

# Zem irot A re for E veryone

## לך נאה זמירות

### *An invitation to the Shabbat meal and the songs that adorn it*

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#### Introduction

You're sitting around a table with your friends and/or family. Great food; a feast. Nothing to rush off to; you're just relaxing and shooting the breeze. It is in this setting that the Shabbat Zemirot find their home.

There's no exact/adequate English word for these songs. Closest is: "table-song" or "hymn." "Hymn is too formal, but it does identify what sets these apart from other songs (short ones like *Hinei Ma Tov, Esa Einai, V'taher Libeinu*). Zemirot are poems-songs with structured stanzas (usually with a refrain).<sup>1</sup> In addition, more than sacred songs in most other cultures, Shabbat zemirot are distinguished by the informal setting in which we sing them – akin to the folk-songs that people in every culture sing when gathered for a party or around a camp-fire.<sup>2</sup> The closest similar songs with which many will be familiar are the songs, like *Adir Hu*, which we sing at the end of the Pesach seder. While some are shorter in form,<sup>1</sup> the experience of singing these around the table – among family and friends, with our "hair down" and spirits relaxed – is what Shabbat *zemirot* are all about.

The zemirot have been called a "mirror of the soul life of . . . Israel,"<sup>3</sup> no doubt because they reflected so many themes held dear by the common Jew, and put them into poetry and music which reaches the experiential inner self. "To experience the soul is to go beyond [the mind or body] to the eternal."<sup>2</sup> Their "unique combination" of religious expression and "good cheer" is a "product of the Jewish genius."<sup>4</sup> Scores of generations of Jews in vastly varying times and cultures have sung these and similar songs in the privacy and comfort of their dining room. They have captivated me and my friends as well, and with this volume I hope you enjoy them too.

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<sup>1</sup> The Star-Spangled Banner, America the Beautiful, and Hatkivah are similar in that they have multiple stanzas, with the latter two having a similar ending to each stanza. (However, hardly anyone sings more than the first stanza of these national songs/anthems.)

<sup>2</sup> In some sense, Christmas carols have this combination of informality and sometimes-sacred themes, although they are more commonly associated with the outdoors – the carolers walking around the neighborhood while enjoying their songs – rather than the meal table.

<sup>3</sup> J.H. Hertz (Chief Rabbi of British Empire), Foreword, to Herbert Loewe, *Mediaeval Hebrew Minstrelsy* (Clarke & Co., London 1926), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

## Our Folk Music

The zemirot are in many ways our "folk-music" – music that has been transmitted over time and that captures the fancy of a particular culture/society. Strictly speaking, "folk" means something that has no known single author (or composer of a melody, or choreographer of a dance), or has been modified over time. In practice much of what becomes the corpus of a culture's folk material has identifiable authors. Such music is not strictly "folk music" but is widely regarded by the contemporary culture as such.<sup>5</sup> This is true of much contemporary American "folk music" – songs by Woody Guthrie, Simon & Garfunkel, Tom Paxton, Phil Ochs, etc. – as it is of zemirot texts – Abraham Ibn Ezra for *Ki Eshmera* and *Tzama Nafshi*, and Israel Najara for *Yah Ribon*.

The folk music with which "we" (my readers and I – mostly people residing in the U.S. and Canada) are most familiar is a combination of "popular" (or "vernacular") music, where the identity of the author/composer is known: singers and groups such as Woody Guthrie, Simon & Garfunkel, or the Beatles; and of genuine folk music, like "Greensleeves," "Home on the Range," and (yes) "House of the Rising Sun," with unknown authors, or even sometimes, texts, which were created and evolved over time.

Unlike copyrighted songs or musical compositions such as Broadway songs or classical symphonies, in genuine folk music, both the texts and melodies are transmitted and changed over time. This is the "folk-process" – a bit like the game of "Telephone," except that many people are perpetuating and transmitting the songs, so changes do creep in, though not to the drastic degree that a single chain of "Telephone" produces. Those changes which collectively capture many people's fancy, among other factors, are incorporated into the folk-processing of the song. Whether or not written by a specific author, once it leaves the writer's pen, a folk (or folk-like) song takes on a "life of its own."

We in the Jewish community are very familiar with this when it comes to synagogue music. New melodies come along – borrowed from the surrounding culture, from other metrically-similar prayers, or composed by contemporaries, or a combination of these. They take hold and displace older "traditions." Many will be familiar with the numerous melodies for *Lecha Dodi*, *El Adon*, or *V'sham'ru*, and with how the melodies with which they grew up are superseded (often enthusiastically) by new melodies. Other melodies were written by known composers,<sup>6</sup> but get changed once a choir or organ no longer "leads" the congregational singing. (Listen to the original of *Va-yehi Bin-so'a* and *Ki Mitzion* and you'll get an idea how much they have changed.) Texts change over time as well. (For example when manuscripts of *Yedid Nefesh* become known, it was obvious that the "accepted version" which most congregations and siddurim used was quite different from the original. Some recent siddurim now use the "original" text – and the resultant response of congregations to this in itself becomes part of the folk-processing.)

## "Insider Information"

The key element of folk music that makes their analogy to zemirot so useful, is that they contain numerous allusions to places, events, ideas and phrases with which the people of that folk culture are familiar. Someone with a perfect command of English who had never lived in the American folk culture of the twentieth century or the youth culture of the 1960's, would have no idea what phrases like: "American pie," "Deadhead," or "flower child" meant. Those who had not lived through (or

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<sup>5</sup> Scholars in this field often use the term "vernacular music" for this broader set encompassing both folk music and folk-like music.

<sup>6</sup> For example, the choral composers Solomon Sulzer and Louis Lewandowski, who wrote much of what we sing in the Torah service on Shabbat morning, and in other parts of the services.

subsequently absorbed) the experience of the Vietnam War and Civil-rights era protests, would misunderstand or be perplexed by the line: "The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls."

These allusions are the "insider information" which gives folk poetry part of its message, that is understood and shared by members of that folk culture. Hear "This Land is Your Land" and insiders know the connotations stemming from the song's origin (Woody Guthrie's response to "God Bless America") and its various uses (for example, in political conventions from the left to the right). Mention "The Grateful Dead" and devotees know what kind of music and messages they connote. Mention "Alice's Restaurant" and insiders will recognize the song's famous length and its allusions and associations.

That is the goal of this book – to provide the keys that "unlock" the secrets that the insiders of Shabbat zemirot have enjoyed over centuries. Sometimes they paraphrase biblical passages that were well-known to people immersed in a Jewish community; some allude to key experiences of our people – the revelation at Mount Sinai; the celebration at, and then the destruction of the national Temple in Jerusalem; the Jews' migrations and sufferings over centuries and yearning for redemption. Above all, of course, the Shabbat zemirot celebrate the Shabbat experience: the change of pace, focus on spirituality, the favorite prayers and foods.

### Terminology

The word "Zemirot" (a plural form) means a song, or psalm, or tune. Different writers and scholars have used *zemer* or *zemirah* for the single. While "*zemer*" at first blush appears to be in the masculine singular, it is used much more frequently, while "*zemirah*" feels stilted. So I will adopt "*zemer*" for the singular in this book.

Not all songs however are zemirot. Short songs like "Hinei Ma Tov" are not zemirot, although unfortunately the term has become abused and used for anything people sing. Unfortunate because the full, robust structured poems are an experience of their own, and loose usage of "zemirot" to refer to anything leads many to never discover the true zemirot. The term for the more general "songs," which embraces both zemirot, short songs, and everything in between, is "shir" (pl. shirim). It is my hope that many more contemporary Jews will rediscover the joys of "the real thing" – its poetic form, its expressions of deep and wide-reaching feelings and experiences, and the musical experience of singing these songs.

The term zemirot is used not just for the songs sung at home, but certain traditions (e.g., Sephardic, Mizrahi-Iraqi ...) use it for the selections sung in the preliminary morning service. (These "introductory psalms and hymns" – entitled "*Pesukei D'Zimra*" in the Ashkenazi tradition – are largely biblical selections rather than post-biblical poetry.) Conversely, some Sephardic traditions refer to the table-songs as *Pizmonim*. Some also use the term zemirot to refer to writers' entire collections of poetry (whether or not written for the meal-table).<sup>3</sup>

The term "piyut" (pl. "piyutim") is also used to describe this genre of post-biblical poetry, and some use the terms zemirot and piyutim interchangeably. The term "piyut" is more commonly used for poems that have been incorporated into the liturgy (be it daily, Shabbat, particular holidays, and other special occasions. By contrast, zemirot can refer to religious poetry that are sung outside the formal liturgy (namely, our meals).<sup>4</sup> I will use the term "piyut" to embrace the entire class of post-biblical, multiple-stanza, religious poetry, and zemirot as a subset of piyutim.

(Yemenite Jewish poets would often collect their hymns into a compilation called a "*Diwan*."<sup>5</sup> Even though these poems were as fully structured as the zemirot, they often called them "Shirim" or "Shirot.")<sup>6</sup> Hopefully this list will help you be a notch less bewildered when encountering these terms in various places.

I hope that this discussion will help you feel a little less bewildered when encountering these terms in various places.

### Development of the Genre of Zemirot

The custom of singing at Shabbat meals is probably as old as rabbinic Judaism, dating back to Talmudic times.<sup>7</sup> The genre of piyutim (and hence, zemirot) really started in the late Talmudic period, and the first important *paytanim* wrote shortly thereafter. The first piyut-writers of note, such as Yannai and Eliezer ben Kallir, lived in approximately the fifth to seventh centuries. Their style was quite different, both from the biblical poetry (as in the psalms) and from the later zemirot which we know. They contained much more obscure allusions and complex language, often weaving in Aramaicisms and other references to establish their eruditeness.<sup>8</sup>

Starting around the tenth century, Jewish poets experienced a "back to the basics" movement, which highlighted a revival of the much simpler and direct biblical language style, and a move away from opaque allusions of the previous centuries. It is largely poetry from this style, which predominated Jewish poet-writing for the next five-plus centuries, from which the zemirot emerged that became "hits" and endured down to our times. I will describe the times and mood of the key zemirot writers below, in section II.

### The Writers (General Introduction)

These writers were far from being faceless, bearded, rabbis, sitting in dark rooms. They had wide-ranging interests and avocations, and often colorful lives (which I will describe in each known writer's section, below). In addition, their authors wrote zemirot in social circumstances that in some ways parallel our contemporary folk artists.

