

Echoes of Aleppo

Syrian Jewish Music in New York

A Synthesis of Religion and Culture



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May 12, 2008

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The Syrian Jewish Community of Brooklyn, New York has been labeled “Aleppo in Flatbush” (Sutton, Aleppo), a name which not only reflects the cherished Syrian city of Aleppo from which these Jews came, but also the extent to which Aleppo remains with them in America. In the old country, Syrian Jews carried an illustrious reputation for their Judeo-Arabic musical tradition, which they continue to emphasize despite their Western surroundings. For Jews, musical involvement is more than a recreational pastime. Prayers, holidays, life-cycle events, festive meals, and day-to-day life are influenced by music. Although many Jewish communities have lost much of their pre-migratory musical traditions, Brooklyn’s Syrian community has preserved its musical heritage, which in turn preserves the community. The central role of music in Judaism has inspired a rich tradition of Syrian Jewish music that continues to facilitate the preservation of the community’s Oriental culture in Brooklyn, New York. The Arabic atmosphere evoked by Syrian Jewish melodies encapsulates and maintains the community’s Judeo-Arabic mores on a perpetual basis of performance, and is illustrated by the fact that the music was fully compiled after its practitioners settled in America.

The vital role of music in Judaism can be traced back to the Bible itself. In Genesis (4:20-22), the Bible records that musical instrumentation was one of the first achievements of mankind. It is clear that the Bible views music as a core human innovation. When the Jewish people fled from Egypt and God split the Reed Sea they expressed their deep recognition of God’s harmonious providence through music. As the

verse states, “Then, Moses and the sons of Israel sang the following song: ‘I will sing to G-d because He is exalted...’” (Ex. 15:1). The Jewish women sang as well, with the accompaniment of instruments (Ex. 15:20). Additionally, during their travels in the desert the Jews celebrated the miraculous well of water that G-d provided them through song. The Bible unambiguously values music as a means for spontaneous self-expression.

In the ninth century B.C.E., the Jews built their first Temple where music served as a means of glorification and elevation. During this period, King David wrote the book of Psalms, a compilation of poems that reflects on David’s relationship with God and conveys his wide array of emotions. A group of twelve singers and an intricate musical orchestra were appointed from the tribe of Levi to provide musical accompaniment during the daily service (Jachter), which often chanted the Psalms. The continual music in the Temple served a dual purpose: of praising God in a most dignified manner and raising the spirits of those bringing offerings (Kassin 28-29).

Music’s capacity to elate the heart and soul of man is further exemplified by the fact that prophecy was achieved through instrumental accompaniment. The book of Prophets records incidents of prophecy in which prophets summon musicians to inspire their attention towards the Divine (I Sam 10:5-7; II Kings 3:11-16). The potency of song is unmistakably illustrated in the story of King Saul’s depression. In order to uplift Saul after God removed the Divine spirit from upon him, the expert musician, David was brought in to effectively release him from his deprived state (I Sam 16:23).

Philosophically, Judaism views music as a means for deep personal expression and a tool to uplift the spirits of others, enhancing their closeness to G-d.

Based on this conceptual understanding of music as a means of expression and elevation, we can understand the role of music in Jewish law, or *halakha*. Although the Temple has been destroyed for over two thousand years, the Rabbis created a system of prayer that parallels the Temple service. A Jew is required to pray three times a day, in place of the three daily sacrifices brought in the Temple (Babli, Berakhot 26b). Just as music was used in the Temple to elevate the worshippers, it is similarly employed to assist focus in prayer. A representative from the congregation is appointed to lead the prayers, out loud in a pleasant melody. On the Sabbath and festivals the congregation is urged to appoint a cantor with a nice voice that is well versed in Jewish music (Maharil qtd. in Karo 560:3) to assist the congregation in directing their hearts heavenward. The Talmud records an incident of a great Rabbi that lost his faith because “Greek music never ceased to emerge from his mouth” (Babli, Hagiga 15b). Because the *halakha* recognizes the potency of music, it prohibits singing, playing, or listening to songs unless they are spiritually directed (Karo 560:3). Jewish law reflects this notion that music has a profound effect on the individual and the community, with the potential to draw man closer to G-d or astray (Jachter).

