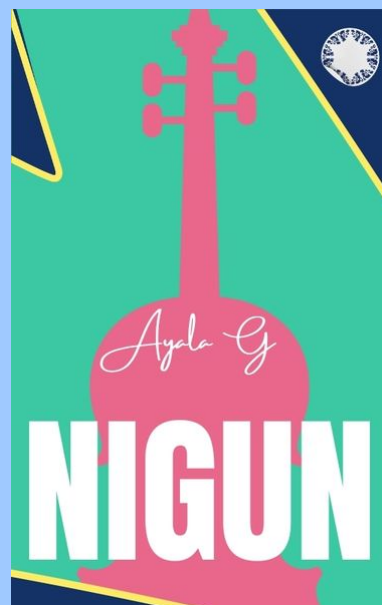




Nigun



Name: **Ayala G**

Country of residence: **United Kingdom**

Judaism runs through my veins, and Music keeps my heart beating. Now I've found my path, it feels inevitable. I'm excited to see what Jewish communities I will help build through music, wherever this journey takes me.



Great question... Am I supposed to be able to answer that? My family history and name seem the obvious place to start.

Mostly Ashkenazi, but also a bit Sephardi, a bit Mizrahi, and even a bit Bukhari.

Ayala (אילא) means “doe, a deer, a female deer”... if you didn’t sing that, *how*??? My mom suggested Ayala, and my dad liked it because of the open sound of the three As, like sunlight... or “a drop of golden sun” (sorry, I couldn’t resist). He discovered much later a quote from the Torah, when Jacob blesses his sons:

“Naphtali is a doe set free that bears beautiful fawns.”

“רַפָּשׁ־יִרְמָא וְנַפְתָּלִי הָעֵלֶשׁ הַלֵּיאָלָה לְתַפְנִי”

(Genesis 49:21)

As it happens, one of my dad’s Hebrew names is Naphtali.

My two last names, Gottlieb Alter (no hyphen!), are an admin nightmare. One or the other is almost always forgotten. But they are both a core part of me, I am not one without the other.

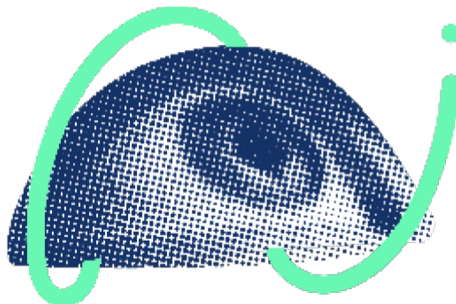
The Gottlieb side of my family is both large, sprawling really, and characterised by my Saba. His cheeky humour and immeasurable love for us all glued our close family, our smaller unit of Gottliebs, together.

Alter isn’t just my relationship with my dad, but also the history of a family decimated by the Holocaust. According to my grandfather, we are descended from the founder of the Gerer dynasty. However, all records were lost in the war (according to the Polish authorities). As the only survivor of his family, when applying for a Nansen passport, my grandfather changed his civic name from Avraham to Adam.

A bit of background is all well and good, but it doesn’t really answer the question. Who am I?

Music and Judaism, for me, have always been intertwined. I began harmonising as a survival mechanism. Sitting in shul and wanting to join in when the key was too low for little me, I did my best to match the melody up a third. Now harmony comes to me as naturally as breathing.

Perhaps, by the end of my story, you’ll see how this feels like the closest I can get to a true answer.



It often feels like no part of my identity is straightforward. Every aspect comes with a 'but.'

Am I British? Yes, **BUT** my mom and uncle are my only older family members who were born in the UK, and I grew up in a Jewish bubble. Culture clashes with my properly British peers became very obvious at university, reinforcing how un-British I actually am.

I grew up in London **BUT** spent 3 of my formative years in the States. I learned to speak there, so when I'm speaking to someone with an American accent, I can go very SoCal without realising it.

I also have a German passport thanks to my dad **BUT** he was born stateless in Berlin to parents who were also stateless, thanks to the Polish authorities' inability (or perhaps unwillingness) to locate any relevant documentation after WWII. They met at a Chanukah party in Berlin in 1946 on the great Jewish trek of survivors from East to West. My dad eventually obtained German citizenship **BUT** left for the UK in his early twenties. Naturally, his relationship with Germany is complicated.

I may have spent most of 2024 working full-time as Cantor for the Great Synagogue of Stockholm, **BUT** I'm not ordained. When I started my job, the only training I had was 14 months of fortnightly zoom lessons.

I'm a cellist. I started learning at the age of 5 and now I'm even paid to play occasionally **BUT** I haven't studied intensely at conservatoire level.

I'm a singer, and I can't remember a time in my life before I started singing, **BUT** I hadn't had a single lesson until I went to university, and I didn't begin developing any technique until I was 23.

I'm a cantorial student **BUT** I'm not yet learning through a formal cantorial programme.

