

JEWISH MUSIC 101: SOUNDS, SETTING & SIGNIFICANCE

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סיפורי מוסיקה
STORIES OF MUSIC



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Introduction

The Stories of Music Series is an exciting, educational journey which will enable you to take your class through many aspects of Jewish music and how it connects to our history, practice, and identity as a Jewish people.

To introduce Jewish Music, we have taken a broad view, exploring Jewish music in religious settings, seeing how different cultures helped produce different Jewish sounds, acknowledging the role of Western Art Music in American Jewish experience, and delving into the music of Jewish communal experience.

This lesson should help your students understand some important facets of Jewish music. For one, they will learn how open, evolving, and diverse Jewish music truly is. They will understand how Jewish music reflects our people's experience--historically, sociologically, and religiously. Further, they will get excited seeing how Jewish music helps us move forward as a people. Finally, your students will begin to see how Jewish music can be one prism through which to understand and define their own Jewish experience.

(*NOTE:* This lesson is intended to be taught over two sessions. For those completing the lesson over two sessions, we have marked where the instructor might break, giving bullet points that can help review that section of the lesson before the break and/or when resuming after the break. If completing this material in one session, the instructor will have to decide what material to include or not, yet still transmit the essence of the lesson. This can be comfortably done with some preplanning.

We have also on occasion provided some possible time frames, particularly for exercises (e.g. pair shares) and discussions. For larger units, we have not. Each instructor should feel free to make the choices on what to emphasize and on which sections to linger based upon their own priorities.

For all lessons we have a Resource Guide and a Student Worksheet. Among the items these contain are lyrics. The Student Worksheet contains all the lyrics to musical selections intended to be explored/discussed. The Resource Guide contains more lyrics.) We have also created a Class Presentation for your use. The Presentation's slides are linked to the music highlighted in the lesson.

Finally, please know that we at Stories of Music are available to discuss issues with you as they arise in your preparation to teach a lesson. We also encourage you to review the [Users' Guide](#), which many have found very helpful as they prepare.

Enduring Understandings

(What are the big ideas learners will take away from this lesson?)

- Jewish music is an open, evolving concept.

- Jewish music reflects the historical, sociological, and religious experiences which Jews live.
- At the same time, Jewish music forwards the esthetics, spirituality, and culture of the various contexts in which it is used and experienced.
- Jewish music is one facet through which Jews can understand and define their own Jewish experience.

Essential Questions

(What are the essential questions that frame this unit? What questions point towards the key issues and ideas that will be taught?)

- What social, historical, political, and cultural forces influence Jewish music?
- How does (or how might) Jewish music affect your personal Jewish experience/identity?

Outline of the Lesson

Part 1: Prelude/Introduction

Part 2: Music in Jewish Religious Settings

- Kol Nidre, four versions: Yossele Rosenblatt, Max Bruch, Yemenite, and Alan Shulman

Part 3: Differing Sounds of Jewish Culture

- Torah cantillation, five versions: Yemenite, North African (Tunisian), American Ashkenazic, Western Sephardic (Spanish-Portuguese), and Persian/Iranian

Part 4: Western Art Music in American Jewish Experience

- Leonard Bernstein's *Symphony #1: Jeremiah*; Joseph Achron's *The Golem* (suite)

Part 5: Music in Jewish Communal Experience

- Communal Angst: "*Mayn Rue Platz*," Communal Peace: "*Shir LaShalom*," and Communal Hope: "*Cuando el Rey Nimrod*"

Part 6: Jewish Music in Popular Culture

- Irving Berlin's "God Bless America," Leonard Cohen, "Who by Fire," Barbra Streisand, "Where is it Written?," Matisyahu, "King Without a Crown," and Sharon Jones and the Dap Kings, "Eight Days of Hanukkah"

Part 7: Coda/Conclusion

- Outro: Yiddish version of "God Bless America"

The Lesson

Part 1 — Prelude/Introduction

SLIDE 1

Welcome to *Stories of Music!*

(NOTE: Instructor may wish to have the audio of some music in the background as participants arrive and get ready for the lesson. If so, you might want to choose any of the music that will be explored or heard in this lesson.)

You are embarking on an exciting, educational journey which will take you through many aspects of Jewish music and how it connects to our history, practice, and identity as a Jewish people. The Jewish people is incredibly diverse; while we hope to demonstrate this diversity through a variety of examples and exercises, we hope you will understand that no lesson could ever show every Jewish musical tradition. Our sincerest hope is that we have curated the material in such a way that learners (and teachers alike) will be able to discern both broad overviews, patterns, and themes, while still engaging with individual stories and experiences.

Opening: Our Community's Key Song (activity)

Ask those gathered: What is the one song that everyone in our community looks forward to singing, or that everyone knows and seems emblematic of who we are as Jews?

