Christopher Silver

# I Sing and I Pray: Samy Elmaghribi's Sonic Reflection on Music and Religion

## Translator's introduction

There were always more than two solitudes in Jewish Montreal. This was especially true for the thousands of North African, mostly Moroccan, Jews who began arriving in Canada in the 1950s. Among these migrants, whose departure from their homelands began in earnest after Moroccan independence in 1956, were not only French speakers but those who were Arabophone as well. For a younger generation observing their elders, Arabic was "a magic language," as Marie Berdugo-Cohen, Yolande Cohen, and Joseph Lévy so beautifully framed it in their foundational *Juifs marocains à Montréal*.[1] Eloquent, expressive, carrying with it a certain panache, the tongue known as *darija* lent itself to some of the most evocative sentiments of an ancient community in a new setting. Its magical quality also owed to the fact that in Canada it now functioned as a secret language, used by parents to discuss pressing matters in front of children not conversant in it. At the same time that it enchanted, the language also carried with it a familiarity. It was used in myriad quotidian ways, whether to greet people on the street and in the synagogue or to pepper daily speech. In other instances, as Jessica Roda and Stephanie Tara Schwartz have shown, it served a commercial purpose, as families interested in recreating Moroccan living rooms in their adopted Montreal headed to the "Arab quarter" around Fullum Street to purchase low-set couches and other furniture reminiscent of home.[2]

In addition to the Arabic language, Moroccan Jews quite literally brought Arab music with them to Montreal. Indeed, a great many carefully packed records in their suitcases in order to transport familiar soundscapes to unfamiliar surrounds. Meanwhile, importer-exporters helped stock Judaica shops like Rodal's on Van Horne with North African cassettes featuring both the latest hits and the classics. Accompanying the recorded sounds of the Moroccan Jewish immediate past across the Atlantic were the performers who crafted them in the first place. Whether entertaining in public, delighting the faithful in synagogue, or hosting guests in their salons, musicians of renown back in Morocco, including Salim Azra, Isaac Loeb, and Cheloumou Souiri, enriched the sounds for many in the growing Moroccan Jewish community. Of course, none was more celebrated than Cantor Salomon Amzallag of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, the artist known to most then and now as Samy Elmaghribi.

In the 1950s, Morocco had few bigger stars than Elmaghribi. Born in the coastal city of Safi in 1922, the future celebrity moved with his family to Rabat at the age of four, and eventually settled in the cultural capital of Casablanca. His talent was recognized very early. By the postwar period, he was performing regularly at ever larger private gatherings. By 1948, equipped with good looks, a powerful voice, and dexterity on the ʿud, he debuted on Pathé. The artistic directors of the most important label in North Africa believed him to be the future of their Arab catalogue.[3] They were right. Soon

his popular records, which included styles like swing and bolero, could be heard regularly on radio. In between a demanding touring schedule across North Africa alongside the region's best artists and dancers, his presence was regularly requested at the royal palace. As he wrote to his brother in 1951:

> My success in Morocco is certainly immense and I am recognized and surrounded very quickly no matter which city I'm in, in Casa, [cities] small and big, everyone points out Samy with their finger, with a smile...[4]

His rise to fame came at the very moment that Sultan Mohammed Ben Youssef rose up against France. In concert with the sultan, Moroccan anti-colonial activists called for independence and demanded the end of the French and Spanish protectorate regimes, which had divided and ruled the country since 1912. Elmaghribi embraced the movement. On stage, Elmaghribi and his ensemble, the "Samy's Boys," wore the national colors of green and red. For his own Samyphone label, he composed and recorded the defining nationalist songs of the Moroccan march to liberation.

In 1959, amidst the instability that accompanied decolonization, Elmaghribi departed Morocco for France. He was at the height of his fame in North Africa but he also had the well-being of a large family to consider. From Paris, where he soon settled, he continued to perform on stage, record for his own label, and manage his business in Morocco. But he also began to lend his voice to other settings, namely high holiday services. In 1967, he was recruited to become the cantor at the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in Montreal. From the *bima* (pulpit) at Canada's oldest Jewish congregation, he catered to the growing Moroccan Jewish community. He did so with a markedly different repertoire than the one with which he gained fame. During his first decade at "the Spanish," he toured across North America but with a Spanish-Portuguese and Ashkenazi liturgy now in tow. In leading services from Ottawa to Long Island, he swapped the green and red outfits he had once worn at cabarets and concert venues for cantorial garb. To be sure, the dancers which once accompanied him across Morocco and Algeria were no longer there.

