

## Pizmonim

*Pizmonim* are Hebrew texts set to Arabic melodies and tunes.<sup>1</sup> The earliest use of *pizmonim* can be traced to Aleppo, Syria, and, after mass migration of the Syrian Jews to other parts of the world, including New York City, Buenos Aires, and Mexico City, they brought with them the traditional *pizmonim*, which they continue to use today.<sup>2</sup> *Pizmonim* have special meaning, importance, and memories for Syrian Jews around the world, yet these songs continue to change and develop under the influence of the new music of more modern generations.

For some Jewish groups, singing is only permitted in the sacred language of Hebrew. Other languages, as well as secular songs, are thought to be offensive and bring the listeners to do evil and sin.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, religious Hebrew texts were set to secular music. According to Rabbi Kassin, chief rabbi of the Syrian community in Brooklyn, “It is necessary to establish a foundation of holy words...in order to lead the spark from the realm of evil to the realm of holiness... [It is an obligation] to make clear the holy sparks. So it is with holy songs.”<sup>4</sup> The purpose of the Hebrew text is to draw people away from wrongdoing and bring them closer to G-d. These melodies are not only for the people, but the sacred texts are also meant to arouse G-d and bring Him to notice his people singing.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, *pizmonim* are created to allow the Syrian Jews to sing melodies and get closer to G-d.

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<sup>1</sup> Habermann, Abraham Meir. “Pizmon.” *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007, Vol. 16. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Gale. Brooklyn College Lib., Brooklyn, NY. 15 September 2008. <<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/start.do?p=GVRL&u=cuny-broo39667>> p. 210.

<sup>2</sup> Cabasso, Isaac, Personal Interview, 19 October 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Shelemay, Kay Kaufman. *Let Jasmine Rain Down: Song and Remembrance among Syrian Jews*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998. p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Kassin, Jacob S., Chief Rabbi. “Introduction to Shrem,” *Let Jasmine Rain Down: Song and Remembrance among Syrian Jews*, by Kay Kaufman Shelemay. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> Shelemay, *op. cit.*, p. 27-28.

The first *pizmonim* were composed hundreds of years ago. Some of them are lost but others are still remembered to this day. An outstanding composer of *pizmonim* was Rabbi Raphael Taboush, a rabbi from Aleppo from 1873 to 1919, who not only composed many *pizmonim*, but also restored those that had been lost, and rejuvenated the use of *pizmonim* in the Syrian Jewish communities. Raphael Taboush was blind and someone else was designated to write down his compositions. He would go to Arab weddings, coffeehouses, and other social events to listen to the new Arabic songs.<sup>6</sup> Raphael Taboush gained respect amongst prominent singers and when he entered the room “they used to say, ‘Here comes a thief, thief of songs.’”<sup>7</sup> Raphael Taboush was known as a ‘thief’ because he would take melodies from other singers and add Hebrew text, thus changing it to a holy melody. Taboush had a *pizmon* for every occasion, whether a wedding, bar-mitzvah, or simple social gathering. Not only that, but Taboush was able to create new *pizmonim* on demand. The *pizmonim* transmission continued with his students Moses Ashear, Hayyim Tawil, and Eliyahu Menaged.<sup>8</sup>

Rabbi Raphael Taboush had a close relationship with his students. He taught them his knowledge of *pizmonim*, Arabic music, and Hebrew poetry. Moses Ashear was adopted by Raphael Taboush as a young child, having lost his parents. Ashear was thus taught music, poetry, and the love for *pizmonim*. In 1912, Moses Ashear immigrated to New York, where he lived first in Manhattan and later in Brooklyn. He brought with him the *pizmonim* from Aleppo that he had learned from Taboush, and composed many new *pizmonim* as well. Moses Ashear would listen to recordings of new Arabic songs to learn new melodies and thereby create new *pizmonim*. While in Brooklyn, Ashear was a

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>7</sup> Kaire, Hyman as interviewed by Kay Kaufman Shelemay, Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>8</sup> Shelemay, op. cit., p. 32.

constant reference to past *pizmonim* as well as a bridge to the new. He would help to identify some forgotten songs and teach others in order to continue the transmission of *pizmonim*. It is said that Moses Ashear died trying to remember the melody of a song while having chest pains.<sup>9</sup>

