

Article

Music, History, and Culture in Sephardi Jewish Prayer Chanting

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Abstract: This article presents the study of a Jewish liturgical genre that is performed in main sections of Jewish prayer services. This liturgical genre is called “prayer chanting”. The term refers to the musical performance by the cantor of the prose texts in Jewish prayer services. The genre of prayer chanting characterizes most Jewish liturgical traditions, and its central characteristic is a close attachment of the musical structure to the structure of the text. The article will examine musical, cultural, and historical characteristics of prayer chanting of two Sephardi Jewish traditions and will explain how this liturgical genre reflects historical and cultural features related to these liturgical traditions. The study presented here is based on field work that includes recordings of prayer and interviews of well-known cantors of the two traditions as well as observations in synagogue of the two liturgical traditions.

Keywords: Jewish music; Jewish liturgy; prayer chanting; Jerusalem Sephardi tradition; Spanish–Portuguese Jews



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1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the Jewish diaspora two thousand years ago, after the fall of the Second Temple, the Jewish faith that originated in the Middle East has reached various corners of the world. This article presents two traditions of “Jewish music” that are performed and researched today but are almost entirely a product of life in the diaspora¹.

In the diaspora, Jewish ethnicity was associated with two fundamental components: the observance of *halakhah* (religious laws according to the interpretation of the religious leaders, the rabbis), and historical memory (perpetuated by liturgical rituals). Within a community bound by religious faith and rabbinic authority, the core of Jewish music in exile developed within the context of religious performance.

The long road of the diaspora imposed on the Jews the need to adapt to the non-Jewish surrounding societies. Therefore, each community was involved in a musical dialogue with the non-Jewish environment, and over time many different Jewish “musics” were created. Moreover, frequent displacements and geographical changes of communities and individuals greatly influenced the musical culture of these groups.

Thus, what is known today as “Jewish music” is the result of complex historical processes. This music is mainly a tradition that was transmitted orally and therefore the lack of documentation of the music of the Jewish communities, even in the recent past, is a methodological problem in Jewish music research. The existing information is from sources close to the present and this database must have been influenced by the changes that have taken place in the last two hundred years among the Jewish communities caused by wars and migrations of communities to different geographical areas.

In this article, I present a study of a Jewish liturgical genre that is performed in main sections of Jewish prayer services. This liturgical genre is called here “prayer chanting”². The term refers to the musical performance by the cantor of the prose texts in Jewish prayer services. The article examines musical, cultural, and historical characteristics of prayer chanting of two Jewish liturgical traditions and explains how this liturgical genre reflects historical and cultural features related to these liturgical traditions.

1.1. Jewish Liturgy

The sequence of texts that forms the basis of the Jewish prayer service in the synagogue is performed in a sound system different from speech or recitation. Corbin (1961) defines liturgy as a unique cultural system that combines ethnographic, musical, and literary features. In her opinion, the essence of the liturgy lies in the combination of fixed texts with the performance methods required for the oral transmission of these texts. Alvarez-Preyre (1994) defines Jewish liturgy as a combination of orally transmitted music and written text.

Jewish liturgy consists of the public performance of a selection of texts that are performed with various types of sound structures, ranging from simple declamation to well-defined melodies. These texts are compiled in two books—the *siddur* (the order of daily, Sabbath, festivals and new moon prayers) and the *mahzor* (the order of New Year, Day of Atonement prayers). The core of the textual component of the Jewish liturgy was shared by most Jewish communities by the 10th century CE³. The *siddur* and the *mahzor* include biblical verses, texts from the oral law (*Mishnah* and *Talmud*), benedictions (some of them instituted towards the end of the biblical period), prose insertions from the post-Talmudic period, and *piyyutim* (liturgical poetry from roughly the 5th century onwards). Liturgical services take place at fixed times of the day (morning, afternoon, and evening on regular days), usually (but not necessarily) in a synagogue (Elbogen [1913] 1988, pp. 1–8).

While a large part of the textual component of the community-specific liturgies became fixed, the performance of the sound system remained open. In the different geographical areas, each Jewish community developed its own distinctive sound system for the performance of the liturgy. An important factor in shaping the specific sound of liturgical performances in each Jewish community was the local non-Jewish musical culture (Shiloah 1992, pp. 17–21).

1.2. Jewish Prayer Chanting

The central portion of the Jewish prayer service consists of a texts in poetic prose. These prose texts of the service are usually performed in a musical style we refer to as “prayer chanting”. Prayer chanting refers to the rendition of these texts in prose and are performed by the cantor. Studies of Jewish prayer chanting of the Sephardi traditions are scarce. Abraham Zvi Idelsohn (1882–1938) was the first scholar to integrate the “East” in his studies and his work represents the first description of music in the variety of Jewish-musical cultures within a framework of a diachronic point of view (Idelsohn 1923, 1929, [1929] 1992). In his comprehensive study he dealt with the genre of prayer chanting. Idelsohn claims that every section of the Jewish liturgy has a basic melody that is a kind of musical formula. He examined the different aspects of prayer chanting in each tradition and the motifs associated with the performance of this genre in each tradition. In the years since Idelsohn’s study, detailed or in-depth studies of prayer chanting among Sephardi and Eastern Jews have been scarce compared with the greater number of studies of this genre of the Ashkenazi (European) liturgy⁴.

Kligman (2009) researched the liturgical music in a synagogue of Syrian Jews in Brooklyn, New York, and described and analyzed in detail the music in the prayers of Syrian Jews from Aleppo. He discovered that the liturgical music of this community is based on the system of Arab *maqamat* and is conducted in an improvisational style similar to that of Arab music.

The present writer has studied the performance of the liturgical music in Sephardi synagogues in Jerusalem and the Galilee since 1997. I discovered that within this liturgical music there are four musical genres: cantillation of the Pentateuch (*zimrat hatora*), psalmody (*zimrat tehilim*), metric melodies (*lekhanim*), and prayer chanting (*zimra tefilatit*) (Marks 2002, 2014).