But even a decade as a congregational cantor could not hold him back from his passion for classical and popular Arab music. In 1978, Elmaghribi made a triumphant return to the concert hall with his appearance at Montreal's famed Place des Arts. For the veteran artist, it was a natural move. Others, however, started to ask him a variation of the same, peculiar question counterposing cantorial song to other types of music. "If you had to choose between hazzanut and [secular] singing, what would you do?" the journalist Charles Lugassy inquired in advance of his comeback concert. He responded, "That was never a question during my ten years as a cantor in Montreal and is even less so now. Both are important to me, and I will do everything to preserve each of them." From his perspective there was nothing incompatible with

alternating between sacred and profane repertoires.

The question of compatibility followed Elmaghribi over the next few years. It stemmed, in part, from the gravitation of some Moroccan Jews to various forms of more austere Eastern European ultra-Orthodoxy. But for Elmaghribi, who himself became more observant during this period, his burning desire to pass on his Arabic musical heritage assumed a pride of place. In 1984, as he left the Spanish to lead the newly established Maghen David Congregation, he also returned once more to the Place des Arts for a critically acclaimed concert. Within a year of that appearance, he founded a record label entitled, "Rannen" (Ar., "singing" or "song") on which he released a self-titled LP. While five of the six tracks on the record were Elmaghribi's interpretations of early twentieth century Egyptian standards, the final song, "Eng-henni wensalli" (*nghani w-nsalli*, I sing and I pray), was very much his own compo-sition.

The nearly nine minute song, which features qanun (the trapezoidal zither), violin, and Elmaghribi himself on ʿud, answered the question that his compatriots had been asking him for nearly a decade. It did so in a non-denominational darija layered with literary Arabic, a language that many Moroccan Jews and Muslims in Montreal and around the globe were still sure to understand. Its authority derived from Elmaghri-bi's powerful voice, one which had accompanied so many throughout their lives. The lyrics were translated by two Moroccan women who are themselves professional translators: Yolande Amzallag, Elmaghribi's youngest daughter and director of the Fondation Samy Elmaghribi (FSE), and Naima Lamrani, a member of the board of the FSE. Fittingly, Amzallag and Lamrani accomplished the tremendous feat of pro-viding words printed on a page with a certain musicality by listening to the song together over a number of sessions.

## Introduction du traducteur

### Je chante et je prie : les réflexions sonores de Samy Elmaghribi sur la musique et la religion.

Il y a toujours eu plus de deux solitudes dans le Montréal juif. Cela était particuliè-rement vrai pour les milliers de Juifs nord-africains, principalement marocains, qui ont commencé à immigrer au Canada dans les années 1950. Parmi ces migrants, dont l'émigration s'est mise en branle après l'indépendance du Maroc en 1956, se trou-vaient non seulement des francophones, mais aussi des arabophones. Pour les jeunes de la génération suivante, l'arabe de leurs aînés était « une langue magique », comme Marie Berdugo-Cohen, Yolande Cohen et Joseph Lévy l'ont si bien remarqué dans leur ouvrage fondateur *Juifs marocains à Montréal*. Éloquente, expressive, porteuse d'un certain panache, la langue connue sous le nom de darija évoquait le sentiment

d'un monde révolu. Sa qualité magique tenait aussi au fait qu'au Canada il fonctionnait désormais comme une langue secrète, utilisée par les parents pour discuter de questions urgentes devant des enfants qui ne la comprenaient pas. En même temps qu'elle enchantait, cette langue portait aussi en elle une familiarité. Elle était utilisée au quotidien de multiples façons, que ce soit pour saluer les gens dans la rue et à la synagogue ou pour pimenter le discours de tous les jours. Dans d'autres cas, comme Jessica Roda et Stephanie Tara Schwartz l'ont montré, son utilisation servait un objectif commercial, car les familles intéressées à recréer des salons marocains dans leur Montréal d'adoption se dirigeaient vers le « quartier arabe » autour de la rue Fullum pour acheter des canapés bas et autres meubles rappelant leur pays d'origine. En plus de la langue arabe, les juifs marocains ont littéralement apporté la musique arabe avec eux à Montréal, sous forme de grandes collections de disques soigneusement emballées dans leurs valises, l'idée étant de transporter des paysages sonores familiers dans des environnements inconnus. À cette époque, les importateurs-exportateurs se sont mis à approvisionner les magasins d'objets de culte juif, comme celui de Rodal sur la rue Van Horne, avec des cassettes nord-africaines contenant à la fois les derniers succès et les classiques. Parfois, les interprètes eux-mêmes traversaient l'Atlantique avec leurs enregistrements. Que ce soit en donnant des spectacles grand public, en ravissant les fidèles à la synagogue ou en accueillant quelques invités dans leur salon, des musiciens marocains de renom, dont Salim Azra, Isaac Loeb et Cheloumou Souiri, ont enrichi l'univers sonore de la communauté juive marocaine alors que celle-ci trouvait en pleine croissance. Bien sûr, le plus célèbre d'entre eux fut le chantre de la synagogue hispano-portugaise de Montréal, Salomon Amzallag, mieux connu sous le nom de scène de Samy Elmaghribi.