Raphael Taboush also had a close relationship with other students, including Hayyim Tawil and Eliyahu Menaged. Taboush was so close to Hayyim Tawil that he composed a *pizmon* for Tawil's wedding. Hayyim Tawil left Aleppo in 1912 and moved to Mexico City, where he taught *pizmonim* and carried on the transmission of these songs. Like Moses Ashear and Hayyim Tawil, Eliyahu Menaged left Aleppo, moving to New York in 1912. Eliyahu Menaged was also a major figure in transmission of *pizmonim* and had a unique ability to improvise. With the help of these three students, *pizmonim* were preserved and transferred to different parts of the world from Aleppo.<sup>10</sup>

*Pizmonim* are transmitted through oral and written tradition. Many people learned these melodies through repeated exposure to them. They would listen to them over and over until they knew the song and were able to sing it. According to Joseph Saff, a congregant with knowledge of *pizmonim*, "Singers usually get together and sing songs, and that was the beginning of my hearing them. And we get together Saturdays, and one person would sing one song or another, and we all would repeat it, and we picked it up from each other more or less."<sup>11</sup> Repetition played a large role in spreading these melodies. Usually these gatherings, in which these songs were sung, were on Saturdays. The Sabbath was a significant day when cantors and congregants would gather before

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 33-34.

<sup>11</sup> Saff, Joseph as interviewed by Kay Kaufman Shelemay, Ibid., p. 36.

and after the synagogue prayers to sing *pizmonim*. During these get-togethers men would attend and learn new melodies, as well as sing the old *pizmonim*.<sup>12</sup>

The oral method of transmission has been a prominent technique, however, the twentieth century has introduced the use of written transmission, specifically because of memory loss. Many *pizmonim* were forgotten or lost over time, but now melodies that have survived are written down and recorded to preserve them for the future. Indeed there are some members of the community who cannot use the written books but stick to the oral methods because this is how they were taught. Nevertheless, it is these written publications that are increasingly being used. The most important publication of *pizmonim* texts is Sheer Ushbahah Hallel Ve-Zimrah, compiled by cantor Gabriel Shrem, in 1964.<sup>13</sup>

Cantor Gabriel Shrem used two existing books as context for writing his own text. He used Rabbi Rafael Taboush's collection of *pizmonim* from 1920/1921 called Sefer Shir Ushevahah. The second book used was Moses Ashear's collection of Sefer Hallel Ve-Zimrah from 1928.<sup>14</sup> Gabriel Shrem explains, "I first put the *pizmonim* of Hakham Raphael Taboush and afterwards Hakham Moshe Ashear (Alav Hashalom [May he rest in peace]) and then the additional ones. See I didn't make it like a salad, you know."<sup>15</sup> With the help of Gabriel Shrem's book, Shir Ushbahah Hallel Ve-Zimrah, over five-hundred of the *pizmonim* texts are preserved.<sup>16</sup> Gabriel Shrem gives a small introduction on

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<sup>12</sup> Sutton, Joseph A. D., Aleppo Chronicles: The Story of the Unique Sephardeem of the Ancient Near East – in Their Own Words, p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> Sutton, Joseph A. D., Magic Carpet: Aleppo-in-Flatbush: The Story of a Unique Ethnic Jewish Community, p. 211.

<sup>14</sup> Shelemay, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>15</sup> Shrem, Gabriel as interviewed by Kay Kaufman Shelemay, Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>16</sup> Sutton, Magic Carpet, p. 211.

*pizmonim* as well as a foreword referring to the contributions of Raphael Taboush and Moses Ashear. As Shrem writes on the title page:

Sheer Ushbahah Hallel Ve-Zimrah. To perpetuate the memory of the most famous liturgical poets. Praise and blessing for the most holy of them, R. Raphael Antebi Taboush, and to his second in rank, the sweet singer of Israel, R. Moses Ashear ha-Kohen. They succeeded, with the Holy Spirit, to compose holy songs which are sweeter even than honey and the honeycomb. And they expanded the frontier of song by raising up many students: both cantors and poets. May their memory be revered forever. Amen.<sup>17</sup>

Most members of the community feel that Gabriel Shrem's book has helped the transmission of *pizmonim*. It is believed that the interest in *pizmonim* was diminishing in the community and this book made it easier to find the songs, read the words with the help of vowels, and learn the melodies. In addition, frequent reprinting of the book allowed the community to revise and add newly composed songs. This book was not only for the Brooklyn community but was sold worldwide to other Syrian and Sephardic Jews in Mexico and Jerusalem. Therefore, Sheer Ushbahah Hallel Ve-Zimrah connects the Jews who study *pizmonim* around the world.<sup>18</sup>

