

## CHAPTER 5

# Time, Place and Memory: Songs for a North African Jewish Pilgrimage

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I continue to be fascinated by our fundamental need to create meaningful narratives, ignore inconsistencies, silence some stories, and elaborate others; by our enormous capacity to forget and live on, and remember and live on, and take this dual process for granted; by our inexhaustible efforts to continuously reconstruct our memory of the past between words and silences, images and void.  
(Zerubavel 1995:xvi)

Entering the Old City or medina of Tunis at the Bab el-Bhar (Gate of the Sea) or, as it came to be known during the French protectorate, the Porte de France, you have a choice of two ascending routes. To the left, the Rue Jamaa el-Zitouna takes you to the ancient Mosque of the Olive Tree, dating from the seventh century. To the right, the Rue de la Kasbah rises to the Place de la Kasbah flanked on the left by the Dar el-Bey—the palace of the Ottoman Beys, and on the right, by the walls of the ancient citadel, today the site of government buildings. On the way, a plethora of narrow, covered streets wind through the traditional markets, or souks, each named for its special commodity such as perfume, leather, spices, multi-textured rolls of cloth, and jewelry of silver and gold. Restaurants appear from nowhere; doors open onto tiled vestibules of Ottoman palaces; shafts of sunlight expose residential streets with small grocery stores selling candies and baguettes. But first, you have to pass through the more overtly touristic shops down by the entrance, and it was outside one of these, flanked by pictures of traditional symbols such as the fish and the hand of Fatma, that I sighted a picture of the nine-branched candelabrum, or menorah—the Jewish *hanukkiyah*, and reacted with the same startled surprise as when I discovered Stars of David decorating the minaret of the great mosque of Testour, a town to the west of Tunis in the Mejerda valley, founded by Andalusian refugees. Remarking on the apparent anomaly of the Jewish symbols on this Muslim place of worship to my companion, a native of the town, I learnt that they were there because “Jews once lived among us—they’re part of our history.”

Apparently, not a single Jew lives in Testour today and few live in Tunis. Yet, according to legend, Jews have lived in Tunisia since Phoenician times, when traders from Tyre founded the ancient colony of Carthage on the northernmost tip of Africa. More Jews arrived with the Romans and more still with the

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expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Moorish Spain as city after city fell to the Christians. Later, Jews came from Livorno, on the West coast of Italy until, by the dawn of the French protectorate, the Jewish presence in Tunis was such that, in his account of his travels in Tunisia in the winter of 1887, Guy de Maupassant observed: “Truly, Tunis is neither a French city, nor an Arab city: it’s a Jewish city. It’s one of those rare places in the world where the Jew seems to belong, as though he’s in his own country ... where he acts almost as though he’s the master, displaying a calm—if still slightly nervous—assurance” (Maupassant 1993:27).<sup>1</sup> Maupassant focuses, above all, on the remarkable appearance of the Jewish women: their strange, harlequin-style dress with pointed caps, tunics, breeches and slippers, and the way the sylph-like maidens are transformed, after being fed a continuous diet of pasta, into grotesquely voluminous married women, fattened to please their suitors. Presciently, Maupassant notes that in a few years time, the same women will be fasting and adopting Western dress as the wealthier families leave the Jewish quarter of the medina to settle in the new French city (Maupassant 1993:29-30).

In Maupassant’s Tunis, Jews were at the forefront of professional musical life and Jewish women would soon emerge, as singers, at the vanguard of the new commercial musical culture that was about to hit the capital.<sup>2</sup> During the protectorate, the traditional public venues for music-making such as cafes, bars, and *cafechantants* where audiences, seated in rows, watched staged performances while waited on by *qahwaji* (coffee servers), were augmented by larger, more formal venues such as theatres, casinos and, most lucrative of all, the record industry. In the cosmopolitan Mediterranean seaport and capital, the new commercial opportunities coincided with an influx of musicians and musical styles from the wider Maghreb and Egypt, resulting in a musical culture of unprecedented richness and diversity. Surveying the Tunisian record catalogues from the first decade of the twentieth century, the Algerian scholar Bernard Moussali observed that “the expansion of the record industry, the onslaught of Syrio-Egyptian productions, the fashion for Tripolitanian and Algerian tunes, the inflation of musicians’ fees and the struggle to emulate, if not to surpass them, resulted in a greater variety of choice in the world of Tunisian music, which was constantly changing” (Moussali 1992:6; see also Davis 2003:129-31). Reacting to the new trends, Jewish musicians “eager to free themselves of the constraints of traditional modes and scales, and equally attentive to the acoustical quality of the Western instruments and the extent of their ambitus, specialised in combining traditional Arab with European instruments, particularly those of fixed pitch such as the piano, harmonium, and fretted mandolin” (Moussali 1992:4). The main forum for experimentation was the popular song genre known as *ughniyya* (lit. secular song). Characterized by simple solo/choral strophic and refrain structures, earthy colloquial language and themes depicting real-life situations and emotions, the *ughniyya* absorbed the cosmopolitan musical trends of the day, including Western scales and tunings and melodic modes and rhythms from the neighboring Maghreb and eastern Mediterranean, especially Egypt.<sup>3</sup>

It was in this efflorescent musical environment that the two Jewish brothers Mordechai and Gaston Bsiri, sons of immigrants from Izmir, the Ottoman city port on the Aegean coast, forged their separate musical careers at the turn of the twentieth century. Mordechai played the *nāy* (reed flute) in the Beylical court, specializing in the Andalusian repertory, or *ma'lūf*; Gaston was one of the most prolific *ughniyya* composers of the day. Mordechai married a Jewish girl from Sfax, a city port to the south of Tunis, and settled in Hara Kebira, the larger and more cosmopolitan of the two Jewish villages on the offshore island of Djerba, less than a mile from the island's main port and market town, Houmt Souk. Mordechai's home was distinguished by the presence of a harmonium, the first on the island, which was played by his wife and daughters and eventually, by his young son Jacob, who learnt to play and sing by imitating his mother and sisters. As a teenager in the 1920s, Jacob Bsiri set off for Tunis and apprenticed himself to his uncle Gaston.

