ASHER: Those terms are still in use in the Arab world. But my understanding is they're a little bit archaic and a little bit formal. And I kind of love that because it's like a time capsule of when my family, you know, left that part of the world and came to the States. And so I treasure that.

SARAH: This is Heritage Words, a podcast about the words we've inherited from our ancestors and the meaning they bring to our lives. Heritage Words is produced by the HUC-JIR Jewish Language Project, which raises awareness about Jewish ancestral diversity through the lens of language. I'm your host, Sarah Bunin Benor. Today, I am very happy to have with us our guest, Asher Shasho Levy. Asher is a Syrian Jewish musician who sings and plays many instruments, including oud. He's done so much to raise awareness about the Sephardic tradition through his scholarship and his performance. I personally first encountered Asher when he was an undergraduate student at the University of Southern California, and he did an internship in *hazzanut*, or cantorial music, at my synagogue, IKAR, in Los Angeles. And that was the first time that I heard haftorah recited in a tradition other than the Ashkenazi one that I grew up with, and I loved it. Later, Asher served as artist in residence at Valley Beth Shalom Synagogue, and I also invited him to do research and several performances for the HUC Jewish Language Project, including performing at our launch event, Passover Around the World in 2020. Asher now lives in San Francisco, where he is the hazan and musical director at The Kitchen, a progressive Jewish community. He's also the leader of the Aram Soba ensemble, a group dedicated to the musical heritage of Syrian Jewry. Asher, welcome to Heritage Words.

ASHER: Thank you. Sarah. What a joy.

SARAH: So I want to start by asking you about your name or your names.

ASHER: Yes, yes.

SARAH: Tell us where your—where your names come from and what they mean to you.

ASHER: So my—my name, my full name, is Asher Isaac Shasho Levy, and so my first name, Asher—*Asher* in Hebrew—is named in honor of my maternal grandfather of blessed memory, Al, *Avraham*. My middle name, Isaac, *Yitzhak*, is named after my paternal grandfather of blessed memory, Isaac Shasho Levy, who was also known as Irving during his life, Zaki, a lot of different names. So when I was born—my parents, my mom is Ashkenazi and my dad is Syrian—and so when they named me, they wanted to honor both conventions. So at the time, my *jido*, my grandfather, who I'm—I'll be talking a lot about during the course of this interview today, he was alive. And so I was named

Yitzhak to honor him, as the Syrian Sephardic tradition is to name after living grandparents. And my first name, Asher, was in honor of my mom's father, who had passed away, and to honor the Ashkenazi custom of naming after deceased relatives. And my last name, Shasho Levy. It's not actually a hyphenated name between my mom's name and my dad's name. It's actually all my dad's family name. So we are a family of Levi'im. So Levites who have that tradition from the ancient times. And in many communities Levi—it—because it's a tribal designation, it could be a last name, but it also could be something that was more of a ritual designation, and people would have another last name that would reflect their trade or their position in the community. And so that's what Shasho is. Shasho is—is a name that I believe has to do with working with fabrics. And our family took, I believe it was in the 19th century. We did some research as to when that name was taken. There was another branch of the family that had the name Tuwashi or *Tuvashi* it became in Turkey, which I believe has to do with being guards. So there was a switch in the family name that had to do with a switch in profession. And so those are my names and it tells quite a story. Shasho, I'm not even sure what, I think it's Arabic, but you can also find many non-Jewish Kurdish people with the name Shasho. And so I've always wondered if there's any connection there, because the Shashos tend to come from one region. But if you meet anyone Jewish with the last name Shasho, that's my family. There's one Jewish Shasho family.

SARAH: Okay, so. And what was your mom's maiden name?

ASHER: My mom's maiden name was Steinman.

SARAH: And so your dad's side, both of his parents were born in Syria, is that right, or?

ASHER: No, so both of his parents were born in New York to immigrants who had just arrived over from Syria. So the initial story of our family's journey was really the breakup of the Ottoman Empire. You know, starting with the Balkan Wars and ultimately the breakup of the Ottoman Empire. That's when my great-grandparents decided that it was time to go somewhere else. And so they came to New York. And so both of my dad's parents were born on the Lower East Side to immigrants who had recently arrived from the Ottoman Empire.

SARAH: In the teens or the 20s? Like, when did they arrive?

ASHER: In the teens. They arrived in the teens. And my—my grandparents were born in the early 20s.

SARAH: And your mom's family, were they also in New York?

ASHER: They were also in New York, and they came over from Ukraine and Russia.

SARAH: Where did you grow up?

ASHER: I grew up in LA. And I would always go as a kid to visit my extended family in New York, summers and winter vacations to see my grandparents and my aunts and uncles and cousins over there.

SARAH: And you have some rabbis and cantors in your family, right?

