

# A Voice of Bells

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What ever happened to Ofra Haza?

Image by Chloe Cushman



Culture

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**In 1975**, a seventeen-year-old Ofra Haza appeared in an annual televised concert called the Oriental Song Festival. It was the first time many Israelis saw the singer who would become, and who arguably remains, the country’s most internationally celebrated artist. Black-and-white footage available on YouTube shows Haza marching onto the stage in a long-sleeved, V-necked, empire-waisted, floor-length dress, dark with a floral print. She wears a two-inch Star of David around her neck and around her crown a delicate headdress with a filigreed pendant. For a brief moment, she almost wobbles, stepping wide and swinging her arms to keep her balance. She steps to the microphone and the bass comes in, then keys, guitars, strings, and horns. She begins to sing and her voice is loud, clear, steady, and pure. It is perfectly in pitch. The song, “Shabbat Hamalka,” is religious, adulating the Sabbath as a queen who “descends in splendour from the heavens” and “brings joy to those in sorrow.” I am not religious, but watching this performance, I have an “almost” moment.

It is this moment that leads me to ask, “What ever happened to Ofra Haza?” I had no idea how loaded this question was, how it has haunted people for the past 20 years. When I tried to find out, I discovered

a potent narrative: a girl from the ghetto beats back every obstacle and gains her rightful recognition, then is ravaged by one of the world's most stigmatized diseases. Adding to this potent arc were Haza's beauty, her famous penchant for privacy, and perhaps above all the fact that she was possessed of that most coveted and revered of gifts: the ability to radiate, in song, all that lies unsaid, and often unknown, inside the beating human heart. Israelis called it "kol pa'amoin"—a voice of bells.

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Ofra Haza was born in November 1957 in Tel Aviv, the youngest of seven daughters and two sons. Haza's family lived in Hatikva, an underserved neighbourhood principally populated by Jews of Middle Eastern or North African descent; in Hebrew they are described as Mizrahi (of the East). Her parents had emigrated to Israel from Yemen in 1944 with three children in tow—their fourth was born just after the family disembarked in the port of Haifa. Haza's mother, Shoshana, had been a wedding singer in Yemen, and was the centre of lively gatherings on Motzei Shabbat, the end of the Sabbath, when neighbours congregated in the Haza home to sing and dance. Like many families who came from Yemen to Israel in the mid-century, the Hazas kept kosher, went to synagogue regularly, and refrained from working from sunset on Friday to sundown on Saturday. When she was twelve years old, Ofra Haza knocked on Bezalel Aloni's door, asking to audition for the theatre workshop he led in Hatikva.

Aloni came from a similar background. Born in 1940 in Petah Tikvah, a mid-sized city in central Israel, he was one of ten siblings whose parents emigrated from Yemen in the 1930s. Though he didn't live in Hatikva when he set up his theatre workshop there, the neighbourhood was his central pre-occupation. In 1947, after the declaration of the Jewish state, Tel Aviv did not incorporate Hatikva as part of the city and it remained effectively segregated into the 1960s. Aloni's plays depicted and critiqued the egregious state of its streets and schools. "My soul is a protest soul," he told me during a brief call this past January.

The day Haza showed up at his house, Aloni told her she was too young for his group. "But I want to sing, too," she said. "I'm from Hatikva, too." Perhaps amused by her gumption, Aloni agreed to listen to her sing. Her voice, he says, gave him "shivers in my skin." He allowed her to begin sitting in on the group's rehearsals, where she memorized all the songs and all the actors' parts. When the male lead in a play called *Sambusak, When Are the Elections?* bailed two hours before opening night, Haza filled in and stole the show. A few months later, she was in the Sinai, performing for soldiers fighting in the Yom Kippur War. She was 14 years old.

Aloni began writing for her specifically—the play *First Love* was about a relationship between a Yemenite girl and an Ashkenazi (a Jew of European descent) boy. It included "Ga'aguim" ("Longings"), a performance which Aloni has described as capturing Haza's essence. The song itself has a stunted melody and metaphors, but Aloni is right. I listen to a recording of "Ga'aguim" over and over, trying to divine whether some one thing is responsible for my eyes repeatedly pricking, whether it's Haza's phrasing, or her timbre, or her vibrato. She is at once hopeful and sad, her voice fragile and robust. *Each day, she sings, I wonder. Will all my dreams help me find my place? Will all my striving leave me with only a dream?*

When Aloni's group performed at Kibbutz Shefayim, a coastal community between Tel Aviv and Netanya, he invited Avraham Deshe Pashanel, the country's biggest entertainment producer, to attend. "Look, I don't know what to do with the play," Pashanel remembered telling Aloni during a 1999 televised retrospective of his career. "But give me the singer, and I will make her a big star." Aloni eagerly agreed.