Judaism’s philosophy of music, as especially emphasized by Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism), served as a springboard for the first musical genre of Syrian music. Shortly after the Spanish Inquisition of 1492, Rabbi Yisrael Najara of Damascus originated the custom of singing “*baqashot*” (Mosseri)¹. *Baqashot* literally means “requests,” titled as such because they are an order of poems set to melodies, praising God and beseeching His mercy and redemption. Furthermore, due to the influence of Kabbalah in the Levant

¹ The origin of the *baqashot* seems to be a matter of dispute; notwithstanding Mosseri’s supported claim that the custom began in Damascus, Shelemay records that the custom began in Safed while Betesh writes that it began in Spain.

during this period, the mystical notion that the early morning is an auspicious time for Divine compassion encouraged a tradition of saying petitionary prayers before dawn. It seems that these early morning “requests” evolved into the *baqashot* tradition of arising early on Sabbath mornings to sing (Sephardic). Expelled from Spain where Arabic and Jewish poetry flourished, Jews took this tradition with them to countries around the Mediterranean, originating almost all the melodies to the *baqashot* over the ages (Kligman, Modes 26) into a compilation of 66 songs. The singing of *baqashot* was most prevalent and advanced in Aleppo (Arking) and it “continues till this very day in Syrian Synagogues world over. The participants reach a sublime feeling of fervor and ecstasy” (*Shir ushevaha* 3).

Jewish law’s prohibition of singing secular songs prompted another genre of paraliturgical Syrian music called “*pizmonim*,” which are traditional Jewish songs comprised of praise to God and religious teachings (Sephardic). The city of Aleppo has been the home for Jews since at least the fifth century, as proven by the discovery of a synagogue in the region dating back to that time (Baron 104). Culturally, Jews were very similar to Moslems and Christians in that “Arabic culture was shared by all and adaptations were made to meet the needs of what was religiously acceptable” (Kligman Modes 55). With the rising popularity of coffee houses in sixteenth century Aleppo (Marcus 227), Jewish men heard the latest Arabic love songs and began to sing and perform them (Kligman, Modes 43). Aleppo’s Jewish leaders recognized the danger of lustful music turning Jews away from God. In order to channel the songs positively, the Rabbi’s encouraged that Jews take the Arabic melodies and write religious poems to them. As Rabbi Jacob Kassin writes,

"[Borrowing melodies and providing them with new, sacred Hebrew texts] is done ...because the melody is a holy spark. For when one plays sensual love songs, the spark is submerged in profane coverings. It is for this reason that it is necessary to establish a foundation of holy words...in order to lead the spark from the realm of the profane to the realm of holiness. This is an obligation in the same way that it is an obligation to draw sinners to good, to turn away from iniquity, and to bring out the precious from the mundane...." (Kassin 32).

In ethno-musicological literature, the substitution of a text to a preexistent melody is called "contrafactum" (Shelemay 28), and in Syrian Jewish circles these songs are labeled "*pizmonim*."

The major proponent of *pizmon* (s.) composition was Rabbi Refael Tabboush (ci.1817 – 1919, a great-great uncle to this author). As a Rabbi he was well versed in Biblical, Talmudic, and Kabbalistic literature, all of which appear in his songs. He frequented coffee houses and was even recognized by the Moslems and Christians as a musical virtuoso despite his blindness. He would remember the tunes and create sacred songs out of them for the Sabbath, holidays, momentous occasions, and in praise of God (Shelemay 32-33). He passed the tradition on to his students Moses Ashear, Eliyahu Menaged, and Hayyim Tawil who would carry it with them to America (Shelemay 34). Moses Ashear's son, Albert reminisces about his father saying,

Somebody came in one day and he [Ashear] is listening to Arabic music. That needs an explanation. He told them: "it's the same like somebody wants to build, he builds and he puts wood, and he pours the pavement...So the pavement will be hard and then he throws away the wood he's building, see? I, too, learned the Arabic. Once I put in the Hebrew music phonetically and everything, then I throw away the Arabic. It doesn't mean anything to me anymore. That's why I'm learning this first" (qtd. in Shelemay 226).

