



Psalms of Healing in Music and Art

Topic

Integrating music and art into the Psalms

Grade Level(s)

Middle School and High School

Goals for the Lesson/Activity

Students will

- Engage in text study of the Book of Psalms
- Through visual art and video-making, express their understanding of and reaction to the psalms
- Learn a variety of songs based on the psalms, and teach them to others

Materials Needed

- Psalms text sheets (downloadable)
- A variety of art supplies (drawing paper, pencils, oil pastels, paint, clay)
- Classroom instruments – egg shakers, tambourines, etc. (optional)

Technology Needed

- Laptop or tablet for playing music
- Tablets or smart phones to record videos
- Stop motion animation app such as Stop Motion Studio (for iPhone) or Stop Motion Maker (for Android) - optional

Background for Teachers

Music and art can help us and our students process our emotions, relieve anxiety, and find a sense of meaning and balance in our lives. In Judaism, one way we cope with times of distress is by turning to the wisdom and poetry of *Sefer Tehillim*, as well as turning to our communities for strength and support.

Sefer Tehillim (Book of Psalms)

Sefer Tehillim is the first book of the section of the Hebrew Bible known as *Ketuvim* (The Writings). While *Tehillim* in Hebrew means “praises,” the name of the book is translated into English as the Book of Psalms, from the Greek translation *psalmoi*, which connotes instrumental music. The book consists of 150 psalms, many of them liturgical poems that were sung daily and on Shabbat by the Levites in the *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple). In fact, many of the psalms begin with instructions about



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which instrumentation to use or how the psalms should be sung (though the meaning of the instructions is mostly unclear to the modern reader).

According to rabbinic tradition, King David put *Sefer Tehillim* together in five sections just as Moses gave five books of the Torah (*Midrash Tehillim* 1:2). Rabbinic tradition also posits that David included *tehillim* (psalms) written by those before him, such as Moses (Tractate *Bava Batra* 14b). Even so, according to tradition, David is still considered the final author of the Book of Psalms, earning him the title “the sweet singer of Israel.” However, modern scholarship posits that the dating of *Sefer Tehillim* is uncertain, and it is most likely the case that the various *tehillim* form a collection from many different periods in time.

Psalms and Healing

The content of *Sefer Tehillim* is quite varied, ranging from petitions for help while in danger to songs of praise during times of joy. Unlike much of the *Tanakh* (Bible), though, this content contains petitions to God, which can act like prayers. Thus, psalms have traditionally been considered to have healing properties, both physical and emotional (e.g., Peleh Yoetz *Tehillim*).

Because of the wide range of emotions contained in the different works, *tehillim* can help individuals to make connections with their own selves. According to Rabbi Simkha Weintraub, “Psalms are a container for our fears and hopes, a catalyst for the freeing up, and offering up, of our profound and deep-set wishes, prayers, desires, and insights.” (https://www.jbfcs.org/file_viewer.php?id=787)

Psalms and Community

The tradition of when and how we recite psalms is flexible. Many people have a custom of saying psalms individually as a personal practice, but we can also recite them as a community, especially in times of trouble. For example, many congregations recite or sing psalms together when there have been acts of violence or terror in Israel.

Here are a few ideas for integrating music and art into the psalms, and for ways to include your community in the process.

Description of Activities

Begin with a study of Psalms as follows:

Definitions:

Beit Midrash: a “house of learning”, or any space where Jews traditionally get together to study sacred texts such as the Hebrew Bible or Talmud.

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Chavruta: or “fellowship” – the traditional method of Jewish text study in pairs. *Chavruta* partners will read a text together aloud line by line, and discuss and debate its meanings.

Group students into pairs (or groups of three), and give each group one of the psalms to study. Together they will read and discuss the text of the psalm, using these questions as a guide:

- What emotion(s) are expressed in this psalm, and how does it make you feel?
- What images stand out for you in this psalm?
- What are the rhythms or patterns in the psalm’s language (repeated words, rhymes, short or long phrases)?
- What do you think is the message of this psalm?

Then choose from among these three activities:

1. Artist’s Beit Midrash: *Chavruta* text study of Psalms 23, 30, 118, 121, 122

Ask each student to choose one verse or phrase of the psalm that is meaningful to them or that they relate to most. They can illustrate the theme of the psalm or a particular verse using the art material of their choice (oil pastels, pencils, collage, paint, clay, etc.).

