

Songs That Speak¹

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It has been said that “one ventures from home on the thread of a tune” (Deleuze and Guattari 1982, p. 311). Here we will follow the threads of several tunes to explore a musical and cultural tradition that conveys a dual Arab-Jewish identity little known to outsiders but still embraced by Syrian Jews today living in communities scattered worldwide. This tradition challenges current political and cultural divides.

The Syrian Jewish community’s presence in Aleppo, Syria, has been dated by archaeological evidence to the early centuries of the Common Era. In the late-nineteenth century, Syrian Jews joined a broader stream of migration out of the Middle East that began after overland trade declined following the construction of the Suez Canal. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Syrian Jews began to establish new communities abroad; by the twentieth century’s end, no Jews remained in Syria. Wherever Syrian Jews migrated, they took with them a repertory of hundreds of songs known as *pizmonim* (sing., *pizmon*), hymns performed in various religious and social contexts. I will discuss the many ways in which the *pizmonim* “speak” and perpetuate a dual Arab-Jewish identity, setting sacred Hebrew texts to tunes borrowed mainly from the popular Arab musical tradition.²

These songs are performed and new songs are composed within a community that today has its largest concentration in Brooklyn, New York. With the Middle East torn by ethnic and religious conflicts for most of the last century, and with Aleppo now in ruins, it can be difficult to imagine that close cultural interaction once existed between Arabs and Jews of that region. But Arab-Jewish interaction lives on in song. *Pizmonim* are still performed today by Syrian Jews wherever they live on virtually all religious and social occasions, whether at bar mitzvahs, circumcisions, or parties.

1 Read 7 November 2014.

2 Unless otherwise noted, information in this paper is drawn from Kay Kaufman Shelemay, *Let Jasmine Rain Down: Song and Remembrance among Syrian Jews*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

We begin with a pizmon sung to lead off Saturday afternoon gatherings in Syrian Jewish homes. These domestic gatherings are held after Sabbath morning prayers and are mounted to celebrate events such as the birth of a child or an engagement. The pizmon “Yahid Ram” (“Unique One”; Musical Example 1) is “the opening song that they usually sing for whenever they have happy occasions in the house (H. Kaire, interview, 17 February 1988).³ Another member of the Syrian community remarked: “This is the opening music. And if you hear the music you’ll see why—it’s catchy, it’s fast” (J. Saff, interview, 4 December 1984).

“Yahid Ram” was composed in Aleppo during the late-nineteenth century by Rabbi Raphael Taboush, who set a new Hebrew text to a popular Arab melody of his time. We know the song was commissioned in honor of a man named Joseph, as the end of the third stanza translates: “Have mercy upon me, speedily, for the sake of the house of Joseph, your righteous one.” In addition, the name of Joseph also appears in the text’s Hebrew acrostic (Figure 1). The song contains themes of personal and national redemption, alluding to the coming of the Messianic Age, and paraphrases an important prayer (“Alenu”) saying “the world will be set right by the rule of God.” Other references encourage singing together “as in the days of old,” setting forth a hope for the future where “every one of them shall sing.”

“Yahid Ram,” like most pizmonim, speaks to several important themes, including individual and communal memory, social history, and the importance of performing pizmonim together. Initially commissioned to honor an individual named Joseph, the song has, over time, been used to commemorate others of the same name as well as the community at large. The song’s text refers to sacred precepts and significant religious occasions. Finally, through acts of song performance, the community is joined in the present and maintained into the future. I will return to these important themes after brief comments about how these pizmonim are constructed.

Arab music was and is transmitted primarily as an oral tradition. In Aleppo, it was heard by Jews mainly in public coffee houses, especially by legendary musicians such as Rabbi Raphael Taboush, who composed pizmon “Yahid Ram.” Taboush is humorously remembered as “a thief”; he would hear a melody in a coffee house one day and set new Hebrew words to it the next. Since the early-twentieth century, Arab songs have also been conveyed and learned through sound recordings and other media.

3 To access Music Example 1 (“Yahid Ram”), please refer to the electronic version of this article on the website of the American Philosophical Society. This musical example with instrumental accompaniment was not recorded on the Sabbath, when instruments are forbidden by Jewish law.