But Pashanel's patronage was not enough to launch Haza's career. "I wasn't able to get a single song for her," he said. According to Aloni (in a 2019 interview with Israeli TV personality Yoav Kutner), Pashanel told Haza to give up singing, get married, and have children. That was when Aloni realized it was up to him to ensure that Ofra Haza's talent wasn't squandered. They had visited Pashanel's office on a rainy day in Tel Aviv; when they left, Aloni had trouble kickstarting his sodden Lambretta. Driving home—with Haza crying on the back of the scooter—Aloni began composing the first song he ever wrote for her solo career, "Hageshem," "The Rain."

To my ear, "Hageshem" is a mediocre composition, with lyrics lacking any degree of nuance and a melody dripping with schmaltz. But let me imagine for a moment that I am Aloni on that rainy day in Tel Aviv. I am probably a little panicked. More protest soul than pop composer, here I am, responsible for making sure this girl—a girl I've been taking care of, in a sense, since she was a child—has a song to sing. A lot of songs, in fact. And so, as I splash home on my Lambretta, I reach for one. And when "Hageshem" comes, it is a huge relief, a lifeline, a Hail Mary.

Fortunately, Haza carries it. It becomes a hit. More mediocre compositions follow, which Haza converts to radio hits. For four years in a row—from 1980 through 1983—she is chosen Israel's singer of the year by popular vote. And, finally, the professional songwriters start coming around. In 1983, Haza represents Israel at Eurovision in Munich. *Chai, chai, chai*, The people of Israel live, Haza sang on a German stage, flashing her sunny smile, stepping a delicate toe behind a slender heel, wearing a shimmery outfit of yellow—the colour of the star Jews had been made to wear in Germany just a few generations earlier. She was the celebrated runner-up in the competition. That summer, at my Jewish camp in Muskoka, Ontario, we must have sung "Chai" upwards of 75 times.

But I didn't actually know Haza's name until four or five years later, when my Israeli cousin told me about "Shir Hafrecha," "Song of the Bimbo." (The translation does not capture the particular offensiveness of the slur, which was typically reserved for women of Mizrahi descent; Ayelet Tzabari explores it at length in "A Simple Girl," an essay from her 2019 collection, *The Art of Leaving*.) Haza sang "Shir Hafrecha"—extremely reluctantly, according to Aloni—as part of her role in a 1979 feature film called *Schlager*. The lyrics self-refer to a frecha as being vapid and "loose," caring only about shoes, makeup, and finding a man to marry. Haza hammed it up for the movie—undoing her hair, pulling up her pant leg to reveal a shiny black high-heeled boot, slapping her own thigh. But even as she followed the sexpot stage directions, she emanated innocence, and more than that, a knowing bit of wit. The song makes fun of frechas, yes, but also of the people who make fun of frechas. Haza "debunked what the word meant," says her niece Inbar Algov-Kaplan, more than forty years later.

And get this: When Haza first went into the studio to perform "Shir Hafrecha," the composer played it an octave higher than originally planned. He'd hoped for a different singer, Haza explained in a 1999 interview, and was seemingly trying to cast doubt on Haza's suitability for the role. "But I pushed myself," she said, with a hint of triumph in her smile, "and I prevailed."

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In my 30s, I joined a band. I taught myself some chords on the guitar and I wrote a decent song or two. But when I sang—and oh, how I wanted to sing—I was flat. Not always, but often. For about three years, I tried to remedy this—taking lessons in an effort to train my ear, flouting humiliation to practise while roommates were home, hollering along with the tape deck in my car—until I reached the conclusion that I would simply never be a singer. It was painful, but it was clear, and it freed me up to understand my part when it comes to singing: to listen.

For a while, I was obsessed with singers—singers with perfect pitch, singers with a five-octave range, singers whose talent makes background music of full orchestras and thrashing rock bands. Singers like Celine, Aretha, Whitney, and Amy. I would watch footage of these singers and wonder what it's like to be able to do something—maybe the one thing—that every single person in the world wishes they could do. We adore them, to be sure; I wonder if, deep down, we aren't also envious. Surely this is part of the reason we are so fascinated with singers, especially those whose lives end in tragedy: Their mortality practically shocks us.