The liturgical music of the Spanish–Portuguese Jews is also a major topic of study by the present author. I began to study this religious music in 2003. The same four musical genres mentioned above were found in the liturgical music of the Spanish–Portuguese tradition (Marks 2016). However, no further studies have been found that delve deeply

into Sephardi prayer chanting of the different Sephardi communities. This article is part of my ongoing study of prayer chanting in Sephardi liturgical music.

1.3. “Flowing Rhythm” in Jewish Prayer Chanting

One of the characteristics of prayer chanting is the free rhythm of this musical genre. Free rhythm in Jewish liturgy means there is a close attachment of the musical structure to the structure of the text and a wide range of possible interpretations by the cantor. Free rhythm is a central style of performance in Jewish liturgical music in all denominations and lies at the heart of the performance of the bulk of prayer in the synagogue. Idelsohn ([1929] 1992, pp. 110–128) argues that free rhythm was an important characteristic of Semitic–Oriental music, which is one of the sources of Jewish liturgical music. He considers music with a free rhythm to be of a higher quality than music based on fixed meter.

A similar view in the context of free rhythm in eastern music is found in Touma (1996, pp. 46–47) who characterizes the style of free rhythm as a type of performance in Arab music performed by an individual. In his opinion, this is the purest form of the Arab *maqam* phenomenon. What these two scholars have in common, one from the beginning of the twentieth century and the other from its end, is the view that free rhythm, whether in Jewish–Oriental liturgical music or in Arab music, is an important and prestigious musical style in eastern musical culture.

Frigyesi (Frigyesi 1993) argues that while this type of rhythm does not have a fixed meter, it is not completely “free” and has repetitive patterns in different performances. Frigyesi defines it as “flowing rhythm”. Frigyesi’s article deals mainly with the Ashkenazi style of prayer, but her definition of “flowing rhythm” is accepted by the author of the present article and can be applied to prayer chanting of the Sephardi traditions.

1.4. Sephardi Jews

This article deals with Jewish liturgy of the period following the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula in the late 15th century. Spanish Jewish culture was forged in a long process that included intense cultural interaction with both Islamic (roughly 8th to 12th centuries) and Christian civilizations (13th to 15th centuries).

In 1492, the Jews were expelled from Christian Spain and Portugal (apart from those who converted to Christianity) and headed towards three main areas: North Africa, the Ottoman Empire (the Balkans and the Middle East), and Western Europe (The Netherlands, Southern France, and Italy). In their new diaspora, the Iberian Jews, called Sephardi (from *Sepharad*, “Spain” in Hebrew), continued the cultural practices that had crystallized in Spain while at the same time melding their heritage with the local cultures in their new places of settlement (Diaz-Mas 1992, pp. 35–70). The liturgy of the Sephardi Jews reflects this complex and rich cultural experience.

2. Prayer Chanting of the Jerusalem–Sephardi Tradition

The liturgical style known as Jerusalem–Sephardi is a major performance style in Sephardi synagogues in Israel and in the Jewish Sephardi diaspora. This liturgical style is the result of historical and cultural processes that took place in the Jewish communities expelled from Spain at the end of the 16th century and that were dispersed throughout the Ottoman Empire. They settled in Aleppo and Damascus, as well as in Constantinople, Izmir, and Adrianople, which were all under Ottoman rule.

Evidence regarding prayer chanting in the Jewish communities in the Ottoman Empire indicates that the musical method of using the Turkish and Arab modal system in the singing of *piyyutim* developed from the 16th century onward (Seroussi 2013).

In the Ottoman period, Aleppo and Damascus had the largest Jewish communities in the region of Syria. The community in Aleppo was influenced by the surrounding Arab culture and language. The result was that by the end of the 19th century, the music in the Aleppo Jewish community had become strongly influenced by Arab music of the Syrian

region itself and by the Arab music of the Middle East. This led to the development of a liturgical performance style in Aleppo's Jewish community and by the beginning of the 20th century this style was already crystallized.⁵

The liturgical traditions of the Jews in the Ottoman Empire including those of Aleppo were passed down as oral traditions, so we have no written record of the music itself until the 20th century. The first scholar who in written and recorded materials documented the liturgical tradition of the Aleppo community was Abraham Zvi Idelsohn. His research took place at the beginning of the twentieth century, upon the arrival of Aleppo Jews in Jerusalem, and the establishment of the Ades synagogue. Idelsohn claimed that from the end of the 19th century onward, the liturgical music (i.e., the prayers) of Aleppo Jews was based on Arab musical culture including the modal system of the Arab *maqam*⁶.

The liturgical tradition of Aleppo Jews as it appears in Idelsohn's study is based on the method by which central portions of Sabbath and holiday prayers (especially morning services) are performed musically in a particular *maqam* (Idelsohn 1923, p. 107). Following the arrival of the Aleppo community in Jerusalem and its great influence on the liturgical style in the city, the liturgical tradition now called Jerusalem–Sephardi was formed, incorporating significant characteristics of Arab musical culture.

Musical Characteristics of Jerusalem–Sephardi Prayer Chanting

I started my research into Jerusalem–Sephardi prayer chanting in 1997 and discovered that prayer chanting is a distinct musical genre in these synagogues. This genre is based on the characteristics of Arab music in the Middle East, and mainly on the Arab *maqam* (Marks 2002, 2014, pp. 245–66)⁷. The field work for this research included recordings of well-known and highly appreciated cantors, the late Abraham Caspi⁸ and Ezra Barne'a⁹, who are considered among their congregations as highly proficient in their performance of Jerusalem–Sephardi liturgy. The recordings of Mr. Caspi were made in 2004–2009 and those of Mr. Barne'a in 2004–2007.

