

# The Musical Culture of Iraqi Jewry: Three Countries and Two Continents

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The Iraqi Jewish community prides itself on the fact that it is the most ancient people in the diaspora. Iraqi Jews reside among us today in Toronto. Prominent Jewish figures have indicated that Israelis continue to draw upon much of the culture of the various Iraqi Jewish communities that have existed throughout the ages (i.e., from the time of ancient Babylonia onward). And, as Israeli president, Haim Herzog, said recently, Iraqi Jews have “had the greatest spiritual and cultural influence in the history of the people of Israel” (1990: 2).

The present study deals with the migration of the Jews from Iraq, which was once ancient Babylonia and Mesopotamia, to Israel, and eventually to Canada. Of particular concern here are the ways that these transitions have been reflected in the musical culture of Iraqi Jewry. Except for one informant, who was born in Jerusalem of Iraqi parentage, the research reported here is based on interviews with members of the Toronto Iraqi Jewish community who have participated in Jewish life in both Iraq and Israel.

Several significant musical traditions of the Iraqi Jews can be observed currently: lullabies, wedding songs, *piyyutim* (liturgical poetry), mournful lamentations, love songs, *shevahot*, *chalgi Baghdad* ensembles, and the belly dancer and *daqqaqat* traditions. Due to constraints of space, I have chosen the last four genres as a focus for my discussion of transformations in the musical culture of Iraqi Jews. The *daqqaqat* and belly dancer traditions are examined as a unit because both comprise female performers, whereas the other two traditions involve male musicians.

The conclusion of this account considers briefly whether the Iraqi Jewish musical tradition has been perpetuated successfully in Canada. Considerations here are a) whether Iraqi Jews have embraced their tradition in their current dwelling, and b) the extent to which their tradition currently plays an important role in the lives of the Canadian Iraqi Jewish community.

## Historical Overview

The Babylonian Jewish community traces its roots to the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E. At this point most of the Israelites were exiled

from Israel to Babylonia. The majority of these remained in Babylonia for over 2000 years. In Babylonia, Jews periodically suffered persecution and discrimination. However, they were hardly unhappy, for they knew that there were very few, if any, nations that could boast a non-discriminatory treatment of their minorities. In fact, documentation shows that the Jewish sect of Babylonia flourished, and that its integration and friendly ties with Moslem neighbours did not interfere with the degree to which its community was close-knit and vibrant.

By the beginning of the 20th century, the Jews of Iraq, and especially of Baghdad, enjoyed relative freedom in religious practice, and equality of rights had also been granted to them. In addition, they prospered economically and engaged in the trade of silk, textiles, precious stones, and food stuffs with Syria, India, Vienna, Singapore, Persia, and London (Ben-Yaacob and Cohen 1972: 1449).

After the First World War, under British rule, the political situation of the Babylonian Iraqi Jews improved further as did their education. Some Iraqi Jews were elected to Parliament. Many Jewish intellectuals had graduated from the Jewish Iraqi educational system (the Alliance Israélite Universelle schools) and were quadrilingual, speaking Arabic, Hebrew, English, and French (Ben-Yaacob and Cohen loc. cit.).

With murmurs of the prospect of a Jewish homeland circulating around the globe in the early 1900s, the Zionist movement also made its way to Iraq. This marked the beginning of the deterioration of the Jews of Iraq. From 1929 onward, Jews were persecuted for Zionist beliefs and activities. Many teachers of Hebrew who had come from Palestine were forced to leave. By the Second World War, Iraq was solely under Iraqi rule, and in 1948, martial law was imposed. At this time, tens of thousands of Jews fled to Iran and some went to Israel. From May 1950 to August 1951 there was a legal mass exodus to Israel, or as some would say "back to" Israel, after about 2500 years of diaspora. At this point, the Jews were permitted to leave their homes (and properties and goods) in Iraq if they relinquished their citizenship (Cohen 1972: 1453).

### **By the Rivers of Babylon: Four Jewish Genres in Iraq**

Before the *Aliyah* (i.e., return to Israel: Talushkin 1991: 655-57), Jews of Iraq mainly lived together in the cities of Baghdad and Basra.<sup>1</sup> They lived among Moslems, and adhered to, and appreciated, the Moslems' strict rules of modesty and dignity. Not unlike the Moslems, the Jews of this Arab land were highly traditional. It would be misleading to discuss their music without considering the religious culture of Iraqi Jewry, for this religious culture has been intricately woven into all aspects of their lives.

The music of the Jews in Iraq could be heard and enjoyed in several venues: sidewalk cafés, henna parties, circumcision ceremonies, weddings, the nursery, and the death bed. Music was truly a part of everyday life.

