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Music & Memory: How Stories Can Influence Musical Choices in Prayer Spaces

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Senior Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Cantorial Ordination  
and Master of Sacred Music Degree

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion  
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New York, New York

2025

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the profound role of Jewish music in shaping prayer experiences, fostering spiritual connection, and preserving cultural memory across generations. Drawing on interviews with members of Reform Jewish communities in the New York tri-state area, the study examines how specific melodies evoke memories, deepen prayer, and create a sense of belonging. Participants reflect on their relationships with iconic Jewish melodies like "Shalom Rav" and "Mi Shebeirach," highlighting their roles in moments of joy, grief, and healing.

The findings reveal that Jewish music serves as a bridge between tradition and innovation, connecting individuals to their heritage while embracing new expressions of worship. It uncovers the tensions between familiar and modern tunes, illustrating the delicate balance between honoring the past and engaging the present. From comforting melodies to transformative communal singing, these narratives illuminate how music fosters resilience, unity, and intergenerational continuity within Jewish life.

Ultimately, this project affirms the centrality of music in the spiritual lives of individuals and communities, offering insights into its ability to transcend language and ritual, nurture personal and collective identity, and inspire enduring connections to Jewish faith and culture.

## **Introduction**

This thesis explores the profound impact of Jewish music on individuals' prayer experiences. Through a series of interviews with members of various Reform Jewish communities in the New York tri-state area, this project seeks to understand how melodies enhance, transform, or even hinder prayer. From childhood lullabies to communal singing, the voices in this collection of stories reveal music's capacity to evoke memory, emotion, and a deep sense of belonging.

To uncover these deeply personal connections, I asked each interviewee a series of questions designed to illuminate their backgrounds, experiences, and relationships with Jewish melodies. What is your name? What are your pronouns?

These questions served as a foundation for building trust and encouraging reflection:

1. Where did you grow up?
2. Where are you located now?
3. What did your Jewish upbringing look like?
4. What have been some of your most meaningful Jewish moments or experiences?
5. Are there any Jewish melodies that bring up specific memories for you?
6. I'd like for you to imagine yourself sitting in a service in your current Jewish community or congregation and that melody is sung, what does that do to your prayer experience?
7. What happens for you if you're expecting to hear it, and you don't hear it?

By asking these questions, I was able to gain insight into the unique spiritual journeys of each individual and uncover how specific melodies have shaped their prayer

experiences. For some, a particular melody evokes cherished childhood memories of Shabbat dinners or family time. For others, hearing a familiar tune during a challenging time offers solace, renewal, or even a connection to lost loved ones. Their answers reveal how music transforms prayer into something visceral, meaningful, and deeply personal.

The interviewees represented a diverse range of ages, backgrounds, and life experiences, including young adults, families, and retirees. Many have been actively engaged in their Jewish communities for decades, while others have rediscovered their connection to Judaism later in life. Despite their differences, a shared theme emerges: Jewish music serves as both a bridge and a mirror: connecting generations, carrying the weight of history, and reflecting personal moments of resilience, joy, and healing.

Through their narratives, we witness the power of melodies that transcend time and space. Whether it is a cherished rendition of "Shalom Rav" or the tender notes of "Hashkiveinu" sung as a bedtime prayer, these voices offer a window into the soul of Jewish prayer experiences. When familiar melodies are sung, they can deepen prayer, transport individuals to significant moments, or foster a sense of unity with the community. Conversely, the absence of these melodies--when expected--can evoke feelings of longing, loss, or disconnection, highlighting their emotional and spiritual significance.

In sharing these stories, this project aims to illuminate the central role music plays in our spiritual lives: how it roots us in tradition, lifts us toward transcendence, and reminds us that we are never singing alone. By providing practical tools for clergy to engage in meaningful dialogue with congregants, this work fosters collaboration in shaping musical liturgy and deepening the collective spiritual experience.

## Literature Review

Across the field of Jewish music and spirituality, various cantorial theses and projects have explored the profound relationship between music and prayer. Other works have also explored these ideas and can be referenced in the bibliography to provide a broader scholarly context. This section compares my work to that of several accomplished cantors: Cantor Danielle Rodnizki<sup>1</sup>, Cantor Vicky Glikin<sup>2</sup>, Cantor Alicia Stillman<sup>3</sup>, Cantor Jenna (McMillan) Pearsall<sup>4</sup>, and Cantor Rollin Simmons<sup>5</sup>. By analyzing these works, we gain insight into shared themes, methodologies, and the unique contributions each project brings to this vibrant area of study. I consulted these works throughout my project, and they influenced my analysis, emphasizing their relevance to this study.

All of the theses, including my own, center on the intersection of Jewish music and spirituality. They investigate how music--whether traditional or contemporary--influences prayer, worship, and individual connections to Judaism. My project contributes to this exploration by interviewing individuals and examining the role of

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<sup>1</sup> Danielle Rodnizki, *Integrating Repertoires: Stylistic Partnership in Jewish Liturgical Music* (Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music, New York, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Vicky Glikin, *Journey to God: Personal and Professional Benefits of Spiritual Development for Cantors* (Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music, New York, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Alicia Stillman, "The Blessing of Coming and the Blessing of Going" (Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music, New York, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Jenna McMillan, *Crafting Communal Worship on the Web: The Impact of COVID-19 on Congregations, Cantors, and Their Musical Teams* (Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music, New York, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Rollin Richmond Simmons, *Finding Common Ground in Uncommon Sound: Creating Meaningful Interfaith Worship* (Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music, New York, 2010).

specific melodies in their prayer lives. Similarly, Cantor Danielle Rodnizki examines the integration of diverse styles of Jewish music and their impact on the prayer experience.

Many of the theses emphasize the role of personal experiences in understanding the relationship between music and spirituality. Like my project, which uses interviews to gather personal stories, others rely on interviews or personal reflection to delve into subjective experiences within the Jewish community. These projects aim to uncover how music evokes emotions, memories, and a sense of belonging, shaping meaningful prayer and worship. For instance, Cantor Vicky Glikin interviews cantors to explore how their spiritual development influences their cantorial identity and relationship to music. Cantor Alicia Stillman draws on personal experiences and biblical stories to examine themes of personal transformation, while Cantor Jenna (McMillan) Pearsall interviews cantors, prayer leaders, and congregants to study the impact of the pandemic on worship and music.

A shared goal among these projects is understanding or creating meaningful worship experiences. My project investigates how specific melodies enhance or hinder the prayer experience. Similarly, Cantor Rollin Simmons examines the elements of meaningful worship and interfaith dialogue, and Cantor Jenna (McMillan) Pearsall explores strategies for engaging congregants in crafting meaningful worship experiences.

Many projects grapple with the tension between traditional and contemporary music within Jewish liturgical settings, striving to balance innovation with familiarity. My project examines how the absence of specific melodies can evoke feelings of loss, reflecting this tension. Cantor Danielle Rodnizki's work also addresses this balance by

studying collaborations between cantors and singer-songwriters to integrate diverse musical styles.

Several projects highlight music's role as a bridge connecting different groups or ideas. Cantor Rollin Simmons focuses on how music facilitates connections in interfaith worship settings. Cantor Danielle Rodnizki explores how music links diverse Jewish musical styles. Similarly, my project examines how music bridges personal experiences and spirituality, deepening individual connections to prayer and worship.

All of the theses incorporate interviews or personal stories as a key method of investigation. My project relies on interviews to uncover individual experiences with Jewish music and prayer. Cantor Vicky Glikin's work includes interviews with cantors, Cantor Danielle Rodnizki involves conversations with cantors and singer-songwriters, and Cantor Jenna (McMillan) Pearsall collects insights from cantors, prayer leaders, and congregants. Both Cantor Rollin Simmons and Alicia Stillman draw on personal narratives and reflections to enrich their analyses.

In summary, all of these projects share a concern with the intersection of Jewish music and spirituality, investigating how music shapes individual and communal experiences. These works are referenced in my bibliography, reinforcing my engagement with the existing scholarship. They rely on personal stories and interviews to illuminate their subjects, contributing to a broader understanding of how music enhances or hinders prayer and worship. While each project takes a unique approach, they collectively form part of a larger conversation about the role of music in Jewish life, underscoring the significance of my work within this broader context. These ideas are further supported by

additional works that I consulted and referenced in my bibliography, which provided valuable perspectives and insights that influenced my analysis.

