My Arabic is Mute & Not to be afraid to say the word nostalgia

Almog Behar – Ills.: Joseph Sassoon Semah

My Arabic is Mute

Strangled in the throat
Cursing itself
Without uttering a word
Sleeping in the suffocating air
Of the shelters of my soul
Hiding
From family members
Behind the shutters of the Hebrew.
And my Hebrew erupts
Running around between rooms
And the neighbors' porches
Sounding her voice in public
Prophesizing the coming of God
And bulldozers
and then she settles in the living room
Thinking herself
Openly on the edge of her skin
Hidden between the pages of her flesh
one moment naked and the next dressed
She almost makes herself disappear
In the armchair
Asking for her heart's forgiveness.
My Arabic is scared

quitely impersonates Hebrew
Whispering to friends
With every knock on her gates:
"Ahalan, ahalan, welcome".
And in front of every passing policeman
And she pulls out her ID card
for every cop on the street
pointing out the protective clause:
"Ana min al-yahud, ana min al-yahud,
I'm a Jew, I'm a Jew".
And my Hebrew is deaf

Sometimes so very deaf.

Not to be afraid to say the word nostalgia

Not to be afraid to say
The word nostalgia
Not to be afraid
To feel longing
Not to be afraid to say
I have a past
Placed in a box
Of locked-up memory
Not to be afraid
To buy myself some keys
To press my eyes to keyholes
Until it all opens
Until I can steal a glance
Into me
Not to be afraid to say
I’m a forgetful man
But I have a memory
That wouldn’t forget me.

Translated by Dimi Reider

Kunstmuseum Den Haag – Joseph Sassoon Semah – 31 oktober 2020 t/m 21 maart 2021

Foto: Ilya Rabinoch

Joseph Sassoon Semah – *On Friendship…* 31 October 2020 – 19 September 2021

Exile, hospitality and friendship are key themes in the work of Joseph Sassoon Semah (b. 1948, Baghdad). In 1950 he and his parents were forced to leave Iraq to Israel, and Joseph eventually arrived in Amsterdam in 1981, via London, Berlin and Paris. *On Friendship…* will for the first time bring together 36 architectural models of houses, a synagogue, schools and cultural buildings made by Sassoon Semah that refer to the liberal Jewish culture of his Babylonian ancestors – a culture which, he says, barely exists except in memory now.

86 drawings and wall-mounted objects refer to the old culture and to exile. These works are part of his research project *On Friendship / (Collateral Damage) III – The Third GaLUT: Baghdad, Jerusalem, Amsterdam*. Referring to his own GaLUT (Hebrew for exile), these are the three cities with a reputation for tolerance where Sassoon Semah was made to feel welcome. Now he himself will act as host and friend, sharing his original culture. By way of a personal welcome, the triptych *Joseph / YOSeF / Yusuf* will be displayed beside one of the entrances to the exhibition in Kunstmuseum Den Haag's Projects Gallery. The triptych is a kind of self-portrait featuring the artist's name in Dutch, Hebrew and Arabic, along with a godwit (the national bird of the Netherlands), a hoopoe (the national bird of Israel) and a chukar partridge (the national bird of Iraq).

The work of Sassoon Semah allows plenty of scope for critical reflection on identity, history and tradition, and is part of the artist's long exploration of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity as sources of western art and

culture, and of politics. The aspirations of his grandfather, the Chief Rabbi of Baghdad, to promote dialogue between different religions and world views, resonates in everything he makes. One of the display cases will for example contain the prayer shawl (Tallit) that belonged to his grandfather, who refused to leave Baghdad during the first forced deportation, probably because to him Baghdad was already a place of exile, but above all because Iraq was his homeland. One of the wooden architectural models, a bronze version of which with rams' horns will also be shown, is based on his synagogue, the Meir Taweig synagogue in Baghdad, which still exists but is no longer in use.

Lost paradise
Drawings of human skulls and the skulls of animals native to Iraq – 86 of them, the age at which Sassoon Semah's grandfather died—also symbolise the lost paradise: the straight lines symbolising the street plan of the destroyed Jewish quarter, the yarn referring to measuring and territory, the sewing itself to textile as a carrier of information. A typewriter with Hebrew script and sand from Jerusalem on a steel Tefillin refer to the second place of exile, that of Sassoon Semah's father, a leading lawyer in Israel. Joseph has reworked the book in the display case, the Talmud Bavli Tractate Pesachiem YaKNeHa'Z. His additions to the typography refer to his concept of architecture in exile. The abstract forms reference Mondrian, De Stijl and other abstract art of the West, the third place of exile. And so, in a metaphorical sense, *On Friendship…* is an ode to a lost culture, and at the same time an invitation to a dialogue about these different cultures.

Publication
New English-language publication *'Joseph Sassoon Semah: On Friendship / (Collateral Damage) III – The Third GaLUT: Baghdad, Jerusalem, Amsterdam'* – published at the end of October, available in the museum shop. 264 pages, ISBN 978 90 361 0601 65, design and layout by Geert Schriever (artlifelove) Amsterdam, edited by: Linda Bouws and Joseph Sassoon Semah, € 39.95.

Nederlands:
Centrale thema's in het werk van Joseph Sassoon Semah (1948, Bagdad) zijn ballingschap en gastvrijheid. Zelf wordt hij in 1950 samen met zijn ouders gedwongen te vertrekken uit Irak naar Israël en komt via Londen, Parijs en Berlijn in Amsterdam terecht. In de tentoonstelling brengt hij onder meer 36 architecturale modellen bijeen van huizen, een synagoog, school- en cultuurgebouwen die refereren aan de joods-liberale cultuur van zijn

Babylonische voorouders, een cultuur die volgens hem buiten de herinnering amper nog bestaat.

Het werk van Sassoon Semah laat volop ruimte voor kritische reflectie op identiteit, geschiedenis en traditie, en maakt deel uit van een langdurig onderzoek van de kunstenaar naar de relatie tussen het jodendom en het christendom als bronnen van de westerse kunst- en cultuurgeschiedenis. In alles resoneert het streven van zijn grootvader, de opperrabbijn van Bagdad, om de dialoog te bevorderen tussen verschillende religies en wereldbeelden.

