

# NON-ASHKENAZIC JEWRY AS THE GROUND OF CONTEMPORARY ISRAELI MULTICULTURALISM

Zvi Zohar\*

Recibido: 4 Septiembre 2007 / Revisado: 2 Octubre 2007 / Aceptado: 20 Octubre 2007

## 1. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

In the wake of the Expulsion from Spain (1492), Sephardic<sup>1</sup> Jews gradually settled as refugees in many lands, primarily – in areas under Ottoman rule. One of these was the Holy Land, *Eretz Israel*, whose Jewish inhabitants until that time were mostly indigenous *Musta'arabim*<sup>2</sup>. For a variety of reasons, the *Musta'arabim* gradually became assimilated to the culture of the Sephardic newcomers. From the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the dominant ('hegemonic') culture of Jews in Eretz Israel (henceforth: EI) was Sephardic. However, beginning in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and especially during and after the brief Egyptian rule (1831–1840), increased Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East led to the establishment of non-Sephardic communities in EI.

The relations of these communities with the established Sephardic leadership (recognized by the Ottoman government as representing the entire Jewish population) were complex and sometimes strained. For example: during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Ashkenazic population of Jerusalem had increased to the point, that Ashkenazic groups (*kollelim*) attained *de facto* autonomy in a number of crucial realms. One of these was that of *shehita*, ritual slaughtering of meat. At first,

Sephardic rabbinic authorities branded this development as illegitimate. Later, they realized that not only was such opposition futile, but that many Sepharadim were in fact purchasing meat from Ashkenazic *shehita*. Thereafter, the Sephardic rabbis concentrated on de-legitimizing consumption of such meat by Sepharadim; by and large, this campaign also failed, since the "Ashkenazic" produce was less expensive. Ashkenazic influence upon Sepharadim manifested itself also in other aspects of traditional Jewish life – such as recitation of ritual benedictions by women, and the adoption by certain Sephardic rabbis of ultra-Orthodox rejectionism towards, e.g., secular studies.

In the instances discussed above, various ethnically Jewish sub-groups interacted and influenced each-other with regard to varieties of *Jewish* cultural norms. At the same time, of course, these very sub-groups were affected by non-Jewish cultural norms. Thus, members of the Sephardic sub-group arrived from a European milieu, where the dominant languages were European and people wore European clothes. Interaction with the non-Jewish milieu in *Eretz Israel* led over time to, e.g., mastery of the Arabic language and adaptation to local norms of apparel. Thus we find a Sephardic Jerusalemite rabbi in the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century preaching the virtues of modesty embodied in Muslim-style women's attire. The background to

\* The Shalom Hartman Institute. Jerusalem, Israel. E-mail: [zvizohar@mail.biu.ac.il](mailto:zvizohar@mail.biu.ac.il). Telephone: +972-52-2369544. Fax: +972-2-5730190.

<sup>1</sup> The Iberian peninsula was identified in rabbinic tradition as the biblical land of Sepharad (Ob. 1:20). Thus, Jews hailing from Spain and Portugal are termed Sephardic (Heb. *Sepharadim*).

<sup>2</sup> This term is a Hebraization of the Arabic *Musta'arabin*, i.e., those who adopt the ways of the Arabs.

his harangue was, apparently, the beginning of influence of Western-style women's fashion upon local Sephardic matrons. Indeed, with the increased penetration of modern European culture into the Ottoman Empire, local elites, both Arab and Jewish, began sending their children to European-style schools, either Christian or Jewish, with European curricula. Secular studies and European languages were taught, and Western mores were presented as more advanced than local custom. In Jerusalem, Sephardic upper and middle class families were especially prone to send their children to such schools, including those directed by Christian monks or nuns. As a result, by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century many young Sephardic men and women could converse in at least one European language, and held European culture in high regard.

All this cultural dynamic took place independently of Zionism. However, when Zionist influence began to manifest itself in EI, it too was a major cultural influence in favor of modern European culture. The major reason for this was, that despite some mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Sephardic proto-Zionists, and despite enjoying the emotional support of the Sephardic masses in North Africa and the Middle east, the Zionist movement –from its inception in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until 1948– was initiated and led by Ashkenazic Jews, who resided in Europe and in the U.S. Ashkenazic Jews also formed the majority of Jews residing in EI during that same period. Undoubtedly, differences between Lithuanians and “Galicianers” or between Hungarian and Romanian Jews seemed saliently significant to members of those Ashkenazic subgroups. Nevertheless, common historical cultural roots, common language (Yiddish) and common non-Jewish background (= European Christianity) created significant similarity between them. Another common denominator was, that many young European Jews had internalized anti-clerical attitudes characteristic of European Enlightenment culture, and came to regard major components of established rabbinic Judaism as passé, or as obstructions to the Jewish future.

The more fervent trends in Zionist thought strongly critiqued central Jewish characteristics and culture that were rooted in Diaspora/*Galut* reality, and developed an ideal of disassociation from the Jewish nation's lifestyle and culture formed in exile. The alternate to what was seen as the atrophied

body and spirit of the Diaspora Jew was embodied in the figure of the new Eretz-Israeli Jew, the Tsabar (Sabra), who was portrayed as a fair-colored, self-confident and physically competent person. Although ethnically Ashkenazic, the ideal-type Tsabar was not culturally so, but rather characterized as European, Hebrew-speaking, modern, enlightened, and secular. Rebellious against and overcoming the Jewishness of Exile, the Tsabar was to forge a new and better life for the Jewish People in their National Homeland. If all Jews arriving in EI would divest their inappropriate personal and cultural baggage and meld in to Modern Israeli culture and lifestyle, the well being –indeed, the salvation– of the Jewish People would be within reach.

It was difficult enough for a young man arriving from Europe in e.g. 1949 to adapt himself to the demands of this ideal: abandon Yiddish, Polish or Hungarian for modern Hebrew, change his given and family names to Israeli ones approved by the establishment, drop behaviors regarded as old-fashioned or Diasporic, and adopt the casual, not to say rough garb sported by Sabra “pioneers”. Nevertheless, since most European Jews of his age were already modernized and secularized, rejecting the Judaism of Galut was for many a price not too difficult to pay for the sake of the salvific qualities of life in Zionist utopia. However, with regard to a newcomer arriving in that same year from e.g. Morocco, the required transformation was exceedingly more complex. This was the case, despite the fact that such a person was quite likely to have been exposed to aspects of modernization in his land of origin.

