

Prosodic Rhythm in Jewish Sacred Music : Examples from the Persian-Speaking World

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Abstract : Musical rhythms are connected to prosodic principles in many Jewish sacred music practices. For Persian-speaking Jews of Iran and Central Asia, rhythms are especially informed by ingrained habits of interpreting Persian quantitative poetic meters, applied to both Hebrew- and Persian-language texts. For describing and analyzing Jewish sacred music in the Iranian and Central Asian traditions, the term “prosodic rhythm” usefully highlights the importance of syllable length and other rhythmic features of a text, with broader implications for the study of Jewish sacred music and music without a steady pulse in general.

Introduction



Jewish sacred music is an ideal area for investigating the relationship between texts and musical practices. Jewish religious practice is heavily based on a wide-ranging collection of texts to be performed aloud, many of which have remained remarkably consistent over time and among disparate communities. Consideration of the nature of the heterogeneous corpus of sacred texts—such as whether the text is from the Torah or a hymn written a millennium later—is balanced with local performance traditions and the presentational options available to participants based on their linguistic competencies and musical experiences. The resultant variety of treatments of similar or identical texts throughout a worldwide diaspora provides unusual opportunities for comparison. [...]