

MUSIC IN THE MOROCCAN JEWISH COMMUNITY OF TORONTO

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Aspects of Sephardic Jewry

When discussing the Spanish component of Judaism in the Moghreb (North Africa) the Israeli (Moroccan-Jewish) historian Choraqui notes:

*Spanish influences had predated the expulsion from Spain. Numerous and close ties in the field of commerce and learning had long connected Iberia and North Africa. For the Jews especially these ties had been exceptionally close for, under the unifying force of Islam, the Jews too had enjoyed a remarkable unity. The ritual, the chants, the liturgy and the traditions of the Jews living in the various Moslem countries were very similar, especially in the case of North Africa and Spain which, even after the defeat of the Moors in the latter country, still tended to resemble two provinces of the same country as far as the Jews were concerned.*¹

When the Jews left Spain they were following the foot-steps of their ancestors who had fled the Visigoths and the later Almoravids who conquered Andalusia. The Sultan viewed these talented arrivals as an adjunct to his kingdom and most of the Jews settled in and around the Arab urban centres controlled by the Sultan. The Sephardim brought about a cultural revival of the Moroccan Jewish community which had been isolated for some time.² There was much symbiosis between the two communities and many customs were exchanged, but, on the whole, in religious and intellectual matters the Sephardim were dominant. According to Choraqui:

The geographical limits of marked Spanish influence were noticeable for as long as Jews remained in North Africa. Tangiers and Spanish Morocco were understandably the parts of Morocco most affected and it was there that the old Jewish culture of Andalusia was preserved till recently in its purest state, free from Arab influence. The streets of the mellah (ghetto) recalled the streets of Seville and Granada; the houses looked alike, the passers-by had the same features, the language was almost the same, slightly mixed with archaisms and Hebrewisms. The manners and customs were those of sober Seville of the fifteenth century; time had little effect in the mellah with its long memories. The newcomers to the rest of Morocco exerted such influence that they soon absorbed to their ways the native-born communities of Tangiers, Tetuan Salé, Arzila, Larache, Rabat, Safi, Meknes and Debdou.

*The influence of the Spanish exiles continued to lessen and those of the native "toshavim" to increase with the distance from Spanish Morocco. The inter-action between the two cultures was noticeable and they reached a point of equilibrium that made co-existence possible.*³

The poetry of the great Spanish Jews of the Middle Ages was

¹Andre N. Choraqui, *Between East and West: A History of the Jews of North Africa* (New York: Atheneum Books, 1973), p. 86.

²Ibid., p. 88.

³Ibid., p. 91.

incorporated into the liturgy of the Moroccan Jews. The effect of this literary movement was so great that until recently there were Rabbis in the remote Sahara regions and in the Atlas mountains who wrote Hebrew poetry in this style.⁴

The Sephardim dealt with in this article are those who found refuge in Morocco, and these people belong to what is generally referred to as the western Sephardic tradition as opposed to communities in the Eastern Mediterranean. Unlike their brethren in the Turkish Empire they had more lasting contacts with Spain and Portugal in the centuries after the expulsion, and these continue to the present day. In the display window of the Anshe Castilla Synagogue on Bathurst Street there is a letter from the Spanish ambassador of Canada commending them on the establishment of their new house of worship and on the tenacity of their Hispanic heritage – quite an historic irony. Sephardim often bear Spanish personal and family names and it seems that much of their world view and customs have been adopted from their Spanish neighbours.⁵

The literature of the Sephardim comprises three categories: works in Hebrew of both religious or poetical design in the old Judeo/Spanish tradition, works in Spanish along similar lines which include parts of the liturgy translated into Spanish and used during services, and finally the folk “literature” or Spanish Ballads known as Romanceros. These were collected to some degree in the last eighty years in manuscript form with some musical transcription but still lie in the oral tradition of the elders and seem to be destined to fall into disuse.⁶

The synagogue service is distinct from that of the Ashkenazim of Eastern Europe with many differences in the contents of the liturgy, terminology, and especially in its musical rendition.⁷

Unlike the Ashkenazim, loyalty to the Sephardi heritage does not necessarily mean that one is essentially a ritually observant Jew.

