binding, even when it comes into conflict with modern life. It is out of Modern Orthodoxy, the branch most committed to strict adherence to Jewish law while also participating fully in the secular world, that partnership minyanim have emerged.

The following chapter will analyze the two halachic concepts most central to the creation of partnership minyanim. The first is known as *Kol B’Isha Erva* (or simply “*Kol Isha*”), literally translated to “The voice of a woman is licentiousness.” This law prohibits a man from hearing a woman, other than his wife or immediate family member, sing, as the singing voice is as distracting as sexual nakedness. The concept of *Kol Isha* has been discussed several times in music scholarship, such as Ellen Koskoff’s work among Lubavitcher Hasidim, and the studies of Syrian Jewish women by Kay Kaufman Shelemay and Faye Ginsburg. While these studies have discussed the psychological and sociological ramifications of *Kol Isha*, I attempt to dig deeply into the law itself. As I show, *Kol Isha* is very much a law that is “on the books,” but it has been understood in a variety of ways by Rabbis throughout the generations. In addition, I will examine the acceptability, according to Halacha, of women chanting from the Torah. The

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<sup>8</sup> Reuven Hammer, “Judaism and Modernity,” *Jerusalem Post*, December 30, 2011, accessed March 14, 2012, <http://www.jpost.com/Magazine/Judaism/Article.aspx?id=251448>.

chanting of the Torah is a highly musical act which, prior to the existence of partnership minyanim, had been reserved exclusively for men in Orthodox settings. Historically, the reason for this is not only that women were prohibited from singing in front of men, but also grows out of a concept known as “Kavod HaTsibur,” literally, “the dignity of the congregation.” Finally, I will briefly touch upon the concept of “Kavod HaBriot,” literally, “dignity of the individual,” and discuss whether or not this concept can trump other possible objections to women chanting from the Torah.

It is not my intention to support or condone the halachic stance taken by partnership minyanim. Here I examine the legalistic principles by which partnership minyanim function, and the objections by their opponents in the Orthodox world.

The concept of women’s voices, as they relate to Kol Isha, has been a contentious issue in contemporary Israeli culture. In January of 2012, the Chief Rabbi of the Israeli Defense Forces announced that soldiers would not be permitted to leave military sponsored events in which women are singing. Prior to this, Orthodox soldiers who observed the law of Kol Isha would leave the room when a woman sang in front of an audience. The announcement has been perceived by segments of the religious community to mean that military orders are to supersede halacha, which may mean that in the future some traditionally observant Israeli citizens will opt out of their compulsory military service. This announcement was delivered in the midst of an ongoing series of events that have called into question the place of women in Orthodox society. In December 2011,

a Haredi man was arrested for spitting on an eight year old girl as she walked to school because the man viewed her clothing as being immodest. This event took place during a period of protests in which certain Haredi communities in Jerusalem demanded segregated busses, on which women were required to sit separately from men, in the back of the bus. In 2008, conflict also arose surrounding musical performances. Thirty-three leading Rabbis signed a ban on a concert in New York by popular Hasidic singer Lipa Schmeltzer because they had been told that there may be mixed gender seating. Mixed seating during a concert, the leadership of the far right wing believes, can easily lead to actions which are considered sexually explicit, such as men and women dancing together. With the Lipa Schmeltzer concert established as a precedent, it was understood that all subsequent *Haredi* concerts would be banned as well. However, when religious authorities were assured that men and women would sit separately at Schmeltzer's show, the ban was repealed.

As certain segments of Ultra-Orthodox Judaism increasingly support the implementation of measures to separate men and women in the public sphere, other segments of the Modern Orthodox world are looking for ways to increase women's participation in both the synagogue and the secular world. It is out of this sentiment that partnership minyanim have emerged. I believe that the rapid proliferation of partnership minyanim is both evidence of their functioning as a long desired home for women and men who felt discomfort with conventional gender roles within Orthodoxy, and also a response to the contemporary discourse surrounding the place of women within this particular religious and cultural

sphere. The future of Orthodoxy is indeed a contest, as Heilman states. Orthodox individuals vote with their feet, as they choose the synagogue in which they will pray, the community in which they will reside, and the school in which their children will study. Halachic discourse is the source of authority for their decisions. Jewish law is used to challenge or support various approaches to prayer and personal observance. In practice, debates are not held. Individuals share with their like-minded colleagues and students halachic evidence that supports their decisions, and inherently denounces the other side.

The present halachic survey is also included in order to address another important facet of my larger exploration of partnership minyanim. While my research is primarily an analysis of gender role negotiation within a fixed tradition, there is also an important subtext regarding the malleability or immutability of law. While Saba Mahmood discussed a “politics of piety” I suggest that we may also consider a similar “politics of law.” As I have stated, the legitimacy of partnership minyanim is predicated on their interpretations of halacha. The debates over their validity are, in a sense, really a conversation about if, how, and under what circumstances a legal principle may be adjusted in order to meet the needs of an individual or society. As such, this discussion is relevant to contemporary cultures grappling with conflicts between tradition and modernity, religion and secularism, and religion and government. In this sense, my exploration belongs to the ethnomusicology of law, an arena which, given increased attention, could yield important results.

Partnership minyanim, representing the new left-wing of Jewish Orthodoxy, base their halachic position on opinions explained by Rabbi Mendel Shapiro and Rabbi Daniel Sperber. Below I summarize their arguments, and present counter-arguments from right-wing sources. The arguments below have been developed over several centuries and represent divergent opinions and approaches to Jewish observance.

### Kol Isha: The Partnership Minyan Position and the Traditional Sources

I first examine the perspective on Kol Isha explicated by Rabbi Mendel Shapiro, a view employed by partnership minyanim when establishing their worship structure. Rabbi Shapiro does not believe that the prohibition of Kol Isha is an impediment to women chanting from the Torah. He begins this section of his essay by asking whether or not chanting the text of the Torah with the accompanying melody is a violation of this law. Shapiro makes two claims: First, he states that the Talmud's prohibition of women chanting from the Torah (seen in the epigraph to this chapter) mentions only the concept of Kavod HaTsiibur, and does not mention Kol Isha. Therefore, he concludes that Kol Isha is not a relevant consideration. Secondly, he suggests looking at a very similar case which has been explored more thoroughly in the Rabbinic literature. Shapiro points to the halachic debate surrounding women chanting from the scroll containing the book of Esther, which is sung on the holiday of *Purim*. Can women chant Esther for a mixed congregation? In this debate, the majority of halachic authorities, says Rabbi Shapiro, believe that Kol Isha is not a reason to stop women from chanting

this text. Because of these two points, Rabbi Shapiro believes that Kol Isha is not a relevant concern regarding Torah Cantillation. Instead, the only real possible problem is Kavod HaTsiibur, which is addressed below. In order to unpack Rabbi Shapiro's estimation of Kol Isha, it is worth taking a closer look at the relevant passages of the Talmud, as well as major commentators' opinions on these passages.

Kol Isha is mentioned twice in the Talmud, the written record of Rabbinic discussions regarding the oral tradition which is traditionally believed to have been delivered by God to Moses at Mount Sinai. In the tractate *Berachot*, page 24a, Rav (Rabbi) Yitzchak states that “a *tefach* of a woman is nakedness.”<sup>9</sup> The sages of the Talmud then weigh in on how to correctly interpret this statement. Rav Sheyes explains that this is to be interpreted that when a man is concentrating on reciting the prayer known as the *Shema*, the declaration of belief in one God, the presence of even a small piece of a woman's exposed skin would be a distraction akin to nudity. Rav Shmuel replies that “The voice of a woman is nakedness as it says (Song of Songs 2:14) ‘for your voice is sweet and your countenance comely.’” Rav Chisda interprets Rav Yitzchak's statement to mean that the exposure of a woman's thigh is like nudity, and Rav Sheshes believes it to mean that a woman's uncovered hair is akin to nudity. Rav Shmuel's opinion, in which he compares a woman's voice to nudity, is the first reference to Kol Isha.

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<sup>9</sup> A *tefach* is a Biblical unit of measurement equivalent to the size of a grown man's fist.

Several widely respected authorities, Rabbi Yom Tov Assivili, better known as the “Ritva”,<sup>10</sup> and Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet, the “Rashba,”<sup>11</sup> explain that the “voice” refers specifically to a woman’s singing voice, not her speaking voice. This is the opinion that is given as authoritative in the *Tur*, a fourteenth century halachic guide, and the *Shulchan Aruch*, written in 1563 and still considered the most authoritative legal code in Judaism. Numerous other sources specify that a man cannot recite the *Shema* prayer when he can hear a woman sing, even if he is not actively listening, as her voice is a powerful distraction.<sup>12</sup> Several commentators, including the Rashba state that the prohibition against hearing women sing while saying the Shema even applies to hearing one’s own wife’s voice.

The second reference to Kol Isha is in the tractate called *Kiddushin*,<sup>13</sup> in which Rav Nachman said to Rav Yehudah, “Would you like to say hello to Yalta [Rav Nachman’s wife]?” to which Rav Yehuda declines, saying, “Rav Shmuel says the voice of a woman is nudity.” The Artscroll publication of this tractate explains in a footnote that, according to the teachings of the Rashba, “The general prohibition against hearing a woman’s voice actually refers to singing, not speech. When a woman responds to a man’s greeting, however, their interaction can lead to intimacy, and even listening to her speaking voice is forbidden.” Rav Yehuda’s

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<sup>10</sup> 1250-1330, Spain

<sup>11</sup> 1235-1310, Spain

<sup>12</sup> The Artscroll edition of tractate Berachos cites the following authors on this point: *Mordechai* section 80 citing *Rav Hai Gaon*; *Rashba*; *Ritva*; *Re’ah*; *Meiri*; *Orach Chaim* 75:3

<sup>13</sup> Page 70a

decision to not speak to Yalta because he would hear her speak back is a strict opinion, and is not the generally accepted law.<sup>14</sup>

Given the aforementioned statements in the Talmud, there are now several questions that must be addressed. First, Rav Sheyes' statement and Rav Shmuel's response in *Berachot* seems to imply that hearing a woman's voice is only prohibited when attempting to focus on the *Shema* prayer. However, Rav Yehudah's statement makes no reference to the *Shema* prayer. Therefore, is the prohibition of hearing a woman sing only applicable in the context of attempting to recite the *Shema*? In addition, does the law specify *who* the woman singing is? For example, what if the man does not know what the woman looks like? Additionally, is it permissible to hear a group of women singing, if one voice could not be distinguished from another? Finally, does the content of the song matter? Is there a difference between a woman singing her prayers and a woman singing a folk tune?

We begin to glean answers from another discussion in the Talmud. In the Tractate *Sotah*, Rav Joseph speaks on the topic of singing during festive meals.<sup>15</sup> He states, "When men sing and women join in, it is licentiousness; when women sing and men answer, it is like a raging fire in flax." Rashi, an eleventh century rabbi, considered to be among the greatest commentators on the Torah, explains that there is a distinction between leading and answering in a song. Rabbi Ben Cherney explains, "The one who leads does not pay attention to the one who is

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<sup>14</sup> In the Talmud it is common for a Rabbi to present an opinion that is more lenient or more stringent than what is now considered to be the halacha.

<sup>15</sup> It is traditional for people to sing between the courses of a meal on the Sabbath or a holiday.

answering; therefore, even though the principle of ‘Kol B’Isha Erva’ applies, it is not as volatile a situation if the men lead. However, if men are answering, they pay close attention to the voice of the leader. If a woman is leading, there is a greater danger of sexual incitement.” This provides one opinion regarding the content of the song, and whether men and women can sing together. We see here that, according to Rav Joseph, paraliturgical songs, which are religious in nature, may not be sung by women. The infraction is most serious if they are leading singing, and thus calling attention to themselves.

Some Rabbis have argued that the number of singers factors into whether or not a particular musical event violates *Kol Isha*. Chatam Sofer suggests that it is permissible for men to listen to two or more women sing together, because when hearing two voices, the listener does not hear either of them clearly. Others, such as Rabbi Benjamin Zilber disagree, citing the aforementioned passage in Sotah regarding song during the meal. If it is inappropriate to hear women sing during the meal, he says, that certainly disproves the Chatam Sofer’s position.

Other Rabbis have suggested that the content of the song is the determining factor when deciding whether or not a woman may sing in front of men. The Sde Chemed, a Sephardic Rabbinic authority, quotes a particularly lenient opinion of the *Divrei Heifetz* which states that the women are only prohibited from singing love songs in front of men. The Sde Chemed himself permitted women to sing together around the Sabbath meal table- the same practice that was frowned upon by Rav Joseph.

Rabbi David Bigman, the current head of *Ma'ale Gilboa*, a religious kibbutz in Israel, also focuses on the content of the song in his discussion of Kol Isha. In 2008, a Modern Orthodox Israeli youth group, *Bnei Akiva*, was to hold a singing competition. There was much discussion surrounding the event. Parents and organizers argued about whether or not boys and girls should be allowed to sing together, and whether men should be allowed to watch the girls perform. Rabbi Bigman explained to an Israeli newspaper his belief that, “Restrictions can be eased on listening to a woman singing when there is a clear assessment of innocent listening to innocent song.” He identified five areas by which the “innocence” of a woman’s song may be evaluated: atmosphere of the event, lyrics, musical style, the woman’s clothing, and body language. He went on to say, “There is no problem for the modest and pious of our girls to develop a singing career, even within popular culture, but without relinquishing the delicate foundations of the culture of the Torah and without cooperating with the vulgar commercial aspects of the culture surrounding us... Women of certain public sectors are so insulted by the decree prohibiting them from singing in public that they become estranged from Torah and *mitzvot* [commandments] because of it.”<sup>16</sup>

Similar lenient opinions relating to the laws of modesty are recorded in the Talmud. In Tractate *Ketubot*, Rav Acha danced with a bride at her wedding, an act which is normally prohibited because dancing with a woman could be considered lewd behavior. He explained that she was “as a beam of wood” to him.

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<sup>16</sup> Kobi Nahshoni, “Rabbi Bigman: ‘Women Can Sing in Innocence’,” *YNetNews.com*, July 14, 2008, accessed March 14, 2012, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3567666,00.html>.

He was not attracted to her, and thus was not in danger of committing any transgressions. Similarly, Rabbi Acha Ben Abba, who permitted his married granddaughter to sit on the lap of Rav Hisda, explained that when one's motivations are "for the sake of Heaven," one may be lenient on these matters.

Finally, Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch, a highly influential Rabbi of the nineteenth century, explains another leniency regarding Kol Isha. Rav Hirsch rules that it is permitted to listen to multiple women singing at once, because a single voice would not be able to be distinguished and a male listener would not be enticed by hearing a specific female singing. Similarly, Rabbi Eliyahu Waldenberg, better known as the Tzitz Eliezer, rules that Kol Isha does not apply in regard to recorded music, as the male listener is not actually hearing a voice, he is hearing a mechanical reproduction of a voice. Others, such as Rabbi Yaakov Breisch disagree, saying that even the recorded voice of a woman could lead someone to have impure thoughts. Rav Ovadia Yosef, the former Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel, believes that it is permissible to listen to a recording of a woman singing if the male listener does not know what she looks like.<sup>17</sup> Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, the most respected halachic authority of the twentieth century, stated that the rules of Kol Isha begin to apply when a girl has reached the age of eleven, at the onset of puberty.

Partnership minyanim base the permissibility of women reading Torah on the argument of Rabbi Mendel Shapiro in his paper "*Qeri'at HaTorah* by

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<sup>17</sup> Aryeh Lebowitz, "Kol Isha on Recorded Music" YUTorah.org (Yeshiva University), accessed March 14, 2012, [http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/744356/Rabbi\\_Aryeh\\_Lebowitz/Ten\\_Minute\\_Halach\\_a\\_-\\_Kol\\_Isha\\_on\\_Recorded\\_Music](http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/744356/Rabbi_Aryeh_Lebowitz/Ten_Minute_Halach_a_-_Kol_Isha_on_Recorded_Music).

Women: A Halakhic Analysis.” Rabbi Shapiro explains that many authorities have stated that when a woman’s singing voice is being employed in the context of holy songs, Kol Isha is not an issue. He also cites an opinion of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, who has pointed out that the Talmud’s primary objection to women singing is based on the principle of *Kavod HaTsibur* (Dignity of the Congregation), not Kol Isha. One could read this, as Ovadia Yosef does, to understand that since there is not an objection to Kol Isha, a woman should be allowed to sing in front of men when chanting sacred text.

#### Kavod HaTsibur (Dignity of the Congregation)

Much Rabbinic opposition to women reading from the Torah is based on the principle of Kavod HaTsibur. Ostensibly, a woman reading from the Torah would be an affront to the congregation’s dignity, although the specific reasons for this objection are not obviously apparent. The Ritva, Rabbi Yom Tov Assivelli, explains that the concept of Kavod HaTsibur relates to the congregation’s appearance to an outsider. A visitor to a Jewish community who saw a woman reading Torah would assume that there was no man capable of fulfilling the commandment and would think poorly of the community.

