Where There is Song, There is Prayer:

Cultivating Musical, Spiritual, and Culturally Relevant Educational Experiences as a Non-Jewish Educator within a Jewish Day School

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Prologue

I walked into Temple Beth Zion in Brookline on a dark, wintery Friday evening with a certain trepidation. A friend had invited me along to a monthly Shabbat service that was taking place, and she'd insisted (rather firmly, I should add) that I'd appreciate and benefit from the event. Not being Jewish myself, nor having much familiarity with Jewish faith traditions (apart from attending a handful of bar and bat mitzvahs during my youth) I followed my friend's lead closely through the massive doors as I shrunk myself and questioned my belonging in the space. We hung up our jackets, greeted a few folks, and followed the sounds of community commotion as we made our way into the enormous shul. The high ceiling towered over us and the gigantic walls seemed to stretch forward forever towards the Ark, an ornate, elevated cabinet at the very front of the synagogue that contains the Torah script. Before entering the room, I drew from my previous experiences in houses of worship and expected to see the back of congregants' heads as they directed their eyes up towards a faith-leader of some sort, perhaps leading songs or prayers from a raised platform at the far side of the temple. To my surprise, it became quickly apparent that the seating and community were positioned in a huge circle, facing inward, oriented around a small group of musicians in the middle of the room. I found my way to a seat along the outer edge of the circle and, having established the slightest sense of belonging in a chair, I passively soaked up the vibrant scene.

Soon enough, the instrumentalist began to play, and the singing started. The social frenetic buzz that flooded the environment mere moments before had transformed into spontaneous chorus. Voices filled the space; some melodies were wordless, using repeating syllables like "ni-ni" or "ya-da-da" or "lai-lai-low" and others were in Hebrew. Rhythmic tapping, clapping, and hooting ebbed and flowed with the intensity of a given song. Melodies

seemed to repeat over and over and over again, almost breathing along with the individuals singing them, ever changing in tempo and dynamics. There were no songbooks. A songleader gently facilitated the music-making from the center, though he was almost invisible as the feeling in the air was one of cool togetherness. Some folks closed their eyes and lifted their voice from the inner circle, some sat on the floor alongside friends on the outer wall and socialized quietly, and others planted themselves silently in their seat and absorbed the atmosphere. The music and environment struck me as.... magical? Sacred? Holy? Following the service, we convened downstairs for a potluck dinner and more singing and schmoozing.

This particular Shabbat Nariya service, a Friday night gathering open to the public to welcome Shabbat, was a meaningful introduction to the art of the *nigun,* a wordless vocal melody that invites community engagement and participation. More broadly, Nariya offered a personally valuable, moving experience in connection with the Boston-area Jewish musical community. As a non-Jewish "outsider," I walked away from the synagogue that evening feeling meaningfully connected with strangers, both through the musical and interpersonal connections that the environment facilitated. Noah Weinberg, a musical Jewish prayer leader and the aforementioned song leader near the center of the Nariya circle, shared with me in an interview the idea that "the most spiritual ideas are the most primal human things. The tribe gathers at night in a circle… through fire rituals… singing together and connecting with people closely" (Weinberg, N, March 15, 2021.) Indeed, the Nariya service, though explicitly Jewish in tradition and setting, seemed to reach some universal human fulfillment in its communal song making. With this event placed sweetly onto my soul, I was heartened several years later to stumble into the role of K-6 music teacher at Maimonides School, a Modern Orthodox Day School in Brookline, just down the road from Temple Beth Zion.

Introduction

My experience teaching music at Maimonides can speak to the unique union between musicality and faith that exists in the Jewish Day School space. Despite not being Jewish myself, the role has extended ample meaningful opportunities for me as a musical leader to blend song and spirituality within the school community, including teaching and producing a handful of student performances in Hebrew. By no means do I consider myself an expert or even competent in teaching Jewish *nusach* or tradition, though perhaps it bears mentioning that any song leader, regardless of faith background, carries potential in facilitating at least some level of spiritual connection between individuals and communities. Joey Weisenberg, a visionary Jewish musician whose teachings largely inspired the Shabbat Nariya service, writes in his book titled *Building Singing Communities: a Practical Guide to Unlocking the Power in Jewish Prayer*, "Singing allows us to communicate and express ourselves in the ways that words cannot. An example is our yearning for the divine, or in the communication of our deepest sorrows or joys" (Weisenberg, 2011, p. 5). While not correlated explicitly with Jewish prayer, Weisenberg's insights underscore the powerful relationship between big questions of the universe and music making.

In this essay, I want to explore two primary questions. First, "How can music be used to nurture a spiritual and faith-based community within the context of Modern Judaism?" And secondly, "What is the role of a non-Jewish person facilitating musical experiences in a Modern Orthodox environment?" To guide this exploration, I will primarily use my own experience as a community member and teacher at Maimonides as an axle around which to reflect and make connections with broader insight, history, and research about Jewish musical tradition. With that in mind, I carried out a series of interviews with Jewish educators and musicians in the Boston

area with experience at the intersection of music and Modern Judaism. The latter question is one that I've grappled with regularly (in a variety of contexts) as a non-Jewish teacher at a Jewish Day School, which has spurred an evolving journey of personal self-reflection and professional adaptability as both a music educator and member of a complex, global community. Upon discussing these questions openly with Jewish educators, I will offer connections and personal/professional growth areas between existing culturally responsive pedagogies (including a case study specific to one Jewish Day School environment) and the cultural sustainability of my own music classroom. Relatedly, I'll discuss care pedagogy as a teaching tool to ensure that students' cultural backgrounds (beyond faith alone) are affirmed and celebrated. Finally, I will share and reflect on a few projects I've developed (some individual, some collaborative) during my time at Maimonides and discuss their greater impact on the school community and myself alike.

Music's Place in the Jewish Tradition

It's undeniable that music and Judaism are anciently interwoven. Talmud, an age-old written compilation of Jewish tradition and practice, describes, "Where there is song, there is prayer" (Talmud, Brachot 6a). This quote illuminates the inextricable link between prayer and music, and oftentimes they are one in the same. The practice of *davening* (prayer) frequently entails the union of *nigunim* (tunes or wordless melodies) and *nusach* (wording of a religious text) as a means to get closer to God, or Hashem. By extension, song is an integral tool to connect with the divine. Averbach suggests a similar sentiment in his article, "The Potentially Transformational and Special Role of the Music Teacher as Life Coach" (originally published in the Journal of Jewish Music and Liturgy) when he writes, "Spiritually, music enlivens the soul and opens the heart to serve HaShem with joy, to magically motivate dancing." He adds,

“Cantillation provides the musical melody for the reading of the Torah. The cantor’s responsibility includes inspiring the congregation through music” (Averbach, 2003, p. 19). If closeness to God is a primary purpose of worship, Averbach seems to be suggesting that prayer and song are actually synonymous. In mentioning the role of the cantor, he emphasizes music as an important vehicle through which a faith-leader might carry out the essential task of leading prayer within a faith-community. Lastly, we can consider the thoughts of Nachman of Bretslav, a spiritual leader in the Hassidic movement in the late 1700’s, who was known for his gravitation towards music during ritual worship. As cited in Shiloah’s *Jewish musical traditions,* Bretslay writes, “By means of song you will achieve joy and ecstasy… one who is fearful will allay his fears with songs of joy” (Shiloah, 1992, p. 77). This approach towards prayer implies music’s potential for drawing individuals closer to a divine presence, and similarly recommends song as a tool for courage during moments of fear. Folks of faith often seek the presence of God or Hashem during instances of trial and challenge, and Bretslay’s words remind us that perhaps we can find that presence in a tune.

Musical Expression Within A Jewish Day School

Judaic worship in the 21st century might look a little different than in Nachman of Bretslay’s day, though in some Jewish places of prayer perhaps not. Since my primary engagement with Jewish tradition is in a school setting, the question that comes to mind is something along the lines of: how are present-day Jewish Day Schools facilitating musical, spiritual experiences that guide students and the larger community to their faith and Jewish identity? And, by extension, how should *I* cultivate such a communal experience within my role? In my conversations with three spiritual leaders in three distinct Jewish Day Schools in the Boston area, I learned about how individual school communities are nurturing regular practices,

events, and classes within school environments that leverage music explicitly to cultivate a faith-filled experience.

As expected, music plays a foundational role in each school to nourish Jewish identity and tradition. Oren Kaunfer, a Spiritual Educator and leader of the Jewish life team at Jewish Community Day School (JCDS) Boston, emphasized that "JCDS is a school that lives and breathes music. It's just ever flowing through the halls here. Of course [for] any davening experience, we use a lot of music. Anytime the school gathers for an occasion there is always going to be music" (Kaunfer, O, April 1, 2021). Additionally, Kaunfer echoed Weisenberg's sentiment regarding music as a pathway for individuals to connect with something larger than self:

> [Music] brings people together and makes people feel something. It's definitely a spiritual experience as far as I can tell. It can augment feelings... sad emotions, happy emotions, searching, yearning, and all those things I think are just deepened and strengthened by music… sometimes the people singing know what the words mean and other times they know what it means if they stop and think about it, but the music can often dictate the feeling. It's an incredible tool. (Kaunfer, O, April 1, 2021).

Kaunfer describes music at JCDS as "less of a performance and more of an experience" in which every individual can participate and contribute. He spoke about the middle school prayer electives in which students can opt-in to different modes of connecting with spirituality throughout the semester, be it yoga, art, or photography. The prayer elective that centers around music, called *Nigunim*, is an opportunity for students, as the name of the elective suggests, to gather in a circle within a small room, occasional silence, occasional guitar, and a single melody for 30 minutes. Kaunfer notes, "I've felt a real spiritual connection in that small setting singing the same melody over and over again," which is somewhat evocative of the Nariya service in its melodic repetition. *Nigunim* and the silence that environment offers inherently breeds

self-reflection and listening, which is consistent with Weisenberg's assessment that "silence ought to remind us that a 'singing community' is really a 'listening community'" (Weisenberg, 2011, p. 16). There is silence in song that can be as powerful and prayerful as the singing itself.

Similarly at Maimonides, music, song, and dance are integral features of fostering the school community's Jewish identity. Benji Hain, a music maker and Dean of Students, spoke about the wide variety of music that serves a purpose in Jewish Day School and affirms Jewish identity. For example, he mentioned American Jewish Music, which focuses more on the "love of God and love of worship," as well as Israeli Pop songs, which offer a more contemporary pride towards Israel and Judaism (Hain, B., March 16, 2021). In particular, he spoke about the tune "It's Time To Say Good Shabbos" by Journeys as an example of a simple, folksy tune that simply ushers in Shabbat and meaningfully links the listener with a cultural ritual and tradition.

