

UNIT 1

# JEWISH MUSIC 101: WHAT IS JEWISH MUSIC? OR WHAT MAKES MUSIC JEWISH?

(Content experts: Mark Kligman, Ph.D and Jeff Janeczko, Ph.D;  
lesson plan written by Rabbi Barry Lutz, M.A.J.E., RJE)

סיפורי מוסיקה  
STORIES OF MUSIC



“Jewish Music” comes in many styles, genres, and contexts. This lesson explores the many answers to the questions “What is Jewish Music?”

This lesson will serve as an introduction not only to the concept of Jewish music but also as a prologue for the entire curriculum. Using some of the themes of the different units (e.g. Sacred vs. Secular, Yiddish in America ...) this lesson will explore the concept and definition of Jewish music.

### **Enduring Understandings**

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

- Jewish music is an open, evolving concept; there are many ways to “describe” it. (musical, sonic/sound, conceptual, social/historical)
- “Jewish music” is a reflection of the historical, sociological and religious experiences in which Jews live.
- Jewish music is one facet through which to understand and define one’s Jewish experience.
- The Milken Archive is a repository and access point for hearing and learning about Jewish music.

### **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 are the components that “define” Jewish music?
- What social, historical, economic forces influence Jewish music?
- How does Jewish music both shape, as well as reflect, my own Jewish experience?

# The Lesson

## 1. Materials

- Computer with either internet connection or on which the presentation file for the lesson can be downloaded.
- Presentation slides.
- Speakers (Bluetooth or wired for amplification of audio and video selections).
- Projector and screen for viewing of slides.
- Whiteboard / blackboard / large newsprint pad.
- Microphone (as desired)
- Writing utensils / Paper

## 2. Resources (Biographical Summaries can be found in Appendix B)

- Yossele Rosenblatt
  - » Background biographical essay:  
<https://www.milkenarchive.org/artists/view/yossele-rosenblatt/>
  - » Kol Nidre by Cantor Yossele Rosenblatt
- Debbie Friedman
  - » Background biographical essay:  
<https://www.milkenarchive.org/artists/view/debbie-friedman>
  - » <http://www.debbiefriedman.com/>
  - » Lechi Lach by Debbie Friedman
- Craig Taubman
  - » Background biographical essay (in Box):  
<http://craignco.com/v3/wordpress/about-craig/>
  - » Hashkiveynu by Craig Taubman:  
<https://www.milkenarchive.org/music/volumes/view/cycle-of-life-in-synagogue-and-home/work/arvit-lshabbat/>
- Irving Berlin
  - » Background biographical essay
  - » God Bless America, Irving Berlin
- Max Christian Friedrich Bruch
  - » Background biographical essay: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Max\\_Bruch](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Max_Bruch)
  - » Kol Nidre, Max Bruch
- Leonard Bernstein
  - » Background biographical essay:

<https://leonardbernstein.com/about>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonard\\_Bernstein](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonard_Bernstein)

» On Symphony No. 1: Jeremiah (1942)

<https://leonardbernstein.com/works/view/4/symphony-no-1-jeremiah>

- Ofer Ben Amots

- » Background biographical essay,

<https://www.milkenarchive.org/artists/view/ofere-ben-amots>

- » Musical selection (highlighting east / west convergence) (in Box)

- » Video Essay on Jewish music

<https://www.milkenarchive.org/artists/view/ofere-ben-amots>

- Musical samples

- » Ashkenaz vs. Sephardi

- Bereshit bara Elokim, Yemenite

- Bereshit bara Elokim, North Africa

- Bereshit bara Elokim, Western Sephardic

- » Western Art Music

3. **Instructional notes:** Throughout these lessons, you will find suggested texts in discussion outlines. “Texts for the instructor are not meant to be “prescriptive” ie. spoken word for word, they are provided simply as a discussion guideline. Please use your own words.”

A. Some Principles of Adult Learning to consider (based on “What We Know About Adult Jewish Learning”, Diane Tickton Schuster and Lisa D. Grant):

- the motivation for participation often has more to do with connecting with / having an experience with friends than the subject matter.

- intrinsic motivation

- want to use their learning to deepen their understanding and seek connection of their life experiences to the content

- thrive in a ‘democratic atmosphere’ (discussion, experiential learning, collaborative inquiry)

- educated / sophisticated in many aspects of life, not so much in their Judaism.

- “life to Torah and then back to life again” (Rosenzweig)

B. This lesson, as well as those that follow, rely heavily on the following conceptual framework as a way to discuss and “define” Jewish music.

