

# KOACH STUDY GUIDE – Spring 2011

## *Kabbalat Shabbat*

### **Background Material:**

#### **History of *Kabbalat Shabbat*:**

One of the most beautiful and joyous prayer services we have in our liturgy is the *Kabbalat Shabbat* service on Friday night. The service consists of several paragraphs of Psalms, *Tehillim*, and the magnificent liturgical poem, *Lekha Dodi*, which the congregation sings together. What is the origin and meaning of the *Kabbalat Shabbat* service and what is its role in our liturgy?

The *Kabbalat Shabbat* service is relatively new in comparison to the rest of our *tefillot*, which were established at the beginning of the second Temple (516 BCE). *Kabbalat Shabbat* was established in the 1500's by a group of Kabbalists in Safed, Israel. They based this new service on the rabbis of the Talmud who would dress in their best white clothing and say to each other, "*Lekha dodi likrat kallah*", "Let us go greet the Shabbat Queen."

*Kabbalat Shabbat* begins with six paragraphs of Psalms, each corresponding to a different day of the week. Each of these paragraphs share a common theme: God is the Master of the universe. The Psalm 29, is the most significant of the six. The great and renowned Kabbalist, Rabbi Yitzchak Luria Ashkenazi (1534-1572), also known as the Ari, or the Arizal, wrote there are many profound mystical ideas found in this psalm. Psalm 29 has also been understood as describing God's appearance at the Revelation at Sinai. Since there is special significance connected to Psalm 29, we stand while reciting it.

The climax of the *Kabbalat Shabbat* service is the beautiful *piyyut* (liturgical poem), *Lekha Dodi*, welcoming the Sabbath as a bride. Written by one of the leaders of the Safed Kabbalists, it is imbued with profound kabbalistic meanings. The imagery of this magnificent *piyyut* is based upon an ancient interpretation of the biblical Song of Songs. Some believe this book of love poetry describes the love between God and Israel. Overall, *Kabbalat Shabbat* ushers in a joyous Shabbat atmosphere.

This study packet offers you an opportunity to explore, in greater the overall structure of *Kabbalat Shabbat* and the liturgical *piyyut*, poem, *Lekha Dodi*, which welcomes in the Sabbath. The packet is comprised of two separate sections. The first section examines the six psalms in *Kabbalat Shabbat* and has questions which try to help you understand the placement of these psalms in the service. The second section takes an in depth look at *Lekha Dodi* and the underlying/hidden significance of the images conveyed through the poetry. Use a *siddur* as your companion text for the Psalms in the original.

# FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

## **Getting Started:**

One possible way to open the conversation is by asking the group to share thoughts about a *Kabbalat Shabbat* service they attended which made them feel good, content, peaceful, relaxed and/or thankful (any positive adjective can be used here as an example), and why?

**Follow-up question:** Was there a specific Psalm or tune which either created or added to this feeling of joy? Which one?

## **Section One: Psalms**

The collection of six psalms marks the beginning of the *Kabbalat Shabbat* service. The number six was chosen deliberately to symbolize the six days of the week that preceded the seventh day of rest, Shabbat. The first five psalms, 95-99, form a distinct group within the Book of Psalms with one common theme: the enthronement of God as Sovereign of the world upon the completion of Creation. Jewish tradition views these psalms as referring to the messianic age. Shabbat is the weekly celebration of creation. Therefore, these psalms are appropriately placed since they depict the reign of God, which begins with Creation. These psalms keep our minds focused on this central theme.

## **Select one or more of the following six Psalms to analyze:**

Psalm 95, Psalm 96, Psalm 97, Psalm 98, Psalm 99, Psalm 29

### **Psalm 95**

### ***Lekhu N'ranenah***

Let's go, let's go together - This is the first Psalm in the Journey

This Psalm shows us we can recognize the Divine through discerning the way God intervenes in the affairs of the world. Once we were all wandering in the desert. Sometimes it feels as if we are still wandering and wondering:

**Q. What does God want from us?**

**Q. What do we want from God?**

\*Think about who this psalm is directed towards, noting in the second section the psalmist speaks in the voice of God. Also, each of the 5 psalms which follow are geared towards a specific group of people.

Q. At the end of the first line, we find the words “*L'tzur y'sheinu*”.

Why is God described as “the Rock of our deliverance.”? Take a look in the Bible at Deuteronomy 32:4, in what context is God as “the Rock” referred to in this verse? How does this alternative biblical title for God enhance your understanding of this psalm?

Q. The last line of the psalm contains the words, “*el m'nuhati*”, to the land of rest. What is the land of rest? Also, what else aside from land could “the land of rest” be referring to?

\*Since we are at the beginning of our journey towards Shabbat, perhaps the “rest” implied here is rest associated with Shabbat. Therefore, the verse can be understood as a reference to time, meaning the day of rest, Shabbat.

