

# Lift Your Voice Like a Shofar

*Strengthen Your Voice  
and Make Prayer-Leading Spiritual Again*

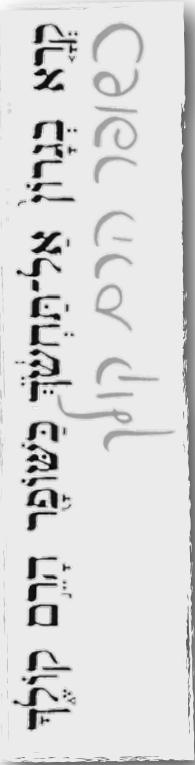


by Minna Bromberg

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## About Minna Bromberg

I am a voicefinder: a singer, songwriter, and rabbi who uses the tools of singing, songwriting, meditation, and whatever else we need to help people embody the wholeness that is theirs to bring to the world. Through voice instruction within a spiritual framework – both in person and, increasingly, via Skype – we work to unify body and spirit. Finding the power in our physical voices nurtures our spirits. And nurturing our spirits helps us find the voice that can truly inspire and connect with others.

I received my rabbinic ordination from Hebrew College – a rabbinical school founded to infuse deep Jewish learning with a new spirituality – and my PhD from Northwestern University. I trained as a Jewish meditation teacher at Chochmat HaLev in Berkeley, CA and I have studied voice with many different teachers, most recently contralto [Elizabeth Anker](#).

Continually inspired by the cry of the Song of Songs, “Hashmi’ini! Let me hear you!” I believe that everyone has a song to sing and that every voice deserves to be heard. Yours too!





# Introduction

It is the morning of Yom Kippur. Already our throats are a little dry and we are unsure of just how we are going to make it through the rest of the day. And then, right there in the haftarah, comes God's demand of Isaiah:

**"Cry out full-throated, don't hold back;  
lift your voice like a shofar."**

When you hear those words, do they fill you with a sense of despair and inadequacy at the prospect of living up to them in your exhausted state? Or do you feel ready, despite your thirst, despite any nervousness, to use your voice truly to move people, truly to help your community pray? Do you know, in these moments, how to find your own voice again and again? Do you know how, as Leonard Cohen sings, to "ring the bell that still can ring?"

If....

- .... your voice gets tired when you lead prayer
- .... you worry about how to be loud enough without losing your voice
- .... you aren't sure that you really "can" sing
- .... you are wondering how you and your voice are going to make it through the next High Holy Days (or even just through this very week)
- .... you sometimes wonder, from the bima, "When is it my turn to really pray?"
- .... you want a way to strengthen and nourish your voice so that it will carry you through Ne'ilah and beyond...

...then I wrote this book for you.

I wrote it because I believe that prayer leaders can learn to use their voices in healthy and sustainable ways and that those same practices can make prayer leading a spiritually nourishing experience.

I'll be answering questions and concerns that real people (rabbis and rabbinical students other prayer leaders) have asked me over the years.





## How do I sing?

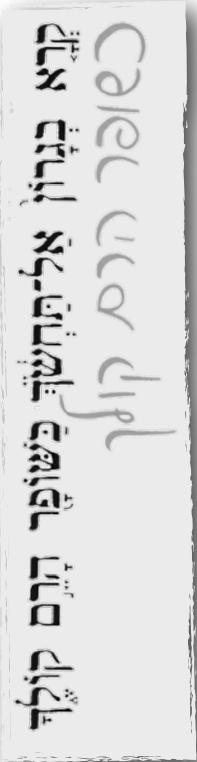
For healthy singing, there are three physical practices you can learn and then return to continually:

- Posture
- Breath
- Resonance

That's it.

**Stand up, let the breath come all the way into the belly, and let the mouth be open.**

If you want to see and hear how each of these is done, watch my [“Mah Tovu” warm-up video](#).



## How can I be louder?

First, let me reassure you, you *can* be louder without hurting yourself. This is all about breath support and relaxing/opening the mouth. But it's also about *letting yourself be heard*.

I've had many students who say they want or need to be louder but are shy of their louder selves or don't like their voices at all.

**Commit to bringing your whole self to this: your whole voice, the voice you have and not the one you wish you had.**

Practice being louder (without straining) in contexts that feel safe (the car and the shower are excellent options). And as you are warming up your louder voice, notice the physical sensations – not just what it sounds like in your head, but what it feels like in your body. Then, when you are leading prayer, see if you can return to those physical sensations: where in the body do you feel the voice?



## How do I keep from running out of breath?

The quick answer: Breathe more frequently.

This is as much a musical skill as a physical skill. In other words, you keep from running out of breath by only planning on singing what you can sing in one breath.

