

# LINER NOTES

**SPARKS** release date: February 4, 2020

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Made in U.S.A.

UPC for the album: 888295966801 (except 194660590893 on iTUNES)

[ProfessorLesser@gmail.com](mailto:ProfessorLesser@gmail.com)

(backup email: [info@larrylesser.com](mailto:info@larrylesser.com))

[larrylesser.com/sparks](http://larrylesser.com/sparks)

SONG	SUMMARY & RELATED TEXT (most on <a href="http://www.sefaria.org">www.sefaria.org</a> )
2 Jews, 3 Opinions	Using a popular cultural quip to explore how our diverse opinions are strengths when we argue constructively, seeking truth rather than victory; featured in <a href="#">Israeli Journal of Humor Research</a> ; Erubin 13b, Genesis 1:28-29, Numbers 16, Pirkei Avot 5:17, Menachot 33a
Shabbos Keeps the Jews	Quip by cultural Zionism founder Asher Ginsberg (Ahad Ha'am): musing what transcends varied approaches to Shabbat practice; <b>New Mexico Music Awards Finalist for Best Bluegrass Song</b>
Lights Lead Home	Jewish ritual can awaken what's within, as it has for many descendants of Anusim (Crypto-Jews) forced by the Spanish Inquisition to flee, hide, or forsake their faith. A composite of experiences of B'nei Anusim I've known from my time in El Paso (which has an <a href="#">Anusim Center</a> ), this song was featured in a national <a href="#">resource guide</a> , a museum exhibit, the Spring/Summer 2020 <a href="#">HaLapid</a> , and a <a href="#">video</a> .
Kind	Dietary practices (Deuteronomy 14:3-21, Genesis 9:4, Leviticus 17:10-14) have allegorical kindness rationale from first-century BCE philosopher Philo of Alexandria's <i>The Special Laws IV</i> (103, 107, 108, 111, 116) and <i>On the Virtues</i> (133-144); featured by <a href="#">KosherToday</a> and <a href="#">Opera UTEP</a>
Max (The Bark Mitzvah Song)	Jewish coming-of-age from canine view; Exodus 11:4-7 & 24:7, Pirkei Avot 4:2 & 6:1; my related letter in the Jan./Feb. 2020 <i>Moment</i> responds to <a href="#">this piece</a> ; <b>New Mexico Music Awards WINNER for Best Humorous Song!</b> Featured in <a href="#">Israeli Journal of Humor Research</a>
7 Circles	Poetic reflections on a mathematical motif in Judaism; Joshua 6:15-20, Exodus 23:10-12
Sparks	Atmospheric anthem inspired by Kabbalah, which charges us to free and reunite trapped sparks of the Divine Light by transforming ourselves and repairing the world; Genesis 1:27; Zohar (I, 2a, 15a); <b>New Mexico Music Awards Finalist for Best Religious Song</b> ; see song <a href="#">video</a>
2 Pockets	Chassidic rabbi Simcha Bunem (1765-1827) of Peshischa suggests we find balance by recalling both our importance and impermanence; his proverb was featured at a <a href="#">nationally-televised town hall</a> from the prior Presidential election year; Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5, Sanhedrin 37a, Genesis 18:27
Feathers	Parable (some attribute to R. Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev) illustrates why careful speech is crucial; Leviticus 19:16, Arakchin 15b
Temples	What doomed the Second Temple in the year 70 still looms today; Gittin 55b-58a, Yoma 9b
Spiritual Not Religious	This increasingly popular label fit my 20s self; Featured in <a href="#">Israeli Journal of Humor Research</a> ; audience recording from <a href="#">2018 Yom HaShir</a>
Tearin' the Sea	My improbable <a href="#">story</a> validates the Talmud's metaphor for how hard it is to find a soulmate; Sotah 2a; Sanhedrin 22a; Psalm 136:13; Bereshit Rabbah 68:4; Zohar; Megillah 10b; Exodus 15:20-21 & 14:22
The Best	Like trying to grasp a movie in the middle, we don't always see how barriers may yield blessings in a bigger picture; featured in <a href="#">The Jewish Educator</a> and Opera UTEP; life lessons in travels of Rabbi Akiva
One-Way Train	Written after reading <i>Night</i> by Elie Wiesel OBM; sadly salient now as survivors dwindle and anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial rise; picked for a 2021 NEA Big Read event
Stack the Stones	Set in post-Shoah Eastern Europe; Genesis 35:20, Numbers 19:11, Psalm 18:3
Right Messiah	A song on why Jews believe the Messiah hasn't yet come that I wish I had in college when encountering some supersessionist evangelism whose approach offended even many Christian classmates. Isaiah 2:4, Zechariah 14:9, Isaiah 11:11-12, Jeremiah 23:8 & 33:18; Jeremiah 23:5; Deuteronomy 29:28, Avot d'Rabbi Natan 31b
Nothing in Between	Distinctive ways we connect; Exodus 20:3, Psalms 145:18, Genesis 1, Deuteronomy 5:3, Exodus 19:2 Rashi, Kedushat HaYom (Shabbat Mincha Amidah), Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 19:2:10
Deep and Wide	Pirkei Avot 4:1 tells us that a wise person learns from everyone and I've been inspired enough by friends and relatives with diverse Jewish practices to refuse to settle for a faith that's not deep <i>and</i> wide; Deut.5:3
Rowboat	parable (some 15 centuries old) of interdependence (Midrash Rabbah Vayikra 4:6) extended to our environmental crisis; <a href="#">featured in The Jewish Educator, Hadassah</a> , and a 2023 art gallery exhibition
Bruria	Tribute to a top (female) sage of the Talmud; Pesachim 62b, Tosefta Keilim Metsia 1:3, Brakhot 10a, Midrash Proverbs 31:2, Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:13, Def Shevui & Rashi on Avodah Zarah 18b:4, Brakhot 10a, Erubin 53b-54a; chosen for a 2020 gender studies <a href="#">conference</a> and a 2023 art gallery exhibition
Letters	encounter with unlettered but deeply spiritual person affirms that a humble open heart matters most
Everyone	Popular culture makes us feel few have room to succeed, but Pirkei Avot 4:1 opens success to all!
The Stone	Rabbi Akiva's watershed moment launched his great mid-life learning; Job 14:19, Avot d'Rabbi Natan 6:2, Bava Kamma 82a
Give Thanks	Blessed with a wonderful son Yehuda, I especially appreciate how an attitude of gratitude is in the nature – and name – of a Jew ( <i>Yehudi</i> ); Brakhot 60b, Genesis 29:35, Menachot 43b

