

JAMES A. DIAMOND

The Torah as Song and the Rabbinic Sage as Troubadour

In gratitude to Eliezer (Leonard) HaKohen, the High Priest of Song

R. Hiya bar Abba said in the name of R. Yohanan, "In the future all the prophets are destined to sing in unison."

B. SANHEDRIN 91B

The prophet is human yet he employs notes one octave too high for our ears.

ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL¹

The title track of Bob Dylan's (née Robert Zimmerman) 1965 album *Highway 61 Revisited* begins provocatively with a partial retelling of the opening lines in the binding of Isaac narrative (*akedah*) that originally appears in Genesis 22. The first stanza reads as follows:

Oh God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son"
Abe says, "Man, you must be puttin' me on"
God say, "No." Abe say, "What?"
God say, "You can do what you want Abe, but
The next time you see me comin' you better run"
Well Abe says, "Where do you want this killin' done?"
God says, "Out on Highway 61"

A few years later, Leonard Cohen, another twentieth century Jewish musical icon and poet laureate of rock music in the Sixties and onward released his own version of that same biblical narrative in *The Story of Isaac*. Part of its message, similar to much of the folk and rock music of those decades, was a protest against the older generation's decisions to send their

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children to war.² Consider Cohen's rebuke:

You who build these altars now, to sacrifice these children, you must not do it anymore.

A scheme is not a vision, and you never have been tempted by a demon or a god.

You who stand above them now, your hatchets blunt and bloody, you were not there before.

When I lay upon a mountain and my father's hand was trembling with the beauty of the world.

The *akedah*-related themes of trial, sacrifice, martyrdom, and death (potential or actual) of the beloved son, which so critically informs and shapes subsequent Jewish, as well as Christian, theology,³ have found their way into modern popular music. These songs cannot possibly be understood without their referent—one of the most powerful, shocking, problematic, and inspiring passages in the Hebrew Bible.⁴ I return to these musical revisions of the *akedah* further on, but the question which this paper addresses from a philosophical-theological perspective is how the secular and popular protest music and poetry of the Sixties is the logical culmination of a long biblical and rabbinic tradition regarding the centrality of music, and how that legacy consequently accounts for the Jewishness of some of contemporary popular music's greatest bards. As such, my goal is to offer a Jewish theologoumenon of music; I do not venture into the thorny halakhic issues regarding normative restrictions on music since the destruction of the second Temple.⁵

Although according to biblical chronology musical instruments were only introduced in the eighth generation of the annals of humanity (Gen. 4:21), there is of course a prior auditory dimension to existence that is a condition precedent to that innovation. There are those sounds that no one hears, the "sounds of silence," such as the primordial wind, which precedes creation per se, followed by the daily creative voice of God generating the various components of existence. Then there is the first sound heard by a human being, a divine "blessing" that ensures the independent perpetuation of human regeneration (פרו ורבו) and that transfers control of the environment (וכבשה) to humanity (1:28). These premiere instances of sound thus inaugurate the auditory future of human beings with the qualities of preservation, protection, and triumph.

That pristine sound of silence, the "divine wind" (רוח אלקים),⁶ reverberates throughout all time with the protective sense of "hovering" (מרחפת) over the waters, which the Talmud analogizes to a "dove hovering over its nest."⁷

Once the idyllic social harmony of Eden is disturbed by the relational imbalance of domination and subservience and ultimately shattered by a fratricide, music enters the scene to repair and reharmonize human relations. And so, as if to compensate for the natural antagonism of brotherly professions between Cain and Abel—the rootless shepherd versus the rooted farmer—the next contrast between brothers occurs in the eighth generation, posing Yaval, the forerunner of all nomadic shepherds “dweller of tents among the herds” (אבי אהל יושב ומקנה), alongside his brother Yuval, the pioneer of musical instruments (אבי כל תפס כנור ועוגב) (Gen. 4:20-21)⁸ and, according to later commentators, the inventor of music altogether.⁹ With names that both assonate with the sound of their forebear *Hevel* and follow his shepherding lead, there is a literary resurrection of their murdered ancestor. Unlike that second generation, the two here do not present naturally competing occupations that encroach on each other’s domain, but rather mutually beneficial ones. Yuval’s product that enables musical sound can be utilized by Yaval to accompany and enhance his own interests and livelihood. Their near-identical names reflect the social harmony that music cultivates, thus retrieving the protective sense of that primordial soundless sound of the divine breath. Perhaps it is because of this dimension of music, the power of strengthening the bonds between diverse peoples, that Immanuel of Rome (c.1260—c. 1330) characterizes the science of music as a “wondrous art”.¹⁰

It is no wonder then that when civilization deteriorates once again, societal fragmentation, alienation of disparate groups, and global disharmony find its dénouement in the aftermath of the Tower of Babel debacle of a myriad of languages where peoples are separated by babble, or insuperable barriers of incomprehensible sounds (אשר לא ישמעו איש שפת רעהו). The very word for God’s *confounding* languages (11:7), *navla* (נבלה), resonating with the sound of both the names *Yuval* and *Yaval*, as well as the term for Yuval’s lyre, *naval*, suggest a link between the two. Humanity became obsessed with material productivity (11:3), mining resources for stone and mortar (תהי להם לחמר). The “same language and the same words” (הלבנה לאבן והחמר היה להם לחמר) (שפה אחת ודברים אחדים) unique to that corrupt civilization held together a monotonous conformist world typical of the mass production line that had lost the sense of music that Yuval introduced. That single-minded obsession with the production of goods overcame the importance of aesthetic creativity signified by music that both traverses national boundaries in its appeal and preserves a space for individual expression.

