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Crossing Boundaries Through Contrafactum

A Case Study from the Syrian Jewish Tradition

Kay Kaufman Shelemay

In a very real sense, the re-use of a familiar tune enables one to cross boundaries – moving through memory from the present to times past, and at moments, crossing cultural boundaries as well. A newly composed text set to a borrowed tune, a contrafactum, is a compositional device often encountered in different places as well as in different historical eras. Whatever their location in time and place, contrafacta both serve to perpetuate texts that would otherwise fall out of memory as well as to transmit sonic chronicles of the community history and the lives of individuals within them. Contrafacta are particularly powerful sources for revealing what may be termed “contact zones” between nations, cultures, and regions.¹

Although contrafact processes are very common in religious and para-liturgical practices of most Jewish communities,² I will focus this paper on one particular Jewish musical repertory of the eastern Mediterranean region that consists entirely of contrafacta. This is a hymn tradition that has been sustained by Jews who lived for centuries in Aleppo, Syria, and then migrated worldwide beginning in the late 19th century. I will introduce the Syrian Jewish community and its colorful contrafact tradition in the first part of this paper.³

¹ James Clifford, “Diasporas”, in: *Cultural Anthropology* 9/3 (1994), 302–338: 303.

² Contrafacta are also widespread in European (Ashkenazic) Jewish music. See, as one example, Ellen Koskoff, *Music in Lubavitcher Life*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2001, 168–169 for discussion of contrafact processes perpetuated in one prominent Hasidic Jewish community.

³ Unless credited to another source, this paper draws on materials from Kay K. Shelemay, *Let Jasmine Rain Down. Song and Remembrance Among Syrian Jews*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1998.

The second part of the paper will explore the wealth of personal and cultural data transmitted through the Syrian contrafact process by taking a close look at one hymn dating from the early 20th century. The third and final section will provide an overview of different processes of melodic borrowing in Syrian Jewish contrafacta in order to facilitate comparison with other communities within and beyond the Jewish orbit. The conclusion will address the importance of contrafacta as mnemonic devices that commemorate events and people from the past.

Part 1: Syrian Jewish History and Musical Repertoires

The Syrian Jewish community's early presence in Aleppo, Syria has been confirmed by archaeological evidence dating to the fifth century of the Common Era, although oral traditions within the Syrian Jewish community itself claim that Syrian Jews came to Aleppo during the time of King David. There is no question that the Syrian Jewish community was long resident in Aleppo and spoke Arabic as well as their own dialect of Judeo-Arabic.⁴

In the early sixteenth century, Jews exiled from Spain during the Spanish Inquisition, known as Sephardic Jews, sought refuge across the Mediterranean, including in Aleppo, where they joined the Jewish community already living in that city. This is the process through which a very old Arab-Jewish community came to adopt a Sephardic identity in the 16th century while maintaining its use of Judeo-Arabic language and a deep love of Arab music. Only at the end of the 19th century did Syrian Jews join a broader stream of migration out of Middle East that began when overland trade declined following the construction of the Suez Canal in 1869. During the 20th century, Syrian Jews established new communities abroad; by the end of the 20th century, no Jews remained in Syria.

The Syrian contrafact tradition has its roots in Judeo-Spanish practices shared by many Sephardic Jewish communities of the Mediterranean region. The eastern Mediterranean also provides the earliest source for Jewish contrafacta, a 1587 songbook titled *Zemirot Israel* ("Songs of Israel") published

⁴ Walter Zenner, *A Global Community. The Jews from Aleppo Syria*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press 2000, 33–36.

in the city of Safed in what is today northern Israel by poet Israel Najara (c. 1550–1625).⁵ Najara notes in his preface that the Hebrew lyrics contained in his collection were intended to be sung to Arabic, Turkish, and other tunes of his day. Most of the poems in Najara's collection are accompanied by the instruction that they were to be sung “to the melody of [...]”, followed by the textual incipit of the song from which a particular melody was borrowed; about 150 of the songs were of Turkish origin, 30 were derived from the oral tradition stemming from Spain, and a small number drew on Greek melodies.⁶ Scholars who have investigated the interaction among various Jewish musical repertoires have concluded that the Jewish liturgy, the Judeo-Spanish *romance*, and other genres of Judeo-Spanish folksong all partook of contrafact processes.⁷ Of particular interest is that the Syrian Jewish contrafact tradition reflects the close interaction among Jewish and Arab communities of both Islamic and Christian faiths in Aleppo. Popular tunes from Arab Aleppo pervade paraliturgical repertoires and are even incorporated into the Syrian Jewish liturgy.⁸

⁵ *Zemirot Israel* later appeared in a second edition in Venice (1599) and a third in Belgrade (1837). Contents of the three editions vary, with additional materials in the second edition, some of which were removed in the third.

⁶ Hanoch Avenary, “Gentile Songs as a Source of Inspiration for Israel Najara”, in: *Encounters of East and West in Music*, Tel Aviv: Dept. of Musicology, Tel Aviv University 1979, 186–193.