Dans les années 1950, le Maroc comptait peu de stars plus connues qu'Elmaghribi. Né dans la ville côtière de Safi en 1922, cette future célébrité a déménagé avec sa famille à Rabat à l'âge de quatre ans, et s'est finalement installée dans la capitale culturelle de Casablanca. Son talent a été reconnu très tôt. Dans la période d'après-guerre, il s'est mis à se produire régulièrement lors de rassemblements privés de plus en plus importants. En 1948, doté d'une belle apparence, d'une voix puissante et d'une dextérité sur l'oud, il a fait ses début sur Pathé, la plus grande maison de disques d'Afrique du Nord. Les directeurs artistiques de ce label considéraient Elmaghribi comme l'avenir de leur catalogue arabe. Ils avaient raison. Bientôt, ses disques populaires, qui comprenaient des styles comme le swing et le boléro, pouvaient être entendus régulièrement à la radio. En plus d'un programme exigeant de tournées à travers l'Afrique du Nord aux côtés des meilleurs artistes et danseurs de la région, sa présence était régulièrement sollicitée au palais royal. Comme il l'écrit à son frère en 1951 :

« Mon succès au Maroc est certes immense et peu importe la ville dans laquelle je me trouve, que ce soit Casa ou [une autre ville], petite ou grande, je suis reconnu et entouré très vite et tout le monde pointe Samy du doigt, le sourire aux lèvres… ».

L'ascension d'Elmaghribi vers la gloire est survenue au moment même où le sultan Mohammed Ben Youssef s'est soulevé contre la France. De concert avec le sultan, les militants anticoloniaux marocains ont appelé à l'indépendance et exigé la fin des régimes de protectorat français et espagnol, qui avaient divisé et gouverné le pays depuis 1912. Elmaghribi a embrassé ce mouvement. Sur scène, Elmaghribi et son ensemble, les « Samy's Boys », portaient les couleurs nationales du vert et du rouge. Pour son propre label Samyphone, il a composé et enregistré les chansons nationalistes déterminantes de la marche marocaine vers la libération.

En 1959, au milieu de l'instabilité qui a accompagné la décolonisation, Elmaghribi a quitté le Maroc pour la France. Il était au faîte de sa renommée en Afrique du Nord à l'époque, mais il avait aussi le bien-être d'une grande famille à prendre en compte. De Paris, où il s'installe rapidement, il continue à se produire sur scène, à enregistrer pour son propre label et à gérer son entreprise au Maroc. Mais il commence également à chanter dans le cadre des offices religieuses des *yamim noraïm* (les jours redoutables, à savoir la période allant de Roch Hashana à Hochana Rabba). En 1967, il est recruté pour devenir chantre à la synagogue hispano-portugaise de Montréal. De la bima (chaire) de la plus ancienne congrégation juive du Canada, il a dévoué ses talents à la communauté juive marocaine en pleine croissance et ce à l'aide d'un répertoire nettement différent de celui avec lequel il s'est fait connaître. En effet, au cours de sa première décennie à titre de chantre, il a effectué une tournée musicale de l'Amérique du Nord au cours de laquelle il interpréta la liturgie traditionnelle hispano-portugaise et ashkénaze. En dirigeant des offices religieuses d'Ottawa à Long Island, il a troqué les tenues vertes et rouges qu'il avait autrefois portées dans les cabarets et les salles de concert contre des vêtements de chantre. Certes, les danseurs qui l'accompagnaient jadis à travers le Maroc et l'Algérie avaient disparus.

