

EPISODE 1450

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FT: So Money is brought to you by CNET, the site that shows how to navigate change all around us. So Money episode 1450, how to slash your grocery bill by 50% with Saving Whiz, Gina Zakaria.

***GZ:** I don't want to save money for the sake of saving money and feel miserable in the process. So I'm always looking at ways to test it out."*

[INTRO]

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FT: Welcome to So Money, everybody. I'm Farnoosh Torabi. We're dedicating this episode to saving money on everyday items, starting with food. Maybe I'm late to this, but I just downloaded this app called Fetch. My friend introduced it to me. Basically, you scan your receipts to Fetch, whether that's an email receipt, a paper receipt, and you get points. Once you accumulate a number of points, maybe 1,000 or whatever it is, it'll give you an opportunity to redeem that for cashback or a gift card towards a retailer of your choice like Amazon or Target. So I started using Fetch. It's a small way to feel like every time I spend, it's going to go towards something in the future. Even if it's just \$25 cashback after several trips to the grocery store, it feels like something.

Today, we're going to dedicate the show to how to save. As we head into 2023, a lot of us are concerned about the recession, losing our jobs, and things are still expensive. Inflation is showing signs of cooling, but food prices, in particular, are not budging. They are being very stubborn. Basics, eggs, milk, bread, cost much more today than they did just a year ago. So our guest today, Gina Zakaria, is a personal finance educator and grocery expert. Through her Saving Whiz platform and social network of over three million people, she helps people develop simple strategies to make saving easy and consistent. She is not about deprivation. She'll talk

about that, and her advice is so good, so spot on. It's been featured on Good Morning America, the Today Show, Money Magazine, and now So Money.

By the way, if you go into our show notes, she has a freebie. Grab her free freeze list. We talk about the importance of investing in a freezer and freezing and what can you freeze. I don't know you could freeze milk. Oh, yeah. I learned a lot on this episode. I took a lot of notes. I hope you'll enjoy it. Here we go. Here's Gina Zakaria.

[INTERVIEW]

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FT: Gina Zakaria, the Savings Whiz, welcome to So Money. It's great to have you on the show.

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GZ: I'm so happy to be here. Thank you for having me.

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FT: Let's just dedicate a whole 30 minutes to saving money. I mean, we talk about it more or less on the show. The show is called So Money, so it's part of the whole theme of being financially awesome. But let's really drill down and tell everybody how we can really buckle up because the latest data shows that pretty much every economist, almost every CEO, is expecting a recession in 2023, like a real recession, where we're going to see real job loss, a real pullback.

Maybe we could start with your own, how you have become the Savings Whiz. I was reading an article about how you have slashed your grocery bill alone in half, something like that. So groceries can be a big part of everybody's budget. But, Gina, tell us a little about your journey to becoming a savings queen.

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GZ: So when we first started, my husband and I were over – We had over six figures of debt, and I wanted to find ways of saving money so that we could pay off that debt, without feeling like I was depriving my children of having fun or depriving myself from having an actual lifestyle that was enjoyable. So I started looking at the everyday things that we were doing and realized there was a lot of power in those small things that I could be doing that could really amplify my savings so that I can save a lot of money in the back end and actually start paying off this debt. So it took us about five years, and we were able to pay off that debt, just by saving money and figuring out ways of tapping into those unutilized resources that we have on an everyday basis that we usually overlook.

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FT: So you didn't go out and try to earn more money. You just really used savings techniques. Tell us what worked for you specifically.

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GZ: At first, I thought, well, maybe I should be earning more money. Maybe I don't make enough money, and realized that actually I was making a pretty good salary and so was my husband. But we weren't actually budgeting correctly, and we weren't really looking at all of the things that could help us save money. So I started looking at groceries first because that's the first place that I knew I could probably cut back on not in the quality of the ingredients or that I was going to feed my family junk food all the time, but that there were things that I knew that I had been wasting money on that I could probably scale back. So I started there.

When I first started, I tried coupons. I tried all of the things that people talk about. Honestly, it just didn't work for me. Yeah, you save money. But you waste a lot of time. Or in my personal experience, I wasted a lot of time running to different stores, trying to figure out where the best deals were. Instead, what I ended up doing was finding ways of creating a system in my kitchen to help me save money. So I utilize my freezer storage much more than my pantry storage.

