

Naphtali Herz Imber's "Hatikvah"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://www.teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/hatikvah>.

Introduction

"*Hatikvah*" (Hebrew for "The Hope") is the national anthem of Israel, and is often considered a worldwide anthem of the Jewish people. Israeli scholar of Hebrew song Eliyahu Hacoen has summed up the song's importance thus: "For the first time after thousands of years the entire Jewish people [has] shared one Hebrew song that is not Biblical, from the siddur or the mahzor. '*Hatikvah*' set in motion the wheels of Zionism more than a thousand speeches by leaders and emissaries."

Penned in 1878 by poet Naphtali Herz Imber (born 1856, Zlotshov, Austro-Hungarian Galicia, now Ukraine), "*Hatikvah*" was first published as "*Tikvoseynu*" ("Our Hope") in 1886. Though the sung anthem consists of one verse and the chorus, the original poem contained nine verses, each speaking of the Jews' hope to be restored as a free people to the land of their Israelite forefathers. The poem was published while Imber was living in Ottoman-era Palestine, and it soon began to be sung in the Jewish colonies there. Its musical setting is most commonly attributed to Samuel Cohen, a Romanian-born member of a farming community there, though the original provenance of the tune is much debated. Some argue that it originated in a Moldavian folk song (quoted by Czech composer Bedřich Smetana in his *symphonic poem* "*Vltava*"), while others trace it back much earlier, or claim it as a pan-European "wandering melody."

The song would soon achieve popularity throughout the *yishuv* (the pre-statehood Jewish community in Palestine). It was also quickly taken up by Zionist organizers the world over and it was declared the official anthem of the movement at the eighteenth Zionist Congress in 1933. In 2004, the song was finally named the official anthem of the State of Israel, though it had enjoyed a de facto status as such for many years.

The ascent of "*Hatikvah*" as the anthem of the Zionist movement, and later, of the State of Israel, has not been without controversy. Some protests, like those of Zionist leader Theodor Herzl, have focused on the poet Imber who died penniless of alcoholism and was considered a libertine by many of his time, not possessing the upright character consistent with a national poet. Others have focused on the possible non-Jewish origins of the tune and the irreligious quality of the words (God is not mentioned.) Still others have considered it "too Jewish," and unsuitable for a secular, democratic, multicultural state. These complications and contradictions are explored in this kit, which provides video, visual, and textual materials for exploring the song in its original context, the debates that have surrounded it, and the life of its eccentric creator.

Cover image: Silk insert from a pack of Nebo Cigarettes (New York, circa 1905-1910), showing the beginning words (in English translation) and notes of "*Hatikvah*."

Subjects

Hebrew, Israel-Palestine, Music, Poetry

Reading and Background

- The official lyrics of the anthem (in Hebrew characters and transliteration, and in English translation), as prepared by the Israeli Knesset, or parliament, may be found [here](#).
- University of Virginia Jewish history professor James Loeffler's article "[How 'Hatikvah' \(The Hope\) Became Israel's National Anthem](#)" provides a general introduction to Imber, the song, and the incidents surrounding its meteoric rise.
- A lengthy [synthesis of further scholarship and resources](#), written by Uruguayan-born Israeli musicologist Edwin Seroussi, was published by the Jewish Music Research Centre at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
- The Milken Archive of Jewish Music also has a [worthy article](#) about "*Hatikvah*," penned by the archive's artistic director and



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professor emeritus of the Jewish Theological Seminary Neil W. Levin. The article appears alongside a 1947 symphonic rendition of the anthem orchestrated by famed German composer Kurt Weill.

- An excellent [article about the infamous "bohemian, poet, wit"](#) himself, Naphtali Herz Imber, was written by Gerard H. Wilk and published in *Commentary* in 1951.
- A short biography of Imber appears in the *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur (Biographical Dictionary of Modern Yiddish Literature)*, translated by Joshua A. Fogel [here](#). Its length may be attributed to Imber's relatively few contributions to the literature of his native language, Yiddish. Imber was far more significant and prolific in Hebrew, of course, but also English, the language of his adopted United States, where he died.

Resources

1: Poem manuscript, Naphtali Herz Imber's "Tikvoseynu" ("Our Hope"), 1908, Hebrew.

In 1908, Naphtali Herz Imber was suffering from alcoholism-related illness in the Beth Israel hospital in New York City, when American ethnomusicologist Jeannette Robinson Murphy visited the hospital. She had come to give a concert, and included "Hatikvah" in her performance. By this time, the song was world-renowned as the anthem of the expanding Zionist movement, having been sung at the third Zionist Congress some four years earlier in 1903.

