

SUMMARY

This thesis/project is written in four chapters each encompassing one of the three stages of the project's development and execution. The final chapter includes a reflection on the project as a whole. The goals of this thesis were, one, for me to fully immerse in the psalms as prayer, liturgy, poetry, and song, and two, for me to reimagine and bring to life a new, practical use and meaning for the psalms in contemporary Reform Jewish ritual and worship. The materials used to achieve this goal included the primary Hebrew texts of the Psalms, several English translations, and English commentaries on the Psalms as well as scholarly articles on the Psalms and on *Hallel* specifically. Additionally, music, both digitally downloaded sheet music and recordings, were used towards the compilation of the new *hallel* itself.

This thesis contributes two things. First, through its content, this thesis helps *tefilah* leaders, and pray-ers to reimagine the role of the psalms as song, poetry, and as access points to deepened spirituality and a way of connecting the seemingly disparate parts of our lives in communal worship. Second, the existence of this thesis marks the start of a new paradigm of what it means to complete a rabbinic final project at HUC-JIR's New York Campus. This project is the first "Rabbinic Capstone Project", a new category of final projects now included alongside the traditional academic thesis and the text immersion in the, what I hope will be an ever-expanding, list of options for a rabbinic final project towards the requirements for ordination.

THE PSALMS AS LIVING LITURGY

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for
Ordination

Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion,
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MY INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALMS

In selecting my topic for my rabbinic thesis, there were a few elements that I felt were important to take into consideration. First, I was eager to continue to work on my Hebrew reading fluency. Second, I knew that I wanted to dedicate my time to a practical endeavor; a capstone project that would be enriching and meaningful to me as I conclude my time as a student and begin to transition into my professional rabbinic career.

The Psalms are practical. As they are part of the Old Testament, they appear widely in American religious culture. I experienced this as a student chaplain in Clinical and Pastoral Education. In the hospital, Jews and Christians alike, recited psalms in times of joy and in times of sorrow. The universal themes of the psalms, fear, suffering, rejoicing, are themes that reach all people, and thus the psalms served as a framework for me to formulate prayers and meditations with patients and families of all religions.

The Psalms appear in our liturgy, but I had never studied them in depth. Although I was familiar with a few lines of a few psalms, like those that appear in the *Kabbalat Shabbat* rubric, and in *Pesukei D'zimra*, the Hebrew was new for me, but certainly familiar, and understandable--perfect to help me achieve my goal of improving my Hebrew reading fluency.

Finally, the Psalms are songs or poems. By choosing to study them, I was excited to have the opportunity to include some of my other aptitudes and interests in this thesis, such as singing and visual technology. For me, the Psalms were the perfect text to immerse myself in, to craft into a practical yet innovative spiritual experience, and ultimately, to bring to my community beyond the pages of this document.

I knew almost nothing about the Psalms when I began, though I knew the Psalms that nearly everyone knows: Psalm 23 and Psalm 150. Here and there, I knew other bits and pieces from our Jewish liturgy. I enrolled in Rabbi Dr. Andrea Weiss' class on the Psalms and started my thesis (months before the course began) by working my way through her syllabus. At first, I ordered several books listed on the syllabus: *The Koren Tehillim*¹, Robert Alter's *The Book of Psalms*², Nahum Sarna's *On the Book of Psalms*³, and Walter Brueggemann's *The Message of the Psalms*⁴. My thesis advisor, Rabbi Dr. Sonja Pilz, gave me Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's *Psalms in Translation for Praying*⁵. In addition, having learned that I was working on the Psalms for my thesis, and knowing that I had a relationship with Rabbi Bernard Zlotowitz z"l (a member of my childhood congregation), my mentor, Rabbi Elyse Frishman, gave me Martin Rozenberg and Bernard Zlotowitz's *The Book of Psalms*⁶. Needless to say, I was overwhelmed with books of, and about the Psalms!

My study of Psalms began with a two-month long period of getting to know the "Psalms. First, to get acclimated, as Rabbi Weiss' syllabus recommended, I read the

¹ Cashdan, Rabbi Eli, translator. *The Koren Tehillim*. Commentary by Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, The Rohr Family Edition ed., Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd., 2015.

² Alter, Robert. *The Book of Psalms; A Translation with Commentary*. 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.

³ Sarna, Nahum M. *On the Book of Psalms: Exploring the Prayers of Ancient Israel*. Schocken Books, 1995.

⁴ Brueggemann, Walter. *The Message of the Psalms: a Theological Commentary*. Augsburg Publishing House, 2007.

⁵ Schachter-Shalomi, Zalman. *Psalms in a Translation for Praying*. ALEPH, 2014.

⁶ Rozenberg, Martin S, and Bernard M Zlotowitz. *The Book of Psalms; A New Translation and Commentary*. Jason Aronson Inc., 1999.

introductions of Robert Alter's *The Book of Psalms*⁷, Walter Brueggemann's *The Message of the Psalms*⁸, and Nachum Sarna's *On the Book of Psalms*⁹, keeping a chart of each author's main focuses, goals, and perspectives on the Psalms, including how each commentator understands God in the Psalms, what the Psalms are for, and notable characteristics.

| | Alter | Sarna | Brueggemann |
|-----------------------------|---|--|---|
| Author's goals: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faithful to the original and yet readable • Avoid preposterous Latinate terms like "iniquity" and "transgression" • Different translations of God names and metaphors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historical context | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Form-critical , post-critical interpretation • To fully value any Psalm it must be used in context of all of them • Cannot and need not consider every Psalm individually - thought there are representative psalms |
| What are the Psalms? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The most urgently, personally present of all the books of the Bible • Daily and weekly liturgy (Judaism + Christianity) • Celebrations of the gods | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humans reaching out to God - initiative is human • Human soul extends itself beyond its confines, strives for contact • Give character and essence to Jewish and Christian liturgies • Personal statements and expression of the entire community • Timeless • Portrayal of human condition | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genuinely dialogical nature • Both sides of the conversation of faith - Addressed to God, and God's good word to God's faithful people • Entire gamut of Israel's speech to God |

⁷ Alter, Robert. *The Book of Psalms; A Translation with Commentary*. 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.

⁸ Brueggemann, Walter. *The Message of the Psalms: a Theological Commentary*. Augsburg Publishing House, 2007.

⁹ Sarna, Nahum M. *On the Book of Psalms: Exploring the Prayers of Ancient Israel*. Schocken Books, 1995.

| | | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|--|
| Who is God? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compassionate God • Deity as warrior God | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ultimate Source of all life • Presence to be experienced | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God is reliable • Disorientation has to do with God • In a new orientation, God's rule is known, visible and effective, just when we had lost hope |
| Who wrote the Psalms? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different poets: Asaph, Ethan the Ezrahite, Heyman the Ezrahite, the Korahites, etc. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • David collection = 73 • Asaphite = 12 • Korahite = 11 • Solomon = 2 • One each: Moses, Heman + Ethan • Anonymous/orphan = 49 | |
| When were the Psalms written? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 996-586 BCE and after 457 BCE | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acquired extraordinary status and high prestige in Second Temple Pd. liturgical tradition and music helped preserve all 150 as one book | |
| What are the Psalms for? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public reading in coordination with public reading of Torah according to triennial cycle | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meant to be internalized | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psalm forms correspond to seasons of human life and bring those seasons to speech |
| Genres/groupings of Psalms: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Praise - "hallelujah" • Supplication • Thanksgiving • Wisdom • Royal • Historical • Zion • Many are hybrids • Some are cultic • 5 Books, each ending with a doxology (except the 5th book) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 Books, each ending with a doxology, the 150th Psalm at the end of the 5th book is a doxology for the entire book of Psalms | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psalms of orientation (joy, delight, goodness, coherence, reliability, God's creation, God's governing law) • Psalms of disorientation (hurt, alienation, suffering, death, rage, resentment, self-pity, hatred) • Psalms of new orientation (joy breaks through despair, new gift from God) |

| | | | |
|---|---|--|--|
| Notable characteristics of Psalms: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 kinds of Parallelism: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Between two halves of the line - some equivalence of semantic meaning 2) Between two halves of the line - equivalent number of stressed accentual syllables 3) Between two halves of the line - parallelism of syntax • Rhythmic compactness • Semantic momentum from verse to verse • Familiar images - reworking familiar images (e.g. agricultural world, God as light, creation) • No desire to disorient or surprise • Striking metaphoric inventiveness (e.g. clothing) • Intrinsic structural compactness of biblical Hebrew | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Musical Guilds | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psalms of disorientation are: extravagant, hyperbolic, abrasive • Psalms of new orientation: feature a fresh intrusion that makes things new, affirm sovereign God who puts Human kind in a new situation • Life of faith expressed in psalms is focused on two decisive moves that are always underway, by which we re regularly surprised and which we regularly resist: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Movement from orientation to disorientation - A relinquishment, suffering, lament 2) Movement from disorientation to new orientation - hymns and songs of thanksgiving |
|---|---|--|--|

Next, I read through the entire book of Psalms using the Koren¹⁰ translation making notes, labeling them with their genres based on both Vanhorn and Strawn, “The Psalms and Their Types,¹¹” and Brueggemann and Bellinger’s “Psalm Types,



Figure 1

¹⁰ Cashdan, Rabbi Eli, translator. *The Koren Tehillim*. Commentary by Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, The Rohr Family Edition ed., Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd., 2015.

¹¹ Horn, Roger Van, and Brent A. Strawn. *Psalms for Preaching and Worship: a Lectionary Commentary*. William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2009.