### **Psalm 96**

***Shiru L'adonai Shir Hadash: sing a new song to God!***

Q. Who is this psalm directed towards?

\*Directed towards the nations who are invited to join the worship of the only true God, the Creator of the world.

Q. If the words “*shir hadash*”, new song, are not actually referring to a specific “new song” then, what might these words be able to teach us?

\*We can make something new by appreciating each day as a new wonder, a new gift from God - the Creator.

Q. The phrase “*shiru l'adonai*” Sing....to *Adonai*, is recited three times in the first two lines. In Judaism, what occurs on a daily basis which is related to the number three?

\*According to the *Midrash*, this refers to the three times we pray each day.

The last stanza of the psalm begins with the words, “*yismehu hashamayim*”, Let the heavens rejoice. This verse mentions both heaven and earth, which

both appear in the first verse of the Torah in the description of creation: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1).

Q. What does it mean that the heavens rejoice and the earth is glad?

### **Psalm 97**

#### ***Adonai Malakh***

This psalm also deals with God’s sovereignty; however, instead of asking others to acknowledge this, the psalm proclaims God’s ruler-ship as a fact and describes it in vivid terms. The themes in this psalm are nature and justice. Both clouds and fire are used as symbols to describe God's presence.

***Anan va-'arefel sevivav*** -'Cloud and mist surround God' (God is clouded from view). Clouds often signified mystery and majesty, yet in contemporary American culture, clouds are a symbol of gloom and confusion. However, according to the psalmist, clouds and fire symbolize God's Presence. We have now (at least) two different possible understandings about what the clouds represent.

Q. Regardless of which understanding you prefer, when the psalmist exclaims 'God is clouded from view', what is the message the psalmist might be trying to convey to us?

Perhaps the message does not end there, but continues into the next few verses. ***Hei'iru verakav teiveil***, 'God's lightning lights up the world'. Even when surrounded by these clouds, there is still light.

Q. What universal message could be drawn out from this psalm? (think about what darkness and light often represent).

### **Psalm 98**

#### ***Mizmor. Shiru L'adonai Shir Chadash***

A song of grand thanksgiving to God for saving Israel from her enemies. This psalm shows God’s greatness, once again, to the nations of the world. Like Psalm 96, here too we also find the term “new song”. Again, we do not know the exact reason for using this specific terminology, but can only imagine there was great excitement surrounding the context of these words.

**Q.** The Hebrew word “*zamru*” means sing. The Psalmist instructs us to sing praise to God with the lyre and melodious song. Why does the Psalmist make this suggestion?

**Q.** What do you think the Psalmist is trying to convey to the reader (if anything) by making this suggestion?

### **Psalm 99**

#### ***Adonai Malakh Yirg'zu Amim***

This psalm continues to expand upon the theme of God as righteous ruler (seen in Psalm 98) and describing God's kingship, while showing the contrast between human and divine justice.

When God's chosen ones (Moses, Aaron and Samuel) pray to God, God answers. God forgives them (divine justice), but they still have to deal with the consequences of their actions (human justice).

The focus of this psalm is on the Temple in Jerusalem, the holy place which is the seat of God's rule.

**Q.** The word *kadosh* (Holy) is used three times in this short psalm (verses 3, 5, 9). Try to come up with a definition of 'Holy' and then ask yourselves, why does this word appear 3 times?

**Q.** What is being referred to as 'Holy'?

**Q.** Each time the word 'Holy' is used, what additional information does the psalmist want you to know?

### **Psalm 29**

#### ***Mizmor L'david***

This psalm describes the enthronement of God and the Divine Presence moving through the world. There are a number of interesting word plays throughout the

Psalm. As you peruse this Psalm, see if these impact your understanding of the Psalm.

\*The “voice” of God is mentioned seven times in this Psalm. What are some reasons behind the significance of the number seven? Try to imagine the different “voices” of God. How does God speak in today’s world? Try to come up with seven ideas for the “voice” of God.

\*Does God still speak to us today? How?

\*God’s sacred name is mentioned numerous times in this psalm. How many times does it appear? (18) Where else in the *tefillot* do we see this number? (*Amidah*) What is the relationship between this number and Psalm 29?

## **Discussion**

As you move from Psalm to Psalm, what patterns do you notice in the language of the psalms? What types of imagery are described? Is there a clear connection between the psalms?

At the outset of this section, beginning with Psalm 95, the journey through these six psalms began. What greater insight do you now have into the selection and placement of these six psalms? Does this make the *Kabbalat Shabbat* service more meaningful to you? Why/Why not?

We have almost completed the first part of *Kabbalat Shabbat*. Soon we will recite *Lekha Dodi*, a beautiful poem welcoming the Sabbath bride.

**Q.** However, have these six psalms properly prepared you to welcome the Sabbath?

**Q.** What is one reason you might argue you are prepared to welcome in Shabbat?

**Q.** What is one reason you might argue you are still not ready to welcome in Shabbat?

**Q.** Do you feel there is anything else which you need to think about before switching gears from the “warm-up” service, to the actual moment of welcoming the Sabbath bride?