⁷ Judith R. Cohen, “Musical Bridges: The Contrafact Tradition in Judeo-Spanish Songs”, in: *Cultural Marginality in the Western Mediterranean*, ed. Frederick Gerson and Anthony Percival, Toronto: New Aurora Editions 1990, 121–127; Israel J. Katz, *Judeo-Spanish Traditional Ballads from Jerusalem. An Ethnomusicological Study*, New York: The Institute of Medieval Studies 1972 (Musicological Studies 23 [1]); Edwin Seroussi, “Rabbi Israel Najara: Moulder of Hebrew Sacred Singing after the Expulsion from Spain”, in: *Asufot: Annual for Jewish Studies* 4 (1990), 285–310 (in Hebrew); Edwin Seroussi and Susana Weich-Shahak, “Judeo-Spanish Contrafacts and Musical Adaptations: The Oral Tradition”, in: *Orbis Musicae* 10 A (1990/1991), Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University (Assaph Studies in the Arts), 164–194.

⁸ The Syrian Jewish liturgy for a particular Sabbath incorporates prayers set in a specific *maqam* (category of melody in the Arab modal system), based on associations between that *maqam* and the subject of the weekly Biblical reading. For details of *maqam* use in the Syrian Jewish liturgy in general, see Mark L. Kligman, *Maqam and Liturgy*.

My case study focuses on the largest repertory of contrafacta known as the *pizmon* (pl. *pizmonim*, lit. “[hymns of] adoration” or “praise”) today maintained among Syrian Jews of Aleppian descent living in New York, Jerusalem, Mexico City, and other diasporic locales. The current *pizmon* repertory numbers more than 500 hymns published in a collection issued by the Syrian community in Brooklyn, New York (Shrem 1964–2002).⁹ Today the largest diaspora community of Syrian Jews resides in the New York City metropolitan area.

With the Middle East torn by ethnic and religious conflicts for most of the last century, and with Aleppo in ruins since 2016 as a result of the Syrian civil war, it can be difficult to imagine that close cultural interaction once existed between Arabs and Jews of that region. But this longstanding Arab-Jewish interaction does in fact live on through song. *Pizmonim* are still performed today by Syrian Jews wherever they live on virtually all religious and social occasions, whether at *bar mitzvahs* in the synagogue, circumcision ceremonies at home, or at parties.

Arab music was in the past and is today transmitted primarily as an oral tradition. In Aleppo, Arab music was heard by Jews mainly in public coffee houses, especially by legendary musicians from the Jewish community such as Rabbi Raphael Antebi Taboush (c. 1854–1918). Taboush, who was blind from an early age, is humorously remembered in Syrian Jewish oral traditions as “a thief”, said to have heard a melody in a coffee house one day and to have set it with newly composed Hebrew words the next.¹⁰ Since the early 20th century, Arab songs have also been conveyed and learned through sound recordings and other electronic media.

Ritual, Music, and Aesthetics of Syrian Jews in Brooklyn, Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press 2009.

⁹ Gabriel Shrem (ed.), *Sheer Ushbahah Hallel Ve-Zimrah*, 9th ed., New York: Magen David Publication Society [1964] 2002 (hereafter SUHV). For recordings of selected *pizmonim* and supplementary information provided by the Syrian Jewish community, see Sephardic Heritage Foundation, *Sephardic Pizmonim Project* 2018, <http://www.pizmonim.org/index.php> (16 August 2018).

¹⁰ For more information see the chapter “A Judeo-Arab Musical Tradition” in Shelemyay, *Let Jasmine Rain Down* (see n. 4), 104–134; on Raphael Taboush in particular *ibid.*, 30–31.

In the Jewish religious tradition, a melody borrowed from a secular source is considered to be sanctified when it is set with a new, sacred Hebrew text. The composer of a *pizmon* needed to be quite expert in both Arabic and Hebrew languages in order to craft a new Hebrew text that matched the rhyme and meter of the Arabic original while transforming a secular love song into a hymn praising God. Ordinarily, a *pizmon* composer would be commissioned by the family celebrating a rite of passage; members of the family or the honoree himself would suggest a favorite Arab song melody to be used for the *pizmon*, generally one popular in the community at the time of composition.

Pizmonim were composed by, dedicated to, and performed by men. Women do not sing publicly within Orthodox Jewish communities due to a theological dictum termed *kol isha*, a longstanding religious constraint that deems the voice of a woman to be erotic and restricts men's hearing of it only to immediate family members. However, women are quite active in the *pizmon* tradition through perpetuating oral traditions about songs, by planning and managing life cycle ceremonies at which the songs are performed, and by transmitting the Arab songs on which the *pizmonim* draw.¹¹

Part 2: The *Pizmon* as Locus of Genealogy and Social History

The *pizmonim* are composed for important occasions in the Syrian Jewish life cycle with which they are afterwards closely associated. When a new *pizmon* is completed, its text is printed in Hebrew for distribution by the composer. Next the *pizmon* is rehearsed by a small group of men 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 family. Most *pizmonim* contain the names of the person and family to

¹¹ For a discussion of the role of women in *pizmon* transmission, see Kay K. Shelemyay, "The Power of Silent Voices: Women in the Syrian Jewish Musical Tradition", in: *Music and the Play of Power in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia*, ed. Laudan Nooshin, Great Britain and Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Limited 2009, 269–288.