Many of the zemirot writers belonged to poet circles [re: Spain: Weinberger? Scheindlin?] or traveled among communities of kindred spirits, much as folk writers we know gather, either privately or in folk festivals where they shared each other's music and performed for larger audiences. In many of their environs (among the medieval poets), being a poet was the "in thing" which garnered not just social status, but the financial support of the rulers or nobility.

Poets – both medieval and modern – often drew on existing genres in order to express popular sentiments in creative new ways, and to impress the public, the upper class, and each other. Some of the poets lived through persecution & poverty – yet even of these, many were influenced by this culture of poetic status. Even if born later, the ethos and styles of those times continued to influence such writers. In Part \_\_\_\_, I will describe how medieval Jewish poetry was "jump-started" by the highly-evolved and highly-regarded Arabic poetry, the status of such poets at the times in which they lived, and styles used (compare quantitative meter, with stress-accent meter). (The Jewish writers were primarily exposed to these forms these in the countries under the Islamic empire, predominantly but not exclusively Spain.)

Jewish medieval poets wrote thousands of zemirot over the years. The matters include both well-known figures (who are known for accomplishments other than poetry), and anonymous-or-

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<sup>7</sup> Sometimes a particular *piyut* can occur in the liturgy as well as among the *zemirot*. For example, the poem *Yedid Nefesh* was included in the Birkot Hashahar among Sephardim as well as in the *zemirot* for Seudah Sh'lishit. More recently it has gained widespread acceptance as an introductory hymn in Kabbalat Shabbat.

<sup>8</sup> The same root served as the basis for the Spanish and Ladino words *bendicho* (be blessed) and *bendigamos* (let us bless) — the titles of two Ladino prayers.

unknown authors. Some of the writers published their poetry; the poems of others were published posthumously/after by others. But many writers never published their work, or only some of it. Of those poems that became known, some caught the public's fancy, and some of those in turn constitute the current "corpus" of European/North-American minhag (custom).

### Folk-Transmission

Folk music is a combination of the texts and melodies. Both of these (especially the music) are subject to changing over time. Even where the author is known, the words often change when transmitted (as in "Telephone"), and sometimes entire paragraphs will be different.<sup>9</sup> Poets have written thousands such poems.<sup>10</sup> Just like the vast majority of songs aspiring song-writers create in our day, most of these did not see the light of day. Of those which anyone sang, a minority again survived the cut to the next generation or level of transmission. The ones which gained the most popularity or had the greatest luck in promotion, continued on to today.

The *zemirot* are not a "canon." No central authority declared: the following texts are to be sung at Shabbat meals. Rather, the poems most often sung have varied over the centuries, and between different Jewish communities around the world.

Of the *zemirot* which saw the light of day, some "caught on" and became part of families' meal-song repertoire. Obviously, such repertoire varied even more in different regions and communities, such as: Spain-Morocco, Iraq, Northern-Spain/Southern-France, Italy, Northern France, Germany, and Yemen — and later on, Turkey/Land-of-Israel, and Poland/Russia. (These are not by any measure a comprehensive list of communities, and I have lumped together some intertwined communities.)

These aspects which captured people's fancy are inherently subjective, but still identifiable: the songs' messages, the poetic/musical flow of the text, amenability to singing, and the aesthetic impact of meter, alliteration, and other poetic elements. As we know from other walks of life (e.g., classical music, "golden-oldies" popular music), it is only later that we know which songs endure beyond a generation, and stand "the test of time."

Even so, some songs have continued to fade in or out of prominence. The (Hatam Sofer highly praised the *zemer Yom Zeh L'yisrael*, and this song rose from relative obscurity to prominence in the repertoire. Some *zemirot* (e.g., *Yom Shabbaton*) have appeared more often recently, while others (e.g., *Yom Shabbat Kodesh*, and even *Yah Echsof*, one of the most recently written *zemirot*) have faded in use. Some *zemirot* have increasingly appeared in published *zemirot* books, while others have faded in use. Even more recently, Jewish communities around the world have adopted some of each other's favorites. *Mipi El*, a western Sephardic song, has caught on among Ashkenazim, but has not yet made it into that "canon." Hertz has *Ki Eshmera* as one of his few *zemirot*.

The tenor of the times influences the choices, too. While it may seem counterintuitive, often it was during the times of greatest oppression and suffering that songs flourished which depicted the happiest Shabbat scenes. In such times people probably had a greater need to focus on those elements

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<sup>9</sup> *Yom Shabbaton* (Yonah Matz'ah) is a dramatic example, where the middle verse in the Yemenite *diwan* of Shalem Shabbazi has nothing in common with the versions used elsewhere, but the initial letter (to preserve the acrostic). *Ki Eshmera*, \_\_\_ are other examples with significant variants. *Yah Ribon* has few variants (other than some vowels and grammar details), probably because it was published immediately by its own author.

<sup>10</sup> Israel Najara, Yehudah Halevi, and Shalem Shabbazi each alone wrote hundreds at the minimum, with popular estimates running much higher. (See., e.g., Weinberger \_\_\_)

of joy which they either experienced, or at least could imagine. (Think of our protest songs of peace; when else did they feel compelling but during wartime?)

Along with all the foregoing, the rise of the printing press and publishers of sacred books, greatly shaped the choice of zemirot. The press at once both made copies of these (and other Jewish texts) more readily available, and created a greater relative standardization of repertoire. Of necessity they could not include all the hundreds of (already-known) zemirot, and hence had to use editorial discretion in selecting some for inclusion and others for omission.

Undoubtedly publishers took into account each song's relative popularity in making such decisions, since even then, market forces would make one book sell better than another. There is a debate among modern-day scholars of zemirot as to the role and degree of importance played by these publishers. [FN's] This is somewhat a chicken-and-egg phenomenon, since, in my view, popularity of songs influenced choice of publications at least as much as the choices made by publishers has shaped families' repertoire.<sup>11</sup>

Notwithstanding the role of publishers, this selection-process has been a fairly democratic, grass-roots phenomenon. Synagogue liturgy for daily and holiday prayer has long been canonized, and variants (occasional additions or deletions of a piyut/poem, or new prayers, e.g., for the State of Israel) come slowly.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, Shabbat-table zemirot have continued to be treated as halachically "optional" liturgy – praiseworthy to sing, but carrying no negative implication of transgressing a commandment if not sung. Nothing – except people "voting with their feet" (or rather, one might say "their mouths") and the inertia of publications, keeps this repertoire from changing.

Indeed, the repertoire selection continues to change despite the slowing of its pace. Changes in popularity and use are ongoing. Yedid Nefesh has enjoyed recent acceptance in the Ashkenazi liturgy. Haim Nahman Bialik's Shabbat HaMalka, now about a century old, has caught on, especially in Reform Jewish circles;<sup>13</sup> only time will yield the answer as to this song's place in the wider community's repertoire. In his *Zemirot Anthology*, Neil Levin noted his non-inclusion of contemporary tunes "because we have as yet no indicator of their endurance."<sup>14</sup> The same holds true with regard to this book's selection of texts.

## Music

While changes within a given text occur fairly slowly and gradually, the pace of change with melodies is rapid. Nothing has impeded the borrowing of "new" melodies and applying them to existing zemirot, or to the discontinuance of other previously popular choices. As with song melodies in

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<sup>11</sup> Publication has likely played a role in reducing variants and promoting standardization. On the other hand, sometimes it is the publisher (or manuscript copier) who, sometimes based on opinions about grammar, modified wording to what they regarded as the "correct" version. (Levin, p. xii).

<sup>12</sup> The one place which witnesses the greatest flexibility is precisely those poems – piyutim – that most closely resemble zemirot in their status as not-fully-canonized in the core repertoire. Thus, in the High Holiday liturgy, contrast the centrality of Unetane Tokef, or Ki Anu Amecha to less-known piyutim such as *Imru Lelohim* or *Aderet Mamlacha*.

<sup>13</sup> See Lawrence A. Hoffman, *My People's Prayer Book* (Jewish Lights), vol 7 "Shabbat at Home" (1997), pp. \_\_\_\_ [discussion about selection]

<sup>14</sup> *Zemirot Anthology*, p. xx.

synagogue services,<sup>15</sup> the turnover of *zemirot* melodies is fairly quick, and usually most of the melodies in any community or circle will be totally different from those of but a generation or two earlier. The currently "traditional" (most prevalent) song melody for *Shalom Aleichem* was written by Israel Goldfarb in 1916! Recently, a number of melodies by the late Shlomo Carlebach (1925 - 1994) have become popular for a few *zemirot* (including *Kol Mekadesh*, *Menuchah v'Simchah*).

Over the ages, Jewish music has always been a hybrid of handed-down melodies and incorporation of new ones. Jews have both absorbed melodies and styles of communities world-wide in which they lived, and retained an anchor of its modes and styles from its mid-eastern and biblical roots. The anchor is reflected in *nusach* – the liturgical-musical traditions (that themselves vary among the major groupings of world Jewry) which assign particular modes and phrases to particular services of the day, week, and seasons. This becomes a vehicle which colors each of these services, whereby the same words are sung to distinctive keys and themes that create experiential associations with each time of day/week/season. For more about the role of *nusach* in our days, see my article, *Nusach – Reclaiming a Lost Heritage*.<sup>7</sup>

*Zemirot* too reflect the expressiveness that goes beyond words, as well as the moods and styles of our ancient roots and surrounding cultures. A large number of *zemirot* melodies come from ethnic Jewish communities around the world – Yemen, Georgia, Poland, Morocco, among others. These tend to be the older, more enduring melodies, that have been less affected by "Telephone" folk-transmission. They reflect our musical roots – sometimes even echoing the *nusach* for the day. (For example, almost all ethnic melodies for *Dror Yikra* are in natural minor – a key heard much more often on Shabbat.<sup>8</sup>) New melodies from our surroundings add spice and variety, but often lack the same roots. ("Sloop John B" is the first melody in major key that I have heard applied to *Dror Yikra*.) It is a nice melody, quite harmonizable; still it is good to be attuned to noticing what is more rooted and what is less so.<sup>9</sup>

The oldest melodies tend to be those sung by the Sephardic and Yemenite communities. The former assiduously sought to preserve their folk-songs during their wanderings since their exile from Spain in 1492, so many melodies (like *La Rosa Enflorece* for *Tzur Mishelo*) have been around for at least several centuries. The latter were able to perpetuate their musical traditions for several centuries due to their relative isolation from the rest of the Jewish world until recently. The melody for their *piyut* *Ahavat Hadassa* is now song to *Ki Eshmera* by many communities across the world.

