

THEATER

# 'Without An Evil Eye' in focus as production from Israel has premiere in Westborough



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## Key Points

- The Nephesh Theatre of Israel production of "Without An Evil Eye" will have its English language premiere Oct. 26 at Congregation B'nai Shalom in Westborough.
- In the one-man show, Israeli actor Asaf Ben Shimon combines storytelling and stand-up comedy to tell about his loss of vision and how he has continued to follow his dreams.
- The production was originally in Hebrew but now premieres with an English translation by Nephesh Theatre's Howard Rypp after audience requests.

"Without an evil eye" is a Hebrew phrase similar to "knock on wood" that is said after making a positive statement to ward off bad luck, or in this case the evil eye.

"It's an expression," said Howard Rypp, founder and artistic director of the [Nephesh Theatre](#) in Tel Aviv, Israel.

["Without An Evil Eye"](#) is also the title of a one-man play in which Israeli stage, film and TV actor Asaf Ben Shimon relates how he handled his gradual loss of vision and continued to pursue his dreams. Ben Shimon, who co-wrote the show, combines the storytelling with stand-up comedy.

The Nephesh Theatre production of "Without An Evil Eye" will have [its English-language premiere](#) on Oct. 26 at Congregation B'nai Shalom in Westborough with Ben Shimon live on stage.

"Without an evil eye, everything's OK," Ben Shimon, 41, said. With that attitude, and despite a tough start in life in addition to battling blindness, his life has had a happy outcome. He showed off his three young daughters during a recent Zoom interview from Israel.

And maybe there is another happy ending to come ...



## 'When I was a kid they thought I was clumsy'

The new English-language Nephesh Theatre production of "Without An Evil Eye" at Congregation B'nai Shalom is being presented by the [Jewish Federation of Central Massachusetts](#) and the [Central Massachusetts Jewish Theatre Company](#). The U.S. premiere of the production was presented by the Central Massachusetts Jewish Theatre Company in April at The Willows at Worcester in Worcester. On that occasion, Ben Shimon performed on stage in Hebrew with projected English subtitles. Now he'll be performing in English.

Ben Shimon has retinitis pigmentosa, a genetic disease of the eyes that over time leads to a narrowness and loss of sight and eventually to blindness.

"When I was a kid they thought I was clumsy because I was always bumping into things," Ben Shimon said during the Zoom interview with Rypp translating as he spoke. "Now I'm legally blind. My peripheral vision is very small."

Aside from it being a pun, the title of the play means "it's important to look at things with good eyes," Ben Shimon said. "All of us have limitations, but the show inspires by looking for the good," said Rypp.

The play is written by Ben Shimon and Sarel Peterman and directed by Peterman. The two met in acting school and have stayed freinds.

"Without An Evil" has been running in Israel for four years, Rypp said. [Zelda Harris for The Times of Israel](#) called the show "one of the most unique productions I have ever seen. One is drawn into a world which exists around us of which we understand little. If you only see one play this year — make it this one!"

Rypp has translated the play from Hebrew into English for the new production debuting in Westborough.

The combination of storytelling and stand-up has proved to be appealing to audiences, Rypp noted. "I think that's what makes it so successful. It's two genres that are very direct — storytelling and stand up win the audiences over in a big way."

## 'We wanted to break the stigma'

Ben Shimon's heritage is Moroccan Jewish, and his grandparents were from Morocco. Growing up in Israel he lived in "a poor neighborhood where I had to prove myself ... It was

"We wanted to break the stigma of the blind person as a victim through humor while allowing the audience to stand in his shoes," Peterman wrote in his program notes.

In the show, Ben Shimon relates about going on a blind date. "A blind, blind date," he says.

"How do you have a first date in darkness? How do you get home from the bus stop? Why doesn't a blind person order pasta in a restaurant? How would he dare to be accepted at an acting school in Tel Aviv?" Peterman asks. "Asaf reveals how he achieves his goals with courage and the knowledge that every life crisis contains an opportunity. If we only reach out and grasp the good, we can turn around and change our lives."

"Without An Evil Eye" also has original music by Idan Yitzchayek that includes a North African sound and songs reflecting Ben Shimon's roots.

Peterman has written for stage, film and television, and worked with stand-up comics. He is also an actor. Ben Shimon's Israeli film roles include "The Good Words" and "Special Unit." He had a lead role in the film and the recent Israeli television series "The Happy Groom."

Rypp said of Ben Shimon and his blindness, "First of all he's the greatest actor in the world because no one ever knows it. You would never know he's blind in any way."

A trailer for "Without An Evil Eye" shows Ben Shimon rehearsing for a stage show by counting the number of steps to his marker on stage and to the edge of the stage.

## From Israel to Worcester

The Nephesh Theatre Company was founded in Toronto, Canada, in 1978, and moved to Israel in 1983. It has produced over 100 educational, multicultural and socially relevant stage shows as well as films. The company has worked with the Central Massachusetts Theatre Company to present several live-staged and U.S. premiere screenings of its productions locally, including an adaptation of [Isaac Bashevis Singer's](#) Yiddish tale "[Gimpel the Fool](#)" (starring Rypp) and "An Israeli Love Story."

After "Without An Evil Eye" came to Worcester in April for its U.S. premiere in Hebrew, the production did a coast-to-coast tour that also included Toronto. "We had a lot of requests that it be done in English," Rypp said. "It's a lot of work for Asaf, it's not his native tongue, but a lot of people said it should be in English."

After the Congregation B'nai Shalom performance in Westborough, the new "Without An

Hal Schneider, founder and executive director of the Central Massachusetts Jewish Theatre Company, said that when the show came to Worcester with English subtitles in April, "the audience thought it was wonderful. I can imagine how well it's going to go over this time. Everybody's going to get the real impact of the performance." People reading the subtitles may have missed some of the gestures and physical comedy Ben Shimon brings to the part, Schneider noted.

Ben Shimon's start in life was tough but he credits being sent to a boarding school with helping him to advance. The school "built him as a person," Rypp said translating.

Besides being an actor, Ben Shimon also has a background as a therapist working with children. He said he's "married to a gorgeous woman" and coaxed each of his three daughters to make brief cameos in front of the Zoom camera.

## **Film future?**

Asked if "Without An Evil Eye" could be filmed, Rypp said there was previously a movie in the works. Plans called for Ben Shimon to tour Morocco, but this was were shelved after the attacks on Israel carried out by Hamas and several other Palestinian militant groups on Oct. 7, 2023.

"Now, hopefully, we're thinking about doing it (a film) again," Rypp said.

The cameras could roll when the Ben Shimon and the show are in Toronto after being in Westborough.

When Ben Shimon was previously in Toronto he was at a Jewish house of worship when someone noticed him trying to read a prayer book with a magnifying glass. The person turned out to be an eye doctor who works with patients with retinitis pigmentosa.

When Ben Shimon returns to Toronto the doctor will give him special glasses that may be able to help make him see again.

"If it works for him he'll donate the glasses to Asaf," Rypp said of the doctor. "It could be a happy ending with the glasses."

Which may call to mind another universal saying or expression.

"Sometimes we say there is no coincidence in life," Rypp said.

**Where:** Congregation B'nai Shalom, 117 East Main St., Westborough

**How much:** \$36. [cmjtc.org](http://cmjtc.org)