

4. Choir: In memory of the first day, when [the founders of the confraternity] began to rise at dawn to deliver their prayers in front of God, so that Redemption and the coming of the Messiah can be reached, now and every year they exalt His glory.

5. Solo: How dear are the friends who gathered to speak to God and glorify Him every day at dawn: may they receive a prize of great goodness!

6. Choir: Consider how both this [holiday] and that [celebration] bring together magnificence and beauty, as at the time of judgment and of our gladness, *Hosha'na Rabah* appears, adding merit to the day of righteousness.

7. Solo: If so, at the precise moment of this gladness, which is "re-doubled," let us not silence our song, and instead happily begin a choir in honor of the Ruler, so that He will grant to the confraternity all that she is asking for:

8. Choir: Oh, Author of great acts, who makes the light of your mercy shine for the justs, granting great goodness and fulfillment as long as the moon itself [shines], bestow [all of it] to the confraternity of the *Shomrim la-Doqer*.

The influence of Italian Jewish musical practices on the rest of the Diaspora is further explored in tonight's selections, which continue with melodies of Italian origins that have been incorporated into the musical repertoire of Congregation Shearith Israel. Among them are the Psalm, *Mizmor ledavid habu l'adoni*, composed in Livorno by Michele Bolaffi (its earliest source is a manuscript, dated 1826, found in the Eduard Birnbaum Collection of the Hebrew Union College), and two versions of the poem *Ein kelo'henu* (one for Passover and Festivals, based on a melody known as "Alei d'Italia," and another for Shabbat *Zakhor* and Purim), which traveled from the Portuguese communities of Italy to that of Amsterdam, before reaching the shores of North America. The presentation of the Choir concludes with a selection of melodies that characterize the evenings in the liturgical life of New York's Spanish and Portuguese synagogue. These tunes, which are regularly performed at services, but that do not usually find their way on the concert stage, provide a unique occasion to experience the "flavor" of this congregation, which carries its centuries-old tradition into the pulsating heart of the city.

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Image credit: A Jewish Concert: Tlemcen, France 1870, Moldovan Family Collection



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# SEPHARDIC NIGHTLIFE MUSIC

## THREE CONCERT SERIES

Presented by American Sephardi Federation and Yeshiva University Museum



## GHETTO BEATS: JEWISH MUSICAL NIGHT LIFE, FROM ITALY TO NY Wednesday, December 5, 2007 at 8pm

Performance of the Renaissance Jewish repertoire:  
**Male Choir of Congregation Shearith Israel**, directed by  
**Maestro Leon Hyman**

**After-Party:**  
DJ Handler mixing contemporary beats based on the Sephardic musical heritage

What better way to open the music series, *Sephardic Nightlife*, than with a celebration of "ghetto music"?

Tonight's program plays with words, and with sounds, to create a unique listening experience that brings together, surely for the first time, the sounds of nightlife from early-modern Italian ghettos, the repertoire of the choir of Congregation Shearith Israel, New York City's Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, and the magic of DJ Handler, soul of the NY Sephardic Music Festival.

Never, in the time before the creation of the State of Israel, did Jews of so many varied origins live together, and in such a stimulating (if at times threatening) environment, as they did in the land they called in Hebrew *I-Tar-Yah*, or the "Island of Divine Dew." A crossroads in world culture, Italy has, for over two thousand years, been a haven for several layers of immigration from the four corners of the Diaspora, allowing for the persistence and co-existence of peculiar Italian, Sephardic and Ashkenazi identities, rituals and traditions. It all happened at the dawn of the Modern Era, behind the gates of the Renaissance ghettos. Distinct traditions, customs, melodies, and recipes, were preserved and created, bearing the influence of the communities where they originated. The Italian Jewish ghettos can thus be seen both as "a time capsule," where older Jewish cultural traits were kept, as well as a "laboratory of modernity," in which such traits were adapted to ever-changing conditions. Italian Jews incessantly mediated their way amongst tradition, diversity, religious conflicts, cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, while being socially segregated inside the ghettos, which were located at the very heart of Christianity.

Italy's own history is reflected in its Jewish melodies. Each Jewish community developed a style of synagogue song according to its origins in the Diaspora, but also in relationship to its particular cultural environment. Some Jewish groups retained the ancient Italian rituals, while those who immigrated to Italy kept their original Sephardic and Ashkenazi customs. All communities, however, adapted their sounds to the immediate Jewish and non-Jewish surroundings. Ghettos facilitated the mingling of different Jewish musical traits, and at the same time exposed them to the influence of Italian art and popular music. Folk tunes, as well as Italy's most celebrated music, Opera and bel canto, were incorporated into the liturgy. Some of the melodies created in the Italian communities were disseminated throughout the Diaspora, where they are still sung, even if their origin has been forgotten.

