

LANGUAGE, LEARNING, AND THOUGHT

Music, Piyyut, and Song

From Andalusian poetry sung before dawn to Baghdad radio stars and Israeli chart toppers: the sounds of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish life.

SACRED SONG

Hebrew poems called *piyyutim*, including beloved works by poets of medieval Spain, are still sung in synagogues and at Shabbat tables.

THE MAQAM

Syrian and other communities sing prayers in the melodic modes of Arabic and Turkish music, called *maqamat*.

WOMEN'S VOICES

Lullabies, wedding songs, and ballads, often passed from mothers to daughters, carried languages and memories across generations.

TODAY

Musicians in Israel, the United States, and beyond are reviving these sounds in concert halls, synagogues, and pop charts.

Music has always been one of the strongest threads in Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish life. In synagogues from Aleppo to Casablanca, worshippers sang Hebrew poetry to melodies shared with their Muslim and Christian neighbors. At home, women sang ballads in Ladino and wedding songs in Judeo Arabic. In the twentieth century, Jewish singers and instrumentalists became stars of Arabic and Persian radio, records, and film. Following these songs is a way to follow the story of the communities themselves: where they lived, whom they lived beside, and what they carried with them when they left.

Sacred song: piyyut, bakkashot, and the maqam

Piyyut. A *piyyut* is a Hebrew liturgical poem, sung before or within the prayers. Piyyutim were written across the Jewish world, from Spain to Iraq and from Lithuania to Azerbaijan, and one poem may be sung to dozens of melodies. The great poets of medieval Spain, such as Solomon ibn Gabirol, Yehuda Halevi, and Abraham ibn Ezra, wrote poems that are still sung today. "Lekha Eli Teshukati," usually attributed to Ibn Ezra, opens the Yom Kippur prayers in most Sephardic communities.

Bakkashot. In Aleppo, Morocco, and later Jerusalem, worshippers gathered in synagogue in the small hours of winter Sabbath mornings, roughly from Sukkot to Passover depending on the community, to sing *bakkashot* ("petitions") until morning prayers. The custom most likely took its present form among the kabbalists of Safed in the 1500s. Moroccan communities sing from *Shir Yedidot* (1921), a collection of about 550 poems set to melodies of the Arab Andalusian tradition.

The maqam. In 1587 the poet Israel Najara arranged his poems by the *maqamat* of Ottoman music. Today, Syrian Jews choose a different maqam for prayer each Sabbath.

How the weekly maqam works

A maqam is a musical mode: a set of notes with its own mood and melodic habits. In Syrian synagogues, the cantor matches the week's maqam to the Torah reading:

- **Rast**, considered the first maqam (its name is linked to the Arabic word for "head"), is used for the opening reading of the first four books of the Torah.
- **Hijaz** is used for readings that tell of the deaths of biblical figures.

Syrian *pizmonim*, Hebrew hymns sung at celebrations, often draw on Arabic classical music. Scholar Mark Kligman shows how the pizmon "Bo'i be-Rinah" follows the Arabic song "Hawwid Min Hina."

Musical traditions

Syria: pizmonim

Aleppo's Jews are known for keeping the Arabic maqam at the heart of their prayers, including in Brooklyn. Composers such as Raphael Tabbush and Moses Ashear wrote pizmonim for weddings, prayers, and other occasions. The Sephardic Pizmonim Project catalogs them by maqam, with recordings.

Sources: Mark Kligman (review by Galeet Dardashti); Sephardic Pizmonim Project

The Ottoman world: Ladino song

Ladino song was mainly a women's repertoire. *Romansas* are narrative ballads, not love songs, with roots in medieval Spain, often sung alone during household work. Women led wedding songs, sang laments called *endechas*, and played the tambourine (*pandero*). Rhymed *koplas* retold holiday stories such as Purim.

Sources: Judith R. Cohen, Jewish Women's Archive; My Jewish Learning; University of Washington

Morocco: Andalusian song and women's voices

Moroccan synagogue song draws on Arab Andalusian music. In *matrouz* ("embroidered"), poets wove Hebrew and Arabic together in alternating verses. Zohra El Fassia (1905 to 1994, though some sources say 1912) recorded from the 1930s, sang on Radio Maroc and for Mohammed V, and moved to Israel in the 1960s. Her recording of the henna song "Abyadi Ana" can still be heard online.

Sources: Hebrew University Jewish Music Research Centre; Jewish Women's Archive; European Institute of Jewish Music

Iraq: the chalghi and the al Kuwaity brothers

Baghdad's classical ensemble, the *chalghi* (oud, fiddle, qanun, drum, and singer), was largely made up of Jewish musicians, who played at weddings, in coffee houses, and on radio. The brothers Saleh (violin) and Daoud (oud) al Kuwaity were celebrated stars in Iraq; Saleh led the Iraqi state radio ensemble. After they left for Israel in 1951, their names were removed from their recordings in Iraq.

