

The Art of the Nigun

A Nigun which means melody in Hebrew, comes from the Hasidic Jewish tradition and is formed of multiple melodic phrases, typically sung without instrumental accompaniment and without words. This last feature, while not found in every Hasidic nigun, is one of the genre's most distinguishing characteristics. In place of words one repeats nonsense syllables such as bam-bam-bam, doi-doi-doi or just vowels.

Musically speaking, the revolution of the 18th-century Hasidic movement was to elevate music to a symbolic place above sacred text. One of the most famous Hasidic composers Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady the founder of the Chabad Lubavitch movement said: "The song of the souls consists of tones only, dismantled of words. As such, they reach onto the truly cosmic level of the universe."¹ These tunes are ascribed to specific musicians or famous rebbes, others were adopted from traditional Jewish prayers, modes of Cossack dances, Polish military marches or East European folk songs. The use of secular or non-Jewish melodies for nigunim was not considered a problem for Hasidic Jews. On the contrary, Hasidic thought contains a notion of *tikkun* (literally, "fixing"), whereby non-Jewish melodies are spiritually redeemed and restored to their religious state by being sung as nigunim. A famous example is a Hungarian nigun Gules, Gules which according to tradition a rabbi was walking in the Ukrainian forest when he heard a shepherd singing a love song in Ukrainian. The rabbi was captivated by the melody which spoke of the shepherds longing for his love, separated from him by the vast forest. The Hasidic rebbe translated the song into Yiddish replacing the description of secular love with a description of his soul's longing for the divine mystical presence.

Singing with no words brings people together below the intellectual level so that illiterate people and Talmud scholars could sing or sound together during ritual. Expressing through the soul that which words can not express, feeling the unity and oneness of all. The Nigun comes to life when there is another person or more singing with you. It can be a practice just for yourself too. When singing in a group the nigun relies on having support from each other, a leader starts and everyone joins. Eventually the words disappear, we start off tied to words but later they disappear while we sing in unison. Metaphorically it becomes a never ending loop going into the heavens and then coming back to the earth.

The concept of the ladder that connects the heavens and earth is based upon millenia of Jewish thinking and starts with the story of Jacob seeing a ladder in his dreams while he was resting his head on a stone. The angels sing up and down that ladder representing musical notes as they climb up and down the musical scale, making melodies. Almost all Nigunim follow a pattern of starting with a lower tone, rooted in the ground and the second section gets higher and higher, then bringing it back down again. Essential quality of a Nigun is starting slow and letting it be slow for a while, sitting in the sound of it, letting it rest and inviting silence into the melody. According to Jewish thought we have to make sure when we go to the heavenly or out of body space via sound to get back to this realm on earth because it is here that the work needs to be done in everyday life.

¹ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-nigun/>

The Concept of Musical Healing through a Nigun

The sound of the nigun for the purposes of healing is mentioned in the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, which states that David was a person of Nigun who knew melody, a concept that goes beyond poetry & song. It is said he sang and played the harp so well that he could heal King Saul who went crazy. Similarly, Serach, daughter of Asher, was able to heal Jacob, her grandfather, with her harp and song.

The Hasidic tradition accentuates the life-giving aspect of music which is so palpable in the nigun and does not allow anything to come between us and spirit. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov says: “It’s good for a person to accustom himself to reviving himself with a nigun, because Nigun is a powerful and mighty tool, and it has the great strength to awaken a person and point his heart towards the Blessed Name. And even one who doesn’t know how to play music [or sing out loud] can sing to himself and through that revive himself. For the “lift” of a nigun cannot be measured.”

When we leave the intellectual level we forget about words which can often get in our way, their precision and correctness that is often needed in life.. The Nigun comes along to heal the wounds that words create, including division, becoming a tool to elevate our spirit. We start losing ourselves in the melody and go straight to our heart and the heart eventually melts until just our bones are singing. According to Jewish mystical sources it is when we leave our heads behind and even our hearts so only our bones buzz with the song and melody. This is compared to the Jewish people when they came through the sea from Egypt when they burst into song with their entire bodies vibrating. It is the melody which reminds us of the oneness that’s at the heart of it all. Mystical messages can come from these experiences and most religions reference these concepts, not only Judaism.

Dan Yolles, a rabbinical student at the *Open Tent Be Mitzvah Educator* writes of a magical moment while he was singing a nigun: “I closed my eyes, started the nigun slowly, voices around me began to trickle in, and the anticipation, the nerves, the stressful feelings of praying that our results were negative began to wash away. Together as a group, as we built volume, speed and layers of energy on top of the nigun we were transported to a place of connecting with one another, connection within, and into a journey of bliss and song. We were swaying our bodies, our minds were focused on the melody, moments of musical harmonization created a field around us. It was as if I could see the colors of everyone’s voice and body movements, blending together making a pallet of rainbow colors, waves, and patterns. After the music peaked, I began to softly slow the pace, ease the volume, and settled into the pillow of light we created together. We faded out on the last note, held a moment of silence and reintegration.”²

The choice of words that Yolles uses to describe his emotional state after singing a nigun is very similar to the language people often use when describing their subjective feelings during an energetic healing experience. Creating a field around him while singing is akin to the energetic field that healers work with around the body, seeing colors of everyone’s voice is comparable to the rainbow colors of the chakra system that either practitioners see or patients report seeing during a healing session. Yolles writes about waves and patterns which are emblematic of the subtle bodies around the physical body in energy healing

² <https://www.judaismyourway.org/2022/01/31/the-power-of-a-nigun/>

and he ends with writing about silence and reintegration which is always a key aspect of any energetic healing session.

To conclude, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook says a nigun can be interpreted on four levels and prefaces that one is not better than the other:

Level 1- the song of an individual and their soul

Level 2 - a song sung by a community of people, a tribe that is bigger than an individual

Level 3 - a song belonging to all of humanity, crossing the lines of whatever dogma separates us from one another, that which speaks to all of humanity

Level 4 - songs sounded by all of creation: by frogs, mountains, valleys, oceans, all animals, wind and all the elements which reside on earth.

Rabbi Kook encourages us to see all these sounds as interesting aspects of our life and to try to find our own song, to recognize the song of creation and the sounds that the world continuously sings to us.

Most of the information in this paper came from the webinar series [Art of the Nigun](#) taught by Joey Weisenberg, the Founder and Co-Director of Hadar's Rising Song Institute. Weisenberg is the author of *Building Singing Communities* and *The Torah of Music*, winner of a 2017 National Jewish Book Award. A devoted student and teacher of traditional Jewish melodies, Joey also composes new nigunim that have moved and inspired Jews around the world. His eighth album with the Hadar Ensemble, *Leila*, was released by the Rising Song Institute in February 2022.

Bozidar Boskovic