

# Pizmonim Online

## Sephardic Website Gets a Facelift

David Betesh

**P**izmonim.org is the official online address of the Sephardic Pizmonim Project, the mega-project devoted to the preservation and dissemination of all Sephardic Middle Eastern *pizmonim* (songs), cantorial and liturgical traditions. The project, which was launched in September of 2002 is accomplishing its main goal of making every attempt to record each song in the *Shir uShbaha Halal veZimrah pizmonim* book, the official canon of our community's *pizmonim*.

In 2004, the collection of Gabriel A. Shrem A"H became available to the public on CD format, after two long years, thanks to the combined efforts of many community members. This collection of 11 CDs, which is currently available at Bnai Yosef Synagogue, Mevor Haseforim and Shore Judaica in New Jersey, consists of approximately two hundred and seventy five *pizmonim* by Cantor Shrem. Many attempts were made to include as many recordings as possible onto the 80 minute CDs, but

shortly after the project was complete, more and more tape cassettes of Cantor Shrem and other distinguished cantors kept on popping up left and right. It was then that I realized that my job was incomplete.

I uploaded a few tapes onto a website launched by Rabbi Ricky Hidary. As more and more tapes were being provided to me by community members, I kept on placing them on the website. My initial rationale was that if I didn't do so, people would constantly be calling me to borrow the tapes. Now that they are on the website, this is no longer a problem. Before this project, the tape cassettes of many community members were sitting in various basement boxes going unused, but now, as a result of this project, they are available to be used by anybody on the internet.

Since August 2006, the website experienced a major facelift, as my friend, Sam Franco, donated his valuable time and expertise to this cause. He made the website much more presentable than it original-

ly was, with all of the content professionally reformatted. We owe him a debt of gratitude for his labors. According to our website counter, we have had more than 10,000 visitors on the website since May 23, 2006. That alone is the definition of success.

The website, which is divided into nine sections, begins with an introductory note about the project; mentioning its history, the Gabriel A. Shrem CD project, and the dedicated people who have helped along the way

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The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the Sephardic Pizmonim Project website. At the top, there is a header with the title 'Sephardic Pizmonim Project' in both Hebrew and English. Below the header is a navigation menu with links in Hebrew. The main content area features a large heading in Hebrew, 'שיר ושבחה הלל וזמרה', followed by the English title 'Sephardic Pizmonim Project' and a subtitle 'dedicated in living memory of Gabriel A. Shrem A"H'. A sidebar on the left contains a list of links under the heading 'Pizmonim Recordings', including 'About the Project', 'Pizmonim Recordings - 2004', 'Weekly Pizmonim - 2004', 'Tz'urim (Contributors) - 2004', 'Repertoire of Shabbat - 2004', 'Pizmonim (Cantorial) - 2004', 'Pizmonim Presentation Checklist', 'Articles', and 'Buy a CD'. To the right of the sidebar is a decorative image of a harp. Below the sidebar, there is a 'Welcome,' section followed by a paragraph of text in Hebrew and English, which is partially obscured by the sidebar.

# Pizmonim...

The second section is the *Pizmonim* section and it is the most important part of the project. In this section, you will find the table of contents of the entire *pizmonim* book, and recordings of all the songs that are available on the website. There are links to the recordings next to the songs that are available. This collection includes everything except for the Gabriel Shrem CD collection, which is available at stores. Each major maqam – a technique of improvisation that defines the pitches, patterns, and development of a piece of music – has a summary, as well as a guide on appropriate application. Also, there are links to the Wikipedia website articles that I have created of *Pizmonim* and *Baqashot* in this section. For those who might know a unique thing or two about *Pizmonim* and *Baqashot*, you can contribute to those Wikipedia articles (as you can with any other Wikipedia article).

The third section is called **The Weekly Maqam**, and provides the maqam (theme of songs) used each week for the Sabbath Morning *Nishmat* prayers throughout the year. In addition to that, it also provides a possible suggested explanation as to why the maqam is used that week. Usually the maqam of the week has to do with the story of that week's *parasha* or holidays coming up. For example, on weeks with mention of a *brit milah* in the *parasha*, Maqam Sabah, with the *brit milah pizmonim*, is applied. For weeks with mention of a sad event, Maqam Hijaz, with all the sad sounding melodies, is applied. This section is original and unique, in that you cannot find this information written, especially in English, anywhere else!

The fourth section is the *Ta'amim* section. Like the rest of the project, it is still a work in progress. Most people probably did not know that most of the different books in the Tanakh (Bible) have a different set of *ta'amim*. In this section, Gabriel Shrem A"H and Yosef Hamaoui A"H have recorded themselves reading portions from the different books of the Tanakh. Like the *Pizmonim* section, as more and more recordings become available, they will be posted.

The fifth section is the *Baqashot* section. Without going into details of what the Sabbath morning *Baqashot* songs are, the Sephardic Archive Association of the Sephardic Community Center, led by Dr. Morris Shamah, Joseph Mosseri, Morris Arking, Hyman Kairey, Mickey Kairey and Isaac Cabasso, recorded the *Baqashot* in the 1980's, and with their permission, they have allowed us to post the recordings onto our website. This has been a very valuable contribution to the website.

The sixth section is the *Hazzanim* section. Instead

of listing the *pizmonim* by page number, it lists them by *hazzan* (cantor). The *hazzanim* that are listed in this section are Gabriel Shrem A"H, Eliyahu Menaged A"H, Isaac Cabasso, Mickey Kairey, Mordechai Nadaf, Yosef Hamaoui A"H, Ezra Tawil A"H, Salim Salem A"H and Mordechai Laniado A"H. In the future, as more and more tapes are being recorded and provided, there will be more biographical information about each *hazzan*. I also expect to get more and more *hazzanim* to participate in making recordings.

The last three sections of the website include a list of needed songs, a collection of articles that I have written for *Image Magazine*, and information on how to purchase *Pizmonim* CDs from anywhere around the world. If you go through the list and know any of the needed songs, then you are more than welcome to call anyone from the project and have your recording on our website. Over the last two years of selling around 500 CD sets, international purchasers have requested collections to be sent to London, Jerusalem, Paris, the Philippines, Mexico City, Hong Kong, Gibraltar, San Diego, Seattle, Atlanta, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Miami and Chicago.

The Sephardic *Pizmonim* Project has many long-term goals. The first is to get every song in the *Pizmonim* book recorded by at least one person. This will ensure the song's preservation. The second is to get the texts for all the songs onto the website. Both of these goals will take a long time, but with the dedication that I see from my associates, I know that they will be accomplished. There are dedication opportunities available for this project. If you are willing to sponsor some portion of the project, you can email anyone affiliated with the project. This will allow us to accomplish more of our goals in a shorter period of time.

It is important for each and every person in the world to preserve his or her culture, nationality, tradition, family roots, history and religion as much as possible. This creates a personal and communal sense of identity and belonging. It goes without saying that the Sephardic community as a whole is doing a great job preserving our ethnic Syrian foods through family cookbooks. That is, of course, important. However, I believe that equal attention should be dedicated to preserving our ethnic *pizmonim*, songs that contain the vast majority of our cultural and religious teachings, values and melodies. The Sephardic *Pizmonim* Project was founded on those very principles. □

*David Betesh is a graduate of Yeshivah of Flatbush and Brooklyn Honors College. Visit [www.pizmonim.org](http://www.pizmonim.org) for past articles written for Image Magazine.*