Take 1-2 minutes to brainstorm. Great. Now let's *SING THAT SONG!*

Discuss

❓ So, why do you think that song and melody are so important to our community?

Great discussion. It's the perfect way to begin our time together, because this lesson is (these first sessions are) going to help us explore our love of music, Jewish culture, and their intersection.

In this lesson we are going to explore Jewish music in a way that we hope will reinforce what you already know about Jewish music and tradition, but will also challenge some of your conceptions about the topic. When we finish this lesson, we hope you have new insights into what constitutes Jewish music, and how it relates to the American Jewish experience. We include music written for and used in sacred Jewish spaces but also music written by Jewish composers or songwriters for secular settings and general audiences.

The five main areas we will be looking at are:

SLIDE

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- Music in Jewish Religious Settings
- Differing Sounds of Jewish Culture
- Western Art Music in American Jewish Culture
- Music in Communal Jewish Experience
- Jewish Music in Popular Culture

Part 2 — Music in Jewish Religious Settings

SLIDE 3

(Case Study: Kol Nidre)

We start our journey with the recitation of Kol Nidre. For most American Jews, Kol Nidre occupies an incredibly important place in the calendar cycle of Jewish music and memory. It inaugurates Yom Kippur, the holiest night and day of the Jewish year. It is a time when we ruminate on our personal past, the current state of our character, and our role in the relationships we have--and in some cases, have not--maintained.

Yet the recitation of Kol Nidre, in American Jewish life, is known more for its melody than for its words. Clearly, for many Jews, the chanting of Kol Nidre is the sonic marker that signals renewal and repentance. In many ways, the music has taken on more meaning to congregants than the original Aramaic text, and is the conduit to a deep connection to our shared history.

On Kol Nidre

- For many American Jews, Kol Nidre is one of the defining musical moments of the Jewish year.
- With Kol Nidre, the sonic (aural) experience goes hand-in-hand with the spiritual experience.
- For many people, hearing Kol Nidre is a connection to the Divine and a reminder of one's connection to a historical people.
- The Kol Nidre experience has taken on a much deeper and more prominent place within Ashkenazic culture and communities than within other Jewish cultures and communities. (For brief explanation see end of article [here](#).)


Listen to 4 Kol Nidre renditions, paired to help explore each more deeply

SLIDE 4

[Play four versions in two segments, which can all be found on this single video.](#) 

(NOTE: For the sake of time, only the Yemenite version is played in full on this video. Beginning and end times for each are placed in parentheses below. For those who wish to access the full video of any version, please click on the name below.)

These first two versions might sound familiar to many. What are the differences musically between the two versions, and what meaning does each version seem to be drawing from the Kol Nidre moment? We'll discuss on the other side:

- [Yossele Rosenblatt](#), 0:00-1:05  — for background on Rosenblatt, click [here](#)
- [Art music \(Max Bruch\)](#), 1:06-3:22  — for background on Bruch, click [here](#)

Discuss together



(NOTE: If time is a consideration, instructors should prioritize which question(s) to

pursue for the class community. This applies whenever there are multiple questions for group discussion.)

- ❓ What are the differences musically between the two versions, and what meaning does each version seem to be drawing from the Kol Nidre moment?
- ❓ Do either of these musical versions reflect or resonate with your Jewish experience/identity?
- ❓ Could you imagine either of these having a role in your own High Holy Day experience, inside or outside of the synagogue?
- ❓ Which one(s), and how might it/they affect your High Holy Day experience?

Introduce

We are now going to hear two more versions that may seem less familiar to many. Think about the musicality of each, and how each seems to understand/interpret Kol Nidre.

- [Yemenite](#), 3:23-5:02 
- [Alan Shulman \(for cello and piano\)](#), 5:03-7:39  — for background on Shulman, click [here](#)

Pair share

SLIDE 5

- ❓ How do the various versions of the Kol Nidre affect the way you understand or experience the recitation?
- ❓ Do any of these versions reflect or resonate with your Jewish experience/identity?

Discuss as a class

- ❓ Consider the role of the music (the melody) vs. the text (the words). What relationship, if any, do you see between the music and the text?
- ❓ Two of these versions did not use the written text. Does hearing Kol Nidre without words affect your experience? If so, how so?
- ❓ Could you imagine one or more of these having a role in your own High Holy Day experience, inside or outside the synagogue?
- ❓ Which one(s), and how might it/they affect your High Holy Day experience?

Extension idea

Instructor might take time to compare (any of) the various musical versions to the actual words of the Kol Nidre (see Resource Guide for Chapter 1). The Kol Nidre is not a prayer but a legal formula. What is the relationship, if any, that one discerns between the words and the music?

(NOTE: We will explore the music of prayer more fully in a future lesson.)

