Seven Songs

View PDF



Dr. Jane Mushabac, English professor at CUNY, has had fellowships from the Mellon Foundation and Harvard University. A Short and Remarkable History of New York City, which she co-authored, was named a “Best of the Best” by the American Association of University Presses. Recent writing includes an essay on Melville in the online Columbia Journal of American Studies and an NEH-funded podcast on Whitman. Her Ladino short story, “Pasha: Pensamientos de David Aroughetti,” appeared in Sephardic Horizons this past fall. This article appears in issue 13 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

I.
Let’s start with “Elohenu she-baShamayim.” It’s a Passover counting song.

Most of the Sephardic songs I know I learned from my father. Until I was twelve we lived in Manhattan, but when we learned to be Americans by moving to the suburbs, we got a new activity in our lives—one that nearly all Americans practice day in and day out—regular bouts of riding in the car. For some reason, whenever my mother was driving with me over the Atlantic Beach Bridge from forays to the supermarket or to the bakery for a Jewish rye, the dashboard of our pea-green stub-nosed 1950 Dodge would smoke. The upward lilting smoke accompanied terribly tense conversations about hairstyles or other deeply painful mother-teenage daughter issues. Driving in general did not suit my mother’s Bronx Turkish temperament, if you’ll forgive a stereotype; it made her anxious; it did not come naturally to her. Within a few years, she rebelled entirely against the suburban life, and we moved back to the city, where she could go to Carnegie Hall or a museum in a civilized way, by subway or cab or on foot, and could get a job as a payroll secretary.

During the suburban interlude, my father, as the provider who had to drive from Long Island to his office in Brooklyn, had the better car, a 1958 two-toned blue

Dodge with tailfins (!); he had acclimated far better to this American business of driving because he'd been doing it for years. As a man, he had no gendered driving dysfunction, although I did realize years later that all along he had this habit of putting his foot up and down on the gas pedal, as if he hadn't really decided yet to go forward body and soul with being a high-fueled American. One summer I took a job at another branch of his company in Brooklyn, and so we had a steady two months of car-rides to Brooklyn and back, he dropping me off on the way to his office and later picking me up. This was a good routine. During these rides, father and daughter in a legitimate business enterprise could reap all the rewards of time together, and it was not surprising that he used the time to sing me songs, or to teach me how to say it's raining in Italian (piove!), or the nursery rhyme by which he learned the French vowels in Turkey in 1909. The songs he loved to sing while driving were mostly those he learned from his mother. Sephardic songs belonged to women, because men sang the liturgy of prayers and blessings. Singing his mother's songs called up all the pleasures of being a treasured son. He also loved his father's blessings, and sang them at the table or at synagogue with conviction in a happy natural way, but those didn't come up in the car.

We'll get to the car songs shortly, but "Elohenu she-baShamayim" calls out to me first because, although my father learned it as a child, with all the excitement that followed, a world war in Turkey and the American twentieth century, he forgot the song until about 75 years after he learned it, when I commandeered my family to take a weekly class with me given by Joe Elias, the son of a Monastirli cantor, at the Hebrew Arts School on West 67th Street in Manhattan. My family included my Sephardi-looking Ashkenazi husband, our youngest babe in utero, and then in arms, and my father and mother. Although my mother had disdain for Turkish songs, which she'd grown up with from brittle heavy 78s played with unconscionable frequency by her parents, and rowdy Saturday night Turkish musical gatherings in the Bronx, she rose to join any activity that got the family together and brought social focus to the week. Our oldest son, at ten years old, along with our seven-year-old, managed to elude this weekly gathering. For an hour or so one night a week for two years, a bunch of us sat in a little circle learning songs that Joe remembered from his mother and collected from women informants. He'd been a District Superintendent for the Board of Education, but his passion was the repertoire of songs that his mother knew by heart, hundreds of them, and I gather—I found this out many years later—that Rabbi Marc Angel, descended from the Jews of Turkey and Rhodes, had encouraged him to perform and preserve. My cousin, Elliott Kerman showed up also, Elliott soon founding his well-known barbershop, doo-wop, and pop Rockapella; while his group's usual