Leave enough time at the end of the lesson for students to present their artwork and share why they chose to interpret the text in the way they did.

2. Video project

Students will work collaboratively to make a short video based on a psalm, using either 2-D artwork, interpretive dance/movement, a short skit, or a combination of these.

You can use a free stop motion animation app like one of these:

<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.octoroid.komadori.lite>

<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/stop-motion-studio/id441651297?mt=8>

These videos from the G-dcast Psalms Project may be useful as inspiration:

<http://www.g-dcast.com/psalm1/> (recommended for ages 12+)

<http://www.g-dcast.com/psalm23/> (recommended for ages 12+)

<http://www.g-dcast.com/jewish-proverbs/> (recommended for all ages)



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3. The Psalms in Song

There are several different musical settings suggested for each of the psalms (see song list). Let each group listen to the music based on the psalm that they studied. Ask them to keep these questions in mind:

- How do the songs help to express the psalm's meaning?
- Which songs do you think express the words of the psalm most effectively?
- How do the different settings change the mood of the psalm?

Have an informal sing-along in your class, or develop it further into a more formal school event (see suggestions below).

Extending Learning into the Community

- Plan an informal exhibit of the artwork based on the psalm study and invite family members or another grade to view their work. Have the artists act as docents.
- Recruit students to form a *Chesed* Task Force. Reproduce the students' artwork to make greeting cards. Have task force members send a card to any students who miss class because they are sick or grieving. Be sure to write positive messages based on the psalms inside of the card!
- Check with your school director to see if your class could plan a concert/sing-along for the wider school community. You may also want to integrate instruments, if available (shakers, drums, guitars, keyboard), and work with students to come up with hand motions or choreography.

Differentiation Options

Knowing that students learn in a variety of ways and modalities, the following options are provided to adjust the above lesson to meet the unique needs of your learners.

For learners who need more assistance

- Choose one word from the psalm that you think is important and illustrate it.
- Add percussion to the songs, using egg shakers, clapping, or tabletop drumming.
- Sing along to the songs without the words, using lai lai lai (*niggun*).

For learners who need extension opportunities

- Select your favorite verse(s) from the psalms. Based on that selection, write your own poetry and set it to music based on a tune you already love.
- Select your favorite verse(s) from the psalms. Imagine the circumstances that brought someone to write these words. Tell that story in words or pictures.



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Suggested songs – feel free to use your own! Visit the Psalms of Song Blendspace for more

1. Psalm 23 – Gad Elbaz, Israeli 2008: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUv8Qy4pKNs>
2. Psalm 23 (English) – Bobby McFerrin: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cn2zKKhhF3I>
3. Psalm 23 – Gam Ki Elekh, Carlebach:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EH90MvbmWLk>
4. Psalm 30 – Mourning into Dancing, Debbie Friedman,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=35&v=pLsTk0YpE4A
5. Psalm 118: Min Hameitzar – Joey Weisenberg:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmOBoVA5DpE>
6. Psalm 118 – Min Hameitzar, Traditional cantorial, by Jacques Halevy, sung by Jacob Barkin:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R12iocN00pU>
7. Psalm 118 – Debbie Friedman: (excerpt) <http://www.allmusic.com/album/the-journey-continues-mw0000600843>
8. Psalm 118 – Ozi v'zimrat Ya – Chanting by Shefa Gold:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y3lcuzLjtDk>
9. Psalm 121 – Esa Einai, Yosef Karduner, Israeli, 2008:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUv8Qy4pKNs>
10. Psalm 121 – Esa Einai, Carlebach: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCfwtub2fPc>
11. Psalm 122 - Yehi Shalom - Neshama Carlebach
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EH3PnspPdwE&list=RDyRCdhf-t0J8&index=32>
12. Psalm 122 – Yehi Shalom Craig Taubman:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8B-EMWokZY>
13. Psalm 150, in the style of the Abayudaya Jews of Uganda:
http://wn.com/psalm_150_abayudaya
14. Psalm 150 to the tune of Leonard Cohen's Hallelujah:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYrSDGSEmh>