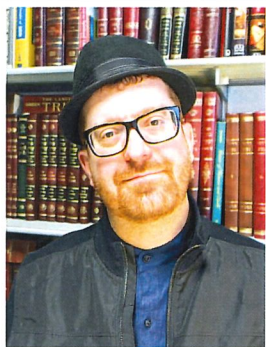


Nusach Americana?!? Paul Simon's Songbook as a Portal Into Kabbalat Shabbat

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Paul Simon's Americana songbook is deeply intertwined with his Jewish identity, even if it's not always explicit. His music, like that of many Jewish songwriters who shaped American popular music, reflects themes of displacement, longing, and cultural fusion. This is the thematic journey of most Jewish prayer and especially Kabbalat Shabbat. But is there *Nusach Americana*?!?

Nusach Tefillah refers to the specific textual and musical traditions of Jewish prayer. The term *nusach* (נוסח) means "formulation" or "wording," and in the context of *tefillah* (prayer), it denotes both the liturgical text and the melodic style used in different Jewish communities (from Ashkenazi to Sephardi and Mizrahi traditions). When I asked renowned Cantor Alberto Mizrahi just what defines *Nusach Americana* he shrugged and smiled at me, acknowledging it was a lifelong quest of his to discover. We remain on that quest together with Paul Simon's songbook.

Paul Simon's Jewish identity is deeply tied to his lineage and upbringing. He was born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1941 and raised in Kew Gardens Hills, Queens - a predominantly Jewish neighborhood at the time. His paternal grandfather, Paul Simon Sr., was born in Galicia in 1888 and immigrated to the U.S. in 1903, fleeing poverty and pogroms. The elder Simon worked as a tailor and continued speaking Yiddish at home, shaping the family's cultural environment, including becoming a bar mitzvah. His mother, Belle, came from a more religious background and attended synagogue on the High Holy Days.

Simon's songbook reflects diasporic Jewish themes, particularly in its exploration of identity and belonging. His lyrics often encapsulate the theme of Jewish diaspora and personal identity. While Simon rarely foregrounds his Jewishness in his lyrics, his songwriting is steeped in the storytelling traditions and introspective lyricism often associated with Jewish artists.

Simon's approach to music also mirrors the Jewish experience in America—blending influences from various cultures, much like Jewish immigrants adapted to and shaped American society.

His ability to weave different musical traditions into his work reflects the broader Jewish-American experience of cultural adaptation and reinventions. Simon's Americana songbook subtly explores the Jewish spiritual journey through the Americana landscape. Notwithstanding his "coming out" as a spiritual Jewish seeker in "Seven Psalms" one could still argue that part of his success is that Simon's Jewish identity is rarely explicit in his music, but it consistently is manifesting themes of exile, spirituality, and cultural memory. His songwriting often reflects the broader Jewish-American experience - blending roots of diverse traditions, questioning convictions, and searching for meaning, all homeward bound...

How does this relate to *Kabbalat Shabbat*? Recall that Kabbalat Shabbat, the mystical Friday night service welcoming the Sabbath which is a highly modern creation of 16th century Safed and moreover this liturgical service is often framed as a lover's songbook - a poetic dialogue between the Jewish people and the divine, drawing on themes of longing, union, and spiritual intimacy. Paul Simon's musical journey of the spirit resonates with these themes of yearning, exile, and redemption as homeward bound, all of which hew closely to the emotional arc of Kabbalat Shabbat. Take "Hearts and Bones" as a meditation on love and separation echoing the way Jewish mysticism portrays the Sabbath as a bride, arriving after a week of spiritual distance. Similarly, "Kathy's Song" expresses deep longing and devotion, much like Lecha Dodi, which invites us all to greet the Sabbath with a joyful heart. Many wonder how does Paul Simon's songbook really open the door to a spiritual journey, never mind one that is Jewish? I would argue that Simon's lyrical introspection also aligns with the contemplative nature of *Kabbalat Shabbat*. Songs like "The Sound of Silence" and yes, even "The Boxer" wrestle with existential questions, much like the Psalms that frame *Kabbalat Shabbat* liturgy. Both musical journeys of the spirit are a soundtrack for our searching for meaning, inviting us all into a self-reflective, and dreamlike state. Even musically, Simon's folk-inflected melodies draw from many roots; they still share a kinship with the traditional *nigunim* (wordless melodies) of prayer in the Hasidic mode. Simon's ability to craft songs that feel both deeply personal and universally resonant mirrors the way *Kabbalat Shabbat* blends individual devotion with communal experience.

Join me for Mirpeset *Kabbalat Shabbat*!



PrayerLab Shabbat

Are you curious about the choreography of prayer and ritual life in the synagogue services? Join us on Saturday, August 23rd for the next installment of our interactive prayer lab service that will continue to explore key sections of the Amidah prayer. Bring your questions and curiosities.

Saturday, August 23rd @ 9:30 am