

Zohar Argov and the Hebrew Language Gap

by Norman Berdichevsky (May 2013)

Zohar Argov (1955-1987) is a name that only provokes a blank stare from an overwhelming majority of American Jews. He was more than a popular singer and represented the underprivileged, under represented Mizrahi (Oriental) face of Israel. He was called the King and deserved the title as much or more than Elvis did. Zohar came from the most impoverished sector of Israeli Jewish society, the oldest child in a family of ten of Yemenite immigrant parents and became the leading figure of the Mizrahi and Mediterranean music in Israel, following the startling victory of Menahem Begin and the Herut-Likud Movement that had become the champion of many Mizrahim in the 1977 general elections.

He was strikingly handsome with very pronounced Middle Eastern features, almost as dark in skin complexion as Obama and by the time of his premature death at age 32, had achieved more success than any popular Israeli entertainer. His voice and oriental style of singing had until his appearance, largely been consigned to hazzanut (cantorial repertoire and the use of *silsul* or trills akin to warbling).

It is no exaggeration to say that his fame and achievements are unknown among American Jews who are at least 97% of East European origin (Ashkenazim) and are with each passing generation more and more ignorant of popular Israeli culture, literature and much public debate in the Modern Hebrew language.