

Makhzorim: Jewish Cycles (2026)

by Ari Barack Fisher

Commissioned by Neil McTavish for ATLYS String Quartet

Composer's Note

The concept of the *Makhzor*, the “cycle”, is not merely a liturgical designation for a prayer book; it is the fundamental rhythm of Jewish existence. To live within the Jewish calendar is to exist in a state of perpetual return. We move through seasons of deep introspection, explosive joy, existential struggle, and collective memory, only to arrive back at the beginning, transformed by the journey we have just completed.

The structural foundation of this work was suggested to me by my wife, who saw the potential for the Jewish calendar to serve as a compositional bridge. By grounding this composition in the universal cycle of our holidays, the music could speak to the breadth of the Jewish experience. This music would resonate with every Jewish individual, regardless of where they were born, their individual path, or their level of religious observance.

Makhzorim: Jewish Cycles is designed to capture a concept in Judaism that time is a “spiral.” The work is unified by a recurring spiral motif, a melodic thread that appears then weaves itself through the entire composition. Much like the experiences of Jewish history, this motif remains constant, yet its presentation shifts to reflect the unique emotional and spiritual topography of each holiday it represents.

In constructing this work, I have drawn heavily from *nusakhim*, the traditional melodies anchored in Jewish prayer for centuries. By weaving these ancient musical markers into a contemporary work for string quartet, I hope to bridge the gap between our rich history and our own modern reality. Ultimately, *Makhzorim* is a testament to people who have faced repeated cycles of darkness, and constant renewal. The work concludes with a *tekiyah gedolah*, a blast from a ram’s horn, synthesized by the quartet, welcoming another New Year.

Program Notes

I. Introduction: Time is a Spiral

The work opens by establishing the spiral motif, an architectural musical thread for the entire composition. By introducing this motif at the beginning of the work, the Jewish calendar is framed as a recurring cycle of memory, struggle, and renewal.

II. ימים נוראים — Days of Awe (Yamim Nora'im)

This movement invokes the intense introspection of Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement). The viola mimics shofar blasts, set against the lingering pitches of pure drones, conveying the removal of ego during the act of devotion. The music then introduces a lyrical prayer-like theme, followed by a quote from Fisher’s prior composition *Psalm 27 for Hazzan, Choir, and Orchestra*. By weaving in traditional *nusakhim*, compositions by the 19th-century synagogue composer Lewandowski, and the lament of Psalm 27, the movement portrays the process of *teshuvah* (return). The cello pleads for forgiveness, atoning for our sins. The movement concludes with ethereal, pure tones, symbolizing a soul cleansed and reconnected to the Divine.

III. זמן שמחתנו — Season of Our Joy (Z'man Simkhateinu)

Shifting from introspection to the celebratory energy of Sukkot and Simchat Torah, this movement takes the form of a *scherzo*. Central to this movement is the tradition of *hakafot*, where the community dances with the Torah in seven circuits. This is often described as the “final party” with the Divine before the annual Torah reading cycle resets; in this spirit, the music channels the intensity of the Lubavitcher Hasidic Rebbe, who is said to have celebrated Simchat Torah for the entire night. A central, sparse slower section represents the forty years of wandering in the desert, creating a meditative pause before the revelry resumes. This section culminates with a gentle percussive effect where the musicians strike the wood of their bows against their forearms, sonically mimicking the shaking of the *lulav*.

IV. שֶׁהִחְיֵנוּ וְקִיְמָנוּ — Who Has Kept Us Alive and Sustained Us (Shehekhianu V'kiyamanu)

This movement confronts the resilience of a people who have faced existential threats throughout the generations. It begins with the prayer for the reading of *Megillat Esther* and transitions to a short dialogue between the *nusakhim* of Hanukkah and Purim. Both Ashkenazi and Sephardic traditional modes of the reading of *Megillat Esther* are incorporated. The core is a militaristic battle building to a triumphant climax, representing the triumph of the Jewish people over baseless evil. These victories are celebrated by the final two bars of *Hatikvah*, a reference to the miraculous nature of modern day Jewish resilience. The spiral theme reminds listeners that the Jewish people will always triumph whenever history repeats itself.

V. חֵירוּת וְהַשְׁכָּלָה — Freedom and Enlightenment (Kherut v'Haskalah)

This movement portrays the epic journey from slavery in Egypt to liberation at the Red Sea and the receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. Beginning with the somber *Halakhma Anyah* (Bread of Affliction), the music accelerates into the vibrant *Shirat HaYam* (Song of the Sea). A romantic iteration of the spiral motif is woven with themes from Fisher's composition for his own wedding, *Shir Shel Yoninah*. The movement concludes with the majesty of 19th-century synagogue composer Salomon Sulzer's *Vay'hi binsoa*. In this context, *Kherut* (Freedom) is understood not as the mere absence of slavery, but as the capacity to “engrave” (*kharut*) Divine wisdom upon the heart. *Haskalah* is the achievement of intellectual and spiritual clarity our people receive from the Torah at Mount Sinai.

VI. תְּשֻׁעָה בְּאָב — The 9th of Av (Tisha B'Av)

The work finds its necessary counterpoint in Tisha B'Av, the darkest day on the Jewish calendar. This date has become a historical repository for collective trauma: it marks the day the Biblical spies returned with a report of doubt after viewing *Eretz Yisrael*; the destruction of both the First and Second Temples; the Roman plowing of Jerusalem; the fall of Betar; the horrors of the First Crusade; the expulsions from England (1290), France (1306), and Spain (1492); and the beginning of the mass deportations from the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942. The movement acts as a slow elegy. As the music develops, a quote from the opening movement serves as a stark reminder that tragedy is a recurring feature of Jewish history. A retrograde of *Hatikvah* symbolizes the fragility of hope in the face of absolute despair. The movement concludes with a quotation of the ending of the second movement, looking forward to the next year and cleansing our souls again. The final sound heard is a *tekiyah gedolah* of the shofar by the violin, a solemn signal of defiance as the cycle of the Jewish year begins anew.