ASHER: That's right. So my dad is a rabbi and a chazan. And so I grew up with that strength of tradition, you know, in the house. But actually my—my grandfather, my *jido,* he fought in World War Two when the Normandy invasion. So when he came back to the States after he—he was chosen by the community as someone who had the potential to be a *chacham*, to be a rabbi. But the economic reality of his life was such that he needed to provide for his family. And so he went into business. And so he was always very, very engaged in passing down the tradition and in, in learning and just being an active part of the community and an active part of his kids' Jewish education. So, you know, I feel like in my dad's becoming a rabbi, the seeds had been planted previously, and it was something that sort of came to flower. And I think of myself in that same way that I come from a lineage that taught this and valued this. So my dad was the rabbi at the Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel in Los Angeles on Wilshire Boulevard, which is LA's historic Sephardic synagogue that was founded by Jews from Turkey and from the island of Rhodes. And so I became familiar with that particular strain of tradition, and grew up just surrounded at the—especially in LA, the Sephardic community, unlike in New York, which is really Syrian dominated. My Syrian heritage was not as represented in the Sephardic community in LA, so I got that strength at home. But also our family picked up customs from the Ladino Sephardic world, and also from the North African Sephardic world. Many of my teachers and many of the people who I grew up with were from Morocco and from Algeria and from Tunisia.

SARAH: What are some examples of traditions from North Africa or from the Turkish and Rhodes communities that you picked up and used in your home?

ASHER: Yeah. So a great example of that is the *Seder Pesach*. We do a traditional Syrian *seder Pesach*, where we're chanting the *Haggadah* in the, in the Hebrew and in the Aramaic in the Syrian *nusach*, and also in the Syrian tradition, you have passages that are, you know, in certain—certain places they'll do the whole *Haggadah*, translated in Judeo-Arabic. We will chant pieces of the Haggadah in Judeo-Arabic, as is our

tradition, but we'll also chant pieces of the *Haggadah* in Ladino, which is something that we picked up from the Ladino Sephardic community. And there are a few other instances. The Ladino in *Ein Keloheinu*, the Ladino insertion in the *piyut* for *Havdalah*, *Hamavdil*, a few Ladino insertions like that, and many melodies many different melodies we've picked up from—from the Sephardic Ladino community and from the North African community as well. A lot of—a lot of melodies and a lot of musical traditions. Because the North African community, particularly the Moroccan community in LA has a lot of strength, and they've been able to preserve a lot of really beautiful tradition in a way that other Sephardic communities in LA maybe haven't, with strength and a particularism, to say that, you know, this isn't just pan-Sephardic *Yerushalmi*, this is Moroccan, and this comes from a specific city, and I—I love that. So I always sought out teachers who could speak to that.

ASHER: We learned Moroccan *ta'amim* and things like that. But I don't use them. I use them more, for example, and for teaching, and not in my own personal, you know, *kriah*. But I do use a lot of Moroccan *nusach* when I'm leading *tefillah*, because the Moroccan *nusach* in many ways is unlike, let's say, unlike the Syrian *nusach* and the Yerushalmi *nusach*, in which the melodies are changing every week according to the *maqam* of the week, the Moroccan ways of chanting is a really wonderful way of teaching people the texts, because it repeats every week, and it can really sort of internalize some of the concepts.

SARAH: Mm. So can you give us an example? I hope you don't mind if I put you on the spot to sing a little…

ASHER: Oh, no. Yeah.

SARAH: …can you give an example of Moroccan *nusach* and Syrian *nusach* that you use now in your cantorial work?

ASHER: Absolutely. So let me let me grab a *siddur* and I'll give you—give you a little taste.

SARAH: Okay. Okay, you got your *siddur*?

ASHER: Yes. So to give an example. I'll just—I'll take *Nishmat Kol Chai* from Shabbat morning *tefillah*, and I'll give it to you in the Moroccan *nusach*. And I'll also give it to you with—with a Syrian *nusach*, because I—I do incorporate both of these ways of doing it, but it's, I think, illustrative of the differences. The Moroccan *nusach:*

נְשָׁמַת כָּל חַי תְּבָרֵךְ אֶת שִׁמְךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ. וְרוּחַ כָּל בָּשָׂר תְּפָאֵר וּתְרוֹמֵם זִכְרְךָ מַלְכֵּנוּ תָּמִיד

And it goes through the cycle with that same melody. Aaaaaaahhhh. And then as you go through some of the big ending phrases, you know, the whole *kahal* would do together:

וְרוֹב רִבֵּי רִבָּבוֹת פְּעָמִים, הַטּוֹבוֹת נִסִּים וְנִפְלָאוֹת שֶׁעָשִׂיתָ עִמָּנוּ וְעִם אֲבוֹתֵינוּ.

