

Song and Remembrance

If the relationship of music to remembrance remains a neglected domain in musical scholarship, the pizmonim of the Syrian Jewish community provide an ideal venue for its exploration. We can begin this process by charting the broader dimensions of the Syrian musical heritage, reconstructing memories of its past while beginning to sketch the manner in which this past is remembered and recreated in the present. Memories relating to pizmonim are embedded in two different domains: memories *about* the pizmon repertory, and memories *of* the songs. Additionally, memories about and of pizmonim can be accessed primarily through two modes of representation: most commonly, they can be spoken or they can be sung. Yet memories of the pizmon tradition are also recorded in writing, as well as interconnected to recollections of sight, smell, and taste.

The Syrian Jewish memories posited within the pizmonim are further characterized by an essential duality: the song texts recall a world of explicitly Jewish experience, while the melodies evoke extra-Jewish sources and frames of reference. The pizmonim therefore constitute a hybrid form, with two expressive channels directly reflecting the bifurcated historical experience of this Judeo-Arab community.

Of Tradition and History

The time depth of a tradition within a community is often a source of comment and contestation, and the Ḥalabi community is no exception. Indeed, the loss of historical memory can be invoked to solve any such dilemma pragmatically: "It has been said that . . . if you can't remember where that song came from and when it was sung, that it has become already tradition" (D. Tawil, 4 December 1984). In most cases, however, transmission of the pizmon tradition draws on both documented historical memory and modern experience in a manner calculated to bring the two together. In this instance, the Syrian experience replicates a process widely shared cross-culturally,

where collective memories themselves mediate historical events and are then further transformed to articulate new values and ideas (Zerubavel 1995:3). Among Jews, the dialectic between history and memory is of particular importance in ways that are more fully explored below.

Collective memories of the past and realities of the present are further welded together in the transmission process itself. Within musical domains, with transmission vested largely, although not exclusively, within the act of performance, the present tends to predominate. Approaching the pizmonim from the perspective of present-day performance, "transmission of [musical] tradition" can be seen as a tautology since the etymology of the word, from the Latin *traditum*, refers to anything that is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present (Shils 1981:12). In short, tradition is what is practiced as such.

Beyond its practice, musical transmission is surrounded by a complex of concepts and materials that travel alongside actual performance. Therefore, when discussing the "pizmon tradition" in its broadest sense, one must include any communication of or about musical materials from one person to another, whether in oral, aural, or written form, without regard to the time depth of the materials transmitted. The process of transmission is concerned with reconciling the past with the present, a process thoughtfully articulated by a woman who noted that traditions had been conveyed "over the generations" in her family: "My daughter still follows my custom. We had the same custom. They followed the rules." When asked what "the rules" were, she replied with a single word: "Tradition" (S. Cohen, 28 February 1985).

If transmission of tradition by its very nature privileges the present, historical memory is often invoked to justify and explain the perpetuation of tradition. In the case of the pizmonim, biblical models provide a frequently cited source for its legitimacy:

You will find that song and music are introduced in the Bible in the very earliest chapters of Genesis. There was a man by the name of Jubal [Genesis 4:22]. He was the originator, he created several instruments of music, and the art of singing. Now they sang and they danced when they . . . came out of Egypt you know, after the miracle of the Red Sea. There's a famous song that was composed by Moses. A beautiful song. . . . And those were the men, and they sang and danced separately. Then the women, under the leadership of Miriam, the sister of Moses, she gathered the women around and they sang and they danced. (S. Catton, 30 October 1984)

If the story of Jubal provides an origin myth for music and dance within the broader continuum of Jewish history, it has served the Syrian Jewish pizmon tradition particularly well, providing a tale of its genesis in the distant past, its maintenance through periods of exile, and the celebration of survival in song. That this myth is gendered and provides for separation of men and women while making explicit the role of women in the tradition is worthy of note as well; this feature is explored below.

The connection of this biblical narrative to modern practice is reinforced through an embossed representation of Jubal's lyre on the covers of a recent edition of pizmonim published in Brooklyn (plate 7).⁷ Thus the modern pizmon tradition is literally "bound" historically, connected by myth and icon to the oldest forms of musical expression in Jewish religious experience.

