

# Musical *Midrash* and Talmudic Tunes: Edutainment for Adult Learners

by Lawrence Mark Lesser

I've related STEM education to song<sup>1</sup> and to Judaism,<sup>2</sup> so, naturally, my Jewish songs have an educational bent. The month before the pandemic hit, I released *Sparks*, an album of 24 original non-liturgical songs deeply and accessibly grounded in *Torah*, *Talmud*, *Midrash*, etc. Topics span *mussar*, messiah, *Kabbalah*, *kashrut*, *Shabbat*, pluralism, *lashon ha-ra*, Holocaust, gratitude, and matchmaking. While each song's theme comes through without knowing underlying text, more meaning is gained from exploring that text (which can be found with English translation on [Sefaria.org](http://Sefaria.org)) and the album website<sup>3</sup> tabulates those sources. Lyrics are accessible and inclusive (e.g., almost completely in English; no holy names or gendered names for God) and, indeed, there are tributes<sup>4</sup> from heads of national organizations across denominations, including CLAL—The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, the United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism (USCJ), the Mussar Institute, Partners in Torah, and the Women Cantors' Network. Songs such as "Deep and Wide" and the *Tisha bi-Av* song "Temples" confront baseless hatred in Jewish communities.

### CONCERT-AND-CONVERSATION

My campus and congregational album-release events have had varied blends of entertainment and education — ranging from a straight concert to a lecture sponsored by the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) Religious Studies program about the process and conceptualization of the project with just a few songs played for illustration. The release event that best hit the edutainment sweet spot was a concert-and-conversation at El Paso's Reform temple that also was publicized by the local Conservative congregation, Jewish Federation, and city-wide monthly entertainment magazine. Attendees included adults (spanning all three Abrahamic faiths) from the broader vicinity, thanks to the regional NPR station airing some of the album's music and a 15-minute interview.

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The room (see photo, courtesy of Rabbi Ben Zeidman) soon filled with about 50 attendees, most of whom had never regularly attended adult education classes focused on text such as *Talmud*. I gave attendees a handout with lyrics and underlying text for each of the six songs played. I opened with one of the album's playful songs to break the misconception that learning, Judaism, or Jewish songs can't be fun. After all, starting a lesson with a joke is advice from the Talmud!<sup>5</sup> I played that song, then passed out the handout and facilitated conversation. For each subsequent song, it made more sense to call on attendees to read aloud the underlying text and then discuss the song *before* I played it. To illustrate how the songs were teaching vehicles, let's examine two specific songs from the setlist.

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February 23, 2020: Concert-and-Conversation at Temple Mount Sinai's Zielonka Hall

Song Title	Summary and Sources
Max (The Bark Mitzvah Song)	Canine view of Jewish coming-of-age culture: <i>Exodus 11:4-7 and 24:7, Pirkei Avot 4:2 and 6:1</i>
The Best	Like trying to understand a movie starting from the middle, we don't always see how barriers may yield blessings in a bigger picture: Life lessons from travels of Rabbi Akiva in <i>Brakhot 60b</i>
Rowboat	Talmudic parable of interdependence, extended to a modern situation: <i>Midrash Rabbah Vayikra 4:6</i>
Feathers	Powerful parable illustrates why careful speech is crucial: <i>Leviticus 19:16, Arakhin 15b</i>
Sparks	Atmospheric anthem inspired by <i>Kabbalah</i> , which charges us to free and reunite trapped sparks of the Divine light by transforming ourselves and repairing the world: <i>Genesis 1:27; Zohar (I, 2a, 15a)</i>
Give Thanks	Blessed with a wonderful son, Yehuda, I especially appreciate how an attitude of gratitude is in the nature – and name – of a Jew ( <i>Yehudi</i> ): <i>Brakhot 60b, Genesis 29:35, Menachot 43b</i>

Setlist of songs played at Concert-and-Conversation event

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## EXAMPLE 1: MIDRASHIC-SONG “ROWBOAT”

“Rowboat” has been played on the WCUW-FM Jewish music program *Shirim* and I’ve performed it not only in

synagogues, but also by invitation at a Unitarian Universalist service. Its focus on the environment (climate change) and interdependence make it a good *Tu bi-Shevat* song, and I have also played it at a university’s Earth Day celebration.

