



The Mohel Rabbi Shemuel Chamoula,

The Amazing Untold Stories

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12 Shevat 5702 (January 30, 1942), Alexandria, Egypt – 27 Iyar 5764 (May 17, 2004), New York, NY

Humility

Humble and unassuming, Rabbi Shemuel Chamoula hid his greatness from the casual eye. As the premier *mohel* (one who circumcises according to Jewish tradition) of the Syrian Sephardic community for nearly four decades, no one would have blamed him for developing some sense of elitism – but his nature did not allow this. He lived his entire life with dignified humility and deference to all who were fortunate enough to make his acquaintance.

But behind his simple demeanor was a man of remarkable talent. In addition to being a premier Mohel and an accomplished *Talmid Hacham* (Torah student), Hacham Shemuel was also a *Baal Koreh* (reader of the Torah), *Baal Tokeh* (blower of the *shofar*), *Hazan* (cantor), and *Shohet* (ritual slaughterer). He spoke six languages, including Syrian Arabic, French, Spanish, Hebrew, English and a Moroccan Arabic so authentic that native Moroccans didn't believe that he was really raised in Egypt and not Morocco. He also possessed an extremely sharp wit and was skilled at playing the keyboard and accordion – but few knew of such talents because his most accomplished skill of all was modesty.

In the days following his passing, dozens of Rabbi Chamoula's exemplary deeds, which he tried so hard to hide during his life, began to surface. No doubt, these stories of selflessness, sacrifice and service to Hashem and to his fellow man, are merely the tip of the iceberg. Rabbi Chamoula's consummate modesty insures that we will probably never know the true extent of his greatness.

One rabbi, not even half the age of the *niftar* (deceased), told the mourners about how Rabbi Chamoula would stand up for him when he approached, simply because the Mohel once heard one *halacha* (Jewish law) from him. When the Mohel answered the phone and someone asked to speak to "Rabbi Chamoula," he would tell him or her, "There is no Rabbi Chamoula here – I'm not a rabbi." In his efforts to avoid the spotlight, he would not volunteer to the *minyán* whether he had a *milah* that day – only the truly determined were able to extract the information from him and thus adjust the prayers accordingly. He would never speak about favors he did for others and when his children would ask him

about a good deed they heard he performed from a grateful friend, he would interrupt and change the subject.

Pure Beginnings

Born of Syrian descent to Shaul and Frieda (nee Harari) Chamoula אבן חן, Rabbi Chamoula began learning to perform the mitzvah of *brit milah* (circumcision) at the behest of his father. While still in Egypt in his early teens, he would pay a significant sum of money for each opportunity to practice on gentile babies.

In 1957, Rabbi Chamoula was brought to New York by Rabbi Avrohom Kalmanowitz אבן חן, the Mirrer Rosh Yeshiva. He completed his studies in *milah* there, under the guidance of Rabbi Bronstein.

His father was the right hand of Hacham Helfon Safdieh אבן חן in Alexandria, Egypt. Never would one see Hacham Helfon walking without also seeing Shaul Chamoula next to him. And so borrowing a page from his father, and in a manner indicative of how he would live his whole life, Rabbi Chamoula quickly volunteered to serve as the *shamosh* (assistant) to the Rosh Yeshiva in Brooklyn. For the five years he studied there, Rabbi Chamoula joyfully brought the Rabbi breakfast each morning.

Brit Milah

When his family joined him in Brooklyn in 1962, Rabbi Chamoula stepped up to support them by working in the jewelry trade. Although he soon became a prolific Mohel, Rabbi Chamoula did not regard this as his livelihood, steadfastly refusing to accept payment for his services. This went on for the first 15 years he was performing *milot* (circumcisions), until finally, his Rebbe, Rabbi Miller told him, “You have to take money.” Still, as Hacham Baruch said at the *Arayat*, “If he felt that the family couldn’t afford it or if the father was a Torah student, he did not allow them to pay.