The introductions within the modern pizmon edition, penned by famous Syrian rabbis and cantors, cite the words of venerable Jewish religious sources predating them to historicize further the role of melody and song:

The upshot of what has been said is this: this custom [of singing] is firmly established and well founded in the sources of the Talmud, legal codification, Midrashim, the holy Zohar, as well as in all other holies on high. . . . And so it is, let the righteous ones see it and rejoice; let the just give praise for the printing—for the children of Israel—of this book of supplications of the community of Aleppo. Anyone who rushes off and makes great effort to [possess] this [book] is to be commended—the payback from heaven will be double. (Kassin 1988: 31–32, translated by James Robinson)

On the level of documented music history, the pizmon tradition extant in Brooklyn today shares deep roots with a broader stream of Jewish tradition. The practice of setting sacred Hebrew texts to pre-existing tunes dates from medieval Spain, where it was sanctioned by Jewish mystics.⁸

From the inception of the tradition, the use of melody and song was believed to be vital to the glorification of God and the means by which a man earns life in the next world.⁹ However, singing is permitted only in Hebrew, that "holy tongue, that divinely chosen language of ours which is more dear than gold." The singing of "sensual love songs, God forbid, in any language . . . is a criminal offense, since, as we know from our rabbis, forebears, and ancient sages, it stirs up the hearers' inclination to do evil." However, there is an obligation to sing melodies, particularly those of other nations, if they are set to sacred Hebrew texts because "with the tunes that

you sing you arouse the Holy One, who is blessed, to take notice of the nation whose tune you sing.”

Borrowing melodies and providing them with new, sacred Hebrew texts is done for a

good reason, a reason of fundamental importance, and it is correct that it is said about it “that it is good.” This is so because the melody is a holy spark. Because when one plays sensual love songs, the spark is submerged in the kelippot [husks].¹⁰ It is for this reason that it is necessary to establish a foundation of holy words—drawn from the mouth of scholars and from the mouth of books—for any new tune with a non-Jewish source, in order to lead the spark from the realm of evil to the realm of holiness. This is an obligation in the same way that it is an obligation to draw sinners [to good], to turn many away from iniquity, and to bring out the precious from the vile. [It is an obligation] to make clear the holy sparks. So it is with holy songs. The holy sparks bring light to the just. (Ibid. 32)

Following the expulsion of Jews from Spain in the late fifteenth century, these songs continued to flourish, drawing increasingly on melodies from non-Jewish sources. A central repository for our knowledge about this historical process is the widespread distribution and survival of a *diwān* (song-book) titled *Zemiroth Israel*,¹¹ published in Safed in 1587 by a Sephardic poet named Israel Najara (c. 1550–1625).¹² Najara noted in his preface that the Hebrew lyrics were intended to be sung to Arabic, Turkish, or other tunes; he preceded most of the poems with the instruction that it was to be sung “to the melody of . . .,” followed by the opening line of the non-Jewish model song (Avenary 1979:186). It is estimated that among the “foreign songs” used by Najara were about 150 of Turkish origin, thirty derived from the oral tradition stemming from Spain, and a couple of Greek melodies (ibid. 186, 188). Recent studies have further investigated the “constant dynamic interaction” between and within various Jewish repertoires, implicating a variety of repertoires ranging from liturgy to the Judeo-Spanish epic to other genres of Judeo-Spanish folksongs in this process (J. Cohen 1990, I. Katz 1988, Seroussi and Weich-Shahak 1990/91).

In the musicological literature, the use of preexistent melodies as vehicles for new texts is termed “contrafactum.” A contrafactum is a vocal work in which a new text has been substituted for the original one (Randel 1986:200). The term itself, while commonly applied to the European secular monophonic repertory of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Falck 1980:700), in fact emerged with the above meaning only in the context of

twentieth-century scholarship (Falck 1979). Here I use “contrafactum” as a convenient rubric to highlight a musical process that is quite common cross-culturally and that aptly characterizes the pizmon tradition. I return to issues concerning cross-cultural use of the contrafactum and its implications in chapter 6.

