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## CONTEMPORARY SEPHARDIC HAZZANUT

*by: Rabbi Moshe Tessone*

Sephardic Hazzanut today is broadly defined as the cantorial rite that has emanated from the Judeo Spanish, Judeo Arabic, Judeo Persian, North African, Occidental, and Yemenite and perhaps other geographically and culturally related Jewish communities of the diaspora and Israel. These rites have evolved and been transmitted from generation to generation in so many different varieties of Sephardic and Mizrahi (Middle Eastern) communities and perhaps are too varied to all be mentioned and described in detail in this article. It can be said that these cantorial rites that developed in Sephardic lands, have picked up along the way the musical and syntactical influences of their geographic location demographic counterparts, that is to say they were directly shaped and defined by local and transient societal elements which they were in contact over more than 2 millennia of Jewish migrations throughout the world. In light of this vast amount of variance, it would be extremely telling to attempt to classify and perhaps in doing so, derive an organized and unified structure of sorts within this so varied discipline that is today called "Sephardic Hazzanut".

Abraham Zvi Idelsohn, in his monumental musically based research on Jewish liturgy and cantillation in the early 1900's, traveled throughout the world in an attempt to understand and perhaps identify the origin of Liturgical chant. Indeed, the simple conclusion from some of his work will confirm that the Jewish community of Babylonia (modern day Baghdad, Iraq) was the most significant and unifying point of origin from which ancient Jewish chant began. This musical finding is not surprising, in light of the historical fact that the first major Jewish Diaspora community to exist was the ancient Babylonian Jewish Community.

The thesis of this study would explain that all forms of Jewish liturgical music and cantillation (musical chants of the Torah reading, also known as "te'amim" or "trop") are derived in some form or manner from the original prayer patterns and melodies of the Babylonian Jewish community. The respective forms of "hazzanut" that subsequently developed and evolved throughout the Jewish diaspora, deviated from the original (Babylonian) in time and space and its variance from the original was greater, as the geographical distance grew from the point of origin.

Based on this analysis, it stands to reason that the melodies of the Jews of Yemen or other Middle Eastern countries in close proximity to Babylon throughout the recent millennia was more closely related to the original than the melodies that developed amongst the Jews of western European

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countries such as Germany or Hungary. In a similar vein the Sephardic Hazzanut emanating from the Sephardic community (Spanish Portuguese) of Amsterdam is also quite estranged and perhaps drastically different in some ways, stylistically and musically from traditional Judeo Arabic liturgical chant.

Having understood this basic premise regarding the development of Jewish and more specifically Sephardic prayer music, we can now better understand the framework that would classify the different genres of Sephardic Hazzanut. In modern terminology and from a musical perspective, there are at least 5 broad categories or types of Sephardic Hazzanut variations:

1. Judeo Arabic/ Oriental Hazzanut (includes Middle Eastern countries such as: Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Libya, Iran, Bukhara and other related countries as well)
2. Judeo Spanish Hazzanut (includes Turkey, Greece, Balkan lands)
3. North African Hazzanut (includes Morocco, Algeria)
4. Occidental Western Sephardic Hazzanut (Spanish Portuguese)
5. Yemenite Hazzanut

These respective rites share certain commonalities and differ musically, as well as in syntax, pronunciation, and style. Yet what most clearly defines them into their unique genre identity is not only their unique cultural style or melodic patterns, but rather a precise classifying litmus test of a different sort. They can be defined as independent genres of Sephardic Hazzanut most clearly by virtue of one single clearly identifiable criterion: each genre carries its unique set of Te'amim, which operates musically within a specific musical mode or "maqam".

The only exception to this precise classifying criterion is the fact the same or very similar set of te'amim are shared by the Judeo Arabic and Judeo Spanish communities. In spite of the shared set of te'amim, these 2 variations of hazzanut are classified herein separately because each genre of these two genres of hazzanut reflect significant stylistic and cultural liturgical and musical variations which are presumed to have evolved due to demographic and geographic differences.

It is important to note that there are so many areas of musical and liturgical commonality between the Judeo Spanish and Judeo Arabic rites, but delineating these fine points are beyond the scope of this essay. In this connection it is also noteworthy to mention that the "maqam" system employed by Judeo Spanish and Judeo Arabic modes are very similar

from a musical and structural perspective and serve as a defining unifying factor. (The “maqam” system of Sephardic Hazzanut is broadly defined as the musical mode or scale system employed by various forms of Sephardic Hazzanut and represent musical patterns that are indigenous to the classical and folk music of various Oriental lands from which Middle Eastern Jewry emanated).

In recent decades, modern Sephardic hazzanut has adopted a “hybrid variety” or cantorial rite commonly known as: “Nusah Sephardi Yerushalayim” or “Nusah Yerushalmi-Halabi”. Literally these mentioned titles or phrases mean; “Sephardic Jerusalemite cantorial rite” or “Jerusalemite –Allepian cantorial rite”. The reason why the word “Halabi” or Allepian has become synonymous in this reference is primarily because the community of Aleppo has done so much to further the preservation and codification of Sephardic cantorial traditions, some scholars might argue, perhaps more so than any other oriental community in our day. Much to their credit, the community of Aleppo, in the recent century, has really spearheaded the growth and proliferation of Judeo Arabic liturgy (with Judeo Spanish influences) and have become the torch bearers of the most highly developed genre of Oriental hazzanut to date.

The “Nusah Sephardi Yerushalayim” or “Nusah Yerushalmi-Halabi” genre has become the unifying factor among most contemporary Sephardic populations all over the world, and is in large part adherent to the Judeo Arabic/Oriental model of prayer, with influences and contributions from the other genres in particular borrowing much from the Judeo Spanish and some from the North African/Moroccan rites as well. This modern mode of hazzanut has served to also unify Sephardic groups most particularly in Israel, where today the majority of the population is overwhelmingly Sephardic/Mizrahi.

One of the hallmark traits of Sephardic communities is maintaining the traditions in a most accurate and original way. This mantra is known in Halakhic terminology as “*minhag avotenu b'yadenu*” literally meaning “our forefather’s customs are in our hands”. The diversity among the different forms of Sephardic hazzanut that has been preserved over the recent millennia most certainly proves this halakhic dictate to be alive and current as manifest in the various liturgical rites discussed herein, and is an attribute that should be emulated and maintained, but should be preserved in a way that only binds and unites the Jewish people and society as a whole.

Contemporary Sephardic hazzanut and specifically “Nusah Sephardi Yerushalayim” is serving to preserve and unite Sephardic hazzanut in a modern world in a most meaningful way, and promises to become the foremost genre as the next page of Sephardic liturgical history unfolds before our very eyes. In this way, perhaps we may be brought back (perhaps in our days), to a uniting and original liturgical rite that preceded even the

Babylonian exile, and is reminiscent of the prayers of the Temple era. In doing so we may very well actualize the long standing inter-generational Jewish yearning and dream to return to earlier days of prayer service and worship, as reflected in the words of the prophet Jeremiah: “...*hashivenu Hashem elekha, V'nashuva, hadesh yamenu ke'kedem*” “Bring us back to you – Oh God, and we shall return, renew our days as they were in earlier times.”

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