

The Dybbukast

Season 2, Episode 1: "I Sing and I Pray"

Transcription

A selection from the song, "Enghanni Wensalli" or "I Sing and I Pray" is heard.

Actor 1: *People...ask other people
About my life and livelihood
Among those who watch me,
Many are unknown to me
What are they looking for?
Well, let's satiate their curiosity
There is no harm in that
Let them listen and understand me*

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Aaron Henne: Welcome to Season two of *The Dybbukast*, the show in which we ask: What do poems, plays and other creative texts from throughout history tell us about the times in which they were written, and what did they reveal about the forces still at play in our contemporary societies? I'm Aaron Henne, artistic director of theatre dybbuk. In this episode, presented in collaboration with the Museum of Jewish Montreal, we will be exploring the life and work of Salomon Amzallag, known by many as Samy Elmaghribi; a Jewish Moroccan musician who was a major star in Morocco and beyond, who also became an important cantor and community leader in Montreal.

At the start of the episode, you heard a selection from a song of his titled, in English translation, "I Sing and I Pray." Samy's life and his music moves through a broad spectrum of time and space, giving us glimpses into moments in history that shaped generations.

And now, *The Dybbukast*, Season Two, Episode One: "I Sing and I Pray."

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Yolande Amzallag: He was born in Safi in 1922, and his mother passed away when he was 15 years old. His older sister was his second mother, a second mother to him. His father was, uh — my grandfather was a tailor. He was a high-end tailor and he worked for the palace, for the court, but he [Samy] remembers going — at a very young age — going out in the *mellah* when there was a wedding or festive occasion. Musicians were playing late into the night so he would just escape from the house and go and sit near the stage and listen to the music. He was enthralled with the music. So this is the beginnings, his first inspirations.

Aaron: That was Yolande Amzallag, one of Samy's children, who is a professional translator and the founding president of the Samy Elmaghribi Foundation, which was created shortly after his passing to preserve and commemorate his musical legacy. She shared with me about her father's life. I was also fortunate to spend time with Dr. Aomar Boum, Professor and the Maurice Amado Chair in Sephardic Studies at UCLA. He was able to offer insights into the political and cultural histories that intersect with Samy's experiences.

Dr. Aomar Boum: Morocco became a French colony, or, to be more specific, a protectorate — French protectorate in 1912. Why is that important? Because it ushers a period of social transformations, economic transformations, and political transformations. We're interested now here in this conversation on the Moroccan Jewish community. So you have a reorganization of the community beginning in the early years of the colonial period. In the period between the wars, you have, what we call The Pacification. The French army would go as far as trying to control the rest of the country, with the exception of the northern part, which was under the control of Spain, and the southern part, the desert, which was what was called a Spanish Sahara, which was under the control of Spain also. But it would take until 1934 to have a full control of the whole territories, especially in the south, using the support of tribal leaders. So by 1934, you have what we call the complete "pacification" of the whole country. And then you have the war, World War II. Of course, it's another important

event because you have a shift in terms of government within France now to the Vichy government that I think also can be seen as important, not only as far as what kind of policies France implemented during the war, but also how those policies affected Moroccan society at large, Jews and non Jews. And between the war and 1956, where Morocco gained its independence, you have the beginning of the independence movement. And in 1944, they really have a formal independence movement led by the Istiqlal Party. So I think that's also a central event; the national — what we call the national — consciousness now, beginning to arise and to emerge around the institution of the monarchy.

Aaron: I also spoke with Dr. Christopher Silver, the Segal Family Assistant Professor in Jewish History and Culture at McGill University and curator at gharamophone.com, a site dedicated to preserving North Africa's Jewish musical past one record at a time. He began by talking with me about Samy's rise to fame.

Dr. Christopher Silver: By the time he comes of age in the 1940s, he's discovered. So he enters a competition to discover sort of the next indigenous film star in Morocco, okay. Sort of like a Star Search competition of the time, 1947, Morocco, held in Casablanca to discover the next Moroccan star. He is the runner-up but nonetheless is sort of — his path to stardom is clear. And by the following year, by 1948 — that's the year that he connects to the French recording label Pathé, which operated extensively in North Africa and the Middle East for decades at that point, and he records his first 78 RPM discs. And from that moment until 1956 — so again, his star continues to rise. We should see Samy Elmaghribi as a Moroccan artist. He was also Jewish, but the music that he was recording, the music that first made him popular — there was nothing particularly Jewish about it. As for what he's singing, depending on the song, it's sort of a standard Moroccan Arabic vernacular.

