

THE PROJECT FILE

INTRODUCTION OF THE PROJECT:

The project was the organization of a Sacred Chant Circle (SCC) to be a “sub-unit” of Bnai Keshet’s Chevra Kadisha. Members of the SCC would agree to be “on call”, prepared to chant for souls moving through the continuum of life spectrum. The project involved the development of an initial training and educational program focused specifically on selecting a repertoire of 8 chants appropriate for shmira and shiva. It was determined that these two occasions served as ideal entries into Chevra Kadisha participation since prospective SCC members would likely feel most comfortable chanting in these two contexts. The chants selected were chosen because they could be equally appropriate to both occasions. The goal was to develop a half-day workshop that would teach participants these chants, delve deeply into their meaning, and also create a recording of these chants to make them accessible online so that interested volunteers could practice them. Moreover, the goal was to also incorporate other teachings (texts, discussion, etc.) that would help with cultivating proper kavanah - something perhaps akin to methods used in hospice training or chaplaincy training.

THE BODY OF THE PROJECT:

The eight chants selected to be part of the initial Shiva/Shmira repertoire training workshop were primarily those of Shefa Gold (with the exception of Ayn Od Milvado). This “Chant Sheet for Shiva & Shmira” includes:

Me Olam ad Olam, Atah El

From this world to the next world, you are God

Kol Haneshama t’halel Yah Halleluyah!

Every soul praises Yah with every breath,

from the moment of birth until Death! Hallelujah!

Ana Haya Ki Ani Avdecha (Psalm 116:16)

Please God, for I am your servant; I am your servant

Ha Makom Yinachem Etchen

The Place will comfort you

Ayn Od Milvado

There is nothing but God (all is one)

Ufros Aleynu Sukkat, Sukkat Shelomecha

Spread over us your canopy of peace

Min HaMetzar karati Yah, Anani vamerchav Yah (Psalm 118:5)

From the Narrow place I called out to God

who answered me with the Divine Expanse

Gam Ki Elech

(all but Ayn Od can be heard on Shefa Gold's website. Her website includes the words in Hebrew, English translation and transliteration and some interpretive words about the chant's meaning along with a recording of the chant).

I also developed a "Chant Sheet for Kavanot (setting the direction of the heart) which is meant for SCC members to learn in order to be able to chant some of these amongst themselves prior to attending to those in need as a preparation for their holy work: (some reappear in the other chant sheet)

Ana Haya Ki Ani Avdecha (Psalm 116:16)

Please God, for I am your servant; I am your servant

Elohai Neshama Shenatati bi, t'hora hi

The soul that you, my God have given me is pure

Ayn Od Milvado

There is nothing but God (all is one)

Kosi Rivaya

My cup runneth over

Also, a "Chant Sheet For House of Mourning" from Shefa Gold includes:

Va'ani Tamid Imach (Psalm 73:23)

*I am always with You. Though my heart is troubled and I'm filled with dread
I turn to face the great mystery*

Nachamu, Nachamu Ammi (Isaiah 40:1)

Comfort, comfort my people!

Ki Ta'avor Bamayyim itcha ani, u'va'n'harot lo yishtafucha (Isaiah)

*When you pass through the waters, I am with you, yes I am with you; I
won't let the rivers overwhelm you, I will be with you*

Gam ke elech b'gay tzalmavet, lo ira ra (Psalm 23:4)

*Though I walk through the Valley of Death, I will not fear,
Though I walk through the Valley of Death, my God is near*

HaMakom Yinachem Etchem

The place will comfort you

SACRED CHANT CIRCLE ATTEMPTED LAUNCH 2014
An account of what happened and what can be learned

At Bnai Keshet, two close friends of mine who have trained extensively with Rabbi Shefa Gold teach a chant class once a month as part of our Bet Midrash cycle. There are a group of regulars, so it seemed possible to envision the possibility of forming a Sacred Chant Circle as a sub group that would be part of the Chevrah Kadisha – one which would develop a specific repertoire of chants appropriate to the continuum of life spectrum; this would include chants for sickness, death bed, taharah, shmirah, burial, and shiva. Obviously there would be overlap with some chants being appropriate for more than one of these circumstances.

Another dimension that was frequently discussed between me and the 2 other founding members of the SCC (mentioned above) was the importance of Kavanah or intention, and since we were to ultimately be training CK members wishing to be part of the SCC, it was of the upmost importance not only to be teaching the chants (words and melodies) but also to somehow transmit a certain presence or attitude, and we were challenged about how to go about doing that, as perhaps it might require psychological knowledge and skills we didn't possess, or might require more experience before being qualified to train others in this, such as credentialed hospice trainers or chaplaincy trainers.

