

Indian Sufism in Israel: A Musically Orchestrated Interaction

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Abstract

This paper explores Indian Sufi influences in Shye Ben Tzur's music. Ben Tzur is a Jewish Israeli musician who composes Sufi poetry in Hebrew and plays it to *qawwālī* music, the traditional North Indian Sufi music. Ben Tzur's songs are devotional and there are many Sufi references that invoke Islamic terminology. His music has been reviewed in numerous newspapers and his Jewish identity, coupled with Sufi themes, evokes questions regarding religious belonging. Even though Ben Tzur openly discusses Sufi influences, his music has remained uncontroversial. This article interprets this as a sign that the symbolic repertoire of Ben Tzur's music evokes associations with India and not with Islam and more specifically with India as a spiritual rather than religious space. The image of India as a spiritual land manages to subsume references to Islam and render them part of the "mystical East" allowing Ben Tzur's audience to consume Muslim themes outside Middle Eastern politics.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Aufsatz fragt nach Einflüssen des indischen Sufismus auf die Musik von Shye Ben Tzur. Ben Tzur ist ein jüdischer Israeli, der auf Hebräisch sufistische Poesie schreibt, welche er zu *qawwālī* Musik, der traditionellen nordindischen Sufi-Musik spielt. Ben Tzurs Lieder haben devotionalen Charakter und spielen mit sufistischen Referenzen und islamischen Konzepten. Obschon die sufistischen Elemente in Ben Tzurs Musik deutlich sind, hat seine Musik zu keinen Kontroversen geführt. Dieser Aufsatz interpretiert diesen Umstand als ein Zeichen dafür, dass Ben Tzurs Musik nicht in erster Linie mit dem Islam, sondern mit Indien, und zwar mit Indien als einem spirituellen Land assoziiert wird. Das Bild des mystischen Indiens schließt dabei islamische Referenzen ein. Diese Spiritualisierung der Musik Ben Tzurs hat einen entpolitisierenden Effekt auf die Musik und ermöglicht damit einer jüdisch-israelischen Zuhörerschaft den Kontakt mit dem Islam außerhalb des Nahost-Konfliktes.

“One look and my soul was imprisoned,
 I am not pretending to be the master of my own life.
 My religion is lost, and I have no country,
 My heart beats by my Beloved’s face.”
 (To die in Love, *lamut ba’ahava*, Shye Ben Tzur, *Shoshan* 2009)

1. Introduction

Shye Ben Tzur is a Jewish Israeli musician who composes Sufi poetry in Hebrew and sings it to *qawwālī* music, the traditional North Indian Sufi music. Ben Tzur is the first musician to combine Hebrew lyrics with the *qawwālī* musical genre on stage and his music is popular in Israel.¹ This paper examines Ben Tzur’s musical production in order to discuss the phenomenon of a Jewish Israeli – Indian Sufi interaction. While the interaction between Jews and Jewish Israelis with other Indian or Eastern religions such as Buddhism or Hinduism has received much attention in recent academic debates, the Jewish-Sufi encounter in present time has so far remained an under-examined phenomenon.²

The last two decades have seen record numbers of Israelis traveling to India and returning with experiences and messages that have penetrated the Israeli mainstream and played a role in the formation of the New Age scene in Israel.³ Ben Tzur is an illustrative example of how Indian Sufism is imported into Jewish Israeli society and how this transfer is done via the merging of Sufi and Jewish traditions as it becomes audible in Ben Tzur’s musical production.⁴

¹ We judge his popularity by the fact that his songs are regularly played on radio and his concerts are routinely sold out.

² See Marianna Ruah Midbar: Thank God it is Good. A Look at Jewish Israelis in light of the Theory of the Easternization of the West, in: *Theory and Criticism*, 44 (2015), pp. 409–416.

³ “New Age” is a contested term. We use it here as shorthand for the integration of non-traditional, non-Western schools of thought in modern culture. For a discussion of the term see Wouter J. Hanegraaff: *New Age Religion and Western Culture. Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, Leiden, New York, Köln 1996; Kay Alexander: *Roots of the New Age*, in: James R. Lewis / J. Gordon Melton (eds): *Perspectives on the New Age*, Albany 1992, pp. 30–47; Robert Ellwood: *How New is the New Age*, in: James R. Lewis / J. Gordon Melton (eds): *Perspectives on the New Age*, Albany 1992, pp. 59–67.

⁴ Even though Ben Tzur both composes the music, and writes the lyrics for his songs, this paper focuses on his textual production rather than on his bringing together of different musical genres. For a discussion of Ben Tzur’s musical innovations and compositions see the magazine article: Simon Broughton: Junun. Shye Ben Tzur and Jonny Greenwood joined forces with the Rajasthan Express, in: *Songlines Magazine*, 2016 (Jan / Feb), 114, pp. 36–40. For further

The paper starts by providing a short description of the *qawwālī* genre in order to contextualize Ben Tzur's music. It then gives some information about Ben Tzur – and especially about the way in which he is portrayed in newspaper and magazine articles – and about his musical composition. The main part of the paper examines Ben Tzur's music as a novel production of *qawwālī* in Hebrew. It focuses on how Ben Tzur merges Jewish and Sufi traditions in his musical work. We conclude with a discussion of the question how this new genre of Jewish-Muslim devotional music can unproblematically enter the popular music scene in Israel. Our argument is that it is the Indian element in Ben Tzur's music that facilitates the circulation of Muslim references in the Israeli musical scene. We argue that India functions as a catalyst for the transfer of Sufi devotional music into Jewish Israeli society because for many secular Jewish Israelis India constitutes a realm of personal experience outside of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Moreover, in popular perception, India continues to carry the orientalist imagery of being a spiritual zone transcending religious and social differences. Once the idea of India is evoked, it is powerful enough to subsume Islam and remove its potential of threat.⁵

2. A Jewish Israeli performing *qawwālī* music

2.1 *Qawwālī* music

Qawwālī is a musical genre of classical North Indian music. Broadly speaking *qawwālī* refers to Sufi Muslim devotional music. A crucial element of the *qawwālī* music is the text. The texts of the *qawwālī* music are Sufi poems which predominantly revolve around the theme of love which in Sufi theology is considered the basis of the relation with god and a means to “bridge the distinction between Created and Creator, leading to divine union.”⁶ The importance of the text in *qawwālī* music is reflected in the etymology of the

information regarding *qawwālī* musical structure see Regula Burckhardt Qureshi: Sufi Music of India and Pakistan. Sound, Context, and Meaning in Qawwali, Oxford 2006.

