

# **Two Psalmic Styles in One Synagogue: Psalm Singing in the Sephardic “Aboav” Synagogue in Safed, Israel**

ESSICA MARKS

## **Introduction**

The opening section of most synagogue services, especially those of the morning, consists mainly of a selection of psalms. The Eastern Sephardic and North African Jews perform these liturgical psalms in a very distinctive musical genre we will call “psalm singing.” In this article, we will investigate psalm singing in one synagogue that is considered to belong to the Eastern Sephardic tradition. The paper will show how an analysis of the musical characteristics of psalm singing in this synagogue led us to draw conclusions regarding the coexistence of two styles of psalm performances in that community.

Few ethnomusicological studies of Jewish psalm singing exist. The first scholar to record and document psalm tunes from different Sephardic and Eastern communities was A.Z. Idelsohn (1922, 1923, 1925). For him, psalm singing represented a small part of the Eastern Jewish repertoire, a repertoire he documented and studied. Idelsohn did not investigate the system of poetic accentuation as extensively and specifically as he had the accentuation system of biblical prose. He dealt with the general formulae of psalm singing. According to Idelsohn, Eastern Jewish psalm singing had a unique musical formula (Idelsohn 1922, 7-8, 17-18; 1923, 103; 1925, 7-8). He found nine performance styles among the Moroccan Jews (1925, 7-9) and four among the Eastern Sephardic Jews. (1923, 103). He classified these psalm singing performance styles according to the interval between the ending tone of each of the biblical verse’s two hemistiches and according to the different melodic patterns. Idelsohn discusses two melodic structures of the Eastern Sephardic Jews, especially among those originating from Syria: short two-part melodies that make up the majority of psalm verses, and longer verses that consist of three-part melodies.

Flender (1992) was the first scholar to focus his attention on Eastern Jewish psalm singing. In his study, he thoroughly investigates the structural principals of this genre. Flender's main assumption is that the system of poetic accentuation represents a method of text intonation based on the liturgical function in which it is performed. Flender's research investigates the connection between poetic accentuation and the musical performance of psalm singing. He found musical patterns related to the principal poetic accentuations, as well as musical structures typical to Eastern Jewish psalm singing.

Spiegel's research (1997) is concerned with the cantillation of sacred texts outside the Pentateuch, in two Jewish communities: Djerba and Yemen. Although her study encompasses only two traditions, her conclusions regarding the rendition of psalm singing in these two communities add to the scholars' debate surrounding the connections between the system of accentuation and its musical performance. Spiegel shares Idelsohn's view that there is virtually no connection between poetic accentuation and musical patterns. In her opinion, the melodic structure of psalm singing is related to the formal structure of the text rather than to the accentuations.

Two research approaches emerge from these earlier studies. The first approach holds that musical performance is not based on permanent musical patterns related to the accentuation system. This is the shared view of Idelsohn and Spiegel. The second approach belongs to Flender, who argues that the psalm singing of Eastern Jews consists of musical patterns based on the principal patterns of poetic accentuation.

The current article examines the performance of psalm singing in the "Aboav" Synagogue as a live tradition reflecting styles of performance within the synagogue's community. We will also try to show how these styles relate to the two approaches mentioned above.

### **Psalm Singing Performance in the Sabbath Morning Service of the "Aboav" Synagogue**

Two permanent soloists perform the Psalms in the "Aboav" Synagogue. Each one belongs to one of the two main congregation groups. One group consists of people

whose ancestors left Spain after the expulsion in 1492 and arrived in the city of Safed several hundred years ago. They refer to themselves as “Sephardim.” Also included in this group are people originating from the Muslim countries of the Middle East (Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Turkey). The synagogue’s other major congregation group comprises people originating from Morocco and other North African countries.

The two soloists perform the singing of the Psalms in alternating styles. Each of the performers considers himself to be a loyal representative and performer of the unique tradition to which he belongs. The two soloists maintain that the Moroccan tradition and the Sephardic tradition of performance are not identical, and that they can be clearly distinguished.

As regards the relationship between the system of poetic accentuation of the Book of Psalms and musical performance, the two informants, when asked to explain the performance method of their psalm singing, said that psalm singing has a “very special melody.” The performer of the Moroccan tradition said: “it is not like the cantillation of the Pentateuch, performed according to accentuations. We sing Psalms to a special melody.”

