

## Soundscapes of Salvation

### *Resounding Refrains in Jewish and Christian Liturgical Poems*

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**ABSTRACT** We do not know how hymns in Late Antiquity sounded. We do know that refrains became an important aspect of hymnody in the period, not only among Christians in the capital accustomed to acclamations, but also among Hebrew-speaking Jews and Syriac-speaking Christians further east. This article investigates ways that the refrains contributed to shaping soundscapes or sonic space. The article constitutes a study of three of the era's most outstanding liturgical poets: Yose ben Yose and Yannai who wrote *piyyutim* in Hebrew and Romanos the Melodist who wrote *kontakia* in Greek. Refrains should ring loudly, and all three poets show a distinct awareness of the refrain's ability to shape the performative space. Throughout the song, the refrain would return repeatedly as an echo and saturate the room with loud voices. The hymnographers used this feature semantically, to dye the soundscapes with highly charged or pregnant notions, so that eventually the singing of the songs themselves gave way to the experience of community and deliverance. Conducted by poets, voices gathered to create soundscapes of salvation. **KEYWORDS** soundscape, refrains, hymnography, Yose ben Yose, Yannai, Romanos the Melodist, kontakion, piyyut

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*And all the people see the voices*  
(EXODUS 20.14)

After a night of vigils, the Christian fourth-century theologian Gregory of Nyssa exclaimed: "All night our ears have resounded with psalms, hymns and spiritual chants; it was like a river of joy running through our ears to our soul and filling us with blessed hopes."<sup>1</sup> Sound had turned into a spatial category for

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1. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Easter, Homily 4* (PG 46:681). Translation from A. Hamman, *The Paschal Mystery: Ancient Liturgies and Patristic Texts* (Staten Island, NJ: Alba House, 1969), 96. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite similarly speaks of hymns as "the sound of many waters," possibly alluding

Gregory, a stream that flowed through the landscapes of the body. And public worship in the Byzantine realm indeed consisted of a flowing, “almost seamless musicality,” as Alexander Lingas has pointed out.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the soundscape of late antique synagogues was rich: the recitation of the statutory text by the cantor, the cantillation of the ritual reading of Scriptures, the communal recitation of the Psalms and the singing of Hebrew liturgical poetry (*piyyut*) reverberated within the walls of the sacred space.

What role did hymns play in late antique people’s lives? Why do we see an upsurge in sung poetry—and especially sung poetry with refrains—in the period? This article explores the spatial potential of hymns, how voices and singing, like rivers through erodible valleys, may have been experienced in the acoustic space. How was this aspect utilized by late antique hymnographers, particularly in connection with the refrains? We do not have access to late antique people’s experiences, but by studying (in the textual sources) how the poets cued voices, we may be able to draw some conclusions about what effects they were seeking and expecting.

Sound theorist R. Murray Schafer defines *soundscape*s simply as the “sonic environment.”<sup>3</sup> Most cultures, of course, use or create sound in their environment to navigate. With his book *Village Bells*, Alain Corbin has shown how church bells in the French nineteenth-century countryside helped shape what we may call acoustic communities; their pealing provided the village with information and by defining the parish boundaries they demarcated a common space.<sup>4</sup> Sounds are also used to distinguish groups from each other; in a multi-religious city like modern-day Jerusalem, for instance, Christians listen for the church bells, but Jews attune their ears to the Shabbat horn, and Muslims pay attention to the call of the muezzin. And, as Iris Shagrir has demonstrated, the conquest of this city by the crusaders came with a new array of resonances and noises that reshaped the soundscape

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to Ps 93 (92); pseudo-Dionysius, *The Celestial Hierarchy* 7.4. Translation is from pseudo-Dionysius: *The Complete Works*, trans. C. Luibhéid and P. Rorem (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 165.

2. Alexander Lingas, “From Earth to Heaven: The Changing Musical Soundscape of Byzantine Liturgy,” in *Experiencing Byzantium*, ed. C. Nesbitt and M. Jackson (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013), 311–58 at 313.

3. R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (new ed., Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994), 274.

4. Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: The Culture of the Senses in the Nineteenth-Century French Countryside* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). The term “acoustic communities” comes from Schafer, *The Soundscape*, esp. 214–22.

of Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> Yet even before that, aural phenomena structured Byzantine and late antique lives. Amy Papalexandrou has pointed out that in the past, sounds often served to map an area or a city, and the organizing of sounds help structure social networks: Monasteries used the collective and audible tossing of spoons on the plates to mark the end of the meal; monks and nuns knocked on a wooden *semantron* to announce particular events, not unlike church bells.<sup>6</sup> Even wordless sounds signify, then, and sounds contribute to the forming of identities. The sudden breaking of the silence or change in the sound-world communicated that it was time to be attentive or to change one's activity; these sounds created boundaries in time and space, and the transgression of such boundaries could indicate the greatness or gravity of an event.

### LITURGICAL POETRY AND LATE ANTIQUITY

Much research has been done on the sonic potential of late antique and Byzantine church buildings lately, and, as has been pointed out, churches in Byzantium seem to have been constructed as sound-spaces, to serve the acoustics—and not vice versa.<sup>7</sup> Such a conclusion may not hold true for all the churches nor for synagogues of Late Antiquity, but it tells us something about the importance of ritual sound. This article will not, however, duplicate acoustic scholarship, which has explored the intersection between singing and architecture; we shall rather pay a visit to the intersection between sonic performance and literary composition in order to understand what seems to be a conscious use of sonic effects by the hymn composers. Instead of quantifying the waves of sound, we try to grasp how the sound of voices in praise may have been

5. Iris Shagrir, "Urban Soundscape: Defining Space and Community in Twelfth-Century Jerusalem," in *Communicating the Middle Ages: Studies in Honour of Sophia Menache*, ed. I. Shagrir, B. Z. Kedar and M. Balard (London: Routledge, 2018), 103–20.

6. Amy Papalexandrou, "Perceptions of Sound and Sonic Environments across the Byzantine Acoustic Horizon," in *Knowing Bodies, Passionate Souls: Sense Perception in Byzantium*, ed. S. A. Harvey and M. Mullett (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library Collection, 2017), 67–85; for these two examples see pp. 74–79. These "aural icons" are sometimes called *earcons* in sound theory; see, e.g., Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter, "Ancient Acoustic Spaces," in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. J. Sterne (New York, Routledge, 2012), 186–90.