### *Shevahot*

Religious ceremonies and festivities were filled with song and sometimes dance. Iraqi Jews have vivid recollections of praise songs, otherwise known as *shevahot*. These were a part of the Sabbath observance, circumcision ceremonies (Brit-Milah), Bar Mitzvahs, Pideon Haben (which celebrated the birth of a first-born son), and festivities commemorating the beginning of a new month (Elam-Amzalag 1990: 21). The *shevahot* praised God and specific prophets, for example, Samuel, Jeremiah and Deborah. Iraqi Jews have taken particular pride in the fact that many of the great Hebrew prophets lived (and died) in Babylon, for instance, Ezekiel, Nehemiah and Zechariah.

The performers of the *shevahot* are called *ba'alei ha-shevahot* ("masters of the hymns"). *Shevahot* are communal in nature. The *ba'alei shevahot* are backed by a prominent chorus singing refrains. Not one Iraqi Jew whom I have met hears these tunes without clapping or joining in on the familiar verses.

The *shevahot* were passed down through generations in oral tradition. Most are sung in Hebrew. On religious holidays and in the synagogues, these compositions were not accompanied instrumentally, due to the prohibition in Jewish law, since the destruction of the Temple, against playing instruments on the Sabbath and high holidays.

Recordings of *shevahot* from informants have resulted in the widespread view that *shevahot* are "male-oriented." This is a misrepresentation of the actual situation in Toronto, for female informants were just as familiar with these praise songs as were males. At festive family gatherings in Iraq, women, as well as men, sang them. Women tended to sing this music at home. By contrast, men experienced these songs in synagogue. Because of their religious nature, *shevahot* were often composed by rabbi-poets, and were sung by cantors and other men within the public sphere.

The singing of the *shevahot* is said to require a "high degree of vocal, technical and musical skill" (Elam-Amzalag 1990: loc. cit.). Nevertheless, all in attendance were encouraged to sing. The concept of the cantor as a professional leader and singer was not as highly developed in Iraq as it is today within the larger, modern community of North American Ashkenazi Jews, who trace their ancestry to Europe. In Iraq, the cantor was a well respected elder who did not necessarily make a living from his religious singing. His work was most often voluntary, as it is in many Iraqi Jewish communities, both in Israel and elsewhere. The cantor is described as being "one of the *chevrah*," one of the group or clique who was willing to sing and who possessed a pleasant singing voice (Ben-Mordechai 1990: 9906I, 3).

Praise songs were also sung at parties celebrating a special event. For example, a pregnant woman's husband might be blessed with the birth of a boy, and on such an occasion, a *shevahot* song would include lyrics that

anticipated a forthcoming circumcision. If the husband had an older daughter, the *ba'alei shevahot* might allude to an approaching wedding.

As noted above, the *shevahot* were communal in performance and employed hand-clapping and group participation in the chorus (or *Yalelis*).<sup>2</sup> Such communal music-making arises in other genres, for example *chalgi Baghdad*, belly dancing, and the *daqqaqat*.

### ***Chalgi Baghdad***

The *chalgi Baghdad* (pronounced *chalri Baghdad*) comprises an ensemble that was generally dominated by Jews. In fact, Qassim Hassan (1980: 111) distinguishes between three types of Iraqi music at the turn of the century: *al mazika-l-ahila* (music of the locals), *al mazika-l-sha'bia* (popular music, or music of the public), and *l mazikat-il yahud* (music of the Jews). Unlike the liturgical music, *chalgi Baghdad* was heard on the airwaves. Amnon Shiloah (1983: 21) writes that “the great majority of art music composers in Iraq were Jews.” Moslems disdained music and musicians, and assigned musical roles to ethnic minorities (Warkov 1986: 10). In this way, Iraqi Jews were absorbed into the general musical life of Iraq.

The fact that Jewish singing was usually accompanied (except on Sabbath and high holidays) “enabled Jewish musicians to adopt the surrounding art music with greater facility, suiting it to the sacred texts” (Shiloah 1983: 14). Although books, audiotapes, and informants present different views of the instrumentation in *chalgi Baghdad*, one can define a consensus performance where the *chalgi*, as it is referred to by those familiar with the tradition, is composed of the standard 'ud, (lute) *kemenje* (fiddle), *dumbuk* (drum), *qanoon*, (dulcimer), and a singer. Some compositions include, as well, flute, *santour* (dulcimer), and a tambourine-like drum, the *daff*.