We have already seen that Sephardim in EI were affected by European mores already by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They were not the only non-European Jews to do so. While the Jewish communities of Europe were the first to face the consequences of modernity's challenge to traditional Jewish culture, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the consequences of developments in Europe were making themselves felt also amongst the Jews of most Muslim lands. By the eve of the First World War, Jews in North Africa and the ME were significantly affected by modernity, in direct proportion to their economic status, their education and their urban location. That is to say: a wealthy, Alliance-educated Jew living in a newly-built quarter of Cairo was quite modernized indeed –while a lower-class, *kuttab*-educated Jew living in a Kur-

dish village was little touched by modernization. The inter-war years saw the extension of modernization to large sectors of the Jewish middle and lower-middle class. By mid 20th century, the majority of Sephardic-Oriental Jews in their countries of birth were modernized to some extent. Thus, the claim advanced by some activists that before arrival in EI the Jews of Muslim lands were “innocent” of modern influences is hard to resolve with historical facts.

Nevertheless, several variables made modernization in Islamic lands different from that of Europe<sup>3</sup>. One ‘external’ variable was, the lack (in Islamic lands) of anti-clericalism as a salient feature of modernism. Another was, that Islamic religious leaders in these countries did not respond to modernity by rejecting traditional religiosity and attempting the formation of radically different modes of Islamic religious life<sup>4</sup>. Rather, even those Muslims who criticized the current socio-political and cultural situation of their society chose to characterize the sought-for changes as truly compatible with the spirit of Islam and with the norms of the Shari’a<sup>5</sup>. In these respects, Jews of Islamic lands were similar to their Muslim compatriots: attacking rabbis as backward and criticizing halakhic Judaism as obscurantist were not *a la mode* in the Sephardic-Oriental milieu, and movements that advocated abandonment of rabbinic Judaism in favor of some brave, new definition of Jewish identity did not develop there<sup>6</sup>. In general, even those sectors of the Jewish community whose lifestyle reflected an halakhic identity in only the most minimal way, including those who advocated modern political ideologies such as socialism, communism or secular Zionism, did not seek to bolster

their position by insulting the community’s rabbis or traditions<sup>7</sup>. In addition, direct European rule over Islamic countries was (of course) of shorter duration than over European Jews: while Algeria was under direct French rule since 1830, Morocco fell under French sway only in 1912. This difference in duration also contributed to mitigation of modern influence, compared to Europe itself.

‘Internal’ cultural variables also contributed significantly to differentiating Jewish responses to modernity. Since the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, ideological schism has characterized European Jewry: Hasidim vs. Mitnagdim, Orthodox vs. Reform, Yiddishists vs. Hebraists, Zionists vs. Anti-Zionists, etc. Such was generally not the case with regard to Jews of Muslim lands, where communal leaders and rabbis strove to maintain an inclusivist community policy not requiring an either/or choice as a condition of membership. Also, prominent sages of Oriental Jewry in modern times adhered to a basic religious orientation very different than that of European Orthodox rabbis. While the former upheld the vision of a dynamic *halakha*, and could hark back to the medieval Sephardic ideal of openness to universal culture, the latter identified faithfulness to the Torah with the preservation of a pre-modern halakhic *status quo* and advocated cultural insularity as the best guarantor of Jewish continuity.

In light of all the above, our young Moroccan Jew arriving in Israel in 1949 was faced with expectations that were for him much more difficult than for his peer arriving from Europe: he was called upon to divest himself of his ties to traditional Moroccan Judaism, to reject an inclusivist vision of community, and to align himself with one or ano-

<sup>3</sup> For a concise presentation, see my article “The Halakhic Teachings of Modern Egyptian Rabbis”. *Pe’amim* 16 (1983), 65-88 (Hebrew).

<sup>4</sup> Thus, the so-called “Islamic Reform” movement, which was an important factor in Egyptian and Middle Eastern Islam in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century under the leadership of Afghani and ‘Abduh, was much less radical than European Christian Reform. Conversely, the Wahabi movement, which radically attacked the traditional Islamic establishment, was not at all a response to modernity.

<sup>5</sup> *Inter alia*, this was the path adopted by many Arab communists.

<sup>6</sup> A very unusual exception to this general rule was Rabbi Raphael Katzin’s attempt to establish a “reform” congregation in Aleppo ca. 1862, described by Yaron Harel in “Spiritual Ferment in the East: The Establishment of a Reform Congregation in Aleppo, 1862”. *HUCA*, 63 (1992), XIX-XXXV (Hebrew).

<sup>7</sup> Which is not to say that rabbinical leaders were never openly and directly criticized. Thus, many Cairene Jews in the early 1920’s severely criticized the behavior of the incumbent Chief Rabbi as high-handed and despotic; in the late 1940’s, thousands of Baghdadi Jews participated in a mass demonstration against Chief Rabbi Khaduri, whom they regarded as cowardly in failing to demand that Iraq’s nationalist (and effectively anti-Semitic) leadership alleviate the community’s plight. But even these radical critiques were definitely *ad hominem*.

ther of the fervent European-style ideologies competing within Israeli society. All of this, over and above the requirements faced by new arriviers from Europe –and the adjustment facing any newcomer to any society. A broad sector of immigrants from Islamic countries found this to be an impossible set of tasks– although in the process of their attempting to comply (and the attempts of state institutions to cause such compliance), great damage resulted to the immigrants’ familial and communal traditions and structures.

Soon after Israel’s establishment it became increasingly clear that immigration to Israel by a large number and wide variety of non-Ashkenazic Jews from Africa and Asia was undermining two central aspects of the secular Zionist ideal. First, the taken-for-granted European character of Israeli Jewish society and culture. Second, rejection of the Diaspora heritage. The implications of these developments were at first resisted through a state-initiated “Melting Pot” policy. Ultimately, however, the central goals of this policy were to a great extent not fulfilled<sup>8</sup>. The ship of secular European anti-Diaspora Israeli culture foundered upon the ground of Sephardic/Oriental Israeli socio-cultural reality – although that reality itself was significantly eroded in the process.

