



# musical exodus

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Al-Andalus and its Jewish Diasporas

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RUTH F. DAVIS

# Musical Exodus

*Al-Andalus and Its Jewish Diasporas*

Edited by Ruth F. Davis

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## Chapter Nine

# Tafillalt's "Soulmate" and the Israeli *Piyyut* Revival

Carmel Raz

The current surge of interest in *piyyut*<sup>1</sup> (lit. "poem"; pl. *piyyutim*), sacred Hebrew poetry set to popular tunes, has rejuvenated and transformed Israel's musical landscape. Long familiar to observant Jews, *piyyutim* have only recently become part of the Israeli musical mainstream.<sup>2</sup> In the past decade, *piyyut* singing has emerged as a new source of education and as a cultural alternative for secular Jews in quest of their own ethnic heritage.

*Piyyut* is an intertextual form of cultural expression through which poets have consistently incorporated local aesthetic, stylistic, and linguistic features. Such borrowing is particularly evident in those *piyyutim* created by the Jewish poets of al-Andalus, who integrated neo-Platonic ideas and Arabic meters and aesthetics into their Hebrew verses. Popular *piyyutim* were often included in prayer collections called *machzorim*, which were disseminated throughout the Jewish Diaspora, from Iberia to India. The texts were typically sung to the tunes of well-known songs in the vernacular, which varied according to locality. Thus, a single *piyyut* may have multiple musical settings, reflecting different cultural origins and circulation histories. While some *piyyutim* were incorporated into the liturgy, most are sung freely, in the synagogue and at home, on the Sabbath and religious holidays, and at important life-cycle celebrations.

Although *piyyutim* have maintained a continuous presence in Orthodox Judaism, until recently they appeared to be facing extinction within mainstream Jewish culture (Ish-Ran 2009).<sup>3</sup> Yet in response to a complex interplay of social and cultural phenomena ranging from the new identity movements associated with second- and third-generation Mizrahi Israelis<sup>4</sup> to post-Zionism<sup>5</sup> and a renewed interest in various spiritual aspects of Judaism,<sup>6</sup>

*piyyutim* have recently emerged as a living tradition in new contexts outside of the synagogue.

A number of grassroots organizations drive the contemporary *piyyut* revival. The earliest group to coalesce was Kehillot Sharot (lit. “singing communities”), a network of amateur choirs that meet weekly to sing and study various *piyyutim*. Kehillot Sharot was founded in 2002 by Yossi Ohana, an educator and grassroots activist who encountered *piyyut* while in search of his Moroccan heritage. Ohana thought that the traditional songs would interest other Mizrahi Jews seeking to reconnect to their ethnic roots (Arnoff 2006). Today, a dozen singing communities across Israel are supported by the private Avi Chai Foundation, which provides facilitators, training, and guest musicians, as well as community workshops and events at schools and universities. In a development parallel to Ohana’s community initiative, a program entitled Yedidi, Hashachachta? (lit. “My Friend, Have You Forgotten?”), dedicated to the study of *piyyut*, was piloted at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2002 through the Hillel House organization and was later expanded to four other university campuses across Israel.

The growing demand for information about *piyyutim* led one of the first Kehillot Sharot facilitators, Yair Harel, to initiate the Invitation to Piyut (Hazmana Le’ Piyut) website in 2005. A massive database of texts, recordings, and scholarship, Invitation to Piyut also offers scores, biographical information about authors, scholarly commentary on the texts, an Internet radio channel, and even suggestions for choosing appropriate *piyyutim* for events such as weddings, births, and bar mitzvahs. In a further development, Harel founded the Piyut Festival in 2008, an annual event showcasing traditions from different diasporic traditions. In addition to serving as focal events for the *piyyut* community, the festivals encourage performers to explore and present repertory that has not previously been given a prominent public stage in Israel.

With their increasing presence on the public scene, *piyyutim* have proven to be fertile material for contemporary musicians in the domains of pop, rock, jazz, ethnic, and even electronic music. The resulting works bring traditional *piyyut* tunes out of the synagogue and into dialogue with each other; with contemporary sounds, instruments, and genres; and with popular culture as a whole. In the past few years, musicians from across the stylistic spectrum, ranging from rock stars Beri Sakharoff, Meier Banai, and Kobi Oz to jazz musicians including Omer Avital and Daniel Zamir and classical crossover star David Daor, have added *piyyutim* to their concert rosters. Their versions of *piyyutim* have also received considerable airplay on the mainstream radio stations (Ish-Ran 2009).