## SONG CREDITS

1. Two Jews, Three Opinions 3:11  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, electric guitar, harmonica  
**Bill Radcliffe** electric guitar, harmony vocals  
**Ross Ingram** drums
2. Shabbos Keeps the Jews 1:43  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, acoustic guitar  
**Bill Radcliffe** mandolin  
**Amalia Kelter Zeitlin** violin
3. Lights Lead Home 2:44  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, Spanish guitar  
**Bill Radcliffe** electric guitar, harmony vocals
4. Kind 1:59  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, classical guitar  
**Sabiha Khan** flute
5. \*Max (The Bark Mitzvah Song) 2:44  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, acoustic guitar
6. Seven Circles 3:55  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, electric guitar, organ,  
acoustic guitar, cymbal, timpani  
**Ross Ingram** drums
7. Sparks 3:11  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, acoustic guitar  
**Bill Radcliffe** lap steel guitar, bass guitar
8. Two Pockets 3:17  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, classical guitar  
**Bill Radcliffe** pedal steel guitar
9. Feathers 2:35  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, acoustic guitar, whistle,  
Peruvian ocarina, wind chimes  
**Sabiha Khan** flute
10. Temples 3:22  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, classical guitar  
**Amalia Kelter Zeitlin** violin
11. \*Spiritual Not Religious 3:19  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, acoustic guitar
12. Tearin' the Sea 3:56  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, acoustic guitar, tambourine
13. The Best 3:28  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, acoustic guitar  
**Amalia Kelter Zeitlin** violin  
**Bill Radcliffe** bass guitar  
**Ross Ingram** drums
14. One-Way Train 3:48  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, acoustic guitar  
**Amalia Kelter Zeitlin** violin  
**Bill Radcliffe** electric guitar
15. Stack the Stones 2:12  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, classical guitar  
**Amalia Kelter Zeitlin** violin  
**Bill Radcliffe** pedal steel guitar
16. Right Messiah 3:24  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, electric guitar  
**Bill Radcliffe** electric guitar, bass guitar  
**Ross Ingram** drums
17. Nothing in Between 1:49  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, acoustic guitar  
**Bill Radcliffe** electric guitar, bass guitar  
**Ross Ingram** drums
18. Deep and Wide 3:28  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, acoustic guitar  
**Bill Radcliffe** pedal steel guitar
19. Rowboat 2:39  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, classical guitar
20. Bruria 2:27  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, acoustic guitar, shaker  
**Bill Radcliffe** electric guitar, bass guitar  
**Ross Ingram** drums
21. Letters 2:40  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, classical guitar  
**Sabiha Khan** flute
22. Everyone 3:16  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, acoustic guitar  
**Bill Radcliffe** electric guitar, bass guitar  
harmony vocals  
**Ross Ingram** drums
23. The Stone 2:26  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, classical guitar  
**Bill Radcliffe** kitchen sink
24. Give Thanks 2:27  
**Larry Lesser** vocals, acoustic guitar  
**Larry Karol** harmony vocals  
**Amalia Kelter Zeitlin** violin  
**Bill Radcliffe** electric guitar, bass guitar

*\*live recording*

## ALBUM CREDITS (slightly expanded from CD jacket)

*Ross Ingram* [engineer]: drum tracks (1,6,13,16,17,20,22)

*Larry Karol*: harmony vocals (24)

*Sabiha Khan*: C flute (4,9,21)

*Larry Lesser* [co-producer]: vocals (1-24), acoustic guitars (Alvarez 5011 classical on 3,4,8,10,15,19,21,23; Fender DG-10 steel-string on 2,5,6,7,9,11-14,17,18,20,22,24), whistle & Peruvian ocarina (9), Eleca DGT-1 stratocaster-style electric guitar (1,6,16), harmonica (1), Thomas 2001 organ (6), percussion (timpani and cymbal 6, wind chimes 9, tambourine 12, shaker 20)

*Bill Radcliffe* [co-producer]: pedal steel guitar (8,15,18), lap steel guitar (7), mandolin (2), Eastman T-486 electric guitar through Quilter Mach II amp (1,3,14,16,17,20,22,24), bass guitar (7,13,16,17,20,22,24), harmony vocals (1,3,22), kitchen sink (23)

*Amalia Kelter Zeitlin*: violin (2,10,13-15,24)

Recorded July-August 2019 at Brainville Studios, Sunland Park, NM

(except #14 from October 7, 2018 Yom HaShir concert in El Paso, from an iPad in the audience)

