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Chapter 11

The Power of Silent Voices: Women in the Syrian Jewish Musical Tradition

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Introduction

In much of the Jewish and Islamic Middle East, women have been constrained by religious precept from participating publicly in musical performance. This chapter explores one such case study in detail – the Syrian Jewish paraliturgical hymn tradition known as the *pizmonim* (sing. *pizmon*) – and seeks to amplify women's otherwise 'silent voices' in order to achieve a fuller understanding of power relations within that tradition.[1] While the *pizmonim*, and the broader world of Syrian Jewish musical and ritual life which these songs anchor, are generally perceived as exclusively male domains, I will argue that women occupy roles vital to the processes of transmission and maintenance of tradition. My approach will draw in part on a theoretical framework for evaluating power relations proposed by James P. Scott, who uses the term 'public transcript' as 'a shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate' (Scott 1990:2). Alongside a public transcript, Scott suggests that there exists

This chapter is dedicated to the memory of Adrienne Fried Block, pioneer in the study of women and music, and of Johanna Spector, pioneer of Jewish musical studies.

[1] The research process for this project began as a collaborative one with my then graduate students at New York University in the mid-1980s. We worked closely in a team effort with musicians of the Syrian community, almost all amateur aficionados of the *pizmon* tradition (See Shelemay 1988). After the conclusion of the team project, I continued research on my own with members of the community in Brooklyn, Mexico City and Jerusalem. While we had interviewed only one woman during the collaborative stage of the project, during the late 1980s and the early '90s I purposefully interviewed a number of women in the United States and elsewhere. I also attended many domestic rituals and family occasions, which provided an experience of life inside the Syrian Jewish family and ritual cycle absent from the team project. It was only while writing a book about music and memory in the Syrian tradition (Shelemay 1998) that I began to appreciate the importance of the silent voices of women within that tradition. I thank Ellen T. Harris, Judith Tick, Sylvia Barack Fishman, Maureen McLane, Sarah Weiss and Steven Kaplan for their useful comments and suggestions on drafts of this paper. I thank also those who gave stimulating feedback following colloquia at Wesleyan University, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Harvard University, the Peabody Institute and The University of Florida.

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a 'hidden transcript', a 'discourse that takes place "offstage", beyond direct observation by powerholders' (1990:4). Gender relations in the Syrian Jewish *pizmon* tradition can be usefully analysed in these terms, encouraging us to explore the 'hidden transcripts' that women perpetuate alongside and in dialogue with the more public world of music making perpetuated by men. At the same time, however, we need to move beyond Scott's emphasis on structural aspects of dominance and resistance to unravel the relationship of public and hidden notions of power within an explicitly performative domain of musical culture.

Following an introduction to the musical tradition at the core of this discussion, the second section of this chapter will follow established patterns for the historiography of women in interrogating religious ideology, social process and repertory (Tick 2001:520). The third section will explore selected *pizmon* texts for insights into how women are represented within the songs, while the fourth will present ethnographic data providing new insights into female roles which may escape notice if inquiry is restricted only to music making in public domains or within performance events. The conclusion will propose that in situations where women are excluded from composing and performing music, particularly in sacred styles with sex segregation, repertory analysis and ethnographic interviews can provide surprising revelations, exposing the intimate knowledge that women acquire of musical traditions in which they do not obviously participate.[2] The chapter suggests that women's silence does much more than simply mask a 'hidden transcript', and may in fact provide insights into how women exercise power within the tradition.

Shadowing this discussion of the Syrian Jewish *pizmon* tradition is its transmission in diasporic settings. From its inception in medieval Aleppo, the *pizmon* was a cultural and musical hybrid that wed Jewish linguistic and religious content to Arab musical and expressive domains; its use of popular Arab melodies within a Jewish religious context also united seemingly incompatible streams of secular and sacred within *pizmon* composition and performance. By the early twentieth century, *pizmonim* began to travel as Syrian Jews migrated worldwide. Today, the *pizmonim* are no longer extant in Syria due to the departure of the entire Jewish community from their historical homeland, but the songs continue to be actively sustained by Syrian Jews living in North and South America, Israel and other locales.[3] A search for Syrian women's voices at the turn of the twenty-first century must therefore be dually situated: within a dynamic, transnational setting and within the realm of memory that retains a strong and deep connection to its Middle Eastern roots.

[2] A pioneering effort to interview women about Syrian Jewish social history is found in Zerubavel and Esses (1987), where the authors discuss the frequency with which women describe themselves as silent, 'as not being able to speak' (533).

[3] From its inception in the late nineteenth century, recording technology played an important role in musical transmission among Syrian Jews worldwide. This subject is too complex to address here, but is explored in detail in Shelemay (1998).

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Introducing the *Pizmonim*

The *pizmon* repertory incorporates well over five hundred songs, some dating from the sixteenth century but many composed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The *pizmonim* are *contrafacta*, their melodies borrowed primarily from Arab secular songs, their texts newly composed in Hebrew. Today the *pizmonim* constitute the primary surviving traces of a Judeo-Arab identity dating back more than a thousand years. That this hybrid identity is still nurtured by many Syrian Jews in diaspora and regularly celebrated in song speaks to the persistence of an expressive culture rendered marginal by nearly a century of intense conflict in the Middle East. *Pizmon* texts praise God, quoting and paraphrasing Jewish literature and liturgy as well as referencing Jewish folklore and custom. The texts further contain names of individuals within the Syrian community, including family genealogies, and provide allusions to the occasions for which they were commissioned and on which they were first performed. *Pizmonim* have been composed exclusively by men and most were commissioned to celebrate life-cycle occasions as experienced by their male honourees, including circumcisions, *bar mitzvah*s, weddings, holidays and miscellaneous other special communal events.