The sages have questioned, however, if community members are permitted to waive their “dignity.” Theoretically, if a community collectively states that the opinion of an outsider is not of interest to them, they could certainly have a woman, or a child, for that matter, chant from the Torah. The authorities differ on the permissibility of waiving the dignity of the congregation. The

Shulchan Aruch, the Code of Jewish Law, states that this is, in fact, permitted. Other legal authorities, most famously Rabbi Yoel Sirkis<sup>18</sup>, better known as *The Bach*, do not permit a congregation to do so.

The final key to Kavod HaTsibur is whether or not the congregation's waiving of their dignity would be an affront to *Kavod Shamayim*, the Dignity of the Heavens. Some believe that the concept of Kavod HaTsibur is equivalent to Kavod Shamayaim. This is the opinion of the Bach, who stated, "The term kevod HaTsibur does not refer to the dignity of the congregants... but [means] that it is not dignified for the congregation to be represented and commended before the Almighty by a person lacking in imposing appearance. Similarly, one would not send a representative of unimposing appearance to commend the community before a mortal king, even if [the representative] were exceedingly wise... Similarly a woman may not read publicly... because it is a disgrace to the congregation."<sup>19</sup>

Though there are well-known and respected halachic authorities who have presented reasons why the Talmud's statement regarding Kavod HaTsibur is an insurmountable obstacle to a woman chanting from the Torah, partnership minyanim rely on more lenient opinions in order to allow women to chant from the Torah. Partnership minyanim operate with the assumption that the men who attend prayer services do so with the understanding that they are waiving their

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<sup>18</sup> Lived 1561-1640, Central Europe

<sup>19</sup> Mendel Shapiro, "Qeri'at ha-Torah by Women: A Halakhic Analysis." *The Edah Journal* 1:2 (2001): 27.

“dignity,” which allows women to chant from the Torah. In actuality, male participants vary in their understanding of the halachic considerations at play in these settings, and may or may not be aware of the legal considerations assumed by more knowledgeable members.

*Kavod HaBriot* (Dignity of the Individual)

In 2002, Rabbi Daniel Sperber, professor of Talmud at Bar Ilan University in Israel, wrote an article in which he suggested that in halachic discourse the concept of *Kavod HaBriot*, the Dignity of the Individual, trumps the concept of *Kavod HaTsiur*. The concept of *Kavod HaBriot* is derived from an example in the Talmud in which women are permitted to participate in the preparations of a calf before it is sacrificed in the Temple in Jerusalem, because their exclusion may be found offensive.

It was asked: [Scripture states] "Speak to the children [*benei*, lit. sons— *trans.*] of Israel...and he shall lay [his hand on the head of the offering]" (Lev. 1:2-4)—the sons of Israel lay their hands, but the daughters of Israel do not. R. Jose and R. Simeon say: The daughters of Israel may lay their hands, though they are not required to. R. Jose said: Abba Eliezer told me the following: Once we had a calf to be offered as a *shelamim* sacrifice and we brought it to the women's court and women laid their hands on it. Not because laying of hands applies to women [i.e., not because it is permissible], but to allow the women to feel pleased.<sup>20</sup>

Rabbi Sperber comments on this passage from the Talmud: “under certain circumstances, when something would constitute a great affront to women, they were prepared to disregard certain prohibitions or authorities and allow things that normally would be considered forbidden or unsuitable.”<sup>21</sup> He goes on to cite

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<sup>20</sup> Tractate *Hagigah*, 16b

<sup>21</sup> Daniel Sperber, “Congregational Dignity and Human Dignity: Women and Public Torah Reading.” *The Edah Journal*, 3:2 (2003): 8.

another passage from the Talmud, which explains “Great is human dignity (Kavod HaBriot) which supplants a negative commandment.”<sup>22</sup> Rabbi Sperber goes on to cite several other instances of human dignity trumping an established halachic understanding, ultimately stating that in the current day, it is an affront to a woman’s dignity to prohibit her from reading from the Torah. Furthermore, he states, the Jewish legal tradition has not been fixed in a particular time and place. Rather, it is a dynamic system which must meet the needs of the current day.

Rabbi Sperber’s essay is refuted by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, the current Chief Rabbi of the Israeli settlement of Efrat. Rabbi Riskin claims that the cases which Rabbi Sperber had mentioned were being used erroneously. The Talmudic cases in which a woman was allowed to participate in specific religious rituals on the grounds of *Kavod HaBriot* were actually instances in which there was an established custom of women performing certain tasks. Because their participation was a fact of historical precedence, it would have been an affront to their dignity to deny them the opportunity to participate in these ritual acts.

Kavod HaTsiibur (The Dignity of the Congregation) vs. Kol Isha (The Voice of a Woman)

According to Rabbi Shapiro and partnership minyanim, since the Talmud’s only reason for forbidding women from being called to read from the Torah is that it would be an affront to the congregation’s dignity, we can conclude that when it comes to holy matters, there are no problems with a man hearing a

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<sup>22</sup> Berachot, 19b. The 613 commandments are divided into 248 positive commandments (“You shall...”) and 365 negative commandments (“You shall not...”).

woman sing. If Kol Isha had been an issue here, the Talmud would have recorded that as part of the debate. Other authorities disagree with this interpretation. Rabbi Ari Wasserman, a contemporary rabbi and attorney, cites numerous objections that have been articulated throughout the centuries in his Hebrew text *HaGiyunei HaParsha*. Many of Rabbi Wasserman's points are derived from Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg, also known as the *Tzitz Eliezer*, who was the head of the Religious Court system in Jerusalem for much of the twentieth century. Rabbi Waldenberg asked the same question that Rabbi Shapiro asked in his paper: Why doesn't the Talmud mention Kol Isha as the problem with women reading Torah? Why, instead, does it talk about Kavod HaTsiibur? Waldenberg suggests several reasons. First, by stating that a woman should not read Torah in front of men because of Kavod HaTsiibur, and not because of Kol Isha, the Talmud is able to address a possible situation in which one might permit a woman to sing. This is specifically relevant in the case of a *penuya*, an unmarried woman. Since some authorities might say that it is permissible to listen to a young, unmarried woman sing, Kol Isha was not a broad enough position. Instead, the Talmud prevents a woman from reading because of Kavod HaTsiibur, which is a more encompassing prohibition.<sup>23</sup> Secondly, if there was no man present who was competent in Torah reading, a community might be tempted to relax its standards regarding Kol Isha. Kavod HaTsiibur prevents that from happening. Additionally, Rabbi Wasserman

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<sup>23</sup> In other words, one might have thought that the Talmud would simply cite Kol Isha as the reason for not allowing women to chant from the Torah. There are certain cases, however, in which an unmarried woman may be permitted to sing in front of a man, which would make the situation of Torah cantillation unclear. Under the restriction of Kavod HaTsiibur, even unmarried women are forbidden to chant Torah, unambiguously stating that women are forbidden from chanting Torah.

quotes the book *Yafeh Halev* (Beauty of the Heart), which states that when the Talmud cites Kavod HaTsiibur as the problem with women reading from the Torah, it is actually combining two halachic principles: Kol Isha and *Maarit Ayin* (Appearance of the Eye). *Maarit Ayin* refers to doing an act which, although technically permitted, may confuse a passerby.<sup>24</sup> In the case of Torah reading, a visitor to a community in which women read Torah might think that this is permissible and spread the practice.

### Kol Isha and Women's Place in Contemporary Society

The principle of Kol Isha is conceptualized in many ways by contemporary Jewish women and men. A three and a half minute video posted to YouTube in December 2011 shows a young woman, likely in her early 20s, describing her changing attitude toward Kol Isha as she has become more observant of Jewish law.

I think, for me, the hardest thing [about becoming more religiously observant] was when I first learned about it [Kol Isha]. For me music is something that is so deep, and personal, and of your soul, that it makes you feel like you can't share yourself with people. That people can't get to know you in that way... I've learned that people can still get to know me without hearing me sing. But it's something that is, like- it's difficult... I used to struggle a lot more- I definitely struggled a lot- with 'hear my voice.' That I couldn't be heard. I wanted to be heard... Over the years, I think it's gotten easier in the sense that it's become more meaningful to me. I can say, 'Wow. This music that I have is so powerful, and deep, and has such potential. And it reveals my soul. It reveals the depths of you. And you don't just want to share that with everyone. It's not something that you just want to have for the world to hear. It's like your naked body. It's not something that you just want to give away to anyone.'<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> For example, most Orthodox Jews would not walk into a non-kosher restaurant to purchase a bottle of water. Even though the water is kosher, a passerby might observe the Orthodox Jew in the restaurant and mistakenly assume that the establishment was kosher.

<sup>25</sup> "On Kol Isha," December 1, 2011, video clip, accessed March 14, 2012, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pOAu51-oGfA>.

Similarly, music scholarship by Ellen Koskoff and Kay Kaufman Shelemay has shown, in certain Orthodox Jewish circles, women have embraced the concept of Kol Isha, interpreting it as an attribute of power to their own voice.

However, other individuals feel that the prohibition of women singing in front of men is part of a larger silencing of women that is taking place in the Orthodox world. One blogger, who goes by the pseudonym, “the middle,” on [jewlicious.com](http://jewlicious.com), a cross-denominational Jewish news/humor site, recently began “The Women’s Voice Movement.” Responding to a series of events in which Orthodox soldiers in the Israeli Defense Forces left army sponsored gatherings in which women were singing, “the middle” called for women to sing anytime they found themselves in the company of an Orthodox male. The author writes, “Do not rest silent until the ones who can’t control themselves leave the bus, auditorium, line, cinema, restaurant, supermarket or office! Let them leave. Who needs them? Sing away O Women of Israel, sing away! Fill the country with song and beauty and do away with the ugliness that is trying to trample you underfoot. I look forward to hearing your lovely voices.”

Within one month of this call, the author had posted four “Women’s Voice Movement Alerts” which highlighted news stories in which women were marginalized. Responding to a November 2011 vote in which The Israel Bar Association failed to appoint a woman to the committee to appoint Rabbinical Judges, “the middle” encouraged readers to vote for female political candidates to ensure women’s representation in government, and to fight against what she

perceived to be an increasingly patriarchal legal system: “Make it a point to vote for women candidates. Then vote for the party which has the most women running on its slate. But for now let’s start small. If you’re female, I remind you to sing or hum whenever and wherever you are in a public place with men around you, particularly Orthodox men. Make them feel your presence and your strength. Remember, you are not doing anything wrong, you are not stripping or being immodest, you are not being sexually provocative or in any way offensive. You are merely singing. Let them know that they do not control you. Sing. Sing. Sing.”

In Israel, religious observance and contemporary values often conflict, and the topic of a woman’s place within the society is especially heated as it impacts matters of the state. An increasing number of Orthodox school systems, which are funded by the government, insist on separate facilities for boys and girls. This, of course, requires extra government spending in these communities. Additionally, some public bus lines which run through Ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods in Jerusalem have instituted a policy in which men sit in the front and women sit in the back of the bus. The issue has been contested and continues to be a major topic in city politics.

It is out of this climate that Shira Hadasha has emerged and thrived. Many Israelis have found Shira Hadasha to be a religious environment which has successfully found a balance between adherence to Jewish law and maximization of women’s roles. By negotiating the complex web of halachic issues pertinent to

women reading the Torah, worshippers at Shira Hadasha cast their vote for an Orthodox Judaism more in line with the values of contemporary Israeli secular society. Many visitors to Shira Hadasha have been inspired by this innovative prayer community, and have sought to replicate their model in the United States, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere in Israel, resulting in approximately thirty partnership minyanim around the world. While traditional Jews in the diaspora may not face the same issues regarding church and state, they care about the future of Orthodoxy. They are willing to invest extensive time and energy to developing a prayer community in which women are seen as partners in worship and the leadership of religious communities.

### Conclusion

The place of a women's voice continues to be a debated issue, and is perhaps more relevant than ever before. As mentioned above, in recent months the Israeli army has decided that Orthodox soldiers may not leave army events if a woman is singing. This has prompted leading Rabbis to instruct their students to opt out of their compulsory military service, which further divides secular and religious factions within Israeli society. Kol Isha, which had previously been observed only by the Ultra-Orthodox community, and largely ignored by Modern Orthodox Jews, is increasingly being presented to Modern Orthodox communities as a relevant concern. In many ways, the concept of a woman's voice is at the heart of the growing divide between the emerging left wing of Orthodoxy and the remainder of the Orthodox world which is increasingly sliding toward more strict

practice. As I show in the next chapter, musical performance at partnership minyanim occupies an important place in this conflict. I suggest that partnership minyanim can be viewed as the envoicing of women, giving women a place within traditional Jewish practice to escape the limitations on their voice that they perceive are imposed by Kol Isha, and to take on leadership roles in the synagogue for the first time in an Orthodox setting.

## **Chapter 2: Partnership *Minyanim*: The Envoicing of Orthodox Jewish**

### **Women**

“I have a big ol’ God given voice,” laughs Shoshana Razel Gordon-Guedalia, the founder of *Yedid Nefesh*, a Jewish partnership minyan in Newton, Massachusetts.<sup>26</sup> Partnership minyanim like *Yedid Nefesh* are the only Orthodox Jewish prayer settings in which Shoshana is able to sound her voice for all to hear. Negotiating the boundaries between maximizing women’s role in prayer while adhering to Jewish law is a difficult, and at times contentious, endeavor, requiring a careful reconsideration of halacha. The result, however, is a prayer service in which women participate to a degree that is markedly different than mainstream Orthodoxy. This “envoicing of women,” to borrow the term from Carolyn Abbate, takes the form of musical performance within the context of the worship service.<sup>27</sup> While in a traditional Orthodox synagogue the service is completely led by men, in partnership minyanim women chant from the Torah and lead designated sections of the prayer service.

While the reconsideration of gender roles is the primary function of partnership minyanim, they have also come about at a time when many individuals are seeking increased spirituality in their prayer experience. Partnership minyanim address this need by creating song-filled services, led by talented singers. In addition to giving women voice, music is a key component in the efficacy of partnership minyanim, both in their desire to increase women’s

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<sup>26</sup> Shoshana Razel Gordon-Guedalia, in discussion with the author, April 8, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Carolyn Abbate, 1993, "Opera: Or, the Envoicing of Women", *Musicology and Difference*, 225-258.

participation and in the ability to create a meaningful worship experience. In this chapter, I consider the use of music in three partnership minyanim in the Boston area and examine how the literal sounding of voice acts as a mechanism for the creation of a new empowered space for women within established male systems.

### Partnership Minyanim as Orthodox Settings

Gender roles are clearly defined, within Orthodox Judaism, both in and outside of the synagogue. All Orthodox synagogues have a *mechitzah*, a physical barrier, which separates men and women during worship. This separation is considered necessary so men can focus and concentrate on their prayers, undistracted by a woman's beauty. The mechitzah is frequently a tall divider, a physical wall, or a separate balcony section. The requirement to have a mechitzah comes from the Babylonian Talmud, the central legal text of the Jewish tradition.<sup>28</sup> In a discussion of the layout of the Temple in Jerusalem, the Talmud discusses separate sections for men and women, including a women's balcony. From this, the sages have prescribed that all prayer spaces must also have a separation between men and women, as men could easily be distracted by a woman's beauty while praying. While the Reform and Conservative movements have rejected this notion and allow mixed gender seating in their synagogues, the Orthodox movement remains committed to the importance of the mechitzah. However in partnership minyanim, the mechitzah is less imposing. It is often made of transparent material, and around four feet tall, the lowest length that still meets the standards of Orthodox interpretations of Jewish law.

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<sup>28</sup> Sukkah: 51a-52b

The mechitzah at Minyan Tehillah, a partnership minyan in Cambridge, Massachusetts is a soft sheer curtain strung on a rope which runs down the center of the room. “It’s there but it’s barely there” says Anna Schachter, an active member and the group’s Programming Chair. “It’s exactly in the middle of the room, it comes exactly to the middle of the *bimah* [the podium from which parts of the prayer service are conducted]. It’s completely in the middle of the room in every way. And then it’s sheer, so it doesn’t feel like you’re walled in.”<sup>29</sup>

In traditional Orthodox synagogues men lead all sections of services. Women are not required to keep “time-bound commandments,” such as prayer, because they might interfere with their duties as a wife and mother, which are considered more important. As partnership minyanim reconsider gender roles in the context of the prayer service, they have had to make decisions regarding when it is acceptable for a woman to lead the service, and when that role must be given to a man. The resolution is based on the common understanding that prayer services consist of various sections. While men are required to recite certain sections, other portions of the service are merely customary. Men are obligated to lead the required prayers, while the other sections of the service may be led by women. The exception to this rule regards Torah cantillation, as will be discussed below. Figure 1 displays this practice as it relates to services during the Sabbath, which lasts from Friday night to Saturday night.

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<sup>29</sup> Anna Schachter, in discussion with the author, March 3, 2011.