Thus an understanding of the composition process reveals the symbiotic association between tune and text in the *pizmonim*.

Judaism's emphasis of melody in prayer similarly stems from the Jewish conception of music. As mentioned above, the Levites in the Temple sung the Psalms of David during Temple worship. It is likely that this practice was adapted when the Psalms and prayers came to be recited in synagogues, during and after the destruction of the Temple (Hammer). Moreover, the Talmud says that "one who reads Scripture without chant, or studies Torah without melody, of him it is written 'I gave them laws that were not good'" (Babli, Megillah 32a). Melody clearly adds beauty and meaning to the words. As such, the medieval Masorites created a notation system for chanting the Biblical texts that is followed by all Jews to this day. A further reason for pairing ritual with music is because the performance of any formalized liturgy presents the danger that individuals will be unable to express their inner feelings and freshly perceive meaning in the words (Hammer). Community leader, Sam Catton illustrates the importance of liturgical music saying, "The way a person feels is important...Music is good to uplift the soul" (qtd. in Shelemay 171).

The Syrian Jewish liturgical rite is singled out for its distinct and complex musical system that emanates from the Arabic "*maqam*." *Maqam* (pl. *maqamat*) translated literally is "place/location" because it is the system of modes that serves as a basis for melodies, comparable to the Western major and minor scales. Moe Tawil, a prominent cantor in the Syrian community refers to the *maqam* as "the science behind Arabic music" (qtd. in Shelemay 118). These modes can be thought of as the structure from which song and improvisation emanate, both vocally and instrumentally. There are eight basic *maqamat*: *Rast*, *'Ajam*, *Bayat*, *Kurd*, *Hijaz*, *Nawa*, *Nahwand*, *Siga*, and *Saba*. Each

of these is called a *fassilla*, or family, because they give rise to numerous variations. Every *maqam* has its own character, which conveys a particular mood.

The concept of *maqam* governs the *baqashot*, *pizmonim*, and the prayers. The melodies of the *baqashot* and *pizmonim* are organized by *maqam*. Most significantly, however, is the role of the *maqam* in the liturgy. *Maqam Siga* is always used for the chanting of the Torah in the synagogue. The Friday night Sabbath service is traditionally in *maqam Nawa* and sometimes *Nahwand*. Each Sabbath morning, has its own *maqam* that usually reflects the mood of that week's assigned reading of the Torah. For example, when the portion of Sarah the matriarch's death is read, *hijaz* is used because it suggests a somber mood. This is in contrast to the Sabbath of the splitting of the Reed Sea which is read in the jovial *maqam 'Ajam*. A Syrian cantor must be an expert in the *maqamat* and accurately apply them to the prayers. A congregant "should be able to sense the meaning of the words and feel it" (D. Tawil qtd. in Kligman, Modes 378). Additionally, the entire congregation sings portions of the prayers using melodies from the *baqashot* and *pizmonim*. In order to lead the congregation, the cantor must prepare a repertoire of seven songs in the same *maqam* to apply to the prayers. In sum, the intense emphasis of the Arabic *maqam* in Jewish observance demonstrates that "Syrian liturgy is not the result of music culture contact; rather it is music that is the result of cultures [Jewish and Arab] in contact" (Kligman, Modes 419).

In order to understand how music preserves Syrian-Jewish culture in America, a brief historical background is necessary. Jews left Syria in the early twentieth century for a number of reasons. First, "the great caravans to the East," which had once been a major vehicle of commerce could not compete with the Suez Canal (Zenner 156). Furthermore,

anti-Semitism and Muslim nationalism became real threats, partially due to the spread of Zionism. Mandatory military service after the Young Turk revolt in 1909 became another reason to leave the country (Kligman, Prayers 180). By 1902 Jews began to emigrate from Aleppo to New York, igniting a trend that continued throughout the 20th century.