Sources: Galia Ben-Mordechai (Canadian Journal for Traditional Music); Hebrew University; KQED

Egypt and North Africa: stars of radio, records, and film

Leila Murad (1918 to 1995), born to a Jewish family in Egypt, became a star of Egyptian film and song; she converted to Islam in 1946. In Algiers, Lili Boniche (born 1921) studied the oud with a master of Andalusian music and created a French and Arabic blend he called "Francarabe." Historian Christopher Silver traces the Jewish and Muslim artists who shaped North Africa's early recording industry.

Sources: Jewish Women's Archive; World Music Central; Christopher Silver, *Recording History*

Iran: masters of Persian music

Among the great masters of Persian classical music was Morteza Neydavud (1900 to 1990), born in Tehran to a Jewish family of musicians. He played the *tar* (a long necked lute), worked for Radio Tehran, and recorded 297 melodies of the Persian system. He moved to the United States in 1980 and died in San Francisco.

Source: Encyclopaedia Iranica

Yemen: the diwan

Yemenite men sang poems from the *diwan*, a collection in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic. About half its poems are by Shalom Shabazi, a seventeenth century poet of Ta'izz whose tomb was honored by Jews and Muslims alike. Ofra Haza (1957 to 2000) brought Yemenite songs to the world with *Yemenite Songs* (1984).

Sources: Encyclopaedia Judaica (Jewish Virtual Library); Hebrew University; Jewish Women's Archive

Israel: musika mizrahit and revival

Immigrants brought these sounds to Israel. Cassette tapes helped spread *musika mizrahit*, and Zohar Argov (1955 to 1987) became one of its best known stars. Today the sisters of A-WA sing in Yemenite Judeo Arabic, Neta Elkayam sings Moroccan Jewish songs, and piyyut singing circles bring people together.

Sources: Posen Library; European Institute of Jewish Music; Jewish Virtual Library; J. Weekly

Roots and revival

Two paths of memory. Scholar Vanessa Paloma Elbaz describes Sephardic memory as traveling along two paths: a “tree” of texts and melodies passed down in synagogues and study halls, and a “web” of songs and sayings shared in homes and among women. Her recordings of Moroccan Jewish women's songs, including lullabies, songs for baking Purim treats, and songs of the courtyards, preserve voices that might otherwise be lost.

Loss and return. As Jews left the Middle East and North Africa in the mid twentieth century, some musicians lost their audiences. In Israel, the al Kuwaity brothers played in the Arabic orchestra of the national radio, Kol Yisrael. A generation later, grandchildren revived the music: in 2011, Daoud's grandson, rock musician Dudu Tassa, released new versions of their songs, and in 2016 A-WA's “Habib Galbi” became the first Arabic language song to top the Israeli charts.

Common misconceptions

- **“Ladino songs are medieval.”** Romansas have medieval roots, but many popular Ladino songs date from the 1800s or later.
- **“Romansas are love songs.”** They are narrative ballads that tell stories.
- **“Jewish music and Arab music were separate.”** Jewish musicians played major roles in Arabic music in Iraq and North Africa, and much synagogue song shares its modes.
- **“Sephardic music is one style.”** Syrian, Moroccan, Ottoman, Iraqi, Persian, and Yemenite traditions each sound different.

Words to know

Piyyut (pl. piyyutim) *Hebrew*

A liturgical poem, sung in or around the prayers.

Paytan *Hebrew*

A poet or singer of piyyutim.

Bakkashot *Hebrew*

“Petitions,” poems sung before dawn on winter Sabbaths.

Maqam (pl. maqamat) *Arabic*

A melodic mode with its own notes and mood.

Pizmon (pl. pizmonim) *Hebrew*

A Syrian Jewish hymn for celebrations, often modeled on Arabic songs.

Romansa *Ladino*

A narrative ballad with roots in medieval Spain.

Kopla *Ladino*

A rhymed song in verses, often for a holiday.

Matrouz *Moroccan Arabic*

“Embroidered”: poetry alternating Hebrew and Arabic.

Diwan *Arabic*

A poetry collection; for Yemenite Jews, the songbook of sacred and festive poems.

Chalghi *Iraqi Arabic*

Baghdad's classical music ensemble.

Bringing the music to life

In the public school classroom

- Treat songs as cultural exchange: compare a Syrian pizmon with the Arabic song it follows, and discuss what is shared and what changes.
- Listening activity: play recordings of "Lekha Eli Teshukati" from Morocco, Tunisia, and Thessaloniki on the National Library of Israel site. How do the melodies differ?
- Explore instruments such as the oud, qanun, and tar, and compare them with instruments students know.
- Study sacred songs as poetry and history. Students listen and analyze; they do not sing liturgical texts as worship.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Choose a pizmon for the week's maqam, or host a bakkashot evening with a local paytan.
- Read the poems of Ibn Gabirol and Halevi alongside Sarah Sassoon's essay in *Distinctions*.
- Invite grandparents to teach a song from home.
- Use the Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit to weave music through the school year.