Modern technology has also been tapped to help spread the knowledge of *pizmonim*. Many websites have been created, specifically, a website known as [www.pizmonim.org](http://www.pizmonim.org) was created by Gabriel Shrem's grandson, David Betesh. This website describes the life of Gabriel Shrem, contains the full content of Sheer Ushbahah Hallel Ve-Zimrah, as well as an extensive description of *pizmonim*. Also, David Betesh is trying to preserve the *pizmonim* by recording each one. He calls on members of the community who may know these melodies to record them and thus add to the growing

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<sup>17</sup> Shrem, Gabriel, ed. 1988. Sheer Ushbahah Hallel Ve-Zimrah 5<sup>th</sup> ed., in Let Jasmine Rain Down: Song and Remembrance among Syrian Jews, by Kay Kaufman Shelemay. p. 39.

<sup>18</sup> Shelemay, op. cit., p. 42.

list of known *pizmonim*. This website allows people to learn about these songs as well as listen to them.<sup>19</sup> Cantor Isaac Cabasso said, “This website is fantastic!” and feels that the website is an excellent tool for the advancement of this art form.<sup>20</sup>

*Pizmonim* are taught and learned in two different settings, specifically the synagogue and home. These melodies are performed on many different occasions in the community. Some of these events are formal and religious while others are informal, secular, and intended for smaller events. Usually someone would hear these *pizmonim* during synagogue services, life cycle ceremonies, such as a wedding or bar mitzvah, a domestic setting, or a party. There are some *pizmonim* that were composed in honor of specific individuals as a musical marker to celebrate a special life event. They are performed and created by men, but women play an important role in their transmission, for women may sing or listen to these melodies on holidays or celebrations in the home, but it is specifically women who transfer these songs to their children.<sup>21</sup>

*Pizmonim* may refer to a specific person, place, or time. Many of them incorporate names of specific individuals, sometimes a person for whom the song was written, while in other cases the songs refer to the poet. Many use the person’s name as an acrostic, which is common in Jewish poetry, in general.<sup>22</sup> “Memorializing individuals in song also served literally to unite early twentieth century immigrants to Brooklyn with their ancestors in Aleppo.”<sup>23</sup> *Pizmonim* also connect individuals to a specific place or time period. The melodies borrowed for these songs came from the local popular Arabic music. Sometimes, a favorite melody was even requested for a *pizmon*. Therefore,

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<sup>19</sup> Betesh, David. “Sephardic Pizmonim Project.” 2002. 8 Dec. 2008. < [www.pizmonim.org](http://www.pizmonim.org) >.

<sup>20</sup> Cabasso, Isaac, Personal Interview.

<sup>21</sup> Sutton, *Aleppo Chronicles* p. 480-481.

<sup>22</sup> Sutton, *Magic Carpet*, p. 79.

<sup>23</sup> Shelemay, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

*pizmonim* are “able to bridge the differences of time and space between Syrian Jews from various communities.”<sup>24</sup> Through these songs people are able to remember the original places where Syrian Jews lived and feel a connection to that time.

Even though the Jews have been separated from Aleppo for a century, they still refer to themselves as Syrian Jews, and have a strong Syrian identity. Emigration by rabbis and members of the spiritual elite occurred after World War I in part because they lost their prestige and influence on the community.<sup>25</sup> Later on, “after World War II the political and economic instability affecting Syria accelerated Jewish emigration to England, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, and the United States for many affluent or middle-class people. Thus the absolute number of poor Syrian Jews increased.”<sup>26</sup> However, most of the Jews left Syria by 1994, and only 150 Jews remained.<sup>27</sup>

Syrian Jews left to nearby Middle Eastern countries, especially Lebanon, but this was a temporary stop for many individuals, for later they continued to the New World. Some of the Halabi Jews, or Jews from Aleppo, left straight for the United States but it was difficult to enter the country. One reason was because of the strict quota system in 1924 that did not allow for many immigrants to enter the country. Another reason was because some were rejected for health reasons, and they were either sent back, or they went to settle in other areas, such as South America, Mexico City, or other places in Central America. The primary locations for Syrian Jews became New York City, Mexico

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>25</sup> Laskier, Michael Menachem. “Syria and Lebanon,” in The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times, ed. Simon, Laskier, and Reguer. p. 321.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 324.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 325.