**Sonic:** utilizes elements like scales, rhythms, and ornamentation that are generally considered to “sound Jewish” but not necessarily specific tunes, etc.

Leonard Bernstein used cantillation motifs in symphonic works; jazz musicians might vamp on a Sephardic folk song; klezmer musicians record traditional freylakhs or Hasidic melodies.

**Meaning:** a musical piece has some kind of Jewish frame of reference but doesn’t necessarily use traditional tunes or scales, etc.

Anything that uses a Jewish text, is sung in Hebrew, Yiddish, Ladino could fit here.

For example: Max Helfman’s oratorio “The New Haggadah” is based on a poem about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Or, it could be something totally abstract, like an instrumental piece the composer feels reflects a Jewish concept or a personal identity

**Context:** “Jewish music is music created by Jews.”

This category is broad and not as easily defined. Essentially, we refer here to music by Jews or music in Jewish social/religious contexts.

For instance, songs by (Jewish composers) Debbie Friedman, Craig Taubman, Rick Recht, Beth Schaefer, are derived from long standing Jewish values, but do not always directly use a Jewish text. Nevertheless, both their origin and their use, over time, in Jewish camp and synagogue settings has cemented their place as Jewish songs.

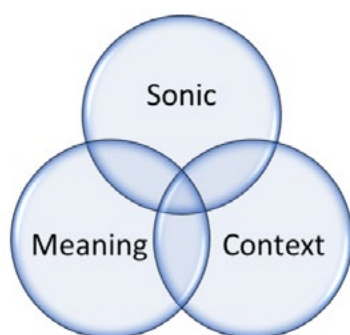
Questions rising out of this frame of reference include:

Does any music a Jew writes inevitably reflect some aspect of his or her Jewish identity even if there is no specific Jewish content? i.e. Berlin’s “God Bless America”, Bob Dylan, or most of the Tin Pan Alley and Broadway composers.

Can “non-Jewish” music played in Jewish contexts be Jewish music? ie. Max Bruch

Finally, it is important to emphasize that a lot of music can fit into multiple categories. This can serve as a reminder to students that music is not the “universal language” it’s often framed as, but rather, that musical “meaning” is contextual and subjective.

(See the following Venn diagram, based on work by Milken Archive Curator, Jeff Janeczko)



#### 4. Preparation

##### A. Advance Prep

1. Please read through the lesson.
2. Please read through, listen to, and familiarize yourself with all of the musical pieces referenced in this lesson.
3. Please read through the biographical reference material. Use this material to give brief biographical backgrounds on the musicians referenced in the lesson.
4. Please be sure to familiarize yourself with the technology used in this lesson. Please go through the slideshow at least once prior to instruction so you are comfortable with the “choreography” of the lesson.

##### B. Printing and Copying

1. Do copy **Appendix A: Listening Guide**, at least 3 per participant.

##### C. Classroom Setup

Room setup is at the discretion of the facilitator and may be contingent upon enrollment.

1. Projector and Screen should be set up.
2. Speakers should be connected to computer.
3. Technology should be tested in advance of class start time.

## Color Codes Used in the Lesson

This color is used to indicate suggested talking points for the instructor. Feel free to use the text as it is written in the lesson, or to paraphrase as you desire.

 These are questions to be asked of the students.

 Texts highlighted like this are points of information and/or suggestions for the instructor in teaching this lesson.

**THE LESSON**

JEWISH MUSIC 101:  
WHAT IS JEWISH MUSIC?  
OR WHAT MAKES MUSIC JEWISH?



## Introduction

Slide 1

1. Begin with a niggun or song to welcome everyone to the class.
2. Invite the participants to introduce themselves and say a brief word about themselves (ie. why they are taking this class?)
3. Explain “Today/throughout these sessions we will be exploring the question, “What is Jewish music?” and “How does Jewish music reflect and/or help me to better understand myself and my experience as a Jew living in the 21st c.?”
4. Invite the participants to introduce themselves and say a brief word about themselves (ie. why they are taking this class?)

### ? “What is Jewish music?”

Slide 2

Ask participants to write down their answer as they listen.

- A. Play Kol Nidre by Cantor Yossele Rosenblatt.

☰ Biographic information available in Appendix

- B. Play one of the following:

☰ Choose according to your learners familiarity with the music

–Lechi Lach by Debbie Friedman

–Hashkiveynu by Craig Taubman

☰ Biographic information available in Appendix

Slide 3

Slide 4

Slide 5

? What images, memories comes to mind when you hear these pieces of music?

? How do they make you feel?

