

New Melodies for an Ancient Tradition: Integrating Contemporary American Jewish Music into Cantorial Studies at AJR

By Daniel Geigerman

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Introduction

Project Overview

Over the last several decades, American Jewish identity has shifted and evolved in tandem with the liturgical music of the Jewish community. When one attends a service within any Jewish denomination in America, they are most likely to hear both traditional melodies and more recent melodies composed towards the end of the 20th century. However, those are not the only styles of music found within the liturgical music of today's Jewish communities. A new generation of composers has emerged whose music reflects the American soundscape. These 21st-century artists are creating new music for a new generation. In spite of its growing popularity, "new" cantorial music is often minimized, if not ignored, within cantorial training programs across America.

This project acknowledges the changing field of liturgical music in the Jewish Diaspora. It proposes a sample one-semester course on Contemporary Jewish American Music to be included in the current curricula of AJR. The course intends to fill what the project sees as a significant hole in the cantorial programs of Jewish seminaries, training current and future cantors to work with contemporary liturgical music in the same way that they are currently trained to work with ancient and classical music. The project has ~~two~~ ^{two} main academic foci: studying current 21st century music compositions and their composers and applying vocal and song-leading skills to these compositions for integration into sacred worship.

The Rise and Development of Jewish Worship Music

The unique style of Jewish music in ancient times was developed from the Jewish people's ability to assimilate into many cultures. They took ideas from the kingdoms of Phoenicia, Babylonia, Assyria, and, most prominently, Egypt, and crafted their own distinctive sound. This music, mainly instrumental, evolved into the sacred music that was played at the Temple of Solomon which was the center of Jewish spiritual life.

Unfortunately, with the destruction of the Temple of Solomon in 70 CE, all of the traditions of instrumental music were forgotten and lost, because the skills and techniques were never written down. With the Jewish people scattered around Europe, Asia, and Africa after the destruction, there was a need for more centralized religious ideas which included writing down the laws and teachings of the Jewish people. Around 200 CE this task was taken up by a group of Jewish scholars called the Pharisees who; created a written record of oral teachings called the *Mishnah*, formalized the training of religious leaders, standardized the liturgy, or prayer, format of the religious service, and in the fifth century helped compile what is known today as the *Tanach*¹

With the creation of the *Tanach* and standardization of the service, the Jewish people dispersed throughout the world felt more united. However, both the common worshiper and the leader of the service found the reading of the passages lacking. This created a need for a professional musician who was also a spiritual leader and consequently the position of

¹ Idelsohn 92-100

chazzan, or cantor, was created. In an effort to increase interest in the weekly readings, a system of cantillation, or chanting, was invented. Since the Jewish people were scattered, the cantillation evolved into many different forms and there needed to be a standardization of that as well. Around the eleventh century, scholars invented a system of symbolic notation called ekphonic notation which used symbols written with the text which corresponded to the melody, but this system had many different and complex forms which made it unusable in the wider community.² This tradition of chanting, called *nusach*, was passed down from generation to generation. During the fifteenth century the worshipers favored a pleasing voice rather than an educated spiritual leader. The professionalism of the cantor dropped considerably and did not recover until the 1800s.

In the mid to late 1700s, around the beginning of the general Classical era of music, a new movement called *Haskalah* was growing in Germany. One of the main ideas of *Haskalah* was for Jews to recognize non-Jewish authority on the same level as Jewish authority in order to fit in with the non-Jewish community.³ One of the main proponents of this philosophy was Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) the grandfather of the composer, Felix Mendelssohn. Moses Mendelssohn, who is considered the father of the *Haskalah* movement,⁴ believed that if the Jewish people adapted to other cultures, then they would be more readily accepted into those cultures. In 1791 in France and 1812 in Germany the

² Ruben. 67-75

³ Schoenberg, Shira. "The Haskalah" *Jewish Virtual Library* 25 September 2023.

⁴ Ibid.

Jewish people were declared citizens of each country with full rights. With this freedom, many Jewish musicians started taking part in the musical life of non-Jewish Europe and adapted some non-Jewish styles of music, thus aiding the assimilation process.⁵

As the Jewish people became citizens, enormous changes in the role of the cantor in the early nineteenth century took place. In the early 1800s itinerant cantors were seen as uneducated charlatans within the Jewish community because most were musically and educationally illiterate. Itinerant cantors were more or less traveling musicians who roamed the lands performing for any congregation that would have them. Their main goal was to heighten the spirituality of the service which was led by the *shaliach tzibbur*, the community service leader. Since their main performance venues were small towns, they did not receive much pay for their services, and sometimes did not earn enough money to buy food. This meant the cantors spent a very short time in each town just long enough to get paid. This illiteracy combined with the begging-like quality of these cantors put the musical traditions of the Jewish people at risk.⁶

Some cantors of Central and Western Europe saw that there was a need to reform the cantorship. Up until this point, cantors depended entirely on memory to learn and teach

⁵ Rubin. 153-157

⁶ Idelsohn, Abraham. *Jewish Music* New York: Dover Publications, 1992. 21-218.

music, and these “reforming”⁷ cantors feared that the traditional *nusach* and songs of the Jewish people would be lost if they were not written down.⁸

One of the most famous and influential reform cantors of the 19th century was Solomon Sulzer (1804-1890). At a very young age Sulzer's interest in Judaism and wonderful singing voice pushed him to take up singing. He began his musical career while he was still a child traveling with an itinerant cantor up until the age of 13. For the next nine years, Sulzer received both his Jewish and musical education from many different sources. In 1826 he received a job in Vienna as the cantor of a new synagogue. Sulzer soon found out that being a cantor of a congregation in Vienna was very different than that of any other city. The congregants were used to hearing compositions from great composers such as Beethoven and Schubert. With an educational background in Hebrew, the Talmud, music, and voice study, Sulzer modernized Jewish music in the synagogue by adding choirs and organs to the service and fusing the old Jewish tradition of *nusach* with the musical theories and styles of non-Jewish Europe. Some of his compositions are still used in Jewish services today.⁹

The reform cantors believed that Sulzer was an excellent example of what a true cantor needed to be. They believed that the cantor needed to be an educated person not only musically, but must also possess knowledge of Hebrew and traditional Jewish teachings. So, in an effort to create a more professional *chazzan* these reformers created

⁷ Not to be confused with the Jewish Reform Movement. They were trying to reform the cantorate.