On the other hand, the *hasidim* of Eastern Europe borrowed readily from surrounding cultures, so their musical traditions are not as ancient or indigenous. Nearly everyone is aware of the borrowing within our tradition of melodies from one text sung to another text – *Lecha Dodi* for *Adon Olam*; *Esah Einai* for *El Adon*.<sup>10</sup>

Every household or circle of friends has complete autonomy in choosing *zemirot* melodies, and in incorporating new ones. Young adults of our time have continued this process in drawing on contemporary popular or rock songs, on melodies composed by contemporary American or Israeli musicians, or musicians of other religious traditions (e.g., Sufi), and on existing ethnic melodies newly applied to

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<sup>15</sup> With synagogue music, it is useful to distinguish between "songs" – like *Lecha Dodi*, *El Adon*, or the Torah service – and "davening" – the non-metrical patterns traditionally "davened" to a pattern of *nusach* (motifs davened in a defining mode). For example, a prayer-leader traditionally davens the beginning and ends of passages, leaving the individual congregants to pray the middle at their own pace. Thus, *El Adon*, or the first line of the *Shema*, may have song melodies, but the passages before and after it are usually davened.

Nusach endures over centuries: the exact phrases may differ but the general mode will be recognizable. Songs change quickly (so that a 150-year old song in our services is "very old"). Still extant compositions older than that, like *Kol Nidre*, are the rare exception rather than the rule.

different texts. These newly applied melodies, along with older favorites, travel with the circles who have adopted them, and are thereby becoming folk-processed into the repertoire. Fifty years from now, some of these will be "old traditional" favorites, while others will have faded from use.

Thus, it is "we, the people" – in our homes, who collectively have control over and the final say as to which melodies catch on. Musicians and anthologists publish collections now and then, but these can almost never match the musical experience of any circle, at least not for long.<sup>16</sup>

Ultimately, each of our own circles of friends and homes can choose what to sing and what melodies to use. My own circle of "zemirot buddies" loved finding numerous melodies for each zemer. We learned some melodies from folks just passing through, and we have never been able to pin down the origins of some of these melodies. We have tracked down and sought out melodies used by different Jewish ethnic groups – e.g., melodies from Syria, Georgia, Aden, and Yemen for *D'ror Yikra*; Turkish, Yemenite and Moroccan melodies for *Ki Eshmera*, and Yemen for *Yah Ribon*. In many cases the Jewish communities absorbed folk melodies of the surrounding cultures; in others they composed their own or transmitted even older melodies from previous locales.)

### Other Jewish Music

Our people has produced an immense amount of music that is varied and diverse as the music of the world. In addition to songs (monophonic melodies) we have choral music; instrumental music; liturgical music and more. A survey of that does not belong here.

I do wish to contrast a few types of songs for clarity:

Short songs – capture a theme in a phrase or sentence or two. *Hinei Mah Tov, Lev Tahor, Esa Einai, V'ha-er Eineinu*, etc. These can be very expressive and are easy to learn. But they lack the depth of expression of longer, structured poems – especially those that have survived hundreds of years of folk-filtering.

New Strophic Hymns: (a poem or song with stanzas each sung [or singable] to the same melody). Contemporary Jews continue to write poems and songs – especially but not limited to Israeli music *BaShanah Ha-baah* or *Shir L'Shalom*). With time, some of these will capture our people's hearts and endure over generations.

I suspect that one strong candidate for that is Naomi Shemer's *Yerushalaim Shel Zahav*. This song is structured like a zemer, with rhymed, structured stanzas and a refrain. Like many *zemirot*, this song draws on biblical and post-biblical language and metaphors.<sup>17</sup> It taps our emotions in its manifold sentiments, and rode a piece of history (the recapture of the Old City) in 1967, just weeks after her song's award-winning release!

### The Themes of the Zemirot

The particular topics and poetic styles of the *zemirot* vary widely, as with any poetry by different people from a wide range of cultures and ages. However, several themes permeate these poems across

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<sup>16</sup> For example, even though my circle has drawn on Neil Levin's *Zemirot Anthology* (one of the best recent collections) for ideas and to identify certain melodies by number, we have never heard perhaps a majority of the melodies therein sung (other than when we would read them).

<sup>17</sup> The "insider-crowd" here knows that the phrase "Yerushalaim Shel Zahav" / "Jerusalem of Gold" does not point merely to a golden-colored city, but to a type of jewelry – in particular a pendant that Rabbi Akiva wanted to give to his wife. *Nedarim* 50a; Naomi Shemer, "Eikh Nolad Shir" ("How a Song was Born"), *Yediot Aharonot* (May 22, 1987), p. 24. See also Tovia Preschel, "Yerushalayim Shel Zahav," *Hadoar*, 48.5 (November 29, 1968), p. 70 (other Israeli poets used this metaphor shortly before Shemer did in 1967)



these geographic and temporal boundaries. Not surprisingly, one of the recurring themes of the Shabbat *zemirot* is Shabbat itself: the joy of the day, the pleasures one can experience on it, its foundations in Jewish tradition and observance. Several other recurring themes are: the creation story, our receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai, the joy of praising God in song, the Flood story, and the yearning for, and confidence in, redemption.

The concepts of redemption expressed in these songs vary as much as they do among different Jewish philosophers (who sometimes were the same people!) For some, it is the rebuilding of a central national Temple in Jerusalem and a return to the joy of assembling and worshipping there; for others, the focus is on an end to all suffering. Still others focus on the other-worldly "World to Come" (*Olam Ha-ba*)— an existence that everyone (or everyone deserving) experiences in a different time and/or plane of existence. Many of the latter draw on the pervasive motif that the Shabbat experience, here in this world, contains a taste and hint of the World to Come.

*"But I don't agree with some of the themes."*

You are not alone. Our times and values have changed (in some ways) from the outlook of medieval Jewish European and Mediterranean communities. This has not stopped many contemporaries from embracing these songs, and it need not stop you.

First, these songs are poetry, not dogma. Poetry is not meant to be taken literally or read as dogma. The authors wrote for a popular audience, incorporating themes that they thought would resonate with them. They were not writing codes of law (although many writers did both – and the two styles could not be more different!)

Moreover, good poetry, like all art, means different things to different people. The authors knew this, and realized that, once the poems left their pen, they "take on a life of their own" (especially those which catch on and continue through the centuries). A poet likely has several meanings in mind with a given phrase – and the phrase may evoke other messages which the poet never thought of. The reader can choose what meanings resonate with him/her – and I guarantee, over time different nuances will resonate. A large part of this book's mission is to provide multiple interpretations, and to facilitate your choosing from them, and coming up with new ones on your own – just as we do for other poetry.

In addition, when singing folk music, people do not agree with everything they sing and embrace! The songs of any culture contain a wide range of themes, diverse viewpoints and different expressions. It is scarcely possible for everyone to agree with everything. Think about folk-song parties or camp-fire sings – if you reflect on the songs you'll realize you don't agree with every theme, but odds are that this did not bother you and your friends.

The same pertains to the folk music most familiar to us today. Many of us sing songs with specific messages we don't necessarily fully endorse, or no longer endorse (such as "all war is wrong," "wealth redistribution," or "don't trust anyone over 30"). We might retain general values such as the rights of the poor or of common people, or distrust of authority. Even here not everyone will agree, yet many will sing along with these songs (or lead them!) And still more people continue to sing such songs because they simply enjoy them, and it provides an opportunity to share time with their friends, even though they hold a range of differing opinions.

So it is for *zemirot*. The Jewish people were never a monolith, yet they sang poems and passages, some whose meanings any individual might not be enthusiastic about. And just as we embrace songs from our American culture without self-consciousness or guilt, so too can we do so with our Jewish culture.

We must also view the writers' songs on their own terms. I try to look at them through their own eyes, through their own experiences and world views. In the biographic sketches I try portray

them as they lived their lives and experienced their world. I will set down "our" (the Jewish people's) key stories and themes which recur in these songs, I will set down the recurring themes, and in Part IV, comment in commentaries on specific passages.

For one example, most contemporary Jews outside the Orthodox world do not want the re-establishment of the Temple in Jerusalem, animal sacrifices and all. Many are simply not excited by the prospect, while others are averse to the geo-political and religious implications (such as the holy war that would likely erupt if Jews tried to do anything to the Dome of the Rock where the Temple once stood). But if we more fully understand what the Temple meant to these writers and their contemporaries, and understand the feelings and experiences in ways with which we can identify, we can better understand, and even share, the general yearning for community and/or connection to God which that Temple came to represent.

Another example: We might not all believe in a personal Messiah, but who among us cannot resonate to the plight of oppressed people – our own during so many times (and even now) – and those who seek escape from tyranny and exploitation. Our views of God necessarily vary (and some have no view or belief at all), but we can appreciate the beauty of our world which the writer of *Yah Ribon* attributes to God.

And the theme of the Shabbat itself: You can do it and the joys recounted in so many of the zemirot can become your own experiences. You don't like quail? You can think of your favorites. You're not into the legal summaries in *Ki Eshmera* or *Mah Yedidut*? You can be happy for those who are (– they might even be sharing your table!)

#### The Shabbat Meal – "Zeh Hashulhan"

The Shabbat meal occupies a prominence in our tradition unlike most religions (especially in the West). It is an informal, home-based practice that Judaism nonetheless regards as a central part of observance. Until the modern era, the home (in particular, these meals) was even more prominent than the synagogue; with communities that survive and with families that pass Judaism to the next generations, these meals still are. The mandatory parts (even under strict observance) are few: Kiddush, *motzi*, *Birkat Hamazon*/grace after meals, leaving great room for individual variety.