After a number of relocations, the Syrian Jewish community established itself in Brooklyn, New York. In pursuit of financial success, Syrians knew that they had to adapt to American culture externally. Internally, however, they retained their tight-knit community life and Arabic culture. In Syria, religious communities that paid their dues to the Ottoman government lived autonomous lives, and the Syrian Jews in America intended to do the same (Kligman, Prayers 182). In the words of a community maxim, the goal was to raise children to be “100 percent American in Manhattan (the workplace) and 100 percent Syrian in Brooklyn” (Chafets). This self-perception and the desire to be viewed by others as more Arab than American became a daunting yet successful task for the Syrian community.

Music, as embodied in the *baqashot*, *pizmonim* and prayer service, continues to preserve the Syrian community’s pre-migratory culture. The Syrians’ understanding and application of the *maqam* in Brooklyn crystallizes their continued preference for an aesthetically Oriental atmosphere. Historically,

Aleppo’s people are known to have very developed taste in music... Muslims, Jews, and Christians. Especially in music, they are world-known. It is said that every Arabic musician, if he has won the approval of the people of Aleppo, he has *carte blanche* to audiences everywhere (M. Antebi, qtd. in Sutton, Aleppo 228).

The Syrian Jewish community of Brooklyn confirms this reputation. The community’s estimated 75,000 people (Chafets) and over sixty synagogues perpetuate their Arabic *maqam* system and songs (Harari).

The frequent use of authentically Arabic music within Syrian Jewish life molds the community into an aesthetically Middle-Eastern society on a regular basis. Jewish law obligates men to pray three times a day. Each of these weekday prayers reinforces *maqam Siga*, and each Sabbath prayer emits aromas of various *maqamat* and employs Arabic melodies for specific parts of the prayers. The role of music in the Syrian community does not end in the prayer service. Informal groups meet to sing *baqashot* at *Bet Torah* synagogue and occasionally at others (Sutton, Aleppo 483). Sabbath meals are not complete without the singing of *pizmonim*. Each holiday of the year demands particular *pizmonim* that refer to unique holiday themes. Happy occasions like the birth of a child, engagements, weddings, and bar-mitzvas are celebrated with a Sabbath luncheon called a *Sebet*. After partaking of the elaborate spread of Syrian food, the men gather around a table to sing festive *pizmonim* in honor of the host family's occasion. Weekday engagement parties and weddings are likely to host either a D.J. or band headed by a professional Arabic singer or Syrian cantor. In the earlier days of the community, parties would feature full bands of the traditional Arabic instruments: the *'oud* (Arabic lute), *'anun* (Zither), violin, and *darbekka* (lap drum). Thus it is clear that music is a vital part of Syrian Jewish life and continuously bridges the gap between America and Aleppo.

As with any genre of music, melodies create environments of emotion and memory that connect its participants to the past. In this case, the vibes of Oriental music paint pictures in the hearts of Syrian Jews of an idealized past (Shelemay 215). Music is a strong cue for what psychologists call 'flashbulb memories;' a "mental time travel" that allows people to re-experience past events. Although 'flashbulb memories' in psychology generally refer to traumatic experiences, it is clear that music can recall memories of

strong emotional content and reminiscence of a general sort. “Nostalgia,” a form of reminiscence in which individuals feel a “wish to return to an idealized past” (Feder 307), is evoked particularly in *pizmonim*. As contrafacta, these songs always carry “echoes” of the source melodies taken from the Levant.

Not only do the *pizmonim* bridge the gap between Aleppo and Brooklyn with a cultural nostalgia, they also create a literal interaction between Jews and the Arab world. Arabic composers and singers comprise a regular topic among community members, who often keep up with the latest recordings (Shelemay 108). Muhammad Abdel Wahhab is arguably the most popular Arabic composer and Oum Kalthoum is considered the diva of the East. Many Syrian immigrants pride themselves in their original record collections of Sayed Darwish, Zakki Mourad, ‘Abdel Wahab, ‘Oum Kalthoum, Farid El-Atrache, Asmahan, Leyla Mourad, and others. A wave of interest in Arabic music has arisen amongst the new generation who purchase their own collections of cassettes and CD’s. This trend is exemplified in the recently created business of loading Arabic music on community members’ Ipods, arranged by *maqam*.