Mastered by Chris Common at Twin Hills Recording, El Paso, TX

Front cover acrylic painting by Joshua Meyer; back cover photo by Caren Szanton

Image on CD disk by Alfonso Cerezo from Pixabay; layout of CD by Lauren Davis

## KEYS, CAPOS, 'N' CHORDS, oh my

Song	Key	Fret of guitar capo (* = except on 6 <sup>th</sup> string); Chord shapes (in order of when first played) on the album
1. 2 Jews, 3 Opinions	G	0; C, D, G, C7, D9, C/G, A7, C9
2. Shabbos Keeps the Jews	Bb	3; C, Dadd11, G, D, Am, C/G, B7, Em, D7
3. Lights Lead Home	Eb	3; Am, E, E7, Dm, Fmaj7b5, F, G, C, Em
4. Kind	A	2; G, C, D/F#, Em, Am7, Dsus4, D
5. Max (The Bark Mitzvah Song)	A	2; G, C, D, Em, Am, D7
6. 7 Circles	Am	0; Am, F, Em, G, F, Fmaj7, Dm, C, C/B, Am/G, G6, Amadd9, E, Fmaj7b5, Fsus2/F
7. Sparks	E	0; E5, Em7, Bsus4, Bm7/11, Aadd9, Dadd9, Cmaj7, Em7/11, Emadd11, Badd11
8. 2 Pockets	E	2*; D, A/D, G, A, Bm, G/D, Em7, Em9/D, Cadd9, A7, D/C#
9. Feathers	Em	0; Em, Amadd9/C, B7, D/F#, G, Aadd9
10. Temples	Am	0; Fmaj7, G, Am G6, C, F, C/B, Am/G, E
11. Spiritual Not Religious	Bb	3; G, Am, C, D/F#, D, Em7
12. Tearin' the Sea	G	0; G, C/G, F, Em7, Am7, D, Dsus4, G/F#, Em, C, Cmaj7/G, D/A
13. The Best	D	0; D, A, G, Bm, D/C#, D/B, D/A, G/F#, Em7
14. One-Way Train	Am	0; Am, G, F, Em, Amadd9, Fmaj7add11, Fmaj7, C, D, D/F#, E7
15. Stack the Stones	C#m	4; Am, Dm, Bb6addE, G, Fmaj7, C, D7, Amadd9
16. Right Messiah	G	0; G, D/F#, Em, Csus2, C, D, Am, Cdim, Dsus4
17. Nothing in Between	C	5; C/G, G, D/F#, D, Em
18. Deep and Wide	B	4; G, C, D, Em, Bm, D7, B7
19. Rowboat	B	2; A, E, D, F#m, D/E, E/B, C#m, Esus4, Aadd9
20. Bruria	Cm	3; Am, B, Dm, Dm7, E7, C, G, F, Em, C/G, D, Bm7
21. Letters	C	0; F, G, Am, Cadd9, C, G/B
22. Everyone	E	2; D, G, A, Em7, Bm, D/F#, Em, C, A/C#
23. The Stone	E	2*; D, G, A, G/F#, Em7, Bm, Dsus4, F#m
24. Give Thanks	A	2; D, G, D/F#, C/G, Dadd9, 11/A, Em, Cadd9, Am, F, Cadd9, Dadd11

## **(1) TWO JEWS, THREE OPINIONS**

words and music © 2014, 2018, 2019 Lawrence M. Lesser

Two rabbis in ancient times—  
Hillel and Shammai— often find  
their schools were at odds,  
but both spoke words of the livin' God!  
Sages' debates drive us like rack-and-pinion:  
2 Jews, 3 opinions.

Can we eat meat? Can we frack?  
Do these questions take us back  
to what Creation is really worth  
and stewardship of the Earth?  
What does it mean that God gave us dominion?  
2 Jews, 3 opinions.

Who is a Jew? Does it mean  
culture, faith, or a set of genes?  
How does Israel add more love?  
Is it just all-of-the-above?  
And how does the Shoah sway your position?  
2 Jews, 3 opinions.

Well, some towns are torn apart  
on how to do service of the heart:  
What tune is used, how much is read,  
how long it lasts, what kind of spread.  
Now all the shuls pray for minyans:  
2 Jews, 3 opinions.

We can disagree for Heaven's sake,  
but fights like Korach I just can't take!  
Meet me in the middle for a better stance  
'cause that's how my mezuzah slants!  
Whether a sabra or Virginian:  
2 Jews, 3 opinions. Only 3?!

## **(2) SHABBOS KEEPS THE JEWS**

words and music © 2018, 2019 Lawrence M. Lesser

When I lose my way,  
workin' to the bone,  
I seek a beacon  
to come back home  
to who we really are,  
not what we earn or do.  
More than Jews keep Shabbos,  
Shabbos keeps the Jews.

Friday brings friends,  
some from far away:  
each brings to the table  
somethin' real to say.  
After dinner, some go out,  
some stay and schmooze:  
more than Jews keep Shabbos,  
Shabbos keeps the Jews.

As the Friday sky grows dark,  
how do we light a spark?

Oasis in time:  
hold our busy lives  
to take in sweetness  
of song, bread, and wine.  
Timeless walk and talk  
bring bigger views:  
more than Jews keep Shabbos,  
Shabbos keeps the Jews.

You may carry nothin'  
but some wordless tunes.  
You may cook up somethin'  
that simmers and renews.  
You may put a light on  
dif'rent rabbi views  
on your drive for meaning  
in the woods or in the pews.  
More than Jews keep Shabbos,  
Shabbos keeps the Jews,  
Shabbos keeps this Jew!

### (3) LIGHTS LEAD HOME

words and music © 2007, 2014 Lawrence M. Lesser

Rosa Mendez wonders why  
her *abuela* drew the blinds,  
lit two candles and closed her eyes  
on Friday nights.

*Lights lead home, lights lead home  
over ocean of soul.*

Here in this New World land,  
Rosa starts to understand  
Traditions hidden, lost or banned,  
since Ferdinand.

*Lights lead home, lights lead home  
over ocean of soul.*

It's like she found an ancient key  
that opened doors of memory:  
fin'ly safe now to see  
sparks redeem.

*Lights lead home, lights lead home  
over ocean of soul.  
Lights lead home, welcome home  
over ocean of soul,  
sobre el alma del mar.*

### (4) KIND

words and music © 2009, 2010, 2019 Lawrence M. Lesser

If I were a fish,  
what kind would I be:  
would scales guard my integrity,  
would fins help me steer and flee,  
or would I scavenge from the bottom of the sea?

If I were a beast,  
what kind would I be:  
would I have split hooves or claws for my feet?  
Would I wolf down my food so rapidly  
or ruminate thoughtfully?

If I were a bird,  
what kind would I be:  
a bird of prey like an eagle,  
or a gentle bird like a dove  
to rise above?

I am a human,  
I've come to see:  
what I take in becomes part of me.  
And I think of blood, I think of milk,  
I think of a mother and her ilk.

So I'll face  
what's on my plate  
and think of the source, think of the fate.  
May the awareness help me find  
a way to be mindful, a way to be kind.

### (5) MAX (THE BARK MITZVAH SONG)

words and music © 2018, 2019 Lawrence M. Lesser

I'm man's best friend, gotta healthy sheen:  
in human years, I'll be 13.  
I got good *yichus* in my pedigree:  
my ancestors' silence in Egypt  
helped Jews go free.  
Look at my tag: it certifies  
I have no problem with rabbis (I mean, rabies)!