And everyone does it, and it's predictable in that way, and really, really beautiful. But it has a sort of flow to it that really helps people learn. Whereas in a Syrian tradition, traditionally you would be changing the *maqam*, the musical mode, every week in accordance with the *parasha*. So the weekly *parasha* is associated with a certain musical mode that the community has determined over hundreds of years reflects the themes of the *parasha* in some way. So as a result, the *hazanut* gets a little bit more free, but there are melodies that are sung often at the beginning and the end so that the *kahal* can participate. So if I was to do a *maqam ajam*, which is like a major key, you could do it like this. And this would be Syrian style:

נְשָׁמַת כָּל־חַי תְּבָרֵךְ אֶת שִׁמְךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ, וְרוּחַ כָּל־בָּשָׂר תְּפָאֵר וּתְרוֹמֵם זִכְרְךָ מַלְכֵּנוּ תָּמִיד, מִן־הָעוֹלָם וְעַד־הָעוֹלָם אַתָּה אֵל. וּמִבַּלְעָדֶיךָ אֵין לָנוּ מֶלֶךְ גּוֹאֵל וּמוֹשִׁיעַ, פּוֹדֶה וּמַצִּיל, וְעוֹנֶה וּמְרַחֵם, בְּכָל־עֵת צָרָה וְצוּקָה, אֵין לָנוּ מֶלֶךְ עוֹזֵר וְסוֹמֵךְ אֶלָּא אָתָּה:

So you have a melody at the beginning, and then you have *hazanut* that is basically improvisation within that given mode that the melody sets up. And I use both of those approaches in my *hazanut*. Oftentimes if there's a section of the *tefilah* that in our community I really want people to know and people to internalize the concepts and take them to heart, especially when you have sections of the *tefilah* where it's like a list of something you know, certain characteristics of the *Borei Olam* or whatever it is, like,

אֲדוֹן עוֹזֵנוּ, צוּר מִשְׂגַּבֵּנוּ, מָגֵן יִשְׁעֵנוּ.

that sort of thing. The Moroccan tradition really helps because you sing it in a way that, you know:

מָגֵן יִשְׁעֵנוּ, מִשְׂגָּב בַּעֲדֵנוּ.

And it's just—it just—it kind of, I think, emphasizes the concepts, whereas the Syrian is—is—it can be quite elaborate, and it can be very beautiful, and I—I love it. But in terms of being able to teach it to a *kahal* that is not familiar with it, the *hazanut* itself takes longer to learn.

SARAH: So it seems like you're incorporating traditions that come from your family and your childhood community in congregations that are predominantly Ashkenazi.

ASHER: Yes, absolutely.

SARAH: Do you also use Ashkenazi *nusach*?

ASHER: Yeah, and I can—I can show you, but I—I as a chazan, my—my style of *hazanut*, my pronunciation, my musical style, is totally rooted in the Middle Eastern Sephardic traditions. So when I'm using Ashkenazi *hazanut*, some people might miss it because they might not recognize its application, but it is truly Ashkenazi *hazanut*. So, like Shabbat morning, let's say right before *El Adon*, like:

אֵין עֲרוֹךְ לָךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ בָּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה, וְאֵין זוּלָתְךָ מַלְכֵּנוּ לְחַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא, אֶפֶס בִּלְתְּךָ גּוֹאֲלֵנוּ לִימוֹת הַמָּשִׁיחַ, וּמִי דּוֹמֶה לָךְ מוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ לִתְחִיַּת הַמֵּתִים

That's Ashkenazi *hazanut,* but it's done with the Sephardic approach.

SARAH: What's Sephardic about it?

ASHER: The pronunciation, the improvisation. In terms of the, like, I'm taking that melody there, that Ashkenazi *nusach*, da na na na na na na na for Shabbat morning. That's in the Arabic and Turkish traditions that would be called *Maqam Nahawand*. So I'm applying the kind of melismas and improvisation and approach to building tension and resolution that I learned from *Maqam Nahawand* and applying it to Ashkenazi music that is in that category. It's not a ridiculous thing to consider these melodies *Maqam Nahawand,* because the Sephardic tradition takes melodies from all different sources and then classifies them ultimately in the *maqam* system. In fact, the first time I started doing this, like, I felt like I had the permission to do it, is on the famous Pizmonim website from the New York Brooklyn Syrian community- on their list of *maqam Nahawand* melodies, they have:

אֲדוֹן עוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר מָלַךְ

on their list of *Maqam Ajam* major melodies, they have:

מָעוֹז צוּר יְשׁוּעָתִי

So when you're thinking in that framework, it doesn't preclude you from bringing things from outside in. And so that, for me, has been very helpful, using this framework of *maqam* to bring together things from the Eastern Sephardic traditions, Turkish and

Syrian, Yersushalmi, Egyptian, Iraqi, the North African Western Sephardic traditions, Morocco, Algeria, and the Ashkenazi traditions all together. The musical framework can hold it.

SARAH: Wow. So I think we're at a stage in American Jewish history where we're really seeing mixing in ways that we hadn't previously. So I think it's unusual for an Ashkenazi synagogue to incorporate as much Sephardi…

ASHER: Yes.

SARAH: …*nusach* as you are incorporating. But I can see this happening in smaller doses at other synagogues. And I'm wondering what you think about that.

