Communal Singing

Dr. Talilah Eliram

Translated from Hebrew by Eliahu Adelman

Communal singing (Shira betzibur) is the main avenue in which the genre of the Israeli Folksong is performed. Because of this, communal singing is also part of the genre's definition. Ariel Hirshfeld writes:

> "During its heroic period, between the 1930s and 1960s, the Israeli song became a medium that combines endeavors of music and literature, sometimes on the highest artistic level, with folk, community based, performance, where a **sense of togetherness is at the center of its definition** [bold by Talila Eliram] […] The 'togetherness' of the Israeli song expresses a connection to the Zionist state identity (even before the founding of the state) […] The forces array in it is based on dependencies: the song needs those who sing it in order to exist. The individual appeals to the 'togetherness' through the song. He does not obey the song, but rather joins it, ensuring that his singing is out of key and coarse, in order to maintain his own extra-musical existence. On the other hand, the individual needs the song in order to stand in its shadow, to be part of its 'togetherness,' and to receive his identity through it." (Hirshfeld, 1997)

Communal Singing, Its role and Characteristics

Communal singing partly defines the genre of Israeli Folksongs. It can be used to describe the main framework and function of these songs, as well as a supporting beam for the genre and its development. In the entry Israeli Folksongs, the genre of Israeli Folksongs was defined through its being sung communally. Now we will look at different aspects of communal singing as the framework through which the genre comes to fruition.

Communal Singing and the Israeli Folksong

Singing communally in Hebrew is a tradition that has existed since the days of the Zionist movements in the Diaspora who were anticipating their immigration to Palestine. At the beginning or end of a social gathering they would sing translated songs, songs that they knew from home, and songs of pining for Zion. In addition to these, they also learned new songs that were taught to them by emissaries that came from Palestine. This social activity was continued by Halutzim (Zionist pioneers) in training camps and Kibbutzim in Palestine, when at the end of the workday they would gather and sing together. As the years passed, this type of musical activity spread to urban areas and communal singing became one of the characteristics of Israeli society. When in homogenous groups, like the Kibbutzim, singing communally would start spontaneously, without the need for a leader or instructor. However, as the repertoire grew, and the audience's origins became more heterogeneous, especially since the fourth and fifth Aliyot (Jewish immigrations to Palestine), and mainly in the cities, the role of the communal singing instructor was created. Communal singing events at that time became less spontaneous and more formal (Hirshberg, 1995). Communal singing gatherings at 'Beit Brener' in Tel Aviv, instructed by the composer Daniel Sambursky, or at the end of 'Oneg Shabbat' gatherings in Tel-Aviv, instructed by Menashe Revinah (Rabinowitz) can be seen as examples of this development.

Communal singing continued to be spontaneous in the youth movements, who had a long standing tradition of singing together. Communal singing events continued from the youth movements to the Palmah where they occurred at the Kumzitz, the communal campfire. To this day the Israeli Folksongs are associated with sitting around the campfire. This is also the source of the title of Amnon Rubinstein's article *By the Radiophonic Campfire* (1998). The article discusses the radio show that began airing in 1995,which was hosted by the late Netiva Ben-Yehuda who was replaced after her retirement by the composer Nahum Heiman. Ben-Yehuda broadcasted songs from before the establishment of the state. It seems that Rubinstein associated listening to these old songs with singing around a campfire, and perhaps with the feeling of warmth while singing.

This activity of holding a communal singing event that is monitored by an instructor has had a revival over the past two decades and is considered a typical and unique cultural activity of Israeli society. Effi Netzer claims that "the phenomenon of communal singing is an Israeli phenomenon. There is no place in the world where people pay money to sing together in public. It simply does not exist."

Communal singing has also been recognized by the cultural institutions of Israel. For example, during the singing festivals that were held by the broadcasting authority in the 1960s, a communal singing section was incorporated between the two parts of the competition. A more current example is a series of concerts held by the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra in 1998 that was called 'Singing with the Philharmonic'. At these events, the orchestra accompanied the singers and singing troupes that performed songs onstage, as well as the audience as they sang from lyric sheets that were both projected on giant screens and printed into booklets. It seems that this phenomenon, when a philharmonic orchestra, which usually specializes in classical music, accompanies communal singing in the context of an entire concert (and not only one song as is common at the end of the London Proms), is completely unique. The response of the audience, which is comprised of both young and old, to these sold out concerts proves that these are activities that appeal to a wide audience.