One long-term consequence of this failure was, a transformation of Israeli society and culture, in the direction of multiculturalism. The social dynamics of that transformation are complex, and have been the topic of much research and discussion. Indeed, since many contemporary societies in developed countries are much more multicultural than they were in the past, it might well be that Israel would have become part of this trend even had its population been totally homogeneous.

But that is hypothetical. In fact, non-Ashkenazic Jews were (and are) a major presence in Israeli society. In fact, their presence countered the homogeneousness of Israeli society from a very early stage. In fact, their great variety of sub-cultures, and the fact that unlike most European Jews they arrived in Israel still ‘attached’ to their original

Judaic sub-culture, was (and to an increasingly greater extent, *is*) a tremendous resource for, and impetus towards, multiculturalism in Israel.

In many socio-cultural realms, non-Ashkenazic sources are grounds for contemporary multiculturalism in Israel. The next part of this article is devoted to illustration of this reality, by presenting examples from three cultural realms.

## 2. POETRY

Erez Biton was born in Oran (Algeria) in 1942, and arrived in Israel in 1948. At age 11 he was blinded and lost his left hand (he and his friends found an old hand-grenade in a field near their home); nevertheless, he successfully completed highschool, a B.A. in social work and an M.A. in psychology. His first volume of poetry, *Minha Maroqait*, was published in 1976 and received negative reviews from leading critics: he mixed North-African Jewish Arabic into Hebrew texts, and described scenes of lower-class ‘Oriental’ Jewish life in what the highbrows considered a parochial, homespun manner. In 2006, however, Moshe/Moise Benarroch writes that “Thirty years are a full generation of poetry, and today it can be said that Erez Biton’s poetry is that which has most influenced the poets who began writing in the 1980’s and 1990’s ... it is very difficult to deny his influence upon Sami Shalom Chetrit, Shim’on Shelush, Shelly Elkayam and –down to our times– Matti Shmueloff... space does not permit the mention of all the poets influenced by the poems of Erez Biton... including [more mainstream poets such as] Roni Somek, Peretz-Dror Banai and Eli Bachar”<sup>9</sup>. All of the poets Benarroch cites are Sephardic/Oriental, and not a few are outrightly anti-establishment. Yet to be anti-establishment is a quite normal orientation for passionate poets. Benarroch, born in Tetuan (Spanish Morocco) in 1959 and living in Israel since 1972, has been described as follows: “Moshe Benarroch lives in Jerusalem and writes in Hebrew, English, and Spanish. His twelve books (nine are in Hebrew, three in English and one in Spanish) show the influence of such varied writers as Charles Bukowski, Alan

<sup>8</sup> A concise account of the Melting Pot policy and its decline and failure may be found in Leshem, Elazar; Roer-Strier, Dorit, *Cultural Diversity: A Challenge to Human Services* (Hebrew). Jerusalem 2003, especially at 30-35 and 79-91. For a different perspective, that notes also those areas in which the policy had significant effect (such as, the social status of women), see:

<sup>9</sup> Moise Benarroch, “Thirty Years After the Publication of *Minha Maroqait*”. Available from Internet at (Hebrew): <<http://www.notes.co.il/benarroch/20046.asp>>.

Ginsberg, Edmond Jabès, Vicente Huidobro, and Pablo Neruda”<sup>10</sup>.

Benarroch states outright that he has been rejected by the hegemonic Ashkenazim; yet Natan Zach, widely regarded as one of Israel’s greatest poets, characterized him in 2001 as one of the most worthy young Israeli poets<sup>11</sup>, and in July 2007 Adam Baruch, an iconic commentator on the Israeli cultural scene, wrote of Benarroch that ‘his quality rap is essentially universal’<sup>12</sup>. In any case, others in the short list above are clearly at the heart of the cultural scene. Peretz-Dror Banai, born in Qamishli (Syria) in 1947 and raised in Aleppo, came to Israel in 1962<sup>13</sup>. Recipient of several prizes, some of his poems are included in the high-school Hebrew Literature program of Israel’s Ministry of Education<sup>14</sup>. In addition, he was elected by his peers to serve in central positions in the organization of Hebrew authors in Israel. Roni Somek, born in Baghdad to the Somekh family, is a leading poet and lyricist. His brief bio notes that:

“his work has been translated into 36 languages. 2 selections of his poems have appeared in Arabic translation, one in French (with the exile Iraqi poet- A.K. El-Janabi), one in Catalan, one in Albanian, one in Italian and one in English- “The Fire Stays in Red”. He recorded with the musician Elliott Sharp 3 disks: called “Revenge of the stuttering child”, “Poverty Line” and “Short History of Vodka.” In 1998 made an exhibition “Nature’s Factory, Winter 2046” with Beny Efrat in The Israel Museum. Ronny Someck is the recipient of the Prime Minister’s Award, Yehuda Amichai Award for Hebrew poetry, The “Wine poem award” in Struga Poetry Evenings, Macedonia, 2005 and Hans Berghhuis

prize for poetry 2006 in the Maastricht International Poetry Nights in the Netherlands<sup>15</sup>”.

To cite additional names would be to belabor the point: Non-Ashkenazic poets constitute a significant and recognized presence in contemporary Israeli poetry, and contribute significantly to its colors and qualities. In an article devoted to an overview of their work, Shira Ohayyon concludes that they have added a new dimension to the Israeli cultural scene, because of the innovative ways in which they integrate several cultures into something different:

“This literature cannot be categorized as Hebrew Literature, Universal (i.e., European) Literature, nor as Oriental Poetry or “Arabic” Poetry. It is a new, hybrid genre of poetry, that ... creates a new language [and] new insights regarding culture and identity”<sup>16</sup>.

