

## Arab Music and Mizraḥi Poetry

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**Abstract:** The concept of "Arab Jews," which has appeared in Israeli Mizrahi (Oriental) discourse over the last decade, resists the framework of Israeli national culture that demands the elimination of Arab identity. For this music suggests possibilities of remembering and "re-presenting" this partially-repressed element. Moreover, the experience of remembering Arab music represents, more than anything else, the diasporic attitude of the Mizrahim (Oriental Jews). It demonstrates a common legacy that Israeli culture is unwilling to accept and understand. Extrication from the boundaries of Zionist culture (which has historically rejected the diasporic past and its cultures, especially the Arab-Jewish past) manifests itself, for many Mizrahim as a reconnection with their Arab musical identity. Ella Shohat—a leading scholar in ethnical studies—defines this position regarding Arab music as a "return to the diaspora," which she proposes as the opposite of the "return to Zion." This is the place in which an immigrant rediscovers his ability to rescue a past endangered with oblivion. Mizrahi poetry frequently addresses music as a way of establishing an Arab-Jewish identity in Israel, which can create connections between the present and the historical-cultural past. This article will focus on the first generation of Mizrahi poets (Erez Biton) as well as on the second generation (Roni Somek, Sami Shalom Chetrit, Vicki Shiran). Their poetry is a protest against the erasing of the Mizrahi cultural inheritance, in which Arabic music played an integral part. We will not discuss Arabic music as such, but the way in which it is represented and used in Mizrahi poetry.

## Yochai OPPENHEIMER

### Arab Music and Mizrahi Poetry

#### ***A Jewish-Arab Perspective***

Ella Shohat was one of the first scholars to use "Arab-Jews" as an anti-nationalistic term. As such, it clarifies the reality of the Jews from Arab countries, who simultaneously lived in two cultures before the Arab-Israeli dispute rendered as impossible the option of crossing the borders in the opposite direction. The intercultural possibility that she terms "hyphenated identity" (because of the hyphen connecting Arabism and Judaism) existed for a long period of time, in which the differences of nationality did not emerge as an open conflict. In her article, "Taboo Memories, Diasporic Vision: Columbus, Palestine, and Arab-Jews," Shohat describes a process that erased the hyphen and forced Arab-Jews to choose between their Judaism and their Arabism, especially those Arab-Jews who (like the members of her own family) immigrated to the State of Israel. From this standpoint, the hybrid experience linked to a pre-national historic reality is perceived in her articles first and foremost as a model of thinking, which challenges any kind of national thinking and especially challenges the mode of Zionist thinking based on a homogenization of the Jewish people and on its segregation from the Arab environment. This thinking is itself based on the argument that, from the Zionist perspective, it was of vital importance to erase the Arab dimension in Oriental or Mizrahi (literally, "Eastern") Jewry.

Hannan Hever and Yehouda Shenhav clarify the challenge presented by the Arab-Jewish category, which has become a signifier of avant-garde cultural thinking:

It is generally used as a category of critical discourse that seeks to challenge the limits and basic assumptions of Zionist discourse. This challenge is intended to show that there was an historical and epistemological opportunity to link Jews and Arabs at a certain historical junction, an opportunity that was thwarted by the historical circumstances in which the enmity between Jews and Arabs was structured as a natural phenomenon. In many respects, this is a category that is today being reinvented as part of the politics of identity in Israel.

The use of "assertive categories" for the purpose of social, cultural and political protest is not unusual ... This provocative, non-binary use of the above category constitutes a political strategy that disrupts the processes of erasure and denial that characterize Israel's politics of identity and which enables both the return of what has been suppressed and the feasibility of Jewish-Arab coexistence. (71)

This position is based on the assumption that the hegemonic culture will not be able to totally separate Mizrahi Jews from their Arabism, and that every denial of the existence of regions in which Jews and Arabs cannot be separated from one another will actually operate in a dialectical manner to cause these regions to once more become present. In other words, one should not disengage the discussion of Arab-Jewish identity from the historico-political context that demanded—and which continues to demand—the erasure of Arabism, just as one should not ignore the possibility of a renewed remembrance or a resurfacing of what has been partially erased. This is, therefore, an additional reason for the refusal in principle to see the culture of the Mizrahim as simply folklore, and to present it as part of the multicultural network of Jewish "ethnic groups." Not only is Mizrahi culture thereby reduced to the level of a "popular" culture that is concerned with the preservation of customs of an irrelevant past, but legitimization is thus given to the concealment of the process of de-Arabization to which Mizrahim are subjected within the framework of the Zionist project as a "melting-pot." If many Mizrahi writers and intellectuals are not prepared to accept this category, this avoidance stems, partly, from the fact that the category is only "an option that signifies everyone's imaginary horizon" (Machlev 308) and is not the description of an existing situation.