Zie: https://www.kunstmuseum.nl/nl/tentoonstellingen/joseph-sassoon-semah

Zie ook: https://vimeo.com/484103296/1f2e571ca3

The Art Of Cooking – Shakshuka

Many dishes are unavoidable in the Middle East, and yet every country has its own version.
One of those dishes is *Shakshuka*!
A savory tomato sauce with an egg cooked on top of it, and it tastes great at any moment of the day.

Because first of all, it is such an old dish which can be found all over North Africa and the Middle East, and secondly, there are so many different ways to make it.
I like to add eggplant, simply because I love it, and yet at the same time, the eggplant helps to make the Shakshuka a bit more savory.
But please feel free to try out different ingredients/toppings and spices when you are making your own Shakshuka!

Ingredients:
1 Eggplant

Eggs
Large onion
Garlic
1 Cayenne pepper
1 Red paprika
2 Canned diced tomatoes
Olive oil (for cooking)
Salt
Pepper
Paprika powder
Cumin powder
Turmeric Powder
Feta cheese or any good alternative white cheese for topping
Fresh parsley

Cooking Shakshuka:
First of all begin with dicing of the eggplant into small chunks, then cook them with oil in a deep skillet until golden brown.
Meanwhile, dice the onion/garlic/paprika and cayenne pepper (remove the seeds if you do not like it too spicy).
When the eggplant is soft and cooked through – make sure there is enough oil in the skillet – add the onions and cook the mixture until translucent, at this moment you can add the garlic, the paprika, and the cayenne.
By now you can add the seasoning, a pinch of salt and pepper, a teaspoon of paprika, a teaspoon of turmeric, and cumin (you can add a pinch of dried chili or ground cayenne pepper if you like it extra spicy!).
When all the seasoning is mixed well with the vegetables add the canned diced tomatoes and let it simmer for 15 minutes. You can add a splash of water when the mixture becomes too dry.
By this time when the tomato mixture is cooking, the sauce becomes thicker; at this moment one should make holes in the sauce for the eggs.

An easy way to place the egg into the Shakshuka is by cracking the egg into a bowl first.
So, when all the eggs are on top of the sauce put a lid on, let it simmers for a couple of minutes until the eggs are cooked to your liking.
Please note, when you turn off the fire let the eggs cook a bit longer in the hot

tomato sauce before served.
Garnish with fresh parsley, crumbled feta cheese, and a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil.
Eat with any type of bread, even with toasted bread, that is as long as you can soak up all that sauce!

Steve Acre – On Fire In Baghdad. An Eyewitness Account Of The Destruction Of An Ancient Jewish Community

Sabih Ezra Akerib also known as Steven Acre

Farhud—violent dispossession—an Arabicized Kurdis word that was seared into Iraqi Jewish consciousness on June 1 and 2, 1941. As the Baghdadi Jewish communities burned, a proud Jewish existence that had spanned 2,600 years was abruptly incinerated.

As a nine-year-old, I, Sabih Ezra Akerib, who witnessed the Farhud, certainly had no understanding of the monumental consequences of what I was seeing. Nevertheless, I realized that somehow the incomprehensible made sense. I was born in Iraq, the only home I knew. I was proud to be a Jew, but knew full well that I was different, and this difference was irreconcilable for those around me.

That year, June 1 and 2 fell on *Shavuot*—the day the Torah was given to our ancestors and the day Bnei Yisrael became a nation. The irony of these two historical events being intertwined is not lost on me.
Shavuot signified a birth while the Farhud symbolized a death—a death of illusion and a death of identity.
The Jews, who had felt so secure, were displaced once again. We had been warned trouble was brewing. Days earlier, my 20-year-old brother, Edmund, who worked for British intelligence in Mosul, had come home to warn my mother, Chafika Akerib, to be careful. Rumors abounded that danger was coming. Shortly after that, the red hamsa (palm print) appeared on our front door—a bloody designation marking our home. But for what purpose?
Shavuot morning was eerily normal.

My father Ezra had died three years earlier, leaving my mother a widow with nine children. I had no father to take me to synagogue; therefore, I stayed home with my mother, who was preparing the Shavuot meal. The rising voices from the outside were at first slow to come through our windows. However, in the blaze of the afternoon sun, they suddenly erupted.

Voices—violent and vile. My mother gathered me, my five sisters and youngest brother into the living room, where we huddled together. Her voice was calming. The minutes passed by excruciatingly slowly. But I was a child, curious and impatient. I took advantage of my mother's brief absence and ran upstairs, onto the roof.

At the entrance to the open courtyard at the center of our home stood a 15 foot date palm. I would often climb that tree.
When there was not enough food to eat, those dates would sustain us. I expressed gratitude for that tree daily. I now climbed that tree and wrapped myself within its branches, staring down at the scene unfolding below. What I saw defied imagination.

On the narrow dirt road, 400 to 500 Muslims carrying machetes, axes, daggers, and guns had gathered. Their cries—*Iktul al Yahud*, Slaughter the Jews—rang out as bullets were blasted into the air. The shrieks emanating from Jewish homes were chilling. I hung on, glued to the branches. I could hear my mother's frantic cries: *"Weinak! Weinak!"* (Where are you?)
But I could not answer, terrified of calling attention to myself.

The complete story (PDF-format): https://www.mikecohen.ca/files/steve-acre-farhud-article.pdf

Joseph Sassoon Semah – Working drawing, architectural model mass grave ('Farhud', Baghdad, June 1-2 1941). 30 x 21 cm. Paper, blue ink, pencil

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Riches To Rags To Virtual Riches:

The Journey Of Jewish Arab Singers

Shoshana Gabay. Ills. Joseph Sassoon Semah

Some of the most revered musicians from the Arab world moved to Israel in the 1950s and 60s, where they became manual laborers and their art was lost within a generation. Now, with the advent of YouTube, their masterpieces are getting a new lease on life and new generations of Arab youth have come to appreciate their genius. Part one of a musical journey beginning in Israel's Mizrahi neighborhoods of the 1950s and leading up to the Palestinian singer Mohammed Assaf.

