CONGREGATION AHAVATH SHOLOM · COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

כֹּל הַנְּשָׁמָה תְּהַלֵּל יָהּ

Let All That Breathes Praise

Musical instruments in our Shabbat and holiday services — a values-based conversation

[Wednesday, October 14, 2026· On Zoom · Facilitated by Rabbi Jennifer Rudin

REFLECTION 1 · BREAKOUT ROOMS · 6 MINUTES

Think of a Shabbat or holiday service that stayed with you.

1

What were you hearing — voices, silence, an instrument, the shofar?

2

What were you doing — singing, listening, moving, praying quietly?

3

What made it feel like Shabbat or a holiday — not just any gathering?

When you return: type one word in the chat that captures that service.

OUR LENS · RECONSTRUCTIONIST JUDAISM

Tradition in conversation with us

An evolving religious civilization

Mordecai Kaplan taught that Judaism is the living civilization of the Jewish people — its law, language, art and music grow as the people grow.

The past has a vote, not a veto

We take inherited practice seriously and study it closely. Then the community, informed by it, decides how to live it now.

Community at the center

Practice is shaped together by the people who live it — through study, honest conversation and shared values, not by a single authority.

OUR PROCESS

Values-Based Decision Making

STEP 1 · TODAY

Name the question

What role should instruments play in our services?

STEP 2 · TODAY

Learn together

Texts, history, other communities' practice.

STEP 3 · TODAY

Name the values

Which Jewish values are at stake, and where do they pull apart?

STEP 4 · TODAY

Hear every voice

Personal experience is part of the evidence.

STEP 5 · LATER

Weigh and decide

Options shaped by our values, decided as a community.

STEP 6 · LATER

Live it and revisit

Try it, notice its effects, and adjust.

KEY TERMS

Halacha and minhag

Halacha

הֲלָכָה

"The way we walk." Jewish law, derived by rabbinic interpretation of Torah and codified in the Mishnah, Talmud and Shulchan Aruch.

Changes through rulings of recognized authorities.

Example: the rabbinic ban on playing instruments on Shabbat and festivals.

Minhag

מִנְהָג

"Custom." Practice that grows up within a community and is handed down, varying by place, era and family.

Changes as communities live, borrow and choose.

Examples: our melodies, a cello at Kol Nidre, a guitar at Kabbalat Shabbat.

Reconstructionists treasure both as wisdom; the community decides, guided by values.

THE TRADITION ON CUSTOM

Custom both conserves and changes

Minhag Yisrael Torah hu

The custom of the Jewish people is Torah.

Tosafot, Menachot 20b

Minhag m'vatel halacha

Custom can set aside law.

Jerusalem Talmud, Bava Metzia 7:1

Puk chazi mai ama davar

Go out and see what the people are doing.

Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 45a

Hizharu b'minhag avoteichem

Hold fast to the custom of your ancestors.

Babylonian Talmud, Beitzah 4b

TEXTS THROUGH TIME · 1 · THE BIBLE

Instruments already live in our prayers

PSALM 92:4 · A SONG FOR THE SHABBAT DAY

עֲלֵי־עָשׂוֹר ר וַעֲלֵי־נָבֶל עֲלֵי הִגָּיוֹן בְּכִנּוֹר

With a ten-stringed lute and a harp, with the sound of the lyre.

Sung every Friday night in Kabbalat Shabbat.

PSALM 150

הַלְלוּהוּ בְּתֵקַע שׁוֹפָר ר הַלְלוּהוּ בְּנֵבֶל וְכִנּוֹר

Praise with shofar, harp and lyre, drum and dance, strings and flute, ringing cymbals.

Sung every Shabbat morning in P'sukei d'Zimrah.

TEXTS THROUGH TIME · 2 · THE TEMPLE

The Temple was full of music — even on Shabbat

1 CHRONICLES 15:16

David has the Levites appoint singers to raise joyful sound with harps, lyres and cymbals.