The songs sung in the *chalgi* were popular songs of Iraq that did not necessarily have a Jewish theme. These narrative songs employed themes of love of all kinds—tragically lost, suddenly found, regained, forbidden, misinterpreted, romantic, and passionate—and emotions such as sadness, longing, happiness, and admiration for nature. The *chalgi Baghdad* ensemble could be heard on radio, in coffee houses, and at large parties and such family gatherings as weddings and Bar Mitzvahs. Informants say that the well-to-do hired *chalgi Baghdad* bands for *Henna* and *Shevah Brachot* (i.e., pre- and post-matrimonial: Talushkin 1991: 613-15) parties, and that poorer folk would be satisfied with hiring them for only one night.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Daqqaqat***

The *daqqaqat* troupe consisted of a small group of women (from about three or four to seven or eight) who sang and played diverse drums. Shiloah's *Musical Tradition of Iraqi Jews* (1983) portrays the *daqqaqat* as entertainers. Nonetheless, informants described these women as unattractive, some-

times middle-aged women who were not of the same calibre as the *chalgi* performers.

The *daqqaqat* troupes were brought in at weddings where they would improvise songs complimenting the bride's beauty or praising the father's decency and generosity. They would pick out other honourable guests and invent songs about them too. The idea of praising and complimenting (especially generosity) was important because the *daqqaqat* musicians made their living solely from tips. Money was literally thrown to them by guests. What they earned, as one informant bluntly put it, amounted to "pennies" (Ben-Mordechai 1990: 9901I, 5).

### ***Belly dancing***

Also among the women musicians of Iraq were the belly dancers. They were generally hired by the wealthy, and their function was to enliven parties. A few of these belly dancers were lower-class Jewish women of 'tainted' backgrounds. Like the *daqqaqat*, the belly dancers relied primarily on gratuities for their income. It was not uncommon for a man to share the floor with the dancer and to stuff bills into her bra or panties.

### **Land of Milk and Honey: Iraqi Jewish Music in Israel**

The years 1950-51 marked the migration of 150,000 Iraqi Jews to Israel as a result of worsening political and social attitudes (Cohen 1972: 1454). This was deemed "Operation Ezra and Nehemiah" after the two great Iraqi prophets. With the move to Israel, the Jews of Iraq left behind more than 2500 years of heritage. The transition was not easy. The shock of parting from established roots, homes, and friends was magnified by brutal living conditions: deteriorating shanties, scorched by the sun in summer, and drenched by cold rain in winter (Herzog 1990: 2).

The Iraqi Jews and their new culture were not warmly welcomed by the Israelis. The very new state was concerned with modernization and encouraged the "assimilation of ethnic traditions into the melting pot of the new Israeli society, which stemmed from a desire to integrate its citizens into nationhood" (Warkov 1986: 23). Shedding of ethnic background, language, and custom was necessary to achieve unified "Israeliness." David Kazzaz writes (1990:17): "The strong identity of the Iraqi Jew weakened in Israel." Although Israel is a Jewish state, the Iraqis found that the religion which once had unified them was de-emphasized and sometimes even mocked in the young country, where socialist ideals were stressed rather than religious values. As well, Iraqis were ridiculed and criticized if they sang their songs. One informant states bitterly, "It was difficult, all of a sudden to come to this country and be expected to listen to Mozart" (Ben-Mordechai 1990: 9901I, 3). Another informant, Gershon Ovadia, stated that, "We stopped speaking our language. We had to change our mode of dress and our culture. By killing all of this in me, they were killing me"

(Ben-Mordechai 1990: 99071, 3). Needless to say, indulging in Iraqi Jewish music was also severely rebuked. Gershon continued: "On top of it all, to have your own musical heritage...that was just too much to ask for" (Ben-Mordechai 1990: loc. cit.).

Nonetheless, music-making among Iraqi Jews did not vanish in their new home. For some time following their arrival, they tried to shed their Iraqiness and assimilate. But even in the *maabarot* (strips of land where shacks and tents were set up as living quarters by the Israelis), the music continued. Though they could leave Iraq only with very little, some managed to sneak their instruments by, and all carried their songs in their heads. But not until the 1960s did the majority of Iraqis come to terms with their new identities and begin to look back to their Iraqi roots.

During the early years in Israel, synagogues were established for Iraqis by Iraqis. The melodies of the *shevahot* continued to be heard and sung at high holidays and Sabbaths, and, to a lesser extent, at family events. There is no indication that the language of the *shevahot* changed in Israel. These songs were generally sung in Hebrew, and those that employed the Judeo-Arabic dialect were not altered in the new country.