Isaac Arama’s musical depiction of the angels’ relationship to the heavenly bodies precisely captures why this suppression of artistic individuation

in favour of materialistic conformity is so insidious. The planets and stars are the angels' musical instruments whose "sounds" in the form of their perpetual endless movements attest to "the infinite majesty and exaltedness of the Creator and the futility of absolutely emulating Him." As proof that music bears witness to sublimity, Arama cites Moses' motivation for composing the song at the Sea, *I will sing to the Lord for He is exalted* (אשירה לה' כי גאה גאה) (Exod. 15:1), meaning, "that the purpose of the song is to declare God's exaltedness above all others."¹¹ Absent the sensitivity of the song which points upward toward the sublime, the civilization that built the Tower revelled in their own exaltedness, which deluded them into thinking their material progress could place them in the same realm as God. The certainty and arrogance of their own unlimited creative ability, confined to building with stone and mortar, should have been tempered by what Abraham Joshua Heschel considered the sense of finitude conveyed by music, for "music is the language of mystery. But there is something greater than mystery. God is the meaning beyond all mystery."¹²

A life without mystery pointing to something beyond, a life without music, fuelled their delusions to "make for ourselves a name" rather than defer to the Other and proclaim the Name of God. Even one of the fathers of the modern study of Jewish history, Heinrich Graetz (1817-1891), drew an intrinsic connection between the Judaic notion of God and music, but in his version, music emerges from an auditory *weltanschauung* "which perceives its God in the alternately loud and soft sounds of the movement of the waves, in the rhythm of word sounds, the artistic drive, in harmony with this particular view of God, gave birth to music combined with religious poetry."¹³ If we graft Graetz's historical insight onto Heschel's theological one, what results is a reciprocal relationship between music and the Jewish God, between mystery and history, where music directs the mind to God and God, in turn, inspires musical artistry.

As we plot the course of biblical history along a musical staff, we encounter a patriarch whose life can be particularly charted along an ebb and flow of music and whose life personifies the role of music in the religious life of the Jew. History repeats itself with a contrast between brotherly occupations—Esau "the skilled hunter, outdoorsman," and Jacob, "a mild man dweller of tents." Jacob thus is occupationally a descendant of *Yaval*, the ancestor of all "dwellers of tents," but, unlike their brotherly antecedents, there was no music to mediate their relationship, and so Jacob's and Esau's names and births portend the enmity and struggle that was to define their relationship. Consequently, that which paves the way for a brotherly kiss and

embrace, after many years of a poisoned relationship, is a name change from *Ya'aqov* the “deceiver,” the one who stealthily exploits another’s vulnerability or ignorance (Gen. 25:29-34; 27:18-24), the one who holds others back (25:26), who usurp another’s rightful place (27:36), to *Yisra'el*, the one who advances openly by direct confrontation and struggle, and who triumphs by standing his own ground (32:29). *Ya'aqov*’s encounter and transaction conducted with the angel is then a reversal of his first recorded exchange with Esau—a blessing previously obtained by dubious exploitation of another’s physical impairment and hidden identity (Esau’s fatigue and hunger; Isaac’s blindness) is now acquired by sustained effort and open disclosure while he himself experiences physical disability: he wrestles alone all night (32:25); he admits his name when asked (32:28); and he strains his hip (32:26).

Yet here, too, *Ya'aqov*’s ultimate victory over his angelic combatant is achieved, according to the midrash, by a suppression of music. *Yaakov* ignores the angel’s plea for release to perform his designated function among the angelic retinue of singing for God. *Ya'aqov* persists in his insensitivity to the power of music, to that art which God Herself is portrayed as dependent on daily from His angelic consorts, and refuses to release the angel from his grip.¹⁴ It is no coincidence then that the name Israel bears a midrashically etymological derivation from song (*shir*) and God (*el*)¹⁵ which captures both the metaphysical bond between God and music, as well as the physical uniqueness of Israel as the national reflection of this integral bond, and signifies that a spiritual path to God can be found through music. In fact, Nahmanides goes as far as to consider the song at the end of Deuteronomy a précis of the entire Jewish historical experience in terms of its relationship with God: “Now this song, which is our true and faithful testimony, tells us clearly all that will happen to us.”¹⁶ Jewish experience and biography is a divine musical score. Thus, by renaming Jacob, the angel introduces music into his existence, an element sorely lacking until this point in his life.¹⁷ Immediately afterward, the brothers reunite and, if only for a fleeting moment, join in a genuine mutual expression of love.¹⁸

