


**From the
Sh'ma Archive**

Jeremiah Lockwood
on the Shofar
and *Hazzanut*
www.shmadigital.com
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is most deeply embedded in sexual and gender politics. In it, she explores the tradition of incantation bowls that were buried, upside-down, beneath the homes of Jews (as well as non-Jews) in Babylon (present-day Iraq) throughout the second through sixth centuries of the Common Era. Inscribed on these bowls are women's pleas for fertility, blessings for the home, appeals to lovers, and pleas for protections from evil. The project integrates issues of gender and Jewishness as it tells stories about female desire, spirituality, and the power of magic in a world in which these practices were (and still are) seen as "not Jewish." To talmudic scholar Daniel Boyarin (a friend of Eisenberg's who provided initial encouragement for the project), these texts open up a complex and little-understood world in which Jews, and particularly Jewish women, operated: "a world rich with demons and former pagan gods who became demons, in which the boundaries between Jews and others were not as firmly and sharply drawn."

One of the most self-consciously radical dimensions of the project was the Friday-night Radical Ritual series Eisenberg curated, offering free presentations of the radical Japanese dance known as *butoh*, Jewish meditation, the sacred geometry of African braids, and — evoking the Jewish tradition of seeking sexual union

between husband and wife on Shabbat — sacred orgasm. Depending on one's perspective, her choice to present these offerings on Shabbat could be seen either as a complete subversion of tradition or as an attempt to nudge "disconnected" Jews to a point where they might consider trying on some kind of ritual observance. It's a daring strategy worthy of the name radical — pushing Jewish culture forward by both celebrating tradition in all of its diversity and rupturing it at the same time. And here we also experience "Jewish" undermining assumptions about "traditional" Jewish culture by emphasizing a historical moment when ancient Jews were at their most cosmopolitan.

Although it's not the key aspect of Eisenberg's brand of radical Jewish culture, her sonic eclecticism — punk, heavy metal, and Middle Eastern folk music — reflects the kind of sensibility that inspired Judaic scholar Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg to define the Jews as "sophisticated Bedouins." By absorbing cultural and religious Judaism into her life on her own terms, and developing some new performance strategies, Eisenberg may inspire a new generation of Jewish postmodern performance artists to consider what Jewish culture means to them and their audience. Wherever the Bowls Project goes next on tour, it has the potential to take Jewish culture in many new directions. 

Sound & Revelation: A Heard Mentality

GREG WALL

The Sinai experience was *the* transcendental moment in Jewish religious history. According to Jewish tradition, more than 2 million people had a mass prophetic experience that cemented their faith in a supernatural deity and in the phenomenon of revelation and prophecy.

In *Sefer Sh'mot*, the book of Exodus, the Torah says, "All the people saw the sounds, the flames, the sound of the shofar, and the mountain emitting smoke...." (Exodus 20:15) It was an extrasensory exchange in which the physical properties of sight and sound came together. Rabbi Akiva, quoted in the *Mechilta*, commented, "They saw what is heard, and heard what is seen."

Although the sights must have been overwhelming, it was the sounds themselves that defined the experience. Sound is the *ikar*, the

essential component, of any prophetic experience, and it predates any other physical or spiritual manifestation of the divine.

In the Torah's opening paragraph, we learn: "The Earth was unformed and void and the breath of God shook over the waters." The event is memorialized in Psalm 29: "The voice (sound) of God is upon the waters." But there was nothing and no one to hear. God's breath, the sonic footprint of holiness, preceded all creation, making waves in the process. God then formed the world with divine speech, the ten utterances of creation still reverberating millennia later.

The pinnacle of creation, human life, was initially on a superprophetic level. God speaks to the first humans, but there is no mention of them listening; the primordial couple enjoys an internal relationship with God. There is no

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((SOUND LINKS))

"Ofan" composed by Greg Wall/Greg Wall Music BMI, www.shma.com

Shai Bachar, keyboards; Dave Richards, bass; Aaron Alexander, drums — in Wall's group, Later Prophets.

need for sensory stimulation. After their mishap in the garden, the first humans tumble from their exalted original state to a solely external relationship with God, and they must thereafter rely on *nevuah*, or prophecy, a sensory-based experiential existence.

“*Va’yishm’u et kol Ad-nai Elokim mit’halaiikh bagan...*” “And they heard the sound of God in the garden.”

Post-Sinai prophesy would be predicated on sound, emitted by musicians channeling the original breath of God.

Abraham was tested for the tenth time as he brought Isaac up on the altar, and afterward — after finding a ram to replace his son — prophesied that his descendants would use the sound of the shofar to reunite with their Creator. “*Abraham called the name of that place ‘Ad-nai will see,’ as it is said, on that day, on God’s mountain, God will be seen.*” (Genesis 22:14) There needed to be a sensory evolution from sight to sound, and that was the ultimate purpose of Sinai.

The sound of the shofar, the voice of God, was seen, but only for an instant. Afterward, God tells the people: “*Do not make anything (visual) with me.*” (Exodus 20:20) To guard against being led astray by images, the relationship is to be based on sound. Sound, from the first divine breath, to the shofar, to the teachings, is to be transmitted *b’al peh*, orally. The visual world would be our downfall, as evidenced by the report of the spies. (Numbers 14:23) Their report to Moshe condemns that generation of Israelites to die in the desert; the

Promised Land is left to their children.

Post-Sinai prophesy would be predicated on sound, emitted by musicians channeling the original breath of God. Says the prophet Elisha, “*But now bring me a musician. Then it happened, when the musician played, that the hand of the Lord came upon him [Elisha].*” (II Kings 3:15)

For Samuel, David, Asaf, and other prophets, music accompanied the revelation; it became the sonic conduit between Heaven and Earth. And as the prophet Elijah experienced God, God was no longer in the wind, the earthquake, the fire... only in the *kol d’mama daka*, the still, small voice inside us all. (I Kings 19)

In Hebrew, the word “*kol*” refers to either a sound or a voice — something meant to be heard. Speech is heard, not seen. It is not by chance that Hebrew uses the words “*shomaya ani*,” “I hear,” when it wishes to say, “I understand.” The Talmud, when wanting to drive home a point, says: *sh’ma minah*, hear from this, or *ta sh’ma*, come and hear!

Sh’ma Yisrael: Comprehend, O Israel!

Rav Kook writes in *Orot Hakodesh*, “Waves from the higher, inner realm act on our souls ceaselessly. The stirrings of our inner spiritual sensibilities are the result of the sounds released by the violin of our souls as they listen to the echo of the sound emanating from the divine realm.”

Alas, we now live in exile, and prophetic sounds come through the voices of children, the lips and fingers of gifted musicians, the rhythm of sublime poets, and the sound of words.

Ta sh’ma: Come and listen!



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