

# Bendigamos

By Jonathan Cohen (Draft 0.5 Dec. 2004)

*Bendigamos* is a popular Sephardi table hymn. Below is the Spanish text as it appears before Grace after Meals in the Prayer Book of the Union of Sephardic Congregations (of America), edited by David de Sola Pool. Dr. de Sola Pool did not provide a translation: the English below is based on one by Professor Alan Corre, and the Hebrew is mine, incorporating some improvements suggested by Prof. Corre. I have not attempted to make either translation rhyme.

Claims that *Bendigamos* is an old Marrano song may be wishful thinking, as the song is not in Ladino, but (I am reliably informed) comparatively modern Spanish. However, according to Rev. Cardozo, Hazan of Shearith Israel, NYC<sup>1</sup>: "Bendigamos was first discovered in Bordeaux, France where a Marrano community [had] existed in the 17th century". It was imported from there to the USA via Curacao and Jamaica. I know the hymn from the S&P Community of London in the 1970s, to where it had presumably been imported from the US, as I am told that it was unknown in London in the 50s.

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נברך את העליון האדון אשר בראנו נבטא לו תודה על הטוב אשר גמלנו	Bendigamos al Altísimo, Al Señor que nos crió, Démosle agradecimiento Por los bienes que nos dió.	Let us bless the Most High, The Lord who created us, Let us give him thanks For the good things he has given us.
ישתבח שמו הקדוש כי תמיד רחם עלינו הודו לה' כי טוב כי לעולם חסדו!	<i>Alabado sea su Santo Nombre, Porque siempre nos apiadó. Load al Señor que es bueno<sup>2</sup>, Que para siempre su merced.</i>	<i>Praised be his Holy Name, For he has always taken pity on us. Praise the Lord, for he is good, For his mercy is everlasting.</i>
נברך את העליון ראשית על תורתו הקושרת את עמנו תמיד עם השמיים	Bendigamos al Altísimo, Por su Ley primeramente, Que liga a nuestra raza Con el cielo continuamente,	Let us bless the Most High, First, for his Law, Which connects our race, With heaven, continuously.
ישתבח שמו הקדוש כי תמיד רחם עלינו הודו לה' כי טוב כי לעולם חסדו!	<i>Alabado sea su Santo Nombre, Porque siempre nos apiadó. Load al Señor que es bueno, Que para siempre su merced.</i>	<i>Praised be his Holy Name, For he has always taken pity on us. Praise the Lord, for he is good, For his mercy is everlasting.</i>
נברך את העליון שנית על הלחם וגם המאכלים האלה שאכלנו ביחד	Bendigamos al Altísimo, Por el pan secundamente, Y también por los manjares Que comimos juntamente.	Let us bless the Most High, Second, for the bread And also for these foods Which we have eaten together.
כי אכלנו ושתינו בשמחה חסדו לעולם לא חסר הודו לה' כי טוב כי לעולם חסדו!	<i>Pues comimos y bebimos alegremente<sup>3</sup> Su merced nunca nos faltó. Load al Señor que es bueno, Que para siempre su merced.</i>	<i>For we have eaten and drunk happily, His mercy has never failed us. Praise the Lord, for he is good, For his mercy is everlasting.</i>
יבורך הבית הזה בית אשר בו הוא נמצא בו אנחנו שומרים את חגו בשמחה ונאמנות	Bendita sea la casa esta, El hogar de su presencia, Donde guardamos su fiesta, Con alegría y permanencia.	Blessed be this house, The home of His presence, Where we keep his feast, With happiness and steadfastness.
ישתבח שמו הקדוש כי תמיד רחם עלינו הודו לה' כי טוב כי לעולם חסדו!	<i>Alabado sea su Santo Nombre, Porque siempre nos apiadó. Load al Señor que es bueno, Que para siempre su merced.</i>	<i>Praised be his Holy Name, For he has always taken pity on us. Praise the Lord, for he is good, For his mercy is everlasting.</i>
הודו לה' כי טוב כי לעולם חסדו!	<b>הודו לה' כי טוב, כי לעולם חסדו! הודו לה' כי טוב, כי לעולם חסדו!</b>	<b><i>Praise the Lord, for he is good, For his mercy is everlasting.</i></b>

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<sup>1</sup> Sephardic Songs of Praise, by Abraham Lopes Cardozo (Tara Publications, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Prof. Corre prefers "*Bendito Dios que bueno es*" for the third line of the chorus, feeling that it better fits the tune.

<sup>3</sup> The third repetition of the chorus begins as a continuation of the third verse, and then reverts to the standard chorus in its second half.

## Textual variations

An additional version of *Bendigamos*, that I found on the Internet (see below), has no equivalent of the second verse (and chorus) of the first version, and also differs in the last verse.

While the first version thanks the Almighty "first" for the Torah, and "second" for the food; the second version thanks "first" for the food without any "second"! Possibly it was deliberately truncated (and *segundo* changed to *primeramente*) for a public performance or recording.

