



The power of Leonard Bernstein

by **Michele Alperin**
NJJN Contributing Writer
March 7, 2018

The centennial year of Leonard Bernstein’s birth is being celebrated with performances, lectures, and more. An exhibit on the legendary American musician, composer, and conductor opens at the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia on March 16. “Leonard Bernstein: The Power of Music” offers “an incredible opportunity to explicate his story in more depth and in a way that the museum is uniquely suited to do —foregrounding his Jewish identity and his social activism, in his life and his work,” said Ivy Weingram, exhibit curator and associate curator for almost six of her 10 years at the museum.

The exhibit includes music at a listening station; “Samples of Faith,” a multi-media interactive work; and items such as Bernstein’s piano, conducting suit, baton, and marked-up scores.

These items, said Weingram, “bring him to life and make him relatable and give you a peek inside his world.”

Also featured are galleries devoted to two of Bernstein’s iconic works, the Broadway score of “West Side Story” and “Mass,” which was commissioned by Jacqueline Kennedy in memory of her assassinated husband and premiered in 1971.

“Fans of Broadway, music enthusiasts, social activists, and history buffs can find something to relate to about his contribution to American culture,” Weingram said. “For a younger audience the exhibit is really about identity issues.”



[+ enlarge image](#)

Ivy Weingram, curator of “Leonard Bernstein: The Power of Music,” at the National Museum of American Jewish History.

NJJN: What did you learn about Bernstein from working on this exhibit?

Weingram: I didn't know that if you had asked Leonard Bernstein if there was one central theme to his body of works it was the search for a 20th-century solution to the crisis of faith. I knew he had a strong Jewish identity, but I didn't have a sense of how much faith fit into how he thought about the world, how he composed, and how he conducted himself. [It had a] spiritual-religious component — his and human beings' relationship to God.

He also thought about the faith we have in each other and the faith we have in our nation's leaders and in our government.... He lived through World War II and the Holocaust, the civil rights movement, and the Vietnam era, a lot of weighty historic moments that would challenge his and a generation's faith.



Leonard Bernstein with his parents, Jennie and Samuel Bernstein, circa 1921. Courtesy Leonard Bernstein Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress

NJJN: What was the nature of Bernstein's Jewish practice?

Weingram: He was someone who was always asking questions of himself and of the world; he really believed that was the essence of Judaism — asking questions, debating, searching for answers.... As an adult, he went to synagogue on Yom Kippur. His son, Alex, talks about shul hopping with his father on Yom Kippur; he liked to go to different synagogues to hear different cantors in different parts of the city on different parts of the day. Perhaps

the greatest expression of Jewish ritual in the family was their Passover seders.... There was a lot of singing, and a lot of asking questions and storytelling, which are intrinsic to the Passover holiday and to Leonard Bernstein's character.

I think visitors will be surprised and delighted to see the Jewish stories that are woven throughout the exhibit — his longtime connection to his childhood synagogue [Congregation Mishkan Tefila in Boston], which reappears throughout the exhibit. He married his wife there,

his son was bar mitzvahed there. He tended to always look back on the synagogue as that which moved him most deeply.

NJJN: What was the evolution of “West Side Story”?

Weingram: Leonard Bernstein and Jerome Robbins began in the early '50s to conceive of a retelling of “Romeo and Juliet.” At first they imagined this retelling as the story of Jewish-Catholic teen gang rivalry on New York’s Lower East Side. Ultimately, they felt like that story was out of date and had already been told. [By focusing on Puerto Rican gang violence in New York, they found] a new way to make this classic story relevant.

NJJN: Bernstein’s contributions to music are obvious, but can you talk about his commitment to social activism?

Weingram: Leonard Bernstein advocated for increased opportunities for African Americans in classical music, in opera, and on Broadway.... The team behind [Bernstein’s Broadway debut] “On the Town” — Leonard Bernstein, Jerome Robbins, Adolph Green, and Betty Comden — cast African-American dancers and actors alongside white dancers and actors in very similar roles.



Bernstein composing in 1955. Photo by Al Ravenna, Courtesy Library of Congress

They were casting African Americans as sailors on Broadway at a time when the American military remained segregated. Bernstein worked with African-American singers and musicians pre-1947, before baseball was integrated, before the civil rights movement. On the whole, Leonard Bernstein advocated for the rights of minorities and anyone who really felt like an outsider.

NJJN: How did the Holocaust affect him?

Weingram: He had distant cousins who perished in the Holocaust, [but] when he traveled to Europe in 1948 on a conducting tour, that was his first in-person encounter with the tragedies of the Holocaust. [Playing with 17 survivors in the Ex-Concentration Camp Orchestra, comprised

of survivors from two displaced-persons camps outside of Munich] was a profoundly moving experience for him. He was 29 years old. That experience of sharing stories and music with survivors made a lasting impression on him; he continued to work on music and on themes related to the Holocaust until the end of his life.

NJJN: What were Bernstein's feelings about Israel?

Weingram: He was a Zionist. He really saw his role as a cultural connector and ambassador; he believed in the power of music in shaping Israeli culture, from the mid-1940s in pre-state Palestine to the end of his life. He felt a deep connection to the State of Israel [and conducted there during 25 different seasons]. He loved Israeli culture, he loved the people, he loved the experience of being in Israel. He always felt at home the moment the plane landed.