*Sephardim tend to be very insistent on preserving these slight differences, probably because they are conscious of their minority within the Jewish community, and tend to develop the same rigorous adherence to custom vis-a-vis the Ashkenazi community as the Orthodox Jewish community does to the outside world. It is not uncommon at the present time for a deep or even fanatical attachment to Sephardi tradition to be coupled with laxity in observance of Jewish law.*⁸

This attachment was well demonstrated to me when on March 19 I first attended the Friday evening service at the Anshe Castilla and engaged in conversation with Moses Benmergui, one of the leaders of the community. He was born in Morocco in the city of Tangiers and he described the efforts of the Alliance schools to teach Sephardi children French in exclusion to

⁴Ibid., p. 103.

⁵Alan D. Corre, “Sephardim,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1972), Vol. 14, p. 1167.

⁶Ibid., p. 1170.

⁷Ibid., p. 1170.

⁸Ibid., p. 1171.

Spanish as an example of cultural genocide! This was a direct result of the European and in particular French influence in Morocco and given difficulties like the above instance, it should not be forgotten that the extent of Jewish well-being, i.e., freedom from harassment, was proportional to the degree of political influence that France began to wield at the turn of the century. The liturgy that the Sephardim use is referred to as the Hispano-Portugese rite and its adoption by the native communities of Morocco is exhibited by the fact that the French Moroccan congregation of Toronto, Tiferet Yisrael, follows the same practice.⁹

Sephardic Music in Toronto

Originally I intended to present a brief overview of the repertoires of the two Moroccan Jewish communities now residing in Toronto, but I concentrated on the Spanish Sephardi congregation for a number of reasons. The first was that the homogeneity of the community was greater than that of the Francophones since almost all the congregants had been born in the Spanish-speaking area of Morocco, i.e., Tangiers, Tetuan, and surrounding villages, as opposed to the Francophones who numbered some Tunisian and Egyptian Jews among them as well as a wide variety of Jews from various parts of Morocco. In short, I have found that the traditions and usages of the Spanish Sephardi congregation have broken less radically from the traditional pattern practices in Morocco than that of Tiferet Yisrael. The second reason was that the relation of the Spanish Sephardim to the music of adjacent peoples interests me greatly. I am referring here to the music of Spain and to that of the Andalucian Muslims who have had close relations with the Sephardim for centuries both inside Spain and in North Africa where they both found refuge. This musical tradition, that of ancient Andalucia, is related to that of the Gypsies, to the later flowering of flamenco, and to the traditions of the mediaeval troubadours.

When I made contact with the congregation of the Anshe Castilla, Moses Benmergui, a member of the congregation in high standing and past president of the Synagogue, suggested that I phone Mr. Benchimol who suggested I come to the Synagogue on Friday evening for the service which lasts about an hour, since he felt that music was the nicest in the liturgical repertoire.

For the next three weeks I attended the Friday night service sitting beside Mr. Benmergui who is quite an ebullient man and a proud Sephardi. In essence we talked our way through the service with him explaining to me the structure of the liturgy and its associated customs, and sidetracking into anecdotes about life and music of the Jews of Morocco. The congregation on Friday evening is made up almost entirely of men, about forty persons altogether, and when there is no solo singing, they all sing together in loud voices in a general heterophonic unison which is of exquisite beauty. When I expressed my admiration for the force and sound of this type of singing, Mr. Benmergui smiled and told me, "Yes, the Sephardim like to sing."

⁹Anon., "Magen David et Tiferet Israel Officiellement Unis," *Shalom*, Vol. 1, No. 2, April 1976 (published by the synagogue).

