

Musical Notes: Melismatic Morocco by Adam Davis

Whether you grew up with Judaism or were introduced to it later in life, it is easy to overlook its remarkable diversity. Its multi-faceted beliefs, practices and observance vary by denomination, congregation and personal practice. This variety gets even more interesting when we add culture into the mix.

Jewish culture is not monolithic but a global network of dozens of distinct cultures. Central Asian Bukharians, Breslover Hasidim and the now Brooklyn-based Syrians share the same Torah, yet each has their own linguistics, customs, costumes and cuisines. Anyone who has visited the Jerusalem Shuk has seen some of this diversity first-hand. The rest of us can experience it through online articles, videos on youtube or when it finds its way to Sukkat Shalom for special events.

When it comes to this last way to experience unique Jewish cultures, I am of course most interested in the musical components of this diversity. I love my own Eastern European background but have always been drawn to the colorful musical contributions of the Sephardim. These are the Jewish communities who originated on the Iberian peninsula (Sepharad is Hebrew word for Spain). Though sometimes is used as a catch-all term for non-European Jewish ethnicities, Jews from Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, each have their own separate identity.

Some years ago I befriended a few Sephardim from Egypt, Yemen and most notably, Morocco. I attended services at their Sephardic congregation, sang with them around their Shabbat tables and learned about their unique modes of prayer. These melodies were as exotic as the foods that accompanied them.

While their liturgy is similar to ours, the melodies are rooted in the middle-eastern musical system known as Makam. Used throughout the Arab, Turkish and Persian spheres of influence, it is shared by the Jews, Moslems and Christians faiths alike. The many different Makam modes each reflect different times of the day, much like the Indian Raga system (they are indeed connected).

Like European Jews, Sephardim chant the Torah using tropes or Taamei Mikra to flavor the reading of our sacred text. Their Shabbat prayers themselves, however, are sung following a single Makam for that week based on a tradition dictated by the mood or tone of the Torah reading itself. It makes for a varied and fascinating musical service experience.

In the last decade, there has been renewed interest and research of the many melodies for the liturgical poems, known as Beqashot and Piyutim, from around the world. Several initiatives now exist to preserve, document and hand down these songs to new generations living in communities far removed from their countries of origin, like those of Morocco.

We're fortunate to live in a time when such access is available, and I've been to tap into this treasure trove of melodies. Many of them reflect the rich Moroccan heritage that cross pollinated with Spanish, North African and Berber influences. I am so excited to be sharing this music, backed by Chicago's most exciting world music ensemble, Lamajamal. They will accompany me as I sing the melodies using traditional instruments like Oud (lute), Qanun (zither), Riq (tambourine), Darbouka (drum) and Ney (flute).

Together we'll journey to Fez, Casablanca, Tangier, Essouiera, Rabat and the Atlas mountains, all within the comfort of our own sanctuary at Sukkat Shalom. I hope you'll join us for this amazing evening of music, as well the tasty oneg that follows at our Moroccan-themed Shabbat, Friday, February 28th at

7:30pm.