The island of Djerba is famous for its synagogue, known as the Ghriba. Situated on a gentle hill on the outskirts of the smaller village, Hara Sghira, about seven kilometers inland from Hara Kebira, the Ghriba is a shrine to an eponymous female saint, and its foundations are said to contain relics of the Jerusalem Temple. Every year, in late spring, pilgrims from mainland Tunisia and beyond gather on Djerba to celebrate the joyous festival of Lag B'Omer. Traditionally associated with the cessation of a mysterious plague that raged at the time of the second century Palestinian Rabbi Akiva, Lag B'Omer also marks the anniversary of the death of the Cabbalist Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, a student of Rabbi Akiva, who supposedly revealed the Zohar, the core teaching of the Cabbalah, to his disciples on that day. Throughout the two days of rituals and music-making, celebrity musicians from Tunis, including Jacob's uncle Gaston Bsiri, joined local musicians in performances of religious songs in Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic, called *piyyutim*, sung to the tunes of the latest popular hits.<sup>4</sup> In 1930, Jacob Bsiri made his debut at the Ghriba, accompanying himself on the harmonium.

The relative stability of Jewish life under the protectorate was challenged as the nationalist movement, with its specifically Tunisian Arab identity, gained momentum through the 1930s. 1934 saw the founding of the Neo Destour Party, whose leader, Habib Bourguiba, was to lead Tunisia to independence in 1956. While some Jews supported the nationalist movement, even playing leading roles, others were divided in their allegiances.<sup>5</sup> The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and Tunisian independence in 1956 prompted waves of Jewish emigration; in the 1960s, discriminatory economic reforms, and anti-Jewish incidents following the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, caused most of the remaining Jews to leave (Sebag 1991:273 ff). As communities throughout Tunisia fragmented, uniquely, the small Jewish community on the island of Djerba, albeit drastically reduced in numbers, remained intact. In the early 1960s Muslim migrants from the mainland, attracted by work opportunities on the island, began to move into the empty Jewish homes. Around 1970 a mosque was built on the outskirts of Hara

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Kebira and, with the development of the coastal *zone touristique*, an international airport was built on the island. Yet, amidst all these upheavals, the remaining Jewish community, while embracing the material trappings of modernity, adhered tenaciously to their traditional ways of life, communal structures, values and mores. So resilient was their distinctive Djerban Jewish identity and so unbroken its continuity with the past that, as Abraham Udovitch and Lucette Valensi observed in their extensive ethnographic study: “while all other Jewish communities of North Africa disappeared, those of Jerba resisted both assimilation and migration to become ‘the last Arab Jews’” (Udovitch and Valensi 1984:3).

Following independence, the Ghriba celebrations became the focal point for the annual return of Tunisian Jews from Israel and France. With the development of tourism on the island and especially, the establishment of the international airport, the pilgrimage was transformed into a tourist bonanza, with luxury coastal hotels turning kosher for the week. In Israel, Jews from throughout the world celebrate Lag B’Omer with a pilgrimage to the actual tomb of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in Meron, in the Northern Galilee. Yet Israeli Jews of Tunisian descent, rather than making the simple journey up the road, prefer instead to undertake the circuitous journey via Paris, Marseille, Frankfurt or Istanbul to their diasporic homeland, to celebrate the *hilula* of Rabbi Shimon at the shrine of the Ghriba. And, despite the proliferation of new forms of mass media and the participants’ constant exposure to new Tunisian, pan-Arab, French and Israeli songs, the celebrations no longer serve to showcase the latest popular tunes set to new Hebrew or Judeo-Arabic texts. Instead, the returning pilgrims join their remaining Tunisian relatives in a nostalgic celebration of diaspora as Jacob Bsiri and a mixed band of Djerban and Israeli musicians replicate not only the musical rituals but also, the actual musical repertory of the protectorate past.

In May 2007 I took part in the pilgrimage to the Ghriba for the first time since my original visit to Djerba in 1978. In this chapter, focusing mostly on the 2007 celebrations, I explore the symbolic significance of the musical rituals and their crystallized repertories in terms of time and place, and in the light of recent attempts to transcend them, for both the returning pilgrims and for the two Tunisian communities—Muslims and Jews—who stayed behind.

