

## C.V.7.1. Music of Israel: Its Ethnic and Classical Modes

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The music of the Israeli Jews (this article does not address the substantial non-Jewish ethnic and religious minorities within the State of Israel) is a performative cultural field in which different perceptions of “Israeliness” are displayed and compete with each other. This article addresses the Songs of the Land of Israel, the primary musical genre of “classic Israeliness,” by setting it in its historical, social and cultural context.

### The roots of the State of Israel’s musical culture

The ideological roots of the State of Israel and its musical culture are found in the latent religious longing for the return to Zion from exile, the impact of the Enlightenment on European Jews since the second half of the 18th century, and the subsequent adoption by circles of Jewish intellectuals in the 19th-century of the concept of “nation state” as a solution to the “Jewish problem” raised by modern anti-Semitism. At the heart of this ideology was the development of a secular national identity that will displace religious observance as the sole basis for Jewish identity while maintaining its basic racial underpinnings. The hero of the Zionist enterprise was a “new Hebrew person” stripped of the physical and cultural stereotypes that hunted the upper middle-class European Jewish intelligentsia of the late nineteenth century and endowed with a renewed cultural capital rooted in Biblical times and reshaped according to late Romantic and Orientalistic conceptions of authenticity. Music was one of the primary fields of expression to cultivate and display such new concepts of being Jewish in a national framework.

From the last two decades of the nineteenth century and until 1948, the Jewish colonization of Palestine was characterized by waves of immigrants (aliyot in Hebrew). The earliest aliyot (ca. 1900-1935) were of Eastern European (Ashkenazi) Jews (mainly from Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Rumania and Hungary) and later on from Germany. Small contingents of Sephardic and Oriental Jews from Islamic countries (Yemen, Persia, Bukhara, Morocco) and from Turkey, Greece and Bulgaria arrived during the same period.

Zionism aroused the opposition of the Arab population of Palestine which developed since the 1920s into a national conflict between Jews and Arabs. The UN decision of November 29, 1947 on the partition of Palestine into two states, one Jewish and one Arab, was not accepted by the Arab states. This rejection launched a war known in Israel as the War of Independence. The State of Israel was declared in May 14, 1948. In the following years, major waves of immigration arrived from Islamic countries (Iraq, Iran, Syria, Yemen, North Africa) in the 1950s and from the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and Ethiopia since the 1960s until the present.

The continuous stream of Jewish immigration waves and the Arab-Israeli conflict are two keys to the understanding of the present-day Israeli society and its musical culture. A native Jewish population, the Israelis, emerged out of the Eastern European Jews who laid down the basis for the state. A major factor in the formation of this new culture was the successful renaissance of Hebrew language as a functional modern language and as a vehicle symbolically linking modern Israelis to Biblical times. The “Israeli”, conceived as a “new” Jew or *tzabar* (lit. a type of cactus, as the native Israelis were metaphorically depicted by their immigrant parents), was secular and a native speaker of modern Hebrew, a constructed antithesis to the “diasporic” Jew.

The Zionist political establishment consisting of Jews from Eastern Europe dominated the cultural infrastructure of the emerging state. They attempted to homogenize the incoming flux of immigrants by introducing them, via the educational system, to the core values of secular Zionism. The chief concept used for this process was *mizug galuyot* (“ingathering of the exiles”, the Israel version of the “melting pot”).

The new society consisted of different types of settlements each having a distinctive musical life. Modern urban centers (particularly Tel Aviv), agricultural settlements (*moshav*) and collective farms (*kibbutz*), and peripheral “development towns” (*‘ayyarot pituah*) developed distinctive musical repertoires and activities such as satirical cabarets, dancing halls, and a network of educational and performing institutions of art music in the large cities, communal folk singing and small orchestras for communal purposes in the agricultural settlements, and traditional music in developmental towns whose population consisted mostly of immigrants from Islamic countries.

The cultural hegemony of the Zionist establishment was challenged from the early 1970s on (if not before) when issues such as ethnic diversity and tension, socio-economic gaps and the role of religion in the state became factors of contention between the different strata of the Israeli society. The resistance to traditional “Israeliness” led to a multi-cultural society. Perceptions of belonging are defined today in Israel by ethnic or national origins (particularly among the immigrants from the former Soviet Union), the degree of allegiance to religious observance and socio-economic status rather than to the traditional ethos and symbols of classical Zionism.