Mais même une décennie en tant que chantre synagogal ne pouvait entamer sa passion pour la musique arabe classique et populaire. En 1978, Elmaghribi fait un retour triomphal dans les salles de concert avec son apparition à la célèbre Place des Arts de Montréal. Pour l'artiste vétéran, c'était une décision naturelle. D'autres, cependant, ont commencé à lui poser une variante de la même question opposant le chant synagogal à d'autres types de musique. « Si vous deviez choisir entre le chant religieux et le chant [profane], lui demanda le journaliste Charles Lugassy avant son concert de retour, que feriez-vous ? » Elmaghribi répondit comme suit : « Pendant mes dix années comme chantre à Montréal, cette question ne s'est jamais posée à moi et se pose encore moins aujourd'hui. Ces deux genres de musique sont importants pour moi, et chacun d'eux mérite que je fasse de mon mieux pour le préserver. » Selon Elmaghribi, il n'était pas contradictoire d'alterner entre les répertoires sacrés et profanes. La question de la compatibilité entre ces deux genres musicaux a continué de suivre Elmaghribi tout au long de sa carrière. Celle-ci s'imposait à lui, pour partie, en raison de la gravitation de certains juifs marocains vers des formes plus austères d'ul-

tra-orthodoxie issues d'Europe de l'Est. Mais pour Elmaghribi, qui devint lui-même plus observant au fil des années, le désir ardent de transmettre son héritage musical arabe prend une place centrale dans sa vie artistique. En 1984, alors qu'il quitte la synagogue hispano-portugaise pour diriger la nouvelle congrégation Maghen David, Elmaghribi se donne de nouveau en spectacle à la Place des Arts pour un concert acclamé par la critique. Moins d'un an après cette performance, Elmaghribi fonde une maison de disques nommée « Rannen » (Ar., « chant » ou « chanson ») et endisque un 33-tours éponyme. Alors que cinq des six pistes de ce disque sont des classiques égyptiens du début du XXe siècle, la chanson finale, « Enghenni wensalli » (*nghani w-nsalli*, « Je chante et je prie »), a été, en grande partie, composée par Elmaghribi lui-même.

Cette chanson, qui dure près de neuf minutes et met en vedette Elmaghribi jouant l'oud, accompagné d'un qanoun (cithare trapézoïdale) et d'un violon, répond à la question qu'on lui posait depuis près d'une décennie. Il chante dans une darija (arabe dialectal magrébin) non-confessionnelle parsemée d'arabe littéraire, mode d'expression que de nombreux juifs et musulmans marocains à Montréal et dans le monde entier étaient encore sûrs de comprendre. La voix puissante d'Elmaghribi, qui avait accompagné tant de personnes tout au long de leur vie, confère au texte de cette chanson un air d'autorité. Les paroles ont été traduites par deux traductrices professionnelles marocaines, à savoir Yolande Amzallag, fille cadette d'Elmaghribi et directrice de la Fondation Samy Elmaghribi (FSE), et Naima Lamrani, membre du conseil d'administration de la FSE. À force d'écouter la chanson ensemble à de nombreuses reprises, Amzallag et Lamrani ont réussi à donner à leur traduction une musicalité qui se lit à même les mots imprimés sur la page.

## Translation / Traduction

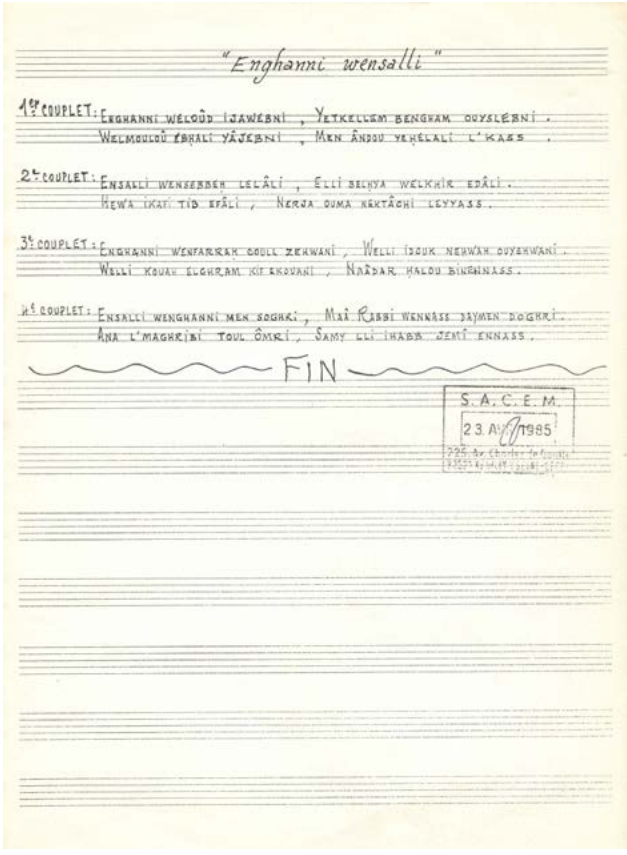
In August 2021, Amzallag and Lamrani discussed their process and questions of translation and "un-translatability" over email. Their eloquent answers are worth quoting in their entirety.

