

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE-JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION  
LOS ANGELES SCHOOL

Tof B'Yad  
Drum in Hand

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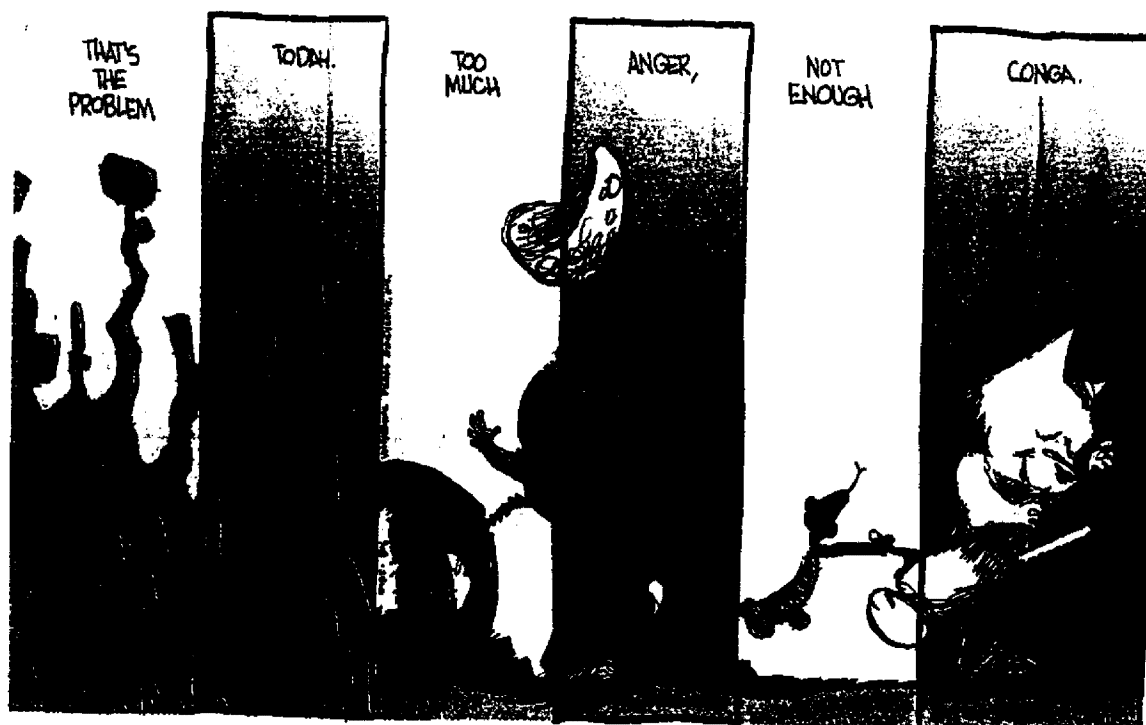
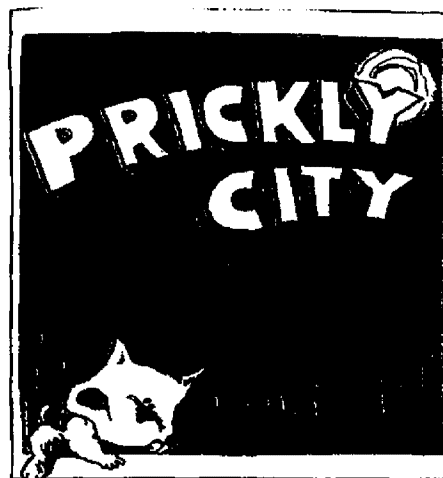
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**Tof B'Yad  
Drum in Hand  
A Guide to using Drum Circles as a Community Building Asset**

**By: Michael Mason, MAJCS, MSW**

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**Introduction:**

Simplicity and ease of use are the features that make the drum an accessible musical instrument. The drum circle is an ideal method for community building. The drum circle can provide unity and a sense of shared purpose between participants. This resource guide will consider the theory behind drumming and the drum circle, techniques for facilitating effective drum circles, Jewish texts that relate to making music and drumming, and an original drum circle facilitation and activity outline.

Babatunde Olantunji, the master African drummer has been quoted as saying that drumming as a community building tool “brings all people together. We are bringing people from all levels of life, understanding, and background together. That’s the wonderful thing about drumming (Hull, p. 125, 1998).” Group drumming can be used in a wide variety of situations to greatly influence those that participate. The benefits of a drum circle for participants include: “increased social interaction, greater musical accomplishment, and better mental and physical health for participants (Belli, 2001).”

So, what is a drum circle? Mickey Hart, former drummer for the Grateful Dead, has become very interested in the power of the drum, commenting that “the drum circle is a huge jam session. The ultimate goal is not precise rhythmic articulation or perfection of patterned structure, but the ability to entrain and reach the state of a group mind ([http://remocom/portal/pages/drum\\_circles/defined/Drum+Circles+Defined+What+is+a+Drum+Circle.html](http://remocom/portal/pages/drum_circles/defined/Drum+Circles+Defined+What+is+a+Drum+Circle.html)).”

Drumming circles in a Jewish context can provide a number of positive outcomes. Drumming can help to provide a meaningful and engaging Jewish worship experience as one can find at Ikar, a new religious community that has been established to combine

Judaism with social justice causes. Attendees at Ikar Shabbat services are drawn in by the drumming and singing that is a signature part of the prayer experience.