Rabbi David Ozeri illustrated this point during the *levaya* (funeral) with a personal account. After coming to check his baby on Friday, performing the *milah* on Shabbat and coming to check the boy both Saturday night and Sunday, Rabbi Ozeri tried to hand him an envelope. “He ran away from me like he saw a fire. I chased after him, I said, ‘Please take it.’ He said, ‘No, no, no, never,’ and he ran.”

Even from those who were able to pay, he never made a request – he left the matter entirely for the father of the baby to decide. He performed countless *milot* at no charge for people who didn’t have much religion and whose boys would otherwise have remained uncircumcised. Rabbi Ozeri recalled a case where he enlisted Rabbi Chamoula’s help in circumcising the son of a former neighbor who had little understanding of Jewish law. When the father of the boy asked afterwards, “Is there a fee for your services?” without hesitation, Rabbi Chamoula replied, “No. But I’ll be back tomorrow to check on the baby.”

Once, when the *Mohel* sold a diamond for an engagement ring to a particular gentleman he told him “Your first 10 *milot* will be free!” The man had many sons each of whom was

circumcised by Rabbi Chamoula. And true to his word, the Rabbi refused to take any sort of payment for his services. When the man continued to insist, he finally told him, “Make the check out to Mirrer Yeshiva.”

Although he performed thousands upon thousands of *milot*, Rabbi Handlesman asserted that he performed each *Brit Milah* with the same seriousness, excitement and enthusiasm as if it was his first. Serving the community for nearly forty years, he also merited to perform *milot* on the children of those who themselves were circumcised by him.

In his eulogy, Rabbi Saul Kassin, related the events of one particular morning when he accompanied Rabbi Chamoula on three *milot*, the first in Ahi-Ezer, then in Shaare Zion and finally at Shore Boulevard. Amazingly, this was a common occurrence for Rabbi Chamoula. And true to form, Rabbi Chamoula happily drove Rabbi Kassin that day to each destination just as he had done hundreds of times before.

Loving His Fellow Man

One night, in the early hours of the morning, the Mohel received a call that a baby he had performed *milah* on was crying. Although the name did not sound particularly familiar, without hesitating he got up and went to the house. It turned out that he had done the *milah* on the child three months earlier. A lesser man would surly have scolded the parents for summoning him in the middle of the night when obviously the baby was not crying because of the *milah*. But Rabbi Chamoula’s reaction was quite different. Instead of getting upset and storming out, he spent some thirty minutes trying to help the parents figure out the real reason the baby was crying. And although he received many calls from worried parents – each of which turned out to be a false alarm – he never got upset, even when the concerns were frivolous.

After performing one *milah*, the Mohel noticed a young brother of the baby crying. He asked the boy what was bothering him and was told that his brother didn’t allow him to watch the *milah*. Rabbi Chamoula immediately deputized the young boy. He asked that he accompany him upstairs to check the baby and assigned him all sorts of tasks, from fetching gauze pads to helping apply the ointment. The feeling of involvement made the youngster’s face light up with pride.

Rabbi Ozeri related an incident when he saw Eli Romero, the gentile that works in Congregation Bnai Yosef, in a hurry to get somewhere he asked him, “Eli what’s the rush?”

“I have to go to the hospital to see Hacham Shemuel the Mohel,” he answered.

“Why do you have to go?” Rabbi Ozeri inquired.

Mr. Romero explained, “When I suffered a mild stroke and I came out of the hospital, I came to the shul and he came running over to me and said, ‘You know I prayed for you every day.’ He prayed for me! I have to go visit him.”

When one of his neighbors was asked if there were ever any problems from the Mohel, he replied jokingly, “Too many Rabbis.” Once a contractor who was doing work on a

neighbor's house rang the doorbell and asked to speak with Rabbi Chamoula. He wanted to tell him personally that he couldn't believe that after all the problems caused by the construction, the noise, the constant blocking of the driveway and the street, the mess etc, no one from the house ever complained.

