

Maqam of the Week

Book of Numbers – Summer 2009

David M. Betesh

The Middle Eastern Sephardic Jewish community has a unique tradition of using a different maqam (Arabic: melody type) each Shabbat for the Shaharit (morning) prayer services. The melodies used in a given maqam aim effectively to express the mood throughout the prayers. The maqam that will be used is based on the theme of the parasha.

The main maqamat generally used are: Rast, Mahour, Ajam, Nahwand, Saba, Sigah, Bayat, Hoseni, Rahawi/Nawah and Hijaz.

The maqamat have different melodies and have different reasons as to why they are used. Allow me to explain why and when some of the maqamat will be used throughout the weeks of the early summer 2009 season—specifically during the eight weeks of the Book of Numbers (Sefer Bamidbar Sinai).

The information here is based on the traditions of the Sephardic Syrian Jews of Aleppo as recorded by the Red Pizmonim book, *Sefer Shir U'Shbaha Hallel Ve'Zimrah*. There are slight variations in the maqam choices by the Beirut, Damascus, Jerusalem and other Middle Eastern communities.

On **Shabbat Bamidbar**, which is Shabbat Kallah (the Shabbat prior to Shavuot), the prayers are conducted in Maqam Hoseni. On years that Bamidbar does not coincide with Shabbat Kallah, Maqam Rast would be applied, because this is the first parasha of Sefer Bamidbar. Maqam Hoseni is related to the Shavuot holiday, because it is when we commemorate the receiving of the Torah. Since the Torah is something of great beauty, Hoseni, the maqam that means “beauty” in Arabic, is applied. Maqam Hoseni is

Sephardic Pizmonim Project
 עמוד ראשי | הקדמה | מקצרות | מפתחות פזמונים | טעמי המקרא | תפילות | מאגרות | מועדים
 May 15, 2009 | Shabbat Behar-Behuqotai, Maqam Nawah, Saba, Mahour, or Nahwand

Sephardic Pizmonim Project - In Memory of Gabriel A. Shrem

בגמי עמי עשיו יהיה נועם ה' וכו'
 ס פ ר
 שיר ושבחה הלל הזמרה

Liturgical Traditions of the Middle Eastern Sephardic Jewish communities
 من النغابيد اليهودية في الشرق الأوسط
 May 29: Shabuot (Pentecost)
 Maqamat: Shabbat Kallah= Hoseni, 1 Shabuot= Sigah, (2 Shabuot= Ajam, outside Israel)

- BOOK OF RUTH SAMPLE
- KETUBAH FOR SHABUOT
- AMON YOM ZEH
- AZHAROT
- NISHMAT- RAQS EL BAN

שיר לה' שיר חדש שירו לה' כל הארץ

Aleppo Codex | 63,876 visitors since April 23, 2006 | Pizmonim Books available at Sephardic Heritage Foundation | Designed by Sam Franco

Welcome to the official home of the Sephardic Pizmonim Project!

also used for the ta'amim (cantillations) of Megillat Ruth; the scroll that is read during the Shavuot festival.

For **Shabbat Naso**, the longest parasha of the Torah, the prayers are conducted in Maqam Saba (which means army). There are two explanations for this. The first is because the words of “Yose'e Saba” are mentioned in the opening of the parasha. Another explanation is because the subject of “Sotah” is connected to Brit Milah. A Brit Milah is something that protects oneself against promiscuity so that one will not see oneself in the dire situation of the “Sotah.”

On **Shabbat Beha'alotecha**, the prayers are conducted in Maqam Sigah. Maqam Sigah is usually applied in connection to building the Mishkan and specifically the building of the Menorah (this is also the reason why Sigah is used in

connection to the Hanukkah festival). Also, it may or may not be a coincidence that Sigah, the word that means “third” in Persian, is used for the third parasha of Sefer Bamidbar. Sigah is the maqam used for reading the Torah.

On **Shabbat Shelah Lecha**, the prayers are conducted in Maqam Hijaz (meaning barrier, referring to the location on the Arabian peninsula). The Damascus tradition, as well as the Jerusalem tradition, is to apply Nahwand for this parasha. The reason to apply this sad maqam is because of the sin of the spies. The spies, who brought back negative reports about the Land of Israel, caused a tremendous trepidation and sadness amongst the children of Israel. The punishment for this sin was to have the nation wander in the desert for the next 40 years.

Continued on page 2

Maqam...

Continued from page 1

On **Shabbat Korach**, the prayers are conducted in Maqam Nahwand. This maqam is used when there is a controversy in the parasha, and this holds true here where Korach, the first cousin of Moses and Aaron, starts a rebellion and tries to overthrow the chosen leaders of Israel.

When **Chukat-Balak** are combined, the prayers are conducted in Maqam Hoseni or Mahour. On years that Huqat is read alone, Hoseni is appropriate to use, because the idea of following the laws of Parah Adumah, a law without a given explanation, reflects the spirit of the Matan Torah aspect (of following a rule without knowing the reason). On years that Balak is read alone, Mahour (a maqam that means chagrined or broken hearted), is appropriate, because Bilaam and Balak are very angry and broken-hearted after the attempted curses are switched into blessings. Another explanation based on the Hebrew word *maher* (quick) is appropriate because it reflects the relative quickness of Bilaam to chase after the money of Balak and to curse Israel.

On **Shabbat Pinhas**, all traditions agree to conduct the prayers in Maqam Saba. An explanation for this is because G-d gives a *brit shalom* (peace treaty) to Pinhas for his courageous and zealous actions in killing those involved in promiscuous behavior with the Midianites and the worship of their gods. Maqam Saba is used in other cases with the mention of a brit/covenant, because this is the maqam for the Brit Milah. According to the Zohar, Elijah the Prophet was a reincarnation of Pinhas, and being that Elijah is the prophet that witnesses every circumcision, it is associated with Maqam Saba. It also may or may not be a coincidence, but this is the eighth parasha of Sefer Bamidbar, and eight is the number of brit.

When **Matot-Masei** are combined, the prayers are conducted in Nawah or Nahwand. Maqam Nawah would specifically be appropriate, because it is the maqam used for ending a Humash and this is the last parasha in Sefer Bamidbar. In our days, the de-facto choice of most hazzanim is Maqam Nahwand. In years when the two are read separately, Maqam Nahwand would be used for Matot, and Maqam Saba would be used for Masei.

Special thanks to Hacham Mordechai Nadaf for providing crucial explanations for some of the maqam choices.

You can learn about these topics and more by visiting pizmonim.com. □