Music, however, is not always appropriate, especially at a time of death and tragedy. Here too, the midrashically-constructed end to Jacob’s life is instructive. Joseph’s pain and self denial during the seven days of grieving for his father’s demise (Gen. 50:10) so affects God that He guarantees a future transformation of that sorrow into the ultimate joy of messianic redemption and the “comfort” of Zion’s ultimate reconstitution. Isaiah’s prophetic vision corroborates this by assuring that God *comforted Zion, comforted all her ruins . . . gladness and joy shall abide there, thanksgiving and the sound of music* (51:3).¹⁹

The most prominent of midrashic collections on Genesis climaxes in its very last word of “music” (זמרה).²⁰ Jacob’s death, a time when music stopped, signals a utopian future that is suffused with song. Even abstinence from music during periods of mourning itself portends further prospects of joy and music’s reintroduction into the mourners’ lives. Thus, the two extreme poles of human emotions, grief and happiness, are defined by the presence of song and music.

What Jacob had partially accomplished by the assimilation of music into his life, marked by his name change, is consummated by the national crystallization of that name in his descendants: Israel’s Song at the Sea. The expression of joy over the ultimate defeat of the Egyptian slave-masters and a future of freedom and independence takes the form of spontaneous song. Ultimate reward is signalled by what the midrash considers a future tense of “sing” in the preface to the song “then Moses and the Israelites *will sing* (ישיר) this song” (Exod. 15:1). The rabbis consider this locution to be a biblical locus that substantiates the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead—that is, a song will be sung in the future.²¹ In fact, if Ezekiel’s resurrection of the dry bones (ch. 37) is the dress rehearsal for and concretizes the truth of resurrection, then one tradition ascribes the whole purpose of resurrection to the performance of one last song, after which the revived bodies lapse back into lifelessness.²² Once again, just as the end of Genesis, music is the quintessential characteristic of ultimate reward, adding resurrection to messianic redemption is another instance of its occasioning.

Yet here, too, there is a vindication of the transfer of the role of spiritual music initiated by Jacob’s defeat of his angelic combatant. Though the angels request divine leave to sing at the splitting of the sea, the future tense midrashically indicates Israel’s pre-emption of the angels in song: “God said to them, *then Moses and the Israelites will sing* first and then you afterwards.”²³ But music, in the flurry of midrashic exegesis inspired by the Song at the Sea, not only anticipates the ultimate in human perfection, it also perfects God himself, for the midrash attributes divine kingship established on earth to the power of the Song. Previously, God was merely the Creator, but the Song coronates Him as king.²⁴ Thus it is music that transforms the detached God of the philosophers into the providential God of the patriarchs who governs and forms relationship with His subjects. Music therefore looks back retrospectively to the origin of all things and prospectively to the end of all things. Music is the nexus between creation and redemption and it is music that animates the Creator as the God of history as well. Without music there is no vital continuum between creation and redemption, but simply an indifferent,

and therefore directionless, sequence of events. Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) was wary of the danger of music, which is prone to creating “ideal time” at the expense of real time. These rabbinic traditions which view music as connecting all time and drawing down God’s presence into time are the midrashic articulations of what Rosenzweig considers the neutralization of this danger by leading music “out of its next-worldliness into this world of time and incorporate its ideal time into the real.”²⁵

Just as God’s presence as king is drawn into the orbit of human existence and history through music, the divine voice is heard only through the exhilarating effects of music. Sadness is a bar to prophecy, or that which constitutes the perceptual bridge between the divine and the human realms, the essential medium enabling religious life by disclosing divine will. The instrumental catalyst of prophetic inspiration is music, as exemplified by the travelling group of prophets Saul encounters prior to his installation as the first king of Israel. That group is described as being thrust into a prophetic mode to the accompaniment of “lyres, timbrels, flutes, and harps” (1 Sam. 10:5). Maimonides codifies this fundamental rule of joy through music in the cultivation of prophecy, the very highest form of engagement with the divine.²⁶ However he also makes it clear that music and the joy it inculcates on its own are not sufficient to trigger prophecy, but they are conditions precedent “on the way toward prophecy” after a process of “seeking” it.²⁷ Like Rosenzweig, and his tempering of musical ideal time to real time, Maimonides thus adds a sobering note to the unrestrained power of the aesthetic, of art, of music, and of poetry, as means that must be integrated with the whole person, intellectually and morally, in the quest for spiritual perfection. The musician poet needs the grounding of emotions, ethics, and mind in establishing a line of communication with what transcends all these single dimensions of human existence.

