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Jewish Women in Pre-State Israel

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Women and Music in Jewish Society

Woman's Role in the Music Tradition in Israel

The different types of women's singing have always played an important role in the traditional singing of Jewish communities. In the past, singing accompanied women in their daily chores and in life-cycle activities. Today, women continue to play a central role in folk-traditional music works as composers of popular and artistic music as well as performers and researchers.¹

Woman's status in the ever-evolving society is the focus of the present study.² In the past, identifying women with the private sphere and excluding them from the public one was typical of many Jewish communities.³ While men's roles were mostly community-oriented, women concentrated on the private realm, restricted to child and home care. The woman felt responsible for the continuation of her social, cultural, and religious tradition.⁴ In Jewish society, the women provided the various texts for life-cycle events, and in that respect women were given considerable leeway, which was also expressed in their songs, lyrics, and music.

Recent years have witnessed a dramatic change in the perception of women's identity and role.⁵ Women's participation in business, public, and political life allows for a better exposure of their talents, aspirations, and adaptability that are not congruent with the common beliefs that formulated woman's image in the past.⁶ It seems that Israeli society is currently going through a process of change regarding women's status, yielding an environment that now makes possible the realization of potential beyond the restrictive limitations of the past.

Cultural and social values always have been expressed, through music, among other ways. Understanding musical structures and symbolism as part of culture and addressing historical developments together constitute the

first step in understanding culture as a whole.⁷ This approach supports the importance of research that combines social concepts with musical analysis.

The cultural heritage of the Jewish communities includes extensive musical data that reflects cultural values and social processes.⁸ The present study chose women's singing as a means for understanding the status of the Jewish woman and the changes it has gone through over time.

Woman's singing consists of a wide range of texts expressing a variety of inner emotions and experiences such as love, work, play, longing for the land of Israel, biblical stories, and so on. These texts express women's feelings, longings, and opinions. The singing reflects her involvement in society and her empathy with national-historical events as well as her views, not always concurrent with those of her time.

The songs clearly reflect her standing for her rights and her status vis-à-vis the social conventions of her time. While the singing expresses women's compliance with social conventions—for example, in the wedding song "Listen to My Beautiful Voice," from Haban, in which the young bride is instructed on her future role—there is also the bride's pointed call to her parents, "Oh My Mother, Oh My Father, Why Have You Sold Me," and even her most mutinous longing for different—unacceptable—social norms in "I Went Down the Wadi."⁹

The present article focuses on the woman and her singing in the traditional society of two small Jewish communities: Haban and Yifran. Both communities reflect similar as well as different ways in which women formed their status following the conventions and social processes of their environment. Haban is a small town in southeast Yemen, in the Hadhramaut region, and Yifran is a small village in southwest Libya. Each of these communities, located far apart from one another, zealously kept its social independence and cultural traditions, including its musical repertoire. This repertoire played a significant role in the yearly cycle of events and in life-cycle events, too. The women were well versed not only in the musical repertoire but also in all traditional rituals of their community.

The Haban women were independent and active; they were in charge of many activities, whose range expanded even more after their arrival in Israel, following the rise in their economic status and public awareness. In contrast, the Yifran woman, dependent and subdued, was active mainly in her home, and preserved her way of life in her new country, too.

Both communities immigrated to Israel in the 1950s. They insisted on settling together in villages, each community in a separate place, to preserve their traditions, but both developed relations with other communities in their

neighborhoods. By helping to support the family by working outside the home, the women in both communities thus share in the cultural and social changes in their society. The Haban women, for example, joined the village committee, held different public offices, and became influential in the public-communal arena, thereby breaking the boundaries of tradition.¹⁰

In both communities, musical expression plays an important role in women's as well as men's singing. Observations, interviews, and recordings made of both communities over the past fifty years show a rich and versatile feminine cultural-musical world. Women's music reflects creativity and novelty expressed in their musical productivity and in the adaptation of modern texts to old tunes. We found each gender has a different, independent musical repertoire, with the women's typical lyrics and tunes differing from those of the men's. It might have been assumed that the musical components would differ, too. Yet a thorough investigation reveals that both share similar ones despite the different cultural background of both communities. Of these musical repertoires we have chosen to focus on women's singing and have found the following musical components.¹¹

Musical Components

In both communities, women's singing is performed as responsorial singing between two groups (Haban) or between a soloist and a group (Yifran), alternately shifting between the performers. The audiences differed between the two communities. While the Yifran women sang among their own small group, with no men or outsiders present, the Haban women sang in the company of men and for them. Nowadays, the Yifran women continue to sing among themselves, while the Haban women diverted from their old tradition to also sing only among themselves, as the Yifran women do.

