

It's a very small world when you play the saz



by Geoffrey Clarfield

My wife Mira and I have been living in Ein Kerem for the last month. It is an ancient village, thousands of years old and its stone terraces were once cultivated by Maccabees and Israelites.

It is filled with churches and monasteries, some going back to Byzantine times as this is the village of John the Baptist, a character who looms large in the New Testament as he baptized Jesus in the Jordan River. We are staying in the guest wing of one of these religious institutions as it is a haven of relative peace and quiet during a turbulent time in modern Israeli history.

Today Ein Kerem is considered a suburb of Jerusalem and when not under attack from enemies in Gaza or Lebanon or Iran (who rained missiles on us one evening not very long ago) it is frequented by pilgrims, international tourists and Israelis who want to get away from the big city for a meal at one of the local restaurants or, a quiet weekend at an Air B and B in this hilly and forested place.

Many of its Israeli inhabitants would be described in Hebrew as "bohemian" meaning a combination of New Age mixed with both non-Orthodox and Orthodox Judaism. You can see them walking the streets of Ein Kerem wearing Indian like outfits. Women are known for their creative turbans which give them both a modest and feminine air. There are many different kinds of Synagogues that dot the town.

When Mira and I lived in the lower Galilee in the 1990s I was

known among my Israel born neighbors as a Canadian born musician who had somehow learnt how to play Greek, Turkish and Arabic music on the guitar, the oud (fat bellied lute) and the saz (the long-necked lute). I was invited to join an ensemble of Jewish and Arab Israeli musicians who were reinterpreting traditional and popular music through an Eastern Mediterranean lens. Some of them developed a national following.

This kind of music came relatively easy to me, as years before as an ethnomusicology student I had fell in with a family of immigrant Roma (they call themselves Gypsy) musicians from Greece and a Muslim Turk who taught me how to play the saz and the oud. Together we performed eastern Mediterranean music in the bars and restaurants of what is now called "Greek town" in the eastern part of Toronto. A good time was had by all, and I acquired a taste for the Greek wine called Retsina, which has its origins in Homeric times.

In Israel, many people in our audiences had come to the Galilee to explore what can only be called a version of New Age Israeli life and it is now long standing, as a new generation has taken on its trappings. I bumped into some of them by accident two weeks ago. They are my kids' age, in their thirties and forties and some are much younger.

Mira and I were sitting outside a café listening to a young generation of Israelis singing Hebrew songs together. "Shirei be tsibur" it is called in Hebrew. I noted that that was an aspect of the artistic collectivism so notable in early modern Israeli culture and that is still alive as a surviving genre, originally developed on the Kibbutz.

Go to any beach in Israel and you will witness folk dances that were created before and just after Israeli independence with that East/West style of music that accompanies these dances (usually with accordion), and which was consolidated as a genre in the 1950s. I still listen to old Vinyl records of this no longer mainstream music. It has its charm, but as

society changes, its music changes.

As the students left the café, Mira noticed a young woman walking down the street carrying a Turkish saz bag on her back. She turned to her and said, "I know what that is. It's a Saz! You must talk to my husband," and so I greeted her and asked her about her instrument.

She said she was on her way to a Synagogue compound with a large outdoor patio where musicians come to informally play and jam every Tuesday evening, and she invited us to come along. The only thing is that it started at eleven, so we went home, took a nap, and walked over at around ten thirty. (Ein Kerem has many small synagogues from various ethnic backgrounds but the most prominent are Yemenite and Moroccan).

At the compound there were guitarists, singers, nai players (the Arabo Turkish Iranian side blown flute made from cane/reed), there were ouds and Moria the young woman we had met pulled out her Turkish saz. It turned out that some of the musicians were part of an ensemble and they were sharing their songs with others who improvised alongside their tunes. I was asked if I played and I said yes; guitar, saz, and oud but I had not touched the last two instruments in five years.

I sat and listened for some time. Moria, the woman with the saz, took out her long necked lute and played some Turkish melodies that you could have heard at a good coffee house in Istanbul. She had the touch and the feel of the instrument and everything she did was musical. A young man beside her with a very quiet demeanor selectively played his nai, others played guitar and there were one or two oud players.

All the singing was done in Hebrew, and it included both secular and religious songs, some compositions drawing on the poetry of Chassidic Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav. Many of the songs clearly came from well-known contemporary Israeli popular singers, but at an unconscious level all the songs

were drawing on Near Eastern, Mediterranean, Israeli and some Yiddish melodic formulas.

Part of the evening was taken up with the singing of prayers called Selichot and which were accompanied by guitar, saz, oud and nai. Quite something as this is a mixed secular, Orthodox, New Age group of people. It is not Chabad but something unique and local, typical of Ein Kerem.

I mean to say that during that musical evening there was a poetic and melodic unity to what these young people were playing and singing, in a mood of self-awareness that can only be called spiritual. Players were careful not to compete but to complement each other, even when some seven or eight instrumentalists were playing together.

