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## Welcome everyone!

To our event this evening - Songs of the Inspired Soul - traditional Hassidic melodies or Niggunim, as they are also called, of Eastern Europe.

To a large degree, Jewish music is a cross-cultural phenomenon, the music of the wanderer. Certain Jewish ritual musical forms have their sources in antiquity, but the idea of creative adaptation has been a hallmark of Jewish musical life for a very long time.

Jewish music has three distinct cultural streams:

One is the Ashkenazi, or Western stream. This is music originating in Eastern Europe and extending to the rest of Europe and the Americas. It includes Klezmer.

The second stream is the Sephardi, which refers to Mediterranean cultural sources, including Spain, Portugal, North Africa, Greece and Turkey.

The third stream is the Misrahi, literally Eastern, and refers to the music of Jewish people who resided over the centuries amidst Arabic cultures.

Nigun or plural niggunim, (Hebrew: ניגון meaning "tune" or "melody", is a form of Jewish religious song or tune sung by groups. Some nigunim performed as prayers of lament, while others may be joyous or victorious.<sup>[1][2]</sup>

Nigunim are largely improvisations, though they can be based on thematic passages and stylized in form, reflecting the teachings and charisma of the spiritual leadership of the congregation or its religious movement. Nigunim are especially central to worship in the Hasidic Judaism, which evolved its own structured, soulful forms to reflect the mystical joy of intense prayer (*devekut*).

The Hasidic movement began in the middle of the eighteenth century in Galicia on the Polish-Romanian border and in the Volhynia region of the Ukraine. It was founded by Rabbi Israel Ben Eliezer (1700-1760) who became known as the Baal Shem Tov which translates as Master of the Good Name. Different Hasidic groups have their own nigunim, often composed by their *rebbe* or leader. Hasidim gather around holidays to sing in groups. There are also nigunim for individual. The Baal Shem Tov spoke of *devekus nigunim* as "songs that transcend syllables and sound." Several tunes attributed to him are still used today.

The belief is that when you sing a nigun, the soul of the rabbi who created it appears in the room. On festive occasions the nigunim are especially joyful melodies. On the festival of Simchat Torah, the most joyous day in the Jewish calendar, fervent nigunim are sung while dancing with the Torah scrolls in the synagogue.

Nigunim within the Chabad world are admired across Hasidism for their intellectual depth. The aim is to articulate Hasidic thought in a philosophical investigation, in order to awaken inner emotional ecstasy. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov wrote that every shepherd has his own unique melody, his own nigun, born of the grass, and the place to where he leads his flock to graze, and so forth. The nigun is a sort of "spiritual distillation," refining men's spirit from that of the animal kingdom. As the Ramban writes, "There is nothing as subtle within the realm of physicality as music." The nigun is found on the borderline of physicality, at the point of connection with the spiritual. Therefore, it is bestowed with the power to raise us from the material and physical to the realm of spirituality.

Words make up the language of our intelligence, while music is the language of the soul. That is why the language of the nigunim is at times more spiritually elevated than words, just as the emunah [the faith] rooted in one's heart ascends the limits of knowledge and rationality.

Jewish Music in the 20th century has spanned the gamut from Shlomo Carlebach's *nigunim* to Debbie Friedman's Jewish feminist folk and includes through-composed settings of the Avodath Hakodesh ("Sacred Service") by such composers as Ernest Bloch, Darius Milhaud, and Marc Lavry. Velvel Pasternak has spent much of the late 20th century acting as a preservationist and committing what had been a strongly oral tradition to paper. John Zorn's record label, Tzadik, features a "Radical Jewish Culture" series that focuses on exploring what contemporary Jewish music is and what it offers to contemporary Jewish culture. Periodically Jewish music jumps into mainstream consciousness, Matisyahu (vocalist and beatboxer with a deeply personal and spiritual blend of reggae, rap, and jam) being the most recent example.