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Singing God's Words: The Performance of Biblical Chant in Contemporary Judaism

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Jeffrey Summit

Singing God's Words: The Performance of Biblical Chant in Contemporary Judaism.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Singing God's Words: The Performance of Biblical Chant in Contemporary Judaism offers the first comprehensive study of the experience of chanting Torah. Jeffrey Summit writes with the expertise of both a practitioner—he is an ordained rabbi and until recently was executive director of Tufts University's Hillel—and a scholar of Jewish liturgy. His authorial voice deftly directs the reader toward his interlocutors' experiential retellings, which form the core of this work.

As Summit notes in the Introduction, previous ethnomusicological and musicological studies have focused on the analysis and theory of the cantillation system used to read Torah, but have not addressed the topic from a reader's experiential perspective. Here, though, the central question is what drives lay practitioners to read Torah and how they relate personally to this performative ritual. Torah reading requires specialist skills, including some Hebrew language competency, knowledge and memorization of the *teamim* (cantillation markings) and *nekudot* (vowels), and the ability to "perform" in a musically oriented style in front of an audience that, for some Torah readers, includes God.

Summit focuses on liberal U.S. Jewish perspectives, with voices drawn from the gender-egalitarian Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and Renewal movements and, in lesser number, from Modern Orthodoxy. Excluded, then, are the experiences of Haredi (ultra-orthodox) Jews, who live in relative isolation from the rest of the U.S. population. Sephardi

and Mizrahi Jews—those with roots in Muslim-majority countries—are also omitted because this U.S. Jewish minority group read Torah according to a different cantillation system and, whether self-described as orthodox or traditional, rarely engage with the progressive denominations that dominate the U.S. Jewish landscape. In limiting his scope, Summit states that his intent is to portray a particularly U.S.-American kind of Judaism wherein Torah readers privilege self-fulfillment, spirituality, and religious experience over obligation; that is, individual benefit over community service. While all 650 of Summit's interlocutors chant the same scriptural text using the same cantillation models, their motivations and experiences differ from one another. It is these diverse experiences that Summit shares with the reader in *Singing God's Words*.

The book is divided into 11 chapters in four parts, the breadth of which far exceeds what can be summarized here. Part 1, "The Tradition," addresses the ritual components of the weekly Shabbat Torah reading service. Summit analyzes every aspect of this highly choreographed service and its denominational variations, emphasizing its multivocal and interpersonal nature. The material culture of the Torah scroll is described, from the scribe's writing process to the purchase of a *sefer Torah* and ritual behaviors such as the processing and perhaps idolatrous kissing of the scroll that one encounters in a synagogue service. This section is an exceptionally comprehensive description

of the Torah service and serves as an excellent introduction to those readers not personally accustomed to synagogue rituals.

Part 2 foregrounds the voices of Summit's interlocutors, focusing as it does on the individual's experience of reading Torah. Despite contemporary associations between intense text study and religious fundamentalism, Torah readers are more interested in the *experience* of reading than in the words they chant. They speak of making a contribution to their synagogue community and gaining a higher social status therein, forging a transgenerational connection through Jewish history and feeling empowered by demonstrating embodied Jewish expertise.

The final chapter of this section, "Women Reading Torah," offers a rich assessment of the changing status of women's voices. Here, Summit draws expertly upon Jewish theology, philosophy, and praxis, weaving a rich web of canonic texts and contemporary individual voices to produce a nuanced and multilayered impression of not only the current state of women's participation, but also the historical circumstances that produced today's reality. Summit touches upon the relative lack of learning opportunities for women, which, combined with the fact that women only began reading Torah publicly in the 1950s, means that many of today's readers are the original "pioneers" and there is a limited pool of expert women Torah readers. In much of the Modern Orthodox community, women reading Torah is still taboo and young women rarely learn to read in preparation for their bat mitzvah (whereas young men are expected, even required, to do so at this lifecycle event). Summit mentions, too, the need for synagogue

