

Sephardic and Middle Eastern Jewish Music

Students listen to *piyutim*, the sung Hebrew poems of Sephardic and Middle Eastern Jewish communities, compare traditional and modern performances, and discover how this music became part of Israeli popular culture

GRADE AND SETTING

Grades 6 to 8: public, independent, and Jewish schools

TIME

One 60 minute session, or two 45 minute class periods

APPENDICES

A: Lecha Dodi
B: Yismach Hatani
C: Teacher Background

Overview

For more than a thousand years, Jewish poets in Spain, North Africa, and the Middle East wrote *piyutim* (singular *piyut*), Hebrew poems sung in the synagogue, at weddings, on Shabbat, and on holidays. Each community sang them to the melodies and musical modes of the lands where they lived, so a single poem might sound Andalusian in Morocco, Arabic in Aleppo, and Turkish in Istanbul. When these communities came to Israel, their music came with them. At first it was heard mostly at family celebrations and on cassette tapes, but over time Mizrahi music moved to the center of Israeli popular culture, and today *piyutim* are sung by orchestras, pop stars, and young people across Israel. In this lesson, students read and listen to two *piyutim*, compare traditional and contemporary performances, and consider why communities keep their musical heritage alive.

Essential Questions

1. What are the roots of Middle Eastern Jewish music?
2. How did this music become popular in Israel and beyond?
3. Why do communities keep old songs alive, and how do they make them new?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Define *piyut* and describe where and when *piyutim* are sung.
2. Read and interpret the text of a *piyut*, citing lines from the poem.
3. Describe musical elements of a performance, such as instruments, tempo, voice, and mood.
4. Compare a traditional and a contemporary performance of the same *piyut*.
5. Explain how Mizrahi music moved from the margins to the mainstream of Israeli culture.

Curriculum Connections

- **Music (National Core Arts Standards):** MU:Re7.2.6 (describe how musical elements are used); MU:Cn11.0.6 (relate music to history and culture).

- **English Language Arts (Common Core):** RL.6.4 (meaning of words and phrases in poetry); SL.6.1 (collaborative discussion).
- **Social Studies (C3 Framework):** D2.His.2.6-8 (change and continuity); D2.Geo.8.6-8 (how migration spreads culture).
- **Jewish Studies (Jewish settings):** Kabbalat Shabbat; wedding customs; Sephardic and Mizrahi liturgy.

Key Vocabulary

- **Piyut** (פיוט, plural *piyutim*): a Hebrew poem written to be sung, especially in prayer and celebration.
- **Paytan:** a poet or singer of piyutim.
- **Maqam:** a system of melodic modes used in Arabic and Turkish music, and by many Middle Eastern Jewish communities in prayer.
- **Acrostic:** a poem in which the first letters of the lines or verses spell a word or name.
- **Mizrahi music:** Israeli popular music shaped by the musical traditions of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa.
- **Hafla:** Arabic for “party” or celebration, often with music and dancing.

Teacher Background

Read Appendix C before teaching. In brief: piyutim began in the Land of Israel in the early centuries of the Common Era and flourished in Spain from the tenth century, with poets such as Solomon ibn Gabirol and Judah Halevi. After the expulsion from Spain in 1492, Sephardic Jews carried the tradition to North Africa and the Ottoman Empire, and poets such as Rabbi Israel Najara in Safed and Damascus and Rabbi Shalom Shabazi in Yemen wrote new piyutim to local melodies.

Lecha Dodi was written in sixteenth century Safed by Rabbi Shlomo Halevi Alkabetz, born in Salonika in the Ottoman Empire. The first letters of its first eight verses spell his name. Jews around the world sing it on Friday evening to welcome Shabbat, each community to its own melodies. **Yismach Hatani**, by an unknown author, is a song of blessing sung for a groom when he is called to the Torah around his wedding and at wedding celebrations in many Sephardic and Middle Eastern communities. The singer Sarit Hadad, born in Afula in 1978 to a family of Mountain Jews from Dagestan in the Caucasus, recorded it for the 2016 Israeli film *Yismach Hatani* (in English, *The Women’s Balcony*).

For public school settings: These songs are religious poems. Teach them as literature and music that reveal a community’s history and values. Singing is a way to experience the music, not an act of worship; make it optional, and offer clapping, rhythm, or listening as alternatives.