Part 3 — Differing Sounds of Jewish Culture (Case Study: Cantillation/Trope) SLIDE 6

Explain

The [cantillation/trope system](#), or the chanting of sacred texts, is one of the oldest Jewish musical forms. In or around the 10th century C.E., the system of notation upon which modern cantillation is based was well-developed. Thus cantillation has been in continuous use for centuries.

The trope system helps communicate tonality and inflection, but it also serves a semantic purpose, helping to tell our Jewish foundational story that appears in the Torah and Prophets (*Nevi'im*).

SLIDE 7

Chant or ask for a volunteer to chant Genesis 1:1-5.

Great/*Yasher ko-ach!* This is one way to chant the Torah. We are going to listen to the way five different communities chant the same text. Feel free to follow along with the text and trope in your worksheets.

Chant or Play [Genesis 1:1-5 in these trope styles \(all in the same video\)](#) 

SLIDE 8

(NOTE: Let students note which one they are hearing before each one is played.)

- Yemenite, (0:00-1:00)
- North African, (1:02-1:44) — specifically Tunisian
- American Ashkenazic, (1:52-3:14) — based on Eastern European
- Western Sephardic, (3:16-3:47) — Spanish-Portuguese
- Persian/Iranian, (3:49-5:11)

Discuss

Now that we have heard five types of Torah cantillation/trope, let's talk about them. (Teachers may choose to introduce any or all of these questions prior to listening.)

- ❓ Can someone try to pick one of these musical styles of cantillation and describe what they heard?
- ❓ How does this particular melody or style help tell the story?
- ❓ Which of these reflect your experience with Jewish music? How so?
- ❓ How might any of these add to your (and/or your community/s) understanding and experience of Jewish music?

Follow-up questions

SLIDE 9

- ❓ What do you think leads to the same verses sounding so different?
- ❓ What conclusions can we draw, if any, from the range of different sounds?

Extension idea

We have been speaking about Jewish music, but we have yet to speak about what “Jewish” means. If opting for this discussion, this article from [*Psychology Today*](#) gives both a helpful summary of the various possibilities, as well as showing how problematic attempting a precise, all-encompassing

Part 4 — Western Art Music in American Jewish Experience

SLIDE 10

(Case Study: Leonard Bernstein's *Symphony #1: Jeremiah*)

As our exploration of trope shows, Jewish music is influenced by the historic, social, and cultural contexts in which it evolved. These different contexts help explain why in different places, Jewish communities have created different “sounds” and use different instruments. The music of various Jewish communities is tied to the music of their surrounding cultures, particularly their host culture. Further, the music might reflect the relationship between the Jewish community and the host culture.

This was certainly the case when Western Art Music, commonly known as classical music (Beethoven, Bloch, Bernstein, Brahms, etc.), became accessible to Jewish composers. The intersection of Jewish sounds and themes within Western Art music has led to many distinct styles that we collectively call “Jewish Art Music.” This umbrella term can refer to everything from symphonic music to electronic music. “Jewish Art Music” still encompasses Jewish musical hybridity.

- Leonard Bernstein, the eminent composer, conductor, pianist, and public philosopher, used music as a means of offering his own *d'rash* (interpretation) on a given subject, whether Jewish or secular.
- As a composer, Bernstein revolutionized the music of the concert hall, bringing in the sounds of various other styles from the Americas and from his own Jewish heritage.
- Bernstein expressed his connection to his Jewishness in many ways, including through his music, through his lifelong passion for social change and justice, and through his deep, unending, support for Israel.

(NOTE: On the slide you see Bernstein flanked by two Jewish musical greats, Aaron Copland and Serge Koussevitzky. Brooklyn-born Copland was considered the “Dean of American Composers” and known for such works as *Appalachian Spring* and *Rodeo*. Russian-born Koussevitzky was also an illustrious conductor and composer, perhaps best known as the Musical Director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.)

Profanation from *Symphony No. 1: Jeremiah (Jeremiah Symphony)*

SLIDE 12

[\(Here is a link to full program notes\)](#)

- *Jeremiah Symphony*, Bernstein’s first major work, is an example of how Bernstein used a Jewish musical language (cantillation/trope) to express both Jewish and universal ideas through music.
- Bernstein’s writing demonstrates a deep understanding of and appreciation for Ashkenazi Jewish culture. This deep connection to Jewish music is a result of Bernstein’s longtime relationship with the music director of his synagogue, Solomon Braslavsky.
- Bernstein likely heard the [biblical book of Lamentations](#) chanted at [Tishah B’Av](#) services. The interconnection between text, liturgical context, Bernstein’s biography, Bernstein’s own experience of Jewishness, the Jewish people’s historic experience and self-perception, and Western Art Music and Bernstein’s immersion in it--are all present throughout the *Jeremiah Symphony*.