We initially began by forming a repertoire of chants and announcing on our synagogue website that every 2nd and 4th Sunday afternoon for an hour at the synagogue the SCC would meet to chant. I was pretty much the only one carrying the responsibility of being present at each session and at most there were 5 or 6 of us there and at times no one showed up. After a few months of this it seemed clear that this approach lacked any real direction, and momentum was quickly being lost. There was an overall lack of deep commitment from interested members, as this every-other-Sunday afternoon had a bit of a “drop in if you feel like it” sense to it; moreover, there wasn’t actually a fully-developed curriculum set out which laid out a goal of what was going to be learned and in what amount of time, etc. No work was being done either to communicate about the SCC, either to recruit more participants or to let those who might wish to invite chanters to assist at a shiva, know this was even offered. I did get to chant with another SCC member on a couple of occasions during shmira.

So, following the realization that perhaps I had acted too impulsively by starting the Sunday afternoon sessions so quickly before thoughtfully establishing a clear “program” or curriculum, led me to stop and pull back, slow down, and rethink things. On another level, I was feeling that I needed to be very sensitive to the two Shefa Gold disciples (my friends) who have been teaching chant at BK for years. I didn’t want them to feel like I was taking over their territory since they had for years been expressing a wish to start a healing chant circle. While the SCC I initiated and invited them to be “co-founders” of does include “healing” on the two ends of the continuum (those ill and those grieving), for me, it was primarily about chant being utilized as an accompaniment through the soul’s transition. I sensed that they wished to focus the SCC more on healing, while I wanted it more for escorting souls through transition. This difference of focus perhaps may have caused them to be less invested or committed to getting this off the ground (not to mention all of our busy schedules and the difficulty of finding dates and times when everyone can meet). I also strongly felt that I was in no way nearly as qualified as they were in being a chant expert/teacher, and so it didn’t feel right to me to move ahead with “my” plans for the SCC without always first seeking their approval and/or participation, and so this was not always easy for me to navigate.

I attempted to share my feelings with them about this, and they assured me that they were delighted that I had taken the initiative to start the SCC as part of the CK, and that perhaps our best approach would be to ‘go back to the drawing board’ and start first with offering a one-day or half-day chant workshop, with the concrete and defined goal of teaching 8 specific chants appropriate for shmira and shiva, since it seemed clear that these would serve as the most accessible entryways into getting members interested in participating in the CK, and also because the repertoire of chants could be shared for both occasions.

We met in early summer 2014 before the fall workshop was supposed to take place, and at this point I had newfound hope that things were really going to get off the ground this time. At this meeting, we had also decided that it would be really useful and even essential to record the chants we were going to be teaching, so that members who signed up for the workshop would have the chants (and the chance) to practice. We thought about having the chants either on a CD-rom or available on BK’s website, and I met with a friend (and interested SCC participant)

who has the equipment to make recordings. (He is also a composer of sacred music). It was during this meeting in June 2014 that the issue of Shefa Gold as author/composer, and copyright concerns came up; I was told by her two disciples that Rabbi Gold would likely not be pleased to learn that we were utilizing her chants and recording them without her permission. It was my own negligence that I did not write to her immediately to find out whether or not this was true and/or to simply ask for her permission. So, at this meeting, it was decided that we shouldn't be relying so heavily or exclusively on Shefa's chants, and at this time, two of our SCC members said they would prefer to write new chants themselves, a project they seemed very enthusiastic about embarking on.

After that meeting, everybody went their separate ways for the summer, I didn't reach out to Rabbi Shefa Gold (whom I don't know), and no new chants were composed. When I emailed the other SCC founders later in the summer about getting a September workshop date on the calendar (without having made any recording since this didn't take place as originally planned), nobody could agree on a date, everybody said how tough it is at the beginning of the school year, and besides, it was no longer clear whether we should be relying on Shefa Gold's chants or not and no new chants had yet been written.

In the meantime, that same fall, I became co-chair of our CK, and one of the "functional units" of the CK was now the SCC. This was another sign of hope since it was deemed an existing entity and the two chant experts were naturally assigned to head up that unit (I, as new co-chair could not also head a functional unit) This was somewhat painful for me since I kind of considered the SCC "my baby" (still embryonic). But, I couldn't be co-chair of the CK and co-leader of the SCC and it made more sense that the co-leaders of the SCC should be the trained expert chanters.

