

**Jeffrey A. Summit.** *Singing God's Words: The Performance of Biblical Chant in Contemporary Judaism.* American Musicspheres Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 306 pp. \$27.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-049708-8.

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Jeffrey A. Summit has produced a masterful analysis of contemporary synagogue practice, offering insights into how Torah chant is performed and how it is understood by chanters, scholars, and worshippers. It is a major contribution to the understanding of a significant ritual in contemporary Judaism across denominational lines. In addition to being an ethnomusicologist, Summit is a rabbi and a regular participant in the ritual as a worshipper, chanter, and teacher of chanting. His own intimate knowledge of the ritual and his skill in performing the ritual combined with his scholarly training provide him with a unique lens to analyze the ritual. The combination of scholarship and his own role as a participant in the ritual enrich his study. A companion website allows readers to hear how Torah is chanted and to listen to familiar tunes that are sung during the Torah service ([www.oup.com/us/singinggodswords](http://www.oup.com/us/singinggodswords)). This enables the reader to experience the musical examples of the actual practice.

The book consists of eleven chapters divided into four sections: "The Tradition," "The Individual and the Experience of Chanting Torah," "The Performance," and "Torah and Technology." At the end of each chapter, Summit provides a brief summary titled "Final Thoughts." No review can fully capture the depth and breadth of this study.

The introduction sets forth the scope and purpose of the study. Its goal is to understand a significant ritual in a cross-denominational study as a marker of identity and spirituality. Torah chanting is a ritual that plays a uniquely important role across the denominations and therefore is the appropriate marker for understanding meaning across and within the denominations. Summit invites the participants to speak to their experience and their understanding of its meaning. The responses that he evokes range from the intellectual to the emotional. Chapter 2, "Chanting Torah," describes the ritual and its place in the worship service. One of the key elements in the ritual is that "it enables the individual to position him or herself at the epicenter of the worship service proximate to the most venerated religious symbols in the Jewish tradition" (p. 57). Chapter 3, "The Torah Service and the Re-creation of Revelation," is a detailed description of the ritual actions that surround the chanting of the Torah. It shares the thoughts and reactions of each of the participants. The chapter is rich in revealing the variety of feelings and experiences of the participants. The Torah ritual is a theatrical reenactment of the revelation at Mt. Sinai. Across and within denominational lines the experience of participation in the Torah service often evokes anxiety. It may be

strengthened or lessened by personal competence and the norms of the community.

Chapter 4, “Performing Community,” details how the selection of participants and special prayers for healing or gratitude for surviving a life threatening situation serve as a bulletin board for the events in the lives of members of the community. Through these prayers community is forged and members of the community are able to find strength in adversity and joy in celebration. In addition, the author describes the chanting of the Haftarah (the prophetic portions that accompany the weekly reading) and sermon. He points out that during the Torah service “many feel that a nexus is created between the worshipper and the divine.” The experience of meaning during the Torah service is often independent of theological beliefs. “The worshipper steps into a stream of ancient practice, feels a connection with the Jewish people and experiences the strength of community with family and friends” (p. 103).

While reading of the Torah is an obligation, chapter 5, “Singing Your Way into Sacred Space,” emphasizes that “most lay readers do not choose to read Torah out of obligation” (p. 123). People are drawn to chant for a variety of personal reasons. Some simply love to sing and perform and others want to engage intellectually with the text. The chapter seeks to detail the complex motivations of the participants. The next chapter, “The Same Act: Many Levels of Experience,” offers a more detailed description of the complexity of experience of those who chant and those who observe the chanter. Some learn the system of cantillation and understand the meaning of the Hebrew text. Others merely memorize the chant for the section that they are performing without understanding either the cantillation or the text. The chapter offers a rich array of reactions from participants and rabbis. The rabbis are often dissatisfied with the current state of chanting and even the construction of the Torah service.

In “Women Reading Torah,” Summit discusses in detail the participation of women in this central ritual and its significance for them and for the Jewish community. Outside of Orthodoxy it is now common for women to be full participants in worship. Women are an increasing presence in the rabbinate. Among the Modern Orthodox a great deal of controversy remains about the manner and extent of women’s participation in public worship. There now are increasing opportunities for women to chant Torah and serve in rabbinic roles. Some see women’s full participation in public worship as the boundary line between Orthodoxy and the other denominations. However, within the Modern Orthodox world there are a growing number of authorities who encourage women’s participation. In my view, it remains to be seen whether the issue will ultimately lead to a full schism within Modern Orthodoxy.

Chapter 8, “The Power of Music in the Transmission of Torah,” raises many issues dealing with what constitutes a proper performance. Since it is a text-based experience, accuracy becomes an important criterion for judging the performance. As Summit points out, “cantillation is not music in the ways that we think about music” (p. 183). However, the cantillation transforms the reading into a rite with historical resonance and authenticity. The next chapter, “Music and the Interpretation of Meaning,” emphasizes that the use of cantillation is designed to make the meaning of the text clear to the congregation. “While the aesthetics of Torah reading allow the reader little opportunity to be overly dramatic when chanting, this is now being challenged in some places” (p. 192). Summit discusses an innovation where in some communities the text is chanted in English or in a combination of English and Hebrew to bring out the meaning of the text especially in congregations where the majority of congregants lack the ability to understand the Hebrew text. Studies show that today individuals are engaged in a quest for meaning. Therefore, rabbis and congregations are experimenting with innovations

that provide approaches to the text which emphasize its content and relevance. Chapter 10, "The Transmission of Tradition in a Digital Age," discusses the use of technology to aid individuals to learn to chant. Teachers use increasingly sophisticated digital tools to teach cantillation. In some cases, the digital tools replace the interaction with a teacher. Summit wonders what the ultimate impact of the technology, in a digital age, will be on "the students' understanding of history, peoplehood and authentic practice" (p. 239).

The volume concludes with a reflection on the complexity of contemporary American Jewish life as reflected in the chanting of Torah. Summit offers an important lens through which to observe current trends in Jewish synagogue practice as viewed by participants. The book is rich in quotations from members of the community, which add much to our understanding of how American Jews feel about their synagogue experience. It is an important study and major contribution to our knowledge of the spirituality of American Jews across the denominational spectrum. It would be interesting to have a subsequent study on synagogue music in general, perhaps focusing on the Yamin Noraim. It would be worthwhile to understand how synagogue music functions as a vehicle for creating meaning, identity, and spirituality in contemporary American Judaism. A similar study of Israeli practice would be a valuable contribution to our knowledge base. The book is a real contribution to our understanding not only of an important ritual but also of how Jews who participate in the ritual experience it. *Singing God's Words* has broad implications for those interested in Jewish continuity. It is a must read for scholars of ritual practice, congregational rabbis, and those interested in the future of the Jewish community in America.

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