fare was great snappy black t-shirt choreographed popular love and zombie songs, he was still drawn to the Zamir Chorale and Sephardic songs. Elliott's grandmother—did he know this?— my father's sister Esther, had been a beloved kanoun (zither) player in Turkey as a girl. We sat around Joe's small classroom, listening to his stories, and singing through his self-published 20-page photocopied song-books, rich with Isaac Levy folk music collection borrowings and with black and white cartoonish covers showing a mustached oud player in a fez and a tall thin festively dressed woman holding high a tambourine. Joe mostly played the guitar, his foot on the chair, his guitar propped up on his knee, and especially after retiring from the Board of Education went on to play concerts here and in Israel, finding especially rapt audiences in Florida. It was a point of pride with him that he was an authentic Sephardic singer, as opposed to many people springing up on the concert circuit. He never said anything like purity of blood, of course, because of the phrase's provenance in Spain, but the many Johnny-come-latelies who sang Sephardic songs earned a certain dismissal from him. He was the real thing.

And his son Danny played (and still plays) a superb Balkan clarinet. Joe never mentioned that a truly authentic Sephardic singer would be a woman. He had a corner on the market, and while he generously had us share in his glory—we performed at street fairs and at the Sephardic Home for the Aged—my dad and I did one song with my new baby in my arms, written up in, not the Huffington Post, but the Sephardic Homes News; and another day our middle son belted out a song with us on the Lower East Side. But Joe was the professional and a total pleasure, and we were the tag-alongs, and rightly so.

When Joe introduced a variant of Elohenu one evening, what a gift. Although my father's version was slightly different, here was a cherished counting song thrillingly recovered from my father's Ottoman era. My father ignored Joe's wording, more complicated and less appealing than his own, but regained a piece of his Anatolian-peninsula childhood. And once he reclaimed it, there it was for the rest of us, for every Passover thereafter for our sons and, among others, the extended Elliott Kerman clan. I eventually created a brief song sheet for these seders; and as my father passed into his eighties and nineties, his eyebrows ever bushier, we kept up the validation of generations celebrating the same holiday with the same song. "Elohenu" didn't displace "Dayenu," or "God of Might," or the Ashkenazic version of Mah nishtanah ha laila hazeh, but there it was:

Eloheno she-baShamayim, el dio nos yeva a Yerushalaim (the refrain, our God in the heavens will bring us to Jerusalem).

Kualo es el uno? Uno es el Kriador, Barukh Hu uBarukh shemo (bless Him, bless His name).
Kualo son los dos? Dos, Moshe y Aron, Uno es el Kriador, Barukh Hu uBarukh shemo.
Two is Moshe and Aaron. Three is our three fathers, four, the four mothers of Israel, five, the five books of the Law, six, six days of the week, seven, seven days counting Shabbat, eight, eight days for berit milah, nine, nine months of pregnancy, ten, ten commandments of the Law. The Spanish is so easy, the concepts so central to what matters in life, and no small thing too that the mamas numerically beat out the papas.

Kualo son los tres? tres, muestros padres son.
Kualo son los kuatro? kuatro madres de Israel.
Kualo son los sinco? sinco libros de la ley.
Kualo son los sesh? sesh dias de la semana.
Kualo son los siete? siete dias kon Shabbat.
Kualo son los ocho? ocho dias de berit milah.
Kualo son los mueve? mueve meses de la pregnada.
Kualo son los diez? diez komandimientos de la ley.

Going past verse ten has never been of interest; ten verses are enough. And my father never talked about the 50,000 Salonika Ladino-speaking Jews murdered in the Holocaust. He was very focused on the present, and if he read the December 6, 1983 New York Times article Joe handed out about the horror of that decimation, my father never mentioned it. For him, a song reclaimed was a happiness reclaimed. Incidentally, I added to the song sheet the Ladino chant, when you hold up the matzah, which everyone knows in English, but here it is in Ladino: Este el pan de la africion ke komyeron muestros padres en tierra de Ayifto, todo el ke tiene hambre venga i koma, todo lo ke tiene de menester, venga y paskue, este anyo aki, el anyo ke viene en tierra de Yisrael, este anyo siervos, al anyo ke viene en tierra de Yisrael, hijos foros. My father always sang this at Passover, and I finally realized what it was and put it on our Passover song sheet. It’s in Rabbi Angel’s Sephardic Haggadah, be assured.