*Now it's time for my Bark Mitzvah—  
I bound onto the bima with joy!  
I run to do a mitzvah,  
fast as any girl or boy.*

For my mitzvah project, my pet crusade,  
is helping ev'ry cat get neutered or spayed.  
*Too selfish? I'll try again:*  
For my mitzvah project, I'll give 18 bones  
to good dogs not blessed to have good homes.  
My trainer says, "It's not a show.  
Torah *leash-ma* is the way to go!"  
So no collar by Gucci for just doin' my job:  
I'll be happy with whatever treat you lob.

*I celebrate my Bark Mitzvah,  
I've learned to heed commands.  
I beg to guard a mitzvah:  
I'll do, then understand.*

*Today I am a Bark Mitzvah (muzzle tov!):  
I've shed my puppy youth.  
One day, I'll marry a Shih Tzu:  
I'll see you at my aufruf!*

## (6) SEVEN CIRCLES

words and music © 2015, 2016, 2019 Lawrence M. Lesser

Joshua at Jericho  
walked 7 times around,  
blew the horns and shouted  
and walls came down, tumblin' down.

*7 circles, 7 circles take down walls*

We renew the cycle  
with honors for all:  
we take out all the Torahs  
and dance 'round the hall, 'round the hall.

*7 circles, 7 circles take down walls*

I stand beneath the canopy:  
for years, I kept my guard.  
When you walk around me,  
you open my heart, my cracked open heart.

*7 circles, 7 circles take down walls*

7 times the Earth will turn  
to bring a day of peace;  
7 times around the sun  
brings year of release

Head and heart so far apart  
in a world with false charm,  
I bind myself to God  
like the strap 'round my arm, 'round my arm.

*7 circles, 7 circles take down walls*

## (7) SPARKS

words and music © 1997, 2001, 2004, 2018  
Lawrence M. Lesser

What was formed  
as spoken  
some affirm  
as broken.  
Another way is to say:

*We're sparks divine,  
more light can shine.  
Sparks divine,  
hearts shine, we shine!*

To make this world,  
God made room.  
Light unfurled,  
broke right through:  
some returned, some fell and burned.

*We're sparks divine,  
more light can shine.  
Sparks divine,  
hearts shine, we shine!*

To heal this world,  
we must desire  
sparks' return  
to their fire.  
You and me can set them free:

*We're sparks divine,  
more light can shine.  
Sparks divine, right time  
to shine, shine, shine your part divine.*

## **(8) TWO POCKETS**

words and music © 2006 Lawrence M. Lesser

*You need two pockets with a truth in each  
that you can reach, depending on the need.*

When feeling lowly,  
reach in the right pocket and read:  
“For my sake, the world was made.”

*You need two pockets with a truth in each  
that you can reach, depending on the need.*

When feeling mighty,  
reach in the left pocket and read:  
“I am dust and ashes.”

*You need two pockets with a truth in each  
that you can reach, depending on the need,  
depending on the need*

## **(9) FEATHERS**

words and music © 2006, 2009, 2014 Lawrence M. Lesser

I told tales about you as I went through town.  
Later, feeling sorry, I track you down  
and say, “Please forgive me.”  
You say, “To begin,  
take a pillow to the meadow,  
and free its feathers to the wind.”

I find this strange, but I do as asked,  
then go to report completion of the task.  
You say, “Now, go find  
where each feather blew:  
damage done by words  
is as hard to undo.

Find those feathers,  
find where each blew—  
damage done by words  
is as hard to undo.”

## **(10) TEMPLES**

words and music © 2009, 2017, 2019 Lawrence M. Lesser

As we offered up our service,  
raising up our hands,  
Romans laid siege,  
took our treasures to their land:  
our golden lamp and vessels,  
the table that held our bread.  
Before they burned down  
our Temple to the ground,  
I said, with dread:

*Baseless hate, baseless hate,  
baseless hate will devastate...*

All the years of exile  
we went through  
have not taught us how  
to treat a fellow Jew.  
They may not share our passions  
or wear what we wear –  
is that why we don’t try  
to share our prayer?

*Baseless hate, baseless hate,  
baseless hate will devastate, desecrate...*

Now we’ve many temples,  
great halls with donors’ names,  
where some slander  
those who don’t look the same.  
And some want me shamed  
for how I learn or pray:  
they call me heretic or fanatic,  
as they relay

*Baseless hate, baseless hate,  
baseless hate will devastate—  
beyond the stones, can we atone?*



### (11) SPIRITUAL NOT RELIGIOUS

words and music © 2014-2018 Lawrence M. Lesser

With organized religion,  
I did not identify.  
Here's what I'd say  
to a friend who asked me why:  
"Ancient Jewish teachings  
don't fit modern life,  
but Ayurvedic wisdom  
transcends time.

I follow my heart, I need no part  
of a group that's superstitious:  
I am spiritual, not religious."

"And I love to unplug  
and spend weekends at the beach,  
but I don't keep the Sabbath –  
it seems out of reach.

The sun and moon are comfort,  
they light a path that's clear;  
that synagogue's confusing –  
candle times change all year.  
The food and art, I view apart  
from the superstitious:  
I am spiritual, not religious."

"I don't need rabbis  
judgin' what I do.  
'It's unhealthy,' says my shrink  
and my yoga teacher, too.  
Like, why let rules  
guide what we eat?"

I asked as I biked to the co-op to buy  
grass-fed pastured beef, wild-caught salmon,  
GMO-free corn, free-range hormone-free  
organic chicken, veggies sustainably locally  
grown, and fair trade chocolate sweets.  
I said, "I need no laws, I'm moral 'just because',  
and I am not litigious –  
I am spiritual, not religious."