At the hospital, Imber jotted down the first verse and chorus of the song on the back of a medical form, and gifted it to Murphy. Below the lyrics, the author signed his name and gave the Hebrew year, תרס"ח ("tarsakh," 5668, corresponding to the years 1907/8). On the side of the document is information relating to its acquisition by a later collector, who would donate it to the National Library of Israel.

The translation of the lines is as follows:

"So long as deep within the heart
The Jewish soul is yearning,
And onward to the edges of the Orient,
It casts its eye to Zion –

Our hope is not yet lost,
The ancient hope,
To return to the land of our forefathers,
To the city in which David dwelt."

Suggested Activities: First you may wish to orient students to the circumstances of the poem's composition. As a young itinerant poet and teacher, Imber found himself tutoring the children of Jewish lawyer Baron Moshe Waldberg in his Romanian mansion. A *Commentary* magazine article by Gerard Wilk (1951), describes the origin of the lines thus:

"Between teaching German and the three R's to the junior Barons Waldberg he wrote a song about home. It had nothing to do with Zloczov [the town of his birth, in Galicia, the eastern domain of the Austrian empire]. Home was not Zloczov; it was none of the innumerable Zloczovs where Jews had been living as strangers for two thousand years. Their synagogues echoed with the lament of the banished. They prayed to go home from force of habit, without hope. Their mood annoyed the nineteen-year-old in the Rumanian castle. He scrawled eight angry stanzas against it on a piece of paper and above them: 'Tikvosenu—Our Hope.'"

Have students read the translation of the opening lines of "Tikvoseynu." If they (or anyone in the class) can read Hebrew, also have a student read aloud from Imber's manuscript. What is the predominant theme of the words? And in what tone is the theme expressed? Would you characterize it as "angry," as Wilk does? Why might Wilk have done so? How might Imber's writing have been influenced by his life, as the struggling, modern-minded young son of impoverished, deeply religious Hasidic parents? How are both the traditions and lore of the past, and the promise of the future, expressed in his lines? And why would he choose to write them in Hebrew, despite being a native speaker of Yiddish, a teacher of German, and at this time a resident of Romania?

If students note the differences between Imber's words and the lyrics of "Hatikvah" sung today, encourage them to enumerate them. These differences are explored in resource 3 of this kit.

Source: Naphtali Herz Imber, "Tikvoseynu" in manuscript (New York City, 1908),

<http://web.nli.org.il/sites/nli/hebrew/digitallibrary/pages/viewer.aspx?presenterid=EDU_XML_ENG&docid=EDU_XML_ENG003417555&Print=true>, accessed March 1, 2019. Gifted to Jeannette Robinson Murphy, who later gifted it to Abraham Schwadron, who donated it to the National Library of Israel.

2: Newsreel footage of Czech-Jewish schoolchildren, ca. 1933/4, singing Naphtali Herz Imber's "Hatikvah" ("The Hope").

In this footage filmed for the American newsreel series known as "March of Time," students of the Hebrew Gymnasium (school) in the town of Munkács, then in Czechoslovakia (now Ukraine), sing the Zionist anthem. The words of the chorus are those that Imber wrote, and differ from the version sung today.

NB: The way in which the words of "*Hatikvah*" are set musically aligns with the Ashkenazic pronunciation of Hebrew, that is, the Eastern European-Jewish pronunciation, with its accents on penultimate syllables. Modern Hebrew mostly prefers Sephardic-style pronunciation, with Ashkenazic Hebrew sounding to many Israelis old-fashioned and redolent of the Diaspora. Even so, "*Hatikvah*" is still sung with the traditional Ashkenazic inflections (that is, "*nefesh yeHUdi*," rather than "*nefesh yehUDI*," or indeed "*haTIkvah*," rather than "*hatiKVAH*").

Suggested Activity: Play the video for students, and note the time and place of the footage. First ask them for their initial reactions to the music: what emotions do they have upon hearing the melody? Does the emotional quality of the tune match the lyrics, or does it conflict with the lyrics in some way? How might the musical setting (in a minor key, unusual for national anthems) relate to Jewish music generally, or to the history of the Jewish diaspora?

Next, ask for the students' evaluation of the aesthetic qualities of this particular performance: the way it is staged, the appearance of the surroundings, the sound of the voices, the dress of the children, the movement of the conductor. Does it resemble school performances in which they have taken part? How do the elements combine to convincingly convey the message of the performance and the footage, and what might that message be?