Shabbat (as well as the hours leading up to it) is traditionally an occasion for song in Jewish tradition. Noah Weinberg, a Nariya songleader as well as the Jewish Life Coordinator at Gann Academy in Waltham, spoke about a musical custom (pre-COVID) that welcomed students to school on Friday mornings called Shabbaton. Essentially, much like Nariya, he and a colleague would bring drums and instruments outside of the school and facilitate a Shabbat sing along before school. "It became a really important cultural piece for the school," he says. "[What's] been interesting is that because Gann is a pluralistic school, there are zero songs that everybody knows coming in… a big part of Shabbat is singing together, and we can't just show up on Friday. We have kids coming from different backgrounds, so we ask ourselves, what's the pre-work that goes into having a magical spiritual moment? How to hold the space? How do you use your body to show the beat and bring people along and express the emotive parts?" (Weinberg, N., March 15, 2021). In this reflection, Weinberg seems to be suggesting that while

the music and lyrics themselves are important to create an experience, the product isn't quite as important as the process, and the music-makers aren't quite as important as the community of sound. "Our job [as song leaders] isn't to be heard," he adds about Nariya. "It's to hold down the core in a way that amplifies everybody in and up. And it's really intentional how it's set up in a circle. It's a community effort. What we're cultivating is real." Indeed, there is power numbers and power in authenticity, and it's no surprise that musical engagement which draws from such deep interconnected tradition and roots can be so profound for children and adults alike.

The limitations caused by the coronavirus pandemic have reaffirmed the deep desire for musical engagement in a spiritual sense. Kaunfer, Hain, and Weinberg all spoke at length about events and rituals (including annual school-wide assemblies) that haven't been able to take place due to COVID restrictions. Kaunfer lamented that JCDS has "basically eliminated music in a major way… the absence of music has really cemented the fact that music is vital. It's been so hard not to have that." It's powerful to consider that for faith communities like Jewish Day Schools, a substantial reduction of music making and singing, be it in music class or elsewhere, comes not only at the expense of music education, but a consistent and reliable tool to connect with a spiritual and cultural identity.

Many of these schools' musical practices are similar to another modern Jewish and community music experiment called the Rising Song Institute (RSI). Founded by Joey Weisenberg, RSI sings, adapts, and composes *nigunim* to envision and build the future of Jewish music-making and spiritual practice. Centered around the belief that singing transforms people and builds communities, RSI fosters Jewish spiritual life through song, educates through experimental music-making, songleading workshops, and full-time fellowships and residencies. While the philosophies and values of RSI are explicitly based in Jewish tradition in many senses,

it's meaningful to consider the underlying framework's potential adaptability for other community song-making spaces. Here are a few examples of their philosophical foundations:

> ARTISTIC AND COMMUNAL: we emphasize the intricate interdependence between the work of advanced musical spiritual artists and the powerful grassroots energy of people gathered in community to sing
>
> PARTICULAR AND PLURALISTIC: Our singing includes many different styles of music, and our particular synthesis of these styles will find wide applications that transcend established genres and denominations
>
> ROOTED AND RADICAL: Our music is deeply rooted in ancient Jewish traditions, but we will also invent entirely new musical modalities
>
> INCLUSIVE AND EGALITARIAN: Our music gathers people close together and facilitates careful listening, transcending dogmatic social categories. People of all gender identities and expressions, and from all cultural backgrounds and streams of Judaism, are invited to participate and lead.
>
> JOYOUS AND TEARFUL: Our music unlocks heavy hearts and encourages the therapeutic expression of a wide emotional spectrum
>
> PRAYERFUL AND TORAH-CENTERED: Music is a form of prayer, a language for opening up people's largest questions. Music speaks most powerfully when it reflects our collective ancient-new wisdom ("Torah")
>
> BEAUTIFUL AND IMAGINATIVE: Music reminds us of humankind's capacity for beauty and curiosity.
>
> (*Rising Song Institute*. (n.d.).

While these guiding principles are clearly rooted in a certain cultural tradition and practice within Judaism, there is also an uplifting and open consideration with regard to its future. In pondering the power of communal prayer and song, Weisenberg considers the potential of worship if choral music were considered to be less of a performance and more of an interactive community experience. He writes:

> We could create an atmosphere of both great beauty and drama in our spaces of prayer; we would value each and every individual in our community as a creative musician, and encourage his or her efforts in an attitude of musical collaboration. This reality is possible, if only we educate ourselves about (and hold ourselves to) aesthetic standards, if we raise the bar just a bit higher on what we can achieve together in a beautiful, conscientious song. (Weisenberg, 2011, p. 5)

Weisenberg's words contain an optimism that is refreshing and bold. Music educators of all faith backgrounds could benefit from adopting such interconnected groundedness in the classroom. When one thinks of a conventional prayer song in a house of worship, dare I say it is not exactly the communal musical collaboration that Weisenberg describes. Indeed, there is something contemporary and almost radical about such an attitude in a prayer space. As previously mentioned, there is significant meaning in applying music as a tool to draw individuals closer to faith, and it's meaningful to think about entities like the Rising Song Institute (among others) that are turning the page in musical, spiritual practice within Judaisim.

