Medieval Song in a Jewish Key

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Thereby, it is permitted for one to use candlelight to pray from a liturgical booklet when the eve of Yom Kippur falls on Friday night or to recite liturgical poems when the eve of the holiday falls on Friday night. Even though the candle is low and within reach, feeling the presence of the congregation prevents one from inadvertently adjusting it and desecrating the Shabbat. In our own region of the exile, it happens frequently that on Friday nights of a wedding, we will sing around the table from songbooks. Even though the candle is low and within reach, the rabbis have not been concerned about the potential to desecrate the Shabbat.[1]

Isaac son of Moses of Vienna, *Sefer Or Zaru'a*, Vienna, Austria, thirteenth century

1 Isaac son of Moses of Vienna, *Sefer Or Zaru'a* (Jerusalem: Makhon Yerushalayim, 2001), 2: §43.

Much like today, the medieval world was full of music and song. The chants of monks resounded through monasteries, royal courts were graced with the ballads of troubadours, while musicians filled the streets with the sounds of their voices and instruments. Song was not restricted to the professional class and the educated elites, but permeated the daily lives of ordinary men, women, and children. Students studying Latin were trained to sing their grammatical tables, parents sang songs to lull their children to sleep, and taverns resonated with the tunes of drunken merriment.

Medieval Jews were in no way absent from the musical life of the city. Any festive occasion, such as the birth of a child or a holiday, could inspire community members to celebrate with song. Depictions of Jews playing instruments in medieval manuscripts indicate that these moments of singing could be accompanied by instrumental music and dance as well.[2] In the above source, R. Isaac son of Moses of Vienna (1200-1270), one of the most prominent rabbinic figures in medieval northern Europe, remarked that it was common for Jews to gather on Friday evening and sing songs in celebration of community weddings. While this comment appears as part of a larger discussion about the minutiae of Jewish law, it permits a glance at an important facet of Jewish communal life: singing.

In medieval Jewish life, singing was both a festive pastime and an important spiritual practice. Thirteenth-century guides for circumcision ceremonies state explicitly that one's obligation to rejoice is fulfilled by, among other things, singing.[3] Raising one's voice with others in song was, according to this understanding, deemed to be inherently joyous. This meant, though, that on more somber occasions, singing could be judged inappropriate. R. Israel Isserlein (1390-1460) is said to have sung at every Sabbath meal except during weeks of communal sadness, such as after the murder of a Jew in the community.[4] Like their Christian neighbors, Jews also ascribed religious importance to singing, beyond its celebratory function. The image of the biblical King David composing the Psalms with harp in hand helped shape such pious understandings of singing.[5] According to *Sefer Hasidim*, a collection of Jewish law and lore from the thirteenth century, singing both manifested and made palpable one's love of God: "Love of God . . . causes a person to sweetly sing songs that fill one's heart with joy in the love of God."[6] Other teachings from *Sefer Hasidim*, seeing a more practical spiritual value in singing, explain that humming the tune of a pleasant song could help one focus during prayer.[7] In these ways, singing suffused every sector of medieval Jewish life.

One of the most central times for singing was the Sabbath, mentioned here by R. Isaac as the time at which the community would celebrate weddings. The Sabbath offered numerous opportunities for communal singing even when there was no wedding. According to a frequently cited piece of rabbinic lore, the angelic responsibility to serenade God with song was passed on to the Jewish people every Sabbath.[8] Though musical instruments were prohibited, Jews fulfilled this responsibility with great vigor by raising their voices in song throughout the

2 See the illustrations discussed and reproduced in Suzanne Wijsman, "Silent Sounds: Musical Iconography in a Fifteenth-Century Jewish Prayer Book," in *Resounding Images: Medieval Intersections of Art, Music and Sound*, eds. Susan Boynton and Diane J. Reilly (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 313–33.

3 Jacob haGozer, *Sefer Zikhron Berit laRishonim*, ed. Yakov Glassberg (Berlin: Tzvi Hirsch, 1891), 1:68.

4 Yosef son of Moshe, *Leket Yosher*, ed. Amichai Kinarti (Jerusalem: Makhon Yerushalayim, 2013), 2:73-74.

5 See, for example, *Sefer Hasidim*, ed. Reuven Margoliot (Jerusalem: Mossad haRav Kook, 1957), 151, §147.

6 Ibid., 240, §300.

7 Ibid., 163, §158.

8 Isaac son of Moses of Vienna, *Sefer Or Zaru'a* (Jerusalem: Makhon Yerushalayim, 2001), 2:51-52.

Fig. 1. The Piyyut *Dror Yikra* (Dunash ibn Labrat (920-990)) and the marginal note instructing the reader to sing the poem to the tune of a vernacular French Troubadour song. *Mahzor Vitry,* France, 1204. New York, Jewish Theological Seminary, MS 8092, fol. 38v. Courtesy of The Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

holy day. Already in the eleventh century, R. Yosef Tov Elem (c. 1050), an influential French sage, recounted how his coreligionists would escort the Sabbath as she departed on Saturday evening as they would for a visiting Queen: with voices raised in song.[9] Sabbath singing was also a mainstay of domestic Sabbath life. Families would take a break from their festive meals to sing praises of God and the holy day.[10]

