

Teacher Background: Piyut and Mizrahi Music

What is a piyut?

A piyut is a Hebrew poem written to be sung. The earliest piyutim were composed in the Land of Israel in the first centuries of the Common Era to adorn the prayers of the synagogue. The tradition flourished in Spain from the tenth century, the era often called the Golden Age, when poets such as Solomon ibn Gabirol, Judah Halevi, Moses ibn Ezra, and Abraham ibn Ezra wrote verse that is still sung today. Some piyutim became fixed parts of the prayer service, such as Adon Olam and Lecha Dodi; others are sung at weddings, circumcisions, holidays, and gatherings at home.

One poem, many melodies

Jewish communities sang piyutim to the music of the places they lived. After the expulsion from Spain in 1492, Sephardic Jews carried their poems to North Africa and the Ottoman Empire. In the sixteenth century, Rabbi Israel Najara, who lived in Safed and Damascus, wrote Hebrew poems to fit popular Arabic and Turkish melodies; his *Yah Ribon* is still sung at Shabbat tables. In Yemen, Rabbi Shalom Shabazi's seventeenth century poems formed the heart of the Yemenite Jewish *diwan*. Jews of Aleppo sang *bakkashot*, cycles of piyutim, in the hours before dawn on winter Sabbaths, and many Middle Eastern communities organized their prayers by *maqam*, the system of melodic modes shared with Arabic and Turkish music. Moroccan Jews preserved the Andalusian musical tradition whose roots reach back to medieval Spain.

From the margins to the mainstream

In Israel's early decades, official culture and national radio favored music in a European style, and the music of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa was heard mostly at weddings, at family celebrations, and in synagogues. In the 1970s and 1980s, Mizrahi singers built huge audiences through cassette tapes, many sold at stalls around Tel Aviv's central bus station. Scholars of Israeli music, such as Motti Regev and Edwin Seroussi, have shown how traditional melodies, including songs from the Yemenite diwan, became Mizrahi hits, and early Mizrahi albums often placed piyutim next to love songs. Over time Mizrahi music moved to the center of Israeli popular culture, and singers such as Zohar Argov, Ofra Haza, and later Sarit Hadad became national stars.

The piyut revival

Since the 1990s and 2000s, interest in piyut has grown across Israeli society. Orchestras such as the Israeli Andalusian Orchestra Ashdod, founded in 1987, perform the music of the Maghreb in concert halls; programs such as *Invitation to Piyut* and *Hibbat HaPiyut* record and teach piyutim; and young musicians of every background sing them. Contemporary artists, many of them women, also sing in the Arabic, Persian, Judeo Arabic, and French of their grandparents.

About the singer

Sarit Hadad was born in Afula, Israel, in 1978 to a family of Mountain Jews who came from Dagestan in the Caucasus. She became one of Israel's most popular singers and has helped open the Mizrahi music world to women performers. Her recording of *Yismach Hatani* was made for the 2016 film *Yismach Hatani (The Women's Balcony)*, a comedy set in a Sephardic synagogue community in Jerusalem.

Written by JIMENA. Sources: Piyut North America; Motti Regev and Edwin Seroussi, *Popular Music and National Culture in Israel* (University of California Press, 2004); The Forward, "Mizrahi Music Gets Its Rock Star Moment" (2015).