¹²” and leaving a pencil tick mark next to Psalms that I found most resonant. I compiled a list of the twenty-five Psalms that I had ticked and set that aside to begin brainstorming how I would use them towards the performance component of my project.¹³

Following this introductory research, I moved to Jerusalem, Israel for the summer and upon arrival, I focused on the Psalms corresponding to the days of the week, attempting to engage in the

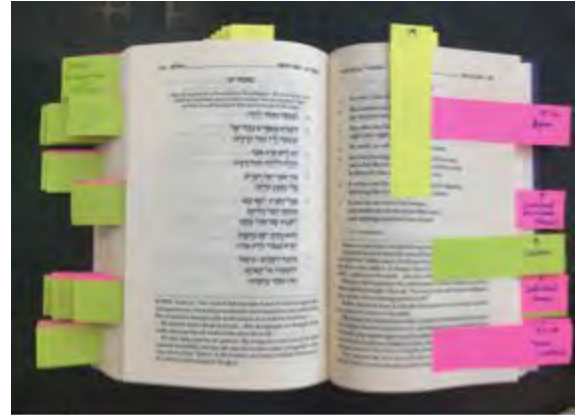


Figure 2

ritual of reading one daily. Most days, I sat at the kitchen table in the afternoon to read the psalm of the day usually with a snack and tea. At first, I wrote out the entire Psalm in both Hebrew and English using the Koren¹⁴ translation of the Psalms. I would write the



Figure 3

Hebrew on the left of the page spread and English on the right so that the translation was opposite the Hebrew as it appears in the Koren¹⁵. I did this to attempt to get to know these psalms better and perhaps even memorize parts of them. After writing out the psalm, I

¹² Brueggemann, Walter, and William H. Bellinger. *Psalms*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

¹³ Figures 1 and 2 are my own photos of my copy of the Koren translation of the psalms.

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ *ibid*

would read it again in both Hebrew and English, line by line, making notes and doodling

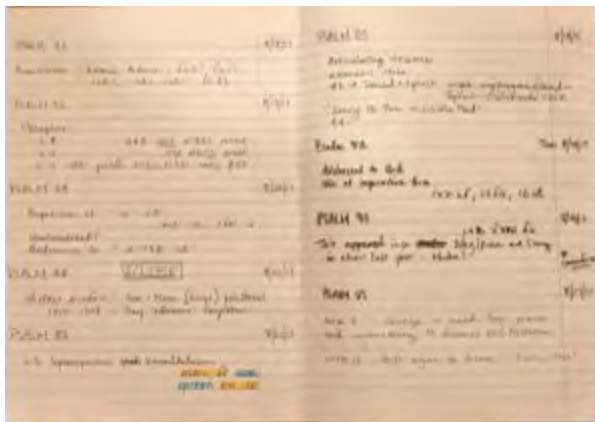


Figure 4

with colored pens. Some days the doodles got rather elaborate. After a week or so, I realized that writing out each psalm took too long, and I had fewer notes to write. I adapted my practice to read through the daily psalm, and then to focus on one line, or

even just a couple of words from that psalm. I kept notes recording what I focused on, and any ideas that these words sparked.¹⁶

I spoke to anyone and everyone about my project and soon I began to see psalms everywhere. At the *Tachana Rishona* in Jerusalem I noticed large posters created by an organization called 929¹⁷ hanging high



Figure 5



Figure 6

around the perimeter of the center, tented area. Each poster had an image with one verse of one psalm in Hebrew, English, and Arabic.

¹⁶ Figures 3 and 4 are my own photos of my daily notebook.

¹⁷ Figures 5 and 6 are my own photos of two of these posters. Original images can be found at 929.org.il.

On a Friday night I would notice, “*shiviti Adonai l’negdi tamid*,” inscribed above the ark. In an exhibition of photographs and artifacts from early Tel-Aviv in the Shalom Meir Tower, I came across verses of Psalms 126, “*ha-zorim b’dima, b’rina yiktzoru* - those who sow in tears shall reap in joy,” and 137, “*im eshkachech yerushalayim tishkach*



Figure 7



Figure 8

yemini - if I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither.¹⁸” While touring The City of David, at the entrance I noticed Psalm 122.¹⁹ One day, my roommate asked about my thesis and he told me that he had composed a setting of Psalm 18, verses 28-29, “For you keep my lamp alight, *Adonai* my God lightens my darkness.” When hurricane Harvey hit Texas I read Psalm 18, “Streams of destruction overwhelmed me... God drew me out of the mighty waters.” When an extremely powerful earthquake hit Mexico I

read Psalm 46, “Therefore we are not afraid, when the earth is shaken, when the mountains tumble into the heart of the sea.” Another day, on my first shabbat back on the bima with my congregation in New York, after spending the



Figure 9

¹⁸ Figures 7 and 8 are my own photos of two of the pieces in the exhibition at the Shalom Meir Tower.

¹⁹ Figure 9 is my own photo of Psalm 122 in the entrance courtyard of the City of David archaeological site.

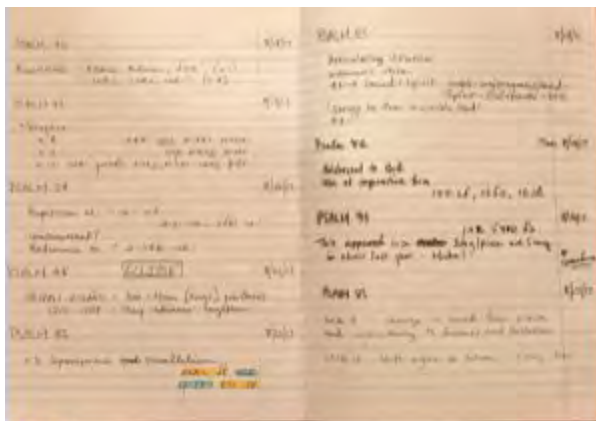


Figure 10

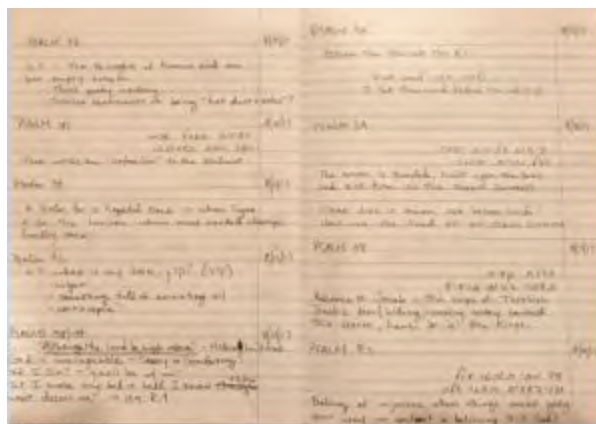


Figure 11

summer in Israel, a man introduced himself to me after services. He is not from the United States and not from a Jewish background, but he described his faith journey to me explaining, “Psalm 51 is my story.” Rather than reading the psalm of the day, I began to read whichever psalm found me that day. The Psalms served a *kavanot*, intentions, for the days of my summer and they were a concrete something to hold on to that I could share with family and friends.²⁰

After looking through the twenty-five

psalms that I had originally selected, Rabbi Pilz noted two themes: First, I had selected many of the *ma'alot* Psalms (Psalms 120-134), and second, many of the Psalms that resonated with me mentioned, what she called, “caution with speech” (Psalms 19, 34, 39, 51, 55, 126). I spent some time looking at these two sets of psalms, assigning one or two psalms to each day of the week for a two week period.

²⁰ Figures 10 and 11 are my own photos of my daily notebook.

With the *ma'alot* Psalms, I decided to read through the psalm not only in Koren²¹, but also in Alter's *The Book of Psalms*²², and Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's *Psalms in Translation for Praying*²³. Because I had already identified these Psalms as ones that I connected with, I hoped to deepen that connection by using two very different translations: the Alter²⁴, which keeps many of the elements of the original Hebrew and provides commentary on the translation choices, and the Schachter-Shalomi²⁵, which emphasizes the poetry, imagery, and prayerfulness of the Psalms. I noted differences in the commentators translations and themes. At the same time, I was reading Yossi Klein Halevi's book, *Like Dreamers*²⁶, and I could not help but see many connections between the *ma'alot* Psalms and the book's exploration of the many divergent ideologies that have shaped Israel since the Six Day War. Such as, the messianic aspirations of the return to Zion from exile, the idea that "...those who sow in tears²⁷," those who suffer in exile, "reap in joy²⁸," return and are victorious. Even the title of the book, "Like Dreamers" is found in Psalm 126: "*hayinu k'cholmim*," which speaks of the ancient hope to return to

²¹ Cashdan, Rabbi Eli, translator. *The Koren Tehillim*. Commentary by Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, The Rohr Family Edition ed., Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd., 2015.

²² Alter, Robert. *The Book of Psalms; A Translation with Commentary*. 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.

²³ Schachter-Shalomi, Zalman. *Psalms in a Translation for Praying*. ALEPH, 2014.

²⁴ Alter, Robert. *The Book of Psalms; A Translation with Commentary*. 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.

²⁵ Schachter-Shalomi, Zalman. *Psalms in a Translation for Praying*. ALEPH, 2014.

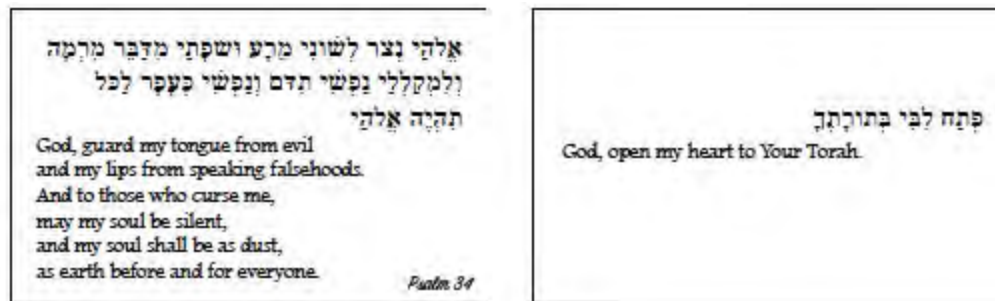
²⁶ Klein Halevi, Yossi. *Like Dreamers The Story of the Israeli Paratroopers Who Reunited Jerusalem and Divided a Nation*. Perennial, 2014.

²⁷ Psalm 126, translation from Cashdan, Rabbi Eli, translator. *The Koren Tehillim*. Commentary by Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, The Rohr Family Edition ed., Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd., 2015.

²⁸ *ibid*

Zion after the destruction of the first Temple, the 20th century dream of the early Zionists, and the reality of Israelis in 1967.