It's worthwhile to consider shifting attitudes in Jewish musical and spiritual cultivation within educational settings even in the last fifty years. In his article "Jewish music as a bridge of understanding," which was originally published in 1972, Ira Goldberg explores breakthroughs in Jewish music education at the time that enabled students to experience music as part of a cultural, collaborative experience. He notes, "Through meaningful participation in music… students come to see Jewish music as a relevant part of their lives and experience. Furthermore, they come to that view without the traditional pressures one finds so frequently in the academic experience. No longer did the teacher fulfill the traditional role of autocratic leader of a group of coerced students" (Goldberg, 1972, p. 29). It's encouraging to consider the evolving attitudes around communal music in nurturing a spiritual identity within individuals and communities, and it's exciting to envision the benefits of such spiritual nourishment.

What Is The Role of a Non-Jewish Music Educator in a Jewish Learning Environment?

The role of a non-Jewish educator to facilitate such a personal musical experience is a curious one. As explored above, songleading skill and musical finesse (regardless of faith background) can go a long way to cultivate a sense of harmonious togetherness in any given environment, however within the context of the Jewish Day School and Judaism more broadly, there are certainly obstacles that might confront a non-Jewish educator like myself. To examine such a quandary, I turned to my colleagues as well as documented successes from "outsider" teachers using culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogies and strategies alongside students from backgrounds different than their own.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) actively recognizes the inequitable history and consequential existing condition of the American education system and serves to facilitate an unlearning and rethinking of what it means to "educate" and to be "educated" in this country. As is the case with all American institutions (the economy, the church, the government, etc.) the educational system, in its predominant values and curriculum, is rooted within a system that meticulously benefits culturally dominant groups as well as structurally disadvantages historically marginalized groups, including Jews. CSP is often discussed in relationship with similar concepts, such as culturally relevant teaching and culturally responsive teaching. While there are nuances to distinguish these modalities, for the purposes of this essay, I will primarily use CSP as a catch-all term to signify a research-based philosophy which nurtures intentional environments of cultural and identity belonging within a classroom setting.

CSP asks: what if the educational system as we know it could be unbound from such an archaic foundation? In their book, *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world,* Paris and Alim zero-in on this question. They write, "As we think about teaching and teachers, we ask: What would our pedagogies look like if this gaze (the kindred patriarchal, cisheteronormative, English-monolingual, ableist, classist, xenophobic, Judeo-Christian gazes) weren't the dominant one? What would liberating ourselves from this gaze and the educational expectations it forwards mean for our abilities to envision new and community-rooted forms of teaching and learning?" (Paris & Alim, 2017, p 2). While there is no easy answer to such a complex question, it behooves educators of all backgrounds to acknowledge and take personal action around the deep biases they inevitably bring into the classroom and, though we'd prefer not to admit it, impact and even harm young people, sometimes in profound ways. Paris and Alim add, "For too long we have taught our youth (and our teachers) that the Dominant American English and other White middle-class normed practices and ways of being alone are the keys to power, while denying the languages and other cultural practices that students of color bring to the classroom." (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 6). It should be acknowledged that by and large, the focus of CSP is to envision and create radically different schooling experiences for Black and Latinx students in particular, though CSP certainly offers strategies for teachers to bolster cultural sustainability in the classroom alongside other historically disenfranchised student demographics as well.

CSP in Context

To develop a sense of what CSP might look like in action, it's useful to consider a case study that puts the concept into context specifically within a Jewish Day School environment. In their article, "Implementation of Culturally Relevant School-Wide Positive Behavior Support,"

McGoey, Munro, McCobin, and Miller examine the implementation of the “Mensch Program,” an elementary school-wide positive behavioral support program (SWPBS) that infuses Jewish tradition into the behavioral incentives and interventions (Mcgoey, Munro, McCobin, Miller, 2016). The goal of any SWPBS is to teach positive behavior and consistently acknowledge, reward, and reinforce the desired behaviors from students (as opposed to, say, a punitive behavior system which identifies and punishes negative behaviors). The authors note that SWPBS are empirically supported and effective in reducing disruptive behaviors for culturally dominant student groups, though they are less successful for students from historically disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups. This data point in particular served as inspiration for this research within a Jewish Day School. They add, “Many challenges that occur within an ethnic minority student population are the result of a mismatch between the student’s cultural values and the school’s expectations” (Mcgoey et al, 2016, p. 136). For reasons that extend far beyond the behavioral and engagement benefits, students must see themselves and their cultural identities recognized and celebrated in the expectations, curriculum, and values of the school. This idea is a paramount in growing a culturally relevant atmosphere.

The Mensch Program was designed to support students’ academic, behavioral, *and* spiritual needs. The program, taken from the Yiddish word “mensch” which means “a person of integrity and honor” blends a traditional SWPBS with some aspects of Jewish culture. There are two primary facets to its organization. First, teachers and administrators clearly explain the positive behaviors that are expected in school. Then, adults reward positive behaviors from students with “tokens,” or little cards which recognize the desired actions and behaviors from students. Secondly, students are broken-up into 12 inter-age “tribes” which serve as a small group of peers (and mentees/mentors) throughout the school year. The tribe that receives the

most cards during a 2-week period receives a reward. The program offered opportunities for older students to mentor younger students on Jewish cultural traditions that took place throughout the year, and similarly, the tribe system provided students with a more intimate, age-diverse Jewish community than the larger school environment. Lastly, the program enabled students of the same tribe (across age groups) to form allegiances together towards a common goal of being a mensch.