II
The second song is a one-line lullaby. I think it’s a Turkish song translated into Ladino, and the words say “Ya se va durmir,” and then the child’s name. Lullabies usher a child into the sweet nether world of sleep. Joe Elias didn’t know this one, and I’ve never seen it in a book. But the simple words are so-and-so is falling asleep already; that’s it. The line is repeated three times, and then a fourth time

without the child’s name. I think it was my father who sang this to me at bedtime when he happened to be home on time; my mother didn’t go in for this kind of stuff. But over and over again, with a modal twang, the words kept coming, lulling the child to sleep gently and ineluctably, as if someone simply made up the line as an easy way to soothe a child to rest. I in turn sang it to my children. And then when my father was on East 5th Street in Dr. Nichols’s nursing home at the end of his one hundred years of life, and struggling with the inability to be his charming instructive optimistic self, I placed my cool hand on his forehead, to soothe him with Ya se va durmir, Victor, Ya se va durmir ir ir ir , Vi i i i i c tor, Ya se va durmir ir ir ir , Vi—i ictor, Ya se va durmir-ir ir ir ir . It’s possible my father’s mother sang this song to me, but I doubt it. I think it was just my father, whispering like Athena into my ear, and calming me from the uproars of family life.

I don’t know that I actually ever heard my father’s mother sing any of these songs which he told me she’d taught him. Knowing that she’d sung them to him was just a fact of my growing up, but I don’t think I ever experienced it directly. The singing came down to me as a gift from her via my father.

III

And so, did I ever hear my father’s mother actually sing “Ken ve va kerer a mi?” Probably not, but this one was definitely for the car. And soon I was wailing out the chorus along with my father, Who is going to love me, who is going to love me, Sabiendo ke yo te amo y me muero de amor de ti, knowing I love you, your love is the death of me, as if the greatest questions of life were decided in Ladino driving on Flatbush Avenue, famously the longest street in the world, or so said my father. But it was the song she sang most often, he told me. Who is going to love me, you’re abandoning me for another woman. Why such sad lyrics, why such a tragically bitter song when my father’s father was truly a good Jewish man, and my father’s mother such a well-loved joyful woman? Yo me acodro de aquella noche, cuando la luna me enganyo (I remember that night when the moon tricked me!). Why did she take such pleasure in those lines? The song said, She fell in love, and the man abandoned her. And my father’s mother sang it with zest and force of spirit!

Why?

Ethnomusicologist Dr. Judith Cohen tells me this song was not from medieval Spain (people erroneously think most Sephardic songs are from medieval Spain—forget it!). Probably instead, she said, Ken me va kerer a mi was one of many modern songs that appeared in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Spain and reached Ottoman Sephardic communities “through touring

Spanish singers, and perhaps on the ‘new’ phonograph machines. Istanbul,” says Judith, “was a very early center of the recording industry.” We can picture that the song became very popular.

The feisty woman’s complaint emboldened popular singers, who began to make their way across the cultural landscape with aplomb. The very idea of a woman’s song must have lit up women’s lives and made a lament into a complaint, capturing all the intention of a woman’s purpose-driven hectic domestic life to survive in tough times, even with sunny Turkish skies above. Who is going to love me, you tricked me, you abandoned me for another woman, you know well I have a son, he was born from that misery, I was so disgraced even my mother abandoned me, tomorrow night I’m going to make my way with my son to the salty sea, to throw away all my sins, because I know that I am going to die. None of it was true to my father’s mother’s circumstances. It was the very differentness that appealed.

Above all, this was entertainment—and entertainment before technology took over and made women singing while cooking a thing of the past. But the feeling of heroism in the angry singer made this song a live rebuttal to whatever might face her on the horizon, whether a great war at home, or transporting herself and her husband and six children across the seas to a new land.