## Stories

### **Susan**

Susan's story is one of resilience and a deep connection to both music and Judaism, shaped by the challenges she faced. Growing up in New Jersey, life at home wasn't easy. From a young age, Susan had a strong sense of justice and wasn't afraid to speak up when something felt unfair. One of the first times she did this was during her Bat Mitzvah preparation at a conservative synagogue. While her brother had a fancy Saturday morning Bar Mitzvah, she was only allowed to participate on Friday night and wasn't permitted to read from the Torah. At just 12 years old, she confronted the rabbi, saying, "I read better than my brother every day," and fought for something more equitable. Though she didn't get everything she wanted, that moment captured her willingness to stand her ground.

Susan's love for Jewish music goes all the way back to her childhood, where two prayers—"Shema" and "Chad Gadya"—held a special place in her heart. Her relationship with her father was complicated. He struggled with mental health issues, and although Susan was the closest family member to him, she also witnessed his difficult moments. She remembers lying in bed as a child, feeling helpless, and instinctively reciting the "Shema" for comfort. Even though she didn't fully understand its meaning at the time, the words, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One," became an anchor, something solid to hold onto when everything else felt uncertain. The "Shema" became a lifeline that connected her to something bigger, something constant. In contrast, "Chad Gadya" brought joy and lightheartedness. During Passover, Susan's family would sing "Chad Gadya" together, and she remembers how it could even soften her father's mood.

It was one of the few times they could share something purely fun as a family. Now, as an adult, Susan sees more depth in the song—it describes life's cycles, life's consequences, and how everything in life is interconnected. For Susan, both “Shema” and “Chad Gadya” are more than just prayers; they're woven into her personal history, symbols of comfort and resilience. These songs, along with the music of her synagogue, have been constants in her life, helping her navigate both joy and hardship.

As Susan grew older, she drifted away from organized Judaism for a time. Then, one night while flipping through TV channels, she stumbled upon a live Shabbat service. The music immediately drew her in. Even through the screen, she could feel the warmth of the community and the power of the melodies. After a few weeks of watching, she decided to attend in person. Although she wasn't comfortable in crowds, the music and the sense of connection she felt there overcame her hesitations.

Music quickly became a central part of her spiritual journey. She would go to services, mentally note the melodies, and then go home to learn them. She joked that her pitch and tone were always better when singing along with the congregation. For Susan, music wasn't just about the melodies; it was a way of feeling connected to the community, even when she wasn't physically present. She especially loved the healing prayers, always hoping they would sing something like Debbie Friedman's “Mi Shebeirach,” which deeply resonated with her. It combined music, prayer, and healing in a way that felt personal and comforting. Having experienced her father's struggles with mental health, she connected with the prayer's message of collective healing and found solace in the congregation's shared vulnerability when they sang it together. The song

became a spiritual lifeline, helping her process grief and find strength through her Jewish faith.

One particularly poignant memory was from the pandemic. A visiting artist named Chava Mirel sang “Achat Sha’alti,” and Susan was so moved that she bought her CD immediately. Listening to it became a source of comfort and connection, and she often found herself waking up with the melodies in her head. The CD brought her a sense of peace, helping her relive that meaningful moment whenever she needed it.

By the end of our conversation, Susan reflected on the profound role music plays in her life. “Music is like a healing thing, a comfort thing. It’s what keeps me going, even in tough times. Music means everything to me. It’s always there—through trauma, grief, joy, happiness—it’s just part of life.” Susan’s story is one of strength, with music and Judaism as her steady companions through it all. Even in the hardest moments, these constants have grounded her and brought her a deep sense of connection and healing.

## **Judy**

Judy grew up on Long Island and was raised by observant Reform Jewish parents. Judy's father, who had grown up Orthodox, became a strong advocate for Reform Judaism, believing it represented the future of the faith. Her family's commitment to Jewish practice was evident through regular attendance at Friday night services and her mother's active involvement in Hadassah, creating a rich foundation of Jewish identity.

As an adult, Judy and her husband moved to New Jersey. There they joined a Reform synagogue in a predominantly Christian community, aiming to ensure their children understood what it meant to be Jewish. However, her children responded differently than they had anticipated. Her daughter, feeling out of place among the "rich, spoiled, entitled" children in the synagogue, distanced herself from the community, while her son, "more of a conformist," embraced it. Ironically, her daughter eventually moved to Israel, and both of Judy's grandchildren now serve in the Israeli Air Force.

Music has been a central part of Judy's Jewish experience, a love that began in her early childhood. Sent to summer camp from a young age, she recalls, "I was five years old, and my sister was seven, [when we started] sleepaway camp," and the melodies she heard there still resonate with her. Songs like "Ein Keiloheinu" hold special meaning, bringing her back to those formative years. "When I hear Hatikvah, I get goosebumps," she says, recalling the time when Israel was recognized by the United Nations, and the song became a symbol of hope and pride for her family. These musical memories have stayed with her throughout her life and are a core part of her spiritual connection during services.

For Judy, music is more than just a part of the service--it is the essence of her prayer experience. "Music is the most important part of services today," she explains, which is why she is drawn to her synagogue's focus on incorporating meaningful melodies. She believes that simply "reading a prayer doesn't mean very much" without the emotional connection that music brings. Having spent her professional career in the music business, Judy understands the importance of introducing new talent and fresh melodies, but she believes it must be done carefully. "I don't think anybody responds to anything the first time they hear it, even if they love it," she explains. Introducing new music "in bits and pieces" allows the community to grow familiar with it, just as they would with old favorites.

When a familiar melody is unexpectedly replaced with a new one, Judy acknowledges that she "probably prefer[s] to hear the one I'm familiar with." However, she remains open to new music, drawing a parallel to concerts: "When people go to hear Billy Joel, you want to hear the old things that you know. And you don't mind if he puts in a couple of new things here and there, but you want to hear what you relate to because that's what that experience is."

As Judy reflected on her experiences, she offered a final thought on the importance of music in worship: "Music matters so much." For her, it is the thread that ties together the entire spiritual experience. She believes congregations that fail to recognize the significance of music in worship "are missing the boat." Judy's story is a poignant reminder of the deep connections between Jewish tradition, music, and personal identity, and shows how those connections can shape future generations in unpredictable ways.

## **Judith**

Judith grew up in Brooklyn, in what she described as a non-religious upbringing: “We celebrated Christmas, we had a Christmas tree and stockings... I really had no religious upbringing.” It wasn't until her daughter attended a local synagogue’s nursery school that her family began to engage with Jewish traditions more meaningfully.

At this synagogue, Judith became steadily more involved, eventually serving on the board while nurturing a growing love for Jewish music. The sanctuary’s beauty and the voices she heard moved her: “When I walked into the synagogue, I was just so taken with the...gorgeous sanctuary and listening to [the] Cantor sing.” Over the years, both of her children became b’nei mitzvah, went through confirmation, and stayed connected to the synagogue through their adolescence. Judith herself has been a member for over 50 years.

Music holds a special place in Judith’s heart. She admits, “I questioned whether there is a God... but it's the music that keeps me there.” Songs like “Avinu Malkeinu” and “Hashkiveinu” elevate her spiritually, even when she doesn’t fully understand the Hebrew words. Judith loves “Avinu Malkeinu” so much that she even requested to have it sung at her daughter’s wedding. Although the officiating rabbi explained that the piece is traditionally reserved for the High Holy Days for Judith, the request wasn’t about tradition but about the powerful emotional connection she felt to the melody.

Certain melodies also connect Judith to personal memories. The memory of “Lechi Lach” is bittersweet for her, as it was sung during a farewell gathering for this friend, someone she describes as being “like my sister.” As Judith recalls, “When she left, we had a little group, and we sang that song. It brings me to tears right now because I

knew she wasn't coming back." The lyrics, which describe a blessing for journeying into new phases of life, seemed to mirror the sadness Judith felt as her friend moved into a nursing home, marking the end of an era in their shared spiritual lives. Every time Judith hears the melody, it triggers those intense emotions, blending both loss and the love she still holds for her friend. It is not just the song's message, but the specific moment in time it captures that makes it so powerful: a communal goodbye to someone who had been integral to her synagogue experience.