⁵ We are aware that our argument is based on the assumption that Muslim references evoke negative responses in Israel. A cursory analysis of media reports and mentions of Islam across different disciplines shows that this assumption reflects the current state of affairs.

⁶ Regula Burckhardt Qureshi: Exploring Time Cross-Culturally. Ideology and Performance of Time in the Sufi Qawwālī, in: David Taylor (ed.): Islam in South Asia. Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies, London 2011, pp. 285–319; here p. 293.

word. *Qawwālī* is Arabic and comes from *qawl* “to speak or say.”⁷ *Qawwālī* can accordingly be described as “the musical expression of Sufi poetry.”⁸ It is, as Burckhardt Qureshi says, a “textual-musical idiom” to enunciate Sufi poetry.⁹ *Qawwālī* is the central element of *samāʿ*, which is at the core of the Sufi practice. *Samāʿ* literally means listening or audition and refers to an assemblage for listening to Sufi poetry and music that speaks of the joy and pain of the relationship with god.¹⁰ As a member of a Sufi order puts it, a *samāʿ* involves “the hearing of harmonious sounds which move the heart, and kindle the fire of love for God.”¹¹ With this emphasis on the lyrics, they become a central element of the musical genre. However, the recitation of Sufi poetry alone does not create a *qawwālī*. The recitation of the poetry needs to be “clothed in music” in order for it to classify as a *qawwālī*.¹² The tension of the *qawwālī* revolves around, as Kugle neatly phrases it, “book and melody, between the page and the voice.”¹³ The common composition of a *qawwālī* group is a number of vocalists with a main singer playing the portable harmonium, and a drummer.¹⁴

The *qawwālī* has different, interrelated functions. First, it should make people listen to Sufi poems via music.¹⁵ Second, it should provide a space for recalling the history of the tradition and the lives of the saints through the recitation of the poems and help the listener identify with it by recalling or re-imagining past events.¹⁶ Third, it should increase the effect of the poetry, as it touches the listener on a sensory level which text alone cannot do.¹⁷ Finally, it should put the listener in a frame of mind that encourages entering an ecstatic

⁷ Regula Burckhardt Qureshi/Hiromi Lorraine Sakata: Music in Pakistan. An Introduction, in: The Concise Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, New York 2008, pp. 1047–1048; here p. 1047.

⁸ Burckhardt Qureshi/Sakata, Music in Pakistan, p. 1047.

⁹ Burckhardt Qureshi, Exploring Time Cross-Culturally, p. 290.

¹⁰ Regula Burckhardt Qureshi: Sufi Encounters with Music and Love, in: Eranos Yearbook/ Annale di Eranos 70. Love on a Fragile Thread, Einsiedeln 2012, pp. 638–652; here p. 638 f.

¹¹ Quoted in Subhan, Sufism. Its saints and Shrines, p. 216.

¹² Burckhardt Qureshi/Sakata, Music in Pakistan, p. 1048.

¹³ Scott Kugle: Qawwālī between Written Poem and Sung Lyric. Or ... How a Ghazal Lives, in: The Muslim World, 97 (2007) 4, pp. 571–610; here p. 572.

¹⁴ See Burckhardt Qureshi, Exploring Time Cross-Culturally, p. 295.

¹⁵ See Burckhardt Qureshi, Sufi Encounters with Music and Love, p. 644.

¹⁶ See for a discussion of the aspect of memory in *qawwālī* performances Qama-ul Huda: Memory, Performance, and Poetic Peacemaking in Qawwālī, in: The Muslim World, 97 (2007) 4, pp. 678–700.

¹⁷ See Burckhardt Qureshi, Exploring Time Cross-Culturally, p. 300.

trance state (*ḥāl*). This ecstasy brings one closer to the divine. This union with god, temporal in the present and permanent in death, is the main goal of the religious practices in Sufism and the music serves as a vehicle for reaching it.¹⁸

2.2 Shye Ben Tzur as a composer of Hebrew *qawwālī*

Shye Ben Tzur was born in the US, grew up in Israel and spent most of his adult life in India. It was in India, at the age of twenty, where he started learning classical Hindustani music with the *dhrupad* master Ustad Zia Fariduddin Dagar with whom he studied for over a year.¹⁹ Ben Tzur is in his forties, he is married to an Indian Muslim woman from Ajmer, and they have a daughter together. They live in Israel.²⁰

In journalistic writings Ben Tzur is either portrayed with regard to his nationality, to his linguistic background, or to his religious belonging. Descriptions that stress his nationality speak of him as an “Israeli singer”, an “Israeli composer”, or simply as “an Israeli who plays traditional Muslim music.” Depictions that underline his linguistic background refer to him as “a Hebrew Sufi”, or a “Hebrew qawwali composer.”²¹ In portraits that stress his religious

¹⁸ Burckhardt Qureshi, *Exploring Time Cross-Culturally*, p. 293.