Furthermore, the category of "Arab Jews" is also an avant-garde mode of cultural and political thinking, as it is still a foreign element among the categories of identity that are accepted by the majority of Mizrahi Jews, who have been forced to adopt the national binary division between Jews and Arabs in order not to be considered anti-nationalist. Nonetheless, it does satisfy the need of the Mizrahi communities to draw attention to the intermediary linguistic-cultural-spatial region that was suppressed—and consequently disappeared—due to the pressure of the hegemonic binary categories. The scholar and writer Sasson Somekh presents a different position, arguing that the concept has historical, rather than politico-practical, meaning and is clearly applicable solely to the intellectual class of Iraqi Jewry:

The Arab Jew is someone who was born in an Arabophone Jewish home within an Arabophone Jewish

community located in a district/state where the primary language was Arabic. A positive attitude toward literary Arabic (*fusha*) and its literature and the desire to participate in the shaping and advancement of Arab culture in general are the traits that are the most determining factors in the shaping of the Arab-Jewish nature of a community or an individual. If, from what I have now said, the inevitable conclusion is that the re-emergence of Arab Jews will never happen in the foreseeable future, I will not be the one to attempt to refute that interpretation." (Somekh 48-49)

Somekh makes two primary claims: that the Jews of Egypt are not for the most part Arabophones; that the Jews of Yemen used spoken Arabic rather than literary Arabic, and that their writing was in Hebrew and was intended solely for Jewish readers. Thus, these Jewish communities cannot be considered as part of the concept "Arab Jews." He therefore prefers to limit the scope of this concept, which has in recent years become prestigious among Mizrahi intellectuals, thereby neutralizing its radical significance as a tool to raise awareness and to define the identity of Mizrahim in Israel, especially the identity of members of the second generation whose mother tongue is not Arabic.

Notwithstanding Somekh's claims, however, the most prominent expressions of Arab-Jewish experience, are found in language and music. Even in those places where there is a clear intellectual recoiling from any essentialist definition of Mizrahism, one can discern a clear recoiling from the blurring of identity. For example, the social activist Dudi Machlev writes:

There are Arab components in the infrastructure of the Mizrahi's soul. These Arab components are what I love the most; they truly delight me. As an Israeli, the son of Iraqi parents, I am bound by intimate ties of love to the Arabic language. However, to my great regret, as a product of the Israeli system of education and socialization, I am not completely fluent in Arabic. Thus, I have been denied the opportunity to taste and experience in a meaningful manner the ocean of Arab civilization. Although I love many types of music, no music touches the very roots of my soul like Arab music. (Machlev 307-308)

The distinction, on the one hand, between beloved and acquired types of music, and, on the other hand, between music and language that delight a person internally clarifies the cultural openness of Mizrahim to Israeli culture. This openness, however, is not intended to cause the disappearance of the Other place that is unique to Mizrahim, and which returns as the suppressed memory of the massive proportions (an "ocean"! ) of the Arab culture to which they once belonged. For this is where the nucleus of their identity is to be found. Thus Machlev's statement is intended to demarcate anew the many areas of overlap between Jews and Arabs, and to define the cultural agenda of Mizrahim in this intermediary space.

As noted above, the revival of the Mizrahi collective musical memory was given only partial expression (since the appearance of the songs performed, to name a few, by Zohar Argov 1955-1987, Ahuva Ozeri 1948-2016, and Daklon 1944-). At the same time, however, richer forms of contact with Arabic music have developed. The band *Habreira Hativeet* (Natural Selection, a term borrowed from evolutionist biology), which has been performing since the 1970s, has been heavily influenced by traditional Arabic and North African music, rhythms and musical instruments (Spanish acoustic guitar, conga, sitar, Indian guitar, bass guitar), as well as singing in Moroccan Arabic and delivering texts containing a message of social protest (especially in their performance of Erez Biton's orchestrated poems). The Israeli Andalusian Orchestra, which was founded in Ashdod in 1994, specializes in music that originates from Moorish Spain and which has been preserved by North-African Jews. Since the 1990s, we have been witnessing the blossoming of musical groups that perform ethnic music in accordance with various traditions: Greek, Persian, Turkish, Arab, Central Asian, Andalusian and Ladino. The annual Jerusalem International Oud Festival has been held for over a decade. In addition, the "Abraham's Orchard" or "East and West" ensembles, as well as the "Singing Communities" Project have reintroduced the tradition of the Mizrahi "sacred poem." These variegated phenomena demonstrate, on the one hand, the revival of the Mizrahi collective musical memory and, on the other hand, the integration of this memory into the global musical world and World Music. The revival of the Mizrahi collective musical memory has occurred simultaneously with the revival of other categories of communal memory, such as, for example, of Hasidic klezmer music, which has blossomed primarily in America, or of liturgical music, which has found its niche in radio programs about "Your Favorite Cantorial Selections."

The depth of the intercultural zone, and the potential diverse movements that can be discerned in that zone, can be understood as a resistance to the hegemony that has long separated Jews from their Arabism. The admission ticket of Arab-Jewish music to Israeli culture does not really reflect a synthesis of East and West because "after such a thorough uprooting, the banished voice cannot once more be admitted into its midst only if that voice has already become westernized. First of all, this voice must be granted its own unique place" (Pedaya, "hakol"). The process of the voice's search for its own unique

place expresses the liberation of the Mizrahi from the hegemonic limits imposed upon them by Israeli culture. Without the mediation of Israel's state education system, it is hard to recall the Arabic language, yet Arab music has now become more accessible and its memory closer than ever.