However, its most interesting difference, which to me seems authentic beyond all doubt, occurs in the second half of the chorus. Here, the Hebrew phrase "*Odu Lado-nai ki tov, Ki leolam jasdó*" is used instead of its Spanish translation "*Load al Señor que es bueno, Que para siempre su merced*". Ending as it does with *jasdo*<sup>4</sup>, the Hebrew phrase rhymes with *apiado* from the first half of the chorus!<sup>5</sup> I have always found the non-rhyming *apiado / merced* combination in the de Sola Pool version slightly jarring, and felt an instant affinity with *apiado / jasdó* when I saw it — in fact I wondered why I had never thought of it myself!

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Bendigamos a el Altísimo,  
Al Señor que nos creó,  
Démosle agradecimiento,  
Por los bienes que nos dió.

Let us bless the Most High,  
The Lord who created us,  
Let us give thanks  
For the good things he has given us.

*Alabado sea Su santo nombre,  
Porque siempre nos apiadó,  
Odu Ladonai ki tov,  
Ki leolam jasdó.*

*Praise be his holy name  
For he has always had mercy on us.  
Blessed is the Lord for he is good,  
For his mercy is everlasting.*

Bendigamos a el Altísimo,  
Por el pan primeramente,  
Y después por los manjares,  
Que comimos juntamente.

Blessed is the one most high,  
First for the bread,  
And then for the other foods  
We have eaten together.

*Pues comimos y bebimos alegremente,  
Su merced nunca nos faltó,  
Odu Ladonai ki tov,  
Ki leolam jasdó.*

*We have eaten and drunk happily.  
His mercy has never failed us.  
Praised is the Lord for he is good,  
Whose mercy is everlasting.*

Bendita sea la casa esta  
Que nunca manque en ella fiesta,  
Tarde, mañana y siesta,  
A nos y a los hijos de Israel.

Blessed be this house  
May it never lack celebration,  
Afternoon, morning, and evening,  
For us and the children of Israel.

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*Alternative last verse:*

Bendita sea la casa nuestra  
Que nunca manque en ella fiesta  
Mañanas, tardes y siestas  
para todo Israel.

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## Theory and practice

If *apiado / jasdó* is indeed the original form of the chorus, why was it later translated into Spanish? A possible answer might be that it was sung in a secular context and that it was thought best to avoid the Hebrew Name of God<sup>6</sup>. However, when *Bendigamos* is sung at the Sabbath table this reservation certainly does not apply, and my inclination is therefore to introduce (or reintroduce?) *Hodu* into the chorus of the first version, and omit (as superfluous) the double *Hodu* at the end. In addition to the fact that the chorus now rhymes, the recurrence of *Hodu* at each repetition of the chorus is very pleasing. It is a great improvement.

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<sup>4</sup> The *j* in *jasdo* is pronounced like a guttural *h*. (The same applies to *juntamente*, but not to *manjares*.)

<sup>5</sup> The chorus for the third verse ends in *faltó* — which *also* rhymes with *jasdo* and not *merced* — strengthening this theory!

<sup>6</sup> This would force us to the conclusion that the awkward appending of the double "*Hodu*" at the end was a later addition.

## The melody

*Bendigamos* is not sung to just any old tune, but to none other than the flagship melody — the jewel in the musical repertoire — of the London S&P Community; basically the same melody that is used (more famously) for *Shirat Hayam* (*Shabbat*) and *Baruch Haba* (*Hallel*, *Havdalah*, and weddings). Here is the latter version.<sup>7</sup>

Baruch Haba

*London Sephardi Melody*

na - i va - ya - er - la - nu. Is - ru  
de - ka Elo - hai - va ro - mi - me - ka. Ho -  
to - v ki le - o - lam has - do.

## A word about syllables and beats

It has always seemed to me (though I would be happy to be corrected) that the first line of each verse — and of the chorus — of *Bendigamos* have a bit more in the way of syllables than the other lines. Counting metric syllables may not be an exact science (though academics will insist that it *is*), especially when dealing with the rules *and usage* of a foreign language, but I feel that the way it is currently sung (Example 1) forces the text into a 3/4 rhythm that is not quite natural to it. By introducing a 4/4 bar near the beginning of each verse and chorus (Example 2), the tension is relieved with an interesting "extra" beat, that "marks time", as it were, before catching up with the tune.

I may have heard *Bendigamos* sung this way many years ago and remember it from there (on the other hand, my idea may be based on erroneous assumptions about Spanish pronunciation).

Example 1

Ben - di - ga - mos al al - tis - si - mo, al sen

Example 2

Ben - di - ga - mos al al - tis - si - mo - al sen

There is certainly an established precedent for the introduction of an extra beat in the middle of a tune. It is routinely done in London S&P music (as they are more careful about the correct pronunciation of liturgy-set-to-music than some other Jewish communities are), and there is an enshrined example of it in the *Shirat Hayam* version of this very tune. Here (Example 3) the 4/4 bar is added slightly later into the first line.

Example 3

Az ya - shir Mo - she u - v - ney Yis - ra - el et ha - shi - ra ha  
zo - t La - do - nai - va - yo - me - ru le - mor. A -

<sup>7</sup> Note that I have written *Baruch Haba* in 9/8 time, which I consider best represents the way it is sung. In the London Spanish and Portuguese Congregation's book *Sephardi Melodies* (OUP, 1931) it is written in 3/4, and I myself have written the examples above in 3/4 for the sake of simplicity.