For Judith, the music serves as a vessel for memory. Even without the words, hearing "Lechi Lach" transports her back to that poignant moment when she had to come to terms with her friend's departure. It encapsulates the essence of why Jewish music has such a central role in her spiritual life—not merely as part of a religious service, but as a way to hold onto memories and emotions that are deeply personal.

## Joy

Joy had always felt like an enigma within her own identity. Growing up in Brooklyn and Queens, she was born into a Jewish family but raised in a radically atheist home. "Each of my grandparents and parents had their own unique reasons for being non-practicing Jews," she would often recount, her voice tinged with the complexity of her upbringing. Despite the secular environment, Joy found herself drawn back to her Jewish roots later in life, particularly after the Pittsburgh Tree of Life massacre, which became a turning point for her.

Embracing her Judaism brought Joy to several significant moments, including her adult bat mitzvah two years ago, which she described with great enthusiasm as "definitely a highlight.". More recently, her journey took her through a transformative Spiritual Autobiography workshop with her rabbi. "I had to get in touch with what spirituality meant to me," Joy explained. "Up until very recently, I couldn't even say the word spirituality, I didn't even know what it meant." This workshop was a crucible for her, where she confronted and embraced her traumatic childhood. "I discovered that the shame I was afraid of was self-shame," she realized. "By verbalizing it to the public, I found that it was all my own shame."

Music played a significant role in this spiritual journey. Jewish melodies, in particular, evoked powerful memories and emotions. Joy remembered her grandfather's fondness for the songs from *Fiddler on the Roof*, especially "If I Were a Rich Man." Her grandfather's story was a poignant blend of the American dream and a melancholic reality. "He became a rich man, but later in life, when he had no money, he would sing 'If I Were a Rich Man,' which was ironic because he had been a rich man," Joy recounted.

This memory was so dear to her that she chose a unique epitaph for his tombstone: "A man's song lives forever."

Her passion for music extended beyond personal memories to her active participation in the Jewish community. As leader of a small group called City Outings, Joy regularly takes members of her synagogue to Jewish-themed events around the city. One such event was a concert of *Fiddler* selections performed by the lead of the Yiddish production. "Music is very spiritual for me," Joy shared. "It puts me in a place of transcendence."

When Joy's oldest friend Gary reached out with a video from a Grateful Dead concert, her initial excitement turned to dread as he revealed he had been diagnosed with stage four pancreatic cancer and had only three months to live. "Can I hop on a plane and come down and see you immediately?" Joy asked. Gary's response was heart-wrenching: "Oh my God, that would be amazing." So, Joy flew to Florida as soon as she could. Gary, still well enough to drive, picked her up. They spent 24 hours together, " [playing] music from the same speakers from like, when [we were] 15," she shared. And they danced to the music they had loved as teenagers. "We just held each other and danced to the music that we danced to when we were kids," Joy recounted, tears in her eyes. Wanting to give Gary something deeply meaningful, Joy sought guidance from her rabbi. "I didn't want to give him a physical gift. I felt like that would be too shallow. I wanted to give him something that truly mattered, something that would speak to our shared bond and his spiritual journey." So, Joy wrote a letter to Gary incorporating passages from Jewish texts that spoke about music's transcendent nature. As she says, "When I read [those passages] to him, he cried."

Gary's imminent departure and their poignant farewell moment left Joy with a profound sense of connection and sorrow. She had given Gary not just a visit but a piece of their shared spiritual and musical bond, a final gift that transcended their remaining time together.

One of the most meaningful Jewish prayers for Joy was the "Mi Shebeirach," the prayer for healing. "Of all the prayers, this one speaks to me the most," she said. "It talks about the source of strength rather than directly mentioning God, making it more universal and accessible." For Joy, this prayer's lyrics about renewal, "the renewal of body, the renewal of spirit," resonated deeply, particularly in recounting her relationship with Gary. The prayer's message of healing and renewal mirrored the profound emotional journey she shared with her friend--a journey filled with both sorrow and spiritual connection. Joy's spiritual journey, intertwined with her memories and experiences, was a testament to the power of embracing one's roots and finding meaning in tradition, music, and community. Through her exploration of Jewish melodies and the stories they carried, Joy discovered a deeper connection to her faith, her past, and her path forward.

## **Marjorie**

Marjorie's journey with Jewish music is a deeply personal and spiritual one, reflecting a connection that has grown and evolved over the decades. Growing up in suburban Newton, MA during the 1960s and 70s, Marjorie was raised in a Reform Jewish household where Jewish identity was central. Even though she didn't become Bat Mitzvah herself, her parents instilled a strong sense of Jewish values and community engagement in her.

Marjorie's bond with Jewish music deepened when she moved to New York City, where she has lived for many years. She is actively involved at her local synagogue, attending regular Friday night Shabbat services, singing in the congregational choir, and participating in a Yiddish choir. After a successful career in communications, music has become a focal point in what she calls her "third chapter" in life as evidenced by her recent foray into cantorial studies.

For Marjorie, Jewish melodies bring back significant memories and emotions, enriching her prayer experiences. One melody that has resonated deeply is the "Hashkiveinu" prayer, especially during COVID-19 when her community recorded their own versions to stay connected. This familiar and beloved melody brings a sense of peace and unity during turbulent times, grounding her in her faith and community.

Marjorie vividly recalls a time when she had to rush back from caring for her ailing father in Boston to attend Shabbat services. She remembers, "I had a particularly painful week in Boston that I spent with him. And I was able to catch a train and get back in time for Shabbat services." That particular service featured a specific melody for "L'cha Dodi," which she fondly calls the "Phantom of the Opera L'cha Dodi" melody

due to its theatrical introduction, and it held a special place in her heart. It served as a much-needed beacon of solace and joy after a tough week, reminding her of the strength and comfort found in communal worship and familiar tunes. "Often when I hear it, I think about my dad," she shared. Based on this vivid recollection, it is clear that this "L'cha Dodi" setting for Marjorie a moment of relief and spiritual rejuvenation after a period of hardship.

In the midst of her cantorial studies, Marjorie has encountered new melodies and compositions that have deepened her appreciation for the richness and diversity of Jewish musical traditions. Pieces like Schall's "Mah Tov", which she describes as sounding like a love song, Schall's "Kiddush," and Katchko's "Hineni" have all endeared themselves to her of late. While she values familiarity in her worship experiences, she also finds joy and meaning in learning new pieces, even those that challenge her musically. These new melodies, whether traditional or contemporary, contribute to her spiritual growth and her ability to connect with others through music.

Marjorie acknowledged her appreciation for Jewish music, while noting that her family, who also attends services with her, sometimes prefers familiar melodies they can comfortably sing along to—a sentiment shared by many in her congregation. One of the most emotionally resonant pieces for her is Debbie Friedman's "Lecha Dodi," which she finds deeply moving and evocative in its ability to make prayer personal and relevant. "There's nothing like Debbie Friedman's 'Lecha Dodi.' It's funny, one of my daughters laughs because it's such a beautiful and emotional rendition of a prayer. At the height of Bar Mitzvah season, we have two B'nai Mitzvah per Shabbat on a Saturday, and usually two people are becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah. So, we actually went to the earlier service

so I could get my crying out," Marjorie shared with a chuckle. This piece, celebrated by her family for its beauty and emotional impact, exemplifies how Jewish music can transcend the liturgical text, making spiritual connections that resonate deeply with individuals across generations.

Marjorie's journey into cantorial studies represents a fulfillment of a long-held dream, embodying the idea that it is never too late to pursue one's passion. Her dedication to learning and sharing Jewish music reflects her commitment to enriching the spiritual lives of others, particularly through the power of music in worship and community engagement.

Her story also underscores the transformative power of Jewish music in shaping personal identity, fostering community connection, and deepening spiritual experiences. Her journey from childhood in Newton to her current role in her NYC synagogue's musical life is a testament to the enduring relevance and emotional resonance of Jewish melodies in the lives of individuals and communities alike.

