

THE NIGHTINGALE OF IRAN

This Documentary Podcast Travels: Across Space, Time, and Sounds



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It has always been a mystery to the Dardashti sisters – Why did their family leave Iran? Now, in a documentary podcast series, the sisters reveal painful secrets unspoken for generations. The Nightingale of Iran is a story that will resonate with outsiders everywhere.

- JTA x PRX



THE PERSIAN MUSIC I NEVER INHERITED

By Galeet Dardashti

I grew up in the US singing in my family band with my parents and two sisters. We sang in twelve languages including Yiddish, Ladino, Hebrew, Greek, and Spanish, among others. ***But we never sang in Persian.*** This is surprising since my grandfather, Younes Dardashti, was one of the most beloved singers of Persian classical music in mid-twentieth-century Iran, a religious Jew who became a national radio star known as "The Nightingale of Iran." My father, Farid, grew up in that world and was himself a teen pop idol on Tehran television before leaving for the United States in 1962. In America he eventually trained as a cantor, the professional singer who leads prayer in a synagogue. But the Persian music he and his father had grown up with wasn't part of my childhood. **That gap between what a family carries on and what it sets aside on the way to becoming American is one of the questions that has shaped my work as a musician and as an anthropologist.**

The American Jewish story is often told as a single arc, and the version that has come to stand in for the whole — Ashkenazi, with roots in Eastern Europe — represents only about two-thirds of American Jews. The other third includes Sephardi/Mizrahi Jews with roots in Spain, the Middle East and North Africa, Persian Jews like my father's family, and many others.

When my father auditioned for cantorial school in 1965, he discovered that becoming an American Jewish professional cantor essentially meant becoming an Eastern

European one. The Persian melodies he had grown up with weren't legible as "Jewish music" in that American context, so he let them go. *This is a pattern your students will recognize across many American ethnic experiences: the particular textures of a heritage — a language, a liturgical style, a way of cooking, a way of grieving — often get narrowed under the pressure to become recognizable as American, or as a recognizable kind of American minority.* What's striking is that no one forbade my father from singing Persian Jewish music. ***He simply understood that it wasn't what Jewish music was supposed to sound like in America.***

I've learned both from my family and from my academic work that heritage isn't a static object passed intact from one generation to the next. **It's a living practice that gets remade at every point of transmission — sometimes consciously, often not.** I've spent significant time as an adult learning the Persian Jewish music my father set aside — studying with teachers, working on a vocal style I hadn't grown up with, building a connection from fragments rather than inheriting it whole.

My sister Danielle and I created *The Nightingale of Iran*, a six-episode documentary podcast about our family's journey from Iran to America, and we're now developing curricula around it for classrooms because the questions **the podcast raises aren't only Jewish ones.** They are questions **about diaspora, assimilation, what survives and what gets lost, and how later generations go looking for what was left behind.**

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TESTIMONIALS

Teaching *The Nightingale of Iran*

"I spend a lot of time thinking about the humans my students will become after they leave my classroom for the last time ... If I teach my students anything, I hope that I teach them to be compassionate young people who can think critically about all of the content they consume ... The opportunity to teach *The Nightingale of Iran* has been a gift ... the podcast invites listeners to question and reflect upon (sometimes harmful) preconceptions they may have had ... Perhaps more than ever before, we need to be helping and preparing students to think about and discuss difficult topics, including Middle Eastern geopolitics. ***The Nightingale of Iran* is an excellent entry point for educators hoping to have these challenging, if difficult, conversations with their students.**"

- Public High School Teacher, Kentucky

"This podcast **really helped me to understand** the struggles middle eastern Jews faced before and after the Holocaust. Although we've studied the Holocaust and its impact on Jewish people previously, learning about the Dardashti family through the *The Nightingale of Iran* opened my eyes to new struggles I didn't previously know about, such as housing struggles Jewish refugees in Israel faced after 1948 and the challenges Jewish Iranians faced as they attempted to adjust to new communities in Israel or the United States."

- 11th-grade student