Jewish tradition regards the meal table as akin to the altar in the national Temple (*Beit Hamikdash*, last functioning in 70 C.E.), and has brought in as many parallels as possible to keep alive our connection to that experience.<sup>18</sup> On Shabbat especially, the table was cleaned and set with fresh dinnerware. The loaves of challah echoed actual loaves at the altar (and both were replaced with fresh loaves on Friday).<sup>19</sup>

Before *Motzi* and eating the Challah, we perform a ritual laving of the hands (apart from any hygienic washing), which reflects the requirement that the priest bathe before various Temple rituals and that people exposed to a contamination bathe as a part of purification.<sup>20</sup> Upon breaking bread it was dipped in salt,<sup>21</sup> reflecting its widespread use as a preservative and its prominence in ancient

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<sup>18</sup> In all fairness, the Temple altar and related practices in part echoed the home and its table! [cite]. The transformation back to the home therefore was not such a drastic stretch.

<sup>19</sup> Exod. 29:23-24; Lev. 24:8; *Zohar Shemot* § 2 (Soncino) p. 153b.

<sup>20</sup> E.g., Lev. 15:5-13, 18; 16: 26-28; 17:15; Num. 19:7.

<sup>21</sup> Lev. 2:13 (both sacrifices and meal offerings must be accompanied by salt).

times.<sup>22</sup> Salt was considered an essential enough commodity that it served as currency in Rome.<sup>23</sup>

The parallels went beyond incorporating such practices into the home ritual. The table was regarded as an altar itself, for the foregoing reasons and based on biblical and Talmudic passages. When Ezekiel (ch. 40-41), in a vision, saw the Temple being rebuilt and the altar being described in detail, he was told: "*Zeh hashulhan asher lifnei Adonai* – This is the table that [stands] before the Lord." (Ezek. 41:22). The Talmudic rabbis relied on this quote to justify treating the home-table as not just a parallel to the altar, but as a completely satisfactory equivalent, sufficient even for gaining God's atonement.<sup>24</sup> Purification from sin is possible especially when one talks Torah during the meal and gives food from it to the poor.<sup>25</sup> One should prolong one's meal (and save the food!) to facilitate this providing the poor with the food.<sup>26</sup>

The metaphor "*Zeh Hashulhan*" is so prominent, that several *zemirot* compilers have given their collections this name.<sup>27</sup> It comes as no surprise to find references in many of the *zemirot* to preparations for the meals, the table-spreads, and activities and food enjoyed at the meal.

The more traditionally-inclined can adopt more of these rituals echoing our national communal experience. But anyone can make a meal! Just having kiddush, a loaf of bread, good food and *zemirot* with a group of friends or family, changes how you experience the evening (or lunch).

Shabbat meals certainly create room for enjoyment and song – but tradition regards joy and song as mitzvot of their own. The Torah's command for each of us to appear at the Temple and "rejoice before the Lord your God" (Deut. 26:11) is transferred to our dinner table. (*Zohar Shemot* § 2, p. 168a). When people not just eat but enjoy themselves, the joy is reflected in God's parallel spiritual world. (*Zohar Vayikra* § 3, p. 62a). It is a neat tradition that gives you brownie points for having a good time!

### The Joy of Singing

Singing is fun, but many (musically) lay-people feel intimidated from singing in public. Here, you are around your table with just your friends, and you can "let your hair down" and just sing away. Recordings and friends can help you learn melodies if you want to know them better, but this is not a performance. It is one notch short of "singing in the shower." That is (one reason) why "*zemirot* are for everyone."

There is no required canon, only choice and fun. Sometimes we would spend a whole afternoon singing just *Yah Ribon* to numerous melodies. Other times, half-way through a *zemer*, Charlie Libicki would call out, "wait a minute, this song is too long" – which was code for "let's switch melodies in

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<sup>22</sup> Alfred J. Kolatch, *The Second Jewish Book of Why* (Jonathan David 1985), pp. 328.

<sup>23</sup> *J. Horayot* 3:5 [check]; *Second Jewish Book of Why*, p. 368, n.43. The English word "salary" derives from Latin for salt.

<sup>24</sup> B. Berachot 55a; Chagigah 27a; Menachot 97a.

<sup>25</sup> *Zohar Shemot* § 2, p. 154a.

<sup>26</sup> Berachot 55a. Thus saving food instead of throwing it out is certainly relevant in our days, and a practice worth undertaking!

<sup>27</sup> Meir Hovev, *Zeh HaShulhan . . . Seder Zemirot Shel Shabbat U'vi-ureihen . . .*, (Jerusalem: Sochnut haYehudit, 1978); *Sefer Zeh haShulhan Asher Lifnei H'* (fill in, 1990 [BM675.Z4 J6]); Mosheh Ben Abu, *Sefer zeh ha-shulhan: kole\_ ra'ayonot u-ma'amarim* ... (\_\_\_\_ 2005) [BS1225.3.B58].

the middle" (so we got to sing more melodies in the same evening).

*Zemirot* are a wonderful opportunity for having a good time among friends and family. The experience is at once personal and communal. The choice of *zemirot* is entirely your own, as is the choice of melodies.

*You can sing them when you're hungry, you can sing them when you're full;  
You can sing at appetizer, at main course, or later still;  
You can sing them at the table, you can sing them on your couch;  
You can sing in perfect posture, you can sing 'em while you slouch!  
You can choose some lively melodies, you can choose ones deep and slow;  
You can sing as high as voices allow, you can choose keys very low.  
You can choose some in major keys, you can choose ones mostly minor;  
You can choose a mix of all of these – such a choice could not be finer!*

(apologies to Dr. Seuss; if these rhymes are somewhat loose.)

These songs can work on so many levels, and you are bound to experience the pleasures or meanings of different ones at different times. Of course the texts carry many messages: celebration, joy, connection to something greater, consolation at troubled times, and more. It is the nature of poetry to be able to convey multiple meanings to different people. (Much of the body of this book is dedicated to exploring these meanings.) There is the enjoyment of the music, as noted above. Naturally different tunes will appeal to different people. Sometimes going around the table, and allowing each person present to select one which he or she prefers, can give each person some satisfaction while at the same time promoting a diverse selection.

The experience of singing goes far beyond the cognitive. We get to interact on a level we often don't have a chance to do, in our cerebrally-focused, usually rushed, daily lives.<sup>28</sup> It can also be at once emotional, spiritual, and social. Singing with your friends can both draw on, and strengthen personal bonds. I experience such a sense of comradeship when singing among friends, relaxed and relaxing. Once we know the words and melody well, we don't need to look at the text much, which allows for eye contact and enhanced "ear contact," which can become an intimate and powerful experience.

"Sing with our ears and commune with our eyes." Communication can take place on many levels: musical, emotional, comrade/social. In thus looking at and listening to each other, we're able to adjust our singing to each other in something that can be quite intimate while still in a group setting. Perhaps this is captured by the term: "musical intercourse" – an activity characterized by two-way interaction and communication.

### Invitation: Enter the World of *Zemirot*

"So, what's stopping you?"

Judaism contains the opportunity for spiritual experience every bit as much as eastern religions that so many gravitated to starting in the 1960s. But like in the *Wizard of Oz*, this experience is in our own back yard.<sup>11</sup> We had it all along. "There's no place like home."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Rushing is one of the most potent destroyers of spiritual-connectedness. Being-in-the-moment means you're not worrying about something coming later. (This is one reason it's so important for a prayer-leader to let every person complete her prayers before moving to the next part of the service.)

<sup>29</sup> Judaism of course offers spirituality in many places, *zemirot* being just one of them.

Enter the world of these rich poems and songs. Learn about them. Read some of this book. When something triggers your interest, or the mood simply arises, get some friends/family together. Learn some melodies. (This is easier with a group than alone.) Sing, and after some practice you can enjoy sitting back and letting loose.

Enter the world of these rich poems and songs! Learn about them. Read some of this book. When something triggers your interest, or the mood simply arises, get some friends or family together. Learn some melodies. (This is easier with a group than alone.) Sing, and after some practice you can enjoy sitting back and letting loose. You have found a new past-time with many dimensions that can enrich your life.

### Meals as a form of outreach

Eating with friends, enjoying the singing, discovering new meanings – all these make Shabbat meals and *zemirot* so worthwhile. Shabbat meals are also one of the best vehicles for reaching out to the uninvolved or shy. If anything moves me as much as do *zemirot*, it is my home that the wider Jewish world become active in reaching out to the unaffiliated, uninvolved Jew.

More than any great prayer-service, meaningful sermon, or interesting/satisfying lecture or program, it is when people make personal connections with others that we most effectively reach new people and help them join a community. As noted above, communal and family Shabbat meals are a central example of living and experiencing Judaism in the home, and a primary vehicle for reaching out to the less involved.

Home is where relationships form. It is when people invite new faces or friends to their homes, share the experience instead of just talking about it, and build new friendships and connections, that we most effectively reach and retain new people.

Indeed, such home-hospitality through Shabbat meals is a central part of the success that the Orthodox world has had in reaching thousands of Jews around the world. Outside the Orthodox world, however, Shabbat meals (especially where people invite friends and newcomers) are the exception, not the rule. I hope Orthodox outreach continues to thrive; may they have nothing but joy in continuing to build new bonds. But some people find that approach too narrow-minded or dogmatic. Different approaches to tradition speak to different people.

We need vibrant, liberal Jewish communities too. From my travels and living in many communities, I know that there are many "out there" in the woodwork, who *do* seek a spiritual connection. Liberal branches of Judaism have much to offer them, if they are made to feel welcome.<sup>30</sup> Most important of all, is that a much wider portion of liberal lay Jews take an active role in person-to-person contact and communal activity<sup>31</sup> – namely, the informal, around-the-table meals at home. Walk up to newcomers, in synagogue or on the street (when you overhear something that suggests someone would welcome meeting you), strike up conversations, and get to know each other.

Remember, the benefit of forming relationships flows both ways. You enlarge your personal

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<sup>30</sup> Many of these movements and synagogues, while less dogmatic religiously, have had overly rigid rules and practices that are a turn-off to many first-time visitors – those who are reaching out with some shyness and suspicion. They will more successfully attract the spiritual seekers by changing institutional norms, lowering their turf-protection practices, and showing more interest in the newcomers as individuals rather than as prospective members, valued only for their dues. (See, e.g., Sidney Schwarz, *Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of Jews Can Transform the American Synagogue* [Jewish Lights Publ. 2000], pp. 227-229, 235-236, 241.)

<sup>31</sup> *Finding a Spiritual Home*, supra, pp. 238-242 (creating an open, welcoming culture), 252-256 (outreach, new options).

community, thereby creating more social networks, mutual support circles (from the smallest errands to being there for someone in a crisis). Families with kids enlarge their kid-friend-networks in safe supportive environments. Just plain people to do things with – that may start with a Shabbat meal, but extend to any mutually-desired activity or past-time. And you are helping people – yourself included – to connect more meaningfully to Judaism.

