LINER NOTES

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PLP 5780

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SONG	SUMMARY & RELATED TEXT (most on www.sefaria.org)
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 *Israeli Journal of Humor Research*; Eruvin 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; **New Mexico Music Awards Finalist for Best Bluegrass Song**
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 Anusim Center), this song was featured in a national resource guide, a museum exhibit, the Spring/Summer 2020 *HaLapid*, and a video.
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 *The Special Laws IV* (103, 107, 108, 111, 116) and *On the Virtues*(133-144); featured by *KosherToday* and Opera UTEP
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 *Moment* responds to this piece; **New Mexico Music Awards WINNER for Best Humorous Song!** Featured in *Israeli Journal of Humor Research*
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); **New Mexico Music Awards Finalist for Best Religious Song**; see song video
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 nationally-televised town hall 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, Arakhin 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 *Israeli Journal of Humor Research*; audience recording from 2018 Yom HaShir
Tearin' the Sea	My improbable story 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 *The Jewish Educator* and Opera UTEP; life lessons in travels of Rabbi Akiva
One-Way Train	Written after reading *Night* 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 *and* wide; Deut.5:3
Rowboat	parable (some 15 centuries old) of interdependence (Midrash Rabbah Vayikra 4:6) extended to our environmental crisis; featured in *The Jewish Educator*, *Hadassah*, 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, Eruvin 53b-54a; chosen for a 2020 gender studies conference 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 (*Yehudi*); 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
   Ross Ingram synth bass

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), synth bass (7)
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 6th 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:

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!

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 Conversative/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 18th-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 *beshert* 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