Next, as I worked through the six psalms on the theme of “caution with speech”, psalms 19, 34, 39, 51, 55, 126, rather than journaling as I had been for the other sets of psalms I studied, I found myself inspired to use Microsoft PowerPoint to create animated visuals of these psalms set to some musical settings that I felt brought these psalms to life. These musical settings included: Noah Aronson’s “Create a Pure Heart Within Me,”²⁹ Louis Lewandowski’s “Torat Adonai,”³⁰ and Marshall Portnoy’s “Meditation (Yihiyu L’ratzon).”³¹ Ultimately, this animated PowerPoint presentation accompanied my vocal presentation.³²



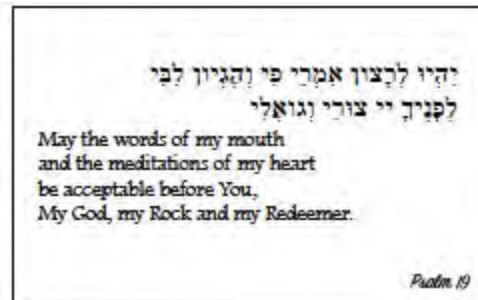
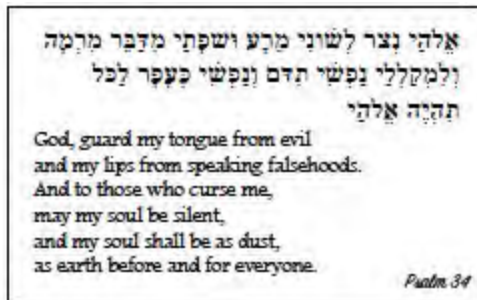
Figures 12 and 13

²⁹ Aronson, Noah, *Create A Pure Heart Within Me*. Translation by Stephen Mitchel. 2013. Digital Sheet Music. <noaharonson.com>.

³⁰ Lewandowski, Louis, *Torat Adonai*. Todah W'simrah: vierstimmige Chöre und Soli für den israelitischen Gottesdienst Berlin: Bote & Bock, n.d. 1882. Digital Sheet Music. <[http://imslp.org/wiki/Toras_adonaj_\(Lewandowski%2C_Louis\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/Toras_adonaj_(Lewandowski%2C_Louis))>.

³¹ Portnoy, Marshall, *Meditation*. Hal Leonard. Digital Sheet Music. <<https://www.sheetmusicplus.com/title/meditation-digital-sheet-music/20191258>>.

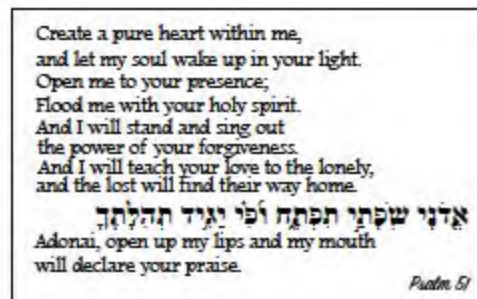
³² Figures 12-15, 19, 22-26 and 28-30 are all of my own creation using the Hebrew words of Psalms 19, 34, 39, 51, 55, and 126 from sefaria.org and translations from Alter, Robert. *The Book of Psalms; A Translation with Commentary*. 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2007. Figures 16-18, 20 and 27 are all from 929.org.il. Figure 21 is from financialtribune.com.



Figures 14 and 15



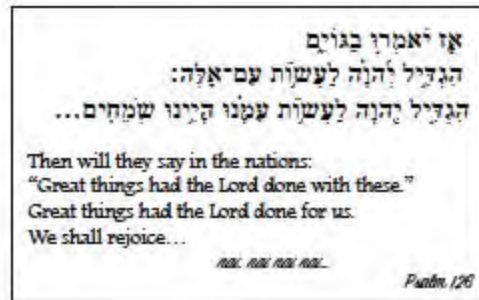
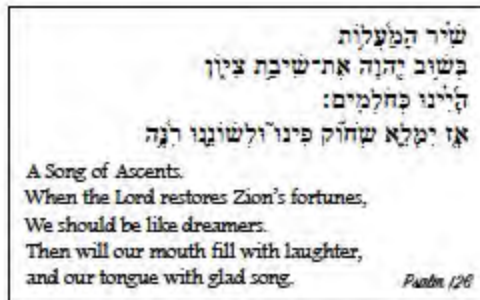
Figures 16 and 17



Figures 18 and 19



Figures 20 and 21



Figures 22 and 23

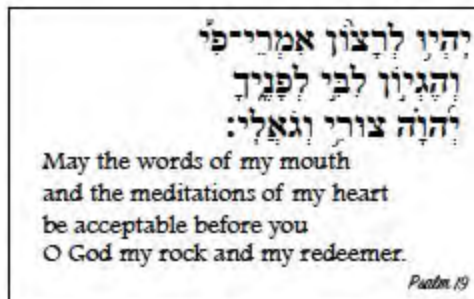
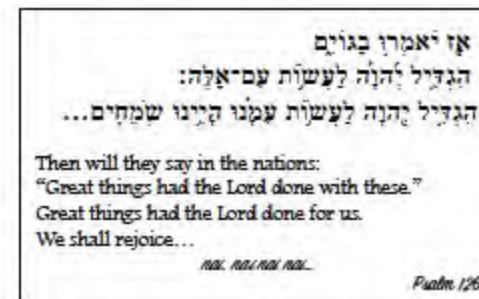
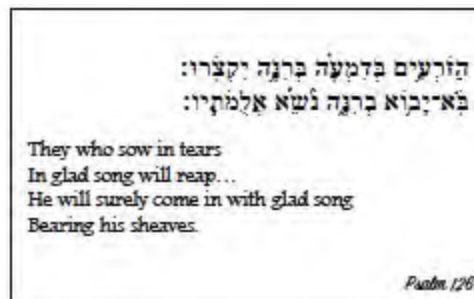


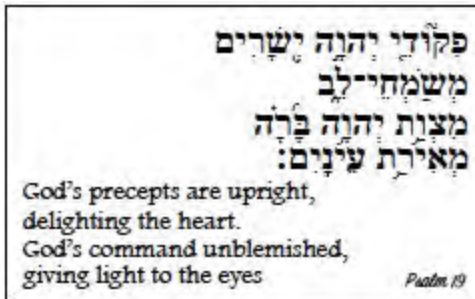
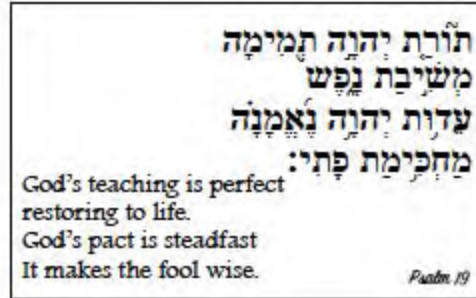
Figure 24



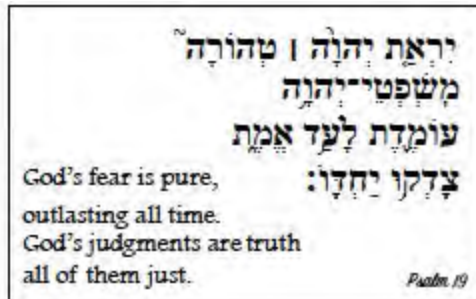
Figures 25 and 26



Figures 27 and 28



Figures 29 and 30



Ultimately, for the musical component of this project, I chose to focus on these psalms connected to speech, Psalms 19, 34, 39, 51, 55, 126. I decided to focus the presentation on these psalms and the theme of speech for a few reasons. First, these psalms grouped together are truly a new set, and I had the freedom to shape the ritual and liturgical use of them more freely. Second, the theme of speech in these psalms resonates with my personal experience as a rabbinical student, serving a community for the first time and knowing that my learning is still in process. Thus, creating a liturgical piece using these psalms serves as an excellent culmination of my studies. Finally, these psalms, and the theme of speech in particular, speaks to contemporary issues in America today.

THE WEIGHT OF WORDS

Psalms are used throughout liturgical texts both individually and in sets such as in *Kabbalat Shabbat*, *Pesukei D'zimra*, and *Hallel*. Because psalms 19, 34, 39, 51, 55, 126 and the theme of speech connects to the themes of the *Amidah* and the Torah service, I chose to compose an alternative set of psalms to be used in worship, an alternative *Hallel*, in the place of the traditional *Hallel* which traditionally comes between the *Amidah* and Torah service. These psalms echo in the *Amidah* and Torah service: To begin the *Amidah*, we open with an excerpt from psalm 51 asking God to “open our lips”. We close the *Amidah* with excerpts from psalms 34 and 15 with the prayer that our words will be acceptable. Another part of psalm 15, speaking directly about the Torah as God’s words to us, also appears, in English translation, in the Torah service in the Reform siddur, *Mishkan Tefilah*.

Not only do the words of these psalms connect deeply with the themes of the liturgy, they also allow us to contemplate, and even make a statement about contemporary issues without explicitly discussing them in a sermon. There are many examples of people reciting psalms in times of trouble, though usually they are recited privately. I was looking for a way to address contemporary troubles in the context of community and in the public forum of *tefilah* in a way that reaches people in a new way, without putting anyone on the defensive or causing anyone to feel isolated.

By using the frame of *Hallel* I was able to bring this theme of speech, and especially the relevant idea that our words really matter, to the forefront of the community’s thoughts. Using a familiar framework prevented me from breaking the

spiritual container of *tefilah*, and allowed an expansion of spiritual possibilities through presenting a contemporary issue, and providing Jewish sources, psalms, to sing new meaning into one of today's problems. There was no need for me to introduce the theme of speech by making the contemporary issue as explicit as this: "Our current president uses his words, usually just 140 characters, to unrestrainedly provoke, insult, and degrade people around the world, both enemies and supposed friends. The daily news is caught up on each and every letter, his words are seen worldwide and ring in the eyes and ears of those who must choose how and when to react. His words have consequences. Perhaps nuclear war. From this we learn that our words too have weight. They are seen, heard, they can hurt or they can heal." Rather, I was simply able to introduce the idea that our words have weight, choose pieces from the psalms that speak directly to the impact that our words have on our enemies, on ourselves, and on those we love, and allow people to take what they need from that (Please see Appendix A, the program used for my musical presentation). Because they are timeless yet vague, the psalms have the ability to reach us again and again, to re-teach us values that are in question today.