Considering the centrality of the imaginative faculty for prophecy in Maimonides²⁸ (who maintains that all prophecies occur in dreams and visions,²⁹ and that prophecy is often transmitted in cryptic parabolic language and images³⁰), it is no wonder that an aesthetic sensibility attuned to the inventive, dreamlike, and imaginative cadences of music would be more prone to achieving prophecy.³¹ Clearly, those who are “on the way toward prophecy” would count among those exceptional individuals whose music leads, according to Maimonides, “to prudence of the spirit and to nimbleness of [mental] activity to acquire intellect or submission to the divine commandments.”³² If those other facets of his being must complicate the musician in him to become an authentic prophet, then his audience must also

appreciate the prophecy beyond the music. The danger of the recipients of the prophetic message simply being seduced by the music is captured by God's assessment of Ezekiel's message to the community: "To them you are like a singer of erotic songs whose voice is melodious and who makes sweet music; they hear your words but do them they don't (33:32)."³³ His audience divorced the lyrics from the melody, transforming a sacred teaching into profane entertainment. The result is a spiritually catastrophic fracturing of what was forged at Sinai.³⁴ Ezekiel's adherents *hear* and *do not do*, rupturing the resounding *hearing and doing* (*na'aseh venishma*) which underpins God's revelation to the entire community of Israel at Sinai.

Once individual revelation is understood as originating in song, the groundwork has been laid for viewing revelation on a national scale. The formal commandment that obligates Jews individually to write a Torah scroll is derived from a particular divine mandate addressed to Moses and Joshua to, in the consensus of both modern biblical scholars and classic traditional medieval exegetes, write one small segment of the Torah, the Song of Moses: "And now write you this song and teach it to the Israelites" (Deut. 31:19). The poem that is its direct referent follows in the next chapter and commences with the word *Ha'azinu*, "listen," and therefore is informed with an auditory sense. But the rabbinic rereading of the command transforms the entire Torah into an epic poem, a song. The minor poem of *Ha'azinu* mirrors the major "poem" of the Torah from Genesis to Deuteronomy in that, just as only nature heard the divine voice at Creation, the poem commences in kind with nature, the heaven and the earth, as God's audience. And just as the Torah moves from the universal story of creation to the particular story of a single people concluding with it and its leader on the cusp of establishing its own homeland, so too does the poem crescendo from its opening in creation to its climax in the people of Israel and its land: "And [God] will cleanse the land, His people" (32:43). But the Torah as song, as poetry, also captures the relationship between its devotees and its text in the classic Jewish enterprise of study and interpretation. R. Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, the Netziv (1816-1893), claimed that the poem captures the nature of the Torah much better than prose in its covert allusiveness, metaphor, symbolism, and acrostic clues that disclose meaning far beyond what he considers the simplicity and overt message of prose.³⁵ The profound discoveries and *hidushim* of the sage, the *talmid hakham*, are then artistic explications of poetry; they are expressions of keen listening to the tone and rhythm of the text that turns authentic learning into musicology. The sage becomes the Torah's troubadour.

Indeed, in the kabbalistic tradition, music, concretized by the cantillation notes that melodize and punctuate the words of the Torah, ontologically precedes the vowels and alphabet of language, opening a pathway into the inner recesses of the Godhead.³⁶ According to the Zohar the letters are actually informed with meaning by the musical intonations “whose melody is followed by the letters and vowels, undulating after them like troops behind their king. . . . All of them range in motion after the intonations and halt with them.”³⁷ This sentiment is moderately echoed even in the rationalist school by Profiat Duran (Efodi) (c.1350–c.1415), who considered the “special melody with which we sing the phrases of this sacred Book,” superior to all other nations’ music “for by itself it almost provides the meaning intended by the phrases.”³⁸ It is music that preserves the text.

Without their musical cadence, the Torah’s words are lifeless and meaningless and therefore cannot invigorate those who are dedicated to living their lives by it. R. Johanan rules that the book of Ezekiel’s odd divine pronouncement of “giving laws that are not good and rules by which they could not live” (20:25) applies to “anyone who reads Torah without a melody or repeats Mishnah without a tune.”³⁹ Without music the study of both the texts of the written and oral laws is drained of any value, amounting to simply a collection of dead letter statutes which fail to perform their normal function of guiding life and behaviour. In this sense, the study in the *beit midrash* of Judaism’s foundational texts are animated by the *baal qoreh*’s weekly musical rendition of the parshah. Every Shabbat, the *leyning* performance jolts the listener into that preverbal transcendence that must animate the mundane engagements with the literary form of the canonical texts that consume her life and mind. The melodic phrasing accompanying the study of a talmudic *sugya* is not simply a practical aid for “increasing yearning and desire,” or “strengthening the faculty of memory,”⁴⁰ for any moral or legal guidance the *sugya* might offer. Rather, it retrieves the “sweetness and joy” of the *tana* Ben Azzai’s compositional midrashic weaving together of all the sections of the Hebrew Bible.⁴¹ The flames his learning generated were decidedly not merely the result of the subject matter, of delving into the most esoteric realms of the Torah and the mysticism or metaphysics of the *ma’aseh merkabah*, but rather of the passionate intensity that imbued his ordinary rabbinic engagement with the Torah.⁴²