¹⁹ The term “Hindustani music” refers, broadly speaking, to classical North Indian music in opposition to Carnatic music, classical South Indian music. The term *dhrupad* refers to a classical style of North Indian music for which the “strongly systematized arrangement of music parts” is distinctive (Wim van der Meer: *Hindustani Music in the 20th Century*, The Hague/Boston/London 1980, p. 30). Its roots can be traced back to the *prabandha* style of the 12th and 14th centuries and it has flowered in the 16th and 17th centuries (see Meer: *Hindustani Music in the 20th Century*, p. 30). Today it is a rather rare musical style to an extent that leads Van der Meer to speak of its near disappearance (see Meer: *Hindustani Music in the 20th Century*, p. 164).

²⁰ See Aimee Ginsburg: Song of Moses, in: Outlook. The Fully Loaded Magazine, 07.09.2009 (<http://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/song-of-moses/261520>, accessed 13.08.2016). The Dagers are the most important family of musicians to continue the *dhrupad* style today. The family originally hails from Jaipur and it is known for providing traditional teaching methods (see Meer: *Hindustani Music in the 20th Century*, p. 164). Yet, they also introduce new elements one of which is that they welcome anyone who shows some talent and interest as their student whereas in the past the music has been transmitted within the boundaries of the family (see Meer: *Hindustani Music in the 20th Century*, p. 146). This, of course, was a necessary condition for the acceptance of Shye Ben Tzur as a student in the *dhrupad* tradition.

²¹ <http://www.shyebentzur.com/en/home#!bio> (accessed 12.08.2016); Gabe Friedman: The Jew who writes Islamic spiritual music in Hebrew, in: The Times of Israel, 30.01.2016 (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/the-jew-who-writes-islamic-spiritual-music-in-hebrew/>, accessed 13.08.2016); Pramila N. Phatarphekar: Shye Ben Tzur, in: Outlook. The Fully Loaded Magazine, 05.04.2004 (<http://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/shye-ben-tzur/223510>, accessed 13.08.2016).

background he is described as a “Jewish composer”, or a “Jewish qawwal.”²² However, as we will discuss further down, Ben Tzur is also characterized as a person who identifies with other religious traditions. While maintaining his Jewish identity, as becomes clear in his lyrics which we discuss later, he is also described as a follower of a Sufi order, the Gudri Shah Sufi Order, whose lineage is based in Ajmer and is linked to the Chishtī Order, one of the four main Sufi orders in India.²³ Furthermore, he expresses closeness to the Bhakti tradition.²⁴

In portrayals of Ben Tzur, emphasis is generally put on the exceptionality of him as a person as well as on the exceptionality of his artistic work. He is described as “[t]he Jew who writes Islamic spiritual music”,²⁵ “[t]he world’s sole Hebrew qawwali composer”,²⁶ or “the world’s first Jewish qawwal.”²⁷ Such formulations stylize an image of a Jewish and Islamic tradition as two distinct entities which normally do not intersect except in such rare a figure like Shye

²² Friedman: The Jew who writes Islamic spiritual music in Hebrew; Ginsburg: Song of Moses. A *qawwāl* is a singer of the *qawwālī*.

²³ The Chishtī order (the Chishtīyya) exists side by side with the Qādiriyya, the Suhrawardiyya and the Naqshbandiyya orders (see John A. Subhan: Sufism. Its saints and Shrines, New Delhi 1999, p. 175). It was established in India between the 12th and the 14th centuries and is the first important Sufi order to be established in India (see Carl William Ernst / Bruce B. Lawrence: Sufi Martyrs of Love. The Chishtī Order in South Asia and Beyond, Basingstoke 2002, p. 14). There is a rich literature on the order (see for example the two monographies: Tanvir Anjum: Chishtī Sufis in the Sultanate of Delhi, 1190–1400. From Restrained Indifference to Calculated Defiance, Karachi 2011; Ernst / Lawrence, Sufi Martyrs of Love). What is relevant for the social formation described in this article, is that firstly the Chishtī Order attributes great importance to music and the recollection of the names of god (*zikr*) in a vocal form (see Ernst / Lawrence, Sufi Martyrs of Love, pp. 27–46), and that secondly it welcomes people from different religious and cultural backgrounds as their disciples, sometimes also without the requirement of conversion to Islam (see Kelly Pemberton: Sufis and Social Activism. A Chishtī Response to Communal Strife in India Today, in: Clinton Bennett / Charles M. Ramsey (eds): South Asian Sufis. Devotion, Deviation, and Destiny, London 2012, pp. 269–284; here p. 280).

²⁴ Bhakti is a form of personal devotion to God in the Hindu tradition. It is characterized by an emphasis on the unmediated relationship between the devotee with god which places it outside the fold of organized religion (see Karen Pechilis Prentiss: The Embodiment of Bhakti, New York 1999 for an overview of the bhakti tradition). Furthermore, an important characteristic is that the social and religious background of a person is considered irrelevant for the achievement of the religious goal of bhakti practices, that is, the unification of the person with god (see S.R. Goyal: Social Aspects of the Bhakti Movement, in: Ajay Mitra Shastri / Devendra Handa / C.S. Gupta / Vishvambhar Sharan Pathak (eds): Viśvambharā. Probing in Oriology (Volume 2), New Delhi 1995, pp. 431–443; here p. 435). There are many similarities between Bhakti and Sufi worship and many poets and saints are claimed by both traditions.

²⁵ Friedman, The Jew who writes Islamic spiritual music in Hebrew (emphasis ours).

²⁶ Phatarphekar, Shye Ben Tzur.

²⁷ Ginsburg, Song of Moses.