The results of the culturally-relevant SWPBS research were mixed. Positive behaviors as a whole did increase over a four year period, but it's unclear to what extent that's due to other factors like school leadership and increased retention in students and staff. The authors write, "The initial buy-in, outcomes, and long-term implementation fidelity of SWPBS may be positively influenced by culturally adapt the procedures to meet the contextual variables within the school setting" (Mcgoey et al, 2016, p. 140). Regardless of mixed data, it's reasonable to believe that offering students more intentional opportunities to engage with their cultural background, such as within their tribes or engaging with questions of what it means to be a mensch, has significant advantages. It also bears mentioning that within this particular SWPBS example, the Jewish Day School space has the advantage of sharing some degree of unique cultural commonality between most (if not all) community members. The goals of such a Jewish Day School as they relate to faith and tradition is a bit more straightforward than, say, a secular school environment with different cultural diversity in its student body. I don't mean to suggest that Jewish Day Schools are heterogeneous environments that are void of nuanced, intersecting identities, however more research might be useful in secular environments to explore other variables within a culturally relevant SWPBS.

With that said, it's valuable to acknowledge the profound depth of cultural nuance that exists within the Jewish community at large. It's worthwhile to explicitly state that overlapping Jewish cultural practices within a group do not signify that those individuals learn the same and benefit from the same learning strategies, nor that they observe Judaism to the same extent. And in fact, unsurprisingly, a number of variations and interpretations exist for any particular Jewish tradition or practice. When I asked my mentor, for example, to distinguish why some women at Maimonides wear wigs, some cover their hair, and some wear hats, she replied, "it depends who you ask." (Surely this question is just the tip of the iceberg regarding my own personal biases and preconceived notions around Orthodox Judaism that I'd brought with me on day one). When discussing and applying culturally relevant pedagogy, it's critical to not paint with a broad brush.

One article in particular that explores some of these nuances is called "Teaching Teacha! An exploration of Culturally Responsive pedagogy in Jewish education," by Miriam Hirsch (2014). In the piece, Hirsch, a Jewish educator, self-reflects and offers a case study from her own experience teaching an undergraduate pre-service teacher education course for Jewish women. The purpose of Hirsch's course is for student teachers to explore critical inquiry and self-reflection in their teaching practice. One of the texts in the course was Albarelli's *Teacha! Stories from Yeshiva,* which presents a narrative from the perspective of a young, non-Jewish teacher at an ultra-conservative Hasidic Jewish School in Williamsburg. The author's account paints an honest yet harsh picture of the Hasidic Jewish community, and a handful of Hirsch's students were caught off guard and experienced strong emotional responses to the text. Several students wrote to Hirsch and inquired why they'd been asked to read a text that portrayed a Jewish community in such a light. Hirsch, who is Jewish herself, felt guilty about her role in

putting her students in uncomfortable and challenging positions, but she also wanted to capitalize on the learning experience, both for herself and for her students. She writes:

> While I consider myself Orthodox, I am guilty of using my own Freire inspired critical inquiry stance with a population of students who held culturally relevant beliefs and ways of knowing very different from my own… And yet, this book, unlike any other read throughout the semester, clearly challenged the students to confront their own belief system and cultural religious identity. I had asked them to critically reflect on the practices of a population that they were on one hand, religiously commanded to respect, but which on the other hand, exhibited behaviors quite contrary to the conventional contemporary educational practice (Hirsch, 2014, p. 92)

Hirsch felt that she didn't sufficiently prepare her class for the potentially challenging content of the text, especially as it relates to her students' religious cultural identities and perceptions, but she also didn't regret asking students to critically consider all sides of their religious tradition. She continues, "Do teacher educators just paint a rosy picture of perfection or do we actually want students to grapple with the areas of Jewish education that need improvement? How will we transform Jewish education if we cannot talk about the things that we aren't doing well?" (Hirsch, 2014, p. 95). This case study is meaningful because it not only emphasizes the vastness of the Jewish diaspora, but also the multiple intersecting nuances in between. Despite a number of challenging and occasionally painful conversations, Hirsch did foster an environment in which her students felt comfortable expressing their ideas. Gloria Ladson Billings, a pedagogical theorist and thought leader in the field of culturally responsive education, might say that Hirsch has succeeded at cultivating a responsive classroom in the sense that her students felt "psychologically safe to express themselves" and "were not afraid to assume oppositional viewpoints" as a means to foster student confidence during difficult dialogue (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 112). In her own words, Hirsch's experience "addresses the generative role of culturally relevant curricula, the resistant nature of culturally determined assumptions, and the orders of magnitude that sit between people who may seem culturally

homogenous" (Hirsch, 2014, p. 96). Again, when it comes to culturally responsive pedagogy, it's important not to paint with a broad brush.

