

Foreword
by
Peninnah Schram

The Jewish oral tradition contains a vast repertoire of stories and songs, religious and secular, which appeal to the heart and treasure the human voice. After all, the voice is a musical instrument which can most expressively communicate attitude, tone, emotion and meaning in order to illuminate the text of a story or song. As Ibn Pakuda wrote in his medieval book, *Duties of the Heart*, “the voice is the messenger of the heart.” While many of the world-wide Jewish narratives and songs originated from Jewish sources, others were adapted from the oral traditions of diverse cultures. In the telling and singing of the adapted stories and songs, however, these works began to mirror the cultural and religious contexts of the storytellers, musicians and singers who became the carriers of Jewish values and traditions. The Sephardim and Oriental Jews, being more tradition-bound societies, have preserved their heritage whether initially derived from Jewish sources or from other cultures.

The history of the Sephardim is a fascinating global journey. Before the seventeenth century, the Sephardim lived under Islamic rule in Spain and in other lands of the Mediterranean. In the lively market places and coffee houses, Jews, Muslims and Christians from all walks of life exchanged many folk songs and stories. As a result their imaginations were fueled and the repertoires of each group steadily grew. When the expulsion of the Jews from Spain occurred in 1492 (and from Portugal soon after), the Jews took with them the love of God, the love of words and their language (Judeo-Spanish or Ladino), the love of learning, and the keys to their houses in the hope of returning one day. When the Sephardim were allowed to return to Spain in 1968, after the expulsion law was rescinded, no doubt the “locks” had been changed by then.

Hebrew printing presses were already functioning in Spain and Portugal in the 1480s. “At the time of the expulsion printers carried their type with them into exile, setting up presses in Fez, in Italy, and in Turkey” (Gerber, *The Jews of Spain: A History of the Sephardic Experience*, p. 158). Taking the moveable type with them, the Sephardim printed communal prayer books, the *Talmud* and *Shulhan Aruch*, rabbinic responsa [Rabbinic written replies to questions on all aspects of Jewish law], as well as literature, including poetry and scientific works. However, they did not print the folktales and folksongs. Perhaps they did not think them important or sacred enough because of the great secular influence on these tales and ballads. Nevertheless, they retained the oral transmission as a way of preserving and perpetuating their heritage.

Many songs found in oral traditions from the Middle Ages, especially the *makamat* [Arabic literary and musical forms] and ballads of the Sephardim, are actually narratives originating as songs and later becoming folk tales, or stories that were turned into ballads. The melodies were often used as mnemonic devices to help the singer remember each verse. One such piece that Gerard Edey and I have presented on occasion in our program, *The Minstrel and the Storyteller*, is “El Rey Por Muncha Madruga.” We integrate the spoken dialogue of the verses in English with the lyrics in Ladino. The ballad is about a queen who has taken a lover. One day the king visits his wife in her bedchamber as she is combing her hair. The queen,

thinking it is her lover who has approached, speaks of her consuming love for him. However, when she opens her eyes, the queen is shocked to discover that it is the king, her husband. She tries to camouflage her remarks but it is too late, “the arrow had found its mark.” The king announces that she will now have to wear “a white dress and a red necklace”, the garb of those sentenced to death. You can hear the strong impact of the Arabic secular oral tradition in this poignant Sephardic ballad.

Other narrative themes can also be found in story and song. For example, “Cuando El Rey Nimrod” recounts the birth of Abraham. There are many verses telling the story about King Nimrod who, when he discovers that a “light of Israel” will soon be born, orders all Jewish boys to be killed at birth. However, the wife of Terach knows that her baby will be a great treasure to the Jewish people and the song tells how she gives birth in secret to her son, Abraham. This wondrous story about the birth of Avram Avinu [Abraham our father] is also found in *Midrash*. (See Bialik and Ravnitsky, *Sefer Ha’Aggadah*, p. 31:5) There are a number of other stories in Jewish folklore which also foretell the birth of great sages such as the Baal Shem Tov, Rabbi Isaac Luria, and Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berdichev. Their appearance in the world is God’s way of rewarding us for our hospitality, sacrifice, and mitzvot [good deeds]. Often, it is Elijah, the 9th century Israeli prophet and folk hero, who predicts these births. Since Elijah is the most popular hero in all of Jewish folklore, it is not surprising to find a great variety of songs and stories devoted to this enigmatic master of miracles. In his research, Gerard Edery has found many Sephardic songs about Elijah the Prophet which he interweaves into the stories I tell. He uses the music to signal that the disguised stranger is really Elijah, later inviting the audience to join him in the refrain.

These two parts of our oral tradition work with a natural synergy. Coming from a cantorial family, I have learned to appreciate the central roles that music and words play in the Jewish heritage. I tell a story using rhythm and phrasing consonant with Gerard’s use of these musical elements in his singing and playing. Through this collaboration the spoken and sung oral traditions complement each other perfectly. Among the many artists who have contributed to keeping Sephardic music alive, Gerard Edery has distinguished himself for his virtuosic performances and recordings. He has brought this music to the attention of enthusiastic audiences throughout the world and now, with this collection of treasured songs, will certainly inspire many more. For his great passion and enthusiasm in helping to preserve this vibrant culture we owe him a debt of gratitude.

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