Not only is Syrian music in America a continuation of a longstanding tradition, a form of mental time travel, and an interaction with the Levant, it is also a means for actualizing the Syrian Jewish self-image. For Syrian Jews, liturgy and song serve as outlets for their self-perception of being Jewish in an Arab style. In the words of Professor Roy Wagner, ritual “completes the world of a culture by allowing man to experience what thought cannot frame” (145). Thus, although Syrian Jews may dress and speak like Americans, they can perform and experience their Judeo-Arabic persona through music (Kligman, Prayers 204).

This notion that the music of the Syrian community plays a large role in conserving their culture is confirmed by history. To the knowledge of modern scholars, the custom of writing Hebrew words to secular songs dates back to the sixteenth century, but as one community leader says, “we don’t know all of them (*pizmonim*). These are old. Hundreds of years old. They are lost...All we know is the ones we know” (M. Kairey, qtd. Shelemay 29). It is not ironic that the most exhaustive preservation of *pizmonim* began after the Jews were outside of the Middle East, far from their interactions with the Arab world. Notwithstanding scattered printings of various *pizmonim* and oral transmissions over the last 150 years, the first thorough compilation of *pizmonim* and the liturgical *maqam* system took place in Brooklyn in 1964. A group headed by cantor Gabriel Shrem compiled all the remembered *baqashot* and *pizmonim* into one book titled, *Shir ush’vaha Hallel veZimra*. This book of over 560 *pizmonim* also delineates the *maqam* associated with each week and holiday and the songs traditionally employed in the prayers. With the development of technology, recordings have become a primary source of conservation. Recently, Gabriel Shrem’s Yeshiva University class cassettes were transposed to CD and distributed as an eleven disk set.

It is easily apparent that the codification of Syrian Jewish music into *Shir ush’vaha Hallel veZimra* is a reflection of the community’s desire to preserve its culture. Shelemay argues further that the ubiquitous presence of Aleppian music in America serves as a substitute for the rapidly declining use of the Arabic language, operating as the primary link to the community’s Middle Eastern past (Shelemay 224). In a recently published article, “The Art of Davening” an Ashkenazic (European) cantor bemoans the disregard for liturgical musical tradition in many American Ashkenazic communities

(Mark). Through the work of 20th century community leaders, the Syrian community can proudly attest that their ornate musical tradition is alive and well.

In conclusion, the Torah, the text of Jewish life, has inspired a tradition of music that Syrian Jews have developed in accordance with their surrounding Arabic culture. *Baqashot*, *Pizmonim*, and liturgical music are reflections of religious commitments and Oriental predilections. In the face of pressures towards Westernization, the Syrian community persists in keeping with its musical heritage. Through music, Syrian Jews in America find a vehicle to connect to their distant homeland and express their Jewish identity that has been tinged by the Levant for centuries. In contrast to other Jewish immigrant communities, Syrian Jews have preserved their elaborate and majestic musical tradition in such a way that past and present are gracefully intertwined.

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Appendix

I. Chronology of the prominent writers of *Baqashot* and *Pizmonim*:

- Najara, Israel, *Zemirot Israel*, Safed, 1587.
- Abadi, Mordechai, *Divre Mordechai*, Aleppo, 1873. (69 pizmonim)
- Abadi, *Sefer Miqra Qodesh*, Livorno, 1883. (Baqashot)
- Antebi Tabbush, Refael Yi.s.haq, *Shirah Hadashah*, Aleppo, 1888.
- Cohen, Refael Hayim ("Parsi"), *Shir Ushbahah*, Jerusalem, 1905 and 1921.
- Ashear, Moshe, *Hallel Vezimrah*, Jerusalem, 1928.
- About, Hayim Shaul, *Sefer Shire Zimrah*, Jerusalem, 1936, 1953.