The birth of the Internet awakens our slumbering memory. Sometime in the 1950s and early 1960s, the best artists from the metropolises of the Levant landed on the barren soil of Israel, from: Cairo, Damascus, Marrakesh, Baghdad and Sana'a. Among them were musicians, composers and singers. It didn't take them long to find themselves without their fancy clothing and on their way to hard physical work in fields and factories. At night they would return to their art to boost morale among the people of their community. Some of the scenes and sounds which at the time would not have been broadcast on the Israeli media have little by little, been uploaded to YouTube in recent years. Through the fall of the virtual wall between us and the Islamic states, we have been exposed to an

abundance of footage of great Arab music by the best artists. This development has liberated us from the stranglehold and siege we have been under, allowing us to reconstruct some of the mosaic of our Mizrahi childhood, which has hardly been documented, if at all.

We should remember that in the new country, as power-hungry and culturally deprived as it was in the 1950s and 1960s, the impoverished housing in the slums of the Mizrahi immigrants was a place for extraordinary musical richness. The ugly, Soviet-style cubes emitted a very strong smell of diaspora. At night, the family parties turned the yards, with the wave of a magic wand, into something out of the Bollywood scenes we used to watch in the only movie theater in our neighborhood. On the table, popcorn and a few '*Nesher*' beers and juices. At a Yemenite celebration one would be served soup, pita bread, *skhug* and *khat* for chewing, and at that of the Iraqis,' the tables would have kebabs and rice decorated with almonds and raisins. A string of yellow bulbs, as well as a beautiful rug someone had succeeded in bringing from the faraway diaspora, hung between two wooden poles. There were a couple of benches and tables borrowed from the synagogue, and sitting on the chairs, in an exhibit of magnificent play, were the best singers and musicians of the Arab world.

It is worthwhile to reflect upon those rare times, just before the second generation of Mizrahim began trying to dedicate itself to assimilating in the dominant culture. Those were the days when the gold of generations still rolled through the streets of the Mizrahi neighborhoods and through its synagogues. We should step back for a moment and allow ourselves to look at what we had, what was ours, and what ceased to be ours.

An example of the musical paradise in which we lived can be seen in a video recording from a little later – apparently from the early 1990s. At that time, Mizrahi musicians of all origins were already mingling at each other's parties, which we see here in a clip of a Moroccan *chaflah*. The clip, uploaded by Mouise Koruchi, does not tell us where and when the event took place. The musicians in this clip are: Iraqi Victor Idda playing the qanun, Alber Elias playing the Ney flute, Egyptian Felix Mizrahi and Arab Salim Niddaf on violin. One of the astonishing singers is the young Mike Koruchi, tapping the duff and singing with a naturalness as if he never left Morocco, a naturalness that our own generation in Israel has lost. Indeed, it turns out that back then he used to visit Israeli

frequently but did not actually live there.

Following him, we see some older members of the community appear on the stage: Mouise Koruchi sings 'Samarah,' composed by Egyptian singer Karem Mahmoud; after him comes Victor Al Maghribi, the wonderful soul singer also called Petit Salim (after the great Algerian singer Salim Halali); Mordechai Timsit sings and plays the oud; and Petit Armo (father of the famous Israeli singer Kobi Peretz) rounds out the team. This performance could easily be included in the best festivals in the Arab and Western world, complete with Al Maghribi's beautiful clothes and the rug at the foot of the stage.

Next up, we encounter rare footage of singer Zohra al-Fassia wearing beautifully stylish clothes, recorded in her flat in a public housing project, surrounded by treasures from the Moroccan homeland. The clip demonstrates a little more of the musical beauty and the aesthetic of the small celebrations in the development towns and neighborhoods.

In my neighborhood, which was mostly populated by Yemenites, we enjoyed a regular menu of prayers in angelic voices, drifting away out of the many synagogues in the neighborhood every Shabbat and every holiday. This is a recording from government housing in Ra'anana in 1960 of 'Yigdal Elohim Chai' written by Rabbi Daniel Ben Yehuda, the rabbinic judge from Italy. The magnificent and powerful Yemenite tune reflects, to me, more successfully than Sephardic or Ashkenazi ones, the idea of God's greatness expressed in the 13th century *piyut* (a Hebrew liturgical poem). At night the sweeping rhythm of the tin drums, the only musical instruments at Yemenite weddings and henna celebrations, called out to summon us. As soon as we heard the drums from afar we, a herd of kids, ran over to participate. Uninvited guests would never be chased away; there were hardly any fences between the houses anyway; the neighborhood felt like one huge courtyard in the middle of our house. And that is exactly the way it sounds in another recording, in the 1960s, of singer-songwriter Aharon Amram, the most important musical figure among Yemenite Jews.

And now, let's take in the dances of a breathtaking singing and dancing session of Shalom Tsabari of Rosh Ha'ayin, the rhythm virtuoso and one of the greatest Yemenite singers in a late recording of from the late 1980s. (The drums he plays perfectly recall the black music which arrived in the neighborhood in the late

1960s and early 1970s. It was then that the children adapted African-American hairstyles, which miraculously suited their curly hair and prayed with intense bodily twists to the Godfather, James Brown).

In a neighborhood where the only television was in the Iraqi café with its antennae tuned to Arab stations, before the arrival of Israeli television and with few record players around, we had the good fortune to watch singers, vocal legends, who people across the Arab world would have done anything just to catch another glimpse of.