5. Ask the learners to share their ‘definitions’ of “Jewish music”.

☰ On your white/black board, try to categorize responses loosely around the conceptual music frames referenced in the “Instructional Notes” above (p.5-6):

- Sonic: It sounds Jewish.
- Meaning: A musical piece has some kind of frame of reference, but doesn't necessarily use traditional tunes, scales, etc.
- Context: Jewish music is music created by Jews.

- 🔍 Do these two selections fit into your understanding of Jewish music?
- 🔍 Why, or, why not?

6. Continue: "Listen to the following piece of music."

- 🔍 Does it fit into your concept of Jewish music? Why, or, why not?

7. Play Irving Berlin's, "God Bless America".

Slide 6

(Jew writing 'secular'/non-Jewish themed music)

☰ Biographic information available in Appendix B.

- 🔍 What images, memories come to mind when you hear this music?
- 🔍 How does it make you feel?
- 🔍 Does this align with your idea of Jewish music?
- 🔍 Why or why not?

8. Play Max Bruch's: Kol Nidre

Slide 7

(Non-Jew interpreting Jewish liturgy)

- 🔍 What comes to mind when you hear this music?
- 🔍 How does it make you feel?
- 🔍 Does this Jewish music fit with your idea of Jewish music?
- 🔍 Why or why not?

9. Refer back to original learner descriptions of Jewish music.

- 🔍 Now that you have heard these four pieces of music, do you want to refine your concept of Jewish music in any way? How?
- 🔍 Is there anything you would add?

Is there anything we should remove?

10. Explain: “Our personal concept of Jewish music is certainly influenced by our own experience of that music. While we all certainly consider Rosenblatt’s Kol Nidre as ‘authentically’ Jewish music, and most would likely consider Friedman/Taubman’s or even Bruch’s composition to be “Jewish” - certainly, most would not consider God Bless America to be Jewish music, even though written by a Jew.”

11. Introduce/discuss the conceptual frames as a way to frame your discussion of the various ways in which we come to identify and understand a piece of music.

Slide 8–10

12. Differing Jewish sounds

Transition: For much of the history of the American Jewish community, “Jewish music” has been defined by minhag Ashkenaz, that is the musical tradition that has arisen out of musical sounds of Eastern Europe.

But, of course, Jewish music has been composed wherever Jews have lived. Over the millennia that has encompassed just about every corner of the globe.

Let’s listen to the sounds of some of these traditions.

☰ Avoid a “trope vs. music” discussion here. The purpose of introducing trope here is simply to introduce the participants to a variety of Jewish sounds.

13. Genesis 1:1

Slide 11

A. Ask for a volunteer to chant Genesis 1:1

❓ What do you know about this particular trope style?

❓ Where did it come from?

B. Give the background of the standard Ashkenazic trope most

familiar in American synagogues.

C. Chant/play Genesis 1:1 in these trope styles.

☰ Play each trope style without identifying.

1. Yemenite

Slide 12

- ❓ Can anyone identify this style?
- ❓ Where might you hear it?
- ❓ If you had not known, would you have identified this sound as Jewish? Why? Why not?

2. North Africa

Slide 13

- ❓ Can anyone identify this style?
- ❓ Where might you hear it?
- ❓ If you had not known, would you have identified this sound as Jewish? Why? Why not?

3. Western Sephardic

Slide 14

- ❓ Can anyone identify this style?
- ❓ Where might you hear it?
- ❓ If you had not known, would you have identified this sound as Jewish? Why? Why not?
- ❓ What do you think leads to this same verse sounding so different?

4. Highlight the differences

- ❓ What conclusions can we draw from the different sounds?

☰ This last question focuses on the Enduring Understanding: “Jewish music is a reflection of the historical, sociological and religious experiences in which Jews live.” For instructional reference, please see Appendix for a chart highlighting the characteristics of the different trope styles.

## 14. Western Art Music

Slide 15

- ☰ The question of ‘What is Art Music?’ may arise in your discussion. (It may even be a question you ask yourself.) The easy answer is, “You know it when you hear it.” A more substantive answer is, “music that has been carefully crafted, using advanced musical techniques and concepts.”

Transition: As our exploration of trope shows, Jewish music is defined by the historic, social and cultural contexts in which it evolves. (i.e. What are the “sounds” of the surrounding culture? What are the instruments? What was 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, Bach, Brahms, etc.) became accessible to Jewish composers. The intersection of sounds led to a distinct style of Jewish Art Music.