Somehow we have absorbed a sense of the breath as a necessary evil in singing. I find this is especially true of folks who have sung in choirs. So, take this to heart:

**Your breath is an essential part of your prayer.**

Your inhalation and its accompanying quiet is equally as important as your exhalation and all the sound that comes out with it.

Learning to give yourself time to inhale without losing the rhythm of the song / prayer is definitely a learnable skill. If you already have a strong sense of the rhythm you want to keep, just go ahead and stop singing earlier (in other words, steal some time from the end of a phrase), give yourself a chance to breathe, and come back in on time.



## How can I keep from losing my voice?

Drink plenty of water. If it's appropriate, have water available for yourself throughout services. I personally don't drink anything on Yom Kippur itself, so I always try to remember the advice of my teacher, Liz Anker: drink plenty of water in the days *leading up to* the services you'll be leading. You want to be hydrated in advance.

Sing from a place of supported ease. The day after Yom Kippur, my abs feel like I gave them a big workout the day before... because I did. Learning to build this supported space for your breath will help you put less strain on your vocal cords.

### Rest! Rest your voice whenever you can.

This means that you should not only stop singing, but stop talking and definitely don't whisper. This is as much a social skill as anything else; become conscious of when you talk even though you don't need to. For many of us, schmoozing in loud environments is part of our work. But see if there aren't some times when you can excuse yourself to give your voice the rest (and the respect) it deserves.



## Can I train my voice without sounding stilted or operatic?

No one wants their prayer leading to sound like a concert or a recital. The thing is, prayer leading IS a performance. *But*, friends, so is every other social interaction you have ever had. I can't say this any better myself so I'll borrow from one of my favorite role models of performance, Ru Paul:

**“You're born naked and the rest is drag.”**

Perhaps when you lead prayers you want to sound:

- casual
- informal
- inward
- contemplative
- unpolished

Perhaps you even think of these as sounding more authentic and even more spiritual. But here's the thing: Once you take on the role of prayer leader, once you are praying in front of people, any "inwardness" is a *performance* of inwardness. Your informality is a performance of informality.

There's still nothing wrong with being or wanting to be perceived as inward or contemplative, as long as you *own* this. However, you may want to assess what your larger goals are. Do you want to be easily heard in a large space? Do you want to sing without tiring your voice?

My advice is to focus on your larger goals and worry less about how meeting those goals makes you sound. We are, in any case, bad assessors of how we sound to others.



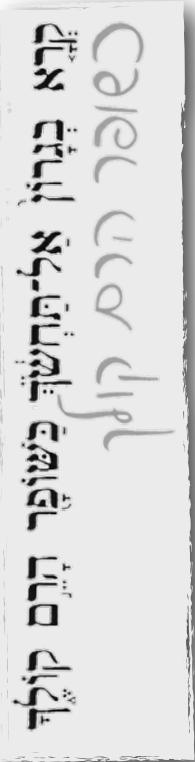
## But won't I sound like someone else?

No, but you may very well sound like a significantly different version of yourself. This different version or different voice will sound much more distinct inside your own head.

**To outside listeners the changes will be much more subtle, especially to untrained ears.**

This may, no doubt, take some getting used to. But what voice training should do is:

1. Give you the flexibility to make *choices* about how to use your voice and, in fact, give you a number of voices to choose from. Say it with me and Walt Whitman: "I am large, I contain multitudes." So, embrace your many vocal options and remember that authenticity and multiplicity are not mutually exclusive.
2. Give you a way to warm up your *whole* voice, your many voices, even if you are only going to be using one part of your vocal options on a regular basis. For example, I try to warm up my whole range (from my very lowest notes to my very highest) even though I regularly sing in less than one third of that range. Warming up your whole voice protects and nourishes whatever part of your voice you regularly use.



## WAIT! Are you suggesting that I warm up my voice before I lead services?

Yes. There's no way around it.

**The best way to keep your voice healthy and able to carry you just as you carry it is to warm it up at least a little bit every time.**

But you can vary how extensive a warm up you do depending on how much time you've got. Ideally we would all give ourselves 15-20 minutes to warm up our voices, relax our minds, and connect with our own deepest souls before every act of prayer leading. Personally, I manage to do that about four or five times a year. More often, I warm up for about two or three minutes, often on the way to or from the bathroom (by the by, bathrooms themselves are excellent places to warm up, second only to cars).

When you don't even give yourself these two minutes beforehand, please *use* your opening prayers themselves as a time to let the voice warm up. You can use my "**Mah Tovu**" voice video as a guide for any of these options.



## If I'm leading prayer, when do I get to pray?

The more you can let your prayer-leading itself be a way to connect more deeply with the prayers, with your own sweet neshama, and with the Divine, the less often this painful question will arise. But how?