In exploring melodic components of women's songs, we discovered a wavy melodic move centered on repetitive tones. This melodic move uses small spaces, a restricted range spanning between a fourth to a sixth with a rare seventh. The melodies usually are composed of a short musical unit including two or three repeated phrases, each consisting of repetitive motifs with the final one usually constant.

Both communities use numerous rhythmic values and constant rhythmic patterns, such as ostinato. These rhythmic patterns usually are performed with percussion instruments accompanied by hand clapping that helps to maintain the performance flow even during pauses in the singing.

Tonal stability in the women's singing has been shown in both communities. The tonal material of the Haban women's singing is constructed around melodic material, while the Yifran songs emphasize the important tones of the major and minor scales. These songs of limited range are somewhat reminiscent of major or minor tetrachords.

Connections between Music and Text

Most of the songs consist of one musical unit, which corresponds to a textual sentence. This musical unit repeats itself time and again throughout the song. Most of the songs in both communities are syllabic, with melismas to mark the end of a sentence. In most of the songs, we find musical sentences composed of meaningless sounds, highlighting the significance of the music over the text.

These typical musical components, like other traditional cultural patterns, have been preserved by the communities until today. Yet, as stated above, the involvement of women in their surroundings has promoted an inevitable process of change in cultural patterns, music among them. Three main factors supported this process: exposure to technological developments; relationships to neighbors and meeting new communities; and the initiative of key figures.

The immigration to Israel, especially at the end of the 1950s, exposed the people of these villages to modern communication technologies, previously unfamiliar in Haban and Yifran. Their use of these new means, initially limited, gradually expanded, particularly from the mid-1970s, enabling different musical styles to exert their influence.

The remarkable openness of the Haban women and their interest in listening to and learning as much as possible from their new surroundings resulted in a change in their behavior patterns, unlike the Yifran women. One such example is the integration of Adenian songs, unfamiliar in Haban, together with the Habanian ones, at traditional events. However, we did not find similar openness in the Yifran women. Although they listen to popular songs in the media, they still stick to their old musical repertoire in their traditional events as it was sung in the past.

We have also witnessed the use of other percussion instruments such as the darbuka in addition to traditional drums in both communities. Moreover, some wood and brass instruments have been replaced by stainless steel and plastic ones.

In both communities, the power of women is significant.¹² They are the ones who usually run the ceremonies and the singing. Yet, during the events, other women, who are not key figures, are allowed to take the initiative and lead a certain song, thus becoming key performers while the others join in. Women also determine the balance between old and new in the choice of text and music, in the entire community repertoire. Of late, a tendency has become evident of decreasing the number of traditional songs while increasing the use of new ones, learned in Israel.

These three factors—technology, contact with the neighborhood, and the initiative of key figures—are more notable among women than in men.¹³ These factors brought on the changes in the cultural tradition of the two communities as well as in their musical repertoire. A number of characteristic changes took place in the musical structures, including aspiration for accuracy in pitch of absolute tones, aspiration for accuracy in the rhythmic values and patterns, a tendency to add melismas to different parts of the melodic sentences, gradual escalation toward the songs' endings, incorporating Hebrew texts into the original songs, and cutting down performance duration of songs. All of these changes show the development of two intertwining trends: the absorption of new, different cultural patterns and values on one hand and the wish to preserve tradition on the other. Through their creative effort, expressed in their music, the women of both communities contribute not only to their close-knit societies, but also to the community as a whole. In both places, women are those who zealously keep tradition, and although the traditional role division between women and men has remained unchanged, we currently are witnessing a shift in the perception of women's role and status in traditional societies. The dependent and subdued is replaced by the independent woman, expanding her role beyond her home and contributing to the community through her social involvement.

Music thus takes part in the long process of formulating woman's identity within traditional society in Israel. The women's role has become significant not just in preserving tradition but also in re-drawing the line between tradition and progress. These processes yielded different results in the formation of the woman's image in the community. Thus, these two communities seemingly constitute a sample of two different aspects of one prototype:

- The Yifran women of today represent a pattern of preserving the traditional concept regarding their status. Simultaneously, they are also part of the ongoing process of change that has had only a limited impact on their traditional image and no implications for the various traditional events.

- The Haban women represent a different pattern, one in which preservation and change are intertwined, resulting in a new image of a woman. Beside their zeal to preserve their tradition, they portray considerable openness to their surroundings and become part of the changes their tradition is going through.

The creativity of the Israeli woman undoubtedly reflects the formulation process of her image. The changes in her behavioral patterns and status are at the focus of different anthropological and musical studies on different communities in Israel. We believe this research will shed further light on women's identity and support our thesis of her multifaceted image.