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In the next video clip, Najat Salim performs a song from the repertoire of Saleh and Daoud al-Kuwaity. Saleh, who accompanies her on the violin in this scene, is the father of modern Iraqi music and, along with his brother Daoud and other Jewish musicians, kicked off the musical revolution that took place in Iraq in the beginning of the 20th century. These musicians played a significant role in turning the ensembles called *'Chalrey Baghdad'* into orchestras in the style of new wave Arab music. In this process, which happened in tandem with that of other Arab countries (first and foremost Egypt), western sounds began to inform the traditional Arab sound – with influences ranging from classical music to waltz, rhumba and tango. The revolution was so successful that all Arabs, from the *fellah* to the metropolitan *feinschmecker* connected to it with every fiber of their being. The footage was uploaded to the Internet by an Iraqi, who gave it the somewhat naive title, 'The Star Najat Salim,' apparently not realizing that Salim was virtually unknown in Israel.

Part of the experience of the Iraqi *chafla,* which was typical of the home where I grew up, a secular bohemia rooted in the heart of Arab culture, can be heard in the notes of this fabulous violin *taksim* composed and performed by the violinist Dauod Aqrem in the following clip, smoking and playing simultaneously. The Egyptian Faeiza Rujdi, a fiercely expressive Israeli Broadcasting Authority singer whose songs were a hit in Iraqi *chaflas*, introduces Aqrem (in the clip, she sings

muwashshah, "girdle poems," which originate in the verse of medieval Andalusia). The next clip features Iraqi *maqam* singer, poet and composer Filfel Gourgy, accompanied by Saleh al-Kuwaity on violin, with Najat Salim beside him. The clip below shows a royal duet of the mighty Filfel and Najat singing a composition by Mulah Othman al-Musili, the poet, composer and performer of the 19th and early 20th century. Al-Musili was one the founders of the Iraqi *maqam* and a virtuoso of Turkish-Sufi music. They are accompanied by the Arab Orchestra of the Israeli Broadcasting Authority.

These links demonstrate that it is mostly Arabs who long for Gourgy. The Internet began to break down the barriers of alienation between the Arab public and Jews from Arab countries who immigrated to Israel, but the development came too late. Filfel Gourgy rose to fame only posthumously, and will never know what is written and said about him on Arabic websites today, where he is considered one of the greats among Arab musicians by music experts from academia. Nor will he ever know how often his voice reverberates on Iraqi radio heritage programs for younger generations. Filfel Gourgy did not live to see that young Iraqis who edit small documentaries on YouTube and Facebook sync stills of Old Baghdad in the 30s to his voice, his music symbolizing Baghdad the way Gershwin's embodies New York.

The *maqam* artists did not live to witness the 2008 UNESCO resolution that declared Iraqi *maqam* should be preserved as intangible cultural heritage of humanity. This very same Iraqi *maqam* was severed from the country the moment the Jews hastily packed it in their suitcases and fled to Israel. Filfel Gourgy, Saleh and Daoud Al-Kuwaity, Ezra Aharon, Ya'acov al-Ammari, Yosef Shem-Tov, Elias Shasha, Salim Shabbat, Yechezkel Katzav, Yusuf Zaarur and many others in the Iraqi Jewish community are displayed on the monumental wall of the Maqam masters.

Meanwhile, all day long at home, the radio was tuned to a variety of Arab stations; therefore we, the children, simultaneously heard childhood songs and lullabies along with Arab children in their own countries. Twice a day, a dish was

served which featured an Umm Kulthum concert as its main ingredient. And the rest of the day, we would hear Abd al-Wahhab, Abdel Halim Hafez, Farid Ismehan, Fairuz, Sabah Fakhri, Wadih El-Safi and all the rest. We watched Arabic movies on Arab TV, as well as cabaret performances and charming Arabic operettas in local cinemas, way before Israeli television started to broadcast programs in Arabic. Here is Ya Warda, the cabaret song of Zohra Al Fassia, a song that touches the very core of the secular culture of the Arab Jews.

Thanks to the record shop of the 'Azzoulai Brothers' in Jaffa, the neighborhoods and the development towns could hear the singing of the musical genius Salim Halali, an Algerian Jew who, after immigrating to France managed to escape the Nazis. Later he became the idol of Algerian *rai* singers.

This refined man, composer, singer and poet alike, a Jewish homosexual who sang in Arabic in the land of the French, weaved different cultures into his singing: Andalusian, Berber and Arab. The following clip gives a short summary of the man and his achievements. Look at his fancy gala dresses in the few pictures that highlight his songs. He is all beauty, elegance and cosmopolitanism – features that the Israeli *nouveau riche*has always craved. Halali performed in Haifa in the 1960s and in the Tel Aviv Sports Hall in 1974, without any mention in the Israeli media. Thanks to Mouis Karuchi, we have the whole recording of the performance in Tel- Aviv in two parts.

We might examine more closely the odd reversal that occurred in Israel in the life of the Jewish Arabs compared to their brothers, the Jewish artists from Russia. The latter arrived over a century ago from their oppressive country to the United States, and were actually quite fortunate in gaining worldwide acclaim. If the Russian artists experienced the American dream of 'rags to riches,' then the experience of Arab Jewish artists in Israel was the reverse: "from riches to rags."

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When we say, "what once was is no more," about the Diaspora musicians who

arrived in Israel, the intention is not nostalgic. It simply communicates that these great musicians had no Jewish successors. The next generation was hardly able to master the art and language of their parents. Of all the important musicians only a few played in the Arab Orchestra of the Israeli Broadcasting Authority. For instance, Alber Elias, Zuzu Musa from Egypt or *qanun* player Abraham Salman. It was renowned violinist Yehudi Menuhin who kissed Salman's hands, fully recognizing his genius. Those are fine examples of artists who learned music in schools and academies. Yet that sort of musical education was not available in Israel.

The students of artists such as Yosef Shem Tov were in fact Palestinians, whose elite, including Palestinian musicians, was uprooted from their homeland in 1948. There were not many Jews like the musician Yair Dalal who took the trouble to come and learn from masters such as Salim al-Nur. Al-Nur composed pieces of intellectual and emotional complexity. But on YouTube, a melody he composed at the age of 17 in Iraq, 'Oh You Bartender,' attracted many listeners in the Arab world: it was sung by Jewish singer Salima Murad, the national singer of Iraq, and the words were written by the poet and caliph of the house of Abbas, Ibn Al-Mu'tazz of the 9th century.