## Jeff

Jeff's journey with Jewish music is deeply intertwined with his personal and spiritual experiences. Growing up in Washington DC and Scarsdale, New York, Jeff's early exposure to Jewish traditions was shaped by a Conservative Jewish upbringing, though his parents leaned more towards assimilation than strict observance. He describes this period as having "very traditional" practices, but his family's focus was more on blending into American life rather than deepening their Jewish engagement. Jeff reflects, "My parents were far more interested in being Americans than they were in being Jews."

Despite this, Jewish music has always been special to Jeff. As he charted his own path, music became a vital link to his Jewish roots. Jeff shared, "Music is clearly the one that gets me. The sense of community and the Jewish values are the other two." His connection to Jewish music grew stronger through his involvement with his local synagogue, where he loved the "very community-focused" environment and the chance to engage with the music in a participatory way.

One standout memory for Jeff is from his Bar Mitzvah, which he describes as "one of the few times I've ever actually written music." He composed an original song based on a section of his Haftarah and performed it during services. This moment was unique and deeply meaningful for him, blending personal creativity with a significant religious milestone.

Jeff's trips to Israel also left a lasting mark. His first visit in 1974 was especially memorable because of the song "Bashana Haba'ah," which was playing nonstop on the EL AL airplane. "It was on repeat, I think, on the EL AL airplane flying there, so I think

it got stuck in my head,” he recalls. The song became a nostalgic symbol of his initial connection with Israel.

Jeff also loves exploring contemporary Jewish music. He has found joy in modern takes and innovative approaches, like a surf music version of traditional Jewish songs he heard at a festival in San Francisco. He calls it “one of the funniest things I’ve ever heard.” He’s also a fan of Nefesh Mountain, a band that blends bluegrass with Jewish themes. Jeff adds, “Their version of 'Modeh Ani' is on my wake-up playlist,” showing how their music resonates with him personally.

He’s also fond of the Barenaked Ladies' take on Hanukkah prayers, which he prefers for its unique fit with the holiday’s themes. Jeff humorously described his quest for novel Jewish music during the Christmas season as a way to celebrate his Jewish identity amidst the dominant cultural landscape.

Jeff has enjoyed significant engagement with services at his home synagogue, particularly noting the way specific melodies are woven into the prayer experience. He appreciates how these melodies enhance his connection to the prayers, “aligning perfectly” with the text and conveying the essence of Jewish values.

In reflecting on his experiences, Jeff feels a deep appreciation for Jewish music as a source of joy and community. “It’s really about finding what resonates with you,” he says, highlighting how music, both traditional and contemporary, has helped him stay connected to his Jewish heritage. His story is a testament to how Jewish music can bridge the past and present, offering comfort and inspiration through different stages of life.

## **Gayle**

Gayle's earliest memories of Jewish music were woven into the rhythm of her childhood in Wilmington, Delaware. Her life revolved around the synagogue, a bastion of tradition, where she attended Hebrew school four days a week. "I loved Hebrew school," Gayle said with a sparkle in her eyes as she recounted those days. "Friday night services and learning were my favorites."

Gayle's cantor, a Holocaust survivor from Europe, brought a solemn reverence to the melodies he sang. His voice, steeped in history and resilience, left a lasting impression on young Gayle. "The cantor was very traditional in his melodies," she explained, his voice still clear in her memory.

Summers were spent at Camp Ramah in the Poconos, deepening Gayle's connection to Jewish music. "We had morning services every day and all-day services on Saturdays," she reminisced. The Hebrew-rich melodies sung there became as integral to her "as my own heartbeat."

As she grew older, Gayle's journey took her from Boston University to New York City. Yet, wherever she went, those familiar tunes followed her, comforting and familiar. Moving to New Jersey in 2000 introduced her to new traditions, but the old melodies remained a constant source of solace.

One of Gayle's most cherished routines was attending Friday night services at her local synagogue. Amidst modern renditions and new tunes, she often found herself drawn back to the familiar. "After the silent prayer, I always gravitate towards 'Sim Shalom' and 'Shalom Rav,'" she admitted with a smile. "I sing them in my head just like I learned them."

These melodies weren't just songs for Gayle: they were time machines, transporting her back to her childhood sanctuary and to the campfires of Camp Ramah. They anchored her, reminding her of her roots and shaping her identity.

When asked about specific memories evoked by Jewish melodies, Gayle paused, her mind wandering back through the years. "They remind me of my upbringing," she softly said. "We sang them so often; they're ingrained in my memory."

Even the newer melodies she learned later in life, like settings of "Hashkiveinu," found a special place in her heart. "I adore 'Hashkiveinu,'" she confessed, her voice filled with emotion. "I don't remember singing it growing up, but the way it's sung at my synagogue brings peace and calm to my day."

For Gayle, these melodies weren't just prayers set to music; they were expressions of her deepest feelings, connecting her to a larger narrative. "Any prayer with music has deeper meaning," she explained. The melodies made the prayers resonate more deeply, engaging her emotions in a profound way.

Gayle's relationship with Jewish music reflected its enduring power. From childhood tunes to camp anthems and contemporary pieces, each note told a story—a story of Gayle's life, her faith, and her unyielding connection to her Jewish heritage.

## Serena

Serena grew up in Manhattan where her Jewish upbringing was shaped by a mix of influences from her family and community. Despite attending Hebrew school from kindergarten through eighth grade, her Jewish life at home was minimal. "My mother's parents were Holocaust refugees from Germany. They were...assimilated Jews, and I don't even know what kind of Jewish upbringing my grandmother had, but she felt very strongly Jewish because she was targeted for being Jewish," Serena recalled.

Her father's family, hailing from Long Island, also led a relatively assimilated Jewish life, even incorporating Christmas traditions into their celebrations. "I remember him telling me that they would celebrate Christmas with a Christmas tree," she said. They observed Jewish holidays, but the family's involvement was mostly limited to synagogue visits during the High Holidays.

Serena's deeper connection to Judaism began in high school when a rabbi from a nearby synagogue taught Hebrew at her school. This rabbi became a mentor, inspiring Serena to study Hebrew more seriously. "I kind of fell in love with it, with Hebrew, with the whole learning Hebrew. This rabbi was like a real mentor. He encouraged me to consider Hamilton College, which I did, and we kept in touch," she shared.

While Serena's early Jewish experiences were sparse, she did participate in significant programs like the Israel Friendship Camp sponsored by Edgar Bronfman. "It was the first time I had spent considerable time just with Jewish people. It was a meaningful experience for me," she noted.

After college, Serena continued to deepen her Jewish knowledge and connection. Despite her love for Hebrew and Jewish studies, she realized that a career as a Jewish

leader was not her calling. "I loved...studying Hebrew and learning Biblical Hebrew, but I didn't feel like I was the future leader of the Jewish community," she admitted.

Serena's relationship with Jewish melodies and prayers has been profoundly impactful. She shared memories of her childhood, recalling basic Jewish melodies like "Hinei Ma Tov" and how she now enjoys seeing young children learn the same songs at the Jewish preschool where she works. "It's really special for me because it feels like a connection across generations."

Certain melodies evoked strong emotional responses for Serena, even without specific memories attached. Pieces like "Sim Shalom," "Echad Eloheinu," and "Dodi Li" hold a special place in her heart. "There's just something about the music, the progression of the notes that I really respond to, and I don't really understand it," she pondered.

Serena cherished the moments spent with her children, Griffin and Declan, especially during bedtime when she would sing to them. She shared Jewish melodies that held so much beauty for her, like "Esa Einai," "Dodi Li," and the "Sh'ma," which became a part of their nightly routine. Singing to her children was not just a way to lull them to sleep; it was a way for Serena to pass down the meaningful parts of her Judaism.

Recently, her younger son, Griffin, remembered a conversation they had about the name Ezra, and Serena mentioned the line "Ezri me'im Adonai" from "Esa Einai." Griffin recalled her singing that to him when he was younger. For her older son, Declan, these bedtime songs provided a sense of comfort and connection to their family's traditions. Through these moments, Serena was passing on the significance of her Jewish faith and culture to her children.

Serena's prayer experience is deeply enhanced by these melodies. "Singing is all about the breath. I wanted to take voice lessons because I love singing, and I wanted to be able to sing in a way that felt pleasing to me," she explained. This newfound understanding of breath and voice has transformed her participation in services. "It's like a whole body, meditative experience."