9 *Mahzor Vitry*, ed. Aryeh Goldschmidt (Jerusalem: Makhon Otzar haPoskim, 2008), 2:206.

10 See my article, "'To Sing on Shabbat, Night and Day, Each Person at Their Table': On the Formation of the Custom to Sing Shabbat Zemirot in Medieval Europe," *AJS Review*, Forthcoming.

Jews, like their Christian neighbors, frequently sang in their vernacular languages. Kirsten Fudeman has shown that vernacular singing was an important way by which those untrained in Hebrew, primarily women and children, could participate fully in communal festivities.[11] Yet, we have few extant examples of vernacular songs that were incorporated into communal Jewish singing. Most songs known to have been sung communally by Jews were composed instead in a poetic Hebrew. While this means that some may have not understood what they were singing, the wide-ranging familiarity with Hebrew in medieval communities indicates that participation would not have been impossible for non-elites. This is especially true if community members grew up hearing and singing these songs regularly, just as they did the liturgy.[12]

These Hebrew songs were drawn from the liturgical poems written by famous poets from across the Jewish world like Yehuda Halevi (1075-1141) of Spain or Simon son of Isaac (950-1020) of southern Germany. The songbooks, which began to be produced in the thirteenth century, collect anywhere from a few to dozens of songs and would have been owned by wealthy Jews or by the community. In his comments, R. Isaac mentions how these books would be used by those singing Sabbath and wedding songs. While some core songs were popular throughout medieval Europe and appear in songbooks from across the continent, every community had songs specific to their own cultural environment. For example, collections of songs for the Sabbath from medieval Italy privilege the work of the thirteenth-century Italian poet Daniel son of Yehiel of Montalcino (c. 1300), whose songs do not appear at all in Ashkenaz.[13] Similarly, manuscripts from Germany that record the French liturgical rite include satirical dirges about the expulsion of the Jews from France that likely would have only been sung by French Jews.[14] With allusions to both biblical and rabbinic literature, all the Hebrew songs celebrate the themes of the day, whether they be the love of bride and groom at a wedding, the creation of the world on the Sabbath or anything else. Frequently, songs veered from the spiritual majesty of the day to physical revelry. With the same lyrical sophistication, singers would rejoice in the food, wine, and rest that accompanied communal celebrations.

Although we have ample evidence for communal singing and the songs that were sung, we have no extant music from medieval Ashkenaz. It is not until the eighteenth century that Jews began to write down their own songs with musical notation. So what tunes were Jews using to sing their songs? Manuscript evidence suggests that numerous tunes were orally transmitted through Jewish communities. In many Jewish songbooks, marginal notes instruct that specific Hebrew songs are to be sung to the tune of other assumedly popular songs.[15] While this tells us nothing about the tune itself, it does suggest that communities had particular tunes to which they sang certain songs. Such well-known community tunes would have helped community

11 Kirsten Anne Fudeman, "'They Have Ears, But Do Not Hear': Gendered Access to Hebrew and the Medieval Hebrew-French Wedding Song," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 96 (2006): 542–67. For more on this Hebrew-French song, see Samuel N. Rosenberg, "The Medieval Hebrew-French Wedding Song," *Shofar* 11 (1992): 22–37.

12 For discussion of memorization of Hebrew liturgy among medieval Jews, see: Ephraim Kanarfogel, "Prayer, Literacy, and Literary Memory in Jewish Communities of Medieval Europe," in *Jewish Studies at the Crossroads of Anthropology and History*, eds. Ra'anan S. Boustan, Oren Kosansky, and Marina Rustow (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 250–70.

13 For an example, see: Rome, Biblioteca Casanatense, Ms 1965, fols. 10v-13v and 35r-39r. Little is known about Daniel son of Yehiel aside from a few of his poems and his link to the famous Anaw family.

14 Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, Ms Cod. Parm. 1912, fol. 37v.

