

**THE  
:C HORAL  
TORAH**  
**Five Books In Four Parts**

Fifty-Four A Cappella Compositions  
(One For Every Torah Portion)

**JOSH EHRLICH**

Cantors Assembly 2021

## Foreword: The Torah of the Choir

What is “Choral Torah?” In Judaism, the word “Torah” refers principally to the Five Books of Moses, read each year in their entirety by Jewish communities worldwide. But the term “Torah” may also refer to countless other sources of Jewish religious text, comprising early rabbinic literature (referred to as the “Oral Torah”), medieval commentaries, Jewish legal codes, and beyond. In modern times, the word Torah may refer to a more personalized and individual source of wisdom — one’s own teaching, based on the study of Jewish text refracted through one’s lived experience. This sense of personal Torah has been renewed from biblical roots: “My son, heed the instruction (*musar*) of your father, and do not forsake the teaching (Torah) of your mother (Proverbs 1:8).” The “Choral Torah,” beyond being the title of the book that lays before you, is also an invitation to ask: What is the teaching — the Torah — of the choral art form? What wisdom does it offer to humankind, and to Jews seeking religious and/or spiritual expression?

The earliest known choirs in the Jewish religion were found in the Jerusalem Temple, composed of levitical guilds who spent their lives in divine service. Without delving into the many biblical, rabbinic, and second temple period texts describing the Temple’s music, one can recognize that a fundamental aspect of all choirs is their complexity — large, coordinated musical forces requiring specialized training for the glory of God and the beautification of God’s worship. Reflecting on the advanced techniques and musical practices of the Temple, the poet Yehuda HaLevi (1075-1141) wrote in his *Sefer Ha-Kuzari* (chapter 2, verse 64):

*“Music was the pride of a nation which distributed their songs in such a way that they fell to the lot of the aristocracy of the people, that is the Levites, who made practical use of them in the holy Temple and in the holy season. For their maintenance they were satisfied with the tithes, as they had no occupation but music...”*

With such musical specialization also comes other features: hierarchy and differentiation. In order for a greater music to be realized, musical roles (whether instrumental or vocal) must be differentiated. Individuals are called to embody musical possibilities beyond that which can be realized in an impromptu manner. But what to make of this specialization and hierarchy, when one of the primary, prophetic messages of the Bible is the equality of all human beings? How is God’s equal love of each human life to be modeled if some voices are heard above others?

This tension of values between equal human worth and the necessity of differentiation takes on an additional element in the musical sphere — the question of harmony. Western ideas of musical harmony, as theorized by the Greeks and passed through the ages, via Arabic and later through the aesthetic cultures of European Christianity, were part of a world outlook that emphasized

cosmic order. All of the world was in divine balance; one need only harmonize one's mind and actions with this great truth. But for Jews, this philosophy was not an uncomplicated proposition. While “natural design” and cosmic order are found in one strand of Jewish thought, in many ways the Hebrew Bible is a subversion of this idea. The Israelites equally saw the world as profoundly broken and in need of repair — filled with slavery, poverty and injustice.

This contrast of worldviews within Jewish tradition may be acutely appreciated in the *midrash*<sup>1</sup> of the *bira doleket*. This is a rabbinic story about how Abraham, the patriarch, discovers God. In one version of the story, Abraham's encounter with God comes from reflecting on the world and discovering order: “*If a person was traveling in the desert and found a building aglow, would it be possible to say that this building did not have a master? So too, it is impossible that this world and skies have no leader and no creator.*”<sup>2</sup> In an earlier version of the *midrash*, Abraham is compared to one who comes across a building on fire. He looks at the world and says to himself: “*one would conclude that this world has no supervisor!*”<sup>3</sup> In this version of the story, God comes down and says to Abraham: “*I am the owner of the entire world.*” The poignant part of these two stories is that the same two Hebrew words, “*bira doleket*,” could be translated in either manner — either as a “glowing building” or a “burning house.” Thus we discover the truth that people can look at the same world and see it very differently — as beautifully aglow or horrifyingly ablaze.<sup>4</sup>

The experience of harmony, sonically or otherwise, can come as a profound therapeutic experience — the music of a world beautifully aglow. It allows the listener and the musician to experience a unity beyond their ability to realize themselves, as a function of the specialized gifts of the musician. But like all hierarchies, it can mask the complexities and inequities that lie within — the experience of the burning building. How might we resolve this philosophical tension between order and disorder, between harmony and reality, particularly in our volatile age of smashing cultural norms, rising social movements, and the just desire to make sure that all voices are heard?

Perhaps this tension cannot be resolved, but rather calls us into a faithful hybridity, both in the practice of music and beyond. The choral experience, as the fifty-four million Americans who sing in choirs can attest, has many powerful goods: inspiring wonder, cultivating close relationships, creating moments of immense beauty, and encouraging aspiration in the craft of

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1 a interpretive parable or explanation from ancient biblical commentary

2 Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer, Parasha #15

3 B'reishit Rabbah, Parasha #39

4 I am here indebted to Rabbi Aviva Richman, who taught me these midrashim as part of Hadar's 2021 Jewish Wisdom Fellowship.

musical expression which uplifts the entire ensemble. While choral music creates the classic “performer-listener” dynamic which is much derided, it does this, at its best, as part of an intentional relationship between those who make music and those who are assembled to hear it. Harmony cannot always encapsulate the truth of the world's brokenness, but it can provide stability, inclusivity, and love in a world of mistrust and identity politics.

The choral experience holds religious meaning in yet other ways. As Yehudah HaLevi observed, the levites of the biblical Temple were constantly occupied with music. In this way, they were brought closer to two profound goods — the practice of music and the spiritual life, being simultaneously devoted to both. It is here where the promise of Choral Torah is perhaps deepest — taking that which is most beautiful, and pointing toward that which is most good.

Josh Ehrlich's Choral Torah, the first of its kind (at least on American soil), fantastically reveals this truth. His work, exploring Torah verses through song, demonstrates what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: “A word has a soul, and we must learn how to attain insight into its life.”<sup>5</sup> Those for whom choral singing and composition is a passion will discover that this spiritual insight can be attained through the choral medium. This book is a well of deep repertoire for choirs of all stripes — liturgical or performance; Jewish, Christian, or secular; youth or adult.

May it inspire many others to mine the goods of the choral tradition in the parts of worship and life in which those teachings are most needed. And may it be a constant reminder that our musical gifts are the seeds of countless opportunities from which to grow our religious spirit.

Cantor Matthew Austerklein  
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5 “The Vocation of the Cantor,” in *The Insecurity of Freedom* by Abraham Joshua Heschel (Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 1966).