In opposition to my limited experience in the Ashkenazic tradition, I noticed that the service was not led by a Rabbi or Cantor but by a gentleman who was seated on the edge of the two groups of chairs which face each other in the Sanctuary. This man, whom I later found to be Moses Ozziel, is the Parnas of the congregation. He acted as the master of protocol and he started and directed the melodies for the hymns and cantillation which was followed by the rest of the congregation. At one point in the service a hymn ("Lecha dodi") was rendered by a soloist and answered by the rest of the congregants while the Parnas would point to the new soloist to prepare for his part. On another occasion, I found out that Ozziel changed the tune for the aforementioned hymn to make it less ecstatic out of deference to one of the participants who had just lost one of his parents and was in mourning. I am not sure of the exact role of the Parnas in the Sephardic tradition but it is an apparently ancient practice. S. D. Goitein has noticed a similar phenomenon among the Yemenite Jews and has this to say:

*A visit to a synagogue of Yemenites in Palestine in the forties of this century, when it was still possible to observe them in a relatively unspoiled condition, gave me an impression of utmost antiquity. As in Talmudic times, the pulpit on which the Torah was read was a mobile piece of furniture [as it still is at Anshe Castilla], not a fixed structure. The Holy Ark occupied almost the whole eastern wall [as it still does]. The congregation was seated on the floor. No Rabbi or Precentor officiated, but, as in ancient times, the "head of the synagogue" (the Archi-synagogues of antiquity) apportioned to various members of the congregation the solo chanting of the prayers and the reading of the weekly portion from the Bible . . . The head of the synagogue had the privilege of opening the recitations of the sections chanted by the congregation . . .*¹⁰

As time was limited and the Sephardic conception of time and deadlines is similar to the Spaniards, I realized that to achieve a bare overview of the music of this community, the best thing to do was to interview the Parnas, Mr. Ozziel, since Mr. Benmergui and others had mentioned that he knew many of the musical traditions and was quite a good singer. Therefore in two interviews I attempted to get a general picture of Sephardic musical life in its cultural context and throughout time. The following is a summary of those discussions.

The people at the Anshe Castilla synagogue almost all come from the city of Tangiers and the town of Tetuan which during the last hundred years were included in the Spanish Protectorate of Northern Morocco. The first to emigrate to Toronto was the aforementioned Mr. Benmergui who arrived in 1957, and according to Ozziel the majority of the community migrated in a block a couple of years later. At the moment, the congregation consists of one hundred and eighty-six families, and as the average Sephardic family has at least five members, that amounts to about a thousand people. Of these, about ten to fifteen families come from Tetuan and this is of some significance for Tetuan was considered the Little Jerusalem of Morocco and

¹⁰S. D. Goitein, "The Jews of Yemen," in *Religion in the Middle East*, ed. A. J. Arberry (Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 234.

was *the* cultural centre of the Sephardim. As a result one could postulate that their musical traditions are “diagnostically” representative of Sephardic music at its most developed.

The people at Anshe Castilla can thus be easily categorized in two groups: those who were born in Morocco and emigrated to Canada about twenty years ago, and those who have been born in Canada. However, one of my informants, Mesod Salama, is in his late twenties and spent most of his life in Tetuan before coming to Canada. The main musical traditions are still carried out by the older members of the congregation and are likely to be changed to some degree by the following generations.

In the first interview with Ozziel and Salama I was primarily interested in distinguishing the organization of repertoires in accordance with the degree of Spanish contained in specific usages. The distinction of repertoires is not on whether one is in Spanish or not but on the distinction between music for the Synagogue and the Home. This does not mean that one is more holy than the other. Very simply then the liturgy can be listed under the following headings:

Daily public prayers – sung in the synagogue.

Daily home prayers – usually said or sung by an individual alone or in the presence of others.

Sabbath prayers – in the synagogue and contains a scriptural reading as well as poetical insertions sometimes in honour of a special Shabat (Sabbath).

Sabbath Meditations and songs (Zemiroth) which are usually sung by males and females during the course of dinner or after.

Prayers for distinguished days – which are sometimes sung in the synagogue or at home.

Prayers for special occasions – circumcisions, weddings, in the synagogue and at home.

Haggada for the Seder of Passover – sung by the whole family at home.

Service of the three yearly festivals with poetical insertions – in synagogue.

Service for the high holidays in September at the beginning of the Jewish Lunar year – in synagogue.

Service on Fast and Penitential days – usually at the synagogue but sometimes at home.