7. Sharon Gerstel and Chris Kyriakakis, "Revealing the Acoustic Mysteries of Byzantine Churches," *Faith & Form* 49/3 (2016) n.p. <http://faithandform.com/feature/revealing-acoustic-mysteries-byzantine-churches/> (accessed 17 Sept. 2018). Research projects include *Bodies and Spirits: Soundscapes of Byzantium* (see Spyridon Antonopoulos, Sharon Gerstel, Chris Kyriakakis, Konstantinos Raptis, and James Donahue, "Soundscapes of Byzantium," *Speculum* 92 (2017): 321–35) and Bissera Pentcheva's *Icons of Sound* (see her edited volume *Icons of Sound: Voice, Architecture and Imagination* [forthcoming].)

experienced, and how late antique hymnographers—Jewish or Christian—engaged these voices in their songs.

Liturgical poetry was a late antique innovation of Near Eastern religions. Poetry always played a role in ancient Near Eastern cult, but new kinds of religiosity, and new liturgies in particular, emerged in response to the decreasing prevalence of animal sacrifice.<sup>8</sup> Jewish and Christian liturgies took shape in the first centuries of the Common Era and by the end of the third century they began to take on fixed forms. In the fourth century, Christian and Jewish poets started to embellish liturgical prose, infusing religious meaning with poetic beauty. By the fifth century, liturgical poetry had become an integral medium of religious discourse and instruction, and poets evolved into prominent cultural figures.<sup>9</sup>

Modern people sometimes miss the cultural importance and impact that hymns had in this period, but if we keep in mind the vast cultural bearing of popular music in our own time, we may get a sense of the power of sung poetry. The last two decades have witnessed a surge of interest in the comparative study of Christian and Jewish liturgical poetry from the late antique Near East. Realizing that hymns from the period share a number of features across boundaries of religions and languages, many scholars now see the emerging hymns as part of a broader historical trend. It is worthwhile noting that the study of late antique liturgical poetry faces from the outset a fundamental challenge: how to bridge the gap between the poems that came down to us in written form and the poems as they were performed in churches and synagogues. Truly, there is not an easy solution to this methodological challenge, yet studies in the last decade demonstrated that this gap can be filled, even if partially, by careful reconstructions of texts and their probable (or perhaps imaginative) contexts.<sup>10</sup>

8. Ophir Münz-Manor, "Narrating Salvation—Verbal Sacrifices in Late Antique Liturgical Poetry," in *Jews, Christians, and the Roman Empire: The Poetics of Power Late Antiquity*, ed. A. Y. Reed and N. Dohrmann (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2013), 154–66, 315–19.

9. Ophir Münz-Manor, "Liturgical Poetry in the Late Antique Near East: A Comparative Approach," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 1 (2010): 336–61. For a general background, see also Margot Fassler and Peter Jeffrey, "Christian Liturgical Music from the Bible to the Renaissance," in *Sacred Sound and Social Change: Liturgical Music in Jewish and Christian Experience*, ed. L. A. Hoffman and J. R. Walton (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 84–123.

10. See most recently Laura S. Lieber, "Theater of the Holy: Performative Elements of Late Ancient Hymnography," *Harvard Theological Review* 108 (2015): 327–55; Ophir Münz-Manor, "In situ: Liturgical Poetry and Sacred Space in Late Antiquity," in *Placing Ancient Texts: The Ritual and Rhetorical Use of Space*, ed. M. Ahuvia, et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 87–98.

This essay builds on these recent developments and seeks to bolster and expand the perspective.<sup>11</sup> Even though church and synagogue may have represented different religious traditions, there was cultural interaction between them and a correspondence in the way they used hymns. The discussion will be limited, however, to a case study of one literary–performative device where voices intersect and one kind of sound-making breaks towards another, namely the refrain.<sup>12</sup> In the new forms of religious poetry that were created in the period, refrains formed a crucial element.<sup>13</sup> Like other poetic devices in the emerging “school” of Near-Eastern liturgical poetry, the refrain has biblical antecedents. However, from a marginal device in biblical poetry the refrain became central in late antique hymnography.<sup>14</sup> This shift relates in some ways also to the increasing use of psalms in Christian and Jewish liturgies in the late antique period, mostly since some psalms also have a refrain (e.g., Ps 136). However, the possible connection between the role of refrains in liturgical poetry and in psalmody falls outside the scope of this article, and the development of the liturgical use of the psalter remains understudied, especially in Jewish liturgy.<sup>15</sup>

We will examine compositions by three outstanding hymnographers of the era: Yose ben Yose (fifth century), who is the first *payytan* [Hebrew, poet] known to us by name, composed *piyyutim* mostly for the High Holidays, whereas his successor Yannai (sixth century) composed a cycle of some 150

11. Thus the article reaps the fruits of an ongoing collaborative scholarly effort to study Hebrew, Greek, and Syriac hymns of Late Antiquity comparatively, and we would like to thank our friends and colleagues in the Comparative Hymnography group. See also Joseph Yahalom, “*Piyyut* in Byzantium: A Few Remarks,” in *Jews of Byzantium: Dialectics of Minority and Majority Cultures*, ed. R. Bonfil, O. Irshai, G. G. Stroumsa and R. Talgam (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 831–45; Laura Lieber, “Portraits of Righteousness: Noah in Early Christian and Jewish Hymnography,” *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 61 (2009): 332–55; Ophir Münz-Manor “The Ritualization of Creation in Jewish and Christian Liturgical Texts from Late Antiquity,” in *Jewish and Christian Cosmogony in Late Antiquity*, ed. L. Jenott, S. Kattan-Gribetz (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 271–86; Wout Van Bekkum, “Jewish and Christian Hymnody in the Early Byzantine Period,” in *The Jewish-Greek Tradition in Antiquity and the Byzantine Empire*, ed. J. Aitken and J. Carleton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 261–78.

12. For a broader and more musicological approach to the soundscape of Christian Byzantine music, see Lingas, “From Earth to Heaven.”

13. Thomas Arentzen, “Voices Interwoven: Refrains and Vocal Participation in the *Kontakia*,” *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik* 66 (2016): 1–10.