## **THE GHRIBA: ITS ORIGINS AND MYTHS**

The festival of the Ghriba is a festival of origins: its meaning can only be fully understood in relation to the complex mythology surrounding the origins of the synagogue and the community itself. The inhabitants of the Hara Sghira believe they are descendents of priests, or Cohenim, fleeing from the destruction of King Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem in the sixth century BC. (A more modest version of the story substitutes the second Jerusalem Temple, destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD.) Traveling westward across North Africa the priests carried

with them a door and other relics from the Temple until, eventually, they landed on the island of Djerba where they built a synagogue, incorporating the holy relics into its foundations. They called their settlement Dighet (considered a Berberized form of Delet, meaning in Hebrew, door). To this day, Hara Sghira is also informally named Dighet and, until the mass exodus of the Jews in the mid-twentieth century, almost all its inhabitants were Cohanim (s. Cohen: the name given to descendants of the priestly caste). Belief in the legendary antiquity of the Jewish community is shared by Djerba's Muslims, and the Jews are generally regarded as the island's original inhabitants, preceding the Arabs and even the Berbers.

A second corpus of myths relates specifically to the synagogue. A mysterious young girl came to live on the outskirts of Hara Sghira, where she built herself a hut. The villagers were frightened of her strange ways, and kept their distance. One day, a fire broke out around the hut and, assuming the girl was working one of her spells, the villagers kept away. Eventually, the fire consumed the hut, with the girl inside. When finally they approached, the villagers found the girl dead, her body miraculously intact, untouched by the flames, and her face serene. Filled with remorse, they built a synagogue as a shrine for the girl, calling both the girl and the synagogue Ghriba (Miraculous, Stranger). Venerated by Muslims and Jews, the Ghriba became the site of an annual pilgrimage, coinciding with the Festival of Lag B'Omer and the death of the Cabbalist Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai.<sup>6</sup>

The story of the Ghriba resonates with the Jewish concept of the Shekhina (lit. "Indwelling") signifying the feminine aspect of God—the form in which God manifests Herself in the world. The Shekhina is also identified as the bride of God, thus the Jewish people. In practice, the Shekhina is understood as a protector and mediator whose overarching role is to effect reconciliation between God and His people, thus helping them achieve their longed-for Messianic return to the land of Israel. Interpreted on a cosmic plane, her role is to reunite the masculine and feminine principles of God, hence, the Universe itself.

The concept of the Shekhina is especially developed in the Caballah, the Jewish book of mysticism, whose central teaching, the Zohar, is traditionally attributed to the second century Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, who revealed its contents to his closest disciples on his dying day. As he imparted his revelation a brilliant light radiated from his body, enveloping him completely, and his house was filled with fire; nor did the sun set until his revelation was complete. When the light subsided the Rabbi was found dead, a serene expression on his face, clutching the Torah between his arms. Rabbi Shimon commanded his disciples to celebrate, not mourn, the anniversary of his death, marking the reunion of his soul with its Maker. Thus began the tradition of the annual pilgrimage to his tomb in Meron, in the Northern Galilee, on the festival of Lag B'Omer and the custom of celebrating the day with bonfires and lighting of candles.

There are clearly parallels between the miraculous deaths of the strange girl, known as the Ghriba, and the Cabbalist Rabbi. Both are associated with fire and

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light; both the Rabbi and the young girl die in serenity, their physical bodies miraculously unharmed; and in both cases, their deaths signal a divine revelation relating to the feminine principle, or Shekhina. In Djerba, through a complex web of associations, the stories of the strange girl, the Cabbalist Rabbi and the priests from the Temple fuse to create a direct connection between Djerba, “the antechamber of Jerusalem,” and the Holy City itself, ascribing to both places pivotal roles in the past, present and future destiny of the Jewish people. When Tunisian Jews return from their present-day homeland, Israel, to their former homeland in Djerba, they do so, at least in part, to commemorate the mythical Jerusalem of their past and, through the Shekhina, to renew their faith in their Messianic return to the utopian Jerusalem of their future.

## **THE PILGRIMAGE TO THE GHRIBA IN 2007**

The Ghriba’s present-day building dates from the nineteenth century when it was rebuilt after a fire. Approaching the synagogue from the village beneath you see two white, flat-roofed buildings separated by a narrow pedestrian street with an arched entrance. The smaller building to the left is the synagogue; that to the right, rising above it, is the two-storey *funduq*, or pilgrims’ hostel, built in the traditional Arab style around a square courtyard. The two buildings face each other across the street, the entrance of the synagogue facing that of the courtyard, about halfway down. Throughout the celebrations, men, women and children intermingle between the spaces, passing seamlessly from one to the other. This casual mingling of the genders and the prominent role played by women generally is one of the most striking aspects of the celebrations. On Djerba, women are normally barred from worshipping in the synagogues, considered the exclusive domain of men and boys; in both public and private life, men and women occupy separate spaces: unmarried men and women in particular are strictly segregated. The Ghriba celebrations thus provide a unique occasion on which normal gender barriers are removed, and women and girls are free to come and go as they please, whether in the *funduq* or in the Ghriba itself.

The synagogue consists of an outer antechamber and an inner sanctuary containing the *bimah*, or platform from which the Torah is read, and the wall containing the ark of the Torah; beneath the ark is a low door from which a few shallow steps descend into a grotto, believed to mark the site where the body of the mysterious girl was found. Throughout the festivities, the antechamber serves as a general meeting room: women gather there with their babies and children, men gather informally for blessings over wine and both men and women sit silently alone, reading from prayer books. As they enter the inner sanctuary, the pilgrims remove their shoes; inside, they light candles in memory of Rabbi Shimon and recite individual prayers. Young women descend into the grotto, depositing there raw eggs on which they have written their names, and

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lighted candles. Eventually the heat from the candles cooks the eggs. Thus, the women believe, the Ghriba will help them marry and conceive.

