

Yehuda Kurtzer, Dr. Mijal Bitton, and the Erasure of Sephardic Liturgical Music from the Shalom Hartman Institute Ashkenazi NIGGEN

In the “Bourekas and Haminados” Sephardischkeit construct it is usual to allow us to at least have music along with our food!

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/zwaRDoJ0IRo/m/-NdTkKFtAQAJ>

Now, we are already aware of how Shalom Hartman Institute North American director Yehuda Kurtzer has erased us from his much-heralded *New Jewish Canon*; a place where only Ashkenazim have anything to say:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ppIJ5kkel1BtcBDaFoPs4UUHJqYSplQEGlvfVxo7Jkg/edit>

In this same vein, Kurtzer’s contribution to the new SHI journal *Sources* very duplicitously asks: “What Happened to Jewish Pluralism?”

<https://www.sourcesjournal.org/articles/what-happened-tojewish-pluralism>

As I have already said, “Pluralism” means White Jewish Supremacy and its many dysfunctional denominations. Sephardim are very emphatically not part of such “Pluralism.”

SHI’s House Sephardi Dr. Mijal Bitton has a piece in the journal on Jewish Sexism that unsurprisingly has nothing much to do with Sephardim, but a lot to do with the New Jewish Social Science:

<https://www.sourcesjournal.org/articles/is-jewish-continuity-sexist>

And we have seen just how much damage the New Jewish Social Science has done to Sephardim – not that Bitton would care much!

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1_k1I5KoFmIK0Qk7Zfd6HvTPo3iYaWL6YpuRp3VY3tgA/edit

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1l4GaqfTjcBkotDfzurNs8unp9sRA374FLKOmeEBcOkU/edit>

It is all about padding the resumé and cashing those White Jewish checks.

Bitton is also a proud contributor to the shameful Orientalist Haggadah produced by photographer Zion Ozeri and SHI’s Sara Wolkenfeld:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/aEQdT7Ye7pc>

Just to make things that much worse, Kurtzer has now boldly announced that Sephardim do not even rate when it comes to Jewish music!

<https://mailchi.mp/shi.org.il/two-podcasts-for-pesach-listening?e=ce188d0296>

Here are the details of his new SHI podcast, which is White Jews Only:

The American Jewish Music Episode

On [Identity/Crisis](#) podcast episode #50, Yehuda Kurtzer hosts a lively discussion with music enthusiasts Dovid Bashevkin, Yardaena Osband, Miri Miller, and Shira Hanau about religious Judaism in America and its musical evolution from Mordechai Ben David to Nissim Black and Debbie Friedman - plus a special [Spotify playlist](#) of music they discussed.

Yardaena Osband, of something called Talking Talmud Podcast, says it all:

"I think this speaks to all music: a good nigun is a good nigun. There's just something that makes you feel like it was created before Bereshit...that's why it ends up everywhere, because a good song is just a good song."

Here is their playlist – see if you can spot the racist trend:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/07sZQNNCONxjECFCpg5Cis?si=1d78455f251948dc&nd=1>

That's right – of the 31 songs – almost all of them Haredi Lakewood fodder – we get only one Sephardi – Gad Elbaz – who is really not much of a Sephardi anyway:

<https://www.theledger.com/article/LK/20051112/news/608142867/LL>

He's another Justin Bieber, by way of Rabbi Eli Mansour!

<https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/entertainment/2019/september/justin-bieber-opens-up-about-how-the-love-of-christ-led-him-through-heavy-drug-abuse-anxiety>

For those – not racists like Yehuda Kurtzer – who are actually interested in the classic Arab Jewish liturgical tradition as practiced in the Brooklyn Syrian community, I would strongly recommend reading Kay Kaufman Shelemay's classic book *Let Jasmine Rain Down: Song and Remembrance Among Syrian Jews*:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1JHUpX2lTrVYq3m6lrI7DfzHhSPKIubS6TWuNggHBnH8/edit>

<https://www.amazon.com/Let-Jasmine-Rain-Down-Ethnomusicology/dp/0226752119>

It is unlikely that anyone at SHI – including Dr. Bitton – has actually read the book. That is what White Jewish Supremacy is all about. No apology necessary.

Included in the book is a CD featuring Professor Shelemay's field recordings from community cantors that was first presented in truncated form on Shanachie Records' 1985 LP "Pizmon":

<https://www.discogs.com/Pizmon-Syrian-Jewish-Religious-And-Social-Songs/release/16055055>

In order to fill people in who might not be aware of the depth of the classic Sephardic musical heritage and its intimate connection to Arab song, I have written a number of articles that help to explain the situation.

Back in 2009 I wrote an article on the great traditionalist and World Music specialist Simon Shaheen and his wonderful "Aswat" performance at New York's Town Hall:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vixVPPx4qRfOtAHV6alAI8mM9Mf0mLqN/view?ths=true>

Shaheen's most authentic recording of the classic Arab tradition is his seminal 1990 album "The Music of Mohamed Abdel Wahab":

<https://billlaswell.bandcamp.com/album/the-music-of-mohamed-abdel-wahab>

<https://www.amazon.com/Music-Mohamed-Abdel-Wahab-Shaheen/dp/B000000GBC>

In my Tikkun magazine article I laid out the dialectical situation in the following manner:

For those who are not familiar with this liturgical tradition, the songs known in Hebrew as *pizmonim*, written by the cantors and rabbis of the community, were adaptations of the melodies of songsmiths like Abdel Wahhab. So many of the songs of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq appear in the contemporary Syrian Jewish liturgy having their Arabic words replaced with sacred texts in Hebrew composed by poets like Refa'el Antebi Tabboush, Moses Ashear and Ezekiel Hai Albeg.

This is the music that we grew up with. At the feet of my grandmother I personally imbibed this music and it became for me – as for many of my peers – a critical part of my cultural identity. There was little sense of a divide between the Arabic originals and the Hebrew adaptations. The only way to understand and appreciate this music was to go back to the originals – and that meant listening to the recordings of Um Kulthum, Abdel Wahhab, Farid al-Atrash and the others who sang this music in the Arab world.