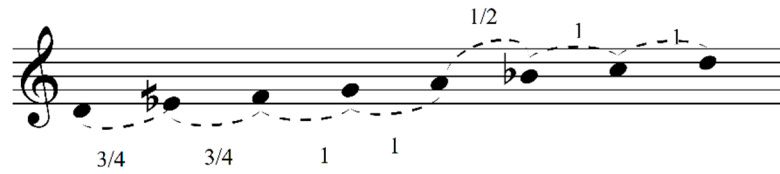
My studies revealed that ten major *maqamat* (plural of *maqam*) are generally used in the Sabbath and holiday morning services: Rast, Bayati, Huseini, Higaz, Ajam, Nawa, Nahawand, Segah, Huzam, and Saba. The chosen *maqam* is associated with the ethos of the corresponding biblical portion of the week. The Jewish calendar contains 50–51 weeks, and in accordance with this, the Pentateuch (the first 5 books of the Bible) is divided into portions (*parashot*). These textual sections are performed each Sabbath in the prayer service throughout the calendar year. The use of the *maqam* is made by connecting a specific *maqam* to the main issue of the Pentateuch portion of the week. The *maqam* is performed throughout the prose texts of the service, not in the biblical text itself. The biblical text functions as an inspiration for the music of the prayer chanting each Sabbath.

One of the central characteristics of the *maqam* system in the Jerusalem–Sephardi prayer chanting is the microtonal element that is an integral musical characteristic of the Arab *maqam* system. This modal characteristic in which there are intervals which are smaller than a whole tone and larger than half a tone is different from the modal systems of other Jewish liturgical traditions including the second tradition presented later in this article. See Figure 1.

Rast



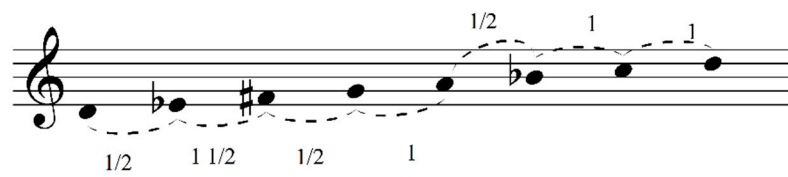
Bayat



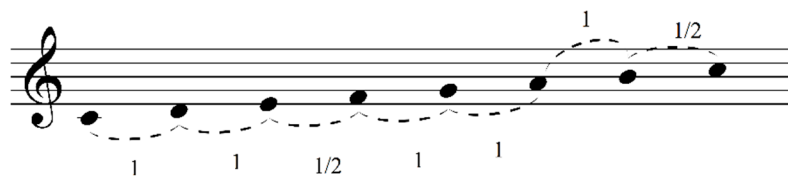
Husseini



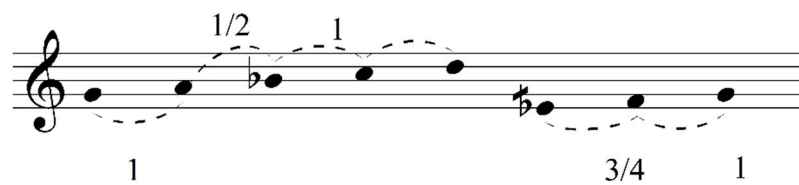
Hijaz



Ajam



Nawa



Nahawand

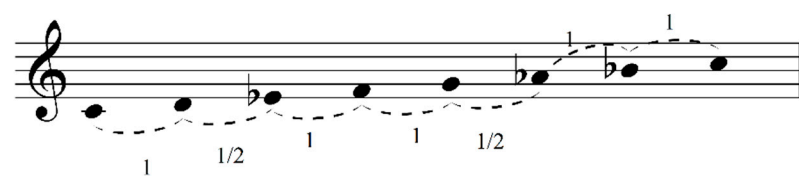


Figure 1. Cont.

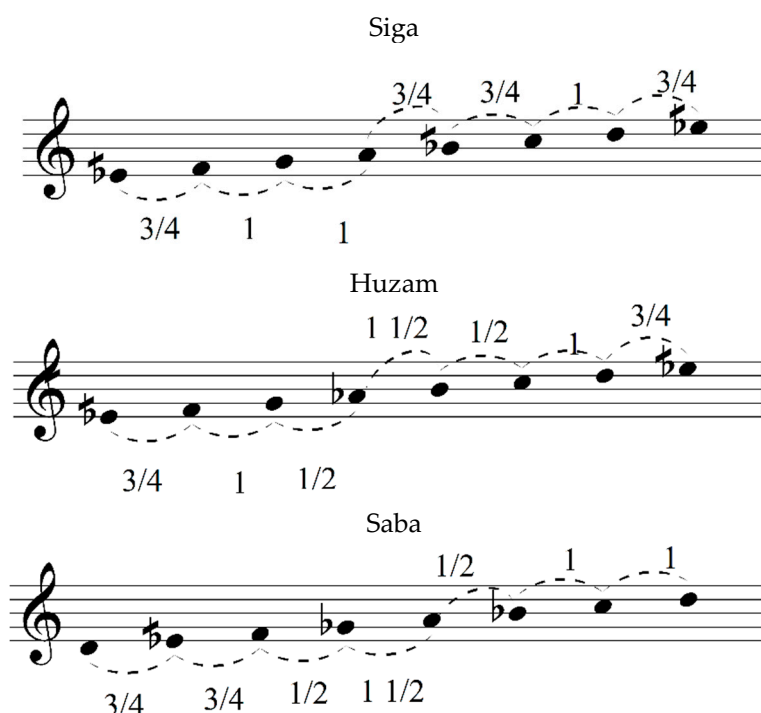


Figure 1. *Maqamat* performed in Jerusalem–Sephardi prayer chanting.

Jerusalem–Sephardi prayer chanting is based on two main melodic units that lead to the two central tones of each *maqam*. Several units create larger sections that conclude with a final formula that leads to the finalis (the ending tone). The melodic line moves around key notes according to the tetrachords and pentachords that compose each *maqam*. The melody reaches its peak in the upper tetrachord of the *maqam* (e.g., the upper *do* in Figure 2 below). The range rarely exceeds an octave.

