



## Mizrahi music hits the Israeli pop charts



Galeet Dardashti said pop stars have made the case that bringing the music of the Mizrahi Jews into today's scene is "important in terms of maintaining cultural history"

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The sacred music of Jews from Arab lands has enjoyed a resurgence in Israel, with traditional songs and poetry transformed into popular numbers in the pop, rock, jazz, and even heavy metal mode.

In a talk in New Brunswick, anthropologist and performer Dr. Galeet Dardashti said this "*piyutim* craze" is also reflected in popular classes that have attracted young and old, men and women, and Mizrahi and Ashkenazi students.

Dardashti spoke Feb. 23 at Douglass College Center in New Brunswick during a program sponsored by Rutgers University's Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life.

The resurrection of the creative and spiritual works of the Mizrahim is the result of people feeling "they have lost a lot," said Dardashti. "They feel they don't have a connection" to the culture of the Mizrahi countries. "There's a sense of wanting to reconnect."

Dardashti leads the all-female Divahn, whose repertoire is Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewish music. The former cantor at Congregation Shomrei Emunah in Montclair, she serves as High Holy Days cantor at Congregation Beth El in South Orange.

The marginalization of Mizrahi music, she told the close to 150 audience members, began with the Ashkenazi founders of Israel, who regarded music as a key to engendering a united spirit of nation-building.

“By the time of the large Mizrahi immigration of the early 1950s, a culture had already been established, and Ashkenazi music had a monopoly,” said Dardashti.

By the 1980s, few Israelis knew anything about the *piyutim* — works of liturgical poetry that were traditionally sung, chanted, or recited during worship — that had been a part of the everyday lives of Mizrahi Jews for centuries.

That marginalization was played out in her own family, said Dardashti. Her grandfather, Yona Dardashti, had been one of the most popular singers in Iran of classical Persian-Jewish music. In Israel, however, he was largely ignored and often returned to perform in pre-revolutionary Iran, where he continued to be hailed as a star.

The current interest in Mizrahi music, said Dardashti, was triggered by the Avi Chai Foundation, an American nonprofit that, in 2003, began funding “Kehillot Sharot” — singing communities — to bring together diverse audiences with the aim of deepening their connection to lesser known Jewish cultural expressions, especially the *piyut*.

Led by musicians, writers, and *paytanim*, or singers of traditional poetry, participants in the Kehillot Sharot studied liturgical pieces and learned to sing *piyutim*.

Dardashti said Orthodox men are traditionally prohibited from hearing women sing, but the *haredi paytanim* leaders allowed women to sing in groups and as soloists because Orthodox rabbis had designated the classes as outreach.

“Spreading this poetry through informal courses has sprung up over the last 10 years throughout Israel,” said Dardashti, who was the Bildner Center’s Reitman Visiting Scholar during the fall semester and is now visiting scholar at the Taub Center for Israel Studies at New York University.

As the popularity of the classes grew, municipalities began funding the *kehillot*. With the help of Avi Chai, courses also emerged at universities, and collaborations were established between *paytanim* and rock and pop stars.

*Paytanim* began giving concerts either on individual bills or with popular singers. The annual Piyut Festival in Jerusalem now draws thousands.

As interest snowballed, Avi Chai launched a website, [piyut.org.il](http://piyut.org.il), compiling thousands of *piyutim*.

Avi Chai has stopped funding the Kehillot Sharot courses, but the *piyutim* have become so much a part of the Israeli cultural scene that their revival is continuing, said Dardashti.

The Israeli government that once turned its back on Mizrahi music has taken over and is making the *piyut* website more user-friendly and rolling it into the National Jewish Library. It now gets 75,000 hits a month. Additionally, Israeli kindergartners will soon begin learning *piyutim* under a government grant.

“Everyone in Israel now understands what *piyutim* are,” Dardashti said. “It’s in the air. These pop stars were able to make a case...about why they are important in terms of maintaining cultural history.”

Dardashti concluded the program by singing a traditional Iranian *piyut*.

<http://njewishnews.com/article/26476/mizrahi-music-hits-the-israeli-pop-charts>