14. On this trajectory see Münz-Manor, “A Comparative Approach.”

15. See Paul F. Bradshaw, *Daily Prayer in the Early Church: A Study of the Origin and Early Development of the Divine Office* (London: SPCK, 1981), 57–64; A. J. Berkovitz, *The Life of Psalms in Late Antiquity*, PhD dissertation (Princeton: Princeton University, 2018), 165–290.

lengthy poetic compositions to each Sabbath in the Palestinian triennial lectionary reading.<sup>16</sup> Both worked in the Galilee. Yannai's compositions were later called *qedushta* (from Aramaic for "holiness"), since they were performed right before the recitation of the Jewish Sanctus prayer.<sup>17</sup> Romanos the Melodist (ca. 490–560), from Constantinople, wrote hymns or songs that posterity would label *kontakia*. They were sung during night vigils in churches, and possibly elsewhere too.<sup>18</sup> Both the Constantinopolitan and Galilean hymn forms consisted of long narrative hymns that often retold biblical or festal stories in strophic form. The three poets made exquisite and extensive use of refrains, and each of them represents a highpoint in late antique hymn-writing in Hebrew-Jewish and Greek-Christian traditions respectively.

As mentioned, refrains became widely popular in late antique poetry. Jewish and Christian hymns might differ in some particularities; for example, the *qedushta* comprises roughly eight sections of which only some feature a refrain, whereas the *kontakion* strophes always ends with a refrain. In this context, a refrain means a set phrase which the whole congregation (or possibly sometimes a choir) would repeat after all or several sections or strophes in a given hymn.

16. See Ezra Fleischer, "Piyut," in *The Literature of the Sages, Second Part: Midrash and Targum, Liturgy, Poetry, Mysticism, Contracts, Inscriptions, Ancient Science and the Languages of Rabbinic Literature*, ed. S. Safrai (Assen: Fortress Press, 2006), 363–74; Avigdor Shinan, "The Late Midrashic, Paytanic, and Targumic Literature," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism, Volume IV: The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, ed. S. Katz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 678–98.

17. On the complexity of the genre and the role of refrains see Laura Lieber, *Yannai on Genesis: An Invitation to Piyut* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2010), 35–92. See also Michael Rand, "Fundamentals of the Study of Piyut," in *Literature or Liturgy? Early Christian Hymns and Prayers in Their Literary and Liturgical Context in Antiquity*, ed. C. Leonhard and H. Löhr (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 107–25.

18. For an introduction, see José Grosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le Mélode et les origines de la poésie religieuse à Byzance* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977); Sarah Gador-Whyte, *Theology and Poetry in Early Byzantium: The Kontakia of Romanos the Melodist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Thomas Arentzen, *The Virgin in Song: Mary and the Poetry of Romanos the Melodist* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); for performance aspects and dialogue, see also Georgia Frank, "Dialogue and Deliberation: The Sensory Self in the Hymns of Romanos the Melodist," in *Religion and the Self in Antiquity*, ed. D. Brakke, M. Satlow and S. Weitzman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 163–79, and Frank, "Romanos and the Night Vigil in the Sixth Century," in *Byzantine Christianity*, ed. D. Krueger (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 59–78; Herbert Hunger, "Romanos Melodos, Dichter, Prediger, Rhetor—und sein Publikum," *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik* 34 (1984): 15–42; Johannes Koder, "Romanos Melodos und sein Publikum: Überlegungen zur Beeinflussung des kirchlichen Auditoriums durch das Kontakion," *Anzeiger der philosophisch-historische Klasse der österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften* 134 (1999): 63–94; Johannes Koder, "Imperial Propaganda in the *Kontakia* of Romanos the Melode," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 62 (2008): 275–91.

In the *kontakion* the refrain is usually shorter than the one in the *qedushta*. But more striking are the similarities,<sup>19</sup> and one such similarity is precisely the widespread use of refrains. While a soloist would (probably) sing the strophes, the refrain lent itself to congregational participation. A great merit of the refrain was, in other words, that it allowed the audience to take part in the performance vocally; the congregation was not reduced to passive listeners but contributed to the singing.<sup>20</sup> Their voices were filling the ritual space. The reiterated chorus of the refrains comprised outbursts of sound and thus—like the dropping of spoons or the knocking on the *semantron*—they were sonic markers. Yet they did more than that—they conveyed verbal semantics.

### CRYING OUT LOUD

The opening words of chapter 58 in the Book of Isaiah exhorts: “Cry aloud, spare not, lift up your voice like a trumpet!” Yet how were pious people to sing? Toward the end of the seventh century, the Christian Emperor Justinian II convoked a Church council in the imperial palace of Constantinople. One of the issues they dealt with was loud singing in the churches:

We will that those whose office it is to sing in the churches do not use undisciplined vociferations (βοαῖς), nor force nature to shouting (κραυγήν), nor adopt any of those modes which are incongruous and unsuitable for the church: but that they offer the psalmody to God, who is the observer of secrets, with great attention and compunction. For the sacred oracle taught that the sons of Israel were to be pious.<sup>21</sup>

There should be no shouting or loud crying among the singers. This ruling, however, seems to reflect a new esthetics of ritual,<sup>22</sup> for earlier witnesses tend to

19. Münz-Manor, “A Comparative Approach”; Ophir Münz-Manor, “The Parable of the Lame and the Blind in Epiphanius and its Relation to Jewish Sources: New Texts,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 68 (2017): 593–606.

20. Robert Taft, *Through Their Own Eyes: Liturgy as the Byzantines Saw It* (Berkeley: InterOrthodox Press, 2006), 60–67; Laura Lieber, “The Rhetoric of Participation: Experiential Elements of Early Hebrew Liturgical Poetry,” *Journal of Religion* 90 (2010): 119–47.

21. The (Quinisext) Council of Trullo, Canon 75. Translation from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 2:14, 398. For the Greek text, see Heinz Ohme with R. Flogaus and C. Rudolf Kraus, eds., *Concilium constantinopolitanum A. 691/2 in Trullo habitum (Concilium quinisextum)* (Acta conciliorum oecumenicorum 2.2.4) (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 52.