In order to clarify the main issue of this article (whether it is possible to detect two musical styles of psalm singing performance in the “Aboav” Synagogue), we recorded and transcribed all the psalms performed by the two informants in the Sabbath morning service. In the analysis of all the psalm performances, we found that each performer makes use of a certain system of musical characteristics and patterns that recur in each psalm. This article presents a musical analysis of the informants’ performances of Psalms 92-93.<sup>1</sup> The performances of these two psalms exemplify the musical characteristics found in all the other psalms performed by each of the informants. Informant 1 represents the Moroccan tradition and Informant 2 represents Sephardic tradition.

Our musical analysis of the performances examined the following components: melodic patterns, tone material, recitation tones, conclusion tones, relationships

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix for a full transcription of the two performances.

between conclusion tones, melodic contour, rhythmic structure (mainly halting and stopping), melodic direction, and text-melody relation.

## Comparison of the Musical Characteristics of the Two Performers

### I) Comparison of Musical Characteristics in “Two-section” Psalmody

The Book of Psalms is largely comprised of two-part verses. We will, therefore, consider the musical patterns in the performance of this type of psalm verse to exemplify the central characteristics of both informants’ performances.

#### a) *Musical characteristics common to both performers in two-part verses.*

1) Both informants preserve the basic musical principle of two-part melodic structure. This melodic form is based on two melodic motifs: motif 1 is the half-cadential, and motif 2 is the final. Each motif includes a conclusion tone, a conclusion pattern, melodic contour, melodic direction, and text-melody relation.

**Example 1** “Two-section” verse (92: 4).

עֲלֵי-עֶשׂוֹר וְעֲלֵי-נֶבֶל עָלֵי הַגִּיּוֹן בְּכִנּוֹר:

informant 1 - Morocco

a lei a sor va a lei na vel a lei hi ga yon ba ki nor

a lei a sor va a lei na vel a lei hi ga yon ba ki nor

informant 2 - Sepharad

2) Both performances have a rhythmic structure based on the textual form. The rhythmic structure coincides with the “two-section” melodic and textual structure, with a stop at the end of each of the two motifs.

3) A trait common to both performers is that they do not always observe the “two-section” rhythmic structure perfectly during performance. In some cases, the informants do not perform a stop after the cadential tone (at the end of motif 1) or after the final tone (at the end of motif 2). In both performances, omitting a final stop occurs more often than omitting a cadential stop. When a final stop is omitted, the melodic line continues into the next verse, and a stop is performed on one of the

conclusion notes of the next verse (cadential or final). The research revealed that this rhythmic pattern [mo 2], in which the stops were omitted, was perceived by the performers and the congregation neither as a mistake nor as a deviation from the norm of psalm singing performance. Instead, it was perceived as part of the traditional style of psalm singing performance in both traditions (Moroccan and Eastern Sephardic).

4) The selection of tones is similar in both performances. We did not find a significant difference in the range of the melodic patterns of the two performers. The melodic line is usually based on a sequence of four successive notes: *mi*, *fa*, *sol*, and *la*. The typical range of the melodic patterns in both performances consists of three or four successive notes. Both performers tend to use a range of three notes more often than a range of four notes in their melodic contours.

5) An important feature of psalm singing performance in Eastern and Moroccan Jewish traditions is the relationship between the cadential tone and the final tone (Flender 1992). In both performances, the interval between these two tones is an ascending half tone (where *mi* is the cadential tone and *fa* is the final tone).

6) The melodic characteristics of motif 1 are similar in both performances. The melodic line contains a basic nucleus of a minor third (*sol-mi*) that is expanded by a step sequence. This expansion includes the note *fa* as a passing note, and the note *la* above the *sol*.

7) In both performances, motif 2 is different from motif 1 in some aspects. The melodic line is based on the note *fa*, with *sol* and *mi* functioning as passing notes and without the expansion to *la*. Motif 2 is more relaxed and less intensive than motif 1.

***b) Differences between the musical characteristics of the two performers in two-part verses.***

1) Omission of final and cadential stops. When one listens to both performances, it is obvious that Informant 1 (Moroccan) differs from Informant 2 (Sephardic) in carrying out stops at the conclusions of both motifs. Informant 1 omits the stops after cadential tones almost twice as often as Informant 2. Informant 1 also omits the stops after final tones three times as often as Informant 2. This fact creates a difference between the rhythmic progression and the rhythmic feel of the two performances. Both the performers and the congregation are aware of this difference, and consider it to be a typical trait of each tradition.

