



28 Cheshvan 5778 / November 17, 2017

Dear Shir Tikvah:

I learned my first niggun when I was 20 years old, as a junior at Vassar College. I'd been singing for years, learning roles for musicals and operas, singing in choirs and synagogue. I'd already fallen in love with music-making, song-writing, and the transformative power of singing together. But somehow, I'd never consciously learned about niggunim until I landed at Vassar and was asked to begin an interfaith gathering with a niggun.

A what?! I probably asked. So I reached out to the Jewish advisor on campus, to start learning about niggunim and that advisor, Rabbi Rena Blumenthal, taught me a melody at once yearning and joyful, a melody that stretched the range and beckoned something from my heart.

My First Niggun - Rabbi Arielle Rosenberg

The night of the interfaith gathering, I taught a melody with no words to three hundred people! Each cycle through the niggun, the melody grew louder, the voices grew stronger. And I suddenly understood the niggun's secret superpower: just like protest chants, niggunim are energetic containers that can be held in a single voice, but truly come to life, become transformative, when groups sing together.

I carried that niggun with me to Honduras, and sang it around campfires with activists and in community meetings in small churches and at a funeral for a Honduran activist who had been disappeared during the civil war in El Salvador in the early 1990s and whose remains were finally returned to his family in 2007. I sang that niggun at my rabbinical school interview, sitting around a table with rabbis who would become my teachers and mentors. The niggun became my offering in new spaces, and my way of grounding when I felt unmoored.

Along the way, I learned a few more niggunim. Okay, a few more than a few.

If I'm being real, I couldn't stop learning them. I learned a niggun that became my handwashing niggun on Shabbat. I learned a niggun that became the niggun we sang again and again on the streets during the summer of 2016, following the murders of Alton Sterling and Philando Castille, as folks in New York City rose up for black lives.

Melodies are so powerful. Sharing them with each other, we deepen our connection and come to see each other more clearly. Singing them together, we build trust and come closer together.

I want to invite you to share your melodies with me! The melodies that you've been carrying with you from your childhood, from punk clubs and community singing circles; the melodies that make Shir Tikvah home for you and the melodies that you long for Shir Tikvah to sing. I want to invite you to sit down with me and share your melodies, to send me emails with voice memos attached, or to sing into my voice mail! It would be an honor to hear your songs and your stories.

As we move into the colder months, may we keep each other warm by our righteous action and our courageous song.

So grateful to join you, singing our shirei tikvah, our songs of hope!

Rabbi Arielle Rosenberg