יחיד רם לעולם. גלה לקץ נטמן. כי בא עת זמן
 נאמן. אל מהר וגאל לעם לא אלמן:
 וגאל נא ושלח נא. מבשר לבני אברהם. הרם דגלם.
 ושמע לקולם. בתוף עירם ישירו. קלם. רנה
 ירננו תוף אהלם. רפא אל צירם. הן עתה כי
 אתה מלך רחמן נאמן:
 סתרי חי אל שדי. אודה לשמך יומם ולילה. בבית
 מעונך. כי בך אשמח יחיד אל בורא נאור
 בגבורה. אתה הוא אדון כל-נברא. חנני במהרה.
 למען בית יוסף צדיקה:
 פנה אלי ענני. כי אתה הוא צור גואלי. ושלח נא
 למעלי. ופדני חי לעולם. רם אהלך לצד בפי
 תמיד כימי עולם. אל נעלם. קבץ נא לעמך בהר
 קדש חי והרחב להם גבולם. קלם יודוך בגוה
 האולם. נאמן. שעה נא לקול מהללם. כי הם עם
 חביב ידידיך: הרם וכו' תם

Unique One, exalted forever.

reveal the hidden end.

For the time, a worthy time, has come.

Quickly, God, bring redemption, for a people not left widowed.

Pray, redeem them; and please send,

To the children of Abraham, a herald.

Raise their banner, and listen to their voice.

In their city, they, every one of them, shall sing.

In their tent, they will shout in exaltation.

Oh God, heal their agony; for surely, now, you are a merciful and reliable King.

My Place of Refuge, Living God, All-mighty.

I will give thanks to You, day and night, in the house of Your dwelling.

Unto You, alone, do I rejoice, awesome God, who are girded with power.

You are the Lord of all creation.

Have mercy upon me, speedily,

For the sake of the House of Joseph,

Your righteous one.

Turn to me! Answer me!

For you are a Rock, you are my Redeemer.

Please forgive me for my unfaithfulness,

and redeem me, You who live forever.

Exalted One, I will praise you, forever, with my mouth; always as in the days of old.

Hidden God

gather Your people to the holy mountain of the Living God; enlarge for them their border.

They will all give thanks to you in the abode of the great hall,

Reliable One, have regard to the voice of their praise,

For they are a cherished people, Your beloved ones.

FIGURE 1. Hebrew text and English translation for pizmon “Yahid Ram.”

A newly composed text set to a borrowed tune is known in musical craft terms as a *contrafactum* [pl., *contrafacta*]. This compositional device is often encountered across cultural boundaries and in different historical eras. In the Jewish religious tradition, melodies borrowed from the widest variety of secular sources are considered to be

Arabic: A-ḥibb a- shū- fak ku- l yawm yir- tāḥ fu- ‘ā- dī
 Hebrew: A-ni a- shir lakh be- khol yom be- tokh ke- ha- li

Arabic: Wa- al- qalb dāb min al- bi- ‘ād yā kul ‘a- dhā bī
 Hebrew: Lib- bi yit- av le- vet va- ad be- khol ze- man- ni

(ARABIC) I love to see you every day
 [So that] my heart feels at ease
 My heart wore out from the distance [between us]

(HEBREW) I shall sing to you every day
 In the midst of my congregation
 And my heart desires Your meeting place at all times

FIGURE 2. Comparison of Arabic song “Ahibb Ashufak” (Musical Example 2a) and pizmon “Ani Ashir Lakh” (Musical Example 2b).

sanctified when they are set with new sacred Hebrew texts. As an example, we can hear the relationship between one pizmon and the popular Arab song on which it was based.

In the late 1920s, a love song with an Arabic text was composed by Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab, a famous Egyptian lute player, singer, and composer. The original song is a classical Egyptian vocal form that requires considerable vocal virtuosity. Listen to the main theme of song “Ahibb Ashufak” (“I Love to See You”) sung by its composer with its original Arabic text. Follow the top line of Figure 2 and listen to Musical Example 2a.⁴

While the Arabic text and tune are in your ears, listen to the beginning of Syrian pizmon “Ani Ashir Lakh,” performed by accomplished amateur musician Moses Tawil and a chorus from the community in Brooklyn (Musical Example 2b).⁵ The text for the Hebrew pizmon is seen below that of the Arabic text in Figure 2.

As you can hear and see, the Hebrew pizmon “Ani Ashir Lakh” follows precisely the melody and rhyme scheme of the “Ahibb Ashufak,” the source of the borrowed melody. This compositional process requires fluency in Arabic, a knowledge of the Arab musical system, and sophisticated skills in Hebrew.