Performing *pizmonim* brings Syrian Jews together as a community and many of the song texts explicitly prescribe aspects of a traditional male life-cycle, as can be seen, for example, in the text of *pizmon* '*Yehi Shalom*' ('*May There Be Peace*'). Composed in the nineteenth century and performed regularly since that time at the beginning of circumcision ceremonies for male infants, the song is dedicated 'To the father of the son':

> May there be peace within our walls, tranquility in Israel.
> In a favorable sign did a son come to us, in his days shall the redeemer arrive:
>
> May the boy be refreshed, in the shadow of Shaddai [Almighty God] will he lodge.
> And the Torah [Five Books of Moses] he then will examine, he will teach the religion to all that ask.
>
> May his fountain be blessed, his life span shall be lengthy.
> May his table be ordered, and his offering shall not be defiled.
>
> His name will go out in all directions, when he grows he will be a strong man.
> And let him be a member of those that fear God, let him be in his generation like Shmuel.
>
> Until old age and hoariness, he shall be plump with all manner of goodness.
> And peace to him and much love, 'Amen,' so will say the Lord.

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The circumcised in his nation will live for his father and mother.
And may his God be with him and with the whole House of Israel.[4]

The text of '*Yehi Shalom*' contains obvious references to the circumcision ceremony as well as substantial intertextuality.[5] The first line is based on Psalm 122:7, 'May there be peace within your walls, tranquillity in your palace'. The expression 'May his table be ordered' is a pun on the name of the authoritative sixteenth-century Jewish legal code, the *Shulchan Aruch* (lit. 'set table'), written by Rabbi Josef Karo. The reference to the 'generation like Shmuel' alludes to a rabbinic saying that the greatness of each prophet is relative to his own generation. Thus the text both celebrates the circumcision ritual and prescribes the future for the newborn baby boy, whose observance and transmission of religious law, the text affirms, ensure that he will prosper.

This song is located within, and seeks to perpetuate, a patriarchal system, invoking the infant to grow into a strong man, in the mould of the biblical forefathers. It sets forth a public transcript based on Jewish religious ideology, which is reaffirmed through male observance of religious law and practice. Many of the double meanings that pervade the text move beyond simple intertextuality to constitute what Scott has termed a 'third realm' of group politics located strategically between the open and hidden transcripts (1990:18–19). While Scott connects this 'third realm' to subordinate or resistant aspects of the hidden transcript, in the Syrian *pizmon* one finds the public transcript reinforced by a further layer of meanings. The close textual relationship of *pizmon* '*Yehi Shalom*' to the rite of circumcision and male power is further underscored by its melodic setting, an Arab melody in *maqām Sabā*, the melodic category traditionally used by Syrian Jews at the circumcision ceremony.[6] The distinctive melodic contour of *Sabā*, incorporating two neutral intervals at the second and sixth scale degrees, provides an audible musical marker reinforcing the strong textual associations within the song text and its ceremonial settings.

With the exception of the final *pizmon* stanza, which enjoins the infant to live for 'his father and mother', there appear to be no references to women either within the text or its layers of double meanings. Yet there is a hidden allusion to women's subordinate roles. This is found in the third English verse, alongside the most overt reference to male physiology, 'May his fountain be blessed', drawn from Proverbs 5:18. Although not quoted in the *pizmon*, the proverb reads: 'Let your fountain be blessed; Find joy in the wife of your youth – A loving doe, a graceful mountain goat. Let her breasts satisfy you at all times; Be infatuated with love of her always'

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4 Shelemay (1998:260); translated by Joshua Levisohn.

5 I thank Joshua Levisohn for explicating these references and preparing the translation of '*Yehi Shalom*'.

6 The association of *maqām Sabā* with the circumcision ceremony derives from the liturgical use of this mode when the biblical reading for the day mentions circumcision. See Shelemay (1998:155–6).

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(JPS 1999:1607). This *pizmon* text closes the circle of male power on multiple levels. Only men sing the *pizmonim* in public, whether during the synagogue service, at domestic rituals or at celebrations. All the historical evidence, initial ethnographic observation and preliminary textual analysis, then, suggest that this is a tradition composed by males, for males, about males. The *pizmon* can be said to openly reflect and sustain the dominant role of men in Syrian Jewish life, where males hold positions of both prestige and power (Ortner 1996b:146), legitimised by Jewish legal and ritual precepts. Certainly the *pizmon* also provides a signal challenge for ethnographic research that privileges musical performance as the central unit of analysis.[7]

Understanding Women's Silence: The Impact of Ideology on Musical Practice

What recourse do scholars have when there is apparently no musical performance by women, public or private? Several paths are open, requiring first and foremost an exploration of why women are silent. Here one encounters the manner in which religious ideology informs – and transforms – both musical and social practices.

Women do not usually sing publicly within Orthodox Jewish communities due to a dictum termed *kol isha*, which states '*kol b'isha ervah*', literally 'the voice of a woman is a sexual incitement' (Koskoff 2001:126).[8] While the genesis of *kol isha* is generally attributed to a sixth-century Babylonian Talmudic scholar's response to a passage from the Song of Songs (2:14) that reads, 'Let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice, for sweet is thy voice and thy countenance is comely', a series of controversies about the dictum, its legal sources and issues relating to its meaning have left it open to debate and reinterpretation throughout history. Attitudes towards and applications of *kol isha* vary between and even within different Orthodox communities, but in general the dictum prohibits public musical performance by women. The social and musical outcomes often attributed

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7 In their introduction to the first section of *Music and Gender* (Moisala and Diamond 2000), entitled 'Music Performance and Performativity', the editors stress the centrality of performance to the study of music and gender as well as to ethnomusicology in general (21). While women's absence from performance prodded me to write this chapter, my approach here has more in common with the second section of the same volume which focuses on narratives and 'telling lives' (97). A recent collection of essays on women and music in Mediterranean cultures (Magrini 2003) similarly seeks to move away from long-time representations of Mediterranean women in the anthropological literature as 'silent, passive, and marginal figures' (13).

8 See Koskoff (2001:126–34) for a more extended and nuanced discussion of *kol isha* as understood and practised in an Orthodox Hassidic community in New York City. The ban in current Orthodox Hassidic practice, as studied by Koskoff, extends primarily to men hearing the singing (not speaking) voices of all women past puberty outside of their families. See also Berman (1980).