(Courtesy of Sephardic Pizmonim Project)

2. Discography for attached audio disk:

- 1) *Baqashot*: Opening improvisation *Va'ani Ashir* into *Odeh La'el* (*Maqam Saba*)
- 2) *Baqashot*: *Or 'Elyon* (*Maqam Bayat*)
- 3) *Pizmonim*: Original Arabic instrumental piece by M. Abdel Wahab (*Maqam Nahwand*)
- 4) *Pizmonim*: *Yeromem Suri* – Hebrew version of track 3 (*Maqam Nahwand*)
- 5) *Pizmonim*: Original Arabic piece by Sheikh Sayed Darwish (*Maqam Kurd*)
- 6) *Pizmonim*: *Ana Kavet* – Hebrew version of track 5, sung by Cantor Yehezkel Zion (*Maqam Kurd*)
- 7) Liturgy: Psalm 145 recited by Cantor Gabriel Shrem – from Yeshiva University class recordings (*Maqam Huseini*)
- 8) Liturgy: *Habdala* – Post Sabbath ritual prayer recited by Rabbi Shimon Alouf (*Maqam Rast*)

3. *Maqam* of the week in Hebrew copied from *Shir ush'vaha Hallel vezimra* (next page):

מ ק א ם	פ ר ש ה
ראשט	ראה
שיגא	שומטים
צבא	תצא
ראשט	תבא
נהונד	נצבים
נהונד	וילך
שיגא	נצבים-וילך מחברות נהונד
ביאת	האוינו
	מחייאר (שבת שבת)
	וזאת הברכה עגים (יום שבת תורה)
מ ק א ם	ז מ ן
ראשט	יום א'
שיגא	יום ב'
עגים	שבת חול המועד
ביאת	יום א'
איראק	יום ב'
ראשט	יום ג'
נהונד	יום ד'
חוסינו	הישענא רבא
ענין גמיר	שמיני עצרת
צבא או שיגא	יום שפחת תורה
מ ק א ם	ח נ ו כ ה
ראשט	יום א'
שיגא	יום ב'
עגים	

תוכח
יום ג'
יום ד'
יום ה'
יום ו'
יום ז'
יום ח'
פנדים
יום א'
יום ב'
שבת קודם פורים
פסח
שבת קודם תג פסח רהאוי
יום א'
יום ב'
שבת חול המועד
ביאת
איראק
יום א'
יום ב'
יום ג'
יום ד'
יום שביעי של פסח עגים
יום אחרון של פסח צבא
שבועות
שבת קודם תג שבועות הוי
יום א'
יום ב'
עגים

מ ק א ם	פ ר ש ה	מ ק א ם	פ ר ש ה
חוסינו	שמיני	ראשט	בראשית
צבא או ביאת	תזריע	שיגא	נח
נהונד או שיגא	ספור	צבא	לך לך
סנוברות צבא	תזריע ספור	רהאוי (נאוה)	וירא
הגיאז	אזרי	חגיאז	הוי שרה
צבא	קדושים	מאהיר	תולדות
מהוברות ביאת יחגין	אחרי קדו	עגים	ויצא
שיגא חוסינו	אמור	צבא או שיגא	וישלח
צבא או נאוה	בהר סיני	רהאוי או נהונד	וישב
נהונד	במקומו	שיגא	סקף
מהוברות צבא	בהר בהוקר	ביאת	ויגש
		חגיאז	ויחן
חוסינו או ראשט	במרכה	ראשט או ביאת	שמות
ראשט-צבא	נשא	חוסינו או ראשט	וארא
שיגא	בהעליתך	שיגא	בא
חגיאז	שלח לך	עגים	בסלח
נהונד	קרח	חוסינו	ייהרו
חוסינו	קתה	צבא	משפטים
מאהיר	בלק	חוסינו	הרימה
מהוברות חוסינו	חקת בלק	שיגא	הצוה
צבא	פינחס	הגיאז	כי תשא
נהונד או רהאוי	מטות	חוסינו	ויקהל
צבא	מסעי	רהאוי (נאוה)	סקורי
מהוברות נהונד	מטות ומסעי	מהוברות ביאת	ויקהל-סקו
חגיאז	דברים	ראשט	ויקרא
חוסינו	ואתחנן	רהאוי (נאוה)	צו
שיגא	קקב		