The musical rituals take place through the afternoon in the courtyard of the *funduq*, whose sides are lined with stalls selling miscellaneous trinkets and food-stuffs; some sell goods specific to the occasion such as yarmulkes, shawls, and CDs of Jewish singers from protectorate times. Framing the courtyard, the *funduq* rises in a two-tiered sequence of arches fronting a veranda below and a balcony above; through the arches, the bright blue doors of the pilgrims' quarters remain permanently closed, their rooms unoccupied. Streamers bearing red and white Tunisian flags and smiling portraits of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali hang across the courtyard. Below, the crowd is seated on benches, women with their babies, prams and children taking up most of the space. Facing them, on the far side of the *funduq*, the musicians are installed behind microphones on a dais draped with colorful cloths. The violinist, Sasson Cohen, and the *'ūd* player and lead singer, Houri Kadora, dressed in the traditional Djerban red *chechia* (felt cap) and white *jalabiyya* (long-sleeved gown), have just flown in from Israel. Sharing the platform, the *darbuka* (goblet drum) and *tār* (tambourine) player, both from Hara Kebira, are dressed casually in dark trousers and white open-necked shirts, without headgear. Between them, the ninety-five-year-old Jacob Bsiri, dressed as usual in his red *chechia*, baggy grey breeches and striped grey cape, a bottle of *bucha* (fig spirits) at his feet, opens the proceedings with a few solo songs, accompanying himself on the *'ūd*; his playing is haphazard but his voice, well-oiled by *bucha*, is strong and full-bodied. Jacob sings of the Ghriba, Rabbi Shimon, and the Messianic return to the land of Israel. He begins with the famous song for the Ghriba by the Jewish cantor from Jerusalem, Asher Mizrahi:<sup>7</sup>

I am the Ghriba  
Whoever visits me is promised a place in Paradise  
I am Serah, daughter of Asher  
I entered Paradise and my eyes were alive  
Whoever visits me is promised a place in Paradise  
Father Yacoub promised that the Angel of Death would never touch me  
Whoever visits me and prays at my place will never be harmed  
I am the Ghriba  
Whoever visits me is promised a place in Paradise

The miraculous Serah, daughter of Asher, and granddaughter of Jacob, first appears in the Book of Genesis as one of the seventy Israelites who went down to Egypt at the time of Jacob. She reappears, several hundred years later, in the Book of Numbers as the only woman mentioned in the much longer census of Israelites who left Egypt with Moses. For Talmudic rabbis, the long-living Serah Bat Asher became a symbol of immortality, as one who “never tasted death” and “entered paradise alive;” numerous legends tell of her wisdom and her miraculous powers to help and protect. In the Zohar she is assigned pride of place in

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Paradise; in Djerba, she fuses with the Ghriba, taking on the attributes of the Shekhina.

The musical rituals centre on a five-tiered hexagonal candelabrum, or menara, mounted on a wagon and covered in multicolored shawls. Each tier represents a level in the Djerban hierarchy of beings from the twelve tribes of Israel through famous Tunisian rabbis, biblical patriarchs and matriarchs, the two mystical Rabbis of Djerban Jewish mythology Rebbi Meir Ba'al Hanes and Rebbi Shimon Bar Yohai, to God, whose name is inscribed within a Star of David. Crowning the whole are the tablets of the Law. In the early afternoon, the candelabrum is wheeled out before the crowd and stationed in front of the dais, beneath the musicians. Waving a shawl the master of ceremonies, mounted on the wagon, conducts a mock auction in aid of the Ghriba, its rabbis and its scholars. At the highest bid the shawl is thrown onto the wagon and the musicians strike up a tune. After numerous shawls have been auctioned, the candelabrum, bedecked with shawls, is wheeled out of the courtyard, followed by the crowd, and led in a procession down the hill and through the village to the synagogue in Hara Sghira, watched along the way by the Muslim residents who peer from open doorways and windows. At various stages, the procession pauses, a chair is pulled out of the crowd and, seated, Jacob sings a *piyyut*. When finally they reach the synagogue the wagon is wheeled into the courtyard where more speeches are made, prayers recited and candles lit until the early evening, when the wagon and its procession return to the Ghriba. The candelabrum is then stripped of shawls and wheeled into the synagogue, where its candleholders are filled with burning candles. On the second day the rituals are repeated until the wagon is returned to the synagogue. Then, instead of decorating it with candles, the pilgrims congregate in the anteroom of the Ghriba for the closing formalities, which culminate in a speech by the Minister of Tourism, who pays tribute to the rich contribution made by Jews to Tunisian culture and society. Jacob closes the proceedings with an unaccompanied song for the Ghriba:

O Ghriba, our Ghriba  
You, who lighten the space within and between us  
Beautiful, distinguished, proud, light of our spirit  
O Ghriba, pure and honorable  
Your joyful face guarding us  
Helping us with your power

Reflecting on the rituals surrounding the menara as they experienced them in 1978, Udovitch and Valensi interpret them in the light of Zoharic mysticism:

When the menara has been adorned, perfumed, decked with fabrics which veil it from people's sight, it resembles a young girl about to be brought to her bridegroom. In fact, it is called the 'arusa,' the bride. The itinerary that it follows from the Ghriba to the various *yeshivot* of Dighet, which are so many masculine spaces, is comparable to the procession leading the bride from her