Salim Halali. He is all beauty, elegance and cosmopolitanism – features that the Israeli nouveau riche has always craved.

Hand in hand with the erasure of the active role of the Jews (sometimes as an avant-garde) in the creation of modern Arabic music, the number of Jewish listeners has declined. In the first Mizrahi immigrant generation, those in the Mizrahi Jewish community still completely understood both the palimpsest of this

high musical language that was developed, layer by layer, over generations and the musical talent of the geniuses of their generation. They continued to consume this music over the entire course of their lives. High art and popular culture were not considered separate entities. Everyone was a connoisseur. As the years went by, the audience grew older. The young generation turned to 'Hebrew' music and was asked to abandon its roots. According to the conventions of Arab culture, an artist needs an audience that can understand what he (or she) sings about, and that would discern the beauty in the musical phrasing he sings or plays. She needs this sigh of pleasure and wonder: 'aha' or 'alla.' Without this feedback, he cannot sing and play. This sudden breach in a naturally developing culture was the reason our musical heritage died.

Logging in to Arab cyberspace, when entering the names of those forgotten artists in Arabic, we will find out that their names are cherished by musicologists on musical forums, in discussions on Iraqi television and radio, and in audio and video clips uploaded by Arab internet users. The acceptance of and excitement over the best of our artists evokes sad thoughts of those who were supposed to be our brothers in Israel.

In Israel, the conversation of the greatness of these musicians has become strange. How is it possible to describe that which is no longer apparent? Many of the youth in Israel no longer understand profoundly the beauty of the sound in the manner of their parents and grandparents and the current young generation of Arabs. One can always praise and exalt, yet she who has Arabic music for breakfast, without saying a word, already knows that Salim Halali and Filfel Gourgy reach great heights. Of course it is possible to talk about the past status of the distinguished musicians and to bring historical evidence to their detractors, that Saleh al-Kuwaity and Zohra al-Fasia were the artists of the king. Yet this is a defensive discourse. After all, the essence of our tragedy is not that al-Fasia does not have a king to sing to. The problem is that she has no one to sing to.

And this is what Salim Halali sings about in "Ghorbati" (my Alienage), a beautiful lamentation about the exile of the eternal wanderer in the places of others (loosely translated): "I, who was silver, turned into copper and the garment I was wearing left me naked. I, who gave advice to the others, now have lost my mind, my wisdom turned to madness.

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[Read part two of this article here]

This post by Shoshana Gabay was taken partly from a movie synopsis she wrote a few years ago about Filfel Gourgy, which was rejected by the Israeli Film Fund. It originally appeared in Hebrew on Haokets*.*

Translated by Benno Karkabe, Noa Bar and Orna Meir-Stacey

Riches To Rags To Virtual Riches: When Mizrahi Artists Said 'No' To Israel's Pioneer Culture

Shoshana Gabay. Ills. Joseph Sassoon Semah

Upon their arrival in Israel, Mizrahi Jews found themselves under a regime that demanded obedience, even in cultural matters. All were required to conform to an idealized pioneer figure who sang classical, militaristic 'Hebrew' songs. That is, before the 'Kasetot' era propelled Mizrahi artists into the spotlight, paving the way for today's musical stars. Part two of a musical journey beginning in Israel's

Mizrahi neighborhoods of the 1950s and leading up to Palestinian singer Mohammed Assaf. Read part one here.

Our early encounter with Zionist music takes place in kindergarten, then later in schools and the youth movements, usually with an accordionist in tow playing songs worn and weathered by the dry desert winds. Music teachers at school never bothered with classical music, neither Western nor Arabian, and traditional Ashkenazi liturgies – let alone Sephardic – were not even taken into account. The early pioneer music was hard to stomach, and not only because it didn't belong to our generation and wasn't part of our heritage. More specifically, we were gagging on something shoved obsessively down our throat by political authority.

Our "founding fathers" and their children never spared us any candid detail regarding the bodily reaction they experience when hearing the music brought here by *our* fathers, and the music we created here. But not much was said regarding the thoughts and feelings of Mizrahi immigrants (nor about their children who were born into it) who came here and heard what passed as Israeli music, nor about their children who were born into it. Had there been a more serious reckoning from our Mizrahi perspective, as well as the perspective of Palestinians, mainstream Israeli culture might have been less provincial, obtuse and mediocre than what it is today.

Israeli radio stations in the 60s and 70s played songs by military bands, or other similar bands such as Green Onion or The Roosters. There were settler songs such as "Eucalyptus Orchard" with its veiled belligerence, and other introverted war songs, monotonous and stale, inspiring depressive detachment. For example, take "He Knew Not Her Name," sung here by casual soldiers driving in a jeep through ruins of an Arab village, or the pompous "Tranquility." When these songs burst out in joy, as is the case with "Carnaval BaNahal," it comes out loud and vulgar. "The Unknown Squad," composed by Moshe Vilensky, written by Yechiel Mohar and performed by the Nahal Band in 1958, always reminded me of the terrifying military march music I used to hear on Arab radio stations as a child. As far as the Arabs were concerned, these tunes represented trivial propaganda, not the cultural mainstream. However, in Israel, the Nahal Band was lauded as the country's finest for more than two decades. Thanks to YouTube, we can now revisit the footage and see them marching, eyes livid and intimidating, faces blank.

Shoshana Damari's voice, which was supposed to cushion our shocking encounter with this music, only made it worse. Every time her voice would boom out on early 70s public television my father would stretch an ironic smile under his thin Iraqi mustache and let out an expressive, "ma kara?" ("what's the big deal?"), in sardonic astonishment of the wartime-chanteuse's bombastic pomp.