Before we listen to a selection of the *Jeremiah Symphony*, it’s important to know that some of this is based upon the cantillation/trope of the Haftarah. “Profanation,” the second movement of the *Jeremiah Symphony*, makes extensive use of a motif derived from the Ashkenazi haftarah blessing.

-  Can someone chant the [blessing before the reading of the Haftarah](#)? (If no one is able, the instructor should chant or use the audio.)

Great/*Yasher ko-ach!* As we listen to the *Jeremiah Symphony*, please see if you can pick out how the Haftarah trope is expressed.

Play [“Profanation” selection from Leonard Bernstein *Symphony No. 1: Jeremiah*](#) 

(NOTE: Please note that you will be listening to Bernstein conducting the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra. The slide here does not represent this version, but, rather, attempts to show how Bernstein’s work got disseminated in our American context.)

Discuss following the listening sample

SLIDE

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(NOTE: This slide is a fresco of Jeremiah by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel of the Vatican. It depicts the prophet lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem.)

- ❓ What does a piece like this suggest about the relationship between Jewish culture/identity and art?
- ❓ What does this piece suggest about the relationship between Jewish past and present (tradition and innovation)? How does music help navigate this space?
- ❓ How does the music of your synagogue/community help navigate this relationship?
- ❓ Does the *Jeremiah Symphony* recall any personal Jewish experience you have had?

Extension idea

The *Jeremiah Symphony* was completed in 1942 and premiered in January, 1944, during the height of WWII; what might it have been like for both the composer and the audience, to write/hear a Jewish musical interpretation of Lamentations at such a moment in history? This discussion might lead to or encompass a discussion of what the average American, including Jewish citizens, knew about events in Europe. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (see this [report](#)) has debunked the idea that little or no credible information was available or reported.

- ❓ To what degree does music help advance the listener’s consciousness (i.e. awareness) and conscience (i.e. action) of any current

Just as our own lived experience as Jews influences who we are in the larger world, so, too, do the sounds of Jewish life influence composers such as Bernstein who bring the musical expressions of their lived Jewish life to bear on the art music they compose for a much larger audience.

(NOTES: The intersection of 'host' culture and Jewish culture is something we will explore more in the lesson on music and Jewish prayer. Additionally, we will explore Leonard Bernstein's legacy further in the lesson devoted to Bernstein and Ernest Bloch.)

Summary for those teaching this lesson in two sessions/parts:

(NOTES: Instructor might first wish to ask class participants what they have gleaned so far. The instructor should keep responses in one place e.g. on a white board. If taking responses, please add from the following:

- We heard four distinct versions of Kol Nidre, with and without words, each reflecting different Jewish communities in different places with different needs and even different perceptions of the Kol Nidre.
- Each version of Kol Nidre represents not only the sacred tradition of Kol Nidre but the evolution of music to express that tradition.
- We heard five different ways the Torah is chanted in five different communities, the music of which reflects the sociocultural locations and experiences of those communities and which may point to varying ways to tell and understand our people's central story--the Torah.
- Different composers brought Jewish stories and ideas and their own Jewish sensibilities, into their compositions (e.g. Leonard Bernstein's "Profanation")
- Jewish music, then, represents a past tradition that is filtered through the lens of the aesthetics, spirituality and culture in which it is experienced.
- Jewish music thus becomes one way individual Jews and Jewish communities understand and define their own Jewish experience.

In our next session, we will explore how Jewish music has indeed been central to the experience of Jewish communities--in navigating through anxious times, in expressing hopes for peace, and in celebrating life. We'll also look at how Jewish music even entered the larger American culture.)

Summary for those teaching this lesson in two sessions/parts

SLIDE 14

As we finish this first session, I present Joseph Achron's suite, *The Golem*. [Achron](#) (1886-1943) was a Russian-born Jewish composer and violinist, who emigrated to the U.S. in 1924. He tried to incorporate Jewish elements into his compositions. Indeed, he endeavored to develop a distinct Jewish musical idiom.

While in New York, Achron wrote incidental music for H. Leivick's poem-play *The Golem*, produced by the Yiddish Art Theater. He reworked five of these pieces for his *The Golem*, using an orchestra with no violins or violas to achieve a specific effect.

[The Golem legend](#), and its use as a metaphor, have had a long history and evolution, and, beginning in the 19th century, received much artistic expression (ballets, operas, etc.). The basic idea is that it was a clay-like being brought to life by invoking God's

most holy Name. The creature could protect the Jewish community but eventually grew independent--free from control of its owner. Chaos could ensue, until the golem figure was destroyed.

Let's listen to the fourth movement, entitled, "The Dance of the Phantom Spirits." As you listen, you might hear how Achron has given Jewish legend, folklore, and mysticism a particular musical expression. See you next time!