MISHNAH ARACHIN 2:3

The Temple ensemble: at least two harps and up to six; at least two flutes and up to twelve.

MISHNAH TAMID 7:4 · "EIN SH'VUT BA-MIKDASH"

Levites sang a psalm each day, Psalm 92 on Shabbat. Rabbinic Shabbat restrictions did not apply in the Temple.

MISHNAH SUKKAH 5:1

The joyous flute of Simchat Beit HaSho'evah played on Sukkot — but it did not override Shabbat or the festival day.

TEXTS THROUGH TIME · 3 · RABBIS AND CODES

How Shabbat services became voices-only

MISHNAH BEITZAH 5:2

The rule

On Shabbat and festivals, no clapping, thigh-slapping or dancing.

TALMUD BEITZAH 36b

The reason

A protective fence: someone might come to repair a musical instrument.

SHULCHAN ARUCH OC 338

The code

Playing instruments on Shabbat is forbidden. Rema: some permit a non-Jew to play at a Shabbat wedding.

TOSAFOT BEITZAH 30a

Custom softens

People now clap and dance anyway — we no longer know how to fix instruments, so the worry has faded.

TEXTS THROUGH TIME · 4 · DEEPER REASONS

Four reasons the tradition held back

Shabbat rest · Sh'vut

Protecting menuchah from the "work" of tuning, carrying and fixing instruments. Beitzah 36b

Mourning the Temple

After 70 CE, music was curbed as a sign of grief — "Do not rejoice, Israel" (Hosea 9:1). Gittin 7a

Distinctiveness

Not imitating the worship of neighbors ("chukot ha-goyim"), especially the church organ. Leviticus 18:3

Whose Shabbat?

If a musician works so we can pray, is their own Shabbat diminished? Is the service still ours to sing?

Communities have been choosing for centuries

1600s

Prague

Musicians accompany Kabbalat Shabbat on Friday afternoon, stopping before Shabbat begins.

1810–1818

Seesen & Hamburg

Reform temples install organs for Shabbat worship.

1818–1819

The great debate

Nogah HaTzedek defends the organ; *Eleh Divrei HaBrit* condemns it.

1900s

Movements diverge

Reform embraces instruments; Orthodoxy refrains; Conservative and Reconstructionist communities vary.

Today

New minhagim

Guitar Kabbalat Shabbat, Shabbat bands, a cello for Kol Nidre — each decided locally.

VBDM STEP 3 · VALUES IN TENSION

Which values pull on you?

Menuchah
Rest — Shabbat as a break from the ordinary.

Kedushah
Holiness — time set apart that feels different.

Simcha
Joy — "Serve with gladness, come with song." Ps. 100:2

Hiddur mitzvah
Beauty — making prayer as lovely as we can.

Kehillah
Community — everyone's voice in the room.

Masoret
Tradition — continuity with generations past.

Klal Yisrael
Connection — to Jews whose practice differs.

Hachnasat orchim
Welcome — services that draw in newcomers and young people.

In the chat: name the two values that matter most to you here — and one that pulls the other way.

REFLECTION 2 · CHAT WATERFALL · 4 MINUTES

What makes a service meaningful and engaging for you — and why?

TYPE

Write your answer in the chat, but don't press Enter yet.

RELEASE

When we say "go," everyone sends at once.

NOTICE

Which values show up in your words? Does music — or silence — appear?

Bonus: an instrument you'd love to hear in our services — or a silence you'd miss.

NEXT STEPS

Where our conversation goes next

Gather more voices

A short follow-up survey by October 22, for those here and those who couldn't be.

Experience it

Weigh and decide

Return together for VBDM steps 5 and 6.

CLOSING · PSALM 150:6

כֹּל הַנְּשָׁמָה תְּהַלֵּל יָהּ הַלְלוּיָהּ

Let all that breathes praise Yah. Halleluyah.

Thank you for your voices, your listening and your honesty tonight.