

Cultivating the practice of integrating music into the expression of your faith, your heart and your soul.

Bnei Machshava Tova, Entry 18 – אות יח' – בני מחשבה טובה, The Piaseczner Rebbe – Rav Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira

A teaching from Rav Kalonymus Kalmash Shapira, the Piaseczner Rebbe. His inspiring ideas address how we awaken to the Divine presence within us. We will explore the significance of integrating melody into the expression of our souls. In the midst of a growing crisis of polarization among people, this may be more important than we can imagine.

The great Rabbi Aaron of Karlin (d. 1872), in the collection entitled *House of Aaron* (Jerusalem: Karlin Stoln Press, 1977), comments on the verse, "Gaze from the heights of *Amana*" (Song of Songs 4:8) - **תשורי מראש אמנה** (שיר השירים ד, ח). These are his profound insights: "A Jew express his faith - **אמונה** - most fully and most joyfully when he sings out unreservedly" (p. 174). We cannot address the whole area of music - **נגינה** -, pitch, and so on at this point. We merely want to state that anyone - **כל איש** -, at any level - **באיזה מצב שהוא** -, can draw forth living waters - **ממם חיים** - from the wellspring of his soul and manifest - **ויגלה** - the living voice within him - **בקרבו**. This is a powerful tool for unblocking and expressing the soul.

Do not be troubled that we know of great singers and cantors whose hearts are far removed - **רחוק** - from God, without faith, heaven help them. Even pagans and idolaters have singers and musical rituals. Melodies - **הניגון** - are one tool for conveying and revealing the soul - **הנפש** - and her feelings - **הרגשות** --- this being our spiritual condition. The soul manifests herself in the words - **בדבור** - with which a person expresses - **מתגלה** - his thoughts and feelings of pain or joy, and, even more than that, in his voice - **בקול**. Our holy books give testimony to this; they teach that when one's suffering - **צער** - overwhelms him, and he can no longer find the words to speak, poor soul, he will break down into crying - **בוכה** - and weeping - **צועק** -, using only his voice, no words.

Now singing - **הניגון** -, which is voice - **קולות** -, has the power to arouse in a person very strong feelings, both of grief - **מרירות** - and exultation - **שמחה**. **And feelings are the sparks - ניצוצים - and the stirrings of the soul!** There is no guarantee as to how a person will apply the spiritual power he has unblocked - **שהתגלה** - with his singing. Let us suppose that there are two people who are experiencing joy. One may direct his feelings of joy into a deepening commitment to serve God - **עבודת ה'**; the other may be totally frivolous - **הוללות**. **Music - הניגון - is a key - מפתח - to the soul, it opens us to our feelings - הרגשות - and our potential capacity to encounter the Divine within.**



Now our group is organized for the purpose of nurturing and enhancing our relationship with the Divine, within and around us. We wish to unleash - **להוציא** - the qualities of the soul so that they can dominate over the power of our bodies. Thus, we become attached to holiness – **לקשר בקדושה**. Our entire physical being becomes elevated, and we sense that we ourselves, our very bones, consist of the breath of God. We practice the use of melody - **עבודה לשמים** – joyful and reverent, as part of our prayer and spiritual practice – **נגונים**.

Take some musical phrase – **תנועה של ניגון** - turn to a quiet and private place --- or simply close your eyes – **תסגור את עיניך** - and remind yourself that you stand in the presence of God – **לפני כסא הכבוד**. With your heart trembling, you are here to pour out your soul – **לשפוך נפשך** - to God, using song - **בשירה** - and melody – **וניגון** -, singing from the depths of your being – **מקרב לבך**. Inevitably, you will begin to feel - **תרגיש** - the emergence of your soul – **שנפשך יוצאת** – in her great joy and delight - **ברננה**.

At first, it was you singing to your soul --- to wake her up from her slumber - לעוררה - and now you feel the soul singing her own song – לנגן בעצמה - מתרדמתה.