Ohayyon may well be correct in her analysis. However, let us return for a moment to a recent biographical note written by Erez Biton, with whom we began. He writes that in 1974

“There began to coalesce within me those elements that came from the Atlas Mountains, from the deserts of over-there, for hundreds of generations. A sort of attempt to rehabilitate that rejected, suppressed element – of which we were actually ashamed in that generation. And then, after *Minha Maroqait*, my first book, I came across the *piyyut* of rabbi David Bouzaglo. Suddenly, I saw myself as a small additional link in a necklace of generations... [Bouzaglo created] a lullaby, for a whole generation, a nation, with whom he was during those nights in the synagogue; a kind of catharsis, a kind of purification, that came upon us unbeknownst”<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Alkalay-Gut, Karen, “An interview with Moshe Benarroch”. *Archipelago*, VII-1 (2003). (online at: <<http://www.archipelago.org/vol7-1/recommend.htm>>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Zach had positive comments on Benarroch also in his article ‘I’m Very Angry at You’ (Hebrew) published in *Hed HaHinukh*, June-July 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Baruch, Adam, *Ma’ariv*. July 27 of 2007.

<sup>13</sup> About Banai, see the Lexicon of Modern Hebrew Literature (Hebrew), online at: <<http://library.osu.edu/sites/users/galron.1/00648.php>>.

<sup>14</sup> The program is online at <<http://www.daat.ac.il/DAAT////sifrut/tochnit/09.htm>>.

<sup>15</sup> <<http://library.osu.edu/sites/users/galron.1/00418>>.

<sup>16</sup> Ohayyon, Shira, “Oriental Poetry or Hybrid Poetry? (Hebrew)”. *Hakivvun Mizrah*, 12 (2006), 35-43. The quote is from page 43.

<sup>17</sup> Erez Biton made this statement in an evening held at Jerusalem’s Van Leer Institute, devoted to rabbi Bouzaglo. His presentation was video-recorded and can be accessed online at <<http://www.vanleer.org.il/heb/videoShow.asp?id=253>>. It was also printed in *Hakivvun Mizrah*, 12 (2006), 34.

What is *piyyut*, and who was rabbi David Bouzaglo?

### 3. LITURGICAL POETRY/ MUSIC: *PIYYUT*

In the introduction to this article I noted that throughout the centuries, Jews in EI were influenced by non-Jewish cultures (both local and from abroad) and by various Jewish cultures. As we shall see with regard to popular music, non-Ashkenazi Jews were instrumental in exposing Israelis of European extraction to non-European musical cultures, e.g., those of the Middle East and of Ethiopia. At the same time, and in a partially interlinked manner, non-Ashkenazi Jews were (and are) instrumental in exposing other Israelis to non-European *Jewish* musical cultures. The prime example of this is the realm of *piyyut*.

The term *piyyut* has several meanings. One is, liturgical poetry. The creation of such poetry began in antiquity, and continued in many (perhaps all) Jewish communities throughout the Middle Ages. However, in Ashkenaz, the writing of *piyyut* was significantly curtailed in modern times, as was the inclusion of post-medieval *piyyut* in religious praxis. This was not the case for most non-Ashkenazic communities, where the writing of *piyyutim* continued also in recent centuries, as did the inclusion of such newly-written compositions in religious activity, whether in the synagogue service or in other ritual events (e.g., naming ceremonies, circumcisions, betrothals, etc.). Another meaning linked to *piyyut* is, the performance of such poetry – traditionally done by singing or melodical chanting. A highly esteemed skill in traditional non-Ashkenazic communities was, the ability to perform each *piyyut* in the appropriate mode, employing vocal expertise, melody, inflection, rhythm etc. Such expertise was also associated with the ability to lead synagogue services and/or to participate in leading them, and to perform at various life-cycle events for which a variety of *piyyutim* always existed. In certain communities, it was customary to convene devotional sessions in the late-night/pre-dawn hours; these sessions were typically devoted at least in part to the performance of *piyyutim*. In

some communities, the pre-dawn hours of Shabbat during the winter months were devoted to the singing of *piyyutim* known as *baqqashot*. In 20<sup>th</sup> century EI two traditions of *baqqashot* were prominent, those of Morocco and those of Aleppo (Syria). Generally speaking, the performance of Moroccan *baqqashot* was (and is) considered very nuanced and complex, requiring a high degree of expertise; the performance of Aleppan-type *baqqashot* is considered more accessible to rank-and-file community members and indeed participation by children and youths is highly encouraged. In mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Aleppan custom was introduced to the Sephardic community in the Old City of Jerusalem, and became a feature of Jerusalem Sephardic life<sup>18</sup>.

Religious Ashkenazic Jews, and needless to say, secular Ashkenazim, were hardly ever exposed to the world of *piyyutim*, and it would probably not be an exaggeration to state that until recently, almost all of them were simply unaware of it. During the heyday of ‘classic’ secular Zionism in EI, and especially during the years of melting-pot policy, many Sephardic/Oriental Jews became alienated from their own liturgical tradition(s). Indeed, processes of alienation from tradition had begun already abroad. Thus, in Morocco, the internal immigration of tens of thousands of Jews from the south and the countryside to Casablanca during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (the community in Casablanca increasing from 5000 to 80000 Jews), led to mass breakdown of traditional ways of life. A crucial figure in the stabilization and renewal of the tradition of *piyyut* in Morocco was rabbi David Bouzaglo<sup>19</sup>. Rabbi Bouzaglo was a rabbinic scholar, a poet in a variety of styles, a composer of music, a consummate performer, and an expert in the teaching and theory of traditional music. He taught a generation of disciples the traditions and techniques of classical Andalusian music, as well as appreciation for the ideational content and for the stylistic achievements of the great medieval and modern composers of *piyyutim*. In addition, he composed Hebrew religious lyrics to contemporary tunes from Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt, thus making *piyyut* relevant to young Moroccan Jews.

<sup>18</sup> See Seroussi, Edwin, “On the Origin of the Custom of Chanting Baqqashot in Jerusalem in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century’ (Hebrew)”. *Pe’amim*, 56 (1993), 106-124. This article includes *inter alia* comments on the origins of the *baqqashot* tradition, links between Jewish and non-Jewish musical traditions in Islamic lands, etc.

<sup>19</sup> Born near Marrakesh in 1903, his family moved to Casablanca in 1919. In 1965 he came on aliya to Israel, where he lived until his decease in 1975.

