

Oseh Shema Revisited: picking the top of the Jewish pops

Planning a simcha but having trouble with a playlist? **Sam Lipski's** got you covered.

WHAT are the 10 Best Hebrew Songs Ever? For that matter: What are the 10 Best Jewish Songs Ever?

Now before you answer my questions with the question: "What do you mean by a Hebrew/ Jewish song?" I'd better explain how I came to ask them at all. First up, a friend recently asked my wife Aura to nominate five Hebrew simcha songs the band should play for the opening dance medley at his daughter's bat mitzvah.

My friend had come to the right address. Even if I say so myself, Aura is an internationally recognised authority on Hebrew music and the online publisher of hebrewsongs.com, a unique website with an extensive database of some 5000 Hebrew songs in transliteration and translation. The site is independently ranked in the top one per cent of the most visited websites worldwide.

So for the bat mitzvah, Aura suggested *Moshiach*, *Yevarechecha*, *Sisu et Yerushalayim*, *Am Yisrael Chai*, and *Od Lo Ahavti Dai*. Not perhaps my choice, but I deferred to the expert.

But then last week a friend in Israel sent me a link to a very special YouTube video, now two years old, which I had seen before. Yet it amazes me every time I watch it. An all-male Russian rock-pop group, singing in Russian accents thick enough to make borsch, swings into tunes I usually hear in shul. And a hugely enthusiastic Russian audience sings along.

They begin with *Oseh Shalom*, then *Siman Tov Umazal Tov*, *Moshiach*, and *Heveinu Shalom Aleichem*. The Russians get into "Moshiach, Moshiach" with such fervour, that I expected the Anointed One to materialise before my eyes on YouTube. Alas, on this occasion the Moshiach tarried. But I'm cool. However long he takes is fine by me.

Now if you haven't viewed this video, you must. And here's the point. You can find it simply by googling "The Best Hebrew Songs Ever". Nothing to do with Russia. Just "The Best Hebrew Songs Ever". Four of the first five "googled" entries feature it, including the Israeli site, ww.israelvideonet-work.com.

For a new generation, maybe even two generations, of Jews it may be hard to understand why a YouTube of Russians rocking away in Hebrew is a big deal, even a small deal. But it's only 25 years – exactly 25 years in February 2014 – since singing in Hebrew in a Russian theatre was a crime punishable by prison or exile.

In February 1989, Australian Jewish leader Isi Leibler opened the Solomon Mikhoels Cultural Centre in Moscow. It was the first

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place in the Soviet Union for 70 years where Jews could openly speak, teach and sing Hebrew. Today, you can rock to *Oseh Shalom* Russian-style on YouTube.

But leaving history-making transformations to one side, I don't agree that the Russians give us "The Best Hebrew Songs Ever". Nor do I agree with the "Top 10 Hebrew Songs" as voted by Aura's international readers at hebrewsongs.com,

That list begins with *Jerusalem of Gold*, which is fair enough. But the next four are *Tumbalalaika*, *Chad Gadya*, *Shema Yisrael* (Sarit Hadad's version), and *Shalom Aleichem Malachei Hasharet* (upbeat Shabbat eve version).

While they're nice enough songs, they don't rate in my top five, and not even in my top 10.

At the risk of seeming to chicken out, however, I'll leave my best Hebrew songs list for another time. Too much to justify and explain. For now, consider an even more problematic list, "The 100 Greatest Jewish Songs Ever".

White Christmas?

Really? Nothing against Irving Berlin, who was Jewish, and Bing Crosby, who wasn't. But a Jewish song?

Some three years ago, the online Jewish magazine *Tablet* published such a list by two American musicologists, Jody Rosen and Ari Kelman. As you can imagine, all "kvell" broke loose.

The arguments continue to this day. Just a taste of the Rosen-Kelman Best 100, tells its own story. Topping their list is *Over the Rainbow* (1939), followed by *Hava Nagila* (1918), Bob Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965), Kol Nidre (13th century), *Hatikvah* (1888), *My Mammy* (1918), *Shema Yisrael* (19th century), *White Christmas* (1942), *Be My Baby* (1963) and, wait for it, *I Got Rhythm* (1930).

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Not according to another musicologist, Curt Sachs. Correctly in my view, Sachs said that Jewish music was music created "by Jews, as Jews, for Jews". At least the Russian rockers belting out "The Best Hebrew Songs Ever" would agree.

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