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to *kol isha* by members of the community include the separate seating of women in the synagogue, often behind a screen or other barrier, and the banning of female performers at gatherings of men. *Kol isha* is maintained to differing extents in Syrian Jewish communities, depending on individual and familial patterns. However, segregated seating is universally observed in Syrian synagogues and women generally do not sing in the same room with the men, even at the festive Sabbath afternoon songfests (termed *Sebet*) held in private homes. Many Syrian Jewish men, especially those of an older generation, are not accustomed to hearing women sing in public.[9] For instance, one elderly Syrian man, who wished to remain anonymous, described for me his reaction to encountering a female singer while visiting an Arab nightclub in Los Angeles: 'She got up to perform. And it was the first time in my life I ever, ever heard a female or soprano singer. Never did …'.

The position of women in Syrian Jewish musical life thus reflects clearly marked gender roles, deriving primarily from *kol isha* and other ritual injunctions regarding female purity. Moreover, it seems likely that Jewish dicta against public performance by Syrian Jewish women were reinforced historically by similar prohibitions in Islamic societies within which this Jewish community long resided.[10] Constraints on women in public performance continue to be a subject of debate.[11] While many women within the Syrian Jewish community perceive roles dramatically differentiated by sex as complementary, others within the community perceive the status of Syrian women to be an example of marked power asymmetry. Both perspectives will be discussed below.

The many issues surrounding the ideology of gender and its implications for musical behaviour and social interaction also render more complex the role of the fieldworker. As a woman and ethnographer, I experienced substantial discomfort over these gender constraints. Similar tensions have been noted by other female fieldworkers as they moved between insider and outsider perceptions of gender asymmetries and inequities. Ethnomusicologist Ellen Koskoff has explicitly addressed the challenge of representing Hassidic women in contexts within which

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[9] Stricter observance of *kol isha* has been reported recently in certain segments of the Orthodox world in the United States, where it has given rise to controversy and opposition. See Fishman (2000:50–53).

[10] Doubleday (1988) and van Nieuwkerk (2003) have published relevant case studies of female performers in Afghanistan and Egypt respectively. The similarities likely derive from long-time proximity which led to exchange in many domains of Jewish and Islamic musical thought and practice. The connections between Islamic and Jewish theoretical and philosophical writings about music are summarised in Shiloah (1992:53–9).

[11] Sylvia Barack Fishman has carried out research regarding attitudes toward *kol isha* in Orthodox communities, observing: 'As it is colloquially understood within the Orthodox community today, prohibitions clustered around the concept of *kol isha* laws prohibit observant men from hearing women's voices in songs that have erotic valence. The fact that Orthodox environments must acknowledge such concerns and deal with them is one important boundary between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jewish feminists' (2000:48).

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the fieldworker herself is uncomfortable.[12] Similarly, anthropologist Faye Ginsburg commented on her personal ambivalence during a study of Syrian women's rituals, which were problematic to her as a Jew and as a feminist. Both Koskoff and Ginsburg include interpretations of these gender asymmetries in a manner congruent with the values of the Orthodox Jewish communities they studied, particularly as they were explained and mediated by (female) insiders. Koskoff explicates Hassidic women's understanding and support of *kol isha* as part of a larger balance of power (1993:155–6), while Ginsburg draws on the frequently articulated Jewish concept of *tsniut*, which is translated from the Hebrew as 'modesty', to reconcile the gender asymmetry from an insider's perspective. Through the Syrian women with whom she worked, Ginsburg came to understand that there are 'realms of general and ritual activity that are to be shielded from the eye of the outsider, and that are characterized by an internalized devotional attitude that transcends individual volition or desire for recognition' (1987:542). Moreover, according to Ginsburg, members of the Syrian community consider there to be a type of 'equity' between public male ritual performance (such as singing *pizmonim*) and more private female practices, such as dressing modestly or maintaining Jewish laws in the home. I will return to the concept of *tsniut* below, but would simply observe here that the enforced boundaries of Syrian women's musical, social and ritual activities are effectively 'naturalised'[13] by concepts such as *kol isha* and *tsniut* for insiders to the tradition, despite their clear vulnerability to external critique as frameworks oppressive to women. Like Ginsburg, I also gathered ethnographic data concerning dichotomous male and female roles in Syrian Jewish life and the ways in which this division of responsibility is perceived by many Syrian Jews to 'carry equal and complementary weight in the ongoing life of the community' (Ginsburg 1987:543).

Despite the fact that the relationship between Syrian men and women in the musical domain appears to mirror that encountered in other aspects of Jewish ritual practices – men predominate in the public domain, while women are involved either in hidden or in separate spheres altogether – I would like to avoid theorising this relationship only in terms of the more obvious binaries. Ethnographic observation and interviews construct a picture that includes moments in which male prestige and power are affirmed, but also of much more subtle interactions. The data also provide ample evidence that Syrian women are implicated much more directly than it might initially appear, for example, in *pizmon* transmission.

Here, it is instructive to consider the writings of anthropologist Sherry Ortner, who has criticised the limitations of evaluating women either in relation to a

[12] Koskoff suggests integrating differing perspectives of ethnographer and insiders in order 'to call attention to the many intentional or unintentional biases through which all so-called raw data are filtered' (1993:163).

[13] This expression is borrowed from Yanagisako and Delaney's exploration of 'naturalising power', defined as the ways in which differentials of power can appear to be 'natural, inevitable, even god-given' (1995:1). See Scott (1990:75–6) for an enumeration of other discussions of the naturalisation of patterns of domination.

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male dominant social order or, alternately, as a resistant (usually morally better) agenda (1996a:16). In the Syrian instance, as in the case studies discussed by Ortner (1996b), one finds movement between these poles as well as a great deal of activity in an ambiguous middle zone. Ortner's discussion, coupled with Scott's notion of a 'third realm' cited above, are extremely helpful in moving discussion away from binary models of either male or female hegemony to acknowledge what Ortner describes as the making and remaking of gender relations over the course of time through interactions characterised by shifting power relations and moments of solidarity (1996a:19).

Just as there are expectations for the Syrian Jewish male life-cycle, there are equally strong prescriptions for a woman: that she will marry (usually at a very tender age), raise a good number of children and oversee a traditional Jewish household (see Ginsburg 1987:542, Zenner 1983:177–8). On occasion, these expectations are echoed in song.

