

Freedom Songs

Lesson plan for Youth (5th – 7th Grade)

This lesson plan is part of a larger Go & Learn lesson entitled “Sing a New Song,” which can be found at <http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/apr10/>. Visit this website to access the featured letter by activist Heather Booth, and to access the lyrics and audio clip of “This Little Light of Mine.”

Using the introductory essay for this edition of *Go & Learn*, (which also can be found on the above website), provide the group with a brief overview of the history of Jewish participation in the Civil Rights Movement. Encourage students to offer any additional information they may know.

Sing:

- Distribute the “This Little Light of Mine” song lyrics linked to from this lesson so visual learners can follow along as they listen to the opening lines, and everyone has the chance to revisit and take home the text.
(http://www.gilderlehrman.org/historynow/06_2006/interactive.php)
- With the help of a song leader and/or the audio clip linked to from this lesson (or the full version you downloaded), teach the students the freedom song, “This Little Light of Mine,” and sing it through a couple of time until as much of the class as possible is joining in.
(<http://www.folkways.si.edu/albumdetails.aspx?itemid=2269>)

Discussion Questions:

- Who knows this song? (if any of your students know the song ask: Where did you learn it? What do you think of when you hear this song?)
- What about the words and/or music of this song make it easy to learn?
- How does this song make you feel? (If you don’t get responses, you can ask: sad, happy, angry, inspired, or some other way?) What about the song makes you feel this way?
- Imagine you were in a situation in which you were scared. Do you think singing this song with a group of people might make you feel less afraid? Why? Why not?
- This song began as a spiritual and was later adopted by civil rights activists as a freedom song. Based on the lyrics of this song, what were the civil rights activists fighting for? Where were they fighting?
- The song refers to a “light” that we all have. Based on the lyrics of the song, what do we know about this “light”?
- What do you think “this little light of mine” is? (Be sure to get a few responses.)

- Consider: How much “light” would each of us shed individually? How much light would we shed as a group? How does picturing the light change the way you think about the song?
- Light is an important symbol in Judaism. What Jewish “lights” or stories about light can you think of? What does each of these lights mean in a Jewish context? (Give as many students as possible a chance to respond to this question. Some possible responses might include: the *ner tamid* (eternal light); Shabbat candles, Chanukah lights which symbolize freedom and a miracle; the *midrash* in which God created fire for Adam during the first night so Adam wouldn’t be afraid.)
- Returning to the song “This Little Light of Mine,” what do you think this song might have meant for the civil rights activists singing it? (Be sure to discuss a range of possibilities.) Do you think this is still true today?
- The last verse refers to “all in this church.” Do you think this verse refers only to people who go to church? What else could “church” mean?
- As a Jew, do you feel comfortable singing the verse “all in this church”? Why or why not? If it makes you uncomfortable, how might you change the words or the way you think about the words to make it more comfortable? (Note to teachers: keep in mind that some of your students may go to church with family or friends.)
- “This Little Light of Mine” was based on a Christian hymn sung in churches. Do you think this mattered to Jewish civil rights activists? Does this matter to how you feel about the song? Now that we’ve had this discussion, can you understand this song in a different way? A Jewish way?

“This Little Light of Mine” is an example of the kind of music sung by civil rights activists in the 1960s. These songs were known as freedom songs or freedom music and were based on the style of congregational singing done in African American churches at the time. Many of these songs were based on well-known Christian hymns or gospel music, and singing them helped raise people’s spirits, unite the whole group around a common cause, and point out the “rightness” and even holiness of their cause. Joining voices together in song also demonstrated their power as a group (much louder than one voice singing alone)

Heather Booth

Using the introductory essay for this edition of *Go & Learn*, explain who Heather Booth is, her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, and where she was when she wrote the letter to her brother. You also will want to provide some information on the dangers faced by activists.

Read:

- Distribute copies of Heather Booth's letter so visual learners can follow along as they listen, and everyone has the chance to revisit and take home the text.
- Have one or two people read aloud Heather Booth's letter.
- Explain that the quote at the beginning of the second paragraph, "We are not afraid. Oh Lord, deep in my heart, I do believe, We Shall Overcome Someday," comes from the lyrics of the freedom song "We Shall Overcome."

Discussion Questions:

- What do you think Heather Booth was afraid of? (Be sure to get a few different answers.)
- Why do you think she feels that anyone who is part of Freedom Summer and not afraid must be crazy?
- According to her letter, what helps Heather Booth feel less afraid?
- Have you ever had to do something that made you scared? What helped you get through your fear?
- Heather Booth was one of many young Jews who went to Mississippi during Freedom Summer. What does it mean to you knowing that this letter was written by someone who was Jewish? Does it change the way you feel about the letter? Does it change the way you understand the letter?
- How is the feeling you get when singing in a group similar to and/or different from the feeling you get when you sing alone (with the radio, in the shower, etc.)?
- Where and when in your own Jewish community (your synagogue, your school, your camp) is there group singing?
- What purposes might group singing of songs serve? (Be sure to get a few different answers)
- When we are worshipping as a congregation and we chant the *V'ahavta* together, is that group "singing"? How is it similar or different from other group singing that we do?
- How would you describe the singing you do in your congregation, youth group, camp, or other Jewish location? How is it similar to or different from what you think of as civil rights or freedom music? How do you think the similarities helped make Jews comfortable with freedom music even if the words were sometimes outside their comfort zone?

Freedom songs like "This Little Light of Mine" and "We Shall Overcome" were often sung at the beginning of civil rights rallies. They brought the activists together as a community, reminded them what they were fighting for, and raised their spirits. But singing was also used to counteract fear and face down threats of arrest and/or violence. When marchers passed policemen with police dogs and angry mobs shouting insults, they would sing louder as if to say "we know you're there, but we're not going away."

Discussion Questions:

- What do you think your natural response might be if someone yelled insults at you or threw things at you? How might your response impact the situation? How do you think responding by singing might impact the situation?
- For many of us, it probably would be challenging to sing when someone was yelling insults at us or threatening to harm us. Why might the civil rights activists have wanted to sing rather than fight back?
- It has been said that the freedom music of the Civil Rights Movement helped sustain and strengthen the activists. How do you think these songs did that? What is it about music that can do that?

Fixing the World

Jews and African American came together during the Civil Rights Movement to fight social injustice. Music was one of the things that drew them together into a community and helped them feel less afraid when they were being insulted and threatened with violence. Today, there are still many situations in which groups of people are treated unequally and unfairly, and music can still give us the strength to fight for equality and freedom.

Make a list:

- Have your students help you make a list of some of today's social injustices. Write your students' responses on the board.
- For each social injustice, have your students share one or two ways people are addressing this issue. Write your students' responses on the board next to the issues.

Write a new song:

- Divide your class into small groups of no more than 4 or 5 students.
- Distribute a sheet of paper and a pen or pencil to each group.
- Each group should choose one of the social issues that are on the board.
- Have your students write a freedom song or freedom rap that could be used while fighting for the social issue they chose. (If they're writing a song, the lyrics must be original but the melody can be from a song with which they're familiar. They may also rewrite a freedom song.)
- Provide time for each group to perform their song.