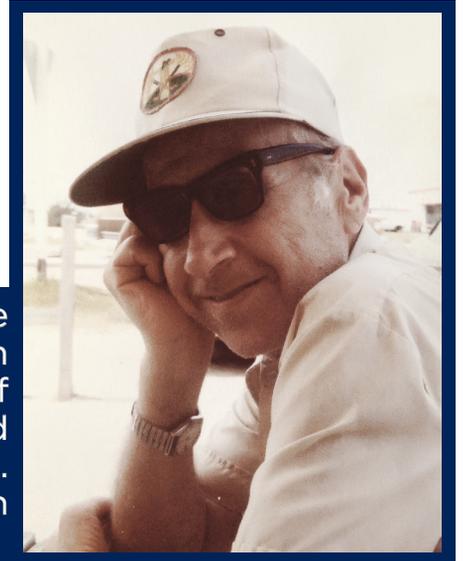


An Ode to Mr. Gabriel A. Shrem, A”H, Renowned Cantor Who Elevated Hashem’s Name with His Prayers

To mark the 30th year since his passing, Community Magazine pays tribute to a community icon, Gabriel Abraham Shrem (1916- 1986). As the cantor of Knis Betesh, Magen David of 67th Street, and Congregation Bnai Yosef, he truly embodied the purity of the services he officiated for over 50 years. Indeed, he was a living example of the values embedded in the prayers he so loved.



Nishmat

The opening word of the Shabbat morning service is ‘*Nishmat*’, or ‘soul.’ Anyone who has ever heard Hazzan Shrem cantor can attest to the fact that he poured his entire heart and soul into voicing the prayers. He was a man who led his congregation for all the right reasons and who had a strong sense of *yirat shamayim*, fear of Heaven. To him, the words “*Nishmat kol hai, tebarekh et shimkha,*” represented his mission of bringing all living people into the fold, as they recognized the Almighty’s providence in the world. In good taste, he drew his congregation close, with humility and a smile.



(L-R) Hazzan Yosef “Sousou” Hamaoui, Hakham Barukh Ben Haim, Hazzan Gabriel A Shrem, and Rabbi Moshe Shamah. This picture is from the wedding of Estelle and Mitchell D Betesh, January 30, 1983.



Gabriel Shrem with his brother-in-law, David Cohen.

Shavat Aniyim

One of our beliefs is that Gd listens to the sufferings of the poor. This was a position to which Cantor Shrem could relate. Despite the great legacy that he left behind, things rarely came easily for him in his lifetime. His childhood was spent in poverty as unemployment spread across Egypt. In time, his family journeyed to the Americas in search of opportunity and a better life.

Once settled in the United States, the Shrem family opened retail stores in the South. For the most part, money was difficult to come by, but they always made the best of their situation. It was Rachel Shrem, Gabriel’s wife, who demanded that they leave the South and make their home amidst the Sephardic community in Bensonhurst. Mrs. Shrem felt that being so far away “was no way to have a life” and made it very clear that she didn’t mind starting from humble beginnings. Gabriel could be a janitor or a store clerk for all she cared, as long as they moved closer to the community. Florence, the couple’s first child, was born in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, but shortly afterwards Gabriel fulfilled his wife’s wish. In 1941, he moved the family to Brooklyn.

El Hahodaot

Each morning, in the *zemirot* of Shaharit, we praise Gd using biblical verses. “*El hahodaot*” is one such example. The concept of singing to Gd in the form of *pizmonim* was not invented by Gabriel A. Shrem, but it was he who put this practice on the map. Sadly, before Gabriel took up the cause, the study of *pizmonim*, was dying out. As Cantor Isaac J. Cabasso can attest, the old *pizmonim* books were unappealing and virtually inaccessible to the public. They were held together with the cheapest possible binding and the Hebrew words were written in small print with no vowels. Plus, the *pizmonim* were not comprehensively compiled into one volume. In order to conduct any given Shabbat service, cantors had to extract melodies from at least five different *pizmonim* books. It was Mr. Shrem’s idea to standardize the songs of our heritage into one beautiful tome. Known as “The Red Book,” the anthology’s title “*Shir ushbaha hallel vezimra,*” is a reference to the 13 attributes of praise listed in the *Yishtabah* prayer. Published in 1964 by Sam Catton of the Sephardic Heritage Foundation, this new compendium was a masterpiece and an instant success. It took Mr. Shrem 15 years to put together this treasure. He labored most nights to edit and collate the pages of the book, all with one sixth of the eyesight of an average person.

When people commented on how taxing it must be for him, he said he didn't care how many hours he spent on the endeavor; he did it for the love of the *pizmonim*.

Because his eyesight was failing, Gabriel asked his youngest daughter, Iris, for her assistance. She was pivotal to the process, constantly taping passages to papers in the *pizmonim* books. Though she didn't enjoy the tedious task of collating many parts of the prayers, she valued the fact that she was helping to assemble what would become a timeless prayer book. When their work was finally completed, Iris accompanied her father to Israel to deliver the manuscript to the publisher. When Gabriel got off the plane and stepped foot in Israel, he knelt and kissed the ground.