Figure 1

**Friday Night**

<u>Section of Service</u>	<u>Required by Jewish Law?</u>	<u>Led by (men/women) in Partnership Minyanim</u>
Kabbalat Shabbat	No	Women
Maariv	Yes	Men

**Saturday Morning**

<u>Section of Service</u>	<u>Required by Jewish Law?</u>	<u>Led by (men/women) in Partnership Minyanim</u>
Pesukei D'Zimrah	No	Women
Shacharit	Yes	Men
Service for taking out the Torah	No	Women
Torah reading	Yes	Both
Musaf	Yes	Men

As mentioned above, partnership minyanim base many of their practices on responsa written by two Orthodox rabbis, Mendel Shapiro and Daniel Sperber, and consult other like-minded Rabbis when questions arise. Partnership minyan participants are familiar with these documents to varying degrees. While some members have read the articles, it seems that many members are not very concerned with the legal justification; they simply like to know that it exists. As one worshiper told me, “A lot of people will hear about this philosophy, and they subscribe to the philosophy, but they’re not really interested in digging into the nitty-gritty and understanding why... They know it’s kind of ‘*hechshered*’ [approved] by Orthodoxy, and they know that it looks egalitarian.” Another community member explained the same phenomenon in terms of the overall religiosity of the group. When asked if Kol Isha has ever been an issue of concern at Minyan Tehillah, one of the more traditionally minded members stated, “No. Because it’s not a very *frum* [religious] group. There are very few really frum people who go to Tehillah. If you are choosing to go to Tehillah, then Kol Isha, at

least in the situation of *davening* [praying], is not an issue.” While some partnership minyan participants consider the partnership approach to be very observant, and strictly adherent to the rules of Orthodoxy, others consider it to be on the very lenient side, and not as “religious” as other Orthodox communities.

### Egalitarianism and Orthodoxy: Competing Values?

Partnership minyanim are complex sites of gender performance in which religious law must be reinterpreted, though not rejected, to accommodate the egalitarian values of the community members. However for some participants, these negotiated compromises are not fully satisfactory. Asked about gender roles and the division of the service, Shira Cohen, the service leading coordinator of Minyan Tehillah told me, “I think that this is just a funny compromise that they have come to. Because they would never ask a woman to lead Shacharit, they would never ask a man to lead Pesukei. It’s sort of this issue, that, on principle because we are striving for a more egalitarian representation, because certain parts could never be a woman, we have certain parts that can never be a man.”<sup>30</sup> She went on to discuss a new issue facing her community: the role of children. A considerable number of the regular attendees at Tehillah have children who are reaching the age where they are capable of leading sections of the service, a regular practice at many synagogues, Orthodox or otherwise. Many parents wish to see their children lead sections of the prayer service, especially in preparation for a Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony. In response to this request, Minyan Tehillah was forced to think critically about which sections a child could lead. Cohen explains,

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<sup>30</sup> Shira Cohen, in discussion with the author, February 28, 2011.

“Basically what it comes down to is- I was thinking this is very profound- the *ketanim*, the young people, can lead anything that a woman can lead. Because that’s the non-essential part of the service. Once you are face to face with this, what the facts on the ground are, in an Orthodox construct, women can’t really lead essential parts of the communal service.”

Another point of negotiated tradition regards the *minyan*, the group of ten men that, according to Orthodox interpretations of Jewish law, is required for a full prayer service. While Conservative and Reform synagogues have decided that a minyan can consist of ten Jews, male or female, Tehillah has chosen to abide by the traditional Orthodox view. However, they have added an additional component. In order to begin the prayer service, Tehillah requires ten men *and* ten women.<sup>31</sup> They have had to make a decision, though, about what to do when, on a slower day, they have ten men in attendance but fewer than ten women. They have reached the requirement for a traditional Orthodox minyan, but they do not have the equal number of women that they hope to have represented to meet their value of egalitarian inclusion. Cohen explains Tehillah’s answer to this problem. “We kind of *have to* go ahead and start, but we’ve fallen short of what our community ideal would be. So what we do is we say a psalm and there’s this sort of recognition that that’s not our ideal.” Minyan Tehillah also marks the shortcoming by continuing the service without music. No melodies are chanted until they reach their requirement of ten men and ten women, with the exception of the Torah reading when singing is required by Jewish law. The absence of

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<sup>31</sup> This requirement has been added by some, but not all, of the partnership minyanim.

music is a common way to signify solemnity in Judaism. Orthodox Jews refrain from playing musical instruments on the Sabbath as a sign of mourning for the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. Music is prohibited on holidays which commemorate the Temple, and for the year of mourning after a parent dies. It is highly significant to code the service with the absence of music, and commensurate with the high value this community places on egalitarian inclusion.

Gender roles and musical choices also interact in the context of *Hallel*, an additional section of the service in which psalms are sung, which takes place on several holidays throughout the year. Shira Cohen explains that the obligation to say Hallel applies to women on certain holidays, but not others. This has musical implications for a female service leader.

On some occasions a woman can lead Hallel as if she's leading the congregation. And on other occasions we have a woman lead Hallel but it has to be that everything is communally said. This has to do with the obligation for saying Hallel on that particular occasion. If both men and women are equally obligated in saying it, then a woman could theoretically lead it on behalf of the men. If men and women aren't equally obligated, then the woman would be chanting it as if she were chanting it just for herself and everybody in the congregation needs to chant it as if they are chanting just for themselves. Which means that you can't have this call and response that you might have during Hallel. Like, in your standard congregation there's all these [sings a responsive melody to '*Ma Lecha Hayam*' - see Figure 2]. But with this particular structure you have to choose tunes that can all be sung communally. It can be very tricky.

Figure 2

The musical score is written in 4/4 time and consists of three systems. The first system shows the Leader and Congregation parts. The Leader's melody is: Ma le - cha ha-yam Ki ta - nus. The Congregation's melody is: Ma le-cha ha - yam Ki ta - . The second system continues the Leader's melody: Ha - ya - rden Ti - sov le-a - chor. The Congregation's melody is: nus Ha - ya - rden T - sov le-a - . The third system shows the Leader and Congregation parts ending with a double bar line. The Leader's part is empty, and the Congregation's part is: chor.

Melodies which are considered standard, such as this commonly used tune for “Ma Lecha Hayam” must be avoided when a woman is unable to recite the Hallel service on behalf of a man. This is a problem unique to partnership minyanim. Other Orthodox communities would have a man recite Hallel, and the melody transcribed above would be perfectly fine, though women would be singing softly to themselves so that men do not hear. Conservative and Reform congregations sing the same melody but do not object to women leading the service or singing loudly from the congregation.

### The Chanting of the Torah

The chanting of the Torah is unique in that it is a required section of the service, but may be performed by women in partnership minyanim. Rabbi Mendel Shapiro addresses the issue in his article, “Qeri’at haTorah by Women: A Halakhic Analysis,” an article frequently cited by partnership minyanim. As described in Chapter 1, Rabbi Shapiro believes that if the male members of a prayer community are willing to “waive their dignity,” then a woman may chant from the Torah.

The reading of the Torah is a highly nuanced musical event. Every word of the Torah has been assigned musical markings, called *te’amim* in Hebrew, or *trope* in Yiddish. These markings prescribe melodic motifs, which must be sung by the reader. These musical motifs help to convey the meaning of the text. The *te’amim* are not printed inside the actual Torah scroll. Readers must study them from another book and memorize the melodies before the public reading. Differing approaches are taken to the aesthetics of vocal recitation when reading from the Torah, the Megillah (Book of Esther), or leading another section of the religious service. As I examine in Chapter 4, musical elements such as timbre, volume, speed, enunciation, and syllable stress can and do vary between individuals. These decisions are often subconscious and relate to the musical cantillation practices with which one is most familiar. Other times the decisions are quite deliberate and hold great meaning for the individual who is singing. Similarly, congregants vary in their reception of the nuances of sung and chanted text, and whether the text is chanted by a man or a woman.

The consideration of two different performances of cantillation, the chanting of the Torah by college student Miriam “Mimi” Oshinsky, and Shoshana Razel Gordon-Guedalia reading from the book of Esther, illustrates divergent approaches to the public reading. In Mimi’s performance of Deuteronomy 33:1-33:7 (see Appendix 1), a selection from the portion of the Torah known as *VeZot HaBracha*, her voice is unornamented, and pitches are occasionally slightly sharp or flat. Her reading is fast and deliberate, gliding quickly through the words to the point that they are barely intelligible. Mimi’s adherence to the melodic movement prescribed by the te’amim is accurate, despite the fact that it requires a wide range of an octave and a third. Mimi sings quickly, covering seventy-seven Hebrew words in approximately forty seconds. Mimi prioritizes speed and confidence in her Torah reading, and is not as concerned with musical precision.

Shoshana Razel Gordon-Guedalia’s vocal delivery of the fourth chapter of *Megillat Esther*, the Biblical book of Esther, is quite different (Appendix 2), emphasizing musicality more than Mimi. Shoshana sings in a much louder voice, with very clear enunciation. Her voice scoops into the notes, as opposed to Mimi Oshinsky’s direct approach. Shoshana sings much more slowly, allowing every syllable to ring through clearly. Shoshana chants the first sentence, which is only twenty words, in thirty-four seconds.

Shoshana’s performance decisions run deeper than simple aesthetic preferences. She explained to me that her family moved from New York to Jerusalem when she was nine years old. Initially she was enrolled in a school taught from the Religious-Zionist perspective, that is, a segment of the Israeli

public believing in the melding of modern society, religious practice, and fervent Zionism. The philosophy of the school was consistent with the approach to Judaism and life in general that she was taught at home. Shoshana's father, a Modern Orthodox Rabbi who had studied with the highly influential Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, taught her that religious life and modern society are meant to interact. Consistent with this modern approach to Judaism, he taught Shoshana to study Talmud and grapple with arguments presented in the text as she shaped her own observance pattern. When Shoshana was kicked out of her school for rowdy behavior- "I was beating up all the boys" she laughs- she entered a far more stringent environment.

Shoshana's parents enrolled her in a Haredi school, which required very modest behavior. Shoshana's father hoped that Shoshana and her siblings would learn to appreciate the warm environment of that community, and at home he would "correct" anything that was taught that was against his progressive approach to Judaism and life in general. The disconnect between the worldly approach to Judaism that she was receiving at home, and the more strict approach that she received in school caused internal conflicts. This erupted one day in school when Shoshana argued, citing quotes from the Talmud, against presentations by the other students which had been insistent on the problems of the non-Haredi world, such as wearing modern clothing and knowing more about scientists than Rabbis. "One of the teachers got up and said, 'You be quiet. We know what you think. No one agrees with you. Just be quiet. No one is interested.'" Shoshana quit school. In a rebellious move, she joined the Israeli

army, which was frowned upon by the anti-Zionist Ultra-Orthodox school she had just left.<sup>32</sup>

This silencing of voice was a theme that came up numerous times in Shoshana's life. In her marriage, Shoshana's advocacy for partnership minyanim was a contentious issue. "I started to do research about it, and I wrote two articles about partnership minyanim. I started to be more vocal about it." Her traditionally minded husband, who recently left their marriage, was very uncomfortable with partnership minyanim, including the one that Shoshana started herself. "I kept myself back in a lot of things... I was holding back on a lot of things that I'd like to be on the forefront of... But at a certain point you can't *not* follow your convictions."

Shoshana and I initially met during a Minyan Tehillah service for the holiday of *Purim* held at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I was taken by her powerful voice as she chanted from the *Megillah*, the scroll that contains the book of Esther. During our interview several weeks later, Shoshana relayed to me a story about another person who was affected by her voice that day.

I'll be honest with you. One of the most moving things that happened to me that day at MIT was, this woman that I don't know came up to me and said that she's always been hard of hearing, and when I *layned* [chanted the text], it was the first time she remembers ever really being able to hear all the words and the notes. She said it really touched her heart. I spent a lot of years accused of being loud. If she [the woman at MIT] only knew what it meant to me- I told a friend that she was an angel from God. It was like a reminder from God that this voice that I was told to suppress was actually something that could be a gift to other people. If this woman said that she went through her life not really being able to hear Megillah or the notes or the words, and she was able to because of my big ol' voice, then maybe it's not a terrible thing, my big ol' voice!

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<sup>32</sup> Many Haredi Jews are opposed to Zionism, as they believe that Jews should not be living in the land of Israel until the time of the Messiah.

For Shoshana, the experience of reading Torah is not simply the fulfillment of a religious obligation, it is validation for her “big ‘ol voice” which has made her relationship with Orthodox Judaism tenuous and uncomfortable. Partnership minyanim, where she can remain a part of the Orthodox world *and* exercise her voice, both literally and figuratively, provide a long desired home within the Jewish community. Shoshana hopes that this new space for vocalization will teach other women, including her daughters, to embrace their voice. “I don’t think the Torah way is to have it silenced and not heard,” she remarked. “I’m not saying I’m such a gift, or my voice is, but it’s nice for me if I can do something with my gifts, and if I can even teach my daughters that their voice is something they should embrace. My twelve year old is no wallflower. She’s got quite a voice and I want her to be able to grow up proud of it.”

Shoshana went on to discuss the verse in the book of Psalms (45:13) which reads, “All glorious is the king’s daughter within the palace.” She explains that this verse is often interpreted to mean that a woman’s voice “is to be kept within, is to be kept quiet, to be kept cloistered.” She says, “But I’m *not* quiet, and I don’t necessarily think that God intended for me to be quiet. I’ve met women in the Orthodox world who actually found that verse from *Tehillim* [Psalms] to be, almost, a weapon that was used against women.”

By chanting sacred text, Shoshana is now attempting to reclaim that verse by reinterpreting the meaning of the words. “The King is God. The palace is the world. Now go out and be glorious.” By stating this ritual performance as her own, she is “stating for myself, for my daughters, and just in general that, no, I’m

not going to allow anyone to tell me, as if in the name of God, that my voice is to be silenced.”

### Music, Voice, and the Spiritual Prayer Experience

While providing space for expanded participation by women is the trademark of partnership minyanim, there is also a strong emphasis on creating a spiritually uplifting prayer service. Rabbi Marc Baker, who acts as the spiritual leader of Minyan Kol Rinah, a partnership minyan in Brookline, Massachusetts, finds the musical service to be spiritually invigorating.

In explaining the role of music in partnership minyanim, Rabbi Baker said:

The whole purpose of this minyan has to do with the expansion of women’s roles. I don’t see any reason why music has to be a defining feature of any partnership minyan. That being said, I’ll tell you my personal view and I’ll tell you the sociological view. Sociologically, I think these minyanim have evolved at a time when people are not only looking for an expansion of the roles of women, but also looking for more meaning and spirituality in prayer. There’s two things going on here simultaneously. Therefore, what you see is, many of these minyanim are also committed to a song-filled, spirited *davening* [prayer].

As our conversation continued, Rabbi Baker spoke of the importance of voice:

In Orthodox *shuls* [synagogues], it’s half the *kehillah* [congregation] that are singing. It’s literally as if you had all the bass turned all the way up and the treble [turned all the way down]. And then you realize ‘Oh wait, there’s another half of the community here who have voices, beautiful voices.’ And when we all come together... The medium of song *is* the message, in the sense that a lot of this is about voices. The idea of having a voice is kind of a metaphor for being fully actualized, for being fully present. The notion of ‘whose voices do we hear?’ If you’re in a classroom- wherever you are- you want to hear many voices. That’s the sign of a pluralistic community. It’s the sign of a humble community where one voice doesn’t dominate all others.

Rabbi Baker believed that in partnership minyanim music is the agent that both gives voice to women, and establishes a community in which that voice is

heard. “Song is a place where the individuals meld into the community. What does it mean to be a community that truly honors every individual voice? Song is a beautiful metaphor for that.” This is a crucial point in understanding partnership minyanim’s construction of women’s roles. A voice is limited without a listener. Partnership minyanim are a new space within the Orthodox world where women’s voices are heard by both men and women in an encouraging environment.

As Rabbi Baker spoke, he reconsidered his initial statement: “I don’t see any reason why music has to be a defining feature of any partnership minyan.” At the conclusion of our interview he remarked, “I take back that statement. I’m not sure there isn’t something integral about hearing the voices of women. It’s very powerful.”

### Experiencing Voices

The religious background of each individual shapes his/her reception of the service and whether the gender of the leader has an impact on the prayer experience. Understandably, participants who are accustomed to egalitarian services- those in which men or women can lead any section of the service- often do not find a qualitative difference in the service based on the leader’s gender. As Shira Cohen, who was raised attending a Conservative synagogue told me, “I guess we all just take in what’s normative for us, and for me [hearing men and women both lead] was just a very normal experience.”

Other worshippers admit that they prefer hearing one gender over another. These preferences are based both on ideology, and perception of what constitutes

a strong service leader. One male participant reported that he preferred listening to male service leaders because, in general, he believes, male voices are more powerful. He states, “Personally, I oftentimes enjoy male voices more than I enjoy women’s voices... If I want to hear an aria, I’ll go to the opera. I don’t need to hear an aria when I’m in *shul* [synagogue]. I hate to say it, that’s just a disadvantage for women.”