In 1965, he chose to move to Israel not because of persecution in Morocco (he was held in high regard by the Sultan, before whom he had performed on several occasions) but because of religious-Zionist motivation. However, his arrival took place during the height of the melting pot policy, and his talents and capabilities were totally overlooked by the cultural 'establishment'. Recognizing the crisis of the Moroccan Jewish community in Israel, rabbi Bouzaglo devoted himself to teaching the tradition of *piyyut* to disciples and to those attending Moroccan synagogues, in development towns and in working class neighborhoods. He thus established and maintained cultural continuity between North Africa and Israel, despite prevailing public doctrine at that time. As was the case for him in Morocco, rabbi Bouzaglo did not seek to isolate himself from contemporary Israeli poetics: a striking illustration of this is, his *piyyut* entitled *Binu Na*, written in response to Haim Guri's 1948 classic poem *Bab el-Wad* and set to the same tune<sup>20</sup>.

When he passed away in 1975, it seemed to those involved in traditional Moroccan-Jewish tradition that an era had come to an end. However, in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century *piyyut* is enjoying an unprecedented revival, and has become widely recognized in Israel as a major cultural resource and inspiration. A pivotal factor in this change of tide has been *Kehillot Sharot Piyyut*, a grass roots organization created in 2002 by Yossi Ohanna and several others. *Kehillot Sharot* addresses two publics. On the one hand, it conducts training courses to enhance the capabilities and the skills of persons who actually lead the singing of *piyyutim* in synagogues and traditional occasions. On the other hand, it conducts once-a-week evening classes for groups of individuals who come from all walks of life –secular, traditional and religious, men and women, Ashkenazim and Sephardim– and who have little or no previous acquaintance with *piyyut*. In each class, one or two *piyyutim* are taught, by persons who are 'real life' masters and performers of the material. The poetic and ideational content of the work are learned, some

analytic aspects of the music are discussed, and the entire group learns to sing the *piyyut* together. Over time, the program of study covers poems and melodies from many non-Ashkenazic communities in North Africa and the Middle East. Towards the end of 2005, the founders of *Kehillot Sharot* and quite a few others launched a website ([www.piyyut.org.il](http://www.piyyut.org.il)) with a rich online collection of recordings, texts, explanations and background material. In March 2006, Basmat Aazan Arnoff wrote:

"At an event three months ago celebrating the launch of the new website Invitation to Piyyut, I understood that something had dramatically changed in how the Jewish community, at least in Israel, relates to this complex, beautiful and little-understood art form. The reception hall was filled wall to wall with a wildly diverse crowd –and everyone there was interested in piyyut. Women and men, Ashkenazi and Mizrahi, religious and secular, young and old, and all were there seeking out Israel's newest "retro" trend– piyyut. Indeed, in the past five years the piyyut has become more and more prevalent on the Israeli cultural scene. Well-known performers like Eti Ankri and Ehud Banai and Barry Sakharov are recording and playing piyyutim. There are "Piyyut Shabbats" held by a variety of communities in hotels across the country for people to celebrate and sing for the entire weekend. People from all walks of life are meeting weekly in "Singing Communities" –*Kehillot Sharot*– to learn to sing piyyutim together. And, in addition to the a vast collection of piyyutim accompanied by interpretation, academic research, and a wide variety of recorded renditions of traditional piyyutim on the "Invitation to Piyyut" website, the Israeli Department of Education has published a textbook for teaching piyyut in middle schools across the country"<sup>21</sup>.

After interviewing Yossi Ohanna, Yair Harel, Roni Ish-Ran and other key figures in *Kehillot Sharot*, Aazan Arnoff cites her father, Prof. Ephraim azan, who was born on the island of Jerba and has

<sup>20</sup> For literary analyses of this piyyut, see Bouzaglo, Meir, 'Salem, Hayyim ve-David: Variatziot Shel Shikheha'. *Teoria uBiqoret*, 22 (2003), 171-184; Biton, Shim'on, "Binu Na: Ma Bein Rabbi David Bouzaglo ve Hayyim Guri". *Amudim*, 694 (2005), 5-10.

<sup>21</sup> Hazan Arnoff, Basman, "The Piyyut is Jewish Soul Music". *Zeek* (March 2006) Available from Internet at: <http://www.zeek.net/print/603piyyut/>.

devoted his academic career to the study of *piyyut* and other forms of classic Jewish poetry. She writes:

“In my father’s opinion, Singing Communities are an expression of a wider return to Mizrahi roots in Israel that began 30 years ago. “This is a music that always called for connection. The *paytanim* and the *piyyutim* were always a bridge between sacred and day-to-day life and between the Jewish and Arab worlds. They were always about tolerance and the possibility of dialogue and understanding and attention to meeting amongst different cultural worlds. Now they are doing that today too.” My father adds that “the music really is succeeding in bringing together a wide range of people under one roof to sing together and to find both individually and collectively their unique connection to the Jewish tradition”<sup>22</sup>.

The participation of prominent popular singers in a *piyyut* workshop conducted over the course of two years at the Hillel House of Hebrew University moved this classical Jewish poetic genre into mainstream cultural events. In late November 2004, Ehud Banai, Barry Sakharof, Micha Chetrit—all famous Israeli pop singers—joined together with various traditional *paytanim* such as Lior Elmaliah, Ilan Damari and Yehuda Ovadia Ftaya, in a three-and-a-half hour concert of *piyyutim* set to both traditional and contemporary music. The venue: a totally sold out *Heikhal HaTarbut*, Tel Aviv’s biggest concert hall (home, inter alia, to the Israeli Philharmonic orchestra). Avi Efrati, who reviewed the event for *Itton Tel Aviv*, was totally unaccustomed to this type of music, as were most of the audience, who had come not because of the content but because of the big names. He wrote:

“I’m not an expert in poetry, certainly not of medieval poetry, but many of the texts revealed during this event, by Israel Najara, Immanuel HaRomi, rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra,

Shmuel HaNaggid, Yehuda HaLevi, Ibn Gabirol and others, are a real hidden treasure ... this was an important, brave initiative, with a lot of vision. It laid the foundation for a dialogue via music between different cultural groups, not to say tribes, who live and create here ... for the crystallization of a contemporary musical-cultural-Jewish mosaic<sup>23</sup>”.