Unlike the insular nature of Eastern European Klezmer music and the “created before Bereshit” NIGGEN, prized by Kurtzer and his White Jewish podcast participants, our Pizmonim are a reflection of Muslim-Jewish Convivencia:

As the orchestra’s sound swelled to crescendo, I found myself welling up and becoming extremely emotional, recalling the moments when I sat with my late grandmother listening to these songs – the 78 RPM records played on an old Victrola that I would crank up on her instructions. When music becomes so much a natural and organic part of our most intimate being, the emotional resonance of its timbres strikes a deep chord within us.

But even more than this, what I have learned over the years in remaining true to my grandmother’s vision of the world is that this music is not merely a static part of my life, but, as the term “Wounded kinship’s last resort” indicates, it is a cultural force that reflects a symbiosis that we are now told never existed – that could never have existed as Jews were never Arabs.

Then in 2010 Tikkun published my article on the excellent ECM album “Siwan,” featuring Jon Balke and Amina Alaoui:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/aEQdT7Ye7pc>

For those who would like to purchase the recording:

<https://www.amazon.com/Siwan-Jon-Balke/dp/B001PS0EKW>

It is a wonderful way to experience the music of Al-Andalus in a way that honors the Convivencia spirit and breathes new life into it.

In 2003 ECM provided us with the extraordinary album “Terra Nostra” from the Greek performer Savina Yannatou, which allows for an even more expansive presentation of the Mediterranean tradition and its wide ethno-cultural scope:

<https://www.amazon.com/Nostra-Yannatou-Primavera-Salunico-2003-03-25/dp/B01A9KN32M>

The following year I wrote a review on Ms. Yannatou’s concert at SUNY-Stony Brook:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/12IYoBxfshy0jIsyIVgFE3RCSvGY2MX7L3h_bM/ZxQgl8/edit

In this context it is worthwhile to remember the great cantor of the Brooklyn SY community Rabbi Raphael Yair Elnadav; an expert practitioner of the many musical traditions of the Middle East, Ottoman Empire, and Iberian Peninsula, whose 1961 album “Ladino Folk Songs” is a lovely rendering of this music:

<https://www.discogs.com/Raphael-Yair-Elnadav-Ladino-Folk-Judeo-Spanish-Ballads-and-Songs-of-Love/release/10119034>

In 2004 Rabbi David Cohen organized a moving tribute to Elnadav, who passed away in 2011:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1zofMljxHb4rgKGjX3IhN8ys1zwYhHvIV-MsuGtje5YY/edit>

We must also recall the brilliant poet, cantor, songwriter, and grammarian [Ezekiel Hai Albeg](#), whose autobiographical [maqama](#) *Kenaf Renanim* still awaits a proper edition and translation from a community that would likely not appreciate its brilliance:

<http://www.worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n85-15293/>

<https://www.worldcat.org/title/kenaf-renanim-haruzim-shirim-u-fizmonim/oclc/41122253>

Albeg edited the Holiday *mahzorim* of the community and helped to mentor younger singers in the classic tradition.

I have discussed the community's abiding concern for its musical heritage in my tribute to Moe Tawil:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1JHUpX2lTrVyq3m6lrI7DfzHhSPKIubS6TWuNggHBnH8/edit>

My uncle Isaac Cabasso recounted to me the story of his father Jacob who was tasked with walking the blind Repha'el 'Antebi Tabboush, the primary writer of the songs in the SY songbook *Shir u-Shbaha Hallel ve-Zimra*, to the local coffeehouse, *Ahweh*, in Aleppo where he would stand outside the window and listen to the songs being sung.

<http://www.pizmonim.org/hazzan.php?hazzan=RTabbush>

Little Jacob would then walk the rabbi-cantor-poet home, where he would adapt the melody he had just heard and compose Hebrew words to fit it.

Careful readers of the SY songbook will notice that in the top left-hand corner of the text is the title of the original song who melody was used by the writer.

Most of the titles are in Arabic, but there is one song "Magen Yish'i" (#146 in *Shir u-Shbaha*) which is reputedly based on an Italian folk song called "Margarita":

<http://www.pizmonim.org/book.php#127>

The song was featured in the 1945 war movie "A Bell for Adano" during a festive communal dance sequence:

<https://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/68410/a-bell-for-adano>

Here is the description of the song from the Pizmonim.org website:

This pizmon, "Magen Yish'ee" (RAST, page 127), is composed by H Moses Ashear (acrostic: Moshe Hazaq), in honor of the wedding of Mr Ezra Obadia Labaton In Brooklyn, NY, circa 1920-25. The melody of this song is from the Dutch folk song entitled "Trip a Trop a Tronjes." As the melody sounds, this is a very happy song that celebrates the occasion of a wedding in the Labaton family. The last stanza contains a reference to H Mordekhai Labaton (1780-1869); the great Aleppian Rabbi and patriarch of this family. The last stanza also contains a prayer to return to the sanctuary of the Temple and to rebuild the city of Zion (Jerusalem). This melody is commonly applied to Shav'at Aniyim on weeks of Maqam RAST. On December 7, 2013, two days after the passing of Rabbi Ezra Labaton, Rabbi of Congregation Magen David of West Deal and the grandson of the individual mentioned above, this song was used as the PIZMON SEFER TORAH in over ten community synagogues as a tribute to the Rabbi.

As with many of the Pizmonim written for happy occasions, the song's lyrics include the names of relevant family members.

It is worth noting here that [Rabbi Ezra Labaton](#), whose namesake progenitor is being honored in the song on the occasion of his wedding, has a daughter Sara who, like Bitton, is on the SHI staff:

https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/DX2nwC4r6OI/m/_62mcnyLBgAJ

Both rabbis' daughters are excellent examples of the loss and destruction of classical Sephardic heritage in our community.