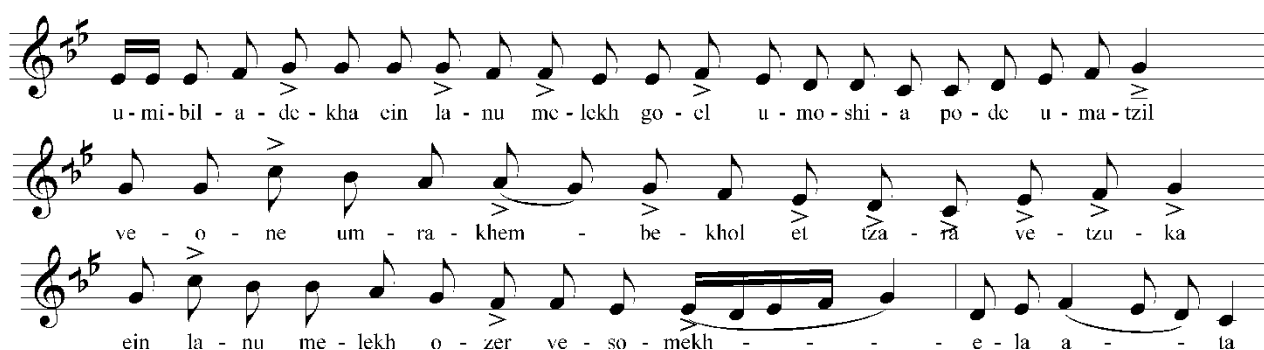


Figure 2. Prayer chanting in *maqam Rast*: from “Blessing of the Song” (performed by Cantor Abraham Caspi).

The rhythm is “flowing rhythm”, but it is based on several components that create rhythmic patterns that are typical of this genre. The first component is a constant pulse. The second component is a series of long and short stops. Long stops are performed after reaching the main cadential tones of the *maqam* while short stops appear on secondary degrees of the *maqam* (e.g., *sol* in Figure 2 below). In addition to the constant beat and the stops, the rhythmic patterns also derive from the duration of each tone that is determined by the accentuation of the words; namely, accented syllables receive longer durations while unaccented ones are shorter.

The two main characteristics of the Jerusalem–Sephardi style of prayer chanting, i.e., Arab *maqam* and flowing rhythm, create a musical style that is unique to this tradition. This style is based on an element that is also central in Arab music based on the *maqam*—the

element of improvisation. The cantors I recorded for many years emphasized the issue of improvisation in prayer chanting as a very important measure of their professionalism. The professionalism of the cantor is evaluated in several ways: (1) the cantor must know all the major *maqamat* in Arabic music and (2) they must demonstrate a high improvisational ability based on transitions between the various *maqamat* according to the musical rules accepted within the Jerusalem–Sephardi tradition.

Participation in numerous prayer services in these Jerusalem–Sephardi synagogues and interviews with members of their congregations revealed that the participants in the services were familiar with the musical system in their liturgy and knew exactly which *maqam* should be performed in each Sabbath service. This knowledge is the result of participating from early childhood in paraliturgical events called *baqqashot* held on the night between Friday and Saturday during the winter months (Marks 2007). In these events, the participants sing religious songs (*piyyutim*) that are musically based on the *maqam* system and the children who participate with their fathers in this singing learn the various *maqamat* from a very young age by listening and singing. At the same time, they participate in prayer services in the synagogue, where the *maqam* is also the musical basis, and thus they absorb the *maqamat* in the prayer and in the singing of the *piyyutim*. See Figure 3.



Figure 3. Prayer chanting in *maqam Saba* on G: from “Blessing of the Song” (performed by Cantor Ezra Barne’a).

3. Spanish–Portuguese Prayer Chanting

The communities founded in the 17th century in Western Europe and the two Americas by immigrants from Portugal and Spain, who had been outwardly Catholic Christians for several generations, form a unique group in the Sephardic Jewish world.

The Spanish–Portuguese community in Western Europe was formed during the 16th century when Jews who had been forced to convert to Christianity two hundred years earlier continued to practice their Jewish faith secretly, and then began to return publicly to Judaism when they left Portugal. Upon their return to Judaism, these converts gradually migrated to Western Europe and established communities called “Portuguese communities” or “Spanish–Portuguese communities.” Initially, such communities were founded in Amsterdam, Venice, and southeastern France. Over time, these communities also spread to other centers in Europe (Paris, London, Hamburg, Livorno, Gibraltar, and Vienna), and the

two Americas (New York, Philadelphia, Rhode Island, Charleston, Savannah, and Curacao) (Bodian 2008, pp. 1–4).

The Jewish religion was the main element in the Jewish identity of these Jews, and they developed a unique tradition of performance of the liturgy. A central part of this tradition was their liturgical music. Spanish–Portuguese Jews left Portugal and Spain as Christians and therefore did not have any Jewish liturgical tradition, as it had been forgotten for generations when these families lived outwardly as Christians. Their solution was to create their own liturgical tradition. These former converts also brought with them from their former cultural experience as New Christians in the Iberian Peninsula a well-developed taste for contemporary European music. Thus, music from the Baroque era especially in the Italian style prevalent in seventeenth-century Spain and to a certain extent in the Low Countries found its way into the Spanish–Portuguese synagogues. In the course of time, the cantors of Amsterdam, from whom a decent proficiency in Western European artistic music performance and composition was required, introduced their own, original compositions to the synagogue, especially for specific texts or for hymns. It is during this period that melodies from other sources entered the Amsterdam synagogue, such as Italian Jewish melodies (due to close contacts with members of the Portuguese communities of Venice and Livorno) and French, English, and Dutch folk or popular tunes (Seroussi 2001).