For others, the experience of hearing a woman sing is significant and adds to the spirituality of the prayer service. Shari Kleiner, who helped to form Kol Rinah, stated, “Hearing women [lead services] is meaningful to me in a way that services normally aren’t.” Kleiner explains that although she also enjoys talented male Torah readers, there are some Biblical texts that she finds are particularly well-suited for women’s voices. “There are some things, I think it’s true of *Shir Hashirim* [Song of Songs], and a number of things, that I think it’s particularly special when a woman does it. We’ve also had women lead *Rosh Chodesh Hallel* [the extra service on the first day of the month], which I thought was really beautiful as well...”

Many participants agreed that it is preferable for the service leader, whether male or female, to have a pleasant singing voice. This preference, though, can be at odds with the values of inclusivity and participation that are so firmly at the core of partnership minyanim. Rabbi Baker stated, “Egalitarianism- and here I don’t mean just in a gender perspective- egalitarianism and quality are in tension with each other. Kol Rinah has the same four to six people leading davening every time. And there’s a reason for that. I, personally, am not willing to just ask

somebody to get up and lead, because I want the quality to be good. But that's in fundamental tension with this notion of expanding room for voices... Music stands at the heart of the tension, because some people have good voices and some people don't." The fear of a mediocre service can lead to an inner circle of participants who hold onto the power to appoint service leaders. This hierarchy directly conflicts with the values of general inclusivity fostered in the partnership model.

### Women and Spiritual Status

In *Women, the Recited Qur'an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia*, Anne Rasmussen examines how, in parts of the Islamic world, a woman's voice is considered *aurat*, "shameful and defective."<sup>33</sup> Though there are parallels regarding values of modesty in Judaism and Islam, much of the Orthodox world views women's voices with a different understanding. In *Music in Lubavitcher Life*, Ellen Koskoff writes that most women in the Chabad-Lubavitch sect of Hasidism view *Kol Isha*, the prohibition of women singing, "as a sign of their special status in Lubavitcher society, a position that sets them apart from men in a positive, spiritual way."<sup>34</sup> This sentiment is echoed throughout the Orthodox world. Numerous Jewish sources teach that women are on a higher spiritual plane than men. In fact, one of the sources for this understanding relates to the concept of voice. In Genesis 21:12, God speaks to Abraham, saying: "Whatever Sarah tells you, heed her voice." The sages point out a question regarding the word

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<sup>33</sup> Anne K. Rasmussen, *Women, the Recited Qur'an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 222.

<sup>34</sup> Ellen Koskoff, *Music in Lubavitcher Life*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 134.

“voice.” The word appears extraneous, as it could have simply said “Whatever Sarah tells you, heed her.” Since every word of the Bible is considered to have specific meaning, an explanation for this extra word must be found. The commentator Rashi explains: “We learn from this that Abraham was secondary to Sarah in matters of prophecy.” The seemingly superfluous word “voice” refers to Sarah’s superior prophetic voice.

Many individuals affiliated with partnership minyanim believe that the understanding of women as spiritually superior was put in place relatively recently in order to justify the suppression of women that had become normative in traditional Jewish life. When asked about this interpretation of women’s spirituality, Rabbi Baker responded. “There’s nothing in the halacha about women being on a higher spiritual plane. That’s a retroactive apologetic for why women don’t need access to public ritual. A very convenient one, too.” He goes on to explain that, “It is in complete tension with the way that women function in our society today. It’s an anachronism. Women are functioning in the world. They are working. They are public.”

Shari Kleiner agrees. As a woman who grew up in the Modern Orthodox movement, and is also an attorney, she feels a great deal of tension between her life within an Orthodox synagogue and her life outside of it. “This ‘one size fits all’ approach, where people say ‘women need this’ and ‘men need that’ works for some women, but it doesn’t work for many women... Today, women are partners in law firms, and CEOs, and doing many of the same things that men are doing- *except in shul* [synagogue]. So, what about those women who are intellectually

and spiritually engaged, but they get to synagogue and just sit in the back? It just doesn't jibe.”

Whether or not standard Orthodox practice was designed in the spirit of sensitivity to women's spirituality, it leaves many women feeling cloistered and constrained in contemporary society. The inability to sound their voice because it may be distracting to men seems out of touch with their day to day experience. Shoshana Razel Gordon-Guedalia states, “A woman's voice is beautiful, just as a man's voice is beautiful, just as a child playing is beautiful. And you're supposed to say ‘Thank you, God, for making the world so beautiful!’ Why does everything have to be so sexual? Don't you think you are making the world *more* perverse when you make everything sexual?”

As Shoshana suggests, listeners can hear and perform voices in a variety of ways. This issue was discussed at Salanter Akiba Riverdale Academy, a Modern Orthodox high school in Riverdale, New York, recently reconsidered their stance on girls singing solos in the school choir. Rabbi Tully Harcsztark, the school's principal, explains their decision to allow girls to sing solos. “We want to give both boys and girls opportunity to express themselves through non-suggestive and appropriate song while expecting both boys and girls to take control of themselves such that what is presented is not charged in a sexual way.”<sup>35</sup> By insisting that students “take control of themselves” the school is

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<sup>35</sup> Rebecca Mandel, “‘Kol Isha’ Has Range of Meanings at Modern Orthodox High Schools Back East,” *The Boiling Point*, April 18, 2012, accessed March 22, 2012, <http://www.shalhevetboilingpoint.com/torah/2012/04/18/kol-isha-has-range-of-meanings-at-modern-orthodox-high-schools-back-east/>

suggesting that individuals can present the music in a manner which de-sexualizes the music.

In many ways, this is connected to the ideas of Anne K. Rasmussen in her book *Women, the Recited Qur'an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia* where she discusses President Megawati Sukarnoputri goals of making women “both seen and heard,” *biasa saja* [regular, usual]. Partnership minyanim believe that a woman’s voice, just like a man’s, is powerful, and should be used in worship to the fullest extent allowable under Jewish law.

### Trajectories

While partnership minyanim are clearly providing a new space within Jewish Orthodoxy, their future remains unknown as Orthodoxy becomes increasingly diverse. As Samuel Heilman explains in his book, *Sliding to the Right: The Contest for American Jewish Orthodoxy*, the Ultra-Orthodox population is growing rapidly. In addition, the left-wing of Jewish Orthodoxy is also experiencing a renaissance. Rabbi Avi Weiss of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale has ordained the first female Orthodox Rabbi, Sara Hurwitz, and has founded Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, a rabbinical school training students in the style of “Open Orthodoxy” that Rabbi Weiss espouses. Another section of Orthodoxy, often called the centrist movement, struggles to maintain the classic Modern Orthodox approach that attempts to fit together traditional religious observance with a high degree of mobility within the world.

Rabbi Baker sees partnership minyanim as a part of the left-wing Orthodox movement, but wonders if they will influence, and subsequently change, established Orthodox synagogues. He questions, “I don’t know if these are going to go the way of the *chavurot*<sup>36</sup>, and stay independent entities for twenty years, or if the institutions are going to respond and people will re-enter them. I’m one of those people, probably. I have no need to be independent. I’m happy to go to a shul that is doing better on some of these metrics. And I’m humble enough to know that shuls can provide me with a lot that I can’t provide myself, nor can my independent community provide for me.” He goes on to explain that life cycle events require a firmly established religious institution that can provide daily services, and a Rabbi who can be accessible in times of need.

Deena Zuckerman of Minyan Tehillah echoes this point, saying that partnership minyanim “are not real shuls. First of all, many of them don’t even meet every Shabbat morning, let alone beyond that. And even the ones that meet every Shabbat morning, and every *chag* [holiday], don’t meet any other time. No weekday meetings. So that’s not *real*. That’s still playing at being a shul. As much as I enjoy it, and as much as that’s where I prefer to be, that’s only playing. That’s not a sustainable community.”<sup>37</sup>

Additionally, many members of partnership minyanim acknowledge that running an independent prayer group requires considerable time and effort. Anna Schachter of Minyan Tehillah states, “It would be really easy for people to say, ‘I

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<sup>36</sup> Independent prayer groups

<sup>37</sup> Deena Zuckerman, in discussion with the author, March 3, 2011.

just want to join a shul.’ At some point I’m done schlepping *siddurim* [prayer books]. I just want to pay dues. I would *love* to do that. But until then this is my favorite kind of shul. This is my community.”

While regular attendees struggle with the limitations of partnership minyanim, the infrequency of their meetings has spiritual benefits. “If you’re looking for that kind of deep meaningful song filled experience, you can’t have it every day. That’s not the nature of the spiritual religious experience,” Rabbi Baker explains. “If I were creating a seven day a week community, I wouldn’t want to have a song filled davening every day of the week. I think I see part of Kol Rinah as sort of a shot in the arm for people, spiritually, in addition to their values. That’s part of the interesting thing about being once a month. I can’t have an ecstatic davening every week.” The fact that Kol Rinah meets infrequently allows them to provide an intensified level of spiritual experience, one that would not be sustainable during daily worship.<sup>38</sup> To enhance his point, Rabbi Baker quotes Rabbi Ebn Leader, an instructor at Hebrew College in Boston whose family started the “Leader minyan,” a highly musical prayer group which meets monthly in Jerusalem. He explains, “Ebn Leader was once asked why the Leader minyan meets only once a month, and he answered, ‘Because God needs time to recover.’”

Much of the Orthodox world looks at partnership minyanim with suspicion, and hopes that their future is short lived. As one Haredi Rabbi told me,

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<sup>38</sup> The leadership of each partnership minyan makes decisions regarding the frequency with which the group will meet. While some of the larger minyanim, such as Shira Hadasha, meet every Shabbat and on all holidays, others meet less frequently. I do not know of any partnership minyanim that meet regularly for weekday services.

“There are on-ramps to a Torah life, and there are off-ramps. [Partnership minyanim] are an off-ramp.” Even some partnership minyan attendees admit that participation may lead to preference for non-Orthodox worship. One regular attendant referred to partnership minyanim as “a gateway drug to egalitarianism.” I asked Shira Zelliger, a regular at Minyan Tehillah who wrote her Master’s Thesis, “Educating an Orthodox Feminist: Male and Female” on partnership minyanim, about the notion of a “gateway drug to egalitarianism.” She replied, “I agree. After doing my research, I was surprised that a lot of the people felt that it is that gateway. There are two perspectives: On the one hand, a lot of people do feel that it is that gateway... And then there are people who say ‘No, this minyan walks a very fine line between full egalitarianism, and full Orthodox halacha...’ So it is different things for different people.”<sup>39</sup>

Rabbi Baker sees the issue in another way:

I can see that notion of it being a gateway, to the extent that any kind of progress- if you view this kind of change as progress- any kind of progress breeds more progress... I would differ with the ‘gateway’ notion a little bit, and say that part of what defines partnership minyanim is the tension between halacha and egalitarianism. It’s not fully egalitarian. And it’s not fully egalitarian because people notice that there is a tension between those two things... The ‘gateway’ notion presumes, ‘I have a destination and I’m going there.’ People at partnership minyanim are comfortable with not being on their way to a destination. They are comfortable living with that tension. That tension *is* what’s authentic about it. When I’m in fully egalitarian places, I look around me and feel like, ‘These people aren’t struggling with halacha.’ And when I’m in my Orthodox shul, I feel like, ‘These people are not struggling with values of egalitarianism and feminism’ which I particularly value. And when I’m in a partnership minyan, I feel like this is a place that, at least, embodies genuine struggling with both of those things... To me, that struggle is much more important than the outcome. The extent to which people are drawn to the struggle is a counter-gateway argument.

Whether or not partnership minyanim will continue to exist is truly in the hands of the participants. Regular attendees exert considerable energy to sustain

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<sup>39</sup> Shira Zelliger, in discussion with the author, April 29, 2011.

the minyan, and many admit that they would prefer to belong to a synagogue which would have the infrastructure in place to cover organizational tasks. Additionally, as Orthodox participants become more comfortable with the expansion of women's roles, some participants are willing to compromise their Orthodox leanings for an even higher degree of participation. In order to accommodate this value, individuals who considered themselves Orthodox are shedding this identity and embracing non-Orthodox, fully egalitarian practice, which, in itself, threatens the future of partnership minyanim. Orthodoxy is far from static, and the current issues facing it hinge largely on women's voices.

The development of partnership minyanim should be understood in a larger context, in which women seek greater inclusion in religious expression. In *Women's Voices across Musical Worlds*, Jane Bernstein writes, "While women musicians have been prohibited from public expression, they have not remained silent. They have instead developed their own musical voice within the confines of their 'cloistered' domains." Indeed, this is true of Orthodox women. As Ellen Koskoff describes in *Music in Lubavitcher Life*, Lubavitcher women host their own musical events, in which they "use a variety of repertoires to arouse themselves to the point of exhaustion."<sup>40</sup> Modern Orthodox women, too, have created their own liturgical musical events. The Boston area, around which this chapter is focused, has numerous examples. Since 1992, Congregation Shaarei Tefillah, a Modern Orthodox synagogue in Newton, MA, has hosted a "Women's Tefillah [prayer] Group" once each month, in which an all-female prayer service

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<sup>40</sup> Koskoff, *Music in Lubavitcher Life*, 125.

is conducted. Modifications are made in order to avoid violating Jewish law, and, in general, men are forbidden from entering.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, congregation Young Israel of Brookline, MA, a traditional Modern Orthodox synagogue, hosts a Women's Megillah Reading on the holiday of Purim. Attendance at the service, however, is not considered by the synagogue's rabbi to have fulfilled the requirement to hear the Megillah being read. While these opportunities for women's involvement were put in place to appeal to some members' egalitarian leanings, these groups are considered to be supplementary, and do not fulfill participants' religious obligation.

Partnership minyanim respond to the desire to break out of the cloistered environment in which Orthodox women have found themselves. While many Orthodox women find meaningful religious expression in traditional worship settings, other women feel the need to break out of what they see as a cloistered environment. They view the silencing of voices as inconsistent with contemporary culture, and, equally important, inconsistent with Jewish values. Through the reinterpretation of tradition, these women see their liturgical experiences as a way to reclaim male domains, and are insisting that their voices be heard. They do not wish their insistence to be seen as overly aggressive; the concept of "partnership" with their male counterparts is central to the dynamic of their groups. Men, too, see the need for a reanalysis of established gender roles, recognizing that both male and female voices must be heard when building an Orthodoxy that is

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<sup>41</sup> Exceptions are occasionally made. For example, for a *Bat Mitzvah* ceremony, up to nine male family members or very close friends may be present, as it is believed that there is no threat of perceived sexuality. Shaarei Tefillah believes that having ten or more males would constitute a minyan, which would prohibit women from holding their own service, since a male led service would be possible.

religiously authentic but also in touch with contemporary society. For participants in partnership minyanim, the sounding of voice is the very factor that achieves this goal.

### **Chapter 3: Gender and the Aesthetics of Torah Cantillation**

*When the congregation takes out the scroll of the Torah to read in it, the heavenly gates of mercy are opened, and God's love is aroused.*<sup>42</sup>

*-The Zohar*

Many Jewish worshippers across the denominational spectrum consider the chanting of the Torah to be the highlight of the Shabbat service. It is at this point that participants engage in a performance of divinity, singing the words that, according to traditional Judaism, were authored by God and are therefore pregnant with meaning, mystery, and holiness. The melody associated with the text is an important syntactic and stylistic tool, as it serves both to provide an additional level of understanding and to beautify the sacred words. Rabbi Baruch Davidson writes, “Some point out that the Hebrew word used for these melodies, *ta'amim*, means ‘taste’ or ‘sense,’ indicating that the *ta'amim* bring out the flavor of the passage. The implication is that reading words without correct inflection and melody is like eating a tasteless meal.”<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, the act of *leyning* (literally “reading” in Yiddish), or chanting, from the Torah has a profound impact on the individual. “He who reads the Scriptures with their joy and their melody- of him it is said: ‘Milk and honey

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<sup>42</sup> In the following essay the words “read,” “leyn” and “chant” will all be used to refer to the act of Cantillation. This usage reflects the manner in which experienced worshippers use the terms interchangeably.