*Answered my friend: you're part of a trend  
I was in, no yang just yin, but in the end  
it felt unstable 'til I was able to see ritual –  
the actual word – as 2/3 of spiritual.  
Don't laugh, do the math, it's a narrow path  
with no vessel to let us wrestle  
with regularity in community  
that's there for me with unity of history –  
more than my mystery –*

*now I see peace of mind  
needs inner and outer worlds aligned  
with feelings and creeds as well as deeds:  
my thought needs language,  
my love commitment,  
my prayer acknowledgment, words and music  
so I can use it for this song to right a wrong  
in the tribe I belong where  
I am spiritual and religious!*

### (12) TEARIN' THE SEA

words and music © 2017-2019 Lawrence M. Lesser

Our sages say a voice through the haze  
before we were conceived  
had us each paired to our b'shert  
if we'd merit that decree. They say

Our Maker makes all matches,  
but it's not easy and free:  
it's hard to pair as it was to tear the sea.

Now what can be hard for the Almighty God  
whose power knows no bound?  
Well maybe our Maker must take from another  
or see God's handiwork drown.

Our Maker makes all matches,  
but it's not easy and free:  
it's hard to pair as it was to tear the sea.

*Well what's the chance you'd hang around  
after leavin' the job that brought you to town,  
and nearby that year revealed  
an opening in my narrow field,  
and I got the offer  
before I gave others an answer?  
And what's the chance  
your local friend was a friend since childhood  
of the mother of my friend since childhood  
and that got us introduced and  
we were ready despite all we'd been through?  
But when 40 miles and 5 jobs between us  
left no time to convene us,  
what's the chance my dad discovered  
that 10 doors down I had third cousins  
whose home was empty  
when they left each winter  
'cause who until you would keep it kosher?*

*So that winter, there you stayed:  
that's how we got engaged.  
It's too small a chance all that was chance,  
too small a chance that was all chance.*

Our Maker makes all matches,  
but it's not easy and free:  
it's hard to pair as it was to tear the sea.

Tearin' the sea...  
joy of soul once again whole.  
Tearin' the sea...  
we dance and sing with tambourine.  
Tearin' the sea...  
we find faith in narrow straits.  
Tearin' the sea...  
walk on dry ground though waters surround.  
Tear in the sea...tear in the sea...  
you and me.

### **(13) THE BEST**

words and music © 2012, 2019 Lawrence M. Lesser

Trav'lin' with his donkey,  
rooster and candle,  
walkin' all day  
far as he could handle.  
The town he reached gave nowhere to stay:  
he'd have to walk to a field  
and sleep on some hay, but he said

*All God does is for the best.  
Though we rarely see under duress,  
All God does is for the best.*

That traveler read his holy books  
well into the night  
'til wind blew out  
his candle's light.  
Then donkey and rooster  
were taken by wild beasts—  
a turn of events  
he could hardly believe, but he said:

*All God does is for the best.  
Though we rarely see under duress,  
All God does is for the best.*

When the trav'ler woke and walked  
a little way, he found  
soldiers had come  
and captured the town!  
Had his candle's light been seen  
or animals been heard,  
or had he slept here, he'd have been  
taken like his bird!

*All God does is for the best...*

I think of his tale  
on the journey that is mine  
as my drama  
turns out fine:  
a failed career,  
a failed romance  
led me to a life  
of greater expanse!

*All God does is for the best.  
Though we rarely see under duress,  
all God does is for the best,  
all God does is for the best.*

#### **(14) ONE-WAY TRAIN**

words and music © 1986, 2001, 2009, 2013, 2019  
Lawrence M. Lesser

Who could foresee how ev'ry decree  
brought darkness near us all?  
Glass was smashed and to ghettos were cast  
those wearing the yellow star.  
Rounded one dawn, all were soon gone—  
80 in each cattle car.  
Huddled through night, some asking God, “Why  
are things going this far?”

Sorted by sex and then by strength  
by the Angel of Death's baton,  
stripped of clothes, teeth taken for gold,  
numbered on the left arm,  
living half-dead on thin soup and bread,  
slaving 'neath chimneys high  
that blackened the skies with families' lives  
and rage to have to hide  
*on a one-way train*

A new century, but still hard for me  
to see how to say  
what we need in country or creed  
to keep that darkness at bay—  
What gives me hope is to know  
tens of thousands dared  
put self at risk so others might live —  
an answer to a prayer  
*on a one-way train*  
*on a one-way train*

#### **(15) STACK THE STONES**

words and music © 2010, 2017, 2019 Lawrence M. Lesser

One of Ljubljana's few Jews today  
walked me to its graveyard,  
showed me Section J.  
Standing in that grass overgrown,  
wond'ring: “Who will stack the stones?”

Visiting Treblinka, where it stood  
with mass graves and burnings  
hidden by the woods.  
Now searching earth for pieces of bone,  
crying: “Who will stack the stones?”

We must keep seeking to learn from our past:  
transcend hatred,  
transcend the ash.  
With faith we're not alone,  
we will stack the stones.  
We will stack the stones,  
stack the stones.

#### **(16) RIGHT MESSIAH**

words and music © 2007-2010, 2019 Lawrence M. Lesser

At college, I got approached on the quad  
by Christians selling their path to God:  
they said my sin made me damned  
unless I got saved by their plan. I said:

*I don't see the prophecy  
of a world at peace,  
much less the world proclaiming God  
in unity,  
with all Jews in Israel rebuilding the Temple,  
so I pray for the arrival  
of the right messiah, right messiah*

A friend of a friend befriended me:  
her faith and morals were clear to see  
in how she blessed and how she prayed.  
I said: I can't join *in Jesus' name*.

*I don't see the prophecy  
of a world at peace,  
much less the world proclaiming God  
in unity,  
with all Jews in Israel rebuilding the Temple,  
so I pray for the arrival  
of the right messiah, right messiah*

Right messiah,  
anointed king –  
a man to lead,  
not redeem,  
a world extreme

*One day we'll see these prophecies  
like a world at peace:  
that day may come sooner  
if our good deeds increase.  
And if I'm planting a tree, gotta wait for me  
before I go greet the messiah,  
the right messiah, right messiah*

### **(17) NOTHING IN BETWEEN**

words and music © 2010, 2019 Lawrence M. Lesser

When I pray, I talk to God direct:  
that's the way my soul connects  
with nothing in between,  
no, nothing in between.