Then ask some questions that examine the historical context of the artifact, and the place of "*Hatikvah*" in the Jewish consciousness of the time. Why would schoolchildren be singing this song in this grand assembly, filmed by foreign cameras? They are not, after all, in Israel, and the State of Israel has not yet been established. What meaning would the song have carried for them, and for Jews worldwide, in this pre-State period? Why might audiences in mid-1930s America be particularly interested in seeing these European children singing this song? Why might Yad Vashem, the Israeli museum of the Holocaust, have chosen to feature this clip prominently in its galleries, where it plays on a large screen in a constant loop?

Source: Excerpt from "March of Time" newsreel series, filmed in Munkács, Czechoslovakia (USA: 1933/4, exhibited October 1935). Posted July 14, 2010, by Yad Vashem YouTube channel at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zA7ihcXGzQ>>, accessed March 1, 2019. Footage courtesy of the National Archives and the Steven Spielberg Film and Video Archive of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

3: Poetry excerpts, "Hatikvah" in different versions, Hebrew with English translation.

Most of the refrain that Imber wrote in his poem "*Tikovseynu*" differs from the version of "*Hatikvah*" sung today as the national anthem of Israel. This source sheet presents the refrain as Imber wrote it and the refrain as it is sung today, in both the original Hebrew (with transliteration) and English translation. As seen in resource 2, the version that Imber wrote was still being sung as the Zionist anthem around the world even into the mid-1930s, and would be sung this way, especially in the Diaspora, up until the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

Meanwhile, the Jewish communities in Palestine had been singing the newer refrain for decades. Its lyrics, which have a somewhat more secular flavor omitting Imber's references to King David, are attributed to Yehuda Leib Matmon-Cohen, an educator who settled in Ottoman-ruled Palestine in 1905. With the founding of the state in 1948, and the unofficial proclamation of "*Hatikvah*" as its anthem that same year, this version of the refrain was universally adopted.

Suggested Activities: First, ask students to try to sing Imber's words to the tune of the anthem's refrain. How does it sound to them, and do they like its aural qualities more or less than the more familiar version? Might there have been musical reasons for the lyric revision that took place? What else might explain the changes that were introduced? What is emphasized in Imber's

version, and how does it differ from what is emphasized in the official version sung today? Why might the founders of the young and controversial State of Israel have preferred their version?

Sources: Text of Imber's version: Naphtali Herz Imber, "Hatikvah," in *Kol shirei naftali hertz imber (Complete Poetry of Naphtali Herz Imber)* (Tel Aviv: M. Newman, 1950), 24.

Text of version sung today: "Hatikva - National Anthem of the State of Israel," The Knesset, 2009, <https://www.knesset.gov.il/holidays/eng/hatikva_eng.htm>, accessed March 1, 2019.

Translations and source sheet by Mikhl Yashinsky (New York, 2019).

4: Sheet music covers and interior page, "Hatikvah," ca. 1910s, Hebrew, German, Yiddish, and English.

This is a collage of various sheet music covers, and one interior page from such a publication, featuring "Hatikvah." Two of them also feature another Zionist anthem, "*Dort, wo die Zeder*" ("There Where the Cedar," or, in its Hebrew version, "*Shom bimkom arozim*"), with the original German words by Imber's fellow Galician poet Itzhak Feld. Primarily because of Imber's disreputable character, Zionist leader Theodor Herzl much preferred the latter song, which competed with "Hatikvah" for popularity among early Zionists (it may be heard and read in Hebrew [here](#).)

Imber's portrait appears in the top left lyrics page, which includes the words of "Hatikvah" (including the rarely sung second and third verses). An ancient-looking lyre, a symbol of Jewish song dating back to the harpist King David, appears atop a pile of heavy tomes, surrounded by roses and thorns. Barbed wire, a reference to the oppressed and captive condition of the Jew in the Diaspora, surrounds the elderly Jewish man in the center cover, who wears a robe with the traditional stripes of the *tales* (prayer shawl)—also perhaps those of a prisoner's uniform—as he walks with arms outstretched toward "Zion." That word appears beside a draped flag of the Zionist movement (later adapted to become the flag of Israel) and a sun rising in the desert.