15 For the limited current discussion of this practice, see: Raphael Loewe, "A Thirteenth-Century Piyyut Set to French Music," *Revue des études juives* 161 (2002): 83–96 & n. 73; Anne Ibos-Augé, Brigitte Lesne, and Colette Sirat,"Du texte à la musique: Enjeux d'une reconstruction mélodique. Juifs et trouvères – Chansons juives du XIIIe siècle en ancien français et en hébreu," in *Philologie et Musicologie: Des sources à l'interprétation poético-musicale (xiie-xvie siècle)*, eds. Christelle Chaillou-Amadieu, Oreste Floquet, and Marco Grimaldi (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2019), 29–34.

members participate by humming along, even if they did not know the sometimes complex lyrics of each song.

Some rabbis were deeply concerned about Jewish communal tunes being adopted by Christians and consequentially warned about the importance of keeping Jewish and Christian tunes separate.[16] Musical segregation, however, was impossible in urban environments aflush with melodies and songs. R. Eliezer son of Joel (1140-1220) reports that it was common in his community for Jews to hire Christian musicians to perform at their celebrations, including on the Sabbath.[17] Jews also adopted Christian tunes and used them for all forms of communal singing throughout the Middle Ages.[18] In one collection of Sabbath songs, a marginal note instructs the reader to sing the poem *Dror Yikra*, composed by the tenth-century Hebrew poet Dunash ibn Labrat (920-990), to the tune of a vernacular French Troubadour song (fig. 1).[19]

While singing could and did occur in almost any setting, many of our Hebrew sources stress that the most welcome space for song was the home. In the above source, R. Isaac describes his coreligionists singing around a table that was most likely the domestic dining table. Many songbooks explicitly position Sabbath singing in the home when they state that one should sing either when one has returned home from the synagogue or between various courses of the meal. These and other comments demonstrate that singing was rooted in the home and was an important expression of Jewish domestic piety in the Middle Ages. Various texts point to this culture of domestic musicality when they praise parents for teaching their children tunes and songs.[20] Although scholarship has emphasized the medieval religious life of the church and synagogue, the home was also an important place for pious expression. This was likely even more true for Jews, who had a multitude of rituals meant to be performed in the home. Instead of yielding to a mandated liturgy as they did in the synagogue, in their homes Jews could choose the songs, the tunes and the choreography for their domestic musical performance. Be it from the home, synagogue, or street-corner, Jewish voices and songs contributed much to the polyphony of sounds accompanying daily life in medieval cities.

16 See, for example, *Sefer Hasidim*, ed. Reuven Margaliyot (Jerusalem: Mossad haRav Kook, 1957), 302, §428-429.

17 Eliezer son of Joel, *Sefer Ra'aviah*, ed. David Deblytski (Bnei Brak: David Deblytski, 1989), 2:326–27.

18 Edwin Seroussi, "Jewish Music and Diaspora," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish Music*, ed. Joshua S. Walden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 31–32; Diana Matut, *Dichtung und Musik im frühneuzeitlichen Aschkenas* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 2:39–61.

19 New York, Jewish Theological Seminary Ms 8092, fol. 38v. For discussion of this song and melody, see: Anne Ibos-Augé, Brigitte Lesne, and Colette Sirat. "Du texte à la musique: Enjeux d'une reconstruction mélodique. Juifs et trouvères – Chansons juives du XIIIe siècle en ancien français et en hébreu," in *Philologie et Musicologie: Des sources à l'interprétation poético-musicale (xiie-xvie siècle)*, eds. Christelle Chaillou-Amadieu, Oreste Floquet, and Marco Grimaldi (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2019), 34, 37-39.

20 See, for example, Eleazar of Worms (1176-1234) who praises his daughters for reciting songs learned from their mother. *Gezerot Ashkenaz veTsarfat*, ed. Abraham M. Habermann (Jerusalem: Sifrei Tarshish, 1945), 165–66.

Further Reading

- Sarit Shalev-Eyni, "The Aural-Visual Experience in the Ashkenazi Ritual Domain of the Middle Ages." In *Resounding Images: Medieval Intersections of Art, Music and Sound*, edited by Susan Boynton and Diane J. Reilly, 189–204. Turnhout: Brepols, 2015.
- Kirsten Anne Fudeman, "'They Have Ears, But Do Not Hear': Gendered Access to Hebrew and the Medieval Hebrew-French Wedding Song," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 96 (2006): 542–67.
- Kirsten Anne Fudeman, *Vernacular Voices: Language and Identity in Medieval French Jewish Communities*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010.
- John Haines, *Medieval Song in Romance Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Albert Evan Kohn, "'To Sing on Shabbat, Night and Day, Each Person at Their Table': On the Formation of the Custom to Sing Shabbat Zemirot in Medieval Europe," Forthcoming in *AJS Review*.