22. For an even later turn in Byzantine hymn esthetics, namely the emergence of the *kalophonia*, see Spyridon Antonopoulos, “Kalophonia and the Phenomenon of Embellishment in Byzantine Psalmody,” in *Knowing Bodies, Passionate Souls*, 87–109.

emphasize loudness as a sign of strong faith. The Christian pilgrim Egeria writes from fourth-century Jerusalem:

During the reading of this passage [about the arrest of Jesus in Gethsemani] there is such moaning and groaning with weeping from all the people that their moaning can be heard practically as far as the city. [. . .] God knows, ladies, my sisters, that the voices of the faithful who have come to catechetics to hear instruction on those things being said or explained by the bishop are louder than when the bishop sits down in church to preach about each of those matters which are explained in this fashion. [. . .] While the bishop is discussing and explaining each point, so loud are the voices of praise that they can be heard outside the church.<sup>23</sup>

From a fragment reflecting sixth-century liturgical practice we learn that when a Christian bishop approaches and enters a town ritually, “the congregation cries out *Kyrie eleison!* ten times.”<sup>24</sup> The acclamation should, in other words, be made in a loud voice. Brent Shaw has demonstrated just how effective collective shouts and singing could be in stirring emotions or raising spirits among the early Christians—as among pagans—in Africa and beyond.<sup>25</sup>

Gregory of Nazianzus speaks about the thundering roll of psalmody, as does Pseudo-Dionysius.<sup>26</sup> A later medieval Christian tradition, which may reflect the new esthetics, professed derogatorily that Jewish liturgy was characterized by its noisiness vis-à-vis Christian harmony.<sup>27</sup> It appears, however, that both Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity preferred loud voices during services. Loudness signified intensity—often interpreted as intensity of faith.

Early hymns clearly accentuate the importance of crying out with a loud voice. The loud shouting created a massive sound effect. Jørgen Raasted has demonstrated that Byzantine hymn composers used musical elements to

23. Egeria, *Travel Diary* 36, 46, 47 (Sources Chrétienne 296:282–83, 310–11, 314–15). Translation from George E. Gingras, *Egeria: Diary of a Pilgrimage* (New York: Newman Press, 1968), 109, 124–25.

24. *Codex Rahmani Syr.* 33; see Ignatius Ephrem II Rahmani, ed., “Ritus receptionis episcopi et celebrationis liturgiae catechumenorum,” in *Studia Syriaca III: Vetusta documenta liturgica*, ed. Rahmani (Monte Libano: Seminarium Scharfensi, 1908), 1–22 at 16, and page 1 (Syriac numerals) in the same volume. Translation quoted from Taft, *Through Their Own Eyes*, 41.

25. Brent D. Shaw, *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 441–89.

26. Gregory Nazianzus, *Oration 43, In Praise of Basil* (PG 36:561) 52; Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Celestial Hierarchy* 7.4.

27. On that notion see Ruth Hachohen, *The Music Libel against the Jews* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2011), 1–16. We wish to thank Galit Hasan-Rokem for this reference.

“underline the meaning of the text.”<sup>28</sup> A couple of examples from Romanos and Yannai show a similar deliberate use of sound; the late antique poets both encouraged and utilized the punctuating loudness of voices in their poetry, in ways that contributed to radical colorings of the sonic space. Even a basic sonic element—one word—could shape the soundscape of liturgy quite forcefully, and by so doing create a meaningful ritual and social experience.

The Christian poet Romanos composed liturgical songs for churches in the city of Constantinople. He typically introduced his refrains by the verbs *βοῶ*, *κραυγάζω*, or *κράζω*—that is, verbal forms directly related to the words that the Trullo council was to use. These words mean to *cry*, *scream*, or *shout*. Like the English word *cry*, these central verbs inhabit a relatively broad field of meanings and can also be translated *call out*, *shriek*, *proclaim*, or *declare*, yet they determine some kind of vociferous or loud exclamation with the voice. The hymn soloist would sing something like “Let us *cry/exclaim* this to God: [*refrain*]!” Thus the poet orchestrated a loud congregational shout; as Derek Krueger has noted, “the congregation join[ed] the chorus with liturgically cued joy”<sup>29</sup>—or, one might add, with liturgically cued dismay. In the hymn “On the Last Judgement,” Romanos paints the end of the world and its horrors in such a way that the audience would likely experience a mixture of desperation and joy. Throughout he describes the reaction of the just and faithful people of God:

- . . .the just will shine as they shout [*κραυγάζοντες*], “Glory to you,  
*Judge most just!*”
- . . .[the people will be] calling out [*βοῶντες*], “Look upon and save your servant,  
*Judge most just!*”
- . . .[the just ones] cry out [*κράζουσι*], “Appear,  
*Judge most just!*”
- . . .[all the faithful] will proudly cry [*κράζουσι*], “Grant us your grace,  
*Judge most just!*”<sup>30</sup>

28. Jørgen Raasted, “Byzantine Liturgical Music and Its Meaning for the Byzantine Worshipper,” in *Church and People in Byzantium: Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies Twentieth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies Manchester, 1986*, ed. R. Morris (Centre for Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern Greek Studies, University of Birmingham), 49–57, esp. 55.

29. Derek Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects: Christian Ritual, Biblical Narrative, and the Formation of the Self in Byzantium* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 95.

30. Romanos, *Hymn* 50.3.9–10, 50.10.9–10, 50.12.9–10, 50.18.9–10 (SC 283:236–258). Translation from St. Romanos the Melodist: *On the Life of Christ; Kontakia*, trans. Ephrem Lash (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995), 222–28 [with minor adjustments].

The congregation *cries out* the phrase “judge most just” 25 times as an embodied outburst, as replies to the strophes sung by the soloist. In the same poet’s *kontakion*, “On Mary at the Cross,” the singer exclaims repeatedly:

shout out [κραύγασον]:

“Willingly he suffered, *my Son and my God!*”

cry this out [βόησον]:

“As he wills he accepts suffering, *my Son and my God!*”

cry this aloud [κραῖξον]: “Have mercy on Adam  
and take pity on Eve, *my Son and my God!*”<sup>31</sup>

What the council at Trullo attempted to forbid a little more than a century later, then, apparently was common practice in Romanos’s time—and there are many more instances in this one hymn alone. Here it is even the character of Christ who tells his Mother to *cry out* and *shout* to him (“my Son and my God”) as he is nailed to the cross. Since it is the congregation that actually pronounces the refrain, however, Christ is indirectly encouraging the assembled people to shout out and cry aloud.<sup>32</sup>

These are merely two examples of how *kontakia*, through the voice of the soloist, urged the people of the congregation to cry, exclaim, or shout the refrain in unison. From the relatively meager song of one man’s voice, the singing would all of a sudden burst into a massive shout from the whole crowd, resounding cataracts in the soundscape, every time the strophe would approach its end.