Tonight's program includes a sampling of Italian Jewish music from Italy's ghettos. Mantuan composer, Salamone Rossi, who lived between circa 1570 and 1630, and whose activities are documented in the ghettos of Mantua and Venice (the latter was the earliest Italian ghetto, established in 1516), is one of the most celebrated Jewish musicians of all times. While active in the secular musical arena, most notably as a composer of instrumental music, Rossi also set to music a selection of Hebrew texts, which were published in Venice in 1622-23 under the title *Shirim asher Ilishlomoh* (or "The Songs of Solomon," a pun on the *Song of Songs*), with an introduction by the noted rabbi, poet, cantor (and gambler), Leone Modena. These settings, which

publicly brought art music and synagogue song together in Jewish liturgical life for the first time in history, were more or less forgotten by the Jews of Italy. They were discovered three centuries later, and welcomed as a beloved addition to the musical repertoires of German, and later American, Reform congregations, whose leaders believed that liturgical innovation should be propagated in the synagogue, and were delighted to find such an illustrious precedent in the Italian Renaissance. However, liturgical and musical innovations have been a central part of the Sephardic tradition, and it is thus no surprise that the choral repertoire of Congregation Shearith Israel includes some of the songs composed by Salamone Rossi. Tonight's program includes a transcription of Rossi's *Adon Olam* by the French composer Samuel Naumbourg, as well as an adaptation of Rossi's setting of Psalm 146 to the communal blessing *Misheberakh* by Maestro Leon Hyman.

The presentation continues with a unique testimony of musical nightlife from the Renaissance ghettos, the *Cantata ebraica* in dialogo by Carlo Grossi, written for the *Shomrim la-boger Confraternita* in Venice at the end of the 17th century, to celebrate the vigil of Hoshana Rabbah. This composition is set for Baritone, four-part choir and *basso continuo*, and has a truly narrative character. The alternation of solo and choral parts tell a vivacious story. On the eve of *Hoshana Rabbah*, the Jewish holiday that marks the seventh day of Sukkot, a man walks down the streets of the ghetto, surprised to see a group of people gathered to sing Hebrew petitions, the *hoshannot*. The group are all members of the confraternity, *Shomrim la-boger* ("Custodians of Dawn"), a Jewish benevolent society that facilitated religious activities within the community. The cantata thus alternates the recitatives of the passer-by with the choral responses of the members of the confraternity in an ongoing dialog. The passer-by begins interrogating the singers, and wonders about their religious fervor. They respond that they are not just happy to be celebrating the Jewish holiday, but they are also rejoicing because it is their confraternity's anniversary. The cantata thus informs us about the traditional practice of nocturnal communal singing of hymns and *piyyutim* (liturgical poems). This practice, which is common to this day in the Sephardic world, and has acquired a particular significance among the Syrian and Moroccan communities, was incorporated into Italian Jewish ghetto life as early as the 16th and 17th centuries. While the musical canons of the piece are those of the late Renaissance, and its composer was a non-Jew, the dialog portrays an intensely Jewish scene, which can be witnessed today in the synagogues of Jerusalem, or Brooklyn.

The lyrics of this piece illuminate the life and hopes of the Jews living in the Italian ghettos. Communal solidarity, the love for tradition, and an equal passion for cultural innovation, truly characterized these Jewish groups. The cantata is indeed a "vignette" of a living, and lively, scene. In it, people gather at night, they celebrate a Holiday, and they make music. But they also engage in incorporating a whole new body of knowledge, that of Kabbalah, into their practices. Within the layers of the poetry, in fact, rests a "coded" message, which propagated Jewish mysticism into Italy and Europe.

1. Solo: My brothers and companions, since it is already well-known that this night is devoted to God's glory, why is it that you show such overwhelming joy? Do tell me what is the reason of your praises.
2. Choir: Oh, you passer-by must know that a plentifulness of joys has conjoined [the] happiness [of celebrating *Hoshana Rabbah*] with our own gladness. A confraternity of the "princes of the people", our own glory, offers thanks to the temple of the Lord King.
3. Solo: Honorable friends of lasting valor, answer again the questions of my heart, and thus tell me the reason of our gathering: are you giving voluntarily, or fulfilling a vow?