Kaddish

Immediately upon his arrival to Brooklyn, Mr. Shrem was offered various cantorial positions in the community. Though he'd learned most of his *pizmonim* repertoire in Egypt, it was in Brooklyn that he truly became a *Hazzan*. In applying the *pizmonim* melodies to the various prayers, Gabriel had a distinct way of elevating the name of Gd. Building upon the established cantorial traditions of his predecessor, H. Moshe Ashear, he achieved new heights of *Hazzanut*. Mr. Ronnie Tawil compares Mr. Shrem's cantoring to the high quality radios that they used to make in the 1950's. "They just don't make them like they used to," he says. Joey Mosseri recalls, "From the age of five to twelve, he was the *Hazzan* I heard more than 90% of the time. He had his own unique way of fitting things and he was also the number one stretcher [of Hebrew words]. Many times as kids, we timed him doing *Kaddish*: [It took him] 5 to 7 minutes! You never wanted to get stuck standing for *Kaddish* [when he was the *Hazzan*]. Everyone made sure to get into the kenis and sit down in time before *Kaddish* began."

Semehim

The Great Sages define the "rich" as those who are happy with their portion. Mr. Shrem, or Daddy Gabe, as his family referred to him, was a very content man, because he loved who he was and what he did.

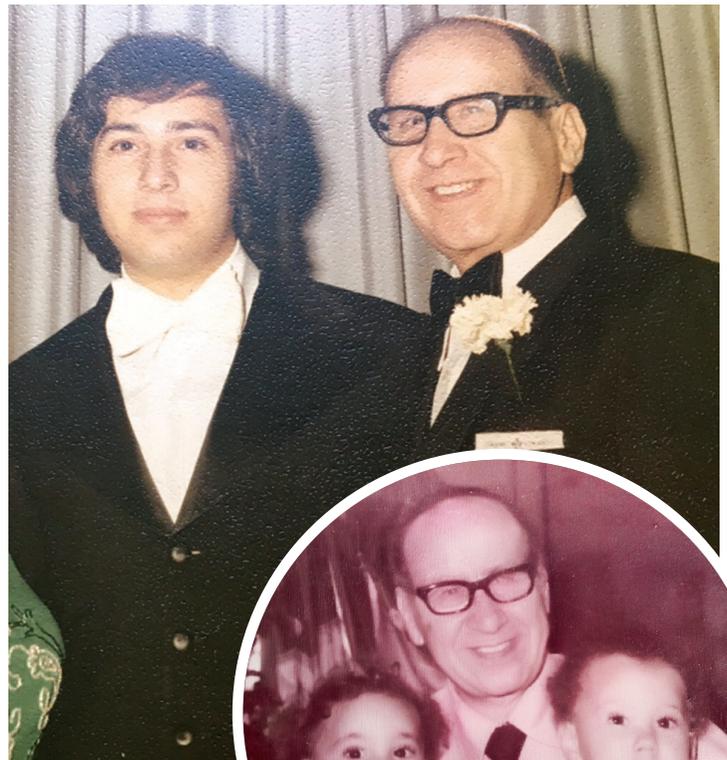
He loved teaching students. His daughter, Emily, remembers, "He would attract all the kids, who followed him to shul." She continues: "Every Shabbat afternoon, you would find Daddy Gabe, sitting by the window and learning Humash. He gave *Bar Misvah* lessons to so many young men in our community. Neighborhood men would stop and tell me that he taught them what they know and that they learned and practiced because of him. He loved what he taught."

For Gabriel, religion was very much a part of his working life, too. He stopped work every day at 4:00pm and took his men to the back of the warehouse to pray *minha*. His wife went so far as to say that "if there was a bed in shul, he would never come home."

Mimisrayim

There is a unique story behind how Gabriel left Egypt. In his youth, he contracted Trachoma, an eye infection common to the region. Just before his family attempted to leave the country, Gabriel was notified that, because of the disease, he would not be allowed to board the boat to the United States. It was decided that he would remain with his uncle and aunt, Abraham and Zakhia Chehebar, until his father could come back for him. Gabriel's younger brother, Saul, recalls his mother, Flora, crying constantly on the ship, because she had to leave her son behind. It wasn't until after his *Bar Misvah* that his father, Abraham, returned and brought Gabriel back to the United States.

For Gabriel, these years in Egypt were far from a negative experience; in fact, they proved to be formative for him. It was there that he absorbed the vast knowledge of his uncle, Abraham Chehebar.



Gabriel Shrem with son, Abie Shrem, on his wedding day, 1972.



Gabriel Shrem with his two grandchildren; Gabe and Larry Heffez.

It was also during this time in Egypt that Gabriel first learned *pizmonim*. Gabriel knew an estimated 300 *pizmonim* melodies; more than anyone else in the community. In the 1970's, he recorded at least 265 of them onto tape cassettes for his class at the Yeshiva University Cantorial Institute. These recordings have been digitally enhanced by the Sephardic *Pizmonim* Project and are currently available on pizmonim.com.

Nakdishach

In a January 1986 interview with Dr. Kay Kaufman Shelamay, Mr. Shrem emotionally discussed the *Nakdishach* prayer. He got so inspired, he said, when his congregants united as one and joined him in saying the powerful words "*Kaddosh, Kaddosh, Kaddosh*." To him, this show of unison, this spontaneous fervor, was what made his role worthwhile. To have the full response of the congregation behind him and in support of him brought him tremendous pleasure. He considered himself to be the captain of a ship, responsible for guiding the lives of his congregants to safety with his cantoring.

Alas, Gabriel's prospects began to dim. Ultimately, trachoma caused him to lose vision in one eye. Despite several corneal transplant surgeries to try and restore the vision that remained to him, his eyesight was never restored. By the end of his life, he was totally blind – though, spiritually, he soared.

Kaddish Titkabal

May the Almighty Gd accept our prayers for the elevation of Mr. Shrem's *neshamah*. May his family and students be protected with the same diligence he showed in preserving the *pizmonim* and heritage of *Am Yisrael*. Amen.