One of her most cherished moments is the melody played when the Torah is returned to the ark, Tanchum Portnoy's "Eitz Chayim." "I always close my eyes and just try to hear nothing but the music. It feels very meditative," she described. This connection to the music extends beyond singing; she finds deep meaning in chanting Torah as well. Learning the art of cantillation opened a new world for her, adding layers of meaning to the texts.

Serena's journey with Jewish music and prayer has been a rich and evolving experience, from her childhood days in Hebrew school to her current role in a Jewish preschool. Through mentors, personal study, and a love for melodies, she has cultivated a profound and personal connection to her Jewish identity. "There's so much about melody that is really meaningful to me," she concluded, embodying a lifelong journey of discovery and connection through music.

## **Becca**

Becca grew up as a military brat, spending her childhood in various locations, including Germany and Virginia. Owing to her transient upbringing, her Jewish journey began later in life through her ex-husband. Becca converted to Judaism in 2014, drawn to it by her connection to her ex-husband's family and her visits to his mother's home during holidays. Her synagogue became a significant part of her Jewish experience, as it was where she and her ex-husband joined the congregation, marking the same year of her conversion.

Becca's Jewish memories are deeply tied to moments of personal transformation. One of the most significant experiences was attending what she calls "Jewish divorce camp" after her divorce. The program, formally known as Divorce and Discovery Camp, was held in a beautiful forest setting in California, where the Saturday morning service took place. Becca couldn't recall the exact parashah that was being chanted that week, but shared how strangely applicable the words were to her life in that very moment. For each of the Aliyot, they invited up participants based on how they related to varying examples and scenarios. "Whoever identified with it, they could go up and it was just so powerful," she shared. "Like to be in the middle of this forest, with the sun shining and these huge redwoods was just so powerful."

Music has played a significant role in Becca's spiritual life. During her time at the camp, she recalled a particularly moving moment. "It was a group of like 30 or 40 of us and we are singing in unison but also in a round.". This form of collective singing, where voices overlap, blending and echoing, created a shared sense of unity and emotional resonance. Becca also shared how she sings the "Hashkiveinu" prayer as a lullaby to her

kids, finding particular comfort in Danny Maseng's melody. She referred to it as a "lullaby" and emphasized its role in creating a soothing bedtime routine: "it's like a goodnight kind of thing." The calming nature of the melody aligns beautifully with its meaning, a prayer asking God to spread a protective shelter over us. By incorporating "Hashkiveinu" into their nighttime rituals, Becca not only passes down a meaningful Jewish tradition but also instills a sense of comfort and warmth in her children's lives. Singing it at bedtime reinforces their connection to their Jewish heritage and provides a nurturing atmosphere as they prepare for sleep.

Becca's journey through Judaism, marked by personal transformation and community connection, highlights the profound impact that spirituality and music have had on her life. From her early childhood as a military brat to her significant moments at "Jewish divorce camp," each phase has shaped her understanding of community and personal growth. Her experience of communal singing with peers and including Hashkiveinu as part of a nightly bedtime ritual reflect not only her deep emotional engagement with Jewish practices but also her desire to nurture a strong connection to heritage within her children. Ultimately, her story underscores the power of music and ritual in forging meaningful connections within her own life and her family's.

## **Edward**

Edward was born to founding members of a synagogue in Massachusetts. Though his religious upbringing was rooted in Reform Judaism, his most formative experiences came from his time at a Jewish summer camp. Reflecting on this, Edward noted, "Even before there was a Debbie Friedman, we sang music differently there than we would in synagogue."

As he grew older, Edward's love for Jewish music deepened. He realized that much of his spiritual engagement stemmed from the melodies that moved him. "I realized it's because of the music," he explained, recalling how the camp melodies stood in contrast to the traditional synagogue services, where he often felt disconnected. While his Bar Mitzvah and confirmation were significant, camp remained the central influence in his religious education.

One of the most profound moments in his adult life occurred when he attended a service at a synagogue in New York City shortly after the 9/11 attacks, which coincided with the synagogue's reopening following a devastating fire. Edward described the service as "electrifying" and "compelling," with a deep sense of familiarity that struck an emotional chord. Another pivotal moment came after the Sandy Hook school shooting. Overwhelmed with grief, Edward turned to the NYC synagogue's livestream and found immense solace in the clergy's words and the music, which moved him to tears.

Over time, Edward's connection to his synagogue deepened, with weekly Shabbat services becoming a source of healing and meaning. "Every Shabbat is different than the one before... I leave there each night saying, 'Well, there's never been anything more meaningful than this,'" he reflected.

Edward shared a particularly moving story about the prayer “Nachamu,” which became deeply personal to him. Composed by Elana Arian, the setting connected with some of his most intense memories. He recounted a time when his synagogue stopped singing Carlebach melodies and the cantor was asked to write a replacement. Though she initially hesitated, saying it was impossible to compose such a piece in a short time, “Nachamu” was born. Edward remembers sitting beside the cantor in the pavilion as she told him the story and said, "Watch this," before singing “Nachamu” for the first time. For Edward, the moment was "tear-inducing" and felt absolutely perfect.

What made “Nachamu” even more special for Edward was how it became intertwined with the memory of his parents, especially his mother. When the cantor asked Edward what music he wanted for his mother's funeral, he immediately requested “Nachamu,” recalling the profound emotional impact it had on him the first time he heard it. "It really worked," he said, describing how the song became a powerful, recurring reminder of his parents and his grief. His father passed away just weeks after his mother, adding another layer of meaning to this already poignant melody.

Edward also recalled a more recent experience after his uncle passed away. During a Friday night service, the cantor sang “Nachamu” again. Edward described the experience as serendipitous and profoundly comforting. "It was just what I needed to hear," he said, feeling as though the song had been there to console him in his grief. He shared this with the cantor afterward, saying, "I can't believe how lucky I am to hear this tonight."

For Edward, “Nachamu” transcends its musical beauty. It is closely tied to his most personal and emotional memories, evoking a deep sense of comfort and connection

with his loved ones who have passed away. To him, the song represents more than just a melody—it embodies his emotional journey of loss and the healing power of music.

Edward's reflections reveal a profound connection between music and his spiritual life, a relationship that sustains him through both joyous and difficult times.

"There's so much of the music that you all sing to us or have us sing with you that is transformative to me," he said, capturing the deep emotional impact that Jewish melodies have had on his journey.

## Nancy

Nancy grew up with music embedded in her life, thanks to her family's deep musical roots. "My paternal grandfather was actually a concert pianist, singer, violinist, and organist, and studied at the Berlin Conservatory," she shared, recalling how her grandfather's intense dedication to classical music, taught by a line of masters, infused her home with melodies from an early age. Her father kept this tradition alive, always filling the air with classical compositions.

For Nancy, Jewish music has been a binding thread throughout her life, stretching from her youthful involvement in organizations like NFTY to the present day. Reflecting on her experiences in Jewish youth conclaves, she described the lasting impact of influential artists from the 70s and 80s: "Debbie Friedman, Jeff Klepper, and Dan Freeland...a lot of that music...was very inspiring to me." Those songs, and the memories they carry still resonated deeply within her. "Every time [I hear them] ... I always have this sort of like, 'Oh, I remember,'" she says, describing how familiar tunes bring her back to her youth.

Nancy's connection to Jewish music extended to teaching. As a music teacher at her temple, she remembered creatively engaging fifth to seventh graders. "I would get creative and look to maybe play different versions, from the very ancient...to the modern. They use the same words, but they're just different tunes.'" She tried to connect students to spirituality in ways they could understand, sometimes introducing songs like Barbra Streisand's famous recording of Janowski's "Avinu Malkeinu" and even turning to Ecclesiastes with pop culture references like the Byrds' rendition of Pete Seeger's "Turn, Turn, Turn."

Nancy described Ben Steinberg's setting of "Shalom Rav" as a touchstone of her High Holy Days experience, holding a unique resonance that drew her deeply into memories from both her youth and adulthood. "There was a woman," she remembered, "Her name was Louise, and she was part of the augmented choir back in the 70s. She would sing that song, and... I could not believe how beautiful it sounded." This early memory left such a strong impact that every time she hears Steinberg's "Shalom Rav," she feels a profound sense of peace and connection. The melody, enduring through time, keeps bringing her back to the sanctuary, filling her heart with gratitude and familiarity noting, "that version is huge for me."