Our holy tongue I wanna learn:  
those letters made the world,  
so there's nothing in between,  
no, nothing in between.

*Am echad im lev echad;  
Atah echad v'shimcha echad!*

We are connected: at Sinai we stood,  
bearing witness as one peoplehood  
so there's nothing in between,  
no, nothing in between,  
nothing in between,  
nothing in between.

### **(18) DEEP AND WIDE**

words and music © 2018, 2019 Lawrence M. Lesser

I have friends whose faith is wide:  
not a yoke, more like a guide.  
They say it's our job to choose  
and heal the world's blues.  
Their tent opens wide  
to embrace what's outside with faith that's wide.

And I have friends whose faith is deep,  
who daily learn laws they keep.  
They are quick to bless  
and modest in their dress,  
and they open their homes  
to trav'lers they don't know.

*Astride this divide, still growing,  
I refuse to choose –  
I need both for the growth of my soul,  
deep and wide, deep and wide, deep and wide.*

Some wide-faith friends can't see  
roles can differ equally  
and how ritual performed  
can transform.  
Maybe not all change is good  
for our peoplehood that so long stood.

And some deep-faith friends can't see  
all that women have to teach,  
and how prayer may fill more need  
with less length or speed,  
or when fences confound  
what they surround.

*Astride this divide, still growing,  
I refuse to choose –  
I need both for the growth of my soul,  
deep and wide, deep and wide, deep and wide.*

I seek faith that's wide  
and deep at the same time,  
'cause both taught me much  
and I was touched.  
At Sinai, all were there  
so this rift is hard to bear – I despair.

*Astride this divide, still growing,  
I refuse to choose –  
I need both for the growth of my soul,  
deep and wide, deep and wide, deep and wide:  
both reside here inside.*

### **(19) ROWBOAT**

words and music © 2006, 2008, 2010, 2019  
Lawrence M. Lesser

Imagine many men  
out on a rowboat.  
Suddenly, one pulls out a drill  
and starts to bore a hole  
under his own seat.  
“What are you doing?!” others yell.

*Can a man rightfully answer  
“What's it to you what I do in my space”?*

Now from this boat we row,  
we gaze at the waters  
where we once could fish and swim.  
The heavens have a hole  
and glaciers are melting,  
raising up these waters we're in.

*Can a man rightfully answer  
“What's it to you what I do in my space”?  
Oh how will we go out on our rowboat?*

## (20) BRURIA

words and music © 2018, 2019 Lawrence M. Lesser

Though Romans wrapped her dad  
in a scroll set aflame  
for teaching people Torah,  
she became a great sage.  
She learned 300 laws  
in a single day;  
when she disagreed with sages,  
the ruling went her way.

*A woman of valor, who can find?  
Was Bruria one of a kind?*

Her husband was a rabbi  
who was so distressed  
by revelry of neighbors  
that he prayed for their deaths.  
She said: "Pray they repent,  
don't pray for their demise."  
He saw she was right:  
oh, she was very wise.

*A woman of valor, who can find?  
Was Bruria one of a kind?*

One day a plague fell  
on her boys in bed:  
how to break it to her husband  
that their sons were dead?  
When he came home,  
she had him explain:  
what if lent something precious,  
and the owner came to claim?

*A woman of valor, who can find?  
Was Bruria one of a kind?*

She denied the view  
that women lack the mind  
for learning Torah,  
gave some men a hard time.  
What would be a reason,  
when all's said and done,  
to not teach our daughters  
all we teach our sons?

*A woman of valor, who can find?  
Was Bruria one of a kind?*

## (21) LETTERS

words and music © 2006, 2008, 2019 Lawrence M. Lesser

On his own, far from home,  
a man comes to a house of prayer,  
knowing nothing but  
letters of the language.

All around, heads bow,  
so deeply lost in prayer—  
again and again, all he can send are  
letters of the language. He cries:

*"Master of the Universe, I beseech You  
to make words from my letters  
that will please You."*

His heart hit the mark  
with a simple way of prayer.  
His world was formed by  
letters of the language.

*"Master of the Universe, I beseech You  
to make words from my letters  
that will please You."*

In his breath, an *aleph* –  
like a *vav* joining *yuds*,  
blending, ascending,  
all found good.

## (22) EVERYONE

words and music © 1999, 2019 Lawrence M. Lesser

It's hard to win the lottery,  
hard to win the Nobel Prize,  
or get to play in the NBA,  
but I found a great surprise:

*You are rich if content with your portion,  
you are wise if you learn from everyone,  
you are strong if you harness your passion,  
you'll be honored  
if you honor the spark in everyone.*

The songs I play won't bring big pay –  
not much room on the chart—  
but with sacred discipline,  
we can all live a work of art 'cause

*You are rich if content with your portion,  
you are wise if you learn from everyone,  
you are strong if you harness your passion,  
you'll be honored  
if you honor the spark in everyone.*

Who has the chance to carry a man  
from a house that's burning?  
But make your might by doing right,  
ev'ry day learning:

*You are rich if content with your portion,  
you are wise if you learn from everyone,  
you are strong if you harness your passion,  
you'll be honored  
if you honor the spark in.....  
everyone..... can be rich,  
everyone..... can be wise,  
everyone..... can be strong,  
so let's honor the spark in everyone!  
Holy spark in everyone,  
I said, holy spark in everyone,  
everyone unique like everyone!*

### **(23) THE STONE**

words and music © 2006, 2008, 2019 Lawrence M. Lesser

Simple shepherd came  
by a well one day  
where dripping water made  
a hole so deep.  
As more drops fell  
on stone by the well,  
inspiration swelled  
and was received. He said:

*Like water wears away the stone,  
timeless ancient words  
can surely impress upon my heart.  
Water, wear away the stone –  
stone that holds my heart,  
and may the shaping start.*

When he was 40,  
he began the journey,  
did the learning  
that made him wise.  
And he taught others  
in great numbers:  
the well he discovered  
never went dry!