IV

The fourth song is famous, “Arboles”—Trees Cry for Rain. This was a great car song. Readers probably know it. Arboles yoran por luvyas, montanyas por ayres (trees cry for rain, mountains for wind). Then my father and I sang it at my parents’ fiftieth wedding anniversary party. We sang it at the microphone to the gathered guests. I was newly pregnant with my third child and we sang in Ladino, Trees cry for rain, so do I cry for you, my beloved. Come hither, my beloved, come, come see me; I want to speak but cannot, my heart sighs. Come hither, my beloved, and we’ll unite—aunaremos! See that word una in the middle of the Spanish word a-una-remos—let’s become one.

Now here’s the thing about this song. It’s so famous that there are books named after it, and videos. The internet and YouTube have many versions of it. But there’s a chorus that my father never sang. It’s a key part of the song, but my father never sang it, and neither do we: Penso y digo, ke va ser de mi? En tieras ajenas no puedo bivir (I think—I ask—what will become of me?—I cannot live in foreign lands).

It’s easy to imagine the song is about the expulsion from Spain, or about leaving beautiful Turkey when there was no way to make a living there. How can we sing in foreign lands? My father never wanted that lament—or maybe his mother simply never sang it, and he’d never heard it. Arboles for him was simply a love song. There was something poignant about my father wanting to sing that song, when his relationship with my mother was stormy and vexing. But, as always, joy was uppermost, celebrating a fifty-year marriage and children and grandchildren represented the best happiness. My husband and I and three sons sang Arboles at our eldest son’s wedding this August at a state park in Oregon. Enfrente de me, ay un angelo, con dos ojos me mira. Avlar kero i non puedo, mi korazon suspira (an angel stands before me looking at me with her beautiful eyes, I want to speak and cannot, my heart sighs). Hello and welcome to our new daughter-in-law.

V

At many weddings, a famous song that gets many women onto the dance floor is the Misirlu. Women, and often men too, get up to join this Greek dance, a single line winding in and around the dance floor. I get up with them, but for me, the Misirlu is first of all a song. My father’s mother was quiet and soft-spoken in her old age, while my mother’s mother could be brash and mean, although always interesting, and excited about being in the world. My brash mother’s mother used to sing the famous Greek song about the alluring Egyptian girl, Misirlu. It would be bedtime and my sister and I would be in bed, and I’d call her and say, Grandma, sing us Ach ya habibi (that’s the refrain, but also the title we used for the song). She’d come in, a big woman with stature and a Turkish hauteur, she’d sit down in my room on the edge of my bed with all her many bangle bracelets on her arm. She’d get a diva-ish Turkish puckering of her lips, and start with a low mysterious sweetness,

O polimo I gli casu imay ya (my little bird, you’re sweet),
O polimo I gli casu imay ya
Ach ya habibi, ah ya haleli, ah (my dear, my beloved, o my love),
Mono no si klepso (I will steal her away)
Mam aptin ara pia (from Arabic lands).
Aah, a-ah ah, ah ah ah, a a Ah, Misirlu.

This grandmother in front of the house once when she didn’t realize that I, a little bit of a thing, was right behind her, stepped back landing hard on my foot. Grandma, I piped up bravely, you stepped on my foot. Don’t you say you’re sorry? From the perch of her grand height, she glanced around and down at me, and pronounced magisterially, You’re lucky I didn’t press. I was. But at bedtime, I’d say, grandma, do the head thing. She’d sing a little, put her arms up over her

head, her arms with her twenty bangle bracelets, as her head slid forward and back like a belly dancer's, awing her grand-daughters in pajamas. It's clear most people are cheated and unaware that Misirlu is a song, one of the richest in the world's repertory. Its haunting sensual melody has long been famous, used in many movies, like Pulp Fiction. Let's not get this wrong. This is not a Ladino song, but a Greek song. Sephardic songs include French, Greek, Turkish, and Hebrew songs. What they reflect is a predilection to make the entertainment of singing a part of daily life, in whatever guises or languages or occasions present themselves.