Nancy also has a profound relationship with Debbie Friedman's setting of "Mi Shebeirach," one deeply tied to her family's journey through illness and grief. At one point, Nancy's mother was in hospice while her sister-in-law was in the midst of battling breast cancer. "There was a time where we sang 'Mi Shebeirach' at temple for [both of] them," she recalled. Her husband once questioned whether the weekly ritual of prayer was making a difference. His doubt reflected a deeply human yearning: to see tangible proof that their faith and ritual were making a difference. As a prayer of healing, they always sang "Mi Shebeirach" with the hope that it might reach Nancy's mother and sister-in-law, offering them strength, if not recovery.

In that moment of doubt, a friend, sitting nearby, responded gently but firmly, "Maybe it is, and you just don't know it." This response brought an unexpected, quiet comfort to Nancy and her husband. The friend's words reminded them that the act of prayer is not always about visible outcomes or answers we can see. Instead, it can be an

expression of faith, a hope, and sometimes even a release — a way to put their grief, fears, and love into something larger than themselves.

Nancy reflected that, in those difficult weeks, her family became more present in the prayers. Even without visible outcomes, they found solace in simply gathering, week after week, held by the words of “Mi Shebeirach.” There was a comfort in knowing they had each other, the song, and the unwavering hope that, somehow, the prayers might have a gentle impact, unseen but felt deeply.

Over time, the prayer took on a more profound meaning. It wasn’t just a request for physical healing but an offering of strength and a way to build resilience together. In the act of singing “Mi Shebeirach” as a family, they found healing — not in the form they originally sought, but through a strengthened bond, a deepened faith, and a shared memory that continues to live within Nancy long after her loved ones had passed. Her friend’s words, “Maybe it is, and you just don’t know it,” became a mantra of sorts, a reminder that faith and ritual can work in ways beyond what we can immediately see or understand.

When asked what these melodies do for her prayer experience, Nancy’s response was heartfelt and grounded. “Well, it reminds me that I really should bring tissues,” she said with a touch of humor. She remembered a conversation with her daughter, who missed the music while attending services at her college. “She said, ‘I couldn’t live without the music,’” Nancy recalled.

## Robert

Robert, a lifelong member of his local Reform synagogue, grew up in Livingston, New Jersey, in a Reform Jewish household. Robert's Jewish experiences were deeply intertwined with his family life. Significant moments included hearing the powerful voices of his childhood cantors, attending family Bar Mitzvah ceremonies in Jerusalem, and getting married on the bimah underneath the *ner tamid* (*eternal flame*).

Robert spoke vividly about the impact of hearing his childhood cantors sing. "They both had these incredible, resonant voices that seemed to fill the entire sanctuary," Robert recalled. "It was like [they] could reach into the very soul of the congregation and pull out a shared experience through [their] singing." He remembered their voices as rich and enveloping, with a tone that conveyed a deep sense of tradition and emotional depth. For Robert, hearing them sing was an experience of feeling deeply connected to the music and the community. The way they sang made each service feel profoundly meaningful, reinforcing the importance of music in Robert's spiritual life.

These experiences helped shape Robert's understanding of how Jewish music could be both a deeply personal and communal experience. The beauty and power of their singing left an indelible mark on him, influencing his appreciation for melodies that evoke a deep sense of peace and connection.

For Robert, "Shalom Rav" --especially the setting by Jeff Klepper and Dan Freeland--held immense meaning. He described it as "not only the perfect version of that song, but one of the most perfect melodies that I know in all of Jewish music." He emphasized that the melody was synonymous with peace: "It reeks of shalom." The song was more than a personal favorite; it was tied to cherished memories of his father and

father-in-law, both of whom loved the melody deeply. Robert recounted that at his father-in-law's funeral, despite his father-in-law's non-religious stance, he asked the officiant to sing the song. "My dad loved it for lots of reasons," Robert noted, highlighting the generational ties to the melody.

The power of "Shalom Rav" for Robert lay not only in its melody but also in the word "shalom," which he notes has a multi-layered meaning. "It translates in so many ways that make it such a powerful word." To Robert, the pursuit of peace, embodied in the word "shalom," was a central theme in Jewish history and identity. He connected it to both personal experiences and the broader Jewish longing for peace, especially in Israel. "Peace has been the existential question of every generation in Israel and the most difficult thing to achieve," he said, noting that even in times of personal and collective unrest, "Shalom Rav" held a promise that resonated deeply within him.

Robert described his approach to the Friday night service as a time to decompress and "turn off the world." He often preferred to sit in the back, away from others, to quietly absorb the flow of the service, allowing himself to be fully present. He shared how he and his rabbi had many discussions about this practice, with the rabbi intrigued by Robert's desire to use the service as a way to slow down and focus solely on the moment.

For Robert, the Klepper-Freeland version of "Shalom Rav" was a song that raised the emotional bar of the Friday night service. He explained, "Even if it's another version, it kind of throws me off kilter a little, but nonetheless, the words are the same and the music is still inspiring." In addition to evoking memories of his father, the setting also calls to Robert's mind his early experiences in the 1970s and his lifelong relationship

with the music since then. He acknowledged that while “Oseh Shalom” was another significant piece of liturgy that spoke to the theme of peace, for him the perfection of “Shalom Rav” lay in its melody. He likened it to “taking one of the perfect Beatles melodies and saying, ‘Why is it perfect?’” He continued, “It’s just the right thing for me.” His grandmother, who wasn’t religious but valued personal connection to art, had always told him, “Whatever moves you--whether it’s art, music, or ballet--is what’s right for you.” For Robert, “Shalom Rav” was just right.

Though he avowedly prefers the Klepper-Freeland “Shalom Rav,” Robert remained open to the evolution of musical interpretations. He joked with his rabbi, saying, “I like this version, you should always do it,” but he recognized the importance of change. “Change is critical in everyone’s life. Evolving is what’s important in everyone’s life,” he noted. He respected that different versions might be right for different moments and found that his quiet participation during services, whether or not he sang along, allowed him to find meaning and connection. Robert described this approach as being “quietly alert,” reflecting his appreciation for the music and its role in his spiritual experience.

Robert’s deep connection to “Shalom Rav” is a testament to how music can embody and express profound personal and collective themes. For him, the melody is not just a musical piece but a reflection of his journey through life, his family’s history, and his spiritual aspirations. It represents a constant, soothing presence amidst life’s changes and challenges, reinforcing the timeless quest for peace that resonates throughout his life and faith.

## **Ira**

Ira grew up in Great Neck, Long Island and attended his local synagogue until he was expelled from religious school in eighth grade. "I was kicked out of religious school in eighth grade. It was a tough moment, and my parents, who had been deeply involved in the temple, decided to leave too. That incident marked a significant turning point, leading me to distance myself from Jewish practice for a while." His connection to Judaism was rekindled later through his wife, Linda. When they moved to New Jersey, they joined a synagogue which would become Ira's spiritual home. His journey back into Jewish practice was significantly shaped by music, especially during the High Holy Days, and the profound emotional connections Jewish melodies sparked in him.

A key moment in Ira's adult Jewish experience was when he and Linda decided to spend the entirety of Yom Kippur at the temple while chairing the Couples Club. Since then, Ira has faithfully attended Yom Kippur services each year, describing it as the time he feels most "traditionally Jewish," cherishing the deep spiritual connection during services. He recalls a study session with his rabbi that made him realize just how much there was to learn, exclaiming, "I'm the stupidest person at our temple!"

Music has always been central to Ira's connection with Judaism. He fondly remembers a young woman playing the harp during a High Holy Day service as a profoundly moving experience: "It was like a moment where you want to cry," he shared. His cantor has been instrumental in shaping his prayer experience, introducing him to more music during services. However, despite the cantor's efforts to diversify melodies, Ira clings to certain traditional tunes, particularly the Klepper-Freelanders "Shalom Rav."

Ira spoke fondly of "Shalom Rav," recalling its significance and how it has become woven into his Jewish life. "I love that song to the point where I carried a small version of the lyrics in my wallet for years," he said. "When the melody changed, I felt such a deep connection to the 'traditional' version that I had to speak up. It's not just a song; it's a cherished piece of my spiritual journey." This incident highlights his attachment to preserving what he feels is the traditional melody, even though changes might be made for special occasions.

