

Irving Berlin's "God Bless America"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/irving-berlins-god-bless-america>.

Introduction

As middle and high school students come of age politically in the twenty-first century, many of them may see "God Bless America" as an anthem of American conservatism. They'll be interested to learn that this wasn't always the case.

This kit traces Irving Berlin's patriotic hymn back to its origin as an immigrant's celebration of his new country, through its evolution into a plea for equality and civil rights, to its standing today as a signifier of white American patriotism. The story of "God Bless America" can add to students' understanding of the early twentieth-century Jewish context from which Berlin emerged and help them think about how the meaning ascribed to a song or another cultural artifact evolves over time.

Through these resources, students will also consider how minority and mainstream cultures intersect in America. In thinking deeply about "God Bless America," which was written from a particular Jewish context but for a more universal American audience, students will consider what is lost and what is gained when a minority culture is embraced by (or co-opted into) the dominant American zeitgeist.

Cover image: Songwriter Irving Berlin, circa 1920.

Subjects

Immigration, Music, Performance, Social Commentary

Reading and Background:

- This 2018 [New York Times article](#) by American music scholar Sheryl Kaskowitz details the history of "God Bless America" in popular culture. Many of the primary sources in this kit are mentioned in the article.
- This is the [obituary](#) the *New York Times* ran for Irving Berlin on September 23, 1989. As with most *Times* obituaries, the first half provides helpful context by discussing Berlin's contribution to American popular culture. The second half reads more like a traditional biography, chronicling key events in Berlin's life.
- In 1938, Kate Smith, a popular singer and radio star, asked Irving Berlin to write her a patriotic song to support the war effort. Berlin repurposed "God Bless America" from his 1918 revue *Yip Yap Yaphank*, and he shortened it. In this video, [Smith introduces and debuts the song](#) for general American audiences. (Note: the actor toward the end is a young Ronald Reagan.)

Resources

1: Song lyrics, Irving Berlin's "God Bless America," 1938.

The sheet music and lyrics for "God Bless America."

Suggested Activity: Play [this 1939 recording](#) of "God Bless America" for the class, and project or print the lyrics. Use this as a set induction. Have students share immediate reactions or memories upon seeing and hearing this song.

After students have discussed their reactions, associations, and memories, look closely at Berlin's lyrics. Point out that the song uses the first person singular: "I." Ask students to consider: who is the "I"? And what does it add to the song? Berlin's daughter asserts that Berlin is making "an incredibly personal statement" with this song (see resource 2 of this kit), but most of us don't



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associate the song with Berlin in the first place. Does the song feel like a personal statement? Does it feel like a political statement? How does it feel to sing the words "land that I love"? Would the song have been better or worse if it didn't use the first person singular (like the "The Star-Spangled Banner," which uses the first person plural instead)?

Source: "God Bless America" by Irving Berlin © 1938, 1939 by Irving Berlin. Copyright Renewed 1965, 1966 by Irving Berlin. Copyright Assigned the Trustees of the God Bless America Fund International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Permission.

2: Text excerpt, Berlin's daughter on why he wrote "God Bless America."

This is a quote from an [article in *Performing Songwriter*](#), an online periodical managed by Lydia Hutchinson, a long-standing member of the National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM), and a music journalist.

Suggested Activity: Berlin's intention, as understood by his daughter, is made clear here: he wanted to thank America and remind others to be thankful along with him. Discuss with students: do Berlin's intentions for the song still matter? Do the meanings we assign to the song tend to match or disrupt Berlin's intent? What if a song means one thing to its writer and other things to its listeners nearly a century later?

Source: Bill DeMain, "Irving Berlin's 'God Bless America,'" *Performing Songwriter*, [performingsongwriter.com](http://performingsongwriter.com/god-bless-america/), May 11, 2014, <http://performingsongwriter.com/god-bless-america/>.

3: Text excerpts from American music scholar Sheryl Kaskowitz, 2014.

In her 2014 book *God Bless America: The Surprising History of An Iconic Song*, Sheryl Kaskowitz traces the history of "God Bless America" from its original conception in 1913, to its use across the political and cultural spectrum today.

Suggested Activity: Read the excerpts aloud with students and then discuss: How can one song be used for such vastly different political means? Why do you think people across the political spectrum have found "God Bless America" so potent for their causes? Is the malleability of Berlin's lyrics a testament to his skill or a sign of his weakness as a song-writer?

Source: Sheryl Kaskowitz, *God Bless America: The Surprising History of an Iconic Song* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 78-80.

4: Newspaper excerpt, first appearance of "God Bless America" in the press, "The New York Times," 1938.

This excerpt is from [an article](#) documenting the October 28th, 1938, meeting of the Conference of Jews and Christians at the Hotel Astor in New York City. Over 1,500 people attended to hear Jewish and Christian leaders call for the end of racist policies in Europe and for unity among Americans in the fight for tolerance and democratic ideals.

