

## With shruti boxes and drums, practitioners chanting their way into Judaism

By Ben Harris · November 22, 2010

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (JTA) -- In a darkened room at a synagogue affiliated with the Jewish Renewal movement, 20 women gather by candlelight for Rabbi Shefa Gold's monthly Jewish chant circle.

As a shruti box drones and a hand drum keeps rhythm, many rock in their seats, their eyes closed and faces lifted in almost ecstatic rapture while they chant biblical verses and liturgical phrases Gold has selected for the evening.

The volume rises and their voices intensify as they intone the verses over and over, building to a climactic moment when the chant ceases and a heavy silence falls across the room.

"The most important part of the chant is the silence," Gold explains. "With the chant we're building a mishkan, we're building a sanctuary, a holy place, with our intention and with all the beauty we can bring to it. And then in the silence afterward we step into that mishkan that we have built and we receive God's presence."

Once a practice confined largely to the fringe, Jewish chanting is making inroads well beyond its roots in Jewish retreat centers and New Age spirituality. Regular Jewish chant circles are cropping up across the United States -- at least three in the Boston area alone, where a festival was held earlier this month focusing on Hebrew kirtan, a variety of Hindu chanting involving call and response.

At the Conservative Temple Emanu-El in Providence, R.I., an alternative "soulful" Shabbat morning service begins with 30 minutes of chanting attracting some 40 participants to its monthly meetings. At the recent convention of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation in Southern California, Gold was invited to lead a chanting workshop and a Shabbat morning service -- an invitation she saw as further evidence of the mainstreaming of Jewish chanting.

"It was something that I felt was a bit more fringe in the past," Gold told JTA. "And now people are recognizing it as an important modality of prayer."

Nearly all the growth in Jewish chanting can be traced back to Gold, a soft-spoken rabbi ordained by the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College who lives with her husband in the mountains of northern New Mexico.

From her home in Jemez Springs, Gold runs Kol Zimra, the country's only formal training program in Jewish chant. Its graduates have gone on to found chanting groups across the country. More than 100 rabbis, cantors and lay leaders have completed the 18-month training course, now in its fourth cohort.

The practice appears to have particular appeal to women and to those already inclined to spiritual pursuits. Participants speak of the healing and meditational qualities of chanting, its ability to open the heart and engage body and mind in ways that more traditional Jewish synagogue practices do not.

"The chanting practice allowed access to an understanding of spiritual things, and an experience of spiritual things, that I wasn't getting any other way," said Bruce Phillips, an alumnus of Kol Zimra who with his wife runs the monthly chant service in Providence.

"It brings the body into play," said Rabbi Mike Comins, the founder of Torah Trek, a California-based organization that runs Jewish spiritual "adventures" in the wildness. Comins says that when he combines chanting with the spiritual and physical effects of being out in nature, the effect "is off the charts."

"Parts of the traditional Jewish community have done a wonderful job in creating opportunities to make an intellectual connection," said Rabbi Susan Mitrani Knapp, another Kol Zimra alum. "But it's the heart connection that I think we have been less successful at. That's why so many turn to Eastern religions."

Like the introduction into synagogues of yoga and meditation, chanting has provided an avenue to enliven traditional services and to expand the range of offerings. It also has brought back into the fold seekers who, failing to find spiritual fulfillment in Judaism, gravitated to other spiritual traditions.

"It's very yogic," said Judith Dack, a formerly secular Jew who found her way back to Jewish practice through chanting and is now on Gold's staff at Kol Zimra.

"It's like you're vibrating sound through your body," Dack said. "The best for me is when I can vibrate sound in my primal language, which I think is Hebrew. It feels like I'm just fully alive in all the different departments, all the different cells."

Gold is convinced that chanting has deep roots in Jewish tradition. At a synagogue in Montreal, an older European-born Jew was moved to tears by Gold's chanting, telling her that he hadn't experienced anything like that since he was a child chanting at the feet of his rebbe and feared he never would again.

"This is something that Jews have done forever," Gold said. "That practice of a repetition of a sacred phrase is just something that works."

*(Visit JTA's [Wandering Jew blog](#) to watch a video of a Jewish chanting session in New Mexico.)*