4 To access Music Example 2a (“Ahibb Ashufak”), please refer to the electronic version of this article on the website of the American Philosophical Society.

5 To access Music Example 2b (“Ani Ashir Lakh”), please refer to the electronic version of this article on the website of the American Philosophical Society.

Now we can return to the three themes noted above, beginning with memory and social history. The pizmonim are composed for important occasions in the Syrian Jewish life cycle with which they are afterward closely associated. When a new pizmon is composed, its text is printed by the composer in Hebrew. Next, the pizmon is rehearsed and then sung for the first time publicly at the relevant ceremony. Over the years, the song becomes a musical memory that speaks to the history of an individual and his or her family. The songs can also convey a good measure of social history, as can be seen in the case of pizmon “Yehidah Hitna‘ari,” the text of which is found in Figure 3.

As noted above, names of people are embedded within the texts of many pizmonim. Although some names are easy to see, others are disguised within the text. Pizmon “Yehidah Hitna‘ari” is so full of names and other veiled references that only oral testimony can reveal what is concealed. This song was composed for Joseph Saff’s Brooklyn bar mitzvah in 1933. In Figure 3, I have entered superscript numbers in the Hebrew pizmon text prepared by the composer to mark the location of important phrases and names (starting with #13, following the introduction to the song text proper.) The composer, Cantor Moses Ashear, in an unusual gesture, capitalized the proper names included in this song, although the identity of the individuals named, as well as many other phrases of significance, are unknown to most listeners. However, during a 1984 interview, Joseph Saff himself elucidated the history of the song and its meaning. His comments take us deep into the domain of social history, which this song narrates.

Those able to read Hebrew will see that the Hebrew text has an acrostic that reads *Yosef Hazaq* (“Joseph Strong”), spelled out by a capital letter at the beginning of every other line extending down the right-hand margin. The refrain of the song carries particularly important content and translates: “You, the one and only, stir yourself, An end to your trouble, enough, enough. Put on your strength and awake, and come to me, to me. Eat my honey with my honeycomb, in the garden of my fields, my fields. Pasture my kids.”

This song speaks eloquently about the situation of Joseph Saff’s family in the 1930s, especially in reference to his mother. It addresses Saff’s mother—“you, the one and only”—and calls on her to put her troubles behind her. This gesture toward a woman is unusual for a pizmon, a musical genre that is composed by and for men and is performed by men as well.

Joseph’s father died in 1927, when Joseph was 7, leaving his mother a widow with six children younger than 9. Joseph Saff described these traumatic years as follows:

יְהִידָה יֵצֵאת עַל יְדֶיךָ
בִּיָּה
וְלִפְנֵימֶנֶךָ בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ
שִׁיר 5 בְּרַצוּה
3 לַהֲלֹכִיד הַנְּעִים וְכֹסֶם עֲזָרָא צַפְרִייתָ הִיָּי יִגְ אֲדָר ש' תרצ"ג
10 בֵּית נְאוּוֹה
11 סִימָן יוֹסֵף חֹזֶק בְּרוּךְ וּמְבֹרָךְ
12 לֵחֶן יָא סְגֵרָת אֵל אֲוֵהָרִי שְׂרֹשֶׁךְ עֵלָא אֵל מִי
13 יְהִידָה הַתְּנַנְרִי
14 דִּי לְצֻרְתֶּךָ דִּי דִּי
15 לְבָשִׁי עֲזָרָה וְעֹזִי
16 וּבֹאִי עֲדִי
17 אֲכָלִי דְבָשִׁי עִם יַעֲרִי
18 וְרַעֲיָי אֶת גְּדִיּוֹתִי
19 וְאֵלֹהֵי אֲבִי עֲזָרִי
20 וְכֹסֶם שְׂמִי שְׂמִי
21 כִּי אֲרִכּוּ יָמֵי יָמִי
22 וְכֹסֶם לִקְבוּץ פְּגוּרִי
23 וּמִסְקָה יִשְׁעֵנִי
24 שְׂמָחִי עִם יוֹלְדֵתִי
25 לְעִבְרָא בְּתַפְלָחִי
26 עִם עֲדָת קְדוֹתָיו
27 לְמִי שַׁעֲשַׁע נְסִים
28 לְעַם בְּרִדְכִי חֲדָדִי
29 בִּי אֲדוּנִי עֵינֶךָ שִׁים
30 הֲוֹק אֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל נִמְרָץ
31 כִּי יִמְשַׁח אֶת עֲדָרִי
32 וְהָאֲרִיץ יִסְתִּי
33 וְכֹסֶם חֲדָדִי
34 וְכֹסֶם חֲדָדִי
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A song for the Bar Mitzvah celebration of the gracious student, Joseph Ezra Saff (Safadiyyah), 13 Adar 5693 (1933)

And it shall be for a token upon thy hand;
and for frontlets between thine eyes.

