

TORAH—Educational Engagement Material for All Ages

7. HATISHMA KOLI קולי התשמע WILL YOU HEAR MY VOICE? THE JOURNEY OF ISRAEL THROUGH ITS POPULAR MUSIC

General Introduction

The journey of the modern State of Israel is captured in the lyrics and sounds of Israel's popular music. Israel's esteemed poets and musicians chronicle the struggle, beauty and hope of a nation. Israeli songs reflect the raw emotion of an entire nation. This music is an essential part of Israeli life. In times of pain and desperation it buoys, cries out, and heals. In moments of joy it dances and marches with pride. Becoming familiar with Israeli popular music—its socio-political themes, its biblical and historical allusions, and its emotions—helps us to better understand our relationship to our homeland and to answer an essential question underlying all of our Israel at 60 initiatives (and explained more fully in the booklet's Introduction on page 5): *How do we find and make a place for Israel within the individual and collective Reform Jewish expression?*

Questions to be addressed in each session:

1. How does the poetry and music reflect the complex, multiple narratives of the people of Israel?
2. What is reflected in the selected pieces in relation to the historical and sociological stages in Israel's development?

Lesson Overview

- Introduction to the theme and historical period 15–20 minutes
- Listen to and then discuss each poem/song 15 minutes per piece
- Conclusion 10–15 minutes

Materials Needed:

Copies of the words of the poems/songs

CD player and CDs with the songs if available, or a computer to download cited links

Part One: 1940s–1950s is included in this packet. Parts Two and Three (1960s–1970s, 1980s–2000s) are available online at www.arza.org/6030.

PART ONE 1940'S—1950'S

Part One Introduction

Beginning with the music of the 1940's and 1950's, the song writers set the socio-political issues to stirring, often militaristic refrains. These decades of early struggle were times of great Zionist patriotism and the formal rebuilding and dominance of the central State. This atmosphere is reflected in the music.

A Brief History

The pioneering efforts of the *Yishuv* (the pre-State Jewish settlement in Palestine) literally paved the way for Israel. Those pioneers (*chalutzim*) established *kibbutzim*, worked the deserts into fields, and devoted their blood, sweat, and tears to restore a homeland for the Jewish people. Moreover, from the War of Independence in 1948 to the Sinai campaign in 1956, Israel's military evolved from a spirited team of patriots to an elite fighting force. Issues of absorption included the right of return for Arab refugees as well as the law of return for Jews. Over the course of the 1940's and 1950's, Israel experienced the often difficult beginnings of a coming tremendous economic boom through expanding agricultural, industrial, and urban development, while attempting to absorb masses of immigrants.

The Music

Israeli popular music at that time was not influenced by jazz, swing or rock and roll. Unlike the popular music heard in America in the 40's and 50's, the main musical influences on Israeli music of this time period come from Eastern and Western European classical and folk music. These were the countries of origin for the majority of the poets and song writers in Israel during the 1940's and 50's. The tone of this music is often triumphant and joyful. March-like and determined rhythms paralleled the pulse of the kibbutznik in the fields and the soldier in battle. There are also poignant melodies, quiet in sonic quality yet rich in textual meaning. Many of the songs have orchestral settings; many utilize the accordion, and Russian folk instruments.

The lyrics often contain imagery and direct quotations from the Bible. These references present a profoundly Jewish interpretation and influence on even a very secular life. They help to link the history of the people Israel with the Land of Israel. The songs tell of the challenges and triumphs in battle, the miraculous beauty of the rebirth of the state, and the grueling strength of character and never-give-up determination of the pioneers. There is an overwhelming sense of pride and conviction in fulfilling the Zionist dream—a Jewish Homeland.

Type 1: Biblical / Religious Imagery

Song One: *Zemer Nugeh* (A Gloomy Song)

The first example is written ten years prior to the establishment of the State of Israel. It speaks of a deep longing. The words are from an earlier poem by the poet Rachel Bluwstein. Known simply by her first name, Rachel was born in Russia. She came to *Eretz Yisrael* in 1909 and was greatly influenced by the early *chalutz* (pioneer), A.D. Gordon (who was born in 1856 in Russia, made *aliyah* at the age of 47) who believed that physical work on the land would bring personal redemption and the redemption of the Jewish people.