"Avinu Malkeinu" also holds a special place in Ira's heart, especially in relation to his family. He described playing Barbra Streisand's recording of Janowski's "Avinu Malkeinu" at his parents' gravesite, where he pours scotch on his father's grave and places flowers on his mother's. This ritual underscores the deep emotional connection he has with this melody. "Avinu Malkeinu' is more than just a prayer to me; it's a bridge to my past. Playing Barbra Streisand's rendition at my parents' gravesite is my way of honoring them and keeping their memory alive. Every time I listen to it during the High Holidays, I find solace and a deep connection to my family and my roots," he reflected.

For Ira, the emotional connection to Jewish music is unmistakable. The melody of "Shema Koleinu" during the High Holy Days often moves him to close his eyes and just listen, deeply immersed in the beauty of the moment. "It's a beautiful melody," he said, reflecting on how it transported him to a place of profound spiritual connection.

"Music is the heartbeat of my Jewish experience. It's not just something I hear during services; it's what touches my soul and connects me to my faith and my past. Each melody, whether it's a traditional tune or a moving performance, holds a profound emotional resonance that helps me rediscover and deepen my spiritual identity." For Ira,

music is not just a backdrop for his prayer life but the emotional core of his Jewish experience. Whether through traditional tunes or awe-inspiring performances during High Holy Days, Ira's story is one of rediscovering his Jewish identity through melodies that speak to his soul.

## **Sara**

Sara's Jewish identity was shaped by two distinct yet complementary influences: her father's intellectual approach to Judaism and her mother's deep cultural connection to Jewish life. "My dad instilled in me a love of Jewish scholarship and just learning about the Torah. He studied Comparative Literature in college and was very interested in the intellectual part of Judaism, whereas my mom is a lot more culturally Jewish and has taught me traditions from that lens."

Sara's father encouraged her to engage with Jewish texts beyond simple recitation, inviting her to wrestle with the meaning of ancient stories, the layers of Jewish law, and the moral questions these texts raise. Through him, she learned to see Judaism as a lifelong study--a framework for moral inquiry and a dialogue between tradition and contemporary life. Her mother, on the other hand, provided Sara with a vibrant sense of Jewish culture, warmth, and belonging. Their home was filled with the melodies of beloved prayers and folk songs, the scent of holiday dishes, and the beauty of Jewish art and symbolism. For her mother, Judaism was about building memories through shared traditions, family gatherings, and celebrating Jewish identity in all its expressions. This cultural foundation helped Sara connect emotionally to her Jewish identity, grounding her in the practices and values of her heritage.

Together, these influences offered Sara a multifaceted view of Judaism: her father's intellectual engagement gave her a structured understanding of faith and law, while her mother's cultural emphasis provided an intuitive sense of what it means to be part of the Jewish people. As she grew up, she seamlessly integrated both perspectives

into her Jewish life, allowing them to enrich her experiences of music, prayer, and community.

A defining moment came when Sara sang at Lincoln Center for Rosh Hashanah with her synagogue's teen choir. "I was about 14 or 15," she recalled, "and being on that stage, seeing the entire congregation exuding love and support, was one of the most spiritual moments of my life." Standing alongside her fellow choir members from her synagogue, she felt a profound sense of purpose as their voices merged into sacred music. It was not simply a performance but a collective spiritual offering--a moment where the boundaries between performer and audience dissolved into shared transcendence.

For Sara, each melody serves as a touchstone to distinct moments in her life, layers of memory woven into each note. The familiar strains of "Kadosh Kadosh Kadosh" evoke feelings of unity within her community. Singing it among friends and family reminds her of being part of something larger, a shared sacred experience she holds close. "Oseh Shalom" brings to mind Shabbat dinners and late-night services, where voices blend in harmony. These melodies feel like family heirlooms passed down through each gathering, marking time not with dates but with shared breaths and familiar phrases. "When I hear these melodies, I feel part of a community, surrounded by the songs of my upbringing."

The first time Sara sang "Kol Nidre" at her college's Yom Kippur service; she experienced a reverence she hadn't fully understood before. Each note carried the weight of collective hopes, forgiveness, and reflections of generations past. Learning the melody was both a musical challenge and a spiritual awakening, immersing her in a moment that required her to lead while surrendering to its solemnity.

For Sara, the melodies of her childhood transcend mere music--they form a bridge connecting her to past generations. Each familiar tune is infused with memories of family gatherings, festive holidays, and quiet moments in synagogue when she'd close her eyes, feeling the communal pulse of prayer. "Hearing these melodies elevates my prayer experience, allowing me to focus on connection rather than worry about singing the wrong note." Each tune connects her to ancestors who sang the same notes and felt the same words resonate in their hearts.

This intergenerational aspect of music holds deep significance for Sara. In the gentle rise and fall of "Kadosh Kadosh Kadosh," she senses her grandparents' presence, as if they are quietly joining her in the chant. The music carries not just tradition but echoes of loved ones she can no longer see but still feels through each note. "Oseh Shalom" evokes memories of her father humming it after services, and when the congregation joins in, she feels her voice merging with theirs--a shared yearning for peace binding generations together.

However, when newer melodies replace these cherished tunes, Sara experiences a subtle disconnection. "When I hear a new melody that isn't one I expect, I feel a bit disappointed." While she appreciates the creativity behind new compositions, each unfamiliar tune feels like a shift in the language she's always known--beautiful yet disorienting. She respects the desire for innovation in Jewish music but longs for the warmth and familiarity of the melodies that have accompanied her throughout her life. "There's a recent drive for new melodies, but when I hear the ones I grew up with, I feel more at home."

Sara recognizes that the newer generation may not share her reverence for what she considers to be “traditional” melodies; they may not carry the weight of family history and personal memory that she does. She acknowledges that for others, diversity and innovation in Jewish music can provide essential vibrancy. But as she said, "the familiarity of the melodies from my childhood is comforting, and their longevity matters." Each time she sings "Barchu," she recalls the joy of learning it as a child, the playful way she chanted it with classmates in preschool, grounding her through every stage of her life.

For Sara, these melodies are pillars supporting her identity and connection to the community. They represent continuity that transcends music, encompassing her sense of belonging and her place within a tradition that has nurtured her and countless others. The weight and history embedded in these tunes offer solace and comfort, reminding her that despite an ever-changing world, she remains part of an enduring legacy.

## **Findings**

Jewish music plays a profound role in shaping personal identity, fostering spiritual connection, and preserving cultural memory across generations. This study not only highlights these deep connections but also offers practical insights that can inform and enrich the work of cantors and Jewish music professionals. Through the narratives shared by individuals of diverse backgrounds, it becomes clear that music serves as far more than a mere backdrop to prayer: it is actually a vital vessel for memory, healing, and belonging. Here, I will examine the major themes drawn from these stories, exploring how Jewish music transcends liturgical text, connects generations, and navigates the tension between tradition and innovation.

The central focus of this project is the powerful connection between music and memory. For many individuals, familiar melodies evoke vivid recollections of childhood, family gatherings, and formative spiritual experiences. Songs such as “Shema”, “Sim Shalom”, and “Oseh Shalom” become woven into personal histories, transporting individuals back to significant moments in their lives. For example, Susan shared how the “Shema” served as a lifeline during her childhood struggles, offering her comfort when she felt helpless. Similarly, Gayle recalled singing “Sim Shalom” at Camp Ramah as a child, a melody that remains ingrained in her memory decades later.

### **Music Bridges Generations**

Survey responses show that Jewish music bridges generations within a family. For Serena, songs like “Esa Einai” and “Dodi Li”, which she sang as lullabies to her children, provide a meaningful way to pass down her Jewish identity. These bedtime routines are

more than soothing rituals; they represent an intentional effort to preserve tradition and create new family memories rooted in Jewish melodies. Serena's story highlights how music sustains generational continuity, allowing Jewish identity to thrive even in families with limited ritual practice. This reinforces the cantor's role in fostering intergenerational continuity, ensuring that the music chosen for worship resonates with people across different life stages.

