

## Looking at ‘The Boss’ Through a Spiritual Lens

Rutgers seminar explores the biblical foundations of Springsteen lyrics

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### Q&A

Bruce Springsteen, *theologian*?

The pop icon lovingly known as The Boss is best known for writing about women, sports, cars and factory whistles. Now a Rutgers professor is leading a [Byrne Seminar](#) exploring the theological underpinnings of Springsteen’s lyrics, and the song writer’s reinterpretation of biblical stories.



Admirers reach out to Bruce Springsteen at a concert.

Azzan Yadin-Israel, an associate professor of Jewish studies and classics, usually teaches courses in early rabbinic literature, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Jewish mysticism and Plato. The one-semester course on Springsteen gives him a welcome opportunity to branch out a bit, he says, and to share the appreciation for the singer-songwriter he’s had since middle school.

[Byrne Seminars](#), open to first-year students at Rutgers, are one-credit courses, with correspondingly lighter workloads, that offer an introduction to research in classes of no more than 20 students.

This year marks four decades since Springsteen released his first album, “Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.” *Rolling Stone* rated it one of the 500 greatest albums of all time, and the Garden State responded by embracing the rock star as its beloved native son.

Rutgers Today spoke with Yadin-Israel about how he mines the Springsteen canon for biblical references, and what message he hopes seminar participants will take away with them.

**Rutgers Today:** You've noted that Springsteen interweaves elements of the secular and the sacred in his lyrics. Can you give some examples of where and how he's done this in his works over the years?



Courtesy of Azzan Yadin-Israel

Azzan Yadin-Israel says the singer-songwriter interweaves elements of the sacred and the secular in his lyrics.

**Azzan Yadin-Israel:** The seminar includes lyrics of songs from “Greetings from Asbury Park, New Jersey,” Springsteen’s first album, all the way through “Wrecking Ball,” so this is clearly a broad phenomenon. In some songs, Springsteen engages biblical motifs explicitly, as the titles indicate. For example, “Adam Raised a Cain,” “Jesus was an Only Son,” “In the Belly of the Whale” (referring to Jonah). But concepts with biblical resonance appear throughout his works (the Promised Land, redemption, faith), and it’s just a matter of taking the theological overtones seriously.

**Rutgers Today:** Is there one dominant theological philosophy running through the Springsteen lyrics you’ve analyzed? Which biblical stories does he link to?

**Azzan Yadin-Israel:** Interestingly, Springsteen refers more often to the stories of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) than the New Testament. On a literary level, Springsteen often recasts biblical figures and stories into the American landscape. The narrator of “Adam Raised a Cain” describes his strained relationship with his father through the prism of the biblical story of the first father and son; Apocalyptic storms accompany a boy’s tortured transition into manhood in “The Promised Land,” and the first responders of 9/11 rise up to “someplace higher” in the flames, much as Elijah the prophet ascended in a chariot of fire (“Into the Fire”). Theologically, I would say the most dominant motifs are redemption -- crossing the desert and entering the Promised Land -- and the sanctity of the everyday. Springsteen tries to drag the power of religious symbols that are usually relegated to some transcendent reality into our lived world. In his later albums he also writes very openly about faith.

**Rutgers Today:** Overall, what role do you think Springsteen’s Roman Catholic upbringing plays in his song-writing?

**Azzan Yadin-Israel:** There is no question that it plays a significant role. Springsteen has said as much in many interviews.

**Rutgers Today:** What do you hope the students take away from the course?

**Azzan Yadin-Israel:** The Byrne Seminars offer a relatively relaxed classroom setting, so there's no expectation that anyone will become a Springsteen scholar. I do hope the students gain an appreciation for a particular way of thinking about texts, an attentive engagement of an author's work, and an understanding of the broader contexts --political, literary, theological, etc.-- that inform a work.

<http://news.rutgers.edu/qa/looking-'-boss'-through-spiritual-lens/20131105>