In 1913, she went to France and, unable to return because of World War I hostilities, then returned to Russia where she was a teacher. Eventually she returned to *Eretz Yisrael* in 1919 to become a member of kibbutz *Degania*, where A.D. Gordon also lived. Rachel generally wrote simple, sensitive lyrics filled with yearning and symbolism. Her love of the countryside and nature is expressed in much of her work. Many of her poems, like this one, have been put to music. Rachel died in 1931. Listen to *Zemer Nugeh*.

Zemer Nugeh 1938

Words: Rachel/M. Zeira music: Shmulik Kraus

Will you hear my voice my far-away one
Will you hear my voice wherever you are
A voice calling with strength, a silent cry;
It transcends blessing
(lit: that, transcending mitzvah, is a blessing)

This world is wide and its ways are vast
Meetings are momentary, separations are an eternity
A man asks but his legs are weak
He's not able to find that which he lost.

Perhaps the end of my days draws nigh
The time for tears of farewell is closing in
I will wait for you until the end of my days
Like Rachel's wait for her beloved.

הַתְּשִׁמְעַ קוֹלִי רְחוֹקִי שְׁלִי
הַתְּשִׁמְעַ קוֹלִי בְּאֶשֶׁר הֵנָּךְ
קוֹל קוֹרָא בְּעוֹז, קוֹל בּוֹכָה בְּדַמִּי
וּמַעַל לְזִמְן מִצְוָה בְּרַכָּה.

אֶרֶץ זוֹ רַבָּה וְדַרְכֵיהֶם בְּהָ רַב
נִפְגָּשׁוֹת לְדַק נִפְרָדוֹת לְעַד.
מִבְקֵשׁ אָדָם, אֲךָ כּוֹשְׁלוֹת רַגְלָיו,
לֹא יוֹכֵל לְמַצּוֹא אֶת אֲשֶׁר אֲבָד.

אֲחֵרוֹן יָמַי כִּבְר קָרוֹב אוֹלִי,
כִּבְר קָרוֹב הַיּוֹם שֶׁל דְּמַעוֹת פְּרִידָה.
אֲחִכָּה לָךְ עַד יִכְבוּ חַיִּי,
כַּחֲכוֹת רַחֵל לְדוֹדָהּ.

Questions for Discussion

- What biblical or “religious” references are there? What does that assume about the listener?
- How does the biblical imagery reflect the meaning of the song? What does it do to the power of the song? Who is speaking?
- What does the use of the words *beracha*/blessing and mitzvah evoke? [God?]
- How does the use of religious vocabulary connect to the secular Zionist background of the author? [biblical, spiritual connection to the Land, but not “religious”?]
- What is the speaker of this song saying?

Related information for the leader: The references to Rachel can be found in Genesis chapter 29.

To listen *Zemer Nugeh* online go to www.arza.org/6030.

Type 2: Nationalism- Patriotism

Song two: *Shir HaPalmach* (Song of the Palmach)

The *Palmach* (*Plugot Machaz*—Strike Companies) was established in 1941. This group of Israeli men and women trained to protect fledgling *kibbutzim* and towns against Arab attacks. The British initially aided the *Palmach* and sought their help in collaborative, covert missions against Syria and the Nazi threat. The *Palmach* came to be an elite force that served the entire country. They sowed the seeds for an Israeli navy and air force. With larger than life members such as Moshe Dayan and Yigal Allon, those within the *Palmach* would help to establish the political leadership of Israel.

As background, first sing or listen to a recording of *God Bless America*.

Since the *Palmach* was established in defensive response to the growing crisis in Europe and the fear that Hitler (as well as the neighboring Arab nations) would attack, the Jews of Palestine were often locked in a similar position of those sitting in North America waiting to see the outcome of the Allies' advances.

- What was the emotional condition of those in North America?
- Were they united behind the war effort and singing songs of patriotism? (For example, *God Bless America*, by Irving Berlin, was originally written in 1918 and revised in 1938.)

Since 2001, *God Bless America* has been revived as the response to the renewed sense of patriotism.

- How has the use of *God Bless America* (and other anthems) reflected the historical contexts in which it has been played?
- Have the range of emotional feelings toward the various military actions (WWII, Korea, Viet Nam and the war against terrorism) been consistent? Have the songs we've sung reflected these feelings?

Listen to *Shir HaPalmach*.

Shir HaPalmach 1942

Words: Zerubabel Gilad Music: David Zehavi

Though the storm is ever mounting
Still our heads remain unbowed.
We are ready to obey all commands,
The Palmach will win—we've vowed.