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father's to her husband's house. The procession of the Ghriba celebrates a wedding ... the symbolic union of the masculine and feminine principles ... But there is more. The occasion of this celebration is the death of Rebbi Shem'un which is designated as a hillula, a wedding, since the master of the Zohar went to meet his God on that day. One of the major themes of Zoharic mysticism is that of the mystical marriage of the community with its Lord, through which the hidden meaning of the Divine Word becomes revealed in its infinite fullness. In Zoharic symbolism, the community represents the feminine principle, and God the masculine principle. In Jerba, to lead the menara clad in a bride's finery in a procession is, in the end, to lead the community to meet its Lord. (Udovitch and Valensi 1984:131)

## SIGNS OF DISPLACEMENT

Djerba is a fertile island, watered by wells from beneath rather than rain from above. On the rare occasions that rain does fall on the flat terrain, it has nowhere to run and it was on one of those rare rainy days at the end of December that I traipsed with my daughter, dressed in our English summer clothes, through the puddles along the main street of Hara Hebira. We were visiting my friend Hanna who I first knew as a young mother nearly thirty years before. It was my first visit in nearly a decade, and my daughter's first. Opening the door, Hanna greeted us as though she'd seen us only yesterday: preoccupied, she ushered us into her tiny kitchen, sat us down in our dripping clothes and put a pot on the stove for tea. She potted distractedly from one surface to the next. The problem? —The draught. Never before had there been so little rain: it was the end of December, and not a drop had fallen. The land was parched; the rivers were running dry; the harvest was ruined; the Kinneret (Sea of Galilee) had fallen to its lowest levels yet. Amazed, we suddenly understood. Physically on Djerba, where she had lived all her life, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, Hanna was in Israel.

In her study *Bilad Al Haqaniya?: Otherness and Homeland in the Case of Djerban, Tunisian Jewry*, Naomi Stone observes that when, with the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, their once mythical homeland and place of messianic longing became a tangible reality, this created for the Djerban Jews "a shifted conception of home" and a sense of "their own unbelonging in Djerba" (Stone 2006:4). The resultant rupture with the past, she argues, had a profound effect on the Djerban Jewish psyche, both among those who left and those who remained: "whereas once the Jews had identified Djerba as home, and felt their belonging within it, in the new paradigm, notions of home were ascribed more exclusively to Israel." Tunisia's emergence in 1956 as an independent state with a specifically Arab character served, against the backdrop of Israeli-Arab hostilities, only to reinforce the Jewish community's sense of alienation and unbelonging. Their diasporic experience of exile "at one time likely abstractly understood, shifted to

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a newly-born, concrete sense of actual displacement within Djerba” (Stone 2006:5).

A physical rupture occurred with the voluntary emigration of the majority of the community to Israel and the occupation of the formerly Jewish homes by non-Djerban Muslims. Hara Kebira was officially renamed As-Sawani (Gardens) and a mosque was erected at the entrance of the village: in the late 1970s, a crackling recording of the *adhan* (call to prayer) penetrated the air five times a day. Intensive construction through the 1990s has turned the once separate Hara into what is effectively a suburb of Houmt Souk. Yet the old Jewish quarter, with its traditional white, single-storied homes interspersed by newer two-storey ones, its courtyards and synagogues, has remained intact. Today it is still referred to unofficially, by both Muslims and Jews, as Hara Kebira.

Even on my first visit in 1978, coinciding with Udovitch and Valensi’s, physical signs of modernity were ubiquitous. The younger generations wore Western-style dress, men and unmarried girls wore jeans, younger and middle aged men wore Israeli-style yarmulkes in place of the traditional red *chéchia*, while younger married women in knee-length skirts and dresses covered their heads with brightly colored scarves, eschewing the red bonnet and pink ribbons worn by older women. Jewish jewelers from Hara Kebira had set up boutiques in the tourist hotels springing up along Djerba’s new coastal *zone touristique*; at night, young Jewish men rode out on motorbikes to the bars and discotheques. Newly married couples were building separate homes fitted with modern kitchens and bathrooms selected from Parisian catalogues, instead of moving into the paternal family home, as had previously been the custom. In the late 1970s, virtually every Jewish home had a television; by the mid-1990s, Jewish households were tuning into Israeli stations on satellite television and in 2006, a young Jewish entrepreneur was setting up the first internet café in the village. Yet in other respects, notably those of religious significance, nothing seems to have changed. Women are still barred from synagogue worship, marriages are still arranged, religious rituals are meticulously observed and traditions of gender segregation are rigorously applied.

A comparable dichotomy applies to musical life. Since the 1970s, the island’s hotels and discotheques have provided continuing exposure to French, English and American popular music, while radio, television, film and other mass media provide contemporary Tunisian and Middle Eastern sounds. At Jewish weddings, professional singers and musicians, flown in from mainland Tunisia, France and Israel, perform an eclectic mix of popular Arabic, Israeli, French and American styles. Yet none of these new musical influences appears to have penetrated the community’s sacred repertory. Apart from the occasional inclusion of imported Ashkenazic settings, *piyyutim* continue to be sung, regardless of the occasion, to the traditional Djerban tunes. Formerly the genre most permeable to new, secular musical influences the *piyyut* has, in recent decades, reverted into a soundtrack of the past. Nor have the new sounds inspired any other musical activity. In the late 1970s, Jacob Bsiri, then in his mid-sixties, was the

last Jewish professional musician on the island; with Muslim instrumentalists making up his band he was the mainstay of every Jewish wedding. At the Ghriba celebrations, supported by a *tār* and *darbuka* player from Hara Kebira, Jacob reigned alone, his powerful voice carrying him through the entire celebrations. Thirty years later, Jacob still has no successor, and his performances at weddings are merely token events, briefly interrupting the main musical entertainment provided by musicians from elsewhere. At the Ghriba celebrations, Jacob's scattered solo offerings impart an aura of authenticity, his exotic presence representing the last, direct link to the protectorate past as Israeli musicians return to provide the mainstay of the traditional repertory.