The gala grand finale of the 2006 Israel Festival was, an evening of *piyyut* presented by many of Israel’s most prominent singers, performing before an enthusiastic full-capacity audience in Jerusalem’s Sultan’s Pool set in a valley at the foot of the Old City walls. Yair Sheleg, an observer of Israel’s social and religious scene, commented:

“These two evenings were the culmination of a process in which Judaism and tradition, and especially *piyyut*, are becoming an inseparable part of the blood-circuit of contemporary Israeli music<sup>24</sup>”.

#### 4. POPULAR MUSIC

The anti-*galut* prejudice of mainstream Zionism did not extend in principle<sup>25</sup> to aspects of local EI life and culture that were regarded as authentic and indigenous. Music was one field to which this applied<sup>26</sup>. Already during the British mandatory period, non-Ashkenazic vocalists—especially ethnically Yemenite women singers such as Bracha Zefira, Esther Gamlielit, Shoshana Damari and Yaffa Yarkoni—became icons of “indigenous” EI tradition<sup>27</sup>. Working in conjunction with composers born in Europe, they sang in a manner that integrated some Oriental aspects into tunes that were essentially Western. However, their style of presentation and appearance marked them as clearly non-Western, and they were so perceived by their audiences. Beginning in the late 1960’s, a style known as “Oriental Music” (*musiqat mizrahit*) began to gain popular appeal, first as a counter-cul-

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Efrati, Avi, “HaRehovot Sharim” (The Streets are Singing). *Itton Tel Aviv*, music section, December 3 of 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Sheleg, Yair, “The Latest Trend in Israeli Rock”. *Jewish Piyyut* (Hebrew). *HaAretz*, October 6 of 2006.

<sup>25</sup> In fact, Jews arriving from Europe had in many cases been affected by anti-Oriental prejudices current in European society.

<sup>26</sup> Cfr. Hirschberg, Jehosh, *Music in the Jewish Community of Palestine 1880-1948*. Oxford, 1995.

<sup>27</sup> Sa’ada-Ofir, Galit, “Sheharhoret Yiqraouni: Musiqat Nashit Mizrahit b’sde haMusiqat b’Yisrael” (Mizrahi Women’s Music in the Israeli Musical Realm). *Hakivvun Mizrah*, 9 (2004) 57-61. For a briefer version in English, go to: <<http://www.aisisraelstudies.org/2004papers/Saada-Ophir,%20Galit.doc>>.

ture among ethnically Sephardic/Oriental youth and later as a style widely appreciated by broad sectors of the Israeli public. To differentiate it from “Arabic” music, it was also termed “Mediterranean” (*musiqā yam tikhonit*), and today performers who sing in this style are regarded as mainstream Israeli pop singers. Some purists are critical of this blend, but, as Edwin Seroussi puts it:

“Given the essential commitment of *musiqā mizrahit* artists and producers to national Israeli culture, the general ‘Mediterraneanization’ of popular music in Israel, could be interpreted as goal achieved. That is, *musiqā mizrahit* speakers have persistently argued that their music is Israeli, and that their interest is to be recognized as legitimate and authentic. With *musiqā mizrahit* turned into *musiqā yam tikhonit* placed at center stage of Israeli popular music, with rock and pop musicians influenced by the Mediterranean sounds of *musiqā mizrahit*, and with *mizrahilyam tikhoni* musicians such as Avihu Medina and Zohar Argov canonized as ‘all-Israeli’, one could hardly interpret this situation as a cultural failure. The nationalist impetus underlining *musiqā mizrahit* has achieved its own self declared goal of bringing *musiqā mizrahit*, under the disguise of Mediterranean music, into the mainstream of Israeli popular music and of Mediterraneanizing the sound of popular music in Israel”<sup>28</sup>.

In the interim between the 1940’s and the 1960’s, when non-European music was marginalized by state policy, islands of such music flourished within the Israeli Jewish public, patronized by specific ethnic audiences. Jewish instrumentalists had been at the forefront of musical life in Iraq and in Egypt, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Arriving in Israel in the early 1950’s, they had to choose between changing over to European-style music to suit mainstream expectations, or conti-

nuing their Middle Eastern style, at the expense of marginalization. Those who chose the latter path were *ipso facto* choosing resistance to the Melting Pot policy<sup>29</sup>. They performed for ethnic audiences in venues such as “Café Noah” in south Tel Aviv and wedding celebrations. The Israeli State Arabic Radio channel existed primarily to communicate Israel’s message to non-Jewish Arab speakers, in Israel and in neighboring states. The channel maintained an orchestra, that provided another niche venue for Jewish musicians playing Middle Eastern Music. One of the central figures in Person’s study was Felix Mizrahi, an outstanding violinist, who came to Israel from Egypt in the early 1950’s –when he himself was in his early twenties. Person relates, that in the 1990’s, Mizrahi began to play other types of music– e.g., he accompanied leading Mizrahi/Mediterranean singers such as Hayyim Moshe and Zehava Ben. She seems ambivalent about this development, since she considers Mizrahi music to be not really Middle Eastern<sup>30</sup>.