The origin of the liturgical basis of the Spanish–Portuguese communities comes from the first community in Amsterdam. This liturgical repertoire relies on the liturgical traditions of North Africa, especially Morocco, and the Sephardi Jews of the Ottoman Empire. The first cantors to come to the Spanish–Portuguese community in Amsterdam came from the communities of North Africa and the Ottoman Empire. Two of the first cantors in the Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam were Rabbi Yosef Shalom Galiego of Salonika (1614–28) and Rabbi Yitzchak Uziel from Paz in Morocco (Seroussi 2001).

Over time, the cantors of the synagogue in Amsterdam were employed in many other Spanish–Portuguese communities because these communities maintained a uniform liturgical-musical tradition despite certain changes that developed in each community over time. This musical tradition was documented in 1857 by Emanuel Aguilar and Aaron De-Sola in their book “The Ancient Melodies” (Aguilar and De-Sola 1857). In this documentation, one can discern the main influences on Portuguese liturgical music: Moroccan liturgical tradition and influences of European artistic music of the Baroque period (Seroussi 2001). Other sources of Spanish–Portuguese liturgical music are original liturgical works from Amsterdam and other Portuguese communities (Hamburg, London, Bayonne) preserved in manuscripts and printed anthologies (Adler 1966).

The liturgical music of the Spanish–Portuguese Jews was crystalized by the end of the 18th century, and from that time onwards the performance was in the hands of individuals and not in the hands of the communities. Those individuals were the cantors of the communities who were responsible for preserving the Spanish–Portuguese liturgical tradition. This tradition was strictly maintained without changes, and the introduction of a new repertoire was strictly forbidden. This policy of strict preservation continues to this day (Seroussi 2001).

The liturgical tradition of the Spanish–Portuguese Jews is today evidenced in its entirety in three centers: Amsterdam, London, and New York. The study presented here is based mainly on recordings that I made, beginning in 2003, of two Spanish–Portuguese cantors: The late Abraham Lopes Cardozo, representing the Amsterdam and New York versions, and Daniel Halfon representing the London version. The recordings of Abraham Lopes Cardozo were made in 2002–2003¹⁰. The recordings of Daniel Halfon lasted from 2004 until 2008¹¹. I also used older recordings of Spanish–Portuguese prayer chanting that were found in the National Sound Archive of Israel. I transcribed and analyzed all the recorded materials.

Musical Characteristics of Spanish–Portuguese Prayer Chanting

As mentioned above, the genre of prayer chanting characterizes most Jewish traditions. Its hallmark is flowing rhythm, a close attachment of the musical structure to the structure of the text, and a wide range of possible interpretations by the cantor. Spanish–Portuguese prayer chanting, however, shows different and unique characteristics.

A comparison of the prayer chanting in the various communities of the Spanish–Portuguese Jews indicates that the policy pursued since the beginning of the formulation of this liturgy, including the principle of strict preservation, has indeed been maintained for generations. The prayer chanting in all the performances and traditions I have analyzed has several common central characteristics.

Prayer chanting of the Spanish–Portuguese Jews is part of the liturgical entirety of this tradition. It reflects the liturgical style that was formed in the 17th and 18th centuries originating in the first community of Amsterdam.

Musically, the prayer chanting of the Spanish–Portuguese Jews divides liturgical texts in prose into sections containing a number of musical units, each consisting of several motifs. Each unit has an opening motif, one or more middle motifs, and a closing one. The musical units end on a long or a cadential tone and a breath. The syntax of the melody is usually based on the textual structure. A demonstration of this characteristic is shown in the next example from the prayer *uva letzyon goel*. This prayer is sung after morning prayers and during the Saturday afternoon service. The text includes: *uva letzyon goel* Isaiah (59, 20–21); *veata qadosh yoshev tehilot yisrael* (Psalm 22, 4); and *veqara ze el ze veamar qadosh qadosh qadosh* (Isaiah 6, 3). This part is sung by Spanish–Portuguese communities in the genre of prayer chanting. It consists of musical units of varying length, each with a number of motifs. Naturally, this principle reflects the varying length of the biblical verses.

The centrality of this melody in the liturgical music of the Spanish–Portuguese community is reflected in the fact that it has been consistently documented. The melody is presented here after a recording made in the Bevis Marks Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in London (19/11/64)¹². See Figure 4.

opening motif middle motif ending motif

u — va le - tsi - yon go - el ul - sha - vei fe - sh'a be - ya - 'a - kov ne um A — do - nai

5
va - a — ni — zot be - ri - ti o - tam a - mar — A — do - nai

9
ru - hi a - sher 'a — le — kha ud - va - rai a - sher sam - ti be - fi — kha

Figure 4. “uva letzyon goel”.

The genre of prayer chanting in the Spanish–Portuguese liturgy creates a division of the text into a set of musical chapters. For example, the prayer *birkhat hashir* that opens the morning services on Sabbaths and festivals demonstrates this structure. It starts with the prayer *nishmat kol hai* (the soul of all living creatures) and ends with the phrase *melekh el hai ha'olamim amen* (king, God of eternity, amen). This section represents a complete

unit textually and musically. It is divided musically into four parts: (1) *nishmat* (the soul)—*anahnu modim* (we thank); (2) *ve'ilu pinu* (if our mouth)—*ubekerev kedoshim tithallal* (among the saints thou will be praised); (3) *bemikhalot* (with choirs)—*betishbahot* (with praises); and 4) *el hahodaot* (God of confessions)—*amen*.

The musical structure of *birkhat hashir*, in all the Spanish–Portuguese traditions, is generally based on tetrachords or pentachords, (C, D, and E) where the melodic progression revolves around a central tone (or a number of them), which is the recitation or the central cadential tone. The musical divisions of *birkat hashir* are shared by all Spanish–Portuguese versions. Figure 5.