Then there is the playful adaptation of "Frere Jacques" entitled "Ram le-Hasdakh" (#143 in *Shir u-Shbaha*) which we would often do as overlapping singalongs:

<http://www.pizmonim.org/book.php#125>

Finally, there is "Shiru Shir Hadasha" (#252 in *Shir u-Shbaha*), written by Albeg in honor of Congregation Ahi Ezer Rabbi Mordekhai Maslaton, using the melody of Irving Berlin's "God Bless America":

<http://www.pizmonim.org/book.php#202>

Here is how that unique song is described on the website:

The pizmon "Shiru Shira Hadasha" (AJAM, page 202), translated as "Sing A New Song," is a very unique song in our tradition. The melody of this pizmon is from the

1918 American patriotic song “God Bless America” by Irving Berlin. This pizmon is composed by the master poet, Cantor Ezekiel Hai Albeg (1910-1995), in honor of the spiritual leader, H Mordekhai (Mourad) Tarab Maslaton (Damascus, 1876 - New York, 1959), at the inauguration of Congregation Ahi Ezer (2165 71st Street in Bensonhurst) on Sunday, April 8, 1951 (2 Nisan, 5711). Ahi Ezer is a congregation founded by Jews of Damascus origin. H Mourad Maslaton served as Rabbi and Hazzan Sefer Torah from 1920 until his passing in 1959. In this two stanza song commemorating the inauguration of a new building, we “sing a new song to the One who resides in the heavens” and who “listens to our cries.” We also pray for God to “bless our community (“Qahal”) with long lives.” The use of this melody for their inauguration of their building is a testament to this community's patriotism and their love for America; a country that took them in with open arms and a country that they fought for in World War II.

From these few examples we can see the complex organic process of Pizmon creation, that melds traditional Jewish poetry with various cultural influences that reflect an eclectic engagement with the world.

It was a process similar to that used by the great Israel Najara:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israel_ben_Moses_Najara

<https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/11301-najara-najar-nijar-nagar-nagara#anchor2>

As the JE entry states:

Poet, liturgist, cabalist, preacher, and Biblical commentator; born at Damascus about the middle of the sixteenth century; died at Gaza, where he had officiated as rabbi. According to Franco ("Histoire des Israélites de l'Empire Ottoman," p. 79, Paris, 1897), there is another account which declares that Najara was born about 1530 and that he lived for some years at Adrianople. From his secular poems, which he wrote in the meters of various Turkish, Spanish, and modern Greek songs, it is evident that he knew well several foreign languages. As may be seen from his works, he was a versatile scholar; and he corresponded with many contemporary rabbis, among others with Bezaleel Ashkenazi, Yom-Ṭob Ṭahalon, Moses Hamon, and Menahem Hefez. His poetic effusions were exceptionally numerous, and many of them were translated into Persian. While still young he composed many religious hymns, to Arabic and Turkish tunes, with the intention, as he says in the preface to his "Zemirot Yisrael," of turning the Jewish youth from profane songs. He wrote piyyuṭim, pizmonim, seliḥot, widduyim, and dirges for all the week-days and for Sabbaths, holy days, and occasional ceremonies, these piyyuṭim being collected in his "Zemirot Yisrael." Many of the piyyuṭim are in Aramaic.

This tradition was followed by Antebi's student Moses Ashear, among others:

https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopedia-of-jews-in-the-islamic-world/ashear-moses-SIM_0002330

Finally, it is important to note the prominent use of the classic Um Kulthum song “Inta Omry” in our liturgy:

<https://vimeo.com/411119685>

The various movements of the song have been adapted by some of our clever cantors to fit into different parts of the Kaddish.

I can recall seeing Moshe Mizrahi’s classic “The House on Chelouche Street” at the Lincoln Center Sephardic Film Festival many years ago, and breaking out in tears as the song appeared in the soundtrack:

<https://israelfilmcenterstream.org/film/the-house-on-chelouche-street/>

I will never forget how the Ashkenazi woman sitting next to me was somewhat perplexed that I was singing the song aloud and had become so emotional about it. I suppose such an “Arab” song should have elicited hatred in me instead!

Just prior to the Pandemic, the song was performed in its complete glory by Faraj Abyad at New York’s Symphony Space:

<https://www.symphonyspace.org/events/vp-wmi-faraj-abyad-and-his-orchestra-ente-omri>

Naturally, as with all local Arab music concerts, there was a contingent of fans from the Brooklyn Syrian Jewish community in attendance.

It is thus a shame that Kurtzer and, conspicuous by her absence, Bitton did not choose to present the music of the Arab Jewish tradition in the SHI podcast. It is a tradition that has much to teach us about Jewish-Muslim relations, and could point us to a much brighter future than the dysfunctional one presented by the Ashkenazim and their Shtetl insularity.

David Shasha

From SHU 1003, June 16, 2021

NIGGEN II: Mechon Hadar and Congregation B’nai Jeshurun “Rising Song Initiative” Intersectionality, Doing the New Age White Jewish Supremacy Dance

One of the elements of “Bourekas and Haminados” Sephardischkeit ephemera is, of course, music.

But even when it comes to that, the White Jewish Supremacy has figured out ways to cut us out of the process.

As I discussed it in my “NIGGEN” article attacking the Shalom Hartman Institute:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/11Rp2kwROcny_KeF1X24JQav3-an2edAl7lySF8nwv6w/edit

In the article I made special note of the manner in which our dear friend Dr. Mijal Bitton was pigeonholed into a very circumscribed SHI area where the lowly Sephardim are relegated, as the Ashkenazim take care of the “serious” cultural business.

In that post I included my essay on Kay Kaufman Shelemay’s seminal book *Let Jasmine Rain Down: Song and Remembrance among Syrian Jews*:

<https://www.amazon.com/Let-Jasmine-Rain-Down-Ethnomusicology/dp/0226752119>

The idea there was to show not only that Dr. Bitton is oblivious to the larger Sephardic tradition and its Multicultural Convivencia richness – including our music and its intimate relationship with the Arab-Muslim culture – but that SHI, as is the case with so many other White Jewish institutions, sees Judaism exclusively out of the Ashkenazi lens, Sephardim being just so much marginal Oriental exotica.