That's actually what I teach my audience is it's one of the most overlooked places in your kitchen. People look at the pantry first, and they look at staple ingredients. But there are so many things that we think we can't store for long term, things like dairy, bread, things that we use on an everyday basis that we can actually store for a month, two months at a time. That we don't have to go run to the grocery store every week to go get, which means we can buy it on sale, stock up, and save while it's not on sale.

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FT: Yes. So you really encourage people to create even maybe additional space in their home for a spot to have more storage. Have a freezer. That was one of the first things we do when we got a house. We moved out of an apartment into a house, and it was the pandemic. So we were cooking a lot more, and I thought no brainer investment. Get a freezer. It has really served us well, bread, frozen items, meats, all that sort of stuff. It really does cut down on your costs. It's easy math.

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GZ: Yeah. It's something you have to touch on every single week. Like every single person who watches my videos or listens to any part, any piece of advice that I provide, they have to go to their grocery store. There isn't anyone that's immune to it. So it's helpful across the board. Honestly, because personal finance can sometimes feel a little intimidating and overwhelming when you're first starting, starting with groceries is something that seems very small and doable. It makes it easy for someone to start working on their finances.

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FT: I want to stick with this system around saving money on groceries. You also, let's mention, used a powerful credit card to get your rewards and cashback. You use cashback apps. While you weren't using coupons, you were using these cashback apps. What about – I mean, this was before inflation. So right now, a lot of us are talking about like \$8 eggs, \$7 milk, and this is not sustainable, and inflation has been so stubborn. What's your advice on just trying to bring

down those costs that – You can't freeze milk, right? You got to buy milk. You got to buy eggs. What's the solution there?

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GZ: Well, you can actually freeze milk, but we'll talk about that.

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FT: Really?

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GZ: You can. I don't know that everybody wants to do that, but you absolutely can freeze milk. You just have to take about a cup out of the gallon or out of the container before you freeze it. So when it expands, it doesn't like warp the container. But as far as like eggs or things that are incredibly expensive right now and are kind of skyrocketing, as we speak, there's a lot of things you can do. When you see those things go on sale, because sometimes they still will, even in a recession, you will still see them kind of slightly decreased because they want to be able to bring you into that store, that's the time to stock up on them.

I know you'll probably think, well, if I'm stocking up on five dozen eggs, well, they're going to go bad before I can get to them. That's when you should precook most of them. Make freezer breakfasts. Have things on hand that you can use for breakfast items, where you don't have to store them in your fridge, and they go bad, and you can buy them when they're at a cheaper price. So we do that a lot with onions. We do that with garlic. A lot of people will look at my garlic video and think, "Oh, there's no way that you got this garlic cheaper than if you got it at Costco." It's like I do because I get it on sale. Then I just buy so much in bulk that I'm able to actually cut the cost.

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FT: We should mention online, you have hundreds of thousands of followers. I'm looking at you on Instagram right now, Gina, and I think I like saw 800,000-plus.

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GZ: 600, yeah.

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FT: 600. Okay. Well, still. It was just a rounding error. What are the videos? What is the content that people really can't get enough of? So can you give us a sense of where our heads are at?

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GZ: It's really funny that the content that actually speaks to most people are those pieces of content that a lot of people would have thought, "Oh, it's just common sense." But the thing is a lot of us are so busy with our day-to-day that we overlook the small tiny steps that we can take. So it's things like shredding our own cheese, chopping our own onion, and then freezing it, processing our own garlic, taking care of our vegetables, and then freezing them for when we need to cook them. Things like that that seem like they would be very simple sometimes get overlooked, and those are the things that actually change the game when you're looking at saving money in your kitchen.

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FT: But, you know, Gina, I'm going to play devil's advocate. Chopping onions, it takes time. Food planning, it takes time. What do you say to the mom or the dad, maybe even the single parent, right, and they've got two jobs? Now, you're telling me I got to chop my own onions, and my kids are screaming at me because they're hangry. How do I work around this? How do I create actually a system that works for me, where I'm not – I hate it. Like I want to like this, but I kind of hate it.

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GZ: I completely understand. When I first started, I didn't do all of the things at once because my kids were young at that point, and I didn't have a lot of time. My time was very limited. So I would say to anyone that wants to start that doesn't have a lot of time or doesn't really generally like this one processing of an ingredient, that's okay. Skip that and get the convenience item for that piece.

