Discussion Questions

1. What does the legacy of Tannhäuser in Jewish culture tell us about the relationship between Jewish and German life during the modern era?

2. What was plot of the original folktale Tannhäuser?

3. What are three reasons why the story of Tannhäuser appealed to Heine, Herzl, and Peretz?

4. Why was the Tannhäuser motif so popular with German nationalists?

5. How did Heinrich Heine adopt and adapt the Tannhäuser folktale?

6. What were three of Heine’s intentions for making such a subversive version of the folktale?

7. Where did Richard Wagner claim that he got his inspiration for his opera Tannhäuser? What was the true story?

8. When viewing and appreciating a piece of art, should it be considered independently from the artist, even when he or she is a prominent anti-Semite, as is the case with Richard Wagner?

9. How and why did Theodor Herzl find Wagner’s opera to be so inspiring?

10. How did Peretz adapt the story of Tannhäuser so that it became Judaized? What were three reasons why he made such major changes to the story?

11. How did Heine, Wagner, and Peretz deal with the motif of “fall and redemption” in the Tannhäuser story? How was Peretz’s version more infused with Judaic notions?
12. Why are folktales a good tool for looking at the manner in which a culture views itself and others?

13. What was Venus like in the Tannhäuser versions of Heine, Wagner, and Peretz? What did she symbolize in each of these works?

14. Are there ways that Heine and Herzl, as German Jews, responded differently to adapting Tannhäuser than did Peretz, a Polish Jew?

15. Discuss whether you believe it is appropriate for Wagner’s operas to be played in Israel. Give three reasons for and three reasons against performing his work there.
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