I have written extensively of the musical Convivencia that links Jews to Muslims, from Iberia to the Arab East and beyond, in articles devoted to the brilliant Palestinian classicist Simon Shaheen, as well as to the excellent ECM recording “Siwan” and its uncanny historical echoes of Medieval Andalusia:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/15VFKmrOpqCAePoGbtHDcx2K548tFXJPg/view?ths=true>

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/15VFKmrOpqCAePoGbtHDcx2K548tFXJPg/view?ths=true>

If you have not yet done so, I again urge you to purchase the recordings which are so much a part of Sephardic identity:

<https://billlaswell.bandcamp.com/album/the-music-of-mohamed-abdel-wahab>

<https://www.amazon.com/Siwan-Jon-Balke/dp/B001PS0EKW>

The Convivencia Intersectionality is not mere ephemera, as we continue to see racist institutions like SHI traffick in the Interfaith Dialogue business, forgetting that Sephardim have deep historical and cultural ties to the Arab-Muslim world:

<https://www.hartman.org.il/hanukkah-interfaith-and-the-israeli-psyche/>

This is what that racism looks in very real time as it deals with Hanukkah in a HASBARAH manner:

What happens when an ancient holiday is rebranded for modern audiences? For Israelis, Hanukkah was reinvented as a celebration of Jewish heroism, of our ability to persevere against overwhelming threats, with the Maccabean warrior as the precursor to the IDF. In contrast, in North America Hanukkah has been rebranded as a universal battle against religious suppression, with the Hanukkah lights as beacons for interfaith ecumenism and religious tolerance.

Mechon Hadar, with its close ties to the [Tikvah Neo-Con](#) world, is currently partnering with the iconic Manhattan Conservative Temple B'nai Jeshurun to do yet another version of NIGGEN:

https://www.hadar.org/programs/rising-song-intensive?utm_campaign=HRSI%202021&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=189830573&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-8_bLgF5lN13OCEFDpaywExzoHqcvDwWH5CuScPM6nnfh00duk5e-bdPjvJgCrKie2Z4q-YqeBQo4KapDOZH_HKgZn_K4yIJFzjdPXZhVWbTqZ3r0&utm_content=189830571&utm_source=hs_email#sessions

They are calling it “The Rising Song Initiative”:

Reach new heights in song and spirituality at Hadar's Rising Song Intensive (HRSI). Led by Deborah Sacks Mintz, with Joey Weisenberg and a team of stellar faculty and musicians, HRSI offers the opportunity to study traditional melodies and sounds, bring new music into being, and climb the ladder of song together.

Enter a community of ba’alei tefilah, cantors, community organizers, lay leaders, musicians, rabbis, and students in an ongoing exploration of communal musical dynamics

Unearth the spiritual underpinnings of song and study the complex intersection between individual and communal voices

Explore with renowned musicians diverse voices within the global Jewish musical heritage

Hadar’s Rising Song Institute aims to cultivate the grassroots musical-spiritual creativity of the Jewish people. Read more about our [Rising Song Institute](#).

This program is being held in partnership with Congregation B'nai Jeshurun.

Here is the full listing of the faculty:

Deborah Sacks Mintz is an educator, practitioner, and facilitator of Jewish communal music, supporting those who seek to deepen their practice of empowered song and connective prayer. As a musician, Deborah has partnered creatively with a diverse array of voices in the Jewish soundscape; in addition to collaborating on over two dozen albums, she released her debut record of original spiritual music, *The Narrow and the Expanse*, in 2020 on Rising Song Records. Beloved ongoing artistic projects include Rabbi Josh Warshawsky's Chaverai Nevarech, New Moon Rising with Elana Arian and Chava Mirel, and Joey Weisenberg's Hadar Ensemble. A candidate for rabbinic ordination and an MA in Women and Gender Studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Deborah serves Hadar's Rising Song Institute as an artist, consultant, and teacher. Learn more at www.deborahsacksmintz.com.

Joey Weisenberg is the Founder and Director of Hadar's Rising Song Institute. A multi-instrumental musician, prayer leader, and composer, Joey works with communities around the world to make music a vibrant, joy-filled force in Jewish life. He is the author of *Building Singing Communities*, a practical guide to bringing people together in song, as well as *The Torah of Music*, which received the National Jewish Book Award in 2017. A devoted student and teacher of ancient and traditional Jewish melodies, Joey also composes new nigunim that have moved and inspired Jews around the world. His seventh album with the Hadar Ensemble, *Songs of Ascent*, was released on Rising Song Records in fall 2019, and his eighth album, *L'eila*, is due for release this coming winter.

Rabbi Yosef Goldman: Raised in a mixed Orthodox Ashkenazi and Mizrahi home, Rabbi Yosef Goldman has served communities across the denominational spectrum as a leader and teacher of prayer and Jewish texts. Yosef received rabbinic ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary in 2013, with a concentration in pastoral care and counseling and a Master of Sacred Music. He has served as a chaplain resident at Einstein Medical Center, on the clergy team at Temple Beth Zion-Beth Israel in Philadelphia, and as Co-Director of Hadar's Rising Song Institute. Yosef and his wife, Rabbi Annie Lewis, are grateful to co-lead the vibrant Shaare Torah community in Gaithersburg, Maryland.

Yosef performs and records with a wide range of Jewish artists, including as a vocalist in the Hadar Ensemble and a founding member of the Middle Eastern Jewish music ensemble, the [Epichorus](#). Along with trombonist Dan Blackberg, Rabbi Yosef was selected by the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts for its 2018–19 [Jazz Residency](#). His first album of original music, [Open My Heart](#), was released by [Rising Song Records](#) in winter 2019.

Aly Halpert is a queer white Ashkenazi Jewish young adult musician, writer, educator, activist, and organizer living on Schaghticoke land in Millerton, NY, USA. A singer, pianist, drummer, and guitar player, Aly writes songs for building community, working for collective liberation, and visioning different worlds. Aly leads music and prayer for Jewish community, including Eden Village Camp, Let My People Sing, Kol Tzedek Synagogue, and Linke Fligl. Her songs have been sung

in national gatherings, song circles, and quiet moments of personal prayer, and have moved people all over the world. Her forthcoming album with Hadar's Rising Song Records will be released this coming year.

Micah Hendler (Forbes 30 Under 30 for Music) is the Founder and Artistic Director of the Jerusalem Youth Chorus, an Israeli-Palestinian music and dialogue project featured for its innovative musicianship and integrity of purpose and process from the Late Show with Stephen Colbert to the New York Times. Micah is also a Founding Partner of Raise Your Voice Labs, a creative culture change company that helps organizations, companies, and communities transform their cultures and embody new visions for their future through deep group process work, collaborative songwriting, and music video production. Micah writes for Forbes.com on music, society, and social change in a global context and serves in volunteer leadership capacities for the Justice Choir and Braver Angels grassroots movements. He currently lives in Washington, DC, where he is the Musician in Residence at Adas Israel.