On the following pages, I analyze some key aspects of psalms 19, 34, 39, 51, 55, and 126 that I feel are essential to my project. I will draw out key themes that speak to the contemporary issue of using caution with our speech, and that highlight the importance and weight of our words.

Psalm 19

To the lead player. A David psalm.
 2 The heavens tell God's glory,
 And God's handiwork sky declares.
 3 Day to day breathes utters,

תהילים י"ט
 לַמְנַצֵּחַ מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד:
 הַשָּׁמַיִם מְסַפְּרִים כְּבוֹד־אֱלֹהִים וּמַעֲשֵׂה יָדָיו
 מְגִיד הַרְקִיעַ:

Night to night pronounces knowledge.
 4 There is no utterance and there are no words,
 Their voice is never heard.
 5 Through all the earth their voice goes out,
 To the world's edge, their words.
 6 For the sun God set up a tent in them--
 And he like a groom from his canopy comes,
 Exults like a warrior running his course.
 7 From the ends of the heavens his going out,
 And his circuit to their ends,
 And nothing can hide from his heat.
 8 The Lord's teaching is perfect.
 Restoring to life.
 The Lord's pact is steadfast,
 It makes the fool wise.
 9 The Lord's precepts are upright,
 Delighting the heart.
 The Lord's command unblemished,
 Giving light to the eyes.
 10 The Lord's fear is pure,
 Outlasting all time
 The Lord's judgements are true,
 All of them just.
 11 More desirable than gold,
 Than abundant fine gold,
 And sweeter than honey,
 Quintessence of bees.
 12 Your servant, too, takes care of them.
 In keeping them--great reward.
 13 Unwitting sins who can grasp?
 Of unknown actions clear me.
 14 From willful men, preserve your servant,

יוֹם לַיּוֹם יְבַיֵּעַ אֱמֶר וּלְלַיְלָה לֵלַיְלָה
 יְחִוּה־דָּעַת:
 אִין־אֱמֶר וְאִין דְּבָרִים בְּלִי נִשְׁמָע קוֹלָם:
 בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ | יֵצֵא קוֹנֵם וּבִקְצֵה תִּבְלֵ מְלִיָּהֶם
 לִשְׁמֵשׁ־אֱהֹל בָּהֶם:
 וְהָוָה פָּתָן יֵצֵא מִחֻפְתּוֹ יִשְׁיֵשׁ כְּגִבּוֹר לְרוּץ
 אֶרֶח:
 מִקְצֵה הַשָּׁמַיִם | מוֹצֵא וּתְקוּפָתוֹ עַל־קִצּוֹתָם
 וְאִין נִסְתָּר מִחֻמְתּוֹ:
 תּוֹרַת יְהוָה תְּמִימָה מְשִׁיבַת גִּפְשׁ עֲדוֹת יְהוָה
 נֶאֱמָנָה מִחֻכְמַת פִּתִּי:
 פְּקוּדֵי יְהוָה יִשְׁרִים מְשֻׁמְחֵי־לֵב מִצְנַת יְהוָה
 בְּרָה מְאִירַת עֵינַיִם:
 יִרְאֵת יְהוָה | טְהוֹרָה עוֹמֶדֶת לְעַד
 מְשֻׁפְטֵי־יְהוָה אֱמֶת צִדְקוֹ יַחֲדוּ:
 הַנְּחַמְדֵּי־ם מְזֻהָב וּמִפָּז רַב וּמִתּוֹקִים מִדְּבַשׁ
 וְנִפְתַּ צּוּפִים:
 גַּם־עֲבֹדְךָ גִּזְהָר בָּהֶם בְּשִׁמְרָם עֹקֵב רַב:
 שְׂגִיאוֹת מִי־יָבִין מִגִּסְתָּרוֹת נִקְנִי:
 גַּם מִזֵּדִים | חֹשֶׁךְ עֲבֹדְךָ אֶל־יִמְשְׁלוּ־בִי אֵז
 אִיתָם וְנִקְיִי מִפֶּשַׁע רַב:
 יִהְיוּ לְרָצוֹן | אִמְרֵי־פִי וְהִגִּיוֹן לִבִּי לִפְנֶיךָ
 יְהוָה צוּרִי וְגֹאֲלִי:³⁴

³⁴ Hebrew of Psalm 19 from sefaria.org

Let them not rule over me.
 Then shall I be blameless
 And clear of great crime.
 15 Let my mouth's utterances be pleasing
 And my heart's stirring before You,
 Lord, my rock and redeemer.³³

The poetry of verses 1-7 of Psalm 19, the rhythm of the Hebrew words, is striking. I was drawn to the metaphor of the natural world speaking. So often, I associate nature with quiet and was intrigued by the idea that speaking, declaring, pronouncing, or uttering, may not be a loud attention-drawing act. The cycles of the days into nights, of wind currents, and water quietly salute God's creativity, and careful formation of the earth.

The psalm moves from the speech of nature to Torah, the speech of God, in verses 8-11. These verses alternately describe aspects of God's speech (commandments, laws, etc.) that put us in relationship with God, and the results that each of these have on the receiver.

Finally, at the end of the psalm, verses 12-15 describe the speech of humans. Unlike nature and God, our words are erratic, unpredictable, and prone to unwitting error. We are far from nature which flows in repeated patterns, always praising God, and we are far from God's perfect word, always forming covenantal relationships.

Psalm 34

Of David, when he altered his good sense
 before Avimelech, who banished him and
 he went away.

תהילים ל"ד
 לְדָוִד בְּשִׁנוֹתָיו אֶת־טַעְמוֹ לִפְנֵי אֲבִימֶלֶךְ
 וַיִּגְרֹשׁ הוּא וַיֵּלֶךְ׃

³³ Alter, Robert. *The Book of Psalms; A Translation with Commentary*. 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.

2 Let me bless the Lord at all times,
 Always God's praise in my mouth.
 3 In the Lord do I glory.
 Let the lowly hear and rejoice.
 4 Extol the Lord with me,
 Let us exalt God's name one and all.
 5 I sought the Lord and God answered me,
 And from all that I dreaded God saved
 me.
 6 They looked to God and they beamed,
 And their faces were no longer dark.
 7 When the lowly calls, God listens
 And from all his straights rescues him.
 8 The Lord's messenger encamps
 round those who fear God and sets them
 free.
 9 Taste and see that the Lord is good
 Happy the man who shelters in God.
 10 Fear the Lord, O God's holy ones,
 For those who fear God know no want.
 11 Lions and wretched, and hunger,
 But the Lord's seekers lack no good.
 12 Come, children, listen to me,
 The Lord's fear will I teach you.
 13 Whoever the man desiring life,
 Who loves long days to see good,
 14 Keep your tongue from evil,
 And your lips from speaking deceit.
 14 Swerve from evil and do good,
 Seek peace and pursue it.
 15 The Lord's eyes are on the righteous,
 And God's ears to their outcry.
 16 The Lord's face is against evildoers,
 To cut off from the earth their name.
 17 Cry out and the Lord hears,
 And from all their straights God saves
 them.

יִבְרַכֶּה אֶת־יְהוָה בְּכָל־עֵת תָּמִיד תְּהִלָּתוֹ
 בְּפִי:
 בִּיהוָה תִּתְהַלֵּל נַפְשִׁי יִשְׁמְעוּ עֲנָוִים וַיִּשְׁמְחוּ:
 גִּדְּלוּ לַיהוָה אֹתִי וּגְרוּמִמָּה שְׁמוֹ יַחֲדוּ:
 דַּרְשֵׁתִי אֶת־יְהוָה וְעֲנֵנִי וּמִכָּל־מְגוּרֹת־יִי
 הֲצִילֵנִי:
 הִבִּיטוּ אֵלָיו וְנִהְרֹוּ וּפְנִיָּה־ם אֲלֵי־יִחְפְּרוּ:
 זֶה עָנִי קָרָא וַיהוָה שָׁמַע וּמִכָּל־צָרוֹת־יוֹ
 הוֹשִׁיעֵנו:
 חָנָה מִלֶּאךָ־יְהוָה סֹבִיב לִירְאָתוֹ וַיִּחַלְצֵם:
 טַעְמוּ וּרְאוּ כִי־טוֹב יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר־יִהְיֶה בָּרֶךְ
 יַחְסֵה־בּוֹ:
 יִרְאֵנוּ אֶת־יְהוָה קִדְּשׁוּ כִּי־אֵין מַחְסֹוֹר
 לִירְאָיו:
 כְּפִירִים רָשׁוּ וְרָעִבוּ וְדִרְשׁוּ יְהוָה לֹא־יִחְסְרוּ
 כָּל־טוֹב:
 לְכוּ־בָנִים שְׁמְעוּ־לִי יִרְאֵת יְהוָה אֲלֵמִדְכֶם:
 מִי־הָאִישׁ הִחְפִּץ חַיִּים אֲהֵב יָמִים לְרֵאוֹת
 טוֹב:
 נִצֹּר לְשׁוֹנֵךְ מֶרֶעַ וּשְׁפַת־יָד מִדִּבֶּר מִרְמָה:
 סוּר מֶרֶעַ וַעֲשֵׂה־טוֹב בִּקְשׁ שְׁלוֹם וּרְדֹפָהוּ:
 עֲיִנֵי יְהוָה אֶל־צַדִּיקִים וְאִזְנֵי־יוֹ אֶל־שׁוֹעֲתָם:
 פָּנֵי יְהוָה בְּעֲשֵׂי רָע לְהִכְרִית מֵאֶרֶץ זִכְרָם:
 צַעֲקוּ וַיהוָה שָׁמַע וּמִכָּל־צָרוֹת־ם הֲצִילֵם:
 קָרוֹב יְהוָה לְגִשְׁבְּרֵי־לֵב וְאֶת־דַּכְּאֵי־רוּחַ
 יוֹשִׁיעַ:
 רַבּוֹת רָעוֹת צַדִּיק וּמִכָּל־ם יִצִּילֵנוּ יְהוָה:
 שֹׁמֵר כָּל־עֲצוּמוֹתָיו אֶחָת מֵהֶ־נָּה לֹא נִשְׁבְּרָה:
 תְּמוֹתֶת רָשָׁע רָעָה וְשֹׁנְאֵי צַדִּיק יִאֲשָׁמוּ:
 פֹּדֶה יְהוָה נַפְשׁ עֲבָדָיו וְלֹא יִאֲשָׁמוּ
 כָּל־הַחֲסִים בּוֹ:³⁶