### Me? Hosting Shabbat meals?

(Good question; it's hard to sing around the table if no one's there.)

Yes, it does take effort to start doing something you're not used to doing. But not that much effort – if you keep it simple. This isn't a "dinner party" with your finest china, and certainly not a Passover Seder! This is the specter that scares many from starting. Just gather some friends or get two families together. Combining forces helps ease the effort. (Try taking turns hosting.) It only takes a little longer to cook for 8 to 10 people than for 3 or 4 people. And if you anticipate eight, cook for ten. Then, if you find a newcomer at shul (or other Jewish event earlier that week), or someone calls you, at the last minute, you can bring them home or invite them with little adjustment necessary.

You can also prepare dishes in larger amounts so you can make two or three casseroles at once. Freeze the additional ones, or if you have a family, you have left-overs that will save you time over the following days. Or buy pre-made food to reduce the time and effort. With these, your net preparation time scarcely increases, and more company means more comradeship. The key is: don't make a big production out of it.

If Shabbat meals are new to you, don't worry; just do what you're comfortable with (and like). There are several user-friendly Shabbat-meal guides, if you're interested in learning more.<sup>32</sup> You don't have to do any ritual at all, if that is your (and your friends') preference.

Don't worry about "impressing." Just do a simple meal every one to two months — and invite people. Or if you already do a meal every 1-2 months, try for every 2 weeks, but trade off fanciness and elaborateness for simple, but more frequent meals.

Combining also gives you an instant critical mass of participants. This can build on itself, so that gradually, an increasing number of families develop "the culture" of having informal Shabbat meals— Having them and having space available for guests becomes the norm.

Different people's meals will be different: Some might do more ritual than others; some will have vigorous political discussions; others will share personal stories or have discussions about the Torah reading. Others will embrace Zemirot-singing as their highlight, like a duck takes to water. It is my hope that, with a book like this to make heretofore mysterious texts accessible, many more will add zemirot as part of their mealtime, with this book serving as an additional food for thought and discussion where desired.

Having this informal, "organic" (multi-dimensional) experience around the table at home can help people "connect" to the Shabbat experience in many additional ways that are different from the synagogue-service or classroom experience. It will broaden the vitality of people's Jewish experience, and bring more people "into the fold" of Jews connecting to, finding meaning in, and enjoying their heritage.

### Bring People Together

One of the great things about zemirot (and other communal expressions) is that it allows us to bring together people of widely disparate religious views and denominations. If you provide food cooked under strict kashrut, your table guests can run the gamut. (Or you can have a Saturday afternoon snack with fruit and nuts, so the strict can eat even in a non-kosher home.)

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<sup>32</sup> See the Appendix for some suggestions.

A recent bok by Noam Zion<sup>12</sup> has a beautiful picture (from ~1890) of three Jews from bitterly opposed factions — a religious Zionist, a Hasid, and a secular Bundist. It shows them arm-in-arm, with some shnaps, at a doorway in old Jerusalem, singing-away like they were already in the World-to-Come. Music and expressions like the zemirot know no ideological borders.

I likewise have sought to invite the broadest possible spectrum of friends and people I meet, to share the same table. They get to meet each other, say kiddush and eat together, have some spirited arguments about religion, or Israel, or American politics – and then turn to zemirot. All differences are forgotten. (Unless one person wants melody #11 for Yah Ribon and another insists on melody #3.)

Seriously, by bringing people together to share food and song, it personalizes the members of the community. If it's a diverse group, we “agree to disagree” – but we become friends. My circle has even developed a way to honor the views of both egalitarian and non-egalitarian participants. If more than 10 people believe in counting women, then for them it's a minyan (and the non-egal people can choose to refrain from the communal prayers: Barchu, Kaddish, and Kedushah – that's about it.) If less than 10 people count women, we don't have a minyan (because that would be counting some people against their belief). This is founded on the respect that we should all have for our friends who have different views. Not a matter of which view is “right” – it's acknowledging that Shmuel my friend believes his way, and I want to treat Shmuel with respect.

A pluralistic Jewish world entails understanding each other; appreciating what doesn't work for you might work for your friend; and appreciating certain conventions that mean something to one circle or another.

One example of this is the use of God's name. The Tetragrammaton (Y, H, then Vav, Heh), spells out the “ineffable name of God” that starting in biblical times had special sanctity and power. When these four letters appear, we generally say “Adonai” instead – and even that name carries some of the association and holiness of the original name. We try to avoid using either of these names unless we are really meaning it.

Therefore, when we are quoting a text when not actually praying/chanting it, many prefer to not say “Adonai”, and instead refer to that name as “The Name” – or in Hebrew, “Hashem.” You will find many Orthodox Jews speak in everyday conversation about Hashem, as connoting their personal God. In practicing prayers, those people will say Hashem, and only when actually reciting the prayer (when actually praying) will they say “Adonai.”<sup>33</sup> (Similarly, “Elohim” for God becomes pronounced “Elokim” – and “El” becomes “Kel”.)

The application of these practices to zemirot vary. Some believe they are praying when singing zemirot, and hence say “Adonai” and the like. Others believe they are simply singing songs that allude to prayers; and so they will say “HaShem” and “Keil” etc.

A related practice is to treat all printed matter containing God's name with respect, and not throwing worn-out copies into the regular trash. Instead they will reserve a separate box which they will then transfer to a Genizah – a place set aside to bury old sacred texts — much as we would bury a person who's time is done.

Not everyone believes the same about these practices. But it is good to understand how others may feel about these practices, so that we can respond with respect and sensitivity.

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<sup>33</sup> Some people, in singing, will employ a hybrid of Adonai and Hashem – “Adoshem.” Others do not like this, and feel that only “Hashem” is appropriate.

## "Introduction to the Rest of the Book"

**Part II** provides a brief synopsis/ biography about each of the authors (whose identity is known). I aim to present a picture of the times and environment in which each lived, their general lives and their poetic/artistic lives, including the creative communities they lived in or traveled to. Where information is known about particular circumstances which might have influenced their themes or styles, I will present that.

\*In **Part III**, I set forth the essential motifs and associations for each of the recurring themes in the zemirot. These are our "stories" — the creation, Noah's flood, our exodus from Egypt, the revelation at Mount Sinai. The themes also include the rebuilding of the Temple, the yearning for redemption from oppression and exile, and the Shabbat experience itself. We may have "heard of" these, but these associations will help us more easily get "inside the heads" of the writers (and the common folk) back then. We can thereby better appreciate the feelings evoked by these references. Indeed, many of these may still ring true to, or gain meaning for, us today as well.

\*[The material of Part III is not a separate part in this draft. Much of its material is contained in the introductions to individual zemirot in Part IV. ]

**Part IV** contains the zemirot and commentaries. They are presented in a four-column format:<sup>34</sup> (from right to left:) The Hebrew text, a transliteration, an English translation, and the commentary. Generally the transliteration (and usually, the translation) will line up reasonably close to the Hebrew text. The commentary however is generally much longer than the text. It will therefore start in its column, and then continue across the bottom of the two pages. In most cases, the zemer will take up two or more (pairs of opposing) pages.

The commentary will use the keyword annotation style,<sup>35</sup> using both the Hebrew phrase in transliteration and the translation, so that any reader can find the phrase in the text on which the comments are made. I also use footnotes where needed, for citations and additional explanations. Endnotes are used for additional material that is more scholarly oriented, although anyone is free and welcome to turn to the endnote pages if interested.

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<sup>34</sup> For this format I acknowledge and draw on the format used in two siddurim from the havurah movement: *Haverim Kol Yisrael* by Mark Frydenberg, and *Siddur Eit Ratzon*, by Joseph Rosenstein.

<sup>35</sup> This is known in traditional text as: "*dibbur hamatchil*"— namely, the words from the text which are being explained. This term literally means "the opening words," but the comments can be on any part of the verse (and I endeavor to explain most phrases in the zemer).



## II. The Writers and Their Times

[See sections in Part I entitled “Development of the Genre of *Zemiroth*”  
And “The Poets (General Introduction)” ]

[To be expanded: Development of *zemiroth*; the flavor of the times as poetry became the “in thing” – especially in Spain. Will draw esp’y (but not only) on Scheindlin’s *Wine, Women and Death: Medieval Hebrew Poems on the Good Life* (JPS, 1986), and *The Gazelle: Medieval Hebrew Poems on God, Israel, and the Soul* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publ. Soc., 1991). rebound of Aramaic; cf. to *Minstrelsy* p. 65.]

### Menachem ben Machir

Only a little is known about Rabbi Menachem ben Machir’s life. He was the nephew of the famed Rabbi Gershom ben Yehudah, called *Rabbeinu Gershom* (our teacher, Gershom), *Me-or Ha-golah* (light of the exile).<sup>36</sup> Menachem lived in Ratisbonne, also known as Regensburg, in Bavaria (southern Germany) in the late eleventh century, and served as its rabbi. Menachem witnessed the Crusades massacres in the Rhineland, and probably some of his immediate family were murdered in them. He wrote at least one elegy/lament (that was modeled after the forms and figures of the Book of Lamentations).<sup>37</sup>

Despite the bleak times, Menachem was capable of expressing greatest joy, such as in his hymn of the Sukkot water-drawing ceremony (of which the Talmud says: “who has not witnessed the water-drawing ceremony has not witnessed true joy.”<sup>38</sup>[24] Both that hymn, and thie *zemer* in this book, *Mah Yedidut*, end with prayers of longing for such happier days. *Mah Yedidut* is typical of *zemiroth* whose joyous spirit made up for the gloom of the external times they lived in.<sup>39</sup> [E-60] (While scholars are not certain that the “Menachem” in the acrostic of the hymn is Menachem ben Machir, the consensus favors him. That is the nature of “folk” music – authors are sometimes presupposed – all the more so in the more distant past.)

