

UNIT 3

DI YIDDISHE AMERIKE:
YIDDISH AS A REFLECTION OF THE
AMERICAN JEWISH EXPERIENCE

(Hinda Eisen Labovitz, Mark Kligman)

סיפורי מוסיקה
STORIES OF MUSIC



With the large Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Yiddish became a prominent feature of the American Jewish experience. Through Yiddish music these new immigrants expressed their allegiance to their new home land. They described as well some of the more difficult realities of the immigrant experience. Yiddish quickly made its way from the Lower East Side to Broadway, Hollywood and into American pop culture. Today there is a revival of interest in Yiddish music that is as reflective of the Jewish American experience today as it was a century ago.

Enduring Understandings

- Since the first wave of immigration from Eastern Europe at the end of the 19th century, Yiddish has been a prominent part of the American Jewish experience.
- For early Jewish immigrants, Yiddish provided a venue for expressing their enthusiasm and passion for their new homeland.
- Today, for many, Yiddish music feels like an authentic connection to Jewish ancestral roots.
- This transformation of the place and use of Yiddish over the past century is, itself, reflective of the transformation in the identity of the individual Jew vis a vis America and of the place of the Jewish community in America.

Essential Questions

1. In what ways did American Jewish composers express their patriotism through music in the early twentieth century?
2. How do these early 20th century attitudes reflect or conflict with current attitudes about American/Jewish identity among Jews?
3. What is the motivation for the Yiddish revival and today's new compositions?

Resources

1. Materials

- Whiteboard / blackboard / large newsprint pad (optional)
- Writing utensils / Paper
- Technology
 - » Projector and screen for viewing slides
 - » 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).
 - » Microphone (as desired)

2. Appendices

- A. Listening Guide
- B. Biographies
- C. Lyrics

3. Resources

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. Music (Recordings and/or Sheet Music, as indicated)

 **Lyrics, translations and transliterations may be found in Appendix 'C'.**

- Irving Berlin – “Jake the Yiddisher Ball Player” (1913)
[Sheet Music: Library of Congress]
- Alfred von Tilzer – “What Kind of an American Are You?” (1917)
[Sheet Music: U of Indiana Digital Library]
- Joseph Rumshinsky – “Long Live the Land of the Free” (1911)
[Sheet Music: Library of Congress]
- Joseph Rumshinsky – “Watch (Vatch) Your Step”.
- Henry Russotto – “Mayn Amerike” (1917)
[Sheet Music: Library of Congress]

- “Di grine kuzine” – Abe Schwartz (1921)
- Klezmatics renewal of, “Ale Brider”
- Cantor Sarah Myerson’s “A Khazn, A Froy”
- Mandy Patinkin: “Take Me Out to the Ballgame / God Bless America”

4. 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 that 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.

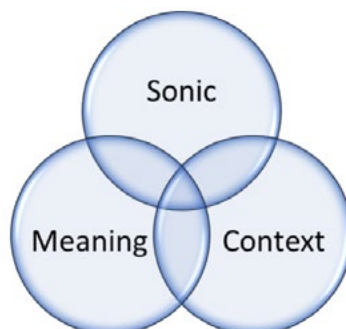
Questions rising out of this frame of reference include:

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)



5. Preparations

A. Before teaching

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

DI YIDDISHE AMERIKE:
YIDDISH AS A REFLECTION OF THE
JEWISH AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

The Lesson

1. Introduction

Slide 1

- A. Begin by welcoming everyone to the class (you might begin with a particularly Ashkenaz niggun or Yiddish song).

Have everyone introduce him/herself and ask for a few to respond to these questions:

- ? “Who in your family history immigrated to the United States, when, and from where? Say briefly why they chose to leave their homeland and come to the U.S.”**

Slide 2

2. Provide a brief historical overview of Jewish immigration to America.

☰ Using the timeline provided in the slideshow from the Library of Congress, give an overview of the landscape of Jewry in the United States leading up to the early twentieth century.

- A. 1700 – Jewish population in the US is between 200 and 300.

Slide 3

This initial community has Sephardic roots.

- B. 1790 – Correspondence between the Newport Jewish community in Rhode Island and George Washington.