But it's finding that balance that works for you. So if chopping onion isn't your thing, maybe shredding cheese is or maybe having an extra five minutes in your Saturday morning while you're waiting for your tea kettle to brew your coffee. Maybe then you can do one extra thing that will help your future you get some savings going. It just takes one step. You don't have to do it all at once.

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FT: These grocery saving strategies saved your family 400 bucks a month, 400 to 500 bucks a month. You went from spending about 800 to 1,000 a month, to more like 400 a month. How big is your family, Gina?

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GZ: I have a family of four. So I have two daughters, and it's my husband and me.

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FT: All right, we got we tackle food. Okay. Food, check. What's the next area that we should be focusing on? I mean, like housing is kind of hard to budget for. I mean, I obviously have heard stories of people moving and going to get lower cost housing or refinancing their mortgages when you could get a lower rate. But the idea of like negotiating with your landlord is not really a possibility in this market, as much as maybe in previous markets. So what's next?

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GZ: Yeah, you're absolutely right with that. For me, I always start – After groceries, we start with bills. So again, looking at the everyday expenses, the things that we use or not use on a daily basis, and the things that we pay for every single month. So when we were looking at it, our next step was really looking at our entertainment expenses. What kind of things do we currently have that we are using, supposedly, for entertaining, but we're not using as much as we think we are? At that point, it was really cable.

I remember having this conversation with my husband, and I'm like, "But wait, the kids aren't going to have the Disney Channel. I'm not going to have the Food Network. What am I going to do when I get home? And so I'm going to be super bored." He was like, "Look, how about we just try it for one month and see? I mean, the cable company will, of course, take us back if we want to come back, right?" So I was like, "Okay, I'm game. We can try it out for a month."

Literally, within the first week, I found all of these network channels that I had never even heard of before, that basically had the same type of content I loved and the things that my kids like to watch for free. I was like, "Wow, I would have never even discovered those things, if I hadn't even taken the chance to cut the cable." So we cut the cable, I want to say, almost 15 years ago at this point. Never looked back because we were paying \$130 at that time because we had international channels. I kid you not. That one thing alone made such a big difference in our budget, but I also wasn't missing the entertaining piece of it because I found an alternative that worked and saved me a lot of money.

So I would look at all of your bills in that way and see, is there something I can do temporarily to see if I really do need this item or not. If it doesn't work, and I really do need it, there is no harm in going back. It's just kind of testing out your current lifestyle and seeing if you can find alternatives so that you can still have the same lifestyle but at a much lower bill.

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FT: I think a lot of us did that math 15 years ago, 10 years ago, cutting the cable. It's now a new hard thing, where it's like, "Which of the streaming channels do I cut?" Or it's like I'm probably paying more now for my television options than I did 15 years ago, and I can't imagine a life without Hulu or Netflix. Or it's definitely HBO Max. Please. I think if I had to rank them, it would

be like HBO Max, Hulu, Netflix. But then it also depends on what shows are back. So is there a workaround that? Can you unplug for like the months when maybe White Lotus isn't on season two yet, and then it's back, and they're like, "Okay."?

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GZ: Like you said, it's about prioritizing, right? You've got your top one and two and three. So it's really looking at how many shows for me. It's how many shows am I watching on every platform. Really comparing it that way and seeing which ones do I spend more time watching. For us, personally, right now, we have Netflix and we have Disney Plus. Both of those work really well because our kids love Disney Plus. Even though I have a 21-year-old, she still loves it. I love Netflix because I get to watch all of the things I like. We started to look into Plex, which gives us the option of seeing all of the things we want. So we're kind of trying that out right now to see if we can eliminate Netflix and Disney Plus, if we were to get Plex.

It's really just testing things out and seeing what feels good because that's the bottom line for me is I cannot save money if I feel like I'm depriving myself from something. I know, as adults, we do have to sometimes make the hard decisions when we're trying to save money. But my ultimate goal is I don't want to save money for the sake of saving money and feel miserable in the process. So I'm always looking at ways to test it out.

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FT: That's a really, really important point. We sort of skipped this, which I think should have been maybe the first things we talked about. But before you and your partner embarked on this savings journey to get out of debt, what anchored you, I mean, obviously, to get out of debt? But what was it – It had to be more than that, right? Like what were you envisioning after the fact? Like once you are gone with that six figures worth of debt, what was the life that you were envisioning, and what's your advice for others who are trying to get motivated?

