

Sparks FAQ answered by Larry

What **genre** are the songs?

[Some](#) see this as a new genre, but if you need a label, try *contemporary folk* that detours into rock, folk-grass, country, classical, and spoken word poetry! Some tell me songs' sensibilities evoke Dan Bern, Bob Dylan, David Wilcox, Daniel Cainer, Cat Stevens, or Joe Black. These are non-liturgical original songs deeply grounded in Jewish culture and Torah, Talmud, and Midrash: **inspiration beyond denomination!** [Lyrics](#) are in English, averaging just one non-English word (Hebrew, Yiddish, or Spanish) per song.

Wait, what *are* Torah, Talmud, and Midrash?

The word **Torah** can include much more, but the Torah scroll is Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The full Jewish Bible (Tanach) comprises those "5 books of Moses" as well as the 8 books of *Nevi'im*/Prophets (e.g., Joshua, Isaiah), and the 11 books of *Ketuvim*/Writings (e.g., Psalms, Proverbs). The Talmud is an "Oral Torah" (that compiled discussions and debates among rabbis about the meaning of that written Torah) that got written down so it wouldn't be lost in times of persecution and exile. The (Babylonian) **Talmud** has 2711 double-sided pages that include Mishnah (exegetical material in Hebrew embodying the oral tradition of Jewish law, redacted 18 centuries ago by Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi) and commentary on the Mishnah known as Gemara (mostly Aramaic, compiled 15 centuries ago by Ravina II and Rav Ashi). **Midrash** can refer to Judaic biblical interpretation, the method, or a collection. Written during/after the Mishnaic period, Midrash relates to *halacha* (law) or *aggadah* (parable).

Whoa – I gotta know **sources** to appreciate the album's content?

No – songs are 'self-contained' so the main message comes through for all. That said, some will be inspired to look up those underlying sources or plan a song-and-study event as described in [The Jewish Educator!](#) From [tabulated related texts](#), type chapter and verse (or tractate and page) in a [Sefaria](#) search window and the text usually comes up with English translation. So some reactions are "I've heard that story, but never as a song!" while others are "Love that song's message, but didn't know it was Jewish!" At <https://larrylesser.com/sparks> are links to read lyrics, access music, etc.

So it's entertaining *and* educational?

Yes! Songs have playfulness, surprise, and [humor](#), and most have sing-along choruses. While lyrics spark many explorations, also compelling are [musicians](#) from many genres and generations who have played and/or recorded with symphonies, ensembles, and bands such as ACM award-winning and GRAMMY-nominated Midland. And it's engaging how these songs are **timely and timeless** by making modern connections: the Midrashic "Rowboat" addresses climate change, the Chassidic proverb "Two Pockets" yielded a question at a nationally-televised [town hall](#) in a recent election year, the Talmudic "The Best" recalls a Garth Brooks #1 hit, etc. It works 'cause so far we're aware of [airplay](#) of 12+ different songs in several states, concerts/classes are well received, and *Sparks* was a [Finalist in FOUR categories](#) (including Best Album!) -- [winning](#) Best Humorous Song at the 2021 **New Mexico Music Awards!**

What's the target audience?

Having experienced (and having friends and relatives in) all denominations in my long ongoing journey of seeking and questioning, I wrote songs to push back on polarization and be inclusive to all (for

example, I used neither holy names nor gendered names when referring to God). It's validating how *Sparks* has received [praise across denominations](#), including current/recent heads of CLAL, USCJ, Mussar Institute, Partners in Torah, and Women Cantors' Network. The themes also resonate with secular Jews and non-Jews – musicians and audiences have spanned all major Abrahamic faiths.

Neat! Does anyone else write contemporary Jewish music like this?

What sets *Sparks* apart (beyond my sheer star charisma 😊) is the songwriting, including the first or best song for several texts/topics! Few albums take on nuanced sociological dimensions of Jewish identity and experience (e.g., denominationalism, feminism, proselytization, diversity, etc.), draw upon Talmud, and range from humorous to Holocaust. Jewish artists more often set a few lines of liturgy to a new melody for a denomination's worship, and I did write "[Healing Song](#)" (covered on other artists' albums), but for *Sparks* I was drawn to *non-liturgical* cross-denominational gems.

What inspired the [album title](#)?

The atmospheric title track and [album art](#) convey a Jewish mystical teaching that we must free and reunite scattered sparks of Creation's "Big Bang" by transforming ourselves and repairing the world. The word *spark* is also on other tracks and all 24 songs aim to *spark* reflection, dialogue, and action!

Wow! 24 songs? Where should I start?

After waiting so long, I didn't want to release some songs from this collection, then wait a year for the rest. Plus, 24 songs averaging 3 minutes take the same time as 14 5-minute songs. If there's time to hear just a few 'Greater Lesser Hits', try "[2 Jews, 3 Opinions](#)", "[7 Circles](#)", "[Sparks](#)", "[The Best](#)", "[Feathers](#)". Or go by type of song: for [humor](#), try "Max (The Bark Mitzvah Song)", "Spiritual Not Religious"; for [Talmud](#), "The Best", "The Stone", "Temples", "Bruria", "Tearin' the Sea", "Everyone", "Give Thanks"; for [Midrash](#), "Rowboat", "Feathers"; for [history/Holocaust](#), "Lights Lead Home", "One-Way Train", "Stack the Stones"; for [Kabbalah](#), "Sparks"; for [sociology](#), "2 Jews, 3 Opinions," "Shabbos Keeps the Jews", "Deep and Wide." Or **choose by browsing [1-liner summaries](#)**. But **no 3 songs fully capture the album's stunning variety and trajectory, so if you just have just 10 minutes, read the [lyrics](#) of all songs.**

Can we see these songs performed [live](#)?

When I've played my Jewish songs at campus, conference, or congregational events in CO, TX, and NM, it's always tailored and fresh because I'm not a full-time musician or Jewish professional (though I taught 2 years full-time in a Jewish day school!) – I have an award-winning [education career](#) that remains my main commitment. But while I can't hit the road for a big tour, I'm open each year (especially summers) to a select few [gigs or scholar/artist-in-residence events](#) with concerts or classes (on song-related texts or other topics I've published on such as [math-Judaism connections](#)); I've presented solo as well as with (Orthodox or Reform) rabbis or other musicians. My first [online performance](#) showed I don't have to depend on travel, that I make my songs timely, and that my experience as a folk/singer-songwriter lets me play solo as needed (though I love the magic other musicians added to the album and to in-person release events). My solo live style can be heard on *Sparks*, with "Spiritual Not Religious" and "The Bark Mitzvah Song" recorded in one take for an audience. Also, I was one of only 5 acts invited to [perform at the 2021 New Mexico Music Awards](#).