Alongside the process of the revival of Arab music among Mizrahi, there have been important developments in the field of literature due to the appearance of a second generation of Mizrahi writers beginning in the 1990's (Albert Swissa, Moise Ben-Harosh, Sami Berdugo, Shimon Adaf, Ronit Matalon). These developments point to an empowerment of the Arab-Jewish hyphen, as well as to a cross-breeding that has produced a dense region that is rich with possibilities. The fiction and poetry that is presently being created continuously returns to the subject of Arab music in order to establish a Mizrahi collective memory capable of at least partially overcoming years of Zionist erasure, and of producing a new connection between the present and the historico-cultural past. Recent studies have broadened earlier discussions that focused on understanding the social status of *mizrahim* in Israel (Hever, Shenhav and Motzafi-Haller, *Mizrahim*). They describe how the politics of identity functioned in the settlement of the immigrants, in education, historiography, the division of national resources, and especially in the creation of knowledge and the hegemonic discourse about *mizrahim*.

### Arab Music in Israel

The sense of a connection with Arab music represents in a symptomatic manner the changes that Mizrahi collective self-awareness has undergone. Arab music, which the Mizrahi brought with them to Israel in the 1950s, was identified by the hegemonic culture as something that represented a foreign Arab culture. It was also seen as a form of black Jewish ethnic visibility that both could not be blurred and then incorporated into an East-West synthesis, and could not be viewed romantically (like the paintings of the British Mandatory period in Palestine that represented figures of Arabs). Nor was Arab music perceived as part of a legitimate multicultural mosaic; instead it was seen as an undesirable element that ran counter to what was included within the boundaries of Israeli culture. The conflict was between, on the one hand, Western music that was considered to have universal aesthetic values and which included the songs of pre-1948 Israel (most of which were influenced by Russian musical traditions brought to Israel by European-Jewish immigrants), and on the other hand, all genres of Arab music, which was perceived as monotonous, a foreign entity from the artistic standpoint. This was both because Arab music is based on quartertones that, to Western ears, lack any melodic qualities and because such music was seen as the representative of popular folkloristic culture. This recoiling from Arab music, linked to its tonality and its language, was expressed in the manner in which it was performed in Israel. Since it could not be performed in concert halls by major orchestras (as opposed to the customary practice in Arab countries, especially Egypt), it was relegated to the limited framework of nightclubs and family gatherings (Perlson, *Simha*).

This stereotypical image of Arab music that took root in the hegemonic discourse in Israel was thus based on ignorance. For the music that was experienced by the Jews of Arab countries who immigrated to Israel in the 1950s and 1960s, and which had been created (for example) by composer-singers Farid Al Atrash and Mohamed Abdel Wahab, singers Umm Kulthum and Abdel Halim Hafez (all of whom were Egyptians), and Fairuz (who is Lebanese) was produced through a sophisticated blending of traditional Arab musical instruments (oud, kanoun, ney and darbuka) with Western instruments (wind instruments, symphony orchestras) and through a similarly sophisticated blending of Arab and Western rhythms (Regev, "Present" 437). Arab musical culture was already undergoing a process of hybridization. Thus, even the "authentic" pan-Arab musical symbols, such as Umm Kulthum's repertoire—termed the "major tradition" or the "principal stream" (Shiloah and Cohen 9)—were shaped within the context of a dialogue with Western music in all its various aspects: instruments, musical forms, playing techniques, the tension between impromptu, free-meter compositions and rhythmic ones, performances in concert halls on stages that separate the artist from the audience (8). In to these innovative cross-cultural features, mid-20th-century Arab music expressed a uniqueness and an authenticity, a link with Arab musical tradition, and an exceedingly high level of artistic vocal delivery. All of these elements were missing in the Israeli discourse on Arab music and in the nationalist Zionist attitude toward Arab music.

Moreover, the presence of Arab music in Israeli culture was limited and ultimately terminated. Although both Mizrahi and Palestinians regarded Arab music as an object of identification, and consequently would play Arab music in order to express their cultural identification, Arab music was not recognized by the Israeli Establishment (Shiloah and Cohen 11). It was, therefore not accorded a presence on Israeli culture's central stages: radio, television and recording studios (Regev, "Present" 442). As Shiloah and Cohen point out, in the early years of Israeli statehood, the Establishment's official position considered it vital to "civilize" and assimilate the Arab musical traditions of Oriental Jews into

the Israeli melting pot (22). Several musicologists and ethnographers were interested in collecting these Jewish traditions and documenting them in archives. In addition, they organized special concerts in which authentic Arab music was performed. These concerts were held in contexts such as the "Meeting of East and West in the World of Music" (1963), the World Congress of Jewish Music (1978) and the International Festivals of Contemporary Music (1980). These efforts, however were accomplished only on the part of highly-committed individuals; composers who attempted to include elements of Arab music in order to "add color" to Western musical compositions were exceptions to the rule in terms of the hegemonic position that chose to express derision and contempt for Arab music in general and Arab-Jewish music in particular (Shiloah and Cohen 11, 16). In the 1970s, the official position on the folklore and music of the Jews of Arab countries began to change. Thus, the Center for the Integration of the Legacy of Mizrahi Jewry organized performances and produced records that featured ethnic music (Shiloah and Cohen 23). This change, however, could also be seen as an instance of folklorization that, on the one hand, had an Orientalist background and, on the other hand, was then fashionable because in that period Mizrahi Jewish music and dancing had become a symbol of Israeli culture abroad (Shiloah and Cohen 23). The belated acceptance of Mizrahi music became possible after its "de-ethnicization"—that is, after it had discarded its distinctive Arab features. This trend could be seen in the musical repertoires of Haim Moshe, who began to sing in Arabic in the 1980s and who subsequently shifted to Hebrew, as well as in the repertoires of Ofer Levi, who underwent a similar transition in the early 1990s (Regev, "Musica" 277-278).