Ben Tzur and/or in the artistic fusion created by him. Interestingly, this perspective stands in stark contrast to how Shye Ben Tzur's worldview is illustrated. In interviews Ben Tzur represents himself as someone who believes in the unity of humanity and as someone who rejects cultural differentiations. For example, *Outlook* magazine quotes Ben Tzur as follows:

“If someone says that my music bridges these two cultures, my answer would be that I don't see much need for a bridge because I don't see much of a difference between them. Maybe I am blind, but nothing feels foreign. Whatever differences there are, they are part of the divine harmony, no?”²⁸

While journalistic writing foregrounds Ben Tzur's Jewish Israeli, Hebrew speaking background, the Muslim and spiritual character is stressed when it comes to descriptions of his musical production. According to *The Times of Israel*, Ben Tzur plays “traditional Muslim music”, “spiritual Muslim Indian music”, “Islamic spiritual music”, “Sufi Indian Muslim music” or “religious devotional music.”²⁹ Again, as pointed out above, such formulations create, willingly or not, a contrast between Shye Ben Tzur as a person of Jewish origin and his music with roots in the Muslim tradition. If, or rather when, one tells Shye Ben Tzur's story by emphasising his Jewishness and the Islamic aspect of his music, the artistic fusion apparent in his music is likely to be heard as a political gesture. This is especially true in the context of Israel. However, this is not how Ben Tzur describes his art. “I am not making any political statements,” he said in the same interview with *Outlook* magazine.³⁰ Ben Tzur tries to escape politicized interpretations of his artistic work, which tend to place Islam and Judaism as binary opposites. However, due to the political conditions in Israel he seems unable to escape being identified as someone with motives reaching beyond those of “just” creating music.

Shye Ben Tzur has released three albums, *Heeyam* (2003), *Shoshan* (2009), and *Junun* (2015).³¹ The names of the three albums all come from Sufi terminology. *Hiyam* is an Arabic term which translates as supreme or divine love,

²⁸ Ginsburg, Song of Moses. Ben Tzur's views regarding the commonalities of different religious traditions and hence the lack of a need for a bridging mission will be elaborated in more detail further down.

²⁹ Friedman, The Jew who writes Islamic spiritual music in Hebrew.

³⁰ Ginsburg, Song of Moses.

³¹ Shye Ben Tzur, *Heeyam* [CD], Israel, 2003; idem, *Shoshan* [CD], Chennai/India, 2009; idem, *Junun* [CD], New York, 2015.

Shoshan, rose, though a Hebrew word, refers to a rose offered at the tomb of a Sufi saint and *Junūn*, madness of love, is a term which refers to a Sufi concept of losing oneself in divine love for god. A characteristic of all three albums is that the majority of the songs consist of Hebrew lyrics written by Ben Tzur himself and the lyrics of the remaining songs are Sufi or Bhakti poems written and sung in Hindustani.³² Ben Tzur explains his choice of Hebrew thus:

“[...] while reading a book by Rumi I found a line that says ‘A man who does not speak his own language becomes mute even if he learns a hundred songs.’ This hit home for me [...]. This is where my desire to write Hebrew lyrics and combine them with Indian music came from.”³³

Ben Tzur’s debut album *Heeyam* was released in 2003 (on the Israeli label Globalev). Ben Tzur says that while writing the lyrics and music he was “thinking of an imaginary Hebrew speaking community in Ajmer, and was writing for that community.”³⁴ His second album *Shoshan* was released in 2009 (on the Chennai based label EarthSync). Again, Ben Tzur composed all the music and wrote the lyrics of the Hebrew songs. The Hindustani songs were written by Meerabai, a 16th century female Hindu Bhakti saint,³⁵ and Gudri Shah Baba III, the grandfather of the current head of Ben Tzur’s Sufi Order. *Junun* is the most recent album, released in November 2015 (on the well-regarded American label, Nonesuch Records).³⁶ *Junun* is the result of co-operation between Shye Ben Tzur, a troupe of Rajasthani folk musicians, a brass band, *qawwālī* singers and Jonny Greenwood, the guitarist of the British rock band Radiohead and a composer in his own right.³⁷ This artistic co-operation results in a unique blend of different musical genres: The Hindustani classical tradition embodied in the Indian instruments and the *qawwālī* singers, the brass band,

³² In this paper we use the term “Hindustani” to denote the language of the songs in the album, as Hindustani is a mixture between Hindi and Urdu that is not automatically associated with Hinduism or Islam.

³³ Ben Shalev: The Return from India of Shye Ben Tzur, in: Haaretz, 30.04.2013 (<http://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/music/premium-1.2007801>, accessed 13.08.2016; Hebrew, our translation).

³⁴ Shalev, The Return from India of Shye Ben Tzur; Hebrew, our translation.

³⁵ Meerabai’s poetry is also popular in Sufism and Sikhism.

³⁶ The album was not recorded in a studio but in the Mehrangarh Fort in Rajasthan. Paul Thomas Anderson filmed the three-week long recording process and created a movie aptly named *Junun* (2015).

³⁷ Describing *Junun*’s complex sound, Songlines magazine points to the fact that Ben Tzur fuses three Rajasthani traditions which normally do not play together: *qawwālī* singers, a brass band, and *nagara* drums which are usually used in folk music in Rajasthan (see Broughton, *Junun*, p. 39).

Ben Tzur's guitar and finally there is Jonny Greenwood's multi instrumented musical input. The quality of production marks a contrast to the two previous albums and it is clear that Ben Tzur's artistic confidence has been growing along with his commercial success.

3. Lyrics and Albums: Representing Sufism in Hebrew and English

All of the songs in Ben Tzur's albums have explicit religious messages expressing desire for and devotion to god. Moreover, they use images and tropes that belong to the figurative language of Sufi poetry. The following section provides a close reading of a selection of Ben Tzur's songs and of the information contained in the booklets that accompany his albums. These albums, along with their attached material, are a useful tool for creating a nuanced picture of Ben Tzur's position in the intersection of Jewish, Israeli and Sufi music.