*You, the one and only, stir yourself,
An end to your trouble, enough, enough.
Put on your strength and awake,
And come to me, to me.
Eat up my honey with my honeycomb,
In the garden of my fields, my fields.
Pasture my kids.*

The God of my father, my help
Who rides the heavens, the heavens,
Let Him adorn me with my crown,
And [make like] suckling babes my enemies, my enemies.
He will continue to gather my scattered ones,
For they have lasted long, my days, my days,
And I await my salvation.
You, the one and only...

FIGURE 3. Hebrew text and English translation for pizmon “Yehidah Hitna‘ari.”

My father died when I was seven—the oldest was nine, and there were four beneath us—I'm not saying this for sympathy—I'm just trying to bring it up to a point. It was very hard for my mother—she bereaved something awful. Now the old Syrian Jewish custom to mourn was pretty much the way Catholics mourn, which has changed in my community now. It was common for a woman that was mourning to wear a black dress anywhere from six months to nine months to ten months. Black dress, black shoes, black hosiery. And not to go out to the street the first two or three months because she's supposed to be in mourning. This was pretty common. In my mother's case, this was because of the way she bereaved my father or kids or everything else, he was forty-two and she was maybe middle thirties But she took it very hard They used to cover the sofas and club chairs in the living room also with black for two to three months because that's a sign of mourning. Now mother did not remove the black covering on the sofa and club chairs until 1937—which is ten years after my father passed away My mother stayed home indoors for ten years. Never went into the streets. She had friends, she had sisters—I used to shop for her or let's say holidays came around—the children needed clothing, they'd take us out, they bought us clothing, [she] just never went out of the house You got that picture.

Although she may not have heard this pizmon when it was first sung on the morning of her son Joseph's bar mitzvah, Mrs. Saff surely would have heard about it, received a copy of the Hebrew text, and heard it sung at the traditional Sabbath afternoon domestic songfest. Joseph Saff explained the following phrases and names from the pizmon, which are marked with superscript numbers⁶:

13. *Yehidah Hitna'ari*: "You alone, the one who carried me." Reference to Joseph Saff's mother.
14. *Dai lesarotekh*: "enough of your troubles!"
15. *Livshi uzzekeh ve'uri*: "awaken and wear your courage"
16. *Uvo'i adai adai*: "and come to me" [don't ignore your family]
17. *Ikbli devashi im yari*: "it's about time you started to taste honey and honeycomb"
18. *uri et gediyyotai*: "lead me as you would a group"
19. *v-elohei avi*: "and the Lord of my father"
20. *Ezri*: Ezra [Saff's father]
21. *Rokhev shemei shemei*: "who gave me my name"
22. *Yosef*: Joseph
23. *Yeshuotai*: Uncle Yeshuo
24. *Yoladti*: "the one who gave birth to me" (Saff's mother)
25. *Le'ovdo*: Uncle Ovadiah

⁶ Translation for the lines preceding the song text containing numbers 1–12 are found at the beginning of the English translation of the song text.

26. *Kehil*: Saff does not remember this name or to whom it refers
27. *Nissim*: Uncle Nissim
28. *Mordekhai*: Uncle Mordekhai
29. *Hazak el yashar*: El Yashar, a close friend of the Saff family
- [] *Tishbi*: Elijah the Prophet, a well-known name not discussed by Saff
30. *Yishal*: Shaul, a close friend of the family
31. *Yimsheh*: Uncle Moshe
32. *Shalom*: Saff's mother's maiden name
33. *shalom lakhem rabbotai*: "peace be with you, my dear friends, my audience"

The recording of pizmon "Yehidah Hitna'ari" is performed by Joseph Saff himself in Musical Example 3.⁷

The pizmon composer, Moses Ashear, a longtime cantor in the New York community, was closely familiar with the difficult Saff family situation and took it upon himself to compose a song without a commission. He chose the melody from an Arab song he obviously knew well, perhaps one he learned in Aleppo before he migrated in 1912. However, the song was no longer popular among U.S. Syrians in the 1930s, and even Joseph Saff commented that he found the melody "boring."