♩ = 92

Ye - hij-dah hi - t - na - 'a - ri dai le - şa - ro - tekh dai — dai — liv - shi - uz - zekh ve - u - ri

u vo - i a - dai a - dai ikh - li div - shi im ya - ri

be - gan sa - dai — sa - dai ur - i — et ge - diy - yo - tai ve - lo -

- hei a - vi ez - ri Ro - khev she - mei sha - mai yakh - ti re - ni — be - ni - z - ri

vi - nuk - kun ka - mai — ka - mai yo - sif lik - botz pe - zu - rai

ki ar - khu ya - mai ya - mai um kav - veh ye - shu - o - tai Ba - rukh

she - he - he - ya - ni ve - he - e - rikh ye - mo - tai va - a sher k — iy - yema - ni

le - ha - t - ḥil be - miṣ - vo - tai li - z - man zehhig - gi a - ni

u - vo yis - lah — ḥo - vo - tai la - khe - n a - k dish it - to - tai Ume - vo -

- rakh mo - ri tih - yeh rov sha - lom le - va - ne - kha — Ba - hem tis - mah ve - ti - ḥ - yeh

Ex. 1: Musical Transcription of *Pizmon Yehidah Hitna'ari*. Source: Kay K. Shelemay, *Let Jasmine Rain Down. Song and Remembrance Among Syrian Jews*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 1998, 179–180.

The musical score consists of five staves of music in 6/8 time, treble clef. The lyrics are in Hebrew and Arabic script, with some words in English. The score includes various musical markings such as triplets, grace notes, and dynamic markings. The lyrics are as follows:

31: ve kha - zeh ḥa - ta - ne kha Bir-kat hed - yot al tih - yeh

34: nekal - lah be - e - ne - kha sha - lom _ la - khem rab - bo - tai Ye - hi -

37: -dah hi - t-na - 'a - ri dai le - ṣa - ro - tekh dai _ dai liv-shi uz - zekh ve - u - ri

40: u - vo - i a - dai a - dai ikh - li div - shi im ya - ri

43: be - gan sa - dai _ sa - dai ur - i et ge - diy - yo - tai ve - lo - hei

Ex. 1: (continued).

whom they are dedicated, while some also convey a good measure of social history, as can be seen in the case of *pizmon Yehidah Hitna'ari*.

Pizmon Yehidah Hitna'ari was composed in honor of Joseph Saff's *bar mitzvah* in 1933. The composer was Moses Ashear, the leading cantor at that time in the New York Syrian community, who had immigrated from Aleppo to the United States in 1912. Cantor Ashear had been the student and ward of Rabbi Raphael Taboush, a renowned composer of *pizmonim* in late 19th-century Aleppo. Although Cantor Ashear composed many *pizmonim* by commission, he voluntarily composed the Saff *pizmon* for reasons that will be explained below. Ashear himself chose the *pizmon* melody from an Arab song he must have known well, although it was not one that Joseph Saff nor anyone from his family selected. Joseph Saff shared information about his *pizmon* with my research team in fall 1984, during an interview, the relevant portions of which are shared in the following pages. However, neither Saff nor the other Syrian Jewish men present at the Brooklyn recording session

recalled the original Arabic song to which the *pizmon* was set.¹² It seems likely that the Arabic song was one that Cantor Ashear had learned in Aleppo before he migrated to New York City. Joseph Saff knew only that the incipit of the Arabic song translates “Oh, the rose tree, your roots are on the water”. He believed that Cantor Ashear selected a simple folk song “that was not very popular”.¹³

Although some Arab source melodies were very well known at the time of their use in a *pizmon*, and these popular songs were often performed by Syrian Jewish singers with their original Arabic texts at secular community events such as parties, relatively little of the historical and genealogical information embedded within the Hebrew texts is common knowledge. However, information elicited during ethnographic interviews with surviving family members reveals hidden textual meanings. In the case of *pizmon Yehidah Hitna’ari*, Joseph Saff himself provided a wealth of information about the content of his own *pizmon* text.

In Figure 1, the English translation of the *pizmon*’s Hebrew text is provided. We must begin with an English translation in order to clarify what the textual surface communicates. The introduction to the text provides the name of the dedicatee (Joseph Saff), the date of its first performance, and the occasion for which the song was composed. There are two references in the text (at the beginning in the prefatory lines and in verse 3) to the bar mitzvah ritual and to the Jewish custom for the 13-year-old honoree to wear a pair of black leather boxes (*tefillin*) containing Hebrew prayers, one bound on his forehead and the second, on his left arm. Otherwise, beyond the bar mitzvah boy’s name (Joseph) and unnamed references to the bar mitzvah boy’s mother, brothers, and sisters in the second verse, only two clearly identifiable names can be found in the text. In verse 3, there is a reference to an uncle named Mordekhai, and in verse 4, a reference to “the Tishbi”, meaning

¹² For details of the team research project on the *pizmonim* carried out with my graduate students at New York University during 1985 and 1986, see Kay K. Shelemay, “Together in the Field: Team Research Among Syrian Jews in Brooklyn, New York”, in: *Ethnomusicology* 32/3 (1988), 369–384.

¹³ Joseph Saff, Interview, 10 September 1996.