The booklet of his first album *Heeyam* devotes the majority of its pages to discussing the common source of all religion and sacred music as a shared component of different religious traditions:

“The musical collaboration between the Hindu and the Semitic traditions was not a coincidence. They all travel far back to antique civilizations, and share great respect for the role of sacred music.”

Or, a few pages later, we read the following sentence:

“The Gospel music of Christians in church, the famous Bhajans of Hindus in temples, the music conducted by the Levite Hebrews two thousand years ago in the Temple of Jerusalem, are only a drop in the ocean of ecstasy stormed by sacred music.”

In the booklet, Ben Tzur also speaks about his relation as a Jew to Sufism, which he describes in the following words:

“In composing and arranging the music, I wanted to create an authentic celebration of spiritual *devotion*. I wanted to bring in my own feelings and ancient heritage of the Jews, and unite it with my great love for the *Hindu and Islamic* cultures.”
(Emphasis in the original)

This need to explain his unique position as a Jew in the realm of Sufi devotional music does not appear in the next two albums. The booklets of the subsequent albums appear in a more standard format, mainly providing lyrics and

listing the names of the composers and the musicians, devoting no space to explicate Ben Tzur's artistic innovation or religious philosophy. It seems Ben Tzur no longer feels forced to justify his musical work as a Jew and an Israeli composing devotional music that is heavily influenced by the North Indian Sufi as well as Hindu Bhakti tradition.

In *Heeyam*, Ben Tzur places Islam and Judaism side by side in novel ways that becomes very clear in the two songs *Tawhid* and *Bacol Atta*. *Tawhid* is an Islamic concept which is interpreted by Sufis as the ultimate realization of god's unity.³⁸ The song is an unorthodox yoking together of the two invocations central to Judaism and Islam: *sh'ma israel adonai eloheinu adonai ehad* (The lord is our god, the lord alone) and *lā ilāha illā allāh muḥammadur rasūlullāh* (There is no god but god and Muhammad is his prophet). Indian vocalists sing the Hebrew invocation, resulting in a juxtaposition of foreign, non-Jewish accents reciting a core tenant of Judaism. The placing together of the two invocations coupled with the Indian accents in Hebrew force the listener to re-assess his or her preconceived notions of cultural ownership and automatic identification with this or that language and invocation. The song is solely composed of these two refrains that drive the message home clearly. *Bacol Atta*, which is translated as *You are in every thing* (*sic*), again plays with the concept of *tawhid*. Ben Tzur talks in this song about the omnipresence of god, which leads him to express his veneration for all elements and artifacts: "I bow to the Sun, I bow to the flowers [...], I bow to a statue, a picture and a rock, Because (*sic*) in every thing, you are."³⁹ These lyrics could not be in sharper contrast to the orthodox interpretation of the concept of *tawhid* in both Islam and Judaism with the insistence on the one and true god. This challenge to monotheism, or exclusive interpretations of the concept, questions the received orthodoxy and is Sufi in its rebellious nature. Ben Tzur's defiance of religious norms is multi-layered. In *Tawhid* he challenges the differentiation between Islam and Judaism, while in *Bacol Atta*, he undermines one of the main tenants of monotheism by purporting to worship god through everything, including statues and pictures.

³⁸ See Alexander D. Knysh: *Islamic Mysticism. A Short History* (Themes in Islamic studies), Leiden 2000, p. 303.

³⁹ Translated by Ben Tzur himself in *Heeyam's* booklet (Shye Ben Tzur: *Heeyam*).

Ben Tzur's second album *Shoshan*, "rose" in Hebrew, is a term which leads us to think of the cover of Ben Tzur's first album *Heeyam*. The image on the cover portrays a basket of roses given as an offering at a Sufi shrine or tomb (*dargāh*), most probably at the *dargāh* of the founder of the Chishti Order in Ajmer. Moreover, the rose is a central metaphor for love in Sufi poetry, divine love being a way to attain god. As in *Heeyam*, the only language in the booklet attached to the album is English. Ben Tzur translates his own songs into English and there is no original for either the Hebrew or the Hindustani lyrics. All the Hindustani songs are mentioned with their original title and the English translation (for example *Dar-e-Yar*, Doorstep of the Friend and *Dil Ke Bahar*, Springtime For the Heart), while only two of the Hebrew songs composed by Ben Tzur are presented with the transliteration of the original Hebrew. This fact leads us to postulate that Ben Tzur gives less importance to Hebrew, or that he was unclear about his intended audience, or perhaps that he was trying to reach out to a new and bigger market.

In contrast to *Heeyam*, the make-up of the booklet of *Shoshan* appears in a more mainstream format. The only unusual component for an album booklet is a dedication placed at the opening of the booklet, aligning himself with the lineage he refers to. The dedication begins with "[t]hanks to almighty God. The source of Love, the source of longing, the source of inspiration!" It continues to deliver expressions of gratefulness first to the "prophets", then to the founder of the Chishti Order, and finally to the Gudri Shahi Sufi Order that Ben Tzur belongs to. He lists several of the Order's saints and embellishes their names with poetically formulated attributions that read as follows:

"Thanks to Hazrat Sayeenji Gudri Shah Baba, the garden of inner blossoming inside the torments of life!' Ben Tzur ends the dedication to the current and last heads of the order thus: 'May this work please your souls and become a Shoshan (rose) in the orchard of your bliss – Amen!'"

Dil Ke Bahar (Springtime for the Heart), was written by one of the heads of the Gudri Shah Sufi Order named Hazrat Nawab Khadim Hasan Gudri Shah Baba III (1894–1970). As in many Sufi poems in Urdu and Persian, love for the divine, submission and the state of ecstasy is a central theme in this song.

