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## A cultural classic

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A documentary film about the song 'Hava Nagila.'

Roberta Grossman's documentary feature film *Blessed Is the Match: The Life and Death of Hannah Senesh* has won a slew of national and international awards. So it comes as no surprise that the filmmaker, who admits to being "obsessed with the Holocaust," plans to make a documentary about Janusz Korczak, the man who chose to stay with Warsaw Ghetto orphans he cared for and accompanied them to their death (and his own) at Treblinka. What is surprising, though, is the documentary she's currently working on, *Hava Nagila: What Is It?*

Over the past two years, the Los Angeles filmmaker has been working on a documentary that she admits she wasn't sure there'd be much interest in. It was only when she began digging into the origins of the song and the phenomenon it has become that she realized she might have tapped into something unique.

"I think the idea must have come from somewhere in the deep recesses of my brain," she says. "I think I was at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles and researching something for Hannah Senesh and somehow I started thinking about this 'Hava Nagila' thing. I wondered where it came from and I realized I didn't really know, and I didn't even know what the words meant, but I had these profound memories as a kid growing up here in Los Angeles in a very Reform Jewish family."

Grossman says she had a very strong sense of Jewish identity but no religious or Jewish affiliation per se. "But if you went to a Jewish bar mitzva or wedding and 'Hava Nagila' started, everybody got up. And I have such joyful memories dancing to that song with my mom, and I just realized there was something very profound and powerful about it." Grossman notes that even among the most assimilated Jewish people, there's something tribal that makes them get up and join in the circle when that song is played at a celebration. "It feels like a time traveler's link to shtetl's past," she says.

Even though Grossman has begun work on the film, she's still seeking funding to the tune of \$450,000 to complete production. To that end, she recently launched a fundraising effort online designed to raise \$3,000 so that she could interview Edward Seroussi, the deputy director of the Jewish Music Research Center at the Hebrew University, as part of the film. Seroussi made a trip to Los Angeles in May, and Grossman quickly raised the funds by posting a small blurb and a clip about the film.

And that's when her project suddenly went viral, with more than 123,000 people seeing the short clip that is, at turns, enlightening and humorous.

"It's fantastic that we've raised the money," she enthuses. "123,000 people viewed the clip, and if only half of

those people donate \$18, our film will be totally funded and I can complete it within a year and a half.” As to the huge success of the clip, Grossman says it has an enormous amount to do with the subject matter.

“This is a special project, and people are forwarding [the clip] to their friends and families because it’s fun and joyful and something they want to share. I don’t think that anyone would say about my next film, ‘Oh, you’ve got to see this clip on Korczak.’” Grossman says it’s difficult to pinpoint what has made the song simultaneously timeless, kitschy, controversial and revered. “There’s just so many branches to this story,” she says, noting that as she delved deeper into the history of the song, she discovered more and more layers. “‘Hava Nagila’ began as a Hassidic *nigun* [melody] in a tiny Ukrainian village. It’s a folk song in America, but it’s also the stories about the Yishuv and the conscious creation of a Hebrew culture in Palestine. It’s also about the marrying of the song with dance, and dance is such an important element in the creation of folk culture in Palestine and later in Israel. That’s a fascinating story in itself,” she says

Grossman was also delighted to discover – thanks to the people who emailed her after seeing the Internet clip – that there’s actually a “Hava Nagila” controversy. While Grossman cites in her film that the lyrics are attributed to Latvian-born Abraham Zevi Idelsohn, who moved to Palestine from South Africa in 1905, “I suddenly had several people e-mailing me and telling me that a man named Moshe Nathanson [a cantor in New York who passed away in 1981] claimed to have written the lyrics to the song, and they were outraged that I hadn’t included that in my clip.”

Beyond the controversy, there’s also the simple story of how the song has traveled all over the world. “It was a pop hit in England a couple of years ago,” says Grossman. “There are Thai drag queens and Bollywood numbers set to this song. The song itself is a crossover hit, and maybe the film will be, too.” To date, Grossman has managed to interview several musicians who have helped “Hava Nagila” stake its claim on the musical map. Among them is Harry Belafonte, who Grossman says was “critical” to the song’s influence. “He performed it in 1959 at Carnegie Hall and later recorded it. That’s how it made its crossover from a Jewish song into an American pop song and then into a worldwide song,” she notes

“I really want to interview people who performed the song,” says Grossman

“Those who have a relationship to it, who have it as part of their repertoire and as part of their life.” Currently on her wish list of potential interviewees are Bruce Springsteen, Glen Campbell and Neil Diamond

Grossman says she also hopes to film part of the documentary in Israel. “I need to go to the Hebrew University and check the archives there. And I’d love to film a folk dance festival, as well do man-on-the-street interviews and visit a kibbutz and capture some of that romantic Halutznik past.” Grossman says she hopes that when the film is complete, audiences will have a fascinating look into 100 years of Jewish history, “conveyed in a very entertaining way, and a moving exploration of Jewish identity and continuity

I think people will walk away feeling proud.” She also says that the film will show the power of music to transcend cultures and divides. “From this one little Ukrainian village; this one Hassidic chord that reaches out to an entire world is a fascinating journey.”

*You can view the clip at [www.indiegogo.com/Hava-Nagilah- What-Is-It](http://www.indiegogo.com/Hava-Nagilah-What-Is-It)*