An additional affirmation to the claim that communal singing remains contemporary can be found in the introduction to the song anthology edited by Effi Netzer and Dan Almagor:

> "This book is intended for all of those who love to sing, and we have a lot of those in this country. An example of this can be found in the dozens of singing clubs and troupes who meet weekly and sing together enthusiastically old and new Hebrew songs. One can be accompanied by lyrics projected on a screen or printed in a booklet, by instructors and guest singers; or just for the fun of it, when one is alone. However, when one sings one is never alone." (Netzer and Almagor 1999, 8)

Communal singing gatherings are a socially acceptable recreational activity. The research conducted by Katz et al (2000) has found that communal singing and folk-dance gatherings account for about half of the offered cultural events in Israel, and the amount has not changed much in the decade since the research was conducted. The program for an evening of communal singing at clubs (for example some of the clubs where the research was conducted, see below), is split into two parts: the first part lasts for about an hour to an hour and a half, and the audience sings with the singing instructor while the lyrics are projected on a screen with slides, or printed in booklets that are handed out at the hall's entrance. Each evening's repertoire consists of medleys organized according to subject. Sometimes an entire evening will be dedicated to one

subject, such as songs of spring or songs of the sea. The evenings can also be dedicated to one artist such as a composer or lyricist. After a refreshment break, there is an hour to an hour and a half long concert performed by a guest performer, singer, or singing troupe that bring their own repertoire of songs with them while the audience usually joins them in song.

The audience and the communal singing instructors generally consider the repertoire of songs that are communally sung to be the repertoire of the Israeli Folksong. For that reason, the genre of Israeli Folksongs is defined by the songs that are sung at these events. It is a dynamic rather than static genre. The repertoire is not permanent, as songs are often added to it as well as taken out. Therefore, the way in which the repertoire is performed is also the way in which it is constantly being updated. In her book *Lyrica Ve-Lahit*, Zivah Ben-Porat notes that the institution of communal singing is a very effective mechanism for the preservation and canonization of the Israeli Folksong. Furthermore, according to her, "The acknowledgment of the social and didactic value of a song that has become a permanent element of communal singing is seen as an acknowledgement of its cultural value. Therefore, even when the current trend no longer grants a specific song with aesthetic value, it will still be granted with a canonized value, due to 'social reasons." (Ben-Porat 1989, 68)

How is the repertoire changed or revised? The communal singing instructor holds an important role in this matter. He teaches new songs, or adds other songs to the existing corpus. If he sees that the new song is accepted by the different audiences, it will slowly become part of the instructor's repertoire. If there are not many positive responses to it, the instructor will abandon it.

The teaching of new songs at communal singing gatherings is nothing new. When the record industry was not very developed, during the period before the establishment of the State of Israel, communal singing not only had a social role, but also a role in helping to distribute Hebrew songs. Composer David Zehavi wrote in the introduction to his book *SheLo Yigamer Le'Olam* (1981): "Many of my songs are broadcasted on the radio, although I myself have contributed to the distribution of the folksong by being a communal singing instructor." Gil Aldema said of Emanuel Zamir (on the television show Ulpan Zemer that was recorded in 1990): "He was a kind of troubadour that distributed his and his contemporary's songs in many communal singing groups."

Eliahu HaCohen is of the opinion that communal singing fills an important role in preserving the songs. He uses the song *Erev Shel Shoshanim* as an example of a song

that is hardly played on the radio or the television, but is known by many through communal singing. Composer Yair Rosenblum, during a communal singing gathering that was dedicated to his songs that he conducted and hosted, addressed this issue of distributing songs through communal singing (June 1995):

> "One of the missions that our parents took upon themselves, when they arrived here as Halutzim, was to spread messages through songs. The songs were part of the construction of our myth. However, when one looks at it today, one asks how they distributed these songs. The songs were distributed through communal singing, in the Kibbutz dining hall. Ze'irah [famous composer of Israeli Folksongs] would come, teach them, and the songs would spread like wildfire. I thought that today there are no longer things like that. Today, songs can only be channeled through the media. I thought - and I was wrong. Look at the song *Leilot* that I wrote with Yoram Tahar-Lev for Dudu Zakai and Dorit Reuveni's show. The show was not a success and I was sure that nobody knew this song. Until one day, I came to a singing hall at Kibbutz Ashdot Ya'akov, and all of a sudden I hear a thousand people singing it. Like in the old days, they learned the song by singing it communally."

Therefore, communal singing gatherings are not only the performance venue of the genre and part of its definition, but also the framework that keeps the genre updated and dynamic. However, it is clear that the genre never changes its character in an extreme way. In order to be included in the repertoire, most of the new songs' characteristics must be similar to the songs that are already part of the genre.

Israeli Folksongs, Communal Singing, and Folk Dancing

The communal singing institution is in close contact with another institution that is connected to the Israeli Folksong - the folkdance. Katz et al (1992), in their research on popular culture, purposely put communal singing and the folkdance together. This combination is widely accepted and hints at the folkdances as an additional framework for the performance and support of Israeli Folksongs. Avi 'Ilam-Amzaleg writes: "Most of the Israeli songs were meant for both the singing and the dancing that developed

along with the songs […] the composers naturally wished that their songs would be as widely distributed as possible, and certainly the singing and dancing audience is preferable." ('Ilam-Amzaleg 1988, 74).

