



Dunya performs at Congregation Beth El in Sudbury. From left: Robert Labaree, Panayotis League, Noam Sender, Mehmet Ali Sanlikol and Cem Mutlu.

Muslim and Jews, in harmony

Boston group revives little-known musical tradition

By Jim Ball

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“You can’t build walls high enough to keep out the penetration of music,” said ethnomusicologist Robert Labaree. “You can’t stop music.”

The New England Conservatory professor spoke at Congregation Beth El of Sudbury as part of a Martin Luther King Day program that focused on the little-known 1,500-year connection between Jewish and Muslim musicians in the Middle East.

The program, “Jews and Sufis: A Shared Musical Tradition,” brought this history alive through a discussion and a musical performance on traditional instruments. It also served to highlight the contrast between then and now in the Middle East, a point that would not have been lost on King.

“We tend to only see the Muslim-Jewish relationship through the prism of the current situation in the Middle East,” said the featured speaker, professor Edwin Seroussi, director of the Jewish Music Research Center at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. “But the history of almost 1,500 years of living together creates a common musical soundscape.”

Recent years have seen more attention paid to this connection, and “music has become one of the venues of possible dialogue” between Muslims and Jews, the musicologist added.

Seroussi, a leading authority on Jewish musical tradition in the Middle East and North Africa, said Jewish and Muslim mystics (Sufis) “shared musical space,” particularly during the Ottoman Empire, where music was a key element in the Ottoman Court. In fact, a Jew was the chief musician of the empire in the late 18th century.

In the city of Edirne, Turkey, the Jewish musicians who performed at synagogue services would stand outside Sufi lodges on Thursday nights, listening to their melodies and adapting them to Hebrew; the Sufi musicians would do the same on Friday nights outside synagogues. Thus, the music of both groups took on a similar character and style.

The music of Jews throughout the Middle East reflected the local culture, Seroussi added. “Moroccan Jewish music is Moroccan music, and Persian Jewish music is Persian music.”

Seroussi also pointed to Rabbi Israel Najara (1555-1628), a native of Damascus who later

lived in Safed and served a congregation in Gaza. Najara wrote “Zemiroth Yisrael (Songs of Israel),” a book of more than 300 poems (piyyutim) set to music and printed in Safed. (Najara is perhaps best known for his song “Yah Ribon”). A prolific scholar who was fluent in several languages and the varieties of music of his time, Najara wrote many poems that he insisted be sung to specific Turkish melodic modes.

The Boston group Dunya played and sang examples of the shared musical tradition, including a world premiere of one of Najara’s works, which was reconstructed using the Rabbi’s instructions. Led by Mehmet Ali Sanlikol, Dunya alternated fluently between Hebrew and Turkish, underscoring the similarities between the two musical styles.

Sanlikol sang, and played oud and ney (flute). NEC’s Labaree, a co-founder of the group, played çenq (a Turkish harp) and sang. Among other members of the multiethnic group is Noam Sender, who introduced the crew to Hasidic music.

Besides performing, the non-profit Dunya promotes all forms of Turkish music through cross-cultural events, publications and education.