Contemporary musicians who choose to work with *piyyut* publicly enact and renew their personal Jewish identities through musical experimentation. This chapter explores contemporary artistic engagement with the *piyyut* tra-

dition through the case study of the Jewish music band Tafillalt, focusing on their version of the well-known *piyyut* “Yedid Nefesh” (lit. “spirit friend” or “soulmate”). Featuring lead singer Yair Harel, Tafillalt claims to “navigate the multicultural soundscape of 21st-century Israel, presenting a deeply personal interpretation of various traditional and modern Jewish materials (sacred Hebrew poetry from North Africa and the Middle East, Hassidic *niggunim*, modern secular Hebrew poetry and more), as well as their own original musical and literary compositions.” In this study, I show how Tafillalt’s arrangement of “Yedid Nefesh”—a piece that synthesizes five widely different traditions from across the geographical and ethnic spectrum of Jewish communities—comprehensively embodies the band’s artistic aspirations, serving as a conscious and explicit metaphor for the social ideals and artistic possibilities associated with the current revival of *piyyut*.

#### CASE STUDY: TAFILLALT’S “YEDID NEFESH”

On March 31, 2011, I heard Tafillalt perform at the Stanmore Synagogue in North London before an audience of about one hundred people. The atmosphere in the synagogue’s large hall was unusually intimate as the trio had decided to perform on the floor in front of the stage, inviting listeners to sit close to them in an outward-radiating semicircle. In the following weeks, I interviewed the band members in person and via e-mail about their personal connections to the *piyyut* revival.

Tafillalt takes its name from the city of the same name in Morocco, the home of the rabbi Yisrael Abuhatzera (1890–1984), an important Sephardic kabbalist and spiritual leader. The word Tafillalt, furthermore, evokes the Hebrew word for prayer, *tefilah*. The band’s lineup consists of Yair Harel (vocals and percussion), Yoni Niv (cello and vocals), and Nori Jacoby (viola, melodica, and vocals). Nori and Yoni are both of Ashkenazi descent, while Yair has a mixed background; his American-born mother is Ashkenazi, while his father is Mizrahi, of Iraqi descent. While their core repertoire comes from the *piyyut* tradition, all of the band members have also contributed original music and arrangements.

Tafillalt was founded in 2000 as a subset of the Ha’Oman Hai (lit. “the living artist”) collective, a group of young improvising musicians who had gathered around Professor Andre Hajdu in Jerusalem. Hajdu, a charismatic Hungarian-born educator and composer, was interested in applying the ethnomusicologically informed compositional approach of his teacher, Zoltán Kodály, to traditional Jewish music. Under Hajdu’s guidance, Jacoby, Niv, and Harel participated in numerous projects centered around Hassidic tunes as well as Talmudic texts and religious themes. These experiences inspired them to further explore the world of Jewish music and in particular of *piyyut*.

Jacoby and Niv studied with Hajdu at the Jerusalem High School for Arts and Sciences and continued their studies, in composition and cello, respectively, at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance. Harel, who met Hajdu at an improvisation seminar, had studied Persian percussion with Jamshid Chemirani in Paris and Andalusian music with the renowned cantors Rabbi Meir Attyah and Rabbi Haim Louk in Israel. Currently, Jacoby teaches music and technology at Bar-Ilan University, Niv is the music director of Beit Tfila Congregation in Tel Aviv, and Harel is the director of the Invitation to Piyyut website and the Piyyut Festival.

In 2009, Tafillalt released its eponymously titled debut CD on John Zorn's Tzadik label. More than half of the album's tracks are *piyyutim*, the remaining tracks relating to prayer in various ways. Notable among these is a theatrical group composition inspired by an abandoned letter from a drug addict to God, found in the streets of Jerusalem. Other works include a contrapuntal seventeen-piece brass ensemble composition inspired by a sixteenth-century *piyyut* by Rabbi Israel Najara and a cover version of Israeli avant-gardist Ronen Shapira's setting of "Prayer," a poem by nineteenth-century Greek poet Constantine Cavafy.

