

## **Modal Analysis and Music-Text Relations in Ashkenazic Jewish Traditions of Biblical Cantillation**

### **Abstract**

Jewish traditions of biblical cantillation are like other forms of liturgical chant in that they are primarily “logogenic”; the melodies and rhythms are directly tied to the structure and rhythm of the verses. It may thus seem that Jewish cantillation is not amenable to music analysis, that we would simply not have much to say about it. There is no independent musical discourse to analyze, no motivic transformation in the usual sense or large-scale formal structures, and one does not typically find expressive links between the melodies and verbal meaning. And yet, the melodies are more intricate than Gregorian psalm tones, and there is historical evidence of pleasure in the musical aspect of cantillation. Thus, a close analytical reading should be possible.

This paper presents an analysis of two sets of cantillation melodies of East European (Lithuanian) origin, now widely used in the United States. The analysis explores focal pitches, contour, range, inversion relationships, and gestural qualities of the melodies. The kind of analysis pursued here is not entirely foreign to the “Western” analytical tradition—it is a form of structural and interpretive analysis—but it is unusual in that the object of analysis is not a particular melody (or “work”) but a set of melodic motives that combine in a variety of ways to clarify the sense and rhythmic structure of the text. This is a form of modal analysis, with mode conceived not as a scalar type or classification tool, but as a melody type (Powers and Wiering, 2009). This analysis also explores the modes of a particular tradition in depth, and it thus offers something different from previous comparative and generalizing approaches (Rosowsky 1957, Avenary 1978 (1976), Cohen et al. 1990).