What is more, not only did none of the well-known record companies in Israel encourage Arab music, even the import of records and cassettes from Arab countries was almost impossible. The production and marketing of cassettes of Arab and Mizrahi music in a non-institutional manner at stands in central bus stations throughout Israel illustrates both the exclusion of Arab/Mizrahi music, and the hegemonic attempt to erase its presence (Regev, "Present" 443). The activities of the Azoulay brothers in Jaffa demonstrate that the legitimization of Arab music originated with the consumers, who thereby created an alternative to Israeli music: in the early 1960s they established Azoulay Brothers Record Company; recorded and distributed Arab and Mizrahi music; documented the beginnings of the musical careers of several singers (Filfel Al-Masri, Zohra El Fassia, Jo Amar, Aris San, Trifonas and others); and copied commercial recordings of important Jewish artists that had been made in Arab countries before their immigration to Israel.

In general, the Ashkenazi public assumed that Hebrew or secular Jewish identity would absorb and assimilate immigrant groups, although this was the subject of a heated debate from the time the country was founded. The Ashkenazim feared that massive immigration from North Africa would irreversibly dilute the country's Western character. During the 1950s some veteran Zionist politicians advocated restrictions on immigration, or a policy of selective immigration. They doubted whether Zionist identity could incorporate ethnic diversity, despite their assumption that this diversity would disappear as the result of a long process of education and acculturation. The misgivings about whether it would be possible to inculcate the Mizrahim with Western culture revealed a rejection of intermediate identities—not only ones that combined different ethnicities (such as Ashkenazi-Mizrahi identity), but also, and principally, ones that combined different national (Jewish-Arab) and religious (Jewish-Muslim, Jewish-Christian) affiliations. Such hybridism was simply not an option, and Zionist writers continually had to reassert an impermeable national and cultural boundary. The Orientalist "knowledge" they were equipped with deterred them from being curious about or investigating anything hidden on the murky, disregarded side of the national and ethnic divider.

Mizrahi writing is an attempt to break through the boundaries of this hegemonic Israeli discourse. A hegemony generally exists within a space that is tense, non-uniform, and full of contradictions, yet it has never faced a significant alternative. Such an alternative, extending beyond the boundaries noted above, crystallized in Mizrahi fiction, and most of the poets discussed here, of all generations, participated in it over an extended period of time.

Several studies (especially those of Lev Hakak, Ella Shohat and Dror Mishani), have demonstrated how the Ashkenazi hegemony-controlled representations of Mizrahim according to Zionist cultural-social standards. I would like to propose that once the Mizrahim began representing themselves, speaking as subjects not subordinated to these boundaries, they challenged the boundaries from a stance of divided affiliation. On the one hand, the Mizrahim were part of Israeli culture, in general used the Hebrew language, and their Mizrahi-ness was defined by and signified by the Israeli cultural apparatus. On the other hand, being Mizrahi extends beyond the boundaries marked off by that apparatus. It cannot be seen as a product of the hegemonic culture; rather it constitutes a different model, multicultural in character. When placed alongside well-known Ashkenazi writers, Mizrahi literature "seems to come from

an entirely different imaginative and experiential realm, one that people are quite unfamiliar with. The language, conventions, assumptions, characterizations and references are all significantly different than what people 'naturally' assume to be 'Israeli'" (Alcalay IX-X). Representations of Mizrahi-ness in literature wrestled with the marginal position allotted to them by Israeli culture. They created new spaces of consciousness and writing, which stood opposed to the hegemonic literary and cultural space, thereby breaking through boundaries and moving out into new, unfamiliar spaces.

### Music as a Poetic Topic

Quite a number of Mizrahi poets have expressed the feeling that their past was in danger of being erased following their immigration to Israel. As far as they were concerned, their cities and homelands no longer existed and only the music of their world remained. Eli Eliahu writes:

#### *Underground*

Baghdad  
Is dead and no longer exists,  
Only the music that my father  
Heard in the bus stations of disgrace,  
When he waited in underground parking lots,  
. . . .  
I will never forget  
The sadness of his hand groping  
For the Hebrew, to quickly change,  
Before everyone exited and ascended  
To ground level" (61)

Arab music is the remnant of a world that was destroyed; this music, however, had no place in Israel. The shame that accompanied this music was ultimately internalized by its consumers. Therefore, one could only listen clandestinely to Arab music. Outwardly, Mizrahim were expected to abandon Arab music, and to maintain an underground connection in private or hidden spaces.