attendees to become accustomed to the sound of women's voices in synagogues. The discussions of women's vocal quality and gender disparity in learning religious ritual would have benefited from more historical detail or comparison with non-Jewish contexts (such as Anne K. Rasmussen's 2010 ethnomusicological monograph on women reciting the Qur'an in Indonesia¹). A greater diversity of voices is given space in this chapter than elsewhere in the book. Some women cried while reporting their first access to touching a Torah scroll or reading Torah in the synagogue after having been denied access thereto. By contrast, Orthodox men and women presented apologetics and textual evidence in order to continue to deny women's participation. Summit represents Gordon Dale's M.A. research on partnership *minyanim* here, a relatively new phenomenon whereby women are given some leadership opportunities in public prayer at a less-than-egalitarian level. In offering a greater diversity of voices and experiences and a more specific topical focus than any other chapter in the book, "Women Reading Torah" hints at the gravity of this topic while also evincing the impossibility of doing it justice in a mere 18 pages. Given the rest of the book's focus on contemporary egalitarian communities, I wonder whether this chapter's presence is altogether justified, since the voices cited therein are minority experiences when situated within the book as a whole.

Part 3, "The Performance," explores the relationship between textual content and musical delivery, and the ways in which performance is evaluated by congregants. The chanter (who, Summit suggests, defies categorization as a reader, performer, or singer) may be corrected aloud by any

congregant, and must then repeat the section in which they erred until they chant it correctly. Summit deftly explores the liminal nature of Torah chant as music, noting that it is presentational but not performative, and demands a level of musical skill accessible to all—a necessity, since the communities under examination expect all congregants to chant Torah during their bat or bar mitzvahs. While individual interlocutors expressed their preference for Torah readers who demonstrated musical competency, a grasp of Hebrew, and the capacity to convey phrase structure and textual meaning through cantillation, a common understanding emerges that these are not essential to an adequate reading, and indeed that an excessively performative reading can detract from the scripture itself. This section offers some useful transcriptions that, along with a comprehensive appendix of Jacobson’s transcriptions of the *teamim*, permit the reader to understand some of the minor musical discrepancies between Torah readers that Summit’s interlocutors describe.

Part 4 assesses the impact of technology on the transmission of Torah reading skills. Until recently, students new to reading would learn individually in person from an expert reader, coming to understand the *teamim* system such that they would be able to prepare future readings independently. Now, students increasingly use websites and apps as an addition to or replacement for in-person studies. Some learn their text by ear from existing recordings, allowing for an accurate synagogue performance without the theoretical underpinning that permits full understanding or independent learning. Summit notes that changes in learning technology have characterized Jewish text study for centuries, from the compiling of the Mishna to Maimonides’

compendium of Jewish law to Steinsaltz’s translations of the Gemara. He presents the move from low-tech oral environments to online learning as a continuation of this process, but one that has deep-seated consequences for Jewish communities and individuals. Increased democratization of access to this skill and the capacity to make secular spaces sacred are likely benefits, but must be weighed against the decline of community authority and *minhag*, the transmission of associated bodies of knowledge such as posture and respect for the *sefer Torah*, and standardization across Ashkenazi cantillation systems. Less convincingly, Summit repeatedly cites the loss of “authenticity” as a troubling consequence of technology without offering a concrete explanation as to what he—or his interlocutors—mean by that term. Nevertheless, the chapter describes and situates this new development thoughtfully, perhaps offering the most informative material for those already accustomed to Jewish ritual practice.

Summit’s prioritizing of interlocutors’ voices and descriptive emphasis are at once the book’s major contribution and the source of its main limitation. *Singing God’s Words* is theoretically scant, with references to other academic texts few and far between. Appropriate and interesting comparisons with other texts are often made, but beyond the Introduction they merit only an isolated sentence or two and do not always translate into greater insight for the reader. Development of comparative or theoretical lenses would have benefited the book and rendered it more obviously relevant to a wider readership. As it stands, *Singing God’s Words* is heavily descriptive, even emotionally compelling, but limited in its analytic framing, leaving the reader

to assess for herself how the experience of Jewish Torah cantillation might relate to comparable experiences and practices in other religious contexts.

That said, Summit's light touch and crisp writing style render this specialized monograph accessible to any scholar of religion or music, and elucidate attitudes and practices familiar to scholars and performers of Jewish liturgy with unusual clarity. His pioneering experiential approach to Jewish liturgy makes *Singing God's Words* an important addition to ethnomusicological literature and one that will inform scholarship that will surely follow in its wake.

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NOTES

1 Anne K. Rasmussen, *Women, the Recited Qur'an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010).

2 Gordon A. Dale, "A New Song: Feminism, Music, and Voice in Partnership Minyanim" (Master's thesis, Tufts University, 2012).