### Isaac Luria

Tradition ascribes the *zemer* Yom Zeh L’Yisrael to Rabbi Isaac Luria, although there are reasons to be uncertain about this. Many books contain only the first four paragraphs, and paragraph nine,<sup>1</sup> which spell out the name “Yitzhak” (יצחק) and two additional letters (L and H) (לה), which have no apparent meaning. It was only in later sources that the additional verses (5-8, 10, 11) appeared. These supply the letters for Luria’s last name and the epitaph “Hazak” (be strong), so that the expanded acrostic spells out “Yitzhak Luria Hazak” (יצחק לוריא הזק). In addition, Luria wrote very little, and according to many scholars, his literary output is limited to three Aramaic *zemiroth* (which in many siddurim and *zemiroth* books now introduce the three Shabbat meals, respectively<sup>2</sup>), and a few other less-known prayers.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, a number of scholars<sup>4</sup> suspect that another Yitzhak wrote this, and someone later wrote the additional verses in order to attribute them to Luria.

Nonetheless, I include his biography for two reasons: (1) Many generations who have sung

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<sup>36</sup> *Rabbeinu Gershom* is best known for his *takanah* (ban) against polygamy (having more than one wife), and ban against divorcing a women against her will.

<sup>37</sup> Weinberger, p. 159.

<sup>38</sup> *Sukkah* 51b.

<sup>39</sup> Loewe, *Minstrelsy*, p. 17.

Yom Zeh L'yisrael have associated it with Luria; and (2) Luria's life supplies important context for other prominent zemirot writers.

Luria was born in Jerusalem in 1534, to an Ashkenazi father and Sephardi mother.<sup>5</sup> Orphaned as a child, he was sent to Egypt where his wealthy uncle, Mordecai Francis, raised him. After marrying his cousin (Mordecai's daughter) at age fifteen, Luria continued his Talmudic studies under some of the most prominent teachers, including Bezalel Ashkenazi, author of the *Shittah Mekubetzet*.<sup>6</sup> When Luria became acquainted with the *Zohar* (around 1556), it made a strong impression on him. He reportedly secluded himself for two years near the Nile, returning to his family only on Shabbats and even then speaking little.<sup>7</sup> Apparently during these and surrounding years, Luria developed his own version of the Kabbalah (the "received tradition," which later acquired the meaning we use today in referring to *Zohar* and Lurianic forms of mysticism).

Many of the Jewish exiles from Spain settled in the Ottoman empire during the early sixteenth century (1500-1550). Of these, a mystically inclined circle settled in Safed, an ancient city situated in the hilly, inland part of the Galil in northern Palestine. Many members of this circle were well-known Jewish leaders who could be characterized as "Renaissance men."<sup>8</sup> Joseph Caro, best known for his legal code, the *Shulhan Aruch*, was drawn to Safed's mysticism, and leading Kabbalist Moshe Cordovero reputedly studied with him. Solomon Alkabetz, best known as author of the *Lecha Dodi* (with his ascrotic, Shlomo Halevi, signing this hymn), also wrote commentaries on several of the Megillot and other biblical books, and mystical guidelines for sanctifying meals. Israel Najara, author of *Yah Ribon* (below) and hundreds of other zemirot, also wrote biblical commentaries, a collection of sermons, and a manual on ritual slaughter. In short, specialization as we know it was uncommon then, as was the dichotomy between legal and mystical thought which modern Jews tend to assume.

In 1569 Luria moved to Palestine, and after a few months in Jerusalem, settled in Safed. Thus, this center of Kabbalah, which we commonly associate with Luria, already existed. Luria initially studied Kabbalah under Moses Cordovero, but soon attracted a following of his own, including the aforesaid rabbis and others, such as Moses Alshech, Eliyahu de Vidas, and Chaim Vital.

Luria clearly was very charismatic, and after Cordovero's death in 1570 his circle became a congregation of its own, attracting a quickly growing following. They commenced the practice of Kabbalat Shabbat, with six psalms preceding Alkabetz' *Lecha Dodi*.<sup>9</sup> Luria taught extemporaneously, often relating his mystical teachings while visiting graves of renowned prophets and later figures, especially that of Shimon bar Yohai, buried in nearby Meron.

All of this happened in the space of just three years – as in 1572, he was stricken by bubonic plague and died within days, on the fifth of Av (July 15). While this was devastating to his followers, it only enhanced his reputation. Like so many charismatic leaders, his fame grew more after his death. Indeed, his arrival and short leadership in Safed can be seen as a "flame" in terms of its speed and intensity. It is easy to see how a poem by an "Isaac" – Luria or otherwise – could quickly become associated with this charismatic leader.

Because Luria had written little, it fell to Chaim Vital<sup>10</sup>, a younger student of Luria's, to set forth Luria's teachings in writing. Vital's own views are inherently interwoven with Luria's – so while Vital was responsible for popularizing Luria and for Luria's system being so influential thereafter, it is impossible to know precisely what elements were Luria's and which were introduced by Vital. More will be said about Vital under Israel Najara's heading.

## Israel Najara

Israel Najara was a colorful character, somewhat eccentric and highly creative. His family was part of the wave of immigrants to Palestine and other lands of the Ottoman empire in the wake of the Spanish persecutions and then expulsions. The family name indeed is the name of a town in Castile, Spain, which town had a significant Jewish population from the twelfth through fifteenth centuries.<sup>11</sup>

Israel's father, Moses Najara, was probably a first-generation immigrant who spent most of his life in Damascus, Syria, where he served as its rabbi. Safed was not far away, and Moses clearly was influenced by Isaac Luria and his circle. Moses wrote a Torah commentary, *Lekah Tov* (Constantinople, 1571); a Lurianic discourse attributed to him framed the opening to Haim Vital's book *Etz Haim*.

Israel Najara was born in or before 1540,<sup>12</sup> probably in Damascus.<sup>13</sup> While he was given a full education in Talmud, his creative drive led him to an initial career as an itinerant singer and teacher of poetic style. Between some bouts of serious illness in his youth, he traveled around the Ottoman empire performing in far-flung communities and being exposed to a wide variety of folk songs.

These travels most likely included Salonica, Greece, where he met the famed poets' circle. [fill in, depending on whether this circle is introduced above].<sup>14</sup> The music and poetry to which he was exposed employed diverse new forms and rhythms that were often quite different from the (by now conventional) Spanish-Arabic forms the Jewish poets of Spain had used. He absorbed music of many styles and languages: Arabic, Turkish, Spanish, Greek, and Italian, and himself wrote songs in Aramaic, possibly also in Turkish, as well as Hebrew.

An even greater indication of the extent to which poets and their literature circulated among wide and distant communities, is the fact that many of these forms flourished in Elizabethan England (which was contemporaneous with Najara's time). Among other things, English poets (such as possibly: Francis Bacon and Thomas Campion – contemporaries of Najara but different region) utilized the Sapphic form, the same as was employed (in modified form) in Najara's *Yah Ribon*.<sup>15</sup>

Years later, Najara incorporated these new forms into his religious poetry. During these youthful years Najara composed many secular and love poems, as well as reviews of others' offerings, often in: "caustic epigrams and satirical . . . arrows" criticizing second-rate poets as talentless, plagiarists, and swindlers."<sup>16</sup> While he absorbed the new styles, Najara's early poetry mimicked the "academic" style of the Salonica circle,<sup>17</sup> his own originality not emerging until later. Najara later published these earlier writings in *Meimei Yisrael* (appended to his third edition of *Zemiroth Yisrael* [Venice, 1600]).

When Najara encountered the mystical community in Safed, he was transformed from a carefree youth into a spiritual yearner. It was then that Najara started composing fervent religious poetry, and started using the new styles he had earlier learned.

His choice of the new folk styles was deliberate. According to Israel Zinberg (*ibid*, p. 101), Najara wanted to reach the relatively uninspired and cosmopolitan Jewish youth who were big fans of the erotic folk songs in the region. He therefore incorporated the rhythms and melodies of those folk-songs, even indicating to the reader the particular song and melody he had in mind — for example: a poem "to the melody of 'Ni Akonias Dionius Turki' or . . . of 'Ya Ein Khari Saal A'niva A'ravi.'"

We of course are very familiar with melody borrowing – both in our contemporary "folk" songs and our liturgical songs.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Many pop songs used pre-existing melodies and (somewhat adapted) texts – such as *Scarborough Fair*, *House of the Rising Sun*, and other instances where one songwriter uses melody B for that writer's own original lyrics A. Also, *Ein Keloheinu* used an extant Protestant hymn, and some contemporary American Jews have put *D'ror Yikra* to "Sloop John B."

Zinberg (p. 102-03) further explains that Najara was first a singer/songwriter rather than just a poet:

For him the tune, the chord, precede[d] the poetic words. The rhythm in Najara's poems derives primarily from the fact that he felt and created them as songs; he sang them before writing them down on paper.<sup>18</sup> He constructed and formed them according to the rules of melodic rhythm, not according to the principles of poetic meter. Only [then] can one properly appreciate his marvelous sensitivity for melodic verse construction, his mastery in song technique.

Najara frequented the mystics of Luria's circle, without becoming completely one of them. Isaac Luria was very taken by Najara's poetry,<sup>19</sup> but Najara's unpolished personal manner antagonized some, in particular Haim Vital (see above, in Luria's bio). Luria said that Najara's soul "is a spark of no less a soul than King David."<sup>20</sup> But Vital accused Najara of lewd talk and drunkenness, even eating meat and singing loudly during the Nine Days.<sup>21</sup> Envy clearly colored Vital's opinion of Najara, although other accounts corroborate Najara's fondness for drink.<sup>22</sup> Even Najara himself (during his youthful days) wrote:

When your heart is cradles in sorrow and trouble, . . . day after day, drink the liquid of the grape, my friend; enjoy the blood-red wine under the cool shade of the paradisaical fields.<sup>23</sup>

One account of both Najara's religiosity and frivolity has gained widespread circulation. One Shabbat eve, while his followers were singing, Luria saw thousands of angels ascending and descending in his house, hearing the joyous and holy singing. Suddenly he saw one angel summon away the whole host of angels, "because Najara rolled up his sleeves, and with bare elbows threw himself on the table and flung his hat from his head."<sup>24</sup> Luria then sent two of his disciples (Vital and Isaac Ha-Kohen) to tell Najara of the untoward impact his actions had caused. Mortified and remorseful, Najara composed himself, sat down at the table, and resumed singing his songs with respectful enthusiasm. Immediately, Luria saw the host of thousands of angels return and listen, enthralled and joyful to hear everyone's singing of Najara's songs.<sup>25</sup>

Having "found religion" in Safed – the connection to a deeper spiritual experience, Najara expressed both praise and longing in his poetry. He expressed ardent desire and passion, drawing on erotic metaphors of "earthly desires and human longings" to depict his spiritual experiences and yearning for union, in expressing the

[t]he intimate experience of mystically-minded souls, in their prayerful drive for the Infinite, in their fervent, trembling longing for God, the beloved and desired One.<sup>26</sup>

Najara's poetry was also permeated with the plea for redemption – relief from misery and persecution; an end to exile, and a restoration of God's presence. Often he demanded renewal of the bond between God and the "persecuted little dove," as he often called Israel. His emotional pleas often drew on similar biblical language, e.g.,: "How long, my protector, will you be angry with me?"; "My heart longs for the living God" (*Olat Tamid* # 125; cf. Psalm [63?]) – the title of Ibn Ezra's *Tzama Nafshi* comes from the same source; and especially the Song of Songs.<sup>27</sup>

Najara expressed not just frustration with God (as one feels with a sought-after love), but cries for vengeance against Israel's oppressors. "Requite my shed blood" (*Pizmonim* #15, Zinberg p. 100, n.73); "Smash the neck of Jacob's enemy" (*Olat Tamid* #142, Zinberg *ibid* n.74); "Repay the people who wage war against me; turn them into dogs that cannot bark!" (*Olat Shabbat* #2, Zinberg *ibid* n.80).