Eventually, I put aside my newcomer's modesty, picked up an oud and began to play along. I had not touched the instrument for five years but after a while, some of my chops came back.

A few weeks later I spent another evening with these mostly younger musicians. The vibe was similar but there was also a performance of Hebrew, Yiddish, and even American influenced song by a trio of young male singers who hail from the Orthodox moshav (farming community) that was established here in Israel by the late Chassidic Rabbi, composer, and singer Schlomo Carlebach. When I told some of the musicians there that as a young man, I was Schlomo's back up guitarist whenever he came to Toronto in the 1970s, I got some street creds for that.

Moria told me some time later that she came from a family of mixed Yemenite and Syrian descent and so near eastern music was part of the family soundscape. It was that that kept her open to the sound of the Turkish saz which until recently was not yet a part of Israeli musical culture. She told me that the first time that she heard it she was entranced, and it led her to the Center for Middle Eastern Classical Music in

Musrara in Jerusalem where she took lessons in Saz performance. Moria is a nurse who works at Hadassah hospital but spends much of her spare time playing Saz with guitar and oud playing musical friends.

Then there is Avishag. She is a forty something Israeli woman of Kurdish background. She can sing along with all the melodies that I heard during the two sessions at the Synagogue community center. She later told me that like most Israelis, she has eclectic musical tastes and in addition has been in various bands. Like Moria she gives much of her spare time to music and these weekly get togethers also seem to be a way for younger Israelis to socialize with others in an informal, relaxed musical setting. She is a trained healer and helps people with pain management.

At one point when things got quiet, Avishag pulled out a round frame drum and started singing in Kurdish. The simplicity and quality of her voice and accompaniment was archaic and elemental. I felt like I was listening to an archival recording of songs her family may have brought with them to Israel from their exile in Kurdistan in the early 1950s, after a two thousand five-hundred-year sojourn in Iraq. I wanted to hear more.

Avishag had to think twice when I told her that. She explained that some of these songs she had heard at family celebrations and some she had found on the Internet. She did not feel that she was a master of this repertoire as Kurdish Jews were famous for putting behind the Kurdish dialects and mountain Aramaic that they had spoken before coming to Israel and quickly became fluent Hebrew speakers who are now part and parcel of the social fabric of contemporary Israel.

Avishag told me there are many Kurdish Israeli singers like her and gave me a name and a Youtube site to explore. I did and she is wrong. They may be well known and have a following, but they are not like her as far as I have heard. I know a

good voice when I hear one.

I was curious to find out more about these young Israeli musicians who were enamored of Arabic, Turkish and Kurdish melodies, among others and so Moria invited me over to her place one afternoon to meet one of her Saz playing friends, a Tel Aviv resident named Gur, a young man in his late thirties.

Gur arrived at Moria's place in Ein Kerem and had driven up from Tel Aviv on his motorcycle. Like Moria he had been captivated by the sound of the Saz but had a first and very long-term detour as a Sitar student in India.

Although he admires the system of Ragas and Tals he told me that as an Israeli growing up in a Mediterranean soundscape, he could never fully internalize the Indian classical soundscape. It was too foreign and so like Moria, when he met up with the Saz he was "in the zone." This led Gur to an apprenticeship with a Turkish saz master. He lived in Turkey for a year and became fluent in the language.

One of the things Gur mentioned was that the tradition of Saz playing in Turkey is one of personal modesty and even the greatest players do not boast of their prowess and success, which is exceptional for musicians in this part of the world.

Finally, the three of us asked if he would play us something. He picked up a saz and began playing. If you closed your eyes, you could be in Turkey. Gur has the sense of the instrument and the music and when it becomes virtuosic, he is more than up to it. The three of us sat there and listened with satisfaction

Just before he finished his well-structured medley of Turkish melodies, he started to play a song called Far Fara. I know it and started singing along. Gur was stunned. This was one of those old Turkish cabaret melodies that had moved from Istanbul to New York to Toronto and was a staple of folk music that had eked into cabaret music or, perhaps, an old Istanbul

cabaret song that had been brought into the more folkloric world of the Saz, with its rural bards called Aşıks.

Among Turkish youth, rural bardic tradition and the Shia Alevi rebel singers whose version of Islam treats the Saz as a sacred instrument at their unorthodox prayer houses without minarets, is now part of the soundtrack for their opposition to the heavy hand of the Islamic political parties that now dominate Turkey and who see music as sinful. I used to play Far Fara with my Gypsy and Turkish musical friends back in Greektown in the seventies in Toronto.

Moria, Avishag and Gur all spoke admiringly about a Turkish saz expert, an Israeli musician and gifted teacher who lives in the southern Galilee. I look forward to hearing him play live one day. I may even sign up for lessons. His village is a very short drive from our old house in that part of the country and who knows, he may have even gone to high school with our eldest son during the nineteen nineties.

It is indeed a very small world when you play the Saz.

First published in the [*Times of Israel*](#).