

**A note about this resource:**

The “10” Commandments of Songleading are based on a resource from the URJ Camp Songleader training track at Hava Nashira 2008. The commentary and discussion on each of the commandments, as well as the additional commandments were developed by the members of the 2008 Songleading Major at Kutz Camp. Additionally, many thanks are due to Dan Nichols, Cantor Rosalie Will Boxt, and Josh Nelson for their own contributions to this curriculum.

This should be treated as an “organic” document - it can be used in whole or in part, and should continue to grow as each individual songleader uses it to their own benefit.

We acknowledge that each of these rules will apply in different ways for different communities, and as such, they should not be treated as commandments in the legal sense. But they are the outgrowth of the knowledge and experience of seasoned songleaders, and should be an invaluable resource for you. We sincerely hope that you and your community make good use of them.

As you grow as a songleader, remember that songleading is both a science and an art. The various “rules” and suggestions will help you with the science of songleading, but you and your talents will bind them together as an art-form.

Above all else, know your group, sit on the hill and sing, and care.

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Head Songleaders, Kutz Camp 2008

**k n o w y o u r t e x t****Know the meaning of your text:**

What is the source?

What is the translation?

What is the context of the song's authorship?

In what setting is the song appropriate?

What is the intent of singing these words and this melody?

Could you give a *drash* on this song?

Know how to use your text:

What is the melody?

What are the lyrics?

What is the pronunciation?

What is the rhythm?

Enunciate as you sing!

Do you have the song memorized?

**p l a n k e y a n d t e m p o**

Know your **own vocal range**.

Know your **group's vocal range**.

Know in which **key** you'll start each song. How high or low are you going to be singing?

Choose your keys and tempos **wisely**, and arrange songs **appropriately** by key and tempo.

Don't rush or drag the tempo. **Remain consistent** as you sing.

You can **slow the tempo** during a **teach** (during difficult sections, or the whole teach), but be sure to sing at the correct tempo at least once through.

Don't be afraid to **transpose**, with or without a capo.



plan with intention

Find the time to plan! Don't just, "Oh I'm gonna go songlead now." There is no excuse for being unprepared.

Know the **direction** of your song session / t'fillah; where do you want to take people with music? Where will you begin and where will you end?

If distance is an issue, **keep in touch** with your fellow songleaders. Use the internet - you know how!

Plan for the **group!** Things you should know ahead of time: knowledge level, age level, why the group is together, how long they have been together, cohesiveness, mood / energy level likes/dislikes & expectations.

Plan for the **time and space!** Things you should know ahead of time: time of day, time allotted for you, your physical space, physical setup of the room, what amplification is needed / available, the weather.

Plan according to the **Jewish Calendar**. What melodies, *nusach*, and songs are appropriate for the time of year? Start teaching songs and prayers in time for the holidays.

Plan (and check!) your use of **tools** ahead of time: songsheets, shireinu, projections, stickies, monitors, percussion, other instruments.

Plan your **teach** - what **techniques** will you use? [see "What's in a teach?"]

Choose your songs **wisely**. Don't make arbitrary choices. Know why you're singing everything and why it is in the place it is.

Have **contingency plans**: backpocket songs, another location (indoor and outdoor), plans for rainy days, extra music, what to do with a guitar malfunction, entire extra songsessions planned.

Plan such that you are able to **transport your group**.

use your **peers** as your **team**

When planning as a group, use **brainstorming skills** to put together song choices. At first, don't reject any ideas - gather a larger list of options, then **as a group**, decide what fits together appropriately.

Evaluate your songsessions and t'fillot as a group. Use as much personnel as you have available: rabbis, cantors, choir directors, accompanists, other songleaders, advisors, the group, and yourself.

Be an **inclusive** songleading team - find leaders other than guitar players. Other instruments (or no instruments) are okay!

Work with your **entire team**. Fellow songleaders, *shlichei tzibbur*, and anyone else on your side. Be open to the entire group's input. **Songleading isn't a dictatorship**.

Get help with **physical setup**.

Use people planted in the group who you've already taught songs to help with a group teach.

Get the **non-songleading staff involved**; make them a part of the team. They shouldn't be sitting at the back of the room.

You don't always have to be the one up front, even if you're the one planning the songsession / t'fillah.

know your **physical space**

Be aware of your **personal space**. Who is around you? Where are you standing and what is near you?

Stay **in your element**. Avoid distractions and dangers. Be safe in your space!

Setup the room and **arrange people** according to both the physical needs of the room and the **acoustic needs**.

Do you need any voice or instrument **amplification**? If necessary, how will you achieve this?

If you are outside, have a **weather contingency plan**.

What is the **distance between you and the other songleaders**? What is the **distance between you and the group**? Don't be further away than you need to be.

listen, **intently**

Listen to **the group**. What is their level of involvement? Are they on track? What are their collective and individual reactions to your leading?

Listen to **yourself**. Self-evaluate as you lead. Are you on the track you set out for yourself? Are you and your instrument in tune? Are you in key? Are you on tempo?