³⁶ Hebrew of Psalm 34 from sefaria.org

18 Near is the Lord to the brokenhearted,
And the crushed in spirit God rescues.
19 Many the evils of the righteous person,
Yet from all of them the Lord will save
him.
20 He guards all his bones,
Not a single one is broken.
21 Evil will kill the wicked,
And the righteous person's foes will bear
guilt.
22 The Lord ransoms His servants' lives,
They will bear no guilt, all who shelter in
God.³⁵

In psalm 34, I was drawn to the multiple uses of our speech in helping us connect with God. As is repeated throughout the book of Psalms, we use our speech to praise God. Here, we also use our words to seek God, or call out to God. Not only is our speech a vehicle for joy, relief and rejoicing, it is also a way of communicating pain, fear, and need. In verses 2 and 3, the psalmist calls us all to praise God. Then in verses 4-7 we see a series of actions each with two reactions, followed by a similar pattern of one action and one reaction in verses 8-11. For example, in verse 7, "When the lowly calls (action), God listens (reaction 1) and from all his straits rescues him (reaction 2)." Not only does God hear our calls, God also acts upon those words.

Our words are important because they move God to action; we have the power to alter our universe. If we seek God, God illumines our faces, if we fear God, we will not want. Because our words have power we learn in verses 12-14 that we should use our

³⁵ *ibid*

words cautiously. Finally, in verses 15-22 we return to the opening action-reaction patterns as if to say with even more intensity, surely “Cry out and the Lord hears, And from all their straights God saves them (verse 17).”

Psalm 39

1 For the lead player, for Jeduthun. A David psalm.
 2 I thought, “Let me keep my ways from offending with my tongue.³⁷
 Let me still my speech,³⁸
 As long as the wicked is before me.”
 3 I was mute--in silence.³⁹
 I even abstained from speaking good,⁴⁰
 And my pain was grievous.
 4 My heart was hot within me.
 In my thoughts a fire burned.
 I spoke with my tongue:
 5 Let me know, Lord, my end
 And what is the measure of my days,
 I would know how fleeting I am.
 6 Look, mere handspans You made my days,
 And my is as nothing before You.
 Mere breath is each man standing. *Selah.*
 7 As in shadow man goes about.
 Mere breath he murmurs--he stores
 And knows not who will gather.
 8 And now, what I expect, O Master,
 My hope is in You.

תהילים ל"ט

לִמְנַצֵּחַ לִידִיתוֹן [לִידוֹת יוֹן] מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד:
 אָמַרְתִּי אֲשֶׁמְרָה דְרָכִי מִחֲטֹאֵי בִלְשׁוֹנִי
 אֲשֶׁמְרָה לִפִּי מִחֲסוֹם בְּעַד רָשָׁע לִנְגָדִי:
 נְאֻלְמַתִּי דוּמְיָה הַחֲשִׁיתִי מְטוֹב וּכְאֵכִי נֶעְפֶּר:
 חִם-לִפִּי | בְּקֶרֶב יְיָ בִּהְיִי תִבְעֶר-אֵשׁ דֵּבַר רָתִי
 בִּלְשׁוֹנִי:
 הוֹדִיעֵנִי יְהוָה | קֶצֶץ יְמִי וּמִדַּת יָמֵי מִהֲהָיָא
 אֲדַע מִהֲחָדָל אָנֹכִי:
 הִנֵּה טְפָחוֹת | נִתְּתָה יָמִי וְחַלְדִּי כְאֵין נִגְדָךְ
 אַךְ כָּל-הֶקֶל כָּל-אֲדָם נֹצֵב סֵלָה:
 אַךְ-בְּצִלָּם | יִתְהַלֵּךְ-אִישׁ אַךְ-הֶקֶל יִהְיֶה מִיּוֹן
 יֹצֵב רֹר וְלֹא-יָדַע מִי-אִסְפָּם:
 וְעֵתָה מִהֲקִנִּיתִי אֲדֹנָי תוֹחַלֶּתִי לֵךְ הִיא:
 מִכָּל-פִּשְׁעֵי הַצִּילֵנִי חֲרַפְתָּ נֶבֶל לְאֵל-תְּשִׁימָנִי:
 נְאֻלְמַתִּי לֹא אֶפְתַּח-פִּי כִי אֶתָּה עֹשִׂיתָ:
 הָסֵר מֵעָלַי נִגְעֶךָ מִתַּגְרֶת יָדְךָ אָנֹכִי כְלִיתִי:
 בְּתוֹכָחֹת עַל-עוֹן | יִסְרָת אִישׁ וְתָמָס כְּעֹשׂ
 חֲמוּדוֹ אַךְ הֶבֶל כָּל-אָדָם סֵלָה:
 שְׁמָעָה-תִּפְלֹתִי | יְהוָה וְשׁוּעָתִי | הֲאֻזִּינָה
 אֶל-דִּמְעָתִי אֶל-תַּחֲרֹשׁ כִּי גֵר אָנֹכִי עֹמֵךְ
 תּוֹשֵׁב בְּכָל-אֲבוֹתִי:
 הֲשֵׁעַ מִמֶּנִּי וְאַבְלִיגָה בְּטָרָם אֵלֶךְ וְאֵינֶנִּי:⁴²

³⁷ ibid

³⁸ Rozenberg, Martin S, and Bernard M Zlotowitz. *The Book of Psalms; A New Translation and Commentary*. Jason Aronson Inc., 1999.

³⁹ Alter, Robert. *The Book of Psalms; A Translation with Commentary*. 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.

⁴⁰ Rozenberg, Martin S, and Bernard M Zlotowitz. *The Book of Psalms; A New Translation and Commentary*. Jason Aronson Inc., 1999.

⁴² Hebrew of Psalm 39 from sefaria.org

9 From all my sins, save me.
 Make not the scoundrel's scorn.
 10 I was mute, my mouth did not open,
 For it is You who acted.
 11 Take away from me Your scourge,
 From the blow of Your hand I perish.
 12 In rebuke for crime You chastise a
 man,
 Melt like the moth in his treasure.
 Mere breath all humankind. *Selah*.
 13 Hear my prayer, O Lord,
 To my cry hearken,
 to my tears do not be deaf.
 For I am a sojourner with You,
 A new settler like all my parents.
 14 Look away from me, the I may catch
 my breath
 Before I depart and am not.⁴¹

I was particularly drawn to verses 2-4 of Psalm 39. These verses speak of a desire to be overly cautious with speech, especially in the presence of *r'shaim*, “wicked ones.” As we learned in Psalm 34, it is a virtue to keep ourselves from speaking evil. Here the psalmist attempts to prevent speaking evil, and even speaking at all to those who provoke him. Those who anger us are the most difficult people for us to listen to, and to listen in anger without permission to respond is infuriating! Psalm 39 validates the attempt to listen unconditionally, remain calm, and dwell in one's own discomfort and defensiveness and the failure to do so when it causes deep pain.

Psalm 51

1 For the lead player, a David psalm.

תהילים נ"א
 למנצח מזמור לדוד:

⁴¹ Alter, Robert. *The Book of Psalms; A Translation with Commentary*. 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.

2 Upon Nathan the prophet's coming to him when he had come to be with Bathsheva.
 3 Grant me grace, God, as befits Your kindness,
 With Your great mercy wipe away my crimes.
 4 Thoroughly wash my transgressions away and cleanse me from my offense.
 5 For my crimes I know,
 And my offense is before me always.
 6 You alone have I offended,
 And what is evil in Your eyes I have done.
 So You are just when You sentence,
 You are right when You judge.
 7 Look, in transgression was I conceived,
 And in offense my mother spawned me.
 8 Look, You desired truth in what is hidden;
 In what is concealed make wisdom known to me.
 9 Purify me with a hyssop, that I be clean.
 Wash me, that I be whiter than snow.
 10 Let me hear gladness and joy,
 Let the bones that You crushed exult.
 11 Avert Your face from my offences,
 And all my misdeeds wipe away.
 12 A pure heart create for me, God,
 And a firm spirit renew within me.
 13 Do not fling me from your presence,
 And Your holy spirit take not from me.
 14 Give me back the gladness of your rescue
 And with a noble spirit sustain me.
 15 Let me teach transgressors Your ways,
 And offenders will come back to You.
 16 Save me from bloodshed, O God,