Slide 4

- i. Note the highlighted quote: “For happily the government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens...”

Discuss that unlike the European countries from which US settlers arrived, the religious freedom available in the US during the 18th and 19th c. was novel and aspirational.

- C. 1820 – First major immigration of German Jews.

Slide 5

- D. 1881 – Massive migration of Eastern European Jews to the US

Slide 6

- E. 1900 – Jewish population has reached approximately 1 million.

Slide 7

- F. 1903 – “The New Colossus,” a poem by Emma Lazarus, is affixed to the Statue of Liberty.

Slide 8

- G. 1918 – American Jewish Committee is founded to help secure Jewish rights in post WWI Europe and in pre-Israel Palestine.

Slide 9

- Hand out to each participant one copy of the Listening Guide, **Appendix A**, for each song that you will play.

☰ The Listening Guide is a tool to help the listener to focus and synthesize what they are hearing in the different pieces of music. Go through it once, explaining each category, and articulating examples of how to fill it out.

- Expressions of Patriotism

Slide 10

- A. Irving Berlin

☰ Instruct participants that while they're listening they should fill out the Listening Guide.

- i. Review Berlin's biography.

☰ See Appendix B: Biographies

- ii. Listen to "Jake, Jake the Yiddisher Ball Player" (1913)

☰ Lyrics can be copied from Appendix C: Lyrics

- iii. Review the Listening Guide for "Jake the Yiddisher Ball Player".

Slide 11

- a. Have participants share their responses.

- B. Alfred von Tilzer

Slide 12

☰ Follow the instructional sequence in section 4 above.

- i. Review von Tilzer's biography.

- ii. Listen to "What Kind of American Are You?" (1917)

Slide 13

- iii. Review the Listening Guide

Slide 14

Von Tilzer's best known work is one of the most widely known and revered songs in America. It is sung in the middle of the 7th inning in every ballpark in America: "Take me out to the ball game."

? Why are these two songs, written in English, part of a lesson on Yiddish culture in America?

? What is Yiddish about these songs?

? What do these songs reveal about being Jewish and American in the early 20th century?

? Berlin and von Tilzer both changed their names. (Israel Beilin to Irving Berlin and Albert Gumm to Albert von Tilzer) Why? Why, even today, do people choose to change their names? How is this the same

or different from the choices of Berlin, von Tilzer, and others that we will meet in this lesson?

- ❓ Who are Berlin and von Tilzer addressing in their songs?
- ❓ What is the image of the person von Tilzer portrays in his song?
- ❓ What is the image Berlin portrays of Jake? Why? Why focus on a Jewish ballplayer? (How do you know he's Jewish?)
- ❓ How in the song do we know that Jake is Jewish, aside from the title? (Do we?)

C. Patriotism in Yiddish

There were many patriotic songs written in Yiddish as well.

Here is one example.

☰ Choose from Rumshinsky or Russotto.

See Appendix B: Biographies

- i. Joseph Rumshinsky Slide 15
 - a. “Long Live the Land of the Free”, (1911) Slide 16
- ii. Henry Russotto Slide 17
 - b. “Mayn Amerike” Slide 18

☰ Translated lyrics can be copied from Appendix C

Of course, the most well known of these patriotic songs, is the one written by Irving Berlin: “God Bless America,” originally composed by Berlin in 1918 and revised by him in 1938. Slide 19

- ❓ How does knowing that Berlin was writing “God Bless America” at the same time that von Tilzer was writing “What Kind of American Are You?”, Henry Russotto was writing “Mayn Amerike” and Rumshinsky was writing “Long Live the Land of the Free,” change the way you think about “God Bless America”?
- ❓ Why was it important for Jewish composers, most of whom were immigrants themselves, to participate in creating cultural elements that expressed patriotism/nationalism toward the

United States?

- ❓ How do these attitudes of about a century ago reflect or conflict with current attitudes about American patriotism/nationalism among Jews today?

5. The Realities of the Immigrant Experience

It is certainly not surprising that the “experience” of America was expressed in the common language of the new “greenhorn” immigrants. Yiddish writers and composers in the early 20th century described not just the ideal, but also the real day to day immigrant experience on the lower east side of Manhattan.