Drumming in a group setting also provides an opportunity for informal Jewish learning. Wilshire Boulevard Temple of Los Angeles recently began including a drumming circle during it's Wednesday night high school program. Participants reported that they felt a sense of connection to fellow drummers in the group as well as being exposed to a unique type of informal Jewish learning by using the drum as a prop to create sound effects during story telling.

### **Theory of the Drumming Circle:**

Drumming is pervasive in our lives, and many of us are not even aware that we all have a drum inside of us; our hearts beat a steady rhythm twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. Our internal rhythms make the drum a very easy instrument to play. Everyone can pick up a drum and make a sound. We can encourage those who wish to begin drumming to “forget everything else, and just let the music transport you to happiness (Laity, 2003).”

Clandos in an article titled “Healing Beat: free workshops reveal drumming’s therapeutic power” pinpoints the effectiveness of community drum circles. In that article, Robert Friedman is quoted as saying “drumming allows people to let out their joy, fear and anger, and by letting those out, that creates better health. Everyone can drum. It is a universal force that is ancient and healing (Clandos, 2001).” The ease of drumming for novices is also a key part of Friedman’s thinking. He says that “In ten minutes, someone can learn to hit the drum and make themselves heard in the world and sound good (Clandos, 2001).” Participation in drum circles is enhanced by the ability to play with other people. It is an easy way to experience making music with other people (2001).

The Heart of the Circle, by Holly Blue Hawkins also elucidates the power that drumming can have in community building. Hawkins sites the power of individuals drumming together as an extremely powerful means of unification. She believes that drumming goes “beyond language and belief system (Hawkins, p. 18, 1999).” Part of the reason that Hawkins believes that this can happen is that most people who play drums in drum circle settings are beginners and have a beginners mind. Hawkins elaborates and

says qualities of the beginners mind are that "there are no mistakes or missed notes, no inner critic, no performance, just freshness (Hawkins, p. 22, 1999)." Hawkins focuses on the ability of the group to step away from what they are comfortable doing, and to let themselves play in a carefree way.

Hawkins places much of the success of a drum circle experience on participants being "willing to let go of the need to do it right, if they can evict that inner critic and persist, there will usually be a point when something shifts automatically and the group finds its natural rhythm (Hawkins, p. 45, 1999)." In our culture it is becoming difficult to find groups that are willing to take these steps. Drumming circles could be the ideal place to bring people together on a level playing field. Hawkins details a key way for drummers within a circle to stay focused and even. She calls this anchor drumming, and it swerves to "hold the energy for the participants, acting as a focal point, grounding, vehicle or background (Hawkins, p. 47, 1999)."

The Economist, a British periodical, echoes these sentiments by equating the evolution of a drum circle to the creation of a community. Furthermore, the notion that the drum circle is for a particular type of person is refuted by stating that when any group of people gets together to play things happen. The drum circle is certainly not an individual experience, and the spontaneity of creating music is unique within every different group of individuals (2003).

In the Los Angeles Times article, "The Beat Federation" written by Susan Carpenter, it becomes obvious that the drum circle, which once only featured "hippies and new age (2003)" types has reached a new audience. The drum circle is said to draw a "societal cross section (2003)." The drum circle fulfills a desire to connect people in a



simple manner; "beat by beat (2003)." An example of such a diverse audience can be found at the Venice beach drum circle, which occurs every Sunday. The drum circle draws a crowd that "brings everybody from everywhere, every instrument, every age, every skill level, every religion, every everything (2003)."

Playing the drum is the simplest means of entering a relationship with a musical instrument. Arthur Hull, who is credited as being the father of the modern drum circle, is quoted as saying "We are rhythmic animals, and drumming is the most simple thing that we as strangers can do together to communicate (2003)." Hull also touches upon the notion that anyone can drum, and that there does not need to be a high level of musical training (2003).

The website [www.drums.org](http://www.drums.org) features an interview with Hull in which he discusses his theories on drum circles. Hull discusses the entry level drum circle. In this setting, the drummers involved are "people who use drums for different purposes, all come together to share their rhythmical spirit to create a drum song with the help of a facilitator, a person who takes what participants offer in their in-the moment and helps them mold it into a synergized harmonic rhythm force that creates a strong feeling of synergy and community amongst the different players (<http://drums.org/dng/arthurdc.htm>)."

The drum circle, in the words of Christine Stevens, "is a modern day elixir, providing participants with the experience of belonging, connecting, and sharing (Belli, 2001)." Belli engages the idea that participation in a drum circle provides emotional uplift for those that are involved. "Drumming can also help people just plain feel better.

If being happy can help people get well and stay well, it's a tool that needs to be more widely used (Belli, 2003)."

In the book, The Soul of Education, Kessler discusses the power of rhythm exercises and drumming for young people in school settings. The author observed that in a classroom setting those children that would drum could "get lost together as they let go of words and concentrate on the simple, yet riveting, rhythms of syncopation and alternation (Kessler, p. 86, 2000)." The author elaborates and says that individuals involved in the drumming circles create a dynamic where everyone feels that they are a contributor regardless of skill level which enhances the feelings of connection to other participants (2000). Kessler, demonstrates another key aspect of the allure of drum circles. Spontaneity is a key to the success of drumming and "this capacity and freedom to improvise is essentially the impulse to play (Kessler, p. 86, 2000)."