City, Buenos Aires, Rio, Sao Paolo, Caracas, and Jerusalem. As the Syrian Jews moved, they brought along with them the *pizmonim* tradition that still continues in these places.<sup>28</sup>

When the Jews felt the need to leave Aleppo they followed the pattern of “chain migration,” for Syrian Jews usually went to cities where they already had friends and family. They would join them in the new locations, and slowly other families would follow. Usually, the men would go first to check out the new location and find a way to earn a living before sending for the rest of the family. Families would settle together because they wanted to recreate the community that they had left in Syria.<sup>29</sup> It is important to stay in the community in order to have a social and religious life as a Syrian Jew. According to Sam Catton, a Brooklyn community member:

There are Syrian Jews all over the world, about 125,000. They are in New York City and a small group in California. There are two large congregations in Mexico City, they number about 30,000...Then in Argentina, they have a community as large as that in New York, about 25,000-30,000. They are very clannish. They live with each other, they know each other.<sup>30</sup>

Sam Catton discussed these numbers in an interview in October of 1984, more than 20 years ago, but since then the communities have continued to develop.

Even though these cities are geographically far apart, the communities share a connection and the interaction between the Syrian communities is possible for several reasons. One is because individuals travel between these cities on a frequent basis, going to visit family, friends, and other community members; this ensures the link between the different locations. Sometimes young boys are sent to other Syrian communities to study and learn from prominent rabbis and cantors. Another important connection is through

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 75-78.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>30</sup> Catton, Sam as interviewed by Kay Kaufman Shelemay, Ibid., p. 65.

marriage between members of the various Syrian communities. Also, the strong relationship that exists may be attributed to the circulating rabbis and cantors. It is groups of rabbis and cantors that transmit the *pizmonim* tradition from one community to the next, and they are thought of as “guarding the gate of the songs, of the *pizmonim*.”<sup>31</sup> Most importantly, the transmission of *pizmonim* between the different locations is largely because of the exchange of written collections of *pizmonim* and compact discs. These written collections and recordings can be copied, and are easy to exchange.<sup>32</sup> As a result, these large Syrian Jewish communities maintain strong ties and relationships with each other.

*Pizmonim* are based on Arabic music and melodies. Syrian Jews would go to concerts and coffeehouses to listen to the music. The two dominant Arab musicians whose songs were significant for *pizmonim* melodies are Umm Kulthum and Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab. Umm Kulthum was known for her voice that was “prettier than a nightingale.”<sup>33</sup> She sang beautiful old-fashioned Middle Eastern music. Syrian Jews, as well as Arabs, enjoyed her music and powerful songs. One cantor, Yehiel Nahari, describes how “to hear her sing ‘is to get drunk without beer.’”<sup>34</sup> Her songs are known for the use of a large orchestra in the background rather than a small ensemble. The love for her music reflects the use of many of her songs for *pizmonim*. Even after her death in 1975, Umm Kulthum remains one of the most popular female singers, so much so that Fairuz and Warda, singers from Lebanon, tried to follow in her path.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Shelemay, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

<sup>32</sup> Cabasso, Isaac, Personal Interview.

<sup>33</sup> Shelemay, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>34</sup> Nahari, Yehiel, as interviewed by Kay Kaufman Shelemay, *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>35</sup> Shelemay, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

Like Umm Kulthum, Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab was greatly admired. ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s music was like no other. As he composed his songs, he added innovations which gave his melodies a fresh twist. Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab was an Egyptian musician, and even though he did not have a direct connection to the Jews in Aleppo his music was widely known and appreciated. There were many stories passed down explaining the relationship of the Syrian Jews to ‘Abd al-Wahhab. One story claims that he thanked the Halabi Jews for being among the first to recognize his talent. While the truth to this story is uncertain, it is assured that Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s melodies had a strong influence on the composition of *pizmonim*.<sup>36</sup>

The Syrian Jews also adopted a major concept from the Arab musical system, namely the *maqamat*. A *maqam* refers to a specific tune, mode, or scale, used for melodies or *pizmonim*. *Maqamat* is an open system in music, thereby not limiting the number of different types of scales that can be created. However, the Syrian Jews identify eighteen *maqamat* that are used and identified in Gabriel Shrem’s book, Sheer Ushbahah Hallel Ve-Zimrah. Even though these various *maqamat* exist, it is believed in the Syrian community that only seven to nine of these modes are considered the major important ones. These are known to be the head of their family, or *fasilah* in Arabic, and are more significant than subsidiary *maqamat*. The principal eight *maqamat* include ‘*ajam, rast, mahur, nahawand, rahaw nawa, bayat, muhayyar, huseini, saba, hijaz, and seyga*.<sup>37</sup>

*Maqamat* are applied to many *pizmonim* on various occasions, but the main use of *maqamat* is for the Sabbath morning prayers. There are three sections in this prayer,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 112-113.

