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A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday June 2, 2023 ~ Parsha: Naso

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

Hava Nagila

Five weeks ago, the legendary singer, entertainer and civil rights activist, Harry Belafonte passed away. Among the various tributes and obituaries that appeared in the media were reminders that he popularized the famous Hebrew song, *Hava Nagila* (Come, Let Us Rejoice). His [rendition](#) of this song, and the wide acclaim it received from both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences, led him to joke to the *New York Times* in 2017 that his version of *Hava Nagila* made him “the most popular Jew in America.”

That story got me thinking. Everyone knows *Hava Nagila*. It's popular among religious Jews, secular Jews and cultural Jews. It's beloved in Israel, and in Diaspora communities. As proven by stars like Harry Belafonte, and Josephine Baker (yes, she also had a very well-known version of this song), it's a big hit all over the world. Hockey fans might remember that there was a tradition of playing it at hockey games for many years. For over a decade, the Utah Jazz have played it after every [home victory](#). When Ali Raisman, the Olympic gymnast (and proud member of the tribe), did her [floor exercise routine](#) at the 2012 Olympics, the entire stadium recognized the music of *Hava Nagila* even if they didn't know the words or their meaning. (And by the way, she won the Gold Medal!)

But do any of us really know the origins and history of this song? I didn't, so I did a little research. To understand the history of the song, we need to go back to Jerusalem at the end of World War I. Due to the terrible suffering that Jewish communities throughout the world experienced during World War II and the Holocaust, and our emphasis on that difficult period of history, many don't realize, or never learned how awful World War I was for Jewish communities as well. Jerusalem during World War I

was ravaged by war, starvation and diseases like cholera, typhoid and malaria. In 1918, the influenza epidemic also wreaked havoc throughout the land of Israel. When the British entered Jerusalem in 1918, thousands of orphans roamed the streets. It was a period of death, disease and despondency.

Amidst this difficult environment, Cantor Avraham Tzvi Idelsohn borrowed a Chasidic *nigun* (tune) and composed a song based on that melody to celebrate the liberation of Jerusalem by the British as well as the Balfour Declaration the year before. These events raised the spirits of the Jews of Israel and the celebratory song soon spread around the world.

<i>Hava nagila, hava nagila</i>	Let us rejoice, let us rejoice
<i>Hava nagila ve-nismeha</i>	Let us rejoice and be glad
<i>Hava neranena, hava neranena</i>	Let us sing, let us sing
<i>Hava neranena ve-nismeha</i>	Let us sing and be glad
<i>Uru, uru ahim</i>	Awake, awake brothers
<i>Uru ahim be-lev sameah</i>	Awake, brothers with a joyful heart

In addition to Harry Belafonte and Josephine Baker (as well as your grandmother and grandfather, and every band that ever played a Jewish wedding, bar mitzvah or anniversary celebration), many other world-class musicians had their own version of *Hava Nagila* including: Frank Sinatra, Ray Charles, and Drake.

As I looked into the history of Hava Nagila, arguably the most famous and well-known Jewish song in the entire world, I was fascinated by what I learned. I hope this will add to your own understanding and appreciation the next time you hear it.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur D. Weiner