Gil Aldema composed Israeli Folksongs, some of which are included in the repertoire of Israeli Folkdance groups. He has also acted as a communal singing instructor as well as an accompanying accordionist for folkdance groups. In an interview he tells:

> "Yesterday my group and I sang *Hakol Patuah*,[1] and Tirza Hodes, the Folkdance choreographer, was there. I asked her: 'So, Tirzal'eh, is there a dance for it already?' to which she replied, 'of course there is!' To me this whole thing is incredible. Show me another nation that writes so many songs that are sung, and immediately danced to. There are folkdance groups in which masses of people, who like to dance together just like they like to sing together, participate in. for that reason there is a need for new dances. A new song is released and *boom*, it has its own dance. Sometimes there are really absurd outcomes, like when people dance to *Mah Avarekh*, or *Oi Artzi Moladeti*. I don't believe that there is any other country where new folkdances are constantly being choreographed."

Effi Netzer is also of the opinion that the Israeli Folkdances contribute to the preservation of the songs. According to him, the folkdances are an enterprise and an unusual phenomenon. He states, as Gil Aldema did, that the audience requires new dances to be constantly choreographed. Before a song is popularized it already has its own dance and the dance contributes to the distribution and preservation of the song. Saraleh Sharon asserts that every song that is considered part of the genre of Israeli Folksongs and is played at least once will most likely have a dance to go with it. In her opinion, this is a positive phenomenon, because the younger generation is being exposed to a wide variety of folksongs through the dances. Amitai Ne'aman reinforces her words, and thinks that the connection between the Israeli Folkdance and Israeli Folksong was formed because people love to dance to the sound of the songs. The Israeli Folkdances are, according to him, a means of expressing social cohesion in Israel (similar to communal singing).

Nurit Hirsh (in an interview conducted by the writer of this entry) claims that the element of dance has an influence on her work. In her words:

[1] The interview was held on 23.1.1994 just around the time when the song was first published.

> "My songs that are sung communally, for example *Makhela 'Aliza,* or *Ruah Tsefonit, Ruah Deromit,* are folkdances. I have maybe sixty songs that are danced to. I have been a dancer, and the Yemenite Step is very prominent is some of my songs. Maybe my songs emit a folkdance rhythm."

Gil'ad Ben-Shakh (in an interview conducted by the writer of this entry, 27.2.1994) defines the songs that are danced to at the Israeli Folkdance groups:

> "The Israeli Folkdances are another facet of the Israeli Folksong. They [the folk dancers] never danced to pop music. They knew exactly what kind of music to choose to suit their dancing. Today, every new song that is released, and is considered an Israeli Folksong, immediately gets its own dance. Only certain songs get picked. For example, there is no folkdance to accompany *Rakevet Laila LeKahir* [a popular song by the band Meshina], but there is one to *HaKol Patuah*. Pop songs are danced to in the discotheques; it is a completely different genre. Today, many Mediterranean style songs are used for folkdances, and then they become Israeli Folksongs, because they are danced to. Many of those who like to sing Israeli Folksongs also go dance Israeli Folkdances; they are a different facet of Israeli Folksongs."

Below are a number of examples of the connection between Israeli Folksongs and dances that were taken from the Israeli media. Mali Kampfner writes (in the 'Yediot Ahronot' newspaper, 25.3.1994):

> "Once the phenomenon of the Israeli Folkdance was immortalized in an unforgettable skit on the comedy show *Zehu Ze*, there can no longer be any arguing that this is a national epidemic. Today, it would be hard to find a school, a community center, a University, or a sports club that does not have groups for folk dancing. The dancers use terms like 'mania' and 'addiction' for what they feel, and explain the phenomenon by a mutual love towards the Israeli Folksong."

In a supplement published by Yediot Ahronot newspaper (19.6.1994) before the Carmiel Dance Festival, we find a direct connection between the Israel Folkdance and communal singing. There it states:

"Songs That We Danced To– Singing Communally

Those who will get tired from the dancing, or just want to sit and sing Israeli Folksongs, are invited to do so at the Heikhal HaTarbut Square. Every night at midnight, Hebrew song enthusiasts will gather and sing together the songs that we danced to."[2]

Another example can be found on the television show *Bataverna* that was broadcasted on the Israeli Broadcasting Authority Channel 1 (24.6.1994). On that episode, Leah Loftin and Ofer Levi sang the song *At Li Or* (written by Yoni Ro'eh), which was new at the time. At the song's conclusion, the show's host, Shim'on Parnas said that: "This is a new hit. I would say that within a week this song will be danced to at all of the folkdance groups."

The conclusion that arises from these examples is that there is an inherent connection between the Israeli Folksongs and Folkdances, the latter of which join communal singing as another institution that supports the Israeli Folksong. An additional emphasis to this claim can be found in the words of Hanan Yovel during a communal singing event that he performed at (8.5.1999), saying: "When does a song become famous? After it has sold tapes and CDs, is played on the radio, and sung communally. However, it completes the journey when a dance is choreographed for it."