The esteemed musician Dikla Dori recalls the ceremonial nature of listening to Arab music in Mizrahi society in Israel, in a society that was forced to lead a divided, exilic life: "My maternal grandfather was called Ezra. He was addicted to classical Egyptian Arab music. Every afternoon he would wake up with the radio and would listen to Umm Kulthum. During those moments, my mother told me, no one would go near his room. He would hear Umm Kulthum on the radio, smoking one cigarette after another" (Dori 55).

The effort involved in continuing to listen to Arab music, in finding the right station on the old radio set or, alternatively, in obtaining records, was simultaneously a daring act of protest and an instance of cultural, emotional survival; it amounted to the maintenance of a link with the homeland represented by its music and it was not just a question of aesthetic pleasure.

Arab music has been a central topic in Mizrahi literature. Through that literature, one could represent the depth of the crisis experienced by Mizrahim in Israel, and particularly the gap between their sense of belonging to their original culture, and the position of marginality and cultural exclusion that had been imposed upon them. The poet Erez Biton was the first to present Arab music as symbolizing the gap between the status of Jews in Morocco and the marginality generally experienced in Israel. One of his poems is about Zohara El Fassia, who was a famous singer in Morocco and Algeria in the 1940s-1950s, and who was to sing at the court of Mohammed V, King of Morocco:

#### *Zohara El Fassia*

It was said of her that, when she sang,  
Soldiers would fight with knives  
In order to make their way through the crowd  
And in order to reach the hem of her dress,  
To kiss the tips of her fingers,  
To put riyal coins as a sign of their gratitude.  
Zohara El Fassia,  
Today, you can find her  
In Ashkelon, in the Atikot C Neighborhood, near the social welfare office  
The smell of the remnants of sardine cans  
On a three-legged wobbly table. (Biton 29)

The singer, who eventually become a social-welfare case after immigrating to Israel in 1962, thus symbolizes this crisis, which was first and foremost a socioeconomic one. Other poets describe the loss of contact with Arab music that followed immigration to Israel, and which is related to the traditional image of the Diaspora as rendered in the Bible: "On the willow trees there we hung our harps" (*Psalms* 137). For in this passage the word *aravim* can be translated as "willow trees" (the translation most suited to the context of *Psalms* 137) or "Arabs" (a legitimate translation that is not suited to the context but that describes the close link of Mizrahim to Arab music):

*Zangola*

And why should he not stretch his properly tuned harp  
 In order to sing his poetry? And sometimes in order to see it standing at the very  
 heart  
 Of the orchestra? He speaks a beautiful Arabic in a nostalgic Jewish dialect  
 And his harp is so, so sad in the melting pot that narrows everything down.  
 . . . .  
 "We again hang our harps on the rivers" (Ozer 12)

*My Father's Generation*

They hung their harps on willow trees  
 They hung their harps on the rivers  
 They carried the wailing of the wind (Balfour Hakak 38)

The melancholy tone of these two poems casts doubts on music's rejuvenating power, as well as on the ability to return to it because of the ban in Israel. This power was discovered by younger poets, who discerned the possibility of Arab music serving as the fertile soil for joint, seditious activity that would express the immigrants' power and their refusal to relinquish their link to their Arabism. Similarly, the poet Peretz Banai writes in his untitled poem:

Friends of my father would come  
 To our house on the Sabbath  
 Laden down with musical instruments.  
  
 They had the tunes and he had the words.  
 We all sang  
 And we sometimes danced.  
  
 The silence of death was stretched out –  
 On the bridge of longing. (18)

The story of the immigration and marginality of Mizrahim, as well as the emotionally-charged domestic stories, were woven around the erasure of Arab music and the renewed remembrance of that music. For many children of immigrants identified with the society absorbing them and rejected their parents' seemingly "backward" culture. When they become adults, however, these same children re-identified with their parents, and experienced a disturbing sense of guilt regarding the culture that it had been so tempting to abandon and scorn. In Vicki Shiran's poem, the story of the Mizrahi family's torment is represented through the story of Arab music—the more vulnerable the family is, the more it refuses to concede, to be erased, to stop pointing an accusing finger:

*Zikaron Matzhik* [A Funny Memory]

A small man, bent over, with a tiny transistor radio  
 And plastic earphones in his ears.  
 He always looked so ludicrous  
 Because the person who sold him the transistor radio  
 Gave him earphones with a short plastic cord  
 That strangled his neck.  
 He clearly deserved this

Because he wanted to hear songs in Arabic (*ichsa* [ugh]!)  
 And the news in Arabic (*fichsa* [yuck]!)  
 He really infuriated  
 Us, saying that he knew how to read and write  
 Literary Arabic. He behaved so absurdly: Since when do the Arabs  
 Have anything literary besides the chant "Ya[oh], *habibi* [my darling], ee-ee-ee!"?  
 Half an hour of the guttural chanting of "Ya, *habibi*!"  
 This memory, in all seriousness, is  
 My father.

I cannot be blamed for mocking him, along with my girlfriends  
 From grade six. I put a finger on my temple  
 I turned around and laughed, "*Tralala* [an idiot], what a *tralala*!"  
 . . . .

