

David's Secret Chord: On Music as a Metaphor for Life

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Leonard Cohen's song "Hallelujah" is one of the most hauntingly beautiful songs I know. This evening, as we pray with the music of Mattan Klein's jazz quintet, I'd like to explore the mysterious first stanza of this famous song:

I heard there was a secret chord
that David played and it pleased the Lord
but you don't really care for music, do ya?
It goes like this: the fourth, the fifth,
the minor fall, the major lift,
the baffled king composing
Hallelujah.

So, a few questions:

What is the secret chord that David played? Why did it please the Lord? And why was David *baffled* while composing the song?

David's day job was being king of Israel, but his true passion was music. When he wasn't busy tending to affairs of state or having affairs with married moon-bathers, David could be found playing the harp and composing songs to God.

His greatest hits album is probably the most famous musical catalog of all time: the *Book of Psalms*.

In ancient times, David's psalms were set to music and performed in the Jerusalem Temple by the Levites when the community gathered for worship and other sacred occasions.

Not only were the psalms sung by Levite singers, but they were also accompanied by musicians playing an array of instruments, including lyres, harps, cymbals, and trumpets.¹

We find the earliest indications of the centrality of music to Jewish worship in this week's parashah: "On your joyous occasions, your fixed festivals, and your new moon days, you shall sound the trumpets over your burnt offerings and your sacrifices of well-being. They shall be a reminder of you before your God: I, Adonai, am your God." (*Num.* 10:10)

Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra says that the sound of the musical instruments is meant to capture our attention and help us "direct [our] hearts to God."²

Opening yourself to the power of music, letting it penetrate your being and move you to a place of sublime joy or deep contemplation, is part and parcel of what it means to pray as a Jew.

Now, with this background, we can return to our questions:

What was the secret chord that David played? Why did it please the Lord? And why was David baffled while composing his song?

We can begin to answer these questions by looking at the least cryptic of the lines in Cohen's first stanza: "It goes like this: the fourth, the fifth/the minor fall, the major lift."

If you're familiar with music, you know that this is a chord progression—actually, the chord progression of "Hallelujah" itself in real time.

If the song is being played in the key of C Major, the "fourth" is the fourth chord in the key up from the root chord C Major—meaning the chord F Major.

The "fifth" is the next chord in the sequence, which is G Major.

The "minor fall" is A minor. That's the sixth chord in the sequence, meaning the progression is continuing to move forward. But the "fall" refers to the fact that the "third" note in the A-*minor* chord has fallen down a half step from the C sharp of the A-*Major* chord. (The "flat third" is what turns a major chord into a minor one.)

The "major lift" is a return to the fourth chord in the key, F Major, which is achieved by moving forward, or *lifting*, the E note in the previous A-minor chord a half step up to F.

That's a lot of music theory, but here's the bottom line: The chord sequence is a progression that involves some steps ahead and some steps backward, even as, *overall*, the song unfolds over time from beginning to end, in an ever forward-moving direction.

And in that way, the song "Hallelujah" is a metaphor for life—because life, too, unfolds over time. And while it will unavoidably involve some steps forward and some steps backward, life is a progression from beginning to end that, despite deviations along the way, moves ever forward toward some eventual point of arrival.

In music, that point of arrival is called the "resolution" to the song.

The resolution is the chord or tone you're waiting for with bated breath toward the end of a song, and when you finally hear it, it feels like an enormous tension has been released and you can finally exhale.

Talented composers use chord progressions to build up the tension, causing us to feel unsettled as we wait for the resolution to come. The most powerful and memorable songs make us wait and wait some more, using what is called “deceptive cadence” to build up the anticipation.

As the musician and neuroscientist Daniel Levitin explains it: “[T]he composer repeats the chord sequence again and again until he has finally convinced the listeners that we’re going to get what we expect, but then at the last minute, he gives us an unexpected chord...a chord that tells us it’s not over, a chord that doesn’t completely resolve.

“The setting up and then manipulating of expectations is the heart of music.”³

But when that resolving chord finally *does* come, it’s so emotionally powerful and spiritually satisfying that, as the philosopher Ronald Dworkin puts it, “we can imagine no other way to resolve what had come before. We realize, in our hearing, that the brilliant chord was *inevitable*.”⁴

This—in my interpretation, anyway—is what Leonard Cohen meant by David’s “secret chord”: the chord that comes at the end of a long and winding road (to quote the Beatles), filled with forward steps and backward steps and frustrated expectations, and brings those yearned-for feelings of relief and fulfillment.

And why was David baffled?

Because as he composed his song, he knew the only way to reach the eventual resolution was by creating tension, manipulating his listeners’ expectations, and, paradoxically, delaying ultimate fulfillment in order to maximize the gratification of finally getting there.

And he’s baffled by how, when the song does finally resolve, it brings an emotional and spiritual ecstasy so intense that it feels like he’s beholding the face of God himself.

In this way, too, music is a metaphor for life—for what in music we call “resolution,” in life we call “destiny.”

On some intuitive level, we, the composers of our own life, know that the journey is headed to some eventual point of arrival.

We may see our destiny in our mind’s eye, but unlike David, we can’t see the entire progression that’s going to get us there. It has to unfold over the course of time.

Along the way, we have to make the best choices we can in the moment and navigate the challenges that come our way with courage and wisdom and faith that we *will* get there eventually.

With that, we could do so—easily and directly.

But therein lies the rub, because not only is that impossible, but without tension in life's musical score, the eventual resolution would be no resolution at all, because there would be no fulfillment in it.

This truth is expressed beautifully in a poem in *Mishkan T'filah* by Rabbi Norman Hirsh. It says: "God disturbs us toward our destiny/by hard events and by freedom's now urgent voice/which explode and confirm who we are. We don't like leaving/but God loves becoming."

The chord progression of life is hard. The movements along the way can be unexpected and painful and stressful and fill us with disappointment and angst. For every step forward, there may be 10 times that we fall down flat.

But we learn from music that there's something inherent in the world—some mysterious cosmic order, some intrinsic meaning and purpose beyond our ability to comprehend fully—that, even as we actively create our life, somehow at the same time makes our destiny *inevitable*.

And it's in that paradox that we find ourself in perfect harmony with God.

So, keep moving through that progression: the fourth, the fifth, the minor fall, the major lift.

It's OK to be baffled by life, to wonder in awe at its beauty and majesty, and to tremble in pain and fear at its terror.

Because, like David, when you finally discover *your* secret chord, and play it, and step into the life you're destined to live, you can have faith that it will indeed please the Lord.

1 See M. Sukkah 5:4

2 Ibn Ezra to Num. 10:10

3 Daniel J. Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music*, 112

4 Ronald Dworkin, *Religion Without God*, 101