“Elijah the Tishbi”, the Biblical prophet.¹⁴ But there are in fact many other names embedded as well as material that illuminates social history: These contents can be revealed by combining Joseph Saff’s testimony with evidence from the original printed copy of the Hebrew *pizmon* text distributed by Cantor Ashear at Saff’s *bar mitzvah*. The facsimile of the *pizmon* text, provided by Joseph Saff in 1984 from his personal papers, is shown in Plate 1; I have added superscript numbers within the facsimile to facilitate the discussion below for readers who do not read Hebrew.

Composer Moses Ashear, in an unusual gesture, capitalised within the printed text all the proper names included in this song. In the facsimile provided by Joseph Saff, superscript numbers mark the location of capitalised names (starting with no. 13, following the introduction to the song text). 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 the Hebrew facsimile will see that the Hebrew text has an acrostic that begins “*Joseph Hazaq*” (“Joseph Strong”), spelled out by a capital letter at the beginning of every other line extending down the right-hand margin. The Hebrew words at the top of the facsimile are numbered 1–12. Number 1, running from right to left across the top line excerpt the liturgical passage instructing the *bar mitzvah* boy that the *teffilin* “shall be for a token upon thy hand; and for frontlets between thine eyes”.¹⁵ Line no. 2 reads “Song for the Bar Mitzvah”, while nos. 3–9 dedicate the song to the “handsome student Joseph Ezra Şafidiyyah [later shortened to “Saff”], on the date 13 Adar in year 5693 of the Hebrew calendar.¹⁶ No. 10 indicates that the *maqam* is *Bayat Nawa*; no. 11 transcribes the acrostic running down the

¹⁴ In Hebrew, names have meanings and can be incorporated (and disguised) within commonly used words. For example, the name Joseph means “that which will increase”, while the name Ezra means “to assist”. Hebrew is written from right to left.

¹⁵ This passage, drawn from Deuteronomy 6:7–8, is an integral part of the *Shema*, the central Jewish prayer required to be recited twice a day in synagogue rituals, once in the morning and once in the evening, respectively.

¹⁶ Joseph Saff was born on leap year day, February 29, 1920. His *bar mitzvah* took place on the thirteenth day of Adar [February/March] in 1933.

A song for the Bar Mitzvah celebration of the gracious student,
Joseph Ezra Saff (Şafadiyyah), 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 . . .

Rejoice with me, my mother,
My brothers and my sisters.
For on this day today I enter,
On the [first] day of the fourteenth of my years,
To serve Him with my prayer,
In my heart and on my lips,
With the community of my congregation.
You, the one and only . . .

A crown I shall put between my eyes,
And a sign I will bind upon my arm,
To the One who performed miracles,
For the people of Mordekhai, my uncle.
Set your eye upon me, Lord,
For I am left alone,
There is no one to set up my curtains.
You, the one and only . . .

Strengthen, O God, upright and feared,
The bars of my gates,
And I shall see the Tishbi running,

Fig. 1: English Translation of *Pizmon Yehidah Hitna'ari*. Source: Shelemay, *Let Jasmine Rain Down* (see n. 4), 172–174.

Flying, leaping upon the mountains.
 He seeks a forceful vision,
 For he will remove my flock
 To the place of my abode,
You, the one and only . . .

Praised is the One who has kept me alive
 and lengthened my days;
 The One who has preserved me
 that I may start my performance of commanded things.
 He let me reach this time,
 [A time] when He'll forgive my debts.
 And so, [to Him,] I dedicate my life.
You, the one and only . . .

May you, my teacher, be blessed.
 May there be great peace for your children.
 May you rejoice in them and be kept alive.
 Like this, too, your son-in-law.
 Let not the blessing of a layman
 be light in your eyes.
 Peace to you, my gentlemen.
You, the one and only . . .

(Translated by Geoffrey Goldberg and James Robinson)

Fig. 1: (continued).

right margin; and no. 12 provides the Arabic incipit that Saff translated as “Oh, the rose tree, your roots are on the water”.

The text of the song begins with what becomes its refrain and carries particularly important content. The refrain 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.

The refrain speaks eloquently about the situation of Joseph Saff's family in the 1930s. It addresses Saff's mother directly – “you, the one and only” – and calls on her to put her troubles behind her. This verbal gesture toward a woman is quite unusual for a *pizmon*, which we have already seen is a largely male musical genre. A very difficult family situation moved Ashear to com-

