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**A Festival of Eastern Chant:
Blessings and Namaste to Rebbe Andrew Hahn,
who chants Jewish Prayers in an Indian form
and does Hasidic Tai Chi**

The combination of music and religious ritual is well known: church choirs, stirring Gospel singers in black congregations, Sufi music, the earth-shaking song of the Tibetan monks, the almost intoxicating song of mystical unification which bursts forth from the temples of the Sikhs, and the holy drums in Afro-Caribbean rituals. The place of music within Judaism is also not absent, and there is space in it for cantors, niggunim and chants. And if it is possible to take what's good from all worlds - well, why not? Meet Rabbi Andrew Hahn, known simply as Reb Drew, a New York rabbi who does kirtan.

Kirtan (or: Bhajan) is a meditative form of chant and an important part of the way of Bhakti, religious unification in the Indian tradition. Whoever has been present at a ceremony like this - even if the Indian culture is completely strange and foreign to her - is not able to resist the power of the tones of the harmonium, the tablas, and the continual collective chant, which one hears as if one were always there and could never cease. The basic structure of the kirtan is, "I sing--you answer": The main chanter sings a line, and the "choir" answers.

Reb Drew, scion of Pittsburgh, began to play and sing at a young age and even took part, in childhood, as a singer in the city's opera. On his website, he tells that standing on the stage as a child was a welcome sign to his place in the future as a musician (and since he is also a rabbi) before a congregation. He turned to guitar, was a member of rock bands, studied music academically - and, in parallel, turned to rabbinic studies. Something moved within him when he took part in the Sanskrit kirtans, for example, of Krishna Das. Under the influence of yogic kirtans, the young (sic!) Rabbi began to learn to play the harmonium - which he plays as an atmospheric drone which seeps in the background into the hearts of the listeners. Additionally, he plays guitar [occasionally] in the course of a kirtan.

His motto, "First we sing, then we believe," is taken from the sayings of Abraham Joshua Heschel, who was a Jewish theologian, poet, philosopher and friend of Martin Luther King. Heschel believed that God is revealed in what we do together. The aspiration of Reb Drew, if there is one, is to establish a Jewish kirtan: to find a way by which it is possible for the participants to release themselves into the the group voice, and to find a place in which leader and congregation "disappear one into the other, and don't know any more who is who, such that the only listeners are perhaps God and the angels."

Reb Drew believes that Hebrew Kirtan works wonderfully. He claims that researchers have shown that the Hebrew language belongs to a group known as the "vibrational languages." In the singing of kirtan, one does not sing one song and pass on to the next one, since it's all about meditative chant. This is one of the challenges with which the rabbi wrestles, since [this approach] is strange to Jewish custom [perhaps]. Indeed, the event itself and the immediate spiritual connection which it creates in its course, he explains, are much more important than the language in which one sings. Both singers and non-singers are invited to his kirtans, Jews and non-Jews — anyone who wants to connect with God, together, by way of voice. Here ([link to website](#)) one can hear the piyyut "Yah Ribon Olam" by Rabbi Israel Najara in a tune adapted from the ashram of Sai Baba, or "Lecha Dodi," "Eit dodim kalah" and "Love your neighbor" with an Indian flavor.

Kirtan is not all. Reb Drew borrows from the cultures of Asia also with tai chi, and on his site, he combines the Star of David with the yin-yang sign. He also teaches tai chi, and in his musical gatherings sometimes even combines Eastern meditation. His tai chi is joined to hasidic concepts, and in his movement lessons it is possible to find Jewish concepts like, "resurrection of the dead," "kavannah" exercises, and "[transparent] self-abnegation."

For anyone who intends to go to a kirtan in New York, it is recommended to bring a pillow, except for those who want to sit in a chair which will be provided. Sometimes it is nice to have a blanket around one, and also to bring a bottle of water.



פסטיבל הזמר המזרחי
ברכות ונמסטה לרבי אנדרו האן, שמזמר תפילות יהודיות בנוסח הודי ועושה טאי צ'י חסידי

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דפדף בנוי אייגל

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