One of the most remarkable tracks on the record is a version of the *piyyut* "Yedid Nefesh," incorporating settings from five different diasporas: Moroccan, Babylonian, Indian, Brezhlev Hassidic, and Ashkenazi. The synthesis of these traditions was Harel's idea, flowing out of his experiences leading workshops with Kehillot Sharot. An important predecessor in this regard is ethnic rocker Ehud Banai's song "Rehov Agas Achad" (lit. "One Pear Street"), which combined melodies from the Persian and Brezhlev traditions framed by Banai singing of his memories as a child in Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup> Like Banai, Harel was interested in the aesthetic and symbolic potential of combining diverse *piyyut* settings and, in particular, the challenge of exploring and moving between very different musical traditions in a single piece. The arrangement itself was worked out during the rehearsal process by the three band members together as they tried out different orders and transitions between the songs. They consider their version of the pieces a joint composition and emphasize that it is still open to further development and variation.

The *piyyut* "Yedid Nefesh" can be traced to Rabbi Elazar Ezkari, a sixteenth-century Sephardic philosopher and mystic from Safed, Israel. This popular *piyyut*, expressing love for God, is traditionally sung at liminal, apparently mystical moments such as the entrance and exit of Shabbat, at midnight, or during prayers at sunrise. Tafillalt's manager, Amira Ehrlich, sees "Yedid Nefesh" as "the epitome of the Jewish spiritual experience," noting that even within the same cultural tradition, different settings of the *piyyut* are sung to mark the different spiritual phases, such as at the entrance and exit of Shabbat (Ehrlich 2011). The Invitation to Piyyut website docu-

ments no fewer than twenty-four different settings from throughout the Middle East, Europe, and Asia.<sup>8</sup>

For Harel, Tafillalt's version of "Yedid Nefesh" exemplifies a central goal of the *piyyut* revival: that of giving equal space to different ethnic traditions while leaving room for a personal artistic interpretation. Harel emphasizes that true identity can only be created when people maintain continuity with their own traditions. In his own words, "This continuity is complicated, as the ethnicities have already become very mixed in Israel, and people don't see themselves as exclusively Iraqi-Israeli, Moroccan-Israeli, etc. Because of this, the continuity has to be inclusive, not just ethnic-specific. In returning to *piyyut* as a living tradition, inclusivity is part of the important role that contemporary artists can play in the meeting of various ethnic traditions."

Jacoby sees himself as part of a larger return to cultural Judaism, a movement in which cultural expression serves as an alternative to secular Israeli identity or to orthodox religious Judaism. For him, "Yedid Nefesh" expresses "an essential aspect of the experience of living in an extremely multicultural environment, in which different types of music jostle with each other in rapid succession." He feels that working with *piyyut* allows him to mediate between the values and principles of Western art music and his contemporary experience as a Jew living in the Middle East, particularly in Jerusalem.

Reviewers have singled out the success of "Yedid Nefesh" in synthesizing diverse Jewish musical traditions. Eyal Hareuveni, writing in *All About Jazz*, notes that the piece "skips organically between Middle-Eastern musical traditions—Moroccan and Iraqi—and Ashkenazi traditions with gentle Indian overtones" (Hareuveni 2009). And, indeed, while Tafillalt respects the stylistic markers of different cultures by deploying various scales, maqams, vocal ornaments, and instruments, these considerations are mediated by the band's own sound and aesthetic. Harel considers "Yedid Nefesh" to be a new composition and not an arrangement, an opinion echoed by Niv, who describes it as "a new piece built from the untraditional arrangement of traditional materials." Jacoby notes that the character of the different versions ended up dictating the form and dynamic arc of the whole.

The following discussion is based on the version of "Yedid Nefesh" that appears on the band's record rather than from their live performance in London, although according to the musicians, the two are similar in almost every respect. I begin by describing the musical arrangement of the five different *piyyut* settings amalgamated by Tafillalt. Following this, I explore how Tafillalt's discourse of musical inclusivity is mirrored in a performance that produces specific cultural and political statements through the strategic synthesis of five heterogeneous *piyyut* settings into a single new work.

Tafillalt's version begins with the Moroccan *piyyut* sung quietly by Harel over a drone held by Niv on the cello. Harel decorates the structural notes of

the melody through filling in intervals with repetitions, scalar figures, and vocal ornaments, as shown in figure 9.1.