Private Devotion – rarely at the synagogue.¹¹

The use of Spanish is less common inside the synagogue than outside of it although at certain times of the year it is used in public prayer. Spanish is used for the Seder of the second night of Passover, and according to Ozziel it is done in both Hebrew and Spanish if time permits. This was probably to keep the women in contact with tradition since they often did not speak Hebrew, and to keep the children interested since it would take them a number of years before they would completely understand the Hebrew text. Stylistically, the musical interpretation of the Seder, i.e., the Haggada, was not homogenous in the Tangiers community for Ozziel explained that there

¹¹ A. Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy and its Historical Development* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), p. vii.

were tunes for part of the festival which were sung only in his family. This is not surprising as Mr. Benmurgy explained that the role of the Parnas is often inherited over the generations as had been the case with Ozziel. Therefore, musical specialization in "family conservatories" would easily enable a family style to be maintained throughout the generations.

During the interviews, much time and discussion centred on the famed "Canciones de Cunas" which are the Romances beloved of folklorists of the Hispanic tradition. Apparently originating in Castile around the sixteenth century, they have a wide diffusion around the world, west across the Atlantic to Latin America and east across the Mediterranean, in the memories of the Jews who were expelled from Spain. Not much work has been done on the musical aspect of the Romancero, the latest being that of Israel Katz who centered on the Eastern as opposed to the Western tradition (Moroccan-Algerian). As far as musical origins and/or changes go, little can be said at this time except that the Jewish ballads are often retained in the oral tradition long after they have died out in Iberia, and since the Moroccan Sephardim had such close linguistic and cultural contacts with Spain since the Expulsion, it is likely that musical traits of Spanish folklore of the sixteenth century have been preserved in them.

The Jewish Romancero is unique in that it has often been de-Christianized or completely Judaized. What is meant by this is that ballads with overt Christian theological content have been edited in order not to conflict with the Jewish world view. The second type is seen in "Amnon Y Tamar," a Bible story in Spanish. The form and possibly the music have been made almost completely native as is the case with the Romance "Sol Asedaka."¹² To make a long story short, the ballad describes a situation where the Sultan's son falls in love with a Jewish girl and everyone including her Rabbi and parents convince her to accept Islam to marry the Prince since otherwise the wrath of the Muslims might be brought down upon the Jews. She refuses all entreaties to change her religion and demonstrates the Jewish ideal of personal covenant with God which is first set down in the Story of Abraham. Finally she chooses to die instead of converting to Islam.

"Sol Asedaka" – Sedaka meaning a righteous one or more literally the "Saint" – is a perfect example of Moroccan Jews (Sephardim) taking a Spanish form to reflect their being unconsciously influenced by Moroccan Islam, insofar as the remembrance of Saints is a peculiar feature of North African Islam and of North African Judaism in its popular form; thus showing acculturation from the dominant people to its minority. These songs were passed down from mother or from father to child, although when I originally asked whether these are songs that men or women sing, Ozziel said that it is a women's repertoire. The truth lies in between in that most men do not specialize in singing these ballads but can sing some. It is a cultural ideal which limits the repertoires, possibly because a man should, in the eyes of the traditional Jew, be more concerned with the music of the synagogue than the music of the home which remained the domain of the Jewish woman.

¹²Issachar Ben Ami, "Folklore Research in Israel – The Role of the Tsadik," *Ariel*, no. 35, 1974, p. 39.

“Sol Asedaka” is not dead, at least not in the daily lives of the Sephardim on Bathurst Street. This is attested by a special evening service held over a year ago in the synagogue to commemorate her martyrdom in Morocco of the 1840s. Yet oral tradition was modified at that occasion by the Rabbi who “arranged” the ballad in written form and distributed it to those assembled in the synagogue. This is an example of incipient mass culture. During that service the men and women sang the ballad through together which is quite unusual as the Romancero is almost always a solo affair.

The Romancero is also sung at weddings by women as Ozziel attested when he spoke of the wedding in the Bouzaglo family. He told me of an incident when he was together with some people at a house and he was interrupted by an older woman who sang him the ballad the “right way.”