Play [Joseph Achron's *The Golem* \(Suite\) IV. "Dance of the Phantoms"](#) 

—BREAK—

Part 5 — Music in Jewish Communal Experience (group activity)

SLIDE 15

(Case Study: "Mayn Rue Platz," "Shir LaShalom," and "Cuando el Rey Nimrod")

Bernstein's *Symphony No. 1: Jeremiah* was built upon the communal experience that Jews have in commemorating Tishah B'Av. Music is often at the center of communal experiences. It indicates how we, as Jews, mark important moments in history. The following three songs represent important moments and themes that have impacted Jewish life, both in the United States and beyond.

We will now break into groups/breakout rooms, each examining one song that connects deeply to the Jewish communal experience. Have each group read their text and background information to the song prior to listening to the recording. The groups should discuss provided questions, as well as any other points they find interesting or important (They may want to listen multiple times). The Instructor may wish to ask each group to also prepare singing just a portion of the song, whether one verse + one chorus or similar, as time permits. Alternatively, each group could pick a one-minute excerpt of their song to share. A worksheet for this section is provided here. (NOTE: If instructor wishes, this section could be done as an entire group. If so, perhaps pick only 2 of the 3 options due to time.)

Group 1 — Song of Communal Angst

["Mayn Rue Platz" \("My Resting Place"\) by Morris Rosenfeld](#)

- "Mayn Rue Platz" is a poem that maintains a simplistic structure that only serves to further underscore its depiction of the bitter workplace conditions of the sweatshops. Each verse begins with an idyllic possibility that gets displaced by the reality of the implied speaker's plight.
- "Mayn Rue Platz" is an example of how a song can act as a conduit for communal grieving, as well as the creation of collective memory. This song is still often performed at memorial programs in the Ashkenazi Jewish community.
- This song is also an example of how music can be used in the fight for social change and *tikkun olam*. It became an anthem in the fight to change sweatshop

conditions for individuals who were otherwise voiceless in the fight for change.

Introduce Morris Rosenfeld (1862-1923)

- Born Moshe Jacob Alter in the village of Stare Boksze (now part of Poland), he finally settled in New York in 1886 with his wife and two children, finding work as a tailor in the sweatshops.
- He also began publishing his Yiddish poems, many of which focused upon the pain and suffering of work in and the conditions of the sweatshops. Thus he was one of the “sweatshop poets.”
- Many of his poems were set to music, some by Rosenfeld himself, and while he was sometimes ignored and later forgotten by the Yiddish literary establishment, he was never forgotten by the people whose lives he honored. The masses sang his poem-songs while working, while marching, and at rallies.

Play “Mayn Rue Platz” (performed by the Klezmerim)

- ❓ What seems to be the main theme of the text of “*Mayn Rue Platz*”? How does the music approach the theme?

Extension idea

At some point, the conversation may turn to the condition of the sweatshops then and, possibly, today. Some background on sweatshops that exist today can be found [here](#). For some starting points for congregational or communal response, see [here](#).

- ❓ The implied speaker of the poem could be explaining their feelings to someone, such as a spouse/significant other, who is nearby, or, alternatively, someone far away--perhaps someone who has yet to emigrate to the United States from Eastern Europe. Indeed, perhaps the implied speaker is speaking from beyond the grave. Which of these possibilities resonate with you? How might the music enhance your interpretation?
- ❓ This song is often played at commemorations such as the anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire on March 25, 1911, and also at protests and rallies for the rights of the common worker and for economic justice. What does the song (and not merely the text) evoke and mean at such occasions?
- ❓ Some associate this song with the Holocaust. Why might people make this connection? Does the song carry a different message in that context?
- ❓ “*Mayn Rue Platz*”, importantly, reflects on the conditions that young women experienced in the sweatshops. This rendition features a woman as lead singer; how do you think this affects the meaning of the song? Consider:
 - that poor working conditions generally affect women more than men.

- o that the majority of the victims of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire were women.

(NOTE: We will explore Yiddish music further in its own lesson.)

Group 2 — Song of Communal Peace

“Shir Lashalom” (“Song for Peace”) by Yaakov Rotblit and Yair Rosenblum

- “Shir LaShalom”, written by Yaakov (“Yankele”) Rotblit, and set to music by Yair Rosenblum is a song for peace originally written for and performed by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) performance groups (*Naha*/troupes) in 1969, during the [War of Attrition between Israel and Egypt \(1967-70\)](#).
- The way the song juxtaposes a military ensemble celebrating peace and condemning violence is one of the many reasons this song was controversial from its inception.
- The style of the song was modeled after the aesthetic of [“Let the Sunshine In”](#) from the American musical *Hair*.
- The song came back into prominence in 1995 as the left-of-center Meretz Party bought the rights to the song for use as its theme song in the 1996 election campaign.
- More well known is that at a peace rally in support of the [Oslo Accords](#) on November 4, 1995, those on the podium, including Yitzhak Rabin, led the crowd in singing this song. He was shortly thereafter assassinated; in his pocket was found a hand-written copy of the lyrics. It is now regularly sung at Rabin memorial gatherings. (More on “Shir LaShalom” and Yitzhak Rabin, see [here](#).)
- The song has an incredible resonance with the American Jewish community as well, being adopted as one of the many Israeli and Zionist songs and dances that rose to prominence in the US following the Six-Day War.