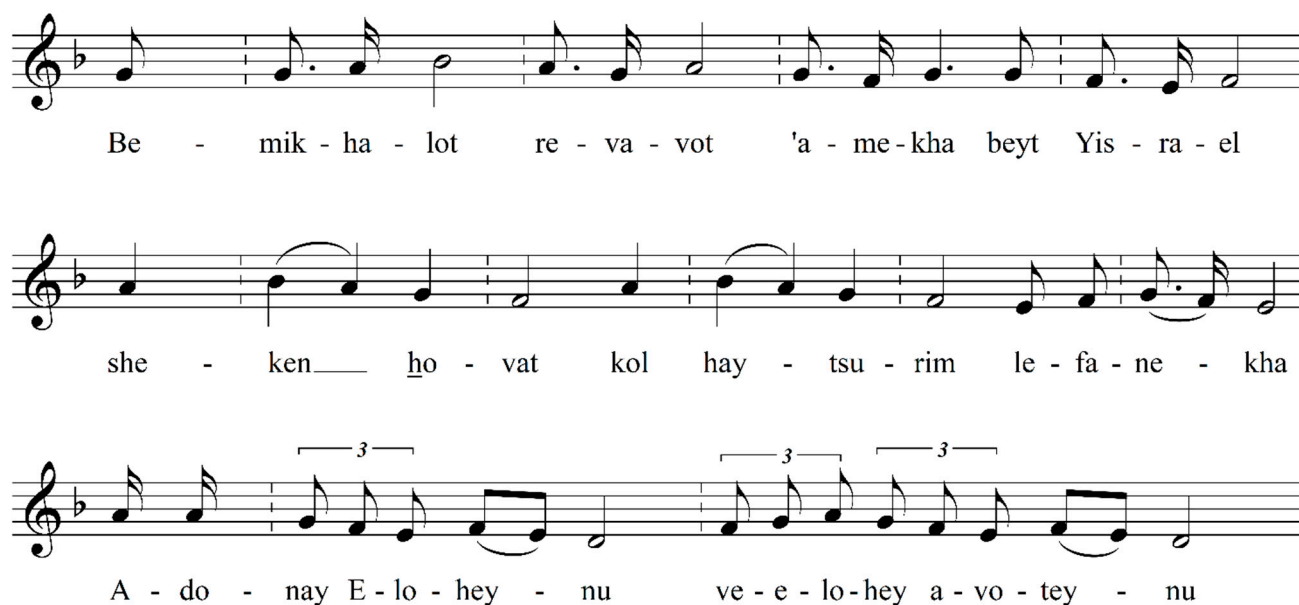


Figure 5. *Bemikhalot* from “Blessing of the Song” (performed by Daniel Halfon).

Our study found that the combination of influences on the Spanish–Portuguese liturgical music—Jewish–Ottoman, Jewish North–African, and European music—created liturgical music that has more European musical traits than North African or Middle Eastern ones.

The first musical element that shows the European influence is the modality of Spanish–Portuguese prayer chanting. The sound structure of Spanish–Portuguese prayer chanting is usually based on tetrachords or pentachords which can be defined as progressions in a major or minor mode on different tones. The melodic progression moves around a central tone or several central tones, which are usually a recitation tone or a central pause-tone. There is no doubt that the resulting tonal color is not similar to the tonal color of the Sephardic tradition of Jerusalem. It is more limited and has no microtones at all as in the prayer chanting of the Jerusalem–Sephardi tradition presented above.

The other element that stands out as different from Jerusalem–Sephardi prayer chanting is the rhythmic element. In Spanish–Portuguese prayer chanting, there is a significant presence of a regular beat as in Figure 5, above. However, the meter is not constant throughout the prayer, and varies between duple and triple meter according to the prosody of the text. In many sections of the prayer, the overall sense is of a steady meter. See Figure 6.

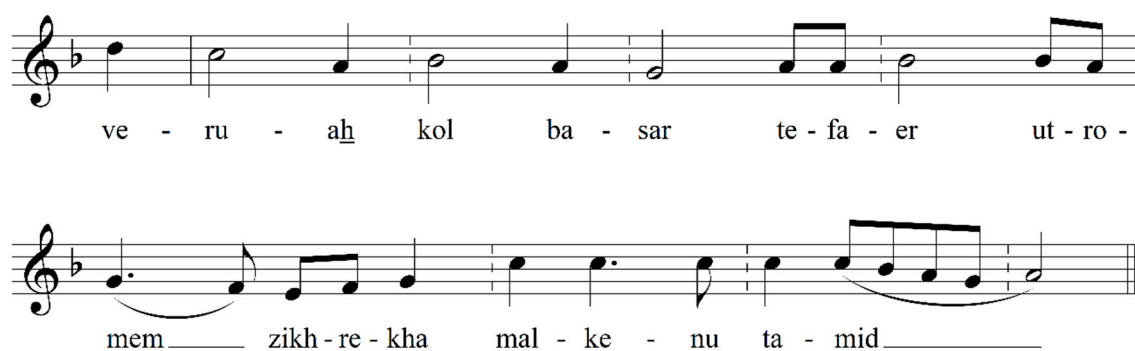


Figure 6. *veruah kol basar* from “Blessing of the Song” (performed by Abraham Lopes Cardozo).

This characterization is different from the genre of prayer chanting in most of the Sephardi and eastern communities, which is usually characterized by “flowing rhythm” (unmeasured rhythm), even in traditions where the sound progressions are intricate (such as in the Jerusalem–Sephardi tradition).

There are also unmeasured rhythmic moves in the prayer chanting of Spanish–Portuguese Jews, but these are a minority that appear in certain divisions, such as in the second chapter of the “Blessing of the Song,” and do not obscure the sense of the constant beat. See Figure 7.