⁸ Idelsohn. 215-218

⁹ Rubin. 160-164

schools with strict regulations and requirements. These educational centers were quite successful in Western Europe.¹⁰

Despite the emancipation of Jews throughout Europe in the nineteenth century, there were still anti-Semitic feelings towards the Jewish people in Eastern Europe. With the assassination of Russia's pro-Jewish leader, Tzar Alexander II, in 1881 the status of Jews in society greatly deteriorated. The incoming Tzar, Alexander III, believed that the Jewish people were a threat to his kingdom, so he initiated a series of pogroms, or riots, in order to wipe out the Jewish threat.¹¹ During the next 35 years one million Jews moved out of Russia, and the migrating cantors sought positions in Western European synagogues. Since there were not many congregations looking for cantors, many of them immigrated to America.¹²

The exodus of the European cantors to the United States was met with hesitation and curiosity. The incoming cantors were surprised at how secularized the American synagogues were becoming and how fast the Reform and Conservative branches of Judaism were growing. Conversely, the American Jewish community found these cantors fascinating not only because they brought both new styles of music to the religious service and knowledge as Jewish scholars.

“They thrilled American congregants with their singing in
falsetto, their virtuosity, acrobatic vocalizes, sobbing

¹⁰ “Pogroms” *Jewish Virtual Library* 25 September 2023.

¹¹ Johnson, Paul. *A History of the Jews*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987. 343-361

¹² Grayzel, Solomon. *A History of the Jews*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1947. 60-61

outbursts, and melodic flourishes...yet they also chanted the Torah and sang with reverence like any *shaliach tzibbur*.”¹³

By 1880 there were many cantors in America that strived to maintain the musical traditions of the European Jews.¹⁴

European cantors continued to immigrate to America and supply congregations with wonderful music until shortly after the Holocaust. As the influx of cantors from overseas waned American synagogues had to look to younger cantors born in America. The United States however did not have schools to train their cantors like the ones from Europe. So the three main branches of American Judaism; Reform, Conservative and Orthodox, established three cantorial schools in New York. These schools would be essential in forming the modern American cantor.

The Importance of Music in Jewish Worship in the Reform Movement

In the Reform Movement, music forms a powerful bridge to the sacred. It transforms the worship experience into shared intimacy rather than the “We and Thou”¹⁵ mode that personal prayer often inhabits. The Reform Movement attempts to make prayer more accessible and inclusive. Composers like Debbie Friedman were a light unto the Reform Movement. No longer bound by *strictly*¹⁶ liturgical considerations, the Reform worship service has become both a “soundscape” and a place for exploring a diverse range of

¹³ Rubin. 172

¹⁴ Idelsohn. 296-307

¹⁵ A play on Martin Buber’s concept of “I & It” vs “I & Thou” in relation to the connection one feels with a higher power. To simplify, the former being impersonal and the latter being personal.

¹⁶ Liturgical considerations are still considered, but are more firm suggestions rather than requirements.

contrasting musical forms written by a variety of composers; folk, rock, pop, and more traditionally oriented musical styles; bridging the constituent elements of Jewish heritage with modern musical sensibilities.

The Reform Movement's approach to music also directly and immediately can help congregants feel more a part of a community. The Reform Movement's goals for worship music can be distilled into four goals.¹⁷

- Engagement:
 - Congregational singing and choral arrangements were introduced in order to inspire participation and to encourage a sense of being together in the Reform synagogues. Instead of the solo cantor, more engaged performances now feature the whole congregation.
- Accessibility:
 - Simplifying complex liturgical melodies into singable tunes allowed congregants of different musical backgrounds to participate. Cantors like Max Wohlberg composed music that remained faithful to traditional nusach while empowering congregational singing and enhancing accessibility.¹⁸
- Relevance:
 - Incorporating contemporary musical styles to better connect with modern Jewish communities. The adoption of instruments like the organ, despite initial debates, and the integration of Western musical forms, such as

¹⁷ Kligman

¹⁸ Ruben

classical and later folk and pop genres, made synagogue music more relevant to congregants' experiences.

- Preservation and Innovation:
 - Reform synagogue music maintained ties to Jewish musical traditions while embracing new forms. Cantors like Salomon Sulzer and Samuel Naumbourg transformed synagogue music by introducing European means of musical expression, negotiating new styles within the Jewish tradition.

Reform cantors/composers take the old forms, what is called “traditional nusach” or the way prayer is sung, and mix them with modern compositions of their own or with arrangements of others to create worship music appropriate for today's synagogue. In this way, ancient Jewish musical themes are kept alive by connecting them with the present.

In contemporary Reform congregations, music has moved beyond merely a worship component. It has evolved into a potent and transformative tool in our work of transferring Jewish identity and values to the next generation. This new style of music has found its way into Jewish education, youth groups, summer camps, and even a popular television series¹⁹.

There has been a distinct upsurge in novel Jewish music in recent decades, especially within the Reform Movement²⁰. Worship has been brought into the 21st century by new composers who build on the traditional but are not bound by it. Their music is united not by a prescription of a single “correct” model but by a commonality of Jewish themes and

¹⁹ The TV show *Grey's Anatomy* uses Cantor Jeff Klepper and Rabbi Dan Freeland's *Shalom Rav* in its season 15 finale. It is a tense scene in which a character is having a panic attack and the cantor next to them sings the song to calm them down.

²⁰ Or perhaps this is an illusion due to the greater access to different media types in the digital age.

liturgy that forms the basis of our worship. In addition, blending styles not only within a service, but also within the compositions themselves has become the order of the day.

This musical movement has been significantly influenced by trailblazing composers like Dan Nichols and Julie Silver, who have taken liturgical traditions and melded them with appealing melodies and lyrics accessible to many congregants. Their work has made it possible for more people to feel comfortable and included in Jewish worship, regardless of their familiarity with Hebrew or standard liturgy.

21st-Century Music in the Seminary

Bringing contemporary Jewish music to a cantorial program provides students a repertoire beyond generational and Jewish denominational lines. Cantorial education should include the study of contemporary Jewish music and the development of practical, worship-friendly skills. The one trimester course outlined in this project is an attempt to begin cultivating this knowledge.

The first half of the proposed course will focus on learning about some of the influential contemporary Jewish composers and understanding their impact on Reform and progressive worship from the late 1990's to the present. It will concentrate on composers like Debbie Friedman, Julie Silver, Noah Aronson, Elana Arian, Josh Nelson, Rick Recht, and others, some of whom have not yet been established in the community as “traditional²¹.” The repertoire for this part of the course will be taken from the first few

²¹ Yes, this term is controversial. “Traditional” here is used in the way a congregant with little knowledge of Jewish composers might use it. These are tunes that are pervasive throughout the Reform Movement; e.g. Debbie Friedman's *Mi Shebeirach*

printings of the Ruach series of songbooks published every other year by Transcontinental Music Publishing from 5761-5783.

The second half of the class is all about practice. Here, students will work hands-on with the skills and knowledge needed to make this style of music meaningful within worship settings. The students will have a chance to develop their song-leading and worship-leading skills together by workshopping, in mock services, some of the compositions from the later printings of the Ruach series.

Literature Review

The literature review gives a glimpse of the course's governing texts and resources. Each selected text from the course's reading list gives the students a much-needed perspective and vantage point from which to consider the course subject.