Singing is a way to make the human voice and human hearing part of the sonic space in a very concrete way. As understood by the Byzantine author Michael Psellos (ca. 1018–1078), for instance, the vocal sound originates in bodies, is received by bodies, and fills the air in between bodies.<sup>33</sup> To Psellos, the sound was no mere ethereal abstraction, but a physical, almost intimate, presence; it emerged from corporeal motion and reverberated in bodies. Choir singers today—as much as people who have sung along during the refrain at a rock concert—may have experienced what congregants of Late Antiquity must have

31. Romanos, *Hymn* 35.4.8–9, 35.6.8–9, 35.9.8–9 (SC 128:164–72); trans. Lash, *Kontakia*, 144–47.

32. For a study of the diversity of voices performed in Romanos refrains, see Arentzen, “Voices Interwoven”; for the performance of Mary’s voice in Romanos, see Arentzen, *The Virgin in Song*, 120–63.

33. Michael Psellos, *On the Echeion [Echo Chamber] at Nikomedia* (for a translation, see Nassos Papalexandrou in Amy Papalexandrou, “Perceptions of Sound,” 84–85.)

experienced when suddenly the whole room, every present body, burst out in a full cry. They became part of the sound, or the sound became part of them.

An extremely effective use of the sudden outburst of human voices can be found in the poetry of Yannai. As noted above, a *qedushta* is a lengthy composition. Its first parts are usually sung solely by the cantor, and congregational participation begins only later on and reaches its peak towards the end of the composition and the communal recitation of the *Sanctus* prayer.<sup>34</sup> Shulamit Elizur has demonstrated how the semantic understandability of the *payytanic* composition changes in the course of the recitation of the *qedushta*.<sup>35</sup> According to her, the first parts of the composition use a denser, poetic language whereas the later parts are more straightforward and easy to comprehend, a fact that relates to the variegated nature of the audience. In this way, congregational participation goes hand in hand with the shift in semantic clarity.

Let us look, then, at the seventh part of Yannai's *qedushta* for Gen 14, where he uses an alphabetic acrostic poem (featuring twenty-two verses according to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet), in which every verse ends with a single-word refrain. The refrain appears at fixed time intervals, after a fixed number of words, so the prosodic and syntactical scheme of each line signals to the congregants when to join the cantor and say jointly the refrain.<sup>36</sup> Before delving into more details, here are several verses from a *qedushta* for the lectionary reading of Gen 14, which describes the war of the four kings:

A time for peace and a time for	<i>war</i>
You said: I am peace, but they are	<i>war</i>
The enemies: haters of peace and lovers of	<i>war</i>
Read in the book of wars and go forth to	<i>war</i>
Exalting in your ferocity on the day of	<i>war</i>
Send us first one anointed for	<i>war</i>
Let arise the one destined to arise for a time of	<i>war</i>
He shall say: Up! Rise against her for	<i>war</i>
And then let us say: The Lord is valiant in	<i>war</i> . <sup>37</sup>

34. See Lieber, "Invitation to *Piyyut*," 35–92.

35. Shulamit Elizur, "The Congregation in the Synagogue and the Ancient Qedushta," in *Knesset Ezra: Literature and Life in the Synagogue, Studies Presented to Ezra Fleischer*, ed. S. Elizur (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1994), 171–90 [Hebrew].

36. In some cases, the one-word-refrain that appears at the end of every verse was supplemented by a related biblical verse that was chanted by the congregation after every three verses. In those instances, the complexity of the refrain performance was even greater.

37. Zvi Meir Rabinowitz, *The Liturgical Poetry of Rabbi Yannai, Volume 2* (Jerusalem: Bialik Press, 1985), 300 [Hebrew]. The English translation is by Lieber, *Yannai*, 418–19.

In this example, the refrain-word clearly stands out and dominates the *piyyut* so that the other words merely appear as shadows, and “war” (מלחמה) fills the whole sonic landscape—or bodyscape—with gloominess on the one hand and hope for victory or salvation on the other. The repeated shouts of the word “war” must have sounded somewhat like a battle cry, turning the sonic space into a veritable battle field.<sup>38</sup> The effective combination of the semantically loaded word and the brevity of the refrain creates a forceful vibration that would have reverberated in the singers’ own corporeal selves.

In another *qedushta*, for the lectionary reading of Deut 20 (“When you draw near to a town to fight against it, offer it terms of peace”), Yannai used the refrain-word “peace” (שלום):

Indeed, you, creator of all things equated everything with	<i>peace</i>
In the heavens, there is neither jealousy nor competition—you make between them	<i>peace</i>
Decrees that you issue you then alter in order to make	<i>peace</i>
You brought together grace and truth and fused justice for	<i>peace</i>
You proclaimed that the merit of charity is	<i>peace</i>
And to the far and to the near you doubled	<i>peace</i>
Come back to your city with words of truth and	<i>peace</i>
You shall extend prosperity to her as a river of	<i>peace.</i> <sup>39</sup>

Once more, we can imagine the sonic effect of the recurring word at the end of each strophe, the pulsating rhythm that amplifies and intensifies with the unison voices. The congregation is immersed in *peace*. They are not mere listeners—they get to fill the sacred space with the word that is the centerpiece of the entire composition; the powerful word echoed in their bodies, in their buildings, and beyond the boundaries of bodies and buildings. If the word *war* created a liturgical space of darkness, here *peace*, like a midday-sun, fills the whole landscape with light. A river of bright salvific *peace*, echoing verses from the Book of Isaiah, runs through the sonic space.

Jewish synagogues in this period were not grand in size, nor did they feature a dome,<sup>40</sup> which means that sonically they could not achieve the echoing effect associated with the monumental churches in Constantinople. It is hardly likely that the long *kontakion* hymns were performed in the most majestic churches

38. Cf. Shaw, “Sacred Violence,” 441–89.

39. Rabinowitz, *The Liturgical Poetry of Rabbi Yannai, Volume 2*, 163–166 [Hebrew].

40. Münz-Manor, “*In situ*,” 91–5.

either.<sup>41</sup> *Piyyutim* and *kontakia* were probably sung in smaller rooms that enhanced the feeling of an intimate sonic space. The sonic impression achieved as a congregation of maybe hundred congregants in a humble synagogue in the Galilee cried out the refrain together would have been powerful, immediate, and direct. As their loud voices filled the space, they carved out a sonic cave for themselves, a place of intense communal war or communal peace. We can only imagine how the last utterance of the refrain “*peace*” resounded under the ceiling of the synagogue. It must have produced a strong sense of community when waves of cries for war and peace packed the communal air—and even burst beyond its walls and escaped out into the open.