This connection between music and memory underscores its essential role in preserving Jewish culture. Each melody acts as a thread tying together generations of worshipers, providing a sense of stability and rootedness in an ever-changing world. As Sara reflected, familiar phrases like “Kadosh Kadosh Kadosh” carry the weight of history, linking her to ancestors who sang the same words and, perhaps, felt the same emotions. Through music, Jewish identity becomes a living, breathing tradition passed from one generation to the next. By recognizing these deep associations, cantors can make more intentional musical choices that strengthen congregants' sense of belonging and continuity.

### **A Space for Solace and Healing**

Worship creates space for solace and healing, particularly during times of grief, trauma, or personal hardship. Prayers like “Mi Shebeirach” and “Nachamu” take on profound significance, offering emotional and spiritual refuge. Nancy's experience with “Mi Shebeirach” during her mother's illness does just that. While her prayers did not bring physical healing, the act of singing together with her family brought comfort and resilience, reminding them of their shared strength and faith.

For Edward, “Nachamu” became a deeply personal and transformative piece of music, tied to his experiences of loss. The melody, originally composed in response to a request for a new setting, evolved into a cornerstone of Edward’s healing process. He requested Nachamu for his mother’s funeral and later found serendipitous comfort when it was sung unexpectedly during services after his uncle’s passing. In moments of profound grief, Edward turned to Jewish music as a source of solace, illustrating its unique ability to hold and soothe emotional pain. Cantors, as spiritual caregivers, can harness these emotional associations to create worship experiences that offer both individual and communal healing.

Similarly, Becca incorporated “Hashkiveinu” into her children’s bedtime routine, transforming it into a prayer for protection and comfort. This ritual not only instilled a sense of peace but also nurtured a connection to Jewish tradition in her children’s lives. These stories demonstrate that music’s ability to heal is not confined to physical spaces; its emotional resonance can accompany individuals through life’s most challenging moments, creating a bridge between hardship and hope. Understanding the power of music in personal healing allows cantors to engage more empathetically in pastoral care, using melodies to support congregants during moments of vulnerability.

### **A Gateway to Spiritual Engagement**

For many, music serves as a powerful gateway to spiritual engagement, often transcending the barriers of language and ritual. While some individuals struggle with the Hebrew text or question their faith, they find connection through the melodies themselves. Judy, for instance, admitted to questioning God’s existence but described

music as the element that kept her engaged with prayer. “It’s the music that keeps me there,” she explained, emphasizing its ability to create emotional and spiritual depth.

Robert’s reflections on the Klepper-Freeland “Shalom Rav” further illustrate this point. He described the melody as “perfect,” evoking peace in a way that transcends words. The song, cherished by his father and father-in-law, became synonymous with his understanding of shalom--a layered concept of peace that holds personal and collective significance. For Robert, and many others, music transforms prayer from a passive act into a profound spiritual experience that engages the soul.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the enduring power of music to sustain spiritual connection. Marjorie shared how her community recorded the “Hashkiveinu” prayer to maintain a sense of unity during isolation. Even as physical gatherings were impossible, the familiar melody provided grounding and comfort, reinforcing the power of music to bind communities together in worship and faith. These insights emphasize the cantor’s role in adapting worship to meet the evolving needs of the Jewish community, even beyond the physical sanctuary.

### **The Need to Innovate**

While the stories emphasize the importance of familiar melodies, they also acknowledge the need for innovation in Jewish music. Judy compared the desire for traditional melodies to attending a Billy Joel concert: people want to hear what they know and love but are often willing to embrace something new in small doses. This tension between tradition and innovation reflects the challenge of keeping worship dynamic while honoring the emotional resonance of beloved tunes.

Jeff's enthusiasm for modern interpretations of Jewish music, such as Nefesh Mountain's bluegrass adaptations, highlights the ways innovation can bring fresh vibrancy to Jewish worship. At the same time, Sara's disappointment when newer melodies replace traditional ones underscores the importance of familiarity for many worshipers. As she reflected, "The melodies I grew up with are comforting, and their longevity matters." These contrasting perspectives suggest that successful innovation must strike a careful balance, introducing new music while preserving the deep emotional connections tied to existing melodies.

The stories analyzed here demonstrate the transformative power of Jewish music as a cornerstone of identity, memory, and spiritual connection. Music acts as a vessel for preserving tradition, evoking powerful memories that tie individuals to their families and communities. It offers solace during life's hardships, providing a sacred space for healing and emotional release. At the same time, it serves as a pathway to spiritual engagement, allowing individuals to experience prayer in deeply personal and meaningful ways. While the tension between tradition and innovation remains, Jewish music continues to evolve, ensuring that it remains a vital and resonant part of Jewish life for generations to come. Through its ability to comfort, connect, and inspire, Jewish music reflects the enduring strength and beauty of the Jewish people's experience.

## **Conclusion**

Through these interviews and stories, it is clear just how deeply synagogue music weaves into people's lives. It shapes how people experience prayer, connect with one another, and make sense of their Jewish identity. Jewish music is not just something to listen to on the High Holy Days or special occasions; rather, it pulses with memory and emotion. Certain melodies bring people back to their childhoods, to moments spent with family, or even to times of loss and healing. These tunes are not just sounds—they are anchors, rooting people in their histories and their communities, linking generations in a shared experience.

There is also a real tension between the love of familiar melodies and the excitement or challenge of hearing something new. Many people found deep comfort in the tunes they grew up with. They made it easy to participate and feel at home. At the same time, new music can bring a breath of fresh air, helping people of all backgrounds feel included and engaged. It is a balancing act for any community, honoring the beloved music of the past while making space for new voices and expressions.

This senior project aims to offer meaningful insights that can contribute to the field of the cantorate in several ways. By delving into the profound impact of melodies on the prayer experiences within the Reform Jewish community, it addresses a crucial aspect of the cantor's role in shaping worship experiences. The project's contributions to the field can be summarized as follows:

**Informed Musical Selection:** The insights gained from the in-depth interviews and thematic analysis will equip cantors with a deeper understanding of the emotional and

memory-evoking effects of specific melodies. This newfound awareness will enable cantors to make more informed and intentional choices when selecting music for Tefillot, aligning their musical choices with the spiritual needs and experiences of congregants.

**Pastoral Care:** Understanding how melodies are intertwined with congregants' personal narratives and emotions allows cantors to offer more empathetic and personalized pastoral care. By recognizing the potential familial and emotional connections embedded in specific pieces, cantors can create a worship environment that resonates on a profound level with congregants, fostering a stronger sense of community and spiritual connection.

**Feedback Improvement:** The project's exploration of effective feedback collection from congregants provides a practical tool for cantors to continuously refine and adapt their musical selections. By encouraging congregants to share their emotional responses and memories associated with specific melodies, cantors can tailor their choices to better meet the diverse needs and preferences within the congregation.

**Professional Development:** The project's recommendations for cantors in the field, based on the generalized data and thematic patterns, offer valuable guidance for professional development. Cantors can leverage these insights to enhance their skills in curating worship experiences that resonate with congregants on a personal and emotional level, thereby elevating the overall quality of their musical leadership.

**Facilitating Meaningful Dialogues:** The compilation of stories and insights generated by the project can act as a catalyst for meaningful dialogues between cantors and congregants. This engagement can deepen the connection between the clergy and the

community, fostering a more collaborative and responsive approach to the musical elements of prayer services.

In sum, this senior project contributes to the field of the cantorate by providing actionable insights into the emotional and memory-evoking effects of melodies on worshipers. Cantors can leverage these insights to create more meaningful, authentic, and spiritually resonant worship experiences, strengthening the bond between clergy and congregants, and elevating the practice of the cantorate within the Reform Jewish community.

What these stories ultimately reveal is that music is so much more than a beautiful addition to prayer, of bringing people together, building a sense of belonging, and keeping Jewish identity alive across generations. When people sing together, listen together, and learn together, they create a sense of connection that goes beyond words. Synagogue music transforms the space into something more than a place for prayer—it becomes a home for the soul, a place where people find comfort, celebrate their heritage, and connect with each other.

Embracing the power of music can transform worship. By honoring tradition and welcoming new voices, synagogues can create experiences that resonate with people on the deepest levels, inspiring and sustaining Jewish life for generations to come.

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