<sup>43</sup> Baruch Davidson. “Who Made Up the Way We Sing the Torah?” last modified April 2, 2009, [http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/817346/jewish/Who-made-up-the-way-we-sing-the-Torah.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/817346/jewish/Who-made-up-the-way-we-sing-the-Torah.htm).

are under his tongue’.”<sup>44</sup> Across the denominations, leyning Torah has become a rite of passage for Jewish boys who, after months of study, chant for the congregation in order to mark their entry into adulthood at their Bar Mitzvah ceremony. Non-Orthodox girls and girls at partnership minyanim, too, chant Torah at their Bat Mitzvah ceremony.<sup>45</sup> This experience is seen as transformative, and often leaves a lasting impression on those who participate in the service. One blogger, a Conservative Jewish woman who writes about her experiences chanting from the Torah writes, “I feel like I am not leyning the Torah, but that the Torah is leyning me, carrying me aloft on its eagle wings. I think of this as a ‘leyner's high,’ similar to a ‘runner's high.’ After a few verses of leyning an *aliyah* [one of the seven sections of the weekly Torah portion] well, I begin to feel like I am flying, carried forwards by the words that are singing out from me in full-throated ease.”<sup>46</sup>

While Torah readers speak of their experience as a core aspect of their Jewish identity, surprisingly little has been written on this cultural/religious performance. Joshua Jacobson presents a comprehensive analysis of the system of Torah Cantillation in his work, *Chanting the Hebrew Bible*. Hanoach Avenary’s *The Ashkenazi Tradition of Biblical Chant Between 1500 and 1900*, investigates the origins of the Ashkenazi (Eastern European) system of Torah Cantillation by examining documents, both ancient and contemporary. Jeffrey A. Summit’s

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<sup>44</sup> Midrash Shir HaShirim Rabah 4, II

<sup>45</sup> Some other Orthodox institutions have established a manner of holding a Bat Mitzvah ceremony for adolescent girls, but this generally does not include Torah reading, as it would for boys.

<sup>46</sup> “Why I Leyn: A Manifesto.” last modified March 17, 2009, <http://ktiva.blogspot.com/2009/03/why-i-leyn-manifesto.html>

forthcoming work on the meaning and experience of Torah Cantillation is the first book to explore chant from an ethnographic perspective. My thesis contributes to that exploration by focusing on Torah chant in the context of partnership minyanim.

As mentioned earlier, partnership minyanim are the only Orthodox context in which men and women may both chant from the Torah. This provides a useful research site, as it will naturally include men who have a great deal of experience chanting from the Torah, and women for whom the experience is new, and charged with numerous, and at times contradictory, meanings. As discussed in the next chapter, “Engendering Song, Engendering Singers: The Reconstruction of Gender among Partnership Minyan Participants,” these prayer groups also create a new Orthodox habitus in which girls are raised with the expectation of reading Torah, and boys are trained to hear a woman’s voice performing sacred text. These dramatic shifts in Orthodoxy provide an opportunity to examine the aesthetics of Torah Cantillation, and the role of gender in the determination of performance style and reception. In this chapter I consider the parameters of accepted performance style, the development of personal leyning style, and worshipers’ preference for hearing a man or a woman leyn Torah. I also consider how readers make decisions regarding musical variables such as ornamentation, speed and dynamics. I end the chapter by examining the imagined, as opposed to objective, reading style of male and female chanters, and what this imagined aesthetic teaches us about the gendered expectations of vocalists.

Performance Parameters: An Overview of Torah Cantillation

Traditionally, the Torah is read every Monday, Thursday, and Saturday morning, and on certain holidays regardless of the day of the week. It has been divided into fifty-four portions, with a different portion chanted each week, though occasionally two portions are read in order to fit the Jewish calendar, which runs on a lunar cycle. Each Torah portion is divided into seven sections, called *aliyot* (singular, *aliyah*), coming from the verb *oleh*, to go up. Before each *aliyah*, a worshiper is called up to the Torah to say a blessing before and after the chanting of the text. Receiving an *aliyah* is considered an honor: approaching the Torah scroll and saying the blessings “raises” the spiritual stature of the worshiper. In ancient times it was traditional for each person called to the Torah to both say the blessings and chant that section of text. Today, most people do not have the thorough knowledge of the text and its accompanying musical tradition to do this. Instead, one or more readers studies the Torah portion prior to the public reading, and, having memorized the melodic movement of the text, chants each section, while the person who received the *aliyah* simply chants the blessings before and after the reading. Experienced leyners are able to memorize the melody of the text very quickly, often after only one or two times reading through the entire portion. In fact, experienced leyners claim that the melody helps them to memorize and internalize the text. It is for this reason that the “Zilberman” school system, a prestigious network of Orthodox Jewish religious schools, always teaches the text of the Torah with the accompanying melody. Zilberman is considered to be among the top *yeshiva* [religious school] systems in the world:

children as young as ten often memorize the entire Torah. This impressive feat is accomplished through the use of the musical trope system.

Above and below the text of the Torah are small markings, called *te'amim* or *trope*, which indicate the melody to which the text is to be sung. The melodic motifs associated with each trope mark differ among Jewish communities. These melodies have been influenced by the musical practices of the host countries, and thus cantillation in a Sephardic synagogue sounds dramatically different than the cantillation in an Ashkenazi synagogue. Even so, the melodic contour of the trope markings remains, in general, consistent between Ashkenazi musical traditions. It is important to point out that there is not one authoritative Ashkenazi trope system. Over time, different local traditions have developed while still retaining similar melodic contours. An example can be demonstrated with the use of "Trope Tutor" an interactive computer program designed to teach students to chant from the Torah. The computer program includes twenty-five traditions of Ashkenazi tropes, each minutely different from the others. The program presents four different Sephardic trope systems. In the diagram below, I have selected five different trope systems to demonstrate the melody assigned to the melodic marking known as "revi'i," which looks like a small diamond placed above the word on the accented syllable. Above the chart I have placed the word "revi'i" in Hebrew, with the trope marking above the fourth letter from the right (Hebrew is read from right to left). The dots underneath the first, second, and fourth letters are vowel markings, indicating the pronunciation of the word. The Torah scroll, from which the text is chanted during the public reading, does not contain vowels

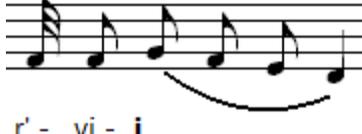
or trope markings. These must be memorized prior to the public chanting of the text.

The first four examples in the diagram are all variations of the Ashkenazi tradition. The first is the melody presented by Joshua Jacobson, which has become authoritative in many communities. The second example is the *revi'i* melody used in the Chabad-Lubavitch sect of Hasidism.<sup>47</sup> Third we have the trope taught by Rabbi Paul Grob, a Conservative Rabbi who taught and led congregations in Florida for many years until his death in September of 2011. The fourth example is described by Trope Tutor, “the standard for Ashkenazim in the United Kingdom,” although I would add that Ashkenazi Jews in the United Kingdom have melodic variations in their realization of trope, as is common throughout Ashkenazi communities throughout the world. Finally, the fifth example is a Sephardic Moroccan-Casablancon tradition motif for the *revi'i*.

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<sup>47</sup> For more on the musical practices of Lubavitch Hasidim, see Ellen Koskoff's *Music in Lubitcher Life*.

# רְבִיעִי

Ex. 1- Jacobson	 <p>r' - vi - i _ _ _</p>
Ex. 2- Chabad	 <p>r' - vi - i _ _ _ _</p>
Ex. 3- Grob	 <p>r' - vi - i _ _ _</p>
Ex. 4- British	 <p>r' - vi - i _ _ _</p>
Ex. 5- Morocco- Casablanca (Sephardic)	 <p>r' - vi - i _ _ _ _</p>

As shown in the diagram, all of the cantillation traditions include the downward motion of the revi'i trope marking. The four Ashkenazi tropes are

fairly similar, while the Sephardic example is more elaborate and includes numerous accidentals, and more chromatic motion. While each of these examples, as well as the other twenty-five included in the Trope Tutor software, represent a consistent musical system, in practice, there is a degree of deviance that is considered acceptable in the actual performance setting.

During the chanting of the Torah in the synagogue, two *gabbaim*, or assistants, stand next to the Torah reader, following the reading in a codex that includes the vocalized text of the Torah, with the trope markings. The *gabbaim* are responsible for correcting the reader. If the reader makes a mistake, the *gabbaim* will interrupt so that the reader can go back and chant that word correctly. Even minor changes in the pronunciation of Hebrew words can alter their meaning and the *gabbai* is primarily responsible for making sure each word is pronounced correctly. Cantillation is only corrected if it changes the meaning of the text, such as when the reader would miss a medial or final pause in a verse.

The cantillation of the Torah requires a degree of talent in vocal performance. This can be a problem for individuals who want to leyn Torah but are not skilled singers. In these cases, it is generally understood that the text must be pronounced correctly, and the basic melodic motion dictated by the trope must be followed. For example, a *revi'i* must include some sort of downward motion, even if the precise notes are different than the ideal. Less talented singers are expected to adhere to the basic melody of the trope. On the other hand, skilled vocalists who are comfortable with chanting the prescribed melodic lines may, within limits, embellish the melody. Some leyners emphasize the syntactic

function of trope, reading faster or slower, or in higher or lower registers to emphasize the dialogue and narrative of the text. In this sense, there is an element of improvisation, within narrow parameters of performance practice, in Torah cantillation.

### Aesthetics, Identity, and Style in Torah Cantillation

The term improvisation has been problematized in recent ethnomusicological inquiry, most notably at Northeastern University's 2011 symposium titled, "Improvisation in Cross-Cultural Perspectives," which included papers by numerous ethnomusicologists including Virginia Danielson, Richard Jankowsky, and Leonard Brown, with a keynote address delivered by Stephen Blum. As explored at that conference, improvisation can take place to widely varying degrees and in many different contexts. While many of the papers at the symposium emphasized improvisation as a tool which promotes "embodied collective learning,"<sup>48</sup> improvisation in the context of Torah cantillation is more individualized, functioning as an agent through which the performer can personally connect to the text and present it to the congregation in a personalized style.

Within these narrow parameters of flexibility, individuals may develop their personal style of cantillation. The creation of style is an opportunity to musically connect the lewyer's past and present, as he or she develops a vocal

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<sup>48</sup> "Symposium: Improvisation in Cross Cultural Perspectives." last updated March 18, 2011, [http://www.northeastern.edu/camd/about/events\\_items/spring2011/perspectives.html](http://www.northeastern.edu/camd/about/events_items/spring2011/perspectives.html)

identity, while using the vehicle of textual performance to convey their unique identity. I focus here on two individuals who attend partnership minyanim: Micol Gordon, who attends Shira Hadasha in Jerusalem, and Eugene Rabina, who was a regular participant at Darkhei Noam, a partnership minyan in Manhattan, until he left New York to attend college in Boston. In interviews, both of these individuals expressed that their aesthetic decisions are shaped by teachers and mentors.

Micol Gordon was raised in Italy, as the daughter of an Orthodox rabbi. When she and her twin sister approached the age of bat mitzvah, Micol's father taught them to leyn Torah following the musical tradition of the Italian Jewish community. Their father explained that in seventeenth century Italy, it was common for women to chant from the Torah. By training his daughters in the Italian style of cantillation, he saw himself as continuing the Italian tradition of having women chant from the Torah. In fact, the bat mitzvah did not take place, likely because the idea of women chanting had fallen out of style, and even in an all female context would raise eyebrows. Micol moved to Israel at age sixteen, and, after marrying and having a child at age twenty-four, decided to attend Shira Hadasha, which had been started two years earlier by her friend Tova Hartman. It took time for Micol to feel comfortable in Shira Hadasha's services. Although she had learned to leyn Torah with her father, she had never participated in a service in which women chanted Torah in front of men. After two years at Shira Hadasha, Micol decided to lead the short service during which the Torah is taken out of the ark. She next asked to leyn Torah, wishing to increase her participation in the prayer service. She reflected, "I think it's because I thought, 'I know my parsha

and this can be an occasion to do it.’ I thought, ‘now is the time.’ It felt right... I wanted to do a step more.” In addition, she “thought it would be nice to introduce a new *nigun* [melody].”

Shira Hadasha almost exclusively follows Ashkenazi traditions, and Micol’s introduction of the Italian Sephardic trope was new to the community. Congregants welcomed the musical diversity. Several individuals, including Tova Hartman, expressed how beautiful the melody was, and how much they enjoyed the variation, especially given that Shira Hadasha was committed to an open, creative approach to music in worship. Micol was pleased but modest about the congregation’s response: “People really were excited about it... It sounds very nice. I think it’s a nice melody.”

Micol’s use of the Italian trope connects her to her Italian heritage as a female who, like the Jewish women of seventeenth century Italy, chanted from the Torah. Her trope also formed a bond with her father, a progressive Orthodox rabbi who was willing to teach his daughters to chant Torah when few traditional rabbis would do so. Partnership minyanim provide a venue for this unique connection. Nowhere else would Micol be able to chant Torah in an Orthodox prayer setting. Additionally, her Italian style marks her as “other” at Shira Hadasha. By singing in a unique style, Micol is identified as an individual with a unique identity which is performed through her chant.

Eugene Rabina was raised in New York City by secular Israeli parents. Eugene spoke Hebrew in the home, and was sent to The Abraham Joshua Heschel

School, a pluralistic Jewish day school in Manhattan. As a teenager, Eugene became attracted to Modern Orthodoxy and found his way to Darkhei Noam, a partnership minyan closely modeled after Shira Hadasha. Eugene attended Darkhei Noam on Shabbat, and continued to chant Torah at his high school's Orthodox weekday services. The Rabbi who oversaw the school's Orthodox services, Rabbi Natan Kapustin, impacted Eugene's leyning style. Eugene explained, "I think that the way I leyn is somewhat an imitation of him. He had this, I think, soothing kind of voice. It was not extremely animated, but there was a musical quality to it. It was just speaking with kind of a tone." Eugene looked up to Rabbi Kapustin, and attempted to imitate his teacher's style. There were specific qualities that Eugene appreciated, which he actively tries to replicate today. Eugene states, "It's clear to me that he understands what he is reading, and it's kind of like having a serious conversation with somebody. And I like that. I think that one of the things that makes the most difference when people are reading Torah is whether they understand. One of the really important things for me is certainly to understand what I'm saying." Eugene speaks fluent Hebrew and is generally able to understand the text. He uses the syntactic function of the trope to deepen his understanding of the narrative. "I like the fact that trope is kind of a parsing of the text. Kind of a punctuation. It's not like I'm a trope expert. I don't fully understand all the significance of the trope, but I like to keep that in mind when I'm reading Torah."

While Eugene's style of chant closely resembles that of Rabbi Kapustin, he points out one difference. "I'm a bit more of a frazzled, overly energetic person

than he is, and I think that definitely comes out in my Torah reading.” Eugene’s readings are often fast and excited, very similar to the way his friends describe his personality. Eugene also feels that he expresses his connection with the Israeli aspect of his identity by consciously deciding to leyn in an Israeli accent. He relayed, “Because I speak fluent Hebrew, when I’m actually speaking Hebrew I speak with an Israeli accent. But because the vast, vast, vast majority of my Jewish experience of any kind has been in the United States, where nobody attempts a Hebrew accent, let alone succeeds... it was weird for me, very much, to daven in an Israeli accent, and to leyn in an Israeli accent. I sort of made a conscious point to try to do it in my Israeli accent, and for the most part I do that.”

Eugene went on to explain that while he enjoys reading Torah, he prefers to chant the *Haftorah*, the weekly selection from the biblical book of Prophets. “I like Torah reading, but I possibly like Haftorah reading more. I think that the trope is prettier. From personal experience I find that I’m [embellishing] the trope far more with Haftorah than Torah. I love reading Haftorah. People have told me that when I’m reading Haftorah you can hear my voice getting louder or softer depending on what’s going on in the dialogue. Or I’ll pause at moments, particularly if people [in the text] are talking to each other.” He went on to describe how he finds the melodies associated with the Haftorah trope more conducive to improvisation than the Torah trope. “I don’t know if it’s something about the notes, the cantillation tradition, which is pretty standard Ashkenazi itself, that allows me to be more expressive with the Haftorah trope, but I feel like I can be more expressive with it than I can with Torah trope.”

I also asked Eugene about some of the variables, such as speed, pausing, and ornamentation that could be improvised by the leynner. He reflected that the more he has practiced for the reading, the more naturally the character of the text will be exposed through his leynning. “The more I read it, the more I will get an idea of where I want to pause, or where I want to announce. I don’t know how conscious that is... It’s more like, if I’m doing it again and again, then I’m anticipating how the story goes, and what’s going to be said, or what the narrative is, and that sort of thing... It’s really not particularly conscious. It’s kind of in direct correlation with how invested I am in the reading.”

Numerous factors influence Eugene’s aesthetic style when chanting Torah. Eugene has been influenced by past mentors, but also draws on his Israeli heritage, and his knowledge of the Hebrew language. As he becomes increasingly familiar with the text, he spontaneously ornaments the melody in order to enhance the narrative. In this way, an analysis of the reader’s aesthetic approach becomes a means to present and perform religious and cultural identity. Similarly, as Micol leyns in the traditional Italian trope, she connects her present at Shira Hadasha, with her traditional Italian Jewish ancestry. Micol’s individual aesthetic style functions as a semiotic connection between text and self. The aesthetics of Torah Cantillation are more than just the product of an individual’s voice and the text, they are, in fact, markers of identity which bind the worshipper to the holy text, layered with religious and cultural traditions.

### Gender and Aesthetic Style

“I often find that with women leyning there is more of an aesthetic. There’s more of a *singing* of the trope. With men, there is singing because its musical, but I don’t always have the feeling of aesthetic in that way.” Mimi Yasgur, who frequently attended Shira Hadasha and other partnership minyanim before moving to Boston, is describing the difference between men and women chanting Torah. Many participants in partnership minyanim stressed the sentiment that cantillation by women is, in general, more aesthetically pleasing than cantillation by men.

