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-rock* that detours into rock, folk-grass, country, classical, and spoken word poetry! Some tell me songs' sensibilities evoke Dan Bern, Joe Black, Daniel Cainer, Bob Dylan, Cat Stevens, or David Wilcox. 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.

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).

Do I need to know text sources to appreciate the album's content?

Nope -- songs are 'self-contained' and in English so the main message comes through for all. That said, some may 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! Most songs have playfulness, surprise, or humor, and sing-along choruses. While lyrics spark many explorations, also compelling are musicians of many genres and generations who've played or recorded with symphonies, ensembles, and bands such as ACM-winning and GRAMMY-nominated Midland. These songs are timely *and* timeless: the Midrashic "Rowboat" addresses climate change, the Chassidic proverb "Two Pockets" yielded a question at a nationally-televised election year town hall, the Talmudic "The Best" recalls a Garth Brooks #1 hit, etc. It works 'cause we've had airplay of 13+ different songs in several states, events are well received, and *Sparks* was a 4-time **Finalist** (including Best Album!) at the **New Mexico Music Awards (NMMA)**! "The Bark Mitzvah Song" won Best Humorous Song at the NMMAs and was a Semifinalist (top 11%) in the International Songwriting Competition!

What's the target audience?

Having experienced (and having loved ones 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 most sets *Sparks* apart 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?

I kept each song short, but there is trajectory and integrity as a collection. But 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." But since no 3 songs will capture the album's full breadth, just take a few minutes to browse 1-liner **summaries** (with links to music or lyrics) and see what grabs you.

Can we see these songs performed live?

Sure! 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 have decades of experience as a musician and educator and taught 2 years full-time in a Jewish day school!) – my award-winning education career remains my main commitment (and includes some scholarly activity related to music or Judaism). But while I may not be able to hit the road for long tours, I'm open each year (especially summers) to a select few engagements, so let's talk! 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 subsequent concerts such as when violinist Amalia Zeitlin and I played at a 2023 Jewish festival). As an example of my solo live style in varied contexts, click here for my performance of "Kind" at a recital hall (for an Opera UTEP event) or go here to hear that song in a congregation's sanctuary. My solo live style is also on the *Sparks* album itself, with the live tracks "Spiritual Not Religious" and "The Bark Mitzvah Song" each recorded in one take for an audience.