

Dreams of the Algerian Sea Shore

With summer, many of us think about the heat, the sand and heading for the shore. I've been thinking a lot about them too, lately. My thoughts are not of Ocean City or Rehoboth Beach, but of the coastal cities of Algeria. Though I'm not headed there anytime soon, the warm sun, the Mediterranean coast, the middle-eastern meals and melodies of the music are enchanting, in the literal sense of the word, no less.

A century ago, that North African country, still under French colonial rule, had a Jewish population of nearly 150,000. Today, there are less than 50 Jews left, mostly aged pensioners. Until 1962, however, the relatively small Jewish population of Algeria had an oversized impact on the commercial and cultural life of the country. This should, of course, sound familiar, as it is just like the story of American Jewry.

The Sephardic Jews living in North Africa, colloquially called the Maghreb, there were particularly well integrated into the fabric of society. They historically spoke Ladino, but by the early 20th century had adopted colonial French and colloquial Maghrebi Arabic as everyday languages thanks to the schools opened across the region by the Alliance Israelite Universelle. They were proud Algerians.

The Jews of the coastal plain of Algeria were the leading preservers of the musical and literary traditions of Andalus, the southern Spanish region whose culture was shared among the three communities of Abrahamic faith living there at the time; Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Carried to the Maghreb following the departure from Spain, these musical forms remained popular among the North Africans of all backgrounds and faiths. They were preserved, performed and recorded primarily by Jews.

The Chaabi (folk) tunes and Hawzi (Andalusian) songs descended from the Spanish tradition came to Algeria via the Sephardic population. The leading, most popular figures of this music were Jews from the coastal city of Oran, which once had a Sephardic majority population.

The multicultural, cosmopolitan nature of this city was to the extent that its music became fashionable and popular in France. There were venues in Paris specializing in it. The music got its own genre name in French- Chanson Oranaise. Like its earlier American counterpart, Tin Pan Alley, which was likewise filled with Jewish songwriters, the performers of this tradition drew in part on the music

of their own heritage, sang in a common language (either French or Arabic) on popular romantic themes and were recorded on well-known labels. It had its own stars, quirky characters and even scandals.

The connection between Algeria and France meant that the singers of this music were effectively international stars. Some like the famous Samy el-Maghribi, were even like the *Jazz Singer*—Cantor by day and night club singer by night! There are also cases of melodies of this unique music seeping into synagogues and being used for prayer melodies. El-Maghribi was once the subject of a scandal around one such of his songs. His 1952 hit Kouftanek Mahloul *Your Robe is Open* was thought to be about his illicit rendezvous with a member of the Royal family. The melody was subsequently documented by the well known ethnomusicologist Paul Bowles in his field recordings of Moroccan Jewish sacred music.

That all ended in 1962, when Algerian nationalists declared independence after a bloody civil war and precluded non-Muslims from holding citizenship. The entire Jewish community emigrated to France, and the music of Chanson Oranaise continued to be popular for decades. To this day, there are still fans and modern stars of the genre in North Africa, Israel and France. A few years ago, a reunion of these musicians led to a concert tour and film called *El Gusto*, which can be viewed online (<http://bit.ly/elGusto>), very similar to the famous Buena Vista Social Club and film by Ry Cooder.

Setting the words of a prayer to a borrowed, popular melody is quite common in Jewish music. Called *contrafacta*, it is a common sign of how well integrated a community is into its surrounding culture. Many of us have heard Adon Olam set to "You'll Be Back" from the musical *Hamilton*. The piyyut Dror Yikra written by Dunash ibn Labrat in 8th century Spain is commonly sung to the popular melody, Sloop John B, also known as I Wanna Go Home, famously recorded by the Beach Boys. This is *contrafacta* at its finest!

As Reform Jews, we're constantly seeking ways to make our ancient prayers and sacred texts relevant to our times. So, let's take a lesson from our Algerian cousins. If you come up with any ideas, or if you'd like to learn more about interesting Jewish music, email me at cantoradamdavis@gmail.com. I'll be poolside, humming Sloop John B, and dreaming that I'm somewhere on the Algerian sea shore!

—Cantor Adam