There is a reciprocal relationship between the repertoire of the songs that are sung communally and those that are danced to at the folk dancing groups. The songs and dances are written side by side. Occasionally, the melody precedes the dance and sometimes vice versa. There have been examples where the choreographers wanted to express a certain topic or theme, so they would use a pre-existing song. In other instances, they first choreographed a dance and then asked a composer to compose a melody for it. An example of this can be found with the dance *Debka Gilbo'a*, which was choreographed by Rivka Sturman in memory of a relative of hers who fell in the battle of the Gilbo'a. The steps of the Debka dance are used in this song to represent the emotional scale of being attacked along with restraint and concentration in anticipation of another attack and an assault. Only after the dance was created did Sturman ask Emanuel Zamir to compose a melody for it (Kedman 1969, 61, 84). Sturman also choreographed the steps to the song *Niggun 'Atiq* before asking Amitai Ne'aman to compose a melody for it (Ibid, 61).

[2] This event also occurred during the course of the Carmiel Dance Festival in the year 2000.

An example of the opposite, where the dance steps were choreographed in accordance with a pre-existing song can be found in the song *Im Hupalnu*. The text states that "If we were taken down\ We will not fear\ For every Patria and Struma\ We will rise above." The song was written at the beginning of the 1940s in the aftermath of the sinking of two Ma'apilim boats, the Patria and Struma. It became a hit and in 1946 Rivkah Sturman choreographed it for the training graduation party of the survivors of the Patria. In the dance there are elements that represent a struggle and freedom. The words emphasize willingness to struggle and a certainty of victory; the dance's different steps all emphasize these feelings (Ashkenazi 1992, 52).

In the past, there was a special relationship between the composer and choreographer, especially during the early period of the songs and dances. Many composers (such as Gil Aldema, Amitai Ne'aman, and Effi Netzer) played the accordion and accompanied the dancing groups and the communal singing events. Gil Aldema says (in an interview conducted with the writer of this entry 23.1.1994):

> "In the 1950s, the Folkdance movement was just beginning to flourish. There were only a few dances, such as *Veshaavtem Mayim*, *Havu Lanu Yain*, before the bond between the composers and choreographers was formed. This was during the period when there was still a Folkdance department (on the radio, T.E.), which acted as the spiritual leader for all of the dance groups that sprouted around the country. There they still debated whether a certain song's rhythm, melody, and text were suitable for dancing. Back then Folkdances were mainly accompanied by the accordion."

The composers who accompanied the Folkdances were familiar with the dances and the characteristics of the music that suited the dancing. Because of that they were able to compose suitable music for the dances. For example, in 1964 courses were offered to dance group instructors, with the participation of composers, in order to inspire choreographers to choreograph their songs. The performance context of the folksongs and dances was very similar, an audience gathered in order to sing and learn new songs, or to dance and learn new dances. The corpus of songs that were sung communally was the same as those that were used for the Folkdances. In addition, in both cases the material is distributed both orally and through song and dance booklets which contained the songs' scores, lyrics, and dance instructions (see for example, Tirza

Hodes' *Meholot 'Am*, 1968). Today, the folkdances are taught through instructional videos that are produced by Israeli Folkdance instructors, which are another way to get to know the songs.

Israeli folkdance to the song *Hakol Patuah*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BUQhrzz8ns

The "Togetherness" of Communal Singing and Israeli Folksongs

A similar attitude towards the role and functions of communal singing and the Israeli Folksong can be found among experts in the field featured on television shows, newspaper articles, and in interviews conducted by the writer of this entry. Hirshfeld (1997) talks of a sense of "togetherness" that defines the Israeli Folksong, while at the same time it also defines the framework and its function in which these songs are performed. On the television show *HaTeiva HaMezameret* (1998) Hirshfeld said:

> "In the Israeli song during the period surrounding the war of independence (1948 Israeli-Arab War, translator), the feeling of 'togetherness' developed. This 'togetherness' was the medium in which the 'Israeliness' of the Israeli Folksong came to fruition, and it has stayed with the Israeli Folksong to the present day. Even if there is only one singer singing a song, one can hear the other voices to which the singer is appealing for approval and consolation. Furthermore, this togetherness can explain the bond between the Israeli song and the State's ideals, with which it does not always agree, but always observes.[…] Another element to take into consideration is death, which came into the picture later, on memorial days, and which actuates a lot of this togetherness. This feeling that 'the storm is ever mounting'[3] means a gathering together out of fear of something from the outside, and the song, like fire, conceals this darkness."

