



Sam Benson Maimon

About the Author

Sam Maimon was the product of another era, the Jewish world of the waning Turkish Empire, transplanted to the shores of Puget Sound in the American Pacific Northwest. Although he arrived at the age of sixteen and was lacking an advanced formal education, he was able to thrive and excel culturally and intellectually in all endeavors that were important to him: family life, synagogue life, Jewish law, Sephardic traditions, secular literature and teaching the Jewish/Sephardic heritage at all levels.

For almost forty years he earned his living as a grocer in the Central Area of Seattle, Washington. Before he retired in 1969 he used his spare time to expand his knowledge of his people, the Turkish Sephardim, through every available means: reading, talking to elders, listening to and singing Sephardic liturgy and *romanzas* to develop his own *hazzanut* (cantorial) style and even joking to pick up Ladino expressions. But as much as he picked up, he gave back even more. He taught and entertained his customers in the store, his congregants in the synagogue and his students in the many and varied classes that he conducted. In addition, he inspired his fellow congregants as a *hazan*, a *notan*, *cantant Yisrael* (pleasing singer of Israel) and the special way he carried out his cantorial duties.

Once the store was closed and he had more time available, his role as a teacher greatly expanded. He taught young boys Hebrew and prepared them for becoming Bar Mitzvah, he taught grown men the Jewish law and traditions they did not learn in their youth, and he taught his entire synagogue community through the columns he wrote in the *La Vo* (The Voice), newsletter of the Sephardic Bikur Holim congregation, from 1971 until 1982.

Sam Benson Maimon, known affectionately as "B'sion" and later as "Uncle Sam," was born in the Turkish city of Bursa in 1907. His father, Rabbi Abraham Maimon, and his mother, Victoria (Vida) Maimon nee Lomco, were from families that had lived in Bursa for nearly four centuries. The father, known as Haribi Avram, decided to flee once a *hukam* in Sephardic terminology, when Sam and his two other sons were very young. Once certified as a *hukam*, Haribi Avram moved to two smaller Turkish towns before 1911 when he was offered the position of *hukam* in the city of Tekirdag, about seventy miles southwest of Istanbul in the European part of Turkey.

It was in Tekirdag that Sam received much of his formal education, and it was his father who had a great influence on how he would lead his life. The Jewish educational system in Tekirdag was centered around the Alliance Israelite Universelle school (secular classes plus some Jewish topics), supplemented by after-school Judaic classes in the *medar* (old-style Talmud Torah). A great deal was also learned in the synagogue. Secular classes were in French, they spoke Ladino amongst themselves, synagogue services were in Hebrew and they picked up Turkish to be able to converse with their non-Jewish neighbors (Turks, Armenians and Greeks).

As Sam and his younger brothers, Jack, Isaac, Morris and Solomon, got older, Haribi Avram became concerned for the future of his sons. Mustapha Kemal had taken control of Turkey by 1922, and among the many reforms he instituted was the obligation of all Turkish citizens to serve in the army. Haribi Avram was not going to let his sons be conscripted because he had seen first-hand how young Jewish men could be changed by their stint in the army. He was open to a rabbinical position abroad. Thus, in 1924 when he was contacted by members of Sephardic Bikur Holim (SBH) synagogue in Seattle, Washington to serve as their rabbi, he readily accepted. Agreement was reached for Haribi Avram to serve as their spiritual leader, and so the family, Rabbi and Mrs. Maimon, Sam and his five younger siblings (four brothers and sister Rachel), was transplanted to the Pacific Northwest. His older sisters, Fanny and Louise, joined the family a few years later.

In Seattle, Sam first learned English and then attended Garfield High School for two years. Sam needed to go to work to help his parents support the large Maimon family. (Because he was lacking one or two credits he never officially graduated, but that was remedied some fifty years later when he was given an actual Seattle Public School diploma at an SBH testimonial dinner in his honor.) Nevertheless, there were many opportunities for him to read and learn outside of school, and he availed himself of them. His brother Isaac recalls how Sam would be up reading books late at night, hovered over the single light in the bedroom, while his four younger brothers were falling asleep on the mattresses stretched out across the floor.

As the 1930s opened, the Maimon family was devastated by the untimely death of their patriarch, Haribi Avram, in January of 1931. The family pulled together, as the older brothers took on the financial responsibilities of the family. Sam formed a partnership with a friend of his, Jack Lanes, and the two opened up a grocery store, the 24th Avenue Market, located at 24th Avenue and Yeeler Way. Sam

operated that store for almost forty years, and it quickly became one of the gathering places for the Sephardim in Seattle. In 1941 Jack Lanes left the store for other business ventures, and Sam's brother, Isaac, who had already been working there, became his partner. That partnership lasted until they sold the store in 1969.