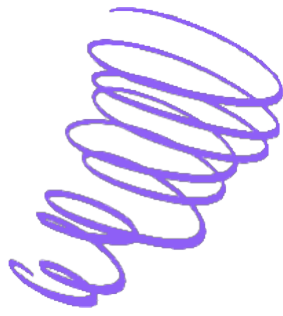
What does that all mean?

In the first instance, unsurprisingly, imposter syndrome!

If 'but' becomes 'and,' then every layer is just a part of what makes me, rather than a contradiction.

For much of my life, these layers have felt like **polyphony** - each facet standing out and not quite blending, creating something that can be a touch overwhelming to listen to, my attention pulled in too many directions.

Lately, the parts of my identity have begun to come together like **homophony** - a solid harmonic grounding. The melody is sometimes passed between parts, but each one enhances the others, even when one takes a backseat for a while.



I was part of the very first cohort of the first pluralist Jewish secondary school in Europe, JCoSS. My year group shaped the school in a way that no other year groups did. I felt seen and valued as an individual.

Music was a huge part of my time there. From JGLoSS (Glee club - all the rage in 2010), to Chamber Choir which got me thinking about Jewish Choral Music (we didn't sing anything that mentioned Jesus - I didn't realise how weird that was until I joined the Bristol University Singers), to Co-Music Directing the first musical at JCoSS, an entirely student-led production of *Les Misérables*.

For over a decade, I attended Noam summer camp every year bar one, first as a chanichah, then madrichah, then educator. I saw my Noam friends at weekly leadership training, and Israel tour remained the best three weeks of my life for quite a few years. My most vivid memory from it was sitting on the wall of a balcony in Jerusalem, playing guitar and singing while my entire tour dozed off in a pile around me. The joy and connection of Kabbalat Shabbat and Havdalah on Noam camp remain some of my fondest memories, and the Youth Services at New North London Synagogue (NNLS), recently revived by current Noamnicks, are my favourite services to attend.

I was introduced to the world of *Chazzanut* by Chazzan Jeremy Burko around the time of my Bat Mitzvah, which was the first in my synagogue's brand-new building, and the first in the vibrant egalitarian minyan that I'd attended with my mom for six years prior. I consider myself incredibly lucky to have grown up at NNLS, and through Noam, where seeing women on the Bimah was the norm, and participation was actively encouraged.

At Haderech (the pre- and post-B'nei mitzvah programme at my synagogue), I discovered how much I enjoyed teaching before I'd even turned 13, and those skills I honed as a mentor and madrichah have served me well with my 50+ leyning (Torah reading) students to date.

At 16, I was asked to join Minim Singers, the UK's Jewish mixed chamber choir. Started by a group of Oxbridge choral scholar graduates, they were striving to revive and reimagine traditional Jewish choral music. We recorded an album, *Roots* ([listen on SoundCloud](#)), while I was studying for my A-levels, and a couple of beautiful arrangements written by the music directors made their way into the Great Synagogue of Stockholm's Musical Kabbalat Shabbat while I was serving as Cantor in 2024.

I grew up at Limmud UK, going with my mom every year from the age of 8 until my last year of school. The shenanigans my friends and I got up to still make me giggle, and I'm so grateful for the way we could grow up together, in this amazing bubble that celebrates Anglo-Jewry in all its forms and connects Jews from all over the world. It was a joy to return in 2024, to reconnect with people I hadn't see in 7 years, experience Festival as an adult for the first time, and I had a fantastic time playing cello and singing with the Limmud House Band. As part of the Limmud Young Leadership Programme, I found like-minded young adults who are just as passionate about creating inclusive Jewish musical spaces as I am.

While studying Music at the University of Bristol (and of course joining nearly every possible music society and way too many ensembles), I was largely disconnected from Jewish life until I started teaching a conversion student who lived locally. My first experience teaching someone from scratch opened my eyes to both the holes in my knowledge and to how much I had taken growing up with Jewishly engaged parents for granted.

In 2019, I attended Brandeis Camp Institute (BCI) in California, another turning point in my journey, where improv sessions helped me grow in confidence as a cellist, and dance and music were instrumental in connecting 52 diverse strangers from around the world. BCI not only empowered me as artist and broadened my perception of Jewishness, I also met my soul sisters there. With me in London, one in New York, and the other in Tel Aviv, we've stayed trans-continentially connected and supported each other through tough times with regular video chats, and the occasional trip!

Unsurprisingly, I chose to do my final year dissertation on a Jewish topic: the music of L'cha Dodi. When narrowing down which melodies to focus on, there was one that I just couldn't shake. In my research, I discovered its connection to the Happy Minyan in Los Angeles, which I had attended from the ages of 2 to 4 with my mom. It must have wormed its way into my consciousness as a child and never left.

My way into Judaism is, and always has been, through music. This was never clearer to me than during the pandemic, seeing the ways in which music brought people together at a time of isolation.

Zoom services became a lifeline when I was stuck in Bristol on my own after losing my Saba to Covid. Given how much of a morning person I am not, it is no surprise that I had never made it in time for P'sukei d'Zimra, that is until Zoom Shabbat gave me the opportunity to learn and lead it. My mom and I also led Kabbalat Shabbat on the NNLS Pre-Shabbat Zooms (with various combinations of 2 voices, guitar, harp, and occasionally cello); people still come up to me to say how much they miss hearing us lead on Zoom. It is easy to forget the importance of providing spaces, both online and in person, for those members who can't join, or rejoin, regular Shabbat services.