Gil Aldema is of the opinion that the "songs' role is to emit a sense of 'togetherness'. When people gather to sing songs that they love, there is a feeling of 'togetherness' and adventure. There is a feeling of ' we are the people of the Land-of-Israel so we will sing the Songs of the Land-of-Israel (Israeli Folksongs)', and when we sing older songs it unites us, giving us a feeling that we are together and that we are friends." Effi Netzer thinks that "people come to sing communally because of the feeling of 'togetherness'. It is an important feeling. People like doing things together, and because of the circumstances here, the sense of togetherness strengthens us."

[3] Translator: this is a translated line from the Palmakh anthem.

Michal Semoira-Cohen explains the appeal of communal singing evenings (in an interview conducted by the writer of this entry, 26.1.1994):

> "It would seem that we are nostalgic towards the vision that was prominent at the time of the establishment of the state. We have lost that vision, and when we go back to these songs, there is nostalgia towards the era of the ideals, a longing for a sense of 'togetherness,' to feel a 'we,' in a sense of 'we love you'; 'we build for you'. The whole trend of Saraleh Sharon is singing for the sake of nostalgia."

The sense of nostalgia is emphasized by the instruments that generally accompany the communal singing events, specifically the accordion, guitar, and the occasional reed instrument. The accordion brings back memories to being in the youth groups and singing around the campfire. It should be noted that these instruments are unique to communal singing events and differ vastly from the instruments that accompany rock and middle-eastern music.

Yitzhak Heruti, who brought communal singing to Kibbutz Merhavia, says (in an interview conducted by the writer of this entry, May 1992): "Singing is holy; it elevates the soul, and brings one to another sphere. The song creates an atmosphere of togetherness. Communal singing has the power to brighten one's face and to calm them down." Nativa Ben-Yehuda claims that: "Communal singing is the best activity. In it the sense of 'togetherness' is completely clear […] the singing itself, the composed song, which is sung communally, has such a unique power that many books can be written about the topic" (Ben-Yehuda, 1990). Yitzhak Livni notes that when he sings at communal singing events, he does not always know the words to the songs, but "even so, they always had a charm, pleasantness, and warmth to them […] tunes, especially when sung at a sing-along, can create a feeling of bonding and identification" (Livni, in the introduction to the book *Zionionei HaDerekh*, Aldema, Ben Sakh, and Shiloni, 1979).

Katz et al find a functional connection between the Israeli Folkdance and communal singing: "Folkdances and communal singing events of Israeli Folksongs supposedly express feelings of national solidarity. This is a traditional Israeli pastime that represents the Israeli collectiveness that has characterized Jewish society in the Land of Israel before and during the first few years after the establishment of the state. (Katz et al 1992, 140)

Communal singing has come to replace the campfire for the aging 'Tsabar' [person who was born in the Land of Israel]. He sings songs whose themes are relevant to all of the Israeli public: the army, security, Jerusalem, the land, landscapes, peace, Zionism, pioneering, as well as other national experiences. They arouse a sense of emotional involvement, and invoke memories and hopes. They are the common denominators that can connect people to a national fate. Singing communally provides one with the option to go back to the vision and ideals that no longer exist in reality, and to feel, at least for a while, the feeling of 'togetherness' and solidarity, that are no longer prominent during one's day to day life.

The discussion on 'togetherness' will be concluded with a quotation about the feeling of solidarity experienced when singing communally, taken from Martin Buber's book *Ten Rungs: Hasidic Sayings* (1947):

> "When a man is singing and cannot lift his voice, and another comes and sings with him, another who can lift his voice, the first will be able to lift his voice too. That is the secret of the bond between spirits." (Buber, 84)

Communal Singing as a Secular Prayer

An important functional aspect of the Israeli Folksong and communal singing is their connection to prayers. This is not a new idea. In the 'Ein Harod Pamphlet (7.4.1942) Gur-Arieh writes:

> "Our forefathers never gave up on public praying. We shall not give up on public singing. It is our way of praying. Singing is humanity's common language. The holy spirit of song sweetens life's bitterness, softens the one's heart, and cleanses his soul."

Years after the appearance of that pamphlet from 'Ein Harod, Gil'ad Ben Shakh said to the writer of this entry: "I once presented a radio program of Israeli Folksongs on a Friday afternoon. In my opinion, Sabbath eve is the right time for hearing Israeli Folksongs. Throughout the week mostly pop songs are being broadcasted and the Israeli Folksongs bring tranquility. Maybe it is a type of prayer, and on Friday evening the atmosphere is fitting."

Effi Netzer said in an interview on Israeli Independence Day in 2003 (Gilat 2003):

"I call communal singing the 'seculars' prayer.' When we sing, we express our hopes and wishes and believe and hope that they are fulfilled. Just as the religious person prays, the secular person expresses themselves through song. It is a sublime feeling that is hard to express through words."

