

Customs for Chanting the Megillah

collected by Dr. Annette M. Boeckler

There is a difference in regard to the megillah reading between traditional and progressive congregations.

Traditionally the megillah is read after the Amidah in a Weekday evening and morning service. If not otherwise noted here, the verses are traditionally chanted in a special trop for reading the megillah. Additionally there are some cantorial customs where to deviate, some are kind of demanded, others are customs of individual cantors. Usually the megillah – when read within a usual weekday service - is read hurriedly, not very loudly, but rather quietly, one slows down and the voice is raised only for the “exceptional verses”. The exceptional verses add expression, drama and sometimes humour to certain phrases, some deviations have become “traditional” in many congregations. Those phrases that depict gloom or despair are to be chanted in Ekha Trop. There are additionally several possibilities to perform some of the ta’amin on certain words in a style that expresses the meaning of certain words to add humour and each cantor has developed his/her own style.

In progressive Judaism the megillah is usually not part of a weekday service but of either a separate [children’s] party and became a rather noisy event or an adult discussion meeting. Also, in progressive Judaism the custom came up to read – not chant - the Megillah or to sing passages to popular folk tunes. When it is read, this is done partly in funny ways in the vernacular and all kinds of additions between the chapters may be added. Many progressive congregations do not read the whole megillah, but only parts of it – especially chapter 9 is usually skipped – or the story is retold in a new way. Some progressive congregations have a discussion about the issues of Purim (revenge, relationship to non-Jews, Jewish history, etc.) connected with a megillah reading.

Blessings “al mikra megilla”, “she’asa nissim” and “shehecheyanu” before starting with chapter one. They have a special tune to be chanted in. [For music sources see end of this document.]

- 1**
- 1:7** 3 words at the end of the first half (וכלים מכלים שונים) are chanted in Ekha trop (according to Midrash Esther 2:11 these vessels were stolen from the temple when it was destroyed).
- 1:22** exceptional verse, special melody (for music see the bibliography at the end of this document)
- 2**
- 2:4** exceptional verse, special melody
- 2:5** 1st verse of redemption, said FIRST by congregation, then repeated by reader. When reading, make a break, so that the congregation knows, when to start their part.
- 2:6** whole verse is chanted in Ekha trop
- 2:15** first 7 words (up to מרדכי) in Ekha trop or verse in special melody

- 2:17** exceptional verse, special melody
- 2:23** exceptional verse, final cadence
- 3** **3:15** last 3 words (והעיר שושן נבוכה) are chanted in *Ekha trop*
- 4** **4:1** whole verse is chanted in *Ekha trop*
- 4:3** last half of verse (from אבל גדול ליהודים onwards) chanted in *Ekha trop*
- 4:13** cantillation idea: "*harotzim el kol medinat hamelech*": one can imitate in the style of performing the *ta'amim* the runners
- 4:14** exceptional verse, special melody
- 4:16** last three words (וכאשר אבדתי אבדתי) chanted in *Ekha trop*
- 5** **5:4** exceptional verse, God's name hidden in initial letters **Yavoh Hamelech Wehaman Hayom** (יבוא המלך והמן היום), either High Holiday *hamelech nussach* or louder.
- 5:5** God's name hidden: va**Y**awo **H**ameleh **W**ehaman el-**H**amishteh (יבוא המלך והמן אל-המשתה)
- 5:7** last two words (שאלתי ובקשתי) in *Ekha trop* or as exceptional verse
- 5:8** contains God's name in initial letters which should be alluded to: **Yavoh Hamelech Wehaman el-Hamishteh** (יבוא המלך והמן אל-המשתה)
- 5:10** Haman's wife, *Zeresh*, was as bad as he was; for the sake of egalitarianism some make noise when mentioning her name, as well. She is also referred to in 5,14; 6,13.
- 5:14** God's name hidden, just before the turning point of story: lifne**Y** Haman **W**aya'as **H**a'etz (לפני המן ויעש העץ).
- 5:14** for *Zeresh* see note to 5:10
- 6** **6:1** exceptional verse, special melody = **turning point of story**, and "*hamelech*" must be chanted in *Yamim Nora'im Hamelech nusach*, as according to Misrash Esther 10,1, God, the king of kings, also was alerted that night.
- 6:7** cantillation idea: "*sus*" with *revi'a* imitates a horse
- 6:9** cantillation idea: "*kaka*" with *yetiv* can be stressed funnily; same in verse 11.
- 6:10** exceptional verse, special melody
- 6:16** for *Zeresh* see note on 5:10
- 7** **7:3** second half of verse (from תנתן לי נפשי בשאלתי till end) chanted in *Ekha trop*
- 7:4** first half till *etnachta* under ולאבד chanted in *Ekha trop*
- 7:5** God's name hidden: **MI Hu'** (spelled with *aleph* instead of *heh* at the end) מי הוא זה

