



# Exploring Asian Music

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## Hasidic Music and Religious Culture

Despite consisting of a relatively small proportion of the American population, Jews have had a tremendous impact on culture in the United States. Movies like *Schindler's List*, musicals like *Fiddler on the Roof*, and many books and television shows feature Jewish culture in a very positive light. Most ubiquitous, though, is Jewish music. Any American who has attended a professional sporting event or has been to a wedding reception of nearly any denomination knows the sound of *Hava Nagila*. However, the popularization of Jewish tunes can serve to misrepresent their true purpose. Most Jewish songs that have gained popularity in America are actually religious prayers and melodies that have a deep cultural significance to Jews around the world, especially in Israel.

Music and worship are closely tied in the Jewish tradition. During normal as well as special holiday services, many prayers are accompanied by melodies. Though there is not necessarily any traditional basis for singing as opposed to speaking or chanting prayers, singing creates an incredible amount of energy among any congregation, regardless of size. According to the website, [EverythingJewish.com](http://EverythingJewish.com), which chronicles many aspects of Jewish culture including history, religion, and mass media, music is a unifying force for Israelis, as "Israel's popular music has helped us get through the worst times and helps us celebrate our best times" ([www.everythingjewish.com/Music/Music.htm](http://www.everythingjewish.com/Music/Music.htm)).

Many different artists have attempted to capture the melodies that are so important to Israeli life. Shlomo Carlebach was an orthodox rabbi in the mid 20th century who reached out widely to Jews in Israel and around the world. He did not discriminate against non-orthodox Jews, but instead reached out to members of the conservative and reform Jewish movements. But his most important contribution came in 1968 when Carlebach lent some of his song melodies to the Israeli play *Ish Hasid Haya* (Once there was a Hasid). The success of the play amongst Israeli audiences, consisting largely of non-practicing Jews, brought a new energy to Israeli music which culminated in the establishment of an annual Hasidic music festival (Edelman).

The timing of this festival was excellent. Because of the Jewish success in the 6 Day War in 1967, international support for Israel was at its highest, especially in the United States. Americans and other Jews quickly were drawn to the Hasidic music. The important effect of this music's popularity in Israel and abroad was its inclusion in religious services, both in the synagogue and in small prayer groups. When people learned that the music they were enjoying secularly was being incorporated into religious services, attendance went up dramatically. In this way, music helped the Jewish community in Israel and abroad come together.

Hasidic music has also aged well into modern times, keeping up with the contemporary sounds of the day. Yosi Piamenta is known as the Hasidic Hendrix for his powerful guitar riffs and onstage presence. As a band leader who plays anything from weddings to outdoor public concerts, Piamenta's music is heard by many. He is effectively able to combine popular rock music with more traditional religious melodies, and therefore has a large following. Fans are brought in by his modern work, but are soon captivated by the quality of the traditional religious songs he plays. (<http://www.zstarr.com/piamenta/>)



It is therefore clear that Israeli music has both a religious and cultural role, and has been crucial in generating enthusiasm for worship throughout the century.

## References:

Edelman, Marsha. *Though not necessarily written for worship, neo-Hasidic melodies quickly found their way into the synagogue.* MyJewishLearning.com:  
[http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/Music/TOSynagogueMusic/Hasidic\\_Carlebach.htm](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/Music/TOSynagogueMusic/Hasidic_Carlebach.htm)

EverythingJewish.com: [www.everythingjewish.com/Music/Music.htm](http://www.everythingjewish.com/Music/Music.htm)

The Piamenta Home Page: <http://www.zstarr.com/piamenta/>