Since her own tragic death, Haza's story has been repeatedly told by others, and perhaps principally by Aloni, who has been cast as something of a Svengali in her career. Most of the people I talked to who worked with Haza told me that she was quite independent creatively; Aloni, it seems, was important in other ways. Itzik Yosha, an Israeli journalist who became close friends with Haza, saw Aloni as the person who "mediated" everything for her—music, business, even her personal life—as she struggled to balance ambition against the pull of family and cultural expectations. "I'm not sure she always knew how to navigate between these worlds," Yosha said in a 2010 documentary.

Then, almost by accident, it seemed as if the solution fell into her lap. In 1984, Haza recorded an album of traditional Yemenite songs—*Shirei Teiman*—as a gift for her parents. She and Aloni brought in Israeli-Yemenite singer Aharon Amram as artistic adviser and hired Israeli-Yemenite percussionist Chaim Gispán to play the "pach," a big hollow tin can on which Gispán tapped his fingernails and pads to produce beats. Haza opened the album a capella, with the first lines of a song called "Im Nin'alu": *If the doors of the righteous are locked, the doors of heaven never will be.* Her voice—her undulation and breath, her rich vibrato—moves like a surfer in the sweet spot of a wave. Her tone is an uncanny complement to the lyrics: mournful, uplifting, regal. It is forty-six seconds of sublimity, perhaps the signature forty-six seconds of Haza's career.

Like "Im Nin'alu," several songs on *Shirei Teiman* were adapted from the poetry of a 17th-century Yemenite rabbi named Shalom Shabazi. The record was a bit pious for commercial radio, so the record company brought in Izhar Ashdot, an Israeli rock musician-turned-producer, to remix the Amram-written "Galbi" as a single, resulting in a sped-up dance track that wove breaks and vocal effects into the original version. The new version started circulating in clubs throughout Europe; a year later Ashdot remixed "Im Nin'alu," and Haza's a capella found its way into another artist's remix—"Paid in Full" by the American rap duo Eric B. & Rakim. That's when she truly went global.

In 1989, Haza spent three months in the Hollywood Hills home of Thomas Dolby, the British musician and producer best known for the 1982 single "She Blinded Me With Science," where she recorded her next record, *Desert Wind*. Dolby describes Haza's voice as an extension of her personality. "There are very few vocalists that have that gift that they just communicate what they're doing," says Dolby over the phone. "There's no reason to stop and analyze it from a technical point of view, tuning or timing, because it's just, you know, expressive. And Ofra was very much like that."

The songs on *Desert Wind* and on Haza's next record, the Grammy-nominated *Kiryá*, often told medieval stories—about vengeance and exile and honour—and typically included Eastern accents, whether through the style of percussion or strings or through Haza's interspersing of Hebrew and Arabic lyrics. The videos conjure *One Thousand and One Nights*: sand abounds, as do veils and turbans. At the time, I would have dismissed it all as cheesy; today, I can't help but find it objectionable. But I am mesmerized by Haza's performance. It strikes me that her instrument was stronger than ever and her artistry was at its height. Don Was, known for working with Bonnie Raitt, Ziggy Marley, and the Rolling Stones, was *Kiryá*'s producer. "To get that special, clear sound out of Ofra's voice, I used a very intriguing technique," he said in a video promotion shortly after making the record. "I put a

microphone in front of her, and then she... sang.”

By then, Haza was in her mid-30s. She still made her home in Yehud, a city ten minutes from Ben Gurion Airport, where she lived next door to Aloni. She still had dinner with her parents every Friday night and spent all of Saturday with two of her nieces, Ori and Talma, who were just a few years younger than she was. Talma Schoen Algov says Haza “was like my mom,” cooking, driving her to and from work, and singing to her in the car. Once, Haza gave Talma a preview of a song called “Ze Yavo Pit’om,” “It Will Come Suddenly”: *It will come suddenly and out of nowhere/He will come, and the dream of love will come true.* “She was a very optimistic person,” Talma said of Haza in a 2005 documentary called *Secrets*. “She always believed that love would come.”