The "Ruach" Songbook Series by Transcontinental Music Publishing
Transcontinental Music Publishing's "Ruach" series attempts to continue documenting the remarkable surge of contemporary Jewish music that began in the 70's, especially within the Reform and liberal Jewish communities.

"The Ruach series is the continuation of the seven original NFTY (North American Federation of Temple Youth) albums...between 1972 and 1989...[as a] primary source of participatory music for cantors, songleaders, music leaders..."²²

Each new publication, every two years, records the profound cultural changes taking place within North American Jewish communities. The music in these pages connects with the rich and varied musical heritage of our Jewish past while making a powerful statement about the vibrant future of Jewish music in North America.

The series features a wide range of contemporary Jewish composers and musicians, including Dan Nichols, Debbie Friedman, Josh Nelson, and Elana Arian. These compositions are chosen to infuse a distinctively 21st-century sensibility that reflects the lived experience

²² Ruach 5769 Preface

of many modern Jews while keeping their work connected, in some way, to the sort of music that might have been sung in ancient times.

"Ruach" is more than just a collection of songs; it is a resource that equips students and cantors with the practical tools needed to lead musical services. The detailed musical notation and lyrics are valuable on their own. However, the added layer of context—often provided through a biographical preface about the song's composer—illuminates not just the works included in "Ruach," but also the large, diverse body of Jewish liturgical music currently underrepresented in many communities. Hearing the "why" behind each song compels students to consider their reasons for singing on a deeper level.

A.Z. Idelsohn's "Jewish Music: Its Historical Development"

A.Z. Idelsohn's "Jewish Music: Its Historical Development" is one of the cornerstones of the field. In it, Idelsohn undertakes the monumental task of tracing the evolution of the music of the Jewish people across centuries and cultures, starting from biblical times and extending into the 20th century. Two aspects of this work make it remarkable: First, it is one of the earliest efforts undertaken by a notational scholar to contextualize the music of the Jewish people within a social and historical framework. Second, Idelsohn's use of ethnographic and historical methods allows him to present a comprehensive global narrative of the penetration of both the music and the people of the Jewish diaspora into the very social fabric of the host cultures in which they lived.

Academics frequently portray Idelsohn as a "one of the great authorities of our sacred literature"²³ that delineates the progression of not just one but several forms of music—liturgical and folk—from Hebrew antiquity to the 20th century. His research tracks down the not-so-simple DNA of Jewish music, showing how it is the product of many cultural encounters over centuries. And not just any encounters but crucial ones leading to radical change and remarkable continuity that we can discern in our own time.

Idelsohn's labor serves a dual purpose. It not only seeks to document the vast array of musical styles that exist within our tradition but also explains how they came to be and why they are so relevant. Idelsohn's work has immensely powerful potential to influence the next generation of Jewish musicians. His documentation of this world serves as a bridge to the goals of the next generation—goals that are very much in line with those of Reform Judaism.

Idelsohn offers students a profound comprehension of Jewish music's beginnings and adaptable nature. It is an excellent resource for unearthing traditional practices that significantly influence the creation of contemporary Jewish music. Its well-researched accounts of historical events and figures make this text a sturdy academic bridge that leads students toward the engaging, richly founded practice of creating and performing modern liturgical music.

²³ Edward Calisch President of the CCAR wrote to Idelsohn on May 6, 1923

Mark Kligman's "Contemporary Jewish Music in America: A Historical Perspective"

What Mark Kligman does in his work, "Contemporary Jewish Music in America: A Historical Perspective," is quite rare. He provides more than just a vision of a possible path to the future, not just a vision of the path contemporary Jewish music in America has taken. When one reflects on the fact that the United States is home to the largest Jewish community in the world, one can fully understand the monumental significance of Edelman's historical survey.

Kligman, from a Jewish musical educational tradition, argues why figures like Debbie Friedman are essential in a "redefining worship -music" arena. His examination of the "Reform Movement's use of music as a means of fostering a sense of community and identity during the worship service" dovetails nicely with the proposed course's overall aim: to "create worship experiences that you would want to be part of, that you would feel engaged in."

Kligman's work functions as both a history and a manual, allowing students to see the incredible, often unseen, contour plots that largely figure in the Jewish music they experience and in the heavenly, dynamic embraces of the music they create.

Cantor Jeff Klepper's "Debbie Friedman: Her Music, Her Life"

Cantor Jeff Klepper's "Debbie Friedman: Her Music, Her Life" gives a wonderfully comprehensive view of Debbie Friedman's unique and profound influence on Jewish liturgical music, especially in the Reform Movement. Writing from the unique vantage point of contemporary Jewish liturgical music, Klepper underscores Friedman's music's

"pioneering role in making worship music accessible and inclusive." He also emphasizes her impact on the role of women in making music that is part of the Jewish experience.

Cantor Klepper speaks to how Friedman combined traditional Hebrew liturgy with American folk and popular music to make an intimate and resonant worship experience. Her compositions, like "Mi Shebeirach" and "L'chi Lach," are more participatory than traditional cantorial music. She uses the voice of the congregation as much as (and sometimes more than) the cantor's voice in leading parts of a service. This gives Friedman's music a distinctive feel. Indeed, one could make a case that Friedman's version of a liturgical piece is sometimes just as riveting (and maybe more "accessible") than the version of her musical forebears.

It's an easy leap from Friedman's liturgical work to her influence on worship space. However, the work and the influence are just symptomatic of much larger and more critical conversations in Judaism today around worship and the kind of communities that worship should help bring together.

Joey Weisenberg's "Building Singing Communities"

Joey Weisenberg's "Building Singing Communities: A Practical Guide to Unlocking the Power of Music in Jewish Prayer" deals with the nearly forgotten art of communal singing in Jewish worship. The book offers hands-on, user-friendly strategies to help experts and novices create more harmonious and engaged prayer communities. While it is particularly relevant to the Contemporary Jewish Music course, its practical advice makes it a good resource for anyone interested in moving worship toward the more contemporary tunes.

Weisenberg advocates for "communal intimacy" during worship, promoting the idea that the kinds of liturgical leadership he values cannot happen with a division between the leaders and the congregation. In contrast with leading from an elevated platform, he sees leading from within the congregation as a way of evening out the hierarchy in the space and allowing intimate worship to happen.

What Weisenberg teaches fits well with the many contemporary Jewish communities that seek a balance between old, established traditions and the freedom to worship in a way that feels right for them. He teaches his students to see what they are and what they will be when they graduate as something more than just leading the community in song. He encourages them to see the community and themselves as co-creators in the kind of worship that will make their services as engaging as possible.

Current Curriculum at AJR

This course aims to bridge the gap between the traditional²⁴ and the contemporary by equipping cantorial students with a well-rounded education in music. It also introduces contemporary elements that reflect today's musical trends and resonates with the structure and meaning of the morning, evening, and Shabbat prayer services.