After an additional repetition of the melody, an instrumental canon introduces the second *piyyut*, a melody from the Babylonian tradition.<sup>9</sup> The band changes their accompanying texture from heavily drone based to a more percussive sound with short, dry bowstrokes and active percussion, emphasizing the words “*nafshi cholat ahavatcha*” (lit. “my soul is lovesick for you”) in the repeat of the melody. (See figure 9.2.)

The rising energy is reflected in increasing percussion and faster accompaniment, leading to a new melodic figure that soon reveals itself as the third version of “*Yedid Nefesh*”: a *piyyut* from the Bene Israel community of Bombay. In Tafillalt’s arrangement, the melody is repeated over and over by the voice and the strings to the ever more active accompaniment of the drums. Both the strings and the vocalist shift registers with every repeat, increasing the dramatic tension. An illusion of Indian instrumental music is created through foregrounding the melodica and the sound of percussive handclaps. The strings further contribute by increasing their volume toward the end of each phrase in imitation of the Indian harmonium’s bellow action. (See figure 9.3.)

After eight increasingly ecstatic iterations of the verse, Niv, singing a fragment of the fourth stanza of the Breslov (Hassidic) version of the *piyyut* in an Ashkenazi cantorial style, dramatically cuts off Harel and the strings. Niv emphasizes the Hassidic style of ornamenting, adding *krekhstn*, the sobbing sound that cantors often include in their prayers. These are indicated with short diagonal lines between the notes in the transcription in figure 9.4.

Ye did ne fesh Av a ha rach  
man Me shoch av dach el  
re zo nach ye le le

Figure 9.1. Vocal line of Tafillalt’s “Yedid Nefesh”: Moroccan melody. Tafillalt 2009.

The Breslov fragment swiftly flows into the last *piyyut*, which reveals its European origins through regular four-bar phrases, emphasized by pizzicato accompaniment in the cello. All three musicians sing: Niv and Jacoby deliver the basic melody in a straightforward European concert fashion overlaid by Harel’s vocal style featuring recognizably Mizrahi ornamentation. (See figure 9.5.)

Ki ye e rav lo ye di du  
tach mi no fet tzuf ve chol ve chol am ha  
dur na eh ziv ha o lam

Figure 9.2. Vocal line of Tafillalt’s “Yedid Nefesh”: Babylonian melody. Tafillalt 2009.

Ye did ne fesh a ha rach man me  
shoch av dach el re tzo nach

Figure 9.3. Vocal line of Tafillalt’s “Yedid Nefesh”: Bombay melody. Tafillalt 2009.





Figure 9.4. Vocal line of Tafillalt's "Yedid Nefesh": Breslov melody. Tafillalt 2009.

Figure 9.5. Vocal line of Tafillalt's "Yedid Nefesh": mainstream Ashkenazi melody. Tafillalt 2009.

Beyond the ideological coexistence displayed by the medley-like nature of the piece, Tafillalt's arrangement brings out unexpected parallels between the settings through a number of parameters, including ordering, modal scale (*maqām*), and motive. The five-part rhetorical arc emphasizes the quiet, serene character of the first (Moroccan) and fifth (Ashkenazi) settings, both of which encompass the range of an octave. The second and fourth melodies, on the other hand, have a range of a sixth and a more declamatory character, tending to circle around tonal centers in the manner of liturgical cantillation. The third melody is briefer, with the narrow range of a fourth, and an ecstatic effect that increases with repetition. Together these relationships create the overall palindromic form as shown in figure 9.6, revealing that geographically distinct traditions have developed settings with a certain degree of similarity in affect.

Moreover, the carefully planned harmonic journey between the different modal scales parallels the formal palindrome of Tafillalt's arrangement. The original Moroccan *piyyut* is based on a melody from a *nūba* (lit. "suite") in the *maqām raml al-maya*, but Tafillalt performs the melody in D-Dorian. The *maqām* of the Babylonian *piyyut* is also altered: Harel replaces the half-flat B of the original *nawā* with a B-natural, adding a half-sharp C. These harmonic changes prepare the ear for the Indian version, which features both a C-sharp (in the actual *piyyut*) and an implied B-flat in the instrumental accompaniment. This mode contains two intervals of an augmented second, or three half steps (E-flat to F-sharp and [B-flat] to C-sharp), thus anticipating the minor modality of the Breslov melody immediately following it. Finally, lowering the fourth degree (a sharp) of the Breslov scale leads us to the E minor of the Ashkenazi version.