The Conference of Jews and Christians was co-chaired by Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic community leaders; at the meeting documented in this article, Dr. Arthur H. Compton, a Nobel Prize-winning scientist, took over the Protestant co-chairmanship from a deceased predecessor. This excerpt consists of a quotation from the speech Compton gave as he accepted the new position, as well as the final paragraph of the article, which is believed to be the first mention of "God Bless America" in print.

Suggested Activity: Read the excerpt aloud with students and describe the context of the article. Ask students why they think the organizers of this event chose to sing "God Bless America"? Does "God Bless America" have an inherent message? If so, what is it? If not, what was the message being attached to the song by the people singing it together at this meeting? Can you think of contemporary examples of a song becoming political or being sung in different political contexts?

Source: Anonymous, "Tolerance Pleas Led By Dr. Compton" (*The New York Times*, November 29, 1938), <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1938/11/29/98870892.html?a...>, accessed February 8, 2019.

5: Webpage and video clip, members of the United States Congress singing "God Bless America" on September 11th, 2001.

A video and description of Congress singing "God Bless America" on the East Front steps of the Capitol building in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

Suggested Activity: Read the webpage and watch the video together as a class. Ask students: What do you feel watching Congress sing "God Bless America," Democrats and Republicans together, on September 11, 2001? What do you imagine the members of Congress were feeling in that moment? Why do you think they broke out in song? In *this* particular song? The House webpage mentions that several days later President George W. Bush remarked that, "All of America was touched on the evening of the tragedy to see Republicans and Democrats joined together on the steps of this Capitol singing 'God Bless America.'" Why might some Americans have found this image touching? What other feelings do you imagine viewers may have had as they watched this event? What do you imagine Irving Berlin would have thought about this rendering of his song?

Sources: "The Singing of 'God Bless America' on September 11, 2001," United States House of Representatives Office of the Historian and Office of Art and Archives, September 11, 2001, <https://history.house.gov/HistoricalHighlight/Detail/36778>, accessed February 8, 2019.

6: Video excerpt, President Richard Nixon performs "God Bless America" at the "Grand Ole Opry," 1974.

Since 1925, the *Grand Ole Opry* has been a country music stage show and radio broadcast out of Nashville, Tennessee. Many country music legends played at the *Opry*, and the show's existence and success was a major factor in Nashville's development as the "country music capital" of America. In March 1974, when the *Opry* had already been running for almost 50 years, a new, larger building was built to house the show. President Richard Nixon was present at the opening of the new *Grand Ole Opry* House, where he performed "God Bless America," introducing it by mentioned an appearance he made with Irving Berlin at a dinner in honor of American POW's returning home from Vietnam.

Note that at this point in his presidency, Nixon was embroiled in the Watergate Scandal. He would resign less than five months later, on August 9, 1974. Nixon had been able to sustain his presidency during the early parts of the scandal because of broad support from Republican politicians and voters. But by the spring of '74, he was losing that support. Nixon's performance at the *Opry* is identifiable as a moment when "God Bless America" began to be associated with conservative politics and the GOP.

Suggested Activity: Watch the video with students and ask them for their reactions: What do they notice about the setting, the music, the feelings people seem to be expressing? How does Nixon come across? Is there anything surprising to students about his manner, his voice, what he says? Why might a president embroiled in a political scandal attend an event like this and perform? Why would he perform "God Bless America," of all songs? Can you think of examples of politicians today going on television, or otherwise engaging in public cultural activities? What might be the motivations and results of such endeavors?

Source: "President Nixon plays 'God Bless America' song on the piano at the opening of the Ole Opry house in Nashville, Tennessee." Critical Past video. 2:25, March 16, 1974. <https://www.criticalpast.com/>.

7: Video excerpt, Ronald Reagan's acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention, 1980.

When then-Governor Ronald Reagan accepted the Republican presidential nomination in 1980, his speech focused on his conservative vision for the country. At the end of the speech, Reagan went off-script, attributed the greatness of America to God, and hesitatingly asked the audience: "Can we begin our crusade, joined together in a moment of silent prayer?" After the moment of silence, Reagan ends the speech by uttering a phrase that today seems almost baked into political speeches, but that then was uncommon: "God bless America." This was the first time the phrase was used by a major U.S. politician in a public speech, and it may have contributed to the song's association with the political right.

Suggested Activity: Watch the video with students and ask them to reflect on what stands out to them in terms of Reagan's words, tone, manner, and delivery. Why might Reagan have hesitated to add the final part of his speech, and to call for a silent prayer? What does it mean that he's closing his speech with a number of religious references: God, Jews, Christians, and crusades? At one point he appears to get choked up as he is speaking? Why might that be? Do you find his emotion in this moment to be genuine or is it just a political tactic?

Ask students to write about the following question: What, in particular, makes the phrase "God bless America" compelling? Would a different phrase serve just as well: "God bless the whole world" or "thank God for America" or "I love America"? What does this particular phrase convey that seems to work so well for so many different political and emotional contexts?

Source: "Republican National Convention Gov Reagan's Acceptance Speech." YouTube video. May 8, 2015. Accessed February 8, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8G5QYt4PUHc&feature=youtu.be&t=44m10s>.