<sup>37</sup> Kligman, Mark. “The Bible, Prayer, and Maqam: Extra-Musical Associations of Syrian Jews.” *Ethnomusicology* Vol. 45 No. 3 (2001): 443-479. JSTOR. Sun Microsystems. Brooklyn College Lib., Brooklyn, NY. 15 September 2008. <[www.jstor.org/stable/852866](http://www.jstor.org/stable/852866)> p. 445-446.

namely *Shaharit*, the *Torah* reading, and *Musaf*. Every Sabbath a different *maqam* is applied to the morning liturgy, known as the “*maqam* of the day.” The *maqam* that is chosen is determined by the weekly *Torah* reading. Even though the Biblical reading is always read in *maqam seyga*, the theme of the reading determines the *maqam* that will be used for the *Shaharit* and *Musaf* prayers.<sup>38</sup> For example, *maqam rast*, which is “the father of the *maqamat*”, is applied to the prayers when the *Torah* portion is the first chapter of the Five Books of Moses.<sup>39</sup> Since *maqam rast* is considered the “first *maqam*” in Arab music it is applied to the first readings of the Five Books of Moses.<sup>40</sup>

The understanding and use of *maqamat* is mostly left to the cantors in the community, and the professional cantors’ knowledge allows them to lead the congregants to sing and chant melodies during prayers. The *hazan*, or cantor, begins the *Shaharit* portion with the “*maqam* of the day,” and introduces the *maqam* that is appropriate for that Sabbath to the congregation. The cantor may improvise on the same *maqam* or change to another *maqam*.<sup>41</sup> However, “If you sing *maqamat* you have to be very, very careful. How you connect the two different *maqamat* together, like two [pieces of] wallpaper...When you see wallpaper, the smart thing is that you won’t see the cut in the middle. Like the wallpaper is done all over the house.”<sup>42</sup> It is important to connect the different *maqamat* in a smooth manner, for this ensures that the people can follow the cantor in singing the prayers, and that the melody will sound pleasant to the ear.

In the Syrian Jewish community, some *maqamat* have a connection to special emotions. This is true particularly with *maqam saba*, *hijaz*, and *ajam*. *Maqam saba* has a

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 450.

<sup>39</sup> Shelemay, *op. cit.*, p. 123-124.

<sup>40</sup> Kligman, *op. cit.*, p. 452.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 444.

<sup>42</sup> Nahari, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

serious connotation, and is always associated with the occasion of circumcision. During the week when the Torah reading is about Abraham's circumcision in the section of *Lekh Lekha*, *maqam saba* is used in the prayers. The direct connection between *maqam saba* and the event of circumcision, or *brit milah*, is unclear.<sup>43</sup> However, according to cantor Isaac Cabasso, "Why *saba*? Because it's a play on words for *sabi* which means boy."<sup>44</sup>

The emotion that is associated with *maqam hijaz* is sadness. Therefore, it is used when the Biblical reading is related to death or a tragic event. The *parashot*, or sections of the Bible, that are connected to this *maqam* include *Hayyei Sarah*, which deals with the death of the matriarch Sarah, *Va-yehi*, which describes the death of the patriarch Jacob, and *Aharei Mot*, which depicts the death of Aaron's sons. Other *Torah* readings that depict a tragic event describe the sin of the golden calf, and the Sabbath which precedes the sad fast day of Tisha b'Av. The feeling of sadness linked to *maqam hijaz* could be because of the scale and notes of this *maqam*. Another reason is because of customary usage, which means that the *maqam* may not necessarily be sad, but since it is always used during times of sadness, this *maqam* became associated with this feeling.<sup>45</sup>

Like *maqam saba* and *hijaz*, *maqam 'ajam* is connected to an emotion of happiness. The most familiar use of this *maqam* is for the Biblical reading of the Exodus from Egypt, in *Be-shallah*, for this is a main source of happiness in the Torah. As a result, the *maqam* that is associated with happiness is applied during the Sabbath morning prayers. Also, when a bridegroom is called to the Torah on the Sabbath following his wedding, *maqam 'ajam* is used because of its liveliness.<sup>46</sup> In the Syrian Jewish

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<sup>43</sup> Kligman, *op. cit.*, p. 452-453.

<sup>44</sup> Cabasso, Isaac, Personal Interview.