Sam got to know all the Sephardim in Seattle, not only those from his own synagogue, but also those from Ezra Bessaroth (whose members came from the island of Rhodes), and Ahavath Ahim (whose members came from the island of Marmara). Sam developed and perfected his humor, his story-telling techniques, his informative style and his Ladino expertise in that store. The many men who had worked as delivery boys over the years, including his brother, Rabbi Solomon Maimon, his son Albert and many nephews, fondly remember their years in the store and the wisdom and humor of one of the men who made it so memorable.

Down the block from the 24th Avenue Market lived Reverend Morris Scharon and his large family. Reverend Scharon had been a student and friend to Haribi Avram, but Sam took special notice of the oldest daughter, Lucy, who chauffeured her father around. They were engaged in 1933 at the wedding of Sam's brother Jack; Lucy and Sam were wed on August 12, 1934. The following year their first child, Victoria (Vicki) was born.

Sam and his father-in-law had become good friends. They shared similar interests. Both were *hazanin* (cantors) in their synagogues. Sam had an exceptionally rich voice, but with his father gone, he had to turn elsewhere to learn the wide variety of Sephardic tunes and *makamot* (musical modes) appropriate for the various prayers and poems to be chanted on the many special days of the Jewish calendar. He learned much from Nessim (Sam) Azose whose father had been a *haham*, and with whom he shared *hazanut* duties in SBH from the mid-1930s to mid-1940s.

There was also a great deal of Jewish law to be learned, beyond what he had acquired in his youth. He enriched his learning in many ways. He studied with a number of rabbis in the Jewish community at large, but probably the person who taught Sam the most in the study of *Gemara* (Talmud) was an Ashkenazic man, Shabbsi Lewis, who often learned and prayed at Sephardic Bikur Holim. Sam also studied a great deal on his own. One of the methods he used was to pick a Biblical commentator for an entire year. Each week he would read the explanations offered by that rabbi on that particular week's *perashah* (Torah portion). The next year he would choose a different commentator, and he continued the cycle for quite a few years. In

addition, Sam and his brother Jack would teach classes at the synagogue on such topics as *Ein Yaakov* (non-legal aspects of Talmud) and *Me'Am Lo'Ez* (a unique encyclopedia-like Biblical commentary written in Ladino, which is fully described in one of his articles in this book). Sam also enjoyed reading secular books of all kinds, and Mark Twain was his favorite American author.

The 1940s brought significant changes. Albert was born in 1941, the same year Sam and Lucy moved into a spacious house on 24th and Spruce, (two blocks from his grocery store), and Esther was born in 1946. Sam, Jack and Isaac had helped send their youngest brother, Solomon, to Yeshiva University. Solomon returned in 1944 with his rabbinical ordination and took on the position of rabbi of Sephardic Bikur Holim Congregation. Haribi Avram's sons had filled the large gap that their father's death had left; Solomon as rabbi, Sam as assistant *hazan* (cantor), with Jack and Isaac also taking on cantorial and other duties.

The 1950s were years of exercising his role as father and father-figure. He taught Albert his Bar Mitzvah *perashah* and as much Jewish law and Sephardic lore as an American teenager was willing to absorb. The arrival of Rev. Samuel Benaroya to serve as the official *hazan* of SBH reduced only slightly Sam's active role as assistant *hazan*. He continued teaching congregants, nephews, and all those who were interested about the vast richness of the Sephardic *hahamin* (sages). When his nephew, Isaac Azose, became *hazan* of the sister Seattle Sephardic congregation, Ezra Bessaroth, Sam spent a great deal of time teaching him the fine points of *hazanut* and the details of how the prayers are to be chanted. He was equally important as "Uncle Sam" to his many other nephews, for his jokes, his wisdom and his inspiration regarding the value of Jewish learning.

During the 1960s Sam took on a new role, that of *papu* (grandfather) to nine grandchildren. His children all chose Ashkenazic spouses: Vicki married Sid Schain in 1956, Albert married Jean Yablok in 1964 and Esther married Eugene Normand in 1967. Each couple gave Sam and Lucy three grandchildren. *Papu*hood came easily to Sam because it allowed him to do so many things he loved to do, tell stories and jokes, sing and laugh, all to a new captivated audience. Sam not only taught all six of his grandsons their Bar Mitzvah *parashiot* (Torah portions), but also studied Bible and Talmud with those grandsons who attended Hebrew day school and yeshiva high school.

Sam expanded his knowledge of Sephardic *halachot* (Jewish law), customs, history and culture through reading, but the sources he had

access to in Seattle were limited. This improved when his son-in-law, Eugene Normand, then a graduate student at the University of Washington (UW) began bringing him books and journals from the large UW library. Later, his access to new sources of Sephardic-related reading material expanded as he combined visits to his children with opportunities to read more. This occurred first in Israel in 1970 when Sam and Lucy joined Albert, Jean and family for an extended stay in Haifa where Albert was living. One or two mornings a week Sam would board the bus in Haifa that would take him to Jerusalem, change buses and end up at the Ben Zvi Institute where he would spend hours reading the books and manuscripts that the Institute had collected. The same procedure was followed in Chicago where Esther and Eugene lived during the 1970s. Sam would travel from Esther's West Rogers Park neighborhood by bus and train to the Spertus College library in downtown Chicago which had an extensive Judaica collection. He would spend hours reading those books of special interest to him before returning at the end of the day for dinner with the family.

