

Rise Up The Ladder of Song

Joey Weisenberg



Musician, composer, and teacher Joey Weisenberg is the founder and co-director of Hadar's Rising Song Institute. He is the author of The Torah of Music (2017 winner of the National Jewish Book Award) and Building Singing Communities. He has released seven albums with the Hadar Ensemble, most recently Nigunim Vol. VII: Songs of Ascent (2019).

When we sing a *nigun* (a spiritual melody), we climb a ladder to the heavens.

This was most dramatically stated by the Piazeztner Rebbe in the Warsaw Ghetto shortly before it was destroyed:

האדם צריך לעשות סלמות לעלות על ידיהם לפעמים השמימה, הנגון הוא אחד מהסלמות,
ובפרט כשמרגנים אחר שמחה של מצוה, ובלב נשבר.

Sometimes, a person must build ladders to climb to the heavens. **A *nigun* is one of these ladders**, specifically when we sing after the joy of a *mitzvah* or with a heart broken open.¹

These words reflect several millennia of Jewish musical imagination. We know that Jacob once put his head down on a rock and slept. What did he dream about? He dreamt of a *sulam*, a ladder, that was rooted in the earth and reached all the way into the heavens. And he dreamt of angels going up and down the rungs of the ladder. *Olim v'yordim, olim v'yordim*. Up and down, up and down.

The *nigun* takes us up that ladder. The angels themselves are musical notes climbing the *sulam*. (In Hebrew a *sulam* is both a ladder and a musical scale.) They climb up and down, making melodies, and the melodies connect the heavens and the earth.

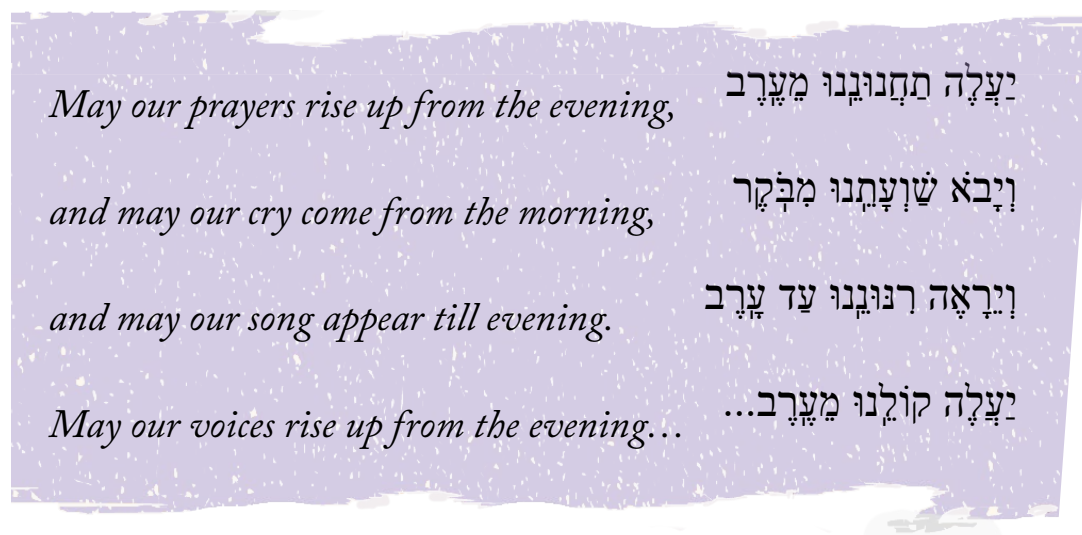
¹ *Tzav ve-Zeiruz* §36, translation Joshua Schwartz from “The Torah of Music,” p. 239.

Most *nigunim* mimic this pattern in some way. A melody often starts low, rooted in the soil, and then reaches up to the firmament. Longer, complex melodies build up rung by rung—A section to B section, B section to C section—before inevitably dropping back down to the ground. Even in the simplest one-part *nigun*, there is almost always a little lift followed by a descent.

Keep an ear out for that progression when singing *nigunim*. Every time we sing, we ascend a ladder and descend it, and then we start all over again. It mirrors the never-ending process of connecting with the heavens and then returning to the world to do the work that is needed here.

Commenting on the word *sulam* from Jacob's dream, the Ba'al HaTurim (R. Yaakov ben Ha-Rosh, c. 1269-1343) wrote that when we sing, our voices climb up the ladder into the heavens, where they are heard by God. He supports his idea by explaining that the word *kol*, meaning voice, is numerically equivalent to the word *sulam* (both words equal 136 in *gematria*). Our voices have the power to climb the musical scales and bridge earth and heaven.

When we sing, we hope that our voices rise up and are heard “on high.” This is the sense of the *piyyut* for Yom Kippur, “Ya’aleh Koleinu,” which I recorded with The Hadar Ensemble (🔊 [Listen on YouTube](#)). In it, we sing:



On Yom Kippur, as during the rest of the year, our prayers are composed in the plural. Music calls us to come together, to unite our energies, and to foster a communal spiritual transformation that is bigger than the sum of our individuality. Our collective prayers go up and then come down as points of goodness spreading throughout the world.

This year, we may have the unique opportunity to spend the High Holidays in smaller settings, with family or even alone. Using the vision of the musical ladder, we can set an intention to unite our energies across physical distance through song.

Try to imagine, as you are singing, as you are praying, that your notes are being carried by angels out, up, and into the cosmos. Close your eyes. Imagine this melody showering back down onto the world, your notes meeting the notes carried by other people's angels, creating a vast tapestry of song.

Even when we are separated by space, our voices rise up the ladder, reaching the same sacred place.



Hadar's Rising Song Institute cultivates Jewish spiritual life through song. It is a meeting place and incubator for creative musicians and prayer leaders who hope to reinvent the future of music as a communal Jewish spiritual practice. Based in Philadelphia, we engage people throughout North America and around the world through communal singing, immersive study, and experimental music-making.

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