Evaluation of Current Curriculum

The cantorial curricula at the Academy for Jewish Religion (AJR) are shaped by a focus on developing spiritual leaders proficient in both traditional and contemporary aspects of Jewish musical and liturgical practices. Here's an overview of the fundamental approach based on the content provided in AJR's academic catalogue:

Courses Included in the Cantorial Curricula

- The cantorial curriculum encompasses a wide range of subjects aimed at building comprehensive liturgical, musical, and pastoral skills. These include:
 - Liturgical and Nusach Studies: Courses on Shabbat, weekday, High Holidays, and festival liturgies.
 - Cantillation: Training in Torah, Haftarah, and Megillot cantillation.
 - Vocal and Musical Training: Vocal instruction, musical skills development, and cantorial coaching.
 - Jewish Music History and Theory: Explores historical and theoretical frameworks of Jewish music.

- Professional and Pastoral Skills: Counseling, education, and leadership development for practical roles in the community.
- Fieldwork and Practicum: Hands-on experience through fieldwork in congregational and other Jewish communal settings.

General Teaching Approach

- Across the curriculum, AJR emphasizes:
 - Pluralistic and Holistic Training: The teaching style incorporates diverse Jewish traditions and modern applications. This enables cantors to serve various denominations and community needs.
 - Integration of Musical and Liturgical Knowledge: Nusach courses use a systematic approach to help students master the musical modes and structures of traditional Jewish liturgy while applying them dynamically in contemporary worship settings.
 - Pastoral Competency: Training is not limited to musical performance; significant focus is placed on developing interpersonal skills and spiritual leadership capabilities.
 - Practical Application: Through coaching and fieldwork, students refine their skills in real-world settings, ensuring they can effectively lead services, teach, and provide pastoral care.
 - Vocal and Musical Excellence: Emphasis on technical proficiency and artistry in vocal performance, ensuring that students are confident

performers who understand the spiritual and emotional resonance of their work.

A thorough assessment of AJR's cantorial curriculum reveals a firm grounding in the traditional skills essential for Jewish worship. These classes and others in the curriculum emphasize that the students must understand the structure of what they are leading. Since melodies differ from one tradition to another, a student must know not just what to sing but also why it is traditional to sing that nusach at that moment and how it relates to the overall structure of the service.

Along with the usual offerings of a cantorial program in the United States, the curriculum has some exciting additions, such as "Empowering Community Through Singing," which centers on the practice of leading communal singing in various contexts, and "Sephardi/Mizrahi Maqamat and Music," which considers the history and development of Jewish music across different regions outside the Ashkenazic realm.

Identified the Gaps

The AJR curriculum teaches the fundamental skills and essential music theory that every graduate of a traditional cantorial program should know. However, there is a significant omission in the AJR curriculum²⁵: the kind of music on which a significant amount of 21st-century contemporary worship is based. The course would be added under the "Professional Cantorial Curriculum" section. It would expand not only the volume but also

²⁵ It is similar in other Jewish seminaries like Hebrew Union College- Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC) and The Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), but for this project the focus is AJR.

the breadth of the kind of musical knowledge AJR cantorial students possess upon graduation.

A course like this would build upon cantorial training in the "Creating Singing Communities" class, moving beyond the traditional into the contemporary. With this course, future cantors would learn about the modern genres and techniques that can affect inclusion in music and the service. They would learn how to navigate the sometimes-tricky territory of serving congregations that have varied expectations when it comes to worshiping with a balance of both traditional and contemporary elements.

NewProposedCourse

Session 1: Introduction to Contemporary Jewish Music

Objectives:

- Gain an understanding of the evolution of Jewish music from the mid-20th century through the early 1990s
- focus on key shifts in style and cultural impact.

Content:

- Provide a historical overview of Jewish music's development in the latter half of the 20th century
- significant milestones and the influence of cultural shifts on musical styles.

Introduce Dan Nichols as a prominent composer and performer whose work has impacted Jewish worship, mainly through his focus on community, spirituality, and social justice.

Activity: Engage in a listening and analysis session featuring Dan Nichols's songs "B'tzelem Elohim" and "Kehilah Kedoshah."

Analysis see "Analysed Music" Section

Assignment:

- Write a short reflective paper (a few paragraphs) describing a time when a new melody in a piece of liturgy enhanced your worship experience. Reflect on what elements of the melody contributed to this heightened experience, considering factors like accessibility, emotional resonance, and connection to the liturgical text. Give a 3 minute presentation of your experience in the next session.

Criteria for Evaluation:

- Depth of Reflection: Does the student provide a thoughtful and introspective account of how the melody enhanced their worship experience?
- Analysis of Musical Elements: Are the factors like accessibility, emotional resonance, and connection to the liturgical text well-analyzed and clearly articulated?
- Clarity and Organization: Is the reflection well-structured and easy to follow?
- Personal Connection: Does the student connect the melody to their own spiritual or worship experience?

Session 2: Exploring Worship in Unconventional Spaces²⁶

Objectives:

- Understand the impact of worship location on musical expression and community engagement.
- Explore how contemporary Jewish composers like Josh Nelson create music that resonates in both traditional and non-traditional worship settings.

Content:

- Focus on Josh Nelson's contributions to contemporary Jewish music
- Discuss how Nelson's music reflects and adapts to various worship environments and his approach to creating worship experiences in diverse locations (e.g. camps, youth centers, etc.) outside of traditional synagogue settings.

Activity: Listening and analysis session featuring two of Nelson's pieces, "Yih'yu L'ratzon" and "L'dor Vador":

Assignment:

- Find and attend²⁷ a Jewish worship experience held in a location other than a synagogue. Write a reflection (2-3 pages) to be distributed to the class or prepare a 10-minute presentation given in class (due in Session 5) on the experience, focusing on how the location influenced the worship atmosphere and community connection. Reflect on any differences in engagement, musical expression, or communal dynamics compared to traditional settings.

²⁶ For the purpose of this class "unconventional spaces" means any worship location that is outside of the synagogue building.

²⁷ Can be a live stream if no other possibilities.

Criteria for Evaluation:

- Observation of Location Dynamics: Does the student analyze how the setting impacted the worship experience?
- Comparison to Traditional Worship: Are contrasts or parallels to synagogue worship effectively discussed?
- Engagement with Community Atmosphere: Does the student reflect on community connection and dynamics in the non-traditional setting?
- Presentation Skills (for oral option) or Writing Quality: Is the presentation clear and engaging, or is the writing cohesive and polished?

Session 3: Integrating Technology in Contemporary Jewish Music

Objectives:

- Understand the role of technology in expanding the reach and influence of contemporary Jewish music in the 21st century.
- Explore Rick Recht's contributions to Jewish music through his development of Jewish Rock Radio and how digital platforms have transformed access to Jewish music.