If we return to the refrain with which we began this study and the “secular” music I myself was nurtured on outside the halls of the *shul* and the *yeshivah*, the outside and inside of those “four ells” are more blurred than clearly delineated. Dylan and Cohen, among others, emerge consciously and

subconsciously, out of a tradition in which song and Torah study, poetry and spiritual devotion, are intertwined in a sacred embrace. Their turns to Judaism's sacred texts are not sacrilegious but rather extensions of the profound role music has been shown to play within the tradition. In order to afford them their due, we need apply the Netziv's methodology of searching for meaning in the songs' allusions, which he would characterize as the *peshat* of poetry.⁴³

Highway 61, the road that winds its way some 1400 miles across the USA, from the south in New Orleans to the north in Minnesota, symbolizes the spectrum of various genres of quintessential American music. Dylan anchors that route in the image of the *akedah*, which animates it with both the terror of encounters with God and the adventurous discovery of the lengthy road that traverses a wide swath of his own country disclosing the endless musical possibilities it encompasses. If the killing is to be done on that highway, then perhaps Dylan appropriates Abraham's encounter and trial as a paradigmatic symbol of breaking new ground in poetry and musical creativity. The music that deserves travelling this road needs to adopt the boldness, the moral shock, the risk taking, the offensiveness, and the suffering that must have informed Abraham's willingness to sacrifice that which he most loved. If the poet songwriter wants to play it safe and compose comfortable music, then she "better run," because for music to approach the realm of the transcendent, it requires the censure and moral outrage that novelty and pioneering in a field usually attract. The toll for the musical highway of meaningful inventiveness is sacrifice of the highest order.⁴⁴

Cohen's treatment of Abraham, like Dylan's, is nuanced and tinged with both reverence and revulsion. Abraham's motivation in the trial and relationship with his son lies in stark contrast to those "over thirty" in Cohen's own time who fail to measure up to the tragic nobility of their biblical predecessor. The present child sacrificers are "schemers" and not driven by a "vision." Misguided or not, Abraham sets out sincerely to accomplish something much larger than himself, to pursue a vision that connotes ideals, that teaches, that leaves a sacred legacy. A scheme, on the other hand, colloquially conveys a sense of deviousness and of immoral plotting to exploit others for one's own benefit. Playing on the Midrash that Abraham's trial is prompted by Satan,⁴⁵ one can judge Abraham's test to have been invoked either negatively by a "demon" or positively by a "God," but his temptation to murder at least reflects a relationship with the Transcendent, with something beyond his own existence. The parents of Cohen's Vietnam era have no such excuse, no temptation other than their own self-interest.

Abraham's weapon in Cohen's hands is elegant, and is also reminiscent of the midrashic uniqueness of Abraham's knife signified by the rare and unusual term *ma'akhelet*. Earlier in the song, Abraham's axe is said to be "made of gold." It was neither "blunt,"⁴⁶ nor crafted to cause the most excruciating pain, nor "bloody", since at the end of the trial, Abraham in fact does not sacrifice his son. Axes used as weapons or tools are normally made of copper, bronze, iron, or steel, and so the preciousness of Abraham's axe of gold almost certainly indicates ornamental use rather than weaponry. Their willingness to sacrifice their children is no real test, for the love they feign for their children is superficial, and therefore effortlessly overcome. Their love bears no resemblance to Abraham's passionate and all consuming love for Isaac, as the midrash understands the implications of the heightened biblical multi-phrasing "your son, your only one, the one you love, Isaac." They "were not there before" and thus cannot hope to stand in Abraham's shoes. Though there is much more to be said, Cohen exquisitely blends the biblical narrative, rabbinic midrash, and his own midrashic accretions to evoke first the nightmarish terror in the murderous movement of Abraham's hand over Jacob's throat. But it also resonates paradoxically with a type of "beauty" in Abraham's gesture⁴⁷ that starkly contrasts to the cruel, crude, and barbaric drafting of Cohen's contemporary children to the foreign battlefield. Cohen's music itself annotates the "trembling" of the akedah with "beauty."

Now I understand what initiated one of the great Jewish master-disciple relationships of the twentieth century. After years of study, after extensive training in Greek and philosophy, after developing deep rabbinic expertise, and after searching for a teacher to whom he could indenture himself, R. David Cohen, known as the Nazir, was staying in the same place in Switzerland as R. Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook (1865-1935) when he heard R. Kook praying in the morning. He was so enraptured by R. Kook's musical rendition of the *akedah*, "with an exalted song and melody," that he immediately knew his quest had come to an end. He became R. Kook's devoted acolyte for the remainder of his life.⁴⁸ He captures R. Kook's melodiously overwhelming effect on his being by adopting the biblical description of Saul's own transformation as a result of joining the prophetic musical troupe mentioned earlier: "and I was turned into another man."⁴⁹ What is significant here is not simply the spirituality of the melody, but the text it accompanied. If the retelling of a horrifying narrative such as the *akedah*, imbued with what Kierkegaard called "fear and trembling," could by its chanting be spiritually transformative and inspire the kind of cathartic enlightenment Saul himself experienced, then one can be certain that the

singer, in this case R. Kook, is the one who knows how to extract beauty from every other part of the Torah. Leonard the *kohen* and his rendition of the *akedah*, follows the lead of these earlier *kohanim* in communicating its inner beauty through song.