The creation of a New Hebrew culture included the invention of a cultural capital (a new language, new songs, a new literature and theater, a new mythology, etc.) and the establishment of social networks and institutions which generate, articulate, support, promote and/or perform this capital. In spite of the efforts to separate “Israeli” culture from past Jewish bonds, the relations between the new culture and the “diasporic” Jewish legacy and psyche remain complex until the present.

In this context we must stress that each community of the Jewish diaspora that immigrated to Israel transplanted to the new country its musical culture. A clear line between the music of European (Ashkenazi) and non-European Jews must be drawn here. Since the founders of Israeli culture were Ashkenazi, there is a commonsense identification of mainstream Israeli music with European secular music (in its art and popular forms). In Israel, therefore, “ethnic” music, the subject of the next paragraphs, means the music of the Jews from Islamic countries usually called “Oriental” (*mizrahi*), and lately Ethiopia.

A distinction has to be made between urban and rural Jewish communities from Islamic countries. Jews from large cities (e.g. Teheran, Baghdad, Aleppo, Istanbul, Tunis, Marrakech), were versatile in the styles of the pan-Islamic art music traditions such as the Persian dastgah, the Azeri mugham, the Iraqi maqam, the Turkish makam or the Andalusian ala from the Maghreb. Jews from small villages in the Atlas Mountains, the Eastern and Northern Caucasus, Kurdistan or Yemen, brought with them more rural music traditions.

### Different musical repertoires, crossovers

The fate of the different musical repertoires within one community differed. Undoubtedly, the main context for the continuity of Jewish ethnic music traditions in Israel is the synagogue. The synagogue was the main center for communal affairs in the diaspora. In Israel it became a house of prayer exclusively whose “identity” derives from the ethnic origin of the majority of the congregants or from the musical style imposed by its leaders. This identity can be clear or vague, depending on the location of the synagogue and the profile of its patrons. There is however an ongoing process of homogenization in synagogue music, whereas dominant styles prevail over local traditions. The “Sephardi-Jerusalemite” style, based on the application of the Syrian-Egyptian maqam system to the Jewish liturgy, dominates now most synagogues of “Oriental” Jews in Israel. Still, some local styles can be heard in synagogues of Yemenite and North African Jews. A similar process occurred in the synagogues of the Ashkenazi “national-religious” sector (Zionist orthodox Jews) which developed a style known as nussah Eretz Yisrael (“the tradition of the Land of Israel”).

Songs associated with life cycle events, particularly weddings, changed dramatically, although some traditional songs may have survived within new contexts next to adopted repertoires. Yemenite Jews were able to preserve traditional wedding repertoires that are mixed with modern “Oriental” Israeli and “Hasidic” popular songs. Other ethnic communities, which were dispersed throughout Israel, were unable to maintain their traditional repertoires and entire repertoires, particularly women songs in Jewish vernacular dialects such as Judeo-Spanish and Judeo-Arabic, disappeared or were utterly transformed into styles of popular music appealing to large audiences.

Another type of “ethnic” music is instrumental music. Jews from the Islamic world excelled in the performance of instrumental genres that pervaded in cafes and in private parties during the first years of immigration (1950s and 1960s). Iraqi Jewish musicians, who were outstanding performers in their country of origin, were engaged upon their immigration in the early 1950s by the “Oriental Music” orchestra of the Israel Broadcasting Authority. In more recent years, political and cultural interests of Moroccan Jews, the largest “ethnic” community in Israel, joined forces to promote the foundation of an Israeli Andalusian Orchestra. This organization performs the traditional art music from Morocco in the format of a symphony orchestra employing Soviet Jewish immigrant musicians. The instrumental music of Ashkenazi Jews, klezmer music, remained functional in Israel too, particularly in the weddings of the religious (national-religious and non-Zionist orthodox) sectors. A local klezmer tradition developed which can be distinguished from its Eastern European and American counterparts.