### THE SOUNDS OF SALVATION

Glenn Peers has pointed out that “though our technologies suppress this understanding, sound before the modern period was a sign of life.”<sup>42</sup> Singing signified human life. In the following we explore hymn texts that labor to reinforce connections between the singing voices in the ritual space and the notion of life (as opposed to death).

So what kind of discourse about sound and voices did the hymn refrains enter into? Yannai’s predecessor, Yose ben Yose, was the one who introduced the single-word refrain into *piyyut*. In one of his most famous *piyyutim* for the New Year (Rosh Hashana) he employed the refrain קול which in English means both “sound” and “voice,” hence enabling us to reflect upon his usage and understanding of its notions. The liturgical context of this *piyyut* is fascinating in itself. One of the major features, if not *the* major feature, of the New Year liturgy is the ritual blowing of the *shofar* (a ram’s horn trumpet). Originally, the *shofar* was used as a war signal, but in the context of the rabbinic celebration of the New Year it became a sign of salvation. According to the rabbis, hearing the *shofar* became one of the major religious obligations of the day. For our context, this is revealing: the most sacred moment of the New Year liturgy was constituted by a communal hearing of sounds. Before the blowing of the *shofar* several

41. As Bissera Pentcheva has remarked regarding Hagia Sophia: “The vast naos ensured a long initial delay [...] lowering the intimacy of sound and creating the mimetic effect of being lost in an immense container.” Such delay would have rendered lengthy hymns unintelligible. Pentcheva, “Hagia Sophia and Multisensory Aesthetics,” *Gesta* 50 (2011): 105; Pentcheva nonetheless seems to think that the *kontakia* were written for Hagia Sophia; see her *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 52–55.

42. Glenn Peers, “Isaac of Antioch’s Organ and the Media of Musical Subjects,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 26:1 (2018), 75.

biblical verses mentioning the *shofar* were recited, most of them having to do with the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai and other verses of salvation from the Prophets. It is worth noting that the *shofar* is part of the standard repertoire of the late antique synagogue mosaics of Palestine, a fact that highlights its centrality in the liturgy. To that we can easily add the function of *piyyut* that added verbal and sonic vividness to the sacred space. Indeed, this intrinsic interrelation between *piyyut*, art, and architecture has been singled out in many studies.<sup>43</sup>

The *shofar* also plays a central role in *piyyutim* for the New Year celebrations; poets such as Yose ben Yose embellished the recitation of the abovementioned biblical verses in comprehensive compositions.<sup>44</sup> Here are the first two lines of the *shofarot piyyut* by Yose:

When I flee for help, I find before me God, close to me, when I call with a *voice*  
For in God's congregation, in my midst, He stands. And here, in a diminished  
temple,<sup>45</sup> I will tweet to him with a *voice*.<sup>46</sup>

The *piyyut* opens *in medias res* with the description of a person fleeing for help—from what we still do not know—however he is certain that God will hear his voice (קול). Yose ben Yose uses here the first-person singular (“I”), a feature of many of his poems, and in the second line he explicitly depicts himself as a messenger on behalf of the entire congregation.<sup>47</sup> From here on—and the *piyyut* holds forty-six lines—Yose ben Yose uses the refrain “sound/voice” in various ways, highlighting its centrality both for the day’s ritual of the *shofar* and for the

43. See for example Steven Fine, “Art and the Liturgical Context of the Sepphoris Synagogue Mosaic,” in *Galilee through the Centuries: Confluence of Cultures*, ed. E. M. Meyers (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 227–37; Gideon Foerster, “Representations of the Zodiac in Ancient Synagogues and their Iconographic Sources” [Hebrew], *Eretz-Israel* 18 (1985): 380–91. Jodi Magness, “Heaven on Earth: Helios and the Zodiac in Ancient Palestinian Synagogues,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 59 (2005): 16–20; Karen Britt and Ra’anan Boustan, *The Elephant Mosaic Panel in the Synagogue at Huqoq: Official Publication and Initial Interpretations* (Portsmouth, RI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2017). For a more skeptical view see Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society 200 B.C.E to 640 C.E.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 270–72.

44. On this genre, see Tzvi Novick, “Let Me Flee for Help . . . Israel as ‘I’ and the Teqī’ot of Yose ben Yose,” *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 8 (2014): 145–72.

45. A “diminished temple,” *בֵּית מִדְּבָר*, is a common epithet for a synagogue in late antique and medieval Jewish culture. Interestingly, Yose’s *piyyut* is the earliest source to use this epithet.

46. Aharon Mirsky, *Piyyutei Yose ben Yose* (Jerusalem: Bialik Press, 1991), 300–3 [Hebrew]. For a detailed study of this *piyyut* and other related *piyyutim*, see Novick, “Let Me Flee.”

47. On the dynamics between the “I” and the “we” in *piyyut* see Novick, “*Let Me Flee*”; Michael Swartz, “Rhetorical Indications of the Poet’s Craft in the Ancient Synagogue,” in *Beyond Priesthood: Religious Entrepreneurs and Innovators in the Imperial Era*, ed. J. Rüpke (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 231–51.

biblical history of salvation. Thus in the next two lines Yose ben Yose alludes to the salvation of Isaac (first line) and Jacob (second) and appeals to God to forgive Israel, described here in the feminine according to common Jewish usage:

Seek good for them and see the lamb of Moriah, let his obedient silence be to the credit of her who did not hear Your *voice*.

Remove from the smooth one, hairy hands,<sup>48</sup> he whispered supplications, for Yours is the *voice*.<sup>49</sup>

The refrain that was recited—we are reminded—by the entire congregation involves them in the salvific history in an interesting way. They reiterate the importance of the “voice” by voicing it out loud. It is also worth noting that Yose seems to play with the sonic similarity (perhaps even homophony) of קול (sound, voice, *qol*) and כל (everything, *kol*). According to the written version, the text reads “for Yours is the *voice*,” but sonically it could also be understood as “for Yours is everything,” hence associating the voice with the entirety of existence.<sup>50</sup>

However, the voice is not always a positive one; in one of the lines the words of the enemy are heard:

As my enemies say: she is desolate, her guard and shadow does not roar with a *voice*.