I have not been able to obtain a translation of the other ballad that he sang, but it is very interesting from a musical point of view. The tune of the ballad, Ozziel explained, he often uses to sing a hymn during the Friday night service. This was the first hint of the interpenetration of musical repertoires with those of the host cultures which is prevalent in the music of the Sephardim. For another hymn, “Lecha Dodi” (written by a Moroccan mystic who went to live in the Galilean town of Safad during the sixteenth century), Ozziel said he knows ten different versions, some which are adaptations of tunes that he heard, either directly or indirectly, that come from Israel. Sometimes Ozziel will change a melody that he knows to be “traditional” and sing it to another, as seen in the conversation we had about the ballad, “Amnon Y Tamar,” to which he referred very simply, “that melody I don’t like it.”

From the two talks that I had with Ozziel it seemed that a distinction was made more between the uses of music than the actual musical content. Otherwise the extent of acculturation from outside sources would be diminished. The analogy is similar to that of the protagonist of modern Kosher cooking who would say that Chinese food is fine as long as you don’t have it with a milk shake. Musically this seems to mean that melodies from the Spaniards and the Muslims can be used for hymns and some more traditional writings (meaning more ancient Biblical books) as long as the ideas that these melodies represent are not overtly imitated.

Two examples seem to prove this point. The first is that Ozziel explained to me that in the morning the Jews of Tangiers would walk by a Mosque and hear the Muezzin calling out the morning call to prayer in a mode which in Arabic is called “Sebochi.” Ozziel later sang me an example of this and he said that he has substituted Hebrew words for the Arabic and that it was used in the service. A different example of the same process is a liturgical piece that he sang in the mode Baytzayin which followed the form of “Mawwal” which opens the secular suites of Andalucian Arabic classical music.

Secular Arabic music in a Jewish context mostly took place at weddings where the women belly dance with clothes on as shown in Delacroix’s painting of the Jewish wedding in Morocco. The accompaniment was called an Arabic orchestra and consisted of an oud, percussion, and a violin with or without singing, usually in Arabic. Although it was called an Arabic orchestra, it often consisted of Jews as was the case with Ozziel’s ancestors. These

musicians had a number of distinct repertoires for different occasions, with a slight degree of acculturation between them. The living example of this type of musician is Sami al Maghribi (Sam Amzalag who lives in Montreal is the chazzan for the Hispano-Portuguese synagogue, plays the oud, once was a court musician for King Hassan of Morocco, and is musically fluent in both Jewish and Moroccan Arab styles). Although he is not a Sephardi from Spain, he is close enough to the kind of musician represented by Ozziel's grandparents who were professional musicians in the Arabic orchestra.

The previous description is somewhat idealized since most of the congregation at Anshe Castilla have been in Toronto for over twenty years and even in Tangiers they were influenced by European music, for Ozziel was insistent on pointing out that the Jews of Tangiers were always in contact with Europeans. Musically, they had the tradition of Spanish balladry which gave them a bridge to the appreciation of Western European popular music. After the second interview, I managed to chat with Ozziel's younger brother, a man in his forties who leads the band that plays at weddings. When asked what music he played he mentioned a number of South American singers and musicians who are very popular, and given the Hispanic roots of the Sephardim, it is not surprising that they have taken to this modern music.

At the same time, many of the younger children of the congregation go to Jewish Parochial schools which are run by Ashkenazim, and although they are much influenced by Israeli culture (which adopted the Sephardic Hebrew as the national tongue some fifty years ago) the conflict with differing Jewish traditions has an effect on the Sephardic one. Mr. Benmergui explained to me that when the children learn the liturgy for their Bar Mitzvah, the elders of the synagogue must tell them to forget everything they learned at religious school as it is necessary to learn a different system of pronunciation as well as a different and more Near Eastern style of singing. Nonetheless it would be premature to predict whether Sephardic music will survive in Canada. Personally, I am doubtful for two reasons. The first is that the other waves of Sephardi immigrants to the United States in the last two centuries have always been quick to assimilate into the mainstream of society, and the second is that even if they follow in the footsteps of the Ashkenazic community of Toronto, their folk music will be gone in two to three generations. Finally, I feel that there is an unmentioned force at work and that is the effect of a secular and pluralistic society which has been very successful at assimilating diverse cultures to the mainstream of New World existence, be it in Jazz or Nuclear Physics.

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Résumé: *Geoffrey Clarfield donne des informations au sujet de la musique d'un groupe de Juifs de Morocco parlant l'espagnol et vivant à Toronto.*