One day, when they shouted at one another (I was so ashamed), he finally said to  
 her, very quietly: "I cannot be  
 An empty person." She shouted at him something in French (something along the  
 lines of "That's your problem, Mister"), and he said nothing. A thin veil of  
 sadness enveloped his eyes.  
 From that time on, he would sit in a corner of the balcony, a mute spot  
 With a short plastic cord that strangled his neck  
 Sometimes he would cry and sometimes he would laugh  
 He did not say what radio stations he had in his head.  
 That is how I remember him sitting in the corner  
 Shrunken, alone  
 With his problem.

Who would have believed, Mommy, that today  
 This would so much be my own problem? (Shiran 27-28)

The everyday Hebrew of the daughters (*ichsa*, *fichsa*, *tralala*) and the French of their mother—already perceived by Francophones in Egypt as more esteemed than Arab culture—mock the guttural Arabic that conveys a message of love (*Ya habibi*). The result is the silence of someone who has been humiliated. As Shiran looks back on this memory as an adult, the daughter not only remembers the shame she felt toward Arabic and Arab music, but also regrets her rebellion against the Arabic language that was also a rebellion against her father. The child's surrender to the hegemonic culture is replaced in her adulthood by a belated feeling of guilt.

Feelings of guilt are expressed by many Mizrahi poets. Generally speaking, there are descriptions of parents who did not dare to obstinately preserve Arab music, but who instead internalized the Israeli attitude that viewed Arab music in a negative light: "I can tell through music the story of my family from the time of its immigration to Israel. That story would depict the initial acceptance of the verdict of cultural erasure, with a minimal underground existence, then the attempts to hold one's head high once more and finally the denial and the awakening (Chetrit, *Hamahapeha* 132). This awakening is identified with the appearance of Mizrahi music, which at first was disseminated illegally but which was subsequently played on state radio and television by virtue of its definition as World or Mediterranean Music.

Nevertheless, it is important to note one prominent fact: Mizrahi poets almost never wrote about Israeli Mizrahi music but rather wrote about Arab music, which, in their view, was the real thing. As the poet Sami Shalom Chetrit writes:

*Alas My Land*

A song, a song for you,  
 A song, a song for you,  
 And I revolve around you,  
 Around you, without yet touching you  
 Revolving in circles that grow more and more distant,  
 As in the muddy puddles of my childhood.

. . . .  
 The background to this poem is being played by Farid  
 The very same Farid from the vinyl record of my childhood

My suppressed childhood.  
Here,  
A song, a song for you,  
And another song, another song for you,  
And yet there is nothing!  
Nothing/Will ever excite me like an Arab *mawwal*  
And the strumming of the strings of an oud.  
*Hallas* [Enough!] (*Shirim* 49)

This poem describes a history that was reflected in the concealment of Arab records, and in their replacement by Hebrew records of army entertainment troupes and singing ensembles. The song "A song, a song for you," performed by the Gevatron singing ensemble, represents the self-confidence of the Israeli identity in the 1960s. This was enacted in the circles of *hora* dancers that the immigrants (particularly in the 1950s) felt obligated to join, in order to express their solidarity with Israeli society. Yet their sense of being outsiders is envisioned in the image of the muddy puddle, which expresses their accompanying sadness. Chetrit's poem is composed by someone who experienced a cultural acclimatization that included a considerable degree of self-inflicted cruelty. It also vividly expresses the author's vain attempts to become an Israeli. The title *Alas* [*oi*] *My Land* is an ironic retitling of poem by the Russian-born Hebrew poet Shaul Tchernichovsky, *Alas* [*Hoi*] *My Land*—with the more literary term replaced by a vernacular one that expresses a protracted feeling of pain. The simultaneous positive attitude toward Arab music and the negative attitude toward Hebrew music sung by Israeli singing ensembles did not, however, prevent Mizrahi poets from expressing an interest in other genres of music—namely, genres that were "neutral" from the standpoint of the cultural ethnic struggle. Thus, Biton writes in his poem "Initial Background Comments": "When everyone was sleeping, /I would learn by heart/Short masses by Bach/In Judeo-Moroccan" (Biton 28). Similarly, Yoav Hayek writes in his poem "Calling Card": "In my black-pupilled eyes/Blonde dreams/I hear Bach/And my blood, smoking a *nargilla*, steals/Umm Kulthum" (Hayek 10). On her part, Miri Ben-Simhon uses Bach's music as a metaphor to describe her father's perfection. Thus in her poem, "A Mizrahi and Oedipal Song of Friendship," she writes: "His impeccable inner self-discipline/Plays like a toccata and Bach's Fugue no. 540/Elegant, sane, mathematical" (Ben-Simhon 23). These examples clearly show that the interest in Arab music is by no means exclusive.