Listen to **other songleaders** or *shlichei tzibbur*. Are you singing and playing together? Are you responding to their cues? Are you communicating with body language?

Listen to your **supervisors**. If you've been asked to lead a specific type of session or *t'fillah*, are you responding to their needs?

Process all that you listen to - both music and words.

Listen to **constructive criticism** and **praise**.

Make sure you have **two-way communication** with the group.

Care and be generous!

don't fill the room with your **ego**

"Do not separate yourself from the community" ~ Hillel, *Pirkei Avot*

Share the songsession with your team, whoever they may be.

Be careful with your directions. **Don't put people down** if they aren't where you want or need them to be.

You are working **for the group** - it's not about you. It doesn't have to be a privilege to listen to you. Be a part of the experience, not the star. **It's not a performance!**

Choose songs **for the group**, not only for yourself.

Know when to use (and when not to use) **the microphone**.

A little ego is okay - but know when it's appropriate, then channel it and use it.

Embrace **personal tzimtzum** - make room for everyone to be a part of the experience and prop them up.

 **a c t u a l l y e n g a g e**

Where do you want to take the group? **Take them somewhere different** from where you are when you begin.

Be focused on **yourself** and the **group**.

Keep people **interested** and **entertained**.

Create a **sense of community**.

Be **present** and **aware**.

Remember that "**Enthusiasm breeds enthusiasm.**"

Embrace the **Disney World Philosophy**; check your baggage at the door.

You can't fake songleading. Don't just go through the motions.

Check in with yourself and the group, and **evaluate as you lead**.

Use **body language** and your **attitude** to engage with the group.

Don't focus only on the music and your instrument. Songleading is about **more than playing music**.

 **u s e v a r i e t y**

Teach new songs and use favourites **wisely**. Don't play the same songs repetitively just because they are favourites.

Write **new songs and melodies**.

Add new and different **instruments**.


Vary your setlist: have a variety of tempos & keys and Hebrew & English.

Use a variety of **types of music**: Jewish, liturgical, secular, folk, rock, etc.

Vary your **setlist order**: you don't have to play songs in the same order.

Vary your **songleader** and the use of **guitars**.

Respect your group: **honour tradition** (give them treats), but **be progressive and challenge them** (teach new music). This is Reform Jewish philosophy in a box!

 **practice all transitions**

It's **not** just about the last notes of one song and the first notes of the next. Your **songs are connected**. Nothing exists in a vacuum. Choose songs that you can transition between appropriately.

Know where you're going. Think about how you've planned with intention.

Bad transitions **kill momentum**. Good transitions **keep the flow in your direction**.

Transition between **keys and tempos** appropriately.

Stopping risks **losing the focus** of the group.

Communicate your transitions to **the group**: use body language, your voice, your guitar, and tempo.

Communicate your transitions to your **fellow songleaders**: use eye contact and your guitar.

How are you **ending** songsession or *t'fillah*? This is a transition as well!

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE!



thou shalt . . .

The following additional commandments were developed by the participants and guests of the 2008 Songleading Major at Kutz.

Keep a **toolbox** [See *Useful Tools and Resources*]. Remember that tools can be both physical tools or skills.

Raise the Bar. Embrace the notion that “good enough sucks.” Are you doing just as much as you need to, or are you moving past the status quo? **Remember that what you think is the status quo is constantly changing.**

Get naked. Strip off all the crap. Don’t waste people’s time with extended intros or solos. Think about what you need to create **a sense of community**, and work with that; excesses are distracting and can be destructive.

Be real. Be open. Be human. Remember that **you can’t fake songleading.** Show people who you really are; don’t put on a character. The group won’t buy it.

Understand **t’fillah**. Just as you wouldn’t lead a song that you don’t fully understand, don’t lead **t’fillah** if you don’t have a grasp of the prayers you are leading. When you’re leading **t’fillah**, you’re not just a songleader, you are also a **shaliach tzibbur** - an **ambassador** of the community.

Think of **baseball**: Never bunt. Swing as hard as you can every time. Then **fall on your ass and get stronger**. If you’re going to mess up, acknowledge that reality, then move past the mistake and put it to use. The best songleaders learn from the worst mistakes.

Think of **harmony**: not just musically, but philosophically. Are you leading on your own, or are you working with the group? What part are you playing?

Learn! Songleading is not stagnant; you can always get better. Always look for people and resources to learn from. If you have access to the fountain of knowledge, you’d better do more than just take a sip.

Teach! Share your wealth of knowledge with others. Embrace the philosophy of **hanhagah l’dorot** - **generational leadership**. Others will come after you, and you can affect an exponential number of lives by ensuring the continuity of songleading.

Care! Don’t just go through the motions. You are moving, carrying, and transporting people to a different place through song. You need to give yourself over to this reality. Songleading is about more than just a few songs; it’s about an overall experience. But also remember to...

Sit on the hill and sing. In the end, nobody is getting killed here; we’re singing songs. Sometimes you can just sit back and sing and let that be it.