

IMAGE Collaborates With the Sephardic Pizmonim Project

David M. Betesh

Starting this month, IMAGE will be introducing a new “Maqam of the Week” feature to the calendar in the back of each issue and to the community calendar on their website, Imageusa.com. For each Shabbat and holiday, we will list which maqam you can most likely expect at your local Sephardic synagogue.

This concept is not new to the Syrian Sephardic Jewish community; in fact, we had the system in place for about 200 years! Please allow me to briefly reintroduce the concept simply for those who are unfamiliar with it.

Did you ever go to synagogue on a Shabbat morning and wonder why the cantor picked the melodies and tunes that he did? These melodies and tunes are not chosen at random. Each week when the cantor appears at the pulpit, he has prepared which melodies he is going to use based on the maqam system.

A ‘maqam,’ which in Arabic literally means ‘place,’ is a standard melody type and set of related tunes. The melodies used in a given maqam aims effectively to express the emotional state of the reader throughout the set liturgy (without changing the text).

There are hundreds of different maqamat, but in our tradition, we only use about 10 of them on a regular basis throughout the year. As a general rule, the same maqam will never be used two weeks in a row. Also, the schedule tries to rotate the maqamot in such a fashion that the 10 maqams are spread out almost equally in time as to avoid the redundancy of hearing the same maqam within a short period of time.

Which maqam will be used is based on either the story/theme of the *Parashat Hashavua* 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.

“Every Shabbat morning, the Mussaf prayers are conducted in the maqam of the following week's parashat...”

Here is a short description of some maqamot and when they are most often used:

Maqam Rast (which means ‘head’ or ‘beginning’) would be used for the beginnings of the new book of the *Humash*, therefore you will see that it is used at the *parashat* that begin the new *Humash* (unless there is a holiday that supercedes it). You will also notice that Maqam *Rast* is also used on May 3, the Shabbat immediately after Passover, because this marks the ‘beginning’ of the Omer period.

Maqam Ajam is used for happy occasions such as weddings and holidays. You will notice that Maqam *Ajam* is used on June 10th, the sec-

ond day of the *Shavuot* holiday.

Maqam Hoseni, which means ‘beautiful,’ is used on weeks where the *parashat* describes the *Mishkan*, the receiving of the Torah (which is ‘beautiful’). You will notice on the calendar that Maqam Hoseni is used on June 7th, the Shabbat prior to *Shavuot* (‘Matan Torah’).

Maqam Saba (which in Arabic means ‘baby boy’) is used when there is a *berit* in the *parashat* (either circumcision or the observance of mitzvot).

Maqam Hijaz (named after Saudi Arabia) is used on weeks with sad events in the *parashat*, such as a death or a major national tragedy. Maqam *Hijaz* is used on June 21st for Shabbat *Shelah*, this is because we are saddened over the tragedy of the spies in that week's *parashat*.

There is only a rotation of maqamat on Saturday morning *Shaharit* prayers, but not for the other prayers throughout the Shabbat. Every Friday night, the *hazzan* always performs in **Maqam Nawah** (or *Nahwand*), because this is the traditional maqam of the Kabbalat Shabbat services. Every Shabbat morning, the *Mussaf* prayers are conducted in the maqam of the following week's *parashat* in order to give you anticipation for next week's *parashat*. Every Shabbat Mincha, the cantor applies Maqam *Rast* (which means ‘head’ or ‘beginning’) to the prayers because you begin the new *parashat* in the Torah readings. Each Saturday night, **Maqam Bayat** is used because the pizmonim of Mossae Shabbat are conducted in that maqam and also because the mood of *Bayat* is a ‘slumber’ and ending the Shabbat is a ‘slumber’ occasion.

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SEPHARDIC CUSTOMS

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If you take a glance at the calendars of Congregation Beth Torah or Congregation Kol Israel, you will notice that they also list the 'Maqamat of the Week' for each Shabbat. How did they find out which maqam is used for each Shabbat? Answer: There is a list in the back of Shir Ushbacha Hallel VeZimrah ('the red pizmonim book') on page 565. If you look there, you will see that there is a list of the *parashat* with the proper maqam right next to it. This is the main source for the Syrian community of Aleppo only. However, there are many other lists that are not well known to us that belong to our sister communities, such as the community of Jews of Damascus, Beirut, Istanbul and Baghdad. Each of these respective communities has their own lists that are mostly similar to that of the Aleppian community, but differ on a few *parasha*. Also note that the Egyptian Jewish community living in the United States today follows the list of the Aleppian Jews.

In today's modern world, we have been blessed with the Internet, a powerful tool that allows the rapid spread of knowledge. Among the millions of things that you can use the Internet for, is learning about the maqamat, pizmonim, and other aspects of our tradition by visiting www.pizmonim.com, the home of the Sephardic Pizmonim Project. Once you're there, find the "Weekly Maqam" link and click on it. There, you will find a complete English list of the "Maqamat of the Week" and the explanations to why they were chosen each week.

You will also find other opinions of what other communities have a tradition of using. By clicking on the name of the maqam you can read all about its origin and applications. By clicking on the *parashat*, you can see which melodies were traditionally used by Hakham Moshe Ashear, the chief *hazzan* of this community from about 1910-1940 as well as other insights by Mr. Joseph Mosseri, moderator of the Hazzanut Forum (affiliated with the Sephardic Pizmonim Project).

Prior to this, IMAGE's calendar was primarily used by the women of our community to take note of the candle lighting times and the dates for upcoming bake sales. Now, the men have a good reason to look at the calendar as well! We are very proud of IMAGE's collaboration with the Sephardic Pizmonim Project to introduce the weekly maqam, and we encourage you look to at the calendar and take note of what the maqam will be each Shabbat before attending synagogue, so that you may be familiar with the melodies of the prayers. □

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