בְּבֹאֲאֵלָיו נָתַן הַנָּבִיא כְּאִשְׁרֵי אֱלֹהֵי-בֶת-שֶׁבַע:
 חַנּוּנִי אֱלֹהִים כְּחֹסֶדְךָ כְּרַב רַחֲמֶיךָ מִחַה פִּשְׁעֵי:
 הָרֵבָה [הָרֵב] כִּפְסֹנִי מֵעֹנִי וּמַחְטָאתִי טְהַרְנִי:
 כִּי-פִשְׁעֵי אֲנִי אֲדַע וּחַטָּאתִי נִגְדִי תָמִיד:
 לִךְ לִבְדֹּךָ | חַטָּאתִי וְהִרְעָ בְּעֵינֶיךָ עֲשִׂיתִי
 לְמַעַן תִּצְדַּק בְּדִבְרֶיךָ תִּזְכֶּה בְּשִׁפְטֶיךָ:
 הִנֵּי-בָעוֹן חוֹלְלָתִי וּבַח טָא יִחַמְתְּנִי אָמֵי:
 הִנֵּי-אֲמַת חֲפָצָתְךָ בַּטְּחוֹת וּבִסְתָם חֲכָמָה
 תוֹדִיעֵנִי:
 תַּחֲטָאֲנִי בְּאֲזוֹב וּבְאֶטֶר תִּכְבֹּסֵנִי וּמִשְׁלָל
 אֶלְבִּין:
 תִּשְׁמִיעֵנִי שְׁשׁוֹן וְשִׁמְחָה תִּגְּלֶנִּי עֲצָמוֹת
 דִּקִּיתִּי:
 הִסְתַּר פָּנֶיךָ מִחַטָּאִי וְכָל-עֲוֹנֹתַי מִחָה:
 לֵב טָהוֹר בְּרָא-לִי אֱלֹהִים וְרוּחַ נָכוֹן חֲדָשׁ
 בְּקִרְבִּי:
 אֶל-תִּשְׁלִיכֵנִי מִלִּפְנֵיךָ וְרוּחַ קֹדֶשְׁךָ אֶל-תִּקַּח
 מִמֶּנִּי:
 הַשִּׁיבָה לִּי שְׁשׁוֹן יִשְׁעֶךָ וְרוּחַ נְדִיבָה תִּסְמְכֵנִי:
 אֶלְמַדָּה פִּשְׁעִים דְּרָכֶיךָ וּחַטָּאִים אֵלֶיךָ יָשׁוּבוּ:
 הַצִּילֵנִי מִדְּמִים | אֱלֹהִים יִשְׁמְרֵנִי תִּשְׁוֹעָתִי תִּרְצֶנִּי
 לְשׁוֹנִי יִצְדָּקְתָּךְ:
 אֲדַנִּי שִׁפְתֵי תִפְתָּח וּפִי יִגִּיד תְּהִלָּתְךָ:
 כִּי | לֹא-תִחַפֵּץ זָבַח וְאַתָּה עוֹלָה לֹא תִרְצֶה:
 זָבַחִי אֱלֹהִים רוּחַ נְשָׁפָרָה לִב-נִשְׁפָּר וְגִדְפָה
 אֱלֹהִים לֹא תִבְזֶה:
 הִיטִיבָה בְּרָצוֹנְךָ אֶת-צִיּוֹן תִּבְנֶה חוֹמוֹת
 יְרוּשָׁלַם:
 אַז תִּחַפֵּץ זָבַחִי-צֶדֶק עוֹלָה וְכָלִיל אֲז יַעֲלוּ
 עַל-מִזְבִּיחֶךָ פָּרִים:⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Hebrew of Psalm 51 from sefaria.org

God of my rescue.
 17 Let my tongue sing out Your bounty.
 O Master, open my lips,
 That my mouth may tell Your praise.
 18 For You desire not that I should give
 sacrifice,
 Burnt-offering You greet not with
 pleasure.
 19 God's sacrifices--a broken spirit.
 A broken, crushed heart God spurns not.
 20 Show goodness in Your pleasure to
 Zion,
 Rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,
 21 Then shall You desire just sacrifices,
 Burnt-offering and whole offering,
 Then bulls will be offered up on Your
 alter.⁴³

In Psalm 51 the psalmist is aware of his sin. Synonyms for “sin” appear six times in the first seven verses while “God” appears only once. Later, in verses 12-21 “God” appears six times, while “sin” appears only once. Through the patterns of these two key words we learn that the psalmist moves from *tameh* to *tahor*, impure to pure. The psalmist begins filled with shame and ends filled with grace.

The transition here is the psalmist's acknowledgement of his faults and request for God to avert God's face from his sins and to look upon him again. In verses 12-17 there is a link between being seen by God and declaring God's praise.

Psalm 55

1 For the lead player, on stringed
 instruments, a David *maskil*.
 2 Hearken, O God, to my prayer,
 And do not ignore my plea.

תהילים נ"ה
 לַמְנַצֵּחַ בַּנְגִּינָ'ת מִשְׁכִּיל לְדָוִד:
 הָאֲזִינָה אֱלֹהִים תְּפִלָּתִי וְאַל־תִּתְעַלֶּם
 מִתְחַנְנִי:
 הַקְשִׁיבָה לִי וְעֲנֵנִי אֲרִיד בְּשִׁחִי וְאַהֲיָמָה:

⁴³ ibid

3 Listen well to me and answer me.
In my complaint I sway and moan.
4 From the sound of the enemy,
From the crushing force of the wicked
When they bring mischief down upon me
And in fury harass me,
5 My heart quails within me
And death-terrors fall upon me,
6 Fear and trembling enter me,
And honor envelopes me.
7 And I say, "Would I had wings like a
dove.
8 I would fly off and find rest."
Look, I would wander far away,
9 And lodge in the wilderness, *selah*
Would make haste to a refuge for me
From the streaming wind and the storm.
10 O Master, confound, split their tongue,
For I have seen outrage and strife in the
town;
11 Day and night they go round it on its
walls,
And mischief and misdeeds within it,
Disaster within it,
12 Guile and deceit never part from its
square.
13 No enemy insults me, that I might bear
it,
No foe boasts against me, that I might
hide from him
14 But you--a man to my measure,
My companion and my familiar,
With whom together we shared sweet
counsel,
15 In the house of our God in elation we
walked.
16 May death come upon them.

מְקוֹל אוֹיֵב מִפְּנֵי עֲקַת רָשָׁע כִּי־יִמְיטוּ עָלַי
אֶן וּבְאָרְךָ יִשְׁתַּמּוּנִי:
לְבִי יִחַל בְּקִרְבִּי וְאֵימוֹת מָוֶת נָפְלוּ עָלַי:
יִרְאַה וְרַעַד יָבֹא בִּי וְתַכְסֵּנִי פִלְצוֹת:
וְאִמְרָר מִיִּיתוֹן־לִי אֲבָר כִּי־זֶה אֲעוֹפָה
וְאֲשַׁכְנָה:
הִנֵּה אֲרַחֵיק נֶגֶד אֲלִין בַּמִּדְבָּר סֵלָה:
אֲחִישָׁה מִפֶּלֶט לִי מְרוֹחַ סֶעָה מִסָּעֵר:
בִּלְעָד אֲדַנִּי פֶלֶג לְשׁוֹנָם כִּי־רָאִיתִי חָמָס וְרִיב
בְּעִיר:
יֹמָם וְלַיְלָה יִסּוּבְכֶנּוּ עַל־חוֹמֹתֶיהָ וְאֶן וְעַמָּל
בְּקִרְבָּהּ:
הַיּוֹת בְּקִרְבָּהּ וְלֹא־יִמְיֵשׁ מְרַחֲבָהּ תֵּן וּמְרָמָהּ:
כִּי לֹא־אוֹיֵב יִחָרֵפֶנּוּ גִי וְאַשָּׁא לֹא־מִשְׁנָאִי עָלַי
הַגִּדִיל וְאִסְתַּר מִמֶּנּוּ:
וְאַתָּה אֲנֹוֹשׁ כְּעֶרְפִּי אֲלוֹפִי וּמִידְעִי:
אֲשֶׁר יִחַדוּ נִמְתִּיק סוֹד בְּבֵית אֱלֹהִים נִהְלַךְ
בְּרָגֶשׁ:
יְשִׁימוֹת [יִשְׂשִׁי] [מָוֶת ו] עַל־יָמוּ יִרְדּוּ שְׂאוֹל
תֵּימִים כִּי־רַעוֹת בְּמִגְוָרָם בְּקִרְבָּם:
אֲנִי אֶל־אֱלֹהִים אֶקְרָא וַיְהִי ה' יוֹשִׁיעֵנִי:
עָרַב וּבָקֵר וְצִהְרִים אֲשִׁיחָה וְאַהֲמָה וַיִּשְׁמַע
קוֹלִי:
פָּדָה בְּשָׁלוֹם גִּפְשִׁי מִקִּרְב־לִי כִי־בִרְבִּים הָיוּ
עִמָּדִי:
יִשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים וַיַּעֲנֵם וַיֵּשֶׁב קִדְּם סֵלָה אֲשֶׁר
אֵין חֲלִיפוֹת לָמוֹ וְלֹא יִרְאוּ אֱלֹהִים:
שָׁלַח יָדָיו בְּשִׁלְמִי וַיַּחֲלֵל בְּרִיתוֹ:
חָלְקוּ מִן־מַחְמַת פִּי וְקִרְב־לִבּוֹ רָכּוּ דְבָרָיו
מִשְׁמֶן מִן־וְהִמָּה פֶתַח־חַיִּים:
הַשְׁלַךְ עַל־יְהוָה וַיַּהֲבֵךְ וְהָיָה יִכְלָלְךָ לֹא־יִתֵּן
לְעוֹלָם מוֹט לְצַדִּיק:
וְאַתָּה אֱלֹהִים וַתֹּרְדֵם וַלְבָאֲר שִׁחַת אֲנָשִׁי
דָּמִים וּמְרָמָה לֹא־יִחַצּוּ יְמֵיהֶם וְאֲנִי
אֲבִטֶח־בְּךָ:⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Hebrew of Psalm 55 from sefaria.org

May they go down to Sheol alive.
 For in their homes, in their midst, are
 evils.
 17 But I call to God,
 And the Lord rescues me.
 18 Evening and morning and noon
 I complain and I moan,
 And He hears my voice.
 19 He has ransomed my life unharmed
 From my battle,
 For many were against me--
 Ishmael and Jalam and the dweller in the
 east,
 20 Who never will change and do not fear
 God.
 21 He reached out his hand against his
 allies,
 Profaned his own pact.
 22 His mouth was smoother than butter--
 And battle in his heart.
 His words were softer than oil,
 Yet they were drawn swords.
 23 Cast your lot on the Lord
 And God will support you.
 God will never let the righteous stumble.
 24 And you, God, bring them down
 To the pit of destruction.
 Men of bloodshed and deceit
 Will not finish half their days.
 But I shall trust in You.⁴⁵

In Psalm 55 I was drawn to the psalmist's simultaneous call to God to hear our
 plea in verse 2 and to trip up the tongue of the enemy in verse 10. In particular, the
 enemy here is manipulative, a "smooth talker" who speaks words that seem soft, but that
 are really threatening.

⁴⁵ ibid

Psalm 126

A Song of Ascents.

When the Lord restores Zion's fortunes,
We should be like dreamers.

Then will our mouth fill with laughter,
and our tongue with glad song.