Many visitors at the shiva related how Rabbi Chamoula would not accept any money after he performed their sons' brit. Mr. Ashear related that when his first grandson was born he instructed his son that he would have to pay for the mohel, while he, Mr. Ashear would pay for the reception. After the brit Mr. Ashear inquired whether he had done his part to which his son answered "I tried to pay him but he said that he's best friends with my father-in-law and therefore cannot accept any money". And once again when his next son had a boy he gave the same instructions and when asked the answer was "he wouldn't take any money. "You're learning in yeshiva all day. I cannot accept any money".

One young man made a special visit just to relate the following story:
The ground in front of his house had been damaged and water started to leak. Having little money, the young man's wife volunteered to sell her engagement ring and with the money they would repair the sidewalk. Knowing how honest Rabbi Chamoula was the fellow approached him to sell his stone. The stone was sold and the money, a few thousand dollars, was used to pay for the repair. A week later, this person received a call to come down to Rabbi Chamoula's office. Rabbi Chamoula returned the original mounting to the fellow with a cubic zirconia as the center stone that looked exactly as it did before. "Give this to your wife" he was told "make her happy".

At the *arayat*, Rabbi Handlesman credited Rabbi Chamoula with literally saving his life. It was the sixth night of Hanukah in 1975. After dropping off a check by Rabbi Kalmanowitz's house, Rabbi Handlesman declined the option of taking a car service home and chose to walk even though it was icy and extremely cold out. As he came to the intersection of Quentin Road and Ocean Parkway, he was suddenly attacked by no less than six large dogs. He was petrified. After being knocked down at first, he jumped to his feet and ran into the middle of Ocean Parkway where he was in mortal danger on two fronts, first from the dogs whose bites had already penetrated his skin and then from the cars who were speeding along the icy road. In the middle of the intersection, one dog threw the Rabbi down on the ground. As Rabbi Handlesman tells it, "At that moment, like an Angel...Rabbi Chamoula arrived with his car, he got out...and with one hand and with one foot he was driving away the dogs and with the other hand he stopped the traffic. He picked me up from the floor, took me into his car, took me to Maimonides Hospital and was there all night with me...I told him he could go home but he said, no, he'll take me home – he'll wait till he can take me home."
Rabbi Handlesman continued that since that time, "When I would see him on Ocean Parkway, he would greet me in such a way that would sometimes make me feel like I saved *his* life and he didn't save *my* life."

This "turning of the tables," was one of the Mohel's greatest talents. One Rosh Yeshiva, who Rabbi Chamoula used to drive around, would say that he was always made to feel as

though *he* was doing the Mohel a favor by *allowing* him to drive. This was quite typical. It's been said that he spent half his life waiting in the car for people he was driving – yet he never double parked because he couldn't imagine being the cause of a traffic buildup.

Among a few of the regulars that Rabbi Chamoula would chauffeur in his car were, Rabbi Shalom Schwadronק"ש, Hacham Ben Sion Abba Shaulק"ש, Rabbi Yehuda Cohen, Rabbi Manis Mandel, Rabbi Saul Kassin and Hacham Baruch. When his car began to have costly mechanical trouble, he refused to give it up because he felt it was too holy after being occupied by so many great Rabbis especially his rabbi, Rabbi Miller א"ה.

Hosting Guests

Relaying his feelings on the Mohel, Rabbi Yehudah Cohen, the Rosh Yeshiva of Yakire Yerushalayim told Rabbi Ozeri, "I was a guest in his home for over 20 years. Every single year I come and I move in on them. But it doesn't end there...we go to the *Netz* (sunrise) minyan and he then waits for me and I try to get away, but he doesn't let me. He says, 'Come, I'll take you where you need to go.' And he drives me from shul to shul for hours in the morning...and I keep telling him, 'Go home, I'll get around.' He always tells me, 'No, I have nothing to do anyway, don't worry.' And he waits in the car with a book, learning Torah while I go from place to place trying to raise money for the Yeshiva." "I always came a month before *Pesah* and I stayed until almost *erev Pesah*. And I would be embarrassed, because I would bring cookies and other *hametz* (leavening) into the room and I would apologize. But his wife and he would tell me, 'Please Rabbi, we wait for you all year...don't worry, you bring blessing to our house.'"

