

Book Review

Sara Manasseh, *Shbahoth-Songs of Praise in the Babylonian Jewish Tradition: From Baghdad to Bombay and London*

Reviewed by Shalva Weil

Sara Manasseh, *Shbahoth-Songs of Praise in the Babylonian Jewish Tradition* (Surrey, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012).

Shbahoth means praise, and praise is the word that can be given for publishing this important book written by ethnomusicologist Sara Manasseh. Shbahoth are songs of praise or devotional hymns recited by Iraqi Jews as paraliturgical hymns for the Sabbath, festivals, and life-cycle rituals. The book collects 31 Shbahoth, which have been selected from a repertoire of some 350 known shbahoth from Babylonian or Iraqi Jews and presents them with original Hebrew texts (but some are also in Aramaic and Judeo-Arabic), transliterations indicating the Babylonian Jewish pronunciation of Hebrew, English translations, and the musical notations for each song. The book is accompanied by a compact disc with 18 selected songs from this collection, sung by the versatile Manasseh, and accompanied by 'ud and percussion. (The remaining 13 can be accessed on Manasseh's website: www.riversofbabylon.com.)

Manasseh is no newcomer to the field of music in the Babylonian tradition. She is the founder of a musical ensemble called the "Rivers of Babylon," based in London, one of the major diasporic centers of Iraqi Jews, who migrated from India and other countries from the 1950s on. Manasseh herself was born in Bombay (today Mumbai), and she moved to London in 1966. She wrote her doctorate at the University of London on the role of Iraqi women in musical performance. Her ancestors moved to India from Iraq, like other "Baghdadi" Jews, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The famous David Sassoon (1792-1864), a relative of Manasseh, settled in Bombay in 1832 and managed his huge commercial interests from that city. Side by side, the "Baghdadi" Jews set up synagogues and places of worship, Hebrew printing presses and periodicals, and published and republished—and later recorded—their unique religious songs known as shbahoth. Today, these shbahoth are chanted throughout the Babylonian Jewish diaspora from Jerusalem to Hong Kong and from Sydney to London.

The Iraqi Jewish shbahoth were paraliturgical hymns sung on all ritual occasions and rites of passage. In Iraq, they were also chanted on the way to the annual pilgrimage to the Prophet Ezekiel's tomb, when the pilgrims would also sing secular songs suitable for the occasion. In Iraq, the shbahoth were both performed by members of the community and by a specialist singer in the synagogue and at private celebrations. Some of the Hebrew texts are common to other Jewish communities, but many are recited in Judeo-Arabic. As with other piyyutim (devotional songs), the poet usually "signed" his name as an acrostic formed from the initial letter of each verse. Some piyyutim were written as early as the tenth century. While the texts were transmitted in written form, the melodies were transmitted orally. In keeping with Jewish Orthodox law, the shbahoth were sung on the Sabbath and festivals, but during the week they were also accompanied by musical instruments. The tunes are mostly metrical, composed in the melodic modes of Arab music. Women chanted the shbahoth along with men, particularly in the home, despite the halachic restriction discussed in the Gemara (Berchot 24a) on hearing a woman's voice, which does not pertain in most Jewish communities to women singing piyyutim or sacred texts in a group.

In India, the hazzanim (cantors) used to sing the shbahoth in the synagogue. In 1937, one Abdil David, who had migrated from Baghdad to Bombay as a teenager, produced a series of four 78rpm recordings of the songs accompanied by a Bene Israel instrumentalist. Some of Manasseh's collection includes renditions by those Bombay musicians and cantors. It is significant that Shimon Kharilkar, a Bene Israel, also used to

sing and record some of the Baghdadi songs, including the popular Arabic song "Sniffing Cocaine" sung on different Jewish festivals! In 2009, Sara Manasseh and Julian Futter produced some of these songs in a CD entitled *Shir Hodu: Jewish Song from Bombay of the 30's*. These collaborations provide an antidote to the common perception that relations between the Baghdadis and the Bene Israel community in Bombay were strained, to say the least.

Shbahoth-Songs of Praise in the Babylonian Jewish Tradition, which is part of the SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) Musicology Series, demonstrates linguistic and musical prowess covering Hebrew, Arabic, and English, as well as musical and textual mastery. However, the book is disjointed, which is a pity. The sections on the musical traditions of the Jewish-Babylonian diaspora had already been published in large part, and there are only two substantial new sections in the whole book: on piyyutim, and the Coda, which summarizes the major attributes of the songs presented in the anthology. The chapter entitled "The Poetry in Its Historical Context" seems misplaced. It traces the development of Jewish poetry from Palestine and Babylon through medieval Spain, referring to rhythmic schemes, verse types, and rhetoric in poetry. All this general information on Spanish Jewish poets and Genizah poems should either have been integrated into the body of the text or been presented before the historical, social, and musical background of Babylonian Jewry.

Manasseh's book is part of a new and growing interest in song and performance among Indian Jewish communities both in India, in Israel, and in the diaspora. Significantly, the subtitle of her book *From Baghdad to Bombay and London* shows that musical traditions survive away from the epicenter and in many different diasporas. Among the Bene Israel community, the performance of the kirtan persisted in Israel until at least the 1980s, although it may be dying out today. Among the Cochin Jews, women's songs in Malayalam are being revived in choirs and on compact discs. There is also a growing interest in the Hebrew devotional hymns of the Cochin Jews, some of which may have been influenced by the shbahoth of the Baghdadis in India. New Internet sites are opening, which preserve piyyutim and other Jewish songs. Manasseh has contributed to the preservation of the traditions of Babylonian Jews by providing both a disc and the musical notations of their special songs so that future generations can play, sing, and remember them.