

## On Joy and Sorrow: Jewish Music-Making in Muslim Lands

Yale Institute of Sacred Music event organized by ISM Fellow Ilana Webster-Kogen and Vanessa Paloma Elbaz

### Speaker Biographies:

#### Peter Cole

Of Peter Cole, poet [Edward Hirsch](#) has said, “[He] is a true maker. His extraordinary learning is deep and personal, and his poems, like his translations, are powered by a large spiritual quest to link and light the world with words. He stands with amazement before great mysteries.” And, more recently, critic Marjorie Perloff wrote of Cole’s newest collection, *Draw Me After*, “These are some of the most inventive, witty, profound, and genuinely *beautiful* lyric poems of our moment.”

Cole has also translated extensively from Hebrew literature, medieval, and modern poetry. He has translated Hebrew and Arabic writers, such as [Aharon Shabtai](#), Taha Muhammad Ali, and Yoel Hoffmann, and his anthology, *The Dream of the Poem* (Princeton University Press, 2007), which painted a portrait through verse of the Jewish artistic and intellectual communities that flourished in medieval Muslim and Christian Spain, was the winner of the National Jewish Book Award and the American Association of Publishers’ R. R. Hawkins Award. His most recent book of translation, *The Poetry of Kabbalah: Mystical Verse from the Jewish Tradition* (Yale University Press, 2012), was the winner of *Poetry* magazine’s John Frederick Nims Prize for Translation.

Cole’s other honors include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation. He has also been the recipient of the PEN Award for Poetry in Translation, the American Library Association’s Sophie Brody Award, and the *TLS* Risa Domb/Porjes Translation Prize. In 2010, he received the Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and, in 2007, he was named a MacArthur Fellow.

Cole currently teaches at Yale University each spring. He divides his time between Jerusalem and New Haven.

#### Dr. Vanessa Paloma Elbaz

Dr. Vanessa Paloma Elbaz is described as “a kind of one-woman roving museum of her own” by *The New York Times*. Her work focuses on the cultural histories of sound in the diasporic regions of 1492’s expulsion, describing how issues of transmission, regeneration and the negotiations of gender and power intersect with sound, philosophy, and belief. Currently Research Associate of the Faculty of Music and Senior Research Associate of Peterhouse at the University of Cambridge, she is working on the UKRI funded project “Ottoman Auralities and the Eastern Mediterranean: Sound, Media & Power, 1789-1922”. She has been a Senior Research Fulbright Fellow, a Marie Slodowska Curie Fellow, a Posen fellow, and a Hadassah Brandeis Research fellow. Dr. Elbaz is often a consultant for documentaries, radio and media having features in the *New York Times*, *France 24*, *L’Express*, *NPR* and others. She was granted her Ph.D. from the Sorbonne’s CERMOM research group of the INALCO with *félicitations du jury*, has a M.M. from the Early Music Institute of Bloomington, Indiana, and began her studies at the Andes University in her native Bogotá, Colombia. In 2012 she founded KHOYA: Jewish Morocco Sound Archive in Casablanca. She serves on the Boards of the Jewish Music Institute, the Tangier American Institute for Moroccan Studies and the Institute for Tolerance Studies. She is the Chair of the

International Council for Traditional Music's Mediterranean Music Studies Group. Her first monograph on Sephardi women's voices in Northern Morocco is due to be published with Brill, she is editing a volume on Sound, Music and Memory for the British Academy, and a special journal issue on Judeo-Spanish songbooks for les presses de l'INALCO.

### **Laura Elkeslassy**

Laura Elkeslassy (she/her) is a singer, actor and educator based in Brooklyn. Born and raised in France, with Moroccan and Israeli roots, Laura weaves Judeo-Arab, Middle Eastern, and Andalusian repertoires in her music. Her work focuses on reclaiming Moroccan Jewish liturgical traditions and North African folk music from a feminist standpoint. In 2021, she released the multimedia project *Ya Ghorbati: Divas in Exile*. Developed in collaboration with [Ira Khonen Temple](#), *Ya Ghorbati* weaves together the music and stories of Judeo-Arab divas from mid-century North Africa.

Laura has performed music at countless venues including Lincoln Center, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the World Music Institute and has taught sacred as well as folk music across the country. She was the lead singer of the NY Andalus Ensemble for 5 years. In the theater, she has worked at the National Opera of Paris, the Venice Film Festival, La MaMa ETC, and beyond. As a spiritual leader, Laura has been active in developing egalitarian Sephardi practice in New York, Boston and Paris over the last four years. Learn more at [www.lauraelkeslassy.com](http://www.lauraelkeslassy.com).

