

# Bendigamos

By **Mendi Glik** - 28 Adar 5785 – March 28, 2025

Photo Credit: Jewish Press



Somewhere back in 2007 (if I remember correctly), I was traveling to northern Italy. Northern Italy is one of my favorite destinations – from the huge ski resorts in the Dolomites to Venice and the Ferrari Museum in Maranello. I spent Shabbat in Venice, which is a convenient place to spend Shabbat because there's a kosher restaurant and synagogue.

When I was planning the trip, I was reading that there are two options for Shabbat *davening* in Venice. One is in the local Chabad yeshiva (yes, there's a Chabad yeshiva in Venice), and I also read that in the Jewish Ghetto of Venice, there's an ancient synagogue with a special *nusach* (style) that goes hundreds years back and this is still the *nusach* that they pray in as of today. You know me already – I'm a big fan of music and also I love *chazzanut*. So obviously the choice was clear – I went to *daven* on Shabbat in the ancient synagogue of Venice. The *tefillah* was beautiful and uplifting. The synagogue itself is also very impressive. Very old, yet still magnificent. And together with the special *nusach*, it was really an experience.

I ate Shabbat meals at Gam Gam Restaurant, which is operated by the local Chabad and allows purchase of meals before Shabbat and pay-after-Shabbat ends. The entire trip was fun and enjoyable.

A few years later, somewhere around 2011, I was living in Manhattan. One of the things I really liked about New York and especially Manhattan is that you can still find synagogues with a real *chazzan*, and some of them still have a choir on a regular basis. This is something that unfortunately is really hard to find today in the Jewish world. So while I lived in Manhattan, I really liked to go on Shabbat and holidays to these synagogues, such as Park East, West Side Institutional Synagogue, and Lincoln Square Synagogue, but there was another synagogue that perhaps was on the top of my favorites list, and it was the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue (Congregation Shearith Israel).

The reason that I liked so much to go to the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue is because of the special *nusach* that they still *daven* there, a *nusach* that goes back hundreds of years. They still pray in the original style that they prayed in when the shul began. And of course I enjoyed their choir so much. They have a professional choir in the synagogue on a regular basis. The synagogue itself is magnificent, all together creating a special experience. Even though it's located on West 70<sup>th</sup> Street, and I lived on the Upper West Side in the 90s, it was still worth it to walk all that way on Shabbat to hear the special *tefillah* together with the choir.

And Congregation Shearith Israel also has a special story. As it says in their website, "Congregation Shearith Israel, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in the City of New York, is the first Jewish congregation to be established in North America. Its founders were twenty-three Jews, mostly of Spanish and Portuguese origin, who had been living in Recife, Brazil."


This synagogue, the community, has a rich tradition of music, of special tunes and melodies. And I want to review that music here.

As I was preparing to write this column, I remembered from the time I lived on the Upper West Side that if there's someone who is an expert about the Spanish Portuguese community, and the special *tefillot* and tunes in particular, it is Zachariah Edinger, the *shamash* and *assistant chazzan* of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue. So I reached out to him before to learn more from him about the special tunes and melodies.

One song I still remember from the time that I used to go to the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, and I still sometimes play it on YouTube, is a beautiful song called "*Bendigamos Al Altissimo*." I didn't know much about the story of the song, but I heard it a few times when I used to go there, as well from a friend who used to host Shabbat meals in her house and always sang it during the meal. And I really liked the song. It's just that kind of a song that you hear once and it starts playing again and again in your head. We'll get back to it in a moment.

But first, who are the Spanish Portuguese Jews?

The Spanish and Portuguese community has a very unique and interesting story. These are Jews who escaped the Portuguese Inquisition. In fact, until speaking with Zachariah, I wasn't aware of the Portuguese Inquisition. I always thought it was only in Spain. Turns out, after the Inquisition in Spain, many Jews escaped to Portugal, and there was another Inquisition there. All the Jews were forced to convert to Christianity. From Portugal, the Jews

 Italy, and from Italy to Amsterdam.

When they settled in Amsterdam, they built a synagogue and started to bring *chazzanim* from Morocco, Turkey, Italy, etc. to both *daven* as well as also to teach. For the inauguration of the synagogue, they hired musicians to write a special music for the occasion. They were also among the first communities to have a choir in their synagogue. Salamone Rossi was among the first to write music for the choir. The *nusach* of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews is very similar to that of the Moroccan Jews, yet different. The Torah-reading melody is also very similar but different. Another difference is that they had the tradition of “art music” which was not common among the Jews in Morocco. The tradition of art music perhaps was influenced by Italian culture.

From Amsterdam, the community expanded, and they established communities in London and the Caribbean – there were Jewish communities all over the Caribbean. The reason is that many of them were traders and they traded goods between America and Europe, and those trading areas were all in the Caribbean.

