

# Aspects of Performance in Faith Settings:

*Heavenly Acts*



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Edited by

Andrey Rosowsky

Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



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This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-2193-1

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-2193-3

This book is dedicated to the memory of our  
dear friend and colleague, Tope (Sky) Omoniyi  
(1956-2017)





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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, this volume would not have seen the light of day without the encouragement of the publisher, Cambridge Scholars. I would like to thank Victoria Carruthers, Hannah Fletcher, Adam Rummens, Helen Cryer, Rebecca Gladders and Amanda Millar for all their help and support over the past 12 months.

Secondly, the *Heavenly Acts* project, of which this volume is an important outcome, was funded through an Arts and Humanities Research Council International Network Grant. I would like to thank them for facilitating the work of this project.

Importantly, I need to mention and express my thanks and appreciation to the many individuals, academics and performers, who have attended and contributed to the various *Heavenly Acts* events in the years 2015-17. Many of these people are featured in this volume. In no particular order, thanks are due to Holly Hearon, Vally Lytra, Rupert Till, Rusi Jaspal, Arani Ilankuberan, Joshua Edelman, Michael Frishkopf, Anna Glukhanyuk, Phyllis Chew, Carl Morris, Shaimaa El Naggar, Tope Omoniyi, Shahe Mardan, The Fir Vale Muslim Boys Choir, Shona Leigh, Alan Williams, Aida Foroutan, Irshad, Brian Bennett, Rajeshwari Pandharipande, Oladipo Salami, Thor Sawin, Nana Aba Amfo, Tsippi Kauffman, Marco Santello, Christian Munch, Usaama Minhas, Earle Waugh, Regula Qureshi, Tatjana Soldat-Jaffe, Andie Palmer, Natalie Kononenko, Joe Hill, Julia Byl, Jeff Roberts, The Pan Project Intercultural East Asian Improvisation Group, The University of Alberta's Middle Eastern and North African Music Ensemble, The University of Alberta's West African Music Ensemble, Shumaila Hemani, Arshdeep Khaira, Daniel Akira Stadnicki, Bernard Spolsky, Jeanette Jouili, Ngozi Nwobia, Ioana Nechita, Marios Chatziprokopiou, Tony Bowring and Rafiki Jazz.

It is impossible to calculate the debt of this project due to the *Sociology of Language and Religion* Network and its two founders, Joshua A. Fishman (1926-2015) and Tope (Sky) Omoniyi (1956-2017). Their inspiration and example were there in the background of everything *Heavenly Acts* sought to achieve.

Finally, Tope Omoniyi deserves a mention just for himself. *Heavenly Acts* began with him as a co-investigator in 2015 and he sadly passed away a few days after the last symposium in Sheffield in May 2017. Without him, I am certain neither the project nor this volume would have seen the light of day and I am honoured and proud that one of his last authored papers appears within (with Nana Amfo).



# INTRODUCTION

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In the second half of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty first, a substantial body of thought, research and writing in a range of disciplines has been devoted to exploring areas of human experience and activity that can be categorised as performance-oriented. This early research has been built upon to the extent that there now exists a number of distinct, but related, threads across the fields of human arts and sciences that represent different disciplines, diverse settings and a range of methodological approaches, all of which are approaching “performance” from one direction or another. In linguistic anthropology, the work of Bauman and Briggs (1990) has understood performance through the process of entextualisation; in identity studies, Butler’s (1997) performative notion of the “repetition of stylised acts in time” is how she theorises gender and sexuality; drawing on reader response theory, speech act theory and theatre studies, Biblical Studies scholars have developed Performance Criticism as a discrete and fruitful lens through which to view performance; ethnomusicologists, too, are exploring new configurations around musical performance and global impact deriving from transnational and diasporic processes.