Yahala Lachmish is a musician, cantor and paytanit, singer, conductor and actress. A graduate of the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance, Yahala teaches the Sephardic track of the Ashira Tehilot program for musicians and cantors at the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem. Yahala has been performing from a very young age. She teaches Biblical trope and sessions on Jewish liturgical poems in Hebrew and English at the Conservative Yeshiva, Beit Avi Chai and other organizations. Yahala is co-head of prayer and musical director at Kehilat Zion in Jerusalem, head of prayer in Midreshet Beit Prat (previously Ein Prat) and serves as a cantor for the Masorti Movement.

Batya Levine uses song as a tool for cultivating healing and resilience in her work as a communal song leader, shaliach tzibur (Jewish prayer leader) and cultural organizer. Batya is a co-founder of Let My People Sing!, and composes original music made of Ashkenazi yearning, queer heart-medicine, and emunah (faith). www.batyalevine.com

Rabbi Roly Matalon was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and was educated in Buenos Aires, Montreal, Jerusalem, and New York City. After his ordination at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1986, Rabbi Matalon came to BJ to share the pulpit with his mentor and friend Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer. They worked to revitalize the congregation and turn its focus to prayer, learning, service, social justice, and interfaith cooperation. After Rabbi Meyer's death in 1993, Rabbi Matalon became BJ's spiritual leader. Rabbis Matalon and Felicia Sol now lead a vibrant, diverse community of 1,700 households. Rabbi Matalon is a founding co-director of Piyut North America, a partnership between B'nai Jeshurun and Hazmanah Le-Piyut in Israel, which is dedicated to the dissemination of liturgical music from Jewish communities around the world. A student of Arabic and Turkish music, Rabbi Matalon plays the oud (Arabic lute). He has received awards from the New York

Board of Rabbis, the Jewish Peace Fellowship, the New Israel Fund, and T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights.

Dan Nadel is an Israeli born, New York-based guitarist and composer, whose personal style combines flamenco, jazz, and Middle Eastern influences. He is a bandleader, a solo performing artist, and a collaborator with Tavche Gravche – his multinational neo-Balkan group. A busy musician on New York’s scene, Nadel has also worked with many world-renowned artists, including jazz musicians Chico Freeman, Dave Liebman and Anat Fort, Israeli-French pop star Yael Naim, jazz vocalist Gabrielle Stravelli, opera soloists Chen Reiss and Maya Lahyani, and genre-crossing musicians from around the world such as Frank London, Ismail Lumanovski, Souren Baronian and Satoshi Takeishi. Dan is the music director for Congregation B’nai Jeshurun in Manhattan, and leads multiple projects dedicated to introducing North American audiences to the beauty and richness of Mizrahi and Sefaradi traditions.

Rabbi Aviva Richman is a Rosh Yeshiva at Hadar, and has been on the faculty since 2010. A graduate of Oberlin College, she studied in the Pardes Kollel and the Drisha Scholars' Circle and was ordained by Rabbi Danny Landes. She completed a doctorate in Talmud at NYU. Interests include Talmud, Halakhah, Midrash and gender, and also a healthy dose of niggunim.

Anthony Mordechai Tzvi Russell is a vocalist, composer and arranger specializing in music in the Yiddish language. His work in traditional Ashkenazi Jewish musical forms led to a musical exploration of his own ethnic roots through the research, arrangement and performance of a hundred years of African American roots music, resulting in the EP Convergence (2018), a collaboration with klezmer consort Veretski Pass exploring the sounds and themes of one hundred years of African American and Ashkenazi Jewish music. Anthony also performs in a duo, Tsvey Brider (“Two Brothers”), with accordionist and pianist Dmitri Gaskin, composing and performing their original music set to modernist Yiddish poetry of the 20th century. An essayist in a number of publications including Jewish Currents and Moment Magazine, Anthony lives in Massachusetts with his husband of five years, Rabbi Michael Rothbaum.

Hazzan Ramón Tasat: Born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Ramón was trained in five different countries. He studied at the Latin American Rabbinical Seminary, the Manuel de Falla Conservatory of Music and the University of Texas at Austin, receiving a DMA in Voice Performance. Hazzan Tasat serves Shirat HaNefesh (Song of the Soul), a congregation in Montgomery County, MD. He is also the musical Director of Kolot HaLev, a Jewish Community choir in the Greater Washington area and the former president of Shalshet: The Foundation for New Jewish Liturgical Music. Ramón has toured Europe and participated in music festivals on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to television and radio appearances, Ramón produced fifteen CDs and two books. He has been the recipient of numerous awards including a NEA Grant. Ramón offers a wide spectrum of concerts, lectures, and

workshops. These range from “Echoes of Sefarad” to “The Music of Modern Israel.”

Rabbi Miriam-Simma Walfish is faculty at Hadar and a Senior Coach for Pedagogy of Partnership. She is completing her PhD in Rabbinics at Harvard University. Her interests include rabbinic approaches to gender, parenting, and education. She has published several articles, including, "Upending the Curse of Eve: Reframing Maternal Breastfeeding in BT Ketubot" (2017). Rabbi Walfish has taught Tanakh, Talmud, and Jewish Law in numerous settings including the Conservative Yeshiva, Hadar, Harvard University, Hebrew College, and the National Havurah Committee's summer institute. She revels in the process of learning Torah with and from her students.

Rabbi Ariel Root Wolpe is a mother, musician, and spiritual educator. She currently resides in Atlanta, GA, where she founded and directs Ma'alot, a growing community of folks who crave creative, radically welcoming, in-touch Judaism. Ariel studied Jewish music at Hadar's Rising Song Institute's full-time residency in Philadelphia, and released her third album, Ruach Neshama, through Rising Song Records this past summer. Ariel is currently completing a book on Jewish texts and rituals to usher in motherhood.

