

# Brooklyn's Revival of Baqashot



*Until now, the Bet Ades Synagogue was one of the only places in the world that was still doing Baqashot on a weekly basis*

David M. Betesh

**T**he Sephardic practice of assembling very early on Shabbat mornings to sing the *Baqashot* (a collection of supplications, songs, and prayers) dates to before the time of the Spanish Inquisition, some 500 years ago.

Primitive handwritten versions of our Baqashot books were carried in the suitcases of our ancestors as they were expelled from Spain. They brought the custom of singing the ancient Baqashot hymns to Jewish communities across the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East, where the custom gained great popularity throughout the 16th through 19th centuries. No community held onto this custom as strongly as the Jewish community of Aleppo, who were considered the masters and experts of this practice, by most of the Jewish world. These medieval “jam-sessions” provided the Hazzanim with a unique opportunity to hone their skills and nurture their knowledge of liturgical tradition. It also gave members of the commu-

nity (young and old alike) the opportunity to sing, listen, and enjoy a mix of traditional hymns and contemporary Arabic melodies accompanied by Biblical Hebrew lyrics, which is the very definition of *pizmonim*.

In honor of Yom Ha’atzmaut and Lag Ba’Omer, Congregation Shaare Zion hosted two special Shabbat sessions of Baqashot in the main sanctuary, the Dome. These Baqashot were conducted from 4 to 6 pm and were led by prominent cantors from the Syrian community: Menahem Mustacci, David Shiro, Solomon Dayan, and Haim Eliahou. These two events, which took place two weeks apart, were huge successes. The Dome was almost filled; Approximately 200 people were in attendance. I was amazed that the people in attendance, mainly Syrians who emigrated from Syria in the 1980s and 1990s, all seemed to know the Baqashot fairly well and were able to sing along for most of the time (and let me remind you that these songs are difficult to follow). I asked the person sitting next to

me how everyone knew the tunes. He responded, “We did this every single week in Syria!” I then asked him, “Did a lot of people attend each Shabbat in Syria?” He responded, “Are you kidding? Everyone loved it. Singing Arabic music while drinking *Araq* (a traditional alcoholic beverage of Syria) with their friends was one of their greatest pleasures.”

I left both events feeling very impressed. I felt hopeful for the future character of our Syrian community.

Needless to say, without the practice of Baqashot taking place in the community, the knowledge of our Hazzanut, *pizmonim*, and *maqamat* will die out. It will only take one weak generation that fails to transmit this sacred tradition. If we are not careful, our heritage, which consists of hundreds and maybe thousands of unique melodies, *pizmonim*, poems and traditions, will be reduced to the “Top 40” format, with only a handful of popular *Sebet* songs surviving. Our tradition is held together like a

*Continued on page 00*



## Baqashot...

Continued from page 00



Rabbi Eli J. Mansour



Congregation Bet Yaakob

chain; each generation is like a link of that chain, and with one weak link, the entire chain will break. Each generation, collectively, needs to be responsible for the next.

2011 (5771) has been a great year for the revival of Baqashot in the Brooklyn community. During this year, I am happy to report that Baqashot have taken place each Shabbat in both: Brooklyn, as well as Jerusalem. Whereas the Bet Ades Synagogue in Jerusalem has maintained Baqashot each Shabbat since before World War I, the Brooklyn Syrian community has revived the tradition after a long hiatus.

As recorded on the pizmonim.com bulletin board, this year, special Baqashot events took place in the following synagogues for one or two special occasions: Congregation Ahi Ezer, Congregation Shaare Zion, Congregation Ahaba VeAhva, Congregation Beth Torah, Sephardic Synagogue (Avenue R), the Avenue O Synagogue, and Congregation Magen David of West Deal. (I apologize to any synagogue that has been omitted from this short list.)

These events were important to raise the awareness of this tradition, but in my opinion, a once a year event, is not enough to maintain the entire tradition. The only way to learn these songs is through weekly repetition, and this leads me to my next point: we, as a com-

munity, need to return to the practice of Baqashot each Shabbat; at least throughout the winter months (which is the original practice). I am not saying that it has to be a four hour event beginning at 3 am, but it should be a weekly event.

I am very happy to acknowledge that Congregation Bet Yaakob, under the leadership of Rabbi Eli J. Mansour, has been the first congregation in our community to revive the sacred ancient tradition of weekly Baqashot sessions, which have been taking place every Shabbat beginning at 6:30 am at (at the old building of Ahaba VeAhva). The Baqashot, throughout this year, have been led mainly by Cantor Menahem Mustacci accompanied by his son, Moshe Mustacci. The Baqashot lasts an hour and fifteen minutes.

It is true that we don't get through all 66 songs on any given Shabbat due to the time constraints. If we are lucky, we get through 15-20 of them; which is a lot better than none of them. Each Shabbat, 25-40 people attend the Baqashot, and this number has been growing since the beginning of the year when the program started. I consider Menahem Mustacci, the leader of the Baqashot revival. Every Shabbat morning he walks miles and miles from his house to Congregation Bet Yaakob, and then to his weekly synagogue where he officiates as Hazzan, year

round. On behalf of our community, the words *Hazzaq U'Baruch* can't even begin to express our gratitude, appreciation, and admiration for his incredible diligence and zeal as he maintains our community's traditions.

In the 1980's and 1990's, one of the only places in the world that was still doing Baqashot on a weekly basis was the Bet Ades Synagogue. I went twice; once for my bar mitzvah in 1997, and then again for my brother Morris's bar mitzvah in 2003. As much as I love traveling to Israel and attending the Ades Synagogue each Shabbat for Baqashot, it can get a bit expensive for a New Yorker like me. That got me thinking; there's got to be a cheaper way.

Now there is. If you live in Brooklyn, I invite you to join us at Congregation Bet Yaakob (in the old Ahaba VeAhva building) every Shabbat at 6:30 am. If you live too far away and cannot attend, please visit [pizmonim.com](http://pizmonim.com) (weekdays only) to listen to the many recordings of Baqashot that are featured on the website.

The chain needs to be strong, and it is my fervent hope that we are successful at linking this tradition to the next generation. □

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