The poet Ronny Someck demonstrates a double perspective in writing about Arab music. On the one hand, he has not given up the hope of connecting Israeli culture with Arab culture, confident that there is not necessarily any basic tension between them. Thus, Someck writes:

*In Answer to the Question 'When did your Peace Begin?'*

On the wall of the coffee shop adjacent to the *ma'abara* [immigrant transit camp]  
David Ben-Gurion's enticing hair was hung  
And beside him, in a similar frame, the sponge-like face of Umm  
Kulthum.  
That was in '55 or '56, and I thought that, if they hang the photographs of a man and a  
woman  
Adjacent to one another,  
Then surely they must be  
Newlyweds—a bride and a bridegroom. (*Gan* 117)

The childish perspective in the poem adopts the Judeo-Arab standpoint of the parents, which connects the images that the Israeli establishment was trying to turn into contrary entities. On the other hand, Someck is attracted to the sudden moment of remembering when Arab music bursts into the everyday space of the figures and seemingly severs their ties to the immediate presence, enabling them to reconnect to their spiritual homeland. Thus, for example, in the following lines from his poem entitled "An Embroidered Rag: A Poem on Umm Kulthum," Someck writes: "She had a black evening gown/And the hammers of her voice drove steel nails/Into the elbow that rested on the table of the coffee shop/In Struma Square" (*Gan* 77). The metaphor of the elbow nailed to the table emphasizes the intensity of the listener's excitement over music that he apparently does not hear, and which carries with it the memory of the singer's black evening gown. Later in the poem this turbulent event becomes connected with the listener's memory of the army cook who also listened to Umm Kulthum's voice:

I asked him for a few oranges  
 And on the cassette's tape her gown again blackened.  
 He closed his eyes to the vapors of lunch and peeled potatoes.  
 "Who's singing," I ventured, "is it Umm Kulthum?" He nodded a yes in response.  
 As far as he was concerned, I could have robbed all the items in his kitchen.

The surprising penetration of these yearnings into the military space that is so familiar (once again the melody carries with it the memory of the black color of the singer's evening gown), merges two pictures: the first encounter with Umm Kulthum in the army cook's kitchen, while the second encounter is in the coffee shop in Struma Square in the Israeli city of Holon. Though not a childhood memory, this music still constitutes an experiential infrastructure that was clandestinely preserved, and whose memory no one was able to erase. Thus, Someck writes in his poem "Secret":

Perhaps I should not be relating this,  
 But my mother wept when she suddenly heard "Cleopatra."  
 How did you, Mr. Abdel Wahab, take an Egyptian queen  
 /From the history books and translate her into the tears of  
 My mother's memoirs?  
 And you, Cleopatra, the heartbreaker in the poker game of nostalgia  
 That was played on a side street in Ramat Gan, do you remember  
 . . .the throats that you constricted  
 In the coffeehouses of Baghdad and the wind that beat on the doors  
 Whose hinges creaked on the threshold of a belly that concealed a secret? (*Hametofef* 28)

In his poem "The Magic Song," Herzl Hakak depicts how his mother remembered her late husband when she heard lines from Farid's love song. These lines, which appear in the text both in Arabic and in Hebrew translation are, from the son's standpoint, a "miracle," or proof that "under the extinguished coals, the spark remained" (58). The link between the memory of the Arab song and the memory of a beloved husband that accompanied the poet's mother during the years of her widowhood imparts to Arab music a powerfully intimate dimension, a dimension that Mizrahi writers attributed to the lost and erased culture that belonged to them and their parents. The awakening of the memory of Arab music is expressed in the manner in which the renewed positioning has taken place in the Arab-Jewish space, which never ceased to be the concealed homeland for Mizrahim; it therefore represents the Mizrahim's sense of being in exile as well as their language that Israeli culture failed to absorb and understand.

Arab music does not concede its "halo," as Walter Benjamin defined it in connection with the art of painting. The halo of a work of art is everything that this work can impart as a tradition from the moment of its creation, starting with its one-time material existence and ending with its historical testimony and its ritual social function (Benjamin 219-254). The music of Egyptian composer-singer Abdel Wahab had established its audiences both in Baghdad and in the Israeli city of Ramat Gan. These musical audiences exist despite both the presence of national boundaries and the absolute cultural severance that the hegemony tried to create between Israeli culture and Arab cultures. The liberation from the limitations of Israeli culture—whose ideology of the negation of the Jewish Diaspora rejected any Diasporic past, especially the Arab-Jewish past—appears for many Mizrahim in the renewed connection with their musical heritage. Shohat defines this attitude toward Arab music as the "return to the Diaspora," which is proposed as the reversal of the "return to Zion" ("Invention" 17).

The establishment of renewed contact for immigrants with Arab music reveals their ability to disconnect from the streets of Ramat Gan and to find themselves in the imagined streets of Baghdad that perhaps no longer exist. This musical memory can also appear as a mystical revelation, as seen in Amira Hess's poem, "On the night that my heart emerged from the prison of silence":

And for a brief minute I imagined  
 That I had been cured and that I was a beam of light  
 In that hidden night in the darkness of my life.  
 Love overwhelmed me  
 And the tunes of the oud of the children of Baghdad and the violin  
 In the flickering of my tears Caused a stream to flow  
 And Aram Naharaim became a Sambatyon River full of light  
 Until the birds inside me that screamed out their flight  
 Like my longings' continual weeping in search of a cure  
 Burst out in a serenade,  
 Singing out the perfection of my love (24)

The title of the poem sheds light on the sharp transition from silence to awakening, a transition that is amplified by a term taken from a prophetic experience ("Nidmeiti [I imagined]," *Isaiah* 6:5). Memory becomes revelation and the soul bursts forth from its narrow Diasporic existence. Similar fragments of revelation, accompanied by a sense of sacredness, create the moments of experiential climax in Mizrahi poetry.