We hear a selection from “Omri Ma Nenssek Ya Mamma”

Yolande: The first hit that he had was “Omri Ma Nenssek Ya Mamma,” which is the song about his mom.

Aomar: And it speaks to something which is important for Muslims and Jews in Morocco — the power and the importance of parents, and especially the sacredness of mothers.

Yolande: He says you brought me to life. You bore me for nine months and brought me to life in suffering, and you tolerated my antics and you would....

Actor 2: ...*hold back your tears and smile to me*

How many nights full of sorrow

My wanderings you would follow

With no complaint, you suffered my folly

My precious, oh my sweet!

Death claims each one of us

When your hour came,

Flames devoured me

Tears still run down my cheeks

when I remember you

Christopher: He also goes on to found one of the first independent record labels in Morocco, appropriately named Samyphone after his first name. And he will tour not only across Morocco, France as well, but also in Algeria where he's incredibly popular. His face, his name, his voice, I mean, graces everything from posters advertising his concerts to his name appearing in the press, both in Arabic and in French as well. He's also the voice that you can hear on the radio, not just in terms of his recorded music, but also in terms of the various commercial jingles that he sings as well. So he becomes the voice of any number of brands that we're familiar with that were also quite popular in Morocco at the time. So everything from Coca-Cola to Gillette to Canada Dry to Palmolive.

Aomar: I really believe that there was a coexistence and that, based on the relations, Judaism and Islam lived side by side. You have people building social relations that are built on connections, on partnerships, economic partnerships, on social relationships.

That's why Samy resonates with Muslims and Jews, because Samy and Samy's music is the ultimate expression of what it is to be a Moroccan from Casablanca or Debdou or Marrakesh. And he does it in the Moroccan dialect.

Christopher: I like to think of him from that era, not just one of, if not the most popular artist of the period. Not just the voice that defines a decade plus, but someone who really provided this soundtrack to a really pivotal historical moment in Moroccan history. So the moment when France will quit Morocco and Tunisia and eventually Algeria as well, and everywhere at that moment is Samy Elmaghribi.

Aomar: His story connects to these major events, national events. His story, just like the stories of a lot of Jews and, to some extent, a lot of Muslims too, it really summarizes those shifts in the sense that he moves to an urban environment and the themes of his songs reflect also this modern shift. It's not anymore a Jewish community that's been embedded in a traditional economic system that revolves around Jews mostly as peddlers and merchants to now Jews as part of a transformed economy where Jews have access to other professions. And being a musician as well as a — not only at the national level, but also a musician with a North African name, but also with a name that goes beyond North Africa. It is part of also the French audience and the French market.

Christopher: Would the revolution have happened without the music or was music the revolution itself? Of course, it's hard to say. Part of what I think Samy Elmaghribi enabled for, even with this early music — that we wouldn't listen to it necessarily and say like, oh, this is clearly nationalist, right? It's popular. It's light. But one of the things that it does is it sort of allows the Moroccans in the early 1950s to dream beyond where they currently find themselves politically; to sort of dream beyond themselves, to imagine beyond their current circumstances.

We hear a selection from the song, "Loucane Elmlayne"

Christopher: He has a song called "Elmlayne." And the lyric basically goes:

Actor 3: *Should the Lord bless you with money*

*Don't cling to it at all, honey.
Money isn't something to save
For no one takes it to the grave
If I had money today
I would spend it my way
I would seek beauty wherever it is found
I would cross oceans, float on clouds
I would find my beloved with all her splendors
For her, I would build a palace of wonders
With my beloved, I would spend every night
In her entangled curls, I would find the light
And, in her kisses, pure delight
For her, I would spend all the money on earth
Otherwise, what is it worth?
Live, sing and dance
Come what may,
joy is the only way*

Christopher: It's the realm of the possible that is being expressed in vernacular Arabic for the masses. And we know from some of the archival records, from his own personal letters, et cetera, that people have picked up these lyrics and are using them in various ways. For example, fishmongers in the *souk*, in the marketplace, using some of these lyrics to call out their customers.

So now, is this revolutionary? It's hard to say, but he is providing Moroccans with a certain vocabulary that they're picking up. And certainly when you get into the more explicitly nationalist music, the impact is clear there because we're also finding that music on the lips of ordinary Moroccans who are repurposing and using it to take pride in what they're doing in that great nation building exercise of anti-colonial nationalism, independence, et cetera.