Play [“Shir Lashalom”](#) 

- ❓ Do you find the words (and music) here wistful, hopeful, demanding--or some combination of these?
- ❓ In this arrangement, as in so many arrangements, the music seems to change (in tone, in pace, etc.). Towards the end, a sizable number of voices are singing merely “shalom” (peace) over and over again, underneath the main melody. What, for you, is the effect of this choice in arrangement/presentation? What might be the message of this arrangement of the song?
- ❓ The final stanza of the song states:
 - o **יום יבוא--הביאו את היום** / *Al tagidu yom yavo havi'u et hayom* / Don't say, “The day is coming”; bring that day.
 - o What do these words mean in the context of the song? What do these words mean to you?

Extension idea

This particular lyric might be reminiscent of the current movement that argues “No more thoughts and prayers” in reaction to the usual public statements by public officials issued in the wake of tragic deaths here (and throughout the world). Many have felt that the offering of “thoughts and

(NOTE: We will explore Israeli music more fully in a future lesson.)

Group 3 — Song of Communal Hope

“Cuando el Rey Nimrod” (“When the King Nimrod”)

- *“Cuando el Rey Nimrod”* is written in [Ladino \(sometimes referred to as Judeo-Spanish\)](#). The text is based upon some version (or versions) of a liturgical poem (called a *“piyyut”*) dating from the 17th century Ottoman Empire. The current musical version seems to date from the late 19th century. (For a brief explanation of [piyyut](#), see [here](#). For a brief overview of [piyyutim and pop culture in Israel](#), see [here](#).)
- The eponymous King Nimrod was a hunter of renown in the Bible (Genesis 10:8-10) who is seen in later midrash (expansions of the biblical text) as the most powerful leader of his time. Abraham, after finding his connection to God, becomes the first to challenge Nimrod by speaking truth to power. (For more on the [midrashic background](#), see [here](#). For an [Islamic version of this story](#), see [here](#). To see some [relevant scenes of Abraham in illuminated Hebrew manuscripts](#), see [here](#).)
- *“Cuando el Rey Nimrod”* was written for use at a circumcision, traditionally performed on Jewish male infants in a special ceremony on the eighth day. The song celebrates the relationship between Abraham and God and, in the last few verses, mentions the participants in the circumcision, among whom is traditionally Elijah the Prophet.
- *“Cuando el Rey Nimrod”* is surely one of the most widely known Sephardic songs today. It is included in the repertoire of many Ladino singers. It is often even included by klezmer bands and Ashkenazi singers who wish to incorporate an exemplar of Sephardic music.
- *“Cuando el Rey Nimrod”* belongs to the genre of Sephardic music known as the copla (for background on the three genres of the [Judeo-Spanish repertoire](#),

[see here](#)). [Coplas](#) are Ladino songs that are mainly (although not exclusively) associated with religious festivals and life-cycle ceremonies, are sung in Ladino, and convey an educational message.

Play [Nani and Alon Sariel performing it here](#) 

- ❓ How does the music help to tell this miracle tale of King Nimrod and Abraham?
- ❓ Why would one evoke this tale at a circumcision (*brit milah*)? How does this music support a family and a community's feelings around a circumcision?
- ❓ Much midrashic expansion of this tale took place during the Middle Ages, when the survival of an infant could not be taken for granted, and when the survival of Jewish communities under Christianity and, later, under Islam were themselves threatened. To what degree is "*Cuando el Rey Nimrod*" a song about the infant (and the infant's blood family) and to what degree is it about the larger community? What evidence can you adduce for your position from either the music or the text?

Reconvene all groups together

When reconvening all three groups together again, each of the three groups should begin by singing or playing their song (if asked ahead of time) and then share with one another what they explored, what they heard, what they discovered, and what they learned. As they share, the instructor can place the main points on a shared space (virtually or otherwise). After they report, you might want to consider having a general conversation on any of the following questions to tie each group's efforts together so as to beget a better understanding of music in the community.

- ❓ In these (three) songs, how does the music address an important moment or emotion in the Jewish community?
- ❓ In your opinion, what particular Jewish values (or sets of values) were highlighted in these pieces?
- ❓ Can you think of other songs/works that fill a similar, musical role in the Jewish community?
- ❓ How (if at all) do you connect to these personally? Jewishly?