**Q.** How do you think this group of six psalms has changed the meaning of this section for you (if at all)?

## Section Two: *Lekha Dodi*

Author: *Shlomo Halevi Alkabetz\**

This poem is filled with biblical references including paraphrases, allusions or direct reference to Shir Hashirim (Song of Songs), *Shemot* (remember the Sabbath), *D'varim* (observe the Sabbath), Isaiah, *Shoftim* (Judges) and Samuel I. In his book, *Lekhah Dodi*, Reuven Kimelman concludes that the meaning of *Lekha Dodi* can only be grasped through its kabbalistic references as they would have been understood in the Safed of the 1550s. If this is so, then how are we able to understand *Lekha Dodi* in a way that will enhance our own religious experience?

\*Study the text in *hevruta* (pairs) or in small groups. Read over each verse of *Lekha Dodi* using both the translation and additional notes to increase your understanding of each stanza. As you do this, pay attention to the phrases and/or words which highlight the analogy of Shabbat as a bride (ex. love, affection, etc.).

\*Read through the stanzas again, keeping the various words/phrases you “highlighted” in mind. When you read the stanzas are you gaining a deeper insight into the relationship between God and Israel? Does this insight spiritually uplift you? If the answer is yes, why? If the answer is no, why?

The following teaching is from *Genesis Rabbah* 11:8. Before you read what Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai taught, keep this in mind: In this section of the Bible (Exodus), the Jewish people have left Egypt and are wandering in the desert. God makes known to them the commandments they need to observe, which should govern their lives. Verses 8-11 specifically refer to Shabbat. The text from *Genesis Rabbah* 11:8 is based on these biblical verses (Exodus 20:8-11).

### **Exodus 20:8-11**

**8** Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work;

**9** but the seventh day is a sabbath unto the LORD thy God, in it thou shalt not do any manner of work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy man-servant, nor thy maid-servant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates;

**10** for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested on the seventh day; wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

**Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai taught**, “The Sabbath said to the Holy One, ‘Master of the universe, every day has a mate - Sunday has Monday, Tuesday has Wednesday, Thursday has Friday - but I have no mate! Said the Holy One to her, ‘Israel will be your

mate.’ Thus, when Israel stood before Mount Sinai, the Holy One said to her, ‘Remember what I said to the Sabbath: “Israel will be your mate.” Thus the command: ‘Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it (to enter into marriage - *kiddushin* — with it)’”(Exodus 20:8).

**Text - Shabbat 119a** - At dusk on Shabbat eve, Rabbi Hanina would wrap himself and say, “Come, let us go out to welcome Sabbath the Queen.” Rabbi Hanina would dress himself up and say, “Come, O bride: come, O bride.”

\*After having read the two selections above (Genesis Rabbah 11:8 and Shabbat 119a), look back at the text of *Lekha Dodi* and think about the following: What additional meaning have these texts added to the text of *Lekha Dodi*?

\*In what ways do these stories enable the descriptive poetry of *Lekha Dodi* to connect with you on a deeper level, and in turn, providing you with the ability to get more out of the *piyyut*?

The middle stanzas of *Lekha Dodi* (all but the first, second and last) are devoted to a call to redeem and rebuild Jerusalem and bring the appearance of the Messiah. When this redemption happens the world will be in a perfect state. The goal of Shabbat is to bring upon ourselves the feeling of this redemption.

\*How does thinking about *Lekha Dodi* through the lens of redemption, and not that of love poetry, affect your understanding of the *piyyut*? Discuss which lens you prefer when thinking about *Lekha Dodi*.

## Glossary:

**Kabbalist Shlomo Halevi Alkabetz** wrote *Lekha Dodi* in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. The first line of each stanza forms an acrostic of his name.

### **Genesis Rabbah** (*B’reshit Rabbah*)

*Genesis Rabbah* is a religious text from the classical period in Judaism. It is a *midrash* comprising a collection of ancient rabbinical homiletical interpretations of the Book of Genesis.

### **Shabbat 119a**

The Talmud is a central text of mainstream Judaism, in the form of a record of rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, philosophy, customs and history. Tractate Shabbat offers rules and instruction relative to the observance of Shabbat. The Talmud was redacted in the 6<sup>th</sup> century of the common era.

## Additional Resources:

- Hammer, Reuven. Or Hadash, A Commentary on Siddur Sim Shalom. The Rabbinical Assembly. 2003.
- Kimelman, Reuven. The Mystical Meaning of “Lekhah Dodi” and Kabbalat Shabbat” English Translation. The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010
- Klein, Isaac. A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice The Jewish Theological Seminary of America. 1992
- Sarna, Nahum. On the Book of Psalms. Schocken Books. 1993.
- [www.koach.org](http://www.koach.org) Check out the melodies online.

Prepared by Rabbi Helene Kornsgold

**www.KOACH.org**