Songs that Speak: Perspectives of Women from Three *Pizmonim*

The following section presents specific examples of the ways in which women are invoked and represented in *pizmon* texts. The first example is a famous wedding *pizmon* from turn of the twentieth century Aleppo; the second and the third examples, less well-known *pizmonim* composed in twentieth-century Brooklyn for *bar mitzvah*s. Printed collections of *pizmon* texts have circulated among Syrian communities worldwide since the second quarter of the twentieth century. In 1964, a new edition titled *Sheer Ushbahah Hallel Ve-Zimrah* ('*Song and Praise, Praise and Song*', hereafter abbreviated *SUHV*), based on previous written collections plus additions from the oral tradition, was prepared and published in New York under the guidance of a Brooklyn cantor named Gabriel Shrem. A sixth edition of *SUHV* was issued in 1993.[14]

Pizmon 'Melekh Raḥaman'

It is noteworthy that the first personal dedication in *SUHV*, that which introduces *pizmon* '*Melekh Raḥaman*', mentions a woman (Shrem 1988:168). '*Melekh Raḥaman*' was composed around the turn of the twentieth century in Aleppo by Rabbi Raphael Taboush in honour of his student, Moses Ashear, for whom he was also a personal mentor and close friend. The Hebrew text of '*Melekh Raḥaman*' conveys familiar religious imagery, seeking God's protection for the people of Israel and portraying the Sabbath as Israel's bride, a common image in Jewish literature. The English translation is as follows:[15]

[14] The references here are to the fifth edition, 1988.

[15] Unless otherwise indicated, the information about '*Melekh Raḥaman*' discussed here was provided by Albert Ashear on 19 July 1989. The complete Hebrew text can be

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Merciful King, protect, pray thee, and redeem a people that awaits You.
Oh Rock, rebuild forever the pleasant city; through it He will gain honor.

Pray accept, a song out of love, when I sing,
before the bridegroom, with beautiful bride,
a helpmate has [surely] come for him.
May he rejoice with her always,
the bride of Moses, the daughter of Jacob, an upright man.

Give thanks, faithful people, with the voice of rejoicing,
to God, He is great yet hidden.
He is, forever, my shepherd and deliverer, in every epoch and age.
From his mercies, I shall behold a beauty.
May the blessing of Abraham be granted me, Oh Lord, forever.
Constant Father. I shall surely ask of the Faithful One.
Let my glory shine, speedily, as in the days of Solomon.[16]

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The song is dedicated to 'the pleasant groom, Rabbi Moshe Ashear, on the day of his marriage to Ṣalaḥah, daughter of Ya'akov Shama'a'. An acrostic spells the name 'Moshe', honouring the bridegroom. Within the *pizmon*, however, Ṣalaḥah is mentioned only indirectly as a (beautiful) bride and a daughter: she is at once defined by the family she leaves and the one that she will join. Other women important in Ashear's life are also named in the song, including his mother, Samḥan, said to be represented by the Hebrew word '*yismaḥ*' (lit. 'may he rejoice'), and his sister Rinah ('[the voice of] rejoicing').[17] Abraham is both the biblical patriarch and the bride's brother. Interestingly, Ashear's father (Joseph), who died at an early age, is not mentioned; however, the names of the groom's brothers, Shaul (lit. 'I shall surely ask') and Shlomo (Solomon), are included.

The reference to the bride by name in the dedication is unusual. In 1912, Moses Ashear immigrated to New York City, where he served as cantor until his death in 1940. Several months after her husband's departure, pregnant and with several young children in tow, Ṣalaḥah travelled from Aleppo to New York. Shortly after her arrival, she gave birth to a son, Albert, whom she nicknamed 'Amerik'. 'You are the seed of Aleppo and the fruit of America', she later told him. If her husband Moses linked the *pizmon* tradition of Raphael Taboush in Aleppo with that of the New World, Ṣalaḥah Ashear also connected their families and associated rituals over time and space. In ethnographic interviews, several Syrian women credited Moses Ashear with initiating the Saturday afternoon

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found in Shelemay (1998:211).

[16] Shelemay (1998:211); translated by Geoffrey Goldberg and James Robinson.

[17] Note that some names clearly evident in the original Hebrew text are much more difficult to recognise in translation. However, names can be disguised in Hebrew as well, as is the case here with Samḥan, represented by '*yismah*'.

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Sebet celebration in New York City.[18] While it cannot be confirmed, Ṣalaḥah Ashear seems likely to have been the first to actually mount a *Sebet* in New York City at her home.

Pizmon 'Yeḥidah Hitna'ari'

Moses Ashear composed numerous *pizmonim*. One of the most interesting, if not the most widely performed, *pizmon* '*Yeḥidah Hitna'ari*', was prepared for the *bar mitzvah* of Joseph Saff in 1933.[19] Cantor Ashear led a rendition of the song as young Joseph was called forward during the *bar mitzvah* ceremony. During an interview (23 October 1984), Joseph Saff explained that there were many names of family and friends within the song.[20] A partial translation of the song is as follows:

> *You, the one and only, stir yourself,*
> *An end to your trouble, enough, enough.*
> *Put on your strength and awake,*
> *And come to me, to me.*
> *Eat my honey with my honeycomb,*
> *In the garden of my fields, my fields.*
> *Pasture my kids.*
>
> The God of my father, my help
> Who rides the heavens, the heavens,
> Let Him adorn me with my crown,
> And [make like] suckling babes my enemies, my enemies.
> He will continue to gather my scattered ones,
> For they have lasted long, my days, my days,
> And I await my salvation.

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[18] Sheila Schweky disagreed, claiming that the *Sebet* was also celebrated in Aleppo before Syrian Jews left the country (Interview, 27 January 1988). For an interesting discussion of 'variants' in life experience narratives, see Bowers (2000:149).

[19] The song is today forgotten by all but its elderly honouree, its lack of popularity attributed by most to shortcomings in its melody, which is considered both difficult and lacking in appeal. Even Joseph Saff, when performing the song during an interview, remarked: 'After you sing the first stanza, the music is repetitious down the line and you'll get bored with it. Honestly, I'm bored with it. I never sing the whole song. I usually sing the first, second, third, fifth and last [verses]' (Interview, 4 December 1984).

[20] See Shelemay (1998:174–7), where the Hebrew text printed by Ashear for the *bar mitzvah* is annotated with superscript numbers that correspond to Saff's detailed comments about the song's contents and meaning. The complete English translation of the text is also presented in Shelemay (1998:172–4).

