Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews in America

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The words are the same, but the melodies are foreign. They have a German-Yiddish slant. Many of them are slow, meandering, and sorrowful. I don’t feel quite at home. I am in a synagogue in Los Angeles for Ashkenazy Jews whose origins are the winter ghettos of Eastern Europe, and I am a Sephardic Jew whose ancestors come from the desert lands of Morocco.

I grew up in the mellah of Casablanca. Mellah is Arab slang for ghetto. It’s where the Jews huddled for centuries in Arabian lands, most of us refugees from the Spanish Inquisition of 1492. It is in these Jewish neighborhoods that we held on tight to our Jewish rituals but also embraced Arab customs, especially the music. How could we not? Arab music hypnotizes. It is the sound of the desert, the seduction of the sun.

Arab melodies were not written by people shivering in a Polish winter. They were written by romantics who saw the eternity of the sand . . . and dreamed.

These Arabian melodies, which also drew from Andalusian and Berber influences, infiltrated the Moroccan synagogue. I grew up with them. They’re bold and gentle at the same time. Sung by a master, they compete with God for your attention, and often win. With such beauty, who can absorb anything else? When a melody fills you completely, what else is there room for?

More than anything, it is these desert melodies that I took with me into exile when we packed our bags for the arctic winters of Canada in the 1960s.
Exile in the Jewish tradition is a complicated word. There is, first, the overarching experience of biblical exile to which we are obligated. This is the exile that Jews learn about in Hebrew school, at Shabbat tables, and at summer camps—our people were dispersed for nineteen centuries after the destruction of the Second Temple, and during that time, they wandered, struggled, built communities, adapted, suffered the darkest moment of their history, survived, and, through it all, prayed that one day they would return home to Zion.

Since the miraculous rebirth of Israel in 1948, Jews of the Diaspora are obligated, in theory at least, to feel a certain emptiness in their souls if they haven’t journeyed back to their biblical home. Beneath this biblical exile, however, there are sub-exiles that are no less important. These are exiles where, for instance, one might live in Canada and miss the beaches of Casablanca, or one might live in France and miss the desert sands of Algeria.

The Jewish story, a long, complex story of a wandering and nomadic people, is very much about negotiating exiles, of living with the tension of competing exiles—big ones, biblical ones, personal ones. The most eventful of these exiles is undoubtedly the exile in America—the one nation that has dared to compete with Zion for the ingathering of the exiles. In its innocent and disarming way, but with New York-style chutzpah, America has thrown a wrinkle in the Great Jewish Story by providing a harbor safe enough for Jews to live with a vengeance.

The scholar Micah Goodman has said that Jews nurtured two great dreams over the nearly two millennia of their exile. One was the biblical yearning to return to Zion, the other was the yearning to find a place—any place—that would accept them as Jews. As it turns out, both dreams were realized in the same century: America and Israel. What makes the exile in America so poignant is how brilliantly it has managed to compete with the exile of obligation—with the dream of returning home. Here is a clash of biblical proportions: Israel as the supreme statement of particularity, America as the supreme statement of universality. How Jews negotiate the clash between these two great ideals will determine much of the Jewish narrative over the next century.

Ask any fervent Zionist and he or she will tell you that American Jews, however free and liberated they might be, ought to feel a sense of betrayal to Zion. After all, the dream of finding a place that would accept us was always meant to be temporary; it was never meant to be the end point. For most American Jews, however, the intoxicating brew of freedom and acceptance has made America the final destination. In a clash of best friend versus brother, the best friend has won.
In my case, I can’t say that yet. I still yearn to return to my biblical home. My American best friend might be charming, funny, successful, generous, loyal, and considerate, but my Israeli brother is still my brother. It’s hard for me to dismiss the image I have painted in my mind of one hundred grandfathers and one hundred grandmothers holding hands in a windy desert, all of them my immediate family, all of them looking at me, all of them thinking of how lucky I am to have been born in the generation that came home to Zion.

Who am I to turn down this gift of which they dreamed for so long? Who am I to turn down my biblical destiny?

My life in America is really a double exile—the exile from the childhood memories of Morocco, which comes and goes, and the biblical exile to which I am obligated, which never leaves me. And yet, when I strip away the gravitational pull of exiles, transient and permanent, I’m left with the naked confession that America has strengthened my Jewish identity. How can that be?