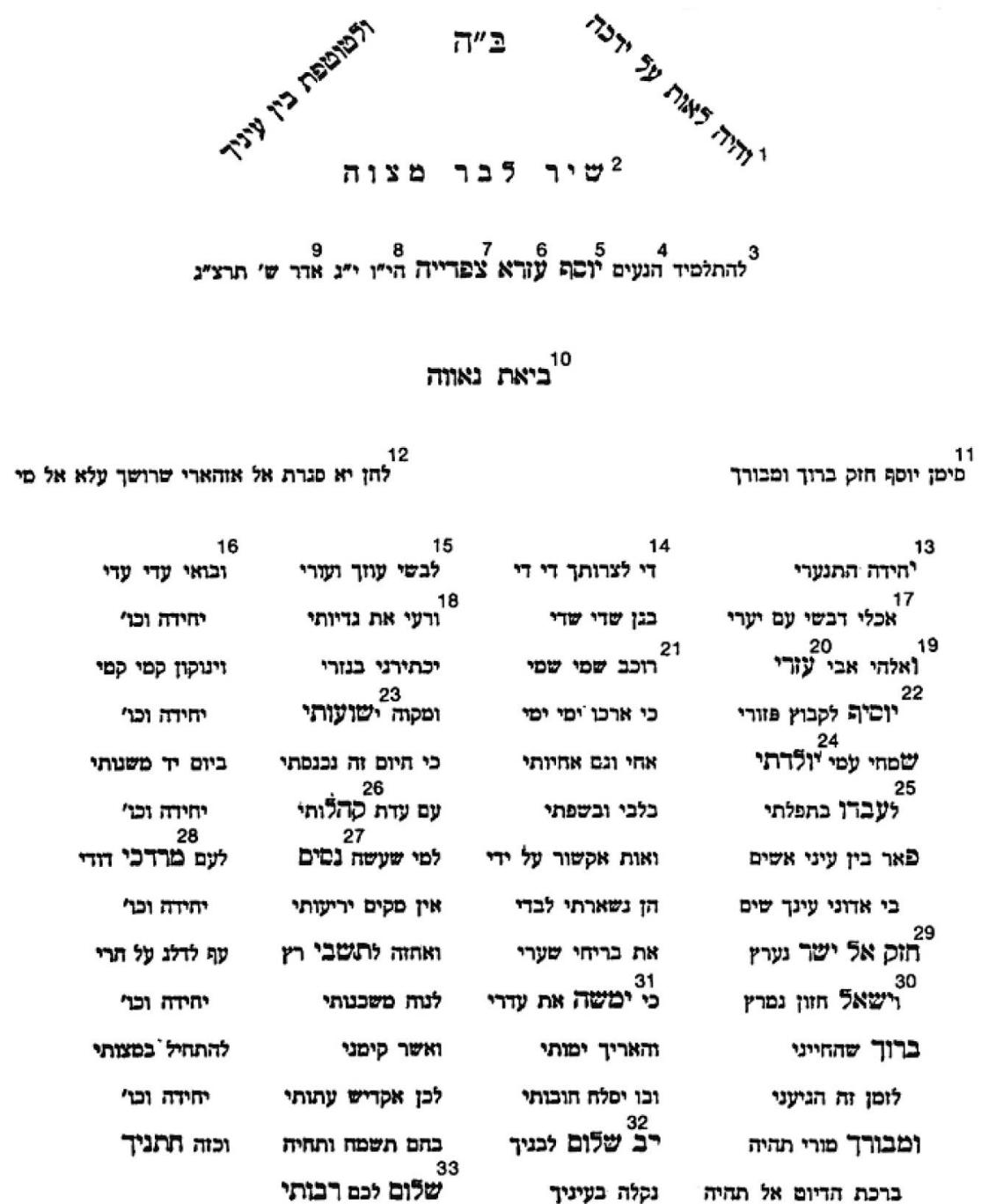


Plate 1: Facsimile of *Pizmon Yehidah Hitna'ari*. Text Prepared by Cantor Moses Ashear and Distributed at the *Bar Mitzvah* of Joseph Saff. Source: Joseph Saff, Interview, 23 October 1984; Shelemay, *Let Jasmine Rain Down* (see n. 4), 175.

pose *pizmon Yehidah Hitna'ari* and to address these circumstances within the song.

Joseph Saff's father died in 1927, when Joe was seven years old, leaving his mother a widow with six children under nine years of age.¹⁷ Joseph Saff described these traumatic times as follows:

My father died when I was seven – the oldest was 9, 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 6 months to 9 months to 10 months. Black dress, black shoes, black hosiery. And not to go out to the street the first 2 or 3 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 42 and she was maybe middle 30's [...] But she took it very hard [...] They used to cover the sofas and club chairs in the living room also with black for 2 to 3 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 10 years after my father passed away [...] My mother stayed home indoors for 10 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 4 – 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.¹⁸

Although she likely did not attend the synagogue to hear 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 perhaps heard it sung at a traditional Sabbath afternoon domestic songfest. But *pizmon Yehidah Hitna'ari* is so full of names and other veiled references that only oral testimony can reveal what is concealed. We are fortunate that

¹⁷ Cantor Moses Ashear lost his own father at the age of six in 1883, which may have accounted for his concern for the young Saff and his initiative in composing the *pizmon* for the *bar mitzvah*.

¹⁸ Joseph Saff, Interview, 23 October 1984.

Joseph Saff explained the following phrases and names from the *pizmon*, which are marked with superscript numbers:

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 uzzekh ve'uri*: "awaken and wear your courage"
16. *Uvo'i adai adai*: "and come to me" [don't ignore your family]
17. *Ikhli devashi im yari*: "it's about time you started to taste honey and honeycomb"
18. *Uri et gediyotai*: "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" [Reference to Saff's mother]
25. *Le'ovdo*: Uncle Ovadiah
26. *Kehil*: Saff does not remember this name nor 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
- [no number] *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"

Pizmon Yehidah Hitna'ari thus recounts a painful chapter in local history, seeking to provide advice to a bereaved mother while recording the genealogy of a family and their social circle. The song seeks to reunite Mrs. Saff and her family with their community, using the joyous milestone of Joseph's

bar mitzvah as a pathway for this return. The song also commemorates a state of loss, offering comfort to young Joseph and his bereaved mother on an important occasion, while retaining the situation in collective memory.