A common characteristic uniting all these threads is the nexus formed by performance and religion. Much of the early anthropological gaze was upon ritual and ceremony. More recent activity is exploring how performance informs and is informed by religious experience and activity regardless of whether that performance is musical, linguistic, theatrical, identity-oriented or ritual (Rosowsky, 2012, 2013). This volume is one of the outcomes of a two-year project that took place in the years 2015-17 although the impetus of the project began much earlier. Its main origins lie in the burgeoning activity of the Sociology of Language and Religion (SLR) which emerged at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century through the inspired collaboration of its joint founders, Joshua A. Fishman (1926-2015) and Tope (Sky) Omoniyi (1956-2017). The SLR network, which was what it was to become, came together in the desire to explore, in an interdisciplinary manner and from sociological points of view, possibly the two major

cultural achievements of human beings, language and religion. This was in recognition of the complex and systematic relationship existing between the two. Fishman's *Basic Theoretical Perspectives for a Sociology of Language and Religion* published in 2006 and given its first public outing in the inaugural SLR colloquium in Roehampton in 2002, can be perhaps summed up best by the general principle that changes in social and cultural processes lead inevitably to changes in language form and practice and vice versa. Much of the work of the SLR network since then has been a working out of this principle in empirical ways.

However, *Heavenly Acts* has taken this work a stage further and brought together scholars working in a much wider range of disciplines than sociology, language and religion. This was for a number of reasons one of which can be perhaps illustrated through my own personal trajectory. My early research into reading in religious settings, in particular the specialised reading as decoding that takes place in religious schools such as *cheders* and *madrassas*, had led me to understand reading through a model of performance rather than conventional models of reading for propositional meaning (Rosowsky, 2008). It was apparent that reading in such a way could only be validated if it was fulfilling a different function for the young readers than the one presented to them in their mainstream school experience of reading. Inevitably, this led me to observe how performance as a mode is central to much religious practice particularly but not only ritual. Not an earthshattering revelation to many I would imagine, but something which I had come to realise in an experiential way rather than a theoretical one. This in turn led me to search for theoretical frameworks which might help account for such reading. Richard Bauman's work on verbal arts was an early discovery and has since served me in good stead (see below). Performance in this sense, however, only covers a number of different perspectives and, though linked, other performance-oriented approaches offer as much purchase on religious practice as Bauman's. As a result, in the *Heavenly Acts* project, and in this volume, a range of thinking with performance and religion exists.

## Heavenly Acts

A word or two about the title of the project and, subsequently, the book. The project was called "*Heavenly Acts*" to represent a focus on performance and faith. "Heavenly" is here used loosely to mean "other-worldly" rather than being tied to any spatial notion of a supernatural homeland. "Acts" (a) symbolises the performances covered in the project in the sense that "acts"

can often be synonymous with “performances” and (b) attempts to capture a little of the sense of “acts of devotion” albeit with the agency of such “acts” left ambiguous or open to interpretation.

## Aspects of Performance

In a book with “performance” in the title, there is also a need to explain how the word is being used as its meanings, though related, are diverse. Firstly, there is a general sense of the word which denotes a deliberate event or process which is somehow or another distinct from its everyday equivalent. Thus, a spoken dialogue in a play is distinct from speech in my conversation with the bus driver and a song sung alone in the bathroom is distinct from singing before an audience at Covent Garden. Having said that, there is also an understanding of performance that suggests all behaviour apart from the most instinctual, unconscious, and often solitary, behaviour is a performance of one kind or another. This latter meaning relates to more considered theories of performance which we will touch on below. As much ritual and devotional practice is deliberate and distinct from natural speech and behaviour, the former meaning of performance is used in most of the chapters of this book. However, there are also some specific and theoretically-oriented meanings of performance that are taken up in different degrees in the chapters that follow.

Richard Bauman’s performance-oriented verbal arts theory has been influential since its original articulation in 1974 (more famous in its 1990 reiteration with Charles Briggs). Drawing on Erving Goffman’s notion of communicative frames (1974), he presents a framework through which the performance of any verbal art can be accounted for. His two key characteristics for performance, accountability to an audience for communication above and beyond referential content and the enhancement of experience in the intrinsic qualities of the act of expression, allow for an evaluation of the extent to which a performance *is* performance rather than another communicative event. Against these two characteristics, therefore, the linguistic content of much religious practice can be measured. Bauman also suggested “high” performance as a term that denotes the “highly focussed and knowingly styled constructions” (Coupland 2011, 575) we generally consider aesthetic performance to be.