Then will they say in the nations:

"Great things had the Lord done with
these."

Great things had the Lord done for us.

We shall rejoice.

Restore, O Lord, our fortunes⁴⁷

Like streambeds in the Negev.⁴⁸

They who sow in tears

In glad song will reap.

He walks along and weeps,

The bearer of the seed-bag.

He will surely come in with glad song

Bearing his sheaves.⁴⁹

תהילים קכ"ו

שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלֹת בְּשׁוּב יְהוָה אֶת־שִׁיבַת צִיּוֹן
הֵי יָנוּ כְּחֲלֹמִים:

אֲזַי מְלֵא שְׂחוֹק פִּינוּ וְלִשְׁוֹנֵנוּ רִנָּה אֲזַי יֹאמְרוּ
בְּגוֹיִם הַגְדִּיל יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת עִם־אֱלֹהֵי:

הַגְדִּיל יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת עִם־נוּ הֵי יָנוּ שְׂמֵחִים:

שׁוֹבֵה יְהוָה אֶת־שְׁבוּתָנוּ [שְׁבִיתָנוּ] כְּאֶפִיקִים
בְּנֶגֶב:

הַזֹּרְעִים בְּדִמְעָה הַבֹּרֵה יִקְצְרוּ:

הַלֹּךְ יֵלֵךְ וּבֹכֶה נִשָּׂא מִשְׁךְ־הַזֶּרַע כְּאִי־בֹא
בִּרְנָה נִשָּׂא אֶל־מִתִּיר.⁵⁰

In Psalm 126 laughter and joyous song fill the mouth of the psalmist. Psalm 126

itself is a story, told aloud, of the return to Zion. The psalm is written in a mixture of the future and past tenses blending the story of the past with dreams of the future; Words and song link reality to dreams. The structure of the psalm itself is a song of lament, however, it contains elements of praise. Through the words of the psalm, and the structure this psalm teaches us to dwell in both praise and lament, sorrow and joy at once.

Of all of the psalms, 126 appeared in my work as a future rabbi most frequently. It is sung aloud on Shabbat and holidays, it resonates throughout Israel singing the

⁴⁷ ibid

⁴⁸ Rozenberg, Martin S, and Bernard M Zlotowitz. *The Book of Psalms; A New Translation and Commentary*. Jason Aronson Inc., 1999.

⁴⁹ Alter, Robert. *The Book of Psalms; A Translation with Commentary*. 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.

⁵⁰ Hebrew of Psalm 126 from sefaria.org

realization of the Zionist dream: at the entrance to the City of David, in memory of the messianic hopes of the days following the six day war in 1967.

THE PSALMS AS LIVING LITURGY

“*Hallel*” usually refers to the liturgical unit formed by Psalms 113-118. Tosefta Sukkot 3:2 and Ta’anit 28b teach us that this liturgical unit is included in synagogue services during Sukkot, Hanukkah, the first day (two days in the diaspora) of Passover, Shavuot, and in many synagogues today on Israel Independence Day. On *Rosh Chodesh* (new moon and new month) and during the last six days of Passover, only a “half” *Hallel*, part of the liturgical unit, is recited (Psalms 115:1-11 and 116:1-11 are omitted). According to Mishna Ta’anit 3:9, Psalm 136 was sung on joyous occasions. Thus, Psalm 136, *Hallel Hagadol*, is added to the liturgy during the morning services of Sabbaths, festivals, as well as on the last day of Passover.⁵¹

In Pesachim 117a, R. Eleazar claims that Moses and the people of Israel were the first to chant *Hallel*, whereas R. Judah states that it was the Prophets who instituted *Hallel* to celebrate Israel’s redemption from possible misfortune. In the Tosefta to Pesachim 95b we see that *Hallel* was recited by the levites and chanted on *erev* Passover. Further, in the Jerusalem Talmud, Pesachim 10:1, 37c, we learn that in *Eretz Yisrael* *Hallel* was added to the end of the Passover evening service, a practice that later spread to the diaspora.⁵²

My new *hallel*, a liturgical unit made up of psalms 19, 34, 39, 51, 55 and 126, was created for Thursday November 2, 2017. It was created to be part of the morning *shacharit*. Originally, it was to come at the end of *tefilah*, however, in coordination with

⁵¹ Skolnik, Fred, and Michael Berenbaum. *Encyclopedia Judaica*. 2nd ed., vol. 8, Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA , 2007.

⁵² *ibid*.

the week's service leaders, it was shifted further into the center of the service between the *Amidah* and the Torah service, the place where *Hallel* is generally added. *Tefilah*, including my *hallel*, took place in the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion's Minnie Petrie Synagogue on the New York campus. The chairs were arranged in five sections, front left, right and center, and rear left and right, all facing forward with the front sections aimed gently towards the center of the front space. In attendance were many of the faculty, some staff members, and a majority of the rabbinic, cantorial and education students of the HUC-JIR New York community, as well as some guests: my own family, mentors, and colleagues.

To bring my new *hallel* to life, I worked with Joyce Rosenzweig, musician in residence at HUC-JIR New York, Ivan Barenboim, and the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music student choir. The choir accompanied me on two pieces formally, Danny Maseng's "Elohai N'tzor,"⁵³ and Louis Lewandowski's "Torat Adonai,"⁵⁴ and on one piece informally to help lead the congregation: Sheli Myers' "Shir HaMa'alot."⁵⁵ Joyce and Ivan accompanied me, throughout the *hallel* on piano and clarinet respectively. I created a PowerPoint presentation to accompany my *hallel* which was run by Thalia Halpert Rodis. Additionally, the whole service and *hallel* was live streamed and recorded

⁵³ Maseng, Danny, *Elohai N'tzor*. 2000.

<<http://hbttemplesingers.ca/music/051%20Elohai%20N%27tzor%20-%20Maseng.pdf>>.

⁵⁴ Lewandowski, Louis, *Torat Adonai*. *Todah W'simrah: vierstimmige Chöre und Soli für den israelitischen Gottesdienst* Berlin: Bote & Bock, n.d. 1882.

<[http://imslp.org/wiki/Toras_adonaj_\(Lewandowski%2C_Louis\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/Toras_adonaj_(Lewandowski%2C_Louis))>.

⁵⁵ Myers, Sheli and Yochai Bar-David, *Shir Hama'alot (A Song of Ascents)*. Messianic Jewish Alliance of Israel, 2009.

by Andy Estevez, Marcus Villegas using necessary amplification and audio-visual technology.

The intention of this particular new *hallel*, as stated on the program (Appendix A), was to take some time in a prayer setting to recite and listen to psalms that touch on the theme of “caution with speech” in order to be mindful of the weight of our words; that our words can create and destroy, heal and hurt. Further, my intention with this project was to use the poetry and music of Psalms to communicate an implicit message without ever naming a “theme” for *tefilah*. In this particular case, the message was “be careful, humble, and joyful with your words.” One goal of this project was to demonstrate a way in which prayer can be thematic, giving time to a relevant theme without becoming obsessed with a single theme, while sticking to a traditional framework.

The Psalms respond to human nature in a way that most of our liturgy does not. Often in *tefilah* we, leaders, judge the success of a service by the participation of the congregation. If the service is high-energy and people are singing along and clapping, even dancing, we consider the service to be a hit, if people are sitting passively, we assume the service is a miss. But truthfully, “happy-clappy” is rarely what the majority of people are feeling on a given day. Another goal of this project was to bring psalms into *tefilah* in order to open opportunities not only for the prayer leader to shape the mood and focus, but also space for everyone to bring themselves fully to the text and the moment. The language of the psalms is vague allowing space for people to “come as they are” to the text and take what they need. The Psalms open up new opportunities for us as prayer

leaders to help people to access spirituality in a new way both connected and relevant to our lives at any given moment and in ways that speak to our souls.

Following my presentation, I received feedback from several people saying “that (referring to my new *hallel*) was just what I needed.” Some of them explained that they needed to feel a boost in confidence, that their voice matters, or that God or something greater out there is listening or reacting to them. Some people expressed a renewed frustration with public figures today who seem to use their words without thinking, and were moved to pray for others and for peace. Others, feeling a sense of smallness in the vastness of the worlds problems, felt uplifted and moved to continue engagement in activism and political issues. Still others expressed a deepened sense of humility and a desire to consider their own words before speaking them. Without a direct prompt, each person I spoke with following my *hallel* connected the words of the psalms to their own lives and/or to relevant issues in our world today and also felt that the *hallel* had spoken specifically to them.

There were many other themes that came up throughout the process of this thesis that could have similarly taken on the form of a *hallel* for different occasions. For example, the theme of crying or calling out to God came up in many psalms and could be used in a *hallel* for times of pain, for healing or for mourning. The theme of light also emerged in my work and psalms with this theme could be used at times of physical darkness, during a storm, winter months, or in times of physical light, such as on top of a high peak, at sunrise or sunset. Additionally, the theme of light could be understood metaphorically, and a *hallel* on light could be used at a time of hope, or at a time when

hope is needed. Finally, the theme of being seen by God came up repeatedly. This theme could be used for a *hallel* in times when we need a sort of redemption, when we feel small, or invisible, be it because of a failure of a greater system to recognize our needs, or our own failure to make our needs known.

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

Personally, performing this *hallel*, The Weight of Words, was a spiritual experience. I felt the prayerfulness of the psalms as I sang them, and the mood that the *hallel* set in the room. The implementation of a new *hallel* provided a possibility for the congregation and for me as a prayer leader to explore *tefilah* in a new way. I felt that this was successful, not because people were clapping and participating in the *hallel* (though they did sing along with the “nai nai”s in “Shir Hamaalot!⁵⁶”), but because people felt that the psalms I bought for this project spoke to them personally. As a prayer leader, what I have learned from this project is that if each person in the congregation can feel a moment of connection, a moment in every service where they feel that a piece of music, a text, anything was selected just for them, and they were meant to be present to read it or hear it, that is successful service leadership.