The prophetic music of creativity and social justice, and the rabbinic euphonic interpretation of Judaism's foundational texts that preserves and perpetuates their relevance throughout history, reverberates in the Jewish exponents of contemporary music and poetry. Though we have only presented a preliminary sketch of the pervasiveness and importance of music in the Jewish tradition and omitted much, including its role in the ancient Temple, in liturgy and in the Psalms—and especially its elevation as a metaphysical crux in Hasidic theology⁵⁰—we have certainly refuted Richard Wagner's vulgar canard that Jews and Judaism have no interest in aesthetics beyond a crass commercialism.⁵¹ The music composed as resistance to what would later become the very demonic mass murder of Jews rendered possible by rants such as Wagner's attests to Wagner's insidious perverseness. What commercial profit ever motivated or accrued to the composers of such songs as Mordechai Gebirtig's *Es Brendt Briderlech Es Brent* [Its Burning Brothers, Its Burning!], which laments the apathy of the passive bystanders during the Shoah while "our poor *shtetl* pitifully burns"?⁵²

The cruelty that evoked Gebirtig's song may never have occurred had the final tempestuous message of Job, the biblical paradigm of innocent suffering, been truly assimilated. It is the canonical text where one would least expect music to be heard. However, one of the first responses to Job's torturous search for a rationale behind his unbearable suffering from the divine voice from the tempest at the book's grand finale relates to music. Framed as a rhetorical question, Job is asked to contemplate the limits of that search: "[Where were you] when the morning stars sang together and all the divine beings shouted for joy?" (38:7).⁵³ Whatever else this may mean, there is the implication that the inability to appreciate the music and the song that accompanied the foundation of the universe lies at the very heart of Job's, and all human beings', confusion regarding the "why" of suffering. Job must restore the music that he agonizingly renounced from his life (Job 3:7). Perhaps what Job must consider is that suffering is partially the consequence of the absence of music, of the refusal to transcend nature and the purely material by remaining deaf to its chords of song and joy, since that music would sensitize to the needs of others. It is no coincidence then that Job is restored and made whole once he "prays on behalf of his friends" (42:10), and only ideal prayer, suffused with joy and song,⁵⁴ can successfully open the gates of heaven.

NOTES

Unless otherwise noted translations of Hebrew sources are my own.

1. Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction* (vol. 1; New York: Harper & Row, 1955), 10.
2. As he declares explicitly in his introduction to the song on side two of the album, *Leonard Cohen: Live Songs*, “It’s about those who would sacrifice one generation on behalf of another.” This sentiment assumes a particular poignancy by the place where it was recorded: Berlin.
3. The literature on the *akedah* is vast, but for one excellent study, see Jon Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).
4. For a comprehensive list of the copious biblical allusions in Dylan’s music, see Michael J. Gilmour’s appendix to *Tangled up in the Bible* (New York: Continuum, 2004).
5. For a thorough overview and analysis of this topic, see Aharon Kahn, “Music in Halakhic Perspective,” *Journal of Jewish Music and Liturgy* (JJML) 9 (1986-1987): 55-72; 10 (87-88): 32-49; 11 (88-89): 65-75.
6. The Zohar (1:16a) identifies the wind (*ruah*) with sound/voice (*qol*), citing Ps. 29:3 (“The voice of the Lord is over the waters”) as corroboration. That primordial divine sound conducts and empowers the void of *bohu*: רוח הוא קול דשארי על ברו [Sound is the medium for shaping the world]. Daniel Matt, *The Pritzker Zohar* (vol. 1; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 120.
7. *b. Hagigah* 15a.
8. The two instruments, *kinor* and *ugav*, have been identified variously as reed or string instruments, but the consensus seems to be that *kinor* is a lyre and *ugav* is a reed pipe. See Bathya Bayer, “The Biblical Nebel,” 1 *Yuval: Studies of the Jewish Music Center* (1968): 89-131.
9. See Judith Cohen, “Jubal in the Middle Ages,” 3 *Yuval: Studies of the Jewish Music Center* (1974): 83-99, who demonstrates that Yuval’s constructed image is as a figure who paves the way for all future musical developments by laying down the very foundations of the art of music.
10. חכמת הניגון היא חכמת נפלאה. See the text and introduction by Amnon Shiloah, “A Passage by Immanuel ha-Romi on the Science of Music,” 10 *Italia* (1993): 9-18, at 14. This text, according to Shiloah, evidences “the advent of a flourishing culture in Italy that gave prominent place to music and its related science” (9).
11. *Akedat Yitzhaq* (vol. 1; Israel: 1973), 61a. ביד וזמר ביד אלה הכדורים הגדולים ככלי שיר וזמר ביד המלאכים המניעים אותם. להודות להכרזי בתנועותיהם המפורסמות והתמדייות שאין סוף וקץ לגדולת רוממות הבורא אותם ית’ שמו ושהרודף אחר השגת ההדמות אליו רודף אחר דבר שלא ינוח בו לעולם. ועל דרך שאמר אדון הנביאים אשירה לה’ כי גאה גאה אמר כי ענין השיר הוא לומר כי גאה גאה מכל מיני הגאווה והרוממות. Arama composed a short mini-treatise titled *Nigun Olam* (*Music of the Cosmos*), which depicts the relationship between God and the world in terms of two identically tuned musical instruments that cause each other to vibrate. *Aqedat*, 113a-115b. For an analysis and a discussion of its influence on a major Hasidic master, see Chani Haran Smith, *Tuning the Soul: Music as a Spiritual Process in the Teachings of Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 84-93.

