

# The Greatest Gift

## The Personal Recordings of Gabriel A. Shrem A"H

By David Betesh

It's 8:35 am and, once again, the Sephardic seventh grade students at the Yeshivah of Flatbush have been kept hostage in *minyan* for over an hour because the "*shir shel yom*" was not sung correctly. This was a daily occurrence because the *minyan* leader, Hacham Mordechai Nadaf, just wouldn't give up on making us repeat the same prayers until each student would pronounce every single word of every sentence correctly in accordance with the traditional Sephardic grammar rules. At the time, the only thing on our narrow minds was the breakfast that was to be served following the prayers. Even more so, if we would even receive any breakfast because the Ashkenazi *minyan* probably finished it all.

Every Friday morning, Hacham Nadaf would give a lengthy lecture about how to apply the *makam* of the week (specific *pizmonim* and tunes) to the Shabbat prayers. I was fortunate to be able to apply what I had learned at the Sephardic Synagogue Youth *Minyan*, run by my cousin, Abie Betesh, each Shabbat.

After my Bar Mitzvah in Israel in 1997, my grandmother, Florence Zeitouni, presented me with the greatest gift I have ever received to this day. She introduced me to the world of her father, Gabriel A. Shrem A"H. She gave me his personal cassette tapes. They were the recordings of his own personal



Gabriel A. Shrem A" H



knowledge of *pizmonim* for his students.

Gabriel A. Shrem A" H (1916-1986) was the cantor for the Congregation Bnei Yosef, and was the editor-in-chief of "*Shir u'Shbaha Hallel v'Zimrah*," the community's red *pizmonim* book. A decade or so prior to his death, he served as a professor

at the Yeshivah University Cantorial Institute. This position, and the prediction that most of the ancient and sacred Sephardic *pizmonim* that he knew would be permanently lost after his death, led him to record the *pizmonim* that he knew onto various tapes for future students of our community to learn.

Prior to receiving the tapes, I did not know the legacy of my great grandfather. Yet, as soon as I played those tapes, I grew very interested in Sephardic *hazanut* and felt very connected to my Sephardic heritage in general. I started to practice *hazanut* in my synagogues, and in the year 2000 I was offered the position of *hazan* in the Mikdash Eliyahu Synagogue's First *Minyan*. Through this position, and with the help of Maney Doueck, Rabbi Abraham Ben-Hamu, and Murray Dweck, I developed my knowledge as a cantor, learning from my great grandfather, via *pizmonim* tapes. When people in the synagogue ask me where I learned how to be a *hazan*, I proudly respond to them that my great grandfather teaches them to me. They were always very confused!

A problem within our community is that *hazanut* is inaccessible to the people who'd like to learn it. It is something that many people are interested in, but don't know where to learn it. That is, unless they hire an expensive *hazan* as a tutor.

In an effort to keep up with technology, my supporters and I,

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## HOW TO IMPROVE

### Settling Disputes...

sion of duties with the skills that go along with the assignment, as would be the case if an engineer handles manufacturing and someone experienced in sales takes care of marketing, agreement is more likely.

But when partners, on very good friends, of similar interests and talents try to make decisions regarding the same matters, problems frequently arise. This is especially true in times of trouble when emotions enter the picture. This is when mediation can be very helpful.

When friends or family members agree to have a mediator help solve their dispute, it is a decision made with wisdom. As in all cases of mediation, it is helpful to emphasize that no one is bound by a decision, because each side should agree. □

*Ben-Gurion Matsas is the publisher of IMAGE Magazine and president of the Sephardic National Alliance. He is available for coaching and mediating family disputes, partner disagreements and difficulties in couple relationships.*

## FOOD

### New Jewish Cookbook

2. To the other part of the onion mixture, add the ground meat and the remaining ½ teaspoon basil and oregano. Brown the meat, but do not over cook. Add the nutmeg, parsley, salt, and pepper to taste. Set aside.

3. In a heavy frying pan, using the remaining ¼ cup oil, fry the unpeeled eggplants that have been thinly sliced lengthwise and wiped dry. As the slices become golden brown on each side, remove them to a paper towel to drain off the oil (An alternative method that I have discovered is to oil a cookie sheet, then brush each eggplant slice with oil and broil until golden on each side. This method takes half the time and uses much less oil).

4. Preheat the oven to 350°.

5. Place 1 layer of eggplant in a 2-quart casserole. Add some of the cooked tomatoes, then some of the meat mixture, and continue in layers until the ingredients are used up, ending with a layer of tomatoes.

6. Bake, uncovered, until brown on top. It can take up to 1½ hours. It is best to cook the casserole for 45 minutes the night before serving and then another 45 minutes the next day. Reheating improves the flavor. □

## SEPHARDIC CULTURE

### The Greatest Gift...

have worked endlessly to get all the cassettes of Gabriel Shrem onto CDs, along with many improvements. The CDs are classified under the 10 *makams*. Altogether, the CDs contain a majority of the *pizmonim* in the red *pizmonim* book. This complex collection is the most complete and comprehensive set of Sephardic *pizmonim* ever released, with over 300 *pizmonim*, and their applications to the prayers.

As I said before, this gift was the most precious gift that I have ever received. I hope to pass it down to the entire community and to the future generations who are eager to learn. With my efforts I hope to spread Sephardic *hazanut* throughout the community-members and *hazanim* alike. I also want those who wish to learn *hazanut* to learn it in the easiest and least expensive way possible.

To receive a set of Pizmonim CDs, contact the Bnei Yosef Synagogue (718) 627-9861. □

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