The use of contrafacta therefore can be confirmed as an early practice among Sephardic communities in the Levant, their popularity both stemming from the need to provide the masses with an accessible way of incorporating religious ideas in a period of spiritual crisis and based on the mystical interpretation of the secular songs by poets influenced by kabbalistic ideas.¹³ There is also no doubt that on some level this practice served to bring Jews into continued interaction with musical traditions they had encountered. In any event, some poems of Najara have “enjoyed uninterrupted continuity of performance down to the present” (Avenary 1979:190) and are still found in the modern collection of pizmonim published in Brooklyn.¹⁴ Pizmonim continued to be composed in this same manner in late nineteenth century Aleppo and twentieth-century Brooklyn, with the outcome in the late twentieth century that those set to “foreign” melodies comprise the majority of the surviving repertory. The definition of “foreign” shifts over time and in relationship to the geographical and national settings in which Syrian Jews find themselves; this issue is addressed in detail in chapter 5.

If individuals are aware of the historical importance of some pizmonim, they are equally sensitive to the reality that the knowledge of many such older songs has declined:

You know, we don't know all of them [pizmonim]. These are old, hundreds of years old. They are lost, they are gone forever. All we know is the ones we know. (M. Kairey, 6 November 1984)

With the exception of Najara's extraordinary contribution in the sixteenth century, no other single individual is remembered and memorialized by modern Syrian Jews as a leader of pizmon composition until the appearance in late nineteenth century Aleppo of Rabbi Raphael Taboush.¹⁵ In the words of one person, “He's the first one that I remember” (G. Haber, 31 January 1989). During the life of Taboush, pizmon composition and performance evidently were restored and revitalized, initiating a modern school of pizmon transmission that survives most actively in Brooklyn, but also in other Syrian communities in the New World (D. Tawil, 11 December 1984). The close relationships of Taboush with his students and their subse-

quent role in sustaining the pizmon tradition throughout the twentieth century in the Syrian diaspora are a central focus of this book.

Teachers of Memory

The pizmonim transmitted today in Brooklyn are viewed as the legacy of Aleppo and the creativity of Rabbi Raphael Taboush. Born in Aleppo around the year 1873, Taboush died in Cairo in 1919 (Laniado 1952:148)¹⁶ (see plate 8). Taboush composed many pizmonim still actively performed in Syrian communities around the world, including such popular songs as *Yahid Ram Le'olam* (no. 238) and *Attah El Kabbir* (no. 210). Tales about Taboush are vividly retold in late twentieth century Brooklyn.

While she never met her great-uncle Raphael Taboush, Gracia Haber recalls having heard many details about his life and accomplishments (G. Haber, 31 January 1989). The narrative begins with the story of Raphael Taboush's parents, Isaac and Seti Ades Taboush, who had five boys and two girls. Their third son, Abraham, was Gracia's grandfather. Raphael was the fourth son, followed by a younger brother named Joseph, to whom he remained close throughout his life.

Raphael Taboush married Grace Hamouwy, with whom he had three boys and three girls; the eldest boy and girl were named Isaac and Seti respectively, after their paternal grandparents.¹⁷ While the date of Raphael and his family's migration to Egypt is unclear beyond the fact that he died there in 1919, likely the presence of his beloved young brother Joseph, who had left for Cairo as a teenager and became a successful businessman, was a factor in his migration.

The most frequently told tale about Raphael Taboush concerns his blindness:

*Hakham*¹⁸ Taboush was blind, by the way, a phenomenal singer, phenomenal poet . . . and he had somebody else do the writing for him. (D. Tawil, 11 December 1984)

According to Gracia Haber, Raphael became blind after an incident in the environs of Aleppo:

Raphael used to go places where there is Syrian songs, Arabic songs; he loved tunes. And he wanted to get the tunes in his head. Always. So every time they hear there is a wedding or a party by the Arab, he used to go there. He has some friends that go with him. He had already finished his

Hebrew school, but not the higher studies to be a rabbi. One day he was in an Arab village and they caught him, realized he was Jewish, and he ran. So, they sent the police after them and he got so scared he ran, breathing very fast, he washed his face with cold water, he was very hot, and he became blind. That's what my grandmother told me. (Ibid.)