The perpetuation of the ethnic musical traditions and the processes of change that they underwent in the new context were bound to a complex set of dynamic social and cultural variables. The meeting of, and interaction between, different Jewish ethnic communities in Israel created an unprecedented situation in Jewish musical culture in which one finds crossovers between different Jewish ethnic styles, the standardization of ethnicity (e.g. the perception of a single Moroccan Jewish music which obliterates the characteristics of local communities in Morocco), and the blurring of boundaries between traditional and popular music. Yet, the early musical ideology of Zionism did not find its main source of inspiration in the ethnic traditions of the Islamic Jewish communities but rather on a combination of Eastern European Jewish elements and a sheaf of imaginary Orientalist topics. This new, invented repertoire is the object of the following paragraphs.

### The new Hebrew “folk” song (Shire Eretz Israel)

The idea that a new national Hebrew culture must be musically expressed through a new Hebrew “folk” song (a musically performed poem) was a major factor in shaping the soundscape of the Jewish community in Palestine and later on, Israel. *Eretz Israel* (The Land of Israel) connotes in modern geo-political terms the area of Zionist settlement during the British Mandate in Palestine. It is a concept with strong national, emotional and at the same time nostalgic, overtones for Zionist Jews. *Shire Eretz Israel* (Songs of the Land of Israel – SLI) became the common label for this new national and secular song repertoire associated with Zionism.

Songs from diverse sources composed or conceived from ca. 1880 onwards constitute SLI: traditional Jewish (mostly Yiddish) songs translated into Hebrew or adapted to new Hebrew texts, Hebrew translations of non-Jewish Eastern European songs (mostly Russian), adaptations of Hebrew song texts to Hassidic tunes or to Palestinian Arabic tunes, originally composed folksongs (mainly conceived under the ideology of the “negation of the Diaspora”), Hebrew theater and cabaret songs of the 1930s and 1940s, youth movement songs, songs of the army entertaining troupes from the 1950s to the 1970s (on the latter see below), etc. Drawing from such a variegated reservoir it is clear that SLI is an elusive concept and its boundaries are set by diverse and clashing imaginary perceptions and discourses of modern Israeliness.

Within the ecology of contemporary Israeli popular music, the aggregate of songs called SLI occupies a place of privilege as the “authentic” genre. Its performance in celebratory state ceremonies is just one indication of its status within the Israeli Jewish society. Encouraged and supported by state agencies, such as the General Labor Union (Histadrut), the Jewish National Fund, teachers of the public educational system, and the state-controlled mass media, the perpetuation of this repertoire owes its special status also to public sing-alongs called *shirah be-tzibbur* (lit. “singing in public”), a favorite Israeli pastime deeply embedded in the collective ethos of Zionism. Another factor strengthening SLI as a quintessential Israeli cultural practice is its close relation to Israeli “folk” dances, another socializing national pastime.

Unremitting revivals of SLI by pop/rock and *mizrahi* performers since the 1970s and the emergence of a widespread nostalgia industry (radio and TV programs and series,

printing of songsters and CDs) focusing on the early days of the State of Israel, the period associated by most Israelis with SLI, pinned down its unique status within the music industry. Academic and amateur research and, more recently, Internet resources further strengthened the ontology of SLI as the genuine Israeli song.

As a constantly evolving repertoire created over a span of a century by composers (anonymous or identifiable) of diverse backgrounds, SLI shows a wide stylistic diversity that challenges essentialist definitions. Some have opted to demarcate the genre by its social contexts of performance and transmission, i.e. *shirah be-tzibbur*, broadcasts in Independence and Memorial days, schools' ceremonies, days of mourning, such as after major terrorist attacks or, more recently, in the days following the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (1995) as well as on yearly memorials of this tragic event. Others stressed the literary contents of the songs as the parameter defining the genre. What distinguish SLI poetry are not formal or poetical aspects of the songs, but rather their themes: emphasis on the Land of Israel, its landscapes, the working of it and its defense. In many songs from the earlier periods, the narrator is the first person plural, reflecting the collectivist ethos of the Jewish community in Palestine, rather than the concerns of the individual self. Turning from "we" to "I" is one marker of the transformation of SLI from folk to popular song in the 1940s. Eventually SLI addressed intimate subjects from the perspective of the narrating self, such as the private loss for the fallen in war or longing for the beloved. As a literary genre SLI is ambiguously located between the "trivial" (*pizmon*, lit. "song with refrain") and the "art" song. The social source of this ambiguity is found in the identity and status of the authors who contributed to the repertoire. Many songs were written by poets who also wrote "high" poetry, such as the influential Natan Alterman (1910-1970), Yaacov Orland (1914-2002) and Natan Yonatan (1923-). Patterns and contents of canonic modern Hebrew poetry influenced authors who specialized only on *pizmon*, such as Yehiel Mohar (1921-1969), Haim Heffer (1925-), Dan Almagor (1939-) Yoram Tehar-Lev (1938-), Ehud Manor (1941-2005) and Dudu Barak (1948-).