The Developmental Urgency of Culturally Relevant Curriculum

To return to the SWPBS case study from earlier, that research is useful in considering how a school community at large might institute CSP in a practical way, but it doesn't quite convey just how high the developmental stakes are for students of non-dominant backgrounds in the existing American education system. In essence, CSP encourages teachers to see and know the cultural identities of the students in their classroom. Historically, students of color and students from non-dominant cultural backgrounds are asked to assimilate to white, middle-class work ethics and ways of knowing in the classroom. The neurological and learning consequences are severe for a student within a school environment that does not foster caring, trusting narratives around that students' cultural identity. Zaretta Hammond explores these neurological impacts at length (and also offers tools for creating safe learning environments) in her book *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally linguistically diverse students.* Early in the book, Hammond emphasizes that fear and learning are inversely related; a student cannot learn effectively if they sense fear or harm. She uses microaggressions as a prime source of student invalidation. She writes:

> The brain seeks to minimize social threats and maximize opportunities to connect with others in community. The brain's two prime directives are to stay safe and happy. The brain takes its social needs very seriously and is fierce in protecting an individual's sense of well-being, self-determination, and self-worth along with its connection to community. We cannot downplay students' need to feel safe and valued in the classroom.. The brain will not seek to connect with others if it perceives them to be threatening to its social or psychological well-being based on what they say and do. It's gesture may be interpreted by the student as threatening. As a result, the amygdala stays on alert, trying to detect other microaggressions. Microaggressions are the subtle, everyday verbal and nonverbal slights, snubs, or insults which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to

> people of color based solo on their marginalized group membership. In many cases, these covert messages serve to invalidate positive group identity or trivialize their experiences. They are designed to demean them on a person or group level, communicate they are lesser human beings, suggest they do not belong with the majority group, threaten and intimidate, or relegate them to inferior status and treatment. (Hammond, 2015, p. 47)

Hammond seems to be stressing the slippery slope of negative chain reactions that take place when fear and social threat enters the equation for students in the classroom. Despite the brain's spectacular ability to instinctively protect our neurological best-interest (it's hard to argue with the priority of "maximizing opportunities to connect with others in community") Hammond's analysis is quite unsettling in a number of areas. One of the many unnerving details is that a teacher or adult can ignite this process within a child without intending to, by, for example, mispronouncing a student's non-English name or confusing two students of the same racial identity. Young people already expel enormous effort as they learn certain day-to-day tasks and new content; the heightened fear and anxiety of being alienated because of one's identity implements a unique fear in the classroom space. Fear, Hammond notes, "activates the amygdala and the release of cortisol. Cortisol stops all learning for about 20 minutes and stays in the body for up to 3 hours" (Hammond, 2015, p. 76). Similarly, the brain's negativity bias is up to three times more likely to remember and respond to negative experiences than positive ones. Of course, minor mistakes and miscommunications are common in intercultural environments, but it's essential to note that these small moments, these cultural misses, when compounded by other slights (as unintentional as they may be) over the course of months and years from a wide array of adults can add up to a student's self-narrative.

The self-narrative, according to Hammond, "is a story [the learner] tells himself about why he can't learn… These narratives act like software that program the brain to behave and react in a particular way. To help shift their mindset, dependent learners have to develop their

own individual counter narratives" (Hammond, 2015, p. 115). Enter culturally sustaining pedagogy. One of the integral intentions of CSP is to validate students' cultural backgrounds and narratives that they already know, and then build on them. Hammond goes on to list other principals of the brain, including "Positive relationships keep our safety-threat detection system in check… Culture guides how we process information… Attention drives learning… All new information must be coupled with existing funds of knowledge in order to be learned.. The brain physically grows through challenge and stretch, expanding its ability to do more complex thinking and learning" (Hammond, 2015, p. 48). A student's cultural context and background is programmed in their brains and impacts the way they interpret new information! For this reason in particular, it's remarkable to consider the vast knowledge and insight that students from all backgrounds bring to non-responsive learning environments, but is never accessed. This is a great loss not only to the student, but to the community of learners as a whole.

Hammond suggests a number of ideas to navigate such an urgent dilemma in the classroom. In particular, she emphasizes that any educator must seek and cultivate authentic, trusting relationships with students. Caring, she writes, "is the best way we generate the trust that builds relationships. We have to not only care *about* our students in a general sense but also actively care *for* them in a physical and emotional sense" (Hammond, 2015, p. 73). Hammond believes in creating a culture of care in the classroom that assists students in moving towards independence. She coins the term "learning partnership" between a student and teacher, which is "anchored in affirmation, mutual respect, and validation that breeds an unshakeable belief that marginalized students not only *can* but *will* improve their school achievement" (Hammond, 2015, p.75). In a sense, this relationship between teacher and student that Hammond describes requires a shared level of intentional effort for its success.

To return to the context of the Jewish Day School, in the same way that it's possible for a non-Jewish educator to facilitate some level of spiritual connection through song, it is also possible for a non-Jewish educator to build and cultivate caring relationships with students, but there are certainly a number of limitations as well. When I asked Kaunfer, a Spiritual Educator at JCDS, about his thoughts around non-Jewish teachers leading songs in the Jewish Day School space, he opined:

> I wish I could say, 'yeah it doesn't matter as long as the person feels it and can amp up a crowd,' but I don't think that's actually true. I think in this specific scenario [at school] we're using music both as a way of spiritual connecting but we're also using it as an educational tool to teach texts and language and words of prayers. So to not be familiar with the language and the practices would be an impediment. And one of my main things that I say a lot about davening is that I want the adults in the room just to be davening… not to be *shh*-ing and not to be policing and this and that… I want adults to really be modeling what the prayer experience is. And I think that might be harder if the person at the front of the room isn't familiar with the prayers. It's not to say that person can't spiritually connect or elevate other people's spiritual connection, but there's a bit of a handicap. (Kaunfer, O, April 1, 2021)