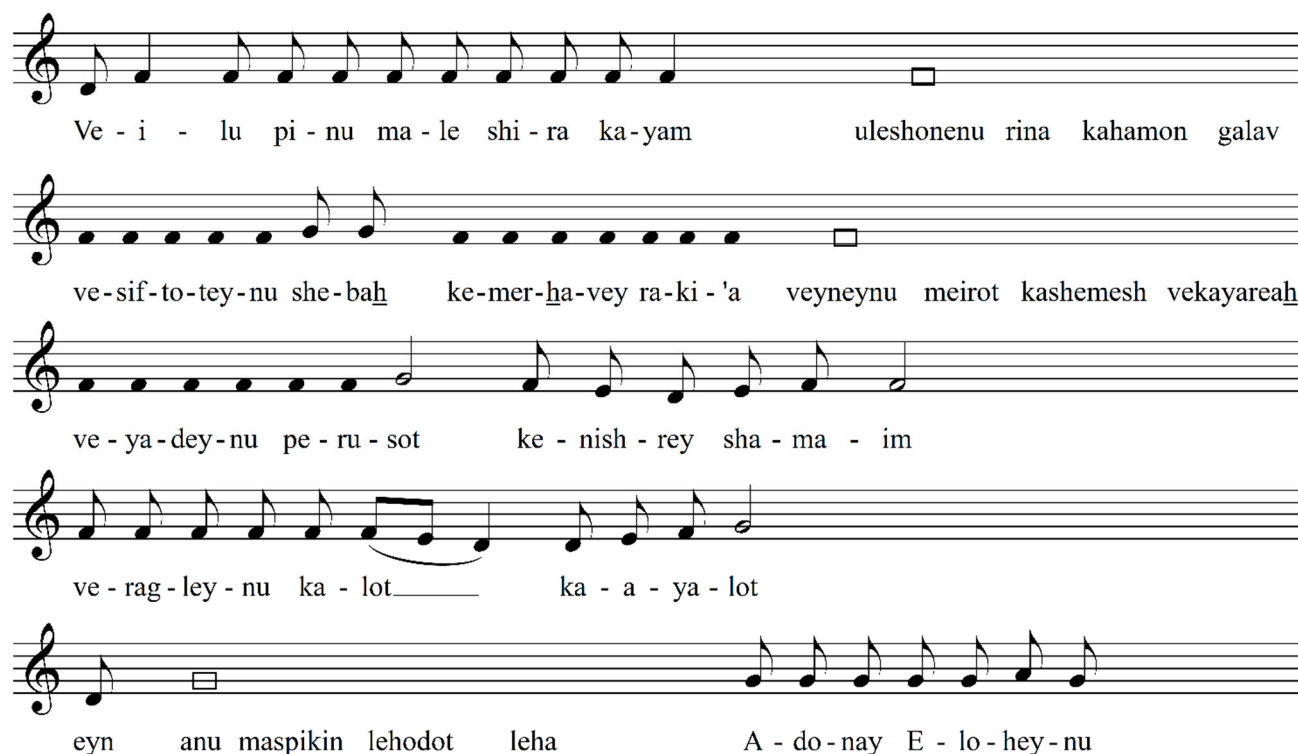


Figure 7. *ve’ilu pinu* from “Blessing of the Song” (performed by Daniel Halfon).

In most Spanish–Portuguese prayer chanting, the relationship between music and text varies from syllabic to neumatic, with only rare instances of melisma. This trait is different from Jerusalem–Sephardi prayer chanting where the melodic progressions include a prominent melismatic style.

4. Discussion

Prayer chanting is a central component of Jewish liturgy in all Jewish communities. The present article describes the prayer chanting of two Sephardi–Jewish traditions: the

Jerusalem–Sephardi tradition and the Spanish–Portuguese tradition. An important principle in Jewish liturgy is that the structure of the prayer service and its texts are common to most Jewish traditions, but the sound performance differs between the communities that reside in different geographical areas. The two traditions illustrated here show this difference very clearly.

Regarding the historical perspective, the two liturgical traditions originate in a common source—the liturgical traditions of the Jewish communities who lived in Spain for over a thousand years and who were expelled in 1492. It can be assumed that in Spain, the Jewish liturgical traditions shared common traits. When these communities reached other geographical areas such as the Middle East and Western Europe, they went through a process of enculturation that included absorbing the music of the areas they lived in.

Prayer chanting of the Jerusalem–Sephardi tradition reflects the historical and cultural processes that Jewish communities in the Near East went through: arrival in the Ottoman Empire and settling in the Middle East, the influence of Turkish musical cultures initially and later the influence of Arab musical culture. The Arab modal system, the *maqam*, became an integral part of the liturgy of the Jews of the Middle East. Within this process, the modal system of the *maqam* became the central musical element in the performance of the prayer chanting of these communities. The adoption of the *maqam* to Jerusalem–Sephardi prayer chanting is expressed not only in the use of the sound system of the various *maqamat* but also in the important component of the *maqam*'s performance, the improvisation element, according to which the Jerusalem–Sephardi cantors are evaluated even today.

The Arab *maqam* and the improvisational style that is characteristic of Arab music underwent a process in the prayer chanting of the Jerusalem–Sephardi tradition in which the musical progressions were adapted to the structure of the liturgical texts in Hebrew, and therefore each musical progression is performed according to the prosodic rhythm of the Hebrew text. In addition, the *maqam* in which the prayer is performed is determined according to the theme of the Pentateuch chapter performed each week; thus, the performance of a different *maqam* each week became part of the Jewish characteristic of the prayer chanting of the Jerusalem–Sephardi tradition.

This style of performance of prayer chanting is very popular today in Sephardi synagogues in Israel and throughout the diaspora. Young audiences as well as young cantors continue to study the Arab *maqam* and the style of improvisation based on the different *maqamat*.

Similar to the prayer chanting of the Jerusalem–Sephardi style, this genre in the Spanish–Portuguese tradition reflects the historical and cultural processes of this Sephardi group. These Jews lived as Christians and kept their Jewish faith hidden for more than one hundred and fifty years. They were part of Portuguese culture and society, which was part of the musical culture of the 17th and 18th century in Europe. This fact and their attempt to rebuild the forgotten liturgical tradition by importing cantors from Morocco and the Ottoman Empire created a unique style of prayer chanting in which there are musical elements from Morocco and the Ottoman Jewish culture with a very clear European influence.