All the performance theories mentioned here overlap and often draw on similar sources. Speech act theory as developed by first J.L. Austin (1962) and later by John Searle (1969) has been influential in the way the notion of performative utterances is empowered by the latter’s contexts. Curiously,

Austin himself felt there was little to learn about language through “high” performance itself. In much religious ritual and religious practice though, words that are uttered, gestures that are made and space that is manipulated are often understood as performative practices that enact certain processes and events. These are rich contexts for the exploration of performative language and acts.

Another strand of performance theory which, like Bauman’s verbal arts theory, too draws on Goffman and Austin is represented by the work of anthropologists such as Victor Turner (1969) and performance theorists such as Richard Schechner (1988) who have sought to understand performance as a way of accounting for the resolution of “disharmonic or crisis situations” (Ibid., 166). Making a distinction between, on the one hand, framed performances (akin to our “everyday” understanding and Bauman’s verbal arts events) and, on the other, the extended sense of performance hinted at above that sees all human practice as performance to a lesser or greater extent, this set of theories treats performance first and foremost as an act of social drama.

Finally, at least for the purposes of this book, the performativity of material space realised by its manipulation is represented by the aesthetic theories relating to the transformation of profane space into sacred or sanctified space. The theories of Lidov concerning heirotopy (2006) in this regard have their linguistic counterpart in Fishman’s (2006) observation that languages and language varieties can be “sanctified” or “co-sanctified” through usage, in particular their association with languages deemed to be sacred either in origin or in designation.

All these separate but interrelated threads which employ performance as a heuristic indicate that a much wider cross-disciplinary approach to this topic is necessary. This volume brings together scholars representing these different threads and (a) presents the insights and expertise they have of their own fields, (b) reveals the potential there evidently is for cooperation and collaboration across these disciplines in seeking to develop both theory and methodology in an inter-disciplinary manner and (c) makes an important contribution to knowledge about performance in religious settings and contexts. Furthermore, with these different researchers carrying out their studies within and across a variety of religious traditions and contexts, this volume has an explicit and integral inter- and cross-faith dimension that will be of interest and importance to non-academic audiences who, it is intended, can use the volume’s findings to further their own agendas in respect of inter-faith cooperation, understanding and collaboration. The

contribution to social cohesion and cultural understanding in this respect is potentially significant.

### Organisation of the book

The volume is organised into four broad areas determined by each chapter's principal focus. However, the boundaries between these areas are sufficiently porous for different focuses in each section to be located simultaneously elsewhere. The first area is *Heavenly Acts - Performance, Faith and Space* and contains three chapters focusing on the performativity of space in faith contexts. Edelman's chapter begins the volume with an account of how public space can be dynamically transformed when faith practices burst out of their "cloisters" and encounter daily life, in this case, busy streets in London. Usefully, this chapter also includes a discussion of how performance studies complement linguistic and anthropological models of the study of religion. This signalling of interdisciplinarity sets the tone for the rest of the volume. Kononenko's "Children of Stone" focuses on the cemetery and role it plays in the lives of a diaspora Ukrainian community in Canada. In particular, she discusses how such earthly and spiritual spaces can perform an important function in materialising folk memory for communities and individuals when other faith practices and beliefs, and institutions (such as church buildings) are on the wane or have disappeared. Similar to Kononenko's important preoccupation with memory, Glukhanyuk also focuses on the materiality of the dead as she presents and discusses the performative role played by the sites where the last Russian Tsar, Nicholas II, and his family were murdered in Yekaterinburg. The evolving sanctity of the locations associated with this murder is plotted historically and she shows how this has culminated in the monastery and church complex at Ganina Yama that now represents the royal family (themselves now sanctified as the "Saint Regal Martyrs"). Using Lidov's theory of hierotopy of creating sacred space, Glukhanyuk explores how the materiality of the site is dynamically sanctified by the events with which they are associated. Finally, the 'Heavenly Acts' in all three of these chapters are instantiated in that liminal space existing at the isthmus of the sacred and the profane by performances of ritual, construction and memory.