### **Dr. Brahim El Guabli**

A Black and Amazigh Indigenous scholar from Morocco, Brahim El Guabli is an Associate Professor of Arabic Studies and Comparative Literature at Williams College. His first book, entitled *Moroccan Other-Archives: History and Citizenship after State Violence*, was published by Fordham University Press in 2023. His forthcoming book is entitled *Desert Imaginations: Saharanism and its Discontents*. His journal articles have appeared in PMLA, Interventions, The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry, Arab Studies Journal, META, and the Journal of North African Studies, among others. He is co-editor of the two volumes of *Lamalif: A Critical Anthology of Societal Debates in Morocco During the "Years of Lead" (1966-1988)* (Liverpool University Press, 2022) and *Remembering Jews in Maghrebi and Middle Eastern Media* (Pennsylvania State University Press). El Guabli is co-founder and co-editor of Tamazgha Studies Journal as well as the Amazigh Studies Series (Georgetown UP).

### **Hadar Feldman Samet**

Hadar Feldman Samet is an assistant professor at Tel Aviv University's department of Jewish History, where she teaches the history of Jews in Muslim contexts. Currently she is also a 2023-24 fellow at the Katz Center, UPenn. Her research focuses on Jewish life in the Eastern Mediterranean Muslim world, particularly the Sephardi diaspora in Ottoman society. Her scholarship examines the Sabbatian movement, entangled histories of Jews and Muslims, interfaith encounters, affinities between mysticism and popular culture, and the relationship between mundane and revolutionary practices. She also explores how expressive culture and performative dimensions of historical phenomena – especially music and embodied devotional experiences – reveal diverse and multifaceted representations of people of the past.

After completing her doctorate at the Hebrew University, she was a postdoctoral fellow at University of Pennsylvania's Katz Center (2018-19), the Harry Starr fellowship at Harvard University (2019-20), and the Scholion Interdisciplinary Research Center at the Hebrew University (2020-22). Her

forthcoming book is entitled *Sabbatian Songs of Faith: Ritual, Community, and Interreligious Encounters in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Magnes Press).

### **Professor Edwin Seroussi**

Edwin Seroussi is the Emanuel Alexandre Professor Emeritus of Musicology at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Chair of the Academic Committee of the Jewish Music Research Centre, Visiting Scholar at Dartmouth College and, in 2023/4, Fellow at the Herbert G. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. His research focuses on Jewish musical cultures of the Mediterranean and Middle East and their interactions with Islamic cultures, Judeo-Spanish song and music in Israel. He explores processes of hybridization, diaspora, nationalism and transnationalism in diverse contexts and historical periods such as the Ottoman Empire, colonial Morocco and Algeria, Germany's Second Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Zionist *yishuv* in Palestine and the Judeo-Spanish-speaking diaspora.

### **Samuel Torjman Thomas, PhD**

Dr. Torjman Thomas teaches ethnomusicology and Sephardic Studies at City University of New York (Hunter College and John Jay College). He is a multi-instrumentalist (saxophone, oud, nay), vocalist (Hebrew, Arabic, Spanish), founder and artistic director of ASEFA and the New York Andalus Ensemble. He is a faculty member for both the ALEPH and Academy of Jewish Religion Cantorial Programs, and is Director of Musical Arts at the Sephardic Center in Brooklyn.

Dr. Torjman Thomas researches and performs musics of North Africa, the Middle East, and Global Jazz. His scholarship centers on musics of the Middle East and North Africa, worldwide Jewish musics, and jazz-based traditions. He is a frequent guest speaker, ḥazzan, and facilitator in ecumenical spaces, cultural institutions, and music and spiritual retreats worldwide.

### **Simon Webster**

Simon Webster is Lecturer in Cultural and Media Theory at SOAS University of London. He earned his PhD in Sociology from the London School of Economics, where he focused on urban imaginaries in the Persian Gulf. He is a past Research Fellow in Arab Crossroads Studies at NYU Abu Dhabi, and the author of many policy papers about Middle Eastern geopolitics. A scholar of the spatial turn, he is currently developing a collaborative project about imagined geographies and ritual mobilities among primarily-Francophone North African Jews. At SOAS, his teaching centers around critical theory and urban ethnography.

### **Ilana Webster-Kogen**

Ilana Webster-Kogen is an ethnomusicologist and Jewish/Middle East studies scholar working on diaspora, migration networks, and gender in ritual. She is the Joe Loss Reader (associate professor) in Jewish music at SOAS University of London, supported by the Jewish Music Institute. She is the author of the award-winning book, *Citizen Azmari: Making Ethiopian Music in Tel Aviv* (2018, Wesleyan University Press). She is spending the year at ISM working on her second book, entitled *Traders, Chanters and Mystics: the Networked Afterlives of North African Torah Scrolls*.