It's not hard to understand why revolutionary Zionists would have their hearts set on a patriotic military musical taste, complete with marching music and Eastern European farming songs fitted for a newfound belligerent lifestyle. But this dominating attitude would prove shocking to Mizrahi Jews, and the musicians among them, who took an active role in the greater Arab music scene (for more on the topic **read part one** of this series). These musicians were accustomed to the cultural freedoms they enjoyed in the cosmopolitan atmospheres of Marrakesh, Cairo and Baghdad before the military coups. And contrary to popular belief, our ancestors carried no sickles or swords. From Sana'a jewelers to Iraqi clerks under British rule, Persian rug merchants and Marrakesh textile merchants, the majority of Mizrahi Jews lived in urban areas.

In Israel, Mizrahi Jews found a political rule that penetrated all aspects of civilian life, controlling and demanding full obedience even in matters like culture and music. Everyone had to conform to the idealized Sabra figure who sang "Hebrew" music – as in, Eastern European music with Mizrahi touches, celebrating the earth-tilling farmer and the hero soldier. The Broadcasting Authority's Arab Orchestra, where only an small portion of the musicians were employed and paid meagerly, was established for the sole purpose of broadcasting propaganda to Arab audiences, never with a thought toward domestic consumption.

Patriotic songs that tried *going Mizrahi* weren't of any greater appeal. We didn't get what was so mizrahi about their monotonous drone. On rare occasions, a moving song like "Yafe Nof" slipped through. Written by Rabbi Yehuda Halevi and composed by the talented Yinon Ne'eman, a student of songwriter Sarah Levi Tanai, the song plays like an ancient Ladino tune, sung in Nechama Hendel's beautiful, ringing voice. The delightful Hendel, who had also been shunned by the cultural establishment for a time, sings the magical Yiddish tune "El HaTsipor" (To the Bird), a diasporic soul tune that occasionally snuck its way on to the radio. At the time, I thought this song seemed more adequate in relation to the sorrows of Ashkenazi Holocaust survivors living in my neighborhood than what "Shualey Shimshon" (Samson's Foxes) had to offer.

There were exceptions, such as Yosef Hadar's timeless "Graceful Apple" and the internationally acclaimed "Evening of Roses." Most of the several-dozen versions of this song circulating on the net were not posted by Israelis or Jews, but rather by music lovers in general.

By the early 60s even the founding fathers' children began rejecting pioneer music, in part due to the rise of the urban bourgeoisie in Israel and its desire to break away from a self-imposed quarantine in exchange for a connection to the West. Naomi Shemer, Israel's national songwriter, frequently borrowed from Georges Brassens' chansons and from the Spanish songs of Paco Ibañez. The musical shortcomings of the Kibbutz-born composer are evident by the influences she heavily leaned on during the 60s. You can hear it not only in the tune she used for Israel's national song, "Jerusalem of Gold," taken from Paco Ibañez' Basque folk song "Pello Joxepe", but also in "On Silver Wings" – a patriotic song glorifying air force pilots. The prettiest phrase in the song (at 0:36) was taken from Brassens' "La Mauvaise Reputation" (0:21). The irony lies in the fact that Brassens' song was actually about a nonconformist who chooses to stay in bed on France's Bastille Day – the entire song is a hymn of dissent.

Mizrahi youth were similarly stranded during the 60s. The radio played songs by artists who came from old Israeli-Sephardic families, such as the great Yossi Banai, who sang a captivating Brassens (translated by Shemer), Yoram Gaon in Ladino, and the Parvarim Duo. Although newer immigrants like Jo Amar managed to slip some heritage into the airwaves, the rest were facing a hopeless situation. They did not have the cultural freedom to delve into their family's musical heritage and come up with something new of their own.

Zohar Levi To Zohar Argov

In order to escape the Cossacks and their *horas*, Mizrahi children – as well as the founders' children – turned to Radio Ramallah, where they could catch up on the Western youth culture denounced by Israel's cultural-political establishment. Elvis Presley, his voice heavily laced with black gospel, had a deep influence on Mizrahi youths. They would congregate, on the beach or during school breaks, clapping their hands to a rock n' roll rhythm, usually carrying a small comb in their back pocket (next to a small color photo of The King) in order to arrange a *brilliantine* hairdo. They would bravely sing away senseless made-up rock n' roll stand-in lyrics.

Ahuva Ozeri, of the same generation (seen here drumming in a home gathering in the 80s), does a delightful Mizrahi soul cover of Elvis (full of funny Yemenite curse words) and finishes it off with a Yemenite Mawal (01:18). Another possible marker of that generation is represented by an anonymous cover of Jail House Rock, sung in a heavy Moroccan accent. And then there is Shimi Tavori, performing a cover of The Beatles' Don't Let Me Down, after singing Farid al-Atrash's "Ya Yuma" with singer Uri Hatuka chiming in (10:00).

Even when these artists did not remember all the lyrics, their groove and feel for the material was spot on, as if they were born on the Mississippi. Mizrahi and other laborers working in the industrial areas of Hamasger Street in Tel Aviv and in Ramla would return at night to the same streets to visit discotheques. Back then (and to this day) Mizrahi musicians had been equal participants in the nascent Israeli pop-rock scene. Here are the Churchills with lead singer Danny Shoshan playing a Beatles cover.

Zohar Levi

Drummer and composer Zohar Levi, a pioneer of Israeli rock music who composed the score for Hanoch Levin's 1970 play "Queen of a Bathtub," presents a possible musical turning point. Levi was also a founding member of Aharit Hayamim, a prominent band in Israel's rock history. Here we see lead singer Gabby Shoshan performing the Levi-composed "Open the Door" with a touch of Mizrahi groove. Levi's music has some "Hair" influence in it, along with a hint of Jefferson Airplane, but not much of Baghdad – the place where he was born.