Content:

- Discuss the impact of technology, specifically digital platforms like Jewish Rock Radio, on contemporary Jewish music and community engagement.
- Focus on Rick Recht's use of technology to reach broader audiences and connect with individuals who may not have access to traditional Jewish community structures.
- Highlight the importance of accessible music and how digital platforms provide opportunities for artists and worshippers to engage with Jewish music on their own terms.

Activity: Listening and analysis session for two of Recht's songs, "Al Shloscha" and "The Hope":

Assignment:

- Listen to a segment of Jewish Rock Radio before the next class. Take note of any elements that stand out, such as song choices, themes, or the use of language. Be prepared to discuss your observations, focusing on how the platform creates a sense

of community and how it aligns with or diverges from traditional synagogue worship experiences.

Criteria for Evaluation:

- Identification of Key Elements: Does the student effectively identify standout features like themes, song choices, or language use?
- Connection to Community-Building: Does the student link these elements to their role in fostering a sense of Jewish community?
- Relevance to Traditional Worship: Does the student note how this platform aligns with or diverges from traditional synagogue experiences?
- Presentation of Observations: Are ideas communicated clearly in discussions?

Session 4: Women's Contributions to 21st Century Contemporary Jewish Music

Objectives:

- Examine the contributions of female composers to contemporary Jewish music, with a focus on their role in creating inclusive, accessible worship experiences.
- Explore Julie Silver's work, especially her dedication to amplifying marginalized voices within the Jewish community through music.

Content:

- Provide an overview of women's contributions to the evolution of Jewish music in the 21st century, highlighting how female composers and performers have shaped inclusive worship practices and encouraged diversity within Jewish communities.
- Focus on Julie Silver's approach to music as a platform for advocacy and inclusivity. Discuss her commitment to making Jewish worship accessible to individuals from all backgrounds, with particular attention to her work within LGBTQ+ and other marginalized communities.

Activity: Listening and analysis session for Julie Silver's "Sim Shalom" and "Oh Guide My Steps":

Assignment:

- No new assignment. Students should continue preparing the assignment from Session 2, where they will present their experiences or have turned in their reflection paper with worship in a non-traditional setting in Session 5.

Criteria for Evaluation

- Contribution to Discussions: Does the student actively participate in class discussions on Julie Silver's work?

Session 5: Continuing the Study of Women in Jewish Music Composition

Objectives:

- Further explore the influence of female composers in contemporary Jewish music, focusing on how their compositions contribute to communal worship and personal spirituality.
- Analyze the works of Elana Arian, understanding her unique contributions to Jewish music and her approach to creating pieces that inspire unity and reflection.

Content:

- Highlight Elana Arian's role in contemporary Jewish music, noting her impact as a composer and musician who brings a fresh perspective to traditional texts. Discuss Arian's ability to blend Jewish liturgy with accessible melodies that resonate with diverse audiences, making her work a staple in progressive Jewish communities.
- Examine how Arian's music not only enhances the worship experience but also reinforces values of togetherness and shared spiritual identity.

Activity: Listening and analysis session for Elana Arian's "Hinei Mah Tov" and "Mi Chamocha":

Assignment:

- Find a piece of music by a female composer that adapts a traditional Jewish text in a way that transforms its presentation yet still honors its original meaning. Write a brief analysis explaining how the music achieves this balance and reflect on what makes the adaptation successful for worship.

Criteria for Evaluation:

- Selection and Description: Does the student choose an appropriate piece and clearly describe its traditional and adapted elements?
- Analysis of Adaptation: Is the balance between honoring tradition and innovative presentation well-explained?
- Connection to Worship: Does the student effectively reflect on the success of the adaptation for worship settings?
- Presentation Skills (for oral option) or Writing Quality: Is the presentation clear and engaging, or is the writing cohesive and polished?

Session 6: Adapting Contemporary Texts in Jewish Music

Objectives:

- Develop an understanding of how contemporary Jewish composers adapt traditional texts to resonate with modern audiences.

Content:

- Focus on Noah Aronson's approach to adapting Jewish texts in *The Left Side of the Page*, an album known for innovative takes on traditional liturgy.
- Discuss Aronson's philosophy of maintaining reverence for the original text while infusing it with modern musical elements to engage a broader audience.
- Explore how Aronson's work has impacted contemporary Jewish worship, particularly in progressive communities seeking to balance tradition with cultural relevance.

Activity: Listening and analysis session of Aronson's "Let There Be Love" (even though it is not part of the Ruach series):

Assignment:

- Pick a song from the first 6 sessions of class to "teach" to the class in the next session. Use your current knowledge from class, do not go learning anything new.

Criteria for Evaluation:

- Understanding of Song: Does the student demonstrate a clear grasp of the song's liturgical and musical elements?
- Clarity of Teaching: Is the song taught in a clear, engaging, and accessible manner?

- Engagement Techniques: Does the student encourage participation or interest among peers?
- Connection to Class Content: Does the teaching reflect ideas and themes discussed in earlier sessions?

Session 7: Master Class on Leading Contemporary Worship Music

Objectives:

- Begin applying knowledge from previous sessions in a master class setting, where students practice leading contemporary worship music and receive constructive feedback.
- Focus on developing confidence in leading music that fosters engagement and inclusivity.

Content:

- Review key elements of worship leadership, including song selection, pacing, and interaction with the congregation.
- Discuss techniques for creating a worship environment that is accessible and spiritually engaging.

Activity: Each student “teaches” part of a song covered in Sessions 1–5.

Group feedback session where classmates and instructors provide constructive feedback on delivery, style, and engagement techniques.

Assignment:

- Reflect on the feedback received, identifying areas for improvement and noting strategies to enhance future worship-leading experiences. No written assignment due for this.

Criteria for Evaluation:

- Integration of Feedback: Does the student thoughtfully reflect on and incorporate class feedback?

- Identification of Improvement Areas: Are areas for future growth clearly identified and explained?
- Connection to Worship Leadership: Does the reflection relate to worship-leading skills and techniques discussed in class?
- Writing Clarity: Is the reflection well-structured and easy to understand?

Session 8: Practice Service Preparation and Planning

Objectives:

- Gain experience in planning a worship service, focusing on incorporating contemporary Jewish music and ensuring a cohesive flow.
- Understand the importance of balancing traditional and contemporary elements in worship planning.

Content:

- Review the components of a worship service, including transitions, thematic alignment, and the role of music in different parts of the service.
- Discuss considerations for selecting songs that reflect the service's themes and engage the congregation.

Activity: Divide into small groups to design a small section (like Psukei D'zimra or Sh'ma Uvirchoteha) of worship service outline. Divide the pieces evenly between everyone in the group so each person has one prayer and discuss how the pieces will flow into one another. You may use pieces from all Ruach books or ask to use a piece from a different source.

Each group presents their service outline to the class, explaining song choices, thematic connections, and intended impact on congregants.

Assignment:

- Finalize the worship service outline for use in the practice service (Session 9), including song selections and thematic explanations.