Shari Kleiner, one of the founders of Minyan Kol Rinah, a partnership minyan in Brookline, MA, felt that the syntactic function of trope was enhanced by hearing the text sung by a woman. “What I’m learning now, through my fifth grader, is that we can use trope to understand the text as well. It’s sort of phraseology. You’ll learn which phrases are meaningful as phrases instead of as words if you look at the trope as well. My fifth grader is learning that in school, and it never occurred to me before... And it really comes across when there’s a good leynner. Forget the musical part, when it’s a really good leynner, it’s like a way of telling the story in a way that makes it almost easier to understand. And when it’s beautiful on top of it, there’s like, this incredible, cool, spiritual experience. I’ve experienced that more with women leading.”

Many worshippers expressed that they experienced chant differently if it was sung by a man or sung by a woman. Specifically, many worshippers found

that the women's chanting was more "ornate," sometimes described as "light" or "airy." In addition, men's leyning was described as "blunt" and "practical." Worshippers valued these aesthetics differently. One male worshipper stated, "I would never deny [women] leading, but personally, I would say I tend to enjoy men's voices more. And the women's voices I really enjoy are really strong, powerful, oftentimes alto voices, because I feel like they just resonate more. And for me, a strong leader of *tefillah* is someone who can lead the *kahal*. Hearing someone who's got power and strength and depth to their voice, rather than hearing someone who is airy, and flighty- there's a difference. There's a spiritual quality, almost, that's different."

Worshippers also made distinctions between men's and women's voices when the haftarah was chanted. As one woman expressed, "I don't know why, but Haftarah trope I find extremely beautiful, and I particularly like women doing it. I just think it's more beautiful, and a higher voice just fits that trope better or something."

When I asked worshippers why, and how, they experienced men's chanting and women's chanting differently, I received several answers. Many focused on the difference in register, with some people preferring high voices, and others low voices. This often translated to a preference for male or female singers. Several partnership minyan attendees also theorized that because the act of chanting from the Torah was new to Orthodox women, their aesthetic approach was different. Mimi Yasgur explained that the novelty of chanting Torah inspired women chanters to amplify the level of musicality in their cantillation. She stated,

“Because women haven’t really had the opportunity to leyn until pretty recently, there’s a certain embrace, I think. There’s a certain wanting to make it beautiful. The type of woman who is going to volunteer to do this, is someone who feels confident about doing it well. It’s not something that is being forced on them.” Similarly, Shari Kleiner suggested that because this was a new cultural phenomenon, women had a heightened awareness of the performative nature of Torah cantillation. They tended to demonstrate their mastery over Torah reading by treating leyning as a musical performance. This often meant singing more slowly and purposefully. She suggested, “I also think that women go a little bit slower right now. Even if it’s not newer to them, they feel like they’re on stage a little bit. The really good male leyners tend to show how good they are by going full barrel ahead.” This decreased tempo, she went on to say, could create a superior listening experience. “If it has a flow that is both beautiful and not too fast, so that you’re understanding the words in the cadence that it’s meant to have, I think it is just more beautiful.”

I began to wonder if an aesthetic style could be characterized as “female” or “male.” Musicologists have addressed the question of gendered aesthetics in the past, although they have primarily focused their attention on composers, rather than performers. In her book *Feminist Aesthetics in Music*, musicologist Sally Macarthur provides a useful overview of scholarship related to the role of gender in music composition. Macarthur comments on Eva Rieger’s 1985 list of seven characteristics which she identifies as generally consistent among works by female composers. Macarthur criticizes the list, saying, “Lists of this kind, of

course, are problematic because they entail drawing on stereotypes. But another problem with Rieger's list is that it is not beyond the realm of possibility that men will also exhibit the same kinds of characteristics in their music... Nonetheless, Rieger claims that 'gender is one of the most important determinants of human behavior.' Since composing may also be viewed as a behavior, it logically follows that gender will influence the way in which men and women compose music. This, I believe is a useful starting point for thinking about the question of feminist aesthetics in music."<sup>49</sup>

However, partnership minyan participants were uncomfortable with the categorization of a particular style of Torah Cantillation as decidedly masculine or feminine. While many individuals were quick to describe a general difference between hearing Torah Cantillation by men and women, they were unwilling to categorize the reading itself as "masculine" or "feminine." Mimi Yasgur expressed her belief that while different voice parts create a different listening experience, on the whole, characterizing a reading as masculine or feminine would be a mistake. "I think that if the person has a good voice and is musical and wants it to sound musical, then they will make it sound that way. And if a person is more blunt, or more practical, you know, less aesthetic, then I think it will come out just a little flatter. Not musically flat, but less ornate. Other than register, I'm

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<sup>49</sup> Rieger's list is as follows: "1) Many women composers have a special ability to create a maximum amount out of a minimum of material, a sort of 'restricted aesthetics.' 2) Many have a special preference for functional music. 3) Communication is of primary concern to them. 4) Women composers are more interested in constituent substance than in compulsive innovation. 5) They often strive to overcome binary contrasts. 6) The aspect of *Ganzheitlichkeit* means that they wish to combine not only various fields of art, but also the whole human being, body and soul, Mankind (or Womankind) and Nature. 7) They relate closely to their own bodies and the human voice."

not sure I would distinguish between a masculine or a feminine way to read. Yeah, a woman's going to sound like a soprano, and a man's a baritone, [and register] makes such a big difference in the way it sounds. But I think it's really hard to isolate a masculine or feminine way."

Mimi's sentiments are similar to those in Macarthur's conclusion to *Feminist Aesthetics in Music*. Though Macarthur does argue that a concept of feminist aesthetics exists, she is hesitant to make sharp distinctions. She writes, "I suggest that women do not *necessarily* compose music that is different from men's music. Indeed, it is impossible to make such grand claims, for men and women alike can imitate the masculine and the feminine; each has *access* to music and musical styles and genres that are already designated patriarchal. Thus, it is not possible to state that a particular music is distinctly feminine. [Emphasis mine]"<sup>50</sup> Just as female composers have access to a prevailing musical style that is patriarchal, so too women leyners often copy a patriarchal style of chant. I believe that the question of access is crucial in understanding gendered performances of Torah Cantillation. Individuals who were raised only hearing men chant from the Torah may choose to copy this style. Like the composers about which Macarthur writes, women leyners develop a personal musical style. Though the leyners compose in an improvisational manner, the decision making process is certainly similar. The advent of partnership minyanim provides the opportunity for an alternative style of leyning, which could very well be marked as "other" and equivalent to "female." Macarthur, too, suggests that the nascent feminine

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<sup>50</sup> Sally Macarthur, *Feminist Aesthetics in Music* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002), 176.

aesthetic which now exists has opened the door to future development. She writes, “most genres have historically operated according to male conventions and are thus governed by a male aesthetic... Is it the case that with the emergence of these new genres in music there is an almost self-conscious attempt by these women composers to write deliberately (from) the feminine (body)?”<sup>51</sup> As partnership minyanim continue to flourish, it will be important to see if current participants, as well as their children who will be raised with a new Orthodox habitus, create a dichotomous, male/female aesthetic of cantillation.

### The Imagined Voice

In my own evaluation, I observed a disconnect between participants’ characterization of men and women’s voices and the actual cantillation I heard on Shabbat. While a great number of worshipers described a significant difference between male and female Torah readers, I found that the characteristics of the readings were often quite similar from one gender to the next. Some women leyners sung in a “flighty” tone or copied the aesthetic of female pop stars, and some men had presence and depth to their voices, but these generalizations did not always prove true. The sonic qualities of Torah readings, as well as Haftarah readings, ranged greatly. “Masculine” or “feminine” traits could be heard in the performance of chant regardless of the leyners’ gender.

To what degree are gendered voice qualities imagined? If, as I have suggested, the aesthetics of Torah cantillation are a reflection and projection of

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<sup>51</sup> Macarthur, *Feminist Aesthetics in Music*, 181.

identity, then it follows that our assumptions about gendered identities would also extend to expectations about the presentation of voice. When partnership minyan participants discussed the differences between hearing men and women chant Torah, were they expressing their sonic experience, or a projection of their idealized conception of gender identity?

Traditional Judaism imagines the female voice to be sexual, and the man to be weak before its powers. Similarly, Susan McClary notes that music in Western Society has been imagined as female and powerful. In an interview she stated, “Music has been coded throughout all Western History as a feminine medium that is in danger of escaping language, in danger of escaping our control. It is seductive, yet causes the body to move. It arouses emotions. It even arouses sexual passions and imitates them. We are reluctant to talk about it because it’s scary stuff... It’s the fear of the presumably feminine qualities of music and our need to control these that keep it under patriarchal lock and key.”<sup>52</sup>

Partnership minyanim, though, are dedicated to imagining and hearing women’s voices differently. Many adjectives were used by partnership minyan participants to describe women’s voices, but none of them connoted sexuality. And yet, many of the descriptions of women’s voices did not match my own assessment. My initial observations suggested that the same musical traits related to speed, embellishment, and improvisation could be performed by male or female leyners, with no greater or lesser frequency. Often our assessments are not

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<sup>52</sup> Susan McClary, Interview with Sally Macarthur, broadcast on *The Score*, ABC Radio National, 13 August 1991.

grounded in sonic experience, as history and tradition shape the way we hear and describe gendered voices.

The aesthetics of Torah cantillation prove to be a significant outlet for personal expression within the act of reading Torah. This, I believe, is one of the factors that make cantillation so significant for the reader. By constructing a personal aesthetic, worshipers connect their unique voice to God's voice through the musical reading of the sacred text.

**Chapter 4: Engendering Song, Engendering Singers: The Reconstruction of  
Gender in Partnership *Minyanim***

Yael, a frequent participant at Shira Hadasha, was pushing her young daughter in a stroller to a park one Sunday. As had happened before, the lock on the wheels was stuck and wouldn't budge. Subduing her agitation, Yael said to her daughter, "You need to ask your daddy to teach you to fix this stroller. That way you won't be like mommy, and not know how to fix things." The young girl looked back at her mother and replied, "That's okay, Mommy. Daddy's good at fixing things, but you know how to leyn Torah and he doesn't."

I heard this story during a Sabbath meal at the home of a member of Shira Hadasha during my fieldwork in Israel in 2011. This vignette displays the dramatic shift in values, and emerging concepts of Jewish identity as youth are raised in the new Orthodox space carved out by Shira Hadasha and the growing network of partnership minyanim. Men and women are constructing a new understanding of Judaism and gender roles as they challenge patterns of male-dominated leadership in the synagogue. As Judith Butler suggests, the self is constructed through action, and the meaning of the action is constructed through the self. She writes, "My argument is that there need not be a 'doer behind the deed,' but that the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed. This is not a return to an existential theory of the self as constituted through its acts, for the existential theory maintains a prediscursive structure for both the self and its acts. It is precisely the discursively variable construction of each in and through

the other that has interested me here.”<sup>53</sup> This framework is useful in examining how individuals involved with partnership minyanim make meaning of their own gender, their relationship to the opposite sex, and their relationship to the prayer service.

Jane Sugarman’s book, *Engendering Song: Singing and Subjectivity at Prespa Albanian Weddings* has special relevance to the exploration of the construction of gender among partnership minyan participants. In a section entitled, “Toward a Critical Ethnomusicology of Gender,” Sugarman asks, “How do individuals within a community come to regard themselves as gendered beings, and to appraise certain qualities and activities in gendered terms?” and “How are asymmetrical power relations, as gender relations often are, reproduced from one generation to the next, even with the willing complicity of those who are subordinate?” and finally, “What roles does musical performance play in each of these processes?”<sup>54</sup> These questions have shaped my approach to partnership minyanim in this thesis. Similar questions are on the minds of community leaders who make decisions which will dictate the future of partnership minyanim. Worshippers at partnership minyanim are often highly educated. Many of the people I met in the course of fieldwork have graduate degrees from prestigious

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<sup>53</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 181.

<sup>54</sup> Jane C. Sugarman, *Engendering Song: Singing and Subjectivity at Prespa Albanian Weddings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 31.

universities, and their approach to Jewish practice is influenced by a broad understanding of Jewish history and a familiarity with feminist scholarship.

The synagogue service and the music accompanying each section have been gendered in much the same way as music at a Prespa Albanian wedding. Certain sections of the liturgy have become reserved exclusively for men, and others exclusively for women. As noted earlier, the only overlap is in the chanting of the Torah. As Jane Sugarman suggests, an exploration of habitus, as explained by scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu, can be particularly helpful in understanding evolving gender construction and performance among partnership minyan participants. This is my point of departure as I begin to explore the construction, performance, and negotiation of gender roles in partnership minyanim.

#### From Male Gaze to Enabling Ear: Orthodox Jewish Masculinity in Transition

Within Orthodox Judaism, significant energy is devoted to ensuring that direct and indirect interactions between men and women are conducted in a manner consistent with Jewish laws and customs pertaining to *tzniut*, modesty. These values, while often only loosely defined and highly specific to a particular sect or community within Orthodoxy, govern not only outward behavior such as dress, but also more subtle and more fundamental etiquette. This includes the circumstances under which men and women may be alone in a room together, the ways in which men and women pass each other on the street, and the permissibility of platonically touching someone of the opposite gender. Over the

past ten years, the emergence of partnership minyanim has required that Orthodox scholars and laypeople reevaluate the code of conduct relating to tzniut so that it may be implemented in the synagogue. One consideration of tzniut, the mechitzah, is a physical construction in the synagogue. As mentioned earlier, the mechitzah is a barrier, often a wall, or a separate balcony section, which separates men and women during prayers. Orthodox Judaism suggests that a woman's physical beauty is so powerfully distracting that a man would be unable to focus on his prayers while a woman is in view. Barriers are erected to keep the male gaze focused on the prayer book rather than drifting toward the women in the synagogue. Shira Hadasha, though, has decided to place a sheer curtain in the very center of the room to act as a mechitzah, which is one of many carefully considered decisions that help to mediate between the stringency of Orthodox Jewish life and the egalitarianism valued by its members. The fabric is such that worshippers sitting very close to the mechitzah can see through it, but those farther away cannot. The prayer leader stands in his or her own gendered space, and cannot be seen by members of the opposite sex. This type of mechitzah is significant in that it meets the legalistic requirements of a mechitzah, but allows members to decide for themselves, through their seating choice, how much they will see worshippers on the other side of the division.

As women take on greater responsibilities in the synagogue, the role of men also changes. The male is no longer the sole active performer in the synagogue. For much of the prayer service, these traditional men experience a

transition. The active voice and outward gaze become the observing participant and the receptive ear.

The relationship between men and women is complicated by a further dynamic- in partnership minyanim ten men are required to constitute a quorum for prayer. Although many partnership minyanim have decided to institute a policy by which they will only begin the service when ten men and ten women are present, the *halachic* requirement of having a *minyan*, or quorum, of ten men remains. As mentioned previously, Minyan Tehillah decided that if ten men are present, but not ten women, they will, in fact, begin the services. They may not, however, begin without ten men present, even if there are ten women.

While partnership minyanim have, in some ways, provided a far more egalitarian format of worship than other synagogues, their allegiance to the Orthodox concept of requiring ten men for worship means that if all the men were to leave, the women would not be able to continue with the service and all proceedings would come to a halt. Although women do have a far greater role in this form of Orthodox worship, they are clearly subordinate to the men when it comes to forming the necessary prayer quorum.

There are other ways in which male power dynamics impact partnership minyanim, even as they work to create worship that is mindful of egalitarian sensibilities. This point is illustrated further by the halachic limitations heeded by partnership minyanim. As described earlier, women may only lead the non-essential parts of the service, and may only chant from the Torah if the men have

“waived their dignity.” The act of a woman chanting from the Torah, even if allowable, is seen as indicating that no men in the congregation are capable of performing this ritual act. The man must give his consent for the woman to proceed. In practice, the act of simply showing up to the services at a partnership minyan is read as consent. No formal acknowledgement of this legal transaction can be perceived. Yet the power structure of male dominance is apparent to many of the worshippers. In this way, the male ear is more than receptive, it is enabling. As men “waive their dignity” in order to allow women to chant from the Torah, they are also opening their ears to the female voice, which is considered to be sexual threat according to Jewish law. However, partnership minyan participants are committed to hearing the voice as asexual.