In an article appearing in the periodical Human Resources, called "Drum Up Teen Spirit" by Amanda Nottage, other benefits of groups drumming are addressed such as a "feeling of unity that is very difficult to achieve (Nottage, 2004)." Individuals in drum circles are in essence part of a team. They each play their own unique part, and contribute to the group process by listening to each other. Hull is quoted as saying that "everyone is in a circle and the playing field is even, to make music each person has a part to play and must listen to one another in developing the piece (Cooper, 1996)." The single most important aspect of a drum circle, according to Hull, is for participants and facilitator to listen to each other. If they do not listen, then the drum circle will be a failure (1996).

“Could the Drum Circle be the next Ropes Course?” by Christine Stevens, maintains that drumming circles are the team building activity of the future. The key difference between the two is that the ropes course features one person participating in the activity at a time as other participants stand around and cheer, while in a drum circle, everyone is playing together. Stevens says that the drum circle also has different defining elements such as the evolving goal due to the contributions of the various players in the circle and the unlimited resources of a group of people improvising music together; rules are spontaneously created in a drum circle to best serve the ability of the group to reach their potential ([www.ubdrumcircles.com](http://www.ubdrumcircles.com)).

The Aquarius-Atlanta.com website posted an article written by Debbie Ellison called “Drumming – the Heartbeat of the Universe.” Ellison outlines why drumming and drum circles have become more prevalent. She states that drumming “encourages cultural tolerance and understanding, community connectedness, and mental, emotional, and physical healing (Ellison, 2004).” She also believes that drumming serves to “calm and focus the mind, producing a state of peace and deep relaxation (Ellison, 2004).” Furthermore, in the article, research findings from the Rhythmic Entrainment Institute (REI) are outlined. REI has found that “repeated rhythmic drumming patterns were found to improve communication skills, social interaction, attention span, memory, motor coordination, depression, and anxiety (Ellison, 2004).”

### **Drumming in a Jewish Context:**

Jacob Kabb, a Jewish drum facilitator from Atlanta, Georgia was gracious enough to make himself available for an interview to discuss how he has facilitated drum circles in a Jewish setting. Kabb said that the response to his drum circles has been overwhelmingly positive; he said that people just love it. They genuinely enjoyed being there, and it allows individuals to hook into a Jewish world that is new. He says that drumming is something that can be welcoming to anybody regardless of their knowledge or skill level. Kabb often starts a drum circle with a chant that people know and are comfortable singing.

The importance of drumming for Kabb's personal Judaism can be found in the ability for it to be a transdenominational experience. He does not feel that it is limited to a sect of Judaism. He often feels that drumming gives people something to pray with, and that having a little drumming in a religious setting can give energy. Drumming can be used as a warm-up before a prayer service. Kabb feels that drumming can hook individuals into a Jewish world that is entirely new to them.

When asked about facilitating drum circles Kabb encourages individuals to "just go ahead." He says that sometimes specific instruction is called for, but sometimes it is not. He begins each session by talking a little and to assure those in attendance that they can do whatever they want. Additionally, if the individuals in attendance have never drummed, he will give them a rhythm from which to begin. Kabb firmly believes that people want an experience, and are rarely disappointed by a drum circle.

The University of Southern California Hillel has hosted several community drum circles on campus. Rabbi Jonathan Klein, Rabbinic Director at the University of

Southern California Hillel, has led the circle several times and believes that drumming and rhythm bring people together. He feels that it is a unique way for Jews on the USC campus to come together to express their identity. The individuals who were most motivated in the drum circles were the ones who had the least experience.

The article "Releasing the inner drummer is good for the spirit" which appeared in the March, 2001 issue of the Jewish Bulletin of Northern California states that a drum circle is a powerful musical and community building device. Of particular interest is the fact that this article appears in a Jewish newspaper. It is important to note that drumming has not happened extensively in a Jewish context. Alexandra Wall calls drumming a "vehicle for our spirits", and "we let our spirits out when we play with each other, which is a very intimate thing." Wall asserts that the drum circle is a powerful way for individuals to experience a feeling of centeredness (2001).

## **Drumming as a Therapeutic Tool:**

An article on the website for the American Music Conference organization outlines seven therapeutic elements of group drumming:

1. *"Drumming is accessible" everyone can do it regardless of experience level. "Drumming is good music";*
2. *"Drumming is expressive" those that participate can relieve stress and untangle their emotions.*
3. *"Drumming is physical" hand eye coordination, and other motor skills are important for playing the drum.*
4. *"Drumming is powerful",*
5. *"Drumming is communication" the language of rhythm is universal.*
6. *"Drumming is bonding" through drumming individuals feel a sense of connectedness in a group setting.*
7. *"Drumming is cognitive", those that become involved in drumming circles require "perception, attention, and memory.*

- Excerpted from [http://amc-music.com/rmm/drumming\\_circle.htm](http://amc-music.com/rmm/drumming_circle.htm).

