

Samuel Torjman Thomas

Programming for Shabbaton, Lectures, Performances

Biography

Dr. Samuel Torjman Thomas teaches ethnomusicology and Sephardic Jewish Studies at City University of New York, and is a faculty member for both the ALEPH and Academy of Jewish Religion Cantorial Programs. His scholarship centers on Sephardic thought and culture, musical cultures of the Middle East and North Africa, Jewish musical traditions, and jazz-based traditions. Dr. Torjman Thomas is also Director of Musical Arts at Brooklyn's Sephardic Community Center (JCC).



Dr. Torjman Thomas is a multi-instrumentalist (saxophone, oud, nay), vocalist (Hebrew, Arabic, Spanish), and founder and artistic director of the **New York Andalus Ensemble** and the critically-acclaimed Sephardic-jazz ensemble **ASEFA**. His artistic work centers on performing musics of North Africa, the Middle East, and Global Jazz. He is a frequent guest speaker, ḥazzan, and facilitator in ecumenical spaces, cultural institutions, and music and spiritual retreats worldwide.

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Programming Options

During Synagogue Services

- **Leading Services (Shabbat, High Holy Day)**

Melodies from various Jewish musical traditions – Ashkenazi and Sephardic – are infused throughout the davening, evoking a sense of the wider Jewish world.

- **Youth Services**

Youth services offer a great environment for group exploration, and an opportunity to connect with the next generation. Samuel emphasizes collaborative learning of different types of Jewish songs (wordless niggunim, Ladino songs, Shabbat songs).

- **Dvar Torah**

A short speech bringing together biblical and contemporary themes, infused with historical and cultural context.

After Services: Discussions and Lectures

- **“The Sephardic Table”**

Many mealtime songs come from the great poets of Medieval Spain. This workshop explores the Hebrew text of a few select favorites, contextualizing the poet and the poetry, while also learning to perform popular Sephardic melodies. Everyone wants to sing a song at the Shabbat table!

- **“Jews of Islam: The Geonim”**

As Islam spread in the seventh and eighth centuries, across the Mediterranean World and to the East, Jewish life came under enormous transition. Based upon established norms in Talmudic discourse, the Geonim of Baghdad were catalysts in the development of a Sephardi rabbinic tradition in embrace with Islam.

- **“Golden Age Hebrew Poets and Poetics”**

Through the *piyyut* or highly-crafted Hebrew poem, Sephardic Golden Age poets such as Dunash ben Labrat, Shlomo ibn Gabirol, and Yehuda Halevy were cultivating a distinctive Arab Jewish identity and reflecting Andalusian philosophical traditions.

- **“Music and Torah”**

Through an in-depth exploration of music references in Kabbalah, Midrash, Tanakh, and various individual rabbinic voices in Jewish history, we can better understand the sonic spiritual side of Judaism. Learn why almost 10% of the population of Ancient Israel was employed as professional musicians. In fact, more musicians were employed by the State than Kohanim (priests)!



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Workshops and Performances

- **“Performing Piyutim”**

This acoustic performance workshop features Samuel on oud, nay, and vocals, combining an introduction on the instrument and vocal styles with the performance of several pieces from different Sephardi communities.

- **“Niggunim: Praying Melody”**

This program explores the Hasidic tradition of wordless melodies. With a foundation in Lurianic Kabbalah, Hasidism sought to bring mysticism to the forefront of Jewish practice. *Niggunim* serve as an important vehicle for democratizing the spiritual experience, essentially promoting access to the highest levels of spiritual awareness amongst the entire stratum of Jewish society.



- **“Deep Song: The Roots of Klezmer and Klezmerica”**

This acoustic performance workshop features Samuel on clarinet, combining an exploration of the instruments and aspects of Klezmer with the performance of several pieces from different Klezmer repertoires. (Additional musicians possible)

- **“ASEFA: In Concert”**

ASEFA journeys through several different styles of Jewish music. Ensemble setups range from 3-5 musicians, emphasizing traditional or jazz-infused repertoire, including songs from Sephardi, Mizrahi, Eastern and Western European Jewish communities, and original, New York sounds. Instrumentation possibilities include oud, vocals, saxophone, clarinet, guitar, violin, upright bass, hand percussion, and drumset.

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A riveting experience for my entire congregation from beginning to end ... leading an exotic and engaging Friday night service, a fascinating talk ... Saturday night, an electrifying evening of Sephardic music that left my congregants longing for more.

- Hazzan Michael Weis, The Brotherhood Synagogue of Manhattan

“

Dr. Torjman Thomas presented lectures on the Sephardi Diaspora to our Lunch and Learn program. Participants responded that he was very engaging, personable, and deeply knowledgeable. He is also an excellent musician; his inclusion of Sephardic music was especially enjoyed by all.

- Adult Ed Committee, Temple Emanu-El, Livingston, NJ

For Booking Inquiries: Hayley Jonas, 917-620-4055, me@samueltorjmanthomas.com

www.SamuelTorjmanThomas.com

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“ “ *The Jewish Museum engaged Dr. Torjman Thomas to discuss and present Moroccan Jewish music styles for its one-day seminar, Travel U: The Jews of Morocco. Prior to the performance, Dr. Torjman Thomas explained the history of Shirat Ala Music and provided thorough handouts – very helpful takeaways. I was especially impressed with Dr. Torjman Thomas' patience in answering questions from our group – he has great people skills! The performance was delightful and I highly recommend him for events to adults and children. My only regret...we wish we had made more time to a lot for his performance!*

Marcia Miller, Director of Membership, The Jewish Museum, NY

“ “ *Dr. Torjman Thomas led a workshop with our students on Jewish migration and immigration, all the while inserting musical interludes of klezmer, niggunim, and Ladino song. The kids were entranced and forgot that in addition to being entertained they were also learning Jewish history!*

Les Krevsky, Education Director, Union Temple (Reform), Brooklyn

“ “ *"Dr. Samuel Torjman Thomas came to our community as a scholar-in-residence and was a spectacular presenter on the heritage of Jews in the Middle East and of Sephardic descent and an expert performer on the oud. On Friday, we led a joint prayer service. He instantly clicked with local musicians and provided a spiritual, uplifting evening that was very educational. He is a topnotch musician and historian. He added so much to our community throughout the weekend, not only with his talent and knowledge, but also with the strongest of charisma. His presentations are of the highest quality and very accessible. I highly recommend him as a guest artist and scholar for your community or university. "*

Cantor Ben Rosner, Mosaic Law Congregation (Conservative), Sacramento

“ “ *"Thank you for coming to The Magnes Museum at UC Berkeley, to present your research and perform repertoire connected to Moroccan Jewish music in North Africa and throughout the global diaspora. The wealth of information you presented strongly resonated with the audience, allowing for a multitude of transcultural connections to emerge. "*

Dr. Francesco Spagnolo, The Magnes Museum, UC Berkeley, California

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Hillel at University of Wisconsin: A Shabbat dinner was shared with new arrivals to the Hillel house, including stories and niggunim around the dinner table. Musical Torah thoughts filled the room. Lively discussions ensued. We ended with a mighty dessert and songs to fill our dreams.

Brotherhood Synagogue of Manhattan: Samuel led Friday night and Saturday services, interjecting melodies from different Sephardi-Mizrahi traditions. Friday night included a short talk highlighting the Jewish experience in medieval Spanish society. During Saturday's luncheon, Samuel led a piyyutim workshop, introducing many poems and melodies to the community. The Shabbaton was capped with a Saturday night concert featuring the full band and a big public audience.