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GZ: Well, I will tell you, before we even got into that amount of debt, we were living paycheck to paycheck, and I remember feeling stressed and feeling like I was kind of put in a corner. Like I was working hard, but I had nothing really to show for it. Then when we got into all of this debt, this is when we moved into our home, and we did all of these renovations that seemed necessary at that moment.

Now, I look at it and think, okay, I probably didn't need to do all of those things. But now that we're in all of this debt, working hard and paying off that debt every single month felt discouraging in a lot of ways. I was waking up early, taking my kids to school, going to work all day, and really had nothing to show for it at that point either because all my money was going to my debtors.

One of the things that helped encourage me to keep going was writing a list of all of the things that we currently pay and then writing a list, and this was just the names of those payments. So like my Chase Card, my car loan, whatever it was, and I just wrote a list of that. Then on the other side, I wrote a list of the things that I would be paying once all of that debt will be paid off. The short list really motivated me because I'm like imagine having just 6 or 7 payments that I'm making per month versus 25 payments I'm making per month. Imagine how much I can do with all of that money that's currently going to debt and what that money can do for me once it's free, and I actually own it.

Because when you're in debt, you don't own your money at that point. Your creditors do. So every moment that you're working, you're really working to make sure they're happy and they're satisfied. You're not doing anything to build your lifestyle or your wealth or your future. So that part was really motivating for me to get me to a place where it was like I was fully focused and on track to save the money and pay off that debt because I wanted to start owning my life.

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FT: Back then, the purpose of saving was to get out of debt and own your money. Now that you don't have the debt, you're continuing to save maybe in other ways. What's the new goal? Where has the goalpost moved to?

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GZ: It's early retirement. I want to be able to own my time now. So before, I really wanted to own my money. Now, it's really about owning my time. I want to be able to travel with my kids and take care of my day the way I want to take care of it. I don't want to have to wake up early to go to work or feel like there's something I have to do. I want to be able to do things I get to do. So that's really the motivating factor for me right now. That's what we're working on.

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FT: Tell me about your day-to-day, the life of a creator online, who's also an advice giver, who's also a mom, who's also, my gosh, running your own personal life. Well, how do you structure your day? How do you own your time right now?

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GZ: Well, I actually work full-time as a budget analyst for a university. At night, I work on Saving Whiz. During the day, like on my lunch break, I will work on home things. So I don't have a lot of free time right now, which is, I think, one of the things that resonates with a lot of people because when people tell me they don't have time, I'm like, I totally hear you. I don't either.

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FT: You have the luxury of not having time, in some ways. It seems like because you just have to get things done when you get a pocket of time.

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GZ: Yes, absolutely.

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FT: It's almost like when you become a mom, suddenly you're like super productive.

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GZ: Yes. That is true.

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FT: At work, at least, because you can't wait to get home or you know you have a ton of things waiting for you at home. So you don't wait a minute when you're working.

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GZ: Yes, that's exactly true. Absolutely. You're actually forced to have more of that structure, and that structure actually helps me very much because I know that if I don't do this thing, I will have to do it at a time where I absolutely don't have the time. So it makes me more motivated to do it now because I have that extra five minutes that I can do it.

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FT: Well said, well put. I totally relate to that, although I don't have 600,000 followers on Instagram. So I am not using my time apparently as productively. Let's go back to bills. We were talking about being really like experimenting. Like maybe you skip a month, see how it feels. I always say that about investing in your 401(k). A lot of people say, "I don't have the money. I can't afford it." Try it for a month. You can always turn it off. You can always dial it back. But at least give yourself the benefit of the doubt and try it and see what happens.

What are negotiating with your billers? So I know you're all about not sacrificing, not necessarily changing your routines, but just being smarter about how you go about paying for things. I think negotiating is a great way to do that. Have you had success with this, and can you share some examples?

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GZ: Yeah. So I actually talk about this as well with my group, the Super Savers. So we talk about negotiating bills a lot because a lot of people don't actually know that the companies that you currently are members with will work with you. They want to retain your business. So there are ways that you can negotiate your bills, even if it is just calling them up a lot of times and telling them that you would like to continue the service with them.

But you're seeing that their competitors have all of these new rates. A lot of times, they'll go back and they'll discount your current bills for maybe six months or a year. It only takes asking because they're not going to come up to you and say, "Hey, you want me to lower your bill?" But you asking that question prompts them to want to retain your business because they can see that you're actively looking to see if their competitors can offer something better, and they're always willing to work with you at that point.