- Philo already notes the musical sounds of the planets as they revolve in perfect harmony but are humanly imperceptible—an idea that originates with the Greek Pythagoreans. See Louis Feldman, “Philo’s Views on Music,” 9 *JJML*, 46-54, at 44-45.
12. “The Vocation of the Cantor,” in *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1966), 250. Heschel’s writings abound with musical metaphors. For a short analysis of his use of music as an essential medium of religious experience, see Michael Heymel, “A Witness to the Existence of God: Music in the Work of Abraham Joshua Heschel,” *Judaism* 49:4 (2000): 399-410.
 13. Ismar Schorsch, ed., *The Structure of Jewish History and Other Essays* (Schorsch, trans.; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1975), 68-69. See Kalman Bland’s discussion of Graetz’s binary distinction between Jewish hearing and pagan seeing, in *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 23-29.
 14. *Bereshit Rabbah*, ed. Chaim Albeck (vol. II; Jerusalem: Shalem Books, 1996) 78:2, 918-919. See also Geoffrey Hartman’s analysis of the midrash which claims that the amoraic argument regarding angelic singing is itself a musical performance: their midrashic ingenuity is their own version of singing in “competition” with the angels; Hartman, *The Third Pillar: Essays in Judaic Studies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 127.
 15. *Zohar Hadash*, vol. II, *Megillat Shir HaShirim* 5b: “שיר דא איהו ישראל”, כוונתם לכך כי האותיות “ישראל” מכילות את שני הביטויים “שיר” ו”אל”
 16. Commentary on Deut. 32:40 (Charles B. Chavel, trans.; vol. 5., 367):
הנה השירה הזאת אשר היא בנו לעד אמת ונאמן, תגיד בביאור כל המוצאות אותנו.
See also *Mekhilta deRabbi Ishmael* 116, which plots all the major turning points in Israel’s history through a final utopian end that is yet to come along a continuum of song [*shirah*].
 17. See the sources cited by Louis Ginzberg. *The Legends of the Jews* (vol. 5; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1968), 307, n. 253, especially those explaining the name Israel as “trying to sing instead of the angels.”
 18. The Masoretic text has critical dots above the letters of the word “and he kissed him” in Gen. 33:4. It is as though the emotion expressed is punctuated as an exceptional occurrence. Though there is an argument about the sincerity of the kiss, one opinion sees this kiss as a momentary gesture of love in a normally hateful relationship; see *Sifrei, Beha’alotekha* 69. Ibn Ezra asserts that, despite traditions to the contrary, the *peshat* upholds the sincerity of the kiss.
 19. *Bereshit Rabbah*, 100:14, 1296.
 20. For a detailed etymology of the root *zmr*, see John A. Smith, *Music in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 40-43. Especially pertinent is his observation that forms of this root in the Hebrew Bible “appear only in contexts concerning cultic worship.” (41) The future song generated by Jacob’s death then elevates the mourning over it from personal grief to sorrow over the loss of some divine dimension as a result of the death of a righteous individual.
 21. See *b. Sanhedrin* 91b
 22. *Ibid.*, 92b.
 23. *Shemot Rabbah*, 23:8.- קדמו שרים אלו ישראל שעמדו על הים דכתיב אז ישיר משה, אחר
וּגְוִינִים אֱלֹהֵי הַמַּלְאָכִים