An interesting reference to communal singing and its relation to praying can be found in the words of Saraleh Sharon, Ehud Manor, and Naomi Shemer. In Sharon's opinion:

"The singing in Israel is unique to the Jews and it can be compared to praying in a synagogue where singing is both individual and congregational. In this analogy the cantor can be compared to the communal singing instructor. Singing is a kind of prayer and a convergence of people, which takes place in a synagogue as well as at a communal singing event; there is a parallel."

Ehud Manor also addresses this parallel when he says (interview, 28.3.1994):

"When people sing communally, they feel like they are all one unit, they feel as if they represent something similar. Communal singing has a purifying sense to it, a catharsis. I think that people are searching for faith when they sing communally. People who are usually secular, or those who came from religious families but no longer go to synagogue or have any interest in singing Sabbath Zemirot, find communal singing to be like going to synagogue. They sing about issues that they believe in, such as love, the state, the past, a better future, and they do it on a weekly basis, much like at a synagogue."

Naomi Shemer connected between the association of communal singing and praying with the aforementioned aspiration of 'togetherness' (in an interview with the writer of this entry 3.3.1994):

"People love communal singing, and in general they love to sing. They love to sing together and to dance together. Our small society is like a family, which emerged from out of the synagogues, as if it rejected them but still carrying them with them. We are, in fact, a community, an ethnic group, searching for our togetherness, perhaps to strengthen ourselves, or perhaps to express ourselves, to protect ourselves against all of the

> hardships that we go through. It is our natural means of expression, it is our skin, and one cannot separate it from the body."

Talma Alyagon-Roz (a composer, poet, and communal singing instructor) wrote in her song *Shirat Rabim*[4] that "communal singing is praying," and she finds similar attributes between singing and praying, as she wrote in the introduction to her book *'Akhshav Sharim*:

> "When talking about prayers, one talks about their spiritual status and their words, which are familiar to us, even without using them on a day-to-day basis. Another aspect that is discussed is 'togetherness.' In Judaism, praying requires a convergence of people, a Minyan (ten people over bar mitzvah age, translator). It requires fraternity and camaraderie.
>
> Communal singing is similar. A group of people sit together for hours and sing. Through their singing a new energy is formed, an energy that is unique and magical. And through it, we, the singers, ascend to a higher, clearer place. Throughout the ascension we forget about the secular and routine and concentrate on a new feeling: that we share the same memories, the same language, and the same culture." (Alyagon 2003, 5)

As a replacement for religious praying, communal singing creates a religious experience through a secular context. It is a function of music and singing at its most abstract level (if we were to refer to Nettl's model). Not only the convergence, but also the repertoire and its content connect between the sing-along participant and the Land-of-Israel, just as the prayer connects between the person reciting it and the object of their prayers.

The song *Shirat Rabim*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uwkc2QIDRls

Communal Singing outside of Israel

A lot can be learned about the function of singing communally when looking at its use outside of Israel. In an article about communal singing among Israeli immigrants in

[4] A term coined by Naomi Shemer meaning communal singing which differs from individual singing.

New York, Shoked writes (1993): "When I arrived in New York I sang in a year, more than I had sung in my entire life." He adds that hundreds of people came to Israeli culture evenings in which communal singing was a major part of. Most of the participants were in their late twenties and early thirties, that is to say, a much younger audience than those who usually participate in communal singing events in Israel. Most of them were not from the kibbutzim or the agricultural villages, but rather from the major Israeli cities, and did not participate in sing along evenings before arriving in the U.S.A. Sometimes they referred to how "to their surprise, they are singing 'ten times more' in New York than what they would sing in Israel."

The musical repertoire of those evenings included songs from before the establishment of the State of Israel, songs from the War of Independence, songs of the military music troupes, songs of Naomi Shemer, as well as others. According to Shoked:

> "The communal singing events gave a place for the participants to vent their hidden emotions and longings, that is to say, to express their nostalgia, which is the obvious explanation. However, along with these feelings they also exposed the source of these feelings […] the songs portray the history of Israel, as it is taught, told, mythicized, and experienced. The songs also provide the base from which an intimate connection with the sites, landscapes, and existence is created." (Shoked 1993, 109)

At the end of his article, Shoked refers to the function of communal singing for the Israelis in New York City, and how it is similar to the one in Israel: the expressing of nostalgia, a feeling of 'togetherness,' a connection to the land, and a form of prayer. He writes, "Whether they intentionally immigrated there or arrived there under circumstances that were out of their control, the Israelis that arrived in New York, do not carry with them prayer books, like their forefathers in previous immigrations, but rather, they carry their songs." (Shoked 1993, 110)

In 1998, five years after Shoked's article was published, communal singing was still important for Israelis in the U.S. A letter that was sent to the writer of this entry from Ronit Tamir, the head of the Israeli House at the Israeli embassy in Washington D.C., states (4.11.1998):

> "Part of the activities of the Israel House in Washington is organizing communal singing events that are hosted at private homes every few

> months. We usually work with slides to project the lyrics. Communal singing attracts an audience of Israelis, which is usually comprised of older individuals that live here and yearn for a connection to Israel. Occasionally we dedicate an evening to one theme of songs, for example: songs of the different seasons, holiday songs, songs of the Israeli landscapes. The communal singing evenings are usually accompanied by guitar or piano. This year, during the memorial event for Yitzhak Rabin, we incorporated communal singing into the program."

