

SEPHARDIC CUSTOMS

Maqam of the Week

Summer 2008

David M. Betesh

As you may recall, IMAGE Magazine has collaborated with the Sephardic Pizmonim Project in providing you the "Maqam of the Week" on its monthly calendar in the back of each issue.

To recap, we have mentioned that the Syrian Sephardic Jewish community has a beautiful tradition of using a different maqam each Shabbat for the prayers in the synagogue. A maqam is a melody type and set of related tunes. The melodies used in a given maqam aim effectively to express the mood of the cantor throughout the prayers. Which maqam will be used is based on either the story/theme of the Parashat Hashavuah or whether there is an upcoming holiday during the next week.

The 10 main maqamot used are: *Rast*, *Mahour*, *Ajam*, *Nahwand*, *Bayat*, *Hoseni*, *Rahawi/Nawa*, *Saba*, *Sigah* and *Hijaz*. Each of these maqamat have different melodies to them and have different reasons as to why they are used. Allow me to briefly explain why and when some of the maqamat will be used throughout this summer (July and August):

Maqam *Rast* (which means "head" or "beginning") would be used for the beginnings of the new book of the Humash or other "beginnings," therefore you will see that it is used at the parashat that begin the new Humash. You will *not* see Maqam *Rast* in the beginning of Humash Debarim on August 9, because Shabbat Debarim is the week before Tisha B'Ab. Maqam *Hijaz* will be used that week. Maqam *Rast* is used on August 30, for Shabbat Parashat Re'eh, because during that week, we will be 'beginning' the Selihot season and the month of Elul.



Maqam *Mahour*, a higher version of Maqam *Rast*, is applied to the prayers on weeks when there is disappointment/anger in the parasha, as *ma'ahur* in Arabic means disappointed or angered. On July 12, Shabbat Balaq, we apply Maqam *Mahour* to the parasha because Balaq and Bilaam get angry and disappointed when as much as they try to curse the Israelites, G-d turned all their curses into blessings.

Maqam *Hoseni*, which means "beautiful," is used on weeks where the parasha describes the receiving of the Torah (which is "beautiful"). You will notice on the calendar that Maqam *Hoseni* is used on August 16, Shabbat Va'ethanan, because this is the Shabbat that contains the Ten Commandments (*Matan Torah*) in the parasha.

Maqam *Saba* is used when there is a *berit* (covenant) in the parasha or when the parasha mentions "armies" since "*saba*," in Hebrew, means "army." This summer, Maqam *Saba* will be used twice, for two different reasons. On July 19, Shabbat Pinchas, it will be used because G-d makes a *Berit Shalom* with Pinchas. It will also be

used on August 2, Shabbat Masei, because the parasha discusses the traveling of the Israelite armies (*saba*) throughout the 40 years in the desert.

Maqam *Sigah*, which is the maqam that we use for reading the Torah, is used when there is a special Torah reading in that week's parasha. Therefore, on August

23, Shabbat Equeb, Maqam *Sigah* is used because the special Torah portion of *Shema Yisrael* is in that week's parasha.

Maqam *Hijaz* is used on weeks with sad events in the parasha, such as a death or a major national tragedy. As we mentioned before, Maqam *Hijaz* is used on August 9, for Shabbat Debarim, because this is the Shabbat prior to Tisha B'Ab, the saddest day of the Jewish calendar, the day in which we mourn the destruction of the Jewish Temple. Note that the Jewish community of Damascus will never use Maqam *Hijaz* throughout the entire year—*except* for Parashat Debarim, to illustrate the severity of the sadness of Tisha B'Ab.

You can learn a lot more on anything that you have read in this article by visiting the homepage of the Sephardic Pizmonim Project, www.pizmonim.com. We will attempt to provide you with another "Maqam of the Week" installment every other month in IMAGE Magazine. Have a great summer! □

David M. Betesh, a contributing editor to IMAGE Magazine, is the President of the Sephardic Pizmonim Project and a student at Tufts University School of Dental Medicine.