



PRELUDE ATTAH EL KABBIR

Kay Kaufman Shelemay

The blended sounds of the 'ūd (lute), violin, qānūn (zither), and darābukkah (hourglass drum) could be heard coming from the open folk arts stage in the South Meadow of the Snug Harbor Cultural Center in Staten Island, New York. After an instrumental prelude composed by Muhammed 'Abd al-Wahhāb, the 'ūd player and singer Vita Israel introduced the program the ensemble was going to perform: ' songs with Arab melodies and Hebrew words "praising God" and "describing our longing for Israel." A group of four pizmonim was led off with a long improvisation by each instrumentalist on the melody of the first pizmon, "Attah El Kabbir."¹ The Near Eastern music ensemble competed with amplified echoes of Theodore Bikel performing simultaneously before a much larger crowd in an adjacent tent.

How did the Syrian pizmon "Attah El Kabbir" come to be heard in a Staten Island festival on Sunday, September 17, 1989, alongside the songs of Theodore Bikel, Yemenite music, and klezmer music—not to mention the strains of the New York All-City High School Marching Band? The occasion was "L'Chaim: A Festival of Jewish Arts," a celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of the Jewish Community Center of Staten Island, one of the festival's sponsors, along with the Snug Harbor Cultural Center, Inc. The day-long gathering featured a heterogeneous mix of exhibits, vendors, artisans, and performers which on its broadest level celebrated Jewish survival and creativity. The festival chairperson, Cheryl B. Sherman, wrote in the program that "a Jewish life is on a tenuous tightrope. Only our traditions are able to maintain our equilibrium." In fact, it took a full century of transnational wandering for the pizmon "Attah El Kabbir" to arrive at Staten Island.

The approximate age and provenance of "Attah El Kabbir" are well known. In the words of one Brooklyn native, "that song must be a hundred years old. The music is from Islam" (J. Saff, 23 October 1984). "Attah El Kabbir" was composed by Rabbi Raphael Taboush, as is confirmed by the

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Louis Massry and his 'ūd. Courtesy Maria Garcia.

