

# The Song of *I-Tal-Yah*\*

## A Sound-Guided Tour Across Jewish Italy

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An old joke tells that in Jewish Hell (if there is such thing, of course), people study *gemarah* [part of the Talmud] day and night. And that in Jewish Heaven (ditto), people also study *gemarah* day and night, only understanding it. In my Jewish music version of this joke, I paint quite a different scenario: in Hell we would keep hearing the same old songs over and over again (call up the tune of your choice), and in *gan eden* [heaven] we would get to continuously discover new melodies. Unexpected *nigunim* [devotional tunes], forgotten lyrics, fantastic *nusah* [modes], all working together to shape an extraordinary Jewish musical past which would become alive before our ears ‘*ad ein sof*, without interruption.

This kind of Paradise can be found on earth: it has a real address—even an Internet one—and visiting hours. I am referring, of course, to the National Sound Archives (NSA) of the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem (<http://www.jnul.ac.il>). Since their foundation by Israel Adler in 1964, their rooms host a magnificent collection of sound recordings from all corners of the Diaspora.

I have been an *aficionado* of the NSA for some years now. My presence there recently culminated in the publication of the CD *Italian Jewish Musical Traditions from the Leo Levi Collection (1954-1961)*, an anthology consisting forty-two songs drawn from field recordings, issued by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome. In this article, I will use this CD as our sound companion to a musical journey into the past, attempting to fill the now almost empty synagogues of Italy with their original music, and to understand the melodies that are still sung there. If Jewish heritage travelers to Italy consider musical memory as an essential part of their travel gear, my publication will have reached its goal.

Thanks to scholarly research on the extraordinary activities of Salamone Rossi, Leone Modena and other musicians, today we know a lot about the Italian Jewish “art music scene” of the late Renaissance and the Baroque era. Rossi’s *Ha-shirim asher lishlomo* (1622), Carlo Grossi’s *Cantata He-braica in dialogo* (1682), and the fascinating compositions for the *Hosha‘na Rabbah* celebrations in the Piedmont synagogue of Casale Monferrato (1730s), give us a vivid image of the vitality of ghetto life and the far-reaching cultural ambitions of those segregated Jews. These compositions—often featured in concerts in Europe and in the U.S., and recorded by various artists—are now a most welcome ingredient in the wide spectrum of the Jewish musical world. Yet, in spite of all this, we still have very little knowledge of the music that was *ordinarily* a part of Italian Jewish everyday life in the past.

Not all Italian Jewish music was art music, and not all Italian Jewish art music was composed in the 17th and 18th centuries. Indeed, in synagogues and in private homes, in liturgy and in life-cycle celebrations, in Hebrew and Judeo-Italian, tunes for the cantillation of the Bible and the Passover *Hagaddah*, melodies for prayers, psalms and *piyyutim* (liturgical poems) were, and some still are, sung by the Jews throughout Italy. Most of this orally transmitted heritage was lost over the first half of the 20th century, and can only be heard through the recordings made by Leo Levi in the 1950s. Together with what one can still hear today in the synagogues of a few Italian cities—travelers should

definitely consider Rome, Livorno, Florence, Venice and Turin for this purpose—archival sounds help us paint an unexpected landscape.

The music preserved as oral tradition by the Jews of Italy in the 20th century takes us back into history, and tells us a great deal about the life of the Italian communities in the past. Leo Levi's recordings are the remnants of what Italian Jews sang before the Second World War. This was a time of decadence in traditional Jewish life. The

glorious days of the Emancipation and the massive Jewish participation in Italy's own national struggle, the Risorgimento (iconized by Verdi's *Nabucco*), were followed by a wave of unrestrained assimilation, and later by the *shoah*. Retrospectively, we should be thankful for this decadence. In the first decades of the 20th century, Jewish traditional life somehow "froze" into a static condition that today enables us to "peek" backwards across history. Thanks to the tools of ethnomusicology, we can draw a fairly accurate picture of what happened in earlier times.