<sup>45</sup> Kligman, *op. cit.*, p. 454.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 455.

community, *maqam 'ajam* is the most favored of all the *maqamat*. People like to hear lively music like *maqam 'ajam* that are catchy and connect to their lives. The younger cantors and children like to use this *maqam* more often because of the associated emotion.<sup>47</sup>

The *maqam* system is not only linked to emotions but it is also connected to different cultural musical traditions. *Maqamat* is a cross-cultural concept that has a relationship to other musical sounds. *Maqam hijaz* is described as a European *maqam* while *maqam saba* is characterized as a Scottish tune. In addition, American and Latin American music are said to be in *maqam nahawand*.<sup>48</sup> As a result, “Syrian Jews perceive the *maqamat* as a nearly universal musical system able to interact with and even subsume other musical systems.”<sup>49</sup> This is one of the reasons why *maqamat* are used by Syrian Jewish communities around the world. Since the *maqam* musical system is universal, the *pizmonim* tradition that is based on *maqamat* is known worldwide as well.

*Pizmonim* and *maqamat* are learned and practiced through participation in the *bakkashot* at synagogues. *Bakkashot* are religious poetic songs that are sung before the Sabbath morning prayer.<sup>50</sup> Many men attend the *bakkashot*, but this event is specifically important for the younger children who come to listen and learn. The children are taught *bakkashot* which, like *pizmonim*, are set in different *maqamat*, early in life.<sup>51</sup> Cantor

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<sup>47</sup> Cabasso, Isaac, Personal Interview.

<sup>48</sup> Shelemay, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Kligman, Mark. “Music,” in *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*, ed. Simon, Laskier, and Reguer. p. 229.

<sup>51</sup> Katz, Ruth. “The Singing of Baqqashot by Aleppo Jews.” *Acta Musicologica* Vol. 40 Fasc. 1 (1968): 65-85. JSTOR. Sun Microsystems. Brooklyn College Lib., Brooklyn, NY. 15 September 2008. <[www.jstor.org/stable/932284](http://www.jstor.org/stable/932284)> p. 67.

Gabriel Shrem notes, “I had the foundation of *pizmonim* from *bakkashot* already in my blood.”<sup>52</sup>

The singing of *bakkashot* takes place at a very specific and important time. Syrian Jews who participate walk to the synagogue at midnight or early in the morning before sunrise on the Sabbath to sing together. The *bakkashot* were “intended to elevate their spirits before the formal morning prayers.”<sup>53</sup> Specifically, the texts of the *bakkashot* praise the Sabbath and the creation of this holy day. According to Joseph Saff, a Syrian Jewish community member, “The Hebrew word ‘*bakkashot*’ means to plead, which translated usually means ‘humble prayer.’ And *bakkashot* are sung Saturday morning—very early in the morning...We are asking the Almighty to accept our singing and our prayers until such time that we’re actually to pray to God in our regular services.”<sup>54</sup> Hence the *bakkashot* are sung to prepare the congregants for the prayers, and put them in the right frame of mind.

The tradition to sing after midnight began in the sixteenth century in Safed, when the kabbalists, mystics, and local poets wrote the texts of the *bakkashot*. The tunes and the words were created for the *bakkashot* at the same time, and the songs composed are original and holy in nature, and therefore, *bakkashot* are thought to be more prestigious and honorable than *pizmonim*. *Pizmonim* are newer pieces and their melodies are borrowed from Arabic music, unlike the *bakkashot*. The music of *bakkashot* and *pizmonim* is engraved in the minds of men because of their constant exposure and singing of this music as children. In addition, a close relationship is formed between father and

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<sup>52</sup> Shrem, Gabriel as interviewed by Kay Kaufman Shelemay, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

<sup>53</sup> Kligman, Mark, “Music,” p. 229.

<sup>54</sup> Saff, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

son, as well as with other Syrian Jews, from the experience of waking up early and attending the *bakkashot*.<sup>55</sup>

The singing of *bakkashot* is unique and special for the Syrian Jews. When the participants gather, they divide into two groups each consisting of a choir and soloists. The soloists of one group begin to sing the *bakkashot* with the help of the choir, and the second group follows. The groups take turns alternating with the singing of the *bakkashot* and changing the songs. Sometimes the community will stop singing to express approval or disapproval on a performance of a soloist. When a new member arrives the singing may also be interrupted. During the *bakkashot*, tea, coffee, refreshments, and candy are offered to the men. This is offered to the participants in order to soothe their throats and enable them to sing.<sup>56</sup> Even though *bakkashot* are not as popular today, there are some synagogues that still sing them, specifically at the Shaare Zion Synagogue, at 7am.<sup>57</sup>

