

The Boss and the Bible

Finding the midrash in Springsteen's lyrics



Bruce Springsteen performs in Toronto in 2012.

□ *Photo by Brian Patterson Photos*

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As an associate professor of Jewish studies and classics at Rutgers University's New Brunswick campus, Azzan Yadin-Israel's main interests lie in interpreting biblical texts and rabbinical stories.



His studies have taken him to such diverse parts of academia as The Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the University of Chicago Divinity School, the Jewish Theological Seminary, and the University of California at Berkeley.

But this semester a course has taken him to new territory, where the Jersey Shore meets the Promised Land, and where saints and sinners gather in a land of hope and dreams.

Yadin-Israel's one-credit course, titled "Bruce Springsteen's Theology," looks at the work of New Jersey's rock laureate through the lens of religion.

"I started to think of biblical themes in his writing," he told *NJ Jewish News* in a Nov. 18 phone interview. "I attended two of his concerts and I have been a fan of his for a very long time. I knew he was singing about the Promised Land, but I thought it as some sort of a metaphor and thought no more of it. Then I would see it again in another place and another place and another place."

Yadin-Israel bought a Springsteen songbook and parsed the lyrics with the diligence of a talmudic scholar.

"I went through all the songs and marked up terms and allusions and images," said Yadin-Israel.

He estimated there are biblical references in several dozen of the hundreds of songs Springsteen has composed since his first album, *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.*, was released in 1973.

"With some, it became clear that you could not actually understand the song without going back and looking at the biblical narrative," he said.

One prime example is in "Adam Raised a Cain," from *Darkness on the Edge of Town*. Springsteen has called the song "emotionally autobiographical."

"He is using the Cain and Abel story in *Genesis* to say, 'Look at how difficult, how problematic, relationships are between fathers and sons.' The story is usually read as a conflict between two brothers. Like a midrash in a way, Springsteen refocuses these characters."

Religious intersections

Springsteen was born in Long Branch and raised as a Catholic in Freehold. Nonetheless, with exceptions like "Jesus Was an Only Son," said Yadin-Israel, "most of his biblical references are Old Testament."

"'Jesus Was an Only Son' does the same thing as 'Adam Raised a Cain'; it takes the focus away from Jesus as the son of God to Jesus as the son of Mary. Mary had been completely marginalized in the classic telling, but the song is about a mother losing her son. It is a part of the story we don't usually pay attention to," the professor told *NJJN*.

It is not the first time Yadin-Israel has applied his religious studies to pop culture. In 2010 he wrote an article for the *Jewish Review of Books* on biblical and theological references by an Israeli hip-hop group called Hadag Nahash.

Boasting “a mixed upbringing” in Israel and the United States and “a mixed heritage academically as well,” Yadin-Israel belongs to the Conservative Congregation B’nai Tikvah in North Brunswick.

“I have often written about the intersection between modern religious thinkers and religious thought,” he said, even as he conceded that the concept of Springsteen studies “is far afield from my primary scholarly interests. My main work is on classical texts.”

Yadin-Israel may write about Springsteen’s lyrics some time in the future. But his latest book is entitled *Scripture and Tradition: Rabbi Akiva and the Ironic Triumph of Midrash*. It is scheduled for publication by University of Pennsylvania Press in 2014.

What might Yadin-Israel ask Springsteen if the two should ever meet?

“First and foremost I would thank him for writing his music,” he said. “We’d have a beer and I’d see where things went. It would be great if we could sit down and chat about how he sees his own writing. But it really doesn’t matter. The biblical references are clear.”

Yadin-Israel’s course is part of the Byrne Seminars, a special program for freshman students.

“I know Springsteen is a very popular guy and a huge rock figure, but that doesn’t mean he is not a serious writer or that he is not trying to say something in interesting ways,” Yadin-Israel said.

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