*Like water wears away the stone,  
timeless ancient words  
can surely impress upon my heart.  
Water, wear away the stone –  
stone that holds my heart,  
and may the shaping start...*

*Wear away the stone, wear away the stone,  
there's a way to wear away the stone.*

### **(24) GIVE THANKS**

words and music © 2009, 2010, 2019 Lawrence M. Lesser

We wake up  
with open eyes  
and give thanks  
before we rise  
before the One  
who made whole  
and brought back  
our very soul:  
in our people's  
very name:

*A way to be, a way to live,  
we are a people who give thanks.*

Delivered  
by the sea,  
from oppression,  
fin'ly free.  
And we're grateful –  
it's ingrained  
in our people's  
very name:

*A way to be, a way to live,  
we are a people who give thanks.*

Thanks for the lightning,  
thanks for the thunder,  
thanks for the rainbow,  
its promise and wonder.  
Thanks for the first fruit of the spring:  
every day, we try to say 100 blessings!

*It's how we live,  
we are a people who give thanks.  
Give thanks, give thanks, give thanks,  
wake up –  
wake up and give thanks!*

**DESERT ISLAND** (hidden track on CD):  
words and music © 2014, 2019 Lawrence M. Lesser

A boat sank with two Jews--  
On a desert island, they were marooned.  
But they used vines to bind some logs  
And built a trio of synagogues:  
One for each and one neither will set foot in--  
Two Jews, three opinions!

## Epilogue/Coda

Bob Dylan said, “a song is anything that can walk by itself.” Instead of being a fixed product of finished growth, some *Sparks* songs still serve as ongoing vehicles for process (because I’m a work in progress, too!). While I worked on the songs quite thoroughly before hitting the studio, some tweaks were inspired between or during recording sessions! I guess it’s not surprising that with 24 songs I’d get fresh ideas about some even after releasing the album, in case you notice differences in future live performance.

Sometimes the new idea is subtle or technical on the music side, like discovering that the fingerstyle approach of the verses of “**Rowboat**” is easier (with hammer-ons) using guitar fingerings from the key of G. Or that I sing “**Rowboat**”, “**Kind**” and “**Give Thanks**” better in keys 2, 2, and 3 half-steps higher than the album. Also, I improved the ending of “**Kind**” when rehearsing for an Opera UTEP event and I now slightly vary the music of the third verse of “**Bruria**” to better reflect the family tragedy.

After the album was released (with the version of lyrics on the preceding pages), several songs (e.g., “**The Best**” and “**Kind**”) have had individual words tweaked for sharper meaning or smoother vocal phrasing. With a couple of songs, I wrote some new verses, such as a more dispute-navigation-focused version of “**Two Jews, Three Opinions**” that replaces its middle 3 verses with this new verse ©2022 below:

Hillel cited Shammai first to respect the other’s words,  
When they disagreed, they still broke bread and their kids would get wed.  
Minority views preserved with decisions: 2 Jews, 3 opinions!

Another example is this new second verse ©2021 below for “**Right Messiah**,” based on a marginalization I and other Jews have experienced in a public school/government setting when some Christians speak from a supersessionist place. I treasure my many dual covenant Christian friends and our interfaith fellowship and dialogue and our shared concern over increasing drives to pass laws as if this is only a “Christian country.” As for bolstering religious continuity, we need not be confrontational, but just make our communities, worship, and education as welcoming, accessible, and inspiring as possible.

A public event began with prayer  
Of thanks and guidance for everyone there:  
My head was bowed but whiplash came  
When it ended “...in Jesus’ name”!

The lyric with the most post-album evolution may be “**Letters**.” My first post-recording change was simply to have a less gendered name of God in the italicized sections so as to be consistent with my approach on the rest of the album. But then I also decided, based on my experience, that this third-person parable would be more powerful and authentic in first-person. And while making that change, I next saw a chance to build in more nuance and trajectory about Jewish approach to prayer. So here’s the ©2021 version I now have:

On my own, far from home, I come to a house of prayer,  
knowing nothing but letters of the language.  
All around, heads bow, so deeply lost in prayer—  
I can’t pretend so all I send are letters of the language.  
*Here I am, Eternal One: I wish I knew  
How my letters could find You.*  
If my heart can hit the mark with a simple way of prayer,  
tears mend, transcend letters of the language.  
*Hear my heart, Eternal One: let it break me  
With words from letters to change me.*  
In my breath, an *aleph* – like a *vav* joining *yuds*,  
blending, ascending, all found good.



## My Jewish Journey Through Song

(extended from my column in the February 2008 issue of El Paso's *The Jewish Voice* and my letter in the Summer 2008 issue of *CJ: Voices of Conservative/Masorti Judaism*)

In the 5 cities I've lived, I've enjoyed congregations of most every flavor, varied in their uses of music – *niggunim*, chanting, drumming, some instruments in Psalm 150, etc. At times I've identified with the well-known story of the ignorant boy who enters a service near the end of Yom Kippur. The boy wants to join in the prayers but does not know how to read. Finally, he takes out a flute and plays his yearning for God from the depth of his heart. Considering the violation of convention, it's striking that the Baal Shem Tov said this carried the community's prayers straight to Heaven, and so it's fitting that my album's related song "Letters" features a flute! To me, music at its best indeed feels like a way of praying, longing or *kavannah* that can go much farther than my ability with words in Hebrew – or English.

With both music and Judaism, I've come to value a foundation of basic rote knowledge and skill as well as being able to experience aspects that are more spontaneous, personalized, and creative. With both music and Judaism, I feel times when I just want to show up and be uplifted by what others are doing, and there are also times when my connection requires my active preparation and participation. At their best, music and Judaism build community across often exaggerated boundaries of genre, denomination, demographics, etc. Both Jewish and musical gatherings feel most transcendent when the leaders are imbued with a sense that they are not the source but at best an indirect channel, and that we are connected to something far greater than any one of us. I believe we all need and deserve both music and Judaism in our lives too much to leave either of them completely to professionals or to prodigies.