He published his first set of *zemirot*, *Zemirot Yisrael*<sup>28</sup> (1<sup>st</sup> ed. Safed, 1587, and 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Salonica

1594); and republished a greatly expanded three-part<sup>29</sup> version of 346 poems in 1599-1600 (3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Venice), which he entitled, “Zemiroth [of] Yisrael; a Cure for All Cures.” [מזמור]

Like most zemiroth writers, Najara’s work was not confined to song-writing. He wrote a book of moral instruction, *Mesaheket ha-Tevel* (Safed, 1587),<sup>30</sup> laws on ritual slaughter, *Shohatei ha-Yeladim* (Amsterdam 1718) (in easy to read language geared to children); a commentary on Job, *Pitzei Ohev* (Constantinople, 1597), and other commentaries and sermons, in addition to other collections of songs.<sup>31</sup>

Aside from Yah Ribon, Najara’s most well-known work is a *Ketubah Le-Ha-Shavuot* (a marriage contract for Shavuot containing the terms of the relationship between God and Israel, read in many Sephardi communities on Shavuot.<sup>32</sup>

Najara later served as rabbi in Gaza, where he died sometime between 1605 and 1625.<sup>33</sup>

### Shalem Shabbazi

Najara’s songs created a wide following, due not just to the eloquence of his language, originality of style and flow of his verse, but also his assiduous publishing, self-promotion and circulation among wide circles. Many subsequent Jewish poets, from Damascus and Jerusalem to Calcutta and Tunis, adopted his style.<sup>34</sup> The person he influenced most significantly was the budding poet of Yemen, Shalem ben Joseph Shabbazi.<sup>35</sup>

Shabbazi was raised by a Kabbalist father, and early on was an ardent mystic himself. He nonetheless apparently learned of Isaac Luria’s Safed circle of Kabbalists only after (and perhaps due to) his becoming familiar with and being captivated by Najara’s poetry and persona.<sup>36</sup> Najara’s style probably strongly influenced Shabbazi, who nonetheless forged his own eclectic and distinctive creative style.<sup>37</sup>

Shabbazi’s poetry became popular due to their “mystical-messianic mood” and “melodic rhythm.”<sup>38</sup> From his time to the present, Shabbazi was for Yemenite Jewry their poet laureate. Numerous songs of his are still sung today, and many of these have been choreographed in our time as dances that are familiar to many Israeli dancers. They include: *Ayuma B’har Ha-mor*, *Im Nin’alu*,<sup>39</sup> *Ahavat Hadassah*, *Et Dodim Kala*,<sup>40</sup> *Ayelet Hen*, and *Eheye Asher Eheye*.

Yemenite poets compiled their songs in a collection called a *Diwan*.<sup>41</sup> These are the Yemenite equivalent of zemiroth books, except instead of being pamphlet-size “benchers,” they are massive volumes often the size of a Chumash and containing the texts for hundreds of full, zemiroth-length songs. The most wide-spread Yemenite Diwans focus on Shabbazi’s songs, written both in Hebrew and many in Arabic (using Hebrew characters). His collection also contains songs of other poets, like Saadiah ben Amram, Abraham Ibn Ezra, and of course, Israel Najara. Among songs by others that are most well known outside Yemenite Jewish circles (again, often in Israeli dances) are: *Sapari*, *Se’i Yona*, *LaNer V’la-b’samim*, *Ki Eshmera Shabbat*, and *Yom Shabbaton (Yona Matz’a)*. (The last two are on the “top ten” repertoire among North American zemiroth singers and books.)

#### IV. The *Zemirot* and Their Commentaries:

These are the *zemirot* which are most commonly sung in Ashkenazi (and especially, non-Orthodox) circles. *Zemirot* which are sung rarely, or whose texts are not metric (e.g., Kol Mekadesh and Baruch Adonai Yom Yom), are not explained.<sup>13</sup>

For under two hundred years, the *zemirot* have been divided into sections for Friday night and Saturday morning. This division has "no basis . . . either in their content or medieval usage."<sup>41</sup> Some commentators, however, believe that the sequence reflects a deliberate sequence, starting with a meditative poem, more festive and jovial songs, and then a transition to *Birkat Hamazon*.<sup>42</sup> It is quite possible that popular usage over time could have produced such a "folk-processing" of the *zemirot* sequence; we have no way to verify or refute this hypothesis. Regardless of the roots of this sequence, there is no reason that this division into evening and day should constrain anyone's choices at any meal. I have never let that get into the way, and neither should you. I have also arranged them in the order most commonly found, as this makes it easier to refer to and from this book, for the vast majority of traditional bentschers.

#### Yah Ribon

In a nutshell, Yah Ribon is a celebratory love poem to God. It has no mention of Shabbat;<sup>43</sup> indeed the introductory portion of the daily prayers in some of the eastern rites include this piyut.

Of Israel Najara's poems, Yah Ribon is the one which most strongly caught the popular fancy. It became and has remained his most well-known hymn.

Most of Najara's poems are in Hebrew. While he provided no explicit reason for choosing Aramaic for Yah Ribon, the reasons can be discerned. Given the flourishing of Kabbalist community in Safed, Aramaic had a special appeal in Najara's circles. Aramaic had seen a decline of its use and reputation after Babylonia ceased being a source of significant Jewish leadership. With the elevation of the Zohar, a mystically-oriented commentary to the Torah, to near canonical status, however, Aramaic's prestige rose.

In addition to the external factors, some structural and content reasons may have led Najara to choose Aramaic. The Aramaic plural suffix, "אָ-יא," lends itself to a mellifluous rhyming of the lines. In addition, the biblical book of Daniel (the first half of which is written in Aramaic) contains many rich allusions which Najara freely incorporated into this hymn. (I will point out the specifics below in the commentary.)

As is nearly always the case, a composition's popularity is ascertained only in retrospect over the ages. And whatever the reason – the captivating rhymes, the depth of its message, the flow of the simple language – this latecomer has remained on the "top ten" in most communities for over four centuries.<sup>14</sup>

As was customary, Israel Najara "signed" this poem with his first name in acrostic: **Yah** (for the initial *Yud* in *YiSRaEL*); **Sh'vahin** (for the *Sin*), **Rav-r'vin** (for the *Resh*), **Elaha** (for the Aleph<sup>44</sup>), and **L'mikd'shach** (for the *Lamed*).

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<sup>41</sup> Noam Zion, *A Day Apart: Educator's Guide* (Shalom Hartman Inst. 2004), Part VI, "Traditional *Zemirot* in Historical Context," p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> Levin, *Zemirot Anthology*, p. xii.

<sup>43</sup> Why is it sung on Shabbat? Because that is when we have time. Additional comments on this at Tzur Mishelo, below.

<sup>44</sup> This is silent letter vocalized with "e" (as in met) in the opening word (*Elaha*), and "ei" in his name (*Yisrael*).

### The Structure of the *Birkat HaMazon*

The traditional *Birkat HaMazon* contains four blessings.<sup>45 15</sup> In the first blessing we thank God for feeding everyone. It begins with the traditional blessing formula followed by: “*ha-zan et ha-olam kulo . . .* – who feeds the whole world . . .”) and ends with the blessing: “. . . *ha-zan et ha-kol*. – who feeds all.”

The second blessing focuses on the Land (of Israel<sup>46</sup>) and other elements of our covenant with God. It starts: “*Nodeh l’cha . . .* – We thank You . . .” and ends with the blessing: “. . . *al ha-aretz v’al ha-mazon* – for the Land and the food.” The third blessing focuses on Jerusalem, the center of our nationhood. It begins: “*Rahem Adonai Eloheinu . . .* – Have mercy, Adonai . . .” followed by phrases (on your people Israel, on Jerusalem, on Zion) that are closely echoed in the third *Tzur* stanza. It concludes: “. . . *bonei b’rahamav Yerushalaim, Amen*. – . . . in Your mercy You rebuild Jerusalem, Amen.”

The fourth blessing (in an exception to the “sandwich” rule) starts with the full opening formula “*Baruch Ata . . .*” and consists of one (fairly long) paragraph, whose key motif is “*ha-tov v’ha-meitiv* – the Good One who ‘does well’ [by us].” It ends with the words: “. . . *kol-tov . . . l’olam al y’hasreinu* – may Your goodness never forsake us.” The passages after this paragraph (verses starting with “*Ha-rahaman . . .* – May the Merciful One . . .”) are later additions to the *Birkat HaMazon*.

According to tradition, the first three blessings are ordained by the Torah, but the fourth was instituted by the *tana-im* (Mishnaic rabbis) around 135 C.E., after the Romans had crushed the Bar Kochba revolt.<sup>47</sup> Despite this calamity, in which all the defenders were killed or starved to death, the rabbis gave thanks that they were able to give the dead a proper burial (an impressive example of seeing a silver lining in a cloud). The rabbis added this blessing for God who had “done well” by them.

When a group<sup>48</sup> eats together, they add a “call to prayer” that parallels the *Barchu* in the synagogue service. Instead of “*Barchu* – Bless!” (plural imperative), we say “*Rabotai* or *Haverai* [both meaning: “My fellows”] *n’vareich* – let us bless (1<sup>st</sup> person plural future), and several short responsive sentences follow. This call-and-response is called the *Zimun* – the Invitation.