Criteria for Evaluation:

- Thematic Cohesion: Are the song choices and transitions well-aligned with the service theme?
- Creativity and Engagement: Do the choices reflect thoughtful consideration of congregational engagement?
- Group Collaboration: Does the outline show evidence of effective teamwork?
- Presentation of Outline: Is the rationale for choices clearly articulated during class presentations?

Session 9: Practice Service Leading in Groups

Objectives:

- Practice leading a full worship service, focusing on transitions, congregational engagement, and applying musical techniques.
- Gain experience in collaborative worship leadership, with a focus on integrating feedback.

Content:

- Discuss roles within worship leadership teams and techniques for maintaining cohesion and flow throughout the service.
- Review best practices for supporting each other as co-leaders.

Activity: Groups from Session 7 lead their planned worship service, with each student taking turns leading different sections.

Observing classmates provide feedback on song selection, transitions, and overall impact on the worship experience.

Assignment:

- Each student will “reprepare” one of the pieces that they led, incorporating the feedback received. They will be presented again in the next session for improvement. Also, the professor will throw in a curveball that the presenter will have to overcome.

Criteria for Evaluation:

- Implementation of Feedback: Has the student addressed feedback from their initial presentation?
- Improvement in Delivery: Are the improvements evident in their re-prepared piece?

- Adaptability to “Curveball”: Does the student handle the unexpected challenge effectively?
- Presentation Style: Is the re-prepared piece presented with confidence and clarity?

Session 10: Master Class on Improvisation and Adaptability in Worship

Objectives:

- Develop skills in adapting and improvising within worship settings, an essential skill for dynamic and responsive worship leadership.
- Practice creating a worship atmosphere that can adapt to spontaneous moments or changes in the congregational mood.

Content:

- Explore techniques for improvising transitions, adapting melodies, and responding to congregational cues in real-time.
- Discuss scenarios where improvisation enhances the worship experience, particularly in diverse or intergenerational congregations.

Activity: Each student leads a short section of a worship service, incorporating a moment of improvisation or adaptability.

Group feedback on the effectiveness of improvisation, focusing on how it enhanced or detracted from the worship experience.

Assignment:

- Write a brief reflection on the role of improvisation in worship, identifying specific techniques or approaches they plan to incorporate into their practice. Each student, working individually, should begin putting together their final presentation in session 12. Each presentation will consist of 3-4 concurrent prayers set to a different composer and delivered as if in an actual service.

Criteria for Evaluation:

- Analysis of Improvisation: Does the student effectively analyze how improvisation enhances worship?
- Identification of Techniques: Are specific techniques or approaches discussed in detail?
- Application to Personal Practice: Does the student outline concrete plans for incorporating improvisation in their leadership?
- Clarity of Writing: Is the reflection organized and easy to follow?

Session 11: Final Preparations and Group Review for Capstone Service

Objectives:

- Prepare for the capstone service in Session 12, synthesizing all learning from the course into a cohesive and impactful worship experience.
- Finalize roles, music selections, and thematic elements for the capstone service.

Content:

- Review feedback from previous sessions to identify best practices and refine the worship service.
- Discuss the importance of reflection and preparation in worship leadership, ensuring that all elements align with the service's spiritual objectives.

Activity: Finalize a full worship service outline as a class, with each student taking responsibility for leading a specific part.

Practice the transitions, timing, and flow of the service, ensuring a polished and unified approach.

Assignment:

- Make final adjustments to individual sections based on group feedback and prepare for the capstone service.

Criteria for Evaluation:

- Final Worship Service Plan: Does the plan reflect cohesive teamwork, alignment with course objectives, and integration of feedback?
- Collaboration and Participation: Did the student actively contribute to group planning and practice?

- Attention to Detail: Are transitions, timing, and thematic elements thoughtfully addressed?
- Presentation of Plan: Is the final plan presented clearly and professionally?

Session 12: Capstone Worship Service

Objectives:

- Demonstrate mastery of worship-leading skills by presenting a cohesive, impactful worship service section.
- Reflect on the entire course experience and celebrate the growth in musical and worship leadership skills.

Content:

- Conduct the capstone service, integrating traditional and contemporary music in a manner that reflects the unique contributions of each student.
- Create an inclusive worship experience that showcases the techniques, insights, and personal growth from the course.

Activity: Students give their final presentation.

Following each section of service, engage in a reflective discussion on what went well, areas of improvement, and overall course takeaways.

Assignment: Write a final reflection on the course experience, focusing on personal growth, insights gained, and future goals in worship leadership.

Methodology

Evaluating the Music

As with any piece of music in the world, people evaluate compositions on their acceptance and the community's response and engagement. In reference to Jewish music, this style of religious evaluation can be seen more broadly in the quote from sociologist Steven M. Cohen's interview with the Jerusalem Center for Security and Foreign Affairs,

"A normative approach argues that Jewish involvement is good and right, and that certain ways of being Jewish are better than others. An aesthetic approach is less judgmental and directive. It sees being Jewish as a matter of beauty and culture, a resource for meaning rather than an ethical or moral imperative."²⁸

At first glance, this quote may seem negative, but its ideas can heighten an individual's Jewish experience. Taking a closer look at this approach reveals four things:

Expanding Possibilities: Taking an aesthetic approach lets people explore Judaism in a way that feels right to them. They can embrace its forms of art and music, its history and rituals, as undemanding enrichments that bring more life and meaning to their existence. This attitude doesn't necessarily lead to a better connection with Jewish tradition since aesthetics isn't always the path to a

²⁸ "Changes in American Jewish Identities: From Normative Constructions to Aesthetic Understandings." Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, jcpa.org/article/changes-in-american-jewish-identities-from-normative-constructions-to-aesthetic-understandings/.

more authentic lifestyle. Still, it can lead to a more sincere lifestyle practice that resembles whatever authentic is for that person.

Reducing Barriers to Engagement: An aesthetic path of no judgment lowers the accessibility barriers that might alienate some people from what they consider stringent expectations of what Jewish life looks like. This gives more individuals the opportunity to partake in Jewish culture and practice in the ways that they determine are right for them, thus strengthening the number of people who have what could be described as a relationship with Jewish culture and practice.

Personalization and Creativity: Seeing Judaism as a "resource for meaning" prompts people to engage with it creatively, integrating its teachings and traditions into the individual contexts of their lives. This makes Jewish identity less a matter of simple fidelity to tradition and more a matter of vibrant, personalized living.

Balancing Norms with Beauty: The normative angle has worth, because it maintains form and foundational ethics. The aesthetic angle enhances this by placing value on beauty and the personal discovery of meaning. Together, they provide a Jewish experience that is ironclad in both inspiration and grounded content.

