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THE JEWISH VOICE

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Get to know: Larry Lesser

The Jewish Voice caught up with national award-winning UTEP professor Larry Lesser whose 2 decades of contributions to our community include JV columns, talks (for adults, teens, EPJA students), concerts, a funded speaker series, and congregational board service.

JV: In your March 2020 Journal of Statistics Education interview, you said you started songwriting the same year you became a math major in college. Were you encouraged to pursue music as a career or was it a creative outlet?

LL: Music has always been more serious than a hobby for my identity and growth. But while I saw after my first album (in 1992) that it would be too hard making a living from it (and it's gotten even harder with people streaming and expecting locals to play for free), I'm happy that hasn't kept me from doing much of it with professional quality and I'm blessed to have had songs make a difference when we come together, ranging from "Healing Song" at TMS services to "Sderot Sky" at gatherings for Israel to fun ditties like my "El Paso version" of the dreidel song. Music and Judaism are way too important to leave to the full-time professionals!

JV: You have stated how music is a mnemonic to remember math content. What inspired your parody "American Pi" (which won the National Museum of Mathematics' Pi Day of the Century song contest)?

LL: Yes, songs are great mnemonics with their many "hooks" (rhyme, rhythm, melody, emotion, etc.). "American Pi" was sparked by noticing how the meter and rhyme in the chorus of Don McLean's #1 hit "American Pie" supported recalling pi's first 6 digits, and verse structure lent itself to touring pi's interesting (partly-American) history. Besides contest awards, my educational songs have helped yield NSF grants that brought money to UTEP.

JV: A press release for your newest album notes that "Post-college relationships launched his journey through 5 denominations to a more knowledgeable, spiritual and conscious connection with his heritage, and these songs on the Sparks CD reflect his experiences. Having David Wilcox and Nance Pettit visit during their Out Beyond Ideas tour sparked the idea of writing songs out of textual nuggets of spiritual wisdom, and from there the concept grew." How did you choose those nuggets of wisdom?

LL: As the liner notes share, what grounded me were "bite-sized" text or stories that encapsulated values

that work for seekers and believers across denominations, or even beyond Judaism. Many songs were inspired by my growth and experiences in our diverse community, with 21 of the album's 24 songs written in El Paso!

JV: Reflecting on your album Sparks being a Finalist in the 2021 New Mexico Music Awards for Best Album as well as for 3 other very different categories: best bluegrass song, best religious song, and best humorous song (which you won), how does the album reflect your Jewish journey now?

LL: [CEO Emeritus of USC] Rabbi Jerome Epstein saw each song had multiple copyright years and noted (correctly) that lyrics must have evolved as I did, and the songs and I are still works-in-progress! From playing diverse events (Opera UTEP, museum exhibit opening, services, Jewish food festival, New Mexico Music Awards gala, Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies conference, a Cantors Assembly event, etc.), I fine-tune music, lyrics, or song introductions. What stays constant is my aim to connect across exaggerated boundaries of genre, denomination, demographics, etc. because my Judaism and muse don't fit in one box!