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THE SATURDAY PROFILE

Bridging Time, Distance and Distrust, With Music

Neta Elkayam, an Israeli singer, plumbs the rich culture of the Moroccan Jews she descended from, and introduces it to new audiences in both countries.

By Aida Alami
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RABAT, Morocco — Neta Elkayam did not really understand the depth of her dual identity until, in her late 20s, she and a friend took a trip from their home country, Israel, to that of their parents, Morocco.

"It was like drugs," Ms. Elkayam said. "We both felt like we were walking on air. This is how our place needs to feel. I felt home. I felt filled with happiness. I felt like a complete stranger at the same time. A lot of people on the streets looked like me or like people I knew from my childhood."

Now 41, Ms. Elkayam, a singer and visual artist, has since earned a following with recordings of the music of Morocco's Jews, most of whom left that country decades ago. Ms. Elkayam has joined the ranks of artists from scattered people around the world whose longing for a lost homeland has helped preserve once-thriving cultures.

Her connection to her Moroccan heritage led to her latest and most emotional project, with roots in a sprawling transit camp on the outskirts of Marseille, France, that once housed displaced Jews. Many of them were from North Africa, trying to make their way to Israel. Few artifacts remain of life in the camp, called Grand Arenas, which operated from 1945 to 1966, but among them are recordings of Jewish women from the Atlas Mountains in Morocco singing.

Ms. Elkayam said she wept the first time she heard the aching, mesmerizing voices of those long-ago Amazighs — often called Berbers, a term some consider derogatory.

The Amazighs are an ethnic group largely from North and West Africa who are nowadays mostly Muslim, though there was a significant Jewish Berber minority in Morocco in the past. In present-day Morocco, there is occasional animosity between

Arabs and Amazigh, who often say that they feel their culture is neglected by the Arab-majority state.

In the recordings, the Jewish women from Morocco sang of displacement and the meaning of home as they headed into a new life in a faraway country, leaving behind all that was familiar.

“This is history that you don’t find in books, and you don’t learn at school,” she said in a video interview from her music studio in Jerusalem. “I was crying while listening to the voices of these women. I felt that I needed to make something with it and make it super relevant.”

She and her husband, Amit Hai Cohen, a musician, are recording an album, incorporating those old recordings and updating them with electronic beats and elements of jazz.

In a way, it is a work she was born into.

Ms. Elkayam is recording an album incorporating archival recordings of the singing of Jewish women from the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. Amit Elkayam for The New York Times

Ms. Elkayam’s grandparents left Morocco for Israel, more than 2,000 miles away, in the 1950s and 1960s, never to return. They joined an exodus of hundreds of thousands of Jews, most of them drawn to the new state of Israel, that left only a few thousand still

in Morocco.

She grew up in Netivot, a relatively poor town of Sephardic Jews in southern Israel. Their language, music and food survived in such places — until her parents sent her to boarding school when she was 14, Ms. Elkayam said, she did not know any Ashkenazi Jews — but have faded with time.

Ms. Elkayam was very close to her father's mother, who left Tinghir, an Amazigh village in the Atlas Mountains, in 1956. Sephardic immigrants struggled for years in Israel, and Ms. Elkayam said her grandmother lived inside her memories of home, never fully learning Hebrew or adapting to her new setting. She kept the rhythms of her pastoral life in Morocco, waking at 5 a.m., making bread every day and socializing with other Moroccan exiles.

"If it weren't for the faith and religion and the memories, she wouldn't have survived," Ms. Elkayam said. "She lived like she was still in Tinghir. She had a neighbor she spoke Amazigh with. My grandmother wasn't a happy person, but she was always singing."

Ms. Elkayam's parents, teachers who were born in Morocco but left when they were young, made their first trip back in 1996. She joked that they brought back nothing but pictures of the cemeteries Jewish tourists visit to trace their family histories.

"I never stopped hearing about Morocco," she said. "We talked about Morocco all the time. Jewish immigrants from Morocco had a lot of troubles and difficulties. That's why Morocco was always present in their memories."

That longing and sense of displacement, which Ms. Elkayam inherited, is a constant theme in her work, as is a search for her own identity. She said that she barely heard the Amazigh language when she was growing up — other than her grandmother's occasional chats with the neighbor — and that her mother only spoke Arabic. But she has been working hard on improving the Moroccan Arabic she sings in, and her music videos alternate images of Morocco and Israel.

About a million of Israel's population of nine million are from Morocco or of Moroccan descent, one of the largest demographic groups in the country, and Ms. Elkayam has introduced many of them to the music of their forebears, including artists like the singer Zohra al-Fassiya. Ms. al-Fassiya was a huge star in the Maghreb in the mid-20th century, even performing for Morocco's royal family. But she moved in 1962 to Israel, where she faded from view, dying in relative obscurity in 1994.

It is that work of bridging gaps, across time and nations — and in particular drawing attention to women artists — that makes Ms. Elkayam important, said Christopher Silver, a historian at McGill University in Montreal and an expert on North African Jewish history.

“Neta has done incredible work to amplify the voice of singers like Zohra al-Fassiya for a new generation,” he said. “She took some of her most iconic music and quickened the tempo, added new instrumentation, sort of paying homage to the original.”

Ms. Elkayam working in her studio. Her grandparents left Morocco for Israel in the 1950s and 1960s, never to return. Amit Elkayam for The New York Times

Starting in the 1960s, Morocco, more than other Arab-majority countries, had cordial unofficial dealings with Israel, though there were no formal relations between them. They even worked together secretly on security issues. Jews who had left began to return as tourists, visiting religious sites, cemeteries and families, and Morocco remains a powerful draw for their descendants.

In December, Morocco joined a handful of other Arab states in normalizing diplomatic relations with Israel. The government of King Mohammed VI of Morocco has spurred renewed interest in the country’s Jewish history and culture, hoping to ease discontent over the rapprochement with Israel, viewed by many as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause.

A documentary recently broadcast on Moroccan state television, “In Your Eyes, I See My Country,” which has been shown at festivals in Marrakesh and elsewhere, follows Ms. Elkayam and Mr. Cohen, her husband, on a trip to Morocco, including visits to their grandparents’ hometowns. It shows Moroccans embracing her, clutching her hand,

even telling her that they remember the names of her grandparents.

Being an Arabic-speaking Jew, in both Israel and Morocco, means living with a complex, sometimes conflicting set of expectations, said Aomar Boum, an anthropologist at the University of California Los Angeles, who specializes in Jewish-Muslim relations. In the film, it is clear that Ms. Elkayam is "carrying a heavy weight," he said. "It's only the music that connects the dots."

The film, which is scheduled to be shown next month at the Miami Jewish Film Festival, shows her and Mr. Cohen performing concerts for largely Muslim audiences, and it ends with him spending days in his family's former village, where he dresses in traditional Moroccan clothes and country boys welcome him like a brother.

Kamal Hachkar, the film's Moroccan director, said, "What touched me the most about Neta is that I quickly understood that she sang to repair the wounds of exile." The documentary, he added, "is a way of defying the fatality of the large history which separated our parents and grandparents and that our generation can recreate links through music, which is a real common territory and melting pot for Jews and Muslims."

The political context is inescapable.

"Singing in Arabic is a political statement," Ms. Elkayam said. "We want to be part of this area, we want to use the language to connect with our neighbors. It isn't only to remember the past."

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