Jewish music becomes a much more accessible form of Jewish expression when it is based primarily on personal resonance and aesthetic appeal. Suppose the music a

congregation selects²⁹ for worship is contemporary, compelling, and even audacious. Will those sitting in the pews be more or less likely to associate themselves with these sacred moments? Shouldn't the goal be for congregants to feel a real and lasting connection to the worship experience? What can be accomplished with music can also be done with liturgy and visuals, such as composition in time and space.

When a community selects music, it creates an identity. Music is a powerful way to project the kind of community one desires to be. When we think about that travel itinerary not just as a collection of steps but rather as an embodied experience of ways to express gratitude and ways to plot a map across the world and time out of our bodies and into the lives of others, we start to get a sense of the kind of caring and welcoming communities that kind of worship creates. From that perspective, music makes the community, and not the other way around.

Beautiful and profoundly expressive music can make the powerful spiritual experiences of worship even more potent. Worship alone can be and often is a remarkable transformative experience. Nevertheless, when a particular powerful musical experience directly enhances the worship experience, it can lead to even deeper transformative moments. Understanding the musical structure and composition of this music is key to applying it in the proper place and time.

²⁹ While it may seem that the clergy are the main decision makers when it comes to music within worship, the congregants also hold sway on what is accepted. This is why the inclusive word "congregation" is used.

Diving Into Analysis

As stated, the first half of the course will be a detailed investigation into the songs of Jewish composers of the “turn of the century,” whose works comprise the first few issues of “Ruach.” By looking closely at these early publications, the goal is to unearth these compositions’ spiritual and musical value and their potential reasons for being widely used within Reform Jewish worship. Four key areas will be discussed for each composition: melody, harmony, rhythm, and lyrics.

- **Melody:** For the sake of this course, analyzing the melody will focus on “singability,” or how easy the melodic line is for the average person to grasp³⁰. Can the congregation participate in this song? Can this melody be used at a time other than worship to introduce it? Hearing a new melody in a non-worship setting may allow others to join in the singing more easily.
- **Harmony:** Considering a composition’s harmony for its ability to elicit emotional and thoughtful reactions is a big step toward understanding how to connect to the spirituality of the music. What is the piece’s harmonic flow? Delving into the chord progressions and harmonic character will help the students compare these compositions to other widespread secular music and study the possible reasoning behind their popularity.

³⁰ This does not mean just simple compositions in terms of melodic line, rhythmic complexity, or harmonic composition. For example, the interval of a tritone is not a usual occurrence in American music, but the popularity of the song *Maria* from *West Side Story* proves that the unusual can stick in the minds of the people.

- **Rhythm:** Rhythm impacts the worship environment, particularly in how it affects the energy and mood of the community singing. Compositions are often written with rhythmic patterns that create an exciting or meaningful atmosphere. For instance, an upbeat tempo and syncopated rhythms are excellent ways to instill a sense of joy and almost a hint of a community singalong. On the other hand, slower, steadier pulses have their place and could encourage a time of quiet reflection.
- **Lyrics:** The lyrics' relevance to worship is crucial for any composition hoping to obtain a status of "spiritual elevation." The words are considered not just for their rhyme and reason but for their work with (or against) the motifs and messages that fill traditional Jewish liturgy. Universal spiritual phrases dealing with peace, gratitude, or renewal themes resonate well with worshipers. In any case, such themes are good to have in a lyricist's toolkit and work nicely with the kind of service that one wants to have when the New Year rolls around.

Outcome

The analysis of this music seeks to lay bare the spiritual and musical profundity of these works and understand why they are so readily accepted and sung during Reform Jewish worship.

Key Composers for Study

Dan Nichols

By blending rock and pop forms, Dan Nichols has exerted a robust contemporary influence on Jewish Reform music. He was born in Indiana and grew up in an interfaith family, converting to Judaism at a young age. His Jewish musical journey began at the URJ Goldman Union Camp Institute in Zionsville, Indiana. While at camp, he encountered the power of music to connect Jewish youth with their heritage. That experience has had a lasting influence on him, leading him to a path he has traveled for almost three decades—using music as a bridge to spirituality and community.

Nichols followed a path of formal musical training, culminating in a Bachelor of Music degree in Vocal Performance from the University of North Carolina. In 1995, he started the rock band Eighteen, which brought him dangerously close to the alternative rock scene that emerged in the mid-'90s. The band served as a vehicle for Nichols to write and perform original songs. When Nichols released his first solo album, “Life,” in 1996, he had already begun to break away from the Eighteen sound and was surging into a nascent Jewish rock scene.

Dan Nichols’s work often pairs the uplifting power of melody with the profound nature of Hebrew sacred text and liturgy. His songs beg to be sung and are a fitting complement to the services of Reform congregations and all kinds of Jewish worship.

The significance of Nichols’ influence on Jewish music cannot be overstated. He has taken age-old themes and given them a contemporary twist while maintaining a solid Jewish

message. His music says exploring the Jewish identity need not be a dusty, musty, or otherwise inauthentic experience. Nichols invites everyone in, and his music only heightens this goal.

Noah Aronson

Noah Aronson is an influential composer and performer who has charged contemporary Jewish music with new energy. Aronson came from a family of musicians in Massachusetts and grew up in varied musical surroundings. His father was a cantor, serving in a longline of cantorial service, and his father's style inspired Aronson to pursue a music career. He studied jazz composition and piano at the Berklee College of Music.

After relocating to New York City in 2008, Aronson became an intern at Pulse Music Publishing and Headroom Studios while also serving as the conductor of the Manhattan Hazamir Choir. In 2011, he released his debut album, "Am I Awake". The album includes the title track, which won the CAJE NewVoices Song Competition and quickly became a contemporary anthem within Jewish worship spaces. Aronson's second album, "The Left Side of the Page," set music to readings from the prayer book Mishkan T'filah. These texts are found on the left-hand pages of the prayer book, which present contemporary interpretations, reflections, or other poems alongside the traditional prayers on the right-hand pages. This album allowed progressive Jewish communities to engage more deeply with the Mishkan T'filah prayer book.

Aronson's most ambitious project is "The Chai Project," which, in 2018, involved producing 18 songs for 18 congregations in the U.S. Each song he created for this project reflects the unique identity of the community for which it was composed.

Aronson's latest album, *Close to the Fire*, was released in 2023. It features music that might best be described as intimate prayer, underscoring spirituality's personal and communal dimensions.

Aronson has affected much more than just composition and performance. He has been on the faculties of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), teaching in their cantorial programs and special community engagement courses like *Hava Nashira* and *Shabbat Shira*.

Josh Nelson

Today, Josh Nelson is one of the most prominent artists in the contemporary Jewish music scene. Both a talented multi-instrumentalist and a spellbinding performer, Nelson manages to walk a line that is perilously difficult for many contemporary Jewish musicians: He infuses traditional Jewish themes into his music while remaining accessible to a modern audience.