מסביב יהום הסער,
אך ראשינו לא ישח
לפקודה תמיד אנחנו,
תמיד אנו, אנו הפלמ"ח.

From Metulla to the Negev,
From the desert to the plain,
All our youth defend the homeland,
Till we bring it peace again.

ממטולה עד הנגב,
מן הים עד המדבר -
כל בחר וטוב - לנשק
כל בחר על המישמר!

In the eagle's path we follow,
Over mountain tracks we go,
Among stony heights and caverns
We are seeking out the foe.

נתיב לנשר בשמיים,
שביל לפרא בין הרים, -
מול אויב דרכנו יעל,
בין ניקרות ובין צורים.

When you summon us to battle,
We will be there first by day or night,
We are ready when you give the command,
The Palmach will march in might.

ראשונים תמיד אנחנו,
לאור היום ובמחשך
לפקודה תמיד אנחנו,
תמיד אנו, אנו הפלמ"ח.

Questions for Discussion

- Is there a sense of pride in the military? How so?
- What symbols are used?
- How does *Shir HaPalmach* compare to God Bless America?
- How does *Shir HaPalmach* compare to *Zemer Nugeb*? [no God, no biblical references] What is the difference in the message? Why does the message need to change? How does a song like this reflect the voice of a nation?

To listen *Shir HaPalmach* on-line go to www.arza.org/6030.

For the musical notation, *Sing Along With Effi Netze Vol.I*, published in Israel. To order www.effinetzer.com

Type 3: Historical Reflection

Song Three: *Mul Har Sinai* (At Mt. Sinai)

In the mid 1950s, Israel's military mettle was tested once again in the Sinai Campaign. In September 1955, in violation of international agreements, Egypt sealed off access to the Israeli port of Eilat. On July 26, 1956 President Nasser announced Egypt's nationalization of the Suez Canal, most of whose shares were held by Britain and France. Diplomacy failed to reverse Nasser's decision. On October 29, 1956, Britain, France, and Israel launched a military operation in the Sinai Peninsula. Four and a half months later, on March 16, 1957, Israel withdrew its troops from the Sinai and Gaza strip after receiving international reassurances that Israel's vital waterways would remain open.

The song *Mul Har Sinai*/At Sinai reflects the passion and pride of the Sinai Campaign. Israel once again returned to Sinai. This song elicits strong patriotism tempered with humility. The strong biblical imagery coupled with the modern reality captures the dialectical feeling in *Eretz Yisrael*.

Yehiel Mohar 1912-1969 arrived in Palestine from Poland in 1937. His lyrical poetry often expressed themes of war and triumph. Moshe Wilensky 1910- 2000, composed music rich folk idioms and syncopated rhythms.

Listen to *Mul Har Sinai*.

***Mul Har Sinai/At Sinai* 1956**

Words: Yehiel Mohar Music: Moshe Wilensky

It is no dream, my friend; it is no dream,
my friend, no legend, if you will.

Because at Mount Sinai, the bush is
burning still.

And now our youth will sing a melody of
flame and at the city gates our Samsons
stand again.

Now the holy flame burns in our hearts
once more it's the holy flame—as all the
engines roar.

We'll tell the tale until the day we die.
How we returned to stand here at Sinai.

It is no dream, my friend, and all remains
the same. From that time until now, the
bush remains in flame.

Still it's burning bright, within the minds
and hearts of all the brave and young
As they go out to fight.

Now the holy flame burns in our hearts
once more. It's the holy flame—as all the
engines roar.

We'll tell the tale until the day we die,
How we returned to stand here at Sinai.

לא אגדה רעי
ולא חלום עובר:
הנה מול הר סיני
הסנה, הסנה בוער.
והוא לזהב בשיר
בפי גדודי בנים,
ושערי העיר
ביד השמשונים.

הו, שלהבת יה - עיני הנערים,
הו, שלהבת יה - ברעום המנועים,
עוד יסופר על זה היום אחי,
בשוב העם אל מעמד סיני.

רעי, זה לא חלום
ולא חזיון הווה
מאז ועד היום
בוער, בוער הסנה.
לוהט בזמר און
בלבבות האל
של נערי ציון
ורכב ישראל.

הו, שלהבת יה - עיני הנערים...