ASHER: I think it's excellent. I think that the more we incorporate Sephardi traditions into the predominantly Ashkenazi institutions, there's so much richness that comes from it because the—the Sephardi traditions, particularly, and I'll—I'll say, melodies are one thing, and melodies are very beautiful. And that's sort of where my heart lies, is with all of the musical traditions. But once you start going a step beyond that and you start looking at textual traditions and language and the differences in approach to learning and teaching Torah and different theologies and philosophies that develop, you're expanding everything in terms of your Jewish life. All of this is in conversation. So, communities that are Ashkenazi communities are rooted in Ashkenazi practice. They already have openings towards Sepharadi, like HaRambam. Everyone studies HaRambam or *Lecha Dodi*, *Kabbalat Shabbat*, the mystics of Safed. That's a way into for Lurianic mysticism and the Sephardic iterations of that and *piyutim* and all of that. So if we think of it as sort of expanding upon threads that are already present in all of Jewish practice and making connections and really opening things up to reflect *arba kanfot*, which is really what our Jewish world is—it's an ingathering from all corners, particularly in American Jewish communities, that may have been founded by Eastern European Ashkenazim. But that's not the reality of the demographics today, that everyone comes from that—that root. And even so, most people who come from that heritage are not deeply connected with it anymore as a sort of ethnic heritage. In certain cases, people are, and I think that's wonderful. But for most American Ashkenazim, three or four generations down the line, maybe their pull to the old country isn't as strong as, you know, some of us Sepharadim who really cling to these sort of things. And so at that point, I think you have an opportunity to do things that are spiritually nourishing. You know, first and foremost, these Sepharadi traditions, it's just beauty and comfort and all of these things, aside from the fact that I come from these communities, I value them inherently. And I think that the more communities start to bring that together, the stronger we'll be in so many ways.

SARAH: I agree, and what you're pointing to, though, is that this is not a new phenomenon, like you mentioned that these…

ASHER: Not at all.

SARAH: …piyut website includes Adon Olam and Maoz Tzur in Ashkenazi traditions, and that Ashkenazi traditions include Sephardi liturgy. Also, one you didn't mention is El Nora Alila. Is it true that that…

ASHER: That's a very interesting one.

SARAH: How did that get into the American conservative machzor?

ASHER: El Nora Alila made its way via the UK. So in the UK, where the historic S&P, Spanish and Portuguese, Western Sephardic community is so deeply rooted that they consider themselves basically minhag hamakom of the UK, there's more influence from them on liberal denominations and Ashkenazi orthodoxy than there necessarily was in recent years in the States. So my understanding is that El Nora Alila first became part of the Ashkenazi tradition in the UK and ultimately from there spread to the States and elsewhere.

SARAH: Yeah, and…

ASHER: But something else I want to note in terms of mixing together is that having a siddur, even, a prayer tradition that is a mix of both is something that is several hundreds of years old now. So in our community at The Kitchen, we just published a new siddur for our community. That is a mix of *nuschaot* in terms of the text of the siddur. So it weaves together elements of the Sepharadi *nusach* or *nuschaot*, the Ashkenazi *nusach,* and the *nusach* or *nuschaot* of the Hasidim. And if you go back and you look at what the siddurim or the development of the siddur that the Hasidim use, that ultimately comes from the tradition of Isaac Luria, the Arizal, and the siddurim that come from that. Basically, what you have is a siddur that has—that takes the core of the old Ashkenazi text and alters it in accordance with Sephardic custom. When there is a substantial reason to do so, oftentimes mystical or Kabbalistic. So already, you know, in the early days of Hasidut, you have these communities in Eastern Europe, it's pretty radical. They were all, you know, Ashkenazim. So they're praying *nusach* Ashkenaz. And all of a sudden, they start changing the *nuschaot* to incorporate the mystical understandings of Sephardic rabbis. You know, we think of it, ‘Oh, it's just the Hasidic siddur,’ but you open it up, it's much more familiar to Sephardim. So many pieces of the

text will feel familiar to Sephardim from our liturgy, whereas many Ashkenazim will see these—these additions that the Hasidim use. And if they're not familiar with the Sephardic liturgy, they'll be, you know, a little bit more unfamiliar.

SARAH: Yeah. And even what we think of as Sephardic developed over the years with…

ASHER: Yes.

SARAH: …influence from one Middle Eastern community to another, right?