By 1969 several factors had combined to prompt Sam and Isaac to sell the 24th Avenue Market. Like all other Sephardim, they and their synagogue had moved to another part of the city, so the store was no longer close by. Sam had already turned sixty and was interested in concentrating on other activities. The social disturbances that erupted in the late 1960s hastened their decision. Sam now had the time to pursue full-time the role he had always loved, that of teacher. He was a substitute teacher at the Seattle Hebrew Academy, the school his children had graduated from and which his grandchildren were attending, and a full-time teacher at the after-school Sephardic Religious School sponsored by SBH. He also became a private tutor, preparing boys for becoming Bar Mitzvah, and teaching adult men the Jewish law and traditions that they had bypassed in their youth.

Because so many people were continually asking him about Ladino and Sephardic customs, he began organizing in his own mind the best way to explain an entire tradition to a large audience. He had to formalize his approach in 1975 because, through the efforts of his friends David and Esther Raphael, he was asked to teach a course, "Ladino: Language and Literature" at the University of Washington. Later, he taught similar classes at the Jewish Community Center. These classes led him to compile Ladino words which, after several years, culminated in his first-of-its-kind English dictionary of non-Spanish Ladino words, "Ladino-English Dictionary" that was

published in 1980 in *Studies in Sephardic Culture, The David N. Barocas Memorial Volume*, Marc Angel, Editor.

Sam's audience multiplied even further with the advent of his column in the SBH monthly newsletter, *La Boz*. The first article appeared in the October, 1971 issue of *La Boz* and it continued uninterrupted until September, 1982 when he suffered a heart attack. These articles rekindled in the Sephardic old-timers, as well as their children and grandchildren, the spark of customs, sayings and events that most had heard about and practiced, but had since forgotten. He taught through his writings in a folk-scholar style that everyone found appealing.

His knowledge of Sephardic customs and language was vast, and his reputation for this knowledge spread far beyond Seattle. He was consulted as a major source by Rabbi Herbert Dobrinsky for his book *A Treasury of Sephardic Laws and Customs*, and Joseph Papo for his book *Sephardim in Twentieth Century America*. Students at all levels sought out his advice. One to whom he devoted considerable effort was Nancy Kobrin, a graduate student at the University of Iowa, for her transliteration of the Ladino ethical tract *Tokpho Shel Yoseph* (The Strength of Joseph). Students sought out their Sephardic identity through questions directed to him, and he always responded favorably. One such venue was the class he taught in Sephardic History and Customs at the after-school High School of Jewish Studies in Seattle. But he was just as likely to get a phone call asking a specific question, or to be button-holed in synagogue for an explanation.

Unfortunately this came to a halt in September, 1982. His younger brother, Morris, had died and several days later, during the *Shachrit* (morning) service of Rosh Hashanah, Sam suffered a heart attack in synagogue. He recovered, but was never able to completely return to the person he had been, intellectually or physically. *La Boz* reprinted some of his previous articles for a year or two; he never wrote any more. Afterwards, his brother Isaac took over with his own column, "News from Isaac," which has a different focus. Isaac has also continued the tradition of teaching Ladino classes, using the same course material that Sam had developed.

Sam and Lucy celebrated their fiftieth anniversary in August, 1984 at a dinner party given by their children. In June of the following year, Lucy suffered a heart attack and died suddenly. Sam was not able to continue living in the home that he had shared with Lucy. He was slowed, but still showed flashes of his earlier brilliance and keen sense of humor. He was able to teach his two youngest grandsons their Bar

Mitzvah *parashiot*, although he did it mainly from memory, listening and correcting them while his eyes were firmly closed.

For the next six and a half years he lived primarily in the homes of his children Albert and Esther. As he had done several times a year, in December 1991 he took a train to spend some time with his daughter Vicki in Salem, Oregon. While there he suffered a gall bladder attack, requiring an operation. He never recovered and died on January 18, 1992. His body was returned to Seattle to be buried alongside his wife. On his tombstone are the following Hebrew passages which epitomize the man who was Sam Bension Maimon:

Ish makir tov v'chaiv shalom loma'id um'lama'id
Ashrei mi sheba l'caan v'talmudo b'yado
Odeh Hashem m'od bphi, uv'toch rabim ahal'lenu

A man who appreciated the good in all, loved peace, studied and taught (A. Maimon)

Happy is he who comes here (Heaven) with his teachings in his hand (Babylonian Talmud, *Ketubot*, 77B)

I will thank G-d exceedingly with my mouth, and amid the multitude I will praise him (Psalms, 109,30)