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You, the one and only …

Rejoice with me, my mother,
My brothers and my sisters.
For on this day today I enter,
On the [first] day of the fourteenth of my years,
To serve him with my prayer,
In my heart and on my lips,
With the community of my congregation.

You, the one and only …[21]

While there is no direct reference to a woman in the song's dedication (as there is in '*Melekh Raḥaman*'),[22] the opening words of the song provide a clear reference to its female subject. The first two lines translate as 'You, the one and only, stir yourself/An end to your trouble, enough, enough'. This is an admonition to Joseph Saff's mother, who headed a family in crisis and to whom the song is actually addressed. Joseph's father died in 1927 when Joseph was seven, leaving a young widow barely in her thirties with six young children. It was customary for a Syrian Jewish woman in mourning to wear black for a period of six to nine months and to remain in the house for perhaps the first two or three months after bereavement. When '*Yeḥidah Hitna'ari*' was composed in 1933, Mrs Saff had not left her home for six years. Her friends and sisters evidently took her children shopping for clothes and Joseph remembers that he did much of the family grocery shopping. '*Yeḥidah Hitna'ari*' seeks to restore a woman to her traditional role, the care and nurturing of her children. Mrs Saff is referred to indirectly in the song; her maiden name, Shalom, is incorporated only within the last two lines.

If the *pizmonim* generally celebrate and commemorate life-cycle events, this song promotes a return to everyday life for the mother. Mother, brothers and sisters are enjoined to rejoice, despite a reference to their being 'left alone' in a later verse of the song. The song also paraphrases in a later verse the traditional view that a woman's 'performance of commanded things' is of the greatest importance and the mother is called on to return to these responsibilities while taking comfort in her children.

[21] Shelemay (1998:172–3); translated by Geoffrey Goldberg and James Robinson.

[22] The dedication and the song text contain an unusually large number of names, all men from Saff's family and social circle. The printed version of the song distributed by Ashear at the *bar mitzvah* highlighted these names in upper case Hebrew letters to ensure that they were recognised (see Shelemay 1998:174–7).

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Pizmon 'Mizzivakh Tanhir'

Lest we construct too valedictory a picture of a song tradition in which women, while only indirectly acknowledged, are valorised, let us return to a more complex example of gender asymmetry and male domination. Like '*Yeḥidah Hitna'ari*', many *pizmonim* have names in them, but they are usually more difficult to decipher. Names are often disguised, transformed or even divided between lines of the sung text.

A woman's name, hidden in another *pizmon* by Moses Ashear, '*Mizzivakh Tanhir*' (Example 11.1), has given rise to an anecdote circulated in several versions:

> So now … you're going to laugh when I tell you … You see … this [*pizmon*] is for a *bar mitzvah*. The *talmid* [student], his name was Ṣion, and the father was Shemuel, and the family's name is Nasar … Now look at the second verse where it says '*shem el nora yinṣereni*', you see it? '*Shem el*' is Shemuel, that's the father. '*Yinṣereni*' is Nasar, the family name. 'Ṣion' [same line] is the boy that's getting *bar mitzvahed*. Now he mentioned all the family. Abraham [two lines down] is probably his other son. Now he [Shemuel Nasar] goes over to the guy [composer Moses Ashear], and he says: 'Where did you put my wife's name?' His wife's name was Sanyar, a Syrian name. He's looking all over the book, he doesn't see it. So [Ashear] says, 'Over here, now … I'm going to sing the song, just that part, where your wife's name is'. So he goes like this: '*Beḥodesh nisan yar'eni*' [in the month Nisan]: He says, 'I cut her off in the middle!' (Meyer Kairey, 12 December 1984)

Example 11.1 Transcription of an extract from *Pizmon* '*Mizzivakh Tanhir*'.

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In one of the other versions of this tale that circulates in the community, the story ends with a more graphic and sexist line. After showing the father the way in which the wife's name is split between two words, the composer's comment is reputed to have been, 'I even spread her legs for you'.

'*Mizzivakh Tanhir*' provides an example that is doubly provocative. Names are of paramount importance in the Syrian tradition, with children named after paternal and maternal grandparents, living and deceased. Both women and men are enormously proud of this tradition and every Syrian woman I interviewed made it a point to mention that granddaughters had been named after her. The inclusion of her name provides evidence of a deep-seated respect for Sanyar. That the wife's name can be heard when sung, yet seen only with difficulty within the written text

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is further testimony of a respectful gesture. Until the late twentieth century, most Syrian Jewish women did not study or read Hebrew. Most spoke a language that the community colloquially terms 'Syrian', a Judeo-Arabic vernacular. Sanyar would certainly have heard her name in this song when it was performed and noted it with pride. That the song today is discussed in the context of a sexist tale may provide evidence of changes over time in the *pizmon* tradition, or expose a moment in which the respectful public transcript gives way to disrespectful elements otherwise masked.

An exploration of selected *pizmon* texts reveals that women are occasionally a muted presence within some songs, a presence which is circumscribed by tradition and posited within their traditional roles in Syrian society as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers. Song texts written by men thus provide only a limited, and quite conventional, window on the power of women in Syrian Jewish life; indeed, their representations in these contexts are consistent with the public transcript. It is to the testimony of the women themselves that one must turn in search of a hidden transcript and for more substantive insights.

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The *Pizmonim* in Women's Lives

Beyond their primary responsibility for running the household and caring for children, women plan and mount the various life-cycle celebrations, such as the *Sebet*, that are an integral part of Syrian ritual and domestic life. Women further maintain Syrian culinary traditions that are at the centre of these observances. These responsibilities were undertaken universally by Syrian Jewish females of past generations and are still rigorously maintained by most today in a community that continues to privilege ceremonial observances, both to conserve strong family ties and to maintain marked social boundaries with outsiders. However, this traditional perspective on Syrian Jewish women's roles appears to understate their impact beyond the confines of their own family units, the activities they undertake to nurture their broader communities and their work alongside their husbands as dictated by economic necessity. Oral histories carried out with Syrian women, particularly those of the generation which emigrated from Syria, document that many worked alongside their spouses, shared business decisions and often instigated moves to other diaspora communities (Sutton 1988:240–48).