Glossary of Terms

Ashkenazi

A Jewish cultural tradition originating in Central and Eastern Europe, with its own liturgical pronunciations, musical modes, and customs.

Betar

An ancient Jewish fortress city and the final stronghold of the Bar Kokhba revolt against Rome in 135 CE; its fall marked a devastating moment in Jewish history.

Days of Awe (Yamim Nora'im)

The ten-day period beginning with Rosh Hashanah and culminating in Yom Kippur, devoted to introspection, repentance, and spiritual renewal.

Eretz Yisrael

"The Land of Israel," the historic homeland of the Jewish people.

Hakafot

Ceremonial circuits made around the synagogue, usually while carrying the Torah scrolls, during Simchat Torah.

Halakhma Anyah

"This is the bread of affliction," the opening declaration of the Passover Seder, introducing the retelling of the Exodus from Egypt.

Hanukkah

The eight-day Festival of Lights commemorating the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem and the Maccabean victory over oppression in the 2nd century BCE.

Haskalah

Literally "enlightenment." In this work, it refers to spiritual and intellectual clarity received through Torah.

Hatikvah

The national anthem of the modern State of Israel, meaning "The Hope," expressing the enduring aspiration for Jewish self-determination.

Hazzan

A cantor; the trained liturgical vocalist who leads communal prayer in a synagogue, often chanting sacred texts in traditional melodic modes.

Kharut

A Hebrew word meaning "engraved." Rabbinic tradition plays on the similarity between kharut (engraved) and kherut (freedom), teaching that true freedom comes through engraving sacred teachings upon the heart.

Kherut

Freedom. In Jewish thought, not merely the absence of physical bondage, but the spiritual freedom that comes from living in covenant with Divine teaching.

Lewandowski (Louis Lewandowski)

A 19th-century German synagogue composer whose works shaped much of modern Ashkenazi synagogue music.

Lubavitcher Rebbe (Menachem Mendel Schneerson)

The influential 20th-century leader of the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic movement, known for his passionate celebration of Jewish ritual life.

Lulav

A ritual bundle of palm, myrtle, and willow branches, held and shaken during Sukkot together with a citron (etrog).

Makhzor (plural: Makhzorim)

A Jewish prayer book used for major holidays, literally meaning "cycle." The term reflects the cyclical nature of sacred time.

Megillat Esther

The Scroll of Esther, a biblical text recounting the story of Purim, read publicly on that holiday.

Mount Sinai

The biblical mountain where, according to Jewish tradition, the Torah was revealed to the Israelites after the Exodus from Egypt.

Nusakh (plural: Nusakhim)

Traditional melodies or musical frameworks that guide the chanting of specific prayers and sacred texts. Each holiday and occasion has characteristic motifs.

Psalm 27

A biblical psalm traditionally recited during the High Holiday season, expressing themes of trust, fear, and longing for closeness to God.

Purim

A joyous holiday commemorating the salvation of the Jewish people from persecution in ancient Persia, as told in the Book of Esther.

Rosh Hashanah

The Jewish New Year, marking the beginning of the High Holy Days and a time of judgment and reflection.

Retrograde

A compositional technique in which a musical theme is presented in reverse order, note by note. In this work, a retrograde of Hatikvah appears in the final movement to evoke the fragility of hope.

Salomon Sulzer

A 19th-century Viennese synagogue composer who profoundly influenced cantorial and liturgical music in Europe.

Scherzo

Italian for "joke" or "jest." A lively, fast-moving musical movement, typically playful or vigorous in character. In this work, the third movement takes the form of a scherzo to capture the joyous energy of Simchat Torah.

Sephardic

A Jewish cultural tradition originating in Spain, North Africa, and the Middle East, with distinct liturgical customs and musical modes.

Shir Shel Yoninah

"Song of the Dove," a wedding composition by the composer, referenced thematically in this work.

Shirat HaYam

"Song of the Sea," the biblical poem sung by Miriam and the Israelites after crossing the Red Sea.

Shofar

A ram's horn blown during Rosh Hashanah and at the conclusion of Yom Kippur, producing a series of ritual blasts.

Simchat Torah

"Rejoicing of the Torah," the holiday celebrating the completion and immediate restarting of the annual cycle of Torah readings.

Sukkot

A biblical harvest festival commemorating the Israelites' forty years of wandering in the desert, marked by dwelling in temporary structures (sukkot).

Teshuvah

Literally "return"; the process of repentance, reflection, and spiritual realignment during the High Holy Day season.

Tekiyah Gedolah

Literally "the great blast"; the final, sustained shofar call blown at the conclusion of Yom Kippur, signaling the end of the Day of Atonement. In this work, it is synthesized by the string quartet to close the composition.

Tisha B'Av

The Ninth of Av, a day of communal mourning commemorating multiple tragedies in Jewish history, most notably the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem.

Vay'hi Binsoa

A biblical verse from Numbers 10:35, sung when the Torah is carried in procession. The text reads: "When the Ark set out, Moses would say: Rise up, O Lord, and let Your enemies be scattered." In synagogue liturgy, it is set to a solemn, majestic melody associated with the revelation at Sinai.

Torah

The foundational sacred text of Judaism, consisting of the Five Books of Moses, and by extension, the body of Jewish teaching and law.

Yom Kippur

The Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the Jewish year, devoted to fasting, prayer, and repentance.