It is therefore clear that the function of communal singing among the Israelis that live in the U.S. is first and foremost a connection to the Israel.

Communal Singing since the Turn of the New Millennium

An example of the importance of communal singing within Israeli culture can be seen in what happened at the end of the year 2000, upon the beginning of the second intifada, which was accompanied by a decline of the security situation in Israel, and was accompanied by tension and harsh attacks on civilians that cost many lives. In reaction to attacks on Israeli civilians the Israeli Army commenced with Operation Homat Magen in March of 2002, which was followed by Operation Derekh Nehusha in June of the same year. During this period of political strife, articles in the media started appearing, including one that was aired on the Israel Broadcasting Authority channel 2 television station ('HaTsibur Shar' [the public sings] by Yigal Ravid that was aired on the show Ulpan Shishi, 20.1.2002), which brought to public awareness the new phenomenon of communal singing clubs that were mostly being frequented by a younger audience of the ages 20 to 40. In January of 2002 there were only a small number of these clubs that held sing along evenings. These included the Yellow Submarine in Jerusalem, where once a month a communal singing event titled HaTish HaGadol,[5] was held and instructed by Moshe Lahav; the Genky in Tel-Aviv, which was

[5] The name is taken from the Hasidic world and it refers to the meeting place between the Rabbi and his pupils. The important part of this meeting is the Rabbi's words that are accompanied by a Nigun. There is also a feast and wine drinking. See Tish in Concepts..

originally a club for Mediterranean music and began to host weekly communal singing events that were hosted by Saraleh Sharon; the Mo'adon Haverim at Kvutzat Kinneret holds communal singing events that are instructed by Y'ankaleh Sapir (Naomi Shemer's brother).

This phenomenon of singing clubs with younger participants who did not frequent the more institutionalized clubs of the older generation, expanded during the course of 2002. These clubs included those that were not solely dedicated to Israeli music. They included, for example, the Stage (instructed by Saraleh Sharon) and the Barby, the rock sanctuary of Tel-Aviv. At these places, a weekly or monthly day dedicated to communal singing was chosen, and each event was usually sold out (250-300 participants). At the Barby, for example, when communal singing events began (the lyrics were provided in printed booklets, a trademark of Saraleh Sharon), they were instructed by two rock singers, Iggy Waksman and Maor Cohen (the latter was formerly of the band Ziknei Tzfat) who were accompanied by an acoustic guitar and bass, and were called The Barbytron (a portmanteau of the words Barby, after the name of the venue, and HaGivatron, the famous Israeli singing troupe). The two of them also performed on television shows focused on Israeli Folksongs that were broadcasted during Sukkot of 2002. Waksman was also a regular participant on the weekly television show Shira BeShidur, which broadcasted communal singing events hosted by Yoni Ro'e, but was cancelled following the stabilization of the security situation.

Saraleh Sharon's comeback to center stage reflects beyond all else, the rejuvenation process that communal singing went through during that period. During the years 1980-1986, Sharon was the host of television singing programs. Up until the beginning of the 2000s, these shows were considered outdated. However, when interest and demand for the sing-along grew during the second intifada, Sharon began hosting large communal singing events that began as a weekly event at the Genky club. Later, from spring until fall of 2002, they were held once every three weeks, first at the Azrieli mall in Tel-Aviv, and later, because of the popular demand for them, and lack of space at the mall, they were moved to a larger venue, Bitan 32 at the Israel Trade Fairs & Convention Center. Hundreds, if not thousands, of adults from their early twenties onwards would come to these gatherings in order to sing for three hours with Saraleh Sharon. Following the success of these events, Sharon was asked to produce a communal singing show for the Israeli channel-10 television station that turned out to be a failure and was taken off the air after just a few weeks. Even after the failure of her

show Sharon continues to host communal singing events at different venues across the country.