Part 6 — Jewish Music in Popular Culture

SLIDE 16

(Example: Irving Berlin's "God Bless America")

As the Jewish community intersected with American culture, it reached into the secular world to make incredible contributions to popular culture. Just as Leonard

Bernstein brought “Jewish sounds” into art music, many Jewish composers have aimed to put their stamp onto popular American music.

In this section, we will briefly explore how Jewish culture, language, values, and music have influenced or been exemplified by American popular music. We continue with a piece of popular music that is obviously “American,” but far less obviously “Jewish.” That song is “God Bless America” by Irving Berlin.

Review the following facts related to “God Bless America” and [Irving Berlin](#).

Introduce [Irving Berlin](#) (1888-1989)

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- Berlin was among the generation of immigrants who came to the US (at age five) and quickly acclimated to America (*di Goldene Medina*, “the Golden Land”), marking a desire of some Jews to shed religion in favor of faith in America and democracy.
- While over time he assimilated, Berlin remained deeply connected to his Jewish heritage in some ways, including his love of Yiddish and his devotion to Jewish-specific charities. (This is according to James Kaplan in his recent book, *Irving Berlin: New York Genius*.)
- Many of Berlin’s songs are mainstays of the [Great American Songbook](#) as well as Jazz standards, continuously being reinterpreted and re-recorded.

[“God Bless America”](#)

- Berlin originally wrote the song toward the end of WWI in 1918 as the second-act closing for the World War I show *Yip Yip Yaphank* but decided to set it aside. He pulled it out and revised it on the eve of WWII in 1938. The end of WWI was a time that included much antisemitism and anti-immigrant feelings. Congress enacted the Immigration Act of 1917, the Emergency Quota Act of 1921, and the Immigration Act of 1924. The time leading to WWII and throughout the war was also a time of antisemitism and anti-immigrant feelings, both in the U.S. and in Europe.
- This song reflects how American Jews and other immigrant groups felt toward their home and/or adopted country, both in the immigrant generation in which it was composed, and in the context of WWII and beyond when it became popular.
- In 1938 the song became an expression of how American Jews felt about America as “home”, how American Jews wanted to show their fellow citizens their commitment to America, and America as a necessity for Jews world-wide. This message was important because as the song gained popularity there was a backlash: because he was a Jew and an immigrant, some critics claimed he did not have a right to celebrate America.
- The song premiered the day after Kristallnacht, giving an added layer of meaning to it. As the world edged closer toward war, and U.S. involvement in

it, the song became a touchstone for many Americans. This was deeply true for Jewish-Americans in the wake of another wave of antisemitism in the United States and as the extent of Nazi atrocities became more and more apparent.

- The song was also boycotted by the likes of the Ku Klux Klan and American Nazi groups because Berlin was a Jewish immigrant.
- In the 1940s and 1950s, striking garment and subway workers sang “God Bless America” as part of their demonstrations. Students protesting racial segregation in the 1960s sang it. It’s been used for political causes on the left and right, representing religious and cultural tolerance.
- After 9/11 it became associated as a resilient response to terrorist attacks. On 9/11 itself, some 150 members of Congress held a moment of silence on our Capitol steps, after which they [spontaneously sang](#) “God Bless America” (see more on that moving moment [here](#)).
- Much discussion ensued about using it instead of “The Star-Spangled Banner” at occasions such as sporting events. This “second national anthem” is more singable, and contains less overt military tones (it was originally hailed as a “peace song”) than the official national anthem. For example, the song was added to many baseball games, often at the 7th inning stretch.

Listen to a portion of [“God Bless America”](#) 
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SLIDE

(NOTE: The linked version is by Kate Smith from the 1943 film, *This Is the Army*. For those instructors who deem the use of Kate Smith objectionable, [here](#) is a 1959 version by Connie Francis.)

Discuss after listening

- ❓ Is there anything in the text of the song that you think connects to Judaism/Jewish values/Jewish identity? (NOTE: There is a tendency to dismiss this idea; yet, perhaps the class might consider that the prophet Jeremiah (29:7) and Rabbi Hanina (Pirkei Avot 3:2) implore us to pray for the city/government where we live, and many synagogues today include a “Prayer for Our Country.” Might “God Bless America” be seen in this light?)
- ❓ How do you think a song like this resonated within the Jewish community throughout the 20th c.?
- ❓ What does a song like this indicate about the Jewish connection to the United States? (Consider the phrase “God bless America, my home sweet home.”)

- 🔍 Do you think this song has the same resonance today? Why or why not?

