**Dylan Beit Midrash**

This activity consists of text study of song lyrics linking to Jewish sources, to be discussed inside the Bob Dylan Gallery.

Needed: Handouts with lyrics

**Introduction:**

We're going to enter the next exhibition. Bob Dylan: 75 years young. Dylan, Shabtai Zisl Zimmerman, born in Duluth, Minnesota to a traditional Jewish family, has developed a career as a folk singer. He has reshaped music and even literature – the Nobel Prize he received was for literature.

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| Here's a great story: As Dylan told his biographer.  "The town didn't have a rabbi, and it was time for me to be Bar Mitzvahed. Suddenly a rabbi showed up under strange circumstances for only a year. He and his wife got off the bus in the middle of winter. He showed up just in time for me to learn this stuff. He was an old man from Brooklyn who had a white beard and wore a black hat and black clothes. They put him upstairs above the cafe, which was the local hangout. It was a rock and roll cafe where I used to hang out, too. I use to go up there every day to learn the stuff, either after school or after dinner. After studying with him for an hour or so, I'd come down and boogie." |

This is a great story, and Dylan is a great storyteller, but I don't really believe it. However, what I do like about this story is that Dylan tells us what he is made of – those contradicting elements, tradition and rebellion, his identity, his creation. Let's go inside.

This is not a chronological exhibition. The photos were taken by Eliot Lande, Woodstock's official photographer. These are quotes from his famous songs. These are album covers.

Before we explore, I want us to use a generations old method of learning, discussing and arguing, called Beit Midrash, looking into layers of text.

The first one – by Bob Dylan, Highway 61 revisited. Another one- by Leonard Cohen. We'll compare words from those two cultural icons, both from the same generation, that stemmed out of the Jewish world. They were both familiar with Jewish texts, and asked questions through lyrics regarding their own identities.

(read one – what does this text talk about? Akedat Yitzhak. Binding of Isaac. Who is the speaker? What perspective?)

A dialogue between God and Abraham. Isaac isn't present. What kind of God is portrayed here? Unexplainable, demanding.

Highway 61 – highway from New Orleans to Minnesota.

Not only Dylan's home, but called the blues highway because the musical styles formed the south. (Related to this)

Now let's read Cohen.

(From Isaac perspective, traumatic moment, father trembling. How he notices that his father is also struggling, the victim can understand both sides.)

Take 5 minutes to explore the gallery, while you do so, try to pick one quote that captures you. I'll meet you here in 5 minutes.

When you go around the gallery – think: why Dylan?

(Dylan was drawn to folk music, it was a part of Jewishness. It serves the lyrics, stories about misfits, unfortunates. Music of the underdog. Music he connects to in his parents' garage. Then gets to be an icon. What he did to folk music when by marching with Martin Luther King (I have a dream and Dylan singing Blowin' in the wind instantly became part of a revolution) became one of the peaks of his career.

He goes to one of the most central folk festivals in Newport, Rhode Island, thousands were waiting for him, the crowd anticipating greatness, and then Dylan went up on the stage and the crowd started shouting Judas – referring to Judas the traitor. He did the the undoable, the unthinkable. He went up on stage with an electrical guitar. Folk usually uses an acoustic guitar, a harmonica; it is quiet. However, Dylan wanted to integrate folk and rock and roll. He decided to do that in the sanctuary of the folk festival, folk’s most holy place. He decided that he was going to change the times himself. )

Share two quotes/Why Dylan? He tells us a story of identity, question, tradition, renewal. Unending quest. What is more Jewish than that?

**Text Background**

**Highway 61 -**

When he was growing up in the 1950s, [Highway 61](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S._Route_61) stretched from the [Canada–US border](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canada%E2%80%93United_States_border) through Duluth, where Dylan was born, and [St. Paul](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Paul,_Minnesota) all the way down to [New Orleans](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Orleans). Along the way, the route passed near the birthplaces and homes of influential musicians such as [Muddy Waters](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muddy_Waters), [Son House](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Son_House), [Elvis Presley](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elvis_Presley) and [Charley Patton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charley_Patton). The "empress of the blues", [Bessie Smith](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bessie_Smith), died after sustaining serious injuries in an automobile accident on Highway 61. Critic Mark Polizzotti points out that [blues](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blues) legend [Robert Johnson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Johnson) is alleged to have sold his soul to the devil at the highway's crossroads with [Route 49](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S._Route_49).[[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Highway_61_Revisited#cite_note-Polizzotti_24-3) The highway had also been the subject of several blues recordings, notably [Roosevelt Sykes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roosevelt_Sykes)' "Highway 61 Blues" (1932) and [Mississippi Fred McDowell](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mississippi_Fred_McDowell)'s "61 Highway" (1964).[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Highway_61_Revisited#cite_note-4)

**Forever Young**

Dylan poetically rewrites a father’s blessing over his children at the Sabbath table, invoking the story of Jacob (“May you build a ladder to the stars /And climb on every rung”) to connect it to his own youngest son, who would grow up to be a rock star, outselling even his father.

**If It Be Your Will- Leonard Cohen**

This song’s title is a translation of “Ken Yehi Ratzon,” a Hebrew liturgical phrase directed to God. The song is also addressed to God, and includes lyrics evoking imagery from Kabbalat Shabbat, the Friday evening prayer service welcoming Shabbat, of nature rejoicing:

(נהרות ימחאו כף, יחד הרים ירננו...)

**Possible Questions:**

In the songs about the binding of Isaac –

Who are the characters? What are their traits? Who is not mentioned? What kind of God is portrayed?

Forever Young & If it be your will –

What elements of prayer are in the songs? What quotes do you find meaningful? What is the significance of the picture that the songs paint?

[**“Blowin’ in the Wind”**](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NzaSpg5j2C8)  (in longer version)

Perhaps his best-known anthem, the song that made him a household name, it is a litany of unanswered, unanswerable questions. What could be more Jewish?

Read more: <http://forward.com/culture/163451/bob-dylans-10-most-jewish-songs/>

So the 1975 [congregational seder at Hollywood’s Temple Israel](http://archive.jta.org/1975/04/02/jewish-holidays/passover/brando-dylan-other-theater-stars-participate-in-seder) — which Brando crashed, and where Dylan played his anti-war anthem “Blowin’ in the Wind” — was not your grandmother’s festive meal.

**“**[**Neighborhood Bully**](http://www.jta.org/2016/05/23/life-religion/bob-dylans-forgotten-pro-israel-song-revisited)**” (in longer version)**

Just after his son’s bar mitzvah at the Kotel — and a year after Israel’s controversial first Lebanon War — Dylan released the song **“**[**Neighborhood Bully**](http://www.jta.org/2016/05/23/life-religion/bob-dylans-forgotten-pro-israel-song-revisited)**”** on his 1983 album “Infidels.” In what is arguably one of the most pro-Jewish rock songs ever recorded, Dylan describes Israel as an “exiled man” who is unfairly labeled a bully for fending off constant attacks from his neighbors. One verse goes: “Well the neighborhood bully, he’s just one man/His enemies say he’s on their land/They got him outnumbered a million to one/He got no place to escape to, no place to run/He’s the neighborhood bully.”

<http://www.jta.org/2016/10/13/life-religion/bob-dylans-5-most-jewish-moments>