Part 3: Considering the sources of Syrian Jewish *pizmonim*

The contrafact process in the Syrian Jewish tradition results in a hybrid form in which a new text in the Hebrew language is joined to a pre-existing melody. On many occasions, however, the source of the borrowed tune for some of these *pizmonim*, especially those that are particularly historically remote, may not be clear from names of the source melodies provided. For example, one can take the widely known *pizmon Refa Siri* ("Heal my pain") composed by Rabbi Raphael Taboush in late 19th-century Aleppo. While its melody is attributed in SUHV to a Spanish song titled *Triste vida*, ("A sad life"),¹⁹ scholars with expertise in Sephardic music have not been able to locate a Spanish song of this title. They have, however, traced its melody to a folksong transmitted within Judeo-Spanish repertoires.²⁰

It is far easier to discuss and define hybridity in more recently composed *pizmonim*. Here we often have documentary evidence of an interactive cultural relationship, including interview testimony, that can be used to construct a rough cultural typology of borrowing.²¹ There appear to be at least three broad categories of cultural interaction exhibited through the Syrian *pizmon* repertory: 1) interactions shaped by on-going majority/minority relationships within shared cultural channels; 2) interactions based on occasional, even fleeting, encounters in public contexts with unfamiliar music tra-

¹⁹ SUHV, 116.

²⁰ Shelemay, *Let Jasmine Rain Down* (see n. 4), 203, citing Edwin Seroussi, Personal Communication (19 January 1997).

²¹ Peter Burkholder's analysis of musical borrowing in Charles Ives' compositions provides insight into different musical processes relevant to musical borrowing and quotation but does not address borrowings outside the composer's own cultural arena nor contrafacta directly. See Peter Burkholder, *All Made of Tunes: Charles Ives and the Uses of Musical Borrowing*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1995.

ditions; and 3) interactions generated by personal tastes and cultural affinities of individual musicians.

1) Interactions Shaped by Shared Cultural Channels

Jewish communities have historically lived as minorities within majority societies across the world. Wherever Jews lived for any length of time, the primary source of their secular music as well as their sacred melodic borrowings have been from the dominant culture of that place.

[...] There is a firm article of faith shared by practically all of today's Judaica scholars that, in all times and places, pre-modern or 'traditional' Jews lived in intimate interaction with surrounding cultures to the point where they may be considered to be embedded in them and, consequently, indebted to them in terms of culture.²²

In the case of the Syrian Jews, it was the majority Arab music tradition that long provided the greatest number of contrafact melodies for the *pizmon* tradition. There is ample historical evidence that Syrian Jews were deeply engaged in Aleppo musical circles. A Damascene chronicler in 1744 described a visit to his city of "three Jews from Aleppo, expert musicians in command of the finest repertoire. They performed in the coffeehouses of Damascus and entertained both the high and the low".²³

Syrian Jewish engagement with the Arab musical tradition continued well after they departed Aleppo and settled in diaspora locales, as we have already seen in the case of *pizmon Yehidah Hitna'ari*. We can take as another even more recent example the *pizmon Ramah Everai*, which was composed by Brooklyn community member Louis Massry for the occasion of the *bar mitzvah* of his great-nephew Alan Nassar on May 23, 1982. The *pizmon* melody was borrowed from "The Wheat Song" ("Al-qamh"), composed in 1946 by renowned Egyptian singer and lute player Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab. The song originally accompanied a scene in the movie *Lastu malakan* ("I am not an angel"), during which Egyptian peasants sang while "reaping the

²² Moshe Rosman, *How Jewish is Jewish History?*, Oxford, UK and Portland, Oregon: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization 2007, 82.

²³ Abraham Marcus. *The Middle East on the Eve of Modernity: Aleppo in the Eighteenth Century*, New York: Columbia University Press 1989, 43–44.

wheat".²⁴ The "Wheat Song" was performed across the Middle East and its diaspora, and was selected for use as a *pizmon* by Massry in consultation with Moses Tawil, his brother-in-law and the grandfather of the *bar mitzvah* boy. Both men were aficionados of the music of 'Abd al-Wahhab: "I have every record and tape of 'Abd al-Wahhab. As soon as a new one came out I would buy it".²⁵

The composition of *pizmon Ramah Everai* both reveals the continuing power of the Middle Eastern musical tradition among Syrian Jews in their American diaspora and the manner in which their historical identity as "Arab Jews" remained meaningful to their lives in North America. At the same time, it is worth noting that 'Abd al-Wahhab's "Wheat Song" itself displays a somewhat westernised musical form and style: It was light and short by Arab standards and set in *ajam*, the *maqam* closest to the Western major scale. The recordings of "The Wheat Song" that circulated internationally featured other striking innovations associated with 'Abd al-Wahhab's musical style, which included combining traditional Arab instruments with those of the Western orchestra. Thus *pizmonim* such as *Ramah Everai* provide evidence of both continued communication across increasingly impenetrable cultural boundaries and reveal changes in that discourse at different points in time.²⁶

²⁴ Nabil S. Azzam, Personal communication, 16 September 1996, and Azzam, "Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab in Modern Egyptian Music," PhD dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles 1990, 114.