The period between the 1920s and early 1960s is considered as the "golden age" of SLI, songs, in which amateur and professional composers, immigrants (mostly from Russia) and Israeli-born, forged the core repertoire. *Kibbutz* composers, most notably David Zehavi (1910-1975), Matitياهو Shelem (Weiner) (1904-1975), Yehudah Sharet (Shertok) (1901-1979); and city composers, such as Joel Engel (1868-1927), Yedidiah Admon (Gorochov, 1894-1985), Nachum Nardi (1901-1977), Mordechai Ze'ira (1905-1968), Daniel Sambursky (1909-1975) and Emanuel Amiran (Pougatchov, 1909-1993) are among the most influential. To this period also belong songs written for satirical cabarets and reviews in Tel-Aviv from the 1930s on. The most prolific and lasting composer of this genre was Moshe Vilensky (1910-1997). Another source of songs from this period is the Zionist youth movements. Later on, two important and unique layers were added: the songs from the War of Independence (1947-9), many of which are of Russian origin and the songs of the *lehaqot tzvayiot* (army entertainment ensembles) of the 1950s and 1960s. Remarkable for their contribution to this later and unique Israeli context of popular music creativity were established civilian composers such as Vilensky and Sasha (Alexander) Argov (1914-1995). Latter accretions to SLI are the songs by Israeli-born and/or educated composers composed for the army ensembles and the civilian stages since the mid-1950s, such as Emmanuel Zamir (1925-

1962), Naomi Shemer (1930-2004), Nahum Heiman (1934-), Nurit Hirsh (1942-) and Yair Rosenblum (1944-1996). Many of these new SLI songs were originally written for the Israel Song Festival, a mechanism of the Israel Broadcasting Authority dedicated since 1960 to revitalize the repertoire of original Hebrew songs under the “threat” of the emerging local rock scene. Eventually soft MOR ballads and even *mizrahi* songs (see below) also entered the canon of SLI from the 1980s onwards through performances in sing-alongs and state events and their inclusion in canonizing printed and recorded anthologies appearing under the SLI banner.

A major factor in distinguishing SLI as a genre is its performers on the stage. The *havurot hazemer* (“singing ensembles”) were a major agent in the propagation of SLI. *Havurot hazemer* sprang in the late 1950s from various processes: the decline of the amateur choirs of *kibbutzim* and regional councils; the professionalization of choral singing, a process that left song enthusiasts outside the circle of performance, the emergence and popularity of the Israeli Army troupes, and the impact of foreign models as the French ensemble *Les compagnons de la chanson* that was popular in Israel in the late 1950s. Once a feature of the musical life in the agricultural settlements, by the early 1960s the *havurot hazemer* developed from city clubs where SLI songs were performed on a voluntary, extemporaneous and entertaining context by an amateur public guided by a professional leader with the support of public institutions, such as city councils and labor unions. *Havurot hazemer* are groups of amateur singers (ranging in its number of members from 8 to 35) who meet regularly to learn and perform these songs accompanied by instruments (most commonly accordion, piano, guitar or synthesizer, and Arabic drum; sometimes backup tapes are used) under the leadership of a conductor. The arrangements are rather simple, usually for two with assiduous use of call and response dialogues between the men and the women sections. Several outstanding SLI composers such as Effi Netzer (1932-) and Gil Aldema (1928-) were leaders of *havurot zemer* and disseminated their new songs via these ensembles of which the most successful and lasting one is Gevatron from kibbutz Geva’ in the Jezreel Valley. What boosted this ensemble were its commercial recordings and its appearances in the radio and after 1969 in the new Israeli TV. Gevatron established the performance parameters and repertoire of *havurot hazemer*, making use of studio techniques to improve the sound quality, and appearing with specially designed, uniform attires in “Israeli” fashion style (casted by Israeli folk dance dress designers).