Haza was not known to have serious boyfriends and she was often described as having been quite chaste. But there is a ballad on the 1986 record *Yamim Nishberim*, the only record for which Haza wrote all the songs for herself, called “Hake’ev Hazeh” (later recorded in English as “My Aching Heart”) which describes the end of an intimate love affair. “She wore her heart on her sleeve on that song,” Izhar Ashdot, who produced the record, tells me over the phone from Tel Aviv. “She cried the first time she sang it for me.” When I ask if he knew what the song was about, I can almost hear him roll his eyes. “It was obviously about a relationship,” he says.

But Haza didn’t have any relationships, I want to say in response. And then I think: How do I know that? And also: What does it matter? “Good songs are always coded,” Ashdot tells me. “You don’t understand exactly what the story is. Every listener makes the story about himself or his life or his relationships.”

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“Ze Yavo Pit’om” came out on Haza’s 1994 record, *My Soul*. In July 1997, Ofra Haza married Israeli businessman Doron Ashkenazi, a divorced father of two, on the roof of the building where her parents lived in Hatikva. She had known him less than a year. Bezalel Aloni has repeatedly said that he distrusted Ashkenazi from the first, that he warned Haza against marrying him, and that he believes Ashkenazi disingenuously convinced Haza to distance herself from her family and friends. “Bezalel probably had a good sense [of Ashkenazi],” Talma tells me. “If she had listened to him, she would be with us today.”

Near the end of her life, Haza reached out to her niece Inbar, a young musician who was serving with the choir band in the Israeli army. She asked Inbar to come over with her keyboard and help her work on her new album, which Haza was keeping very discreet. Inbar tells me how honoured she was by the invitation but also that she felt out of her depth; she offered to introduce Haza to a talented young producer named Ran Aviv whom she knew from the army and whom she trusted. Aviv had a studio in his parents’ home in Petah Tikva, a mid-sized industrial city in central Israel, and Haza began recording with him there. But the album was never completed.

In early January 2000, Haza cancelled a scheduled session with Aviv; she told him she wasn’t feeling well. Then she cancelled a second time. After that, Aviv later said in a television documentary, “All conversations were with Doron.” In less than two months, Haza was dead of complications from AIDS.

In the 2002 documentary, *The Life and Death of Ofra Haza*, several of Haza’s sisters describe visiting her at home through the beginning of February 2000, trying to help her convalesce from what they believed, then, was the flu. But her condition worsened. They repeatedly asked Ashkenazi to call an ambulance, and, they said, he repeatedly deferred. Finally, there was no choice. In the film, one sister

breaks down as she describes the ambulance paramedic reacting to Haza's state in astonishment, telling the family that she was "already gone."

Haza was admitted to hospital in mid-February 2000. In a documentary released earlier this year, one of the doctors who treated her said that when she was first admitted, the medical team believed Haza was suffering from a severe stomach infection. Then, Doron Ashkenazi came to the doctor's office to tell him that Haza had HIV. After ten days in intensive care, Haza's heart stopped. She was pronounced dead of complications from AIDS on the evening of February 23, 2000, at the age of forty-two.

Many have questioned whether or not Haza knew she had AIDS—whether she may have "died of shame," spurning treatment so as to hide her illness. "I visited her two weeks before she died," Talma tells me. "She did not know what she had; she did not know she was going to die." A recent documentary reported that Ashkenazi also carried the virus. He died just over a year after Haza did, in April 2001, of a drug overdose.

This, then, is the story I find when I go looking. But Ofra Haza's life, so rich in narrative, is not actually a story. Stories are contrived, constructed on the scaffolding of foreshadowing, climax, and denouement. Lives, on the other hand, begin and end randomly. That's the way I see things, anyway—no grand design, no universal intervention. Some things happened to Haza, some things she made happen, and this feedback loop continued from the time of her birth until the time of her death. We shape what we know of someone's life into a story, as I have done here, for the purpose of taking something from it. Indeed, we often speak of stories as having takeaways. In this sense, a person's life is like a song—coded, as Ashdot said—fluid, opaque, and interpreted differently by each listener. The takeaway, then, depends on the taker.

Sometimes, though, there is something in a song—and in a singer—that breaks away from the loop and hovers in the atmosphere, somewhere over our heads. We feel the muscles loosen in our necks and the shiver in our skin; maybe we have an "almost" moment. Many people can sing in a voice that is loud, clear, pure, and steady. But only a few of them become the essence of the song itself. "Who is she?" we ask, demanding. Who *was* Ofra Haza? But this is the work of art—to leave the question unanswered and to leave us unknowing, envious and infatuated, bereft and fulfilled.