- 7:7** God's name hidden: **kl kaltaH elaW hara'aH** כִּי כִלְתָה אֵלָיו הַרְעָה
- 7:8** "Yayin" with *revi'a* can be performed kind of drunken
- 7:10** exceptional verse, special melody
- 8** **8:3** cantillation idea: "*watevk*" – weeping can be imitated
- 8:6** whole verse is chanted in *Ekha* trop
- 8:9** cantillation idea: "*vayikatev*" ... three times *munach* imitates process of writing something
- 8:15** 2nd verse of redemption, said FIRST by congregation, then repeated by reader; has special melody. Pause before this verse to give congregation time to say it first.
- 8:16** 3rd verse of redemption, said FIRST by congregation, then repeated by reader, has special melody. Pause before this verse to give congregation time to say it first.
- 8:17** cantillation idea: "*simcha vesason*" joyful
- 9** **9:07** the ten sons of Haman are canted quickly on ONE single breath
- 9:17-18** cantillation idea: the word "*Noach*" could be stressed (alluding to another story)
- 9:24** this is the LAST "Haman", chant longer
- 9:26** "*ha-igeret hazot*": show the megillah
- 10** **10:02** exceptional verse, special melody
- 10:03** 4th verse of redemption, said FIRST by congregation, then repeated by reader, can be chanted with melody of *Adir Hu* (lead melody for Pessach) to hint to the next festival, dealing also with liberation and freedom but in a more sorted and structured way or use traditional special melody.
- Blessing after reading the Megillah.** It, too, has its special tune. Usually then followed by *Piyyut Shoshanat Ya'akov*.

OVERVIEW according to trop:

Ekha trop: 1:7; 2:6; 3:15; 4:1; 4:3; 4:16; 7:3; 7:4; 8:6.

4 verses of redemption: 2:5; 8:15; 8:16; 10:3.

Exceptional verses: 1:22; 2:4; 2:15; 2:17; 2:23; 4:14; 5:4; 5:7; 5:8; 6:1; 6:10; 7:3; 7:10; 8:15; 8:16; 10:2; 10: 3. And 9:7 the ten sons of Haman chanted on one single breath. *Hamelech* in 6,1 chanted in *Hamelech nusach*.

God's name hidden in chapters 5 and 7 framing the turning point (see above).

SOURCES for music for special tunes:

A.W. Binder, *Biblical Chant*, London: Peter Owen, 1959, p. 93ff, for “musical detours”: p. 100ff. (EASTERN EUROPEAN TRADITION)

Joshua R. Jacobson, *Chanting the Hebrew Bible. Student Edition*. Philadelphia: JPS, 2005, p. 165ff, for special verses: p. 185-193.; Joshua R. Jacobson, *Chanting the Hebrew Bible. The Art of Cantillation*, Philadelphia: JPS, 2002, p.787ff. For “exceptional verses” : p. 833-841. (EASTERN EUROPEAN TRADITION)

Victor Tunkel, *The Music of the Hebrew Bible and the Western Ashkenazic Chant Tradition*, London: Tumsder in association with JMI, 2006, p. 139-143. (WESTERN EUROPEAN TRADITION)

A. Perlzweig, *Manual of Neginoth (Cantillation) ...*, London: R. Mazin, 1912, p. 13-16 (WESTERN EUROPEAN TRADITION)

Josh Sharfman, Virtualcantor.com: <http://www.virtualcantor.com/purim.htm> (EASTERN EUROPEAN)

Eliyahu Schleifer, Megillat Esther: <http://s70457.gridserver.com/en/study-programs/music-library/megillat-esther.html> (DUTCH, WESTERN EUROPEAN)

And: megillah readings done by professional cantors are a good source to collect ideas.