By geographic coincidence, the harmonic distance between the modal scales reflects the ordering of the *piyyutim* in a clear geographic arc, stretching from Morocco through Iraq to India, back through the Ukraine, and returning to Poland. This is shown in figure 9.7: if we just look at the intervals in increments of whole steps, we can see a movement from Dorian (1, 1/2, 1, 1, 1, 1/2, 1) to the *maqām* (3/4, 3/4, 1, 1, 1, 3/4, 3/4), then to the *raga* (1, 1/2, 1, 1, 1, 1/2, 1) to the *maqām* (3/4, 3/4, 1, 1, 1, 3/4, 3/4), then to the *raga* (1/2, 1, 1/2, 1/2, 1, 1/2, 1, 1/2, 1/2), to the Breslov (1, 1, 1, 1/2, 1/2, 1/2, 1, 1), and to the minor scale (1, 1/2, 1, 1, 1/2, 1, 1). Dashed arrows indicate quarter-tone changes between the scales, solid arrows indicate half-tone changes, the curved thick arrow indicates the new tonal center, while intervals of three half-tones (augmented seconds) are enclosed by boxes.

Thus, the E minor scale at the end of the Ashkenazi melody is a permutation and transposition of D-Dorian, the scale of the Moroccan melody that opened the piece. The Babylonian *maqām* differs from the Moroccan by two quarter tones, which together make up a half step, the sum of the difference between the Breslov and the Ashkenazi scale. The Indian mode is the most different from both the Babylonian *maqām* (four altered notes with a total alternation of one-and-a-half tones) and also from the Breslov (three altered notes, a total of two whole-step differences).

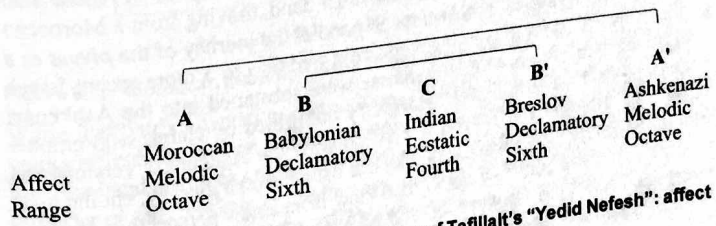


Figure 9.6. Overall structure of the vocal line of Tafillalt's "Yedid Nefesh": affect and range. Tafillalt 2009.

Figure 9.7 shows five staves of music, each representing a different cultural setting: Moroccan, Babylonian, Indian, Breslov, and Ashkenazi. Each staff has a sequence of notes with rhythmic markings above them. Arrows and boxes indicate relationships between notes across the different settings, showing how a single note in one setting corresponds to a different note in another.

Figure 9.7. Relationships between the different melodic settings. Tafillalt 2009.

Looking at the gradual transformation of modal language throughout “Yedid Nefesh,” we can speculate that the specific arrangements of Diaspora elements in the piece metaphorically reflect the dissemination of Andalusian *piyyut* across the Jewish world. On the other hand, moving from a Moroccan *maqām* to an Ashkenazi scale seems to parallel the journey of the *piyyut* as a genre, from its roots in a living Sephardic tradition to a more recent Israeli cultural past in which Arabic elements were subsumed into the Ashkenazi hegemony.<sup>10</sup> This assumption was partly confirmed by Harel, who emphasized that the decision to end the piece with the Ashkenazi version was purely pragmatic: “We wanted to take our listeners on a journey, ending up at a familiar place which they could then view from a new perspective. Besides, everyone knows the last version, and people often sing along.” Jacoby adds, “Hearing the five tunes in succession with modern orchestration is not so

easy, and we have to make sure that we carry the audience with us. Ending with a recognizable tune helps convey the feeling of community.”

The piece is further strengthened by the transformation of motives from one *piyyut* into the texture of other *piyyutim*. The accompanying canon leading into the Babylonian melody relates directly to a phrase from the Moroccan melody, as shown in figure 9.8. The first four notes of the Moroccan melody also appear in the melodic’s counterpoint over the Ashkenazi version, shown in figure 9.9.