We hear a selection of the song, "Allah Watany WaSoultany"

Aomar: Moroccan Jews have in many ways always had a special connection with the monarchy to the extent that it figures in their prayers, in the synagogues and outside of the synagogues. It's also reflected in the relationship between Jews and, during the war period and the post-war period, the way they viewed Mohammed V as their savior.

Yolande: I think it was in '54 or '55. The family went and moved to Paris for a few months. And at the time it was also linked with the king's exile to Madagascar in 1953. So after the king's exile, my father felt maybe threatened or — because he was a nationalist and he had composed nationalist songs. So I think he felt that he needed to sort of try and find a safer ground in France. The event that triggered his departure was that he had a police investigation because of his nationalist songs.

Christopher: Toward the end of 1955, this is not how historians like to speak, but the writing is on the wall in terms of the end of the French protectorate regime in Morocco. So, the French have now entered into negotiations with Sultan Mohammed ben Yusef — Mohammed V — the very sultan that they had exiled earlier. The French have entered into negotiations with him to bring him back to Morocco where he's going to not just reign, but rule. He's going to transition from being sultan into a king.

Yolande: Then, in 1955, the king returned from Madagascar, and my father, who composed that song to welcome him to Morocco — he says that within a day or two, the song was composed and recorded in one of the Paris cabarets where he used to perform at night, because this was the way he earned a living was singing at night in a cabaret.

We hear a selection of the song, "Elf Hnyia Ouehnyia"

Yolande: He went for an audience with the king. First, he was received by the prince, Moulay Hassan, and then the king, Mohammed V, greeted him. And so he was ushered in by the prince. And he played the song for the king, "Elf Hnyia Ouehnyia," which means a thousand welcomes to the king.

Actor 4: *To his majesty Mohammed the Fifth, our beloved King!*

*A thousand and one greetings!
Welcome to our Lord Mohammed the Fifth, Sultan of Morocco!
My friends, rejoice with me,
I pleaded with God and he granted my wish.
He returned my sultan to me
And my heart is at peace after a long agony*

Yolande: So the king said, "well, now, Samy, you must come home." He said, "now, you just come back home." So he said, "Yes, Your Majesty." So that was the story of his going back to Morocco in '55 and living there for another four years and thriving with a very, very successful career doing concerts, tours.

We hear a selection of the song, "Ana Elkaoui"

Christopher: Samy Elmaghribi leaves Morocco in 1959. So that's three years after Moroccan independence. Why he does it is a difficult question because I think, you know, sometimes historians perhaps who don't always have that sort of lived experience project a certain politics on departure. The notion is that it was an ideological choice to leave rather than recognition that the Moroccan economy was in a terrible state. Many had left by 1959, 1960. Something like a third of the total Jewish community had departed at that point. So that's about 90,000 people.

Aomar: I've always thought that the migration of Jews of Morocco, it was a major loss to Morocco. This is a very educated community because they had access to modern education before the Muslims. I'll give you an example for us. The design of some of the textbooks, Arabic textbooks, in the post-independent period was done by Moroccan Jews. The writings of even some legal systems was done by Moroccan Jews. So this just shows the void that they created.

Yolande: I was only two when we left Morocco. But I remember that we — just before leaving Morocco that year in '58 or '59, my father recorded a classical Andalusian — can't say song, it was like a whole piece. It's like a whole *nubah*. He recorded it with my sisters and my brother in a studio in Morocco. It was probably *Radio Maroc*. So that

was the beginning of a series of recordings that he did with us, with the whole family, with his children.

We hear a selection of the song, "Chems Elachi"

Christopher: I very much see his departure in terms of putting food on the table and doing what he has to do to take care of his family. He was the breadwinner for that family, and as well as responsible for his extended family as well.

Yolande: My memories of recordings are in Paris because he continued recording classic Andalusian *nubah* — extracts of *nubah* because they're very long, long pieces. He brought together an orchestra of musicians from the Orchestre De Paris. He wrote the music so that they could play it. It's very difficult to write Arabic music in sheet music or notes because you have to have special signs, and special sounds are difficult to render in that language. I think he even invented notations so that the European or western musicians could decipher the music and also play it in a way that was acceptable to an Arab audience. This is my memory of our family career in Paris. We would learn the songs. Of course we didn't read Arabic, so he would transliterate the words. He would teach us how to pronounce them properly. And we would rehearse almost every night from before the recording. We were involved, completely involved in that project. And that was in the early sixties, '62, '63. And then there was "The Haggada", which was also recorded with the family.