When her television program began, Sharon left her job as the communal singing instructor at the Genky club. She was replaced by Einat Sarouf, who began there as an unknown singer and quickly became popular in the communal singing circuit. A year later Sarouf recorded a communal singing event at the Genky, which was released during Passover of 2003, and became a hit album. On Independence Day of that year, Sarouf instructed a communal singing event at Sacher Park in Jerusalem. The last hour of this six hour (!) event was broadcasted live on television, which gave Sarouf national fame. Through the present day she hosts singing events that take place on important national and religious holidays.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7O6Kz2XTAc&feature=relmfu

The repertoire of the songs sung at communal singing events that began at the end of the year 2000, was what the organizers and instructors dubbed (during the course of phone conversations with the writer of this entry) 'good old fashioned Israeli Folksongs' and 'nostalgia songs.' These included Uzi Hitaman's song *Noladeti LaShalom*, Effi Netzer and Dudu Barak's song *Prahim Bakane*, and Kobbi Oshrat and Didi Manusi's song *Bat Shishim* (that is usually affiliated with the band HaGiv'atron). Along with these songs, contemporary songs that fitted the atmosphere of the communal singing events (that is to say were not pop, disco, etc) were also included. These include Ya'akov Rotblit and Yizhar Ashdot's *Darkenu*, as well as oriental and Mediterranean songs that became 'middle of the road' songs, such as Zohar Argov's popular song *HaPerah BeGani*, which was written by Avihu Medina, as well as Mikha Shitrit and Leah Shabbat's *Biglal HaRuah*.

As previously mentioned, most of the participants at the newer clubs were younger than those who frequented the more institutionalized communal singing venues. Many of these participants, who are in their 20s and 30s, and who continue to frequent these new communal singing venues, were among the Noar HaNerot (the candles children) who turned to Israeli Folksongs as a supporting and unifying force after the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, and who returned to the songs in light of the second intifada. They continue to participate at these events, which are held at venues that are suited for a younger generation who not only want to sing, but

also to drink and to dance a little while doing so (even though the venues are not technically dance clubs and do not have dance floors). Journalist Yael Paz-Melamed referred to this when she wrote (in Ma'ariv 25.2.2002): "They drink beer and alcohol, but do not get drunk. They are filled with joy from the songs rather than from the vodka or beers, and this is precisely what makes the whole thing so Israeli […] Children who heard their parents singing Israeli songs at home tried so hard to escape this music which was stigmatized as 'nerdy,' until they realized that there was nowhere to run."

In Yigal Ravid's aforementioned television program on the subject, Ari Shamai (the musical producer of the Genky club and one of those responsible for the communal singing revival during that period) adds insight in regards to the function of communal singing during this period and among the younger generation: "It could be that during the course of the last year, because we feel that the whole world is against us, and our backs are to the wall, we have gone back to enjoying singing together and the feeling of 'togetherness' that it gives us." In a similar manner that connects the security situation with the revival of communal singing, Zemer Sharon (Saraleh Sharon's son and manager) says (in Rotem-Zefroni, 2002): "It seems that because of the security, the political, or the economic situation, young people have become very connected to the older songs." Zvika Hadar, the host of the television show *Lo Nafsik Lashir*, which began airing during that same period, says (in an interview for the Galei Zahal radio program *Bilui Na'im* 5.7.2002): "Today the situation is so complicated, and the only thing that unites us is when we hold on to something nostalgic and try to create something national that everyone can enjoy." Kobi Ben-Atar (advisor and musical editor of *Mesiba Ivrtit* - parties for youths that that consist only of Hebrew music) is of the opinion that: "The current situation in Israel has created a new wave of Zionism that brings people back to their origins, their language, to the things that we all know" (Kaminer, 2002). Ben-Atar's partner at *Mesiba Ivrit*, the musician Yair Gafni says (Ibid): "For a few years we have had security and economic problems and there is a lot of bereavement all over. Entertainment helps lift our morale. People want to lift their spirits and Hebrew music helps get them out of the dumps." Effi Netzer refers to this phenomenon in an interview that was held with him shortly before Israeli Independence Day in 2002 (Gilat, 2003):

> "It is not surprising to me that so many people want to sing during this period. It was always like that during hard times. That is because, first of all, people want to cling to the past, but mostly it is because

these songs have a power. When people sit and sing communally, they feel the 'togetherness,' it empowers them. They see that they are not alone during these hard times."[6]

The journalist Yaron London also wrote about this (2002):

"And then, as if all of a sudden, singing has returned to the crux of the Israeli experience. They sing on the television, in the towns of the periphery, in the city, as well as in the provinces of the beer drinkers and grass smokers. How do they sing? Loudly and in the Israeli custom of trying to overcome one another with their voices. Does this phenomenon point towards a coming together of Israeli society? Is it the secular replacement of the supplicatory prayers? Is it a war cry or a replacement of a fearful howl and an orgy of forgetting? My assumption: all of the above."

While this entry was being written (summer of 2011), the aforementioned *Tish Hagadol* events, now occur all over the country, and are hosted by Moshe Lahav. Einat Sarouf continues to be a communal singing instructor, especially for the younger crowds, and she also performs in Caesarea. There are still 'traditional' communal singing events being held, mostly in smaller halls, with a middle aged and upwards audience who participate. They are still hosted by communal singing instructors, and are usually accompanied by guitars or keyboards.

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[6] This can be scientifically enforced by Schacter's research (Schachter, 1959) where he found that being among other people reduces feelings of stress and anxiety.

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