

A Joyful Noise: Claiming the Songs of My Fathers

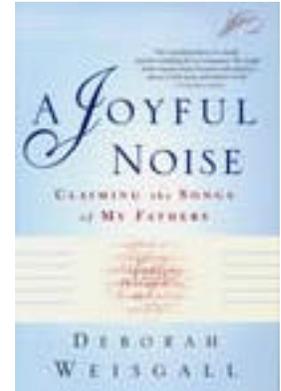
by Deborah Weisgall

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About This Book

A Joyful Noise: Claiming the Songs of My Father, by Deborah Weisgall, chronicles the author's efforts, as a young Jewish woman growing up in modern Baltimore, to come to terms with the cultural and Jewish heritage of her father, a noted composer, and her grandfather, a cantor, both of whom were shaped by the classical traditions of Europe; it is an engrossing story of memory, empathy, struggle--and finally--liberation.

Discussion Questions

1. Issues of identity are central to this book: identity as a woman, a Jew, an American. Perhaps the most complex is Weisgall's sense of her Jewish identity. In what ways does she identify as a Jew? How do the elements of this identity make her feel alienated from the Jewish community as a whole? Is this issue resolved by the end of the book?
2. Weisgall's family believed passionately in the Central European religion of high art and culture. How was this integrated into their lives as Jews? How did they deal with the contradictions--the Christian nature of much of the art? How did this belief at home make Weisgall mistrust popular American culture? Can you imagine how the career of Leonard Bernstein, Hugo Weisgall's classmate at the Curtis Institute of Music, was also a reaction to the intersection of European and American cultures?
3. What about the role of music in Jewish liturgy? Is the Jewish music people love the music they grew up with? Is music memory? Does it function on the same deep level as the words of the prayers themselves? How might have the Weisgall family music expressed the complex historical position of Jews in Central Europe?
4. How did Hugo Weisgall's Central European ideas of what women were like affect his wife and daughter?

5. How do traditional Jewish ideas about kol isha (the exclusion of women's voices from public religious worship) act as a theme for this book?
6. Weisgall believes that claiming the songs of her fathers made them hers. Do you see greater meaning in this? Explain.
7. Can you comment upon the role of Deborah's mother, grandmother, and aunt in shaping her identity as a woman?
8. Comment about the theme of loss and change in the book. What are the losses the author is mourning?
9. Baltimore emerges in this narrative as a site for expressions of changing Jewish culture and for identity. Describe the city's characteristics as a physical, and perhaps, spiritual location for twentieth-century Judaism. Do you believe that it is special, unique, or typical with regard to these characteristics of urban Judaism?
10. How does the experience Weisgall describes, and her evocation of Judaism, mesh with other portraits of Jewish life in similar periods—say, in the Baltimore as described in the films of Barry Levinson (e.g., *Avalon*, or *Liberty Heights*)?

Critical Essay

by Ruth Fein, JWA Board Member

Deborah Weisgall, author of *A Joyful Noise: Claiming the Songs of My Fathers*, grew up in the world of her family and the world of the Jewish community of the 1950s in Baltimore. In many ways these two worlds were very far apart. The Baltimore Jewish community is built on generations of families, many of whom had settled in Maryland in the eighteenth and pre-Civil War nineteenth centuries. In American Jewish terms their history was a long one. Many of their synagogues and institutions were well established with solid traditions of leadership by the time the Eastern European immigrants began arriving at the end of the nineteenth century. They had built imposing houses of worship and filled their pulpits with distinguished rabbis who were a significant national presence in their respective religious movements, in the pre-World War II Zionist movement and even in the anti-Jewish state American Council for Judaism. The newer immigrants who came between 1890 and the First World War added to the richness of the Jewish culture they found when they arrived. They established new institutions, founded new synagogues and together with the more integrated German Jewish community slowly developed ways of working together, especially as Nazi power increased and war became a reality.

Introducing the Weisgalls

Though her family played important roles in the community, Deborah Weisgall's world was in many ways separate from that of the larger Jewish community. Her grandfather had brought his family to America in 1920 from Czechoslovakia; however, in his Baltimore household he maintained his central European Jewish identity, surrounding his family with the art and music of Europe. As the cantor of a large Conservative congregation, Weisgall's grandfather brought the melodies of his family's tradition to Baltimore. His music, writes Weisgall, was full of melody; it was unlike any other synagogue music with which she was familiar. It was not wailing and melancholy but grand and operatic. Her own father was a composer of operas and a conductor who had served the United States government in Czechoslovakia after the Second World War, returning to his family's roots. All of this added to the

European dimension of their family life.

Baltimore in the 1950s

In the 1950s, the Baltimore Jewish community was busy moving to the suburbs, building new and even grander synagogues, sending its daughters and sons to the best colleges and universities and generally creating a solid base in the commercial, cultural and social life of Baltimore. The city itself was growing, tearing down and building anew. "They're obliterating the architecture," the author's father moaned. Her mother worried that they were "ruining Baltimore." And as the new synagogues were built farther and farther from the city, Weisgall's grandfather's synagogue also moved, without her grandfather, whose career came to an end as the dwindling inner city congregation continued to worship at the old synagogue. The majority of the congregation fled the city and its old way of life. Though the old congregation held on as long as Cantor Weisgall continued to sing, it became a symbol of the old Jewish community tied to the past and its European origins. The new suburban building was modern and seemingly sheathed in glass and seemed to fit the changing Jewish community. But Deborah Weisgall, although she loved the past as her Father had taught her, also "shared America's delight in the new."

The Old and the New

The old and the new is a continuing theme of Weisgall's book: the old of the family's middle Europe heritage contrasted with the new of suburban Baltimore, the old of her grandfather's melodies with the new of her father's operas. But throughout the book the reader is aware of yet an additional and important old/new contrast. Deborah Weisgall wants to become part of the old while making it new. To do this she must claim the songs of her fathers for herself and her daughter. Excluded from participation in her grandfather's choir and from learning to sing the chants and the melodies, she yearns to make them hers. This yearning and her eventual success when she is allowed to sing in her father's choir in their little rededicated synagogue near their vacation home in Maine, along with her daughter's chanting of the Shehechyanu, "you have kept us alive," indeed keeps the old alive while assuring the triumph of the new.

Additional Resources

On the Web:

[The Jewish Museum of Maryland](http://www.jhsm.org)

(<http://www.jhsm.org>)