

Shelley Posen
MAZEL
Album Notes

1. A Mazeldikeh Yor

According to Jewish tradition, at *Rosh Hashana*, the new year, God writes every person's name in the coming year's Book of Life—or not. Ten days later, at the end of *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, that book—and each person's fate—is sealed. Life being what it was for Jews in mediaeval times, passages in the holidays' prayerbook are pretty specific about what dooms might await congregants. Its most famous prayer, "*U'n'taneh Tokef*," itemizes God's list: "Who by fire, who by water, who by strangulation, who by famine, who by the sword, who by pestilence." One of Leonard Cohen's songs alludes to this prayer; I incorporate the phrases here in the original Hebrew. But the moral I draw is: on *Rosh Hashana*, don't just wish everyone a *sweet* year, wish them a *lucky* one—a *mazeldikeh yor*!

2. Chanukah Christmas

Come holiday-time in December, many families in which one partner grew up celebrating *Chanukah*, the other, Christmas, observe *both* festivals, blending the rites, customs, and foods traditional to each side of the family. They come up with something old, something new, something fun, and something delicious—and help bring joy and light to this darkest time of the year.

A video of this song, illustrated by Carol Denney's wonderful watercolours, is on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1HrGEdBASU&t=7s>

3. On Chanukah

This is the first-and-only *Chanukah* song recorded by that now-retired, close-harmony trio, Finest Kind, of which I was a member. I wrote these verses to fit an 18th century West Gallery tune about a racehorse called "Spanking Roger," which I learned about from an English friend, singer and choirmaster Lester Simpson. Mine aren't the tune's first religious lyrics: there's a hymn by Isaac Watts sung to it; and Lester, with Barry Coope, Jo Freya, and Fi Fraser, recorded Freya's "Spanking Roger on Christmas Day" to it some years ago—her words the inspiration for mine. "On *Chanukah*" could have been entitled "Spanking Roger on *Chanukah*," but it's not.

A video of this song is on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6I5xVlcEXZI>

4. Chanukah Waltz

What if *Chanukah* didn't exist? Well, with all those *latkes* and *menorahs* and *dreydl*s we see this time of year, we'd have to invent it.

5. Mazel Tov, Mazel

I wrote this to perform at the wedding of two friends. I decided on a traditional come-all-ye format— not exactly traditional for a Jewish wedding, but it worked. It would have been even better if I'd had Ian Robb playing fabulous concertina, and someone to sing harmony on the finish, as here.

6. Akhehr

In Hebrew, *akhehr*, אַחֵר, as an adjective, means "other", "different," "another". In Jewish history, *Akhehr*, is used as a proper noun—"The Changed One"— to refer to Rabbi Elisha ben Abuya (or Avuya), a revered sage who lived and taught in Jerusalem in Greco-Roman times. Rabbi Elisha, it is said, developed an interest in the Greek philosophy spreading through the Hellenist world. He abandoned his teaching, and Judaism itself, to study in Alexandria. As he left Jerusalem, his student, Rabbi Meir, ran after him, begging him to return. Rabbi Elisha answered that he could not: "*Ani akhehr*" (I'm different /I've changed/I'm someone else). He never went back. Opinions of Rabbi Elisha's were later quoted in the great, ongoing, debate-in-print known as the *Talmud*. But where

the normal practice was to cite the opinion holder by name—Rabbi X says Y, Rabbi Z says Q, etc.; in his case, the *Talmud* gives his name not as “Rabbi Elisha”, but as “Akhehr.” *Akhehr* is regarded by the Orthodox community as an apostate, a kind of Jewish Faust. Others, however, consider him a kind of intellectual hero who was not afraid to pursue knowledge, wherever it may have led and whatever the personal or social consequences.

7. *Bar Mitzvah Waltz*

Based on a true *Bar Mitzvah* (mine and everyone’s), and as faithful, in its detail, as such songs usually are. Ron Hynes had the right idea: whatever you’re doing, you’re dancing a waltz.

8. *I’ll See You Rosh Hashana*

At the end of a late summer visit to Toronto some years ago, my brother drove me to Union Station to catch a train back to Ottawa. Waving goodbye, I said, “I’ll see you *Rosh Hashana*.” I wrote the song on the train. It includes “*Shana tova tikateyvu, tikhateymu*,” a shortened form of the traditional Rosh Hashana greeting, “May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year!” Plus a list of the sweet foods eaten on the holiday—honey and apple, honey and challah, honey pastries, honey cake—meant by tradition to induce a sweet year to come. The last verse—“What will the new year bring us? Will it be good or bad?”—alludes to the other side of the Rosh Hashana merriment coin—see *A Mazeldikeh Yor*.

9. *Miracles*

Two Ohio friends, Nick and Leslie Edwards Humez, sent a Chanukah card some years ago with what to me was an astonishing inscription, “May your miracles last longer than 8 days.” It would never have occurred to me that miracles might happen to someone in real life, beyond the universe of a holiday based on one—but suddenly I realized that, of course, they do—or could. And that is an encouraging thought.

10. *Khagim uZmanim*

A journey in song through the entire year of Jewish “holidays and seasons”—inspired by “A Song for Every Season” performed by the great English singing family, the Coppers.

11. *Packed*

A feeling of impermanence and precariousness in one’s place of residence is a legacy that modern Jews, even in North America, have inherited from their mediaeval European forebears—and more recent ones, too. My late friend, Ted Cole, as prosperous and successful and enterprising and cheerful and creative and sociable a person as was ever born in Canada, kept a wallet containing rare, valuable stamps ready in a jacket in his front closet: “I can sell them anywhere,” he told me, “and survive.” My own father and his immediate family left Poland in the 1920s and early 30s, just in time: only one or two of their fellow villagers survived the Holocaust. Too bad to end an album of songs about Jewish food, family, festivals, and *freylakhs*, with such a dark piece; but that’s the way it is.

- For explanations of individual words in Hebrew and Yiddish, and information on Jewish food and festivals, please visit the GLOSSARY at my website, <https://shelleyposen.com/jewish-cds-glossary/>.
- For song lyrics and musician credits, see the MAZEL booklet.
- Individual song lyrics can be found at <https://shelleyposen.com/lyrics/>.