“Rowboat” lyric © Lawrence M. Lesser	Text: <i>Midrash Rabbah Vayikra 4:6</i>
<p>Imagine many men out on a rowboat. Suddenly, one pulls out a drill And starts to bore a hole under his own seat. “What are you doing?!” others yell.</p> <p>CHORUS (2x): Can a man rightfully answer “What’s it to you what I do in my space?”</p> <p>Now from this boat we row, we gaze at the waters where we once could fish and swim. The heavens have a hole and glaciers are melting, raising up these waters we’re in.</p> <p>CHORUS</p> <p>Oh, how will we go, out on our rowboat?</p>	<p>Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai taught a parable: Men were on a ship. One of them took a drill and started drilling underneath him. The others said to him, “What are you doing?!” He replied, “What do you care? Is this not underneath my area that I am drilling?!” They said to him, “But the water will rise and flood us all on this ship.”</p> <p>This is as Iyob said (<i>Job 19:4</i>), “If indeed I have erred, my error remains with me.” But his friends said to him (<i>Job 34:37</i>): “He adds transgression to his sin; he extends it among us.” [The men on the ship said]: “You extend your sins among us.”</p>

Before having an attendee read the *Midrash* text, I noted how the word “*Midrash*” can refer to Judaic biblical interpretation, the method, or a collection of such writings. I explained that some *Midrashim* were written during the Mishnaic period and some later and also how they can relate to *halacha* (law) or *aggadah* (interpretive narrative/parable). Attendees readily recognized how the *Midrashic* parable of interdependence yielded the first half of my lyric. I then shared how the song felt too short without a second verse, and how I searched for a real-life context that would apply the lesson to a contemporary situation and thus encounter my current world in the text. Climate change was the most compelling option and allowed continuing the rowboat setting.

In the discussion, I shared this climate change quote from Israeli historian and philosopher Yuval Noah Harari:<sup>6</sup>

“When it comes to climate, countries ... are at the mercy of actions taken by people on the other side of the planet. The Republic of Kiribati, an island nation in the Pacific Ocean, could reduce its greenhouse-gas emissions to zero and nevertheless be submerged under the rising waves if other countries don’t follow suit.”

I then had attendees brainstorm interdependence instances

besides climate change. One attendee mentioned the Internet, where others’ social media posts impact us. Other examples included indoor smoking policies, speed limits, blood/organ donation, headphone use on public transportation, supporting public education even if childless, and vaccinations (where a low vaccination rate prevents herd immunity).

An example not mentioned that became all too salient just a few weeks later was social distancing and mask-wearing to slow coronavirus spread, especially to the elderly and immuno-compromised. Another especially salient example is how our world is brought down when those of us with privilege and power do not use it to be actively anti-racist. As Martin Luther King reminded us, we came in on different ships, but we’re in the same boat now, and none of us are free until all of us are free.

With more time, attendees could also discuss how the lyric relates to text such as “*Kol Yisrael arevim zeh ba-zeh*” (all of Israel are responsible for each other)<sup>7</sup> or “One who says ‘What is mine is mine, and what is yours is yours’ — this is an average characteristic; others say that this is the character of a Sodomite.”<sup>8</sup>

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## EXAMPLE 2: TALMUDIC-SONG “THE BEST”

This lyric was based not on *Midrash* but on *Talmud*, so I took a moment to tell (or remind) attendees that *Talmud* is an “Oral Torah” (of compiled discussions and debates among rabbis about the meaning of the written *Torah*) that got written down so it wouldn’t be lost in times of persecution and exile. I then shared that (Babylonian) *Talmud* consists of 2711 double-sided pages that include *Mishnah* (redacted by Rabbi Yehuda *ha-Nasi* in 189 C.E.) and *Gemara* (commentary mostly

in Aramaic on the *Mishnah* and redacted by Ravina II and Rav Ashi in 500 C.E.). And I noted that the very bit of *Gemara* underlying “The Best” was going to be covered worldwide in *Daf Yomi* groups only nine days later! I explained that the part in boldface is a translation of what is actually in the (Vilna Edition) *Talmud*, while the rest was added (e.g., in Koren or Steinsaltz editions, or in [Sefaria.org](http://Sefaria.org)) to give the terse original text more clarity or context. As the handout showed, some added parts were just a word or two, while other additions were more substantial.

“The Best” lyric © Lawrence M. Lesser	Text: Berakhot 60b
<p>Trav’lin’ with his donkey, rooster, and candle, walkin’ all day far as he could handle. The town he reached gave nowhere to stay: he’d have to walk to a field and sleep on some hay, but he said <i>All God does is for the best. Though we rarely see under duress, all God does is for the best.</i></p> <p>That traveler read his holy books well into the night ‘til wind blew out his candle’s light. Then donkey and rooster were taken by wild beasts, a turn of events he could hardly believe, but he said: <i>All God does is for the best. Though we rarely see under duress, all God does is for the best.</i></p> <p>When the trav’ler woke and walked a little way, he found soldiers had come and captured the town! Had his candle’s light been seen or animals been heard, or had he slept here, he’d have been taken like his bird! <i>All God does is for the best</i></p> <p>I think of his tale on the journey that is mine as my drama turns out fine: a failed career, a failed romance led me to a life of greater expanse! <i>All God does is for the best. Though we rarely see under duress, all God does is for the best. all God does is for the best.</i></p>	<p><b>When Rabbi Akiva was walking along the road and came to a certain city, he inquired about lodging and they did not give him any. He said: “Everything that God [The Merciful One] does, God does for the best.”</b></p> <p><b>He went and slept in a field, and he had with him a rooster, a donkey, and a candle. A gust of wind came and extinguished the candle; a cat came and ate the rooster; and a lion came and ate the donkey.</b></p> <p><b>He said: “Everything that God does, God does for the best.”</b></p> <p><b>That night, an army came and took the city into captivity.</b> It turned out that Rabbi Akiva alone, who was not in the city and had no lit candle, noisy rooster or donkey to give away his location, was saved.</p> <p><b>He said to them: “Didn’t I tell you? Everything that God does is for the best.”</b></p>