Nelson's musical journey began at age 19 while working at a Jewish summer camp (?? what camp?). The music of artists such as Debbie Friedman and Craig Taubman inspired him. Whether directly or indirectly, Nelson's career seems a tribute to those who have gone before him: his musical themes resonate with Jewish tradition, while the tools he employs to express those themes are decidedly modern.

Nelson's work is many-layered. He has presented over 1,000 shows internationally and in the U.S., including at the Union for Reform Judaism's Biennial and youth conventions. Nelson founded "The Warehouse," an alternative Shabbat service in bars and nightclubs. Performing nearly 100 shows yearly, Nelson still pushes the envelope on these gatherings.

As a music director and resident artist, Nelson often collaborates with synagogues, camps, and other Jewish institutions. Moreover, what he is after is nothing short of establishing “a meaningful and purposeful connection between the Jewish community and contemporary worship.” His vision involves making the music that helps those in attendance feel like they are bringing the Shechinah, the divine presence, into their midst.

Rick Recht

Today, Rick Recht is an influential figure in Jewish music, appealing to a demographic often seen as disconnected from the forms of worship that preceded them. With rock music as his background, Recht found a way to catch the ear of today's youth—a way that rocks while still embedding Jewish values in each note and lyric. Raised in St. Louis in a not-so-shallow Jewish milieu, Recht's youth was filled with the kinds of experiences that reinforced the symbols, songs, and memorable moments making up our tradition.

Recht's music has become known and loved for its ability to create a vibrant and engaging worship experience. Two of his most popular albums, “Free to Be the Jew in Me” and “Shabbat Alive!” are used throughout North America in summer camps, Shabbat services, and educational programs. Their appeal has made them staples for many congregational settings. “Shabbat Alive!”, in particular, illustrates the duality of worship allowed when engaging modern musical forms.

In addition to making music, Recht created two career-shaping platforms for himself and other Jewish musicians: Songleader Boot Camp (SLBC) and Jewish Rock Radio (JRR).

Rick created SLBC with Elisa Heiligman Recht and Rabbi Brad Horwitz in 2009 to provide training in Jewish leadership to “Jewish worship leaders, educators, and

songleaders.” The multi-day national intensive is held annually and hosts presenters from all across the spectrum of Jewish life. SLBC serves as a high-level incubator for the kind of Jewish leaders, organizations, and communities that want and need to spark fresh change.

JRR is a groundbreaking digital station—the first of its kind—devoted exclusively to contemporary Jewish music. JRR captures the spirit of Jewish pop, rock, folk, and hip-hop, creating a virtual space for Jewish communal engagement. The station is a playlist of modern Jewish music and serves as a virtual Jewish community for a generation that has become increasingly disconnected from traditional Jewish structures. Through its music, educational content, artist interviews, and live event broadcasts, JRR provides a platform for artistic and religious expression, fostering Jewish identity and inspiring a deeper connection to Jewish culture and values.

Julie Silver

A contemporary Jewish music icon, Julie Silver, has taken a unique road to reach her present artistry, one that is marked by a deep devotion to social justice issues and an inclusivity that is sometimes lacking in other contemporary Jewish life expressions. It is a path that started in Silver’s hometown of Newton, Massachusetts, found branches through a blended educational and life experience at Clark University, and truly blossomed when she worked in musical “formative” settings like Jewish camps. These camps might be pilot projects for parts of the Jewish community. They are places where one might find part of the Jewish community’s grassroots interior.

Silver’s impact reaches well beyond the Jewish realm. The 2007 release “It’s Chanukah Time” made history as the first Jewish holiday album to appear on the Billboard

charts. That moment encapsulates something about Silver and her music: her ability to appeal to broad and varied audiences. Though clearly and proudly embracing her Judaism, Silver's music is a bridge. At the heart of all her work lies a vision of healing—a sense of something broken that can be put back together with time and effort.

Silver is a strong proponent of social justice and uses her platform to shine a light on the often overlooked voices of marginalized communities. This focus is particularly true for the intersectional experience of the LGBTQ+ community. More often than not, the music she makes is healing for her and the communities she serves through her art. Last year, she launched a mentoring program for young Jewish artists that extends the work she does in her community.

Since the beginning of her career, Silver has been focused on crafting music that accurately reflects her real-life experiences and the values she holds dear. This music is her own, an expression of her “self.” It is a contemporary Jewish worship space that embodies a much more inclusive definition of what sounds and looks like worship: space that, in Silver's presence, becomes the kind of worship that rocks.

Julie Silver remains an adored performer and an effective advocate for Jewish music. Around the world, she supports several Jewish organizations, including ARZA, WUPJ, and Hadassah. She is a singer and a potent public figure whose presence challenges the limits of the label “Woman of Valor.” Her talks and concerts fill synagogues and lofts, and after her performance, she stays to meet and talk with fans and even skeptics who want to understand this moment better. Silver's reach and resonance are undeniable.

Elana Arian

One of the most influential voices in today's Jewish music is Elana Arian, a singer and composer whose music and prayer leadership impact communities worldwide. Elana's concert experiences range from the intimate to the grand, having performed in venues such as the JCC Manhattan and the Great Hall of the People in China. Arian is enthusiastic about the Jewish prayer experience; she brings that atmosphere, intimacy, and impact into her concerts. Moreover, she is also a gifted composer who creates songs that become central to a community's worship experience.

The music of Arian, which features beloved selections like "Gešher Tzar M'od" and "Hinei Mah Tov," is a staple in the spiritual communities, summer camps, and synagogues along the route from New York to Cape Town. Arian is known for penning tunes that are, at once, soulful, accessible, and related to the divine. She is also prolific, with more than a few albums to her name, and she makes music that resonates with many fine Jewish institutions serving up good music for Shabbat and havdalah.

Arian is not just a prolific recording artist; she is also a devoted educator and mentor. She teaches at the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music at the Hebrew Union College and often serves congregations as an Artist-In-Residence, spending extended time in various communities. She works closely with the community to help them use music imaginatively and effectively in their worship and educational settings. Arian's notable performances, from prestigious venues like Carnegie Hall to more intimate settings like the White House, have gained her a global audience. Her commitment to faith and the art and

craft of making music is one of balance and a resolve to bring connection and profundity to life's everyday moments.

Areas of Possible Further Study

Tech in Worship

How has technology changed the world of Jewish music? Today's contemporary Jewish composers have unprecedented means to express their artistry and reach audiences far beyond the synagogue's walls. Nevertheless, Jewish music is a tradition that still values the power of communal in-person worship.

Livestreaming

The technological advances of the past several decades have made bringing live worship music into the home possible. The widespread adoption of live streaming for services and events allows for an even broader reach. Nichol and Arian, among other artists, have covered this digital distance with their contemporary Jewish musical offerings. Some congregations find the use of digital worship tools suitable for their kind of blended service.

Social Media

Jewish musicians have utilized social media platforms to develop interactive communities with their audiences. These artists now perform "live" on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, intending to create intimate and even improvisational environments.

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