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FT: What I like to do is use the chat option, the message option on the website or the app, rather than calling. It's a time saver, but it's also less awkward sometimes because I know. I get this way too. Even though I love talking about money, as soon as I have to now ask for a discount, I suddenly like feel like I'm in violation of something, which I'm not. I'm completely in the right, as you say, to ask for a deal. They're giving them out. Can I also qualify? So the chat button, it's just a really easy, maybe introverted way of getting what you want. That way, you can also multitask while this is happening.

I also want to mention that companies have customer retention. Like they're not going to call you to say, "Hey, we have this new deal," or, "We'd like to give you a discount." But you better believe there are employees. This is their job, and they're called customer retention. So when you call the 800 number or if you are chatting, make sure you're talking to the right people that are empowered to give you the discount. Sometimes, it's not the person right on the front lines. It's their boss or a different department.

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GZ: Yeah, absolutely. I love the idea of the chat box. For me, personally, I love being able to talk to someone, just because I feel like there's this personal connection. But I love the idea of the chat box for someone who's busy or doesn't want to really have that conversation like on the phone. That's perfect. I love that.

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FT: You can start with the chat bot. And if you don't get anywhere, pick up the phone. I agree with you that hearing someone's voice, leveling with them because the person on the other line gets it. They're at home, trying to also save and budget and maybe get out of debt, so they can empathize with what you're trying to pursue, and that might actually work in your favor.

So tell us about this group, the savings group that you're running, and what are the conversations that you're having? Who's joining the club? Who's saving right now? Who's interested in saving right now? Everybody, but who's in your club?

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GZ: So the Super Savers, I would say, mostly, I would say 90% of them are busy moms, just like me, who understand that they have limited time. But they really want to amplify their savings and understand, on a basic system level, how to do that in their own lives. What's really great about the group is it's not them just copying everything that I'm doing, but really finding that balance that works specifically for their lifestyle. So it's tailored to them.

The first six weeks of the program are specifically grocery savings. Once they start to kind of get that groove going, they're empowered to do so much more. Then we talk about bill savings. Then we go into really understanding how to create a budget that works for you. Then we go into long-term savings. So building wealth and understanding how to do that automatically so that it's working for you on the back end, while you're living your life on the front end, without you having to put too much effort into all of those components. It starts to just become this automatic machine, while you get to live your life and enjoy your family.

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FT: Before we let you go, I got to ask about childcare. Do you tackle how to save on childcare? Because I would imagine, especially within your group and you as a mom, this is a very hot button issue. I would love for universal childcare. But until that day comes, what do you recommend parents start thinking about, even before they have kids, as they look to save in this very big category? That's almost as like a mortgage at this point for a lot of families.

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GZ: Yeah. Childcare is incredibly challenging. I was super lucky to have my mom around so that she could take care of my kids. But honestly, I don't know at that point in my life, starting a new career with a young mom and having childcare as one of the biggest burdens, that would have been really, really difficult for me.

I will say that right now, with everything that's going on and the idea of remote work being so much more prevalent, it is a little bit easier for you to negotiate that work-life balance in that you can do a hybrid work schedule so that you're not having to work every day outside of the home, so that you can cut the costs in that way. But ultimately, there are other programs that you can use for childcare.

So I remember when I was in college. They had programs out there to subsidize some of your childcare costs, depending on what your income was. So if you're at a place where your income bracket is a little lower, and you really do need that childcare, there are programs out there that can help supplement it for you.

[00:27:57]

FT: Thank you for that. Yeah. It's just such an ongoing challenge for families, and I have to believe it's why some households don't have kids. It really scares people, the cost of raising a kid in this country. It's hard enough to support yourself, let alone now having dependents. But we are so grateful for your advice. It's, obviously, resonating with so many people, especially now, more than ever. We need to revisit this.

I know we talk a lot about investing on this show and earnings strategies and entrepreneurial inspiration. But let's go back to basics some days and just talk about how to revisit the budget and spend more thoughtfully and cut costs where we can, without sacrificing the lifestyle that we want. Thanks so much Gina Zakaria.

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GZ: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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FT: Thanks to Gina for joining us. Check out savingwhiz.com, her platform, and our show notes for her free freeze list, foods that you can absolutely freeze. I'll see you back here on Wednesday, and I hope your day is So Money.

[END]