²⁵ Louis Massry, Interview, 22 October 1991. Both Tawil and Massry were unaware that the song was originally composed for a film, since they had encountered it through its international circulation on cassette recordings. The time lag between the composition of "The Wheat Song" in 1946 and the use of its melody for the 1982 *pizmon* was longer than typical for Syrian Jewish practice.

²⁶ "The Wheat Song" in its original recording also provides a remarkable instance of cross-cultural borrowing typical of Arab music at large during that era. The song begins with an introduction by an ensemble of Arab drums that are interrupted by a solo piccolo playing a transformation of the flute theme from the second act of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* ballet. 'Abd al-Wahhab frequently quoted from Western classical compositions in this manner. However, Massry and Tawil were unfamiliar with the "Chinese flute theme" from *The Nutcracker* ballet and replaced 'Abd al-Wahhab's lengthy percussion introduction with a straightforward lute passage based on the main *pizmon* melody.

It is clear that *pizmonim* have also drawn on whatever musical influences were within earshot. While the vast majority of pre-twentieth-century *pizmonim* borrow from Arabic song repertoires for their melodies, there is evidence of growing cultural connections well beyond the boundaries of the Arab sound world even in historical Aleppo. There Raphael Taboush composed a *pizmon* still popular today that is sung at circumcision ceremonies, *Ram Leħasdakh* (“Exalt your mercy”).²⁷ Set in *maqam rast*, the *pizmon* is credited as using the melody of a polka, but in fact borrows the tune of the traditional French round *Frère Jacques*. The date and source of the entry of *Frère Jacques* to Aleppo is unknown, as is the reason for the association of *Ram Leħasdakh* with the circumcision ceremony.²⁸ However, in the 20th century we begin to find more tunes from outside Arab culture entering into the *pizmon* repertory, no doubt due to the geographical separation from the Arab world as well as Syrian Jewish residency in multicultural neighborhoods on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and in Brooklyn.

2) Interactions Based on Heterogeneous Musical Encounters

During their early years in New York City, most Syrian Jews lived first on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Just as Raphael Taboush learned melodies at Aleppo coffee houses, Cantor Moses Ashear picked up tunes he heard casually in the very diverse local environment. Ashear's son recalled that his father had once heard a melody he liked played by an Italian organ grinder accompanying a dancing monkey outside his window on the Lower East Side, and immediately composed a *pizmon*.²⁹ This *pizmon*, *Mi Zot*, (“Who's That”) borrows the melody of the Neapolitan song *Santa Lucia*.³⁰

²⁷ SUHV, 125.

²⁸ The Hebrew text does contain a possible veiled allusion to the redemption of the firstborn (*pidyon haben*), a ceremony for a newborn son prescribed in Numbers 18: 16–17. However, *pizmonim* composed for circumcision ceremonies are traditionally set in *maqam saba*, while a Western major melody such as *Frère Jacques* would be classified as *maqam ajam*.

²⁹ Albert Ashear, Interview, 19 July 1989.

³⁰ SUHV, 187. For unknown reasons, the source song *Santa Lucia* has evidently been mistaken for an operatic aria and is identified in SUHZ as “Opera Africa”, likely a reference to Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida*. The composer of *Santa Lucia*, Teodoro Cottrau, was a

Other unexpected melodies made their way into the *pizmonim* of early 20th-century New York. For one wedding *pizmon* composed in the 1920s, Cantor Ashear used a melody that the groom, Samuel Aharon Franco, requested. The text for *pizmon Mifalot Elohim* ("The Works of God") refers to the forthcoming wedding and is set to the melody of Franco's high school anthem:³¹

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 the bridegroom nor Cantor Ashear were aware that High School 62 on the Lower East Side of Manhattan had itself borrowed the melody for its anthem – from the Christmas carol *O Tannenbaum*.³²

Throughout the 20th century one finds a variety of melodies that were borrowed from different repertoires and cultural traditions, then set with new Hebrew texts as *pizmonim*. By mid-century the Syrian community was participating actively in American society,³³ an engagement that brought

Neapolitan music publisher and a close friend of Bellini and other opera composers of his time (Stefano Ajani, Art. "Cottrau, Teodoro", *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, and John Tyrrell, London: Macmillian, 2nd ed., 6 [2001], 548). The melody of *Santa Lucia* is classified as *maqam ajam*. The text of this *pizmon* indicates that it was composed in honor of the birth of a baby girl, a very unusual dedication.

³¹ SUHV, 189.

³² H.S. 62 burned down in 1929 and was subsequently reconstructed as Seward High School. (Hyman Kaire, Interview, 14 March 1985.)

³³ During World War II, many Syrian Jews fought in the American military. Between 1942 and 1945, the Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn published 25 issues of a "Victory Bulletin" dedicated to "those men and women who served both in the homefront and in the foxholes during those critical years of World War II," as well as to nine men from the Syrian community who died while serving in U.S. Armed Forces during this time. These newsletters were compiled and published as *The Victory Bulletin. July 1942–September 1945*, Brooklyn, New York: Sephardic Archives of the Sephardic Community Cen-

Ex. 2: Musical Transcription of *pizmon Mifalot Elohim*. Source: Shelemay, *Let Jasmine Rain Down* (see n. 4), 199.