At home and with family

- Ask elders which songs they remember from childhood, and record them singing.
- Build a family playlist of songs from your community, and learn the story behind each one.
- Read *The Key from Spain* with young children.
- Share your family's songs and memories with JIMENA's oral history project.

Questions for discussion

- What can a shared melody tell us about how neighbors of different faiths lived together?
- Why might songs survive even after a community stops speaking its language?
- When a young musician remixes a grandparent's song, is it keeping tradition alive or changing it? Can it be both?

Learn more

Watch and listen

Persian Jewish Music and Pre Kabbalat Shabbat with Galeet Dardashti (JIMENA, 2020)

youtube.com/watch?v=Dzzl918VZ5k

Chag ha'Banot: An Interfaith North African Hanukkah Celebration of Women (JIMENA, 2020, with live music)

youtube.com/watch?v=YL4DzplSgPI

"Abyadi Ana," sung by Zohra El Fassia (Hebrew University Jewish Music Research Centre, with audio)

jewish-music.huji.ac.il/en/content/abyadi-ana

"Lekha Eli Teshukati" in several traditions (National Library of Israel)

nli.org.il/en/discover/music/jewish-music/piyut/piyut/lekha-eli-teshukati

Read

The Key from Spain: Flory Jagoda and Her Music, by Debbie Levy, illustrated by Sonja Wimmer (Kar-Ben, 2019). Picture book about a beloved Ladino singer.

lernerbooks.com/shop/show/17905

Maqam and Liturgy: Ritual, Music, and Aesthetics of Syrian Jews in Brooklyn, by Mark L. Kligman (Wayne State University Press, 2009).

mjoireviews.org/2010/06/28/maqam-and-liturgy-ritual-music-and-aesthetics-of-syrian-jews-in-brooklyn

Recording History: Jews, Muslims, and Music across Twentieth Century North Africa, by Christopher Silver (Stanford University Press, 2022).

mjoireviews.org/2023/08/25/recording-history-jews-muslims-and-music-across-twentieth-century-north-africa

From Distinctions, JIMENA's journal

"Sontinuity: The Tree and the Web," by Vanessa Paloma Elbaz How songs carry memory, with Ladino and Moroccan recordings.

distinctionsjournal.org/the-tree-and-the-web

"The Poetry of Exile and Return," by Sarah Sassoon From Ibn Gabirol and Halevi to Shabazi and today.

distinctionsjournal.org/the-poetry-of-exile-and-return

Explore online

Piyut and Tefillah: thousands of piyyutim to hear (National Library of Israel)

nli.org.il/en/discover/music/jewish-music/piyut

Baqqashot (Hebrew University Jewish Music Research Centre)

jewish-music.huji.ac.il/en/content/baqqashah-pl-baqqashot

Maqam Rast and the weekly maqam (Sephardic Pizmonim Project)

pizmonim.org/maqam.php?maqam=Rast

The al Kuwaity brothers (Hebrew University)

jewish-music.huji.ac.il/en/node/11781

The Diwan of the Jews of Central Yemen (Hebrew University)

jewish-music.huji.ac.il/en/node/21781

Women and Sephardic Music (Jewish Women's Archive)

jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/women-and-sephardic-music

Zohra El Fassia (Jewish Women's Archive)

jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/fassia-zohra-el

Ofra Haza (Jewish Women's Archive)

cdn.jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/haza-ofra

The Faces and Voices of Sephardic Music in Seattle (University of Washington)

jewishstudies.washington.edu/blog/faces-and-voices-of-sephardic-music-in-seattle

Sephardic Songs Add Merriment to Purim (My Jewish Learning)

myjewishlearning.com/2016/03/21/sephardic-songs-add-merriment-to-purim

Saving Moroccan Jewish women's songs (University of Cambridge)

interfaith.cam.ac.uk/news/ny-times-features-moroccan-jewish-archive-saving-historic-songs

From JIMENA

Culture and Holidays videos

jimena.org/videos/culture-and-holidays

Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit (designed mainly for Jewish day schools)

sepharditoolkit.org

Oral history

jimena.org/oral-history



About JIMENA

JIMENA, Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, preserves and shares the history, heritage, and living culture of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Explore more explainers, oral histories, videos, and teaching resources at jimena.org/cultural-heritage.

A note for educators

This explainer is written to support teaching *about* religion and culture. In public schools, present customs, texts, and prayers as subjects of study, and do not ask students to perform rituals, recite blessings, or take part in religious practice. Share your family's story with JIMENA at jimena.org/share-your-story.

Sources consulted include the Hebrew University Jewish Music Research Centre; the National Library of Israel; the Sephardic Pizmonim Project; Mark L. Kligman, *Maqam and Liturgy*; the Jewish Women's Archive (Judith R. Cohen, Tamar Sella, Nathan Shahar); the University of Washington; My Jewish Learning; the University of Cambridge; Galia Ben-Mordechai, *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music*; KQED; Encyclopaedia Iranica; Encyclopaedia Judaica; the European Institute of Jewish Music; the Posen Library; Christopher Silver; World Music Central; and J. Weekly. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.