Drumming can also help individuals in overcoming drug addiction. The American Journal of Public Health has published an article by Winkelman called "Complementary therapy for addiction" which details the positive health effects of drumming. Those that work with addicts in a music making capacity state that drumming "teaches nurturing, respect, participation, and personal relationships (Winkelman, 2003)." In fact those that participate in these settings, both participants and leaders, can have "experiences that can mirror the recovery process – confidence, uncertainty, insecurity in leading, security in following, desire for change, or novelty.

Drumming activities allow spontaneous expressions of leadership skills (Winkelman, 2003)." Winkelman also tells that drum circles create community and an aspect of centeredness for those that are attempting to overcome addiction. The act of

drumming has other positive effects such as allowing individuals to relax, and experience the feeling of natural pleasure.

An article written by Bittman, et al., entitled "Composite effects of group drumming music therapy on modulation of neuroendocrine-immune parameters in normal subjects" establishes the following principles as benefits of group drumming:

1. *Response to rhythm is basic to human functioning, making these percussion activities and techniques highly motivating to people of all ages and backgrounds.*
2. *Pure percussion activities are interesting and enjoyable to all people regardless of ethnic and cultural background, musical preferences, or age range, making these activities useful in creating groups that are fun and positive for a wide variety of people.*
3. *Participation in active group percussion experiences has physical benefits including sustained physical activity, relaxation, and use of fine motor skills.*
4. *A strong sense of group identity and a feeling of belonging is created because participants are actively making music together and because the sustained repetition of the steady beat brings people together physically, emotionally, and mentally (rhythmic entrainment).*
5. *Percussion activities can be done with little or no previous musical background or training, making these experiences accessible to all people.*

-Excerpted from the article "Composite effects of group drumming music therapy on modulation of neuroendocrine-immune parameters in normal subjects", by Bittman, et al. (2001).

## Creating the Circle:

The book The Art and Heart of Drum Circles by Christine Stevens is a good guide for those that are attempting to begin drum circles, and are new to the idea of facilitating musical experiences. Stevens has begun working with the Remo community drum center in North Hollywood, California. She has also created a company called UpBeat Drum circles which specialize in organizing rhythm experiences for groups.

In the book Stevens outlines eight principles for drum circles. The principles are as follows:

1. *There is no audience: Everyone is part of the musical experience.*
2. *There is no rehearsal: The music does not come from reading notes on a sheet of music written in the past. It is improvised in the moment.*
3. *There is no teacher: Instead, the drum circle is lead by a facilitator who has a dual focus; to build the musicality of the group while also building the sense of community and connection.*
4. *It is inclusive: Everyone is welcome; all ages and all levels of ability.*
5. *Spontaneity thrives: There really is no plan except the importance of supporting the music and community connection.*
6. *Its about much more than drumming: In fact a survey at the Remo Recreational Music Center found that the highest ranked reason people attended the Tuesday night drum circles was actually to reduce stress! (50 percent) Only 35 percent reported they were there to learn how to drum.*

-Excerpted from The Art and Heart of Drum Circles. Stevens. (2003)

Stevens also introduces the concept of entrainment which is "the law that causes two natural rhythms to naturally line up when placed near one another (Stevens, p. 14, 2003)." The only thing that can stop entrainment from happening is the mind of individuals who close themselves off from the possibility of experiencing entrainment (2003).

Christian Huygens, a Dutch scientist, is credited with discovering entrainment. Huygens placed two pendulum clocks side by side and left them overnight and the next day they were found swinging in perfect unison. A technical definition, from Dr.



Michael Thaut, describes entrainment as “the frequency of a moving system being determined by the frequency of another moving system (Friedman, p. 43, 2000).”

Another definition of entrainment by Redmond states that “when a group of people play a rhythm for an extended period of time, their brain waves become entrained to the rhythm, and they have a shared brain wave state. The longer the drumming goes on, the more powerful the entrainment becomes. It’s really the oldest holy communion (Friedman, p. 42, 2000).”

The Healing Power of the Drum by Robert Friedman, describes entrainment found in drumming as the ability to “shift individuals out of their current states of mind (Friedman, p. 43, 2000).” For example, if a person is in an anxious or stressed state they can play a slow and steady rhythm that allows them to entrain their body to a slower speed (2000). The slower speed that Friedman is speaking about directly relates to the physical feeling that a person gets when they play a relaxed and steady rhythm.

## **Facilitation:**

Author and master drum circle facilitator Christine Stevens shares her experiences on what makes for effective group leading in The Art and Heart of Drum Circles.

Stevens equates the drum circle facilitator to that of a coach; stating that the facilitator should “inspire, direct, conduct, and lead a group of people through the discovery of the rhythm that has been waiting inside them all along (Stevens, p. 29, 2003).”

She highlights the importance of facilitation cues for those that are going to lead drum circles by emphasizing that cues must be clear and consistent. The ability to conduct is also important and conviction and authenticity are the keys for this skill (2003).

Stevens outlines several important elements that all drum facilitators need to remember before drumming begins. These include: brief stretching, relaxation of shoulders, removal of jewelry, demonstrating drumming technique, and proper hand position (2003). Stevens tells of the importance of watching for those that are not paying attention to what others are doing. If there are individuals who are not paying attention, Stevens suggests that “instead of singling them out, ask everyone in the drum circle to practice “heads up” drumming and look across the circle (Stevens, p. 57, 2003).”