2) The recitation tones<sup>2</sup> are not identical in the two performances. Informant 2 performs recitation on only one note: *fa*; while Informant 1 performs recitation on two notes: *mi* and *fa*. It should be noted that this characteristic was initially obvious to me as a regular listener; the transcriptions later confirmed my aural observation.

3) There is a difference in the direction of the final conclusion pattern of the two informants. Informant 2 always ascends a minor second from the note *mi* to the final note *fa*, the usual pattern being *sol-mi-fa*. Informant 1 performs the same final conclusion pattern in part of the verses, yet on several occasions (about 40 percent of his psalm singing performance) he descends a major second from the note *sol* to the final tone *fa*. During my observations of the services, I noticed the difference clearly.

## **II) Comparison of the Two Performances in “Three-section” Verses**

Verses that contain the accent *azla legarme* followed by the accent *ravia* (92: 8, 10, 93: 3, 4, 5), and verses containing the accent *ole veyored* followed by *ravia* or *etnahta* (92: 12, 93: 1), have a structure of three hemistiches.

### ***a) Musical characteristics common to both performers in “three-section” verses.***

1) In both performances, the melodic material consists of a sequence of five notes (*re*, *mi*, *fa*, *sol*, and *la*).

2) In both performances, the “three-section” verses have an additional musical unit in the first part of the verse.

3) Both informants usually perform the additional unit as a “two-section” melodic structure.

4) In both performances, motif 1a is characterized by an extension of the melodic line to the note *re*. This note functions as a kind of pivot note, through which the other notes lead to *mi* or *fa* as conclusion notes. In both performances, this melodic extension creates a relationship between text and music that is based on performing a few notes to one syllable. The melodic direction of the motif is based on a descent to *re*, which is followed by an ascent to *mi* or *fa*. The next example shows the basic tone framework of motif 1a.

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<sup>2</sup> The term “recitation tone” refers to repetition of a single tone on a number of syllables.

## Example 2



5) Motif 2a of the additional unit is similar to motif 2 of the normative “two-section” verses in both performances.

6) Conclusion notes are the same in both performances: *mi* as a cadential tone at the end of motif 1a, and *fa* as final tone at the end of motif 2.

## Example 3 “Three-section” verse (93: 3).

נְשֹׂא נְהָרוֹת | יְהוָה נְשֹׂא נְהָרוֹת קוֹלָם יִשְׂאֵוּ נְהָרוֹת דְּכָבִים:

added unit

1a 2a 1 2

informant 1  
nasune ha rot a do nai nasu ne ha rotko lam isu ne ha rot doh yam

informant 2  
nasune ha rot a donai nasu ne ha rot kolam is u ne ha rot doh yam

### **b) Distinction between the two performances of “three-section” verses.**

Informant 1 performs verse 92: 12 as a “two-section” verse, despite the fact that it contains the *ole veyored* accentuation. Informant 2 performs this verse as a “three-section” verse. When we examined Informant 1’s performances, we found that if the verse containing the *ole veyored* accentuation lacked the *etnahta* accentuation (usually in the middle of a psalm), he would perform a “two-section” melodic structure. When this accent came in a verse that consisted of the *etnahta*, he would use the form of a “three-section” verse. Informant 2 always performs a “three-section” form in verses that contain the *ole veyored* accentuation even if these verses lack the *etnahta* accentuation.

### III) Comparison of the Two Performances in “One-section” Verses

Verses 91: 1 and 92: 9 lack the disjunctive *etnahta*, the accentuation on which the cadential tone is usually performed.

#### *a) Musical characteristics common to both performers in “one-section” verses.*

In 92: 1, both informants perform a continuous melodic line that is similar to motif 2 of the “two-section” verses.

#### *b) Differences between the musical characteristics of the two performers in “one-section” verses.*

- 1) The range of the melodic contour is not the same in both performances. Informant 1 performs step moves of a major second, while the contour range of Informant 2 is a minor third.
- 2) The recitation tone is different in the two performances: *fa* in the first performance, and *sol* in the second.
- 3) Informant 2’s performance of verse 92: 9 is different from that of Informant 1. The melodic form of performance 2 resembles the additional section of the three-section verses: a two-section structure with two motifs, and the extension of motif 1. Informant 1 performs this verse as one unit, which is identical to motif 2 of the two-section verse.

Transcriptions of all psalm performances by the informants revealed that when the first verse of a psalm is a one-section verse, both informants perform the verses as one unit, similar to motif 2 of the two-section verses. When a one-section verse is situated in the middle of a psalm, then the differences are as described concerning verse 92: 9. It seems that Informant 2 treats a one-section verse in the course of a psalm like the added unit of a three-section verse. He combines the two verses into a melodic form of a three-section verse.