One wonders what she would have said about a musical event, that took place on February 18<sup>th</sup> 2007, shortly before the joyful Jewish holiday of Purim, in *Beit haConfederatzia*, a respected cultural venue situated between Jerusalem’s King David Hotel and the walls of the Old City. The title of the evening was innocuously traditional: *mishbeNikhnas Adar Marbim b’Simha* – when the month of Adar [the month of the Purim holiday] begins, joyfulness should be increased. However, the subtitle was striking: An Evening of *Piyyutim* [Jewish liturgical poetry] Sung to Tunes Composed by the Great Arab Singer `Abd al-Wahhab. Liturgical poetry is, of course, usually recited or sung in synagogue, or on celebrations of religious events such as circumcisions, weddings etc. The performance of such poetry in a ‘secular’ venue is itself noteworthy (but increasingly common in today’s Israel –of which see more, below). Setting the poetry to popular Middle Eastern music was

<sup>28</sup> Edwin Seroussi, “Mediterraneanism” (in *Israeli Music: an Idea and its Permutations*). *Music and Anthropology*, 7 (2002). Available from Internet at: <[http://www.muspe.unibo.it/period/ma/index/number7/ma\\_ind7.htm](http://www.muspe.unibo.it/period/ma/index/number7/ma_ind7.htm)>. For an analysis of the various strategies employed by young singers from the development town of Sderot in negotiating the sound and content of their music and lyrics between their Mizrahi roots and Israeli mainstream music see Sa’ada-Ofir, Galit, *Bein “Yisraeliyyut” le “Mizrahiyyut”: hakhlaot musiqaliyyot min ha-Ir Sderot* (Between “Israeli-ness” and “Mizrahi-ness”: Musical Hybridizations from the City of Sderot). *Sociologia Yisraelit*, III-2 (2001), 253-275. Sa’ada-Ofir concludes, as does Seroussi, that in fact Mizrahi music has fully entered the Israeli musical mainstream.

<sup>29</sup> These musicians were the topic of Inbal Perlson’s doctorate, published (in Hebrew) as: Perlson, Inbal, *A Great Joy Tonight – Arab-Jewish Music and Mizrahi Identity*. Tel Aviv (Resling) 2006.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 169-179.

not uncommon in Jewish communities in Syria and elsewhere— those were the tunes everyone knew and loved, and it is said that rabbis advocated the use of such tunes in synagogue settings, to encourage participation by the youth. However, intentionally setting all of the liturgy to tunes composed by one person was (to the best of my knowledge) not traditionally done. In addition, of course, the Israeli musical context is completely different from the situation that prevailed in Islamic countries: As noted above, it was for many years official policy to marginalize “Arabic” music, and thus it is not `Abd al-Wahhab that one hears young people humming as they travel to high-school. The vector of this event in Jerusalem was clearly different: it was an initiative to ‘bring back’ such music into an arena frequented by the general public, now judged by the organizers to be receptive to such cultural ventures. But there is more.

In the announcement of the evening printed in Jerusalem’s local paper *`Akhhbar ha`Ir* and on the venue’s website, the event was described as follows:

“A selection of the beloved songs of `Abd al-Wahhab in Hebrew translation, and some of his instrumental compositions, authentically performed by Moshe abusha and his friends, in the spirit of Egyptian song”.

Obviously, the person responsible for this wording assumes, that there exists in Israel a significant public who admires `Abd al-Wahhab (in particular) and Egyptian music (in general), is well-off enough to afford tickets to such a concert, and feels no need to publicly conceal these preferences that are clearly not “melting pot approved”. In addition, the blurb assumes that the public has heard of Moshe Aabusha. Who is Moshe Aabusha?

Of Jewish-Iraqi ethnicity, Aabusha began singing as prayer-leader in Sephardic/Oriental synagogues, and developed into a renowned *paytan*, i.e., cantor/performer of liturgical poetry. He is known to be the favorite *paytan* of rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the great contemporary halakhist. However, several years ago Aabusha began to branch out, and to perform outside of synagogues. Initially, he appeared

before Sephardic-religious audiences; later, and in parallel to growing interest in *piyyutim* within broader segments of the Israeli public (of which see more, below), he appeared before increasingly diverse audiences, both in Israel and abroad. He is also known among lovers of “classical” Middle Eastern music within the Arab world<sup>31</sup>. His ‘friends’, i.e., his accompanists, included two Arab-Israelis (Hani As`ad and Mahdi Bendadi), David Menahem (a *yeshiva* student studying for accreditation as a *daiyan* [rabbinic judge]), and ... Felix Mizrahi, at a spry 79! All were warmly received by the heterogeneous Jerusalem audience, who were delighted when, from time to time, Aabusha switched over from the Hebrew lyrics and sang sections of `Abd al-Wahhab’s compositions in the original Arabic<sup>32</sup>.

Lest it be suspected that “Non-Ashkenazic” in the title of this paper is simply a euphemism for Jews from Muslim lands, a mention of Ethiopian music in Israel is in order. Immigration of Jews from Ethiopia to Israel began thirty years after the mass immigration from Middle Eastern and North African countries. Nevertheless, many of the policy mistakes and bureaucratic obtuseness from which the earlier immigrants suffered, repeated themselves all over again, with regard to the Ethiopians. At the same time, in the artistic realm, Israeli society is in a different place, and this has enabled Ethiopian music and musicians to participate in the cultural scene more rapidly and more openly than was possible in the 1950’s and 1960’s.

Abatte Barihun was born in Ethiopia in 1967 where he was a well-known jazz player. He came on *aliya* to Israel in 1999, and for several years worked as a dishwasher and a night-guard. Moshe Bar Yehuda, who in 1957 served as an Israeli emissary to Ethiopian Jewry, introduced Barihun to musicologist Shlomo Israeli; the latter paired Barihun with jazz pianist Yitzhak Yedid, and the two musicians founded the “Ras Dashen Ensemble”, named after the highest mountain in Ethiopia. Their music, a blend of jazz, Ethiopian music and Ethiopian Jewish tradition, has been received with high acclaim by Israeli music critics. Thus, in 2005 Ben Shalev wrote in *HaAretz*:

<sup>31</sup> The May 2006 posting on an Arab website devoted to “Arabic Classical Vocal Art” of a recording of Habusha singing a composition of Mohammad Othman set to Hebrew words, engendered a fascinating discussion between aficionados with regard to Jews in Arabic music, Art and Politics, Oriental Jews and Arabic culture ... see (in Arabic): <<http://www.zeryab.org/zeryab/showthread.php?t=17504>>.

<sup>32</sup> As witnessed by author.

“The Ras Dashen duo is one of the best things that has happened to Israeli jazz, and maybe to Israeli music in general, in recent years. The encounter between saxophonist Abatte Barihun, who immigrated from Ethiopia six years ago, and Jerusalem pianist Yitzhak Yedid, has given rise to a surprising and tempestuous combination of jazz, African music and modern classical music.