ASHER: That's right. And even the notion of a Sephardic tradition really, you know, in some ways it's a homogenizing force throughout Middle Eastern and Mediterranean Jewish communities. So in, you know, in my—my dad's family's community, the Halabi community of Aleppo, Syria, that is, you know, very much at this point, it's considered to be a Sephardic tradition and a Sephardic community. But before there were Sephardim who came to Aleppo and brought the Sephardic tradition, there was the old Aleppo custom. What's called the Musta'arab custom. Musta'arab is—is basically Arabized, is what you would say. So it's Jews who, in the land of Israel and Lebanon, and Syria, and that area have been there since ancient times, and ultimately culturally Arabized but maintained distinct Jewish traditions that ultimately were almost all supplanted by the Sephardic *nusach*. And the Sephardic *nusach* has supplanted the older customs in places like Iran and the broader Persian community. Bukharian Jews started following Sephardic tradition when a Moroccan rabbi, Abraham Maimon, showed up there in, I think, the 18th century, and all of a sudden, bam, Sephardic siddurim. Same thing in Yemen. You have the Shami custom in Yemen, which is Shami, referring to Bilad al-Sham, which is Syria, Land of Israel, the Levant. It's the Jews in Yemen who stopped following the old Yemenite custom, which is more rooted in HaRambam, and started following the—basically a version of the Sephardic siddur with the Kabbalistic additions and all of that. And the Livorno printing press was the final element of that, whereas there was a particular edition of the siddur, the Sephardic siddur, that was published in Livorno, that became the standard throughout the Sephardic world. So if I look at the old siddurim in my family, and many Sephardic Jews look at old siddurim in your family, you'll often find that it was an edition of the Livorno siddurim. So that further sort of homogenized things liturgically.

SARAH: Wow. And I wonder what role your new siddur will play in homogenizing the liturgical traditions in egalitarian contexts in America.

ASHER: Only wonder.

SARAH: Okay, well, I want to turn now to your ancestral languages. So I assume your great-grandparents spoke Arabic or a Jewish variety of Arabic in Syria, and on your other side, probably Yiddish. And so I want you to tell us, first, to what extent you encountered those languages growing up. And then we'll talk more about the words you've inherited.

ASHER: Yeah, absolutely. So I would say I encountered the same amount of Yiddish as any average American Jew a few generations down the line with a lot of family in New York. So nothing out of the ordinary. In terms of Judeo-Arabic, though, it's interesting. So my great grandparents, obviously they were—they were fluent speakers and they carried that along with, I believe my great grandparents all spoke between 6 and 9 languages, because that's what you did at that point in Jewish history, in the Ottoman Empire, you spoke Arabic, you spoke Turkish, you spoke Italian, you spoke French. You spoke some Spanish. Maybe some Greek or Turkish. All necessary for trade and life in multi-ethnic Ottoman lands. And so when they came to the States, they passed down the Arabic to my grandparents pretty well. My especially my my *jido*, my grandfather. *Jido* is the Arabic word, or Syrian Arabic word for—for grandfather. So that's how I—I always refer to him. So my *jido*, *alav hashalom*, was especially earlier in life, was a pretty fluent Arabic speaker, and even later in life was—was still pretty conversational and had a—had a good knowledge of—of the language. I don't believe he read, though. In fact, I know he didn't read Arabic script. And so this is a common thing that most of the Sephardic Judeo-Arabic speaking communities wrote and read using a sort of altered version of Hebrew script. So if you take the Hebrew alphabet and you assign every letter an equivalent in the Arabic alphabet, you—you—it's basically you're spelling everything the same as you would in Arabic for the most part, but you're just using the cognate letters. And in certain cases where you don't have an exact cognate in Hebrew, you would use a letter either with a some sort of diacritic, maybe, maybe a dagesh or something, or using different dagesh or refuyah versions. But you know, and this also differed place to place. But that's how they wrote that. And so all of the old texts that we have in any of the liturgical texts that we use in Judeo-Arabic, like in Haggadah, they're all written in that convention. And between my—my grandparents and my dad, that's the point where it stops really being fully like a spoken language. And so my dad has some basic Arabic skills, but it's pretty broken and understands piecemeal. And so I grew up understanding very basic Arabic, usable basic Arabic, and a whole lot of words of different sorts, words, just all sorts of different words, religious words, words for food or cultural events, just insults, blessings, words that—that are useful, I would say. And that I think is pretty typical of Syrian Sephardim in the United States, particularly in, like, centers of—of the Sephardic community whose family has been in the States for a long time. You'll have a basic command of some, you know, very basic spoken Arabic, and

then a lot of phrases which at this point have become—it's—there's sort of a—a Syrian New York Jewish English, basically.

SARAH: Yes. And eventually, I hope we'll have on this podcast Isaac Couua, who is…

ASHER: Oh, yes!

SARAH: …who's compiling a dictionary of Syrian Jewish English. Because that's, you know, you might think, oh, it's going to be a dictionary of Judeo-Arabic, but it's not. It's Jewish.

ASHER: No.

SARAH: It's words that are distinct that Syrian Jews use within their English.

ASHER: You have a lot of strange uses of pig Latin and…

SARAH: Oh, interesting.

ASHER: Yeah, and a lot of initials like Syrian Jews, like I grew up referring to Syrian Jews as *S-Y*s. So Syrians are *S-Y* and Ashkenazim are *J-dub*, and so *S-Y, J-dub*. This sort of initial system is, every Syrian Jew knows *S-Ys, J-dubs.*

SARAH: Yeah. And tell us what those stand for.