Perhaps reflecting the origins of this project in the work of the Sociology of Language and Religion (SLR), the volume's longest section is, *Heavenly Acts - Performance, Faith and Language*. Amfo and Omoniyi adopt a very traditional sociolinguistic construct (the notion of a domain) in their focus

on the language practices and associated performances of the worship domain in a multilingual Pentecostal church in Ghana. Here, drawing on Fishman (2006), performance is understood as embodied lingual practice in respect of the forms of religious communication in multilingual settings that interplay fluidly with more general sociolinguistic patterns in Ghana as a whole. Pandharipande, on the other hand, chooses to foreground performative utterances and acts in her analysis of Hindu rituals, particularly in the U.S. Similar to Amfo and Omoniyi, she draws on Fishman (2006)'s remark that language shift and social change are inseparable phenomena that can only be understood in relation to each other. She is able to identify a range of patterns in language use and Hindu ritual that reflect changing social conditions both in the heartland of Hinduism but also in its diaspora. Her main theoretical point is the link between efficacious ritual and the performative power of utterances and physical acts. Soldat-Jaffe focuses on the performance of hip-hop to explore how current instantiations of Jewish and, in particular, Yiddish identity are transformed by the encounter of both old and new, the past and the present, East and West and North and South, the global and the local, through an extended linguistic analysis of how one hip-hop artist draws on both Yiddish roots and Francophone African influences and collaborators in order to forge novel notions of authenticity ("keepin' it real"). Kauffman's chapter is a contribution from the world of Hasidic Studies and presents readers with examples of a-nomic performances in the Hasidic tradition. Here, performance is understood partly – and the chapter covers greater nuances than can only be hinted at in an introduction – through ritual bodily acts that move the worshipper from the mundane to the sublime. Drawing on the strand of performance theory that comes firstly through Turner (1969) and later through Butler (1997), Kauffman shows how performance in Hasidism is not only ritual that can be analysed via performance theory but is in itself a movement that prioritises performance over text. El Naggar takes the performance of a well-known Muslim televangelist and shows how only through a multimodal discourse analysis approach can we understand the underlying ideologies and stances presented. A textual analysis would be inadequate to account for the power and reach vouchsafed by such performances. This takes performance into the world of pedagogy – at least a particular genre within it – and shows how a teacher's performance is made up of a fluid and dynamic range of modes that work together to achieve their effect. Finally, Rosowsky drawing on Bauman (1974)'s theory of performance and the verbal arts, shows us that the multilingual devotional performance of young Muslims serves to not only enrich their sense of religious and linguistic experience but also represents

an effective response to critics of multilingualism and advocates of monolingualism in UK society. The gamut of such devotional practices intersect with Bauman's suggested variety of performative practices in aesthetic utterances and provide the young people involved with an increasingly complex and enriching repertoire spanning languages, registers, modes and texts.

Part 3, *Heavenly Acts - Performance, Faith and Sound*, comprises three chapters featuring three very different faith contexts but united by their focus on the performance of sound. Hearon draws on the rich tradition of Performance Criticism which orientates Biblical Scholarship from the analysis of written text to oral performance (Rhoads, 2006). In her comparative analysis of a 2<sup>nd</sup> Century papyrus of one of Paul's epistles and a modern edition of the Bible, she is able to show how the materiality of text shapes performance. The orality of the earlier text is demonstrated by a precise analysis of its oral/aural signifiers which gives us a window through which we go back in time to "hear" the text rather than "read" it. Morris provides the reader of this volume with an up-to-date and extensive review of the Muslim music scene in the UK. Echoing Appadurai (1996), he describes the Muslim "soundscape" as part of a broader development in the working out of a distinctive Muslim *and* British identity in contexts of diaspora. He argues that academic focus needs to shift from traditional sites of Islam as a practised religion to newer constellations of cultural vitality exercised within a dynamic and fluid Islamic framework. Frishkopf's exploration of how Egyptian Sufi *tariqas* construct and maintain group identity presents data which demonstrate the power of performed devotional texts. A comparative analysis of poetic text performance in two of these *tariqas* allows the reader to experience how the distinct character of each organisation is forged through the lexical choices and lyrical emphases of the texts and their performers.