Since beginning this project, the psalms have continued to appear in my daily life. Just days ago I was sitting on the subway and next to me a woman had her laptop open on with her headphones on. I glanced at her screen and saw that she was working in Finale, music composition software, on a piece of music entitled “The Valley of Shadows.” I felt that I was meant to be on that train, in that moment, next to this person, reading the words and a new musical setting of Psalm 23. Who knows, maybe I’ll sing her setting some day and tell this story to a family that is aching for a sign of comfort, for someone to sit beside them.

⁵⁶ Myers, Sheli and Yochai Bar-David, *Shir Hama'alot (A Song of Ascents)*. Messianic Jewish Alliance of Israel, 2009.

For my own wedding, which took place during the writing of this thesis, we were inspired by Psalm 126 verse two, “Then will our mouth fill with laughter, and our tongue with glad song,⁵⁷” which appeared on our invitations, *ketubah*, and on my [now] husband’s *kippah*. The verse, for us, represents the ultimate union, it carries the context of the end of exile, the end of loneliness and separateness. For us, this verse encapsulates our hopes for our partnership; that no matter what, no matter the challenges that will certainly arise, our hope is to find partnership, companionship, and peace in and with one another.

The psalms have the power to resonate throughout the whole of our lives drawing Judaism and day-to-day joys and sorrows together, connecting the seemingly disparate parts of our lives in the context of communal worship. The Psalms speak to us from quiet places, and give voice to the innermost yearnings of our souls.

⁵⁷ Alter, Robert. *The Book of Psalms; A Translation with Commentary*. 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.

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APPENDIX A

The Weight of Words

In Genesis 1, God speaks the world into being (*Bereshit Rabbah* 3:2). Our gift of speech gives us the power to create new worlds for ourselves and for each other and, if we are not mindful, to destroy the worlds of others. The Psalms included in this *hallel* share a common theme: they ask for the courage to “open our lips” in order to speak words of praise and joy; but they also ask God to prevent us from using our speech in destructive ways. Placed at the liturgical moment of the traditional *Hallel* (Psalms 113-118) in today’s *tefilah*, this *hallel* reminds us that our words have weight: they can create, uplift, destroy, and heal.

Psalms 34

“Elohai, N’tzor”, Danny Maseng

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| 14 Keep your tongue from evil, And your lips from speaking deceit. | 14 נִצֹר לְשׁוֹנְךָ מִרָע וּשְׂפֶתְךָ מִדִּבֶּר מִרְמָה: |
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Blessing for the Recitation of Hallel

*Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam,
asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu likro et
ha-hallel*

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם. אֲשֶׁר
קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְקַרֵּא אֶת הַהֵלֵל:

*Blessed are You Adonai, our God, ruler of the universe, who sanctifies us
with commandments, and invites us to give voice to the psalms.*

Psalms 55

Translation from *Psalms in Translation for Praying*, by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

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| 1 Give ear, O God, to my prayer; do not hide from my pleading. 2 Pay attention to me and answer me; words don't come to me--just moans... 7 Ohhh, that I had wings like a dove--how I would fly to seek safe haven... 10 YaH! Confound their speech... 17 [But now I'm all alone;] I must therefore turn to you, God, praying that you, YaH, will come to my aid. | 1 הֲאֲזִינָה אֱלֹהִים תְּפִלָּתִי וְאַל־תִּתְּעַלֵּם מִתַּחֲנֻנִּי: 2 הִקְשִׁיבָה לִּי וְעֲנֵנִי אֲרִיד בְּשִׁיחִי וְאֶהֱמָה... 7 וְאִמְרֵי מִי־יִתְּנֶנִּי לִי אֶבֶר כִּי־וֹנֵה אֲעֻפָּה וְאֶשְׁכְּנָה... 10 בִּלְעַד אֲדֹנָי פֶּלַג לְשׁוֹנֵם... 17 אֲנִי אֶל־אֱלֹהִים אֶקְרָא וַיִּהְיֶה יוֹשִׁיעֵנִי: |
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Psalms 51

“Create A Pure Heart Within Me,” Noah Aronson

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| 12 A pure heart create for me, God, and a firm spirit renew within me. 13 Do not fling me from your presence, and Your holy spirit take not from me. 14 Give me back the gladness of your rescue and with a noble spirit sustain me. 15 Let me teach | 12 לֵב טָהוֹר בְּרֹא־לִי אֱלֹהִים וְרוּחַ נָכוֹן חֲדָשׁ בְּקִרְבִּי: 13 אַל־תִּשְׁלִיכֵנִי מִלִּפְנֵיךָ וְרוּחַ קֹדֶשְׁךָ אַל־תִּקַּח מִמֶּנִּי: 14 הָשִׁיבָה לִּי שִׂשׁוֹן יִשְׁעֶךָ וְרוּחַ נְדִיבָה תִּסְמְכֵנִי: 15 אֶלְמְדָה |
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| transgressors Your ways, and offenders will come back to You... 17 O Master, open my lips, that my mouth may tell Your praise. | פְּשָׁעִים דְּרָכֶיךָ וְחַטָּאֵי יָם אֵלֶיךָ יָשׁוּבוּ... 17 אֲדֹנָי שִׁפְתֵי תִפְתָּח וּפִי יַגִּיד תְּהִלָּתְךָ: |
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Psalm 39

Translation from *Psalms in Translation for Praying*, by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

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| 2 I said to myself; Let me watch my tongue; Let me set a lock on my mouth as long as the wicked one opposes me. 3 I kept my silence; Even good things I didn't talk about. But my pain got ever more troubled; 4 My heart burns in me. My thoughts are inflamed-- I can't help but talk... | 2 אָמַרְתִּי אֲשֶׁמְרָה דְּרָכֵי מַחֲטָא בִלְשׁוֹנִי אֲשֶׁמְרָה לִפִּי מַחֲסוֹם בְּעֵד רָשָׁע לִגְדִּי: 3 נֶאֱלַמְתִּי דוּמְיָה הַחֲשִׁיטִי מְטוֹב וּכְאֵבִי נֶעְכָּר: 4 חֶסֶד-לִבִּי בְּקֶרֶב יְיָ בִּהְגִּי תִבְעֵר-אֵשׁ דָּבַר רָתִי בִלְשׁוֹנִי: |
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Psalm 126

"Shir HaMa'alot," Sheli Myers

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| 1 A Song of Ascents. When God restores Zion's fortunes, We should be like dreamers. 2 Then will our mouth fill with laughter, and our tongue with glad song. Then will they say in the nations: "Great things had God done with these." 3 Great things had God done for us. We shall rejoice... 5 They who sow in tears In glad song will reap... 6 He will surely come in with glad song bearing his sheaves. | 1 שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת בְּשׁוּב יְהוָה אֶת-שִׁיבַת צִיּוֹן הֵי יֵנוּ כְּחִלָּמִים: 2 אֲזַי מִלֵּא שְׂחֹק פִּינוּ וּלְשׁוֹנֵנוּ רִנָּה אֲזַי יֹאמְרוּ בְּגוֹיִם הַגְדִּיל יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת עִם-אֲלֹהֵי: 3 הַגְדִּיל יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת עִמָּנוּ הֵינֵנוּ שְׂמֵחִים... 5 הִזְרַעִים בְּדַמְעָה בְּרִנָּה יִקְצְרוּ: 6 בָּא-יָבוֹא בְּרִנָּה נֶשֶׁא אֶלְמָתֵיו: |
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Psalm 19

"Torat Adonai," Louis Lewandowski; "Meditation," Marshall Portnoy

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| 8 God's teaching is perfect. Restoring to life. God's pact is steadfast, it makes the fool wise. 9 God's precepts are upright, delighting the heart. God's command unblemished, giving light to the eyes. 10 God's fear is pure, outlasting all time. God's judgements are true, all of them just... 15 Let my mouth's utterances be pleasing and my heart's stirring before You, God, my rock and redeemer. | 8 תּוֹרַת יְהוָה תְּמִימָה מְשִׁיבַת גִּפְשׁ עֲדוֹת יְהוָה נֶאֱמַנָה מַחְכִּימַת פֶּתִי: 9 פְּקוּדֵי יְהוָה יִשְׂרִים מְשִׁמְחֵי-לֵב מִצְוַת יְהוָה בְּרָה מְאִירַת עֵינַיִם: 10 יִרְאֵת יְהוָה טְהוֹרָה עוֹמֶדֶת לְעַד מְשַׁפְּטֵי-יְהוָה אֱמֶת צִדְקוֹ יַחֲדוּ... 15 יְהוָה לְרָצוֹן אִמְרֵי-פִי וְהִגִּיוֹן לִפְנֵי לִפְנֵי יְהוָה צוּרִי וְגֹאֲלִי: |
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THESIS PROJECT by Jade Sank

ADVISED by Rabbi Dr. Sonja Pilz with immense support from Joyce Rosenzweig and the DFSSM choir including percussionist Toby Glaser, and readers Shani Cohen and Emily Simkin.

TEFILAH led by Jess Kerman and Toby Glaser in coordination with Rabbi Kim Geringer and Ivan Barenboim.

MADE POSSIBLE by Cantor Richard Cohn, Rabbi Renni Altman, Rabbi Dr. Andrea Weiss, Dr. Wendy Zierler, Cantor Josh Breitzer, Shinae Kim, Andy Estevez, Marcus Villegas, Harriet Lewis, Elio Cruz, Thalia Halpert Rodis, the ordination class of 2018, and the staff and faculty of HUC-JIR New York.

THIS PROJECT is one part of my thesis project on the Psalms. I began with a deep dive into the book of Psalms as text and prayer, studying one psalm each day. The Psalms became part of my life, emerging everywhere. Psalms 19, 34, 39, 51, 55, and 126 especially stood out to me. These Psalms share a common theme: They speak about the power of our words to create, to uplift, to hurt, to heal, to cry out, and to calm. When I composed these psalms into this *hallel*, and began to sing their words, I gained a deeper understanding of the power of these psalms as poetry, song, and liturgy. This *hallel* reminds us that our voices matter and that our words have weight.

TRANSLATIONS adapted from “The Book of Psalms,” by Robert Alter, 2009 and “The Book of Psalms: A New Translation and Commentary,” by Martin S. Rozenberg and Bernard M. Zlotowitz, 1999.