Did you not always wonder about music? What are the pitches exactly? What is happening when the notes move up and down the scale? Why are notes sustained here and staccato there? You can sense it for yourself! Using your voice, your soul opens a path - **דרך** – upward to the highest realms. She grabs your voice by its stirrings and pulls it upward and along. Subtly, your heart, your inner self - **פנימיות** - accompanies the song of your soul on her journey. The notes --- your route - **הדרך** - rise and fall; each turn - **גילגול** - of the tune etches a path. The pulse and the pace create the dynamic motion - **תנועה**; the song is woven. Your soul carries the song within her and pours it out - **שופך** - before the Holy One.

There will be times when you are in this state when, without consciously planning it – **שבלא דעת** - you will begin to speak spontaneously. At first, you may dwell on mundane concerns and problems. The more you feel moved, emotionally, - **שתתרגש** - the more your soul emerges from her place of concealment. She flies upward - **אל על** -, and you begin to shake off the worldly realm. From this deep place within your heart – **מעומק לבך** - your soul cries – **תצעק נפשך** - a prayer that is real and sincere. “*Ribbono shel olam*, I feel so stuck here...” So, the plea begins with talk of your worldly affairs and becomes a prayer of the heart; you pray to be released from the material perspective. Ideas and words that come to you at moments such as these are not to be dismissed lightly. They are the tools of your soul.



And there will be other times. You may not have words, no requests that feel urgent – **ולא תרגיש איזה הרגשה** – **תרגיש שום בקשה**. But nonetheless, you feel something – **מין** something you cannot quite put into words. You may feel a sense of relief and ease – **התרפקות** – like a child who has reconciled with his father. The child wants nothing more from him than to sit with him, to be in his presence. From time to time, the child sighs and says – **ומתאנח**, “Oh, father, my father.” “What is it my son?” his father asks. “Nothing, not a thing,” the child replies. But soon again, he sighs and repeats, “Oh, father, my father.”

This is an important principle – **כי דע לך**. In the whole area of expressing the soul – **התגלות הנפש**, we have much to learn from children. Children behave with a total absence of artifice and pretense. The child’s very soul is expressed – **מתגלה נפשו** – in each of his activities. The child is transparent – **מעשים כפי תנועות נפשו**. His soul shines through everything he does, including this harmonizing and softening we described, this flowing of soul from father to child. Sometimes when you sing you will have this experience – **תרגיש בניגון מין המיה**. There are no words, there is nothing to say, there is nothing you need – **לא שום בקשה**. Still the soul is overcome with joy – **רק נפשך מרננת** – she softly chants, “Oh God, oh my God – **רבשׁׁע, רבשׁׁע**.”

Somber and sad music – **ניגון של שבירת הלב** – is not the only vehicle for this soulful exercise. Music of gladness and joy – **ניגון של שמחה** – also has a place in the emergence and expression of the spirit – **לגילוי הנפש**. This is the way of the pious: sometimes the person cries – **בוכה** – to a happy tune. Or, when he is happy, he may dance – **רוקד** – to the mournful sound of the Yom Kippur service, *Kol Nidre*.

When you are with your fellows, as they pray, eat, or sing at some occasion, sing with them. Yermiyahu describes one way to give voice: “She shouted out against me” (Yermiyahu 12:8) – **נתנה עלי בקולה** – **(ירמיהו יב, ח)**. The voice is harsh and accusing. You want to use your voice differently --- to raise up your soul – **להעלות את נפשך**. Torah describes it this way: “When the musician played, the spirit of God came upon him” (2 Kings 3:15) – **והיה כנגן** – **(מלכים ב', ג, טו) המנגן, ותהי עליו רוח ה'**. Or translate it slightly differently: When the musician becomes the music, the spirit of God is upon him. At this level, song is like a bridal canopy – **החופה** – under which the bride and groom unite. The Piaseczner hints at the huge and rich kabbalistic symbol system, which presents the relationship between God and the faithful as a parallel for the relationship between human lovers.

Of course, you do not necessarily need to be in a group to sing this way. Even when you are alone if you feel it will be beneficial go ahead and sing as we have described. And you do not need to shout. There are songs uttered in a whisper – **בלחש** – and a sigh – **המיה** – that are nonetheless heard on high – **נשמע במרום**.