There is also another type of Arab music that proposes a cultural homeland—not that of Umm Kulthum, Abdel Wahab, Farid Al Atrash and Fairuz who were known to the first generation of immigrants, but rather present Arab music. The attraction to this music stems not from longings for the past but rather from a desire to be part of a present, Tikva Levy describes her encounter with the music of the Nafas musical ensemble: "I feel that this music/Awakens within me something/Like someone who is very distant,/Is inside me/And, inviting me to come,/ said to me, 'Rafi/Grew up in Dimona/Lived in Paris/Is an actor today in Tel Aviv'" (250).

The second generation's biography of wandering, a biography that ultimately returns to the Israeli center, is not one of assimilation and self-negation; nor is it a return to the experience of the first generation. Instead, it is the discovery of an independent voice that has awakened after one has listened to Arab music, evident in another part of Levy's poem, taken from *A Selection of Poems for [the Holiday of] Purim*:

Again I put on Nafas  
With that music  
I manage just fine  
A Bedouin flute  
Drums that imitate  
Galloping horses  
And the oud is also taking part.  
The instruments respect one another  
When one of them performs a solo  
The others encourage it from a distance,  
When necessary—they become mute.  
Now I hear  
The sadness of the hoarse flute up front  
With the drums and the oud in the background.  
The sadness gradually retreats,  
The drums grow stronger  
And then become weaker in favor of the oud.  
They all live in harmony  
In contrast with the occupiers. (253)

The well-coordinated collaboration of the instruments translates the ethos of mutual respect to the field of music, an ethos that is responsible for the creation of a social space of cooperation. The harmony serves as a stable emotional spiritual fortress against the Israeli reality on the eve of the holiday of Purim and its deafening noisemakers, a reality that is like the "howling of cats outside." The act of listening to the Arab harmony accompanies the events like meditation and quiet contemplation in a hostile area. Levy discerns the hostility when she listens to Camelia, a singer who appears with the East Jerusalem musical group Savrin: "I lower the volume/So that only I can hear the music./My paranoia rushes to/The door or the window/Someone who thinks that anyone who listens to/Arabic is an Arab/And who is coming to kill me" (255-256). The drama of this secret and frightened listening to the "radio stations of shame," which was experienced by their parents' generation, returns decades later and intensifies both the Arab music's deep, slow penetration and its quasi-religious devotion. The delicacy of the poem is expressed in its lack of interest in overly transparent messages; instead of referring to open oppression, the poem refers to a private "paranoia." This private perspective is, however, ironic, emphasizing that Israel is equally hostile to the Arabs and Mizrahim living within its borders.

This musical harmony may be able to exist within Arab culture, but it cannot exist outside that culture. A previous section in Levy's poem considers the possibility of cultural blending: "The other side of Nafass/Is/Music produced by Iranians/Who live in the U.S./A blend of East and West,/This music begins with classical Persian melodies/And, in its crescendo,/The entire melody is captured/By the West" (Levy 252). In these lines a natural suspicion arises regarding cultural fusions between east and west that overlook power relationships. This, despite their appearance of multiculturalism, because "What harmony could ever arise/Between occupier and occupied?" (Levy 253). The choice of Arab music rather than Hebrew music produced by Jewish Mizrahi artists, underlines a lack of faith in such hybridizations

that are created under conditions of a hegemonic Western culture that controls aesthetic concepts as well as the marketing of cultural products. The answer to this situation is a conscious choice both of Arab of writing a poem about Arab music—a poem that might conceivably arouse the ire of literary critics (Levy 256).

### Conclusion

This continued representation of Arab music by Mizrahi poets signifies both the return of the memory of that music after a period of Zionist erasure, and an attempt to reorganize this memory despite the bitter awareness of its partial, discontinuous nature. Salman Rushdie clarified the fragmentary nature of memory in general, and the memory of immigrants in particular. From his perspective, any attempt to rehabilitate this memory creates imaginary homelands that might not be identical with the immigrants' actual homelands, nor with the reality that the immigrants knew before they emigrated (1991). The poetry of the second generation is thus being written from a position of identification with the experience that their parents transmitted to them: the belief that Arab music was a central component in their culture, just as Arabic was their intimate language. Yet the members of this second generation are reestablishing Arab music as they turn it into a standpoint that is much more subversive and provocative than what their parents were prepared to propose in their own voice. They are even ready to concede many of the characteristics of affiliation with Israeli culture, in order to express their commitment toward Mizrahi cultural memory. The symbolic interest in Arab music is part of the attempt to radicalize in retrospect the viewpoint of the Mizrahim as immigrants, as exiles, who refuse to collaborate with the Zionist cultural project. This cultural and emotional phenomenon is a central characteristic in the creation of the Mizrahi identity of the poets of the second generation. The literary treatment of Arab music is part of the process of the consolidation of an identity that positions itself in the Arab-Jewish intermediary region. The moment that it obligates the inclusion of its Arab component, Mizrahi identity liberates itself from the repressive nature of Israeli culture and from its "incitement to discourse" (Foucault, *History* 17-35). In this manner, music proposes Arab-Jewish identity as an alternative to the unifying Israeli national identity.

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