When the founders' children made haste to adopt a rebellious Western youth culture in the seventies, one might have expected the daring Levin to be the likely role model. The new music should have turned its back on the establishment's preposterous musical dictums and its mentality of obedience. But talented artists such as Matti Caspi, Ariel Zilber (at the time) and Shalom Hanoch were not really aiming at instigating a "Zionist Spring"; they satisfied themselves with adopting rock techniques and rhythms, as well as the Israeli petite-bourgeois notion that everything taking place in Western capitals is best. The idea was to decorate Hebrew music with some pop-rock. This meant that Mizrahim like Zohar Levi were expected by peers to abandon their heritage in order to progress. Levi represents a shift from a music that grew out of a local and Arab cultural context to a mere imitation of the West, signifying yet another setback for Mizrahi musical culture in Israel. After all, composition is at the very heart of music making. At this point, defeat becomes apparent, as there is no real competition to authentic British and American Rock (even English-speaking countries like Canada and Australia failed miserably).

When comparing Zohar Levi to his Arab contemporaries, such as the younger Ziad al-Rahbani in Lebanon or Ilham al-Madfai in Iraq, the plight of this young Mizrahi generation becomes clearer. Rahbani – the composer, pianist, playwright and actor, had no problem integrating his musical heritage with the jazz and rock music that interested him. Here is his "Abu Ali," written in 1972, roughly around the time when Zohar Levy was active. As for al-Madfai, he found no problem incorporating Flamenco into his Iraqi sound. Both Rahbani and al-Madfai play frequently in international venues. Levy's Arab contemporaries showed him that in order to advance his art, there was no real need for him to set aside his heritage. On the contrary – he could have reached into it. In the end, Levy's musical career was short lived, and despite his impressive talents he did not become the Israeli Rahbani. There were others who did manage such an integration further down the road, such as Yehuda Poliker and Shlomo Bar.

In fact, the new musicians of "Hebrew music" left the wagon of Israeli music stuck in the mud, rutted by its habitual selective deafness. The time was right to not only admire black music because the Beatles and Rolling Stones were making it, but also to try looking at the musical culture of oppressed people at home, which also included Yiddish music. To illustrate just how bad it was – the extent to which prominent Israeli artists were detached and myopic – I'll mention how

Matti Caspi, despite his great talent and musical erudition, disqualified Ofer Levy for choosing to sing in Arabic during an audition for a military band. Anyone who heard Levy singing a cappella back in those days would not be able to fathom such a decision. The story perfectly sums up the essence of the meeting between those generations: Ofer Levy gets Matti Caspi, but Matti Caspi is very much ignorant of Ofer Levy.

The "tape music" ("Kasetot") that emerged in the late 60s was the sole propriety of Mizrahi Jews, and showed signs of integration with local music with pop-rock. The *hafla* (a common local 'shindig', or gathering) crowd played their own interpretations of Mizrahi and Zionist music, using rock as their medium. Since Mizrahi music was not being taught in Israeli schools, and studying it with musicians abroad seemed like a backwards thing to do, guitarist Yehuda Keisar would sneak into Aris San's concerts to learn some of his electric guitar secrets. The pioneers of Kasetot music, many of whom were born to Yemenite families who settled in Israel generations ago, and whose sons were educated in kibbutzim and boarding schools, lost the ability to play classical Mizrahi and Western instruments (with the exception of Ahuva Ozeri who played the bulbul tarang, and Moshe Meshumar who played the mandolin). At the same time, Arab musicians of the same generation were still studying classical Mizrahi and Western instruments.

When examining the repertoire of Kasetot music, one finds that alongside the tremendous curiosity and openness it showed towards Mizrahi and Mediterranean styles (and even to that of Hasidic music), early adopters of the genre used many "Hebrew" songs, applying to them their own unique interpretations and rhythms. Back in the 90s, I created the TV series "A Sea of Tears," which chronicled the history of Israel's Kasetot music. In it, Ahuva Ozeri said she tried to "add some spice" to the songs, to make them more appealing to Mizrahi ears, or in other words, to serve as a link between Mizrahim and the established culture. Paradoxically, these musicians, who at last managed to make Zionist music more popular with Mizrahim, were the ones to put the cultural establishment in Israel into a blind panic.

At the peak of its success, you could see how the building blocks of Mizrahi music continued to crumble. This time in favor of borrowed music, mainly due to the sidelining of earlier generations of musicians, creating a gaping musical void. Composers of this new style were a small few, mostly without proper instrument

training (apart from Ozeri). Ozeri, together with Avihu Medina and singer Avner Gaddasi, were not enough to supply the demand. Medina acknowledged several times that as a boy educated in a kibbutz, his role model had been Naomi Shemer, rather than composers like Aharon Amram or Saleh al-Kuwaiti, who lived in Tel Aviv's Hatikva neighborhood and sold home appliances. True enough, you can hear the Hora rhythm at the beginning of every verse in "Kvar Avru Hashanim." In fact, Kasetot music was the compromise second generation Mizrahim made in order to be accepted by the cultural political establishment and receive some airtime. Otherwise, their fate would have been as bitter as that of the artists described *in part one of this series.* But this compromise was not enough to appease the establishment, which continued to disregard and ridicule these artists for many years.

Kasetot music in those days suffered from poor production value. Studio musicians – a prerogative lavished on artists accepted by the establishment – had been too expensive for Kasetot singers to afford. It goes without saying that the quality of production served as one staple excuse to shun the music. The texts they used, one example of which is the lofty biblical Hebrew Medina learned at home, marked it as *outsider*music of the Mizrahi variety. If we compare it to the approachable feel-good vibes of his contemporaries in Kaveret (a band well-enough versed in local social codes to allow for that kind of verbal jugglery), we can imagine how Mizrahi Jews did not feel at home.

A visit to the Zemereshet website, the main source for Zionist songs, finds dozens of kosher Zionists songs performed by the *Hafla* crowd. Israel's cultural commissars would never have dreamt it. It is interesting to note that the songs which captivated that crowd most were not songs of war songs nor marching songs, but rather sad romances. Here is Chen Carmi singing Alexander Penn's "Suru Meni" to an unknown tune, and here is another interpretation by Rami Danoch of the Oud Band.

Kasetot music, with all its blemishes and delights, had become the only original genre to come out of Israel, and was in fact the most in sync with musical trends abroad: a pop music that successfully blended a mix of ethnic styles.