I can understand why my ancestors in Morocco nurtured a deep Jewish identity—they had no choice. They were *dhimmis* (second-class citizens) in a foreign and often hostile land. What else could they lean on in their Jewish ghettos if not the comfort foods of Jewish rituals and tribal connection?

I am not a second-class citizen in America. No one is coming after me because I’m Jewish. No one will arrest me for criticizing the president. I am free and safe, whether I am Jewish or not. Like millions of Jews, I have discovered in America the freedom to *not* be Jewish. Some Jews have run with it; others have resisted. Count me in as a resister.

There’s no easy answer for why I have resisted assimilation, but the melodies of my childhood are a good place to start. In particular, I remember a certain melody on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year. At the culmination of the day, during the sunset prayer of *Ne’ila*, I would hold my father’s hand as all the men would gather in front of the holy ark, our prayer shawls covering our heads, stomachs empty from twenty-four hours of fasting, souls overflowing with emotion, all of us singing in unison to open the gates of heaven.

Through the hippie days of the late 1960s, the disco days of the ’70s, the yuppy era of the ’80s, the money-making era of the ’90s, the insecure era around the turn of the millennium, and all my adventures in between visiting Zen camps and other places of youthful exploration, I never forgot that Arabian-tinged melody of *Ne’ila*, when I held my father’s hand and we sang our hearts out.
As I got older and learned more about my history, I came to understand that I was holding more than my father’s hand. I was also holding the hand he held when he was my age, and the hands of my one hundred grandfathers going back to the destruction of the Second Temple. Later, when I held my own son’s hand at that exact same moment of Ne’ila, I understood that I was also holding his son’s hand and those of future generations.

Human beings love drama. A great novel can’t exist without it; neither can a great film or poem or children story. The Jewish story is arguably the greatest drama in human history. Of everything I love about my tradition—philosophy, culture, rituals, values—the story itself moves my soul like nothing else. That may explain a key difference between the insular ghetto of my ancestors and the wide-open freedom I have in America. The Casablanca ghetto already had its own built-in drama. It was a drama of daily survival endured by second-class citizens in a foreign land. In the open and blank canvas that is America, I had to find my own drama, and what greater drama than the incredible story of my people? The irony, of course, is that it is an Arabian exile that helped connect me to my Jewish exile.

Maybe, in an odd way, I am just emulating my ancestors who fought for survival, only I am engaged in a survival of a different sort—a survival of meaning. The biggest fear that humans have, a rabbi once told me, is that their lives have no meaning. A blank canvas has no meaning; it is an invitation to start painting. The melody of Ne’ila helped me paint my way back to the story of my people. That melody was the river of meaning that flowed through me and through all of my wanderings and eventually led me to embrace an ancient story and make it mine.

Will the melody be strong enough to lead me back to Zion?

Would I have reconnected with my Judaism to the same extent had I made the biblical return to the immense Jewish neighborhood that is Israel? Would I have sought out the great drama of my people if I were already living in its place of destiny?

There are no ready answers, just intriguing questions.

What makes the American-Israel clash of exiles especially poignant is that they are both deeply Jewish. The American idea of a continuous work in progress, of an idea that never ends, of an idea “we turn and turn” and never stop turning even when we think we got it right, is an eternal Jewish idea. It is the never-ending journey of Talmud and Midrash. But the messianic idea represented by the return to Zion is also an eternal Jewish idea—the notion that we are working toward the spiritual perfection of humanity, that there is
a happy ending after all, an ending when goodness will rule the world. We are obligated as Jews to yearn for that day and to believe in it. It is the never-ending journey of the Prophets.

The reconciling of these clashing exiles may well come from another Jewish idea—the idea that exile, at its deepest level, is a state of mind. The Jews who have returned home to Zion must carry in their minds the humbling ethos of exile, lest they erode the Jewish ideals of empathy and gratitude. The Jews who remain in America have a different challenge. They must carry in their minds the drama of unfinished business, of seeing their one hundred grandfathers and grandmothers holding hands in a desert field, yearning not just to come home but to continue the chain.

What melodies and memories will help American Jews negotiate their exile and continue that chain? If we don't have easy answers, we owe it to our ancestors to keep asking the question. In my case, I was fortunate to have a childhood melody that came with the warm hand of a father and the seductive sounds of the Arabian desert. The memory of Ne’ila was strong and sweet enough to help me continue the chain, hold tightly to my son's hand, and pray silently that when his turn comes, he will do the same.
Notes