The extensive program combines Jewish Spirituality with Jewish Music in a deeply ethnocentric manner, framed by a peculiarly “New Age” mentality, as we can see in the course descriptions:

Hidden Sparks

Songwriting as Midrash – Rabbi Ariel Root Wolpe

What leads to sparks of spiritual and musical inspiration? How do we fan the flames of textual curiosity into creations enjoyed by others? In this guided songwriting workshop, we'll discover wisdom through text, beauty in song and together imagine how our creativity can support spiritual & musical space.

Kol Atzmotai Tomarna/All My Bones Declare: Vocal Health and Wellness –Hazzan Ramón Tasat

Enter into the world of singing from deep inside your body. We will explore the vital effect of breathing when we sing, searching within ourselves the unique imprint of our voice. Let's connect with our entire body, from head to toes, so we can serve the Creator of the Universe as each one of our bones declare in profound awe: “Hashem, Mi khamokha,” Who is like You, Oh God! (Psalm 35)

Music as a Vehicle for Change

Loosen Loosen: Songs for Healing, Music for Liberation – Aly Halpert

How can songs help us create a liberated world? Join Aly for a session exploring how song can hold us, heal us, and expand our imagination of what is possible. We will sing together, share what's on our minds and hearts, and listen to songs from Aly's forthcoming album, to be released on Rising Song Records.

Musical Conflict Transformation and Culture Change – Micah Hendler

This session will explore how to build a musical container for conflict transformation and culture change and infuse it with group process work that can power shifts on personal, interpersonal, and systemic levels. We will explore the music and methods of the Jerusalem Youth Chorus (<http://jerusalemyouthchorus.org>), an Israeli-Palestinian music and dialogue project, as a primary case study. We will also broaden our discussion to encompass a variety of contexts beyond Jerusalem, through the lens of Raise Your Voice Labs (<http://raiseyourvoicelabs.com>), a creative culture change company that helps groups in transition find their musical north star. No matter where you are based and what issues your community is grappling with, this session is designed for you.

Fresh Approaches to Traditional Sounds

B'shir U'mizmor: Where Piyyut and Prayer Mingle – Yahala Lachmish

In this session, we'll take an uplifting journey through diverse liturgical traditions from the Mizrahi and Sefaradi world, and beyond. Learn several piyyutim in their original contexts in prayer, and practice combining them in innovative and creative ways.

Mayko-mashmelon: Yiddish Art Song as Resource – Anthony Mordechai Tzvi Russell

In the 20th century, Yiddish art song acted as a kind of performative repository of Ashkenazi Jewish music-making of all kinds, containing elements of khazones and liturgical music, Eastern European folk song, Yiddish theatre music and Chassidic music, as well as popular and art music of the time. In this session, we'll take a brief survey of the genre and explore how it can be used as a resource for today's Jewish musicians.

Process and Share

Open Space: Shelichei Tzibbur Processing – Deborah Sacks Mintz

Looking for an opportunity to explore and process with other like-minded prayer leaders? Join our facilitated open space, where we'll reflect, goal-set, and share.

Open Space: Song Share – Batya Levine

Have a nigun you'd love to share with others? Excited to learn songs from other participants? Join our facilitated open space, where all are welcome to share, sing, and listen.

In-Person Beit Shira

Songful Prayer: From Psalm to Song: Uncovering the Hidden Melodies of Our Texts – Joey Weisenberg

Ancient Jewish prayer-songs and poetry - such as the Psalms - are often rollercoaster-like expressions of the human soul that vary as widely in their musical meters as they do in their thematic consistency. This class will explore how we can draw out coherent ideas from the Psalms and other ancient texts, and fit them into contemporary musical expressions and song structures.

Harmony and Hiddur: Deepening the Soundscape of Communal Prayer – Deborah Sacks Mintz

Whether the prayer-leader or a member of the kahal - the community -we all have the opportunity to contribute to the process of hiddur mitzvah - beautification of the mitzvah of prayer. How do we hear the expansive layers of harmonies and unearth the potential textures of sound in the real-time act of prayer and communal song? In this experiential session, we'll explore strategies and tools for realizing this potential in our communities.

Melodies and Narratives

Crafting Your Musical Autobiography, Singing Your Personal Story –Rabbi Yosef Goldman

How do the songs of our own narratives shape our identities? Through song, story, and guided process, we'll weave together the songs that comprise the soundtrack of our personal stories. Whether you're a songwriter, prayer leader or performer, or you use music solely for your own spiritual practice, this session will help you explore and expand your musical-spiritual toolbox.

Singing Our Way Home – Rabbi Aviva Richman

Through midrash and raising our own voices in song, we'll explore the ways niggunim anchor us and help us find our sense of home even as we confront shifting realities. Our core text will be the transformative journey described in the Psalms of Hallel, and the broader narratives midrash weave from these verses about how we integrate change in our lives.

Exploring New Entrypoints

BJ's Piyyut Project: Weaving Liturgical Poetry into Jewish Life – Rabbi Roly Matalon with Dan Nadel

B'nai Jeshurun's Piyyut Project is centered on the global sacred music of the Jewish people, with an emphasis on the communities of North Africa and the Middle East. At BJ, a deep dive into depth and breadth of this poetry and music and its use in the living, breathing act of communal prayer continues to be a cornerstone of the musical tapestry of this congregation's identity. In this session, we'll learn about the project and sing together some of these beautiful melodies, with an eye towards cultivating their integration into North American communal life.

Breath, Body, and Song – Batya Levine

Singing opens us to a myriad of internal textures, emotions, and sensations in our bodies and in our felt experience. This has always been true, but it feels especially relevant these days, when the embodied experience of singing in a room together is so rare. In this session we will be merging embodiment and somatic tools with our singing practice. We will move slowly and spend time in song and silence, noticing and grounding in our bodies and our experience as we go.

Unleashing the Song Within

Nigun Hannah: From Whispering to Joy – Rabbi Miriam-Simma Walfish and Deborah Sacks Mintz

The narrative of Hannah in Tanakh paints the picture of a yearning journey through prayer as dynamic expression - one of varied posture, volume, intensity, and presence . Through an exploration of rabbinic sources, punctuated by learning and singing together a newly composed Nigun Hannah, we'll dig into the prayers of our own hearts.