1. Can you briefly describe how you and Naima went about translating the piece?

**Yolande Amzallag (YA):** Naima produced a first draft translation in French of the song, which I translated into English. She then checked the English to make sure there was no error of interpretation. Though my knowledge of Arabic is fragmentary, I have a strong emotional connection to the language and a sense of its subtleties and multiple meanings. When I was unsure about how to render the meaning of a word, I asked Naima to elucidate and we further honed the translation together.

**Naima Lamrani (NL):** I must admit that it was quite a challenge to "attempt" to translate Samy Elmaghribi's songs, especially as the lyrics are at the intersection of classical Arabic and darija (Moroccan spoken Arabic). It seems to me that one needs to be a Moroccan to grasp the blend of the two languages. Yolande has indeed a sense of the subtleties, which has always amazed me, considering she was not raised in Morocco!

2. What sort of challenges did you run into during the translation process? Were there particular words or phrases that were especially difficult to translate?


"Enghanni wensalli"

1er COUPLET: Enghanni weloûd ijawebni , Yetkellem bengham ouyslebni .
Welmouloûd ebrali yâjebni , Men ândou yehélali l'kass .

2e COUPLET: Ensalli wensebben lel'âli , Elli belhya welkhir ebâli .
Hewa ikat tid ebâli , Nerja ouma nektâghi leyyass .

3e COUPLET: Enghanni wenfarrah goull zehwani , Welli iouk nehwâh ouyehwani .
Welli kouah elghram kif ekouani , Naâdar halou binninass .

4e COUPLET: Ensalli wenghanni men soghri , Maâ Rabbi wennâss jaymen doghri .
Ana l'maghribi toul ômri , Samy Eli inabb jemî ennass .

FIN

S.A.C.E.M.
23 AVR 1985

**YA:** The difficulties of translating songs are the same as those encountered in poetry translation. In addition to the compromises we had to make in order to transpose the meaning of the Arabic lyrics into idiomatic English while keeping a certain rhythm, we had to contend with approximate translations for realities and feelings that only Arabophones can relate to. One example is the compromise we had to make to translate the chorus of *Enghenni Wensalli*. In the Arabic lyrics, the verse "*Kif enghenni wentiq enselli benness*" are translated as "How can you be both a singer and a prayer leader?" The meaning of "*wentiq*" is lost in translation. The actual question is: How can you both be a singer and believe in praying for people? Another example is the collapsing of meaning in the translation of the verse "*Naâdar halu bin enness*" as "Compassion to them I owe". The Arabic verse expresses much more concretely the process of empathizing with those who "felt the wound of love."

**NL:** The difficulties were huge and frankly insurmountable; hence the "approximation" Yolande so rightly mentions. My French draft was merely an adaptation, an attempt to give to the "general meaning." I was not able to translate the rhythm, the word choices which are fundamentally rooted in the Moroccan culture and therefore quite remote from French and English. Our work here is an example of "un-translatability." The concept, which has been extensively explored in Translation Studies, is described below by Hatim and Munday *(Hatim, B. and Munday, J. (2004) Translation: An Advanced Resource Book, London and New York: Routledge.)*

> "(un)translatability" is a relative notion [...] that has to do with the extent to which, despite obvious differences in linguistic structure (grammar, vocabulary, etc), meaning can still be adequately expressed across languages [...] But, for this to be possible, meaning has to be understood not only in terms of what the ST [Source Language Text] contains, but also and equally significantly, in terms of such factors as communicative purpose, target audience and purpose of translation" (15)

To the above quote, I would add that beyond the "linguistic untranslatability," we have here the difficulty of "cultural un-transability."