Moroccan melody

Babylonian accompaniment figure

Figure 9.8. Motivic relationships between the Moroccan melody and the Babylonian accompaniment. Tafillalt 2009.

Moroccan

Vocals

Ashkenazi

Melodica

Vocals

Figure 9.9. Moroccan quotation in the Ashkenazi accompaniment. Tafillalt 2009.

While Tafillalt’s adaptation of traditional materials in the creation of new works reflects its interest in refashioning contemporary Jewish musical culture, the band also seeks to actively involve its audiences in the movement to preserve *piyyut*. Niv relates, “After we perform ‘Yedid Nefesh,’ we usually ask the audiences how many of the versions they’re familiar with. Most people know the last version, but it’s rare to find people who can identify the

other settings." Indeed, at the Stanmore synagogue that evening, I witnessed this myself: after performing "Yedid Nefesh," Harel asked people to name the traditions corresponding to the different settings in the piece. While the Ashkenazi version was quite familiar, no one in the audience could name the Moroccan, Iraqi, or Breslov versions, although one man correctly identified the origin of the Indian *piyyut*. This is perhaps not unexpected, as cultural familiarity is contextualized by the geographic location and ethnic background of the congregation itself. However, Harel notes that it is highly unusual for any given audience member to know more than two versions of the *piyyut*; even when the band performs in central Jerusalem where, within a radius of a kilometer, some twenty to thirty different versions are sung in various synagogues with different ethnic affiliations (Harel 2006). This is because in Israel, people tend to be overwhelmingly acquainted with the Ashkenazi version, as well as possibly the version sung by their local ethnic community.

The band members see preservation and dissemination as part of Tafillalt's cultural mission. The band often conducts *piyyut* seminars throughout Israel and has led workshops at Jewish congregations in Boston and New York City and at Connecticut's Wesleyan University. It is also committed to bringing *piyyut* to new venues and audiences, such as its recent performance at the third annual Lviv Klezmer Fest in Lviv, Ukraine, where it stood out in the context of a strongly Eastern European lineup. In a review of the group's CD release concert in Jerusalem, Jonah Mandel notes, "Projects such as Tafillalt do justice to what used to be almost popular forms of music and expression by returning them to the public with a smile and an openness to contemporary musical forms and personal expression" (Mandel 2010). In Jacoby's words, "So much of the Israeli experience draws upon diasporic sources. Perhaps we can even give something back by introducing our own interpretation or blend of musical sources and taking them to new audiences, both in Israel and elsewhere."

### PIYYUT AS SOCIAL MOVEMENT

*Piyyut* is part of a larger social movement in Israel and in the Jewish world in general, as public discourse demystifies the social construction of binary oppositions such as secular versus religious and Ashkenazi versus Mizrahi. Many third- and fourth-generation Israelis are looking for sources of identity that do not depend solely on nationalistic ideals or the geographic and historical context of their grandparents' immigration. Singing, hearing, and supporting *piyyut* facilitates the expression of a more heterogeneous mode of being Israeli; Jacoby notes that community *piyyut* singers enact "a virtual meeting with their imaginary forefathers, in the sense that the musical heri-

tage they practice is not necessarily linked to their actual ethnic descent." The musical expression of this ideal can take the form of synthesis, renewal, or reinterpretation of traditional material, as well as combinations of these or other strategies. For example, a somewhat different yet equally personal approach to *piyyut* can be found in Israeli rockers Beri Sakharof and Rea Mochiach's "Adumei HaSfatot" (lit. "Red Lips"), released in 2009, which combines the sounds of Middle Eastern music, Klezmer, electronica, spoken word, and rock in order to create perhaps the most unexpected concept album of the past decade: new settings of poems by the eleventh-century Spanish poet and philosopher Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gvirol.

Harel sees the revival of *piyyut* as directly addressing the historic imbalance in cultural representation between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi music. In the decades around the founding of the State of Israel, immigrants, especially those coming from Arabic-speaking lands, were encouraged to suppress their ethnic identity in favor of mainstream Zionist ideals and aesthetics (Regev and Serrousi 2004: 20). The social and cultural encounter of Kehillot Sharot in effect offers an alternative to the *shira betzibur* (lit. "public singing") of canonical Zionist folk song repertoire, or *Shirei Eretz Israel* (lit. "Songs of the Land of Israel"), a tradition that is still practiced today. Even in present-day Israel, consumers of popular music in an Arabic style (*Musika Mizrahit*) still tend to be identified with people of a non-European ethnic background (Nocke 2009: 63), while in comparison, the more Western-influenced Israeli rock style is considered somehow to be more authentically "Israeli."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the public secular singing of *piyyut* has important political resonances.