I currently feel like I've "lost hold" of what was originally my dream. I believe I could potentially do something to revive it, but now I would literally be stepping on what has formally become their 'functional unit' to head up. Each is a dear friend whom I love, but I'm well aware of differences/tensions that exist between them as well, and around the vision of the SCC's ultimate goals.

The best outcomes during the 2014-2015 year with regards to the SCC was when a woman's taharah took place, and specific chants for Taharah were selected and worked into the liturgy by one of the chant experts/SCC heads. Four of us from the SCC stood just outside the Taharah room while the chant expert who was doing the liturgy directed us. This was a beautiful and deep experience and those performing Taharah expressed how moving it was to hear the chanting while doing Taharah, and how moving and sacred it felt as we were focused on comforting the neshama.

Another positive outcome also came when I was invited to chant at a shiva call (because neither of the two chant experts were available) for a woman who tragically lost her young son. It was scary for me at first since I didn't know the family or the young man nor most of the people at the shiva, but the home was packed with people. I didn't want to feel like I was "performing" like a singer, so I tried to stay in alignment with the divine so that while I chanted I could feel

like I was literally pouring out comforting energy through my voice onto all those who were suffering from the loss. Afterwards, many people came to thank me for how much it had soothed their souls.

A couple of other positive outcomes: I was asked to lead chant one Saturday morning since neither of the two experts were in town. It was an occasion that enabled me to select chants specific to the CK and talk about the SCC to those who attended. And during the High Holidays, (September 2015), we offered an afternoon SCC session for an hour and I led it with one of the experts. There was a large turn out and we were able to tell those who were there about the SCC and about the CK and we invited anyone interested in chanting for shmirah and shiva to join.

As for where to go from here in 2016: I would like to play a role as co-chair of the CK to help the SCC leaders define and realize concrete goals which might include a workshop or recording of chants for the website, (or both), or simply working CK chants into their Saturday morning slot. A recent and unexpected positive development is that one of the SCC co-leaders recently took over the role of calling upon Shiva Minyan leaders when the rabbis are not available. This provides an ideal opportunity for her to directly offer chanting to the mourners at the shiva service.

At times I envision informally holding a chant circle out of my own home in an informal way and not mind whether I chant alone or with one other person, or ten, and then just let it evolve organically that way and maybe only after enough momentum is gained, impose a formalized structure/curriculum/plan onto it. The ultimate goal is to have at least a handful of us who know enough chants well enough so that we can be on call and ready to serve when the need is there. I also wonder if the SCC is not just somehow evolving organically in its own time and in its own way.

UPDATE AND FOLLOW UP:

Following the experience of chanting during Taharah and the great work one of the SCC co-leaders did in selecting appropriate chants and inserting them at particular moments within the liturgy, it seems like this perhaps pointed to a possibly new direction for the SCC which members of our CK seem eager to pursue: the development of our own Taharah liturgy which would be able to include selected sacred chants to be sung by our SCC outside the Taharah room either while the liturgy is being read or interspersed between prayers. We will be holding a "Taharah liturgy" meeting in January 2016 and the SCC's role in this is to be discussed.

Websites and other related material:

A d'var I delivered on Mach 8, 2014 for Zayin Adar is on Bnai Keshet's website:

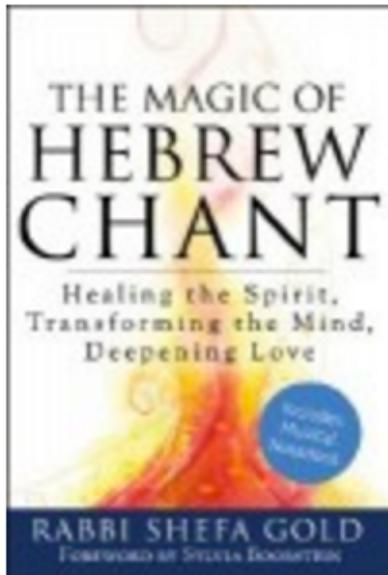
http://www.bnaikeshet.org/ck_furtherreading?post_id=61929

www.rabbishefagold.com

http://www.rabbishefagold.com/chants_overview/chant_listing/psalms-chants/

http://www.rabbishefagold.com/chants_overview/chant_listing/

Shefa's book that includes a chapter on chants for Taharah



- a. Appendices, references, attachments: Materials of any sort that are connected to your project, but not in the body.

INSERT HERE

List of chants?

Suggestions for how to do this?

b. Links to websites, online materials, other documents or materials related to the project

INSERT HERE

Any websites (Maybe BK website?)

Link to CDs of Shefa's stuff?

Other items online?