The media continued to play an important role in the transmission of Iraqi Jewish music. Israeli radio's Oriental Orchestra was composed entirely of Iraqi Jews. One of the leaders of this musical heritage was the violinist Zalah al Kweiti. He and his brother, Daud, were influential and popular composers, singers, and instrumentalists among Iraqis. The Kweiti brothers were featured on Israeli radio programs, and they represented the small percentage of actual Iraqi music that was highlighted there. One informant stated that the Israeli administration did not truly want the Iraqi music, and Warkov writes that Israeli radio patronized the Egyptian and Lebanese mainstream style instead (Warkov 1986: 21). Iraqi music was of secondary importance for Israeli broadcast radio, and was used to draw listeners to the news. At the same time, the mainstream styles functioned to draw listeners from abroad (Warkov 1986: 22). Musicians who firmly embraced the Iraqi style were generally not state-supported, and those who were "appeared to have smoothly adapted to the administration's policies" (Warkov 1986: 21). The "adaptation" that is stressed here reflects the modernization and transition that Iraqis had to undergo in order to be accommodated in all spheres of the new society including those of a musical nature.

The *chalgi Baghdad* ensemble was heard at cafés and clubs in Israel from the late 50s onward, and reached a peak of popularity among Iraqi-Israeli Jews who had emerged "out of the closet," as it were. Attendance at these clubs was considered much more respectable in modern Israel than it was in Iraq. Those who participated in the experience would sit with each other before the entertainers and, with a drink in hand, or snacks of nuts

and sunflower seeds brought from home, reminisce, talk, and enjoy the performance. The musicians were also in demand as more Iraqis, especially those of the older generation, “sought reminders of their pre-emigration past in music” (Warkov 1986: 21). They were, therefore, well-paid by the nostalgic, who desired their services.

The cafés and clubs were a unique opportunity for women, who in the past were not permitted to participate in such an outing. In Israel, where Moslem codes did not apply, women were free to enjoy performances in these venues along with men. Women did not function simply as consumers at these clubs. They also had an active role as performers, that is, as belly dancers. Belly dancing still carried with it some associations with prostitution. Iraqi Jewish women also still sang Arabic lullabies to their first generation Israelis, and, now, too, young women and men, who had come to Israel from Iraq as teenagers, were marrying. In this connection, the *daqqaqat* could play a role.

At *henna* parties, weddings, and especially the first Shabbat following a marriage, *daqqaqat* women were commissioned to play, as they had been in Iraq, though rarely. Like the language of the Iraqi Jews when they first arrived, *daqqaqat* performance was mocked. This time the criticism was undertaken by Iraqis, who distinguished between those genres of their music they wished to perpetuate in their new homes and those they wanted to forget. The *daqqaqat* was apparently one of those genres they wished to erase from their memories, for in Iraq, the *daqqaqat* musicians had never been esteemed. Thus, the music of the *daqqaqat* slowly disappeared from the Iraqi Jews' daily life in Israel.

The regained self-esteem of the Iraqi Jews in the 1960s was perhaps predictable. Their acceptance of themselves was a response to their failure to acquire a wholly “Israeli” identity, whatever that may have been in a country fifteen years young. After all, their tradition was too strong and their culture too rich to escape (cf. Warkov 1986: 25). When attempts at gaining genuine acceptance and belonging in external circles had failed, the Iraqis turned inwardly to one another and became more fully organized politically, socially, and hence, musically.

### **Voices from the Past in the North: Iraqi Jewish Music in Canada**

All of my informants moved to Canada in the early 1970s, except for one who came here in 1967. Iraqi Jews are scattered all over the world: in Australia, the United States, England, Japan, Singapore, and other countries. Their relatively short stay in Israel is sometimes considered to reflect their frustration with a society they may never have fit into. This is plausible, though others would contend that their move resulted from a desire for economic advancement. As a prominent member of Toronto's Iraqi Jewish community stated, “They go wherever the work takes them”

(Ben-Mordechai 1990: 9904I, 1). Regardless of all of this scattering, and maybe because of it, Jews of all kinds, wherever they have been, have tended to cling to an aspect of their Judaism, to keep it alive. Mojshe Kaduri, one of my informants, explained it best when he said, “to keep the little flame burning” (Ben-Mordechai 1990: 9901I, 10).

The small Iraqi Jewish community that exists in Toronto today has kept a fairly low profile.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, many are actively involved in the life of their community. The Iraqi Jewish Association, which was founded some fifteen years ago, organizes parties for holidays, and community events. As well, a congregation meets on high holidays and a few Sabbaths. It is difficult to collect the Iraqi Jews for prayer on every Sabbath. The majority are very busy middle-class people who have fallen into a routine of city living. Nevertheless, at the services, the *shevahot* continue to be sung precisely as they had been generations ago in Iraq.