VI

As I said, my mother didn't hold much truck with Turkish or Ladino music. She decided early that the patriarchal unfairness inflicted upon her by her father was attributable to Judaism itself. She certainly didn't want to buy into that worldview at a time when American culture was sweeping women into the future. She found the Metropolitan Opera elevating, a key to the future somehow of the savvy woman. She went with her brother and sister-in-law and took my father along to all the operas, and bought the librettos, those soft gray-clad somber treatises on women's tragedies and comedies sung into high-class art.

But there was one song that made her laugh. It would pop out of her without her thinking about it, because it represented a salty rebelliousness that fit her refusal to be brought up a second-class citizen as a girl. The song was "La Vida Do Por El Raki." That means I'd give my life for raki, a potent licorice-flavored brandy, and my mother was all too happy to sing its pleasures and the raffishness it liberated in her from the tight constraints she felt her father represented, for instance: no college, you're a girl. So she could sing it and feel Free! Rakish and raffish, she'd sing La vida do por el raki, no puedo yo desharlo, de bever nunca me arti de tanto amarlo (I give my life to raki, I can't stop drinking it because I love it madly.) Of course, it didn't matter that her father loved the song as well, her mother too. It threw everyone in together to a great need for singing, for the wish to be free of impossible constraints. Kuando esta en el baril, el no avla del todo, kuando me ago yo kandil, ago bayuos de lodo (when it's in the barrel, it doesn't say a thing to me, but when I'm drunk, I go down in infamy). Me siento yo ijo varon, me siento yo primario, sin tener liras en el kashon, me siento milionario (I feel myself a young man, I feel myself top dog, without liras in the cashbox, I'm a millionaire). La vida do por el raki.

VII

Here's the seventh song, "Oseh shalom bimromav." At our youngest son's bar

mitzvah, after my mother and I did the hamotzi (this was unusual, but fine), my father asked me to remain at the front of the gathering. So there he and I stood, and when he began singing “Oseh shalom,” I joined in and everyone joined in. It’s that way with the important songs. We know them. We know them well, from our whole lives. “Oseh shalom bimromav, hu ya’aseh shalom aleynu, ve’al kol Yisrael ve’imru amen.” The song is simple and short. No one has to think, do I know the words? It’s right there. Here’s how Rabbi David de Sola Pool translates it, “May He who creates the harmony of the spheres, create peace for us and for all Israel: and say ye, Amen.”

Coda

My mother’s name was Estelle or Stella, like the word Estrella pronounced Streya, meaning star, and although she was a difficult impetuous woman, no one could help loving her force of spirit. So another song reminded us of what she was about, “Streya Biva,” which ends very differently from the songs in which the lover throws herself tragically into the sea. “Streya Biva” is a new addition to our family songbook. My middle son took it up from our reconstructed Ladino song sheets this year and sang it at a little dinner for my husband and me and his friends, as a surprise for us on a special occasion. When he was a child, I said, I’ll tell you what I want for Hanukkah. Work with grandpa and learn the long blessing that he sings on the first night of Hanukkah. What scarf or book or even jug of honey could compare with that most perfect gift? He got it just right, and, many Hanukahs since my father died, my son has launched into it quietly, bringing light unto the nations, bringing a sense of calm and connectedness. This night at dinner, he sang “Streya Biva.”

Tu sos una streya biva, abaxada de ariva, si venites a tomarme, en tus brasos abrasarme, en tus brasos abrasarme. (You’re a living star, descended from above, if you come to take me, you’ll take me in your arms to embrace me).

Las tus karas koloradas, la dulsura ke me dates, komo ti ya no ay otra, ni aki ni en Evropa, ni aki ni en Evropa (your cheeks are rosy, ah the sweetness you bring me, there’s no one like you, not here or in Europe).

Las tus ojos son brilyantes, parecen dos diamantes, arelumbras korazones, de donzeyas y barones, de donzeyas i barones (your eyes are like diamonds, lighting up the hearts of young girls and young men).

Sos yena de ermozura, venida de la natura, en tus brazos me tomates, a la kama me yevates, a la kama me yevates (you are beautiful, your beauty is natural, you took me in your arms to bed, in your arms you carried me to bed).