Stevens also offers four key elements to designing a drumming program:

1. *Know your audience: Go into the drum circle knowing as much as you can about the people you are working with and what they want to achieve. If you don't know ask a few questions at the beginning, like “how many people are at a drum circle for the first time?”*
2. *Know your purpose: If the group is there for stress reduction, design a program that keeps them laughing. If the group is there for a spiritual experience, have a good song of chant ready to share. If the group is there for empowerment, consider a segment where you invite people from the group to facilitate.*
3. *Consider the group size: There are some great drum circle games that work better in smaller, more intimate circles. Yet, in smaller groups, people have less*

*anonymity. I prefer to work with a minimum of fifteen people. In larger groups, you may want to add more space and quiet to balance the noise level.*

4. *Pace the program: The typical drum circle is one to two hours long, but some may be specifically thirty minutes. A common mistake is to run through all your "tricks" in the first fifteen minutes. Pace yourself. Once in a while, simply join the group and enjoy the jam.*

*-Excerpted from The Art and Heart of Drum Circles, by Christine Stevens, 2003.*

Stevens also suggests that the closing of the circle is as important as starting it. She recommends that the circle be ended with a question such as "Does anyone have anything they want to say about this experience tonight (Stevens, p. 66, 2003)?" The reason for emphasis on closing the circle is so that participants don't leave feeling off center (2003).

Drum Circle Spirit, by Arthur Hull, details many facets of successful facilitation.

Hull states that facilitation is the process by which individuals make activities easier for other individuals. He has compiled the following philosophy for facilitation:

- *Know your purpose – Have a good understanding of your role in the event. See the event as a complete experience created in cooperation between you and the circle, with a beginning, a middle, and an end.*
- *Have a clearly defined goal for the event and clearly define that goal to the participants (as appropriate) at the opening of the circle.*
- *Understand the use of the physical circle as an equalizer for mutual communication using sight, hearing, and participation.*
- *Understand the idea of orchestrational position and use it to communication power point to focus attention and direct the group.*
- *Understand the importance of body language for orchestration.*
- *Understand the use of windows of communication (quiet spaces between the rhythms) for giving verbal directions for setting up the next rhythmical piece and for delivering community-building metaphors to the participants.*
- *Educate the group to be self-facilitating by helping participants identify fundamental elements needed for a successful rhythm circle.*

- *Read and assess the participants in the circle as one body to determine the rhythmical expertise, listening ability, and ability to participate as a group. This gives you, as the facilitator, the ability to make decisions about challenging the group to its highest potential while avoiding crisis mode for the participants.*
- *Understand transition points in the process of a circle, and how to use them to further improve the quality of the music being produced.*
- *Open and close the circle in ritual fashion.*

Excerpted from: Drum Circle Spirit, by: Arthur Hull, 1998.

Community drum circles rely on the facilitator. Hull is careful to articulate that the facilitator should absolutely not dominate the drum circle. Rather, he suggests that “the ultimate objective of a community drum circle facilitator is to make yourself obsolete by guiding the circle to a place where they won’t need to be facilitated to play well together (Hull, p. 37, 1998).” The facilitator should be comfortable leading the process, but then also be willing to fade into the background as members of the circle begins to feel comfortable. Facilitators should also abide by the golden rule; “have fun creating fun (Hull, p. 39, 1998).”

Hull also tells of the role of the drum circle facilitator. He says that the facilitator is “an orchestra leader who takes the in-moment music being created by the individual parts of a drum circle orchestra and directing and focusing it into a harmony and giving it a direction (<http://drums.org/dng/arthurdc.htm>).” The facilitator should be able to corral the group if they are drifting, keep them within the chosen time signature, or help start a new rhythm (<http://drums.org/dng/arthurdc.htm>).

### **Drumming at Ikar:**

Ikar is a Conservative leaning Jewish community that was founded in Los Angeles, California in the late spring of 2004. Rabbi Sharon Brous is the leader of the community which focuses on issues related to social justice. Rabbi Brous was instrumental in the formation of a "drum choir" that provides music alongside the singing of the community during Shabbat prayer services. She says that drumming allows those that attend Ikar to experience prayer for themselves, and that the rhythms created by the drums give them the space to do that.

The Ikar community chooses not to use melodic instruments for two reasons. The first is that congregants may choose to sit back and listen to the beautiful music that is created rather than be an integral part of the musical experience. The second is that when a musician is playing a melodious instrument, such as a guitar, there is a chance that a part of the instrument will break. If this were to happen there would be temptation to fix the broken part which would be a violation of Shabbat. Drums are sturdy and durable and generally do not break easily.

Rabbi Brous feels that drumming adds to the Ikar experience immensely, but does acknowledge that it can be distracting for some people. She mentions that she sees people swaying and dancing to the rhythm created by the drums and voices and feels that it creates an environment in which people do not sit passively.

The individuals that play in the drum choir are from very different musical backgrounds, but all come together to play. The majority of the players find as much spiritual fulfillment from the worship at Ikar as they do from the free form drum circle that follows services. There have been upwards of ten participants in this activity on any

given Shabbat. It seems that many people come to Ikar as much to pray in a unique setting with a focus on social justice as to listen and be a part of the music made by the singers and drummers.