We hear a selection of "Le Haggada De Pessah"

Yolande: He also recorded before "The Haggada" — or, maybe at the same time, he had a series of records where he recorded piyyutim and prayer excerpts, which was called "Le Chant Des Synagogues". His father would sing in the synagogue. This was his first place of performance where also he learned Arab Andalusian music because the Sephardi ritual is based on Arab Andalusian music.

Aomar: And when I go to synagogues in Morocco today, when I'm sitting there and I said, this sound, the tone, the voices are not that different from the voices if you're in a

mosque. And Muslims, Jews too, are aware of that. Moroccan Jews are aware of that. They see more closeness to a mosque than to an Ashkenazi synagogue because of the musicality, because of the sound, because that's how the sounds of prayers is embedded in a Moroccan Jewish culture.

Christopher: There's this incredible thing that happens where these very Jewish spaces, and in North Africa, produce the kings and queens of Arab music.

Yolande: This was his first music school was a synagogue. He was also called to lead the services in the synagogue in Morocco, in France, everywhere he went. So he was sort of a natural cantor from the beginning, and he was very interested in his Sephardic liturgy, Moroccan liturgy. The musical inspiration would not be dissociated from the spiritual inspiration. Well, of course, it was his nightlife and his life as an artist, but he went to synagogue. He was always an observant Jew. Those two streams ran parallel in his career, but they were never conflictual. There was never a conflict between one and the other.

We hear a selection of the song, "Bar Yohai"

Aomar: With exile, with migration, you can make that decision to separate. And with time, you start forgetting, and, with the forgetting, that culture and tradition you have in your home, the home of origin, over time, it gets to dissipate, to get erased, to be replaced by something else.

Yolande: He felt that there was a world that was disappearing in Morocco. Moroccan Jews were leaving. When we came to Paris, he wrote that song, "Ma Tebkich Ya Elghrib" for immigrants, which means, "Do not cry, stranger. Do not cry, foreigner."

We hear a selection of the song, "Ma Tebkich Ya Elghrib"

Yolande: He tried to capture in that song his own experience of feeling cut from his home country.

Actor 1: *Oh foreigner, why do you cry?*

You left your home and your country

Dwelling on your grief

Will only swell your sorrow

Address your lament to God

He will answer your prayers

Do not cry, foreigner

Over the country you left behind

God is near everywhere

And he will answer your prayers

Actor 2: *Do not cry over the past*

Do not awaken your wounds

Joy will brighten your life again

And chase away your sadness

God is near everywhere

And he will answer your prayers

Actor 3: *You gave up wealth and ease*

Such destiny, you had not fathomed

You taught the meaning of exile

To your family and your children

God is near everywhere

And He will answer your prayers

Aomar: I think one of the advantages that both Morocco and its Jewish community, including Samy, have, or have had, or they continue to have, is that they have never divorced. I think Moroccan Jews, even when they left — I think you have to give Hassan II some credit here because he really never severed, politically speaking, that relationship. And so they've always considered Moroccan Jews as ambassadors, even when they leave. Samy never lost his Moroccan citizenship because by law you always

have access to Moroccan citizenship because you don't lose citizenship whether you're Jewish or Muslim.

Actor 3: *Do not cry, foreigner
Over the country you left behind
God is near everywhere
And He will answer your prayers*

Actor 4: *Stirring your woes will do you no good
Look ahead, awaken from your blues
Wherever your life is today
That is where you belong
God is near everywhere
And He will answer your prayers*

Actor 3: *The life you live is your fate
Written by God Almighty.*

Actor 2: *Your joys and feasts do not forsake*

All actors: *God is near everywhere
And He will answer your prayers*

Aomar: I'm not speaking as a musician, but my reading of these musicians, they were the vehicle of the communities. I would say they are the poets of these communities in exile.