Kli Zemer: Instruments as Vessels of Song – Joey Weisenberg

How can timeworn Jewish melodies be expressed through modern instruments? Can the electric guitar daven? In exploring how modern instruments express old melodies and prayers, we might explore how we ourselves can become vessels of the ancient divine song.

The announcement ends with a truly Yiddishkeyt flourish:

Have a nigun you'd love to share with others? Excited to learn songs from other participants? Join our facilitated open space, where all are welcome to share, sing, and listen.

Indeed, the overall *geist* of the programming is very New Age Shtetl with a strong dose of Upper West Side Hipster.

It speaks to a world **outside** the Sephardic community, which I just discussed in my article “Killing Off the Sephardic Heritage from the ‘Outside’: ‘New Age’ Suicidal Tendencies from the Jewish Margins”:

<https://groups.google.com/g/Davidshasha/c/XnEHiwsOKQE>

It is thus more than fortuitous that the Hadar music program is being anchored by BJ Rabbi Rolando Matalon:

<https://www.bj.org/people/j-rolando-matalon/>

I do not refer to him often, but did so in the following SHU post:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/DAClvCIILxo/m/X2eOcb7dur4J>

That post discussed The Jewish Week special issue on New York’s Sephardim, which was so important, that their website has deleted it!

<https://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/special-sections/sephardim-new-york/sephardim-ny-june-2014>

Sephardi-in-Name-Only Rabbi Matalon is a disciple of Rabbi Marshall Meyer, with a White Jewish Supremacy CV that is truly impeccable:

José Rolando Matalon, B’nai Jeshurun’s senior rabbi, was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and was educated in Buenos Aires, Montreal, Jerusalem, and New York City. After his ordination at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1986, Rabbi Matalon came to BJ to share the pulpit—and vision—of his mentor and friend Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer. They worked together to revitalize the congregation and turn its focus to prayer, learning, service, social justice, and interfaith cooperation.

After Rabbi Meyer’s death in 1993, Rabbi Matalon became BJ’s spiritual leader. He was joined by Rabbi Marcelo Bronstein in 1995 and by Rabbi Felicia Sol in 2001. With the support of Hazzan Ari Priven, Rabbis Matalon and Sol now lead a vibrant, diverse community of 1,800 households.

Rabbi Matalon’s visionary leadership has had a profound impact on the revitalization of Jewish synagogue life in the US and in Israel, his involvement in the New York, Jewish, and Israeli communities is broad and deep. He has received awards from the New York Board of Rabbis, the Jewish Peace Fellowship, the New Israel Fund, and T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights.

Rabbi Matalon is a founding co-director of Piyut North America, a partnership between B’nai Jeshurun and Hazmanah Le-Piyut in Israel, which is dedicated to the dissemination of liturgical music from Jewish communities around the world. A

student of Arabic and Turkish music, Rabbi Matalon plays the oud (Arabic lute). Rabbi Matalon is married and has two daughters.

Just to make sure that I was not missing something, I made the effort to contact him many years ago, and got the usual empty platitudes and no actual concern for the Sephardic heritage and its continuity.

His famed liberality and openness did not extend to a Sephardi activist like me. Not that it came as a surprise. Racism is racism no matter who practices it, or why they choose to be who they are. Might indeed makes Right when it comes to the White Jewish Supremacy.

His JTS is certainly not the JTS of Sabato Morais and Sephardic Jewish Humanism:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1NQdm28qvvXTVBTWXFtZmtsVGc/view?ths=true&resourcekey=0-Aeuku97fl4PJxarM8kvTdA>

It is all in the spirit of the 1960s Havurah, which has been explained by our Sephardi-hating friend Jonathan Sarna:

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/havurah-judaism/>

This Ashkenazi institutional Intersectionality wants very much to appear “Multicultural,” though it lacks any of the actual Sephardic specificity in either organic community terms, or in the intellectual-literary sense.

The following three figures comprise the Non-Ashkenazi sector of the faculty:

Yahala Lachmish

<https://conservativeyeshiva.lpages.co/yahala-lachmish-cantor-course/>

Ramon Tasat

<https://kolothalev.org/our-director/>

Anthony Russell Bass:

<https://www.anthonyrussellbass.com/>

Ms. Lachmish is, like Matalon, part of the Conservative Movement:

<https://schechter.edu/event/ashira-rabbis/>

And is apparently part of a larger Israeli musical community, where I assume she plays the part of a token Sephardic representative; though, tellingly, little evidence is provided in the posted information I have cited:

<https://www.facebook.com/yahalaviv/>

Ramon Tasat is more interesting, as he is actively involved in the Ladino music world, as both a researcher and performer:

Born in Buenos Aires, Ramón learned Ladino, the language of the Sephardic people, at his grandmother's knee; his style reflects the rich history and drama of this extraordinary culture.

Trained in five different countries, he received a doctorate in voice performance from the University of Texas at Austin. His doctoral dissertation is entitled "The Cantillations and Religious Poems of the Jews of Tangier, Morocco."

In addition to television and radio appearances, Dr. Tasat has been the recipient of numerous awards including First Place at the Montpelier Cultural Arts Center's Recital Competition and a National Endowment of the Arts' Grant. Dr. Tasat's lectures, workshops, and programs range from "The Music of Modern Israel" to "Echoes of Sepharad." Cantor Tasat has toured Europe with world-renowned Dr. Robert Shaw and has participated in international festivals on both sides of the Atlantic.

Dr. Tasat has appeared in numerous opera productions including "Le Nozze di Figaro," "Il Impresario," and "La Traviata," and has drawn worldwide critical as well as audience acclaim. His most notable appearances include the Kennedy Center Concert Hall; the Israeli Embassy; the Jewish Music Festival of Berkeley, California; Limmud UK, Saint Cère, France; Siena, Italy; Helsinki, Finland; Barcelona, Spain; and the Piccolo Spoleto Festival.

Ramón's numerous recordings include Fiesta Sefarad, Trees Cry for Rain, Teshuva, Kantikas di amor i vida, a series of Sephardic duets together with the celebrated singer Flory Jagoda and his most recent, Yom She Kulo Shabbat. He has published several music books on Jewish musical subjects.