Simple (not necessarily easy, but simple): use the basic instructions for healthy singing like any other meditative practice.

Try this BEFORE you are actually leading worship. Take 5-10 minutes and pick something that you are already relatively comfortable singing and that is in some way meaningful to you. It could be something from the liturgy – I find my students often start with “Shalom Aleichem” or some other Shabbat-welcoming song – but it doesn’t have to be (you hereby have my permission to sing “Amazing Grace” if that’s what works for you). If you would like to sing along with my “Hashmi’ini” meditation, [you can find it here](#).

Stand, let the breath come into the belly, let the mouth be open. And I’ll add one more thing, perhaps the most potent singing advice I ever give:

**Sing it like you mean it.**

Then, when the mind wanders to...

...do I sound OK?

...do I really even believe these words that I'm saying?

...I forgot to return Mrs. G.'s phone call and she's going to be sitting right in the fourth row!

...why do I have to keep calling out page numbers?!

*...fill in your own personal mind wanderings*

...gently notice where the mind has gone and bring it back to standing, breathing, letting the mouth be open, and singing it like you mean it.

This is teshuva in miniature, in the moment, and in the body. In life we set goals and intentions, we go astray, we make teshuva. Using the voice well is no different: forming an intention and acting on it, noticing when we have gone astray, gently and firmly *returning* to our intention. And so, every minute that you spend in this practice is a minute not only of reciting the words of the prayers but of practicing teshuva.

Like any practice, spiritual or physical, you have to try it to see how it works for you. And if it does seem like a way of leading prayer that you want to have available to you on the bima, then by all means, keep making time to work with it *before* you will actually need it for the real thing.

So try it, and then let me know what you discover and what other questions arise for you. Every voice deserves to be heard. Let me hear you!



## Epilogue

The very first High Holy Day services I led were in Baton Rouge, LA just weeks after hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The congregation had swelled to include folks who had to leave their homes in New Orleans and other hardest hit areas. The synagogue sanctuary had been horribly damaged by Rita's rains and we were having services at the church next door.

I had taken on the assignment – as a cantorial soloist – because my friend, the wonderful Rabbi Stan Zamek, had assured me that even though I had never done this before, he would walk me through every step of the way toward sharing the bima with him. Needless to say, between rescuing sifrei Torah from Katrina's floodwaters, finding housing for dozens of families, and even temporarily hosting a homeless macaw in his study, Rabbi Z did not exactly have time to spare on preparing with little old me.

Somehow we made it through Rosh HaShana. Then, I found myself early in the morning of October 6, 2005 sitting in an IHOP as a new day dawned in Baton Rouge. The other customers eating their breakfast were National Guardsmen at one table (you could tell by their boots and their camouflage) and employees of various federal agencies at another (you could tell by their clipboards). We were all there preparing for another day in Louisiana in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In just a few moments, we would all get up and begin our day's work. The National Guardsmen would get in their HumVee to head into what remained of New Orleans, the FEMA employees would try to help evacuated families relocate, I would go back to my hotel room, put on my headphones and practice singing Kol Nidre. To me, my day's work seemed shamefully insignificant compared to theirs.

I had wanted to go down to New Orleans to see if there was anything I could do to help. But Rabbi Z and his congregants were firm with me: Yes, they were going to try to save someone's library of rare Jewish books, but they forbade me to come with them because the mold might ruin my voice and leave me unable to lead them in prayer. Really? That's what they were concerned about in that moment?!

By the time we sang the final note of Kol Nidre this had finally started to sink in:

**How precious the task of prayer leading is and how deeply in need of our own reverence, attention, and protection our voices are.**

I came back deeply humbled, feeling that my voice – which was already trained, but often neglected – deserved to be nourished so that my prayer leading could in turn be a nourishing experience not only for the kahal but for me as well.

I invite you to join me in the ongoing practice of nurturing our physical voices so that we can bring our whole selves to leading prayer.

## A Kavannah for Finding Your Voice

May I stand in this human posture  
*my feet on the ground  
the crown of my head reaching heavenward.*

Let my belly be soft to receive Your breath.

Let me widen the banks of this body's channels  
*for the voice that comes through me, yet not from me.*

Let that voice resonate  
*in my very bones  
and in the hearts of all who hear me.*

May I continually listen for Your voice, Beloved, even in my own:  
*the voice of Oneness,  
the voice of wholeness,  
the voice of infinite possibility.*

## More questions?

What else do you wish you knew? What other questions do you have?

Want to work with Minna to find your voice?

Contact her at [minna@minnabromberg.com](mailto:minna@minnabromberg.com)

