

SECTION II

SONGS FOR SPECIAL OCCASIONS

INTRODUCTION

The category “songs for special occasions” is based on song titles or notes in some of the song notebooks and also on information from the women who sang and recorded them.

The first two songs (15 and 16) are particularly, though not exclusively, associated with a special event in the life of an entire synagogue-based community—the dedication of a new *sefer Torah* (Torah scroll).

Songs 17–21 are multi-purpose songs of blessing, traditionally sung by women after a festive meal celebrating a special occasion, such as a circumcision ritual or an event connected with a wedding. These would be sung after the men had recited the Hebrew *Birkat haMazon* (Blessing after Food) at the conclusion of the meal. Some were adapted to the particular occasion—for example, by the addition or change of a verse to refer to a circumcision or a party for the bride or the groom. Such a special occasion could also be marked by a change of melody in performing the song—a custom that is still followed by some Kochinim in Israel when singing their Hebrew songs. The lyrics and melodies of these blessing songs borrow extensively from Hebrew blessings and piyyutim (liturgical poems) in the Kerala repertoire.

Song 22 is specifically designated to celebrate the *brit milah* (circumcision) of a baby boy, and it is a quite faithful Malayalam translation of a Hebrew piyyut for that occasion. Though the celebration for naming a baby girl was much less elaborate, there is one Malayalam song for that occasion in the notebook repertoire, for which no recording is available.¹

The remainder of the songs in this section are associated with weddings. A few of these wedding songs are special blessings, and the rest are light-hearted songs about the beautiful bride or the handsome groom, or about love and romance in

¹ “Naming Song for a Girl” translates and adapts verses from the biblical Song of Songs and from the Sephardic prayer for that ceremony (*Zeved haBat*, De Sola Pool 1977, 417). A composite Malayalam text with Hebrew translation and commentary is available in Zacharia & Gamliel 2005, 46, 123, 201–202, 226–227. See Gamliel 2009, 274–278 for a thorough textual analysis of the song's different versions.

general. Traditionally the latter would be sung at less formal parties during the wedding week.

Like their Hindu, Christian, and Muslim neighbors, Jews in Kerala spent many days celebrating a marriage.² Their parties and rituals began before the Shabbat preceding the wedding and carried through the Shabbat following the wedding—including parties at the homes of both families, processions through the Jewish Street, a party especially for non-Jewish guests, and more informal entertainment during the week following the wedding.

Songs 23–25 are for the bridegroom, sung at parties honoring him, whereas songs 26–28 celebrate the bride, and songs 28–29 celebrate both groom and bride.

The final songs in this section are playful wedding-themed songs that might be sung at these parties along with other folk or popular songs of the day. Songs 31–35 are strongly reflective of Kerala folklore, while 36–40 are specifically Jewish songs about love and romance—two translations of Hebrew piyyutim and three early twentieth-century songs composed by Paradesi Jews in Kochi.

² For detailed descriptions of Kerala Jewish wedding customs, see especially Walerstein-Sibony 1996, 248–270 and 1987, 91–125, and also Caspi 1981; Daniel & Johnson 1995, 174–191; Hallegua 2002; Katz and Goldberg 1993, 226–237; Slapak 1995, 155–157. Gamliel devotes an entire chapter of her dissertation (2009, chap. 3) to an analysis of Kerala Jewish weddings as “performative ritual space,” establishing a framework in which she situates much of her analysis of the Malayalam Jewish songs.