On 11 April 2002, a truck filled with natural gas exploded at the entrance of the synagogue in a suicide attack linked to Al-Qaeda. Twenty-one people, mostly German tourists, were killed and many more wounded. Since then, electronic screening has been introduced and access to the Ghriba controlled. During the week of the pilgrimage, as planeloads of Israeli and other foreign tourists descend on the island, checkpoints are planted at strategic points on the island's main roads. In the small Jewish village, armed police lurk ominously around shop entrances and public arcades; the street leading to the tourist hotel is blocked to traffic, and at the checkpoint on the road connecting the village to the Ghriba, traffic is stopped and documents scrutinized. Inside and around the Ghriba compound, the police maintain a constant and serious presence.

On my visit in 1978 I stayed in one of the pilgrims' rooms, which were mostly occupied by devout pilgrims from the mainland. The *funduq* stayed alive long after the hours of celebrations: the evenings were filled with cooking aromas as families took their suppers on tables set out on the verandas and balconies. As was customary in large public gatherings, there was a conspicuous police presence; but the police were relaxed, joking with the participants, clearly enjoying the party. Local Muslims, while unaware of the specifically Jewish symbolism, participated as though for a public holiday. The auctioning of the shawls, speeches and public announcements were made in the local Tunisian-Arabic dialect with a smattering of French. Israeli-Hebrew was confined to private discourse.

Today, the master of ceremonies, Marco Zaghdoun, originally from Tunis, now from Paris, conducts the auctioning of shawls in French. Other announcements and speeches are in French or Israeli Hebrew. Even the closing speeches, in the presence of the Minister of Tourism and his entourage, are largely in French. Few, if any local Muslims are there for the celebrations alone; all those I spoke to were there in official capacities, as functionaries in the synagogue, stall holders or police. In contrast, the Israeli presence is magnified and overt, Israeli Hebrew and French displacing Tunisian Arabic as the prevailing public languages. Nowhere is this more evident than in the musical entertainment, which, in recent years, has spilled beyond the boundaries of the Ghriba compound to include the space immediately outside the *funduq* wall. Throughout the afternoon, as Jacob and his band accompany the dressing of the menara and the auc-

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tioning of shawls to the traditional songs of protectorate times, a boys choir from Jerusalem, Pirhei Yerushalayim (Jerusalem Flowers), consisting of about a dozen children of North African origin directed by their leader, Hanan Avital, sing an eclectic mix of Oriental Israeli rock/pop, otherwise known as *musiqā mizrahit* (lit. Eastern music), French popular and Chassidic songs, and classic hits of the iconic Egyptian diva Umm Kulthum, to a backing track, cheered on by an ecstatic crowd.

Effectively, Pirhei Yerushalayim have added a new celebratory space, complementing the traditional Tunisian Jewish sound world of the *funduq* with the contemporary North African Jewish sound world of present-day Israel. Stationed at the entrance to the Ghriba compound, the boys choir envelopes the rituals inside in an atmosphere of Mizrahi Israeliness, representing an alternative, more familiar present-day reality—one with which the Jewish participants can more readily identify and to which they feel they belong—than that of today's Tunisian Arab environment, perceived as alien and potentially hostile.

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The airplane which takes pilgrims to Jerba [sic] is a machine for going back in time, and Jerba is the place of reunion. What you find there is yourself, and the *membra disjecta* of the lost community. Not only does the Ghriba get the girls married, she also eases the pain of *wahsh wal-ghorba*, the homesickness and pain of exile.

(Udovitch and Valensi 2004:130)

Most Djerban Jews who immigrated to Israel in the 1940s and 1950s settled in moshavim (co-operative settlements) in the Negev desert, or in new development towns in the area such as Netivot and Ofakim. Thus unlike other North African communities, which tended to be dispersed around the country, the Djerban Jews established relatively homogenous communities, even to the extent of reflecting individual village origins. Reporting from her fieldwork in 2003-5 Naomi Stone describes the settlements as “a bit like replicas of the Haras ... Djerban Jewish Arabic is the almost exclusive tongue for first generation immigrants. Djerban rituals are preserved (although not entirely...) and local Djerban dishes are prepared every day.” Subsequent generations, while speaking Hebrew, “continue to retain many Djerban traditions.” She quotes a woman from moshav Beit HaGadi: “The atmosphere here is like Djerba. They do the holidays like in Djerba. The same bread, the same couscous. The moshav and Djerba are the same.” And a family who immigrated from Djerba only two years earlier remarked: “It is like Djerba here. The holidays, Shabbat. The moshav resembles Djerba. In the moshav, everyone is religious, just like in Djerba” (Stone 2006:102-3).

In 1956, Jews from Djerba built a replica of the Ghriba in Ofakim and re-

sumed the tradition of the annual pilgrimage there. Later, another replica Ghriba was built in Netivot. Stone quotes her interviewees in Ofakim: “We specifically made it to resemble the Ghriba so we could remember the Ghriba.” “In the synagogue, they have maintained the same rules and the same tunes of the prayers.” “A large menara is brought in procession around the town and prayers are auctioned away. People come from all over the place” (Stone 2006:103-4).