Part 4 of the volume, *Heavenly Acts - Performance, Faith and Identity*, comprises two chapters each focusing on aspects of sexuality. Sawin makes use of Facebook data to explore the manner in which online discourse can facilitate or challenge the performance of particular identities within the broader Christian community. His "Side B" participants, challenged on a number of fronts from groups inside and outside the faith, use Facebook to construct an online space for a Side B community which facilitates the exploration of their own self-understandings in the light of interpretations of scripture and tradition. Jaspal continues the theme of identity by exploring the challenges faced by gay Muslims and its implications for self-presentation and social performance. The threat to identity engendered by

these often requires the individual to “perform” a new group membership in order to secure validation from other members of that group. This can entail the uncritical acceptance of the norms, values and representations perceived to be associated with that group membership, despite not actually adhering to them at a psychological level.

The volume is completed by an Afterword written by Brian Bennett of Niagara University.

### **The interdisciplinary and multifaceted character of the book**

One of the characteristics of this volume is the diversity of faith, cultural and performance contexts it encompasses. Firstly, the team of writers represents the following faiths and traditions (either personally (allowing for an emic perspective), academically or both): Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Sufism, Catholicism, Russian Orthodoxy, Pentecostalism and Hasidism. Secondly, they draw on the following disciplinary traditions: Performance Studies, Folklore Studies, Theatre Studies, Anthropology, Sociolinguistics, Linguistics, Religious Studies, Judaism Studies, Critical Discourse Analysis, Education, Biblical Studies, Performance Criticism, Ethnomusicology and Social Psychology. Thirdly, in respect of areas of the world featured or represented, the volume encompasses London (UK), Saskatchewan (Canada), Yekaterinburg (Russia), Accra (Ghana), India, U.S., Congo, Belz (present day Ukraine), the Yiddish-speaking world more generally, South Yorkshire (UK), Egypt, the 2nd Century CE Near East and South Asia. Finally, languages referred to in the text include, 2nd Century Greek, Biblical Hebrew, Yiddish, Arabic, Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi, Sanskrit, other South Asian languages, Akan, Ewe, Ga, colloquial French, Ukrainian, Russian and English.

Readers are provided with a cross-referencing grid in the *Appendix* that allows them to identify which faith/tradition, disciplinary tradition, area of the world, language, and performance perspective can be found in each chapter.

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**SECTION I:**  
**FAITH, PERFORMANCE AND SPACE**

## CHAPTER ONE

# WELCOMING A TORAH TO NORTHWOOD: ON THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGION AND PERFORMANCE STUDIES

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### 1

On Sunday, 17 March, 2015, the Northwood and Pinner Liberal Synagogue of the north London neighbourhood of Northwood did something most synagogues will do once in their lifetimes, if they are lucky – they completed the writing of a new scroll of Torah, the key Jewish sacred text and, as such, the most significant liturgical object in Jewish worship. This chapter will describe and analyse the ritual welcoming of that scroll to the community.

In doing so, I hope also to demonstrate the ways in which the discipline of performance studies can offer a helpful complement to linguistic and anthropological models of the study of religion. The discipline of performance studies developed out of theatre studies in the 1960s and 1970s and a conversation between cultural anthropology and the experimental theatre and performance art world that was questioning the nature of artistic action at the time, especially in the galleries and small theatres of downtown New York. But in recent years, that link between the social scientific study of performance and its artistic cousin has become strained to the breaking point. The initial impulse that those who study religious ritual and those who study performance are working with overlapping sets of material is, of course, completely correct. The two disciplines have developed distinct interests and analytical methods in the past half century each of which, I would argue, could benefit from a dialogue with the other. In working through this example, then, I hope to indicate how this dialogue might be academically useful.

I will begin with a brief description of the ceremony, and then offer an analysis of it from both the anthropological and the performative perspectives, before offering an analysis that attempts an integration of the two. The welcoming ceremony is called a *hachnesat sefer torah*; literally, the “bringing in of a book of *torah*,” and it was designed to commemorate the completion of the writing of a new formal Torah scroll that would be used in the synagogue’s worship. (The Torah, which literally means “teaching,” is the first five books of the Hebrew Bible.) A torah is traditionally written by hand on animal-skin parchment by a master scribe called a *sofer* and bound as a scroll around two elaborately decorated wooden supports.