Prayer chanting of the Spanish–Portuguese Jews consists of characteristics that are different from those of Jerusalem–Sephardi tradition: it lacks the modal system of the *maqam* and the microtones; the improvisation component does not exist because tradition demands that the chanting must be carried out precisely without changes; and the rhythmic component tends to be more symmetrical and fixed. The modal base is more limited than the modal system of the Jerusalem–Sephardi tradition and is based on only three modal progressions: major, minor, and Phrygian where the melodic moves are more limited than the Jerusalem–Sephardi ones and move within the boundaries of the tetrachord (4 tones) or pentachord (5 tones).

The unique history of the Spanish–Portuguese Jews is an important element in creating the common identity of the Portuguese Jews, and music has played a major role in this narrative. It must be mentioned that although the liturgical music of the Spanish–

Portuguese Jews has been preserved and still exists almost intact, the Spanish–Portuguese communities as homogeneous groups do not exist anymore. The congregations in Spanish–Portuguese synagogues today consist of very few members that can identify themselves as “Spanish–Portuguese”. Some of the members have some Spanish–Portuguese heritage but the majority of these congregations consist of people from other Sephardi or Near Eastern Jewish communities such as Moroccans, Iranians, Iraqis, Turks, and others. Even some of the cantors, such as Daniel Halfon, are not from Spanish–Portuguese families. The performance of this liturgical tradition has been preserved by individuals, the cantors, rather than by communities.

5. Conclusions

Two traditions of Jewish prayer chanting have been discussed in this article. These two traditions belong to the Jewish branch called the Sephardi Jews that originated in Spain before the end of the 15th century. Despite the common origin in Spain, the study presented here showed that in terms of musical performance there are differences between the two traditions in the genre of prayer chanting as the result of historical and cultural processes.

A third group of Sephardi Jews who arrived in Morocco after the deportation also developed liturgical music, including a prayer chanting, that is different from that of the two traditions discussed here. The prayer chanting of the Sephardi–Moroccan Jews has not been researched since Idelsohn’s study of the liturgical music of this Sephardi branch (Idelsohn 1929). It is important to the field of Jewish music that this genre of the liturgical music of the Moroccan Jews will be the target of future study.

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Notes

- ¹ Today there are varied styles of music performed by Jewish musicians, both religious and non religious.
- ² The term “prayer chanting” I use throughout this article is not an emic term but a translation of the term I use to define this liturgical genre.
- ³ Although a significant part of the texts of the Jewish liturgy was shared by most Jewish communities, various communities gradually developed their own style of texts in prayer services (nusakh ha-tefilla) based on their own practices. Prayer books continue to change and evolve even today.
- ⁴ See (Schleifer 2001) and the extensive bibliography there.
- ⁵ Idelsohn (1923, pp. 33–38) describes the liturgical tradition of Aleppo Jews at the beginning of the twentieth century as an existing and crystallized tradition.
- ⁶ The peoples of the Middle East share a history that has bound them together over the generations and created a musical tradition with common foundations. The maqam system is the most central element in this musical culture (Touma 1996; Shiloah 1999). The maqam includes two basic elements: the first is a fixed sound system, and the second is melodic patterns based on this sound system. These patterns form the basis of an improvisation method that is unique to Arab music. The sound material of the maqam is based on a modal system that includes 24 intervals (24 quarter tones) within the octave (Marcus 1993). These intervals, which are smaller than a whole tone and larger than half a tone, appear in a limited number of tones and between fixed degrees in the maqam modal systems (Shiloah 1981).
- ⁷ Seroussi (2013, pp. 1–24) claims that the application of the *maqam* system by Jews in liturgical and paraliturgical rituals is a result of Muslim–Jewish interaction over hundreds of years. In his opinion, the *maqam* in Jewish religious music is “a uniquely Jewish *maqam*”.
- ⁸ Cantor Abraham Caspi (1927–2010) was born in Jerusalem. He learned the Jerusalem–Sephardi liturgy and the use of the maqam system in the liturgy from the recognized Sephardi cantors in Jerusalem in the 1940s and 1950s. In 1960, he was appointed as

the chief cantor of Har Zion synagogue in the old city of Jerusalem, and he served there until he died. Until this day he is considered one of the most important experts and teachers of Jerusalem–Sephardi liturgy.

- 9 Cantor Ezra Barne'a was born in Jerusalem in 1935. He is an educator, cantor, and an expert in the Jerusalem–Sephardi liturgy. He is the founder of the “School of Jewish Cantorship” in Jerusalem. Mr. Barne'a served as a cantor from a very young age in several Jerusalem–Sephardi synagogues.
- 10 Rabbi and cantor Abraham Lopes Cardozo (1914–2006) was born in Amsterdam to a well-known Spanish–Portuguese family. In 1939, he became a teacher and cantor in Dutch Guiana, now Surinam. He moved to New York in 1946 to join the staff of the Shearith Israel synagogue. Rabbi Cardozo published several books of liturgical music of the Spanish–Portuguese tradition, including “Selected Sephardic Chants” (Cardozo 1991) and “Sephardic Songs of Praise” (Cardozo 1987). He was considered an extremely important figure in transmitting this liturgy.
- 11 Cantor Daniel Halfon (b. 1955) is an expert in the Spanish–Portuguese liturgy. He was born in London to a Sephardi family from the Balkans and grew up in the Spanish–Portuguese community. He studied for many years with the well-known cantor Eliezer Abinun. He also studied with Abraham Lopes Cardozo in New York and learned the Amsterdam and New York versions of the liturgical traditions. Since the 1980s, cantor Halfon has sung in major synagogues of the Spanish–Portuguese tradition in London, Amsterdam, and New York. He currently lives in Jerusalem.
- 12 This recording is documented in The National Sound Archive of Israel National Library in Jerusalem.

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