"Why should the dust of my grave
O! Khadim, not dance in ecstasy,
From the Ka'ba come the echoes
Of submission to the Almighty" (*Dil Ke Bahar*)

If we take this song as an example of Sufi poetry and if we compare Ben Tzur's own lyrics with it, the similarity between Ben Tzur's poetry and the Sufi poetry becomes clear. Ben Tzur deals in many of his songs with issues central to traditional Sufi poetry such as the relationship with god using Sufi imagery of dancing, ecstasy and submission to the divine (e.g. *Hine ani kuli shelkha* (Here I am all yours, *Heeyam*), *Sovev* (Whirling, *Shoshan*), *Roked* (Dancing, *Junun*)).

Unlike *Heeyam* and *Shoshan*, the songs in the booklet of the double album *Junun*, are presented in three languages: Hebrew, Hindi and English. The Hindi and Hebrew songs are always translated into English and never into each other, which invites the interpretation that the album is meant for an international audience. Interestingly, the script chosen for rendering the lyrics of the Sufi songs is *Devanāgarī* and not *Nasta'liq*.⁴⁰ The politics of script and language choice in the Hindi-Urdu-Hindustani sphere are extensive and any short explanation would oversimplify the complexity of this issue.⁴¹ However, we do not want to omit the questions relating to the choice of script: Is the use of the *Devanāgarī* script to be read as an attempt to not mark the songs as explicitly Muslim? *Nasta'liq* script evokes Islam, both in and outside India. Perhaps the use of *Devanāgarī* serves as an Indian marker? *Devanāgarī* is recognizable as Indian and can evoke the "Mystical East."

Allah Elohim, the eighth song on *Junun*, stands out as it is the only one to combine two, full-length Hindustani and Hebrew songs. The Hebrew lyrics, like all the Hebrew lyrics sung by Ben Tzur, are his own creation and they are the only Hebrew lyrics in *Junun* with unmistakably Islamic, rather than merely religious references, whereas the Hindustani song is, as it is stated in the booklet, "Traditional Sufi." The theme of the song is the already familiar subject of the similarity if not the uniformity between Judaism and Islam:

⁴⁰ *Nasta'liq* is a modified form of the Arabic script used to write Urdu and Persian among other languages. *Devanāgarī* is the script for numerous languages in North India including Sanskrit and Hindi.

⁴¹ For a detailed discussion about Hindi language politics in India see Christopher Rolland King: *One Language, Two Scripts. The Hindi Movement in Nineteenth Century North India*, Bombay 1994; Francesca Orsini: *What Did They Mean by 'Public'? Language, Literature and the Politics of Nationalism*, in: *Economic and Political Weekly*, 34 (1999) 7, pp. 409–416; Alok Rai: *Hindi Nationalism (Tracts for the times)*, New Delhi 2001.

“To the infidels, I’m religious,
 to religious law – an outlaw.
 My Lord’s house is within me
 and I have my temple in his heart.
 To Jews I am a Jew, to Muslims – a Muslim.
 In any tongue I speak
 My language is one!”

This, the last stanza of the song, carries a strong message of unity but does not claim at any point that Islam and Judaism are one and the same. Ben Tzur says “my language is one” but this seems to be the wordless language of devotion rather than the language of religious law. Interestingly, in the Hebrew he uses *kofrim* (infidels), the same root and easily recognizable as an equivalent of *kāfir* in Arabic. Rather than choosing a more neutral word, Ben Tzur places himself with this word choice firmly on the side of religion that is intolerant of non-conforming, or secular views. After establishing himself in this orthodox position he immediately retracts and calls himself an “outlaw” or one who has lost the true path (*holekh sholal*). By saying “to Jews I am a Jew, to Muslims – a Muslim” Ben Tzur voices ideas which challenge Jewish and Muslim ideas of belonging by describing a universal religious experience rather than one associated with any specific religion. While many Jewish mystical approaches challenge the institutional version of Judaism, it is rare that the differences between Judaism and other religions are challenged. By repeating “Allah Elohim” together Ben Tzur implicitly dissolves the boundaries between them, which can be interpreted as challenging the boundaries between Islam and Judaism. *Allah Elohim* plays with the listeners’ expectations and assumptions, forcing them to stop and think or to accept the proximity of Allah and Elohim as natural and unproblematic. The name *Allah Elohim* immediately raises the question whether this is a linguistic division – Elohim in Hebrew and Allah in Arabic – but the same god, or whether this is a division between the Jewish and Muslim god. The last two lines of the song “In any tongue I speak my language is one!” further blur any stable understanding or division between the language and religion. In our reading, this is the ultimate purpose of the song, to render any boundaries as hopelessly rigid and therefore irrelevant.

Although *Allah Elohim*’s message is very similar to the message in *Tawhid*, in which he placed *sh’ma Israel* and *lā ilāha* side by side, *Allah Elohim* carries

a more complex message since here there is a clear articulation of an identity which is inclusive of both religions rather than exclusively Muslim or Jewish. *Tawhid*, on the other hand, leaves the listener to come to his or her own conclusion regarding the relationship between Islam and Judaism. As mentioned above, *Allah Elohim* is combined with a devotional Hindustani song that carries the title *Hum Bane* (We Become). The theme of the song, similar but not identical to *Allah Elohim*, is religious tolerance, in this case between Hindus and Muslims. The first two lines of the song express this message clearly by saying: “H is for Hindu M is for Muslim, H and M together make Hum (in Hindi Hum means ‘us’).” The final part, similar to *Allah Elohim*’s ending, talks about god who is ultimately one but who appears in different forms: “You are manifested in the Prophet Muhammad, and you are manifested in Krishna.” While the Hindustani song’s message can be linked to the discourse of religious tolerance and unity in India, the message of Ben Tzur’s song is a new phenomenon in devotional Jewish and Hebrew music. *Hum Bane* serves as Indian color for Ben Tzur’s song and the space given to it, both in the booklet and in the track itself, is much smaller. The average listener has no way of knowing that there is a complete Hindustani song here rather than some “Indian language background” which is meaningless to the average listener. If the Hindustani is there for the Indian flavor why are the messages of both songs so similar? This remains an open question. It seems Ben Tzur is positioning himself in the perennialist Sufi vein of unity. In other words, Ben Tzur’s lyrics are rooted in an articulated Sufi tradition yet he uses the hazy image of India as a spiritual land in order to deliver the message. The average listener does not read the translation of the lyrics but this does not stop Ben Tzur from maintaining his musical and ideological integrity.