☰ Choose from one of the following two selections.

See Appendix B: Biographies

A. “Watch (Vatch) Your Step”

- i. Introduce Rumshinsky’s biography. (If not done in Section 7 above)
- ii. Listen to “Watch (Vatch) Your Step”.

☰ Translated lyrics can be copied from Appendix C

☰ More information about this song can be found in the liner notes on the Milken Archive of Jewish Music website <https://www.milkenarchive.org/music/volumes/view/great-songs-of-the-american-yiddish-stage/work/watch-your-step/#lyrics>

Slide 20

B. “Die Greene Koseene” - The Greenhorn Cousin

- i. (authorship unsure: Abe Schwartz/Jacob Leiserowitz/Hyman Prizant - see the liner notes at the Milken Archive for a discussion of this: <https://www.milkenarchive.org/music/volumes/view/great-songs-of-the-american-yiddish-stage/work/di-grine-kuzine/>)

☰ Listen to “Die Greene Koseene”.

☰ Translated lyrics can be copied from Appendix C

More information about this song can be found in the liner notes on the Milken Archive of Jewish Music website <https://www.milkenarchive.org/music/volumes/view/great-songs-of-the-american-yiddish-stage/work/di-grine-kuzine/#credits>

Slide 21

iii. Review the Listening Guide

- ❓ Does this song show a different attitude towards life in America?
- ❓ Some of the composers who wrote songs of American national pride and patriotism also wrote songs reflecting the harsher realities of life for a new immigrant. How were they able to write both?
- ❓ What ideas, concepts in the text do you find unique or unusual?
- ❓ What in the messages presented in the lyrics of these songs resonates with you in a modern context? What messages feel dissonant?

6. Yiddish Music Today

Jumping ahead almost 100 years, the role of Yiddish in the American Jewish community remains reflective of the changing place of Jews in American society. As we have seen, Yiddish was the ‘mother tongue’ of Eastern European immigrants to America. It is, therefore, not surprising that these immigrants turned to Yiddish language and music in order to express their commitment to their new American homeland.

What place does Yiddish have in Jewish music today? Let’s listen to this contemporary piece and then we’ll discuss.

☰ Choose one of the following:

- A. Play: Klezmatics renewal of, “Ale Briday”
Un Mir Zaynen Ale Briday (“And We are All Brothers”) is a traditional Yiddish folk song and a long-time favorite of the old-time leftist-leaning Yiddish workers and labor movement. The lyrics are based on a poem (“Akhdes” or Unity) by Morris Winchevsky [born as Leopold Benzion Novokhovitch in Yanove, Lithuania in 1856–died in New York City in 1932].

Appendix B: Biographies

☰ Translated lyrics can be copied from Appendix C

What do you think, feel when you hear this song?

- ❓ How does this song resonate differently today than it did 100
- ❓ years ago?

Slide 22

B. **OR Play:** Cantor Sarah Myerson’s “A Khazn, A Froy”

- ❓ What do you think or feel when you hear this song?
- ❓ Why do you think Cantor Myerson wrote this in Yiddish?
- ❓ What does Yiddish add to this song? (How would this song feel/be different if it had been sung in English?)

For both:

- ❓ There is a growing popularity of Yiddish culture today. There are a growing number of Klezmer festivals both in Europe and North America. On Broadway you can see Fiddler in Yiddish translation. Why do you think that there is this resurgence of Yiddish culture?

7. Conclusion

One hundred years ago Irving Berlin and Albert von Tilzer, a Jewish immigrant and a first generation Jewish American wrote songs that are today as American as hot dogs and apple pie.

Mandy Patinkin recently recorded this version of both songs. As you listen, consider:

- ❓ How does hearing these songs in Yiddish make you feel?
- ❓ What does hearing these songs in Yiddish make you think about?
- ❓ What do these Yiddish versions reflect about being Jewish in America today versus 100 years ago?

A. Play Mandy Patinkin: “Take Me Out to the Ballgame / God Bless America”

- ☰ [Liner notes for this recording can be found on the Milken Archive of Jewish Music website](#)