I surveyed the drummers at Ikar through a questionnaire regarding their experiences. The questionnaire was sent via email as an attachment, and was returned to me upon completion. Specifically, they were asked to discuss the following questions:

1. Why is drumming important to you?
2. Have you used drumming in another capacity besides Ikar?
3. What has the response been?
4. Is drumming an important part of your Judaism?
5. Does drumming contribute to your feeling of community? Why or why not?

Responses varied greatly from each of the participants, and their perspectives on drumming and Judaism were fascinating. In response to the first question, Why is drumming important to you?, one participant stated that rhythm has been an important part of his life since childhood. Another said that playing the drum allowed for a clear path to the divine; he felt that drumming was a door that could lead to the holy.

Drumming was also documented as a way for participants to express themselves musically in a more physical manner. According to this participant, drumming gave a sense of group process and heightened concentration. The participant stressed the importance of listening skills when drumming with Ikar. The ability to be creative in a group setting was also stressed. Another individual said that drumming was a way of channeling the Shabbat energy; it has an ability to transport people. Drumming allows the people in attendance to open up their singing. Furthermore, this individual said that when drumming is done well, it's great.

The second question: Have you used drumming in another capacity besides Ikar?, allowed the participants to expand the role of their drumming beyond the Ikar setting. A participant stated that playing the drum provides a simply yet deep and transcendent energy through music. Another described participation in drumming circles and also private meditation practice. One individual described drumming in other prayer service settings. The participant stated that the ability to hand the drum off to another person in the setting was key to getting individuals involved in the service. The drum was used as an easy way to get people into the musical process, and it was a way to get investment and participation from the group at large.

Generally, the individuals who participated in the survey found that the response to their drumming has been extremely positive. One mentioned that drumming was still a very new entry into Jewish circles. In worship situations where the use of the drum was introduced the response has been positive. The drum has been a refreshing addition, and according to one participant has given individuals a "new way to hear old favorites". A group of drummers can serve to alleviate the barrier between the leaders of the service and the community.

The individuals were also asked to respond to the question: Is drumming an important part of your Judaism? One participant replied by saying that drumming and Judaism were just beginning to enter into a mutual relationship, but stressed excitement about the possibilities. Another individual stated that it is a chosen path to meditate and pray. One said that it wasn't important, but that there was personal enjoyment experienced when drumming was present and that it deepened the experience for them.

The last question: Does drumming contribute to your feeling of community? Why or why not?, provided an interesting set of answers. One individual stated that rhythm is best experienced collectively and that drumming can tremendously increase a feeling of community. Another participant said that they felt that it provided a wonderful connection between players. Lastly, an individual said that successful drumming provided a great feeling of connection. For this person, drumming has "yielded very positive feelings and experiences."



### **The Wilshire Boulevard Temple Experience:**

On Wednesday March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2005 I brought ten drums to Wilshire Boulevard Temple in Los Angeles, California. The goal was to put some of the principles of drum circles and facilitation into practice, and to see how they worked. I also wanted to gauge the participants understanding of the informal educational aspects of my curriculum and community building aspects of the drumming circle.

Following dinner, I set up ten chairs in a circle and ten volunteers came and picked out a drum. The participants averaged sixteen years of age, and there was a 50/50 male to female ration. Approximately half of the volunteers had experience playing the drums, and the others had little or no past drumming experience. Prior to anyone playing drums at all, I taught the group a series of hand signals or cues that I would use with them to help guide the group. I showed them how when I shook my hands I wanted them to rumble their drums. When I raised my hands, I wanted them to get louder, and subsequently when I lowered them I wanted them to get softer. I also demonstrated the cue to stop playing.

#### **Cues used by the facilitator at Wilshire Boulevard Temple:**



**Stop**



**Louder**



**Softer**



**Rumble**

I led them through a beginning exercise designed to show them that they all had rhythm. Following this, I let the group indulge in a free form drumming jam. I encouraged everyone to find their own part in the circle, and to be as creative as they could. I walked around the circle, and helped some of the participants find their part. I encouraged people to switch seats so that they would be near a more experienced player to make them feel at ease. As the drumming began, I asked everyone to look across the circle and make eye contact with the person across from them. The goal was to let people know that they were not alone in the experience, and the smiles that shot across the room were very exciting to see.

Following the free jam, we began an activity called "Beats in the House" which links a standard measure of music in 4/4 time with the Jewish value of Shalom Bayit. The goal of this activity was to get the group to work together as a team. I began the exercise by playing a simple four note beat, and then asked the group to go around the circle with each of them playing one beat. The original beat went around the circle, and eventually I changed the original beat to something more difficult. I found that the level of concentration and listening that would be needed to complete this activity was challenging and rewarding even to myself, as facilitator. The group took quickly to this activity, and I continued to gradually made the rhythm more complex.

After about fifteen minutes spent on the "Beats in the House" activity, we switched to a brief discussion of the Passover story. What made the story unique was the drum circles ability to add sound effects to the parts that involved the Red Sea and Pharoah's army. During the part of the story in which Pharoah's army was chasing the Jews through the desert, I asked the members of the group to rumble their drums slowly

at first and then progressively louder; this symbolized the impending closeness of the Egyptian army. When it was time for the Israelites to cross the Red Sea, I asked the assembled group to rub the top of their drums to create the sound of water flowing past. They would shift between the ocean sounds and the rumbling of Pharoah's army. This aspect of the experience went better than I anticipated, and added to the tension of the story itself.