Among some, the *Birkat HaMazon* is “recited over” a cup of wine (or grape juice).<sup>16</sup> The leader has the cup, and after the entire *Birkat HaMazon* is finished, he (or she<sup>17</sup>) says the blessing: “*borei p’ri ha-gafen*” and drinks from the cup.

These blessings, along with the *Zimun* and the *kos*/cup, form the structure of *Birkat HaMazon* on which *Tzur Mishelo* models itself.

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<sup>45</sup> See the accompanying endnote (on “open” and “closed” blessings) for an explanation of the blessing structure when a prayer consists of several consecutive blessings.

<sup>46</sup> and the food which we obtain from it. These blessings arose when we lived in the Land, and assume that ideally that is where we would live (and eat).

<sup>47</sup> Despite this calamity, in which all the defenders were killed or starved to death, the rabbis gave thanks that they were able to give the dead a proper burial – an impressive example of seeing a silver lining in a cloud.

<sup>48</sup> Three or more adults – men in the original paradigm; many non-Orthodox Jews now also count women to the quorum.

### *Tzur Mishelo Achalnu* — Introduction:

This zemer is modeled<sup>18</sup> after the *Birkat HaMazon* (Grace After Meals), which is recited after any “official” meal (meaning: one where one eats bread and has said *Motzi*). For an explanation of these blessings and the structure of the *Birkat HaMazon*, see the facing page.

The author is unknown. Tradition ascribes it to Shimon bar Yohai (a rabbi who lived around 130 C.E.), but this is highly unlikely. This form of *zemer* did not come into being until hundreds of years later (as discussed more fully in the history portion of the Introduction). Nor do the paragraphs supply any identifying acrostic.<sup>19</sup> I cast my vote with Noam Zion’s recent publication, \_\_\_\_\_, which dates this to the fourteenth century in northern France.

The first three stanzas of *Tzur* are modeled after the first three blessings of the *Birkat HaMazon*: (1) who feeds all; (2) for the land and the food; and (3) rebuilding Jerusalem. The introductory line and refrain (*Tzur Mishelo . . .*) follows the *Zimun*/Invitation; and the fourth stanza addresses the blessing recited over a cup of wine.

For as long as this *zemer* has been known, there has been a lively debate as to whether this fourth stanza refers to the fourth blessing as well. The stanza’s allusions that could refer to the fourth blessing (see commentary, below) are much more indirect.<sup>49</sup> Still, the allusions are there, and the author clearly knew the fourth blessing of the *Birkat HaMazon*. In my view, the author of *Tzur* quite consciously embraces both sides of the issue. Because the fourth blessing of the *Birkat HaMazon* was only instituted at Yavneh, it should not be accorded the same importance. I agree with the commentator *Mateh Yehudah*, that this stanza’s first word

(יִבְנֵהּ – *Yibaneh*) supplies the resolution: This word<sup>50</sup> is the same as “יָבֵנֵהּ” – *Yavneh*! So the author is saying: “hint, hint! This is [not quite] about the fourth blessing!”

Can *Tzur* satisfy the requirement to say *Birkat HaMazon*? It certainly has all the required themes. The prevalent rabbinic opinion is that it does not, but some authorities felt that it did satisfy the requirements – and therefore forbade its singing, because then we would be reciting the regular *Birkat HaMazon* in vain!<sup>51</sup>

Like the preceding *zemer* (*Yah Ribon*), *Tzur Mishelo* has no mention of Shabbat. So why don’t we sing it on weekdays, too? As many commentators have replied, because *ein panai* – we don’t have the (leisurely) time on weekdays that we do on Shabbat!

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<sup>49</sup> This is what gave rise to the theory that a *tanna* – rabbi of the Mishnaic period – wrote this; that is, before the fourth blessing had been created.

<sup>50</sup> In Hebrew only the consonants form the root. Vowels can change without changing the root.

<sup>51</sup> One is required to say a blessing upon enjoying or eating something – but only once! (If you eat again afterwards, that is a different matter.) Pronouncing a blessing (which names and praises God) when it has no object is considered a “blessing in vain.” [get Talmud or codes cite]

Those with a more liberal relationship to *halachah* are much more open to innovation and variation, and the above concerns would not be dispositive.



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1. Most of these songs are not quite as full-bodied as the *zemirot*. Several: *Adir Hu*, *Ehad Mi Yodea*, and *Chad Gadya* (as well as *Dayenu* which falls earlier in the Haggadah), are built on short sentences which expand with each stanza. The closest in structure to *zemirot* or *piyutim* are *Va'yehi Ba-hatzi Halayla* and *Ki Lo Na-eh*.
  2. Lawrence A. Hoffman, *My People's Prayer Book* (Jewish Lights), vol. 7, "Shabbat at Home" (1997), p. 17.
  3. E.g., *Encyclopedia Judaica* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) vol. \_\_, p. 761 (Israel Najara's primary collections published under title *Zemirot Yisrael*).
  4. In addition, some Sephardic communities use the term *pizmonim* to refer to the table songs we call *zemirot*. Some use the terms *zemirot* and *pizmonim* interchangeably.
  5. This word derives from a Persian word for book, and came to encompass offices with accountant books and halls/lounges where people entertained (whence the English "divan" for couch). John Ayto, *Dictionary of Word Origins* (Arcade Publ. 1990), p. 177.
  6. Shalem Shabazi, *Hafetz Hayyim Shirei Aba Shalem Shabazi, Im Shnei Peirushim* (Jerusalem, Shlomo Makiton 1966). The poems of Abraham ibn Ezra are also published as a *diwan*, *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1971), vol. \_\_, p. 1166; Akiva Eger, *Divan le-rabi Avraham ben Ezra* (Berlin 1886), republished, Tel Aviv, Tsiyon 1968).
  7. Jonathan Zimet, *Nusach – Reclaiming a Lost Heritage* (published privately, 1995). Contact the author for this article. A portion of it is quoted in: Seth Kadish, *Kavvana: Directing the Heart in Jewish Prayer* (Jason Aronson, 1997), p. 395.
  8. One well-known melody from Aden (Yemen) is in a mode similar to what Western music calls the Phrygian mode: the second step of the scale is flatted. The Eastern mode lowers that second step slightly less – a quarter-tone instead of a half-tone. (It is my belief that this accounts for the fact that some people sing this melody in regular natural minor – i.e., with the second tone not flatted at all. In effect, use of the Phrygian mode "rounds off" this quarter tone downward, and the natural minor "rounds it off" upward.)
  9. An age-old debate that will never end asks: "what is Jewish music?" Even the sub-issue, what melody is Jewish, can only be evaluated in degree, and will always have a subjective element. The fact that it cannot ever be answered definitively, and that knowledgeable people will disagree, should not keep us from maintaining an awareness of this dimension, and from educating ourselves in the history and roots of our musical heritage.
  10. The Lubaviticher Rebbe championed the singing of the second half of Aleinu (starting with *Al kein n'kaveh*) to a melody that has been used for *Yom Zeh Mechubad*.
  11. For two quite different discussions that amplify on the power of *zemirot* and the Shabbat, see Hoffman, *People's Prayer Book*, pp. 17-22; Nosson Scherman, ed., *Zemiroth le-shabat: Sabbath songs with additional Sephardic Zemiroth* (New York: Mesorah, 1979), pp. 15-25, 31-34.
  12. Noam Zion, *A Day Apart*, p. 102.

13. Possibility of including these in the published book.

14. While my editions of Shabazi's *Diwan* and Yemenite siddur do not contain Yah Ribon, it is likely that this zemer was well-known in Yemen, given Najara's popularity with, and strong influence on, Shabazi himself, as noted above. The Eastern rite ("*Edot Hamizrah*") contains this zemer in its daily prayers, and zemiroth collections in nearly all rites contain Yah Ribon.

(Introduction to Birkat Hamazon and Tzur Mishelo)

15. Blessings have a special liturgical form when a prayer consists of several consecutive blessings (for example: the *Amidah*, the blessings after a *haftarah*, and the *Birkat HaMazon*/Grace After Meals). (Note: In this context, a "blessing" includes not just the formula "Baruch Ata . . ." and following phrase, but the passage – sometimes several paragraphs long – preceding it.)

The first blessing begins with the traditional blessing formula ("*Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha-olam . . .*") and ends with the short formula ("*Baruch ata Adonai [ha-zan et ha-kol]*"). This form is called a "closed" blessing because the blessing formula caps both ends. Each subsequent blessing is in the "open form" and has the blessing formula only at the end.

I liken this to a double- or triple-decker sandwich. For a normal sandwich, you need two sliced of bread, and the filling (e.g., tuna salad) in between. For a "double-decker," you spread the second filling on top, and then only need one additional slice. The blessing formula is like the slice of bread, and the rest of the text is the "filling." The first blessing has the formula twice, and each additional blessing, just one time.

16. E.g., *Pesahim* 105b. For a full discussion on the varieties of practice on this custom, see Ari Z. Zivotofsky, "What's the Truth about ... Birkat Hamazon over Wine?," *Jewish Action* (Orthodox Union, Winter 2000), available at: <http://www.ou.org/publications/ja/5761winter/LEGAL-EA.PDF#search='cup%20blessing%20birkat%20hamazon'>.

17. Most non-Orthodox treat women and men equally in most such ritual matters. Even in Orthodox circles, some hold that women may do this. See *ibid.*, n. 1.

18. *Tzur Mishelo* is actually just one of a genre of hymns and passages which either paraphrase or elaborate on the regular *Birkat HaMazon*. An extensive survey of these can be found in the (Hebrew) book: Heinrich Brody, ed., *Yedi'ot ha-Makhon Le'heker Ha-shirah Ha-ivrit* / Studies of the Research Institute for Hebrew Poetry (Berlin/Jerusalem, 7 volumes, 1933-1958), vol. V, pp. 44-59, 98-104.

19. One manuscript replaces YBNH with TBNH, allowing the four stanza's initials to form the acrostic "תרבה – you/she will increase" – when read backwards! See: Herbert Loewe, *Mediaeval Hebrew Minstrelsy, Songs for the Bride Queen's Feast* (London: Clarke & Co., 1926), p. 136, citing Bodleian manuscript number 2503 and comments.