One of the exciting parts of the performances of the pair in the last three years, and in its debut album released last year, is an Ethiopian Jewish prayer, which Abatte Barihun sings in a way that movingly illustrates the African roots of blues and Gospel. “Both we and our audience felt a very strong connection with this piece,” says Yedid. “And when we thought about what to do in our next program, we decided to focus on passages from the prayers, and specifically on prayers from Psalms. One can find a very strong symbolic connection between them and the Ethiopian aliyah [immigration] to Israel”<sup>33</sup>.

Nadav Haber, an Israeli musician born in 1967, first became acquainted with Ethiopian music in the 1980’s, when he taught children who had come on *aliya* from Ethiopia. He became enthralled, and studied with several non-Jewish Ethiopian musicians who had come to live in Israel. A highly significant event was, his meeting with Abatte Barihun; Haber relates that “Abatte taught me what a saxophone can do with Ethiopian music, and after I met him, I myself was transformed into an Ethiopian saxophonist”<sup>34</sup>. Several months later, in the context of an article on Jazz in Jerusalem, it was reported that

“The Nadav Haber Quartet, “Addis Mist”: Haber and his colleagues returned last week from Addis Ababa, where they were invited to play at the city’s annual music festival. This is a big honor that few Western musicians earn, and Haber won it, with great justification, thanks to his wonderful debut album, which

presents a sensitive and profound encounter between Ethiopian music and expressive jazz. Theirs is the best Jerusalem jazz album of 2006, and is also the year’s most exciting Israeli jazz album”<sup>35</sup>.

Far from holding “European” music as superior, it is deemed an honor for an Israeli ensemble to be invited to the Addis Ababa festival, and their CD based on Ethiopian music is acclaimed as the most exiting Israeli jazz album of 2006.

One cannot write about Ethiopian presence on the Israeli cultural scene without mentioning Idan Reichel’s Project<sup>36</sup>. Following his military service, Raichel (born in 1977 to an Israeli family with East-European roots) became a counselor at a boarding school for immigrants and troubled youth. The school was filled with young people whose families had come from Ethiopia. It was here that he became familiar with Ethiopian folk and pop music. Whilst many of people in the school rejected their own cultural traditions in an effort to assimilate into mainstream Israeli society, a small core of teenagers remained fans of Ethiopian music, passing around cassettes of songs from artists like Mahmoud Ahmed, Aster Aweke and Gigi. After hearing this, Raichel started going to Ethiopian bars and clubs in Tel Aviv. After a few years he decided it was time to pursue a project that reflected his musical ideals, and began working on a demo recording in a small studio he set up in the basement of his parent’s home in Kfar Saba. Raichel had long been fascinated with the diversity of Israel and sought to celebrate his appreciation and respect for different cultures through his music. Idan invited over seventy of his friends and colleagues from Israel’s diverse music scene to participate in his recordings. While most of the Israeli labels considered his work too “ethnic” and too outside of the norms of the formulaic Israeli pop scene to have any hope of success, one A&R man, Gadi Gidor at Helicon Records, instantly heard the potential in Idan’s work and quickly signed him on to the roster. The subsequent album was an imme-

<sup>33</sup> Shalev, Ben, “Shirat haKais”. *HaAretz*, December 21 of 2005. In parallel, since 2003, Barihun has been a member of another ensemble, Kuluma. For an enthusiastic review of that group, on the website of *Ma’ariv* (a leading Israeli newspaper) see Tal Ben Bina at: <<http://www.nrg.co.il/online/15/ART1/020/541.html>>.

<sup>34</sup> “How I became an Ethiopian Saxophonist”. *Haaretz*, November 29 of 2006. Available from Internet at: <<http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/794264.html>>.

<sup>35</sup> Ben Shalev. *HaAretz*, January 22 of 2007.

<sup>36</sup> The following description is derived from <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idan\\_Raichel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idan_Raichel)>.

diate hit, selling over 150,000 copies<sup>37</sup>. In other words, the executives working at the “labels” were mistaken: the Israeli public was much more ripe for such multicultural material than they imagined.

Reichel *et.al.* later went on to present this (and additional) material in concerts, receiving highly enthusiastic response from audiences in Israel and abroad. Some of the singers appearing in the concerts were Cabra Casey, who was born in a refugee camp in Sudan during her parent’s journey from Etiopia to Israel. She grew up in a diverse immigrant community in Southern Israel, and met Idan when they were both serving in the Israeli Army; Mira Anwar Awad, an Arab-Israeli singer from Haifa; Sergio Braams, an immigrant to Israel from Suriname; and Yihia Tsubara, a (then) 76-year-old ethnically Yemenite Jew, who performed “*Im Tachpetza*” (If Thou Wisheth) – a *piyyut* by the great 17<sup>th</sup> century poet rabbi Shalom Shabazi. In June 2007, the New York Times’ music section cited Idan Reichel’s international album as one “of the most notable world music CDs released over the last year”, writing that “The Idan Raichel Project was a huge hit in Israel for good reason: it envisions a modern, multicultural nation where

voices of young and old, Ethiopian and Yemenite, are all heard in songs devoted to love and tolerance”<sup>38</sup>.

## CONCLUSIÓN

Cultural hegemony is in continuous flux. In 1450, the Jews in Eretz Israel were Musta`arabim, culturally part of the Arab world, whereas in 1550 they were first and foremost Sepharadim. In 1850, Ashkenazic and European influences were beginning to be felt within the Jewish community of the Holy Land, and in 1950 it seemed that Zionist-Secular-Tzabar culture was firmly and irrevocably in the saddle. Slightly more than half-a-century later, the Israeli cultural scene has changed, and old-new, new-old voices and sounds are increasingly prominent. In my view, major sources for this change were, and are, non-Ashkenazic Jewish cultural traditions and resources– being brought to expression in contemporary Israel by persons from a wide range of Jewish sub-ethnic origins. To prove such a thesis would require several books; it is my hope that this article has provided examples and illustrations that suffice to make the thesis plausible.

<sup>37</sup> Equivalent to about 7,500,000 copies in a country the size of the United States.

<sup>38</sup> Pareles, Jon, “A Big, Wide World of Music”. *The New York Times*, Music, June 29 of 2007.