Yet religious symbolism is not the only factor motivating the continuing annual pilgrimages, whether to Djerba or to the replica Ghribas in Israel. Indeed, many returning Tunisians I interviewed on Djerba were only vaguely aware of the symbolic meaning of the rituals or the mythology of the Ghriba. A lady from Tel Aviv, a retired bookkeeper and grandmother who had grown up in Tunis, told me that as a child her family never went on the pilgrimages: she made her first visit to the Ghriba five years ago and has come every year since. She spoke with deep appreciation of the annual pilgrimages and the benefit they provide: “I love it; it is good for me.” Yet she had no knowledge of the story of the mysterious girl, and the idea that the Ghriba might somehow represent Jerusalem seemed strange to her: “Jerusalem is Jerusalem, the Ghriba is diaspora.” Rather, for this lady, as for many other returning Israelis, the pilgrimage to the Ghriba seems to satisfy a different, no less deeply felt personal need, touching on levels of communal memory at the very core of their Tunisian Jewish identity. While presented in Zionist rhetoric as a Return from Exile (“Ingathering of Exiles”) and perceived as such in the abstract, for many North African Jews, the reality of immigration to Israel, whether voluntary or forced, meant not only a physical abandonment of place but a denial of centuries-old communal lifestyles and traditions—a denial which, even as they sought to reinvent themselves as Israeli Jews, they experienced as exile and loss. For these new Tunisian Jewish “exiles,” the annual pilgrimages to the Ghriba provide opportunities to reconnect with their diasporic roots—to rediscover themselves, individually and collectively, as Tunisian Jews.

In Israel, following the mass immigration of North African and Middle Eastern Jews in the 1950s and 1960s, the cult of pilgrimages, whether to the Ghriba or to different local shrines elsewhere, took on a quasi-political dimension. In the context of modern Israeli society, with its predominantly European roots and identity, the pilgrimages embody the collective resistance of an ethnically and socially marginalized subgroup to Ashkenazi cultural hegemony. Citing the Israeli sociologists Shlomo Deshen and Moshe Shokeid (1974), Udovitch and Valensi observe that:

From Israel to Morocco, other commemorative rituals bring together Jews of the same origin, gathering them around old or new pilgrimage sites ... All of them express the same aspirations and the same nostalgias. These religious ceremonies are expressions of a social aspiration: the aspiration of belonging to an integrated group ... In Israel, they have also become ... a political discourse, a self-rehabilitation, in the context not only of uprootedness, but also of déclassément and of cultural domination. (Udovitch and Valensi 1984:130)

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In Israel, the year 1984 saw the founding of Shas—the political party that gives voice to religiously observant Mizrahi and Sephardi communities. The years around 1980 also saw the transformation of *musiqqa mizrahit* from a neighborhood “cassette” subculture into mainstream Israeli popular music, and its burgeoning onto the international stage when, in 1983, the Yemenite singer Ofra Haza was selected to represent Israel in the Eurovision song contest, winning second place with the song “Hay” (Alive) (Regev and Seroussi 2003:226-9). In Tunisia, the 1980s saw parallel challenges to unitary nationalist agendas and a concomitant decentralization of cultural and economic policy. These tendencies were accelerated and consolidated by the events of 7 November 1987 when, in a bloodless coup, Habib Bourguiba, who had led the nation to independence in 1956, was officially declared senile and succeeded by President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.<sup>8</sup> In the shifting cultural and political landscape, film provided the ideal medium for exploration, on an international stage, of long-suppressed aspects of Tunisian culture and society, including its relationship with its Jewish element.

In 1986, the seventy-four-year-old Djerban Jewish musician Jacob Bsiri played the character of Levy, a Jewish carpenter and *'ūd* player, in Nouri Bouzid's *Man of Ashes*, a film exploring ideas about masculinity and taboos surrounding homosexuality and sexual abuse. The sympathetic portrayal of the old Jew as mentor and friend to whom the protagonist, a young man who had been sexually abused as a child, turns for advice on the eve of his wedding, drew criticisms of “Zionism” when the film was selected at the Cannes Film Festival that year, overshadowing any controversy about the film's sexual content. Despite calls for its boycott for its “Zionist” sympathies, *Man of Ashes* went on to receive the Gold Tanit at the Carthage Film Festival. Responding to the accusations, Bouzid protested: “You want to erase a part of my memory! I will not let you amputate a part of my culture!” Recalling his motives nearly two decades later Bouzid explained: “I wanted to pay homage to that old Jewish man who had raised Tunisian music to new heights ... I wanted to give life to characters who are almost like that in reality ... it's that forgotten Tunisia that I'm interested in—we have no right to forget people like that” (Bouzid 2004).