The story continued, and I told the group about Miriam, Moses and Aaron's sister, who led the celebration upon the crossing of the ocean. I told the group that Miriam had played a *Tof*, a drum also commonly translated as a tambourine. I asked the group to think about the sense of celebration that the Israelites must have felt with their freedom. I asked them to think about a time that they felt extreme joy or thankfulness. We then went around the circle and shared our experiences. After the sharing, I asked the group to do another free style jam with our theme being joy. The group reacted well to this, and played together for about seven minutes.

At this point our time was winding down, and I decided that we should do a call and response activity. I would play a beat, and the group would have to repeat after me. I began simply, but gradually would get more complicated. The group seemed to love this activity.

Following this activity, I profusely thanked the group for participating, and asked if anyone had anything they wanted to share. I decided to do this because in much of the literature that I had read the importance of closing the circle was well documented. I then asked the group to fill out a brief questionnaire which asked them to reflect about their drumming experience. I tabulated the results, and they follow on the next page.

## Drumming at Wilshire Boulevard Temple

*Please answer the following questions on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being the least and 5 being the most.*

Responses Averaged:

1. Was the facilitator welcoming? 4.9
2. Were the facilitator's instructions clear? 4.6
3. My level of drumming experience prior to this evening? 2.7
4. I understood Beats in the House and the relationship to Shalom Bayit? 4.6
5. I understood why joy, thankfulness, and play were important through the story of Miriam? 4.1
6. I enjoyed the drum circle experience. 5
7. I felt like an important part of the group. 5
8. I felt comfortable playing the drums in a group setting. 5
9. I would participate in a drumming circle again? 5

*Please answer the following questions.*

1. What was your favorite part of the drumming circle?

The Jam Session, playing the drum, seeing people who prior thought they were not capable and then watching them fully participate, jamming', freestyle, drumming with other kids, the part where we could do our own thing with everyone, great to express thoughts/feelings, call and response.

2. What was your least favorite part?

People drumming when the facilitator was talking, going in a circle (1 note per person, beats in the house), the part when we weren't drumming,

3. Please list five words that you associate with your drumming experience.

Amazing, beautiful, peaceful, spectacular, in the house, loud (2), crazy, fun, rhythmic, bonding, awesome, stupendous, cool, excellent, intense, beat, loose, creative, group, in, fulfilling, relief, alleviating, powerful, connections, fun, fulfilling, ecstatic, joyous, excellent,

4. What were your overall feelings about the experience?

It was awesome (4), It was fun, Excellent bonding/learning experience, good, fulfilling, powerful, overwhelming (in a good way).

## **Jewish Texts About Music:**

Sources Compiled by :  
Rabbi Jonathan Klein, Rabbinic Director  
University of Southern California Hillel  
Additional Text Compiled by:  
Michael Mason  
MAJCS / MSW

### **1. 1 Samuel 16**

Now the Spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD began to terrify him. Saul's courtiers said to him, "An evil spirit of God is terrifying you. Let our lord give the order and the courtiers in attendance on you will look for someone who is skilled at playing the lyre, whenever the evil spirit of God comes over you, he will play it and you will feel better." So Saul said to his courtiers, "Find me someone who can play well and bring him to me." One of the attendants spoke up, "I have observed the son of Jess the Bethlehemite who is skilled in music; he is a stalwart fellow and a warrior, sensible in speech, and handsome in appearance, and the LORD is with him." Whereupon Saul sent messengers to Jesse to say, "Send me your son David, who is with the flock." Jesse took an ass laden with bread, a skin of wine, and a kid, and sent them to Saul by his son David. So David came to Saul and entered his service; Saul took a strong liking to him and made him one of his arms-bearers. Saul sent word to Jesse: "Let David remain in my service, for I am pleased with him." Whenever the evil spirit of God came upon Saul, David would take the lyre and play it; Saul would find relief and feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him.

### **2. The Power of music**

Through holy music, you can come to the level of prophecy. For the essence of d'veikut (communion with G-d) with G-d is through melody.

-Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, *Likkutei Aitzot*, N'ginah, #3

3. The Rebbe said that it is good to make a habit of inspiring yourself with melody. There are great concepts included in each holy melody, and they can arouse your heart and draw it toward G-d. Even if you cannot sing well, you can still inspire yourself with a melody sung to the best of your ability while alone at home. For the loftiness of melody is beyond all measure.

-Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, *Sichot HaRaN*, #273

4. Psalm 150

Hallelujah

Praise G-d in his sanctuary; praise Him in the sky, His stronghold

Praise Him for His mighty acts;

Praise Him for His exceeding greatness

Praise Him with blasts of the horn;

praise him with harp and lyre.

Praise Him with Timbrel (drum) and dance;

praise Him with lute and pipe.

Praise him with resounding symbols;

Praise Him with loud crashing cymbals.

Let all that breathes praise the LORD.

Hallelujah.