The transitions between the *bakkashot* are called *petihot*. When singing *bakkashot*, one cannot stop and then start to sing another one because the *bakkashot* are in different *maqamat* and there needs to be a transition from one *maqam* to another. The transition makes the songs sound pleasant and allows the men to shift between the different melodies. Therefore, *petihot* were created which are musical improvisations that bridge the songs and *maqamat*. “Now, *petihot*, the word itself means ‘keys’ or ‘opening.’ Actually, it’s an overture to the coming song.”<sup>58</sup> A *petiha* is usually improvised by the *hazan* or soloist and consists of proverbs of three or four sentences with no definite tune. “Here, every song sort of fits into the next song, either through the melody or through a

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<sup>55</sup> Katz, Ruth, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Shelemay, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

<sup>58</sup> Saff, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

sentence from the Psalms or a sentence of the prayers, mostly from Psalms, they would take a passage and just get into the *maqam* to go into the next *bakkashot*. We call it a *petihah*, an opening.”<sup>59</sup> The *petihot* primarily come from the book of Psalms but are improvised on by the cantor or soloist, for improvisation is the key to singing *petihot*, and it is the time where cantors can show their skills and knowledge of music. In some cases a soloist may even sing an entire *pizmon* between *bakkashot*.

There is a growing interest in today’s Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn in *pizmonim*, as well as *bakkashot* and *petihot*. Cantor Isaac Cabasso states, “There was a period 30 years ago when it started to ebb and not many people were interested but today they are teaching it in yeshivas and people are teaching it. So many people are learning it.”<sup>60</sup> Nowadays *pizmonim* have recaptured the hearts of the Syrian Jews, and is again a significant part of their lives. There is a strong urge to maintain the *pizmonim* tradition and restore what has been lost. As mentioned above, many of the Syrian Jews are attempting to write down the history of *pizmonim* as well as the *pizmonim* melodies so that they won’t be forgotten. The cantors are the most important individuals in this process of remembering old *pizmonim*, teaching others, and transferring the musical tradition to the next generation.

Cantors are honored and play an important role in the *pizmonim* musical system. In order to become a cantor in the Brooklyn Syrian Jewish community, a man must learn the traditions from the previous generation who are knowledgeable in the *pizmonim* tradition. It is expected that “you went to these people, you sat by them four, five years, *pizmonim*, setting down pieces, listening to the old music, that’s how you become a

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<sup>59</sup> Cabasso, Isaac as interviewed by Kay Kaufman Shelemay. p. 153.

<sup>60</sup> Cabasso, Isaac, Personal Interview.

*hazan* [cantor].”<sup>61</sup> Aside from learning the *pizmonim*, there are other requirements to becoming a *hazan*. A cantor needs to know *maqamat* and must have a nice voice. He must also be an individual who lives by higher standards than other people. In addition, these individuals must understand and follow the customs of the Brooklyn Syrian community that follow the Aleppo, or “Aram Soba” customs. Most importantly, the “*hazan* needs to be liked by the congregation, he likes them and they like him.”<sup>62</sup> The relationship between the cantor and the community is very important. This bond allows the *hazan* to lead the congregation in prayer and teach them the *pizmonim* tradition.

The cantor sings *pizmonim* during prayers and at social events. Throughout the prayers, a *hazan* needs to be able to concentrate on the words and also be able to sing the tune at the same time. It is also the cantor’s job to make the congregation participate and sing along. From his own experience as a cantor for 30 years in the Beth Torah synagogue, Isaac Cabasso claims that a *hazan* “should use popular tunes so the audience can join in and insert some small portions of new music so they can learn and get familiar with the new music.”<sup>63</sup> Cantors are also important individuals at social events. These occasions include *brit milahs*, bar mitzvahs, weddings, gatherings, or teaching sessions. During these events, cantors sing *pizmonim* for the community to enjoy and to teach others the musical tradition. The *hazan* also leads the ceremonies at these gatherings and ensures that the audiences are moved by the beautiful *pizmonim* melodies.