In an article surveying Jewish representations in Tunisian film, the influential director and critic Ferid Boughedir identifies *Man of Ashes* and the controversy it unleashed as a watershed, forcing Tunisians to confront that “loss of the dimension of themselves” caused by the almost total departure of the Jews after 1967 (Boughedir 1994:139). He cites subsequent films by Tunisian Muslims portraying Jewish subjects, including a documentary by Mounir Baaziz on the Ghriba pilgrimage (1993) and a film by Selma Baccar about the tragic diva Habiba M'sika (1994), and he previews his own *A Summer in La Goulette* (1996), a nostalgic throw back to the multicultural society of his childhood set in the cosmopolitan port and suburb of Tunis in the summer of 1966—the last before the departure of the remaining Catholics and Jews. Boughedir writes poignantly of the rupture experienced by Tunisian Muslims as a result of that exodus,

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and the need to restore not only the Jewish but also other dimensions of Tunisian cultural memory that had been suppressed by the nationalist movement:

Exile, separation, nostalgia are still, understandably, open wounds for many Jews who left Tunisia twenty or thirty years ago and who are today half French. But they are not the only ones to have been affected. Many Tunisian Muslims, among them intellectuals and men of culture, feel orphaned since our separation—even if they don't care to admit it openly ... We are living through very important times: we are in the process of rewriting part of our history, the true history of Tunisia. In the narrative of one-party states, history is too often distorted by leaving bits out, not only those concerning the Jewish community, but everything relating to the taboos and prejudices of the time. It's a question of being capable, at one point or another, of re-instating the truth. I feel this is what we're doing now ... It is only by speaking of the wounds—all the things that tore the two Tunisian communities—Muslims and Jews—apart, that we'll be able to transcend them. (Boughedir 1994:139-40)

In the current era of radical, entrenched and opposing ideologies unleashed on a global scale by the attacks of 9/11, Boughedir's message of pragmatic idealism, born of a conviction rooted in personal, if not as yet collective memory, seems as remote as the era (that of the Oslo Accords and the beginning of the Israel-Palestine "peace process") in which it was conceived. Yet it remains all the more compelling. In the wake of the 2002 attack on the Ghriba approximately one thousand Jews remain on Djerba, mostly in the big village. Each year, as thousands more Tunisian Jews return from France and Israel to re-enact the rituals of the Ghriba, parading the *menara*, dressed as a bride, through the streets of the once Jewish Hara Sghira (today's Muslim Al-Riadh) to the tunes of protectorate times, they give voice to the silent testimony of the six-pointed stars on the minaret of Testour and the image of the menorah in the medina of Tunis not only that Jews once lived in Tunisia, but that a few still do so, and the shared cultural memory of Tunisia's Muslim and Jewish past lives on in the present.

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## NOTES

1. Maupassant's observations relate more to the striking impression made by the Jewish community than its relative size. According to the first attempted census of Tunisia's population in 1921 (considered to grossly under-represent the Muslim population) Jews numbered a mere 48,436 out of a total Tunisian population of 2,093,939. About 19,000 Jews lived in Tunis itself, and a further 3,600 in the suburbs (Sebag 1991:186).

2. Music was generally considered an undesirable occupation in Tunisian urban society at the time. Although Jewish society tended to be more permissive than Muslim society, the music profession was nevertheless regarded with considerable ambivalence, especially for women (See Abassi 2000:13 and Davis 2009a:195-6). See Abassi 2000:6-13 for biographical information and recordings of some of the more famous examples of female Jewish singers.

3. See Davis 2004:94-6 and Davis 2009a:194-6 for further discussion of this formative period in Tunisian popular song and the role played by Jews. Jafran L. Jones discusses women, including Jews, as musicians during the protectorate period (Jones 1987:72-6). Sadok Rizgui's *Al-Aghani al-Tunisiyya*, including transcriptions of about thirty popular songs, is the most authoritative contemporary study, compiled in the early 1930s but not published until 1967.

4. See Idelsohn 1967:124 and Shiloach 1992:122 ff. for discussions of the widespread practice in Judaism of adapting tunes of popular songs in the vernacular to sacred texts in Hebrew. For examples from Tunisia see Davis 1986, 2002 and 2009b.

5. The much-cited example is Andre Barouch, a wealthy Jewish textile merchant and militant member of Habib Bourguiba's Neo-Destour Party, who in 1952 was arrested and exiled by the French for his nationalist activities. In 1956, Barouch was appointed Minister of Reconstruction and Planning in Bourguiba's first cabinet. However, he was dropped after the first cabinet reshuffle in 1957, and the gesture of having a Jew in the government was henceforth abandoned.

6. The pilgrimage to the Ghriba has parallels in other Jewish communities of North Africa and the Middle East who commemorate the deaths of famous rabbis with pilgrimages to their tombs, often coinciding with the pilgrimage for Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai. The Jewish practice corresponds to the Muslim cult of marabout, prevalent in North Africa, involving pilgrimages to the shrines of holy men (and occasionally women).

7. Born in Jerusalem in 1890, the son of a well-known Torah scholar and teacher, Asher Mizrahi found refuge in Tunis after escaping the Ottoman draft during the Balkan War (1912-13). He returned to Palestine in 1919, when the county was under British control. When the Arab riots broke out in 1929 he escaped to Tunis once more, this time staying for nearly forty years and establishing himself as one of Tunisia's most popular composers. He returned to Jerusalem in 1967, after the six-day Arab-Israeli war, and died there that year. For a fuller biography see the Online Thesaurus of the Jewish Music Research Centre, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, available online at [www.jewishmusic.huji.ac.il/thesaurus.asp?cat=9&in=0&id=703&act=view](http://www.jewishmusic.huji.ac.il/thesaurus.asp?cat=9&in=0&id=703&act=view) (accessed August 2009).

8. For the effects of the cultural reforms on Tunisian music see Davis 2004:105ff and 2009a:198ff.

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