Extension idea

The song catapulted the career of [Kate Smith](#). Her legacy has come under controversy for singing at least two songs deemed racially insensitive, “That’s Why Darkies Were Born,” and “Pickaninny Heaven.” While Kate Smith herself spoke out against racial injustice in a CBS radio address in 1945, the controversy over inclusion of her music continues. Reporter Tom Schad offers more context [here](#). (Instructors who wish to explore the idea of “tainted greatness” might wish to make the analogy to Richard Wagner and his antisemitism. [Here](#) is one article for thought. Ta-Nehisi Coates offers his

The ways in which the Jewish community have navigated our relationships with our host countries and with other communities has led to a fascinating diversity in our culture, and such diversity comes through in our music. Let’s listen to a number of selections that might impact our thinking about the breadth of influence that popular culture has had on Jews/Jewishness and vice versa. (*NOTE:* Instructors should play at least two selections. Instructors might play the selections consecutively and discuss after hearing them, or have a brief discussion after each one.)

Questions to consider while listening

- 🔍 How does the music connect with and possibly extend conventional ideas about Judaism and/or Jewishness?
- 🔍 How does this song connect with and/or challenge your personal understanding of Judaism?

Listen

SLIDE 19

Leonard Cohen, [“Who by Fire”](#) 🎵
Barbra Streisand, [“Where is it Written?”](#) 🎵
Matisyahu, [“King Without a Crown”](#) 🎵
Sharon Jones and the Dap Kings, [“Eight Days of Hanukkah”](#) 🎵

Pair share

- 🔍 How do these selections help you to find new ways to appreciate, extend, and find meaning in Jewish culture?

Part 7 — Coda/Conclusion

SLIDE 20

(Weaving Our Learning Threads Together)

What an exciting journey we have taken so far! As we get to the end of our time together on this lesson, let's consider how much Jewish music we have explored throughout this lesson: 4 settings of Kol Nidre, 5 cultural variations of chanting the Torah, part of Bernstein's *Symphony #1: Jeremiah* ("Profanation"), then we delved into three ways Jewish communities use music when listening to "*Mayn Rue Platz*," "*Shir LaShalom*," and "*Cuando el Rey Nimrod*," then moved to popular music with "*God Bless America*," and more recent selections of Leonard Cohen, Barbra Streisand, Matisyahu, and Sharon Jones and the Dap Kings. Wow! Take that in for a moment.

- 🔍 Now, what have you gotten out of this? (Put answers in a public space, e.g. whiteboard)

After discussion, please fill in by using the following:

- The trope system and the various ways it is culturally rendered reflects a host culture's influence on Jewish practice.
- Jewish music has often built on, reinterpreted, and played with our textual traditions (Bernstein's *Jeremiah Symphony*)
- Jewish music helps to sustain our religious traditions and engage us with our personal spirituality (various renditions of "*Kol Nidre*," "*Cuando el Rey Nimrod*")
- Jewish music is quite diverse in language, culture, etc. (e.g. Yiddish/Ashkenazi; Ladino/Sefardi)
- Jewish music helps us to tell our story (e.g. "*Mayn Rue Platz*")
- Jewish music helps us to remember a historic communal moment and to reflect on our values (e.g. "*Shir LaShalom*")
- Music has helped us to express our gratitude (e.g. "*God Bless America*")
- Jewish music has been appropriated by modern popular sounds (e.g. "*Eight Days of Hanukkah*")
- Jewish music has been written and/or performed with attention to its universal implications and applications (e.g. Matisyahu, Leonard Cohen)

I look forward to our gathering for our next exploration of Jewish music. (Instructor may wish to share which Lesson will begin, with a reminder of the date/time here).

Optional Outro

SLIDE 21

As we go, you are welcome to linger on this fascinating [version of "God Bless America."](#) sung by the Broadway cast of the all-Yiddish version of *Fiddler on the Roof*. It is a case of translating a beloved American song proudly into Yiddish, a demonstration of love of and pride in country at a particular point in time, on January 19, 2021, the eve of the inauguration of a new Presidential team (President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris) and after the horror of the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol building. Lisa Fishman, who portrayed Bobe Tsaytl, came up with the idea. She commented:

“As we emerge from this dark chapter of division and strife and welcome in a new presidential administration, singing this iconic anthem in Yiddish—the author’s native tongue—is a unique way for the *Fiddler* family to honor our incoming leaders, to celebrate the ideals and values of our country, and to pray for this beautiful and fragile—yet enduring—democracy. I can’t think of a more appropriate time in history for a group of people to share Berlin’s prayer with the world.”

— *Lisa Fishman*

This version suggests the influence of our host country on our ethos, how it helps to tell our journey as Jewish Americans, how it forwards a piece of Jewish culture (Yiddish culture), how it expresses gratitude, and how even with the Yiddish--and perhaps because of it--the universal message rings through.

As we will see throughout the *Stories of Music* curriculum, Jewish music is constantly redefining itself in very exciting ways. I look forward to exploring many of them with you throughout this course!

Enjoy! // שלום! // *L’hit-ra’ot!* // See you soon!