The event began in the synagogue itself, where, in the sanctuary, the almost-finished scroll was laid out on a table under the chuppah, or wedding canopy. One after another, individually or in families, members and their families were invited up to hold the *sofer*’s hand as he filled in one of the final few dozen letters of the scroll. Each time, the *sofer* had a small chat with the person holding his arm, chose an appropriate letter, and offered a blessing. This took a while, and the atmosphere was informal; people stood around, angled for a better view, chatted, took photos, or went to the next room for tea and cake.

When the last word had been finished, the *sofer* rolled the scroll back to the Ten Commandments, and asked the synagogue’s senior rabbi to read them out loud. This done, the congregation of several dozen took up the newly completed scroll, wrapped it in white, and paraded it down the stairs and out onto the streets of Northwood under a makeshift canopy of a prayer shawl on four sticks (this, too, invokes a wedding canopy). The procession was led by the rabbi on guitar, and the group sang the sort of simple, traditional Hebrew songs one might find at a Jewish wedding or other celebration.

The procession went down the main street of Northwood, past shops and pubs and bus stops and quite a few surprised and confused locals. (There were half a dozen Metropolitan Police officers across the street, watching the situation.) The procession stopped in front of a tree next to a public parking lot. There, the senior rabbi explained that the mother of the tree they were standing in front of had been planted by a teacher and her young students in January of 1943 in the Theresinstadt concentration camp, which served as a symbol of hope, nurtured by each successive group of children who passed through. After the war, it was moved to Terezin Cemetery as a memorial. Two members of the Northwood synagogue had taken seedlings

from the tree when they visited in 1996, had nourished them at their homes in London, and one of those had grown into this tree here.<sup>1</sup> This was all the more poignant as the original Terezin tree had been destroyed by flooding in 2004. The assembled group recited the Kaddish, the traditional Jewish prayer for the dead, and then turned around and paraded back into the synagogue with more songs of praise and thanksgiving (all in Hebrew, and most of which, of course, take their text from the very Torah being brought in). There, the scroll was paraded around the crowded room, with still more song, until it was brought under the canopy to join its sister scrolls (that is, the older scrolls that the synagogue was already using). The most basic of Jewish prayers, the Shema, was recited and sung, and a few more blessings of thanksgiving and praise were spoken and sung (a few in English, composed for the occasion). The new scroll and the old ones were put away, and with a final prayer, the event was over. Most people went home, though a few lingered for cups of tea.

## 2

Most scholars of religion would initially look to textual precedents for this ritual – which is not unreasonable for an event that, quite literally, celebrates a text. The key precedent within the biblical text itself is II Samuel 6, which describes the arrival of the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem. At that ceremony, musical instruments were played and King David danced “with all his might” (2 Samuel 6:14). This connection, then, would be made between the Biblical Ark, which biblical tradition claims contained the stone tablets of law given to Moses on Mount Sinai, and the Ark of the contemporary synagogue, which contains the torah scrolls which, too, are taken in some sense “from Sinai.” Such scholars would place this ceremony in this centuries-old tradition of celebration as well as other ritual acts of scribal work and reverence for the Torah (restrictions on how it can be carried, stored, read, and so on), whether or not the participants that day in Northwood had any knowledge of these precedents. Scholars likely would compare this ritual to other ritual traditions that used similar symbolic elements such as the canopy, repeated circular processions, and joyous group dancing: the annual commemoration of the revelation on Sinai known as *Simchat Torah*, but most importantly, Jewish wedding ceremonies. The explanation here, again, would be textual: the common biblical and Rabbinic image of God as groom and the Jewish people as bride, with the Torah as the ring which binds them.