The new diaspora still listens to the *chalgi* music that features the instruments they grew up hearing. Mainly this music is absorbed through records and tapes purchased at shops catering to various Arab sects in the city, or dubbed from friends' copies. These include the songs of such greats as Salima Pasha, Zalah and Daud al Kweiti who preserved the Iraqi musical style in Israel, the 'ud player, Ezra Aharon, and some Egyptian singers such as Abd al Wahab and Om Kelthum as well as Faride al Atrache. The melodies of the 'ud, *qanoon*, and so forth can also be heard at certain ethnic night clubs where they are played by Middle Eastern performers. This is not specifically Iraqi music but is appreciated by Iraqi Jewry. There is little indication that the Jews here attend such clubs on a regular basis: however, on occasion, they have hired some of these musicians to entertain in their homes and at private parties. Mainly, though, the music is listened to privately.

None of my informants was familiar with any *daqqaqat* troupes in Canada. When I asked Gershon Ovadia whether their activities continued, I was told, “Here, you've got it on tape,” at which point he handed me a video tape which included a *daqqaqat* performance (Ben-Mordechai 1990: 9907I, 4). This performance took place in Israel during 1987 as part of an attempt to make an ethnographic film dealing with the music of the Iraqi Jews. The performer, Lulu Shama, passed away a week after taping. She was apparently encouraged to leave her hospital bed for what amounted to her last performance. Lulu was a fourth generation *daqqaqa*, and there is no indication that she had passed down her music to anyone. This is how the music of the *daqqaqat* was continued for Gershon. He can still hear and see it in Canada on his video cassette recorder—something he probably would not have imagined in his wildest fantasies as a young boy in Iraq before the *Aliyah*.

Finally, the belly dancing tradition was never extremely strong among Iraqi Jewish women, and I do not know whether any of them perform it in

Toronto. But like Arabic music, Arabic dancing continues to be enjoyed by some Iraqis at night clubs, and is commissioned on occasion as entertainment in people's homes for special events.

## Conclusion

Throughout their various migrations and the disappointments and frustrations along the way, Iraqi Jews have, as a whole, managed to maintain some semblance of dignity and indeed, happiness. On the surface, it would seem that the music of this group has suffered a gradual attrition and impoverishment. I was perturbed to discover that the *daqqaqat*, for instance, was a dying tradition and that I could not find any *chalgi* musicians of Iraqi Jewish background. I was frustrated also at the lack of any audio, let alone video, collections of Iraqi Jewish music at the Jewish Public Library. It seemed that Iraqi Jews were being poorly represented by a community that is their own and of which they are a part.

One finds, all the same, that members of the Iraqi Jewish community in Toronto have done that for which they are well known in history. That is, they have organized themselves to meet their own ends. The Iraqi Jewish Association, though small and not easily accessible, is a perfect example of cooperative organization. Although some musical traditions of the Iraqis are not as strong or prominent as they once were, they remain an important part of the Iraqi Jew's life.

The music of the Iraqi Jew is never referred to merely as "music" by its participants. It is always the "musical tradition" or "musical heritage." For Iraqi Jews, the music does not exist in and of itself. It is strongly tied to family life, and to the celebration of religion and culture. As long as these continue, the musical culture, tradition, and heritage of the Iraqi Jew will continue, as they do today in Toronto. The Iraqi Jews have endured many turbulent times. Their music seems to have been important in relieving their distress.

## Notes

1. The Hebrew word *Aliyah* means "going up" or "ascending." Thus, any time a Jew moves to settle in Israel, s/he is ascending to, or "making *Aliyah* to," Israel. Conversely, leaving Israel to settle somewhere else has the negative connotation of *Yeirdah* or descending from the country.
2. *Yalelis* are the high-pitched quavering calls that women used to add in the midst of songs or employed as cries of joy at weddings and other festive occasions.
3. *Henna* parties were held by women for the bride. After a wedding, the couple is invited for meals at seven different homes for seven days; these gatherings are *Shevah Brachot*.
4. Statistics were not available from any Iraqi or Jewish institutions as to the precise number of Iraqi Jews residing in Toronto.

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### Résumé:

*Galia Ben-Mordechai considère la culture musicale des Juifs irakiens et ses transformations depuis plus de 2500 ans, quand ce groupe s'est déplacé à travers trois pays et deux continents. Elle décrit comment les Juifs ont quitté Israël pour Babylone dans l'Antiquité et comment ils sont revenus en Israël à l'époque moderne avant de partir pour Canada. L'auteur détaille quatre genres musicaux utilisées en Irak et rend compte des façons dont ces sortes de musique ont survécu à Toronto.*