While Yolande's English translation is far better than my French draft which merely expressed the general meaning, I am convinced that no translation, no matter how good it is, would "move us" more than the original lyrics performed by Samy.

3. Is there anything else you would like to add?

YA: I clearly recall the time and the context in which my late father wrote this song, in 1984, a few weeks before his second concert at the Montreal Place des Arts. He had been the well-loved chazzan of the Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue for 17 years, and had fully committed himself to this role, expanding the liturgical repertoire, for example with his own adaptation of the musaf on an Egyptian tune, reintegrating into the service forgotten scores composed by chazzan David de Sola, and creating a children's choir, to name only a few of his achievements. Throughout his career at the Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue, he occasionally travelled to give concerts in France, the United States, Israel, and South America, always with the authorization of the Board. However, some people questioned his dual activity as a popular singer and as a prayer leader. Many believed that a public performer could not carry the moral burden of worshipping God on behalf of a congregation, and that the realm of art and the realm of prayer couldn't be reconciled. My father, of course, didn't feel any contradiction between performing on a stage or at the *bima*. He did both with what he called "*kavana*" – "intention" in Hebrew – always aiming to fully express the meaning of the songs and prayers he sang as it flowed through his highly

sensitive perception. He nonetheless became aware of the need to explain his position, especially in a context where the Moroccan Jewish community of Montreal was undergoing a major shift. Leaning towards a stricter form of orthodoxy, some of the community synagogues had separated from the then called Association séfarade francophone to create the Rabbinat sépharade du Québec under the leadership of Rabbi David Sabbah. My father was among the supporters of Rabbi David Sabbah, with whom he felt he could return to a style of worship and liturgy that was closer to the one he had known in Morocco.

NL: I imagine an "occidental" person reading the translation of *Enghenni Wensalli* and spontaneously wondering, "But what's wrong with being a singer and a prayer leader"? The answer is not in the lyrics. It lies in the cultural component which gives all its meaning to the song. The lyrics and the Moroccan cultural background are inextricably linked. And it's only by putting them together that we can grasp the "raison d'être" of the song. That's why Yolande's explanation is paramount to fulfilling the communicative purpose.

Being a *maghribiya* (Moroccan) like Samy Elmaghribi, I never wondered, "But what's wrong with being a singer and a prayer leader". I know for a fact that in our culture, devoutness and entertainment rarely go hand in hand. But what strikes me most is to learn that the song was written in Montreal, in 1984, *"in a context where the Moroccan Jewish community of Montreal was undergoing a major shift…leaning towards a stricter form of orthodoxy*." Strangely enough, at the same time, in 1984, I was a young Muslim raised student in Marrakesh, Morocco, fighting against rampant Muslim orthodoxy. I suddenly feel an even stronger connexion to our great artist, our Moroccan treasure.

## Enghenni wensalli

People … ask other people
About my life and livelihood
Among those who watch me,
Many are unknown to me
What are they looking for?
Well, let's satiate their curiosity
There is no harm in that
Let them listen and understand me

***Chorus:***
***People ask me***
***How can you be both a singer and a prayer leader?***
***To them I say "Never will I forsake my art,***
***I will always worship God and entertain people"***

I sing, and the ʿud echoes back to me
Its notes enchant me
The music lover pleases me
A glass from his hand I gladly take