ASHER: SY, it's the initials of Syrians. So Syrian Jews are *S-Y* and then *J-dubs,* Ashkenazim. It probably is J-W. And there—there are a bunch of different theories. I've heard a lot of different theories of how this—this originated, but I think the one—the one that I heard is that the when the Syrians arrived in New York, the Ashkenazim didn't accept them as Jews and would insult them and say, you know, you're Arabs, you're gypsies, you're Turks, all of these—all of these sort of racial insults. And so the Sephardim sort of was, okay, let these—they think they're the only Jews we'll call them. They're the J-dubs. They're the Jews, and we're the Syrians. And so it's sort of internalized, and it definitely reflects that American experience, if that's true. Some people say that's not true. You never know with this stuff.

SARAH: Yeah. Really, really interesting. Okay. I want to turn to your heritage words in particular. So you've already mentioned one of them, which is well, you mentioned *S-Y* and *J-dubs*, which are heritage words in themselves. You also mentioned *jido*, grandfather, are there other kinship terms that you use from either Arabic or Yiddish?

ASHER: Yeah. So *jido*. And then there's also *sito*, which is grandmother. And so those are you know, it's interesting, I went to in LA a few years ago, I remember I went I was in a Syrian restaurant that was owned by Syrian Christians, and I was talking with them, and I mentioned the terms *jido* and *sito*, and the woman who was running the restaurant said, 'wow, you know, those terms are from like 100 years ago.' In, like, that part of Syria, they would use different terms. So it is, you know, those terms are still in use in the Arab world. But my understanding is they're a little bit archaic and a little bit formal. And I kind of love that because it's it's like a time capsule of when my family, you know, left that part of the world and came to the States. And so I treasure that.

SARAH: Wow.

ASHER: And that was, that was the case with, you know, in our family and I think in the broader Syrian Jewish community, those are the terms that—that are used.

SARAH: Mm-hm.

ASHER: Like my great—my great-uncle, for instance, and my great-aunts, they were *jido* and *sito* to their grandchildren.

SARAH: Okay. And are there any children in your generation, like, do you have siblings?

ASHER: I don't.

SARAH: Okay. And you don't have any children?

ASHER: No, I don't.

SARAH: Okay. So if you have children someday, would you—what would you have them call your parents?

ASHER: My mom is Ashkenazi. My mom would—she'll choose what she wants. But my dad, I know he wants to be *jido*.

SARAH: Aw, okay, so your—your Ashkenazi grandparents, do you—what do you call them?

ASHER: So my—my—I never knew my Ashkenazi grandfather, but my Ashkenazi grandmother is my grandma.

SARAH: Okay.

ASHER: So no Yiddish there or any—any real particular…

SARAH: Okay. So aside from kinship terms, you mentioned religious and cultural terms.

ASHER: Yes.

SARAH: Tell us some of the Arabic words that you've inherited for those.

ASHER: Oh yeah. There's a, there's a lot. So—so one I would—I would say for sure is *haram*. So when something is not allowed, it's forbidden, you say it's *haram*. It's an Arabic term. It's, in Islam it's used as a religious term, but also in Judaism it has a cognate, you know, the word *haram* and *herem* have the same root, you know, it's not allowed. So in the Syrian Jewish world, if something is *asur*, it's *haram*. So that's religiously how you would use it. But also, it just is used sort of casually, like, you know, Why would you—why would you do that? It's *haram*. Another religious term that I love is *adus*. So in Syrian Arabic, oftentimes the letter that is a cognate with *qof* in Hebrew gets dropped. *Qof* can become *aleph* in Syrian Arabic, and so it becomes a glottal stop as opposed to a "quh" in the back of the throat. So that's how you get, instead of *qidus* or even *qadus*, you would get *adus*. And then the "suh" at the end as opposed to "shuh" is very common in Arabic, like *salam* versus *shalom*, how many—many words with *shin* in Hebrew become *suh*. But *adus* is, it's the—I have the memories of, you know, it's my—my *jido, alav hashalom*, before *kiddush,* would yell "*Adus*! *Adus*!"

SARAH: To clarify for our listeners, that's the blessings that you say over the wine on Friday night and holidays?

ASHER: That's right. That's right. The blessing for the wine on Shabbat and holidays.

SARAH: Okay.

SARAH: And another interesting term is what we call the *tallet* bag. So this one is really interesting because having grown up in a community that had a lot of Ladino speakers, the Syrian Jewish term for a *tallet* bag is a *koracha*. And that's a, that's a Spanish word. But it's not the word that the Ladino-speaking Jews use today. So, *koracha*, I think it means like a purse or some sort of bag or something. But today the—at least those

Ladino-speaking Sephardim that I grew up with from Rhodes and Turkey, they call the *tallet* bag a *tallega*. And so they were always interested to hear this word *koracha*, which is like some archaic Ladino word that they didn't know. But the Syrians preserved that as the word for—for the *tallet* bag.

SARAH: And *tallet* is what Ashkenazim would call a *tallis*, right?