Rays of sun likewise feature in the top right cover, which includes portraits of Zionist leaders Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau, cofounders of the World Zionist Congress, all surmounted by the famous verse Psalms 137:5: "אִם-אֶשְׁכַּח יְרוּשָׁלַם – תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי" ("If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning"). Herzl appears in the sheet music cover at the bottom right, as well, where "Hatikvah" is billed as "The Jewish National Anthem" (similarly, it is called "The Jewish National Air," an old-fashioned word for "song," in the center cover.)

The themes of "Hatikvah" are covered by a now-familiar mélange of symbols in the cover at bottom left: ancient-looking scrolls, blooming flowers, and a cityscape of Jerusalem featuring the Tower of David.

Suggested Activity: Show the collage to students and ask them to name significant images or words they can spot in their designs. Write each down on the board, and note which words and images are featured in more than one cover. Discuss: which elements are featured most? How are they connected to the themes of "Hatikvah," and to its national and political importance? What historical narrative is the song being used to define or promote? Why might it be that men like Herzl are featured more commonly on the old "Hatikvah" covers than the actual author of the song?

For a creative assignment, ask each student to create their own cover for the sheet music of "Hatikvah," either one that may have appealed to consumers in the 1910s or one that is more contemporary and relevant to buyers of the sheet music today.

Sources: Covers and interior pages of sheet music for "Hatikvah," words by Naphtali Herz Imber (New York: J. & J. Kammen, Hebrew Publishing Company, etc.; London: R. Mazin & Co., ca. 1910s). Collage by Mikhl Yashinsky (New York: 2019).

5: Poem, Naphtali Herz Imber's "Tikvoseynu," 1886, Hebrew with English translation.

This is the full version of Imber's poem "Tikvoseynu" ("Our Hope"), which later came to be known as "Hatikvah" ("The Hope"). Only the first verse and the chorus, with changes (discussed in resource 3), are sung as Israel's national anthem. Eight other verses joined them in Imber's poem. His creation is presented here in both the original Hebrew, and a free poetic translation by Nina Salman. (Note that this resource comes from a book of Imber's writing published in 1950, the editors of which used the more contemporary title, "Hatikvah." However, the poem published here was originally titled "Tikvoseynu," and I refer to it as such in order to distinguish it from the anthem into which it evolved.)

Suggested Activity: If you have at least one Hebrew-reader in the classroom, have them read aloud Imber's poem, with someone else reciting the English. If there is no one to read the Hebrew in class, just have students read the English aloud, perhaps switching readers every couple of verses.

Then, asking for suggestions from the class, compile a list on the board of recurring motifs in these verses. (Such motifs include architectural and geographical features of Israel, as well as numerous images of flowing liquid: tears, blood, water.) What unites these motifs? What purpose do they serve? How do they illustrate the poem's chief themes: everlastingness, inevitability, exile, and return? How do they connect to the central and repeating idea of "hope"?

Also ask students what they think of the poem as a whole. How does the whole poem differ from the one verse and chorus that are sung? Is it an artistically effective poem? What about ideologically or sentimentally effective? Note that God is explicitly mentioned in the eighth verse, but does not appear in the sung version, which led some religious Zionists to object to the anthem on account of its lack of traditional piety. (Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, a key figure in the movement of Religious Zionism and Chief Rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine even wrote an alternate anthem for this reason, which can be sung to the same tune, but which has God, the Torah, and holiness at its center. The words of this parallel anthem, "*Ha-emunah*"—"The Faith"—may be found [here](#).)

Sources: Naphtali Herz Imber, "*Hatikvah*," in *Kol shirei naftali hertz imber (Complete Poetry of Naphtali Herz Imber)* (Tel Aviv: M. Newman, 1950), 25–26.

Naphtali Herz Imber, "*Hatikvah*," trans. Nina Salman in *Apples and Honey* (London: 1921; New York: 1922), reprinted in *Master of Hope: Selected Writings of Naphtali Herz Imber*, ed. Jacob Kabakoff (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1985), 332–334.

6: Quotations on Naphtali Herz Imber's appearance and character, 1892, 1932, 1975.

Three major Zionist thinkers, each of whom was personally acquainted with Naphtali Herz Imber, reflect on his life and character, appearance and artistry. Two are from memoirs, while a third, Israel Zangwill's, is from a novel which presented a fictionalized portrait of the poet. Together, they paint a picture of an extremely eccentric man suffering from alcoholism, at once admired for having written the great "anthem of the Jewish people," but feared or mocked for his outrageousness.