Musical involvement by Syrian women derives almost exclusively from their traditional roles in planning and participating in domestic ceremonies and family occasions; they have no formal role in synagogue governance or its rituals. However, many young girls acquire knowledge of *pizmonim* by attending synagogue services with their fathers before they reach puberty, and within their homes many actively participate in music making. Adult women also maintain close contact with the male musical world through the activities of their children, especially through their sons.

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The hidden, but active role of women within the *pizmon* tradition can best be reconstructed through a close look at *pizmon*-related domains in which Syrian women are active.[23] Domains that emerge as important to the transmission of *pizmonim* include the following: (1) ensuring the physical continuity of the community; (2) controlling life-cycle ceremonies; (3) maintaining culinary production; (4) sustaining knowledge of *pizmon* source melodies; (5) conserving oral histories; and (6) experiencing moments of public prestige.

Many women joined in singing *pizmonim* and other Hebrew song repertories with their families.[24] The late Sophie Cohen recalled:

> My father would go to the synagogue; he'd come back, make *kiddush* [blessing over wine] and pray on the bread, and we'd have a nice feast. And then we'd sing all these songs after we'd finished our dinners, the Saturday *pizmonim* … Every Saturday we used to sing the same songs, but on holidays they had extra songs. At *Shabbat* [Sabbath], at holidays, of course they always sang in my family. And I'd join in sometimes. I used to join in when they used to sing. (Sophie Cohen, 28 February 1985)[25]

Syrian women conserve tradition through mounting domestic ceremonies, displaying their array of special foods as a framework for the musical content. That women prepare and serve food at rituals such as the *Sebet*, while men sing at these same events, is of signal importance.[26] Indeed, in Sophie Cohen's memory, food and song converge as complementary domains of experience.[27] Music and food share a semantic field relating to aesthetics: both the *pizmonim* and Syrian food should be 'sweet' not sour. *SUHV* is dedicated to the memory of the 'sweet singer of Israel' (Cantor Moses Ashear) and to the holy songs 'which are sweeter even than honey and the honeycomb' (Shelemay 1998:39). Songs sung in the various

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[23] See Diamond (2000) for discussion of the ways in which feminist scholarship has used oral histories for exploring the 'performance of gender and the gendering of performance' (99). I concur with Diamond's two assertions: first, that oral narratives must be heard or read in terms of what is desired, not just in terms of what has been done; and second, that music and gender are sites for negotiating a place within communities that tend to reinforce certain values and behaviours as normative (100).

[24] Interview, Isaac Cabasso, 13 November 1984.

[25] Sophie's two brothers, the late Hyman Kaire (14 March 1985) and Meyer Kairey (6 November 1984), offered similar testimony. Sophie also remembered that when she would overhear her father teaching her brothers to sing *pizmonim*, she would sing along by ear.

[26] In a study of Syrian Jewish women in Mexico City, Paulette Kershenovich writes that 'From the perspective of the women of this study, the fact that they cook and prepare for holidays and special occasions means that it is they who are the ritual experts and the guardians of traditions' (2002:119).

[27] See Shelemay (1998) for further discussion of the role of memory in the *pizmon* tradition as well as the complex relationship of memory to historical reconstruction.

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Arab *maqāmāt* are said to be 'sweetened' by improvisation, just as food can be sweetened with sugar. The experience and memory of song are reinforced and strengthened through food, with which it shares a network of associations. In this way, too, the male world of musical performance and female world of ritualised cuisine merge and become wholly interdependent.[28]

Like many young girls, Sophie Cohen also went to the synagogue with her father, where she loved to listen to the liturgy. When she was a child, she would sit with her father among the men, but was relegated to the ladies' section before adolescence. Around this time, her attendance at the synagogue fell off and, without knowledge of Hebrew, Sophie's musical interests shifted from the *pizmonim* to the Arab songs that were the source for *pizmon* melodies. She remembers listening to Arab music on the radio while working at her sewing machine in the New York City garment industry, and later to Arab music on cassette tapes at home 'all night long'.

The interest and knowledge of Syrian Jewish women concerning Arab music has been one of the most active ways in which they participate in the *pizmon* tradition, and which has tied them to what is considered to be the authentic 'source' (*makor*) of the *pizmonim*.[29] Women are at once the physical source of the community through procreation, they produce the community's food and nourishment, and their relationship with Arab music is one with the source of the songs. Here we might pause to consider that women's power in relation to the broader religious tradition, as well as its music, can be termed 'generative'. On the other hand, men's power derives from more 'performative' domains.

One Syrian woman deeply knowledgeable about Arab music was Gracia Haber, a great niece of Aleppo *pizmon* composer Raphael Taboush. Haber, who was 80 years of age and blind in 1989 when she sat for an interview at her home in Brooklyn, New York, spent her days listening to the soundtracks of Arabic language musical films on videotape. In the course of the interview, she insisted on showing me one of these videos, during which she alternately sang along with and narrated the action, translating from Arabic to English. Gracia Haber said: 'It's very important … You will enjoy the music, I'm telling you. The wording, it's worth listening to them, the stories. I have tapes, stories and singing.'[30] Like other

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[28] Recipes are also transmitted in a manner similar to the *pizmonim*. The *pizmon* book contains blank pages at the back to accommodate the texts of newly composed *pizmonim*; similarly, the women of the Syrian community in New York collectively publish a cookbook, entitled *Festival of Holidays: Recipe Book* (1987), with blank pages at the end of each section so that 'everyone can add her own recipes' (Sheila Schweky, 27 January 1988).

[29] According to Moses Tawil, one of the most accomplished singers in the Syrian community, 'I sing them [the *pizmonim*] in Arabic, which is the authentic song. Which gives it the authentic flavour, because invariably, it could change in the translation. I'm not talking about the translation of the words, and passing the melody, but the authentic *makor*, the base [lit. 'the source'] is the Arabic and that's that' (Moses Tawil, 6 November 1984).

[30] Gracia Haber, 31 January 1989.