ASHER: Yes, exactly. So the—the Sephardim really the—you hear *tallit* now in modern Hebrew, but traditionally and still in Sephardic communities, especially among older people, the vocalization of that word and text was always rendered as *tallet*. In New York, you'll see, like, the Sephardic Heritage Foundation, they'll always spell it *tallet* that way.

SARAH: Mm-hm. Right. When we think about heritage words, it's primarily the languages that were spoken in the countries our ancestors came from. But it's also distinctive pronunciations of Hebrew and distinctive forms.

ASHER: That's right. That's right. I'll say a couple other words related to religious life and religious practice. One of them is the word for the synagogue, which I grew up always calling *knis*. And so the word *knis* is, for those who are familiar with the Hebrew word for synagogue, *beit knesset*, you might hear a similarity, and it's because it's the same root. In fact, the word that I believe that Persian Jews use, *kenisa*, is also used in Arabic to refer to churches. So there is a sense that that root of—it's like *knesset*, to gather, is at the heart of what we're doing in *tefillah*. So *knis* and the plural of that is *knais*. And then another, another good word is the word for prayer, which is *salah*. And in Syrian, sort of American Syrian parlance, it sometimes ends up being pronounced like *slah*. You know, "*Jido,* how was the *slah* at *knis*?" Like that. But it comes from the Arabic word *salah,* which is prayer. And in fact, it's the same root in Aramaic. If you look at the *Kaddish* when it says "titkabal tselothon", that word of *salah* is the same as in Arabic.

SARAH: Excellent. So, beyond religious and cultural terms, you mentioned blessings and curses. Tell us about some.

ASHER: Yes. Oh, there's a lot. So, you know, simple—simple things like calling someone if you call someone crazy, *majnun* or *majnunah*. That's a really common one. If someone bothers you, you know, that *majnun* over there. I mentioned *haram*. A lot of saying *mashallah* and *inshallah*. Even someone like me who grew up without a lot of Arabic, since I was a kid, that's always been a part of the way I speak. And so, you know, *inshallah* is if God wills it. And so it's, you know, it's kind of the way that some

people will say *beli neder* in Hebrew. They want to do something, but they don't want to make a promise because there's religious consequences and social consequences to breaking a promise. So you say, are you going to make it to the event later this week? You say *inshallah*. It's a way of not saying yes and not saying no. And you can kind of say it in any context. And then *mashallah* is thanking God really. So if something good has happened, you say *mashallah*, everything is good. Their health is good. Thank God. It's like saying thank God. And it's also said kind of in a way, like you would say something superstitious, like if you see a beautiful baby, you say *mashallah*, *mashallah* in a way that you—you don't want anything bad to happen. That God will bless. And then, you know, there's, there's there's just so many terms. There's *bar minan*, which is, I think, ultimately from Aramaic, and it means God forbid. So you're saying something you don't want it to come to pass, you say, *bar minan*, God forbid. Another beautiful blessing towards my grandmother really is what I associate this with, my *sito*, is *selimi deki*, which if you're familiar with, in the, in the Ladino tradition, where they say *bendichas manos*, I believe, may your hands be blessed. *Selimi deki* is the same thing, but in Arabic. And so it's the same tradition of, may your hands be blessed. And this is something that traditionally was said to—to the woman of the house, in the midst of preparing all of the specialties for Shabbat and for—for Seder Pesach, or all of the incredible food that these Sephardic matriarchs would prepare, they would say, *selimi deki,* your hands will be blessed.

SARAH: Mm. We had a similar term in one of our previous episodes, *ashtidek*, which is that exact phrase in Iraqi Judeo-Arabic.

ASHER: Right. I've heard that before, but that's a common feature of all of the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean Sephardic communities, is that this phrase is part of the culture. I do wonder if the Ladino phrase is translated into Ladino from Arabic or from Turkish, or how that came to be. It'd be interesting to—to—to look into that.

SARAH: We'll look into that. So, to what extent do you use all of these words yourself?

ASHER: I use them a lot. Words like, you know, like *inshallah*, *mashallah*, I use—I use in every context. That's just totally part of the way I speak. Some of the, like, religious terms like *knis*, I use, *adus* I use, but not habitually. I don't talk about—when I talk about the kiddush prayer, I usually refer to it as kiddush. Of course, *jido* and *sito*, *bar minan* I use. *Haram* I use. In thinking of ones that I use, actually, I should mention *hamsa*, which is used as sort of a superstition. You don't want something to happen, *hamsa, hamsa*. And another one is *mabrouk*, which I use a lot. So *mabrouk* is, it's congratulations. It's like mazel tov. So if I hear news, you know of good news. Someone's had a baby.

Someone. There's going to be a bar mitzvah. Whatever it is. I'll often say *mabrouk*, and then mazel tov.

SARAH: So I thought it was interesting that just now that you said bar mitzvah, because I guess historically, Jews in the Middle East didn't call it that. They called it *tefillin* or, right?

ASHER: Some, yeah. I believe that the Syrians have been calling it bar mitzvah for longer than maybe some of the other groups. I know that for Persians, for instance, that that's like a quite a recent thing.