For example, listen to the following piece of music:

- A. Play selection from Bernstein Symphony No. 1  
1. Bernstein Symphony No. 1 - II. Profanation

Slide 16

☰ Biographic information available in Appendix

- ❓ Would you consider this to be a “Jewish” piece of music? Why or Why not?
- ❓ Does anyone hear anything familiar / “Jewish” in this Bernstein piece?
- ❓ Can someone chant the blessing before the reading of the Haftarah?

Slide 17

☰ (If no one is able the instructor should chant)

- B. Invite them to listen to Bernstein once again.

Slide 18

- ❓ Now, What do you hear?
- ❓ Can anyone tell me the name of this symphony? (Jeremiah)
- ❓ Who was Jeremiah?

☰ For more on Symphony No. 1: Jeremiah (1942):  
<https://leonardbernstein.com/works/view/4/symphony-no-1-jeremiah>

❓ How does this new information change the way you hear, feel, think about this piece of music?

C. Conclude this section: “Just as our own lived experience as Jews influences who we are in the larger world, so too did the sounds of Jewish life influence composers such as Bernstein who brought the musical expressions of their lived Jewish life to bear on the art music they composed for a much larger audience.”

The intersection of “host” culture and Jewish culture is something we will explore more fully in Lesson 2: “Is It Kosher.”

## 15. Yiddish Theater

Slide 19

Introduction: Just as Bernstein’s lived Jewish experience influenced the Art Music he created, so too did the Yiddish music of the Eastern European immigrants influence American music.

Not only were the composers of the lower east side influenced by the American music that they heard, the Yiddish music of the lower east side eventually made its way into the American mainstream as well. Out of that cultural mix came one of the most popular swing songs of the 1940s.

Composed by Sholom Secunda for a short lived musical comedy, called I Would If I Could (in Yiddish, Men Ken Leb'n Nor Men Lost Nisht, “You could live, but they don’t let you”)

Here is what the original song sounded like:

Play the video file for Bei Mir Bistu Shein

☰ Stop short of the chorus! (1:04)

Slide 20

❓ Does anyone recognize this song?

? If yes, where have you heard it?

A. Play The Andrews Sisters

Slide 21

Introduce Here is the song as you've likely heard it, first recorded by the Andrew Sisters in 1938.

? If you had only heard this version, would you have considered this song Jewish music?

Why? Or, Why not?

? What, if any, are the components that make it Jewish? Or not?

Conclude: We will return to the role Yiddish music played in early 20th c. America in Lesson 3: Di Yiddishe Amerike.

16. The Continuing Evolution of Jewish Music

Introduce: A variety of influences both within and without the Jewish community continue to influence the evolution of Jewish music.

? What do you imagine are the social, historic, cultural variables that influence the composition of today's Jewish music?

A. List responses on the board.

☰ Be prepared with your own items to contribute. They might include:

- An increasingly diverse American Jewish community: Sephardi, Persian, Middle Eastern, Israeli, etc.)
- Development on new modes of "American" music
- Adaptation of different modes of "American" music
- Evolutions in American culture and music
- Israel.
- The continued integration of Jews into American society.

B. Introduce Ofer Ben Amots

Slide 22

☰ Biographic information available in Appendix

Ofer ben Amots is a composer who represents one such dimension in the ongoing evolution of Jewish music. His music brings together a convergence of east and west in creating contemporary American Jewish Art music.

C. Play musical selection 18 Ben-Amots\_ Psalm 81.m4a

- ❓ How does Amots music make you feel?
- ❓ What are the different elements you hear in his music?
- ❓ What might you imagine are the things that influence his compositions?

☰ The discussion here is not about whether the participants like or dislike Amot's composition. Rather, it is about the different elements that influence and can be heard in his music. These different elements may make this music seem foreign, perhaps even not "Jewish" to their ears. That's just the point as we come to the end of this lesson—relating to this lesson's primary Enduring Understandings: that Jewish music is a reflection of the historical, sociological and religious experiences in which Jews live.

17. Return to initial concepts of Jewish music

"We have touched briefly on many different kinds of Jewish music. Let's return to our original definitions of Jewish music."

- ❓ Has your concept of Jewish music changed?
- ❓ If so, how would you now describe Jewish music?

18. Conclude: Let's let Ofer ben Amots provide the final thoughts in this session on the question of "What is Jewish Music?"

A. Play "Spotlight Series: Ofer ben Amots"

Slide 23

<https://www.milkenarchive.org/videos/category/documentaries/spotlight-series-of-er-ben-amots/>

B. Conclude with Amots' definition of Jewish music:

Slide 24

**"Jewish music is a reflection of individual and/or collective Jewish experience in a particular historical moment."**