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women interviewed, Gracia Haber provided a wealth of oral knowledge about the *pizmon* tradition. She told stories she had learned from women in her family, especially from her grandmother, sharing important details concerning *pizmon* history completely absent from the testimony of Syrian men. The historical knowledge of Haber and other women suggests that women's oral/historical narratives are a corollary of and complement to the male narratives embedded within the *pizmon* texts.[31] For example, Haber volunteered detailed information concerning the life and musical practices of her great uncle, Raphael Taboush. Her narrative began with an account of her grandfather, Abraham, and his siblings in Aleppo and sketches the genesis of Taboush's involvement with the *pizmonim*:

> And the third one was my grandfather Abraham … And then the young, the fourth one was Rabbi Raphael Taboush. And the fifth one was Joseph Taboush. So those three older ones were very successful in their business. And the two younger ones, they were spoiled. They used to run around, they don't want to do anything. And the older one, Hakham Raphael [Learned Raphael], used to go to places where there were Syrian songs, Arabic songs that he loved tunes. And he wanted to get the tunes in his head. Always. So every time they hear there's a wedding or a party by the Arab, they, he used to go there. He has some friends that goes with him. And he already finished his Hebrew school, but not the higher [school] to be a Rabbi. When he ran, one day, they were gonna be, they caught them, why they're Jewish and they came to the Arab village? So they send the police after them. And he got so scared he ran, breathing very fast, he washed his face with cold water, he was very hot, and he became blind.
>
> I don't know [why he became blind], that's what they, my grandmother told me. That's Abraham's wife. So, and he became blind, and then he used to go with his friend also to listen to the music. One day then his friend didn't show up. So it was a Saturday, so one of them was going to *shul* [synagogue], another friend was going to *shul*, he told him, 'Raphael, you want to go with me to *shul*, because your friend didn't show up?' He says, 'Yes, I'll go with you to *shul*.' Since that day, he never left the *shul*. He loves it. He had tunes in his head, and every time there was a wedding, or there was a *bar mitzvah*, or a *bris* [circumcision], he used to, in Hebrew, translate the words. The music is in Arabic, but the wording was Hebrew. And that's how we start the *pizmonim*. And for every occasion, there is another *pizmon* that he used to make.

So, from the oral testimonies of Gracia Haber and Sophie Cohen, we hear the voices of Syrian women who learned *pizmonim* as children, became aficionados

[31] This is not to imply that women did not participate in other ways to recording narratives. Edwin Seroussi documents the activity of Sephardic Jewish women who collected folksong texts, describing in detail the manuscript notebooks of Emily Sene, who 'became an archivist perhaps in part to compensate for her own inability to sing' (Seroussi 2003:202).

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of the Arab tunes that were their sources and who remain unique repositories of oral histories about the past.

In terms of public music performance by women, the picture is much less clear. Stories circulate about only one woman in the Brooklyn Syrian community who sang in public, and who belonged to one of the premier families of amateur musicians: Sarah Tawil. Blind since childhood, Sarah initially spoke of her love of singing Arab songs, not the *pizmonim*:

> I used to sing the very high Syrian singing because my Dad, he used to buy me the better records so I should learn it. He used to love to hear me singing. You know, every Saturday, they used to come by us, my uncles, all our friends. We used to sit down from twelve o'clock until sunset … To tell you the truth *pizmonim* I don't know … Most of my singing was Syrian Arabic and Hebrew, my songs … (Sarah Tawil, 30 March 1989)

However, other aspects of Sarah's testimony suggest that she did in fact know *pizmonim* and related repertoires, and that indeed, she may also have once publicly challenged the observance of *kol isha*. Sarah Tawil described a Sabbath evening *Havdalah* ritual around 1945 at a Jewish resort hotel in the Catskill Mountains of New York, as follows:[32]

> Then, the Rabbi Kassin tell me, he says, 'Sarah, would you like to, uh, to say [=sing] *Havdalah*, please, you know the *pizmonim* they say in *Havdalah*?'
>
> And they have the *hazzan* [cantor], can I tell you, you know, and he was screaming his head off. And as a *hazzan*, really, really who is not a great voice, no. But his voice, it doesn't make you happy, that's it, I don't know. I heard *hazzanim* [cantors], you know. Yiddish *hazzanim*, I hear it, and I know them. I know who had the great voice.
>
> Anyway, the Rabbi went so tired of this, listening to him, so he turned to me, please Sarah, say some *Havdalah*. So this *hazzan*, he put his hands like that in his ear, and he said 'Oh, no, a woman singing! Oh, I don't like a woman singing!'
>
> So OK, and you know what I do, I said, heh, and I opened my mouth and I start the '*B'motzaei Yom Menucha*'. The guy, and you know what, he closed his ear, and he was going. Listen to that! So when he heard, he came back and he sat in the room. He said …
>
> So we have a friend here who is very upset at him. He said, 'Why did you do that in the first place?' He says, 'I didn't know you had such a great voice.'

[32] I note that this may in fact be considered a subversive move, or at least that it has been constructed as such in Sarah Tawil's testimony. That she reports that the Rabbi encouraged her to sing is also surprising, although it is useful to consider one scholar's comment that despite religious precepts in Jewish communities, people don't necessarily observe them in practice (Loeb 1996:64). That this event took place outside a formal synagogue context may be another relevant factor in the departure from tradition.

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> He says, 'You know or you don't know, or you won't do that to your kind of people. Why should you do that?'
>
> There was gonna have a big fight in that place and I said this *Havdalah*. (Sarah Tawil, 30 March 1989)

Through these accounts, one can began to understand some of the ways in which women participated actively in Syrian Jewish musical life, providing their own counterpoint to the male transcript of a woman doing only 'commanded things'. Women of younger generations have continued these patterns, reporting that 'I'm no different than all those women. I've learned by just being there, enjoying the music, and yeh, humming along and singing' (Interview, Joyce Kassin, 30 March 1989). Some women have contributed new songs within the home. For instance, Sheila Schweky recalls that her father would ask her to teach Israeli songs she had learned in school to the family after dinner (Interview, 27 January 1988).[33] Moreover, the increasing involvement of women in learning Hebrew and *pizmonim* in the late twentieth century has led a few to think about *pizmon* composition. Joyce Kassin noted:

> Every once in a while I'll hear a song and I'll say, oh gosh, that would be great for a *pizmon* … One day I'm going to take a little book along with me and every time I hear those songs I'm going to jot them down so that when the time comes that I really would love to get a *pizmon* written for some occasion or another … I'm gonna pick the proper song. (30 March 1989)

Women therefore stand in a complex relationship to the *pizmonim*. Constrained on most occasions from participating publicly in musical life, they acquire musical repertories in the home and synagogue and perpetuate them indirectly by sustaining domestic rituals and by listening to Arab music. This picture is consistent with a framework of gender relations shaped by *tsniut* (modesty). There is also evidence that power and prestige are not derived solely from musical activity in the public realm (Ginsburg 1987:542). In some *public* contexts, the *absence* of musical activity appears to mark a woman's special power. For instance, at the end of the Syrian Jewish funeral (during which there is no singing), a ram's horn (*shofar*) is blown for the deceased man to 'keep the *mazikim* [evil spirits] away' (Interview, Gabriel Shrem, 9 January 1986). In contrast, no ram's horn is blown for a deceased woman because, in the words of community member and singer of *pizmonim*, Gabriel Shrem, 'the women, they go straight to heaven – they don't need no nothing'.

[33] It may be of more than passing interest that Seroussi notes that Emily Sene's folksong collection, cited above, reflects 'new Sephardi song' (2003:206). It seems possible that while women conserve memories of the past, they may also under certain circumstances act as agents for change. An appreciation of the role of women in transmitting tradition does not necessitate stereotyping their contribution in conservation as conservative in content.

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Conclusions

In the case of the Syrian Jewish community, gender differences established and explained through religious edict are reaffirmed and performed through song. When women appear in song texts, they exist as defined through their relationships to men, as mothers, wives, sisters, daughters and aunts. At the same time, they are also celebrated in ways which are shaped by the same tradition, within a framework that commemorates and values procreation and biological continuity. Women are celebrated for their achievements, whether as a bride or as mother of the *bar mitzvah* boy. They are also enjoined to reclaim their traditional duties in situations, such as the Saff family tragedy, when they have been unable to fulfil these responsibilities.

How should asymmetrical gender relations be interpreted by a scholar, and how can one reconcile the conflicting positions of different Syrian women? Few have rebelled against the silencing of their voices in ritual contexts or confronted the power asymmetry that this situation perpetuates. Even those who have resisted these gender constraints appreciate a women's power within Syrian tradition. For instance, one young woman who left the Syrian Jewish community to become a Rabbi has begun to reconsider her relationship with her community and 'to slowly reenvision the community from one that I saw as only patriarchal and oppressive, to one of complexity in its weave of Middle Eastern tradition and "America", of a patriarchal facade and hidden, yet tangible female power' (Esses 1992:13).

It is also clear that through mounting rituals, explicating history and transmitting the Arab tunes on which *pizmonim* are based, many Syrian women achieve deeply meaningful participation in Syrian religious life. Music is evidently a crucial source of emotional and spiritual affirmation, at once embedding and sustaining their involvement, as one comment from a Syrian Jewish woman living in Mexico City indicates:

> They're [the *pizmonim*] so pretty, and when you hear them all together … it makes me closer to where we came from, to my roots. I feel it, even though I was born in the United States, and my parents came [from Aleppo] at a very young age … I always feel it every time I'm sitting in the *shul* [synagogue] and listening to the prayers. Maybe because I heard them ever since I can remember, since I was a young child. And the way everyone is together, and understands, and sings with one voice, that means a lot to me. It makes me feel part of a tradition that was before, is now, and probably will continue for many, many years. That won't be lost. As long as they keep it up each year, year after year after year. That's going to keep up forever, as long as there is a Hebrew nation or our people exist. I think so, from father, to son, to grandchild. This is nothing I've thought about a lot. Just a feeling you have when you're there. (Ruth Cain, 7 September 1992)

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This quotation suggests that some Syrian Jewish women may enjoy their deepest moments of connection with the *pizmonim* when they themselves are silent, when they sit and listen to the songs within the traditional boundaries of *kol isha*. From the perspective of a scholar, one could further suggest that the notion of *tsniut* (modesty) is a deep-seated Syrian Jewish value, manifested in multiple domains of Syrian Jewish culture through the masking of meanings. This is certainly the case when Syrian Jews surreptitiously borrow Arab melodies and domesticate them with new Hebrew texts, when they quietly display their Arab identity through quoting beloved Arabic proverbs and eating Middle Eastern cuisine, and when they sing Jewish prayers improvised in Arab *maqāmāt*. In many ways, one might argue, the most meaningful aspects of the Syrian Jewish identity are those which are not on open display, but are intensely private, including the role of women in musical life. As Ginsburg has noted, '… a community in which religious behavior that an outsider might see as polarized into public and private spheres is experienced by insiders as continuous, through the concept of *tsniut*, which links visible religious performance with the less visible practices in the home …' (1987:546). She continues, 'Syrian Jewish women are not passively accepting a sexist status quo. Rather, they are actively meeting new circumstances by constructing an order in which their biological and social experiences of being female are integrated gracefully and powerfully into communal life' (ibid.).

While Syrian women are formally subordinate within a religious and ritual framework, they are not powerless. Rather, they perceive themselves to be privy to knowledge and bearing responsibility for practices that cannot survive without them. Although their roles may have emerged in the interstices of dominant practice, Syrian women have fashioned a powerful role for themselves, within a space that is ideologically sanctioned and consistent with community notions of modesty.

The *pizmonim* have, throughout Syrian Jewish history, been sites of mediation and reconciliation; they have generated and sustained both public and hidden transcripts and have at the same time provided the most enduring symbol of this ongoing dialectic. For centuries, these songs have united the separate worlds of Jewish and Arab experience in historical Syria. For the last one hundred years in diaspora, *pizmonim* have perpetuated memories of the Syrian Jewish past within new homelands and through new technologies. As they have done since their inception, the *pizmonim* have moved constantly across boundaries of secular and sacred expression within Syrian Jewish tradition itself, eliciting reverence during sacred moments in the synagogue and engendering rejoicing at festive parties. That the *pizmonim* and their transmission have provided a locus in which male and female power joined forces to sustain a community is perhaps, in the end, not so surprising.

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