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After an attendee read the *Talmud* excerpt out loud, we discussed its message, with most people seeming to relate to having experienced situations where something appeared bad at the time, but ultimately yielded a positive outcome or at least a silver lining. To bridge Jewish text with popular secular culture, I reminded attendees about the Garth Brooks #1 hit “Unanswered Prayers,” in which the singer in a happy long marriage is grateful he did not marry a different person (his high school sweetheart) he once prayed to end up with. I asked people to reflect on what “All God does is for the best” means to them and raise their hands for each statement that resonated as I read these one by one (more hands went up for the later statements):

- ◆ Everything that happens is what is supposed to happen.
- ◆ Everything that happens is for the good.
- ◆ Everything that happens eventually leads to good, even if it requires a bigger view or timeframe.
- ◆ Everything that happens can lead to good, if we so seek/choose.
- ◆ Everything that happens that’s within God’s control is good.
- ◆ Even amidst the hardest challenge, there remain things for which to be grateful.

From another Talmudic passage,<sup>9</sup> we discussed that when Jews experience very bad news, we say “Blessed is the true Judge” to acknowledge that we simply cannot make sense out of some events, especially at the time, and must trust there somehow is meaning we may find later. After playing the song, I shared how the *Talmud’s* repeated line struck my songwriter consciousness as a chorus that naturally broke the story into three verses, and then how my last verse modelled *midrash* by joining my story to Rabbi Akiva’s.

## CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The event confirmed that people appreciate experiencing timeless Jewish text as timely. The *Sparks* album also includes a *Talmud*-based song (“Bruria”) with resonance for today’s empowered Jewish women, Holocaust songs (“One-Way Train” and “Stack the Stones”) with salience amidst today’s waves of anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial, and a song (“Two Pockets”) based on a Chassidic proverb that arose at a nationally-televised town hall during the prior Presidential election year.

Attendees seemed to appreciate the songs more after a discussion of what sparked them, and they also seemed to appreciate the Jewish texts more by encountering a concise, memorable encapsulation that connected to their world. (By the way, my inspiration to write songs encapsulating universal

gems of Judaism was an album<sup>10</sup> that set to music ancient mystic poetry<sup>11</sup> from all faith traditions.) For many, it was their first time studying and discussing a piece of *Talmud*, something that they likely had assumed was beyond their reach or interest. These songs were designed to be accessible to those with limited Jewish knowledge and also to those who were agnostic. After all, “Rowboat” does not mention God and its theme of interdependence is quite universal. Also universal is the theme of “The Best,” that sometimes an event can seem completely negative, but be viewed quite differently in a later or larger view.

As I finish this article, it is unclear when the pandemic will allow resumption of in-person concerts, but, meanwhile, there is no reason concert-and-conversation events cannot reach at least as many people online, where a song’s lyrics and source text are displayed and interactive conversation comes from live voices, thoughts typed in the chat window, and the platform’s polling feature.

Hopefully, the reader now has a sense of this distinctive type of song and event. I believe audiences have the hunger and ability to appreciate non-liturgical songs that seek to touch minds and hearts equally deeply. Music and education need not stay separate and can integrate to build community across often-exaggerated boundaries of genre, generation, and denomination. Education makes the music deeper; music makes the education sweeter. In an hour, attendees tasted from a wellspring of inspiration for singing and writing, as well as a Jewish view of learning and living. While it will be fun to see how far the album<sup>12</sup> may go in the music world (so far: two radio interviews, nine songs played on four radio stations, and an entry for a GRAMMY nomination in the Folk category), I think the most meaningful moments will remain events such as this concert-and-conversation where songs and sources gained new dimensions for all.

## Endnotes

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2. Illustrated by these four papers:

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<https://www.todos-math.org/assets/documents/TEEM/teem%206%202015-july26final.pdf>

3. <https://larrylesser.com/sparks>

4. Ibid.

5. *Shabbat* 30b

6. Harari, Y. N. “Sunbeams” in *The Sun*, October 2019, no. 526, p. 48.

7. *Shevuot* 39a

8. *Pirkei Avot* 5:13

9. *Brakhot* 54a

10. Wilcox, David and Pettit, Nance. *Out Beyond Ideas* (2005). [CD] What Are Records 60073-2.

11. Ladinsky, Daniel. *Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West*. New York: Penguin Compass, 2002.

12. <https://larrylesser.com/sparks>