Therefore, when I recorded it in the 1980s, the pizmon had not been sung for many years, and the lute player followed Joseph's singing in a halting manner. Although the tune would ordinarily carry its own separate world of specific associations, here it speaks more generally to the connection to Arab culture. (The original title of the song, inscribed at #12 on the facsimile, translates: "Oh the rose tree, your roots are on the water.")

All three songs discussed here address important themes in the Syrian Jewish life and religious practice. The first, pizmon "Yahid Ram," urges congregational singing for the sake of posterity; the second, pizmon "Ani Ashir Lakh," speaks of love for God shared by the congregation; and the third, pizmon "Yehidah Hitna'ari," recounts a painful period of local history and provides advice and a genealogy of a family and its social circle.

I would like to conclude with an example that speaks to the potential pitfalls of borrowing a familiar tune. When someone commissions a pizmon, they usually request that a favorite melody to which the new Hebrew text is set, be used. After Syrian Jews left Aleppo, they continued to borrow new Arab tunes from memory or from widely circulated Middle Eastern recordings. But in their new, multicultural environments, a few melodies were occasionally borrowed from unexpected sources. In one pizmon from the 1920s, Cantor Ashear used the

⁷ To access Music Example 3 ("Yehidah Hitna'ari"), please refer to the electronic version of this article on the website of the American Philosophical Society.



FIGURE 4. Logo of Sephardic Community Center. The logo was created by Mazal Husni in 1982 and is reproduced courtesy of the Sephardic Community Center.

melody that the groom, Samuel Franco, requested for his wedding pizmon: the melody of his school song from High School 62 on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The text for pizmon “Mifalot Elohim” (“The Works of God”) (Musical Example 4) refers to the forthcoming wedding:⁸

Gaze upon the works of God,
Pay attention and speak aloud.
Sing to Him in Choirs,
In the happiness of brides and grooms.”

But neither Franco nor Ashear were aware that this melody had previously been borrowed by the school—from the Christmas carol “Oh Tannenbaum.”

The Syrian Jewish pizmonim thus record individual and collective memories in text and tune. The melodies sustain, for the most part, a deep connection with the Arab world of which they were long a part, whereas the texts embed both allusions to Hebrew prayer and personal lives.

The logo of the institutional center of the Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn, the Sephardic Community Center on Ocean Parkway, captures the doubleness of Syrian Jewish identity. (Figure 4). Read left to right, one sees the skyscrapers of Manhattan, the Brooklyn Bridge, and Middle Eastern-style architecture representing the Syrian community in Brooklyn. Read right to left, as in Hebrew, one can move from the traditional homes of the Middle East to the Western urban center. Viewed as a whole, the logo resembles Arabic calligraphy.

Like the logo of this important Syrian Jewish cultural institution, the pizmonim sustain connections potentially lost to memory through the processes of migration and pervasive changes over time. The songs speak to the full range of Syrian Jewish experience, while preserving an

8 To access Music Example 4 (“Mifalot Elohim”), please refer to the electronic version of this article on the website of the American Philosophical Society.

Arab-Jewish tradition for which there is little room in the world today. However, although the pizmonim are eloquent in so many ways, they do not speak to pressing issues of their times. If some biblical references may be interpreted metaphorically as relating to the moments at which a pizmon was composed, the songs lack explicit references to political issues. Discussion of political and religious tensions emerge quite often in oral testimonies about the pizmon tradition and its place in Syrian Jewish life. But to paraphrase a comment by a literary scholar about the Judeo-Arab literature, “what is not in the song becomes another mode of description” (Alcalay 1993, p. 264). Textual ambiguity and the power of metaphor enable pizmon performance to give voice to the continued vitality of a shared identity that has survived migration and political conflict. Syrian Jews do not sing about the dislocations and violence that have marked their own and broader Middle Eastern history for the last century. Instead, they sing in spite of it, sustaining pizmonim that speak to a deeply felt dual Arab-Jewish identity conveyed through channels of both text and tune.

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