SARAH: Hm.

ASHER: But in my books of—of Syrian *piyutim* that are, you know, they're not that old, but, you know, 100, 150 years, you'll see that the piyutim will be listed as *piyut le hatan ha bar mitzvah*. That's a term that's definitely been used for a while. In fact, there's an incredible, incredible thing that I came across fairly recently through the The Pizmonim Project, the Sephardic Pizmonim website, which is a printout for a piyut that was written for my *jido's* bar mitzvah. And so it's the printout that says, you know, that—that says, in honor of the *hatan ha bar mitzvah*. You know, Yitzhak ben Yosef Shasho Levy, and then it's this piyut, and then there's a recording of it on the website. So I now know to sing this piyut that was written for my *jido*, *alav hashalom*'s bar mitzvah.

SARAH: That's unbelievable. Wow. How did you find that?

ASHER: You know, I found it just by looking for melodies on the Sephardic Pizmonim website within a certain *maqam*. And I was scrolling through the list of the piyutim, and I saw this piyut, and the note was that it said for Isaac Shasho Levy, bar mitzvah. And I was like, what? And so I looked into it and I was, you know, I knew because that name is, it's—it's not super common. But my thought was, okay, maybe it could have been a cousin or something like that. But I looked at the dates and everything and where it was, and ultimately got in touch with the person who is the sort of webmaster of the site. And it was confirmed that this was my *jido*'s *piyut*.

SARAH: What a find. That's awesome. So we're almost out of time, but I want to make sure that you have time to tell us other things that are important to you about your heritage words, and your connection to your ancestral languages.

ASHER: Yeah, well, I've, these words that I grew up with and the sort of taste that I got of my ancestral language, in particular the Judeo-Arabic has always drawn me in. And

so I hope one day to actually learn. I wonder the best way to go about it, because, you know, it seems like there have been several wonderful initiatives teaching certain dialects of Judeo-Arabic, but I haven't really seen anything around the Syrian dialects. So it's—it's unsure how I will do this, but it's possible that I could learn regular Syrian Arabic and then talk with people in the community. But it's a project. I'd like to get closer to—to this language, not only because it's so rich culturally and gives such a taste of so many elements of that life that doesn't exist anymore in Syria and the things that were passed down, but also because there's a lot of really beautiful religious and spiritual heritage that's written in Judeo-Arabic and in Arabic in general in the Hebrew characters. And I'd like to be able to read that stuff. You know, Saadia Gaon, HaRambam, and then also the particular c*hachamim* of the Syrian Jewish communities. Most of the stuff is not translated, and it's written in Judeo-Arabic. And so I feel like the closer I can get to that language, the better understanding I will have of just all of the elements of intellectual life that it's hard to access of of my ancestors. But on a like just on a visceral emotional level it really, the Judeo Arabic, it really reminds me of my of my grandparents, *alav hashalom*, my *jido* and my *sito*. And they're at the foundation of why I do what I do. They're the, you know, when I was a little kid, they would come to LA from New York for a month at a time, a couple times a year. And I really spent a lot of time with them and really got the feeling for my heritage from them. And so all of this work that I do with the tradition is because of them and in tribute to them and a desire to connect with that—that—that heritage. And so, you know, just when I hear the words or I hear the, you know, something being sung or it just it—it warms my heart and brings me—brings me close. That's one of the reasons I always love whenever I can be in a, you know, a particularly halabi, Aleppan Syrian community or synagogue. It's always a beautiful thing to visit because it's just, it's a taste of that world.

SARAH: And you are bringing elements of your ancestral tradition to the broader Jewish world through your work, your chazanut.

ASHER: That's right. And, you know, I'm half Syrian and half Ashkenazi. I grew up in the traditional Sephardic community and also in the conservative movement and in the pluralistic and progressive community in LA, and that's who I am. It's all—it's all there. And so the tefillah that I'm, I'm trying to bring and the Jewish life that I'm trying to—to help facilitate emerging is just all of those things and feels just an outgrowth of—of who I am and how I grew up.

SARAH: Well, Asher, thank you so much for all you're doing for the world and for joining us on Heritage Words today.

ASHER: Thank you for having me, Sarah. It's been a joy and an honor.

SARAH: Heritage Words is produced and edited by Avishay Artsy, with help from Kyle Fingerhut, Annabel Noar, and Hannah Pressman. I'm the executive producer, Sarah Bunin Benor, founding director of the HUC-JIR Jewish Language Project. The theme music is from Maurice El Medioni's French and Algerian Arabic album Cafe Oran, featuring The Klezmatics' David Krakauer and Frank London, courtesy of Piranha Records. Heritage Words is a collaboration of the Jewish Language Project and HUC Connect with support from listeners like you. Your tax-deductible donation supports the important work of documenting endangered Jewish languages and raising awareness about Jewish diversity. If you'd like to make a financial contribution or sponsor an episode, you can contact us at jewishlanguages.org.
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