Example 4 92: 1

מִזְמוֹר שִׁיר לְיוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת:

informant 1

miz mor shir le yom ha sha bat

informant 2

miz mor shir le yom ha sha bat

The image shows two musical staves, one for informant 1 and one for informant 2. Both staves contain a single melodic line in treble clef. The notes are: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4. The lyrics 'miz mor shir le yom ha sha bat' are written below the notes. The two staves are identical, indicating that both informants performed the same melody.

Example 5 92: 9.

וְאַתָּה מְרוֹם לְעֵלָם יְהוָה:

informant 1

ve a ta ma rom le o lam a do nai

informant 2

ve a ta ma rom le o lam a do nai

The image shows two musical staves, one for informant 1 and one for informant 2. Both staves contain a single melodic line in treble clef. The notes are: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4. The lyrics 've a ta ma rom le o lam a do nai' are written below the notes. The two staves are identical, indicating that both informants performed the same melody.

## Discussion

The major question discussed in this paper is whether two distinct musical performance styles of psalm singing exist in the “Aboav” Synagogue. We found that the performers themselves clearly identify two distinct styles of psalm singing. Each informant considers his own performance to be the unique musical and traditional style of his ethnic group. They described, in their own words, a large part of the differences that we mentioned in the musical analysis. When we addressed members of the congregation with this issue, they claimed that each performer “faithfully”

represents his own tradition. When asked to define the differences between the two performances, most members mentioned one major characteristic that could clearly be defined as different: the rhythmic aspect of the performances. They could describe the rhythmic characteristic of “stops after the middle of the verse and at the end of a verse”. They were aware of the fact that the Moroccan performer omits the stops much more often than the other performer. They also claimed that they could “feel some differences in the melody,” but were unable to define these differences.

The opinions of the synagogue members and performers regarding the existence of two psalmodic styles in the “Aboav” Synagogue were similar to my conclusions, reached after many participant observations and repeated listenings to the two performances. My impression as an objective researcher was that the two performances were not identical and displayed major differences. This impression was investigated in the musical analysis presented previously.

The musical analysis shows that the two performances possess similar fundamental musical characteristics. However, this analysis also revealed a number of differences, such as: different recitation tones; different melodic direction in motif 2; different performances of one-section verses; different performances of verses with the accent *ole veyored*; and different performances of stops, creating a change of rhythmic structure.

The differences that were found between the two performers are related also to the approaches of Idelsohn-Spiegel and Flender regarding the connection between the poetic accentuation system and the melodic structure and patterns of psalm singing. We found that both performances are based mainly on the text’s structure rather than on the accentuation system (as Idelsohn and Spiegel claim). We also found that the Moroccan Informant’s performance contains some characteristics that correspond with Flender’s theory:

- 1) in the case of the performance of the accent *ole veyored* followed by *etnahta*, Flender’s findings are identical to ours (Flender 1992: 136).
- 2) Although our research found omission of stops in both performances, a characteristic mentioned by Flender as a trait of Eastern Jewish psalm singing (Flender 1992, 136), we must point out that the Moroccan performer follows

Flender's findings concerning interlocking when the following verse contains the *azla legarmeh* accentuation (Flender 1992, 136) more faithfully than the other performer.

The analysis results show that the performance of the Sephardic Informant 2 corresponds with Idelsohn's theory of the two main formulae of Syrian Psalm singing in Sabbath services (Idelsohn 1922, 17). This performer has two main melodic structures of psalm singing: a short two-section melodic pattern (the majority of the verses) and a long three-section one, as Idelsohn found in his study. He maintains these two Psalmodic formulae even if the accentuation signs indicate otherwise.

One of the main conclusions of this study is that the differences between the two performances color each performance with a musical style that is either "Moroccan" or "Sephardic." An important point to be considered when interpreting the musical analysis, is that both psalm-singing performances possess a very limited melodic line and range. When analyzing performances with a limited range and limited tone material, differences in steps of minor or major seconds, in melodic direction and in rhythmic structure create differences between the performances that have musical and stylistic meaning. These differences were therefore regarded as a reflection of each performer's personal style, while representing a particular tradition of psalm-singing performance.