Kaunfer's honest and thoughtful reflection emphasizes a fairly obvious truth: learning to read Hebrew is a fundamental feature of Jewish education. For younger students, the daily ritual of davening requires someone who can lead *tefillah* (prayers) and perhaps shed light on the meaning and messages of the words themselves. On a practical level, a non-Jewish teacher is probably unable to read, teach, or intellectually interpret Hebrew, which is foundational content in any Judaic studies curriculum. Relatedly, Kaunfer also spoke about his preference for adults to model prayer and actually daven alongside students. Prayer, in this particular sense of the practice, is a personal experience and rooted in Jewish faith. Within such a process is a distinctive connection between the words and tradition itself as well as the shared religious experience of one's peers in the space, which a non-Jewish educator would simply not be able to access in the same way. Personally, I do sense a certain level of distance in my relationships with

students knowing that they pray everyday in a language I do not know and that they honor an age-old tradition of which I know very little. While I don't believe such distance drastically impacts my teaching nor my relationships with children or colleagues, it does challenge me to seek other ways to build connections with students at Maimonides, and it also reminds me that students have much to teach me as well.

Within The Music Classroom at Maimonides

While the coronavirus pandemic has posed significant obstacles to music-making at Maimonides in some ways, we have managed to develop an invigorating music program that incorporates music technology, some classroom instruments, and some singing. The music curriculum that I've implemented is state standards-based and not explicitly Jewish in nature or practice, but there have been a number of special occasions throughout the year where I've been asked to facilitate a specifically Jewish-music making experience (occasionally with support from a Hebrew-speaker.) I'll talk about three projects and reflect on their effectiveness as both educational musical experiences and culturally relevant endeavors.

The Jewish holiday of *Tu Bishvat* takes place in January; it's a celebration of the new year for the trees, and it's a moment of spiritual rebirth and renewal. Following in the footsteps of many choral leaders during the pandemic, I took my first plunge into a virtual choir with a tune called Hashkediya (video here). The song, somewhat like It's Time To Say Good Shabbos, originated as a folk tune in the early 1900's, and has become a familiar melody to ring in the arrival of Tu Bishvat. The chorus translates simply to, "Tu bishvat has arrived. (It's) the festival of the trees." While I did have to learn the chords, Hebrew lyrics (with some guidance from a Jewish musician in the community), and create the instrumental track on Soundtrap, I barely had

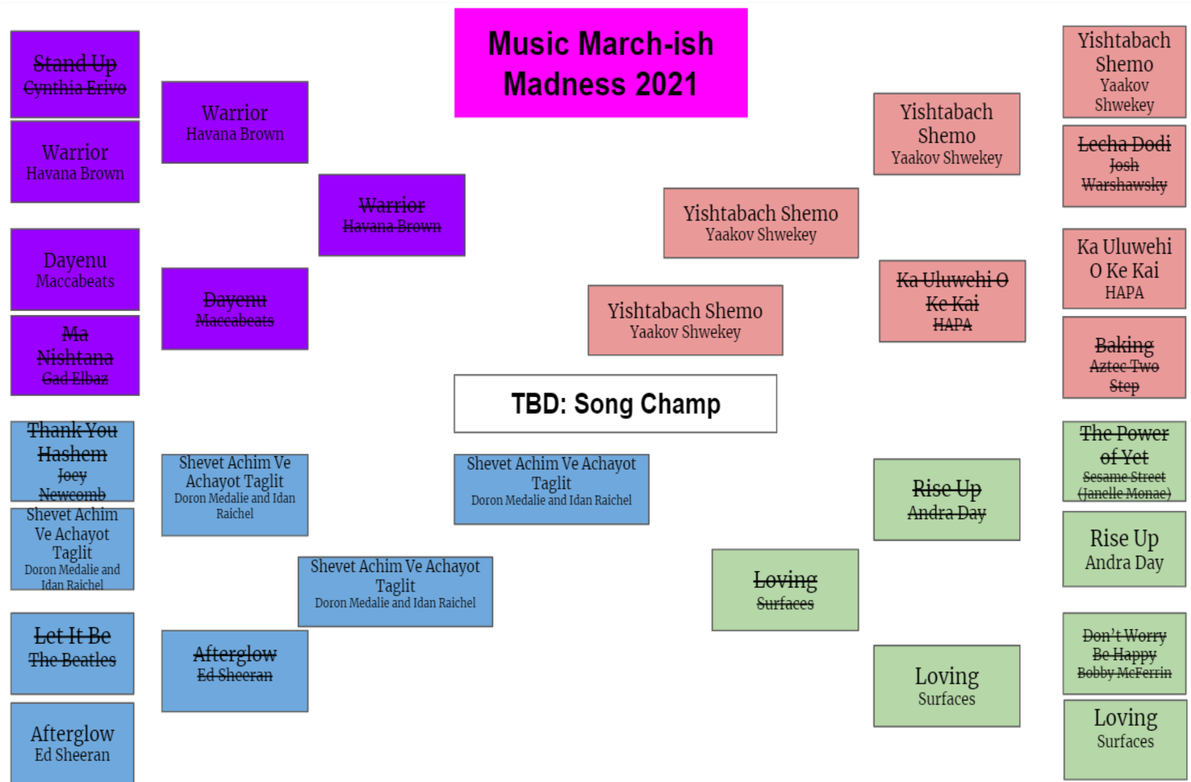
to teach the words or melody at all to students; most kids were confident singing the song without music or lyrics. I offered the opportunity to 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders on an opt-in basis during their recess or lunch periods, so the choir was not directly attached to music class, which also means it wasn't explicitly geared towards any particular state standard or assessment. I recorded students throughout the week in multiple small groups of four or five kids, which also enabled me to deepen relationships with students in a more intimate, personalized setting. From my vantage point, students were quite eager to participate in such an ensemble, and they were thrilled to see their names roll in the end credits when we played the video at an elementary school-wide zoom assembly. Students from other class years wanted to know why they couldn't participate. Additionally, one student had a particular moment to shine as she played the piano introduction on the final track. All in all, the Hashkediya choir was a relatively low effort, feel-good opportunity for me to participate in the affirming of students' Jewish identities through music. In truth, there wasn't much of an intercultural reckoning or deep reflection on my end as the non-Jewish facilitator of the experience. Something of the like would probably come into creation with any other music educator in this particular space for Tu Bishvat, but all the same, the experience was a meaningful one for students and myself alike.