In the song *Ahuvi* (My Beloved), Ben Tzur takes another step in mixing the Jewish and Indian devotional tropes. *Ahuvi* has lines like “the city wears its festive face” (*ha’rehovot lavshu hag*) which is a stock phrase in Hebrew poetry. The beloved here is god and the relationship portrayed is more of a Sufi one than a Jewish one. The song continues with allusions that can be read as both Jewish and Sufi but the ending shows the influence of, or adherence to, Hindustani poetical language. A famous trope in devotional and non-devotional Hindustani poetry is the poet inserting his or her name in the final couplet. Indeed in *Chala Vahi Des* (Let’s go to that land, *Junun*) and *Daras Bin* (Without your image, *Shoshan*) by Meerabai, she also inserts her name in the final

couplet. Here, in *Ahuvi*, Ben Tzur plays with his own name's meaning *shye* (present, gift, grace) in order to both identify as the poet and in order to praise god by saying that his presence is a gift. It is hard to capture the word play in the English translation. The booklet renders it as: "for where shall I turn to seek your grace?" (*ana efne bevakshi – shai hasdekha*). However, "where shall I seek – Shye your devotee," is an equally precise translation.

In order to better understand Ben Tzur's creating *qawwālī* music in Hebrew, we contrast him with another example of *qawwālī* music in Israel. After Ben Tzur introduced the novel genre of Hebrew *qawwālī* another band has sprung up in Israel. This band, called *Haqawwaliya*, Hebrew for "The *Qawwālī* Band", is led by Yaron Peer, an Israeli musician who used to accompany Ben Tzur from time to time. Unlike the band that usually accompanies Ben Tzur, The Rajasthan Express, *Haqawwaliya* consists solely of Israeli musicians who play Indian instruments and their texts are Jewish liturgical poems (*piyutim*) as well as Yaron Peer's own lyrics. On Peer's homepage he describes the band as "performing ecstatic devotional music" and *qawwālī* is explained as "coming from India and Pakistan, with some claiming that it originated in the temple of Jerusalem."⁴² This message can be read as an example of cultural mixture and especially of cultural appropriation. One of the *Haqawwalia's* most popular songs, the song "Ali" provides an intriguing example of cultural fusion and appropriation. The credit for the musical composition is given to Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, a legendary Pakistani *qawwālī* singer while the lyrics are Peer's. However, he makes use of the original lyrics in an ingenious way. The original song is a panegyric to Ali, the Prophet's cousin, and contains the refrain "*Ali maula*" which means master Ali. Peer kept the refrain, slightly altering the pronunciation and wrote the lyrics around it. In the Hebrew version Peer sings "*ali mala*" (go up) as an imperative or request to the soul to rise up and transcend.⁴³ The result is an amazing cross-cultural pollination which most Hebrew listeners will not be aware of. In both the Hindustani and the Hebrew the refrain serves as the peak of the song's excitement, repeated again and again in ecstatic frenzy. In the Hindustani this serves as prayer or supplication to Ali, and in Hebrew this serves as an entreaty to the soul.

⁴² Yaron Peer: *Qawaliya*, <http://www.yaronpeer.com/portfolio-items/the-qawaliya/> (accessed 12.08.2016; Hebrew, our translation).

⁴³ Ali is the female imperative – rise – in Hebrew and the soul (*nefesh*) is a feminine noun.

This example sheds light on Ben Tzur's project and shows how his lyrics and music are not the result of cross-cultural appropriation but transference of a musical devotional genre from one language and cultural context to a different language and context. We now turn to the reception of Ben Tzur's songs in Israel and argue that Ben Tzur's music manages to enter the mainstream music scene in Israel, despite expressing Muslim references, because it is seen, or more precisely, heard, as Indian and spiritual rather than as Islamic.

4. India and Israel, Islam and Judaism: Concluding remarks

Ben Tzur's reception in Israel raises questions about the conditions that facilitate the consumption of his music. We interpret the fact that Ben Tzur's *qawwālī* music has been accepted without resentment as a sign that the symbolic repertoire applied in the performance of Ben Tzur's music evokes associations with India and not with Islam and more specifically with India as a spiritual and not a religious space.⁴⁴ Formulating it in a different way, the Indian markers in Ben Tzur's musical production color the Muslim references as primarily Indian rather than primarily Muslim, which makes it less threatening for an Israeli or more generally Western (or non-Muslim) audience. This allows the listeners to embrace the musical composition in an unproblematic way. With this interpretation we follow the hypothesis formulated by Goldman and Patton in an essay about the phenomena of Israeli's fascination with India. They succinctly say: "Indian culture that is 'Oriental' can be engaged without political threat, and without the burden of territorial claims and counterclaims. Moreover, all that is Muslim can be effectively subsumed into all that is Indian and therefore domesticated."⁴⁵ This means, that for Israeli Jews, and perhaps for many Westerners,

⁴⁴ This emphasis on the spiritual character of India has its roots in orientalist framings of the mystic east. For a discussion of the development of the conceptualization of India as a mystical space, see Richard King: *Orientalism and Religion. Postcolonial Theory, India and 'the Mystic East'*, London 1999. Today, the differentiation between spirituality and religion is still produced and reproduced in New Age circles, and this differentiation has been widely accepted as a cultural factum. In this binary composition, spirituality refers to an entity that transcends all types of communal, religious and social differences by emphasising an ultimate sameness, whereas religion is understood as a man-made entity that fosters boundaries between different social groups.