Imber had written the poetic credo of Zionism, but was perhaps not the most serious believer in that (or any) cause, and did not even at all times identify as a Jew. One legend about him finds him in San Francisco dressed as a Hindu ascetic, where he supposedly married a gentile woman who was much taken with his mystic charms. An incident found in Louis Lipsky's essay on Imber is illustrative of the strange position in which Imber often found himself throughout his unusual career: "He once came to a Yiddish theatre where a Zionist play was being given in which *Hatikvah* was sung, but he was not allowed to enter the theatre" (*Memoirs in Profile*, 179–180).

Suggested Activity: Divide the class into three and have each group read one of the passages about Imber. Once the students have finished reading, each group should present to the others the content of their passage in their own words, and lay out what each respective author's perspective on Imber might have been. Were they admiring, mocking, or a combination of both? What particular interest did Imber hold for each of them? What new things do we learn about Imber, if any, from each author's writing?

Once the individual passages are covered, you may move into a general debate on authors and their art. Should it matter whether an artist fully believed in the messages of their art? Are the creation and its arguments still legitimate, even if the author thought or lived in a way that ran contrary to them? Should an author's character be taken into account when considering their work? Do you think Imber might have been received differently if he had lived in your own era?

Sources: Israel Zangwill, "The Neo-Hebrew Poet," Chapter 7 of *Children of the Ghetto* (London: William Heinemann, 1892), quoted in Philip Slomovitz, "The Man Behind *Hatikvah*," *The Jewish People's Almanac*, ed. David C. Gross (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1981), 307.

Philip Cowen, *Memories of an American Jew* (New York: The International Press, 1932), quoted in Slomovitz, 310.

Louis Lipsky, *Memoirs in Profile* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1975), 180.

Source sheet by Mikhl Yashinsky (New York, 2019).

7: Newspaper editorial excerpts, "Khofesh hashtikah shel hashofet jubran" ("Justice Joubran's Right to Silence"), March 2, 2012, Hebrew with English translation.

While some have called "*Hatikvah*" "not Jewish enough" (see resource 5,) still others have maintained that it is in fact too "Jewish." For Israel's non-Jewish Arab minority, the song's explicit references to the ancient hope of the Jewish people have made it uncomfortable to sing, even as faithful citizens of the State of Israel. Such controversy came to a head in 2012, when Justice Salim Joubran of the Supreme Court of Israel, a Christian Arab Israeli, stood for the anthem but declined to join in the singing at a judicial swearing-in ceremony. His silence, though he did not comment on it publicly, was taken as a protest against the song and its suitability as the anthem of a democratic, pluralistic state, and ignited a political firestorm in the country, with some far-right members of the Knesset even calling for his resignation.

Still others rose to his defense, including the Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin and the Vice Prime Minister Moshe Ya'alon. The major left-wing newspaper *Haaretz* likewise defended Justice Joubran's choice in this editorial, which explains why the words of "*Hatikvah*" are not appropriate for all of Israel's citizens and even advocates for them to permanently be amended (though does not provide a suggestion for what the new lyrics could be).

Suggested Activity: Have the class read the excerpts from *Haaretz's* editorial, whether in Hebrew, English, or both. Now divide the class in two, and have students prepare for a debate. One side will be in support of Joubran's choice, and the other against it. The latter side will be in favor of the words of "*Hatikvah*" remaining as they are, with the other advocating for the lyrics being changed with the aim of inclusivity. Once their arguments are prepared, moderate a debate between these two sides. Students should be encouraged to draw as much as they can on earlier historical arguments for and against the song.

For a creative homework assignment, ask students to imagine that the Israeli government has accepted *Haaretz's* position that the song's lyrics should be changed. Ask them to revise the song so that it might resonate with Israel's non-Jewish citizens, while remaining meaningful to Jews and retaining its poetic tone. What reference-points, instead of the millennia-old national and territorial aspirations of the Jewish people, might they use to celebrate Israel? Alternately, they may be more radical in their rewriting of the anthem, and create something that is critical of the state or even of the landscape itself. Students may write in English or Hebrew (or indeed, any language!), though they should try to create something that matches the scansion of Imber's words, and which could be sung to the famous tune of his "*Hatikvah*."

Source: *Haaretz* Editorial staff, "*Khofesh hashtikah shel hashofet jubran*" ("Justice Joubran's Right to Silence"), *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv: March 2, 2012), <<https://www.haaretz.co.il/opinions/editorial-articles/1.1654782>>, accessed March 1, 2019, translated in *Haaretz* Editorial Staff, "Israel Should Consider Altering Its Anthem to Include non-Jews," <<https://www.haaretz.com/1.5200360>>, accessed March 1, 2019.