Influenced by a feminist critique, it is difficult for the outside observer to see these negotiations as anything other than an oppressive power structure. Still, it is important to note that both male and female participants believe Jewish law, as interpreted by the rabbinic tradition, to be divinely prescribed. Partnership minyanim are unique in that the men are willing to forfeit their power to the greatest extent that they are able. Tova Hartman, a clinical psychologist and the founder of Shira Hadasha writes in her book *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism*, “When we were starting, everyone said, You’ll never get any men to come [sic]. I was always more optimistic. First of all, many men have daughters. Many also have moral religious instincts. True, not everyone gives up power easily, but not everyone resists the sharing of power- and even those who do resist

don't all do it in the same way. To those who founded the shul, religious feminism was not merely a women's issue."<sup>55</sup>

One male service leader at Shira Hadasha, Jonathan Howard, shared this sentiment. When asked about why he, as a male, attends Shira Hadasha, he stated: "Why are people Marxists, or socialists? If they are the underdogs, it is understood. But often they are not. A lot of people in this area [of Jerusalem] have a house, have a wife, have a perfectly nice life. Why do they go out to Sheikh Jarrah and fight for the sake of Palestinians? *They* are not being oppressed. People reach out for the poor when they are not poor. Why? Because they want equality. Because they want liberty for the others. The same thing here [at Shira Hadasha]." Jonathan's decision to worship at Shira Hadasha, though, comes at a price greater than simply the relinquishing of leadership opportunities to women. Males like Jonathan who participate- and thus enable- this type of service may face ridicule from others who object to Shira Hadasha's format. Jonathan stated, "I've been called 'a Conservative,' 'a Reform,' 'a heretic,' 'an infidel,' but on the whole I try to hang around people who have some kind of a worldly sense and are willing to converse about it."

I asked Jonathan if he ever wished he could lead Kabbalat Shabbat, a section of the service reserved for women at partnership minyanim. He replied that he would, expressing frustration that more melodic variety is not currently a

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<sup>55</sup> Tova Hartman, *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism: Resistance and Accommodation* (Waltham, Mass: Brandeis University Press, 2007), 133.

part of the service. He realizes that his singing silences a woman's voice and voluntarily steps aside. Jonathan stated, "Sometimes yes [I do wish I could lead this part of the service], because we always do Kabbalat Shabbat [the first section of the prayer service on Friday nights] in a traditional, Carlebach way.<sup>56</sup> I personally think that I have several things to bring to Kabbalat Shabbat but I recognize that the moment I do that, it pushes women outside. And I have to give up on these sorts of things." Jonathan told me about a joking skit that was written, but never performed, for a community event several years ago: "...There's one where a boy cries out and his mother comes over and says 'Oh, what's the matter?' 'They told me I will never be able to daven [pray] my favorite *tefillah* [prayer service]!' 'Oh, why not?' 'Because it's Kabbalat Shabbat and men don't do it!'"

While humorous, this scene displays the reality of younger Modern Orthodox Jews who attend partnership minyanim. While the gendered division of the service was designed to allow for greater inclusion of women, it nonetheless functions as exclusionary for men. The boys at partnership minyanim are the first Orthodox males to grow up experiencing this type of exclusion in the prayer service. It remains to be seen if, in their adulthood, they will perceive this as oppressive or as a necessary sacrifice toward the achievement of egalitarian inclusion. Perhaps some men may even appreciate the alleviation of any pressure

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<sup>56</sup> The "Carlebach way" refers to using melodies composed by musician and Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach (1925-1994). Many of his melodies have become a part of the traditional canon of the prayer service.

they may have felt to lead services, since women are now permitted to take on this role in the synagogue.

Other men involved with partnership minyanim express disappointment with exclusion for inclusion's sake. As one Shira Hadasha member told me, "It *would* be nice to do Kabbalat Shabbat, sometimes. Always Kabbalat Shabbat is women, because that's the non-*chiyuv* [obligatory] thing. So we lose, of course, we lose out on being the *Shaliach Tsibur* [cantor] for Kabbalat Shabbat. And for me, that's the best *tefillah* [prayer service] there is."

Boys know that other Orthodox prayer options are available to them. If a boy is anxious to lead the congregation in the melodies of Kabbalat Shabbat, he may go to any other Orthodox synagogue and have that opportunity. Girls, however, do not have the option of leading prayer in any other Orthodox setting. With this understanding, these boys are raised with an appreciation of the sacrifice they are making by stepping aside, sacrificing their "dignity," and allowing their ear to hear a woman chant. It is these accommodations that enable women to participate in the service. In the context of partnership minyanim, Orthodox men have willingly switched from being the projectors to the receivers, from the male gaze to the enabling ear.

#### (Re-)Forming an Orthodox Girl

While men have taken on new roles in partnership minyanim, the changes women have experienced have been far more dramatic. "Women's *tefillah* groups" had emerged, in which women would gather together without men

present, and hold a modified service which omitted the sections of the service which require a minyan of ten men. In these prayer groups women would read from the Torah, and fill the role of *gabbai* (sexton). Deena Zuckerman, who currently serves as *gabbai* at Minyan Tehilla, a partnership minyan in Cambridge, Massachusetts, described her experience coming from a Modern Orthodox background and arriving at Harvard University where she first encountered a women's tefillah group at Harvard Hillel. "It was great. It was wonderful to be in an environment in which women could participate in this way. It was very very empowering, I would say... particularly because my father was a *gabbai* when I was growing up for twenty-five years. I grew up with my father always being in charge of what was going on in shul, and my grandfather as well. My father's father was a *gabbai* at shul... When I was older, he was getting older and not as involved, but it was still very much, 'part of my family is being a *gabbai*, that's what we do. Except, I'm not.' So when I got to college and I was able to, it just felt like, 'Well, of course. Now it's my turn to *gabbai* as well.'"

Deena explained that during her high school years she felt uncomfortable with set gender roles in her religious community, yet she simply did not know of any alternative forms of worship within Orthodoxy. "It's not like I was missing it. It's not like all through high school I was thinking 'Why is it that there's no women's tefillah group.' I don't think I even knew of the concept at that point. I *certainly* in high school felt there are big problems with Orthodox Judaism in terms of women... But the whole idea of women's tefillah, let alone a partnership

minyan, which certainly didn't exist, didn't even occur to me as something that could be.”

Today partnership minyanim have largely replaced women's tefillah groups. The partnership minyan service structure in which men and women both participate is generally seen as a more ideal form of worship for those who seek egalitarianism within Orthodoxy. Many women express sentiments similar to Deena's. They have long felt uncomfortable with their role in synagogue life, but did not have any alternative. One woman who now attends Shira Hadasha in Jerusalem told me, “For years I tried out different shuls. When I was a teenager I used to daven in Bnei Akiva [a synagogue associated with the religious Zionist youth movement in Israel] where I grew up with my friends. And then everyone stopped going there so I tried out a few shuls in the neighborhood and I didn't really find a place that I liked. I always felt out of things in the back [behind the mechitzah], like I was never really a part of it. And then for years I just stopped going to shul... And then I started hearing from lots of different people about Shira Hadasha. It took me a while before I actually went to try it out. But then once I went, that was it. Many people at the shul say it took them a while to feel comfortable, it was so different from what they grew up with, but for me it just seemed natural.”

I spoke with a number of older women who had grappled with their role within Orthodox Judaism for decades. One woman in her late sixties who attends Shira Hadasha chose not to personally participate in the leadership of the service: it was simply too foreign. However, she loved that women were given the option

to do so. For her, simply hearing the voices of women chanting the liturgy was an affirmation of her own voice. Though she could not bring herself to lead the service, she was satisfied to know that if she chose to sing, her voice would be heard.

Women at Shira Hadasha and other partnership minyanim perform their gender in a variety of ways. For one, women often harmonize with the *shaliach tsibur*, the service leader, in a high register, beautifying the service with a unique contribution that only female voices can bring to the soundscape of traditional worship. Secondly, women strategically present their femininity, feminism, and religious ideology through a careful selection of clothing. While Shira Hadasha and other partnership minyanim consider their services to be Modern Orthodox, it is important to point out that Modern Orthodoxy is far from monolithic, and worshippers at partnership minyanim vary greatly in their ideology and appearance. Additionally, the feminine landscape at Shira Hadasha is further complicated by the presence of many non-Orthodox tourists who do not follow these conventions of dress and are drawn to the synagogue by the musical environment of the services.

Embedded into Orthodox women's cultural practice is a finely crafted coding system pertaining to dress, by which individuals project their Jewish identity with the use of garment symbols. Normative Orthodox Judaism requires that women and girls dress in a modest way. From the time that a girl is old enough to potentially attract a male's eye, she is expected to wear long skirts, high cut shirts, and generally sleeves that at least reach the elbow. Married women

cover their hair, exposing it only to their husbands or other women. Haredi women usually wear wigs to cover their hair, while Modern Orthodox women generally prefer hats or elaborately tied scarves. While the conventions of dress vary slightly among different communities in the Orthodox world, they all believe in the value of *tzniut*.

Women at partnership minyanim are negotiating a new approach to express their gender in terms of their clothing. While many women at partnership minyanim continue to dress in the traditional style of Orthodoxy, others have felt comfortable enough to wear slightly more revealing clothing. Women who choose to relax their personal code of modesty might wear a shirt with a lower neckline, a skirt that falls slightly above the knees, women's dress pants, or choose not to cover their hair, despite being married. This relaxed dress code is consistent with the value of liberalism that is at the core of partnership minyanim.

Other women have chosen to take on the practice of Conservative and Reform synagogues, in which women wear traditionally male garb such as prayer shawls (*tallitot*) or small head coverings called *kippot*, also known as *yarmulkes*. In many cases, a woman will choose to do so because she grew up attending a Conservative or Reform synagogue where this is common practice. However, some Orthodox women do choose to wear male garments associated with prayer because they have reconsidered the legal matters surrounding their use, just as they have done regarding the synagogue service. In order to show a distinction, women's tallitot and kippot are decorated in ways that are different from men's garments. One woman I met at Shira Hadasha chose to wear a tie-dyed *tallit katan*

over her clothing. The *tallit katan* is a four cornered garment generally worn by men. The rectangular piece of cloth has a hole in the center and is placed over the head. The corners have meticulously tied fringes which are either tucked into the pants, or fall out from under the shirt, hanging by the man's side. This garment is worn in accordance with the biblical law that all four cornered garments must have fringes on it. The tie-dyed tallit katan was a carefully selected signal, both to the woman who wore it, and to others around her signaling her theological approach and position within Orthodoxy. To those who understood the cultural codes, she was simultaneously projecting traditionalism and deviance, a tactful performance of her personal view of her place as a traditionally observant Jewish woman. The act of wearing a tallit katan is understood to be a sign of devotion to God. The fact that a woman was wearing the garment was a sign of subversion: the garment is generally understood to be the ritual clothing of a man. The tie-dyed design displayed a different type of deviance. The tallit katan is generally white, often with a black stripe, but her version was vibrant and colorful, having undergone a psychedelic makeover. Much like the hippie generation with which tie-dye is associated, the tie-dyed tallit katan signaled a revolution- a challenge to oppression and injustice. By wearing the tallit katan over her shirt she foregrounded this signal. Generally this garment is worn underneath one's clothing hidden from view, or with only the fringes exposed. By making the tallit katan visible she is taking a religious expression that was formerly cloistered, private, and closed off and turned up the volume.

While the example of the tallit katan is exceptional in its many layers of meaning, all women at partnership minyanim perform their interpretation of their gender in this safe space through their choice of clothes. This performative aspect of dress is a visual counterpart to the audible display of sounding a woman's voice. This augments the strategies that these women can employ to challenge and embrace traditional authority's structures within Orthodoxy.

Just as individuals in partnership minyanim perform their gender identity through clothing, the partnership minyan leadership also set out expectations of gendered behavior and dress codes. A founder of Kol Rinah, a partnership minyan in Brookline, Massachusetts explained to me that while individuals were free to follow their personal customs, women were not encouraged to wear prayer shawls (*tallitot*) during the service or when called to the Torah for an honor, as the shawl is worn only by men in Orthodox contexts. "We really didn't want to encourage women to wear tallitot unless it's what they do. It was, like, a point of pride. We didn't want to become one of those minyanim that is, sort of, all about women and their perceptions of being just like men. Like, if that's what they do, that's fine, but it's not about that." In this way, partnership minyanim perform their Orthodoxy through maintaining traditional dress codes. They leave space, though, for women to practice in the way they feel most comfortable, even if it is contrary to the overall tone created in the prayer environment.

As girls are raised attending partnership minyanim, this new space for women's participation will become increasingly normative. Their understanding of gender roles will be shaped by both the expectation of women's involvement in

the communal prayer service and the strong sense of pluralism. As a father of an eleven year old girl who attends Shira Hadasha related, “For my daughter, the fact that she sees mommy reading from the Torah makes it obvious that she too will read from the Torah at her Bat Mitzvah. There was no question.” He went on to explain that the pluralistic and moderate nature of Shira Hadasha may be cause for rebellion by his children as they grow up. “That’s the other half of it. And I’m sure our kids will react to that as well. That we are so radically moderate.”

Partnership minyanim allow women to question their performance of gender, not only from the pulpit, but from their own seat in the congregation. While music is one expression of a changing approach to gender, these women use many strategies as they establish their new role, shaped within the context of traditional culture.

### Rethinking Egalitarianism

At the first planning meeting that led to the founding of Shira Hadasha, two groups walked out in protest. The first disapproved of the fact that the nascent Shira Hadasha did not have a Rabbi who oversaw and sanctioned the alterations to the prayer service that were being proposed. The second group, writes Tova Hartman, “had a different complaint: they demanded that the shul be completely egalitarian. For someone committed to remaining to some degree within an Orthodox framework, this issue is probably the stickiest.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Hartman, *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism*, xiii.

Many agree that Shira Hadasha and its offshoots have taken enormous steps toward a more egalitarian form of Orthodoxy. Participants are generally aware that these congregations are not “fully egalitarian,” and yet they continue to attend and enjoy the new structure of the service. While this is partly an acknowledgement that this is the closest to full egalitarianism that they can reach within an Orthodox structure, I believe that the concept of egalitarianism must be reevaluated in order to understand its place in the context of partnership minyanim.

I suggest that egalitarianism at partnership minyanim is not to be found in the sameness of the gender roles; it is to be found in the maximization of potential within the divinely and rabbinically structured separate spaces of men and women. This potential is performed through the exercise of voice and the *hiddur*, or beautification, of the musical repertoire ascribed to each gender.<sup>58</sup> Traditional Jewish law dictates the behavior of men and women, making clear that each has a different role in the world. The founders of Shira Hadasha revisit these laws and separate them from traditional practice. With this new structure established, women, as well as their male counterparts, then had the task of maximizing their individual performance. To accomplish this, women and men sing extensively and beautify the melody with lush vocal harmonies.

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<sup>58</sup> Jewish tradition suggests that individuals enhance their service of God through *hiddur mitzavah*, “beautifying the commandments.” The *Midrash Mechiltah* specifically mentions using beautiful ritual objects such as *tzitzit*, *tefillin* (phylacteries), *lulav*, and *sukkah*. The Talmud adds a beautiful Torah scroll, and *shofar* (Shabbat 133b). Partnership minyanim’s extensive use of music beautifies the prayer service in this same way.

The belief in a divinely authored legal code is crucial to the philosophy of partnership minyanim. Not only does it provide hard lines which cannot be crossed in the construction of the service, this belief is one of the key aspects that categorize the services as Orthodox, a label that is very important to the majority of the worshippers.<sup>59</sup> By obeying the restrictions of Jewish law, and having each gender maximize their potential within that system, partnership minyan participants believe that men and women are equals in the eyes of God.

The emphasis on singing enhances the prayer experience for these participants. As Rabbi Marc Baker, one of the founders of Shira Hadasha and, later, Kol Rinah, told me, “It’s really important that if we’re going to build a new prayer community that the prayer be purposeful and meaningful. For me that involves song-filled.” In addition to enhancing the *kavanah*, the intention, of the prayers, music acts as a performance of sincerity and is understood as a core aspect of serious prayer. “People always say ‘Oh, Shira Hadasha, they’re Reform or they’re not serious, they aren’t really Orthodox.’ But they come to Shira Hadasha and they see that you sing more, and that your prayers are longer, so they can’t leave and say, ‘They’re not serious.’ That’s not what we intended to do, but what happened, I think, is that the music protected us. People who come to us can’t leave and say that it’s empty feminism. You can’t say that we are not religious.”

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<sup>59</sup> Jewish law is divided into two categories, *D’orayta* (Divinely mandated) and *D’Rabbanan* (Rabbinically designed). The Torah commands the Jewish people to make for themselves Rabbis who will construct “fences” around the commandments. Therefore, Rabbinic decrees are considered to be Divinely supported.

Finally, by confirming the importance of Jewish law, partnership minyanim see themselves as part of a long history of traditional Judaism. One Shira Hadasha founding member explained to me that the minyan was not created simply because the women wanted to be more equal. Instead women wanted the opportunity to deepen their connection to God. She went on to tell me, “Some critics say ‘Why don’t you do something else? If you want to do more, okay, but why do you have to do like the men?’ The answer, I think, is that this is the only way of *avodat Hashem* [service of God]. ‘Why do you want to *leyn*? Because this is what Jewish people do. So if you want to be a part of it, this is what you should do.’”