Funerals, sitting Shiva, mourning, grief.

As Jews, we're not supposed to experience any of it alone. But the pandemic changed everything, and the reality became a feeling of unreality. No goodbyes, no hugs, no endless stream of friends bringing you so much food the fridge won't close. Just eight people, four households socially distanced, standing on the lawn outside the cemetery, no one allowed to accompany the coffin to the gravesite. Two Shivas over Zoom, sitting on the sofa watching Coco (and regretting it because, really, we'd done enough crying for a lifetime, thank you very much), and traumatic grief that still catches me off-guard almost five years later.

Losing my Saba was the worst thing that ever happened to me.

Every time I pick up my cello or open my mouth to sing, it's for him. He's sitting on the sofa sneakily recording me while I practise, he's beaming with pride in the front row of every service I lead, he's on the other end of the phone wishing me luck, he's commenting on every Facebook post, sending me links to interesting articles and YouTube videos, driving his grandkids around and giving us the best hugs in the world. He should be here, seeing us grow up and making us laugh, but he is with me, every moment of every day.

The year that followed my degree (or, as I like to call it, *The Year in my Bedroom*TM), I delved into the world of sound engineering and music production in the hope that I could help people connect through music at a time when singing in a group was unthinkable. As nice as it was to be able to help my university friends by mixing A Cappella lockdown videos, it was co-music directing New North London Synagogue's Virtual Cabaret where I truly felt I was doing something worthwhile. The cross-generational Spring-themed Cabaret was a labour of love from all participants and, for me, it was the best part of that difficult first year as we slowly emerged from lockdown.

The Niggun chavurah, which also started on Zoom, was a calm oasis in the busy week that has now developed into monthly Neshama services at NNLS.

Freelance projects and teaching from my bedroom were rewarding for a while, but it got to a point where I needed more structure, so I became a Trustee of my synagogue and three months later joined their professional team as Education Administrator.

Things developed rapidly from there; my first Jewish wedding as a singer, attending the European Academy for Jewish Liturgy (EAJL)'s T'filla leaders' retreat, joining their Baal T'filla programme and being connected with my fantastic teacher Chazzan Matt Austerklein. I co-led Masorti UK's Selichot service at New London Synagogue, which led me to my wonderful vocal teacher, Israeli soprano Chen Reiss who completely transformed my (then non-existent) technique and introduced me to some wonderful Israeli classical repertoire.

2023 saw the early stages of an amazing project: Masorti Judaism's [Shema Koleinu Tefillah \(Prayer\) Skills resource](#), which I've been delighted to lend my voice to, as well as my audio editing skills.

In January 2024, I set off to Sweden for what was supposed to be 6 months covering the role of Cantor for the Great Synagogue of Stockholm while theirs was on paternity leave. It was an incredible opportunity that ended up lasting almost a year! When I started my role, I had just finished learning how to lead all the Shabbat and weekday services and had yet to put some of it into practise. 10 months later I had: completed nearly a full year cycle leading services (with the exception of Ma'ariv and Mussaf for Yamim Nora'im – my task for 2025), taught 20+ B'nei Mitzvah students in Torah and Haftarah tropes that I didn't grow up with, stressed a lot about leyning every week, performed in front of the Swedish Prime Minister more than a handful of times (who knew he liked Gloria Gaynor?), and taught 2 adult learning courses for a semester at Paideia Folkhögskola. And on the 23rd of January 2025, precisely a year since I landed in Stockholm for the adventure of a lifetime, I'll be singing in Hebrew, English, Ladino, and Yiddish at the Riksdag (Swedish Parliament).

[Hebrew & English - Eli Eli](#)

[Ladino - Arvoles Yoran Por Luvias](#)

Yiddish - [Unter Dayne Vayse Shtern](#)

I know there are many challenges ahead of me, but, after nearly a year living alone in a foreign country and inadvertently creating a community of young adults who regularly invite each other for Shabbat meals and sit together in services, I finally believe what my parents have always told me, that I have a lot to give just by being myself.

My mom says she knew a long time ago that I'd end up pursuing Chazanut, and, at first, I was surprised. Now I've found my path, it feels inevitable. Judaism runs through my veins, and Music keeps my heart beating. I'm excited to see what Jewish communities I will help build through music, wherever this journey takes me.

I created a Nigun on 6th October 2024 and, after sending it to my dad who was putting the video together, I listened back to it and finally allowed myself to cry. There we were, a whole year later, and things seemed so much worse. The next evening, while leading Hatikvah for nearly a thousand Swedish Jews, I allowed myself to feel hopeful about the future of Jews in Europe. There we were, a whole year later, singing together.

You can watch the video here: [War Cries](#), a collaboration with acclaimed poet Jane Liddell-King, with art by Hedda Agnes.