And in another line we hear the desperate voice of Israel proclaiming:

Please watch my poverty and wretchedness, no one recognizes me. To whom shall I raise my *voice*?

But the following two lines once more bring reassurance:

My heart will rejoice, as I hear my beloved one knocks on my doors with the *voice*.

Forever he will set me as a seal upon his heart, like back then under the apple tree he awakened me with a *voice*.

By using the suggestive vocabulary and imagery of the Songs of Songs chapter five, Yose ben Yose creates—in this line and in many others in this *piyyut*—a rich, resounding ritual experience in which the congregants are immersed in

48. These are two epithets for Jacob and Esau, according to Gen 27.11.

49. For an alternative translation, see Novick, “*Let Me Flee*,” 153–56.

50. We cannot be certain whether the consonants ‘ק’ and ‘כ’ sounded the same in the Byzantine period, although it is most likely that they did.

multiple sounds, some of grief, some of terror, but ultimately sounds of salvation. Yose interweaves the poetic lines with verses from the Scriptures that relate the connection between a “voice” and the redemption. For example, he quotes verbatim Exod 19.16 about the sound of the trumpet: “On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled.”<sup>51</sup>

In the lines quoted above, the voice itself becomes an instrument of knocking on the door to the chamber, a way of opening up into a new space of love and community. This opening resonates with a wealth of ritual practices from late antique Judaism. Opening a door in order to approach the divine, or conversely to let the divine in, was not an alien notion in the liturgy. The opening of the Torah ark in preparation for the lectionary reading was a meaningful moment on Sabbaths and holidays, and like the *shofar* it was also frequently depicted in synagogue mosaics.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, the *amidah* prayer, the centerpiece of Jewish liturgy, began and ended with bodily gestures that imitated an entrance to and exit from a king’s court.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore and no less symbolic was the understanding that the prayer should make its way to God in the heavens through a gate which was not necessarily always open. This notion was especially powerful during the concluding prayer of the Day of Atonement, appropriately called *ne’ila*, “closure.” Special *piyyutim* were composed for this conclusive prayer of the most holy day of the liturgical year, and we will examine one of them after discussing a *kontakion*.

Romanos used strikingly similar strategies when he wrote for the Christian rite of Constantinople. The ritual life of the city involved a developed system of processions, and much of its symbolism depended precisely on gates and entrances into spaces. As Robert Taft says, “Entrances, processions, and accessions came to characterize all Byzantine liturgy.”<sup>54</sup> People did not go to church for a liturgy; they went to a street procession—a ritual journey—that eventually culminated with the entrance into a church and the celebration of the Eucharist.<sup>55</sup>

51. “Thunders” in the Hebrew text are קולות, voices and “trumpet blast” renders the Hebrew קול שופר, the sound of the *shofar*.

52. See note 43.

53. Uri Ehrlich, *The Non-Verbal Language of Prayer: A New Approach to Jewish Liturgy* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).

54. Robert Taft, *The Byzantine Rite: A Short History* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 32.

55. Andrew Louth, “Experiencing the Liturgy in Byzantium,” in *Experiencing Byzantium*, ed. C. Nesbitt and M. Jackson (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013), 79–88 at 84.

The entrance into the holy space of the sanctuary symbolized an entrance into heaven. In a *kontakion* entitled “On the Ten Virgins I,” Romanos plays with the subject of entering into sacred space.<sup>56</sup> He retells the parable from Matt 25.1–13 about the foolish virgins who did not stay watchful and brought no oil for their lamps, and therefore were not able to enter into the bridal chamber with the bridegroom. The end of the parable reads: “And while [the five foolish virgins] went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other virgins came also, saying, “Lord, lord, open (ἄνοιξον) to us.” The chamber, the inside, represents salvific space, while the indefinite outside is a space of destruction:

Let us make the soul into an inextinguishable lamp for Christ, the bridegroom;  
 let us enter with him, for the bridal chamber closes;  
 let us not wait outside crying [βοῶντες]:  
 “Open [ἄνοιξον]!”<sup>57</sup>

The poet uses the refrain in a distinct and effective way in this song; like *piyyut* refrains we have looked at, his refrain consists of one word only: “Open!” Nineteen times the assembled people exclaim the existential cry:

the bridegroom is coming; we should not remain outside crying:  
 “Open!”<sup>58</sup>

We do not know exactly when and how the *kontakia* were performed in the sixth century, but it is not impossible that they were sung during processions.<sup>59</sup> Given the importance of ritual entrances, it is tempting to see “On the Ten

56. Romanos, *Hymn* 51 (SC 283:271–327). For a study of this particular hymn, see Jan Barkhuizen, “Romanos Melodos, ‘On the Ten Virgins’ (48 Oxf. = 51 SC),” *Acta Classica* 36 (1993): 39–54 and Arentzen, “Voices Interwoven.” The translation is taken from Marjorie Carpenter, *Kontakia of Romanos, Byzantine Melodist, II: On Christian Life* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973), 169–79, slightly modified.

57. Romanos, *Hymn* 51.prelude.

58. Romanos, *Hymn* 51.1.11–12.

59. As suggested by Louth, “Experiencing the Liturgy,” 85; for another performance venue, see the seventh-century *Miracles of St. Artemios* 18, where *kontakia* are sung during night vigils at a healing shrine (ed. and trans. Virgil S. Crisafulli and John W. Nesbitt, *The Miracles of St. Artemios: A Collection of Miracle Stories by an Anonymous Author of Seventh-Century Byzantium* [Leiden: Brill, 1997], 114–15). The most widely accepted scholarly perspective on the performance of *kontakia* is represented by Alexander Lingas, “The Liturgical Place of the Kontakion in Constantinople,” in *Liturgy, Architecture and Art of the Byzantine World: Papers of the XVIII International Byzantine Congress (Moscow, 8–15 August 1991) and Other Essays Dedicated to the Memory of Fr. John Meyendorff*, ed. C. C. Akentiev (St. Petersburg: Publications of the St. Petersburg Society for Byzantine and Slavic Studies, 1995), 50–57.