Another form of diffusion of SLI was the *shironim*, printed songsters, a phenomenon dating back to the earliest period of the Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel. During this formative period, the printing of folksongs was mostly in the hands of agencies of the establishment, such as the General Workers’ Union and the Jewish National Fund. Social networks that demanded new Hebrew songs, such as the educational system, the youth movements and the *kibbutzim* were intricately related to these state institutions. Since the 1950s the private sector entered the business of printing songs for sing-alongs (some private printing of songs existed prior to the State period), such as the comprehensive anthology *1000 zemer ve-,od zemer* (‘1000 songs and another song’, ed. by Telma Eliagon and Rafi Pesakhson, 6 vols., 1981-1994). Sometimes songsters (accompanied by cassettes or CDs) were produced by renowned leaders of sing-alongs, such as *Lashir im Efi Netzer* (‘To sing with Efi Netzer’, 3 vols., 1983-1991).

The role of the media, especially the radio, in the revival of SLI as popular music can be traced back to 1959 when the musical reviews *Tel Aviv ha-qtanah* ('Little Tel Aviv') and *Hayo hayu zmanim* ('Once upon a time') were staged. Another symptom of this revitalization was the release of the LP *Hayu leylot* ('There were nights', 1961) by the popular singer Esther Ofarim, whose esthetics recall the American folk song revival. Another major turning point was a series of LP's issued over the 1970's by pop singer Arik Einstein. Called *Eretz Israel ha-yeshanah ve-ha-tovah* ('Good Old Land of Israel', 4 vols., 1973, 1976, 1977, 1980), the series presented a selection of SLI arranged by young rock and jazz oriented musicians such as Shem-Tov Levi, Avner Kener and Yoni Rechter. By the early 1970s, Einstein was already the central figure in Israeli rock and his turn to the "old" SLI repertoire had major significance.

One can interpret the wave of recordings of old SLI songs by pop artists and the writing of new ones during the 1970's as an aftershock following the Yom Kippur War (October 1973), a traumatic national drama that shattered Israeli society's self-confidence. Two memorable late contributions to the SLI canon from this period came from laureate songwriter Naomi Shemer: *Lu yehi*, recorded by the Ha-gashash ha-hiver ('Pale tracker') trio (1973) and *Al kol ele* ('For all of this') recorded by Yossi Banai (1980). The status that *Lu yehi* acquired as a 'secular prayer' after its release can be extended to other SLI songs. Moreover, SLI sing-alongs acquired the transformative power pertinent to rituals and thus they were conceptualized (by Shemer too) as a secular Israeli response to the community rituals of traditional Judaism. The turn to SLI might thus be interpreted as a reflection of yearnings for earlier periods of national strength and unity, and as a means of healing from the trauma of war.

A more general process accounts for the regeneration of SLI from the 1980s on, beyond their original functions as folk, educational, theatrical or youth movement songs: the performance of nostalgia. The opening of new sing-along clubs in major cities, the outburst in the activities of *havurot zemer*, sing-alongs in Israeli communities living abroad, non-academic documentary enterprises and the Internet are the locations for such performances. An Internet site (founded 2008) dedicated to SLI ([www.zemereshet.co.il](http://www.zemereshet.co.il)) functions as a hub for documentary purposes while also promotes sing-alongs and encounters dedicated to this repertoire. The Association for the Hebrew Song Heritage (established in 2002), a non-profit organization founded by SLI composer Nachum Heiman, is dedicated to the release of CD albums of historical recordings; the name of its website ([www.nostalgia.org.il](http://www.nostalgia.org.il)) speaks for itself.

## Literatur

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