When his partner in the jewelry business found out that a rabbi who was staying in Borough Park was not being accommodated, he called Rabbi Chamoula. Without thinking twice, Rabbi Chamoula drove to Borough Park to meet the unknown rabbi for the first time and bring him home. He was a guest at the Chamoula house for a month.

The house was a veritable hotel hosting scores of rabbis over the years – sometimes even four at once. During the *shivah* (seven days of mourning), rabbis from all over came to visit – many of whom said that they stayed many times in the Chamoula home over the years.

One Purim, in an unusual situation for the Chamoula household, there were no guests for the Purim meal and Mrs. Chamoula was visibly disappointed. With only scant time to begin the meal, the Mohel got into his car after attending Rabbi Miller's class and went out looking for a rabbi to bring him home for the meal. After searching for some time, he found a rabbi – a stranger to him – whom he proudly brought home and cheerfully served.

Dedication to His Rabbis

Every Thursday night, at the class of Rabbi Avigdor Millerק"ש, he was in charge of the tape recorder that spread Torah throughout the world. For thousands of classes that translated into millions of tapes over some 25 years, it was his honor to make sure that the recording was done properly. So great was his dedication to Rabbi Miller's classes that he refused to take personal vacations. Even on the night his son got married, Rabbi

Chamoula excused himself quietly from the wedding hall at 7:45pm and went to Rabbi Miller's Gemara class, returning at 9:15pm to the wedding hall.

Like clockwork, he attended Rabbi Miller's Gemara class every morning and night and recorded the tapes from these classes himself. He would then come home and play the tape, editing it for hours and hours. The sound of Rabbi Miller's voice echoed throughout the house daily.

The tapes were his most prized possession, and so he always attended to them personally lest something should, Gd forbid, happen to them. Over the years, he accumulated 18 complete *masechtot* (chapters of Gemara) that he himself recorded, aside from many parts of other *masechtot* that were not complete.

In Rabbi Miller's handwritten will, which was read at his *levaya* two years ago, Rabbi Chamoula was the first to be mentioned, among those from the Sephardic community, to whom the Rav wished to express gratitude.

When explaining his extreme devotion to those did not understand it, he would say, "If the Hafetz Haim was in town to give a class wouldn't you go? Rabbi Miller is our Hafetz Haim." Hacham Shemuel also acted on his words, incorporating many of the principles that were cornerstone of Rabbi Miller's teachings. When the Mohel bought an expensive tape recorder for Rabbi Miller to record his class, the rabbi asked how much the unit cost and insisted on paying for it. Hacham Shemuel refused to accept the money, but Rabbi Miller was adamant and in the end Rabbi Chamoula was forced to accept reimbursement. It was based on this trait of Rabbi Miller that he internalized the rule of never accepting gifts himself and would always insist on paying for anything that was bought for him.

Self-control was yet another hallmark of Rabbi Chamoula. In 1977, when Hacham Shemuel went with an uncle to the hospital to visit another uncle who had suffered a heart attack, his companion said to him, "You know why we're visiting him?" and he pointed to a pack of cigarettes in the Mohel's pocket. In those days, Rabbi Chamoula was smoking three packs a day. But that one remark was all it took to put that to an end. He removed the box from his pocket, threw it in the trash and never touched cigarettes again.

Much of the credit for Rabbi Chamoula's learning in Torah belongs to his wife, Joanie (nee Shamah), of 32 years. She encouraged – not just supported his efforts and was always willing to sacrifice for the simplistic life he desired. Their modest home was constantly open for visitors, and many prominent rabbis were frequent guests over many decades. Hachnasat orhim was a way of life for Rabbi Chamoula and his family as he constantly instilled in them these values that were so important to him.