This *Sparks* album has been decades in the making (hence two albums' worth of songs!) and I can make out periods in my Jewish songwriting trajectory that mirror how I've integrated new concepts and experiences in my Jewish growth. Around a long-awaited first trip to Israel in 1987, I wrote songs about Israel and Jewish identity, such as "Apples and Honey" (which has been used in Rosh Hashana services at congregations in Austin, Fort Collins, etc.), "Jerusalem" (which won second place at a Jewish arts festival in Austin), and "One-Way Train" (premiered in 1986 with now-[Cantor Rebecca Garfein](#), an updated version of this song is on *Sparks* and was picked for a [2021 NEA 'Big Read' event](#)). A decade later, a second wave of Jewish songwriting arose from my introduction to Jewish Renewal (from attending a Renewal congregation and the ALEPH Kallah) and to my increased exposure to Jewish text and ritual (from marrying into a Modern Orthodox family), yielding this album's "Everyone" and title cut "Sparks."

The third period of my Jewish songwriting journey was sparked by a 2006 visit from David Wilcox and Nance Pettit, whose non-profit CD *Out Beyond Ideas* melodized writings of mystics from many faiths (since you're wondering, the Jewish ones were Yehuda Halevi and Solomon ibn Gabirol). Their stunning project taught me how powerful it is to have nuggets of deep wisdom concisely realized as song – easily remembered and retrieved when needed. It inspired me to explore text in Judaism that could yield such songs with a memorable and ultimately universal message. Examples include "Two Pockets", "Rowboat" and "The Best", the latter two of which come directly from centuries-old Jewish text, except for my adding a final verse. I allowed myself also to make songs more loosely inspired by varied Jewish stories ("Feathers", "Letters") or famous quips ("Two Jews, Three Opinions", "Shabbos Keeps the Jews"). And then came some bigger "statement songs" ("Deep and Wide", "Temples", "Right Messiah", "Lights Lead Home") and songs with playfulness (e.g., "Max (The Bark Mitzvah Song)" and "Spiritual Not Religious"). And I'm so grateful for the honor and thrill of having some of my Jewish songs recorded on other artists' albums (the parsha song "[What We'll Bring](#)" for Sababa; the Misheberach-inspired "Healing Song" for

Larry Bach and for Ellen M. Wilson), sung in sanctuaries, or featured in [blogposts](#), [radio](#), [TV](#), and [bikkur cholim](#) work. I've enjoyed overlapping with my region's fellow Jewish recording artists [Larry Karol](#), [Larry Bach](#), [Alison Westermann](#), and [Ellen Wilson](#).

So far in my fourth decade writing Jewish-themed songs, I've had highlights such as performing my peace song "[Break](#)" in a 400-attendee 2018 concert with UTEP's middle eastern music ensemble (where I met Sabiha and Amalia, who added such wonderful flute and violin, respectively, to my album!), opening for Chava Mirel at [2018 Yom HaShir](#) (from which track #11 of the album comes), having my songs open 2019 talks by award-winning authors [Karen Treiger](#) and [Genie Milgrom](#), having NPR station interviews, being featured in peer-reviewed journals and curated museum/gallery exhibits and conferences, having wonderful videos (for "[Lights Lead Home](#)" and "[Sparks](#)") as well as having so far at least 13 of the album's 24 songs played on stations in several states, such as KTEP-FM (El Paso, TX), WCUW-FM (Worcester, MA), KTAL-FM (Las Cruces, NM), and JewishRockRadio.com. My performances have ranged from being the opening act for Opera UTEP events to doing a full set at a community-wide Jewish Food Festival to playing songs at the closing session for a biennial national conference.

With *Sparks*, I aimed to go beyond liturgy and offer something that could spark exploration as part of concerts, classes, workshops, or *divrei Torah*. I hope that these songs spark curiosity, reflection, learning, outreach, inreach, and dialogue, as I know they have for me. Spanning almost every stream in my journey, friendships, and relatives, I intend these songs to be (e.g., by being almost all in English) accessible to listeners of varied backgrounds and transcend denominations (e.g., by referring to God with neither gendered nor holy names) and offer something for seekers as well as believers, because the songs reflect so much of the questioning I've had. This project was produced in the desert, and (like where the Torah was given) should offer something for all. I can't wait to see what my still-unfolding journey will next *spark*.

I'm grateful beyond words for having been sustained and enabled in my middle age to reach the milestone of writing, recording, and releasing this album before the pandemic shut things down. And I'm blessed for how my Jewish musical journey was inspired by timely example or encouragement from so many, including (in alpha order, sans honorifics): Elana Arian, Bill Averbach, Larry Bach, Clay Bench, Joe Black, Jordan Block, Joe Buchanan, Blanca & Joel Carrasco, Judy Freed, Robert French, Jack Gabriel, Carlos Gámez, Rebecca Garfein, Shmuel Geller, Tzvi Gluckin, Cheryl Gordon, Beth Hamon, Robyn Helzner, Ann Katz, Stephen Leon, Ari Lesser, Leo Mazow, Chava Mirel, Nance Pettit, Marc Phillippe, Janice Rubin, Robbi Sherwin (and Sababa), Karen Treiger, Alison Westermann, David Wilcox (& Nance Pettit), Ellen M. Wilson, Ben Zeidman. (Too little space to also list all who inspired my overall muse or my overall Judaism, but you know who you are and I send deep love and gratitude to you, too!)

Also huge thanks to multi-instrumentalist extraordinaire and co-producer Bill Radcliffe — who else in town could have translated what I was aiming for musically and Jewishly in a short time frame and help me trust my vision and performance? And thanks to engineer Ross Ingram, who helped me optimize my sound and generously shared wise gems like "honor your error as a hidden intention." (I later found echoes in an 18<sup>th</sup>-century teaching of the Maggid of Mezeritch: "Certain opportunities and potentials are so lofty that they cannot be accessed by the conscious self; they can only come about 'by mistake'.") Thanks to Larry Karol, Amalia Zeitlin, and Sabiha Khan for adding their awesome talents in just the right ways.

Biggest thanks to my *besheret* Laurie Davis and my son Judah whose deep, disciplined Jewish practice inspires me whether or not I catch up. I also express love for my maternal grandparents who supported my muse over the years by, for example, "insuring" my guitar so I could take it to summer camp and coming from out of town with my parents for my first major performance of Jewish music.

*Larry Lesser*

# SPARKS

Larry Lesser



