

SEPHERDIC PIZMONIM PROJECT

January 21, 2013 ~ Shabbat SHIRAH. Maqam AJAM.

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# THE SEPHARDIC PIZMONIM PROJECT

## 2012 Annual Report

David M. Betesh

With great pleasure, we present the 2012 annual update of accomplishments of the Sephardic Pizmonim Project at [www.pizmonim.com](http://www.pizmonim.com).

**About Us:** The Sephardic Pizmonim Project, dedicated in memory of Hazzan Gabriel A Shrem (1916-1986) and in honor of Hazzan Isaac J Cabasso, is an organization that promotes the preservation of the liturgical traditions of Aleppo's Sephardic Jewish community. Our digital music archive collection consists of more than 2,000 recordings from some of the most venerated Syrian cantors and famous classical Arabic musicians. Since April 2006, we have welcomed more

than 165,000 website visitors from around the world.

**Overview:** We focus our attention on preserving materials from our community's Red Pizmonim Book, *Shir Ushbaha Hallel VeZimrah* (Shrem, Sephardic Heritage Foundation, 1964), but have also expanded our efforts to include materials from both the Blue Pizmonim Book, *Shirah Hadasha* (Amram, Zimrat Ha'aretz, 2002), as well as from old manuscripts from 19th century Aleppo, Syria (see our

'Library' section). Much of this year has been devoted to populating our website's database of pizmonim with recordings and manuscripts from both the Blue Book and our 19th century Aleppo manuscripts. Overall, this effort is not yet completed and is not yet perfect, but the infrastructure of what we would constitute as a perfect product has been created.

**Preservation:** Due to our efforts, we narrowed our preser-

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vation list of missing pizmonim melodies to approximately 88. Discovering the remaining missing pizmonim melodies has proven to be an increasingly difficult task. Joseph E. Mosseri has been instrumental in the melody identification process. New and improved recordings of already-known pizmonim continuously get added to the website.

**Paragraphs:** Updated Maqam of the Week paragraphs can be found in the 'Miqra' section, as well as in print in the weekly Aram Soba Foundation Newsletter that is distributed weekly by Congregation Bnai Yosef. Included are the correct *maqamat* to apply for the Shabbat morning prayers, selected pizmonim and Hazzanut notes associated with the weekly parashah (as per H. Moshe Ashear), the proper Syrian *Torah Aliyot Stops*, and *Mishmarah* readings. H. Mordechai C. Nadaf, Joseph E. Mosseri, and Haim Shayo have graciously contributed to these paragraphs.

**Face Lift:** In January 2012, a revamping of the entire website took place with the combined efforts of Sam Franco (website designer), Saul M. Betesh, and others. The new website design is more user-friendly and is designed to work ideally with an iPad. Special attention has been devoted to the digital version of the Red Pizmonim Book where one can listen to a pizmon while reading a brief commentary on the pizmon as well as view old handwritten manuscripts (19th century) of the pizmon. Some of these manuscripts, only recently obtained (some from the former Sassoon Library), include: the Eliahou Hamaoui Manuscript (Cairo, 1880), the Yehudah Attia Manuscript (Aleppo, 1858), the Ezra Attia Manuscript (Aleppo, 1845), the Ya'abess Manuscript (1850),

Sassoon Manuscript #647 (1850), and the Moshe Ashear Manuscripts (Brooklyn, 1925). Contributors to the manuscript efforts include: Alberto Attia (San Diego), the Sassoon Family (United Kingdom), Isaac J. Cabasso, and Joseph E. Mosseri.

**New Format:** The new format of the website has enabled us to provide separate pages devoted to biographies, holidays, international Sephardic synagogues, definitions of Arabic music terminology, pronunciation, Hazzanut origin and history, prayer applications, rare maqamat, etc. These additional sections allow the web visitor to obtain a more comprehensive view of the subject matter as well as knowledge of who we are and what we represent.

**In Memoriam:** Unfortunately, with the passage of time, we are gradually losing the elders and role-models of our community. Last year, the Sephardic Hazzanut world lost one of the most venerated cantors of the past generation. Hakham Hazzan Raphael Yair Elnadav passed away in December 2011. He was the former cantor of Congregation Shaare Zion and had a major impact, especially on our Brooklyn community. Our project attempts to preserve his memory by including his biography, his pizmonim compositions, and his recordings. May his memory be blessed.

**Pipeline:** Some of our 2013 endeavors include: obtaining complete digital recordings of the Torah and the Tehillim, as well as obtaining a digital copy of these books where the web visitor can view the text and listen to a recording at the same



time. This will be an instrumental tool for all students (i.e. bar mitzvah) to practice their *Miqra* reading skills. Another endeavor is to incorporate some of the lesser-known melodies that we don't have pizmonim for into the website.

**Conclusion:** 2012 will go down in the history books as the year that the city of Aleppo, our ancestral hometown, was hit by the devastating Syrian Civil War; destroying many historical artifacts of all the ancient communities, including some destruction in our Jewish cemeteries where many of our esteemed ancestors were laid to rest.

Preserving our Syrian Sephardic way of life is very worthwhile, but is becoming a major challenge with the passage of time. We must preserve our Aleppo heritage—our cuisine, our societal and ethical values, our unique Halakhic approach to Torah, and last but not least, our liturgical practice, which includes our Baqashot and Pizmonim. Putting conscientious effort into preservation needs to be organized by our community leaders and encouraged by our institutions. □

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*David Betesh is a founder of the Sephardic Pizmonim Project and a dental student.*