with it musical changes. *Pizmonim* were set to American patriotic songs, including one celebrating the construction in the early 1950s of the Ahi Ezer Congregation in Brooklyn, sung to the tune of *God Bless America*.³⁴ The use of melodies from sources such as musical theater mark the increasing integration of Syrian Jews into the American urban environment and cultural life. Cantor Ezekiel H. Albeg composed a *bar mitzvah pizmon*, *Ashir Na Shir Tikvah* ("I Will Sing a Song of Hope") to the melody of the title song from the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* (see Plate 2).³⁵

3) Interactions Generated by Individual Musical Tastes

It is clear that the close engagement by an individual musician with a given musical tradition can inflect the choice of melodies he uses to set *pizmonim* and prayers within the Syrian Jewish tradition. A notable example can be seen in the practice of Cantor Isaac Cain, born in 1925 to parents who had emigrated two years earlier from Aleppo to Mexico City, where Cain lived

ter, Wartime newspapers of the Syrian Jewish Community in Brooklyn, compiled by the Sephardic Archives c. 1985.

³⁴ See Sheryl Kaskowitz, *God Bless America: The Surprising History of an Iconic Song*, New York: Oxford University Press 2013 for a discussion of the song's genesis and shifting associations with American patriotism.

³⁵ SUHV, p. 509c. This *pizmon* is the only one notated in SUHV; otherwise, only texts are printed and melodies are transmitted through the oral tradition.

תקט(ב)

זומרה

מקאם חגיאן

הַלְלָה

509b

כָּנָר עַל הַגָּג Fiddler On The Roof (musical notes)

Chorus

A - way a - bove my head I see the strang-est sight, A
 בָּהּ, בָּהּ, מֵצָבָה מְרַחְבָּה יְמֵי נָאשֵׁר אָ

FID - DLER ON THE ROOF, who's up there day and night; He
 fid - dies when it rains. He fid - dies when it snows, I've
 never seen him rest. Yet on and on he goes.

What does it mean, this FID - DLER ON THE ROOF, Who fid - dies ev 'ry night and
 fid - dies ev 'ry noon? Why should he pick so cu - ri - ous a place to
 play his lit - tle fid - dler's tune? 1. An tune? 2. An tune? A
 בָּהּ, בָּהּ, מֵצָבָה מְרַחְבָּה יְמֵי נָאשֵׁר אָ

Plate 2: Musical Transcription of *Pizmon Ashir Na Shir Tikvah*. Source: Shelemay, *Let Jasmine Rain Down* (see n. 4), 186; reproduced by permission from SUHV, no. 509b.

and for many years led the Syrian Jewish liturgy in a major synagogue. Cain had studied the *pizmonim* with Hayyim Tawil, who, like Cantor Moses Ashear, had been a protégé of Rabbi Raphael Taboush in Aleppo before he immigrated to Mexico City in 1912.

All Syrian Jewish cantors interpolate *pizmon* melodies within the Syrian Jewish liturgy, using them in an improvisatory way to set important prayer texts and to reinforce the particular *maqam* used during a given week. But Cantor Cain did not always take a traditional approach to composing contra-facta; at times, he simply borrowed a favorite melody and used it directly to set the words of statutory prayers within the synagogue ritual.³⁶ In addition to telescoping the process of melodic borrowing, Cain borrowed melodies mainly from the Western classical tradition.

In 1951, Cain began to take piano lessons from a teacher who suggested that he buy classical music recordings. "So I bought all this music and I started to listen and I loved it immediately".³⁷ Over the years, Cain developed a list of classical melodies that he would draw on for liturgical use, wedging the borrowed melody directly to the text of an existing liturgical prayer. For instance, Cain set the prominent *Kaddish* prayer text to many different melodies from classical Western orchestral compositions, drawing on tunes such as the main theme of Sergei W. Rachmaninov's *Piano Concerto no. 1, Op. 18* and of Joaquin Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez*. In this way, Isaac Cain and other innovative cantors brought new melodies from previously unfamiliar sources into the Syrian Jewish liturgy, a process surely practiced by musicians in other contrafact traditions as well.

³⁶ Seroussi and Weich-Shahak, "Judeo-Spanish Contrafacts" (see note 6) have pointed out in their studies from Jerusalem that "strict contrafacts" have diminished over time in Sephardic tradition. A "strict contrafact" borrowed a Judeo-Spanish folksong melody and used it to set a new, sacred Hebrew text. Following the exile from Spain in the 16th century, poets began to borrow tunes from local musical tradition, a process referred to by some as "adaptation". However, in the Syrian Jewish tradition, it is clear that the borrowing process historically accommodated more casual borrowing of favorite tunes, including integrating them into the liturgy.

³⁷ Isaac Cain, Interview, 7 September 1991.

Conclusion

Contrafacta play multiple roles in musical and cultural life. They are powerful mnemonic devices that support and sustain the transmission of texts within oral traditions over time. A familiar melody can cue a flash of recognition in the knowledgeable listener as well as serving as a site of nostalgia for times and places past.

Contrafacta serve to sustain double identities: Their texts tell one story, but their tunes carry different narratives from the past. Over time, text and tune fuse, rendering it a challenge to uncover the doubleness lost to memory through processes of migration and inexorable changes over time. The *piz-mon* tradition explored here exploits its own doubleness in very powerful ways, speaking to the full range of Syrian Jewish experience while preserving an Arab-Jewish tradition for which there is little room in the world today.