***Chorus***

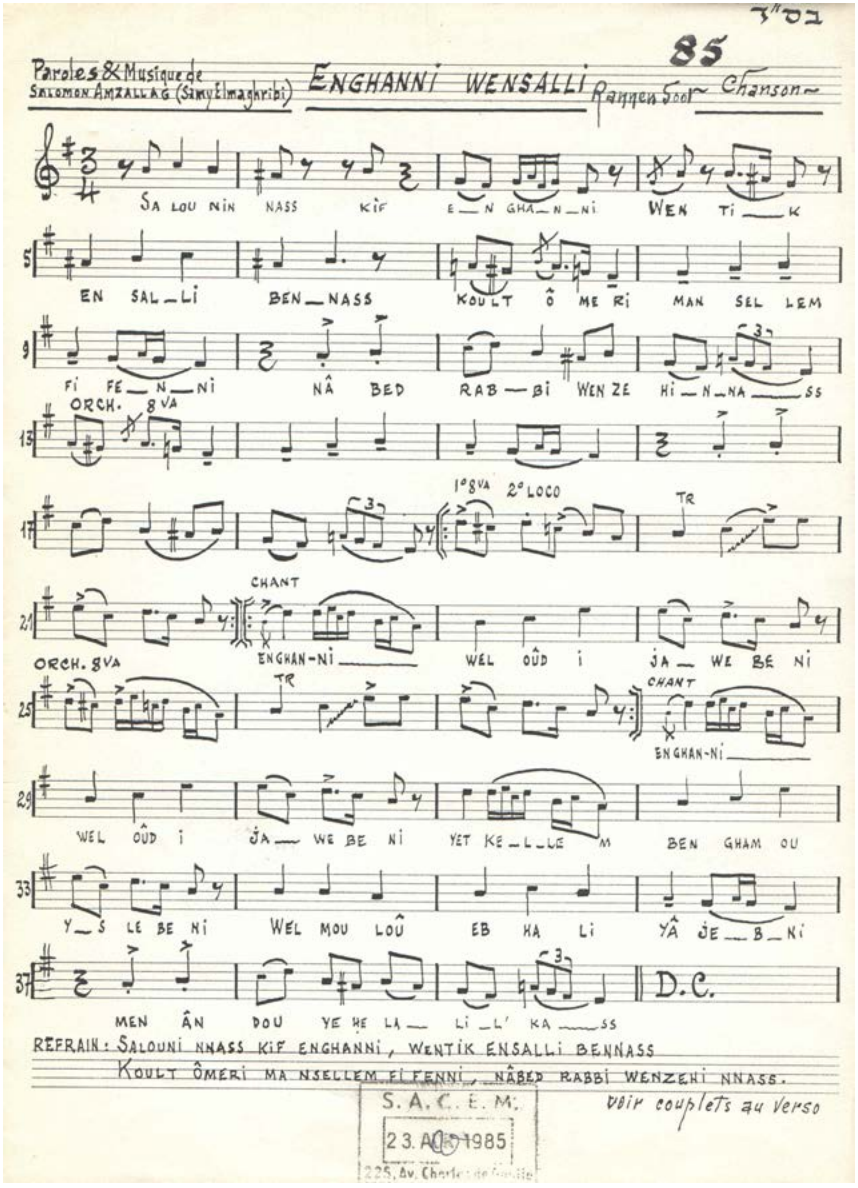
I pray and bow to the Almighty
He is with me in good and bad times
He is the One who rewards my actions
In Him I place my trust and I never despair

***Chorus***

I sing and delight the passionate
Whoever felt the taste of love will love me
And whoever felt the wound of love as I did,
Compassion to them I owe

***Chorus***

I pray and sing since childhood
True to God and the people,
I always remain
I am forever Elmaghribi
Samy who loves everyone


85
Paroles & Musique de
SALOMON AMZALLAG (Simy Elmaghribi)
ENGHANNI WENSALLI
Rapport Sacem Chanson
SA LOU NIN NASS KIF E N GHA N NI WEN TI K
EN SAL LI BEN NASS KOULT Ô ME RI MAN SEL LEM
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WEL OÛD I JA WE BE NI YET KE L LE M BEN GHAM OU
Y S LE BE NI WEL MOU LOÛ EB HA LI YÂ JE B NI
MEN ÂN DOU YE HE LA LI L' KA SS
D.C.
REFRAIN: SALOUNI NNASS KIF ENGHANNI, WENTIK ENSALLI BENNASS
KOULT ÔMERI MA NSELLEM FI FENNI, NÂBED RABBI WENZEHI NNASS.
Voir couplets au verso
S.A.C.E.M.
23 AOU 1985
225, Av. Charles de Gaulle

**1**
*Juifs marocains à Montréal*, ed. Marie Berdugo-Cohen, Yolande Cohen, and Joseph Lévy (Montreal: VLB Éditeur, 1987), 10.

**2**
Jessica Roda and Stephanie T. Schwartz, "Home beyond Borders and the Sound of Al-Andalus. Jewishness in Arabic; the Odyssey of Samy Elmaghribi," *Religions* 11, no. 11 (2020): 609.

**3**
Christopher Silver, "The Sounds of Nationalism: Music, Moroccanism, and the Making of Samy Elmaghribi," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52 (2020), 30.

**4**
Silver, "The Sounds of Nationalism," 35.