Materials

- Projector and good speakers
- Recordings (all checked):
- [Lecha Dodi, Moroccan synagogue tradition](#) (Renanot Institute of Jewish Music; cantors Maimon Mani Hacohen and Shimon Ilouz; 9 min)
- [Lecha Dodi, Lior Elmaleh with the Israeli Andalusian Orchestra Ashdod](#) (3.5 min)
- [Yismach Hatani, Hibbat HaPiyut ensemble with Avi Tzalach](#) (3.5 min)
- [Yismach Hatani, Sarit Hadad, from the film Yismach Hatani](#) (official video, 3.5 min)
- Handouts:

- [Appendix A: Lecha Dodi](#) (one per student)
- [Appendix B: Yismach Hatani](#) (one per student)
- [Appendix C: Teacher Background](#)

Procedures

Introduction: Welcoming Shabbat with Lecha Dodi (20 minutes)

- 1 Main questions.** Write the essential questions on the board. Ask: Does your family have a song that is sung at every celebration? Who taught it to you?
- 2 Read.** Hand out Appendix A. Read the introduction and the chorus and first verse of Lecha Dodi together. Students answer the “What do you think?” questions with a partner.
- 3 Listen.** Play the first minutes of the Moroccan synagogue rendition, then the Andalusian Orchestra rendition. Ask: What does it sound like? What instruments do you hear? How do the two performances differ? Why would an orchestra in modern Israel want to keep these piyutim alive?

Body of the Lesson: Yismach Hatani, Old and New (25 minutes)

- 4 Read.** Hand out Appendix B. Students read Yismach Hatani and answer the “What do you think?” questions: How does the poem bless the groom? Which images stand out?
- 5 Listen and compare.** Play the Hibbat HaPiyut ensemble performance, then Sarit Hadad’s version. Students fill in the listening chart on Appendix B: performers, instruments, tempo, voice, mood, audience, and purpose.
- 6 Discuss.** How is Sarit Hadad’s version different from the traditional one? What stays the same? Why might a pop star record a centuries old wedding blessing for a film? Use Appendix C to explain how Mizrahi music moved from cassette tapes and weddings to the center of Israeli popular music.

Conclusion: Hafla! (15 minutes)

- 7 Learn the refrain.** Teach the first two lines of Yismach Hatani using the transliteration. Play Sarit Hadad’s version again and invite students to sing, clap, or keep the rhythm.
- 8 Reflect.** Return to the essential questions. Students complete the exit question on Appendix B: Why do communities keep old songs alive, and how do they make them new?

Assessment

- **Formative:** partner responses on Appendix A and participation in the listening discussions.
- **Summative:** the Appendix B listening chart and exit question. A strong response describes at least three musical elements in each performance, cites a line from the poem, and explains one reason communities preserve and renew their music.

Differentiation

- **Students who need support:** provide a word bank for musical description (fast, slow, joyful, solemn, drum, strings, solo, chorus).
- **English learners:** invite students to share songs from their own families’ celebrations.
- **Advanced learners:** find the acrostic in the full text of Lecha Dodi, or research the maqam system and how Syrian Jews assign a maqam to each week’s Torah reading.

Extension Activities

- **Be the DJ.** Teams create a playlist of Mizrahi and Sephardic music, from piyutim to today's artists, and present the background of each artist to the class.
- **Write an acrostic piyut.** Like Rabbi Alkabetz, students write a short poem of blessing or welcome whose verses begin with the letters of their own names.
- **Songs of celebration.** Explore the music, ululation, and blessings of the henna celebration in JIMENA's [Henna Party](#) lesson.
- **Find the source.** Students look for Biblical verses inside the two piyutim (for example, "bearing sheaves" in Psalm 126:6) and explain why poets wove them in.

Resources and External Links

- [Lecha Dodi, Moroccan synagogue tradition \(Renanot Institute of Jewish Music, video\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-iqEc_Tsm7c)
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- [Lecha Dodi, Lior Elmaleh and the Israeli Andalusian Orchestra Ashdod \(video\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U5g-FB8sfa4)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=U5g-FB8sfa4
- [Yismach Hatani, Hibbat HaPiyut \(video\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i09kg4EiNF8)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=i09kg4EiNF8
- [Yismach Hatani, Sarit Hadad \(official video\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ePara4T1BwY)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=ePara4T1BwY
- [Piyut North America](http://piyutnorthamerica.org/)
piyutnorthamerica.org/
- [Mizrahi Music Gets Its Rock Star Moment \(The Forward\)](https://forward.com/culture/music/325432/why-mizrahi-artists-are-embracing-their-ancestors-languages/)
forward.com/culture/music/325432/why-mizrahi-artists-are-embracing-their-ancestors-languages/
- [Arts and Music \(Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit\)](http://www.sepharditoolkit.org/recommendation/arts-and-music-education/)
www.sepharditoolkit.org/recommendation/arts-and-music-education/
- [Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit \(JIMENA\)](http://www.sepharditoolkit.org/)
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