After losing his sight, Taboush continued his musical activities and supported himself through selling socks. He also became very religious:

So, he became blind and then he used to go with his friend also to listen to the music. One day his friend didn't show up. So it was a Saturday, another friend was going to shul [synagogue], he told him, "Raphael, you want to go with me to shul?" He says, "Yes, I'll go." Since that day, he never left the shul. He loved it. (Ibid.)

Many stories circulate about Taboush's special musical skills, said to be all the more acute after he went blind. Most frequently told is the story that Taboush was regarded as a "thief" because he "stole" melodies that he heard (J. Saff, 23 October 1984; G. Shrem, 9 January 1986; M. Arking and J. Mosseri, 14 January 1986).

This is a true story. You see this *Hakham* Raphael Taboush? Here's his picture over here you see.¹⁹ He was blind, you know. . . . He used to go to hear all the Egyptian singers that come from Egypt to Syria, like they make a performance usually in the coffeehouses. All the musicians used to come. They used to introduce the new songs that they happened to make. So *Hakham* Raphael Taboush used to go with a man.²⁰ As soon as he comes in they gave their greatest respect. They used to say, "Here comes a thief, thief of songs." This man, he goes up there, he used to sing in Arabic, he used to put his hands on his lap. He used to get the melody. He says it in Arabic, the next day he composed it in Hebrew. . . . This is a gift, you know. . . . And this man had no musical background or anything. It's a gift. (H. Kaïre, 14 March 1985)

Some stories tell of Taboush challenging Arab musicians at the end of their performances to compare the melodies of their songs to his. Taboush would sing a melody from one of the *bakkashot*,²¹ challenging the Arab musician to identify it:

So the [Arab] artist says, with a click of his tongue: "I never heard that *maqām* before." You know, he couldn't associate it. Then he [Taboush] tells [sings] him something else. [The Arab musician] says: "I give up." "This is a holy *maqām*," Taboush says. The [Arab] musician says: "I could never

compare it. It's outstanding, it doesn't compare, it doesn't resemble any other maqām, there's a maqām to it, but the words, it's meaningful." (Ibid.)

Taboush's prolific skill is said to have single-handedly spurred a revival of the pizmon tradition in his native Aleppo:

He had tunes in his head and every time there was a wedding, or there was a bar mitzvah or a bris [circumcision ceremony], he used to, in Hebrew, translate the words. The music is in Arabic, but the wording was Hebrew. And that's how we start the pizmonim. And for every occasion, there is another pizmon that he used to make. All those pizmonim, they used to sing them in shul. That's how they made them, those songs and they, the young community that loved the music, they add to it. (G. Haber, 31 January 1989)

Taboush is said to have known many Arab melodies and to have been so adept at composing Hebrew texts that he could produce a new pizmon almost on demand:

This Taboush, he couldn't see. But he was very, very smart and very fine at singing and he was very religious. . . . One time they wanted to make like a joke out of him. So there was one Rav [Rabbi], he came from some other place in Aleppo . . . so they tell him, "You know Hakhm Raphael, we have Rav so and so." He [Taboush] says, "Why didn't you tell me before that he is here?" And in this minute, the man makes a pizmon for him. (S. Tawil, 30 March 1989)

Despite universal acclaim for his talent, a few intimate that Taboush's voice was not very pleasing to the ear—information transmitted by Taboush's student, Moses Ashear:

And the funniest thing that Moses, Rabbi Ashear, he used to tell us: "The guy he doesn't have voice. It's something of God, really, how he used to explain you the tune." (Ibid.)

While Taboush's children were said to have been musical, especially his sons Isaac, Ben Zion, and David (G. Haber, 31 January 1989), they did not become the main conduits of the pizmon tradition within the Syrian community. This task fell to his students, most notably Moses Ashear,²² but also to Eliyahu Menaged and Hayyim Tawil.²³