Sheltered By their fancies

Several years ago, Ariel Hirschfeld, a scholar of Israeli literature and culture,

wrote an essay about the late composer Moshe Vilensky. Titled “The Rust of the Obvious,” the essay hails Vilensky as the greatest composer of Israeli music, urging readers to return to his music and to try and “remove the rust of the obvious” while listening again to his songs. Hirschfeld’s words clearly convey the distance between music that is obvious, and music that had ceased to be obvious.

YouTube makes it possible for us to observe how the Zionist founders and their children are sheltered by their fancies of fine tastes and beautiful melodies. It was generally believed that if they were not stuck in the Middle East, surely the whole world would have admired their music. But here they are, all the songs can be found on YouTube, and who listens to them apart from Israeli audiences? The answer is nearly no one. You won’t find any initiatives by foreigners on the web to upload “Hebrew Music.” Many of these songs have only several thousand views and comments strictly in Hebrew.

Kaveret

Even in videos from a later period, often referred to as “new Israeli music” – such as a highly esteemed song like “Atur Mitskhekh” – regarded in some media circles to be the foremost Israeli song of all times, sung by the captivating Arik Einstein and garnering over half a million views — all the comments are in Hebrew, apart from one curious passerby. The same song, uploaded to an English channel on Israel’s musical history, lingers at a mere 1,300 views. Even artists who were selected to represent Israel at the Eurovision song contest (back when a state-appointed the committee chose the competitiors), viewed by many millions in Europe, were not able to harness this exposure to success abroad. The case is the same with artists who were sent by the state on concert tours abroad. A 1974 video of the most admired band in Israeli rock, Kaveret, performing “Natati La

Hayay," posted on the Eurovision's English-language YouTube channel, has less than 35,000 views. Kaveret's "Baruch's Boots" has less than 30,000 views and few comments, most of which are in Hebrew (except for several ones in English, posted by an American Jew who spent some time in Israel in the 70s). After the political power shift in 1977, Mizrahi musicians were chosen by the public to represent Israel in the Eurovision. Yizhar Cohen won the contest in 1978, with hundreds of thousands of views from non-Israeli viewers to show for it. Dana International achieved similar results.

Even Shlomo Artzi, who was sent to the contest in 1975 with "At Va'Ani," has had very few of his songs uploaded by non-Israelis (apart from "Iceland," performed in Hebrew by the Jewish French singer and actor Patrick Bruel on French television, with some 120,000 views). Artzi also has few uploads on Spanish or English channels, and not many views. His song "Wiping Your Tears," on his official channel, has 1.6 million views with comments made only by Israelis (including one Arab Israeli). A version of this song uploaded with an English title to a channel dedicated to old Hebrew songs has only 26,000 views.

Compare this to the oeuvres of the great Jewish-American composers, Irving Berlin, George Gershwin and the likes of Benny Goodman, who readily absorbed everything they could lay their hands on in their new homeland – particularly the music of the oppressed African Americans – and allowed their music to express universal concerns of human existence, and you might begin to understand how the sons of our conservative revolutionary movement did not get very far with their cultural narrow-mindedness and ideological zeal.

It seems that the destitute of Israel's music scene are the ones chosen by global Internet citizenry to advance to the front of the stage. Ofra Haza, for instance, could not get any composer of "Hebrew" music to work with her until the late 70s. Here she is singing "Im Nin'elu" together with the Hatikva Neighborhood Workshop Theater in the early 70s, in a program produced by Israel's national Channel 1. The YouTube clip for this Yemenite song, composed by Aharon Amram, has more than 2.2 million views. Finely arranged by Yigal Hared, the song remains close in spirit to the original. The cultural crudeness of the establishment makes an appearance one minute into the song, when program director Rina Hararit queues the ending credits to run over Haza's face. This clip has more than 3,200 excited comments, the great majority of which are not by Israelis. The version by the Hatikva Workshop Theater has more views than the remix version

that would go on to propel Haza to worldwide stardom in the mid-80s. Apparently some felt the song did not need electroshock.

Some may say that Haza is famous enough, such that anything of hers will receive many views. But that is not so: her "songs for the homeland" have a much smaller audience. Here is Naomi Shemer's "Renewal," with only 9,000 views, or Ehud Manor and Nurit Hirsch's "Every Day in the Year" with 23,000. The more Haza distanced herself from songs of earth-toiling and pop towards the end of her life, the more her confidence in her musical depth grew and the more she matured. Here she is performing at the Monterey Jazz Festival, singing a "Kadish" composed by herself and Bezalel Aloni. The clip has over a million views, most of the comments are not in Hebrew, by non-Israelis (judging by the comments, most are probably not even by Jews). Even a stone would be moved by it. Here is another lovely example of an Aharon Amram composition: Shirley Zapari, her mother Miriam Zapari and Achinoam Nini singing "Tsur Manti," recorded from the Mezzo channel by an Israeli – over 1.2 million views. Amram's song has double and triple the views of other Nini songs, such as the theme song for Roberto Benigni's "La Vita è Bella" or her "Ave Maria." Both were uploaded by non-Israelis.

There is yet another destitute Israeli musical genre that is very popular on the Internet – Hassidic klezmer music. Here is virtuoso violinist Itzhak Perlman with a Klezmer band from the U.S., receiving high ratings for their exquisite playing and garnering more than 1.3 million views. Look hard, and you might find one Hebrew comment among the thousand. But not only the great Perlman gets attention – other anonymous Klezmers are not doing so bad on their own. Listen to gripping Russian Jewish music made by Reb Shaya. Judging by the comments, most of the half-million ecstatic viewers are neither Israeli nor Jewish. The stale Israeli argument that every rejection of Israeli artistic offerings is motivated by anti-Semitism is somewhat hampered by these findings. Perhaps we would do better to consider an alternative conclusion, one that would better enlighten the connection between a military existence, a cultural enclave mentality of nationalistic ideological zeal, and artistic ineptitude.

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Part One: http://rozenbergquarterly.com/riches-to-rags-ingers/