

# Sephardic Pizmonim Project

## 2009 Annual Report

David M. Betesh

The Sephardic Pizmonim Project would like to update you on its website (pizmonim.com), activities and accomplishments over the past year. The project, which was founded in September 2002, is dedicated to the preservation of the liturgical traditions of the Sephardic Middle Eastern Jewish community, specifically the material in our community's red "*Shir Ushbaha Hallel VeZimrah*" pizmonim book.

Approximately 73,000 people from around the globe have visited the website since 2006, and almost 20,000 visited the website in the last year alone.

The main objective of the project is to preserve our pizmonim through recording them as soon as possible. To facilitate this objective, we have the Pizmonim Preservation Checklist featured on the main page of the website with a list of songs whose melodies are still missing. Progress has been made over the last few years since the list's inception. Back in 2006, there were 220 missing pizmonim (out of about a thousand in total). This number has been reduced in subsequent years to 190 in 2007, 130 in 2008, and now 117 in 2009. We would like to thank the following individuals for their efforts in reviewing our checklist and/or providing us with their knowledge of certain missing pizmonim: Joseph Bijou, Morris Elmann, Joey E. Mosseri, Isaac J. Cabasso, Yehiel Nahari (Jerusalem), Shlomo Shemer (Panama), Menahem Mustachi, Aaron S. Hamaoui (Boston), Uri Amram (Jerusalem), Morris Arking, Alan Kishk, Morris G. Zeitouni, Joe Saff, Ezra C. Ashkenazi, and Moe A. Tawil.

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Sephardic Pizmonim Project. At the top, there is a header with the title 'Sephardic Pizmonim Project' and navigation links in Hebrew and English. Below the header, there is a table of contents with links to various sections: Preface, Weekly Maqam, Pizmonim, Preservation, Prayers, Cantillations, Festivals, Biography, and Archives. In the center, there is a graphic featuring a harp and the title 'שיר ושבחה הלל וזמרה'. At the bottom, there is a footer with visitor statistics, contact information, and a 'Designed by Sam Franco' credit.

We request that all our readers look carefully at the songs on this checklist, because perhaps one of these songs may have been written in honor of your family's happy occasion and perhaps you may know someone in your family with knowledge of the song. If anyone happens to know any of the songs, please contact us through the website and help us reduce the number of missing songs.

An innovation of the website is the archives section. Many historical documents have been scanned and are now available to the general public. These include three very important works: Mahzor Aram Soba from 1560 (Must'arabi Rite), Hakham Moshe Ashear's handwritten hazzanut notes from the last three years of his life, and the pizmonim book of H. Eliahou Hamaoui (late 1880s) as dictated to him by

none other than the great composer of pizmonim, Hacham Refael Antebi Tabbush. In regards to the last item mentioned, we would like to thank Hacham Aaron Hamaoui of the Sephardic Community of Greater Boston, for sharing his family's precious emblem (a manuscript that has been in his personal safe) with us in order *lezacot et harabim* (for the merit of everyone in the community).

Just as an aside, Hacham Hamaoui told us the story behind his grandfather's pizmonim book. Legend has it that in the 1880s in Egypt, Eliahou Hamaoui was the student of the great composer of pizmonim, Hacham Refael Antebi Tabbush. Since Tabbush was blind, Hamaoui would walk with him from place to place. When Tabbush would hear a nice melody in a coffee house or the shuk, using his

*Continued on page 2*

# Pizmonim...

*Continued from page 1*

prophetic and genius mind, he would immediately come up with Hebrew words for the melody. When the two arrived home, Tabbush would dictate to his student Hebrew words to the Arabic melodies heard on the street and this is how the majority of his pizmonim were born. This manuscript is essentially the first draft of many of the pizmonim that we have today.

In regards to the works of the great hazzanim, Hacham Moshe Ashear and Gabriel A. Shrem, many of their detailed personal notes of which melodies to use for which Shabbats and holidays are available on the website. The Pizmonim Project would like to acknowledge the numerous contributions of Joey E. Mosseri, an individual second to none when it comes to the knowledge of our traditions. Through the avenue of the Sephardic Hazzanut Forum ([www.hazzanutforum.com](http://www.hazzanutforum.com)), Joey educates community members on a daily basis about questions that arise in hazzanut, halacha, prayers, traditions, and Sephardic Middle Eastern culture. We encourage all serious students to join this Hazzanut Forum and contribute as you see fit. Joey has been instrumental in reviving traditions and pizmonim that were thought to have died years ago. This project would not exist without his day to day contributions.

This year, special attention has been devoted to the weekly maqam section. For those that read this publication consistently, you may have noticed one of the five maqam of the week articles that were written throughout the year. There were five articles corresponding to the Five Books of Moses—Bereshit, Shemot, Vayiqra, Bemidbar and Debarim. In each of these articles, we went through each parashah, stated the maqam for that week (in accordance to page 565 in the red pizmonim

book), and then (in simplified terminology) provided an educated speculation (based on traditional sources) as to why that maqam was chosen for that parashah. Special thanks to Hakcam Mordechai Nadaf and the late Gabriel A. Shrem for teaching this material to their many students throughout the community. For those who attend selected synagogues, you may have noticed the maqam of the week feature on your weekly bulletins. This, too, is one of our undertakings, as an offshoot of the articles written in IMAGE. If you are interested in signing your synagogue up to include the maqam of the week feature on their weekly bulletin, please contact us via the website (approval of the president of the synagogue is recommended).

Another new and unique feature in the weekly maqam section is the compilation of many different parashah-maqam lists from the late 1880s to present. Whereas the red pizmonim book (1964) has one such list on page 565, this source is merely one opinion in the company of numerous other opinions. There are many older lists that predate the red book and often disagree with the list on which maqam to use for which Shabbat. Our weekly maqam section has 15 such authentic lists from various historical sources. Thanks to Joey Mosseri for providing access to some of his historical manuscripts.

A lot of effort has been made to assure that the website is technologically up-to-date and organized in a user-friendly manner. We would like to thank the following individuals for their technological assistance and advice: Ricky Hidary, Sam Franco, Charlie Shrem, Victor Betesh (Boston), Simon Tabbush (London), Barry Mizrahi (Los Angeles), and Paul Morris Arking.

We would like to thank the Sephardic Heritage Foundation for

the permission to use their artwork and texts from the pizmonim book for the website.

This year the winner of our annual pizmonim contest was Murray E. Mizrahi with his rendition of the pizmon *yahid ram hai le'olam* on page 216. Special thanks to Abie Betesh for organizing this contest.

Each year, the High Holiday section (a page with all the recordings for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur) gets dedicated in memory of a special individual who has passed away over the last year. This individual is honored because he or she represents the best character traits and values that we, as a community, strive to emulate. The High Holiday page for 2009 was dedicated in loving memory of Joseph Savdie (Yosef Hayeem Ben Regine Savdie). May his memory be perpetually blessed.

Baruch Hashem! All of the project's goals for 2009 have been met with outstanding results. We attribute our success as an organization to a revival of tradition that is currently taking place throughout the Sephardic world and specifically, throughout our community. As the world grows more and more secular with the culture of assimilation present in our cities, the Sephardic Jewish community has something precious that the rest of the world seems to lack. Our ancient pizmonim, our unique liturgical traditions, our strong sense of community, our Sephardic heritage, and our holy Torah is our inheritance that unites us with purpose, provides immunity for us from some of the world's negative influences, and most importantly, serves as a direct link to connect us with our esteemed forefathers. □

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