He is the Artistic Director of an Ashkenazi institution called Kolot HaLev:

<https://kolothalev.org/about-us/>

Indeed, it is not at all difficult to see how these White Jewish institutional interconnections are made, and how that racist world acts as an exclusionary, incestuous cocoon where certain commonly-accepted values and ideas are de rigueur and where the bracing complexity of Andalusian Convivencia is absent and unwelcome. It is all an

authoritarian silencing mechanism designed to favor the Jewish majority, as it punishes the Jewish minority. Equality is never a consideration in such a benighted world.

It is necessary in such a world to speak in a certain manner, using a certain conceptual language, and, most importantly, never to be “negative” in a way that would make the Ashkenazi hegemony ever feel ill at ease or uncomfortable.

I am not sure how such a Multiculturalism works, when there is no presentation of critique in a world that is riven through with an ethnocentric Ashkenazi chauvinism and its residual racism.

It is something that I tried to discuss with Rabbi Matalon but, unsurprisingly, made little headway with. One thing I have learned over time is that the Ashkenazi institutional racists only want the good news, and are not at all interested in actually looking into their Shtetl mirror.

The final member of the Non-Ashkenazi troika is a “Jew of Color” who shows us, once again, that these African-Americans identify exclusively as Ashkenazim:

Twelve years after making his professional operatic debut in the world premiere of Philip Glass's Appomattox with the San Francisco Opera Company, Anthony Russell is now a vocalist, composer and arranger specializing in Yiddish song.

Anthony's work in traditional Ashkenazi Jewish musical forms led to a musical exploration of his own roots through the research, arrangement and performance of a hundred years of African American roots music, resulting in the album [Convergence](#) (2018), a collaboration with klezmer consort [Veretski Pass](#) exploring the sounds of one hundred years of African American and Ashkenazi Jewish music.

In 2017, Anthony teamed up with accordionist and pianist Dmitri Gaskin to win the Concorso Internacional de Canciones en Idish (Der Idisher Idol) in Mexico City, eventually forming a duo, [Tsvey Brider](#) (“Two Brothers”), for the composition and performance of new songs in the Yiddish language. Over the past two years, Tsvey Brider has been featured in Berlin’s Radical Jewish Culture Festival, toured Poland and performed for culture and music festivals all over the United States.

Anthony's work in Jewish music has brought him to stages in Toronto, Montreal, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Boston, Miami, New York, Tel Aviv, London, Berlin, Warsaw and Krakow, Symphony Space in New York City and the Kennedy Center in Washington DC, as well as Limmud Fests across the United States and Europe.

He lives in Massachusetts with his husband of three years, Rabbi Michael Rothbaum of Congregation Beth Elohim in Acton, MA.

His website bio does not tell us anything about the formation of his Jewish identity, but it does mention his deep Ashkenazi-Yiddish ties and his Gay identity.

Indeed, reading the Hadar program notes very closely, we can see how so many “Progressive” values are highlighted, as the actual Sephardic heritage is ghettoized and marginalized within the wider HASBARAH and White Jewish institutional context. The silencing mechanism thus ensures that the blatant hypocrisy of the construct is never exposed.

It is in the end a tyranny of the Ashkenazi majority that is deeply disinterested in understanding the Jewish heritage as many generations of “Enlightened” Ashkenazim did before them.

I have discussed these issues in my companion article “Killing Off the Sephardic Heritage from the ‘Inside’: Louis Solomon ‘Proclaims Liberty’ from the Sephardic Heritage in the Name of Tikvah Meir Soloveichik”:

<https://groups.google.com/g/Davidshasha/c/5L0M39-6qMc>

Of course, there is the cognitive dissonance that exists between Orthodox Sephardic Synagogues like Shearith Israel and the “Open” world of BJ and Hadar that would act as a barrier between those warring parts of the larger Jewish community, rooted in the Ashkenazi dysfunctional factionalism.

But even more than this is a much deeper form of cognitive dissonance that marks the difference(s) between the “Progressive” Jewish world in its Ashkenazi ethnocentrism – open to a very limited and circumscribed form of Sephardi representation – and the ever-vanishing Sephardic heritage in its intellectual-literary formation.

In my two “Killing Off the Sephardic Heritage” articles I made sure to provide a plethora of scholarly references that would serve to present a robust Sephardic culture which could, if only permitted by the racists, serve to allow us to function on a truly equal basis with the majority Ashkenazim.

As indicated in my Tikkun magazine articles on Arab music, it is critical for Jews to come to an understanding that the Sephardim have maintained deep and abiding ties, both existential and cultural, to the Arab world, prior to the trauma inflicted on us by Zionism and the very hazardous establishment of the State of Israel.

So, as we read the Hadar program announcement it is necessary to see how the White Jewish language and its conceptual mindset strictly limits the ways in which a contemporary Jewish identity might be constructed; a very different one than that which existed in late 19th century American Judaism:

<http://unz.org/Pub/Century-1892jan-00323>

<http://unz.org/Pub/Century-1892feb-00512>

Richard Wheatley's two-part series for The Century Magazine, "The Jews in New York," presents a view of Judaism that is dramatically different from that of the current White Jewish Supremacy and its erasure of the classical Sephardic heritage.

At that time, Jewish Enlightenment was the key to Jewish identity, and the key to Jewish Enlightenment was the classical Sephardic tradition, as Shmuel Feiner has shown in his excellent article "From Renaissance to Revolution: The Eighteenth Century in Jewish History":

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qRf2_x_zSK8RRQYvp9SEmCAHQzw07Oa/view?ths=true

When we look today at prominent New York Jewish institutions like BJ and Hadar, we see a massive intellectual-religious shift which pretends to be Liberal and Progressive, but in fact harbors a deeply reactionary ethos that has turned its back on the European *Wissenschaft* Jewish past, as it has turned its back on the classical Sephardic heritage at the very same time.

"The Rising Song Initiative" is yet one more sign of this Jewish degeneration and the inability of Ashkenazi Jews to come to terms with their deep-seated racism as they continue to demean and exclude Sephardim from their Adult Jewish Table.

David Shasha

From SHU 1035, January 26, 2022