A similar musical event took place for *Pesach* (Passover) in March. A mentor approached me to collaborate on an interdisciplinary project with her 2nd grade class. The students had been learning basic coding with a program called Scratch Jr, and she had developed an assignment in which students program their own moving images on an iPad (almost like a GIF) that correspond to the lyrics of a contemporary tune called The Seder Song by Uncle Moishey. Alongside the sequenced images created by students, the teacher asked me to coordinate and arrange another virtual choir, similar to that of the Hashkediya arrangement, with the 2nd graders (video here).

Similar to the Hashkediya choir, I had the opportunity to connect with students in small groups, which fostered moments of unique bonds in an intimate learning environment.The final product was an exciting display of a wide variety of learning and development across disciplines including computer science, digital visual art, music, and Judaic studies. Firstly, students furthered their understanding of the Jewish holiday of Pesach, and specifically, the significance of the Seder and Seder Plate. Presumably, most students brought this knowledge to their own family's Seder tables days later, making this lesson immediately relevant to their cultural traditions. Secondly, students demonstrated tech literacy through coding their own original moving images via an app on their iPads. Thirdly, the choir offered an opportunity for students to connect with their faith tradition, learn a new song in Hebrew, and sing alongside their peers as a link to a larger class project. As a whole, the Pesach unit struck me as a community effort in which each student and teacher played a unique role in their own multifaceted individual learning as well as the collective learning of the class.

Lastly, with March, of course, comes March Madness (the Men and Women's NCAA Basketball Championships). In music class, March brings Maimonides Music March Madness (MMMM). This unit, which I share between grades 1 and 5, centers student voice and choice through music appreciation. I ask 16 teachers to submit a song that has been guiding and supporting them during the pandemic. I collect the songs and put them into a bracket, much like the NCAA tournament, to "compete" with the other selected songs. Then, in music class, we work our way through the match-ups and students vote on the songs they enjoy most. I tally the votes, certain songs advance, and eventually one song "wins" the tournament. At the end of the tournament, I reveal which teacher in the community picked which song, including the champion song. In my experience it's an extremely simple activity with significant payoffs around student

buy-in and investment; it only requires about 10-15 minutes of each music class. Below is the bracket through the championship match-up:



Overall, MMMM has been very successful at engaging students through routine, music appreciation, and community-building. It has not been uncommon for students to approach me and excitedly ask, “which song is winning this week?!” or “did my teacher submit a song? Which one?!” In my view, MMMM is an amusing and gratifying ritual independent of any cultural significance, but it bears mentioning that a handful of tunes that teachers submitted are in Hebrew or are rooted in Judaism in some way. Perhaps more interestingly, it’s compelling to note that the two songs that advanced to the final round, Shevet Achim Ve Achayot Taglit and Yishtabach Shemo, are both songs that are integrated in some way into the Judaic curriculum in the elementary experience at Maimonides. On more than one occasion while voting between

those final two songs, I heard students mutter under their breath, "this is *so* hard" and "I have no idea which song to choose - they're both so good." The criteria for each student's vote was subjective and based simply on likeability, so it's hard to say definitively that cultural connection was the single most important factor in any student's vote, but it is fair to assume that cultural connection played a role in drawing a student to the two final songs in particular.

Conclusions

A music educator in an explicitly religious environment has the unique role of facilitating spiritual experiences through music. A thorough, intentional curriculum is essential in the music classroom, of course, though the shape of that curriculum might look different depending on who you ask. In the article, "A new look at music in Jewish education," J.K. Eisenstein explores the role of music in the Jewish education (1970). He emphasizes, "[Students] must start with a clear understanding that music is not a 'come on,' but a vital and integral part of our heritage, the voice of a people, like the Hebrew language and Yiddish language… a curriculum for music in Jewish education… must provide for the discriminating ordering of a total musical heritage, and for laying down the considered guide lines in adding to that heritage" (Eisenstein, 1970, p. 8). It's impossible to deny the fundamental link between music, culture, and spiritual identity within the Jewish tradition. For any music teacher (of any faith background) to divorce music education from the purposeful musical roots within a vibrant, faith-centered learning environment would be to miss the purpose of any musical experience: to deepen connections with other individuals, with our communities, and with ourselves.

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