In addition, *piyyut* rectifies the underrepresentation of Judaic culture, both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi, which is barely on the periphery of Israel's Western-influenced popular music scene. Thus *piyyut* singing through Kehillot Sharot constitutes a site of resistance to the secular Zionist ideology that shaped Israeli cultural discourse during the first few decades of statehood.<sup>12</sup> However, unlike other earlier musical resistance movements in Israel, the contemporary *piyyut* revival has been embraced with enthusiasm by mainstream artists, scholars, and Jews of all ethnicities.<sup>13</sup> Rather than actively struggling against a dominant political ideology, *piyyut* seeks to redress the previous erasure of a migrant cultures, particularly those of Asia and North Africa but also the traditional cultures of both Sephardi and Ashkenazi European Jewry. At the same time, *piyyut* singing offers secular Jews a way to connect to Jewish tradition without participating in overtly religious practice. Moreover, the secular environment of Kehillot Sharot sidesteps the religious prohibition on public female singing as the study groups consist of both men and women. Thus the contemporary *piyyut* revival may be seen as paving the way toward a new era of pan-Jewish culture, one in which different ethnic traditions coexist and cross-fertilize each other.

The surge of interest in *piyyut* can be both seen and heard as young, predominantly nonobservant people are increasingly finding space to perform their Jewish identity in public, whether by listening to rock, jazz, or folk-style versions of traditional *piyyutim* on the radio or in concerts or through joining community singing groups. Niv sees this as “reflecting the spirit of the times, uniting modern and ethnic languages.” For Harel, *piyyut* is related to the search for a multicultural and inclusive version of contemporary Judaism, both in Israel and in the world at large, based on the ability to create living connections to the knowledge and scholarship of past centuries. His current initiative, in partnership with the Bnei Jeshurun (lit. “Sons of Jeshurun”) congregation in New York City, Invitation to Piyut North America, involves bringing these traditions to the awareness of the broader American Jewish community. In November 2010, Invitation to Piyut North America and Bnei Jeshurun launched a four-day retreat for over eighty North American rabbis, cantors, educators, and musicians to study and sing *piyyutim* in Baltimore. According to Rabbi Marcelo Bronstein, “The retreat is a first step in a long term vision to introduce communities across the country, and in other countries as well, to the wealth of the *piyyutim*” (Matalon 2010). Rabbi Rolando Matalon, who is codirecting Invitation to Piyut North America with Harel, says, “The melodies happen to be beautiful, and the holy texts happen to be very deep and very beautiful . . . but it’s about a new way of relating to prayer” (ibid.). For Rabbi Sharon Brous, the musical experience “blows open the doors of a world that I knew very little about” (ibid.). Exporting Invitation to Piyut’s pan-diasporic model to congregations around the world allows contemporary Israel to serve as a nexus of creation, cultural mixing and synthesis, and spiritual renewal in the domain of *piyyut* singing. This in itself is an organic continuation of the traditional role of *piyyut* as musical dialogue both within Judaism and with different local cultures.

The *piyyut* revival offers artists, music lovers, and religious leaders a framework for sharing ideas about the renewal of Jewish musical culture. While organizations ranging from Kehillot Sharot to Invitation to Piyut North America provide access to a more diverse sacred musical culture, artists from across the stylistic spectrum use *piyyutim* to explore their wider Jewish, ethnic, and creative identities. In a piece like Tafillalt’s arrangement of “Yedid Nefesh,” stylistic juxtaposition clearly emphasizes the rich cultural cross-fertilization between Jews and non-Jews throughout various diasporic communities across the past millennia. In an age of polarizing national politics, increasing secularization, and decline in Jewish consciousness, *piyyut* has an essential role to play in creating a multiethnic model of Jewish culture that fulfills both sacred and secular aspirations.