Much of the focus here would also be on the key symbols present in the ceremony, symbols which, in the minds of some anthropologists, may be culturally specific but can equally point to trans-cultural patterns of religious understanding. In the *Hachnesat*, the Torah is the obvious such symbol. While of course it is a quintessentially Jewish symbol, it would be hard not to see it as what Mircea Eliade called an *axis mundi*—a central pillar around which the world is organised and, literally, revolves, a connection between heaven and earth, and frequently the site of revelation or the (past or ongoing) presence of a divinity. Eliade sees the Hindu lingam as one of these, the Aboriginal totem, the Kaba'a in Mecca, the Cross on Calvary, and so on. When the Torah is processed, with the tribe following it, being danced around, and serenaded with references to it with the traditional name *Etz Chayim*, the Tree of Life, the theory fits too well not to deserve a mention.<sup>2</sup> It is also no accident that the memory of Terezin is also a tree, a tree of life in another sense, and that one tree needs to visit and pay symbolic homage to its predecessor.

Those anthropologists who did not see ritual as a mere contemporary working-out of ancient text might also see in this the liberal Jewish liturgical tradition that has developed since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in Germany, and then in the UK and US. They would note in particular the use of guitar and the particular songs sung as the legacy of Debbie Friedman and the new, folk-rock sensibility she injected into liberal Judaism through guitar-led song circles at American summer camps in the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> They may look at the age range of participants and realise that the current crop of young leaders—now in their 30s and 40s—were the ones most influenced by this development, and note that two of the three rabbis leading this congregation fall firmly in that demographic.

The more comparative amongst them would also make connections to other religious rituals of celebration and completion, such as harvest festivals and ceremonies of thanksgiving for military victories. They might also see a link to rites of passage, as the *Hachnesat* is literally an inauguration, where a new and recognised social status is created: what begins as a piece of parchment becomes holy scripture. The procession, moving from set apart sacred space through the public streets and back into the sacred space, would echo ceremonies of victory or sovereignty. Like similar processions of statues or images of the gods or saints (or their relics) through the public streets in Hindu, Buddhist, and Catholic traditions, it both marks an important event in the life of the religious community and the assertion of some sense of the primacy of the sacred over the secular sphere. These scholars would also likely note how extraordinarily rare such public

assertions are in diaspora Judaism, at least outside of Orthodox enclaves with a majority-Jewish population. They would also note that, unlike harvest festivals or many carnivals, this was not an annual event but a once-in-a-generation one, and that it is likely it was the only one any of its participants ever had (or ever would) participate in. That might helpfully contextualise this unusual and hard to account for assertion of primacy (which most participants would deny was something they wanted to assert).

What this contextualisation does necessarily do is to place this ritual into an ontological or structural category called “ritual,” one which is inherently different from other categories of human action (such as, for example, aesthetic performance). This might not have been the case a century ago, when structuralist influences from Claude Lévi-Strauss or Emile Durkheim were more invested in the qualitative distinctiveness of ritual action. Contemporary scholars are less likely to see such categories as holding a necessary, transcultural or universal status. Instead, they may treat these categories as emic and negotiable, looking for evidence of their use within the anthropological record. For the *Hachnesat*, that internal categorisation does exist—the location, liturgical language, and other factors clearly place it within the category of Jewish worship— but its movement outside of the synagogue and guitar-based music do question that somewhat.

In her influential work, ritual theorist Catherine Bell has described and critiqued the tradition in religious studies of using the concept of “ritual” as a means of synthesising the antithetical dichotomy of thought and action.<sup>4</sup> As she describes, however, this attempt to understand ritual as the union of thought and action is only temporarily effective; soon, ritual becomes condemned as meaningless action (“empty”) and the primacy of thought over action is reasserted. The problem here is that this assertion of primacy has a difficult political history; it has been associated with a Protestant supremacist attitude which has been linked both with anti-Catholicism and the cultural denigration of non-Christian religious life worldwide. The valorising of verbally-articulated belief and theology over lived action has had and continues to have the effect of privileging western Protestant notions of religion over others. Bell notes that too many of her colleagues fail to take account of the political effect of their own work:

Ritual studies, as a recent mode of discourse, has claimed an odd exemption from the general critique that scholarship distorts and exploits, tending to see itself, by virtue of its interest in ritual performance per se, as somehow able to transcend the politics of those who study and those who are studied.<sup>5</sup>