By participating musically in their own gender divided sections of the prayer service, women and men are maximizing their religious expression within their prayer space. This act of embracing the worship of God based on divinely crafted principles allows partnership minyan participants to transcend differences in gender roles, and see limited space for participation as new ground for religious expression. In this way, musical performance is the tool by which partnership minyanim bridge the gap between an exclusionary legal system, egalitarian values, and a desire to embody Orthodoxy.

### Conclusion

Shira Hadasha, and the partnership minyan movement to which it gave birth, are complex sites of gender construction and performance. As children are raised in this new Orthodox environment, their identities will develop in

accordance with the values of their prayer community, producing new options for Orthodox identity. Men, who held the sole role of outward projector, are now, at certain points in the service, the receivers. And yet, this reception is done in a spirit of enabling, as Jewish law requires the presence of ten men for the service to be held. Women, whose role in the service is limited by the constraints of the legal system, embrace the sections which they are permitted to lead and beautify them through elaborate and extensive singing which is complemented by improvised vocal harmonies. Women occupy a new sonic space in Orthodox worship, and men receive their participation with enabling ears.

When examining partnership minyanim, we must consider the multiple modalities of voice and listening, of projection and reception. Depending on the stance of the receiver, the male voice can be an instrument of divine adoration or oppression. If understood as such, a female voice can be a sexual weapon whose sounding assaults a male ear. These gendered and sexualized modalities of voice and reception function on multiple levels, implicating religious conviction, political motivation, and power submission and assertion simultaneously. It is the ability to switch one's mode of listening that enables partnership minyanim to work through the issue of *Kol B'Isha Erva*. By reconceptualizing the traditional understanding of the female voice as highly sexual, and stating that in the context of the religious service their ears will not be listening with sexual motivations, men are able to be in the presence of singing women. This auditory re-interpretation is the act that enables the women to have a voice at all.

Many right-wing Orthodox Jews with whom I spoke believe that gender construction at partnership minyanim is upsetting the very nature of what it means to be a man or a woman. These gender definitions are seen as steeped in mystical thought, and can be understood only through a close reading of the Torah as explained by metaphysical texts. The individuals I met at partnership minyanim did not wish to force their model of Orthodoxy on other traditional Jews, but emphasized that they believed that the established system, which presents heavily essentialized definitions of male and female, does not work for everyone. They stressed that their experiences outside the synagogue were incongruent with the more bounded status normative in traditional Orthodox worship. By singing and harmonizing together, men and women at partnership minyanim have found a way to worship together, side-by-side, equal in the eyes of God.

I interviewed more traditional individuals who dismissed the arguments made by partnership minyanim. When I explained that the men at partnership minyanim believed that they were listening to the women sing through a modality of acceptance and equality, and not one of sexual interest, several individuals believed this to be a lie. They stressed that men are incapable of listening to a woman sing without feeling a sexual urge, and therefore partnership minyanim functioned as the sonic equivalent to pornography. Given that these right wing Orthodox men believed it was impossible for a man to hear a woman's singing voice without being aroused sexually, and male partnership minyan participants believed that there was no sexuality in the female voice, as long as it was in the

context of prayer, we see that the ear is a highly political instrument. The partnership minyan movement's halachic legitimacy hangs in this balance.

## Conclusions

An examination of the development of Partnership Minyanim has relevance for all cultures attempting to negotiate an established religious/social system which clashes with contemporary values. The place of women is perhaps the most contentious issue in the divide between Modern Orthodoxy and the growing Haredi community. While the issue is significant to Jews across the globe, the issue is amplified significantly in Israel, where religion and the state are, to an ambiguous degree, intertwined. What was once a tension between secular and religious citizens of Israel has now turned into a contentious debate within the religious community regarding the place of women in society. Women's voices are at the very heart of the issue. The Israeli Defense Force's announcement that soldiers will no longer be permitted to leave an event because a woman is singing has forced individuals and communities to choose between strict religious practice and service to their nation. The debate over *Kol Isha* in the military has become symbolic of a tense relationship between the secular government of the Jewish state and religious law. At a time when Orthodox women are becoming increasingly absent from the public sphere, it is no wonder that a reaction has emerged in the shape of partnership minyanim. When Shira Hadasha began in 2002, these same issues had been simmering for some time. Recently the heat has been turned all the way up, and partnership minyanim have grown significantly in response to these societal conflicts.

In many ways, the act of a woman chanting from the Torah is the ultimate protest against the marginalization partnership minyan participants believe is

happening in the rest of the Orthodox world. While, traditionally, Jewish life is focused on the home and one's conduct out in the world, it is undeniable that the synagogue is a locus of great significance in the lives of Orthodox Jews. For thousands of years, men have come to pray in the synagogue three times every day, while women generally only attend on holidays and, in only some communities, the Sabbath. The synagogue has traditionally been a space of male privilege socially and religiously. The "*Kol Torah*," the voice of Torah learning and prayer, has always been a male voice within the Orthodox world. Partnership minyanim are revolutionary in that men and women are coming together to create a space where traditional women can claim their voice.

### Kol Isha and the Envoicing of Women

In the first chapter of this thesis, I set out to discuss the halachic framework by which partnership minyanim function. One of my primary goals was to discuss the complexity of the halachic concept of *Kol B'Isha Erva*. The law, which, in its most simple form, forbids men from hearing a woman sing, has been understood by rabbinic authorities in a great number of ways. While some rabbis have gone so far as to avoid hearing women speak, others have said that it is permissible for women to have singing careers in front of mixed audiences. When discussing matters related to Kol Isha, it is crucial that we consider the complexity of this law, and do not resort to a reductionist understanding of women singing in Orthodox Judaism.

As I have discussed, partnership minyanim do not view Kol Isha as a barrier to the type of prayer service they wish to hold. Thus, partnership minyanim are prayer sites in which women are not only permitted, but encouraged, to sing in the presence of men. The song filled environment of partnership minyanim can, as I have suggested, be viewed as the “envoicing” of Orthodox women. The presence of women’s voices is especially significant in the cantillation of the Torah. This act, which is the heart of the service, allows women to be the mouthpiece for God as they chant the sacred text. While prayer groups entirely composed of Orthodox women have existed since the late 1970s, partnership minyanim believe that those settings fell short of the full extent of egalitarianism allowable under Jewish law. In other words, women did not truly have a voice unless there was someone else to hear it. In a partnership minyan context, men and women partner together to hear each other pray, and to pray together. As discussed, though, power differentials are still present and must be considered for a full understanding of this worship format.

#### The Enabling Ear and Power Dynamics

While partnership minyanim certainly offer the most prayer leadership opportunities to women in the Orthodox world, it is important to consider the ways in which power is divided between the sexes. One of the requirements of Orthodox worship is the presence of a *minyan*, a quorum of ten men. Many partnership minyanim have instituted a policy which prescribes that ten women should be present, in addition to the traditional requirement of ten men, in order for the service to commence. However, as seen in the example of Minyan

Tehillah in Cambridge, MA, worshippers admit that, in a pressing situation, they are willing to start the service with ten men, even if ten women are not present. The traditional requirement for a minyan still stands. In partnership minyanim, the presence of men is required for women to worship, and without male presence, women cannot hold the prayer service. Prior to the advent of partnership minyanim, male worship was purely outward projecting, both in the male gaze which must be blocked by the mechitzah, as well as the outward projecting voice. Men at partnership minyanim construct a new habitus in which they allow women's voices to enter their ears, while also allowing women to worship.

Although partnership minyanim offer more opportunities to women than any other Orthodox environment, men are still in a position of power over them. As seen in the first chapter of this thesis, men avoid the potential halachic pitfall of Kavod HaTsiibur by "waving their dignity," stating that they are not offended by women chanting from the Torah. Without this consent, women would not be allowed to chant from the Torah, as it would violate the "dignity of the congregation."

Even if one sides with Rabbi Daniel Sperber's lenient opinion that the halachic concept of Kavod HaBriot (Dignity of the Individual) should trump any possible objections to women reading from the Torah, one might still find significant male power over women. As discussed, the concept of Kavod HaBriot is mentioned in the Talmud in a case where women wanted to lean their hands on the sacrificial offering, just as the men did, in order to participate in this particular service to God during the time of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Rabbis permitted

the women to place their hands gently on top of the animal, unlike the men who pressed firmly, in order to appease the women's wishes. The women's actions did not constitute a proper ceremonial offering- a man would also need to prepare and lean on the animal before it could be sacrificed. The permission granted to the women was merely to appease their perceptions of second-class treatment.

When examining partnership minyanim, one finds that the apparent egalitarianism that is to be found in such contexts is far more complicated than it might at first appear. Some partnership minyan participants were vocal regarding what they believed to be hypocrisy, believing that partnership minyanim claimed an egalitarianism that was not truly present. Other participants believed that their prayer groups were doing the best they could to work within an inherently patriarchal system in order to produce egalitarian results that would cater to twenty-first century values. Many participants, though, have not dug deeply enough into the halachic justification for partnership minyanim, and simply see a prayer community which identifies as Orthodox and encourages women to participate to a high degree. Some participants are simply not interested in gender role negotiation, and instead come for a song-filled worship experience, where a high level of musicality enhances their personal prayers.

### The Gendered Voice

As discussed in the third chapter, "Gender and the Aesthetics of Torah Reading," many individuals experience the chanting of the Torah and other sacred texts differently based on the gender of the reader. Individuals expressed that just

as the cantillation markings aid in the understanding of the text, the singer's voice can add meaning to the text. Worshippers believed that certain texts are particularly well-suited for a male or female voice. I was struck by the language used in describing the generalized gendered voice. Many individuals used terms like "light" and "flighty" to describe female voices, while men were described as "deliberate" and "strong." While this calls for further research as to the use and accuracy of these terms, I suggest that they may indicate a deep-seated perception that cantillation by men is more valuable and meaningful than the same performance by women. Perhaps individuals who were raised in Orthodox contexts experience a degree of discomfort when women read from the Torah. As the next generation of partnership minyan participants grow to be leaders in their communities, it will be important to track the language used to describe gender and Torah cantillation.

### The Future of Partnership Minyanim

Throughout the year that I researched partnership minyanim, no one was willing to predict the future of these prayer groups. Though partnership minyanim provide a worship space for those who resist the general rightward shift of much of the Orthodox world, the survival of these institutions cannot be guaranteed. This is partially due to the tremendous effort required to start an independent prayer group. Partnership minyanim do not have the infrastructure of an established synagogue, lacking permanent homes and financial stability to cover rent and utilities. Most individuals who run partnership minyanim are young professionals in their early thirties. As these lay leaders become parents and find

themselves with less time to devote to sustaining the minyan, many prefer to simply pay dues and attend a synagogue, even if the ideology is slightly out of line with their preferred style of worship. Secondly, as described by Shira Zeliger's Master's thesis "Educating an Orthodox Feminist," many individuals raised in Modern Orthodox families who attend partnership minyanim are increasingly joining Conservative synagogues. While many would prefer a more traditional synagogue, the Conservative movement fully embraces the egalitarianism so important to many participants.

The future of partnership minyanim will be decided by the youth who are being raised with the understanding that this is a valid form of traditional worship. Eventually, they will vote with their feet and ears, deciding whether or not the ideology of partnership minyanim offers a compelling compromise between their dedication to egalitarian values and traditional Jewish observance.

Regardless of the future, the present is a remarkable time for these Orthodox women. Through partnership minyanim, they have found a way to maximize their participation in the prayer service. Orthodox women have both found their own voice and a male audience willing to listen and encourage women's participation. This act of sounding voice is at once religious, spiritual, and political. These women have claimed and shaped an Orthodoxy of their own, and in so doing, have begun to "sing a new song to the Lord."

Appendix 1

## Vezot HaBracha (Deut. 33:1-33:7)

Performed by Mimi Oshinsky  
Transcribed by Gordon Dale  
*Rhythms are approximate*

Voice 
  
 A - me - n Ve-zot Ha-bra - cha - ah A - she - r bay-rach

Vo. 
  
 Mo - sh - e ish Ha - El - o - him et b - nei yis - ra - el lif - neh mo -

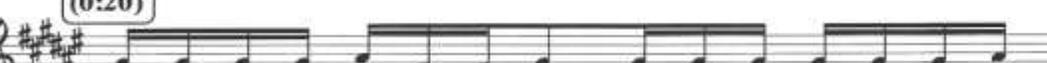
Vo. 
  
 to - oh. Va - yo - ma - a - r A - do - na - ai mi - si - nai ba ve - za - ra - ch

Vo. 
  
 mi - se - ir la - a - mo ho - fi - ya may - har pa - ran

Vo. 
  
 ve - a - ta me riv-vo-t ko-desh mi-mi-no - oh aish - dot lu-mo.

Vo. 
  
 Ah - ahf cho-ve - v A - mi - im kol ke - do-shav be - ya - de - cha Ve - haym

Vo. 
  
 tu - ku le - rag - le - cha yi - sa mid - ba - ro - te - cha.

Vo. 
  
 To - rah tzi - va la - nu Mo - she mo - ra - sha ke - hi - lat Ya -

18 Vo.    
 kov. Va-ye-hi Vi-shu-run me-lech vi - shu-run me-lech be - hit - a - saif

20 Vo.  (0:25)   
 ra - shei am ya - chad shiv - tei yis - ra - el.

21 Vo.    
 Ye - chi Re - u - ven ve - al ya - mot vi - hi ma - tav mis -

22 Vo.  (0:30)   
 par. Ve-zot ye-hu-da - ah va-y-ma - r she-ma A-do -

24 Vo.    
 nai Ko - l ye - hu - da - ah v - el a - mo

25 Vo.  (0:35)   
 te-vi-e-nu ya-da-av rav lo-o - oh ve-e-ze - er mitz-ray-im ti-e -

27 Vo.    
 ch.

**Appendix 2****Megillat Esther Ch. 4, verse 1**

Performed by Shoshana Razel Gordon-Guedalia  
 Transcribed by Gordon Dale

(0:05)

Voice

U - Mor - de - ch - ai - Y - da - a et kol a - sher na - a - sa - ah

(0:10) (0:15)

Vc.

Va - yi - kr - a Mor - de - chai et be - ga - da - v Va - yil - bash sok va - e - fe - r

(0:20) (0:25) (0:30)

Vc.

va - ye - tze - h be - to - ch ha - ir va - yi - za - ak za - ka ge - do - la -

(0:35)

Vc.

ah u - ma - ra - ah.

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### Glossary of Hebrew and Yiddish Terms

*aliyah*- to go up; can refer to one of the sections of the weekly Torah reading, the honor given to people who are called to the Torah, or the act of moving to Israel

*avodat Hashem*- service of God

*bimah*- podium in a synagogue from which prayer services are conducted

*chag*- holiday

*chiyuv*- obligatory

*daven*- pray

*frum*- religious

*gabbai*- sexton

*Haftorah*- selection from the book of Prophets read each Sabbath

*halacha*- Jewish Law

*Hallel*- extra prayer service added on certain holidays throughout the year

*haredi*- right wing Orthodox, commonly referred to as Ultra-Orthodox

*hechsher*- a stamp of approval, generally referring to Kosher food certification

*hiddur*- beautification

*Kabbalat Shabbat*- prayer service welcoming the Sabbath

*kavod habriot*- dignity of the individual

*kavod hatsibur*-dignity of the congregation

*kehillah*- community

*ketanim*- young people (under the age of Bar/Bat Mitzvah)

*kippah*- head covering, traditionally worn by men

*kol b'Isha erva*- "the voice of a woman is nakedness;" prohibition of a man hearing a woman sing

*kriyat haTorah*- reading of the Torah

*leyn*- to chant Torah

*lulav*- the three plant species which are bound together to form a ritual object on the holiday of *Sukkot*

*maarit ayin*- “appearance of the eye;” the principle of being sure that one does not appear to be transgressing Jewish law, even when the action is permissible

*mechitzah*- barrier standing between men and women during prayer

*minyan*- prayer quorum, traditionally consisting of ten men

*mitzvot*- commandments

*nigun*- melody

*parsha*- section of the Torah

*Rosh Chodesh*- the first day of the month

*Shabbat*- Sabbath

*shaliach tsibur*- prayer leader; lit. “emissary of the community”

*shema*- Jewish declaration of faith in one God

*Shir Hashirim*- Song of Songs (biblical book)

*shofar*- a ritual ram’s horn sounded on the holidays of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur

*shul*- synagogue

*siddur*- prayer book

*sukkah*- a temporary hut used as a dwelling place during the holiday of *Sukkot*

*tallit*- prayer shawl

*tallit katan*- small prayer shawl, generally worn by a man under his shirt

*te’amim*- markings indicating melodic motion of the text of the Torah (Hebrew term)

*tefillah*- prayer

*tefillin*- phylacteries; ritual boxes containing parchment on which the *Shema* prayer has been written which are tied around the arm and placed on the head with leather straps during prayer

*trope*- markings indicating melodic motion of the text of the Torah (Yiddish term)

*tzitzit*- ritual fringes, as in those attached to the tallit katan

*yarmulke*- head covering, traditionally worn by men

*yeshiva*- religious school

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