Whenever Rabbi Shalom Schwadron, the famous *Maggid* (lecturer) of Jerusalem $\kappa\forall\mu\zeta$, would come to New York, Hacham Shemuel was his shamosh. Even while he still worked in jewelry, he would take the day off, pick the *Maggid* up from where he was staying on avenue M in flatbush, take him to the *mikveh* (ritual bath) then to vatikin at the Bine Yosef synagogue and drive him around all day wherever he had to go.

Dedication to Torah and Mitzvot

Hacham Shemuel would make frequent trips to the Jewish bookstores. He loved to buy new sefarim (books) and his night table was always stacked with the newest volumes which he would read at all hours of the day and night. Hacham Baruch commented that Torah was the purpose of his life “I remember many times he would ask me questions and if he heard something new, he jumped from joy and showed his happiness with such a smile.”

When it was the time of the month to say the blessing for the new moon, Hacham Shemuel would sometimes drive around for hours until he found a place that allowed a clear view of the moon unobstructed by cloud cover.

Honesty in Business

In the jewelry district, his name was gold. His son Shelomo recounted how when he entered the business many years after his father’s semi-retirement, he walked into the office of wholesalers with nothing but his name. It turned out to be all he needed. The mere mention of his father’s name was enough to allow him to take practically anything he wanted on consignment, in an industry that’s known for its strict credit standards.

Hacham Shemuel’s practice of preparing 14 karat gold was unique. He would carefully weigh the alloy and then mix in the proper amount of pure gold to insure the correct ratio. Then after he had the exact measurement, he would add a bit of extra gold to make sure that on the off chance that his scale was off by one iota, he would still not be cheating anybody.

The process of cutting the gold into smaller pieces suitable for use in making jewelry involved heating the gold. The standard practice in the industry was to then dip the piece in water to cool it and then weigh it while it’s wet. Rabbi Chamoula would do no such thing. Before weighing the piece, he would put it into an oven to dry so that the recorded weight of the gold – which is the basis for the selling price, would not include even trace amounts of water.

A business associate described one interesting transaction to Rabbi Chamoula’s sons. After purchasing about \$50,000 worth of silver from the Mohel on a Friday afternoon, he received a call on Monday morning asking him to bring all of the silver back to his office for a full refund. When the man asked to know why, Hacham Shemuel said that the price of silver was about to drop and he didn’t want him to take a loss on the transaction. The man complied and sure enough, that week, the price of silver fell.

Throughout his career, there were those who beat him for money, and he was encouraged to take them to *beit din* (court). But he refused on the grounds that there was a chance that he didn’t recall the facts precisely as they were, so he said, “Forget about the money.”

The Mohel ended up leaving the business world, ostensibly to focus more on *Brit Milah*. However, some people who were close with him believe that the real reason was his inability to tolerate constant exposure to crookedness in the business world.

Rabbi Chamoula is survived by his wife; his sons, Rabbi Shaul Chamoula and Shelomo Chamoula, and a daughter, Frieda; nine grandchildren; and his siblings; Hazan Ezra Chamoula, Rabbi Eliyahu Chamoula and a sister, Iris. Continuing in his ways, both his sons and his son-in-law are Talmide Hachamim.

At both the *levaya* and the *arayat*, the family expressed gratitude to Hatzalah, and in particular, the crew who responded to his heart attack in March, for their exceptional efforts in working continuously for 40 minutes until they got his pulse going again. Special mention was also made of Rabbi Webber, the founder of Hatzalah, who constantly offered the family *hizuk* (strength) and hope during the most difficult times in the ICU.

Hacham Shemuel passed away on May 17, exactly 49 days after his heart attack. The numerical value of *lev tov* (good heart) is also 49 and while we know he had a *lev tov* in the spiritual sense, it turned out to be true in the physical sense as well. In the end it was an infection that he acquired in the hospital that exhausted his life and not his heart. But as Rabbi Shmuel Miller said, in the end, the specifics of how he passed on are irrelevant, because the only reason his soul departed was because Hashem wanted him.