## Drum Circle Facilitation and Activity Outline

### I. Introduction

- Participants introduce themselves
- Warm Up (stretching)
- Two Deep Breaths (In through the nose, out through the mouth)
- Relax Shoulders (Shake Arms)
- Take off rings and bracelets
- Tone techniques – Bass and Tone
- Teach Cues – Raise hands (get louder), Lower Hands (softer), Shake Hands (rumble)

### II. Drum Warm Up

#### 1<sup>st</sup> Round

1	2	3	4
Bass	-----	-----	-----

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> Round

1	2	3	4
Bass	-----	Bass	-----

#### 3<sup>rd</sup> Round

1	2	3	4
Bass	Bass	Bass	-----

#### 4<sup>th</sup> Round

1	2	3	4
Bass	Bass	Bass	Bass

#### 5<sup>th</sup> Round

1	2	3	4
Bass	Tone	Bass	-----

#### 6<sup>th</sup> Round

1	2	3	4
Bass	Tone	Bass	Tone



### **III. Drum Ball**

This activity is designed to create group cohesion.

Can be used as a name game, or other type of icebreaker

The key is that the group must keep the beat going.

**Materials:** 3 nerf balls

- Facilitator begins by giving an individual in the group a nerf ball.
- The facilitator then asks the person to say the name of someone in the circle and then throw the ball to them.
- That person then says the name of another individual in the circle and throws them the ball.
- The facilitator then asks for the ball back.
- The facilitator stresses that the game requires a lot of concentration.
  
- The facilitator instructs the group to play a very simple beat in 2/2 time. The group begins to play the beat so that the bass tone is struck every one and two.
- The facilitator then introduces the ball, and says that the group has to pass the ball around the circle as demonstrated before.
- The catch is that the group cannot stop playing the beat.
- As the group gets better with using just one ball, the facilitator will add another.

Questions for follow up:

1. How was that experience?
2. What made it easy?
3. What made it challenging?
4. How did you work together as a team?
5. Did having the drums keep a rhythm help or hurt your abilities to complete this task?

#### **IV. Free Jam**

- Begin with a bass note on 1.
- As people feel comfortable they can add other notes.
- Remind participants to watch for facilitator Cues.
- Facilitator can go around the circle to and work with those that are not as experienced.
- The facilitator can offer simple suggestions and ideas for the drummer to use to enhance their group drumming experience.

#### **V. Call and Response**

- In this activity, the facilitator will play a beat, and the group will repeat it.
- Gradually, the complexity will be increased.
- Eventually, the facilitator will ask others in the group to lead.

## **VI. Beats in the House**

### **Beats in the House**

#### **Goal:**

Link Shalom Bayit (Peace in the House) to the rhythm found in a four beat measure of music.

#### **Objective 1:**

Show importance of people doing their individual part to contribute to peace in the house.

#### **Objective 2:**

Participants will work in groups to create a rhythm where four people play one whole note in a four beat measure.

#### **Introduction:**

Explain Shalom Bayit. It is peace in the house. It can be found in a family, on a sports team, in a community, at religious school, or in a drum circle. It is people working together as individuals can become a cohesive whole.

Explain a measure of music. A measure of music is dictated by the time signature. For our purposes the time signature will be 4/4. That means that there are four whole notes or beats in the measure.

Linking the measure of music and Shalom Bayit: If we all do our part, listen, and pay attention we will have peace in the measure of music. All of the beats will flow and it will sound good. If we don't listen, pay attention, and support each other then it will be messy and our measure or house will not be peaceful.

#### **Activity:**

1. Play a four beat phrase. Bass – Bass – Tone – Tone
2. Slowly pass the phrase around the circle with each individual playing a single note.
3. Speed up the as the group becomes comfortable with the format.
4. Change the four beat phrase. Bass – Tone – Bass – Tone
5. Start slowly, and then speed up.
6. Change the four beat phrase. Tone – Bass – Bass – Tone

## **VII. Miriam's Joy, Thankfulness, and Play Jam**

### **Miriam – Joy, Thankfulness, and Play**

#### **Goal:**

- Show the importance of joy and thankfulness to the history of the Jewish Community

#### **Objective:**

Show the link between the story of Miriam and the importance of being thankful, and joy in our lives.

Engage participants by allowing them to use their drums as to enhance the story.

Quote: Exodus 15:19-20

*19: For the horses of Pharaoh, with his chariots and horsemen, went into the sea; and the LORD turned back on them the waters of the sea; but the Israelites marched on dry ground in the midst of the sea.*

*20: Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her in dance with timbrels.*

#### **Activity:**

Ask for an example of a time that the Jews were under intense stress or intense pressure; a time when it seemed like there was no escape.

The Israelites approached the Sea (The Group collectively rubs the head of their drum to make the sound of water), with Pharaoh's army quickly approaching (group performs a rumble at a low volume). The Sea parted (group brushes their drums to create the sound of water). The Israelites successfully crossed an ocean. Pharaoh's army was swallowed up (very loud rumble).

Once the Israelites were no longer threatened by the Egyptians, Miriam, Aaron's sister, celebrated by playing the tambourine. She let her spirit shine.

Now we will celebrate the things that we are thankful for. For example, our health, our families, our friends.

Ask group members to take a moment to think about what they are thankful for or what gives them joy. Encourage each group member to share what brings them joy.

Challenge the group to make the sound of joy on their drums

Start Quietly, and grow louder.

## **VII. Closing the Circle**

- Thank the participants for their enthusiasm and effort.
- Ask group members if they have anything that they would like to share before they leave.
- Ask the group to go around the circle and share the first word that comes to them describing their feelings following the drum circle experience.

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