Questions for Discussion

- What is the biblical connection in this song? [Read burning bush story and discuss reference]
- What does it mean for the bush to stay in flame?
- Discuss the emotional state of the speaker? How can you tell? What imagery is used in the song?
- Is this song more like *Semer Nugeb* or *Shir HaPalmach* in terms of lyrics/tone/intended audience?

To listen *Mul Har Sinai* on-line go to www.arza.org/6030.

For the musical notation, *Sing Along With Effi Netze Vol.I*, published in Israel. To order www.affinetzer.com

Type 4: Societal Reflections

Song Four: *Zamar Noded* (Song of the Wanderer)

Towards the end of the 1950s, the constant building and growth yields a certain level of comfort and wealth in the land. There are those who begin to want to concentrate on the simple pleasures in life. The high zeal for military strength and strong centralized State control is beginning to shift to a more muted show of strength and more individual focus. *Zamar Noded* was written at that time by Naomi Shemer.

By the late 1950s, people are beginning to settle into their lives as Israelis. Immigrants no longer wander with only the clothes on their back. Acceptance into the greater society is marked by the acquisition of material wealth. Hospitals, apartments, and utilities, are part of the landscape. First generation Israelis look toward a bright future. The song *Zamar Noded* reflects this time period, but it is a bit of a polemic against the quest only for new found wealth.

Naomi Shemer was a prolific song writer and composer. She is known as the “First Lady of Israeli Song.” Many of her songs have become hits. Shemer was born on *Kvuzat Kinneret* and grew up overlooking the shores of the Jordan river. Many of her songs recreate the landscape that was such a part of her youth and reflect her love of the topography and scenery of *Eretz Yisrael*.

Zamar Noded/The Song of the Wanderer 1958

Words and music: Naomi Shemer

The road is long and wide

הדרך ארוכה היא ורבה, רבה

The road is long and full of glory

הדרך ארוכה היא ורבת הדר

Everyone walks on the road until the end.

כולם הולכים בדרך עד סופה, סופה

Everyone walks on the road until the bitter end

כולם הולכים בדרך עד סופה המר

*Chorus

אבל אני, אבל אני, לבד לבד צועד

But me I am alone, I march on in solitary, halleluyah.

הללו הללויה הללו

I sing songs of a wandering singer, halleluyah.

ושר אני ושר אני, שירי זמר נודד

הללו הללויה הללו

One lifted his face to the gold,

אחד נשא פניו אל הזהב, הזהב

One lifted his face to the good gold;

אחד נשא פניו אל הזהב הטוב

another found a girl who will love,

אחר מצא ילדונת שתאהב, תאהב

another found a girl who will love him.

אחר מצא ילדונת שתאהב אותו

I don't want a house with a field,

איני רוצה לי בית עם שדה, שדה

I don't want a house with a green field.

איני רוצה לי בית עם שדה ירוק

For your (plural) voice is what I value,
because your voice responds in laughter.

כי כל שכרי קולכם אשר עונה, עונה
כי כל שכרי קולכם אשר עונה בשחוק

*My voice will sing but you (plural) are the echo,
Halleluyah.
Woe to the song that has no echo,
Halleluyah.

קולי ישיר, קולי ישיר, אבל אתם לו הד
הללו הללויה הללו
אבוי לשיר, אבוי לשיר, אם אין לו, אין לו
הד
הללו הללויה הללו

A tree on the roadside slowly grows dark,
very dark
Just as the city lights fade

אילן בצד הדרך אט ישחיר, ישחיר
אילן בצד הדרך אט ישחיר מאוד
כבו הפנסים בכל העיר, העיר
כבו הפנסים בכל העיר הזאת

Questions for Discussion

- How does this reflect a different societal mood? What does the author want?
- What do you think the phrase “one met the good gold” means?
- Who is the echo? [note plural...avoid temptation to say “God”]
- How does a “song’s echo” have value?

To listen *Zamar Noded Sinai* on-line go to www.arza.org/6030.

Concluding Thoughts

The popular music of Israel sheds light on the history of the modern State. For Israelis, music is part of their life force. It presents a snapshot of the development of a nation. By singing these songs we share in the joy and emotion, the struggle and challenge of everyday Israeli life. The music of 1940's and 1950's begins with extreme militaristic zeal for a Zion rebuilt and its land restored. It reflects the Maccabian spirit of might over the many. It ends with hope for continued prosperity, but also a hope for more personal connection in a changing society.