⁴⁵ Shalom Goldman/Laurie Patton: *From All Their Habitations. Indian Love Call. Israelis, Orthodoxy, and Indian Culture*, in: *Judaism*, 50 (2001) 3, pp.351–361; here p. 361.

India provides a space for engaging with Islam outside of the politics of the Middle East and tensions surrounding Islam in the West.⁴⁶

Ben Tzur's music is understood by his audience as Indian since the instruments and the compositions are recognizably Indian even to an untrained ear. Moreover, design and content of the album booklets, as well as the video clips, emphasize an Indian context over a Muslim one. This is not to say that Ben Tzur consciously hides Islamic references but rather that the image of India as a spiritual land, an image which frames common perception of India and which is being reproduced in New Age discourse, does not take into account its Muslim heritage and even when it does, it portrays an oriental, non-threatening form of Islam.⁴⁷ Furthermore, it needs to be mentioned that for the last five years there has been a Sufi festival in Israel. The festival takes place in a center called "Ashram in the Desert" (*ashram bamidbar*) where there are workshops and concerts from various Sufi traditions from across the Islamic world.⁴⁸ While there are a few people with Arab names conducting workshops, the language of the website is Hebrew and English only and obviously Arabs or Palestinians are not the intended audience. Both Shye Ben Tzur and the *Haqawwaliya* band have performed there and from video clips it is obvious that India has a profound influence on the reception of Sufism in Israel. Many of the people participating in the festival wear Indian clothes and of course the event is set in an 'ashram', the epitome of Indian spirituality for people with an inclination for India and Indian religious practices. This observation strengthens the argument that Sufism in Israel is mediated through the

⁴⁶ Apart from this argument about the effect of the Indian element in Ben Tzur's music, we also want to mention the point raised by Chittick that many people consider "'Sufism' as alien to 'Islam,' however these two terms are defined" (William C. Chittick: *Sufism. A Short Introduction*, Oxford 2000, p. 3). If we take into account Ben Tzur's audience that does not necessarily associate India with the "mystic East", those listeners perhaps have a more nuanced understanding of Sufism as not being coterminous with Islam.

⁴⁷ In an interview for the newspaper Haaretz in 2013 it becomes clear, that Shye Ben Tzur is aware that people tend to mystify – and idealize – India and that he is trying to find a way to work against this tendency. He says: "I write about serious things like my desire for God and my love for him, but when I think about how to pass this message, I realize that if the music and the sound will be as serious and as subtle as the text it might sound too New Age like and even pathetic. This happens often when dealing with Indian culture, there is a tendency to romanticize and idealize it" (Shalev, *The Return from India of Shye Ben Tzur*; Hebrew, our translation).

⁴⁸ Sufi Festival, <https://www.suffestival.co.il/> (accessed 15.08.2016).

perception of India as the mystical orient and this allows for Islamic messages to be accepted.⁴⁹

Once the spiritualized and mystified image of India as the framework for Ben Tzur's musical oeuvre is foregrounded, the Israeli, and perhaps international audience, feel safe to abandon preconceived ideas and are open to new perspectives.⁵⁰ This allows people to approach Sufism just as they would try yoga or Buddhist meditation or any other practice that is perceived as intrinsically Indian. The way in which India appears in popular imagery depoliticizes Ben Tzur's music. With this we contradict the argument brought forth by Chen Bram who says, "Sufi spirituality in Israel [...] is not detached from politics."⁵¹ He argues in an article discussing Western Sufi Orders and their relationship with Palestinian ones in Israel that Sufism in Israel, even in New Age circles, can never be non-political because of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁵² However, because of the strong Indian reference in Ben Tzur's musical composition, Ben Tzur's Sufi *qawwālī* production appears independent of the political realm and Ben Tzur's Sufism manages to remain detached from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Perhaps Israelis are in dire need of a space that is not governed by the conflict and India provides this space for them. Goldman and Patton also hint at this point by saying that "India stands in for the 'others' that cannot be admitted into consciousness, that it is an effective substitute for the Palestinians."⁵³ Ben Tzur might be creating a space that is distant from the conflict, a space in which people can feel that they are open to other cultures, while at the same time actually ignoring their immediate neighbors.

⁴⁹ Here we refer to Sufism as a component of the New Age landscape, as opposed to Palestinian-Israeli Sufi circles.

⁵⁰ Marianna Ruah Midbar, a researcher working on the New Age, describes the phenomenon and influences of Israeli interaction with India and how easy it is for Israelis to explore Indian religions without feeling that they have betrayed their own Jewish faith. She argues, simply put, that since Indian religions are viewed as spiritual, they don't pose a threat to one's own religion (see Ruah Midbar: Thank God it is Good, p. 320).

⁵¹ Chen Bram: Spirituality under the Shadow of the Conflict. Sufi Circles in Israel, in: Israel Studies Review, 29 (2014) 2, pp. 118–139; here p. 133.

⁵² In this article, Bram specifically looks at the "Sons of Abraham", which is a Jewish Palestinian Sufi order aimed at finding common ground in spite of – or rather because of – the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Bram, Spirituality under the Shadow of the Conflict).

⁵³ Goldman/Patton, From All Their Habitations, p. 361.