24. Shemot Rabbah, 23:1- באתת עד שלא בראת עולמך, היית אתה, משבראת אותו אתה הוא, - אלא כביכול עומד אבל משעמדת בים ואמרנו שירה לפניך באז נתיישובה מלכותך וכסאך נכון הוי.
25. Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (Barbara Galli, trans.; Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 382. See also Galli's commentary in *Cultural Writings of Franz Rosenzweig*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), who draws a connection between Rosenzweig's understanding of music and "redemption or the end of all suffering." (71)
26. For a comprehensive overview of joy (*simha*) in Maimonides' works, see Gerald Blidstein, "Joy in Maimonides' Ethical Thought" (Heb.), *Eshel Beer Sheva* 2 (1980): 45-163. The other locus classicus corroborating the idea that divine inspiration and prophecy are not acquired while in a state of sadness also involves music and its soothing effects in opening the channels of prophecy is 2Kings 15, as cited in *b. Shabbat* 30b.
27. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Yesodei HaTorah* 7:4. See also *Guide of the Perplexed* (trans., S. Pines; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) (GP) II:36, 372-373, for sadness as an obstacle to prophecy and II:32 for the essential idea that prophecy arrives only after extensive "training and perfection" as well as natural disposition, and that those qualified "were always engaged in preparation" (362). The issue of prophecy in Maimonides has attracted voluminous scholarship and debate and cannot be given its full due in this paper. See, e.g., the bibliography compiled by Jacob Dienstag, "Prophecy in the Thought of the Rambam: a Bibliography," *Daat* 37 (1996): 193-238. Suffice it for the purposes of this study to state my agreement with the position that sees no essential difference between the opinion of the philosophers on the nature of prophecy and the Jewish Maimonidean one or, in other words, a thoroughgoing naturalist conception. For one cogently argued analysis in support of this, see Lawrence Kaplan, "Maimonides on the Miraculous Element in Prophecy," *HTR* 70 (1977): 233-256, who essentially collapses the distinction between what Maimonides lists as "that of the philosophers" and that of "our Law and the foundation of our doctrine."
28. GP, II:36, 369; see also II:45, 403, where he asserts that all prophets excluding Moses "hear speech only through the intermediary of an angel . . . the intermediary is the imaginative faculty."
29. *Ibid.*, II:41, 386.
30. *Ibid.*, II:43.
31. In this paper, I present music and its role as conceived in the post biblical rabbinic tradition. The question of the precise relationship between prophecy and poetry/music in the biblical tradition is another issue altogether. See, e.g., James Kugel's typically lucid analysis in "Poets and Prophets: An Overview," in *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition* (ed. James Kugel; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 1-25.
32. See his responsum on music in *Teshuvot HaRambam*, (ed. Joshua Blau; Jerusalem: Mekizei Nirdamim, 1960), vol. 2, nos. 224, 269, 398-400; 515-516). See also Yitzhak Shilat, *Iggerot HaRambam* (Jerusalem: Maaliyot, 1987) vol.1, 425-431. Much has been written on Maimonides' attitude toward music and, again, I don't enter here into the halakhic complexities of the issue, but only intend to convey Maimonides' conceptual attitude, which is not as negative as it might seem. See Boaz Cohen, "The Responsum of Maimonides Concerning Music," in *Law and Tradition in Judaism* (New York: Ktav, 1969), 167-181, and Fred Rosner's analysis

43. "For the song is not as explicit as prose and requires glossing indicating what each poetic verse signifies and this is not considered *derush*." R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, *Ha'ameq Davar* (Vol. 1; Jerusalem: Yeshivat Volozhin, 1999), 2.
44. I follow Michael Gilmour's advice: "Bob Dylan's Bible is most often a unique rendition of Scripture because he shapes language for his own purposes, whether this means accommodating a rhyming pattern, introducing irony, or weaving images together." Gilmour, "Bob Dylan's Bible," in *The Oxford History of the Reception of the Bible*, <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199204540.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199204540-e-25>
45. *b. Sanhedrin* 89b.
46. See, e.g., the tradition that Abraham carefully inspected the knife beforehand, in *Tanhuma* 96:13.
47. As such, Cohen's appropriation of the *akedah* is another example of what Elliot Wolfson considers his "deep connection to his Jewish roots," as well as the transformation of a "traditional theological image by introducing a note of doubt that is distinctive to the modern predicament." See his extensive treatment of Cohen's engagement with kabbalistic themes in "New Jerusalem Glowing: Songs and Poems of Leonard Cohen in a Kabbalistic Key," *Kabbalah: A Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 15 (2006): 103-152, at 104.
48. *Orot HaQodesh* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1984), introduction, 18-19:
 על משכבי לא שכב ליבי. גורל חיי היו על כפות המאזניים. והנה בוקר השכם ואשמע קול צעדים
 הנה והנה. בברכות השחר, תפילת העקידה, בשיר וניגון עליון, משמי שמי קדם, וזכור לנו אהבת
 הקדמונים, ואקשיב, והנה נהפכתי לאיש אחר. אחרי התפילה, מיהרתי לבשר במכתב, כי יותר
 מאשר פיללתי מצאתי, מצאתי לי רב.
- For an analysis of the critical role music plays in R. Kook's theology, see Dov Schwartz, "Aesthetics and the Limits of Understanding: Approaches in Twentieth Century Orthodox Thought" (Heb.), *Daat* 74:75 (2013): 403-432, at 403-414. Music is so important that "it is not just confined to one area but is the key to understanding all of existence." (404)
49. See 1Sam. 10:6.
50. See Moshe Idel, "The Magical and Theurgic Interpretation of Music in Jewish Sources from the Renaissance to Hassidism" (Heb.), *Yuval* 4 (1982): 33-63.
51. See Jacob Katz, *The Darker Side of Genius: Richard Wagner's Anti-Semitism* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1986).
52. See Moshe Avital, "The Role of Song and Music During the Holocaust," *JJML* 31 (2011-2012): 51-60, and Josef Bor, *Terezin Requiem* (New York: Avon Books, 1978).
53. See also Ps. 148.
54. See. e.g., *b. Berakhot* 31a; *Sefer Hasidim* 18; and *Zohar* 73a.