Virgins I” as a song of entrance, a song saying: let us physically enter the chamber of the bridegroom, i.e. the church nave! Since we have no historical indications of the *kontakia* being performed in connection with the ritual opening of gates or doors, however, it is merely a hypothetical possibility. In any case, the congregated people would have heard an allusion in the *kontakion* to the ritual entrances that they knew so well, or aligned it with what they already understood about the importance of passing through the gates.

Uttered as a cry, the word *ἄνοιξον* emerges as a desperate prayer that those who sing be allowed inside the chamber of salvation rather than to be left outside without hope. And the space outside does indeed appear quite frightening, at least in the imagination of the poet:

when the whole earth is consumed by fire  
and the sky rolled up like paper,  
when the deep sea flees and its very bottom  
will be shown forth as never before,  
there are no luminaries, for the stars fall like leaves;  
so great will be the affliction when these things come to pass,  
that the powers above will be made to totter  
and scream in fear.<sup>60</sup>

With these prospects, the congregation desperately cries “*Open!*”<sup>61</sup> And with its imperative mood, the sung word itself is a speech act, an attempt to open a closed door by vocal engagement, to break open, if you will, the lock with a sonic blow. Like Yose’s congregation, they are knocking on the door with their voice; as the refrain reverberates, the word knocks on locked doors and wants to unbolt them. “*Open!*” quivers throughout the body of believers to create an open space, a chamber of sound. With the communal cries and shouts something is about to open up.

When the three-syllable refrain all of a sudden resonated in the air, as a loud reverberating cry, it would have induced its own sense of spatial immediacy, jelling the fluid space that the soloist had already outlined. A unison call blotting out all other sounds from the soundscape would have made the participants acoustic insiders, as the refrain reverberated in their bodies. In other words, the

60. Romanos, *Hymn* 51.5,3–10.

61. For emotions in Romanos, see now Andrew Mellas, *Tears of Compunction in Byzantine Hymnody: The Hymnography of Romanos the Melodist, Andrew of Crete and Kassia*, PhD dissertation (University of Sydney 2017), esp. 81–131.

voices that were crying “Open!” themselves constructed a space of sound—a sonic chamber that they had entered. The *opening* belonged to their own voices:

unfold your compassion for us and for all who cry:  
“Open!”<sup>62</sup>

Whether or not the historical congregation was let in through a church gate into a space of divine presence, their very singing hewed out such a space from the air that they breathed.

An anonymous Hebrew *piyyut* from roughly the same time period also revolves around the image of the closing gate. It is used as part of the conclusive prayer of the Day of Atonement. The first *piyyut* combines a single-word refrain “king” (מלך) with a longer refrain that reads: “Open for us the gate / At the time of the closure of the gate / As the day ends.” The refrain is as long as the verses of the *piyyut*, hence its character is more of an antiphonic poem, in which the cantor and the congregation are in continuous dialogue. Here are two opening sections:

Then, at twilight we knocked crying on the door of the king:  
*Open for us the gate at the time of the closure of the gate as the sun sets.*  
Lest the gates of mercy be locked before we seek the face of the king:  
*Open for us the gate at the time of the closure of the gate as the sun sets.*<sup>63</sup>

The opening strophe of the Hebrew poem is strikingly similar to the structure of Romanos’s hymn in the way the strophe and the refrain are linked. In the *piyyut* the poet describes the congregation crying out the refrain (פתח - מלך - שערי מלך - על שערי מלך - דפקנו הוימים על שערי מלך - פתח), not unlike the combination we find in Romanos of βράω and ἀνοιξον. Romanos based his poem on the locked door motif from the Gospel of Matthew. The *piyyut*, in turn, echoes a text from the Palestinian Talmud concerning the timing of the final prayer of the Day of Atonement (the so called “closure” or “locking,” נעילה); the text reads: “When is the time for Neilah? . . . Rav said: when the gates of heaven are closed and Rabbi Yohanan said: when the gates of the temple are closed.”<sup>64</sup>

Most important in our context, however, is the shared imagery of the closed gate in both poems,<sup>65</sup> for in a sense the refrains in both the Hebrew and the

62. Romanos, *Hymn* 51.18.11–12.

63. Daniel Goldschmidt, *Mabzor layamim hanoriim, Volume 2* (New York: Leo Baeck Institute, 1970), 300 [Hebrew].

64. Palestinian Talmud, Tractate *Berakhot* 31a.

65. A motif that might be based also on Cant 5.2: “I slept, but my heart was awake. Hark! my beloved is knocking. ‘Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one; for my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night.’”

Greek hymn achieve an opening of the closed space by their vocal outreach. Shouting out into the obscure twilight, the voices gather in a cry that makes them insiders. However scary the prospect of being shut out from the divine chambers may be, the faithful song from the whole congregated community in unison drives darkness away and opens doors and gates. Voices are physical agents in salvific history.

## CONCLUSION

The centrality of sound, indeed the materiality of sound, is a major feature of the mythic revelation of God to the people of Israel on Mount Sinai. The holistic nature of this revelation is emphatically described by a beautiful synesthesia: “and all the people see the voices” (Exod 20.14). God is revealed to the people in a combination of sound and sight in concrete space and time. Late antique liturgies continue this biblical antecedent in more than one way, as even a brief glance at churches and synagogues reveals. These houses of worship combined the spatial, visual, and aural realms in order to create an almost timeless and at the same time very concrete and ritual *now*, a position *in medias res*.

In this essay, we focused on the sonic aspects of liturgical poetry and argued that for late antique liturgical poets—Christians and Jewish alike—sound was a potent ritual agent; the hymnographers developed it skillfully, not least in the refrain. It is true that the actual historical soundscapes of late antique Jewish and Christian liturgical poetry are inaccessible for us, and while the Jewish musical tradition from Late Antiquity is virtually lost, the Christian context is far from being clear. Yet while we do not have access to the sounds, we do have texts that reveal a conscious use of sound effects, a use that shaped the acoustic ritual space; these texts may serve as a gateway to this lost realm. In connection with the refrains, which became so important in the ritual poetry of Late Antiquity, we may witness how composers sought to shape congregational voices and the experiential thematizing thereof. Refrains produced a dense and intense peak in the holy soundscape, a space of resounding echoes—under ceilings and domes—which integrated the congregation into a sonic sphere, so that by their own song in the refrain, they voiced their own rotundas. Singing itself constituted the sacred space of synagogues and churches, in reverberation. ■