Then, in 1654, they established Shearith Israel in Manhattan. It was the first Jewish congregation to be established in North America. (You can read more about the history of the synagogue and the community on their website, <https://www.shearithisrael.org>.) In the synagogue, they kept the same *nusach* as in Amsterdam, London, etc. And Zachariah Edinger also mentioned that the *nusach* in New York is very similar to the *nusach* in the ancient synagogue in Venice. “In Venice?!” I asked. “Hold on! Hold on! Have you just mentioned Venice?” “Yes,” answered Zachariah. “There is a synagogue in the Jewish Ghetto in Venice that also still prays in a very similar *nusach*. and this synagogue is also related to the community.” “I know! I know!” I said. “I was there – I spent Shabbat there years ago!”

So now I know the ancient synagogue in the Jewish Ghetto of Venice is related to the Spanish and Portuguese Jews. The circle is closed.

From the early days of the community, Shearith Israel hired *chazzanim* from Amsterdam, London, etc. When they opened the synagogue they had a large choir for the event, so they said why not have a choir on a regular basis? They decided to have a professional choir. The choir sings traditional music but also a lot of art music. Some of the composers of the art music are homegrown, some are from the broader Spanish and Portuguese community around the world, and some are German Jews.

“*Bendigamos*” is a song that the Spanish and Portuguese Jews sing after *Birkat HaMazon*. The last line of the song is in Hebrew: “*Hodu leHashem ki tov, ki le’olam chasdo.*” The song “*Bendigamos*” was introduced to the New York community by Reverend Joseph Corcos in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Corcos was the *chazzan* at Congregation Shearith Israel from 1919 until 1922. He brought the song from Jamaica. Now here’s the thing: The song is in Spanish. But Spanish and Portuguese Jews do not speak Ladino. (The expelled Jews from Spain who went to Turkey speak Ladino.) Yet it was embraced by the community.

The song probably comes from a song in French which the Jews in the Caribbean translated from French to Spanish. The French version is called “*Benissons la Toute Puissance.*” The song has been sung in French in the same melody since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The melody of “*Bendigamos Al Altissimo*” is still used today in some of the *tefillot* in the synagogue, including *Shirat Hayam* and *Baruch Haba in Hallel*.

When searching for the song on YouTube, there are few performances. In my favorite performance, the song starts with a classical guitar in the background and then a flute enters. The classical guitar stays in the background during the whole song. You can also hear cello and clarinet in the background. In other performances that you can find on YouTube also, the classical guitar with the Spanish strumming is dominant in the song. Classic guitar is very popular in Spanish music, especially Spanish guitar strumming. The difference between classical and acoustic guitar, if you're wondering, is that classical guitar uses nylon strings as opposed to acoustic guitar which uses steel strings. I used to play both. But I can tell you that classical guitar is way harder because you can really play a whole musical composition. And the Spanish guitar strumming technique is not easy either. I can still hear in my head my classical guitar teacher at elementary school correcting me on my Spanish guitar strumming with his heavy Spanish accent. It was not easy...

"*Bendigamos*" is that kind of a song that you hear once, and then it just plays again and again in your head. But it's more than a song. It's a story. A story of a community.

I learned from Zachariah Edinger that the Spanish and Portuguese community has some more popular songs among the community. One of them is "*Kamti Lehallel*" by Chazzan Halfon. Another popular song is "*Tenu Shebaha*" which is a song for the *Chatan Torah* on Simchat Torah evening as well as on Shabbat evening of *Shabbat Bereshit*.

As explained on Congregation Shearith Israel's Facebook page: "The beautiful and unique poem "*Tenu Shebaha*" ("Give praise"), which is sung on the evening of Simhat Torah and again on the eve of *Shabbat Bereshit* for the two *chatanim* (bridegrooms of the Torah) who are honored with completing and beginning the yearly Torah-reading cycle...was written and composed by Reverend Jacques Judah Lyons, our *chazzan* from 1839-1877."

Another popular song in the community is the song "*Todot El*." "*Todot El*" is a much loved table song in the Spanish and Portuguese communities of New York and Amsterdam. It was originally composed as a "*reshut*" or introduction to *Nishmat Kol Chai* and is sung as such in New York on Simchat Torah and the anniversaries of the opening of each of the congregation's five different locations over its long history.

When the synagogue on 70<sup>th</sup> Street first opened on Lag B'Omer (May 19), 1897, special melodies and prayers, including "*Todot El*," were part of the service. It's also used as a melody for *Adon Olam*.

I highly recommend you to go on the Congregation Shearith Israel website and learn more about this community. Also, if you have a chance to spend Shabbat on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, go and *daven* at Shearith Israel and experience this beautiful community.

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