The cantor must pay close attention to the method of singing the *pizmonim* in order to relate to the audience. An important process in singing *pizmonim* is improvisation. With experience, the cantor is able to improvise a melody on the spot,

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<sup>61</sup> Nahari, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>62</sup> Cabasso, Isaac, Personal Interview.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

usually during synagogue prayers.<sup>64</sup> There are many ways the cantor can use improvisation for *pizmonim*. One method of “using a skeleton” is described by cantor Albert Cohen-Saban. “The ‘skeleton’ means just the opening of the song. I used just the opening. Then in the middle of the song I put my own music. Then I come back to the skeleton. In other words, I just use the theme.”<sup>65</sup> Another common form of improvisation is using the *petihot* or other introductions. A *hazan* may also replace the entire melody of a *pizmon* with another or change the octave in which to sing the song. However, it is thought that improvising should be subtle, simple, and minor. In this way, the *pizmon* keeps its general framework, yet becomes a little sweeter and personal to the individual cantor.<sup>66</sup>

Even though cantors may improvise when singing, it is important to stick to the original melody of the *pizmonim* when teaching other people or young children, for cantors are not just singers, but they are teachers as well. They must teach the next generation and pass down this musical tradition to the new cantors of the community. Today, in schools and yeshivas, *pizmonim* are being taught to the children so that they can be familiar with the musical tradition of their community. It also created an opportunity for children who are interested in *pizmonim* and want to become cantors. These programs are being taught in yeshivas such as Magen David Yeshiva and Yeshiva of Flatbush high school and elementary school.

Magen David Yeshiva began teaching *pizmonim* to the children more than 30 years ago. Cantor Mickey Kairey was one of the teachers who taught the children in this religious school, and describes his experience: “I used to teach *pizmonim* in Magen David.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Cohen-Saban, Albert as interviewed by Kay Kaufman Shelemay. p. 187.

<sup>66</sup> Shelemay, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

Today I see these kids married and everything. They still know and that is the only thing they still remember...I used to go there 20 minutes a week, I used to teach them two *pizmonim* a week. Can you imagine they only know about forty or so and they know it.”<sup>67</sup> When the students learn *pizmonim* at a young age, it is imprinted in their minds, and they remember them as adults years later. Sometimes the *pizmonim* that are taught in the school are sung at graduation ceremonies, and are forever remembered by the graduating students.<sup>68</sup>

Similarly, Yeshivah of Flatbush recently began to teach *pizmonim* to elementary school and high school children. In the elementary school, cantors from the community attend the morning prayers to help the young boys and girls to pray according to the Syrian musical customs. In the high school, a new program associated with *pizmonim* was established in the 2008 school year. This course was organized by Cantor Bernard Beer, the director of the Belz School of Jewish Music at Yeshivah University, and Dr. Joel Wolowelsky, coordinator of classes at the Yeshivah of Flatbush. In this class, Rabbi Moshe Tessone teaches Sephardic liturgical music and *Hazzanut* for students who are interested in *pizmonim*. The course explains the background of the music, as well as the different modes and cantorial traditions in the community. Students develop their knowledge of Syrian music and practice to become amateur hazzanim.<sup>69</sup>

The new cantors and children learning *pizmonim* are known as the ‘new generation’. These young *hazzanim* learn old *pizmonim* and compose new melodies with the most recent tunes that are popular today. Cantor Isaac Cabasso describes how “the young people use Titanic or Celine Dion music and put them into prayers. This is the new

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<sup>67</sup> Kairey, Mickey as interviewed by Kay Kaufman Shelemay. p. 37.

<sup>68</sup> Shelemay, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>69</sup> “Yeshiva University Offers Hazzanut Course at YOF.” *Image Magazine*. August 13, 2008.

generation. Music keeps moving.”<sup>70</sup> Even though *pizmonim* are known for their melodies borrowed of Arabic music, new *pizmonim* are being composed with the melodies that surround the ‘new generation,’ which include American songs that are heard in the Brooklyn community, and some Latin American tunes that are included in the *pizmonim* in Mexico City and Argentina. The new cantors want the younger generation to have a connection to *pizmonim* by including some of the popular melodies that they like.<sup>71</sup> Isaac Cabasso laughed in an interview and said, “Maybe we should try rap.”<sup>72</sup>

*Pizmonim* are linked to many different people, events, and musical traditions. The Syrian musical system of *pizmonim* is associated with other musical concepts such as *maqamat*, *bakkashot*, and *petihot*. They also serve as an important reminder of the past and the connection to the original Syrian Jews from Aleppo. “Thus *pizmonim* is located at the juncture of several domains of memory. It brings the past into the present through both its content and the act of performance, while also serving as a device through which long-forgotten aspects of the past and information unconsciously carried can be evoked, accessed, and remembered.”<sup>73</sup> Therefore, the past is linked to the future with the original *pizmonim* that are sung in the community, as well as the new *pizmonim* that are being composed with the help of professional cantors and the ‘new generation’. In essence, *pizmonim* are an important part of the lives of Syrian Jews, linking the past the present and the future.

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<sup>70</sup> Cabasso, Isaac, Personal Interview.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Shelemay, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

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