## **Summary**

Our main conclusion is that two styles of psalm-singing performance do indeed exist in the "Aboav" Synagogue. They are reflected in the musical analysis of the two performances that were examined here. However, we consider the liturgical music performed in the "Aboav" Synagogue to belong to an "Eastern Jewish liturgical genre." Our assumption is that this genre includes a number of musical styles that are expressed in different traditional versions, like the liturgical versions performed at the "Aboav" Synagogue, which are referred to as "Moroccan" and "Sephardic."

Despite the differences between these Eastern traditions, they share basic traits that allow the performance of more than one tradition in a single synagogue—like the performance of two versions of psalm singing in the "Aboab" Synagogue. We believe

that the two performances discussed here belong to a “Meta-Tradition” of Eastern Jewish psalm singing that exists in the communities of North Africa and the Middle East. This tradition is reflected in the fundamental musical characteristics common to both performances. However, the fact that the differences found were not random, but were consistent in the performances of each informant, indicates the existence of two distinct versions: that of the “Moroccan” tradition and that of the “Sephardic” tradition, as attested also by the performers and the congregation.

# APPENDIX

## Psalm 92

1 informant 1 motif 2

miz mor shir le yom ha sha bat

informant 2

miz mor shir le yom ha sha bat

2

1 2

1 2

1 2

3

1 2

4

1 2

5 omission

1 informant 1 motif 2

miz mor shir le yom ha sha bat

informant 2

miz mor shir le yom ha sha bat

2

1 2

1 2

1 2

3

1 2

4

1 2

5 omission

ki simach ta ni a do nai be fo o le cha be ma a sei ya de cha a ra nen

ki si mac ta ni a do nai be fo o le cha be ma a sei ya de cha a ra nen

6 omission

ma ga de lu ma a sei cha a do nai me od am ku mach sha vo te cha

ma ga de lu ma a sei cha a do nai me od a me ku machsha vo te cha

7 omission

ish ba ar lo ye da uch sil lo ya vin et zot

ish ba ar lo ye da uch sil lo ya vin et zot

8 omission

1a added unit 2a 1 2

bif ro achre sha im ke mo e sev va ya tsitsu kol po a lei a ven le hi sham dam a dei ad

bif ro achre shaim ke mo e sev vayatsitsukul po a lei a ven le hi sham dam a dei ad

9 omission

ve a ta ma rom le o lam a do nai

ve a ta ma rom le o lam a do nai

10 omission

ki hi nei oi ve cha a do nai ki hi nei oi vechayo ve du it par du kol po a lei a ven

ki hi nei oi ve cha a do nai ki hi nei oi ve cha yo ve du it par du kol po a lei a ven

11

ve ta rem kir em kar ni ba lo ti ba she men ra nan

ve ta rem kir em kar ni ba lo ti ba she men ra a nan

omission

omission

12

va ta bet ei ni be shu rai ba ka mim a lai me re im tish ma na oz nai

va ta bet ei ni be shu rai ba ka mim a lai me re im tish ma na oz nai

omission

13

tsa dik ka ta mar if rach ka e rez ba le va non is ge

tsa dik ka ta mar if rach ka e rez ba le va non is ge

omission

omission

14

she tu lim be beit a do nai be chats rot e lo hei nu yaf ri chu

she tu lim be beit a do nai be chats rot e lo hei nu yaf ri chu

omission

omission

15

od ye nu vun be sei va de she nim ve ra na nim ih yu

od ye nu vun be sei va de she nim ve ra na nim ih yu

omission

omission

16

le ha gid ki ya shar a do nai tsu ri ve lo av la ta bo

le ha gid ki ya shar a do nai tsu ri ve lo av la ta bo

omission

omission

psalm 93

1

a do nai malach ge ut la vesh la vesh a do ai oz hit a zar af ti kon te vel bal ti mot

a do nai ma lach ge ut la vesh la vesh a do nai oz it a zar af ti kon te vel bal ti mot

omission

2

na chon kis a cha me az me o lam a ta

na chon kis a cha me az me o lam a ta

omission

3

nas u ne ha rot a do nai nas u ne ha rot ko lam is u ne ha rot dach yam

bas u ne ha rot a do nai nas u ne ha rot ko lam is u ne ha rot dach yam

omission

omission



4

mikolot maim ra bim a di rim mish be rei yam a dir ba ma rom a do nai

mikolot maim ra bim a di rim mish be rei yam a dir ba ma rom a do nai

5

e do te cha ne em nu me od le veit cha na a va ko desh a donai le o rechya mim

edo te cha ne em nu meod le veit cha na a va ko desh a donai le o rech ya mim

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