## NOTES

1. My transliteration of the term *piyyut* follows that used elsewhere in this volume except when referencing the organization Invitation to Piyut.
2. This has historical reasons, as religious Jewish and Arabic musical traditions were perceived as incompatible with Israel’s largely secular Western orientation during the 1930s–1950s. Galit Saada-Ophir describes the encounter of the Jews of European origin (Ashkenazim) with Jews from Arabic and Islamic countries (Mizrahim) as essentially Orientalistic, noting that the Ashkenazim treated the Mizrahim as “a pre-modern group lacking in education and qualification for life in modern society [justifying] the geographical, economical, social, and cultural subordination processes Mizrahim underwent upon their arrival in Israel” (Saada-Ophir 2007: 718).
3. Historically, the reforms brought about by the emergence of the eighteenth-century *Haskalah* (lit. “Enlightenment”) movement in Germany saw a substantial reduction in the number of *piyyutim* used in religious services (Kalib 2002: 67). Moreover, within the Zionist culture of the early nineteenth century, religious traditions were further limited and often replaced by newly invented secular and nationalistic customs. One such example is the creation of the body of secular Zionist folksongs called *Shirei Eretz Israel* (lit. “Songs of the Land of Israel”), which was encouraged to replace preexisting musical diaspora traditions during the decades around the founding of the State of Israel (Saada-Ophir 2007: 718). Almost all of these new contributions were created by composers trained in the Western classical tradition (Hirshberg 1995: 147–49).
4. The emergence of the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow Coalition, a social justice movement consisting mostly of second-generation Mizrahi Jews, originally founded to protest the unequal distribution of public lands in Israel, has presented an important meeting ground for various activists and intellectuals interested in expanding the multicultural component of Israeli identity. Prominent Mizrahi intellectual Sami Shalom Chetrit locates the emergence of the movement within the wider context of what he terms the “New Mizrahim.” According to Chetrit, they “do not view Israeli society through the Zionist dichotomy of Arabs and Jews, nor in terms of Right and Left. . . . [They] want none of the Ashkenazi Zionist collective memory and seek to form a Mizrahi collective memory from which a Mizrahi consciousness and alternative vision for the State of Israel will emerge” (Chetrit 2000: 59–60).
5. The post-Zionism movement arose in the early 1990s in response to the work of the “new historians” who relied on newly declassified documents to question a number of deeply held assumptions about the history of the State of Israel (Silberstein 2008: 2). According to political scientist Ephraim Nimni, “the controversial claim at the heart of post-Zionist arguments is that Israel should develop a type of civic identity and an institutional framework oriented to the universal values of liberal democracy. No ethnicity must be ontologically or institutionally privileged over any other” (Nimni 2003: 2).
6. Boaz Huss compares the contemporary revival of the “kabbalistic and hasidic traditions that were marginalized by [the] hegemonic Zionist culture in Israel” to the New Age movement’s valorization of practices from various marginalized cultures, such as Native American, Oriental, and pagan (Huss 2007: 118).
7. Another predecessor and influence is Shlomo Bar, who led the band Habrera Hativevet (lit. “the Natural Gathering”) throughout the 1980s–1990s, featuring Indian violinist and sitarist Samson Kehimkar, guitarist Miguel Herstein, bassist Israel Borochoy, and Bar on percussion and vocals. Bar’s music synthesized elements from different Jewish and non-Jewish cultures and dealt explicitly with social and political themes (Seroussi 2012).
8. Invitation to Piyut website, accessed 25 June 2015, <http://www.piyut.org.il/cgi-bin/search.pl?Expression=yedid+Nefesh&lang=en>.
9. The name “Babylonian” refers to traditions from the region known today as Iraq; however, as Iraqi Jews trace the origins of their settlement to the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century BCE, they are generally referred to as the Babylonian Diaspora.
10. My thanks to Sarah Weiss for pointing me in this direction.
11. Motti Regev suggests that by the 1980s, Israeli rock had replaced *Shirei Eretz Israeli* as a hegemonic expression of Israeliness (Regev 2004: 192).

12. Indeed, Meir Bouzaglo describes the popularity of Kehillot Sharot as constituting a veritable revolution within Israeli society (Bouzaglo 2013).
13. Compare, for example, with the marginalization of *musikat kassetot* (lit. "cassette music") during the 1970s and 1980s in Israel (see Waterman 2006; Regev 1996).

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