Throughout the 19th century, the Jewish communities enjoyed the benefits of the Emancipation. With the exception of Rome (whose Jews remained under Papal rule until 1870), the Emancipation edicts of 1848 put an end to the humiliations of ghetto life, allowed nation-wide access to public education, and left Jews free to engage in a wide spectrum of activities which included politics, business, liberal professions, culture and art. The middle of the century was marked by a loudly announced need for "modernization." This included toying with the European Reform movement (which found a very subtle way into Italian Jewry), welcoming the introduction of the organ and of choral music into the ritual, "rediscovering" the music of Salamone Rossi (the finding of an original copy of his *Ha-shirim* in Parma in 1873, four years before Samuel Naumbourg reissued them in Paris, gave way to a harsh disapproval of the orthodox criticism of the "new" musical practices), and more generally creating a whole new genre of "sacred music" in the synagogue.

Beginning in the 1840s, the communities of Verona, Trieste, Mantova and Vercelli began spreading the word of musical innovation. New celebrations were created. *Bar* and *bat mitzva* celebrations became customary in many communities, and since 1848 the "*Khag Ha-kherut*"—an annual religious commemoration of the Emancipation edict—gave the

opportunity for writing new poems and devising new musical settings. Since the 1860s, a new genre of musical celebration became customary: that for the inaugurations of the newly built monumental synagogues, as in Florence, Vercelli, and Trieste. Many tunes, sung as solo pieces by the cantors in the 20th century, bear the traces of their polyphonic origins. Almost every community took pride in creating a choral society (which operated on a volunteer basis as a form of *tsedaqah* [righteous action] offered by the performers to the community) and in providing musical training to the youth in order to “add to the decorum” of the new synagogues (for example, Psalm 29 from Casale Monferrato and *Yigdal* from Gorizia).

However, not everything was “innovated,” and pockets of earlier forms of music remained a part of the tradition in spite of the openly declared intent to erase the memory of the ghettos. Thus the melodies transmitted orally into the 20th century are a fantastic tool towards understanding what kinds of music were sung in the various communities before the Emancipation. The cantillation (public singing) of the Torah was not touched; until today, each community has preserved different ways of interpreting the *te’amim*, the musical accents of the Bible, according to its *minhag* [tradition]. Six different traditions can be discerned in Italy: two Italian variants, two Sephardi variants from East and West, Ashkenazi, and *Apam*, the latter a French ritual preserved in Piedmont. Moreover, entire sections of the liturgy seem to have remained faithful to older sources. In particular, this applies to the liturgy of the High Holy Days, which generally bear traces of modality and of little innovation. The great quantity of melodies drawn from the operatic repertoire – all inspired by the canons of *bel canto* – are also of an earlier origin. Strongly criticized by the supporters of the Reform in the 1850s, operatic arias were stigmatized as “*musica del teatro*,” tasteless leftovers of ghetto life.

Finally, the wealth of paraliturgical songs is particularly instructive in this domain. The *zemiroth* [table hymns] for the Sabbath, several Judeo-Italian versions of *khad gadya* and *ekhad mi yodea* for the Passover Seder, Purim party songs, and tunes for weddings and circumcisions, all point to life in the 18th-century ghettos. The *zemer* “*Tsur mishelo akhalnu*” from Ferrara, the Piedmontese adaptation of *khad gadya*, the aria-like wedding song by Samuel Archivolti, and the *Bar Yokhai* hymn for Roman pre-circumcision ceremonies portray a different world. We also learn of a world of women’s repertoire sung in private homes, popular rituals discouraged by the rabbinical authorities, revealing a deep connection between Jews and non-Jews in their daily lives.

These songs come to us from the same ghettos in which Salamone Rossi and other privileged Jewish intellectuals and artists also dwelled, but they speak of a life that was different, less glamorous, but perhaps even more revealing.

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\* *The author is citing a wonderful Jewish wordplay. “Italia” is not merely the name of the country. The three words – I TAL YAH – in Hebrew mean “the island of God’s [blessings of]*

*dew.” –The Editors*