Actor 4: *Do not cry, foreigner
Over the country you left behind*

Actor 3: *God is near everywhere*

Actor 2: *And he will answer your prayers*

Actor 1: *Heed Samy Elmaghribi's words*

I am a foreigner too

I have no family, no friends

You are my only refuge

And I live to sing your praise

God is near everywhere

And he will answer your prayers

Yolande: We left Paris in '67, on the eve of the '68 demonstrations and riots. There were riots. So there was a lot of turmoil at the time. My older sisters were in their twenties, and my father didn't feel safe in that environment in Paris. He was also very protective of us, of his children. And this was one of the factors that convinced him to move to Montreal. He had no idea that he would become the hazzan of the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue. But at the same time, there was a coincidence. The Spanish and Portuguese synagogue had to let their hazzan go and they were hiring, they were recruiting. And so he applied for the job. At the time, although this was a Sephardic congregation, the congregation was mostly Ashkenazi and the liturgy was mostly Ashkenazi. So he had to learn the whole Ashkenazi liturgy. He also brought back some of the liturgy that was composed by de Sola — Rabbi de Sola. He found some sheet music and he integrated these melodies that hadn't been sung at the Spanish and Portuguese for 50 years before his time. And he introduced a few changes. He introduced a few Moroccan melodies, even Egyptian, in the service. Actually, he was part of a leadership, the Moroccan Jewish leadership, that wanted to assert their identity without dissociating themselves from their host community, because the Ashkenazi community hosted the Moroccan Jews. The JIAS, the Jewish Immigrant Aid Society, was very active in welcoming Moroccan Jews in Montreal. They helped us, they helped the Moroccan Jews integrate in their new environment.

Christopher: He becomes, in many ways, the center of this newish Moroccan Jewish community in Montreal. He helps ground the community. Like, imagine having one of

your stars, in all senses of the words, suddenly sort of gracing Shabbat services week in, week out, and the high holidays. There's something just incredibly comforting, reassuring to that.

Yolande: At the same time, of course, the dominant Jewish culture was Ashkenazi. There was this negative perception of Jews from Arab countries. You know, they were primitive. Those stereotypes were there in the Ashkenazi community of them. We came from a backward country or we weren't as civilized. But my father was so proud of his heritage and his culture. He organized concerts in which we participated, his children, where we sang in Arabic and Hebrew. Congregation was — they were wonderful with him. They loved my father. They loved to hear him sing. They would come and attend the concerts. Although they were Yiddish speakers, they would enjoy his art in any form. And he also sang in Yiddish. He learned Yiddishe Mama. He embodied that bridge between those two communities and he participated in bridging the divide.

Christopher: And he'll eventually get back to recording here as well. He'll record Arabic music in Montreal on another label that he founds. Through song, he'll address some of these questions of sort of, how does he bridge the gap between being a hazzan or a, you know, a religious figure and person and being a "secular" artist. So he sings about that as well. And the answer he gives is that that's what I do. There's nothing contradictory about it at all, which is very much true.

We hear a selection of the song, "Enghanni Wensalli"

Actor 1: *People ask me*

How can you be both a singer and a prayer leader?

To them I say, "Never will I forsake my art,

I will always worship God and entertain people"

Christopher: He'll have sort of a — comeback isn't the right word — but he has this — in the eighties, he gives a concert here at the main concert venue in the city. In some ways, it's a full circle moment. It's an energizing moment, even in sort of like that early-ish stage of his life, right? By the eighties, he's in his sixties at that point. Still got a lot

of life to live, of course. And he can look back on just the last few decades and find himself as a pillar of a new community in Quebec and Canada.

Yolande: I think the legacy is — I tried to express it in the mission of the Fondation Samy Elmaghribi. The mission of the foundation is to use music as a means to cross all borders, whatever they may be, religious, territorial, or political. The best way to pay tribute to him was to use his music and his musical legacy as a passport because it's poetry, it's inspiration and inspiration has no territory. It's free.

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Aaron: Thank you for listening to this episode of *The Dybbukast*, "I Sing and I Pray." Readings of English translations of lyrics from Samy's songs were performed by actors Julie Lockhart, Clay Steakley, Diana Tanaka, and Jonathan CK Williams. Thank you to Yolande Amzallag, Dr. Christopher Silver and Dr. Aomar Boum for sharing their insights. Original English translations were created by Yolande Amzallag. And thanks also to Yolande for providing us with recordings from Samy's catalog. Our theme music is composed by Michael Skloff and produced by Sam K.S. Story editing is led by Clay Steakley, with support from Julie Lockhart and from me, Aaron Henne. The series is edited by Mark McClain Wilson.

Thank you to Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah for supporting this season of *The Dybbukast* and the show's related resources. Speaking of which, please visit us at theatredybbuk.org, where you will find links to a wide variety of materials which expand upon the episode's explorations. And if you want to know more about theatre dybbuk's work in general, please sign up for our mailing list on that same website, on the contact page. New episodes are available every second Friday of the month. This episode was presented in collaboration with the Museum of Jewish Montreal. More information about that organization and its work can be found at museumofjewishmontreal.ca. *The Dybbukast* is produced by theatre dybbuk.

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We hear a selection of the song, "Enghanni Wensalli"

Actor 4: *I pray and sing since childhood*

Actor 3: *True to God and the people,*

Actor 2: *I always remain*

Actor 1: *I am forever Elmaghribi
Samy, who loves all the people*